Thesis

Hidden Options and Player Pushback:

Rhetoric of *Mass Effect 2*

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis is an exploration of gender construction within the digital gaming subculture of the United States in the early 21st century. Using the 2010 game *Mass Effect 2* as an organizing theme and central focus, the thesis examines how gender is constructed within this single-player role-playing game; how marketing materials reveal expectations about audience for this game and two other single-player role-playing games released in 2010 (*Fable III* and *Final Fantasy XIII*); and how online communities related to games, particularly to *Mass Effect 2*, both reinforce normative assumptions and attitudes about gender for players of digital games and characters within the games, and how they offer opportunities for the subversion and disruption of these normative models.

Theories from Judith Butler and from Candace West and Don Zimmerman provide the primary basis for exploring gender construction. To examine the effects of digital games on literacy and learning, James Paul Gee's work is used extensively. Additional discussion utilizes online fan and gamer posts. Insights about games, their marketing, and the broader community are drawn from a number of perspectives, including autoethnography, visual rhetoric, the principles of interpreting visual art, and a study of theatrical costume design.

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Introduction

When the word *gamer* is mentioned, meaning people who play digital games[1],

the stereotypical conception of this generalized individual[2] is of an adolescent male,

usually heterosexual and White. However, according to the Entertainment Software

Association (ESA), an industry group "dedicated to serving the business and public af-

fairs needs of companies that publish computer and video games . . ."[3] the average age

for a gamer in 2010 is 34, 40 percent of gamers are women, and women older than 18

represent a larger portion of the gaming market than do boys younger than 17.[4]

Why is there such a disparity between the ESA's statistics and the normative

cultural assumptions about gamers in the United States? Part of the problem may arise

from the definition of *game.* The ESA's tallies include games played on PDAs[5] and cell

phones, which means that the organization's counts almost certainly include puzzle

games, such as *Bejewelled* and *Solitaire.* "Hardcore" gamers, which I define as indi-

viduals who self-identify as gamers and who consider gaming to be a central aspect

of their identity, often don't think of puzzle games or basic cell phone games as "real"

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1 In this paper I use "digital game" as a catch-all phrase. It includes both computer-based electronic games and console games (i.e., games that are played on dedicated gaming hardware, such as Nintendo systems, including GameGube, and Wii; Sony PlayStation 1, 2, and 3, the Sega Dreamcast, and Microsoft XBox and XBox 360). It also includes games played on handheld devices, such as GameBoy (and its variants), and PSP, although games played on these handheld systems are beyond the scope of my current research project.

2 In the early 21st century in mainstream U.S. society.

3 Entertainment Software Association, "About the ESA," *The Entertainment Software Association* web site (ESA Entertainment Software Association, 2010).

4 Ibid, "Industry Facts," *The Entertainment Software Association* web site.

5 Personal Digital Assistants.

games.[6] Does this mean that people who play puzzle or cell-phone games—or at least those who play those games exclusively—aren't "real gamers," according to the definitions at work within the gaming subculture? Often it does.

Puzzle games usually involve logic or luck. They do not present the player with an opportunity to enter an alternate reality, become another person, control destiny, fight enemies, direct a sports team to victory (or defeat), or drive a very expensive car at high speeds without running the risks of getting ticketed or permanently injuring themselves. As such, puzzle games do not offer players an **experience**; they provide a short, low-commitment (in terms of time, emotion, and sometimes strategy) break from other tasks. While it is entirely possible, and even likely, that most gamers don't define "real games" this clearly, I think that my definition encompasses many of the objections that people who self-identify as gamers have with the idea of puzzle games as "real games" and with the idea that those who play puzzle games exclusively are not "real gamers."[7]

The types of games I will discuss here are not low-commitment diversions, like puzzle games or cell-phone games. While puzzle games sometimes teach logical thinking and strategy, they do not require the gamer to think very far outside their usual patterns, nor do they offer an opportunity to visit places a player has never been (even sometimes places that cannot exist), grant skills and abilities that the gamer does not possess in "real life" to an avatar, or place the gamer in situations that require the use and possibly refinement of these skills and abilities. In short, the types of games I

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6 This is part of the external grammar of the semiotic domain of gaming, to use James Paul Gee's terminology (see in particular *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy,* chapter 2, "Semiotic Domains: Is Playing Video Games a 'Waste of Time'?"). Please see chapter 4 of this thesis for a more in-depth discussion of these concepts.

