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Sheparding Gender: Queering Video Games in the Mass Effect Series

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Abstract: The *Mass Effect* series is discussed as a case study for how video games construct gendered aspects of their lore and gameplay in order to appease what developers believe, and most likely is, their consumer base. While queering is possible both for the characters in the game and the gameplay as a performance it is also limited by appeasing an implied straight, male gamer.

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Introduction

You are a hero. Commander Shepard, of the Earth Alliance military, 160 years in the future. The story is war. You've been fighting the Reapers, a species of organic machinery bent on the destruction of all sentient life in the galaxy. Elaborate weaponry and thick space marine armor lifted from video game classics like *Halo* or *Metroid* outfit vast intergalactic armies. The "biotic" powers of you and your fellow warriors allow you to conjure force fields and toss objects onto enemies, echoing The Force from *Star Wars.* Various alien species are your allies and enemies alike. But combat is only part of your world; diplomacy is as much part of your mission as war in the video game series *Mass Effect.*

Late in your epic, there is a brief scene that is the civilian corollary of futuristic battle, a 21st century imagining of a 22nd century nightclub. Metallic walls and shimmering monitors envelop the throbbing nightlife. People in tight clothes in odd cuts resembling the neon-lined body suits of futurist film *Tron* dance and drink glowing neon beverages. Generic club music thrums and has, apparently, changed little in the past 100 years

John Shepard enters. His look may vary from game to game, facial features reconstructed by individual players, but the body is always the same. Large, muscular limbs, a thick neck upholding a defined head. What's more, he can be a *she* according to

the player's discretion, but for the purposes of this scenario it is John, not Jane, that walks into the club.

Steven Cortez leans his bicep on the bar. He is a pilot on your battleship the Normandy. You have recently helped him mourn his husband, who died in an attack orchestrated by the Reapers. Tonight, he tells you, he's cutting loose and enjoying the lively atmosphere of the bar. "And some of the eye candy in the crowd isn't too shabby either," he says as the camera focuses on a man dancing (*Mass Effect 3*).

A circle spilt into six sections pops into the lower half on the screen, the conversation wheel. The wheel serves as the interface for you to "converse" with non-player characters (NPCs). Some or all of the pieces of the wheel could be occupied by a snippet of dialogue. Every snippet is an abbreviated version of the voice-acted lines Shepard will speak upon making your choice. These choices could have morally reflexive ramifications, causing the in-game universe to interact with Shepard according to the "good" or "bad" decisions he makes. Different options could lead to different plots or you can use the conversation wheel to question an NPC (see Figure 1-1).

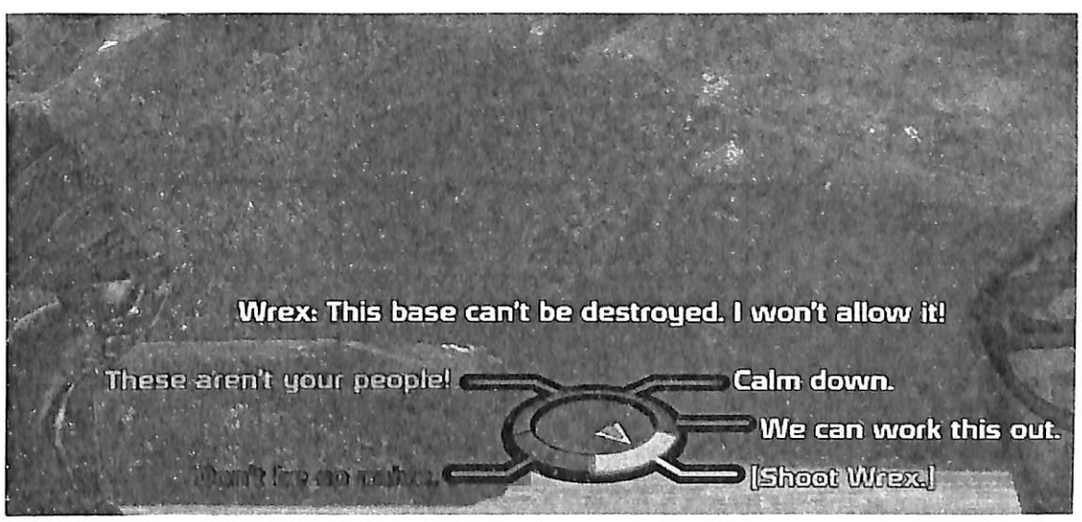

Figure 1-1

In this case with Cortez, the wheel's goal is to imitate a conversation between friends and alter Cortez's disposition towards Shepard accordingly. For now, two dialogue options are available that read "I'm eye candy too," and "I prefer the ladies."

"The eye candy on the stage is fine by me," Shepard says out loud, when you choose the "I prefer the ladies" option. The camera zooms in on said stage. Female bodies undulate. One woman is sprawled on all fours, her legs twisting underneath her thrusting pelvis. Cortez laughs. "Good. I sure don't need you as competition," he says.

The rest of the conversation plays out like a night between war buddies. The men toast, the cut scene ends. Had you picked the "I'm eye candy too" option, your conversation with Cortez would have followed a dialogue tree into what is the single exclusively gay male relationship in any *Mass Effect* game. But described above is the only moment that Shepard ever explicitly states his (or her) sexuality.

There are several gendered elements in this small scene. There are subversions of gendered expectations: Cortez, a stoic military pilot, is openly gay. Two men of different sexualities are close friends, perhaps a rarely represented relationship in most media. But there is also the blatant objectification of female bodies, used to reinforce Shepard's straightness.

In this thesis, I use the *Mass Effect* series as a case study for how video games construct gendered aspects of their lore and gameplay in order to appease what developers believe, and most likely is, their consumer base. I see how the games queer their characters' genders and can queer the player's gender.

In the first chapter I interpret characters' gender and sexuality and how they are constructed in regards to the player. I look at the representation of queer characters

including how many characters there are and how they are represented. For example, are female characters (especially lesbian characters) hyper sexualized? Or what are supposedly "alien" conceptualizations of gender/sexuality?

In the second chapter, I focus more on the game as a game. I will discuss how the player actually interacts with what is represented, what choices are there, and how the player is rewarded based on those interactions. I will not only be looking at what is actually available, but what is most easily available and what kinds of options are missing entirely.

Finally, in the third chapter I examine what developers have discussed regards to construction of gender, queer characters, queer gameplay and why they do or do not include such things. I will then discuss how ordinary players help each other queer content. These gamers are able to subvert the expectations of their own play through the use of mods and through conversations with developers to make changes in future games.

Video Games and Gender

Video games, however short their history may be, have long been fraught with problematic gender-related themes. Women in games, if portrayed at all, often wear less clothing than men and are the specific objects of violence (Beasley 3, Dietz 3). Such imagery has justly prompted criticism of the medium.

Scholars and critics of video games often examine gender in terms of representation. How many women characters are there, how are the women characters treated by men, how are the women characters characterized? A mainstay in these discussions has been Lara Croft, the protagonist of the series *Tomb Raider*. Her game innovated the action/adventure genre not just with its puzzles but also with the "stunning"

new graphics that depicted her bodacious body. Lara embodies "an ongoing culture clash over gender, sexuality, empowerment, and objectification" (Flower). Before *Tomb Raider*, the few women represented in video games were usually damsels in distress or sexy cover girls absent from the actual game ("Damsel in Distress: Part 1 - Tropes vs Women in Video Games"). While Lara's tiny waist and expansive bust evoke a Playboy bunny, her fearlessness, acrobatics, and penchant for violence call up images of Indiana Jones.

