

THE “SHEPARD” WILL GUIDE US: A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF HEGEMONIC  
REINFORCEMENT AND RESISTANCE IN THE *MASS EFFECT* VIDEO GAME  
SERIES

by

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The Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
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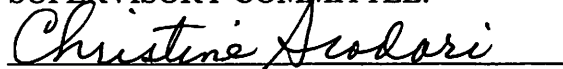
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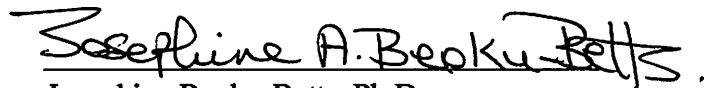
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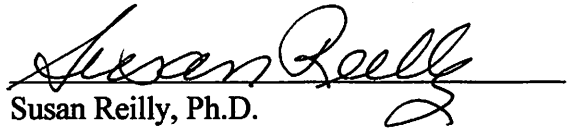
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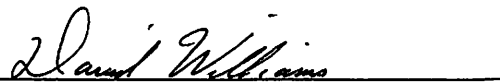
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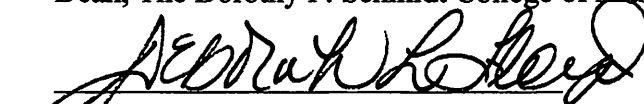
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## ABSTRACT

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*Mass Effect* is a Science Fiction/Action Role Playing/Third Person Shooter video game series that takes place in the year 2183, in which the player assumes control of Commander Shepard. Players can choose to customize the character based on his/her gender, appearance, sexual orientation, background origin and occupation. The choices that show up in the game are also based on how the player wants their version of Shepard to interact with other characters and allows players some leeway to shape their own narrative.

The series also discusses and acknowledges issues of race, gender, subjecthood and sovereignty, politics and sexual orientation within its narrative. This analysis focuses on the text of the series and its implications concerning hegemonic reinforcement and/or resistance in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, politics,

and warfare tactics.

The main research questions are as follows: What are the possible textual outcomes and interpretations regarding gender, race, class, sexuality, intersectionality, and militarism? Do players have opportunities to address such issues in counter-hegemonic ways via their choices in the game? What are the biases in how the series is marketed, and how might the gaming industry become more diverse in creating options for players and in marketing their products?

In order to answer these questions, I created four different versions of Commander Shepard and changed their morality codes, appearances, sexual orientations and gender with each play-through of the narrative and used textual and observational analysis via feminist and other critical theory.

The thesis's findings suggest that for the most part, the series does allow players to take opportunities to resist hegemony and create their own narratives. However, not all options are available to them and there are still many biases in video game marketing that favor the white, 14-35, heterosexual, male demographic. Also, there are many textual outcomes concerning race, sexuality, gender, class, intersectionality and militarism that privilege hegemonic ideologies but can sometimes also be counter-hegemonic, depending on the morality code that a player chooses.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Background and Justification

*Mass Effect* is a sci-fi video game series that was released in 2007 by the developers at BioWare and distributed by EA Games. The media messages that players interact with in *Mass Effect* have multiple layers, interpretations and meanings. Henry Jenkins notes in his text, *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers*: “To understand this paradox, we have to recognize a distinction between ‘effects and meanings’” (210).

Jenkins’ quote is referencing the debate on violence in video games with *Grand Theft Auto 3* as an example. Many lawmakers, parents and lobbyists were saying that games like *Grand Theft Auto* were indicative of anti-social personalities. However, Jenkins is arguing that a difference between effect and meaning needs to be established before critiquing a game fully. Jenkins also argues that “meanings” in games need to be examined much more closely than “effects” (210).

In Jenkins’ terms, “meanings” have more to do with the subtextual and contextual messages of the video game text as opposed to the psychological and social which would be “effects.” The narrative and the characters within the game can send out a variety of messages and even prompt the person that is interacting with them to think about their implications and their meanings. This also applies to other video games and the images in them that gamers interact with and see.

Most of the academic discourse that surrounds video games focuses on the violence and how the violence is affecting the people that are involved in the community.

Jenkins' quotes are important to remember because the meanings in video games are often linked to a hegemonic ideology of how things are supposed to be and how men and women are supposed to behave within the current social structure and how meanings are also determined by how the player engages and plays the game.

Video games as medium and culture have evolved since their first inception in the 1940s. Since then, the gameplay has become more interactive, the graphics and visuals are at a cinematic and lifelike level and the narratives and premises of most of the games in the market have become more complex and thought-provoking. Video games, like other works of art, can be thought-provoking and controversial. They can also be considered a reflection of the current society, or even as critiques of the current political and cultural state of affairs.

Currently, the video gaming culture and industry is experiencing growing pains due to the fact that many video game consumers and participants are craving more diverse representations of women, people of color, and LGBTQ protagonists in video game narratives. While there are ongoing series that have refused to make this shift in paradigm (*Grand Theft Auto*, *Medal of Honor*, *Call of Duty*, *Halo*), there are many others (*Bioshock* and *Saints Row*) that are trying to appeal to a larger demographic.

In the introduction of the book *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat*; Jill Denner argues that gaming is a gender neutral hobby but is often associated as a male activity: "It is this world that girls and women have been mostly absent from but now are joining in large numbers. Thus our understanding of girls and women as gamers needs to move away from examining individual features and game mechanics to studying gaming cultures and genres" (46).

Another shift in the video gaming culture paradigm is that most of the video game narratives are now dealing with sociopolitical issues within the structure of their narratives. *Bioshock: Infinite* and *The Last of Us*, two of the biggest selling games of 2013, dealt with sociopolitical issues. *Bioshock: Infinite* focuses more on race, intersectionality, class warfare, extremism, nationalism and rewriting and denying other historical narratives, while *The Last of Us* deals more with gender politics, albeit in a subtle manner. These games have been universally acclaimed by critics and gamers alike, not just because of the graphics and gameplay, but because of the narratives and how the narratives are a critique of our current society and how our current society views people that have been marginalized. *Mass Effect* had already dissected these issues in their varied narratives six years prior to *Bioshock: Infinite* and *The Last of Us*.

This thesis examines the video game series *Mass Effect*, which is a science fiction and action based role playing game that was developed and released in 2007 by BioWare and EA Games for the PC, XBOX 360, and Playstation 3, as well as its sequels in 2010 and 2012. The series has received universal acclaim from critics and fans alike. The game has been lauded for its storytelling, characters and the sociopolitical issues that the narrative tackles. Wesley Yin-Poole from [www.videogamer.com](http://www.videogamer.com) wrote about *Mass Effect* in his review:

The story is first class, the conversation system a revelation and the single sex scene a much [sic] ado about nothing. But the best thing about *Mass Effect* is its style. The film grain, the stupendous *Blade Runner* inspired soundtrack, the cool sound effects, the gravity-defying biotic powers and the sheer ‘epicness’ of everything combine to present perhaps the coolest, most involving science fiction

universe gamers have ever had the pleasure of losing themselves in.

([www.videogamer.com](http://www.videogamer.com))

There are several reasons why *Mass Effect* was chosen for this thesis. The game utilizes storytelling, character creation and interaction, and decision-making (in which there are consequences) as parameters to give players a different playing experience each time and with each parameter in place, it also provides an opportunity for the players to negotiate various readings of the text. These parameters leave a lot of room for different interpretations, critiques, connections and experiences that the players can have.

*Mass Effect* also addresses a lot of sociopolitical issues that most games would not allude to or dare to do. There are issues of race, gender, war, politics, science, ethics, body politics and among many others that are present throughout the entire game and what solidifies these issues are the characters, missions and the choices that the player makes throughout the entire game. There are many choices in the game that defy or reinforce the beliefs that several of the team members have or the council and ambassadors. The decisions that players make in the game affect the politics that are strewn together in the storyline. These issues that are brought up in the text can also be connected to events that happened in the real world and can also critique a lot of the issues that are currently happening. For example, there are issues of gender and race that exemplify intersectionality as theorized by Patricia Hill Collins and those concerning violence and masculinity, as discussed by Jeroen Jansz.

This analysis examines the sociopolitical implications of the series, and the various interpretations that can be gained from the text. The determination that needs to be made is whether the text of the game reinforces or resists hegemonic ideologies of

race, gender, sexuality, politics and warfare tactics. The text of the game is analyzed by replaying the game within different parameters and by observing the ideologies, connections, critiques and experiences in the game that are taking place.

The choices, experiences and interpretations of these players are important because they say a lot about the political ideologies, their real world experiences and social constructions of these gamers and reveals how *Mass Effect* could reproduce or challenge them. *Mass Effect* presents many opportunities for ideological resistance and rebelling against the culturally hegemonic ideologies that have been generally instilled in games and the gaming community. However, *Mass Effect* can also reinforce ideologies that can be seen as problematic by many other players.

Examining the text of this game is crucial to not only understanding the fan culture surrounding video gaming, but it is also crucial in making the gaming industry itself and that community a much safer, more welcoming and less hostile place for women, people of color and the LGBTQ community.

#### Issues to be Addressed

This research utilizes media/cultural criticism to answer two questions: Does the *Mass Effect* series provide an opportunity for players to create their own narrative and take away a resistive or hegemonic/patriarchal reading of the text when it concerns issues of militarism, intersectionality, and gender, race, class and queer identities depending on their choices.

There are many players, men and women alike, who choose their Shepard to be a man or a woman and otherwise create the character in unexpected ways. They also have their user created characters engage in relationships with team members of different



racism, sexual orientations and biological sexes. The relationships, then, also have the opportunity of resisting or reproducing heteronormativity. There are also men and women that have made decisions in the narrative that they more than likely may not have to make in real life, which allows them to explore some aspects of their feelings towards militarism and other political concerns.

### Literature Review

#### Gender, Race, Sexuality and Gamer Identity

The politics of gender, race and sexuality are both underscored and examined in the *Mass Effect* narrative. However, the narrative of *Mass Effect* is in some ways tied into the identity of the gamer. There are gamers that create their protagonist based on their gender, sexual orientation, beliefs and race and respond to NPCs (Non-Player Characters) according to what they believe and/or how they would react in that situation most of the time. In *Mass Effect*, the player creates and customizes their own protagonist as they see fit. Some players choose to have their characters fit within the criteria of hegemonic masculinity.

#### *Hegemonic Masculinity*

Nick Trujillo's article, "Hegemonic Masculinity on the Mound: Media Representations of Nolan Ryan and American Sports Culture," presents the definition and criteria for hegemonic masculinity. He utilizes the example of the media coverage surrounding baseball player Nolan Ryan and the coverage of sports in general. Trujillo quotes R. W. Connell on the definition of hegemonic masculinity—"the culturally idealized form of masculine character" (83).

Connell also adds that it includes the "subordination of women" and the

“marginalization of gay men” (94). In his article, Trujillo identifies the criteria for hegemonic masculinity and in the criteria are force and control (physical speed, strength, toughness, control), occupational achievement (division of labor, such as “men’s work,” “women’s work”), familial patriarchy (reinforcing gender roles, men as sexual subjects, women as sexual objects, women and children being undermined by male power), frontiersmanship (white male, working class values, individualism) and heterosexuality (being sexually attracted to the opposite sex, considered a form of sexuality that is “normal,” “good,” and “natural,” according to cultural and social constructs). He notes that these criteria and the concept of hegemonic masculinity are pervasive in American sports culture as it is in all other forms of media. He uses the coverage and commentary that sportscasters use to describe the players and also talk about their personal lives so as to reiterate their masculinity in order to demonstrate this. This is also common in many other sports and, at times, when the commentators are talking about a player’s family, the broadcast tends to cut to their family in the stands in order to reinforce heteronormativity.

The concept of hegemonic masculinity is prevalent in video gaming culture as well and within its community. The same criteria are applied in different ways, such as in the narrative exposition, character design, personality traits, etc. The concept comes into play in the *Mass Effect* series. However, there are many subversions of this concept as well, which is why Trujillo’s concept is being utilized as an identifier of the reinforcement and subversion of hegemony within the narrative.

Trujillo explains in his article that any violation or resistances to hegemonic masculine values are considered “weak,” “feminine,” “unnatural,” etc. He states in his article that hegemonic masculinity sees “feminine” as weak and undesirable and any man

that displays these traits are seen as “weak.” The only issue that Trujillo has in this article is that there is very little to no mention of hegemonic femininity. While identifying as feminine or masculine is not detrimental in any other way, it would have been paramount to discuss hegemonic femininity considering how restricting it can be in terms of identity.

Hegemonically masculine criteria also play into the male power fantasy and the male gaze. Laura Mulvey describes the concept of the male gaze as seeing women as the sexual object of males’ desire and not as the subject—for example, sexualizing a part of a woman’s body as opposed to viewing her as a subject. The concept of the male gaze was first introduced and discussed by Laura Mulvey in her influential article, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” She examines narrative cinema by using the concepts and parameters of psychoanalysis and comes up with the idea that in classic Hollywood cinema there is the paradox of phallogentrism. The idea of phallogentrism is that the image of the woman must be lacking in order to privilege the phallus in its symbolic meaning. In other words, the woman is seen but not heard according to this perspective.

Mulvey argues that cinema offers many possible pleasures, and one of them is scopophilia. Sigmund Freud noted in his three essays that scopophilia is one of the many components of sexuality which exists independently of the erotogenic zones. The idea of scopophilia is taking people as objects and subjecting and controlling them through the gaze.

Most of the objects of the male gaze in media are women, while men control the gaze. Mulvey describes the different ways in which the gaze is held and reinforced. For example, the text is positioned to be interpreted by the heterosexual male audience. The camera and its perspective are positioned so that the audience cannot take their gaze away

from a female character—or the body parts that represent her—and the male character is not looked at or objectified in the same manner.

The male gaze figures into hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal ideologies in general. It is reflected in the hyper-sexualization of women in video games, and it presents the perfect environment for hegemonic, patriarchal assumptions and constructions. Game series such as *Soul Calibur*, *Bayonetta*, *Dead or Alive*, *Grand Theft Auto*, *Saints Row*, and many others perpetuate the concept of the male gaze. However there are many other games that violate it and even subvert it. The male gaze is present as criteria for hegemonic masculinity in terms of familial patriarchy and heterosexuality. The women under this hegemonic ideology are seen and portrayed as the caretakers and sexual objects, not sexual subjects. *Mass Effect* has a problematic dichotomy in which, for its positive and diverse portrayal of female and male characters, it tries to compromise with the male demographic by introducing certain female characters that adhere to the male gaze.

### *Masculinity and Violence*

Masculinity and violence are topics often discussed in academia and even within video gaming culture. *Mass Effect* also examines the effect and the consequences of violence and challenges the traditional notions of masculinity, using the characters in its narrative and how they react in certain situations and missions. Violence is a large part of video gaming culture and at times is problematic. One of the most concerning things is how it plays into the criteria of hegemonic masculinity in terms of force and control and frontiersmanship.

The games that Jansz mentions in his article, “The Emotional Appeal of Violent

Video Games for Adolescent Males,” have elements of frontiersmanship. However, violence in video games can sometimes be resistive to hegemonic ideologies due to how players react. Jansz theorizes about why and how games like *Halo*, *Call of Duty* and the *Grand Theft Auto* series appeal to adolescent boys. He says that these games provide a safe space for them to experience and experiment with emotions that are associated with masculinity (anger) and emotions that are at odd with masculinity (fear).

Jansz spent some time with researchers who were interviewing the adolescent participants who were playing *Halo* and other games that contained violence in its narrative and gameplay structure. Jansz mentions that the popularity of these games has caused social concern in which “gaming” could be affecting young adolescent boys and causing them to exhibit more violent behavior. However, Jansz has a different approach. His theory is that these games provide an outlet for many boys to express their feelings against computerized opponents in a safe environment in which they cannot express these emotions in real life. He also argues that they help in exploring and experimenting with their identities and their emotions in a way that is more accessible to them than they are able to, which in turn helps them to cope with the insecurities and uncertainties of the adolescent years.

Jansz also makes this argument and utilizes this theory as well to explain why people are attracted to violent entertainment. The article also explains how the emotions of these adolescents come to light through the plot structure of the game, the character’s story or through the environment in which they have to navigate. Often times it is an unknown world and environment that they have to survive and endure in, much like the real world and their teenage years. Jansz also talks about how video gaming is a form of

social interaction that is common among adolescent males and how these social interactions also strengthen male bonding and relationships.

Jansz uses hegemonic masculinity, which was broken down into characteristics in Nick Trujillo's highly influential article. In this case, Jansz is using that concept, but he is dissecting it. In the context of video games, one of the criteria for hegemonic masculinity is an overabundance of violence in video games. Jansz explains that this is complicated due to the fact these games allow a safe space of adolescent boys to explore their emotions that reinforce and resist hegemonic masculinity, which creates a dichotomy of the texts being resistive and reinforcing these ideologies.

Jansz's article is in-depth and thorough in its information and provides different theories and possibilities and avenues to explore with his article. However, he missed an opportunity to examine adolescent girls who also enjoy playing violent video games. This could have been an opportunity to discuss how some adolescent girls reject the notion of being perceived as "feminine" and see being "masculine" as the stronger choice, however, this notion is problematic because it represents "femininity" as being weak. Not that being one or the other is better, it's the stereotype that things that are considered "feminine" are weak and that things that are considered "masculine" are strong and this is a dynamic that Jansz should have mentioned and explored in the article as a possible motive for adolescent boys as well. Socially constructed gender roles do have a lot to do with the appeal of violence and masculinity.

Jansz's particular take on hegemonic masculinity is here used to dissect *Mass Effect's* "Paragon/Renegade" option system in the narrative. The "Paragon/Renegade" system allows players to safely explore options that are either socially acceptable or

socially condemned. The options that are chosen have consequences attached to them and this allows many players to safely explore the darker aspects of their personalities, which relates to Jansz's theory on why adolescent males are more drawn to violent video games. However, Jansz did not mention in his article that in some instances, some video game narratives unintentionally link violence as a form of racialization, meaning, that some of these narratives have representations of ethnic/darker skinned NPCs (non-player characters) portrayed as villains and/or working in occupations in which violence is common such as "terrorists," "drug dealers," etc.