7 Based on my own involvement with the digital gaming community, most people who play casual games exclusively also do not think of themselves as "gamers," thereby reinforcing the idea that they are not a part of the subculture.

will be discussing are those that offer the gamer a chance to experience a world that is not their own, and to do this in an immersive way.

My primary goal with this work is to examine several mechanisms that support the belief that women don't play digital games, a belief that is held in the United States in both mainstream culture and mainstream gaming culture. In particular, I will examine how gender is constructed in games and in the wider gaming-related community. This gender construction often reinforces the belief that gamers are heterosexual men. Because I think that significant research has already been undertaken in the area of online role-playing games,[8] I am focusing my efforts on single-player games. There are several other reasons for my selection of single-player role-playing games.

The first of these is that examining a single-player, offline game limits the number of variables to examine when exploring the interaction between the player and the game. With online games, other humans interact (generally though avatars) with the player (also generally represented by an avatar). These interactions shape the game experience for the players. With single-player games, the gamer's experience with the game is, in most cases, primarily directed by what the game designers intended the gamer to experience, in combination with the player's own understanding of what they are experiencing in the game-world. In MMORPGs, the community is integral to the actual game*play* experience, as opposed to the gamer's experience of the game in a broader context. Limiting my examination to single-player, offline games allows me to look at the two-way interaction between gamer and game, rather than the three-plus-way interactions between gamer, game, and an array of other MMORPG participants.

Second, my selection of single-player role-playing games (RPGs) as my primary site of study is based on the idea that the single-player RPG format encourages the gamer to identify with the avatar that represents the gamer on screen. The gamer to a

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8 These games are generally referred to as MMORPGs, or Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games. They may also be referred to as MMOs or MMOGs, for Massively Multiplayer Online Games, and with this abbreviation they may or may not have role-playing as a central feature.

certain extent "becomes" the avatar.[9] Of course the gamer is aware (in nearly all cases) that they aren't really the person on screen, but the distinction is fluid; when listening to someone discuss a game experience, one often hears a gamer say that "they" did a certain thing that the individual did not actually do in their physical body. Rather, the gamer directed the on-screen avatar to perform the action or actions.[10]

This conflation of the gamer with the avatar is another factor in my choice to examine single-player RPGs instead of delving into an examination of gamer interactions with online games. Many online gaming-related communities are overwhelmingly biased against woman gamers. While I will not be discussing many of the ways in which this bias manifests, it seems reasonable to assume that these attitudes inform players' understandings of themselves in relation to gaming and the game world. Therefore, a study of the relationship between gamer and avatar in that environment would necessarily be less tightly focused than examination of the same topic in the single-player RPG.

The third reason I have chosen single-player RPGs is because of my own experience with the genre and its conventions. These games are far more likely to incorporate a developed storyline than are other types of electronic games. For example, simulation games are driven by the player's decisions and strategy games are driven by the need to accomplish certain objectives. The strong narrative aspects of single-player RPGs are likely to require the gamer to experience gendered ways of being and interacting that may be unavoidable within the confines of the story.

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9 See James P. Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 54-58, for examples of how this identification works.

10 Please see chapter 4 for a more in-depth discussion of avatars and identity.

Context

The context for this examination of gender and gaming is confined to the United States (to the extent that I am able to determine the locations of people who comment on blogs and in online forums) in the early 21st century. I have also chosen, with reservations, to adopt a primarily dual-gender viewpoint for this inquiry. The dominant normative cultural definitions within current U.S. society include the widespread belief[11] that there are two (and only two) genders, and that these genders (usually) coincide with two (and only two) sexes. There are compelling arguments that present gender as being much more complex than this dualism.[12] However, in order to most effectively address the issue of gender within digital game-culture in U.S. society at the present time, I am limiting myself to the construction of gender that is likely to be most familiar to gamers and game designers, as well as readers of this discussion.