But the dominant discourse discusses Lara-the-video-game-character as if she were the movie version of Lara played by Angelina Jolie. While absolutely valuable, such discourses do not acknowledge the player as fundamentally different from a moviegoer, viewing Lara in terms of a role model instead of a role to be played. For example, Helen Kennedy asks how analysis of Lara changes when considering a man is most likely playing as her, taking on her role. Is there a blurring of gendered norms that results in transgressive play? Or is the performance only a reinforcement of straight male fantasies (Kennedy)? According to Kennedy, not considering player-game interaction results in a limited analysis. Gender is the repetition of expressive acts that one does or performs in conjunction with and for the benefit of others (West and Zimmerman 4). Gender's meaning changes and depends upon the social context in which one is doing it. Such a description could easily be applied to any game where the player takes control of an avatar, the game acting as an intermediary between the self and "others." And this is where *Mass Effect*, literally a *role-playing-game* (RPG), becomes particularly useful for viewing games as gender performance for the player.

Mass Effect is meant to emulate table-top role playing games such as *Dungeons and Dragons* and *Traveller*. In the "real life" version of role playing games, players create characters and more or less adventure according to pre-designated game structures. These games involve an active construction of self (Mackay 83). The world the self is reacting to is constructed via a dungeon master organically manipulating the game and reacting to players in real time. Players of table-top RPGs "use of anonymity, multiple nicknames, identity experiments (e.g. gender swapping)... suggests that the participants are not out to strengthen their position in society," but reject societal norms in their performances of their characters (Mackay 83). A man can create a female dwarf character, adopting the mannerisms he imagines her to have and maybe even wearing a costume. Bioware, *Mass Effect*'s developer, particularly endeavors to follow this model of gaming. Their earlier video games, *Baldur's Gate* and *Neverwinter Nights*, are essentially virtual adaptations of *Dungeons and Dragons*, taking place in the same "realm," with the structures of the video game based upon the *Dungeons and Dragons* rule books.

Compared to table-top games, video games restrict the breadth of player autonomy. Technology has freed up the ability of designers to make more room for more plot trees, but the final game is the final game, inherently limited by the medium. But the Western video game RPG is still derivative of the table-top RPG model, the core intent being for players to perform a role at least partially of their own design.

Bioware is not the only developer creating games in this role playing mode. *Mass Effect*'s player-to-character interaction and relationship building is similar to, say, *The Sims* or *Fable.* Both examples are less intimate (i.e., the player does not speak with

characters in specific "lines," but in generalized interactions such as "tell story" or "give present"), but the gameplay is still predicated on the player taking on a role in conversing with totally fictional characters.

Mass Effect is also an effective case study because it borrows conventions from several different genres, drawing connections between many forms of media in regards to gender. *Mass Effect* follows in the aesthetic and narrative footsteps of science-fiction legacies such as *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*. Equipment and technology designs are similar to the very popular game *Halo*. *Mass Effect* owes more than aesthetic inspiration to *Halo*. Although *Halo* is a first-person shooter, in the mode of *Call of Duty*, and *Mass Effect* is a third-person shooter more similar to *Gears of War* or *Dead Space*, the genres' differences are negligible for our purposes. Shooters in general focus on action packed combat and cinematic cut scenes and all of the aforementioned games fit that description.

Mass Effect is an extremely popular, well-received series. From 2007 to 2012 the combined sales of all three games tops 10 million units (D'Angelo 6). Every iteration was bestowed with several "Game of the Year" awards and every game's Meta-Critic score (a meta-critic score is the aggregate of all of a game's reviews, on a range from 1-100) is at least above an 85, if not well into the 90s. (*Metacritic.com*).

Mass Effect's high visibility and overlap with other games and media make it a useful nexus of both theoretical and substantive connections. The similarities between how the player can interact with NPCs in *Mass Effect* and in *The Sims* may reflect expectations of gendered relations, especially in regards to romantic relationships, present in both games. That, over the course of the series, *Mass Effect* increasingly borrowed combat from blockbuster shooters like *Call of Duty* can be explained by changing market

interests and therefore what is expected to be the default gender performance for that market.

Methods

I had completed each installment of *Mass Effect* at least once prior to any formal research, but my playthroughs were narrow. I always played as Jane Shepard, I always completed missions in the most "morally good" way possible, I always played the same kind of game, missing out on a lot of content. Any claims on potential gendered experiences based upon such limited play styles would be limited.

To account for my pre-knowledge's shortsightedness I played through each *Mass Effect* game in enough styles that each would yield different content. This meant accounting mainly for different plotlines based on morality choices and how the gender of the PC affects gameplay.

Intestingly, for the most part, the game experience does not depend upon which gender avatar the player chooses to enact. Rarely will the game even acknowledge whether the PC is a man or a woman. The cases in which it does, however, are striking and often couched in romance plotlines. Since the game is predicated on player choice it should not come as too much of a surprise that there are several romantic partner options for Shepard. And these storylines show the greatest differences in gender performances.

So, to account for these differences, a playthrough with each romance option with both genders was necessary. This resulted in three playthroughs for *Mass Effect 1*, twelve playthroughs for *Mass Effect 2*, and fifteen playthroughs for *Mass Effect 3*. I did not use games begun from import saved files, I ignored DLC (downloadable content), I played the game on various platforms (Xbox, Playstation). Each playthrough was mostly from

beginning to end, actively playing and focusing on the gendered elements of the game. I recorded my notes on my iPhone as I played, transcribing them later.

Because the series has enough plot trees to fill some kind of orchid of plot and there was always almost certainly some line, image, or quest I missed I used supplementary material online. I watched YouTube clips of scenes I may have missed or needed a refresher on or utilized the *Mass Effect* Wiki. For example, I could compare the sex scenes in *Mass Effect* 1 in more detail by watching them in succession on YouTube rather than relying on my notes after playing and I followed the user created the user created *Mass Effect* Wiki to focus my gameplay by reading mission synopsizes to identify what was important for my work.

Chapter 1: Gender in *Mass Effect*'s Lore and Characters

Gender is socially constructed and not biologically determined. Gendered behaviors are not genetically carried on sex chromosomes; people are taught how to do gender. According to West and Zimmerman "doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micro political activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine 'natures,'" (126). People "do" their gender by performing it for others.

Gender is continually validated by the repetition of gendered behavior (Butler 157). Other people validate the performance of gender by rewarding the proper performance and punishing the improper performance. In the online mode of *Mass Effect 3* a player controlling a character outfitted in pink armor has been insultingly called a girl, gay or various slurs ("Any Gay (Or Gay-Friendly) Players Out There?"). Not that such insults are particularly unique to this situation; gamers are rightly infamous for calling each other many variations of "gay," the insults meant specifically to call the player's gender/sexuality into question rather than gender/sexuality merely being used as a tool to insult. At its core, *Mass Effect* is a single player game, but examples like this from multiplayer mode demonstrate how gender performance is intertwined with the game. Although *Mass Effect* is predominately a solitary experience, it is a symbolic mediator between players and their corporate publishers.

Most of the surface-level lore of the game is geared towards appeasing an

"implied player." An implied player "can be seen as a role made for the player by the game, a set of expectations that the player must fulfill for the game to 'exercise its effect'" and the game anticipates these expectations to facilitate the implied player's gaming (Aarseth). This concept specifically refers to the game's structures; for example, *Mass Effect 2 and 3* follows shooter genre conventions of placing ammunition cartridges throughout the battlefield in order to refill constantly decreasing resources. A challenge and an in-game solution to said challenge are presented for the implied player to complete.