### *Racialized Representation*

Lisa Nakamura's article, "Don't Hate the Player, Hate the Game: The Racialization of Labor in *World of Warcraft*," is important because in the text of the *Mass Effect* Series, labor is racialized as it is discussed. Nakamura's article deals with the racism towards Chinese and Asian workers who are also players within the *World of Warcraft* community. The issues at hand are that North American and European players are creating machinima (original videos made from the digital raw materials of the game) and discussions of how much they detest the Chinese and Asian players for practicing "Gold farming," in which players sell their items and accounts for actual money. This is a practice that actually originated from MMORPG (Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game) games like the *Diablo* franchise and *Starcraft*, which date back to the early to mid-1990s. "Gold Farming" is a practice that ironically originated in North America and Europe.

It is also important to note that in Nakamura's article, *World of Warcraft's* character creation does not allude to a player's ethnicity(ies). However, the machinima

and discussions that the North American and European players created and engaged in perpetuate a stereotype that Chinese and other Asian players engage in the practice of gold-farming. Chinese and Asian players are an underrepresented demographic within the video gaming community and even within their own countries, as many western games are imported and sold there. There are many Chinese and Asian players that play the game for fun, but North American and European players are ready to identify them as gold farmers as opposed to real players. This is robbing them of their identity as players in that community.

The players that engage in the *World of Warcraft* community have open topics based on how to get rid of gold farming practices as a thinly veiled remark that aims to get rid of the Asian and Chinese players that are on their servers. Many of these players assume that anyone that is engaged in this practice is Asian, which in fact most of the time is a player from Europe or North America who may be selling their *World of Warcraft* accounts. The complete and utter lack of people moderating these forums is also troubling as it is perceived as perpetuating a stereotype and creating a hostile environment for Chinese and Asian players. It is also creating an environment in which it is also no longer a safe space for them to identify as a gamer. The machinima videos that are created are also carefully crafted in such manner as to avoid topics of race or racism. Nakamura's article correlates to the *Mass Effect* series due to how labor is also heavily racialized in terms of several races in the series and the rhetoric surrounding race in the text of the game. This issue in Nakamura's article also relates to gamer identity and how the label "gamer" means many different things to many different people.



### *Gamer Identity and Representation*

Adrienne Shaw's article, "Do You Identify as a Gamer? Gender, Race, Sexuality and Gamer Identity," examines how gender and sexuality are connected to the "gamer" moniker. In her article she spoke with gamers and found that the women and the LGBTQ players that she interviewed wanted more diverse representations of their communities in video games. They also felt that if these representations of these characters existed, they would be more inclined to identify themselves as "gamers." Shaw's article is important to reference because while there are diverse and empowering representations of men and women in *Mass Effect*, many LGBTQ fans criticize the series for its lack of LGBTQ representation.

Shaw's article touches on these intersections and how they are often connected to gamer identity. Shaw interviewed several people of various identities (men, women, homosexual, heterosexual, person of color, white, etc.) who play video games and whether or not they identified themselves as "gamers." Shaw spoke with several women and men to see which demographic would identify themselves as "gamers." Most of the women (queer, women of color, white women) that she interviewed in the article did not see themselves as gamers because they felt that it is a "male" hobby and that they constantly have to be competitive in order to be considered a gamer. They also refused to identify as "gamers" because a majority of the games are marketed towards the white, heterosexual, male demographic. To them it is a label opposed to their identity. Yet, they happen to consume and play games more than their white, male counterparts. A similar statement was made by a homosexual male gamer in which he says that "gamer" is a label to him, however he prefers to be identified as a "gaymer." Shaw's article and her

interview subjects point out the constant reinforcement of hegemonic, patriarchal representations of video gaming culture and the constant lack of representation for different demographics.

In terms of hegemonic reinforcement and resistance, Shaw and Nakamura's articles also touch upon hegemonic masculinity in terms of Trujillo's criteria of heterosexuality and frontiersmanship, respectively. Shaw's article mentions how her interview subjects say that most video games in the market often feature a heterosexual, white male and Nakamura's article examines a game in which the player goes on an adventure, but the community reinforces hegemonic cultural assumptions of the Asian community through their discussions and through machinima, which is a form of fan art. While gender and sexuality is examined subtly in *Mass Effect*, race is one of the biggest issues in the text of the game. Racial attitudes within the text of the game reveal much about how far or not we have come when comes to race and equality.

#### *The Tragic LGBTQ Hero Paradox*

Another concept used in this research is the "tragic hero." This concept comes from Aristotle's work, *Poetics*:

There remains then the man who occupies the mean between saintliness and depravity. He is not extra-ordinary in virtue and righteousness and yet does not fall into bad fortune because of evil and wickedness but because of some hamartia ('a going wrong') of a kind found in men of high reputation and good fortune such as Oedipus and Thyestes and famous men of similar families. (10)

The "tragic hero" trope is common in many literary works and video games are no exception. This criterion also applies to a majority of the LGBTQ characters in all forms

of media. However, their tragedies are different from a heterosexual tragic hero/heroine.

For example, there is a tragic back story, a loss of a lover or loved one, becoming disowned by the family, society and/or friend(s), imprisonment, killed in a brutalized manner, or become the martyr on the basis that they are not allowed to express their homosexuality in any way. Henry M. Alley's article "The Gay Artist as Tragic Hero in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*," describes how the tragic hero trope applies to the characters of the novel:

We have, then, more than midway through the novel, a carefully wrought portrait of what a contemporary, healthy gay love might be, both sensual and spiritual in nature. In view of this artistic ideal, Wilde's artist lover, Hallward is the major player, and the perfect forerunner of D.H. Lawrence's Rupert Birkin and Gerald Crich. (4)

These articles are utilized in this analysis due to the fact that they deal with gamer identity and how the demographics of players relate to representations within the games. These articles are also connected in that they all look into gamer identity and how their personal, intersecting identities are also interconnected with their identities as gamers.

#### *Digital Games and Gender*

The marketing of *Mass Effect* can be related to Chess' article "A 36-24-36 Cerebrum: Productivity, Gender and Video Game Advertising" due to how the ads for the *Mass Effect* series are targeted to men, even though both men and women play the game. Shira Chess examines this form of gendered marketing in her article by comparing two different ads for the same gaming system, the Nintendo DS. The ad that is marketed towards women encourages them to buy the DS because it will help them be more

productive while the ad marketed towards men encourages them to buy the DS because it will help strengthen their cognitive skills. She also presents another example with the Nintendo Wii. The ads for women encourage fitness and family time while the ads for men encourage play.

This is also in conjunction with how marketing companies perceive how men and women view video games and play them. Chess' article points out how the ads for the Nintendo gaming systems are heavily gendered and play into the hegemonic ideology of traditional gender roles and the reinforcement of them in their ads. Most of the ads that are discussed in Shaw's article play into the concept of force and control and frontiersmanship. The ads for the Nintendo DS that are marketed towards men encourage strengthening cognitive skills (as she noted with the example of *Brain Age*) and encourage men to go on an adventure (she also noted an ad for the *Super Mario* games). The biggest issue with Chess' article is that she does not go into further detail on the other video game advertisements that are marketed solely to men and how these ads tend to include violence, sexuality and more "masculine" themes. Nevertheless, this article does present the different ways that video game marketing is heavily gendered, even without the violence, sexuality and "masculine" themes. Marketing determines how men and women engage with video games

Valerie Walkerdine explores the idea of how men and women play games differently in her article, "Playing the Game." In the article, Walkerdine examines a group of boys and girls and how they play a game. One of the girls, Carla, instructs the other girls in that in order to play the game, they have to avoid being "killed." Walkerdine's argument is that boys and girls play games according to gender

performance. She says that throughout her observation, the girls that were playing the game were more focused on staying alive rather than trying to get the highest score. In the study, the girls were more interested in enjoying the game (“staying alive”), while the boys were more concerned with getting the highest score according to hegemonically masculine achievement, force and control.

She also talks about how the girls equate “cute” characters to non-violence, kindness and cuddliness. There is an example in which the girls are playing *Pokemon* and they see Pikachu as cute and sees him as a pet. Another example that applies is Princess Peach. The boys and girls in this article both talk about how female avatars are positioned as weak and one of the most popular examples that fell under this category was Princess Peach. Princess Peach’s characterization is an example of familial patriarchy because she is often portrayed as the “damsel in distress,” is undermined because of her gender, and is positioned as a sexual object, which are all traits commonly associated with the criteria for hegemonic masculinity. However, Princess Peach as a character as evolved over time and has been in other games where she has powers and used them to save the day.

There were some girls mentioned in the article that favored the femme fatale archetype which has agency but is not allowed to survive and is often evil. However, this is negotiated with the “pretty and scary” archetype. Walkerdine’s article discusses the “pretty and scary” dichotomy within the *Tekken* series in which all of the women in the fighting game are “pretty” (since they wear revealing outfits and adhere to the male gaze), but they are also “scary,” because they demonstrate and utilize martial arts, boxing, and other various fighting techniques, which is not commonly seen in other forms of media. These archetypes do subvert but reinforce hegemonic masculinity

because the femme fatale and the “pretty” and “scary” can fall under the “FFF” (Female Fighting F\*\*ktoy) trope which reinforces hegemonic masculinity.

Walkerdine’s article examines how boys and girls learn how to play games differently. She was trying to see in the controlled environment if there would be any form of resistance to hegemonic ideologies. However, under the environment that she had surveyed, it was the opposite. The girls and the boys played the games according to their socially constructed gender roles, which reinforces hegemony. What Walkerdine did not take into account is the number of games that are made specifically for the female demographic.

Jill Denner and Shannon Campe also explore Walkerdine’s idea, but for different reasons. In their article, “What Games Made by Girls Can Tell Us,” from the text *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat*, Denner and Campe, want to identify the types of games that girls were interested in and played. They note that most of the games that were marketed towards men emphasized hegemonic masculine qualities and goals. They mention in the 1990s that there were many games created that were being marketed to girls. This became known as the “Pink Games Movement.”

“Pink Games” refer to games that are specifically marketed to girls that feature a product that girls may be interested in such as *Barbie*, clothes, etc. These games have character-centered plots, deal with friendship issues and social relations and feature brightly colored graphics. These games did attract girls into gaming; however, the two biggest deterrents that Denner and Campe found was that the female characters in the popular video game franchises, such as *Super Mario*, always featured a sexualized female character or a damsel in distress and that the “pink games” reinforced gendered

assumptions about femininity and hegemonic femininity. They discovered that many girls would be more attracted and inclined to play video games if they challenged gender roles and allowed girls to be the hero and save the day. The “pink games” offered girls an opportunity to be the hero and to resist hegemonic ideologies of women in video games and allowed girls to explore other ways to solve problems. These games resisted the criteria of familial patriarchy, force and control and occupational achievement, which are a part of hegemonic masculinity.

In their research, they note that girls were also interested in games that had a form of cooperation such as co-op gameplay, such as finding different ways to beat the game, less violence, visually immersing environments and rich audio and visuals. They also indicate that girls were interested in puzzle games and finding out a way to win without everyone losing. Their goal is to outsmart, rather than overcome. These games have a learning element to them as opposed to the games that are marketed to boys in which they “get” a reward.

Denner and Campe’s findings and criteria for a “pink game” are relevant to this analysis of the *Mass Effect* franchise. The possible narratives of *Mass Effect* allow girls to create a female avatar, have character-centered plots, deal with friendship issues and social relations and, in most parts of the game, feature rich, bright colors in its visuals. There are also situations in the games that allow players to avoid conflict by using their words and charm instead of being violent. While many are hesitant to consider *Mass Effect* a “pink game,” the franchise does appeal to both men and women, creating an inclusive gaming experience in which there is something for (almost) everyone.

Denner and Campe’s article highlights the “pink games” that appeal to girls which

have been used as the criteria for the narrative and art design for games such as *Mass Effect*, *Bioshock: Infinite* (to an extent), *L.A. Noire* (to an extent as well) and many others. While many gamers are hesitant to call those games “pink games” they do incorporate a lot of the criteria of a typical “pink game” and these games do have resistance of hegemonic ideologies in their narratives and within their characters. But there is also some hegemonic reinforcement. However, Denner and Campe do not acknowledge that video games that follow the “pink games” criteria are going to have different attitudes and interactions among male and female gamers. They did not take into account that some female gamers can be just as or more competitive than their male counterparts.

Elena Bertozzi and Seungwhan Lee’s article, “Not Just Fun and Digital Play, Gender and Attitudes towards Technology,” also explores Walkerdine’s and Denner and Campe’s theories. However, whereas Walkerdine looked at the concept of how girls play video games as opposed to how boys play games and Denner and Campe’s looked at what types of games appeal to girls and what they prefer to play, Bertozzi and Lee are interested in how men and women interact with other forms of technology. Bertozzi and Lee also counteract Walkerdine’s and Denner and Campe’s assumption that girls’ only concern in a video game is to stay alive by saying that girls are just as competitive as men based on the popularity of *World of Warcraft*, *Grand Theft Auto*, *Call of Duty*, etc. The article also takes into account, like Walkerdine’s and Denner and Campe’s articles, that the negative and stereotypical representations of women in digital gaming are more likely to turn women off from engaging in digital gaming and other forms of interactive media as well as causing a disinclination of women wanting to go into the technological fields.

Bertozzi and Lee’s study showed hegemonic resistance on the part of the girls



being just as or more competitive than boys in video gaming, however they also noted the hegemonic assumption that women are not interested in technological careers. In mentioning this form of hegemony, they cited in their article that one of the main reasons why women are turned off by the technological field is due to the negative and hostile environment that is perpetuated in digital gaming and in the industry as well.

The utilization of these articles for this thesis is important to note because it examines how the audience, men and women interact with media differently, the social constructs that allow for different interactions and experiences with digital media and how it is consumed on the production aspect, which in this case, is marketing. Due to the fact that marketing for digital media (video games in this case) is different for men and women, the gameplay experiences are already set up to be different for men and women.

#### Gender, Race, Class and Intersectionality

##### *Race*

Stuart Hall's article "The Whites of Their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media" presents the definitions of "overt" and "inferential" racism:

By overt racism, I mean those many occasions when open and favorable coverage is given to arguments, positions and spokespersons who are in the business of elaborating an openly racist argument or advancing a racist policy or view; By inferential racism I mean those apparently naturalized representations of events and situations relating to race, whether 'factual' or 'fictional,' which have racist premises and propositions inscribed in them as a set of unquestioned assumptions. These enable racist statements to be formulated without ever bringing into awareness the racist predicates on which the statements are grounded. (20)

Hall argues that these types of racism are prevalent in the media and video games are no exception. For example, in *Bioshock: Infinite*, there are several laws in Columbia that were passed that barred people of color and the Irish from participating in the elections, gaining employment or owning any form of property what so ever within the city. Within the text of the game, there are propaganda posters that are vilifying Daisy Fitzroy, the leader of the activist group the Vox Populi, the Irish and people of color. The comments that are uttered by the citizens of Columbia in the beginning of the game also reproduce the stereotypes of the Irish, the poor and people of color. These instances in the game are examples of “overt” and “inferential” racism and are instrumental in reproducing hegemony in terms of racial attitudes.

Other tropes related to Hall’s concepts are “tokenism” and the “white male savior.” The issue of “tokenism” is discussed in Martin Luther King’s 1963 book, *Why We Can’t Wait*. (16-18) Tokenism refers to media having a single character that is from a marginalized demographic represented (often stereotypically) within a majority white and/or male group. In media, such characters are often known as “the token \_\_\_\_\_” due to the stereotypes that are associated with that character in addition to being seen as the monolithic representative of that group. The problem with “tokenism” is that it is an example of “inferential” racism. Tokenism does not acknowledge the fact that people from marginalized demographics do have their own agency and diverse identities.

“The white male savior” is another form of inferential racism and sometimes is associated with tokenism. The concept of the “white male savior” adheres to the idea that oppressed peoples look to a white male to save them from their oppression. This concept was recently explored by Teju Cole in his article for *The Atlantic*, “The White-Savior

Industrial Complex.” For example, the film *The Help* adhered to the concept of the “white male savior,” only with a “white female savior” and *Django Unchained* reinforced the concept of the “white male savior,” as Django was freed by a white, German bounty hunter. The “white male savior” concept is problematic because it paints people of color, LGBTQ and women as weak and lacking any form of agency in their own lives; therefore they have to rely on a white male to free them from their oppression. It also assumes that everyone can identify with a white male protagonist, while white men often cannot identify with other types of characters.

“Universalism” and “color blindness” are two ideas that connect with Hall’s theories. While Hall himself uses them as tools for analysis, these two concepts are often associated with white privilege and class. The idea behind “universalism” and “color blindness” is also connected to “post-racism.” The concept of universalism is that all oppressed demographics have the same struggles, even though statement is false and problematic, because it ignores intersectionality and it does not take into account the differences that each individual has and the different struggles that they endure and deal with. “Color blindness” (which is thinking that being blind to color means there is no racism) allows “white privilege” to flourish and to ignore the struggles and systemic societal disadvantages that people of color experience as mentioned in Amy Stuart Wells’ text, *Both Sides Now: The Story of School Desegregation’s Graduates* (33-35). These traits are problematic because they do not acknowledge the importance of intersectionality in order to understand and empathize with the diverse struggles of marginalized groups.

## *Intersectionality and Gender*

In *Mass Effect*, intersectionality plays a large role in intergalactic politics and in how the player chooses to engage with crew members who are from different backgrounds, gender, sexualities, and races. The identities of all of the characters in *Mass Effect* intersect in many different forms throughout the narrative.

Conceived by feminist scholars of color such as Norma Alarcon, Kimberlè Crenshaw and Patricia Hill Collins, intersectionality refers to the importance of intersecting forms of oppression. Collins describes that intersectionality is when “two or more identities combined present unique forms of oppression” (227). For example, Daisy Fitzroy from *Bioshock: Infinite* is oppressed and marginalized in the city of Columbia by the citizens due to her race and her gender which are intersecting identities.

Patricia Hill Collins stresses the importance of intersectionality in her text, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*: “Not only do intersectional paradigms prove useful in explaining U.S. Black women’s experiences, such paradigms suggest that intersecting oppressions also shape the experiences of other groups as well” (227). She goes on to say that intersectionality theory and understanding it also help to dismantle and deconstruct the dominating ideological paradigms that are used to oppress other marginalized groups, which creates an opportunity for hegemonic resistance towards negative and harmful stereotypes presented in the media in addition to false societal perceptions, such as the “Sapphire” stereotype.