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11 See, for example, *Gender Trouble* and "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," both by Judith Butler, and "Doing Gender" by Candace West and Don Zimmerman.

12 See, for example, Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2008), and Gerald N. Callahan's *Between XX and XY: Intersexuality and the Myth of Two Sexes* (Chicago, Ill: Chicago Review Press, 2009)..

Overview, literature review, frameworks, and methodology

My thesis as a whole focuses on rhetoric dealing with the construction of gender (i.e., the reading and writing of meanings related to gender) in a variety of electronic-game–related environments. The relationships I am examining are:

- the interaction between the **gamer** and the **game**;

- the interaction between the **gamer** and **official media** (advertising, marketing, video trailers, character art, etc.);

- the three-way interaction between the **gamer**, the **online gaming community**, and the **game**.

For this project I look primarily at the single-player role-playing game[13] *Mass Effect 2*[14] and the communities and interactions that surround it, although I will bring in other games to demonstrate some aspects of the topics I discuss.

Chapter 2 is a close reading of *Mass Effect 2* itself, in which I use frameworks for the construction of gender developed by Judith Butler, primarily in "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,"[15] and by Candace West and Don Zimmerman in "Doing Gender"[16] to examine the gendered structures present within the game. All of these theorists employ, at least in

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13 Please see chapter 2 for more information on the definition of "single player role-playing game" and for more detailed information about the game itself.

14 *Mass Effect 2*. Redwood City, CA: EA International/BioWare, 2010. Computer file.

15 Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40.4 (Dec., 1988): 519-531.

16 Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, "Doing Gender," *Gender & Society* 1.2 (1987): 125-151.

these works, a phenomenological approach to gender and the performance thereof. I will look not only at character design, an approach that has been taken frequently when analyzing games in terms of gendered representations, but also at inter-character interaction, mission objectives and structure, and the positions of characters in the game-constructed society. My examination also incorporates elements of autoethnography, using a single player's experience and interpretation with *Mass Effect 2* (my own) as an example of a possible set of interactions with the game. My experience included a full run-through of the game, with some portions completed more than once. While this experience certainly did not cover all possible permutations of the story, nor did it include all possible choices within various game-play narrative interactions, it does constitute a complete game experience, one in which nearly all missions were attempted and completed.[17]

In chapter 3, I discuss advertising materials. Here I expand my examination to include two additional role-playing games, *Fable III*[18] and *Final Fantasy XIII*[19], both released in the same year as *Mass Effect 2*. This additional material allows me to make broader claims about the marketing-based understanding of *gamer* as demonstrated by products created to sell these games to consumers.

With chapter 4, I extend the focus of my examination again, this time to look at the online interactions of gamers as they relate to games and other gamers. While I focus primarily on the community interactions related to *Mass Effect 2* and its precursor, *Mass Effect*[20], I will also discuss interactions not directly related to these games, primarily to demonstrate the gender-related climate of many online gaming

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17 This includes narrative gameplay missions and elements included in the base game as released by its publisher. Additional downloadable content, which adds more missions and a few more characters, is available but was not included in my run-through.

18 *Fable III*, designer Peter Molyneux, dev. Lionhead Studios (Redmond, Wash: Microsoft Corp., 2010).

19 *Final Fantasy XIII* (Square Enix, El Segundo, CA: Square Enix, Inc., 2010).

20 *Mass Effect*, Redmond, Wash: BioWare/Microsoft Corporation, 2007.

communities—manifestations of the "external grammar" of the semiotic space of the game community, to borrow James Paul Gee's[21] terminology. In chapter 4 I also discuss some ways that gamers can use these online spaces, which are an example of what Mary Louise Pratt calls "contact zones,"[22] to "talk back" to dominant understandings of "who gamers are." Some of my examples illustrate advocacy on the part of gamers for themselves (and for other gamers), and other examples demonstrate advocacy for characters and interpretations. In other words, *advocacy* (for social change) occurs within these online communities. This advocacy involves not only the real lives of the gamers within the communities but also the narrative components of the games.