The notion of an implied player can also be applied to how designers create the gendered world of the game. Lore and to what degree potentially subversive lore is presented must fall in line with the expectations of an implied player as well. Although *Mass Effect* may be invested in what one Bioware designer described as letting "players take on a role and really immerse themselves on how they feel they want to be playing the game," the game is going to create a virtual environment in which lore is constructed to facilitate the player's understanding of gender, despite the futuristic setting (Totilo).

Asari, one of the major alien species in *Mass Effect*, provide evidence of the implied player's expectations kept in mind at play. Asari are what the game frequently describes as "mono-gendered." Liara, Shepard's main Asari companion throughout the trilogy, says that "male and female have no real meaning for [them]." (*Mass Effect 1*) Often, what the term "mono-gendered" is actually referring to is really "mono-sexed" in that the Asari are capable of mating with any of the 15-plus species in the galaxy and always (unless mating with another Asari) take on the role of actually creating the offspring.

While not so blatantly stated, the Asari actually *are* mono-gendered in several respects. Their culture is matriarchal and essentially seems to regard their planet as a feminine island in the context of a broader, masculine universe. Leaders in their culture are labeled "matriarchs," younger members are "maidens" or "matrons." Characters exclusively use feminine pronouns towards Asari. The few times that a masculine word is used in describing an Asari person is in reference to mating – the Asari partner involved in reproduction that is not giving birth is called the "father."

The Asari body is a female appearing body, a female-sexed body. If the "construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender," then there is a strong link between the Asari's femininess and their female body (Butler 9). Every Asari has an identical body model on which small details vary between individuals. The base body consists of large, curvaceous hips flowing into prominent breasts. Their facial features are delicate, with pert noses and wide, long-lashed eyes. The only things particularly alien about them are their blue skin and tentacle-like hair. Otherwise, the Asari are uncannily human (and female) in appearance.

On one hand, the concept of a group of people who have no concept of human gender is queering. In theory, the Asari culture grew into itself without any masculinity to regulate femininity to an othered state. In the context of the fictional world, their culture may be considered revolutionary in a universe in which every other species has two sexes and two genders. Your Asari companion Liara frequently protests that she is not "exactly" a woman refusing to be bound and categorized into a gender.

But the Asari do not exist only within *Mass Effect* and the issue can be reduced to a simple question: why would an alien species in no way related to humans even *need*

breasts? They do not. The only person in need of an entire planet of people with curvy, feminine bodies and luscious lips is the implied player.

While the Asari may be some utopian matriarchal society, in the broader game they are frequently hypersexualized objects. Consorts are Asari, prostitutes are Asari, strippers are Asari. Silhouettes of Asari bodies line the walls of seedy night clubs. Some Asari are born with a genetic trait that allows them to kill their sex partner mid-act, leaving the partner a "mindless shell and soon after… dead," giving the mutated Asari strength and contributing to an addiction to continue killing (*Mass Effect 2*).

They are even the objects of sexualized gameplay. In a club in *Mass Effect 1* an Asari dances on top of a table. She wears a tight body suit, holes cut out on her inner thighs and cleavage. Shepard can sit before her and the camera zooms in on her body. Two buttons are designated to move the camera to frame her front or back. The scene is repeated in another bar in *Mass Effect 2*, identical save for the addition of giving the dancer a tip (Figure 2-1). There is no narrative purpose for this mini-game.

Figure 2-1

Asari simply *are* women. The only group that comes remotely close to being as sexualized as the Asari is human women. Alongside Asari exotic dancers are human women and virtually no other species. A spectrum of images of alien bodies exists in *Mass Effect*: bug people, reptilian people, lumbering elephant-like creatures, and more. And as far as the lore of the game reveals, all of these species have female and male (thus by the expectations of the implied player: women and men) members. Only the bodies with breasts and butts and delicate facial features are sexualized; but these bodies are also the types of female forms overwhelmingly represented.

Female members of other alien species are not so feminine as the Asari and are not represented as often. The only other feminine presenting sentient aliens shown in any *Mass Effect* game are the Salarians and the Krogan. The bug-like Salarians all have the same body model; the only way to tell the difference between male and female members is from voice timbre – females have slightly lower voices – or pronoun usage by other characters. Again, they are somewhat queered in that they do not *do* gender, per se. However, the game's lore undermines said queering because of a disturbing power dynamic. According to in-game information files, the Salarians destroy female sexed eggs (they are bugs, after all) because female Salarians are prone to aggression and would overtake the male portion of the species if left unchecked. The game presents very few Salarian females.

The Krogan have a direr male to female representation ratio: out of the many Krogan that appear, including at least ten secondary characters, only one is a woman. Due to declining viable births all Krogan females are kept on a figurative tight-leash in a

deeply patriarchal society. Eve, the aptly named single female Krogan character, has only one plotline in *Mass Effect 3* that revolves around Krogans' reproduction issues.

Narrative focuses on the Asari's femaleness or femininеness negates many chances for queering. *Human* gender roles would appear relatively egalitarian, or at least a construction of an egalitarian society via present views on gender. Many women take combat positions and diplomatic leadership roles throughout the trilogy. Men care for the household while their marine wives wage war. In one early mission in *Mass Effect 1* a man mourns the loss of his wife to battle, reversing role expectations. Combat positions in the military are not determined by gender identity. Ashley, a female companion NPC, is a heavy combat, assault-type class and male companions such as Kaiden and Mordin are supportive, focused on projectile combat or increasing ally strength.

The companions also present gender performances in a wide range, and this is especially the case with female characters. Ashley, as stated, is a heavy weaponry class. A soldier-type fighter, she has a soldier-type personality. Brash, bold, she once declares to Shepard that "a big gun and confident attitude will get you through a lot in life." (*Mass Effect 2*) One website, lesbiangamers.com, celebrates the varied gender presentations, calling one companion in *Mass Effect 2* a "badass butch biotic bitch." ("Subject Zero Mass Effect 2")

Jane Shepard herself is very butch, using butch as a descriptive term for her stereotypically masculine behavior. Shepard is forceful and brash, ready to defend herself with violence at any time (with some variations depending on the morality the player chooses to represent). Her script is identical to her male counterpart, other than the pronouns bestowed upon her and her romance sub-plots covered in Chapter 2. Her

animations are also the same as John Shepard. When she walks her hips do not sway, when she speaks her hand gestures are hard and pointed. In one scene in *Mass Effect 2*, Jane Shepard takes a seat while she speaks and spreads her legs far apart, even when wearing a dress, a posture considered masculine (Figure 2-2).

Figure 2-2

Jack, a character in *Mass Effect 2*, is queered from the get-go. Her name is masculine, she's bald, covered in tattoos, and characterized by the game as "the meanest handful of violence and hate" (*Mass Effect 2*). In her recruiting mission in *Mass Effect 2*, in-game descriptions of her refer to her either as "Jack," "Subject 0," or "the subject," because the major twist of her mission is that she is a woman. All indications of her gender, prior to her visual introduction, are that she is a man. The twist is predicated on subverting gender expectations.

Whiie women are the main representation for queered gender identities, some male characters push the boundaries on gender as well. Kaiden, a support-type combat class, is sensitive in personality. A foil to Ashley, he is physically small, thin and emotionally empathetic. Another character comments that Kaiden is a "romantic at heart"

(*Mass Effect 1*). Kaiden takes on feminine personality traits and a (perhaps) feminine combat class.