Hill Collins acknowledges the stereotype of “Sapphire,” which is common in many media narratives. The concept of the “Sapphire” stereotype originates from a

historical context in which slaveholders sold black women's children and husbands away, which caused unimaginable grief and understandable anger. In addition, the absence of their partners compelled African American women to assume traditional men's roles, such as financial providers. Collins noted that self-definition and self-valuation are some key aspects of a black woman's identity. With this taken into consideration, in order to dehumanize black women, the "angry black woman," or "Sapphire" stereotype came into being. The problem with the "Sapphire" and "angry black woman" stereotype is that if a black, female character shows any form of power, self-definition, and/or self-valuation, she is labeled as "the angry black woman," and often, dispatched from the narrative, in violent ways. The concept of the "angry black woman" is subverted in the *Mass Effect* series by having diverse portrayals of black women in its narrative, however, it is apparent in other video games narratives, most notably in *Bioshock: Infinite* and *The Last of Us*.

Crenshaw also applies the concept of intersectionality theory in her article, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," when she was examining how identity politics can sometimes be a detriment to the very cause that activists are bringing awareness to and trying to organize. Crenshaw acknowledges the importance of identity based politics and how it has helped bring awareness to the collective consciousness about the issues that are affecting these communities at large, but she also acknowledges that identity-based politics can be problematic at best: "The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite, that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences" (1242).

Crenshaw is referencing how feminist movements tend to be seen as something that is accessible to white women only because their experiences matter more than the experiences of people of color. This argument does have fair precedent because the earlier feminist movements (the First and some sections of the Second and Third Wave) failed to acknowledge that women of color and the LGBTQ community also have lived experiences that do matter and are valid and have also been marginalized by the dominating ideology of the society they live in. Crenshaw maintains that all identities and intersecting identities must also be acknowledged. Without this, feminist thought, critique and activism cannot be successful.

Crenshaw and Collins' work and research can also be applied to popular media. Popular media is often a reflection of the current society that people occupy and how certain ideas are valued and how others are not. The ideas can be either subversive or reinforcing, depending on the space that the ideas are being presented and the audience that occupies this space. Intersectionality theory allows scholars and consumers of media to decide which text reinforces hegemonic patriarchal ideologies or resists it. Intersectionality can also be found in potentially subversive media characters, such as Nyota Uhura from *Star Trek: The Original Series*.

In Christine Scodari's article, "Nyota Uhura is Not a White Girl," she discusses the intersectionality involved in disagreement over the characterization of Nyota Uhura in *Star Trek*, the 2009 film directed by J.J. Abrams rebooting of the original cult television series of the same title. She compares the Uhura from the 1960s television series to the one in the film as well as the reactions to the film by the fans of the series and others. Some female fans were disappointed in how Uhura ended up in relationship with Spock

(a male, half-human, half-Vulcan first officer) while women of color saw this relationship as granting romantic agency to a Black woman, which seldom happens in film. The intersection of race and gender was vital in unpacking these discourses.

In the case of *Mass Effect*, there are many intersecting identities within the game in which the fans have noticed and in turn, through their fan art and fan fiction, they have resistive interpretations that go against some aspects of the text that contain hegemonic masculine ideals. In the series there are many characters in the game in addition to two of the different versions of Commander Shepard that have intersecting identities, which is why intersectionality is being utilized for the purposes of this research. Politics is also a complex issue that *Mass Effect* tackles in addition to the nuances of diplomacy and sovereignty that are strewn in within the game play and the narrative.

#### Subjecthood, Sovereignty and Diplomacy

Peter Mantello's article, "Playing Discreet War in the US: Negotiating Subjecthood and Sovereignty through Special Forces Video Games," examines the idea that Special Forces video games have a much deeper sociopolitical implication. Games such as the *Call of Duty* series, *Splinter Cell* and *Counter Strike* do not acknowledge these issues of sovereignty and diplomacy. The concept of Special Forces going into a country without notifying the ambassador or the diplomat or whoever is in the political leader in charge (if there is one) is common ground in games and perpetuates the narrative of America saving the world also referred to as "American Exceptionalism."

This narrative complicates truths about international politics and is a common trope that is associated with video games that follow hegemonically masculine ideals. In the context of this article, the idea of occupational achievement, frontiersmanship and

force and control are evident in this article as Mantello discusses how the narrative of the games that he mentions positions America as the archetypal hegemonic, masculine hero that has to infiltrate and complicate political matters for the sake of “freedom” and how these games tend to “other” the allied countries and America’s enemies. *Mass Effect* subverts this trope and attempts to keep it closer to reality by having the Council’s secret operatives unit, SPECTRE, follow intergalactic guidelines as opposed to going rogue.

In his article, Mantello says that games like *Call of Duty*, *Counter Strike* and *Splinter Cell* encourage the idea that it is okay for US Special Forces to invade other countries without the consent or knowledge of said country. Mantello says that this concept is problematic due to the fact that these types of games encourage players in the ideological sense that violating diplomatic treaties and violating and disrespecting the sovereignty and culture of these nations would cause negative diplomatic and political ramifications.

Mantello also examined a game that was specifically created for American Servicemen and Servicewomen called *America’s Army*. The goal of this online game was to show the realities of being a US Soldier and is only available to members of the US Army. Mantello argues that the game provides a more realistic approach to what it’s like to be an actual US soldier. This game also allowed other soldiers to connect and communicate with one another about their experiences. Mantello argues that *America’s Army* understands the distinction between subjecthood and sovereignty much better than *Call of Duty*, *Counter Strike* and *Splinter Cell* do.

The concepts of subjecthood, sovereignty and diplomacy are often examined, questioned and even explored in *Mass Effect* and plays a large role in race, class,



ethnicity and nationality issues. In the text of the game, the alien races have a sense of nationality and pride in the systems and planets that they came from or currently reside in. Much of their identity is tied to their laws, culture and their class. Subjecthood is often tied to identity politics. Identity politics has its own intersectionality attached to it, but in the case of subjecthood, national and racial identity plays a large role in the intergalactic politics and policies of the *Mass Effect* Universe.

The concepts of race, class and nationality is not brought up in Peter Mantello's article, but it does factor into the political sovereignty of any nation because that nation has its own culture, political and legal system that needs to be respected and abided by. However, when it comes to humanity in *Mass Effect*, ethnicity and class is not mentioned nor acknowledged, but nationality and race is a point of pride and identity for the humans in the *Mass Effect* universe, but stands as a point of contention for the Citadel Council and other alien races in the game. While Mantello does not discuss the concept of hegemonic masculinity in his article, the games that he mentioned do follow the criteria for hegemonic masculinity in the sense that all of these games are action and strategy based, hyper-masculine, extremely violent, lack of female and POC (people of color) representation and the narrative pegs the United States as heroes compared to other nations in which they are "othered," even if they are allied with the US.

#### Research Procedures and Methodology: Theoretical Framework

The research procedures that are involved in this work range from my own participation and textual analysis of four different play-throughs of the game series. Since *Mass Effect* is a game that is heavily interactive and involved, there are different procedures and methodologies that need to be taken in order to gather the data that is

necessary for the purposes of this research.

During this research, in order to answer the questions of how the interpretations and uses of the game are resisting or reinforcing hegemony, I created four different versions of Commander Shepard with different backgrounds, gender and sexual orientations for what I call *gamer participatory textual analysis*. Part of the character creation process is that players can choose the features that their character will have. For example, the character creation menu in *Mass Effect* allows players to choose their own facial features, skin tones, hair color, etc. Players also have to choose what their character's occupation in the game will be and their psychological profile, which affects their morality code affiliation (see Table 1).

Creating Commander Shepard includes choosing biological sex, history, appearance, occupation, and psychological profile. Psychological profiles differ for each version of Shepard as well as morality code affiliations (Paragon/Renegade); these psychological profiles are "war hero," "ruthless" and "sole survivor." They are coded as "good," "evil" and "neutral" and affect a character's morality code, also known as the Paragon/Renegade affiliation. One aspect of creating Commander Shepard's identity is Shepard's sexual orientation, which is not established in the character creation process, but through the romantic relationships that the player chooses to have Shepard engage in.

*Table 1*

*Mass Effect Character Parameters*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Sexual Orientation</b>	<b>Alignment</b>	<b>Relationships</b>	<b>Outcome (Narrative)</b>
<b>John Shepard</b>	White	M	Straight	Renegade	Liara/Jack/Jack	Dies
<b>Astrid Shepard</b>	White	F	Straight	Paragon	Kaidan/Garrus/ Garrus	Lives
<b>Rimmer Shepard</b>	Black	M	Gay	P/ R/R	None/None/Steve	Lives
<b>Jane Shepard</b>	Black	F	Lesbian	R/P/P	Liara/Kelly/Liara	Lives

Each of these Commander Shepards will be interacting with their crew and other Non-Player Characters (NPCs for short) throughout all three games of the series; this is one of the few things that is consistent in each play-through that I have performed for this research. However, the romantic relationships that each of my characters engage in are in a different category all their own because, while a character interacts with their main crew, their romantic relationships take time to build if the player chooses to have their character get involved with one of their crew members. For all intents and purposes of this analysis, each Shepard engages in relationships with different crew members.

The psychological profile comes into effect through side missions (missions that deviate from the main narrative) and is also demonstrated through dialogue. The

psychological profiles need to be picked in the character creation menu. All of the created characters in this research have different psychological backgrounds. John's profile is "ruthless," Astrid's is "war hero," and Jane and Rimmer were "sole survivors." The last name never changes but players can chose to create a female or male Commander Shepard. In the end of the character creation process, the player has to put in a first name for Commander Shepard. The first name does not matter, since it will not be uttered in the text by any of the characters. It is mainly for players to keep track of their save files in the game.

Each of the created characters goes through changes and growth throughout the series based on the morality code system (Paragon/Renegade) and the relationships that they engage in. While all of their individual narratives are being played out, there will be issues that will arise within the text due to the choices that each of these characters make.

The Morality Code in the series involves the Paragon/Renegade choices. Throughout the series, there are choices within the dialogue box and certain scenes in the game that the player can choose. Whatever decision is made, it affects their morality code and determines what special abilities they get, but also determines the course of the storyline. The romantic relationships that the player also chooses to have their character engage in also affect the storyline, though not as significantly as the Paragon/Renegade system; however, the relationships lend themselves to different interpretations of the text. With this in mind, the only variables that change throughout each of the characters' individual narratives are their morality codes and the relationships that they cultivate and engage with, forming a diverse interpretation of the text.

The *Mass Effect* series consists of three games in total and each of the four

characters that I created carries over to the two sequels based on the save files of the previous game. However, I had the chance to create a new character or change the career of my previous character in the sequels. For the purposes of this research, the four characters had no changes made to their appearance, either in the character creation process or to their careers in *Mass Effect 2* and *3*.

I played the series several times with each of the versions of Commander Shepard that I have created but I made different morality code choices with each version in order to get as many different interpretations as possible. The different versions of Commander Shepard that a player creates do not interact with each other, since their version of Shepard is the main character in the game. By creating a different manifestation of Shepard each time for the purposes of this research, there can be many different textual outcomes.

In addition to the Paragon/Renegade system affecting the multiple interpretations of the text, another factor is the text of the game itself. While the morality code system in the game allows players to dictate the trajectory of their narrative, there is already a basic, pre-existing textual plotline framework that the players are already participating in once they create their own character. In essence, the choice that the player makes in the narrative already have consequences, whichever trajectory the player decides to follow, and is consistent with each play-through of the series.

In order to generate the textual data necessary for this analysis, there were multiple gameplays and characters created for the *Mass Effect* series through various save files with the parameters that have been set in place in order to obtain as many readings of the text as possible. There are three games in the entire series of *Mass Effect* and these

four characters that I have created go through all three games of the series in order to get a full reading for the purposes of this research. While playing the game, I have also taken notes and observations within the text and the narrative.

The parameters for the entire series that I have set up are four characters that I created (two female, two male) that have different features (skin tone, eyes, facial features, etc.), differing ideologies (paragon and renegade) in order to differentiate the responses and interactions within the game, and differing sexual orientations, interactions and romantic relationships in order to show the intersectionality of race, gender and sexual orientation. The only changing variables in the characters are the relationships that they engage with and their morality codes. The reason why I decided to have these variables change is due to the subtle and not so subtle additional issues that arise with the consequences of the morality codes and the relationships, which gives different interpretations to the text of the entire series. These parameters have been set in place for this research because there are different interpretations of the text and these interpretations can either be resistive or reinforcing hegemonic masculinity.

In order to analyze and interpret different meanings from the text and the characters of the games themselves, I created several campaigns for the entire series. The campaigns feature the four characters that are listed in Table 1 (these characters have their own separate game data files). The choices within those campaigns are different with each play-through of the game. So far the current number of play-throughs that I have done for the series stands at twelve with the different parameters that I have set in place in order to get as many varied interpretations and outcomes as possible. The notes are being taken in between play-through sessions and there are already many save data

files in the game that I can reference for the purposes of this research for the key scenes that need to be analyzed.

This research and data collection occurred for more than 14 months, starting in May 2013. As mentioned previously, there are different parameters for the game files of *Mass Effect*. With each play-through of the game, there are going to be differences. With each Shepard that a player creates, there are going to be different interpretations, readings and there are going to be different ways in which they engage with the text that go beyond the game. The situation in which I based this analysis on was while I was playing the entire series and noticed the differences in the narrative based on how my versions of Commander Shepard were created and the choices that I made within their respective narratives.

In examining the responses and how the text is altered, the Shepards begin to adopt personalities of their own based on the history, responses and choices the players make. Shepard could be a reasonable, sarcastic or sadistic but loyal person. With these parameters in place, the goal is to see how the dialogue, text and experience differ based on the responses and choices that the players make, and to examine these for their hegemonic and/or counter-hegemonic meanings in relation to the issues of the study.

### Chapter Preview

In Chapter Two, the overall text, the texts shaped by the four different Shepards, and the marketing of the *Mass Effect* series is examined and critiqued in terms of reinforcement and/or subversion of the hegemonies previously discussed. The concluding chapter answers the research questions, considers the implications of the study, and suggests ongoing research.

## CHAPTER TWO: MARKETING AND TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

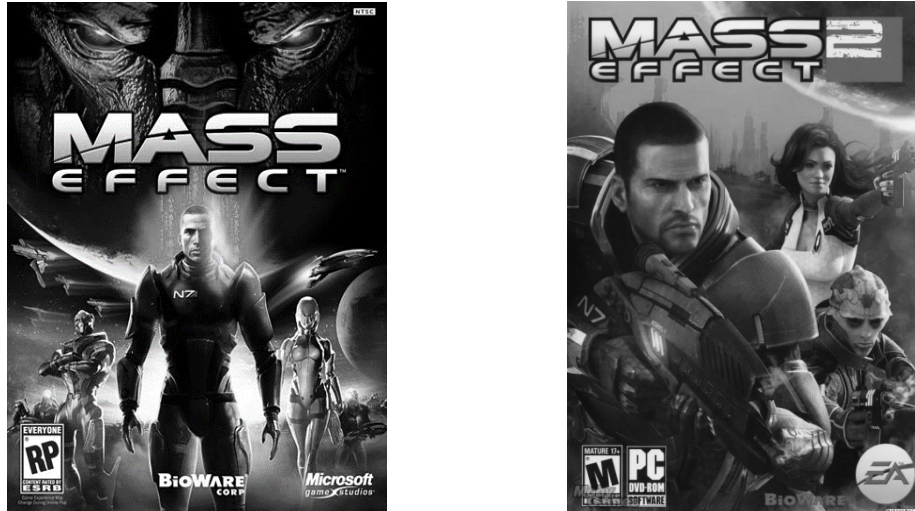
### *Mass Effect: Production, Marketing, and Appeal*

Most video games do not typically appeal to women due to marketing adhering to the male gaze and reinforcing the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity. This section examines how marketing affects and appeals to certain demographics over others due social constructions of gender identity and relates this to the *Mass Effect* case.

Shira Chess's article, "A 36-24-36 Cerebrum: Productivity, Gender and Video Game Advertising," compares the different types of ads for the Nintendo DS. She argues that these ads are heavily gendered because of how the DS is being marketed. For example, one ad features a woman in the waiting room playing a game of Sudoku, while the other ad features a brain. Both of the ads play off on the gendered assumption that women enjoy games that encourage productivity, while men enjoy games that encourage cognitive activities (235-240).

The marketing for *Mass Effect* is also heavily gendered. In the ads for the first and second game, a white, male Commander Shepard is featured prominently while his teammates are in the background. Most of the time, the protagonist that is featured on the box cover is a white male.





*Figure 1: The box covers for Mass Effect 1 and 2*

These ads reinforce the trope of the “white male savior,” which is mentioned in Teju Cole’s article for *The Atlantic*, “The White Savior Industrial-Complex.” In his article, he discusses how the Kony 2012 viral video is an example of the “white savior.” However the narrative of the series subverts this concept to an extent. These ads also reinforce the idea that games within the genre of Sci-Fi and adventure appeal to men more so than women, which reproduces the hegemonically masculine characteristic of frontiersmanship (Trujillo). Even the box cover art reflects this commercial imperative for all three games of the series(see Figure 1). The advertising and the box cover art work off the assumption that men want to engage with the game and engage with the adventure. However, the game itself also appeals to women because there is the option of creating a female protagonist, but the ads reflect something completely different.

Most video games that have the option to create a protagonist of a different gender or race will not feature such options in its marketing due to the industry’s assumption that a video game will not sell if it does not feature a white male character on

the cover, even if the game is about a female protagonist or a minority race. *Mass Effect* is no exception to this rule. One of the few times a female protagonist is featured on the cover art and in advertisements is if she is wearing a revealing outfit or, in even rarer instances, if the game is named after her or her role, as is the case of *Tomb Raider*.

The marketing for video games also affects which demographics will engage with and purchase the game. One of the reasons *Mass Effect*'s marketing worked for some and not for others was because they tried to be inclusive but also excluded in their promotional materials the fact that women could play as a female character. To combat this, there was extensive coverage of the game in various gaming magazine articles and word of mouth from other female gamers stressing that women can create a female protagonist in the game. This shows that while the marketing for video games is heavily gendered, companies can do marketing that appeals to both men and women, which the series did try to do. However, it still featured a male protagonist on the cover, which they could have done marketing featuring both male and female Shepard. While the marketing for the series is problematic, the concepts that are encouraged in the gameplay and the text of the game can be considered progressive in the sense that it gives gamers of marginalized identities agency in creating their own version of Shepard.