Finally, in chapter 5, I bring the discussion back into the realm of the real world beyond both the community of gamers and the imagined constructions of the game worlds. I discuss why both non-gamers and gamers may care about this kind of analysis; the implications of this work for understanding some types of gendered interactions and the possibilities for modifying some sexist social structures[23]; and how the online game subculture bleeds into "real world" locations. I also make suggestions for future research.

A working definition of the game genre under consideration

For the purposes of this thesis, I will define "single-player role playing games" as games that:

- are designed to be played by one person at a time (i.e., not online games involving more than one player);
- place the gamer in control of an avatar that interacts with the game environments in response to the player's direction;

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21 Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us*.

22 Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession* 91 (New York: MLA, 1991): 33-40.

23 *Note:* As far as I know "sexist" is the only word available to communicate this concept, although the issue here is about gender, not sex.

- allow the player to experience a game-world through the "role" of the avatar;

- have a narrative that is an integral part of the game experience.

These constraints allow me to focus on the interaction between gamers and games that are designed to provide a *visible* on-screen presence that acts as a proxy for the player in the imagined world of the game, which in turn involves social interactions. In the design and play of these games, gender is a factor, intentionally or unintentionally.

Literature review

In sociology, phenomenologists and social constructionists such as C. Wright Mills, Erving Goffman, and Harold Garfinkel argue that reality is created and recreated through interactions. Some of these interactions are between individuals, but many are between an individual and the person's internalized conception of social norms. Building on these ideas, Judith Butler (1988) and Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman (1987) discuss the creation of gender within a given social structure. Using language related to Goffman's dramaturgical approach, Butler and West and Zimmerman discuss the performance of gender as a cultural and individual phenomenon that creates and recreates a society's normative gender models.

Certain types of gendered performances will be more or less acceptable in any given culture or subculture. Following this, gendered performance changes depending on the context in which the individual is performing. The performance of "woman" almost certainly will be different if an individual is at a wedding or is on the job as a police officer. Both are valid performances, but either would break cultural expectations if performed in the incorrect setting.

Any gendered characters who perform roles in modern U.S. society—in my context, primarily the player-controlled characters in the RPGs I am examining—

necessarily "perform" gender, simply by existing as a gendered construct. However, the digital character does not perform gender on its own. Before the gamer ever has the opportunity to "become" the character, designers, programmers, and artists have all had a hand in determining the performance the character gives, and marketing departments also have influenced how characters are presented (particularly through advertising channels). Once the character is being played, the gamer also has a role in the character's performance of self through her or his choices (as permitted by the confines of the game world). Many additional forces shape the performance and understanding of the character(s). Some of these are game communities (both flesh-and-blood and online), politicians, and the media.

In the case of a single-player game, the conception of the character presented by the game as interpreted by the player(s) is arguably the most important influence on that player's understanding of the character's identity. Each player's interpretation will, in turn, be influenced by the understandings of gender brought to the game by the player's own experiences. Another factor in the interpretation of a given character can be the conceptions of that character disseminated within the game community or communities. In addition to informing an interpretation of the character, these also bring into play the structures related to the performance of gender within the gaming subculture itself. This is true even when the player does not interact directly with the community through the avatar (i.e., player-character) that is being interpreted.

The identification of the player with the avatar becomes even more complex in light of Laura Mulvey's essay on visual analysis with regard to film, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."[24] Mulvey argues that, in film, the viewer is assumed to be a man, and she also argues that figures onscreen are designed to appeal to what she calls "the male gaze." Gamers, too, are usually assumed to be men, and the games and

characters are, therefore, presumably designed to appeal to that demographic. Further, Mulvey contends that, in film, cultural norms encourage the perpetuation of masculine-biased visual devices. Because games frequently use framing and storytelling conventions that were developed for movies, the generally heteronormative, masculine-biased visual devices she posits are perpetuated in this new medium. Mulvey also makes a distinction between the *sexualization* of the female figure and the *idealization,* or perfection, of the male protagonist. The implied identification of the viewer with the main character (generally a man) places the viewer (player) in an *idealized* shell—and allows for the doubly-strong objectification and sexualization of the female characters: once through the eyes and actions of the main character, and again through the vicarious experience of the viewer (348).[25]

Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987) argue that gender is a "master role." By this they mean that gender is part of a person's identity no matter what other roles that individual may be performing. An additional complication is that the gender role is usually ascribed, which is to say it is selected for an individual by someone else, with no input from the person assigned the role. Common language use offers examples of the importance of gender to other performances. For example, everyday conversations frequently include instances in which specification of a role includes modification with a gendered addition, as in "woman doctor" and "male nurse."[26] The master role informs how the individual is expected to act in the performance of other roles. Those expectations are present in both the individual and the person or people

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25 These terms obscure the distinction between "man" and "male" and between "woman" and "female." However, Mulvey talks about the "male gaze" not the "man's gaze." Because it is the external sexual characteristics that are being emphasized, the discussion of the sexualization of the female figure does not create the same disjuncture in this context.

26 Language use also does not consistently differentiate between the male/female binary and the man/woman binary, which are not identical. "Male nurse" really ought to be "man nurse," given that it is a gender description, but the connection between gender and ascribed sex in modern U.S. society is such that an individual who presents as a man and who is a nurse is much more likely to be called a "male nurse" than a "man nurse" (a term that I have never heard used).

with whom they are interacting, although the individual may or may not conform to those expectations. These role expectations are, of course, culturally based.

The master role can come into play even when the "other" in the interaction is not physically present and even when there is no direct, real-time interaction between individuals, as was shown to be the case when reviewers read articles for blind peer-review in academic journals.[27] I contend that this master role informs the decisions of game developers, designers, and marketers, and that it also informs the interactions of gamers between themselves and with others, where the ascribed gender of "gamer" is generally "man," along with the closely associated normative correlate of "male" and the only somewhat less closely associated "heterosexual."

This master role also means that the assumptions made about "the gamer" by developers have an effect on the game's construction, the action and narrative of the gameplay, the marketing—in short, all aspects of the gamer-game interaction—even before the potential gamer (i.e., any individual) considers purchasing (or experiencing) a title.[28] The games, game communities, game companies, and normative game culture often communicate messages that signal to the player who they are "supposed" to be, and these messages are frequently uncomfortable, disconcerting, or simply strange for players who do not fit the assumptions. As I will argue, players of the predominant single-player RPGs at this point in history and location in the world are expected to be men, and that bias affects the ways in which potential and actual woman players approach, interact with, and react to the games.

A number of studies have been conducted to try to determine how the gender of a player correlates with gaming preferences and styles. In one example, Sheri Graner Ray, active in the gaming industry for a number of years and involved in

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27 See, for example, C. M. Tardy and P. K. Matsuda, "The construction of author voice by editorial board members," *Written Communication,* 26.1 (2009): 32-52.

28 See, for example, Gareth Schott and Siobhan Thomas' "The Impact of Nintendo's 'For Men' Advertising Campaign on a Potential Female Market," *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture* 2.1 (2008): 41-52.

several very successful game projects, conducted a number of quasi-experiments to assess whether gender had any relationship to certain aspects of gaming.[29] Most of her findings reinforced the idea that there is a difference in game preferences that is highly correlated with gender. Among other things, Graner Ray's research suggested that woman gamers prefer noncompetitive, cooperative games; the option to choose a woman avatar through which to interact with the game environment; a clear under-standing of the rules of the game before beginning to play; and emotional stimuli.

Many of the conclusions reached by Graner Ray are reiterated by Jill Denner and Shannon Campe in "What Games Made By Girls Can Tell Us."[30] Examining 45 games created by 126 11- to 14-year-old girls, Denner and Campe coded for the type(s) of conflict included; whether the games challenged gender stereotypes; the number of characters who presented as male or female in the games; what kinds of images the girls incorporated into their projects; what types of competition the games encouraged (if any); and whether the games had real-world applications. This research supported the hypothesis that girls preferred games that met the following criteria: took place in a real-life setting (as opposed to fantasy or science fiction)[31]; dealt with social issues in some way[32]; avoided including "violent feedback" (139); did not require a zero-sum endgame[33].