And such representation is, again, somewhat queering. But Shepard's butchness seems to only be legitimated by being in a masculine gender role, a soldier. It is permissible that Shepard, and by extension Ashley, is butch because it is expected of her to be butch. Jack is violent, tough and tattooed, but only because she is a "broken" person; angry because of a troubled past, she has turned from "a scared little kid into an all powerful bitch" (*Mass Effect 2*). It is ok for Kaiden to be feminine because he is a support-class character. Any character that could be considered queering their own gender is more or less reaffirming normative expectations about gender performances and gender roles.

By matching up gender role and gender performance, regardless of gender identity, *Mass Effect* is playing into the expectations of the implied player. It is assumed that a future will be more egalitarian than our present world, that women will take combat positions, but the game presents a reality that is not too different from our own. It is a safe world that does not question itself and, more importantly, conservatively follows real world constructions of gender that the implied player is comfortable with.

What the developers say they think the implied player wants is more or less reductive of a larger point about forces beyond their control without actively choosing to queer gender. But one developer so delicately said of the Asari: "let's be honest, alien chicks are hot" ("Sci Fi vs Mass Effect Part 2."). There certainly is a degree of active decision making about how gender roles are portrayed and consumed. Perhaps the implied player would notice that Jane Shepard is butch, but it would not occur to him to

celebrate it or criticize it because he expects a woman in a military leadership position to be masculine.

Gender roles, gender identity, sexuality and more are all forced into logical classifications. The game forces "the standardization of sexuality and gender, despite inclusion... deploys key components of heteronormativity, if re-envisioned or re-packages as queer liberalism," because of the inherently logical nature of the medium (Lauteria). Gender and sexuality must be commodified and categorized, subject to the structures of the game. By the aforementioned examples, *Mass Effect* very much falls into this description. If seemingly deliberate queering occurs, it is legitimated by the specter of the implied player. The Asari are matriarchal, but only as a symptom of having a species of "hot alien chicks" in the story. Jack is hyper aggressive, but only because "that's what [she] was made for" as she says in one advertisement ("Promo Subject Zero (Jack) interview for Mass effect 2"). Their constructed gender serves as much a function as the defense rating on a piece of armor.

But there are people that *actively* appreciate, say, Jane Shepard's slight subversion of gender norms and such a person could be described as a "real" or "active player." The active player manipulates "unexpected things, often just because these actions are not explicitly forbidden... they are not part of the game's intended repertoire" (Aarseth). While this refers to more direct modes of un-playing the game, such as cheating or modding or exploiting glitches, it can also refer to interpreting characters and lore in a way that is directly oppositional to what is expected in terms of the implied player.

Queering in games via interpretation of representation could be regarded as a kind of "cheating," disregarding the negative connotations cheating may carry. Cheating is

used to elicit a desired response from the game that is not provided by the blatant structure already in place, including by breaking down the structures themselves. By choosing to interpret characters as queered despite the heteronormativity of the game, the real player is engaging in queered type of gaming, laying the foundation for a broader gender performance via the avatar.

Chapter 2: Queering Romance Gameplay (or Not)

Queerness and queering in the context of gameplay, rather than just in representation, is complex. In many cases, queered gameplay or just how gender interacts with gameplay may not be obvious. For *Mass Effect,* queer gameplay can be literal: the romantic storylines function just like the rest of the game's narratives in which the player interacts with sprawling threads of plot, dialogue, and characterization so that one player's *Mass Effect* epic may be vastly different from another's. The romantic subplots of *Mass Effect* lend themselves to a gameplay-centered analysis because obviousness and availability of queered quest threads reveal potential patterns of gendered gameplay beyond just sexual relationships.

Every *Mass Effect* game uses "achievements" (or "trophies," depending on what gaming system the player uses) as a way of rewarding gamers, allowing them to convey to others how far or how well they have played. The kind and number of achievements show up on online gamer profiles. An achievement could be bestowed for completing the game on a high difficulty setting, for discovering an "easter egg" (a hidden object or inside joke), or any number of predetermined reasons.

Mass Effect includes a "Paramour" achievement in which you receive the reward for completing a full romance plotline. In other words, the player must interact with a romanceable character until Shepard and the chosen NPC have such an intense romantic or sexual relationship that it comes to a narrative climax and literal one: the Paramour

achievement is unlocked by having sex with the chosen NPC. The sex scene is a central component to a *Mass Effect* romance. There is only one scenario where sex occurs, always near the end of the game, always right before a suicide mission. Shepard or the NPC may lament that "these could be their last moments together," essentially that the scene may be their last chance to consummate their relationship. (*Mass Effect 1*) Should the player choose not to have sex with their partner, but still maintain a relationship, the Paramour achievement is not granted.

Sex is important in *Mass Effect.* Romancing a character affects the storyline and how other characters react to Shepard; including an achievement solidifies its importance. Romance is on the same level, in terms of the existence of rewards, as finishing the game on the hardest skill mode. A gamer bent on playing every possible part of a game and racking up all the achievements has to complete at least one romance.

Many games have similar achievements. RPGs like the *Fable* series, *The Witcher*, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim,* and other Bioware games all reward the player for completing a romance, which usually means having sex. Life simulation games like *The Sims, Harvest Moon*, and countless dating simulators, incorporate character relationship building. *The Witcher*, in particular, bestows what mostly amounts to virtual collectable cards for every woman the main character sleeps with. Romance controlled by the player is as much of a staple in video games as leveling up and treasure chests full of loot.

And there is a lot of romancing to be done in *Mass Effect*. There are 11 romanceable NPCs that can give the player the "Paramour" achievement and a handful of other characters whose interactions involve romantic or sexual overtones. These

characters are mostly human, but display a range of alien species within the universe, including several that are not strictly anthropomorphic.

These romances are some of the best ways to examine gender in *Mass Effect*. The script for either gendered Shepard is nearly identical, give or take a few pronouns, save for the dialogues for romances. Because the majority of romances are gender exclusive, insights can be gained from seeing why these differences exist.

Out of the 15 romanceable NPCs, 7 characters are consistently straight throughout the series and 8 characters are queer at some point in the series, meaning they disrupt gender norms. These numbers appear to be heartening at first glance, but examining the romances beyond the ratio of straight to queer characters reveals an imbalance between kinds of straight and queer gameplay. Prior to *Mass Effect 3*, only one potentially queer character, Liara the Asari, grants the "Paramour" achievement. The three pansexual/bisexual feminine gendered characters in *Mass Effect 2* do not receive the same attention or depth as the other romantic options and as such do not grant the "Paramour" achievement. Two of the characters are Asari; one reciprocates romantic feelings but declines a relationship and the other kills Shepard via sex, resulting in a game over. The third queer character in *Mass Effect 2* is a human woman who gives Shepard a private dance in his/her quarters. Their storylines are short, shallow and yield no advantage other than brief objectification. Under the right circumstances – playing as male Shepard or a straight female Shepard – the ludonarratives of *Mass Effect 1* and *2* may not reference queerness at all.

Mass Effect 3 included six human queer characters, 4 that unlock the "Paramour" achievement: Liara is used again, Kaidan (a partner previously open only to female

Shepard) is made available to any gender, and two queer-exclusive characters. Unlike the previous installments where queered gameplay was very easily avoided, *Mass Effect 3* differed in that any kind of role playing the player chose to engage in referenced queerness.

Despite the compulsory queered aspects of *Mass Effect 3*, the game still seems to downplay their existence. *Mass Effect* is meant to emulate human relationships as well as possible. And, keeping the implied player in mind, the game constructs itself not just to avoid queering the NPCs, but to avoid queering Shepard's gender and by extension the player's. This is done by reinforcing the implied player's gender through the aforementioned hypersexulization of the Asari and avoiding outright, queer romantic interaction.