#### Gender, Character Design, and Narrative

The outline of the first *Mass Effect* narrative is that Commander Shepard (the player's version of the character for their own gameplay of the series) leads a team on a mission to stop a rogue SPECTRE (elite black ops unit) agent named Saren. While on their search for Saren, they discover that he is being controlled and manipulated by the Reapers, an alien race bent on destroying and controlling all of the other races in order to have

supreme power. In the sequels, Commander Shepard and the team must continue to investigate and stop the Reapers, but they face many hardships and difficulties along the way, which include both the political and personal. In *Mass Effect* there is an equal sex ratio as to the number of male and female characters represented in the game. However, whichever version of Commander Shepard the player creates can skew these numbers a bit if they chose to create a male Shepard. A female Shepard equalizes the sex ratio.

The fact that women can choose to play as a female protagonist is still considered a watershed among industry insiders because there are so few games that allow women to be the heroines of their own narratives which is one of the reasons why *Mass Effect* has a large female audience. When the option is presented for the female demographic, more likely than not, most women will choose to play as a female as opposed to a male hero. However, the flip side is that straight men will also choose to play a female character for various reasons, one of which is that they would rather have something attractive to look at, which reinforces the idea of heteronormativity, traditional concepts of masculinity and the male gaze. The biggest example of this is Lara Croft in the *Tomb Raider* series before its 2013 reboot. In the franchise, Lara Croft's character design was heavily sexualized in order to appeal to the straight male demographic.

The character creation concept of *Mass Effect* is similar to tabletop games such as *Dungeons and Dragons*. However, the actual gameplay abandons these rules entirely. The game is set up as a third-person shooter RPG (role playing game) and there are weapons, armor and boosters (which are designated to your career of choice) that can be collected along the way. Along with many other RPG games, players gain experience points by defeating the Geth (mechanical beings) and other enemies, which unlocks more

abilities and powers.

Falling in line with the traditional tropes of science fiction, *Mass Effect* deals with many sociopolitical issues. However, unlike most such texts, *Mass Effect* subverts many tropes in its narrative that are commonly associated with the genre. For example, in older works of science fiction, the main female protagonist is always sexualized in some form, whether it is in her outfit or “coquettish” personality traits, and is often the “damsel in distress.” However, in *Mass Effect*, the women have their own sense of identity and agency, and aside from Miranda, they are not as heavily sexualized in their design or appearance.

Another important concept of the series is building relationships and teamwork. Each Commander Shepard that I created has to work in a team and the teamwork concept is programmed into the gameplay. It is programmed so that the games are near impossible to beat without the cooperation and assistance from one’s crew and teammates. These are also part of the criteria for what is known as a “pink game.”

Games like *Cooking Mama*, any *Barbie* game, any *Disney Princess* franchise game, etc. Denner and Campe examine “pink games” in their article, “What Games Made by Girls Can Tell Us,” in the book, *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New Perspectives on Gender and Gaming*, and list the criteria of what constitutes as a game for girls. However, while these games present quite a few problematic gender assumptions, and tend to have a separate corner in many stores, most of them do have character-centered plots, deal with friendship issues and social relations and feature brightly colored graphics (129-30).

A majority of the next-generation video games that have been released in the last

couple of decades contain a character-driven plot and deal with interpersonal relations. Games such as *L.A. Noire*, *Red Dead Redemption*, *Tomb Raider* (the 2013 reboot), the *Dragon Age* series, *The Legend of Zelda* series, *Super Paper Mario* and many others reflect a character-driven narrative with great success. Character-centered plots and interpersonal relationships are among the criteria for a “pink game.” The games mentioned above do not necessarily fall under that category; however, they utilize the character-centered plot and interpersonal relations to engage the audience in the narrative.

The “pink game” characteristics of the series include utilizing character-centered plots in its narrative. One of the most notable aspects of a “pink game” is that it often features a female protagonist that acts as the hero, has agency in her actions, and is active in her adventures (130). Many of the tropes and guidelines that are often associated with “pink games” were later used in games that were marketed exclusively to men. The *Final Fantasy* franchise and many other RPG games were one of the early adopters of the “pink games” guidelines.

The guidelines within the “pink games” were becoming more utilized in many narratives in order to keep the audience more invested in their games and more engaged. The *Mass Effect* series deals with a lot of friendship issues, social relationships and relations and most of the stages feature bright colors and imagery. For example, the fates of the crew in *Mass Effect 2* and *3* are determined based on the relationships that you cultivate with them and their loyalty missions. If the player fails one or more of the loyalty missions, your crew members will die near the end of both games. In the first installment, the player’s relationship with Wrex (Krogan) also determines the narrative and course of the second and third games. The romantic relationships are a big part of the

*Mass Effect* series and the relationship option is one of the aspects of the game that appeals to both male and female fans of the franchise.

The (optional) romantic sub-plots of *Mass Effect* are also seen in other games. The *Final Fantasy* series is one of the more notable examples of this, in addition to *Dragon Age*, and *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (earlier BioWare titles), among many others. While romance is not a big feature of the “pink games,” they do focus on friendship issues and social relations in terms of romantic relationships and associations. In addition to the friendship and romantic relationships in *Mass Effect*, the game also has brightly colored graphics.

There are several stages in all three *Mass Effect* games that have bright colors and bright lighting. While some parts of the Normandy (the ship that the character travels in throughout all three games) are darkly lit, there are other parts that are very bright. One of the criteria that are associated with “pink games” is brightly colored graphics. The Citadel in all three games also features bright colors and lighting, there are some other planets that the crew has missions on that also feature bright colors, but there are also dark color palettes as well. The assumption is that games that contain drab/dark color palettes are meant to appeal to men as opposed to bright colors. *Mass Effect* has both bright and dark color palettes in its graphics which appeals to both men and women. Most science fiction games and media tend to be filmed with dark/drab color palettes with the exception of *The Fifth Element* and *Remember Me*.

The “pink game” characteristics have allowed the *Mass Effect* series to reach a much larger audience than anticipated. By using the techniques and tropes often associated with games that are marketed to girls, *Mass Effect* has become the success that

it is, with the diverse audience that it has. Many other games and franchises have used these criteria, but remained solely focused on marketing their games to the male demographic as opposed to marketing the games to as many demographics as possible. These aspects of production were also evident in all of my play-throughs of all of my Shepards for this research but there were some issues that came up within their narratives and text as well that need to be acknowledged.

Character design, development and gender discourse are some of the factors in the series that remain consistent. These factors show how the male and female versions of Shepard are treated within the universe of the game and from a production standpoint. The female version of Shepard is treated differently than male Shepard, regardless of the relationship and responses that the players choose and vice versa within the narrative. In the repeat play-throughs, female Shepard is still catcalled and sexually harassed; however the player has different options for how they respond and react in these situations.

There are many ways that the male gaze is present in the series—for instance, in the general female character design. Some of these characters are fully clothed, but their uniforms are skintight and don't exactly leave much to the imagination. The “camera” pans the bodies of all of the female characters in each interaction, showing their faces, but also their chests, and in some moments their backsides. Even Astrid and Jane's uniforms are skintight and, as I played the game, I noticed that I was looking at both of their backs rather than their faces; the only time that I was able to see their faces was when I hid for cover or during conversations with crew members and NPCs. The only exception to this is Jack, since she is covered head to toe in tattoos and acts as a subversion of the gaze.

Another thing to note is that while their character design is a bit problematic, at the very least, all of the female characters in the series have their own personalities and agency but, at the same time, their personalities tend to fall into “tropes” and “archetypes.” While these archetypes and tropes have existed since the conception of media, they have become more mainstream in recent decades due the popularity of video game technologies. However, one of the many ways to violate the male gaze, at least in terms of the story, is to present female characters that have agency and an identity all their own, that go against the tropes and archetypical boxes of the genre.

For example, in *Mass Effect 2*, Miranda, one of the characters on Shepard’s team, is dressed in a skintight outfit and seen in terms of the camera perspective of the male gaze, where it pans slowly upwards in order for the player to see her body and then her



*Figure 2: (Male) Commander Shepard having a conversation with Miranda Lawson*



face. With this technique, she is an object rather than as a subject according to the male gaze. However, in the narrative and within the gameplay, she's a very strong fighter and she is capable of holding her own in battle. She also has strong leadership qualities and is highly intelligent while having a very cold, detached, but professional personality. While the camera angles tend to reinforce Mulvey's concept of the male gaze, Miranda's personality and agency within the story defy it. This example reflects a negotiation with the hegemonic male gaze while also attempting to subvert, yielding mixed messages.

While the developers and creators of the series wanted to have female characters with agency and not sexually objectify them in any way, they unfortunately have to appeal to the male demographic. Game developers want to please as many audience members as they can, but there are implications when they try and please everyone. The main implications are that women are allowed to have agency and can be seen as human beings as long they adhere and conform to the male gaze.

Another consistency within the narrative is how it challenges and subverts the concepts of masculinity and the male power fantasy. There are male characters in the series that have muscular builds, but there are others that do not. What is problematic is that all of the male *humans* in the game are muscular. It's not just attributed to the men in the military, but the men that are civilians and politicians also have muscular builds. This plays into the male power fantasy role in which men are supposed to desire to be muscular and masculine. However, even if the men are muscular, their personalities do not fall under the "masculine" category. The men in the *Mass Effect* series also violate the criteria of hegemonic masculinity by having personalities that can be construed as "feminine."

For example, Kaidan Alenko, the male, human Lieutenant on the ship, is sensitive and thoughtful, while Garrus, the male, Turian Citadel Security Officer, is supportive, caring, at times introverted and slightly awkward. These two characters violate the traits of frontiersmanship, familial patriarchy and heterosexuality (in Kaidan's case) by having personality traits that are deemed "feminine" such as compassion, introversion (in Garrus' case) (both characters have this) and teamwork.

While it is often difficult to write a large cast of complex, realistic characters, these male characters have some qualities that subvert the typical tropes that are commonly associated with hegemonic masculinity but, at times do risk becoming caricatures of themselves and reinforcing negative stereotypes. The fact that there is more attention paid to the development of the female characters and the alien characters is interesting because, in most video games, they get the least amount of time to develop and are, unfortunately, often treated as either sexual objects, "othered," or as stereotypes. This idea alone in some ways subverts hegemonically masculine ideas of frontiersmanship and yet it reinforces tropes and negative stereotypes due to lack of character development of some of the other male characters.

Character development plays a much larger role in media than many realize; if the characters are complex, realistic and have a sense of humanity to them, people are going to gravitate to these characters more so than to stock characters. It also goes both ways in terms of how male and female characters are developed. In the traditional concepts of masculinity, these male characters are supposed to adhere to this role of being macho and show only masculine traits such as aggression, dominance, defiance, etc. However, these male characters do not display these characteristics.

## Overview of Pre-Programmed Text

The *Mass Effect* series has in place a basic plot line and structure that gives players an pre-programmed canvas to shape their own narratives by creating a main protagonist and making the choices and interactions that they prefer. In this section, the series concept is introduced and analyzed using Trujillo's characteristics of hegemonic masculinity and Mulvey's concept of the male gaze.

In the series, players have the ability to create their own version of Shepard and control certain aspects of the narrative as they see fit. However, the decisions that the player makes based on the chosen morality code and the consequences that come of the decision remain the same, no matter which morality code the player chooses. There are also certain things programmed into the game that will remain consistent, no matter how the player engages with the game. For example, the basic plot and main mission to track down Saren and stop the Reapers, the missions that need to be completed, and the characters and crew members that accompany Shepard remain the same; no matter how many times the game is played. The differences in each play-through are determined by how the player handles the missions and their relationships with their crew members.

### Text Description

*Mass Effect* is a trilogy series that was released by BioWare starting with the first game in 2007. Its sequels, *Mass Effect 2* (2009) and *Mass Effect 3* (2012) followed afterwards. The series has received much critical acclaim due to its dynamic storytelling, its use of narrative techniques, the art and sound aesthetic in which was heavily based on the films *Blade Runner* and *Ghost in the Shell*. The series developed a large fan base due to many factors. The game allows females, people of color (POC), and LGBTQ (lesbian

and bisexual, mostly) gamers agency in the sense of how they can create their own Commander Shepard and what interpersonal relationships they would like to pursue and cultivate. By many fans and critics alike, *Mass Effect* is often noted as one of the more “progressive” video games that have come out in recent decades.

This section analyzes the *Mass Effect* series marketing and text, including the morality code system and the gameplay mechanics, to see if all of these factor into a counter-hegemonic or hegemonic interpretation. This is done in four sections by describing the gameplay experience with each of the four different versions of Commander Shepard that I have created per one play-through of the series: These characters are named John (character 1), Astrid (character 2), Rimmer (character 3), and Jane (character 4). Each different version of Commander Shepard and the decisions that I have chosen within the morality code system that fit their psychological profile will determine the interpretations of the text and whether the text is interpreted as counter-hegemonic or hegemonic.

The text being utilized in this research is an example of the recent trend in video games to appeal to a larger array of demographics by developing games in which players can create their own characters in a pre-existing universe as opposed to the typical one, which consists of a male protagonist going on an adventure, which tends to favor the white, upper/middle class males that are in the 14-35 demographic. The appeal of the *Mass Effect* series involves the intersection of many demographics and identities. However, the marketing that was done of the series, presents a different story entirely.

#### *Racial Politics and Discourse*

Race is another area to assess concerning consistent elements and themes within

the series. In the character creation screen for all of the games, the player always plays as a human. Within the narrative of the series, the four different versions of Shepard are discriminated against for being human in the public and political spheres. Hall's concept of overt racism is at play in this context. In the text of the game, the alien led council already has ideas about humanity's role in the community and in adhering to their own ideologies, the Council refuses to allow humanity to have its own form of political representation due to the belief that humanity decided to start colonies in the Terminus Systems, an area widely known as dangerous and for demanding political representation.

In the game, both the male and female Shepard is subjected to racial micro-aggressions from other alien races. One of these instances is in the briefings with the Council in the first and third games of the series, the Turian council member, Councilor Palin, makes racial, micro-aggressive comments towards all versions of Shepard.

These instances fit under Hall's overt racism; however, it is much more complicated than that. From an objective perspective, Shepard is framed as "the white savior," helping the "oppressed minority" which in this case is humanity, since humanity does not have any form of political power. In order to prove themselves and show that they want to be a part of the galactic community that they inhabit, their leaders encourage their citizens to band together to save the universe. However, the narrative of the games try to frame Shepard as "other" or "person of color," so that players identify the most with their created character and it feels as if they are merely fighting for equal rights and political representation. The concept of "cultural competency" is at play in this instance. Jacqueline Bobo describes this concept as follows:

Members of a social audience – people who are actually watching a film or

television program – will utilize interpretive strategies that are based upon their past viewing experiences as well as upon their personal histories, whether social, racial, sexual, or economic. (87)

Cultural competency plays into how a player will interpret a game based on their own experiences, whether coming from a privileged or a marginalized demographic.

However, the distinction that needs to be made is that this only applies to players that are trained by these experiences to take a more critical approach to make choices that are counter-hegemonic. Other players will still operate from a sense of exceptionalism and privilege and want dominion over the alien races, not just equality.

#### *Sexual Politics and Discourse*

Sexuality is a more complicated matter within *Mass Effect*. While players can choose their version of Shepard to have a different orientation, the romance options are the same for each version of Shepard the player wants to create. However, this poses an interesting context in which sexuality can be interpreted as fluid and not definite. The characters that can be romanced in the series remain consistent and already programmed into the game. However, the option to have a male version of Shepard engage in a homosexual relationship is non-existent, up until *Mass Effect 3*.

Throughout the narrative of the series, there is an unfair distribution and representation in terms of relationships and sexual identities. It is rare that any type of media or text features a lead gay/lesbian/bisexual/transsexual/asexual/pansexual male and/or female protagonist due to it violating and subverting heteronormativity, gender binaries and hegemonic masculinity. There are very few LGBTQ characters within the gaming sphere and for a game that passes itself off as “progressive,” it would have

actually been a step up to feature more LGBTQ characters among the crew and present the option for players to have a gay protagonist and engage in a gay relationship in all three games of the series.

The result is that a gay man can be represented and portrayed positively as long as he doesn't have a romance or appear to be gay. However this issue is not apparent with any female character within the universe of the series considering that lesbians and bisexual women are somewhat more accepted in the current heteronormative society due to the fact that "lesbian" sexual orientation is often played to the male gaze. Unlike the male Shepard character, female Shepard can have heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual relationships in all three games of the series.

There is also the problem in which transgendered characters are absent from the *Mass Effect* universe, and so the implication stands that that homosexuality, pansexuality, asexuality, transsexuality, bisexuality and any other alternative sexuality are an anomaly and rare. Despite all of this, the series is actually one of the few that has diverse representations of sexual identities, albeit problematically and it also plays into how specific demographics of gamers would not label themselves as such.

In Adrienne Shaw's article, "Do You Identify as a Gamer? Gender, Race, Sexuality and Gamer Identity," the LGBTQ gamers that she interviewed for her article told her that they have difficulty identifying themselves as "gamers" due to the fact that there are very few LGBTQ characters represented in a positive and empowering manner in video games and in video gaming culture (9). This is a common problem. There are as of yet no mainstream games that feature an LGBTQ protagonist as the lead character. However, while there are some empowering LGBTQ representations in the series

(Mordin, Kaidan, Steve, Liara, Samara, Kelly, Diana, Traynor), some of them are not positioned as a main character.

This lack of choice shows a deficit in LGBTQ representation in terms of video game characters even if the player has an option to create a character that is LGBTQ. For a highly influential video game series to not allow players to be able to engage in a homosexual romance with a crew member up until the final game is deeply problematic and disconcerting considering that my heterosexual male character had more romance options than any of the other characters that I created, which also reinforces heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinity.

#### *Political and Militaristic Discourse*

Militarism and politics are recurring motifs in the *Mass Effect* narrative. The issues that arise within the narratives are consistent in that they are often discussed. For example, the passage and effect of the genophage, a virus that was released in order to control the Krogan population and to stop the Krogan wars, plays on the racial assumption that the Krogans are more concerned with wars than they are with politics and the Citadel Council barring humans from holding any form of political representation due to their assumption that humanity is advancing too quickly and cannot function or understand the subtleties of intergalactic politics. These examples are a form of “overt” racism.