Denner and Campe's study also returned some results that surprised the re-searchers. The girls generally created games that included both a win-scenario and a

29 Sheri Graner Ray, *Gender Inclusive Game Design: Expanding the Market* (Hingham, Mass: Charles River Media, 2004).

30 Jill Denner and Shannon Campe, "What Games Made By Girls Can Tell Us," *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New Perspectives on Gender and Gaming,* eds. Yasmin B. Kafai, Carrie Heeter, Jill Denner, and Jennifer Y. Sun (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2008): 129-144.

31 Ibid. 71% of the games took place in a "real-world" setting, p. 134.

32 Ibid. 99% addressed social issues, 99% dealt with fears of some kind, and 53% looked to teach a social lesson of some kind, p. 134.

33 A zero-sum endgame is one that requires there to be a loser in order for there to be a winner.

lose-scenario (occasionally more than one of each), a finding that contradicted the ax-
iom that girls are content with games that simply allow them to explore, with no clear
end-game. In addition, the girls did not have women as the only avatars in their games.
Nearly half the games allowed the player to name the character, which effectively al-
lowed the player to determine the character's gender (140). Finally, although there was
a strong expectation that the girls would create games that "helped others"—and they
were, in fact, encouraged to do so (134, 140)—only 15 percent of the games included
the opportunity for the player to assist someone else (134).

While both of these studies make the case that girls do, indeed, enjoy digital
games, when discussing their results they also ignore many pertinent issues related to
preference, access, experience, and social context. Jenson and de Castell (2009) do an
excellent job of drawing attention to these kinds of omissions. They posit that many of
the differences in gameplay preferences and style that have been attributed to gender
are, in fact, more likely related to experience—while the men or boy gamers tend to
be "expert" gamers with significant gaming experience, the women and girls studied
tend to be "novices." In their study, single-sex groups of gamers were given the op-
portunity to play *Guitar Hero*, a game that many of the children were unfamiliar with
and that none of the gamers owned when the study began. When initially exposed to
the game, the girls behaved in the expected "girl" fashion—lots of talking, collaborative
gameplay, encouragement of others, sharing hints on how to play, and self-deprecat-
ing comments, such as "this is too hard" and "I can't do this" (20). However, as the girls
began to master the game, the chatter, assistance, and banter died down. Comments
were more limited to things like "Oh crap" and "I missed," and there were no more
self-deprecating remarks. Eventually the girls were more eager to check their scores
and were more competitive about their scores relative to each other than were the
boys (20). Jenson and de Castell theorize that many of the "gender" differences ob-
served in other studies are really reflections of differences in access, expectation, and

context for boy and girl (or man and woman) gamers. They further argue that much research on gender and gaming has been framed in a way that makes it impossible for the results to do anything other than confirm the researchers' expectations that there are gender-based differences related to gaming.

Dmitri Williams, Nicole Martins, Mia Consalvo, and James D. Ivory took another approach to examining gender in electronic games: they started counting. In "The Virtual Census: Representations of Gender, Race and Age in Video Games,"[34] Williams et al. examined 150 games released for all platforms[35] over the course of one year. In examining all the characters that appeared in these games (not only player-characters, or avatars, but also non-player characters [NPCs] and background characters), they found that, in comparison to numbers available from the United States census, games showed a consistent over-representation of "males, whites and adults and a systematic under-representation of females, Hispanics, Native Americans, children, and the elderly" (815, and passim). Some of the methodological choices made by the researchers raise questions for me. Most significantly, I question their conflation of gender and ascribed sex without clearly stating that they were doing so; the exclusion of non-human characters from their final results, based on two other studies had found that "viewers heavily discount social objects that they cannon confirm as human" (824)[36]; and the length of time devoted to each game in order to conduct the census.[37] Despite these reservations, the article does show that there is widespread

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34 *New Media and Society* 11.5 (2009): 815-834.

35 Meaning all methods of playing games including consoles, computers, handheld gaming devices, etc.

36 Although one of these studies does appear to relate to avatars and computers, the other, "Perceiving and Responding to Mass Media Characters" by Hoffner and Cantor, appears to be focused on the relationship between viewers and television or film characters. Although it is not within the scope of this project, I would contend that the relationship between an RPG gamer and non-human NPCs has the potential to be very different from that of a viewer to characters with whom that viewer does not interact so directly.