Throughout *Mass Effect*, just as the Asari are the primary representations of women they are the primary representation of queer characters. As the Asari are able to reproduce with anyone, romanceable Asari NPCs are open to either gender. Coupled with their hot alien girl status, their perceived queerness is made safe and approachable, barely regarded as queer characters within and without the game. Some fans regard them as "not really" lesbians. Their queerness can only reflect on players in the very unlikely chance Shepard is female, which occurs in only about 18% of *Mass Effect* games. (Hillier)

The only true "lesbian" romance in the series – "true" in that the character, Traynor, is human and grants the Paramour achievement – culminates in a sex scene that may as well have come from a well-censored pornographic film. As opposed to the other sex scenes where the two characters are in a bed, and the camera coyly pans over the female body and fades to black, the sex scene with Traynor is explicit. When Traynor

mentions that the common showers on the ship are horrible, Shepard offers her personal shower to Traynor who gladly accepts. She disrobes and hops in the shower with the door open. Shepard stays in her cabin, looking rather predatory, while the two chat. The camera captures Traynor's body from various angles, the water making her skin glisten with a kind of oiliness and moans about how warm the shower is. Then Shepard invites herself into the shower, pushes Traynor against the wall, the camera again moves around their very wet bodies, she tugs Traynor's leg against her hip, and the camera pulls away and fades to black. It plays out like a conventional lesbian pornographic film in which one woman innocently helps out a friend, which results in sex, a straight male fantasy that is comparatively safe to be included in the game.

Unlike their hypersexualized lesbian counterparts, queer men and not "safe" for the implied player. When asked why there had yet to be any non-heterosexual men in *Mass Effect* one developer responded it was because they "still view it as... if you're picturing a PG-13 action movie. That's how we're trying to design it." (John) A strange thing to say, given every *Mass Effect* has a M-rating by the ESRB, analogous to a R-rating in films. *Mass Effect 2*, released around the time of the "PG-13" statement, features Kelly, a dual-gender romance option, giving Shepard a private dance. The kind of private dance involving tight, leather body suits cut out in the "right places," spread thighs, and gyrating hips. Like the Asari lap dance minigames, the scene serves no purpose. Shepard watches Kelly or chats with her (in an unheard conversation) with Kelly perched on his/her lap. Engaging in the minigame does not unlock the "Paramour" achievement and seems to serve as a sexy replacement for a player that does not have a romantic partner by the end of the game. Not exactly a "PG-13" scene. The subtext of what the developers

believe is that offering deviant gender expression for men does not belong in a game made for mainstream videogame tastes. By the time such an expression appears in their games in the form of two romance options it is downplayed.

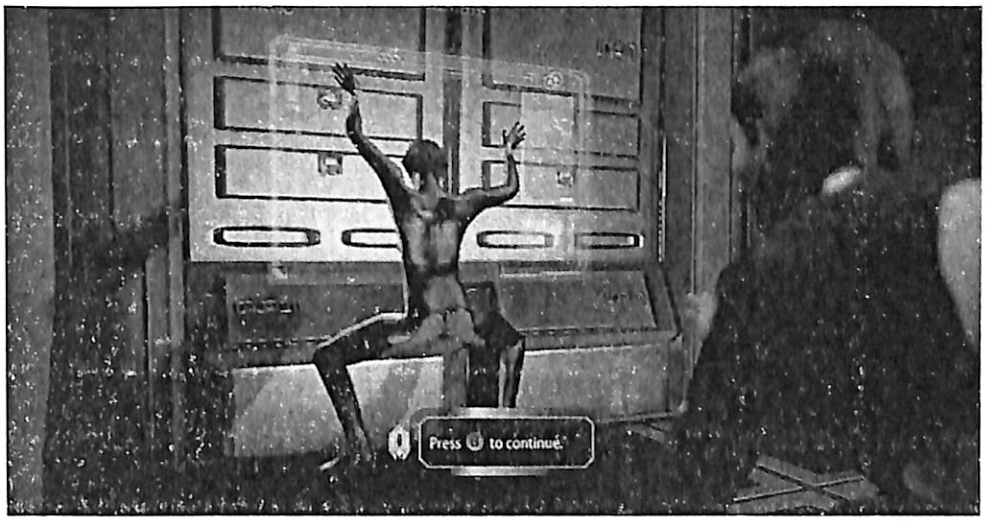

Figure 3-1

Almost every romantic interest approaches Shepard about their feelings first. They confide their attraction, make passes, or outright suggest having sexual relations without any prompting from the player. While Shepard has the final say on whether to go down a romantic path with the character, the game automatically identifies who is and who is not a love interest through flirtatious dialogue. For the two men available in *Mass Effect 3*, Kaidan Alenko and Steven Cortez, romantic buildup is scant.

Kaidan is a reoccurring character in the *Mass Effect* series, first only open to Jane Shepard for a romantic subplot. In *Mass Effect 1*, Kaidan had originally been meant to be romanceable by male Shepard as well. Within the game's files is John Shepard's voice acting for the love scenes, dialogue identical to the in-game version of Jane Shepard's. It did not make it into the finalized game. There was no reason given for its specific removal, but it probably falls along the same line of motivation found in the "PG-13"

comment: the developers were uncomfortable with deviant gender expression for men so they removed Kaidan's same-sex romantic storyline.

Even without those overt sexual themes, the relationship between Kaidan and Shepard is quite intimate. Although Jane Shepard can enter a romance with him, the basic friendship both Shepards can share with Kaidan is still rife with emotional conflict. Kaidan takes on the role of a war buddy archetype, acting as a companion in the first game, making a cameo appearance in the second and returning as a companion in the third. John and Kaidan's relationship is homosocial, especially considering *Mass Effect* is written with John as the "default" Shepard, the male player character used as the primary marketing tool.

Provided Jane Shepard was never in a previous romantic relationship with Kaidan, John and Jane go down similar paths with Kaidan in *Mass Effect 3*. The sub-plot focuses on their relationship as war veterans, as survivors, as two people trying to save the galaxy. But from the very beginning Kaidan makes it clear to Jane that he is attracted to her. Near the beginning of the game, in a scene after he is injured, confined to a hospital bed, he hopes that she "is flirting with him." John Shepard is not at the receiving end of such advances.

When the relationship comes to head is when the most dramatic difference occurs. For Jane Shepard, Kaidan expresses his love. "I have feelings for you, Shepard. And I want more," he tells her. John Shepard does not get the same treatment. Instead Kaidan laments, "the world's ending and it's too late to find someone." (*Mass Effect 3*) From there, John can either suggest that he and Kaidan couple or, oddly, ask that they "keep it professional." Should Shepard romance Kaidan, he says it would "be nice to have

someone to turn to when things get grim. Someone to live for. Maybe love," coming as more of a love of convenience than the intense feelings that Kaidan express for Jane. (*Mass Effect 3*) For Jane, he grabs her hand, kissing it; Kaidan does not even touch John. Public, physical intimacy between men is not a part of the traditional masculine performance that Bioware has in mind for John Shepard. Given the passion that Kaidan expresses for Jane, Kaidan's supposed confession for John seems friendly in comparison, more of hint at queer undertones that are not all that inconsistent with the way Shepard and Kaidan's relationship is depicted up until the "confession."