Another example is the way humanity is treated within the Council and in the political community at large. However, in *Mass Effect 2*, all versions of Shepard are not subjected to this type of discrimination by Cerberus. Cerberus is an anti-alien, pro-human organization, which at times has been accused of being a “terrorist” cell. Cerberus, led by



a man known as “the Illusive Man,” privileges the needs of humanity more so than needs of the intergalactic community. Cerberus as a whole is more concerned with the advancement of humanity and is willing to get its hands dirty politically and militaristically so as to get things done. Cerberus privileged all versions of Shepard (much to their discomfort) and their mission objectives more so than the safety of Shepard’s crew mates and intergalactic politics, which in this context creates a complicated situation for all versions of Shepard and the rest of the crew.

These situations are a contrast with how certain systemic organizations address political representation. The Council represents one extreme, while Cerberus represents another. The Council limits humanity in the political sphere, while Cerberus limits aliens in the public sphere and the Illusive Man (one of the main antagonists in the series) has often expressed hesitation towards working with other alien races as well on issues of militarism and politics. Depending on how the player interacts with the text of the game, these extremes can be seen as harmful and misdirected, while there are other players that side with one over the other. This aspect of the narrative is consistent and, again, it can contain different interpretations. How the player decides to approach it, is the only variable and can lead to several outcomes.

#### Overview of the Series Narrative

The characters that I created for the series are treated differently based on their gender and race, rather than their sexuality or orientation. In the context of race, the character that the players create is always going to be human. The player-created Shepards are not going to be discriminated against based on their skin color, but rather on the basis that they are human. The reason being that the protagonist in the series is always

human is because the narrative is about the first human SPECTRE (special ops soldier). Their sexual orientation is never an issue or a point of contention, but in the grand scheme, there are very few LGBTQ characters that are represented.

In the final installment of *Mass Effect*, there are three different endings that the player can choose from. The choices are “Destruction,” which consists of destroying the Reapers, “Synthesis” in which organics and synthetics become one and “Control” which is controlling the Reapers. The fate of the crew and Shepard is also determined by effective military strength as well as which path Shepard picks. These endings are coded as “noble,” “neutral” and “evil.” The “noble” ending consists of Shepard destroying the Reapers. The “neutral” ending consists of Shepard synthesizing with the machines in order to destroy the Reapers, but this also destroys humanity in the sense that humanity and the other races will be synthesized. The “evil” ending consists of Shepard controlling the Reapers.

The different save data in *Mass Effect 3* reflect that pivotal point in which a decision has to be made on the fate of Earth. The option for a player to essentially choose the ending of a game is rare. This is akin to giving a film director the “Final Cut” in which the director has control of how the movie will end. In the Hollywood studio system, most directors do not have control over the final ending of a film, even if it is already edited in place. It is the Hollywood Studio execs that make the call on “the final cut” based on early test screenings. This is the same principle in which the player can also have some control on how the game will end. With the three different endings in place, there are many different interpretations and different ways to analyze the text.

The outcomes of my characters are also due to my choices. Near the end of the

series, three of my characters lived and one died. For example, the reason that John died, was due to the destructive choices that I made in order to produce a hegemonic, masculine text. I made the choice to have him control the Reapers as opposed to destroying them and he died in the process. As mentioned before, the three choices for how to stop the Reapers are coded by what society typically assumes to be the “right,” “neutral or “wrong” decision. To some extent, the game also plays into the typical societal expectations of what the right and wrong choices are according to the dialogue choices in the game.

The reality is that these choices are set up to be difficult choices in which no one can win. It is the same concept as the Kobayashi Maru test in the *Star Trek* series. These choices are meant to reflect a no win situation for the player despite the choice. In the original version of the third game, even if the Effective Military Strength (the amount of military support recruited for the war) is high in the game, despite the choices that are made, Shepard will die. The outcry from fans was so strong that BioWare created a downloadable patch for players to have a different ending in which Shepard would survive if the Effective Military Strength is high and if Shepard chose the Destruction route. An official statement was made by BioWare Co-Founder, Dr. Ray Muzyka regarding the ending of *Mass Effect 3*:

Our first instinct is to defend our work and point to the high ratings offered by critics – but out of respect to our fans, we need to accept the criticism and feedback with humility. ([www.blog.bioware.com](http://www.blog.bioware.com))

*Mass Effect* is one of the few games that allow players to get emotionally invested and involved in the narrative. The choices that they make and the character that they

shape and create, in some ways are an extension of themselves. During this research and analysis, I began to get attached to these characters that I created and realized that they were extensions of my personality, good and bad. Many fans love the series because of the emotional connection and investment that they have in the characters that they created and the other characters that they interact with.

The pre-coded narrative of the *Mass Effect* series has criteria that have been analyzed. However, it is the different versions of Commander Shepard that actually complicate and shape the narrative, based on the chosen morality code, and the relationships cultivated in each, that need further examination.

### Gamer Participatory Textual Analysis

#### Overview of Results and Negotiated Discourses

There are many different discourses that can be negotiated within the series. The issues of sexuality, gender, race, politics and militarism come into play in each of the narratives. These narratives have many subtle and diverse dimensions to them based on the different morality codes that I chose for each of these characters and how these characters were created. One of the biggest points of contention with the series is that there will be different interpretations of the text based on how the player chooses to play the game and how they decide how the narrative is shaped based on either their own personal preference or personal experience.

In the *Mass Effect* Series, gameplay data and the text are essential in a player's negotiated discourse. How this data and text are analyzed, is another thing altogether. The different save data that I have acquired in my multiple play-throughs of the series, the notes that were taken in between game play start at pivotal plot points in which the player

makes a decision in the narrative. These decisions and choices that are made in the game reflect many different interpretations as well as negotiations of the text in it of itself. This is also taking into consideration the pre-programmed discourse in the narrative of the text. The textual analysis that is presented is based on the common interactive experiences from not only my play-through but also through the play-throughs of other players.

The results of each play-through for all of my characters are different and have different meanings. In John's narrative, he perpetuated the criteria for hegemonic masculinity and in keeping in line with that criteria, he died at the end, due to the choice that I made, which was to control the Reapers. John's play-through is an example of a masculine hegemonic text according to Trujillo's criteria. Jane, Rimmer and Astrid's narratives, however, are more counter-hegemonic on the basis that the criterion for hegemonic masculinity does not take into account women or gay men. Their narratives are read as counter-hegemonic despite some of the problematic variances. There are also aspects of intersectionality, identity politics, and the matrices of domination in play in their narratives. In the end, all three of these characters lived based on what I considered to be counter-hegemonic choice.

#### Process and Parameters

The process which I used to analyze this text was to create four different versions of Commander Shepard, one for each play-through of the entire series in order to produce different potential meanings of the text. Each of these characters and his/her parameters carry over to the two sequels of the series and the choices made in the first game will be reverberated in the next two games. Therefore, the choices, relationships, and the creation

and identity of the main character affect the experience in subtle and not so subtle ways. The choices that are presented in the narrative are often “coded” in the sense that whatever choice the player makes, it affects the course of the narrative and privileges certain interpretations of the text.

### Character 1: John Shepard

In the first play-through of the *Mass Effect* series, I played as John Shepard (he is still Commander Shepard, but, in the character creation menu, the player has to invent a first name) whose background profile is described as ruthless, cunning and mercenary. The idea behind my creating this particular character was to play as a character that embodies all aspects of hegemonic masculinity according to Nick Trujillo’s criteria, and then see what might be interpreted from the text.

### *Gender issues*

In some of the key highlights of *Mass Effect*, I chose *Renegade* responses in order to establish hegemonic, masculine criteria. One of the missions in the narrative was to locate Garrus (Turian ally and crew member). My character, John, had to interview a former Citadel Security officer named Harkin. As John approached Harkin, he tried to intimidate John and establish his power. The response options that were available were the Paragon and Renegade response options. For the purposes of this character I chose the Renegade response and John responded in the same intimidating manner while also threatening to harm Harkin. The renegade response is an example of reinforcing hegemonic masculinity. In this scene, I chose the response that established John’s power, which reinforces one of the criteria for hegemonic masculinity: force and control. This type of scene and response are very common occurrences in video game texts. Scenes

and character traits like these are not exclusive to the *Mass Effect* series.

Another example of hegemonic masculinity being reinforced is in *Mass Effect 2*, for which I also chose the renegade option for John when he was confronted by a female reporter who tried to run a smear campaign against him in *Mass Effect*. The renegade option appeared and when I selected that option, John punched the reporter in the face. This scene is also an example of reinforcement of the force and control criteria of hegemonic masculinity. While this option is also available to female Shepard, it is still problematic in this instance since this scene reinforces the idea that assault on another person is acceptable if s/he tried to run a smear campaign against you. However, the flip side of this interpretation is that this type of violence is not often associated with women, even though women are just as capable of being violent. The most disturbing thing about this scene is how John never got court martialed or reprimanded. Later on, back at the ship, Admiral Hackett says that while the action made Shepard look bad, he doesn't blame him for doing what he did.

This scene reinforces hegemonic masculinity in terms of physical force and control. Shepard is demonstrating literal force and control in this scene by showing power through violence. As Trujillo suggests: "Masculinity is hegemonic when power is defined in terms of physical force and control" (1). This scene recurs in *Mass Effect 3* with the same reporter; However, there is a choice of whether they should recruit the reporter or not. If the player is not interested in recruiting the reporter, she gets punched in the face again, which reinforces the problematic implications of actions and consequences from the previous entry in the series.

The issue of violence in the game does not end here. While it is written in the

narrative that there are going to be violent missions and encounters, the Paragon/Renegade choices allow players to make the decision as to resolve certain encounters and situations with or without violence. The renegade option is the more violent and ruthless response. The renegade options give the player an opportunity to explore the consequences of the “dishonorable” actions in a safe space.

According to arguments in Jansz’s article on “The Emotional Appeal of Adolescent Boys towards Violent Video Games,” these games provide a safe space for adolescent boys to explore complicated emotions and the consequences associated with certain actions (231-34). These scenes in the series offer an example of this exploration and since the paragon/renegade system allows for this, it also allows the player to make the choice regarding whether to show force and control or to tell off the reporter. However, because the series is based on the choices that the player makes, it is also just as likely that there are players that will forgo the violent option and choose to ignore the reporter. John’s relationships are also affected based on the decisions that I made for him according to the Renegade choices and his interactions with his crew members.

### *Sexuality Issues*

In terms of John’s relationships, he had more relationship opportunities than any of the other characters I have created in this research. Relationships are a big part of the appeal of the *Mass Effect* series. The interpersonal relationships among the crew differ based on the gender and sexual orientation of Shepard and the crew members; however, there are many problematic dichotomies that need to be examined amid the relationship structures.

For the purposes of the play-through of the series involving John, I chose for him



to be involved with Liara, an Asari archeologist, in *Mass Effect* and Jack, a female human criminal who happens to use powerful telekinetic powers known as “biotics,” in *Mass Effect 2* and *3*. In order to establish his relationship with Liara in *Mass Effect*, I had to choose questions and responses that were based on Liara’s culture and her scholarly research as an archeologist. In order to establish a good relationship with her, the responses I picked were those that did not involve fetishizing her or her race.

John’s relationship with Jack in *Mass Effect 2* and *3* is also interesting to note because in order to establish a relationship with her, John had to be understanding, patient and somewhat sensitive, which violated some of the criteria for hegemonic masculinity, such as force and control, familial patriarchy but also impressed her with the renegade options in the dialogue choices, which reinforced the force and control aspect of hegemonic masculinity.

This particular relationship dynamic is also interesting because Jack’s character presents a paradox in which she violates and reinforces certain aspects of hegemonic femininity. One of the ways that this particular relationship and this character reinforces hegemonic femininity is the fact that it is a heterosexual relationship and she shows some semblance of vulnerability, however, she violates hegemonic criteria because she doesn’t adhere to societal gender roles, such as being the submissive partner in a relationship, being highly sexual, having mostly masculine personality traits and valuing her freedom and independence. She also falls under a trope that is commonly associated with the male gaze known as “pretty and scary,” which is a combination of the “cute” and femme fatale tropes.

These tropes are examined and mentioned in Valerie Walkerdine’s article

“Playing the Game,” in which the girls she interviewed noted that some of the characters that they engaged with, such as Pikachu, Princess Peach, etc., exhibited certain characteristics, such as “cute and cuddly,” while the female fighters from Tekken exhibited others, such as “pretty and scary” and “femme fatale” (525). These characteristics and the dichotomies and paradoxes within them are also evident in John’s relationships with Liara and Jack.

Jack exhibits more masculine traits than feminine. She is crass, rude, foul-mouthed, no-nonsense and powerful but she has very feminine features and is almost half naked throughout the game except for a pair of baggy pants, suspenders and her body covered in tattoos. Jack obfuscates the male gaze by having tattoos covering her entire body, to the point that the player can barely distinguish that she is half naked and she has a tough personality.

In contrast to Liara, Jack hasn’t dealt with racial prejudice growing up but was abused in the school that she attended. While Jack is a victim of physical, emotional and mental abuse, she doesn’t see herself that way; she sees herself as a survivor, which is resistive to abuse victims being portrayed in the media as helpless and weak.

These two relationships for John have interesting meanings. While his relationship with Liara can be seen as resistive of overt/inferential racism in the aspect that their relationship is interracial and is not politicized or mocked, she is still fetishized in *Mass Effect* during the one sex scene in the game. Liara is a fully realized character that doesn’t adhere or portray any racial stereotype whatsoever. His relationship with Jack has a few more complications.

Jack tends to have more masculine qualities than feminine and the relationship

can, in a way, be seen as reinforcing hegemonic masculinity. For example, in order for John to engage in a relationship with Jack, he has to exert a form of force and control, while Jack is exhibiting her “masculine” traits according to the context of familial patriarchy in which “masculine” traits are stronger than “feminine.” The fact that she is not sexualized in any way is a form of resisting the male gaze according to Mulvey’s criteria; however, she refuses to identify herself as a victim, which is reinforcing hegemonically masculine ideologies in the sense that she is hiding her emotions, which is part of Trujillo’s criteria. However, another argument can be made that she is also resisting hegemonic femininity. There are other relationships that I had John cultivate in the game which also affect some of the more political and racial issues and decisions within the text

#### *Race, Intersectionality and Identity Politics*

John’s narrative also presents an interesting dichotomy. The “white male savior” trope is often found in media and video games are no exception. While it can be interpreted that John is liberating humanity and some of the marginalized races in the series due to his “whiteness,” which is a part of Teju Cole’s concept of “white savior” complex, humanity has struggled, fought and proven to earn the same privileges as the Council Races (Asari, Salarian and Turian). However, humanity still deals with racist and degrading remarks from the other alien races which play into Hall’s concepts of overt and inferential racism. In some occasions in the narrative, humanity is also accused of having “privilege” by the non-Council races. Some of the interpretations that can be taken from John’s narrative are that he is the “white male savior,” saving the galaxy from an alien race bent on dominating all of the other races. This issue is complicated much further

because in most video game narratives, “the white, male savior” is common, despite *Mass Effect*’s narrative being about the first human SPECTRE.

John’s relationship and conversations with his crew members often reveal moments in which they experienced a form of discrimination in their lives. Often, when he has conversations with his alien crew members, they tell him stories of discrimination. For example, Liara often speaks about her childhood and how her culture looked down on her for being a “pure-blood,” a racial slur that the Asari use to denigrate other Asari for having Asari parents as opposed to a parent of another race and, because she is a “young” academic, while outside of her culture, she is sexually objectified due to being a woman and an Asari.

Liara’s past and her relationships with Shepard and the other crew members bring up issues of intersectionality, the male gaze, ageism and racism. The Asari are all mono-gendered (one gender; in this case, female) and look human but they have tentacles on their head and blue skin. Any member of any other race that they engage in a relationship with will breed another female Asari. They have interracial, heterosexual, same sex marriages and relationships and they sometimes have children with the other races and within their own race.

In the Asari culture, the academic path is reserved for when the Asari have reached an age of maturation in which they can either be enforcers of justice known as the Justicar, a political figure known as the Matriarch, or living a life in academia known as the Ardat-Yakshi. In the Asari culture, the young Asari become either entertainers or mercenaries as a form of exploring the world around them. Another Asari character in the series, Atheyta (Liara’s mother, but she calls herself her “father”), a bartender in *Mass*

*Effect 2*, makes the argument that Asari society needs to start teaching the young women to be more politically and academically active as opposed to encouraging them to be entertainers and mercenaries for hire.

Liara explained in the game that the path she chose, which happens to be the academic path, is not considered socially acceptable for women in her age group; however, she preferred it to being a mercenary or an entertainer. Liara's gender, race and her age are an example of Hill Collins' theory of intersectionality and the matrices of domination. Being that Liara is female, Asari and young, she faces different types of oppression within the narrative of the game. Liara values knowledge more than being a mercenary or an entertainer. In the narrative of the game, she feels that knowledge is more empowering for the Asari and other oppressed races as a way to deconstruct their cultural and intergalactic oppressions at large, as is also stated by Hill Collins in her article: "By portraying African-American women as self-defined, self-reliant individuals confronting race, gender, and class oppression, Afrocentric feminist thought speaks to the importance that knowledge plays in empowering oppressed people" (1).

Liara's portrayal as a persistent, determined and independent scholar is an example of an empowered female character. By going against the ageist, sexist, racist attitudes in Asari and in the Intergalactic culture, she becomes a highly accomplished archeologist and scholar and takes the role of the Shadow Broker, the most powerful, information broker in the galaxy. Outside of her culture, she is sexually objectified by male humans and other alien races in the first and second game of the series. This is due to her race, as the character design of her race is heavily sexualized and humanized compared to other alien races in the game.

Within the relationship with John, her identity was examined through the dialogue options every time that I had John interact with her. When those options were chosen, her responses were about her culture and how she was marginalized within her culture. She talked about how she was discriminated against due to her age and, throughout the game, she also noticed how the male NPC's were objectifying and fetishizing the other Asari and how she found it degrading. She is also subjected to some racist remarks and comments from human civilians as well in the first and third games of the series. Another thing that was noted was how Navigator Pressley had an issue with the alien crewmembers that were recruited in the first game. I chose the dialogue option to shut down his racist views. In truth, the alien crew members in the *Mass Effect* series were subjected to some racist remarks and comments from human crew members and civilians during their conversations with all versions of Shepard.