Kaidan and Shepard have nothing to "keep professional." With or without sex in the equation, Shepard has an intense emotional connection with Kaidan. In the beginning of *Mass Effect 3* Kaidan is shot down by an enemy in a cut-scene. Shepard, in the automatic, framed narrative, screams "Kaidan!" After picking up Kaidan's limp body, lugging it into a ship, Shepard stares hopelessly at his soldier. Shepard whispers to Kaidan's unconscious form, "The Alliance could sure use you. I could use you," the tinkle of a piano playing in the background. The game portrays Shepard as having a deep attachment to Kaidan, to the point of needing him, again, regardless of any romantic involvement. So when Kaidan later asks Shepard, "We've been friends a long time, have you ever known me to be with someone?" it does not come off as anything dissimilar that one man may say to his close friend. (*Mass Effect 3*)

But the developers still put the decision to turn down Kaidan in the players' hands, despite not having anything outright to turn down. Because homosocial relationships are "accompanied by a fear or hatred of homosexuality," giving the player the power to deny such timid romantic advances is giving the player the power to deny

the smallest amount of homosexuality in their performance (Sedgwick). They have solid ability to defend their gender. In an almost "no homo," moment, if Shepard keeps his "professional" relationship with Kaidan, the two men still express their affectionate attachment, Shepard reaffirming that Kaiden is his "brother." The developers are coy about the issue, attempting to subvert the expectations of a videogame as being hyper-masculine by including such intimate moments between men that can end in romance, but still avoiding outright confrontation with the implied player.

The solution for Cortez, a romantic interest reserved for only John, is far simpler, if not somewhat contrary to the way the game handles Kaidan. The moment the player meets Cortez he reveals that he is the widower of a man. Cortez's deceased husband is an integral part of his character development; it comes up time and time again, Cortez mourning his loss, and Shepard encouraging the man to move on. At one point, Cortez listens to an audio file looping his husband's voice. It is as if the game were screaming at the player, "This is a gay man!" Each mention acts as a flag for players. His entire character is framed by his sexuality. Which, on one hand, is subversive for openly portraying a widowed queer character, but he still never makes advances towards Shepard without the player's permission, unlike the other love interests.

Granting Cortez the permission to interact with Shepard in a sexual way occurs in the nightclub scene described earlier. As the camera pans towards a man dancing, Cortez says that, "some of the eye candy in the crowd isn't too shabby." From there, John Shepard can either say, "I'm hurt. Why aren't you looking over here?" or, "The eye candy on the stage is fine by me" (*Mass Effect 3*). The first affirms the game to enable romantic dialogue, the second dialogue choice cementing a friendship only subplot. There is no

way to enable the friendship subplot while still retaining a non-heterosexual identity. As Shepard references his "eye candy," he turns towards the club's stage, the camera zooming on a group of women, mostly Asari, dancing. Like with Kaidan, Cortez's "denial" is unusual in that all other romances, including the female-female ones, are initiated by flirtatious dialogue from the non-playable character. There does not seem to be anything to deny Cortez here; he is merely enjoying the view.

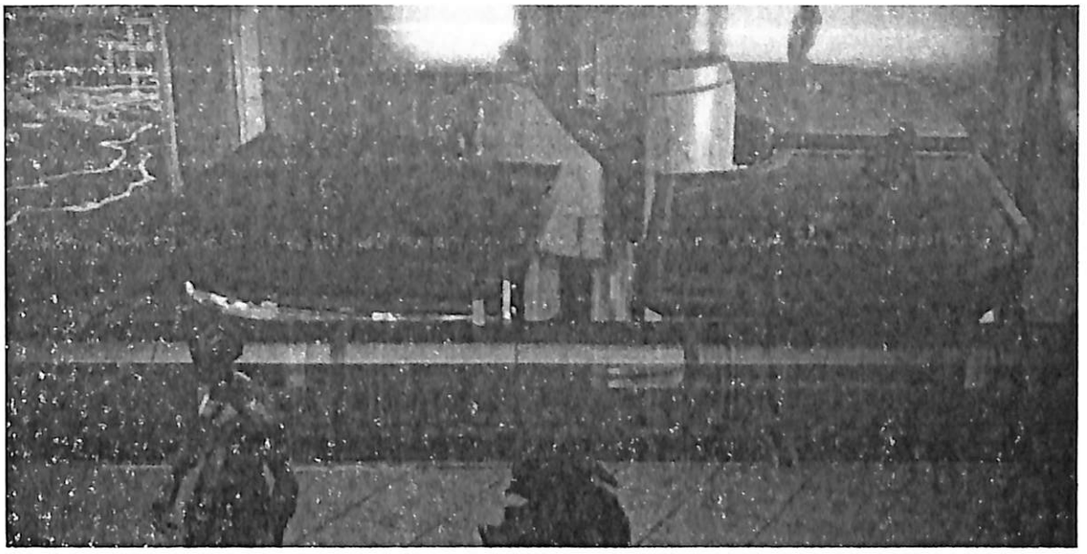

Figure 3-2

That Shepard's "denial" is followed by his gazing at sexualized woman ties into the reinforcement of his and the player's gender performance. Shepard is a man and men look at women, specifically sexually available women. It affirms Shepard's masculinity. Cortez looks at men, which is "other" from Shepard's looking at women. And, just like with Kaidan, the two men celebrate their brotherly relationship, toasting to "a good friend when I needed one most." (*Mass Effect 3*) The scene plays out to obscure the potentially compromising aspects of homosocial relations from the player.

A player *could* perform a deviant identity. A player *could* have their character perform a different gender, a different sex, a different sexuality, anything. But the

assumption on the part of the game is always going to be that the player does not want to do any of those things. The implied player wants only reaffirmation of his "real life" identity. A *Mass Effect 3* writer aptly put it: "Some players have concerns over being 'ninja romanced' – where a relationship shifts from friendly to romantic to the player's surprise – and those concerns seem greater for same-sex romances." (Weekes) Baby steps are made in representing queer characters or queered gender performances only so long as they do not upset the delicate senses of the implied player.

Expecting queer content that is not ashamed of itself may overly idealistic. The active player can interact with the game in a queer way, even toying with identity in a way to explore her "real life" self. But so long as developers create games with the implied player in mind, queering performance is limited. Developers, like the one above, will continue to be timid in their approaches to queer play. Just as the actual player subverts this timidity by "cheating" in her interpretations and play, she can cheat almost literally. Mods and hacks give players the tools to create queer content on their own.

Chapter 3: Forums and Mods as Spaces for Resistance

It is possible for a player to queer their play of *Mass Effect.* For the most part, however, a player would have to actively seek such options as opposed to having the game itself queer the gameplay in the most apparent canons of the story. In the case of *Mass Effect* and other games, developers state that they consciously made these choices. They know the identities of their characters are stagnant, their gameplay reinforces heteronormativity, and they try to justify their decisions rather than make what publishers see as risky business decisions, so the best way for players to receive the change they want in their games is through conversation with developers and creating their own content.

Mass Effect and many other Bioware games have been a large part of conversations about gender in video games. With every release of a *Mass Effect* game came criticisms of one-dimensional gender portrayals. *Mass Effect 1* was met with little criticism, but when Mass *Effect 2* came out people questioned why there were no "real" queer romance options, especially with the recent release of Bioware's *Dragon Age* in which two romanceable characters are bisexual and the PC has more freedom in expressing gender. The developers responded with the aforementioned statement that *Mass Effect 2* was supposed to be like a PG-13 science fiction film, that "love interest is relatively light" and that Shepard was meant to have a "more defined personality." (John)

Video games receive criticism over the lack of representation of queer characters. One designer said, "We have bisexual books, lesbian magazines, transgender movies, gay television series, and more. The need and demand for a gay-centric video games is greater now than ever." (Shaw 236) While tokenism is not desirable either, *Mass Effect* lacks any such characters over the course of two games that were not blatantly sexualized. The need for queer characters or queer ways of playing is an ongoing discussion between designers. Many developers and publishing companies don't foray into broader representation because "Wal Mart probably won't carry it, and that is the kiss of death for mass sales. So the question is not whether the audience is there, but whether there are any mechanisms for reaching the audience with enough efficiency to pay for the awesome cost of making a GLBT game." One designer claimed "WalMart, for example, won't carry 'M' rated games" and queer content would draw attention from conservative family groups. (Shaw 241) The logic is that supposedly "explicitly gay" content results not just in fewer sales from boycotting individuals but from corporations refusing to sell the product on the basis of a higher ESRB rating or general public backlash.

Some of these reasons do not hold much weight. *Mass Effect* and many other M-rated games are and have been sold at Wal-Mart. *Mass Effect 1*'s explicit straight sex scenes, while garnering critical receptions from Fox News and other sources, never resulted in Wal-Mart banning its sale. When *Mass Effect 3* incorporated more blunt queer gameplay Wal-Mart still sold the game. Although some developers may fear a drop in sales from a higher rating, in 2010 M-rated games made up 29% of the titles that sold over a million copies when they made up only 5% of total video games released that year

and of the top 10 best selling games in 2010, half of them were M-rated. (Kuchera "2010: 5% of games given M rating, including 29% of big sellers.") It is the corporations that cannot afford to *not* sell M-rated, even those games that are accused of containing "soft-core porn" scenes, not the developers that cannot afford to make them.

Some designers say that including queer content is to make a political statement, motives that do not belong in the industry. Given that *Mass Effect* directly involves romance, and by extension sexuality, arguing that video games are not a place for "political" inclusion of diverse play merely reveals a double standard. Romance is central to Bioware games and many other titles. Featuring exclusively straight-only characters *is* a political statement, one that disregards the existence of any gender or sexuality that is not "easy" to portray.

These voices worked together and, after two installations, got a taste of what they asked for. Two queer characters. *Mass Effect* writers attributed the inclusion to "feedback from players that they wanted more choice." (Totilo) While the groups asking for more diversity are not specifically mentioned, their contribution cannot be ignored, because larger, louder efforts to change aspects of *Mass Effect* were met not only with acceptance but with acknowledgments towards said groups. These types of efforts can be successful.

While not directly related to queer content, players outcry after the ending of *Mass Effect* 3 is an example of how obsessively complaining about what is perceived to be a huge problem in a game can lead to major changes. After the recent release of *Mass Effect* 3 in 2012, many players who finished the game decried the supposedly horrible ending. Blog entries, articles, YouTube comments, Bioware forums were filled with complaints that the ending was a half done job. Petitions for Bioware to change the

ending were created, emails were sent to developers, Twitter was flooded with demands for a redone ending.

The outcry lasted for weeks and the players received what they wanted. While there was no major overhaul of the ending a few months after the game's release Bioware released a new and free ending DLC that added expository cut scenes and an epilogue montage. Most players were at least appeased, although the ending remained in poor graces. More importantly, releasing additional content addressing widespread criticism set a precedent for games that works with major flaws unrelated to bugs were still open to changes from the developer. Instead of criticism used only as disincentive to purchase a game or something to keep in mind for improvement in sequels the very quality of a single-player game could be open to continual improvement. The ending DLC signifies that if an issue in a game was so egregious that the overwhelming opinion amongst players was that it need to be thrown out and redone, the developers may just do so.

Threads calling for Jane Shepard to be included in promotional material far outnumbered their queer character counterparts. Supporters used posting banners reading "Gays in Space," with characters photoshopped together in romantic scenes. Throughout *Mass Effect*'s advertisements one thing had remained constant: John Shepard. John Shepard's face, John Shepard's voice, John Shepard's body were the globe that advertisement material revolved around. A handful of gamers did not realize playing as anything other than a man was possible. Organized complaints resulted in a handful of specialized advertisements for *Mass Effect 3*. A separate cinematic trailer and a reversible game cover, Jane on one side, John on the other were two of the more celebrated aspects. Of course, John Shepard remained the head figure in commercializing *Mass Effect.* Jane's

inclusions seems like bread crumbs, similar to the pair of queer characters with less lines and prominence than their straight counterparts. But players *can* make change happen.

The "Gays in Space" banners and queer representation threads stick out on Bioware's forum amongst threads entitled "WHO GAY AND WHO NOT" or "Too much homosexual content." Many anti-queer character users encroach on threads to express their disagreement with *any* queer characters ever appearing. Some comments are somewhat tame, echoing the arguments of developers that queer characters would generate too much controversy to appease a small number of fans. Some users cite continuity, that "if Kaiden was only interested in Women in ME1 - then thats what he should be"[sic] or they ask "'why is male Shepard gay?'. There has been no gay options in the previous games and suddenly he wants to experiment with Kaidan?"[sic] ("I was bothered by Kaidan being gay/bisexual in ME3," "How is Kaiden suddenly gay?") Again, these are mostly just excuses to justify their privileged position, backed by essentialist views of sexuality. A character changing sexuality mid-series is apparently less believable than dogfights occurring in space or traveling faster than the speed of light, both of which are physically impossible.

Other naysayers are less polite. The heterosexist language that permeates video games finds its way into forums, with users directly putting down other players. "Trolls" or not, these users are aggressive and threaten violence actively (or at least actively within the game, at the least). A user in a thread titled "Why does everyone always become gay!?!?" wrote, "I wish I didn't have to kill [Kaiden], I liked him a lot more than Ash (racist). But if that's what it takes to keep Sheapard from become severely sexually confused than maybe that's what it takes."

To escape such rhetoric, one user started a thread suggesting the creation of a list of players that were "gay-friendly people [he] could feel comfortable playing with, knowing that they wouldn't call [him] the F word if [he] didn't make it to the [goal] in time" in the *Mass Effect 3* multiplayer mode. After months of playing with people who say "things like 'geth hunters are SO gay!' or 'that guy just wasted a missile on a pack of phantoms?!? What a f*****g f****t!'"[sic] he then "played a match with some random people who started throwing around the N word and telling racially-charged jokes about lynching, and [he] realized that what [he] REALLY wanted was to form groups of mature, respectful, open-minded individuals to play with." ("Any Gay (Or Gay-Friendly) Players Out There?") Yet other users entered the thread asking how they dare not be included. Why was it necessary for some players to have their own special space? Wasn't that counterproductive to promoting harmony among queer and non-queer players?

Again, these comments reflect an entitled attitude held by players that could possibly fit the description of the implied player. One Bioware designer even called out such users on their privilege on the forums. Shortly after the release of *Dragon Age 2*, a thread claimed that queer characters were only shoehorned in to satisfy a minority of players and totally disregarded the majority (and therefore more profitable) group of players. His complaint especially derived from a single line given by a character in *Dragon Age 2,* in which a male NPC flirts with the player character, regardless of gender.

The line so affronted the player that he felt the entire game was actively seeking to dissatisfy "straight male gamers," a phrase he laments having to use at all because "in the past [he] would only have to say fans." (Pearse) David Gaider, the head writer of *Dragon Age*, explained his motivations in writing the lines – that it was only realistic to

have a variety of flirtatious characters, regardless of sexuality – and that Bioware has "good numbers" that significant numbers of people that do not fall into the "straight male gamer" demographic played their previous title *Dragon Age: Origins.* Gaider goes on to explain how the commenter's complaints are couched in his own privilege:

> And if there is any doubt why such an opinion might be met with hostility, it has to do with privilege. You can write it off as "political correctness" if you wish, but the truth is that privilege always lies with the majority. They're so used to being catered to that they see the lack of catering as an imbalance. They don't see anything wrong with having things set up to suit them, what's everyone's fuss all about? That's the way it should be, any everyone else should be used to not getting what they want.