Nakamura's article "Don't Hate the Player, Hate the Game: The Racialization of Labor in *World of Warcraft*," comes into play as she examines how labor is racialized in the *World of Warcraft* community by showing the anti-gold farming attitudes that North American and European players show towards Chinese players through their fan art, message board, machinima and in-game interactions (130-31). Some of the concepts in her article also apply to the *Mass Effect* series, due to how the Asari are racialized according to their professions, however the racialization is already pre-programmed into the text. The professions in the game are always brought up and some Non-Player Characters of different races always discuss how the Asari are involved in politics, art and forms of entertainment (dancing in bars being one of them), the Quarians in engineering and technology, the Volus in accounting and trade, etc.

The different races in the *Mass Effect* series are also met with derision and mockery because of their professions, which happen to be a part of their culture and society. This also occurs within our society. Certain marginalized demographics are met with derision due to the religion that they follow. One example is how those who follow the religions of Judaism, and Islam are also marginalized due to the intensified media coverage and the racial profiling of Arab-Americans. Often times, if they are portrayed in the media, they are often portrayed as villains (followers of Islam), terrorists (followers of Islam), accountants (followers of Judaism), etc.

This relationship is an also example of resisting overt and inferential racism. In the first game, John is in a relationship with Liara, as players can choose to be in a relationship in the text of the game with some of their crew members. Since traditional sci-fi tropes often position aliens as “people of color,” John’s relationship with Liara is “interracial” and oftentimes, “interracial” relationships in media are often politicized. In the context of the game, the relationship is treated as normal and is not politicized in any way. However, Liara’s experiences add another dimension of politics into her identity.

Crenshaw touches upon the issue of identity politics in her article “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color.” She states that women of color did not readily identify with the feminist movement due to it being exclusive to white, upper-middle class women and that their struggles were not what women of color could identify with. She states that identity politics affects the discourse of the feminist movement and acknowledges the importance of intersectionality within the movement (1243-44). Near the end of *Mass Effect*, Saren and his army invaded the Citadel and as the Council Members were trying to escape, an option appeared as to

whether to sacrifice the Alliance Fleet to save the Council or to let the Council members die. The two characters that were in John's party at that point were Liara and Ashley. Liara made the argument that saving the Council would give humanity a better reputation among the Intergalactic Community, while Ashley argued that they should be sacrificed due to the discriminatory treatment that humanity has received. In this instance, I chose for John to let the alien led Council Members die. As a result, Udina used this opportunity to usurp the alien-led council by appointing humans (at this point, John has full renegade affiliation).

With this particular decision, it can be interpreted that John is not in favor of saving the Council due to how humanity as a whole was discriminated against by the Council and does not want to be a part of a community that will not acknowledge humanity's achievements, existence or experiences according to Crenshaw's concepts of identity politics.

### *Politics and Militarism*

Politics is a large part of the *Mass Effect* series and the decisions that the player makes in the game also affect the political sphere of the universe. With this in mind, I chose certain options in John's narrative to see how the character's choices affected the politics within the game.

John's identity as a human lends itself to different forms of marginalization and discrimination by the other alien races within the universe. However, his identity as a human also presents political complications in which he faces pressure from Ambassador Udina and Cerberus to do things according to the best interests of humanity and ensure that humanity has political power and representation on the council. While this theme is



recurring in the narrative of the entire series, the other versions of Shepard have the additional aspect of intersectionality in their narratives, in addition to identity politics. In the case of John's narrative, I chose to let the Council die due to the discrimination that humanity has faced; however, this also had consequences that reverberated throughout his narrative and the rest of the series.

In Peter Mantello's article, he discusses how militarism plays a role in how subjecthood, diplomacy and sovereignty are viewed. While he doesn't state in his article the concept of intersectionality, it does play a large role in shaping politics and how politics and culture tend to clash with one another as well as combine with one another, especially in times of war and diplomacy (273). In this case, the Citadel Council and their policies are discriminatory and privileged in their execution and enforcement. John Shepard is a candidate to be the first human SPECTRE, an occupation that has been dominated by the Council races: the Asari, Turians and Salarians. This is reiterated by Captain Anderson who also says that the alien led council is not in favor of having a human SPECTRE in the ranks. With all of these things in mind, I chose for John to let the council die in the first game and allow Udina to assemble a human-dominated council.

This reinforces hegemonic masculinity in a few ways. For one, it reinforces the criteria of frontiersmanship and occupational achievement, by which the alien Council was usurped by Ambassador Udina. The subtext that can be interpreted from this particular narrative is that white men in power are preferred over having "aliens" (in this context of the narrative, marginalized races) in power. This also sends a problematic message that working in a team to create a more diverse political sphere is ineffective, while hegemonic protection and advancement is effective and vital to the survival of

humanity. In *Mass Effect 2*, the politics are not as pronounced but they are still a constant theme. *Mass Effect 2* focuses more on human politics, subjecthood and diplomacy, particularly in special ops missions.

In the sequel, I kept John's morality code as a renegade and decided at the end of the game to make the decision to let Cerberus (black ops division, commonly referred to as terrorists by the rest of the intergalactic community due to their stance of being anti-alien) control the Reapers. This affects the events of *Mass Effect 3* since he has the support of Cerberus (to an extent) and is in Udina's favor. However, at the end of *Mass Effect 3*, I had to make the choice as to whether I wanted to destroy, control or synthesize the Reapers. In order to keep the morality code consistent, I had John choose to control the Reapers (this is often coded as the "evil" choice) which also destroyed humanity. At the end of the entire series, John died.

The interpretation that can be taken away from John's narrative is that the destructive choices that he has made in all three games led to his demise, which in terms of narrative and karmic structure makes sense. However, what makes the series interesting and complicated is how fluid and complex the morality code and relationships are in the game. I created John in the same vein as other hyper-masculine media characters such as *Rambo* and the *Terminator* from their respective films. By doing this, John Shepard came off in all three games as a mix between Sterling Archer from *Archer*, the self-absorbed, narcissistic, overly entitled, offensive, highly functioning alcoholic secret agent and protagonist of the hit satiric TV series, and Duke Nukem from the *Duke Nukem* video game series, a character who is the embodiment and parody of the hyper-masculinized video game and media male hero such as *Rambo* and the *Terminator*. It is

more likely an aspect of production, but the voice actor for male Shepard, Mark Meer, may have something to do with this, considering that he has done comedies up until *Mass Effect*, which was one of his more serious roles.

The responses that John acted on and gave throughout the series came off as satirical as opposed to serious which adds an element of camp to the series. While it is purely unintentional, some players could argue that this version of Shepard is satirizing the hyper-masculinized video game characters that saturate the market.

### Character 2: Astrid Shepard

In the second play-through of the entire series, I decided to create a heterosexual, white, female version of Commander Shepard to see what the differences were in my experience as opposed to playing as John. I had her morality code set at Paragon throughout all three games in the series and the experience in playing a main female character was a lot more interesting. For one, the relationship options were different and the NPC (non-player character) reactions and interactions with Astrid are much different than that of John Shepard's, despite having the same exact lines. There were many subtle and not so subtle differences that occurred due to the gender of the character.

### *Gender Issues*

In revisiting the encounter and interview with Harkin in *Mass Effect*, Astrid confronted Commander Harkin about Garrus' location. Rather than threaten her like he did to John, Harkin objectified her and spoke to her in a sexualized manner that would make most people uncomfortable (this also happened to Jane as well in that narrative). The responses to choose from, regardless of renegade or paragon affiliations, gave me a chance to put Harkin and people like him in their place for sexually objectifying her,

something that is difficult for men and women to do in real life. Harkin's actions towards this version of Shepard are an example of the male gaze in the textual context, in which he only sees Shepard as a sexual object and not as the sexual subject. In the interest of keeping the morality code consistent, I chose the Paragon dialogue option for Astrid and she responded to Harkin in a very sarcastic tone that stopped Harkin in his tracks and reminded him not to disrespect her in that manner.

The same situation occurred in *Mass Effect 2* when Astrid is on the planet Omega, at the popular nightclub, Afterlife, and a Krogan male (another alien race in the game, looks like a cross between a rhino and a turtle) also sexually objectifies her. The response options in this situation are also to fight back regardless of the Paragon/Renegade options. In the same scenario, the Krogan assumed that she was a dancer and told her to go to the dancers' quarters. The response option available for Astrid was to threaten the Krogan and if that response was chosen, she would reply with "Show me yours, big guy," while pointing the gun to his head. However, for the purposes of maintaining the consistent morality code, I had Astrid choose the Paragon route and correct the Krogan as opposed to threaten him. These responses give some form of satisfaction or catharsis, especially to female and male players who have been sexually harassed in real life by people like Harkin and the Krogan bodyguard. However, one has to wonder about the interpretations surrounding these particular scenes in the game and how they differ from one character to another or one player to another.

The meaning of this scene and how it differs from John's narrative is in terms of how Astrid and Jane are treated and seen. In the article "Interpersonal Mistreatment in the Workplace: The Interface and Impact of General Incivility and Sexual Harassment" by

Sandy Lim and Lilia M. Cortina, they state:

By contrast, unwanted sexual attention involves experiences of sexually inappropriate behaviors that are unwanted and unreciprocated by the recipient. This includes such verbal and physical actions as sexually suggestive comments, attempts to establish sexual relationships despite discouragement, and unwanted touching. (483)

To Harkin and the Krogan bodyguard, she is seen as a sexual object rather than as a person. In both of those scenes in the games, she had to remind both Harkin and the Krogan that she is a person who should be treated with respect and not objectified in any way.

The treatment of Astrid can be interpreted in many different ways in the text. This could be interpreted as the creators of the game wanting to show players that this treatment is something that is very common and daily for women while, on the other hand, players with misogynistic viewpoints can see this treatment as appropriate and get angry at Astrid for defending herself and demanding to be treated as a human being. These scenes show an interesting contrast to John's narrative as he is not subjected to catcalls or sexual harassment. While this does give players, including male players, instruction on what constitutes sexual harassment, it can still be seen as something that women should not make a big deal out of, which is problematic. While Astrid is seen differently by NPCs, her relationships are also different.

#### *Sexuality Issues*

In *Mass Effect*, I had Astrid engage in a romantic relationship with her male Lieutenant, Kaidan Alenko and, in *Mass Effect 2* and *3*, with Garrus Vakarian, the Turian

character that is one of the consistent crew members throughout the series. The interesting thing about her relationships throughout the course of her narrative is that they are more egalitarian and don't necessarily adhere to traditional gender roles.

In the case of her relationship with Alenko, they see each other as equals and Astrid's dialogue options don't necessarily have as many renegade options as John's, but these responses are still there. Throughout the first game they regarded one another as equals and there weren't any gender roles that were being reinforced but, rather, they were being resisted. Their relationship did reinforce hegemonic masculinity in the sense that this is a heterosexual relationship, but it also resists Trujillo's hegemonic masculinity and femininity since the egalitarian nature of the relationship defies familial patriarchy.

In *Mass Effect 2* and *3*, I had Astrid engage in a relationship with her teammate Garrus (he was in the first game but the option to engage in a romance with him was not available). This relationship occurs after Astrid has a fight with Alenko and I had the option of whether to have Astrid save the relationship in *Mass Effect 3* or let it go. I had my character remain in her relationship with Garrus for the remainder of the narrative and it was also one of the more egalitarian relationships in the game. Garrus and Astrid's relationship was built on the solid friendship that they had from *Mass Effect*, which made this relationship come off as one of the stronger ones in the entire series. This relationship also resists hegemonic masculinity due to it being an interracial relationship and due to not adhering to traditional gender roles (violating familial patriarchy) respectively.

What can be interpreted from Astrid's relationships is that they are egalitarian and complex, which is a stark difference to John's. While John had to work harder in order to make his relationships work due to his renegade affiliation, Astrid's were not as difficult

and her dialogue didn't necessarily reflect the need to be impressive. Her paragon affiliation allowed her to have more "organic" conversations and let those build from friendships into romances as opposed to going straight for the romance. The overall experience was that Astrid was more interesting due to her paragon affiliation and her gender. This depends on how they are framed and how more natural it feels without having to reinforce certain gender roles. John's relationship with Jack reinforced gender roles, while Astrid's relationships resisted them. If Astrid had a renegade affiliation, her interactions would also be resistant of hegemonic masculinity because hegemonic masculinity takes only "strong men" into account.

The paragon/renegade system also plays into effect as to how Shepard approaches friendships and other kinds of relationships. In this case, Astrid's relationships felt more natural due to her paragon affiliation, while John's felt more forced due to his renegade affiliation. Astrid's relationships with the NPCs in the game also played a part in shaping her narrative.

### *Race, Intersectionality and Identity Politics*

Astrid's race also adds an interesting dynamic to the text of the game. In the context of the game, the different versions of Shepard face discrimination due to their status as human beings. With this in mind, Astrid's and Jane's cases carry an intersecting identity, due to both versions of Shepard being female and human. While Astrid is heterosexual and white, in the narrative, she is human and female, in which she faces more discrimination than her male, human peers. She is sexually objectified by the male human and alien NPCs and she, like all of the other versions Shepard, is subjected to racial microaggressions from authority figures in power and from alien NPCs.

These instances are a few of the many racial micro-aggressions that occur within the text of the game. There are different interpretations that can be taken from these examples. One of these interpretations is how racism and xenophobia affects politics and social relations in a negative way. Another interpretation is how race is often tied to the social, personal and political. Politics and identity are a common fixture in the series and these issues often intersect within the text, the missions and the crew members; Specifically tying into their racial identities and their feelings towards certain practices within their cultures and their culture's political spheres.

### *Politics and Militarism*

In the same scenario of dealing with the Council at the Citadel, the political sphere also contains an extra layer of intersectionality that comes into play. Patricia Hill Collins touched on the concept in her influential text, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. In the text, she states that the idea of intersectionality is to consider “race, class, gender, and sexuality” as they “constitute mutually constructing systems of oppression” (227). When two or more identities intersect with one another, they create a unique oppression. In Astrid's case, her race and gender create unique oppressions. By this point in the series she has already faced sexual harassment and gender discrimination from NPCs and is also marginalized due to her gender and race in the political and public sphere.

The Council is hesitant to have all versions of Shepard become the first human SPECTRE due to its belief that humanity was advancing too quickly. Essentially they did not want Shepard to become a SPECTRE on the basis of their race. At the end of the first game, Astrid also faced the decision to let the Council live or die. Since I chose for Astrid



to let the Council live, her reward was to pick who the human council member should be. The two choices are Ambassador Udina or Captain Anderson. Throughout the series, Ambassador Udina is always in support of humanity and its advancement in the intergalactic political sphere no matter the cost and refuses to work with any other alien representative in the Council. Captain Anderson, on the other hand, is always concerned with protecting the galaxy from threats and working with the other alien races and communities to do this effectively.

In keeping in line with the Paragon affiliation (and my dislike of Ambassador Udina), I chose for Astrid to appoint Captain Anderson as a Council Member. Choosing the person that serves on the Council will affect the narratives of the second and third game. Since Astrid selected Captain Anderson, in the second game he became instrumental in leading the rebuilding of the Citadel after the Reaper attack and pushed the Council to become more militaristic to defend against another attack from the Reapers and to investigate the Terminus Systems. He also argued that if the Reapers are attacking human colonies, then the other alien communities are at risk. However, the Council felt that the attack was an isolated incident. In the third game he stepped down and selected Udina to take over for him.

These choices in the game are an example of what Mantello discusses in his article. Mantello argues that games like *Call of Duty* complicate in some ways and oversimplify in others. He explains that the *Call of Duty* series does not acknowledge the political difficulty and ramifications of having special ops forces in the country without the knowledge or consent of said country (271-273). *Call of Duty* and games of its ilk, complicate political narratives for the players because of the misrepresentation of the

militaristic process and by reinforcing their own ideologies of how the Special Ops Forces operate, they complicate the truth of how Special Ops Forces operate in the real world. Unlike the *Call of Duty* series, *Mass Effect* does make the effort to show the complications of politics and militarism and how the military in the series cannot act without direct orders, discretion and clearance from the Council, due to the fear of causing an intergalactic war. While there are political ramifications in the context of the series, there are also personal politics that come into play. They have political ramifications that affect the narrative of the series, as well as how the character is going to proceed. The issue then becomes whether getting things done at all costs or following political protocol is the way to go.

*Mass Effect* points out these distinctions and explores extremes of both approaches and, depending on the choice that the player makes at the end of the second game, these choices reverberate. Mantello also critiques is how the militarism portrayed in video games often oversimplifies and “others” the group that the US is trying to overpower (276-278). In *Mass Effect*, there are some elements of these tropes in *Mass* but when the two institutions and ideologies are at odds with one another, depending on the path chosen, there will be consequences, good and bad, associated with the choice, which is something that *Call of Duty* does not provide.

The implications of these scenarios are interesting. When saving the Council and electing Captain Anderson as the first human Council Member, the narrative can be interpreted as humanity’s eagerness and enthusiasm for working with other races, and the idea that diversity and teamwork are highly valued. These notions are rarely expressed in video games, but the concept of teamwork and cooperation as part of the gameplay

experience is not an unfamiliar one.

Walkerdine, Bertozzi and Lee researched the difference between boys and girls playing video games and how they interact with the games. Walkerdine's theory is that girls tend to favor teamwork and cooperation over competition and domination. She observed a group of girls and boys and noted the differences between how they play and instructed each other on different strategies. Walkerdine states that during her observation, the girls were more focused on survival and beating the game, while the boys were more concerned with being the best and getting the highest score. Walkerdine suggests that this behavior is indicative of how men and women are socially conditioned according to gender roles (525-532). In this instance, gender/race intersects, because individual power rather than cooperation is a facet of hegemonic masculinity.

Specifically in Walkerdine's, Bertozzi's and Lee's articles in which the girls, according to Walkerdine, favored teamwork which is resistant of hegemonic masculinity, while the boys favored individual power which reinforces hegemonic masculinity. However, Bertozzi and Lee noted that once the constructs of gender roles were removed, girls and women are just as likely, if not more so to favor individual power over cooperation.

In the narratives of all three *Mass Effect* games, the main protagonist is always working in a team. Part of the gameplay in the series is based on the team that you choose according to the different types of missions that the player has to complete. How the player interacts and engages with his/her crew also affects the narrative. Cooperation and teamwork is one of the main cornerstones of gameplay in the *Mass Effect* series.