Gaider demonstrates not only an awareness of the importance of looking beyond normative, often heterosexist, gaming traditions, but also that at least some designers are know how power informs the way they develop and sell games.

Despite Gaider's awareness, the original commenter is not *so* far off the mark of reality of how gender and sexuality are perceived in the gaming industry. Profit comes first and offending the implied player is avoided, evidenced in the timidity of queered gamely in the *Mass Effect* series and its slow inclusion of various gender identities. Gaider's comments are rare. They occurred around the same time *Mass Effect 2* was released, when many of his coworkers were frantically justifying why queer characters and gameplay were limited. Conversations between player and designer can be fruitful, but such a path can only go so far and so fast. Interpretive playing, intentionally queering the game, outlined prior, can aid in queer gameplay. If queering gameplay can be

considered a kind of "cheating" in which the player looks beyond what is presented to him in his play, then mods, fan created modifications to games are nearly literal ways of "cheating," and provide players with a far more direct means of queering play.

Modding is the fan creation of downloadable add-ons for games: mods. Some mods improve graphics quality; some mods add equipment; many mods introduce new game functions or storylines. Like fanfiction or fanart, mods are a way for players to creatively improve or expand upon aspects already present in a game. Mods are more readily available for PC gamers and therefore the PC mod community is a large one, but console users also utilize modding. Modding is a near literal way to place the power of creation in the players. Not only do mods "yield spaces of playful possibility for gaymers, allowing exploration of these spaces in invasively resistant yet ultimately playful ways. The game itself is inconsequential; the possibilities for play in these mods are thrust," but they create a community of users all seeking and creating similar content (Lauteria).

Bioware (again, as if in a conversation with players) encourages modding. On their list of recommendations for a potential employee is familiarity with modding. They release "toolsets" with some of their games, software designed to make the modding process easier.

A popular *Mass Effect 1* and *2* hack is not even entirely fan-created, not truly a mod. Within the games' files is the cut queer romantic dialogue for Shepard (""[Guide] How to activate gay content in ME," "Guide on how to start F/F & M/M romance in Mass Effect 2"). For example, although Ashley is only available for romance by John Shepard in *Mass Effect 1*, following a few instructions would make her available for romance by Jane Shepard. While activating the content is relatively easy, it results in all

other NPCs perceiving Shepard as opposite his/her chosen gender. In this case, Ashley is initially unavailable to romance (and vice versa for Kaiden) because the game does not make your gender universal – it merely flips the gender flags. But with a few mods these issues can be resolved.

In order to provide a sense of continuity to players that chose to have their John Shepard romance Kaiden, modders also created hacks in which characters acknowledge your romance in subsequent games. While the issue of possible pronoun incongruity cannot be fixed (the voice acted lines are not within the game's files), Kaiden and Ashley can reference their previous romance with Shepard with the inclusion of a little mod.

Mass Effect, however, comes up somewhat short on the number of mods available, with no readily searchable queer content. The main reason for this is most likely because the developers for *Mass Effect* never included a toolset. *Dragon Age: Origins*, however, was packaged with a toolset, the game's content created with modders in mind. This resulted in a greater diversity of mods, including a handful of mods with queer content, especially related to romantic storylines. One of the most popular mods for *Dragon Age: Origins*, known as the "Free Love Mod," unlocks many characters (including several unable to be romanced in the core game) as romanceable. As "free love" implies, every character is open to romance from the PC, regardless of gender. Pronoun and gendered discrepancies occur and some dialogue (for NPCs that were not romanceable in the first place) is not voice acted. Nevertheless, the mod touts nearly 20,000+ unique downloads, making it the one of the more downloaded *Dragon Age: Origins* mods.

Similar mods can be found for other games. One can find mods that broaden sexual and romantic gameplay possibilities for *Fall Out 3*, *The Sims*, and the *Fable* series. These games also all came with a toolset and all already feature queer characters in the core game. When developers are open to play contributions in the first place and broader types of play, it would seem that there is at least a casual connection to how much modding is encouraged.

Mods are not just a magical land of players being subversive and engaging in an open community. Among queering mods and the many more practical mods that give players new armor, weapons, or perhaps fix bugs in the game, there are also mods that are heteronormative and misogynistic. There are several nudity mods for every *Mass Effect* game. Jane Shepard and most every Asari and human female companion have at least one meticulously detailed nude body mod or sexy "armor" set for download. ("ME3 - The Naughty Gamer's Edits.") If a male-bodied counterpart exists, it is not as easy to find. "Free love"-style mods are not limited to removing gender flags from straight-only characters, but open the gay and lesbian characters to both genders as well. Such mods can be seen as insensitive, as one user points out when she says "Mods were made by the LGBT community because [they] didn't have any other choice. [They] weren't included, weren't considered valid enough to include as anything other than through alien sexual novelty" and removing the queer characters' sexual preferences invalidates their inclusion in the first place ("Successful Romance Modding!").

Conclusion

Although role playing games like *Mass Effect* tout freedom of choice as their main appeal, the inherently logical underlying structure of the video game is not nearly as freeing as the genre would like players to believe. Because the achievements of the player-character reflect on the gaming skills of the real life player, it should follow that the world in which the player-character "lives" and develops an identity could reflect on the player even in an entirely solitary gaming experience. The game may have queer characters and maybe a little queering dialogue and gameplay, but these are supported by an underlying heteronormative structure.

So if a blockbuster game in a genre that prides itself on players' ability to stretch how their character can form and perform their identity has not only few chances for queering, but also hides these chances beneath layers of scantily clad alien women and timid LGBT dialogue options how would this reflect on video games as a whole? In the U.S. alone, 12 million people play video games daily, no longer confined to their couches or desks, playing on the go ("The U.S. Experiences Decline in Total Number of Gamers"). Video games have been physically freed, but they remain limited to the demands of what long was their niche market. While it is difficult to get solid figures on gamer demographics or what even qualifies as a game these days (Do *Farmville* and *Words with Friends* or homemade flash games count?), I think it is safe to say that gamers are not as lacking in diversity as they once were and as many people continue to believe. While white, young straight cisgender men may still hold a plurality of the

market, I find it unlikely that they can and will continue to reign over the creative process of video games with more accepting pop culture attitudes toward the medium.

On a surface level, designers are limiting themselves creatively. There are stories to be told that are being silenced, there is the potential for queered gameplay to lead to innovation. Developers are reproducing power structures present in "real life." And that is boring. So long as they are held captive to the white straight male implied player, it is more difficult for games to broaden their horizons.

Developers create games to be massively consumed, presumably by the implied players. Despite popularity and critical acclaim, the common "faces" of gaming are not *Journey, Sword & Sorcery,* or *Quantum Conundrum,* but instead perhaps images of a generic shooter or *Angry Birds* come to mind. This continues to change with the growing popularity of indie games and the ability for programmers to self-publish on smart phones. Even major companies have taken an interest in user created content. Sony recently promised that their new installment of the PlayStation will allow self-publishing. The popularity of *Minecraft* and *Little Big Planet,* both games that incorporate a great degree of player creation demonstrates how the gaming industry is slowing moving towards players engineering their own content. When gaming companies, beholden to the implied player, cannot produce queer and queering content, players can and continue to make strides in correcting the issues themselves, with or without the cooperation of the developers.

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