In *Mass Effect 2*, I maintained Astrid's morality code and decided to destroy the Reaper

Base as opposed to letting Cerberus take control. This decision affected the narrative of *Mass Effect 3* in terms of how Cerberus operatives were hunting Astrid and all of the people that are associated with her. In the end of the entire series, Astrid also has to make several choices. These choices are to save humanity by destroying the Reapers (in which she will survive), synthesize with mechanical life, or control the Reapers (both of which destroy both her and humanity). In keeping with her alignment, I chose for Astrid to destroy the Reapers and she lives at the end. However, the consequence of this decision is that she also destroys all of technology.

Astrid's entire narrative has many possible interpretations. One of the main interpretations that I took based on my play-through is that the choices that I made in her narrative are for the inclusion of humanity and other races in the political and social sphere of the intergalactic community and to end discriminatory practices that the Council had implemented. She also indirectly encourages and, in some ways, fights for political change and inclusion within the Council in terms of human political representation which, in turn encourages other alien races that have been excluded from the political sphere to seek and fight for inclusion.

Another interpretation is that she is still marginalized despite her achievements and her high rank and those men felt "threatened" by her power and agency. However, her relationships are also some of the most egalitarian relationships in any video game narrative, which is impressive since most relationships that are portrayed in video games are often one-dimensional and adhere to strict gender roles.

### Character 3: Rimmer Shepard

For the third play-through of the series, I decided to switch things up. I created

Rimmer to differentiate from John and to find out whether he defies or reinforces hegemonic masculinity. Two of the variables that I changed for Rimmer's character is his sexual orientation (he is gay), his skin color (black), and his morality code (Paragon). His narrative and decisions in *Mass Effect* and *Mass Effect 3* are very much similar to those of Astrid and Jane with a few exceptions but there are some glaring issues that arise in his narrative. However, there are no relationship options for Rimmer in *Mass Effect* and *Mass Effect 2*. In the third game, he has two romantic choices to engage with—Kaiden Alenko (bisexual) and Steve Cortez (gay and also a recent widow).

### *Gender Issues*

In *Mass Effect*, Rimmer's narrative was very similar to Astrid's, except that he wasn't catcalled or sexually harassed by NPCs. However, in *Mass Effect 2*, I decided to change Rimmer's affiliation to Renegade to see what the differences were in the overall narrative. It turned out that there were some actions that I did not want him to engage in. For example, in the scene with the female reporter who tried to smear him in the first game, I chose for him to ignore her and tell her to go away as opposed to retaliating as John and Astrid did. However, he did harm another person and broke his cover during his mission to recruit Archangel, putting his team at risk. In the end, he destroyed the Reaper base in Omega so that Cerberus couldn't have control over it. The Renegade responses were only relegated to dialogue exchange and the reason for this was to see if the dialogue responses still reinforced hegemonic masculinity in terms of force and control.

The interesting complication was that because Rimmer is a gay character, his Renegade responses and morality choices resisted hegemonic masculinity and challenged the male power fantasy as well as heteronormativity. However, this is also a stereotype,

considering that gay men can be considered masculine in four of the five characteristics of hegemonic masculinity. However, with the morality code in place, players can subvert that stereotype, but the game does unintentionally perpetuate it if players chose not to subvert it.

Rimmer also did not follow the stereotypical characterizations of gay men and did not fulfill those expectations. The male characters (with the exception of John) in the series also challenged traits of hegemonic masculinity, heteronormativity and the male power fantasy, due to their character development. It can also be argued that through player engagement, character development results when exploration and challenge come into play.

### *Sexuality Issues*

One of the biggest issues faced in Rimmer's narrative was the lack of romantic options for him. In the first and second game, Rimmer's only romance options were restricted to heterosexual relationships, which reinforce hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity. In *Mass Effect 3*, he did have the option to romance two male members of his crew and I had him engage in a relationship with Steve.

Rimmer's ending was also different. In his narrative, I chose for him to save the Council, but to elect Ambassador Udina instead. With the choice of selecting Ambassador Udina, he does become more cooperative with the Council, but it is revealed in *Mass Effect 3* that he was putting on a façade and feeding information to Cerberus. He also tried to push for more pro-human support and policies, but his policies were also problematic because they were discriminatory towards the aliens in the intergalactic community and he was also plotting to have all of the Council members killed in *Mass*

*Effect 3* in order to have a human led Council (this happens with all of my four characters' narratives). At the end, I made the decision to destroy the Reapers and in doing so, all of technology was destroyed. Rimmer lived because of this decision. One of the reasons I made that particular choice is that in media, LGBTQ characters are often portrayed as "tragic characters." As is noted in Henry M. Allen's article, "The Gay Artist as Tragic Hero in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*":

Like these two early twentieth century embodiments of fierce brotherhood and homoeroticism, however, Hallward finds his tragedy in his inability to bring his love into the context of his contemporary society as we said earlier, into the manifested world such as Aristotle presented in his *Parts of Animals*. (4)

Steve Cortez in *Mass Effect 3* has a tragic backstory in which his husband died in the Reaper attack on Earth at the beginning of the game and he is still grieving up until the second act. To have Rimmer engage in a homosexual relationship with Steve and the game allowing this form of homosexual expression in terms of love and allowing a gay character survive in the end of the series is subversive of that trope and is also subversive of heteronormativity.

#### *Race, Intersectionality and Identity Politics*

In Rimmer's narrative, he faces discrimination for being human, just like all of the other versions of Shepard that were created. However, Rimmer, like Jane, is Black. The interesting thing about *Mass Effect* is that humanity acknowledges the diversity of their own race and that, in the context of the game; there are no racist attitudes within their own race. This is problematic in the context that the interpretation that can be taken from this is that the *Mass Effect* series is "post-racist" or "colorblind racism."

Julie Guthman's article, "If Only They Knew": Color Blindness and Universalism in California Alternative Food Institutions," addresses this issue:

Refusing to see (or refusing to admit) race difference for fear of being deemed racist has its origins in liberal thought, yet as many have remarked regarding the doctrine of color blindness, it does its own violence by erasing the violence that the social construct of race has wrought in the form of racism. (390)

While there is nothing wrong with humanity being at a point in their society when they are post-racial, there is the possibility that racism still exists within the universe and plays into the concept of "colorblind racism." While it is more than likely that the programmers wanted players to see that inclusivity within humanity is beneficial, it still creates the problematic dichotomy in which a person of color who is playing the game can see this idea as dismissive their reality. On the other hand, it could be seen as hope for a diverse and inclusive society.

There is the interesting aspect that Rimmer is a black, gay, male. In the context of intersectional perspective, gay, black men are often discriminated against in society due to their race and sexual orientation. In this context, there are very few positive representations of gay, black men in any form of media. Most video games that are on the market rarely feature a protagonist that is a person of color. The only games that have persons of color as the protagonists often portray them as anti-heroes, as is the case for *50 Cent's Bulletproof*, *Prototype* and *Grand Theft Auto 5*. *Mass Effect* is one of the few games in which a player can create a person of color as their character and they become the hero as opposed to another outlaw. In this sense, Rimmer's creation and representation are important because he defies the racial stereotype of black men being



criminals.

### *Politics and Militarism*

In *Mass Effect*, Rimmer also faces political and identity issues like the other versions of Shepard. In this case, Rimmer's identity as a Black, gay male involves some interesting intersections. In the context of the real world, Rimmer is two times more likely to be discriminated against on the basis of his sexual orientation intersected with his race. In the context of the narrative, Rimmer is under pressure as the first human SPECTRE to represent humanity in its best light as possible; however this can also be interpreted as Rimmer representing the Black/LGBTQ intersection in its best light. Since there are few representations of people of color and LGBTQ characters in video games, the interpretation that can be taken away is that representation, no matter how small, matters. However, this also runs the risk of being considered "tokenism." According to Stuart Hall's article "New Ethnicities" in the text *Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*:

Marginality circumscribes the enunciative modalities of black film as cinematic discourse and imposes a double bind on black subjects who speak in the public sphere: if only one voice is given the 'right to speak,' that voice will be heard, by the majority culture, as 'speaking for' the many who are excluded or marginalized from access to the means of representation. This of course underlines the problem of Tokenism. (532)

While *Mass Effect* has a diverse cast and crew, it does run the risk of falling within the line of tokenism. For example, Shepard's interactions with the alien NPCs and the dialogue exchange. Within these interactions some of the alien NPCs view humanity as this homogenous, monolithic group which is an example of "tokenism."

However, it can also be interpreted as the game mocking the concept of “tokenism” and showing players how harmful “tokenism” really is.

The interpretations that can be taken away from Rimmer’s text are that out of all of the characters that I created for the series, he is one of the most marginalized due to his race and sexuality. While he is not actively harassed and mistreated due to his gender, he is harassed and discriminated against due to being human (or in the subtext, gay). While it doesn’t directly show this in the narrative, the production aspect creates the larger implication that gay protagonists cannot exist and, if they do, they have to sacrifice themselves for the greater good. Rimmer wasn’t given the option to have a homosexual romance in *Mass Effect* and *Mass Effect 2* and because of these production decisions, his narrative takes on a whole new meaning.

#### Character 4: Jane Shepard

Much like Rimmer, I created Jane as an LGBTQ character in my fourth play-through of the series. Jane is a lesbian and a woman of color. The reason I created two characters of color is because it is rare to have a POC as a protagonist in any media narrative and more so in video game narratives. Jane’s morality code is similar to Rimmer’s, but her text has some differences.

#### *Gender Issues*

Jane experienced the same gender discrimination issues that Astrid experienced. However, the added dimensions to the gender issues are Jane’s identities as a lesbian and a black woman. While any female created version of Shepard will be seen differently only due to their gender, the added intersections of sexual orientation and race come into play, especially if it is from the player’s perspective. With this in mind, in any other

media narrative, Jane will have to work much harder and will be portrayed differently than Astrid due to her basis of being a black, lesbian woman.

### *Sexuality Issues*

When it comes to her relationships, Jane has more options to pursue as opposed to Rimmer and Astrid. In *Mass Effect*, I chose for her to have a romance with Liara, who is bisexual. In *Mass Effect 2* she had a romance with Kelly Chambers who is pansexual. Then she resumed her romance with Liara in *Mass Effect 3*. The romance dialogue is the same but one thing to note in all three games is that bisexual (female) and lesbian relationships are more accepted and normalized than gay relationships, which is partly because they play to a male gaze.

Within the narrative, the positioning of the camera and the audience of certain video games, the male gaze is present when it concerns female characters, largely due to adhere to it and to also appeal to the male audience. Considering that much of the media, especially video games, tries to cater to the coveted 18-35 male demographic, the male gaze is largely present in the character design of female characters and in their characteristics. The myriad fan art depicting female characters and “shipping” (pairing characters together romantically) of female characters also address the male gaze, as they are often imaged in a sexually objectified manner. Pornography and the male gaze also sanction the “girl-on-girl” concept.

With all of this taken into consideration, the decision for the developers to not include a gay male romance option in *Mass Effect* and *Mass Effect 2* was likely due to their fears of losing the male audience, but in order to appeal to both male and female audiences, the male gaze was observed with some of the female characters in the option

for a female character to have a bisexual or lesbian relationship. This is not to say that bisexuality and lesbianism are not valid forms of sexual identification; they are, but the problem is that the male gaze exploits bisexuality and lesbianism. The patriarchal mindset is that more men are aroused and find two women that are engaging in intimate acts more acceptable than two men being intimate with one another. The idea of two men being intimate is a violation of the male gaze and hegemonic masculinity, but two women being intimate is not seen as such, which is something that is constantly perpetuated in media.

### *Race, Intersectionality and Identity Politics*

Intersectionality also has a key role in Jane's narrative. While she is sexually harassed and catcalled like Astrid and faces the same discrimination for being human in the intergalactic community, she is also a woman of color. The text does not outright discriminate against humans because of their skin tone, the subtextual implication is that people of color and women are marginalized and oppressed, especially women of color. The reason for creating a female character of color is because there are very few video games that feature a female protagonist of color and/or allow players to create a female protagonist of color. Jane is a Black lesbian commander and occupies a male dominant position. While she is treated with respect and seen as an equal, this is not the reality for women and people of color, especially women of color.

Scodari's article "Nyota Uhura Is Not a White Girl: Gender, Intersectionality, and *Star Trek* 2009's Alternate Romantic Universes" also explores the intersecting identity of Nyota Uhura from the *Star Trek* reboot and how she has a sense of agency and action in the reboot that she did not have in the original series. Women are not often in active roles

in media and Black women are typically positioned in passive roles, if they are represented at all. She also notes that fans that are women of color were happy and supportive that Uhura had romantic agency in the reboot and is at least playing an active role in the film as opposed to the original series. This form of intersectionality makes a difference in how a character and the character's portrayal are interpreted by the audience.

It is also rare to see a Black female protagonist in any video game who is portrayed in an empowering light. Even if there is one, she typically falls into the “angry Black woman” or Sapphire stereotypes which are black women that show any form of “self-valuation,” and/or “self-definition” as described by Collins. For example, *Bioshock: Infinite* and *The Last of Us* have this problem. Daisy Fitzroy in *Bioshock: Infinite* is the leader of the Vox Populi and is portrayed as powerful, intelligent and determined, but near the end of the second act, her anger leads her to attempt to kill a child, and then Elizabeth kills Daisy in order to protect the child. The same issue occurs in *The Last of Us* with Marlene, the leader of the Fireflies. She, too, became so consumed with fanaticism and anger that she tried to convince Joel to allow them to kill Ellie in order to create a cure for the Cordyceps virus. These two women are strong Black female characters but the instant that they show any form of assertiveness, power or dissent, they are dispatched of and eliminated, usually by a white male character.

The option to allow black female players to create an empowered black female character whose narrative they can shape is significant. The *Mass Effect* series allows players from marginalized demographics to create a character that is like them within a complex and rich narrative, without resorting to offensive stereotypes.

### *Politics and Militarism*

Jane's narrative trajectory was similar to Rimmer's, but some minor decisions were changed. She picked Captain Anderson to be the first human Council member and she also allowed Cerberus to take over the Reapers. She later regretted this decision in *Mass Effect 3*, since Cerberus decided to send their operatives to kill her and her crew. She also lives at the end of the narrative, and it is rare to see a LGBTQ and black female protagonist be the hero and survive in the end of the game.

## CHAPTER THREE: CONCLUSION

### Findings

Considering the fact that the *Mass Effect* series is one of the most influential games to have been released in the last several decades, there are many subversive ideologies within the scope of its narrative; however, there are also some problematic ideologies that need to be addressed. The findings, implications and further research options are covered in this chapter along with possible solutions and suggestions. While the solutions and suggestions are few, they are a key component in contributing to growth and inclusion in the video gaming industry, its products, and its target market.

One of the primary research inquiries of the thesis is as follows: Does the *Mass Effect* series really provide an opportunity for players to create their own narrative? While the text of the game for the most part allows players to create a subversive and hegemonic resistant narrative, it also allows players to create a text that reinforces many problematic ideologies. However, the complication is that there are many things that are already programmed into the game that cannot be changed.

Some aspects of the narratives and the personality traits of the characters cannot be changed, in addition to the main mission objectives. The male gaze that is present throughout the entire text of the series is also programmed into the game and cannot be changed in many scenes; however, there are attempts in some scenarios to subvert the gaze. While the text of the game has strong, complex and diverse female protagonists, some of them, most notably Miranda, are sexually objectified through their character

design and how they are positioned. This creates a problematic dichotomy in which women can be complex, but they need to be and appear sexy.

There is also the lack of same-sex romance options (in the case of the male version of Commander Shepard) in the first and second game of the series and lack of LGBTQ representation (most notably, the absence of transgendered characters) which reinforces the concepts of heteronormativity and cis-normativity. Apparently in the *Mass Effect* universe, alternate sexualities do exist, but represent a very small population compared to the many that identify as heterosexual.

Another primary research inquiry is as follows: Are most players likely to take away a resistive or hegemonic/patriarchal reading of the text when it concerns power relations related to feminism, intersectionality, militarism, sociopolitical issues and queer/sexuality? The answer to this question based on my research is complicated. The biggest complication and limitation that my research faces is cultural competency and the fact that I am a media studies scholar.

As previously mentioned in Chapter Two, Jacqueline Bobo's theorization of cultural competency relates to how a player will critically analyze and interpret a text or engage in a practice based on their personal experiences, including their marginal identities and education. Partly because of my personal background and experience of being a part of marginalized and intersecting identities, (female, multi-ethnic, fat) the concepts that are utilized throughout this research are based on my training and educational background in critical theory, which enables me to make choices in the game that are considered counter-hegemonic or in this case, for the purposes of my research, hegemonic. My perspective on the text is coming from a critical eye. For example, in the



text of the game, I can acknowledge that humanity is fighting for equal rights, but I can also acknowledge that another person might see it as fighting not only for the right of equality, but also for the right of domination. Of course this example is also based on my reading of how humanity is portrayed in the *Mass Effect* series. As mentioned in Chapter 2, they are portrayed as a marginalized demographic seeking equality and representation. However, it can also be interpreted that they are also seeking, not just equality but right of supremacy as is the case for Cerberus, the pro-Human group in the game. Someone without marginal status would be more likely to come up with the later interpretation.

The analysis and determinations that I have made throughout this research are based on my personal experiences from previous video games that I have engaged with and researched. The biggest problem is that there are many players that have different interactions and experiences with video games. Considering that this game allows many players to shape their own narratives, their findings, interpretations and overall experience with the series is going to differ from my overall experiences. The players' previous experiences determine whether their own interpretation is going to be counter-hegemonic or hegemonic. There is also another thing to consider; Players that are not a part of a marginalized demographic and/or do not have knowledge of critical theory are more likely to reinforce hegemonic interpretations.

For instance, if it were a typical video game player (i.e. young, white, heterosexual male) the choices would be vastly different compared to mine. For one, he would more than likely choose to create a white, male, heterosexual version of Commander Shepard. He would also choose to have heterosexual romances throughout and play into the concept of the male gaze. However, he would probably choose to have

an ambiguous morality code, since there will be scenarios in which he would choose to go the Paragon route and others he would choose to go Renegade. This scenario is hypothetical; however it serves as an example in contrast to the choices that I have made in my experience. It also serves as an example of some if not many of the choices that many male players have made while playing the game.

The text can be interpreted according to the participant's beliefs and ideologies. For example, while engaging with the text of the game, my interpretation of the text was mostly a progressive, counter-hegemonically resistant interpretation and most of the time I chose to resist hegemonic masculinity in terms of the paragon/renegade system. However, there were choices that I made within the text of the game that reinforced hegemonic masculinity and problematic ideologies that are persistent within the cultural sphere of video gaming.

Many players that engage with *Mass Effect* or any other video game series, are more than likely not going to take a critical look at the text; however, others may experience and interpret the text based on their more marginal beliefs and their life experience despite not knowing most of the critical terms and concepts that I have applied in this research. The comments and experiences of other players' regarding the series need to be considered in research.

The response to the question, "Can players take away a resistive or hegemonic/patriarchal reading of the text when it concerns power relations related to feminism, intersectionality, militarism, sociopolitical issues and queer/sexuality?," is that players can take away a resistive reading of the text, but there are several complications that need to be addressed. One of the issues with the game is that while it attempts to

appeal, include and appease many demographics, it also ends up alienating several others (LGBTQ, particularly transgender), plays into the male gaze in some respects, and reinforces some hegemonic ideologies concerning militarism (the Council refusing to listen to their agents comes to mind).

While the series is not perfect, at the very least, it is making an attempt to address many issues that games refuse to touch and also allows players, especially female players to be the hero of their own narrative by creating and shaping their own version of Commander Shepard. These types of games are rare when you consider the many different genres of games that cater specifically to a male audience.

#### Implications

The implications of this research are, first, that the *Mass Effect* series, within the gaming community and industry, has been cited as an influence on many of the games that have come out six years after the initial release of the first game. It is important to point out the problems with the game precisely because of the fact that this series is highly regarded by many industry insiders, developers and fans and is also highly influential. Doing so can advise many developers, industry insiders and fans of how to create video games in which all demographics are represented, welcomed and seen as individuals, rather than adhere to stereotypes and reinforce hegemonic masculinity along with other hegemonies.

What the industry and culture need to realize is that everyone is that their actual and potential audiences are diverse. There are different types of males who do not reflect Trujillo's criteria of hegemonic masculinity. Nor do all women fit into the criteria of hegemonic femininity. Not recognizing the differences in people is harmful to the

advancement of society, and can minimize the success of the product. It is important that the differences in people are acknowledged and welcomed.

There are very few games that have a diverse cast of characters in their text, and even fewer that allow players to choose options that are considered counter-hegemonic. The *Dragon Age* and *Star Wars: Knights of The Republic* series do allow players to create their own character and make counter-hegemonic choices based on what they want out of the narrative.

As mentioned earlier, the lack of LGBTQ characters in the game as well as in general in video games is a large issue, as the LGBTQ community is a demographic that tends to be largely ignored and underserved. As mentioned in Adrienne Shaw's article, there are LGBTQ players that love to play video games but are not often represented. When they do exist, LGBTQ characters in video games are often represented as a negative stereotype, treated with hostility or treated as comedic fodder, which makes it difficult for LGBTQ gamers to partake and get involved in the culture and industry.

Body politics is another issue to take into consideration. While the player can create her/his own version of Commander Shepard in the *Mass Effect* series, one cannot change the body of this character. In fact, all of the human characters and human NPCs are muscular, slender, and thin. Diverse bodies within the scope of the video game texts are almost non-existent (unless you are playing a different race in an MMORPG).

With all of these things in mind, there are several recommendations that I would like to present to the industry. These recommendations are few, but I believe that they can be followed. I am aware that there are more things that the industry can do to better improve representation in video games, but I feel that these are the most pressing ones

that need to be mentioned.

One of these recommendations is to feature more diverse, male and female characters that are treated and written as human beings, as opposed to stereotypes. To further specify, those in the video gaming industry are capable of creating diverse protagonists that have many intersecting identities. However, there is also the risk of “tokenism.” In the few instances in which there have been a female, queer and/or character of color, they end up being the only character with this identity in the game as if they were some monolithic representative of their own marginalized demographics. While representation does matter, tokenism can be harmful because it reduces those characters to a stereotype.

Another recommendation that I would like to make is to create characters that have diverse characteristics. Most of the characters in video games are slender, athletic, and/or muscular. Not to say that there is anything wrong with that, but when it becomes the standard, that’s where the issue lies. The video game *Watch Dogs* does actually present diverse bodies and demographics and it is executed extremely well. While the male protagonist of the game is white and muscular, the people that inhabit Chicago are diverse in every sense of the word. There are people of color, fat, thin, muscular, men, women, LGBTQ, young and old people in the background of the game that exist within the narrative, living their lives and going about their day to day business. In addition to that, there needs to be more positive portrayals of disabled bodies. The *Mass Effect* series is one of the few that has an empowering portrayal of a character that is disabled. Nevertheless, the industry is capable of creating a game that features a diverse population.

Still another recommendation that I would like to present is to feature more narratives that examine and critique instances of power, representation and social/political dominance. What *Mass Effect* does well is allow players to critique and examine these issues through the use of its Paragon/Renegade Morality Code system. These issues are presented in a subtle manner to the player by having Commander Shepard confront and deal with them within the narrative of the game. In using this technique, it allows the player to not only immerse themselves in the narrative, but to also allow themselves to critique and examine the sociopolitical power structure within the game and make decisions within the narrative based on their examinations. The morality code is one way to allow players to critique and examine these issues, but there are other ways that this can be done as well.

I would like to propose an overhaul in the way marketing is done for video games, specifically in terms of the way that female protagonists are portrayed and represented. As mentioned in Chapters One and Two, if the game features a female protagonist, most of the marketing will sexualize her in some way, shape or form. This also goes to character design. For each subversive portrayal of a female protagonist in marketing materials, there are thousands of others that are heavily sexualized games within the fighting genre such as *Tekken*, *Soul Calibur* and *Dead or Alive* are guilty of this. The bottom line is to feature more subversive and diverse portrayals of female and male characters in marketing materials.

With all of these recommendations in mind, the bigger implication is that the video gaming industry and culture as a whole are still being seen as a “boys only” club as opposed to the actual reality that many women and other demographics also engage in the

culture. If these recommendations are not taken seriously, women and many other marginalized demographics are not going to identify as “gamers” and are less likely to engage in the culture. There is also the possibility of the industry losing out on potential customers and profits if they continue to market video games the way that they have been marketed for the last three decades.

The theory and methodology used in this research and its implications are important to note. The methodology used in this research is textual analysis and taking this into consideration, I used a form of “textual poaching” (a term theorized by Henry Jenkins to refer to audience members’ attempts to remake a text) in order to interpret the text and the different variations of the narrative. Feminist critical theory is also utilized throughout this research; however, to supplement my findings, I had to use other theories and concepts in connection to it. Concepts that are a part of feminist cultural theory such as intersectionality, hegemonic masculinity, the male gaze, queer/sexuality theory were used along with others such as cultural competency, identity politics, “white savior” complex, and tokenism.

The implications involved in utilizing these theories are that they unearth many of the problematic issues within video game texts and their marketing. I was able to point out the more problematic aspects of the series that many players and fans would not have noticed by the first or second play through. While the methodology that I employed was effective for this type of research, it may not work for other types of games. The methodology used in this analysis is specifically tailored to this series and can only be utilized for games that have a similar game play structure as *Mass Effect*; this form of textual analysis or, in better terms, gamer participatory textual analysis is an effective

methodological addition to study and critique video games.

### Future Research

There are many things to critique and examine for future research concerning identity politics within the text of other video games that are available in the market. Another example of a video game that could be analyzed is the text and game play of Ubisoft's latest title, *Watch Dogs*. This game can be analyzed and researched based on the politics of the digital age, the Patriot Act, intersectionality and identity politics using approaches to textual analysis and analyzing theories concerning the concept of the panopticon, the concepts of safety and security, and the politics of militarism and surveillance. In *Watch Dogs*, a majority of the game play consists of hacking into surveillance cameras, computers, traffic lights and cell phones. In hacking into all of these items, the players see a lot of personal information and personal background of each of the citizens in Chicago. The player also listens in on phone conversations and reads incoming text messages from others to detect any potential crimes that are about to happen. These small but key aspects of the game are important to note, because being able to see the identity and personal information of the citizens in *Watch Dogs* is tied into the politics of the digital age, and there are hints of intersectionality in terms of the citizens of Chicago and some of the main protagonists in the game.

Another game that can be examined is *The Last of Us*, utilizing feminist critical theory, concepts of female agency and power, identity politics in addition to intersectionality theory, hegemonic masculinity and the "white savior" complex. In *The Last of Us*, there are two characters, Joel and Ellie, who have to work together, in order to survive a post-pandemic United States. Throughout the game, Ellie constantly asks Joel if



she can have a gun so that she can help him fight off hunters and people that have been infected with the cordyceps virus. Joel constantly says no to her until she saves his life, (twice in the game) which is an example of female agency and subverting the concepts of hegemonic masculinity.

Another video game that provides excellent examples that might be linked to identity politics, militarism and intersectionality theory that can be examined using textual analysis is *Infamous: Second Son*, in which the main character, Delsin Rowe is Native American (Akomish) and has a gene that is referred to as “the conduit gene” which enables him to use special powers. Throughout this particular text, he has to make choices regarding saving the Akomish tribe and helping the Conduits in their civil rights movement, which bears a striking parallel to many issues concerning the LGBTQ, women’s and civil rights movement, or focus on being the most powerful and feared Conduit. There is also the issue of militarism in the form of the D.U.P (Department of Unified Protection) which turns the city of Seattle into a police state, due to martial law being enacted. The reason for the martial law being enacted is due to the three conduits that escaped from a convoy that was going to take them to a specific training facility designed for them.

Another area to examine within these games and many others is the lack of body diversity and/or ability to adjust your character’s body size. The inability to adjust your character’s body size, and/or the lack of body diversity in video games is problematic due to the fact that this continuously perpetuates the problematic ideologies associated with the “ideal body,” perpetuates body standards that are near impossible to attain and is a form of “erasure.”

An additional area to examine is the voice acting performances, which is a production aspect of the text in a video game. During my research, I noticed that Male Commander Shepard's voice could be interpreted as satirizing hegemonic masculinity, especially when I made choices within the game that can be construed as reinforcing hegemonic masculinity. This could also be due to a number of factors, one of which is that Mark Meer, Male Commander Shepard's voice actor, is well known for doing comedies as opposed to dramas, and therefore the voice acting performance could be unintentional. On the other hand, it could be intentional on Meer's part and on the part of the voice-acting director of the series. Voice acting performances can affect how a text is interpreted and received.

There is also the (mis)representation of disabled bodies in video games. One of the supporting characters in the *Mass Effect* series is a pilot named Joker, who suffers from Vrolik's Syndrome, which makes the bones in his legs brittle and if he tries to walk, the bones break. While Joker's portrayal is one of the more realistic and positive ones of disabled bodies, he is one of the few characters in video gaming that is a disabled body. The lack of representation and misrepresentation of disabled bodies in video games is something that is not often discussed or mentioned, let alone analyzed or researched. If there is a character in a video game that is disabled, they are often met with derision or mockery. One of these cases in point is the *Fallout* series. The *Fallout* series treats disabled bodies as a joke and, often, mock and dehumanize disabled characters in their dialogue and rhetoric.

The only other time disabled bodies are present is in survival/horror genre video games. A majority of the games that make up this genre, feature plotlines that deal with

zombies and often times the zombies are deformed and/or disabled. Zombies are terrifying to most for various reasons; but, zombies are the most common portrayal of disabled and/or deformed bodies in video games, which can create a problematic association that living people with missing limbs will be seen as “monsters” by society. To research this particular phenomenon, there are many theories that can be utilized, such as erasure, tokenism, body politics and intersectionality theory in addition to identity politics. Textual analysis is appropriate in this case and some participatory analysis would also be useful. There are many survival/horror genre games that can be utilized to analyze and critique how disabled bodies are portrayed since it is one of the few genres that does represent disabled bodies.

Identity has become a key factor in the narrative of the more recent next-gen video games that have been released. These games are just a tip of the iceberg of the many others that are going to be released in later years. While the character concept and design is already established in some of these narratives, the dialogue, and the way the narrative plays out, can change a player’s perception in terms of how a main character identifies her/himself, or doesn’t.

These games have a recurring theme in how identity is tied into identity issues in some way, albeit sometimes subtle in their respective narratives. These games are also different because they deal with issues that other games do not normally deal with. The previously mentioned games are examples that can be researched and analyzed using textual and observational participant analysis, as well as feminist and other critical/cultural theory.

There are other aspects of the *Mass Effect* series that can be researched aside from

what I have analyzed and presented here. Even though I analyzed the *Mass Effect* series in length, there were shortcuts I made in order to produce a variety of Shepards to analyze. For example, Rimmer and Jane Shepard are both black and they are gay and lesbian, respectively. One could infer in my research that most people of color are also gay/lesbian within the *Mass Effect* universe. However, this is not the case, as players can make a white, gay, male version of Shepard and/or white, lesbian version of Shepard. While creating Jane and Rimmer, I wanted to get as many textual interpretations and outcomes based on multiple, intersecting identities. For further research into interpreting the different narratives and the many possible different intersecting identities within a player's version of Commander Shepard, there are many other versions that can be created according to the researcher's own parameters in order to examine different interpretations of the text based on the different intersecting identities. However, the researcher needs to keep in mind that there are many aspects of the *Mass Effect* narrative that are already pre-programmed, which makes this research a little more complicated.

Another topic of research that one could engage with is the audience for *Mass Effect* and the different ways players interpret and engage with the series, including the online multiplayer in the third *Mass Effect* game. The interactions and discussions on the online multiplayer differ from those on the message board and fan sites; the question is how are these discussions going to differ and what are the different demographics that engage in the forums and the online multiplayer.

Online interactions in the form of MMORPGs (Mass Multi-playing Online Role Playing Games) or First Person Shooters (FPS) also differ in demographics and interactions as opposed to their message boards. These online interactions can be and

often are hostile; however, this environment tends to be more hostile towards some demographics over others. With this mind, participatory analysis and textual poaching are good tools to utilize in order to research this aspect of the game as well as many others, keeping in mind feminist critique and theories of intersectionality.

Another research topic to consider is the recent phenomenon of the hostility round gender within the video gaming community and industry in terms of the recently formed, online hate group and campaign known as “GamerGate” (a term coined by actor Adam Baldwin). GamerGate is a perfect example of the hostile environment which includes, but is not limited to, death and rape threats and insults towards female and male gamers, developers, video game critics and fans that happen to analyze the sexist aspects of the video gaming culture and industry. GamerGate has recently reached new lows after an anonymous person associated with the group threatened to cause a massacre at Utah State University. The reason for the threat was due to the prominent feminist video game and media critic, Anita Sarkeesian, host and creator of *Feminist Frequency: Women vs. Video Game Tropes*, who was scheduled to speak at an event. Due to the lack of adequate security measures and that Utah is an Open-Carry State (gun owners are allowed to carry firearms, provided that they have a permit on them), Sarkeesian canceled her event.

This incident and GamerGate as a whole deserve research and attention because it affects everyone in the industry and illustrates why the industry and the culture need to evolve and mature. This phenomenon needs to be examined by looking at published articles, critiques, and online forums and communities that discuss GamerGate and how the controversy implicates the industry and culture at large.

One of the major topics that I did not have a chance to adequately explore are fan

communities within the video gaming culture. The *Mass Effect* community, for example, is often regarded as one of the more inclusive and progressive communities. However, within each fandom, there are fans that express problematic views. In order to analyze the fan community and how they engage with the text of the series, a qualitative participant analysis is required in order to examine demographics as well as identity issues, textual poaching, and cultural competency.

The diverse and different video game fan communities deserves their own research based on their interactions, fan art and other textual poaching, and how they exchange different ideas, express and reclaim the text. This can be accomplished by going onto the online forums to see how the fans engage with the text and one another. There are different ways that this can be done; analysis of textual poaching along with textual analysis is effective in studying the fan communities in addition to using participant analysis.

Another way to approach participant analysis is to observe a group of players and interview them based on the different choices that they made within the narrative of the game. One of the problems with this approach and participant analysis in general is that it may not take into account the time that the subjects in the study have devoted to the text of the game. Therefore, it will be difficult to determine how far they got in the narrative and what their interpretation of ongoing narrative will be. There is also the factor of interest. There are some gamers that are not interested in Sci-Fi narratives and prefer something else.

My particular approach to how I analyzed the game was eye-opening, but there was also the consideration that I was utilizing feminist cultural theory to interpret and

analyze the text. By creating four different versions of Shepard, I was able to get different game play experiences each time. While this approach had a lot of time put into it, it was worth it due to the material that I have analyzed. However, with my approach, there were many things that I could not allocate my time and devotion to research. While my methods were effective, there were many topics that I wanted to explore within the series that I was not able to, due to not having sufficient knowledge and information regarding some of these topics, such as the advanced technology used within the game and the moral and ethical implications of this technology.

The type of analysis and approach that I did with this research is not for everyone. A majority of gamers do not put this much time into analyzing a video game, let alone spend a year and a half researching it and noting their findings. However, scholars that are interested in picking up where I left off can do a controlled study in which they allow players to choose and make their own versions of Shepard to see how they experience the game compared to others. The findings of this controlled analysis are going to be astounding and will add to my findings.

The implications involved with the utilization of the concepts and theories of my research are that it opens up many more avenues for others to examine video games in a different perspective. There are many other issues and directions that I was not able to take with the *Mass Effect* series, due to the fact that there is so much that can be analyzed in the series that do not necessarily have anything to do with identity politics. What my research is intended to do is to open up other avenues for further studies and analysis into video game texts and to also point out that the games that appear the most progressive can actually contain some very regressive and problematic ideologies within its text, such

as the case for the *Mass Effect* series. What is even more important is that these games are often cited by industry professionals and gamers as “influential” and “game changers.”

The topics that I have mentioned are not often analyzed or discussed in video gaming culture. The reason why video games need to be examined on a sociopolitical level is because they have become more mainstream and many players invest many hours of their time and sometimes, emotions into the narratives and characters that they grow to love. It would be a disservice to the fans of gaming to not point out the problematic aspects within the industry and community.

By critiquing the problems within the community, the industry, and its products, there will be much better and more games that represent a bigger scope of the population that lives on Earth. At the very least the *Mass Effect* series is a great start in terms of allowing players to create a narrative that positively and realistically represents women, POC, LGBTQ gamers, critiques and questions popular misrepresentations of politics, militarism, race and sexism and resists different forms of hegemony.



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