37 Only 30 minutes per game. This is extremely minimal in some cases, particularly with RPGs. I estimate

under-representation of those who are not male, white, and adult. Williams et al. theorize that this is in part because of perceptions among game marketers about who plays video games, in addition to being a result of the gender identity of the majority of game developers (830-831).

In addition to their study of game characters, Williams et al. also theorize about the cycle perpetuated by the under-representation of females as characters. They discuss the idea that consistently over-representing a group leads to internalization of these skewed representations when players call upon "group-based schema" (821) and that the systematic under-representation of groups can lead to the under-represented groups becoming effectively invisible, due to their lack of accessibility in what Williams et al. refer to as the "knowledge store" (821). Individuals who are represented poorly in games are less likely to play them, and, according to some studies, are also less likely to go on to become game designers themselves—thus doubly reinforcing the assumptions and biases about who gamers are and what they want in a game (828-830).

Frameworks

<u>Overview of gender construction framework</u>

The theorists I am using approach the idea of gender from the standpoint of phenomenology. Their understanding is that gender is not a preexisting "thing" so much as it is a series of actions, behaviors, perceptions, and choices that create and recreate the idea of gender as something individuals experience in everyday life. This theoretical lens makes it easier to see how the concept of gender is influenced by the actions of the individual, the actions of those surrounding the individual, and the

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that I had (very briefly) encountered a total of 9 - 10 characters within 30 minutes of starting *Mass Effect 2*, all of whom were human. As the researchers were also looking at primary and secondary characters as a sub-group it seems pertinent to mention that, of these characters, two would reappear later in the story (one as a squad member, one as a pilot) and both would have been coded as "male" in this study.

normative social models that create and are created by individual interactions and expectations. Although this conception presents gender as something that is not "real" in terms of being hardwired or innate, it is crucial to note that because people believe gender is real, it becomes "real in [its] consequences," to borrow from the Thomas Theorem.[38]

Autoethnography

The use of an autoethnographic approach allows me to provide concrete examples of how gender interacts with my own understanding of myself as a player / gamer and, from there, to examine the social implications and underpinnings of gender in games. Although I will discuss autoethnography in more depth in chapter 4, I would like to present my reason for using an autoethnographic approach to the examination of the game itself—when a game is not something that would typically be understood as a "culture."

I think that playing a game is always an individual experience, whether or not the game is played as part of a group interaction. This is especially true with non-linear role-playing games, which offer multiple resolutions to the narrative depending on the choices the player makes within the game. The only real way to examine a player's *understanding* of a game is to examine the player's *experience* of the game. There are a few ways for a researcher to accomplish this with some control over gameplay conditions and player identification. One is to analyze the experiences of a number of people playing the game, including their thoughts, feelings, and interpretations of the events in the game. Another is for the researcher to play the game. A third could combine these approaches. Because of the scope of this project and the availability of gamers able to put in the 50-plus hours required to complete a full run-through of *Mass Effect 2*, as well as the challenges inherent in coding the number of experiences

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38 Thomas K. Merton, "The Thomas Theorem and the Matthew Effect," *Social Forces* 74.2 (Dec. 1995).

required to complete a detailed, statistically significant analysis of the results, I chose instead to concentrate on one individual's experience of the game. My first-person record of my reactions and impressions to playing the game also form the basis for chapter 2, the detailed analysis of the game.

Rather than using a rhetoric and composition-specific framework for my analysis of the character designs (chapter 2) and advertising materials (chapter 3) utilizes theories of: analyzing and interpreting artwork; layout and design; costume design; and performativity. Although Anne Wysocki discusses the rhetorics of images in "The Sticky Embrace of Beauty," her analysis does not touch on many of the elements of the images that I discuss.

Methodology

Selection of the game(s)

The criteria upon which I based the selection of the primary game under examination were extensive. The game needed to:

- have been released fairly recently, which I defined as 2008 or later;

- have been advertised in mainstream game magazines and / or on game-related websites;

- have an active online fan community;

- be third-person, or at least have a way to view the avatar;

- have a woman (or female)[39] as the player-character, or have the option of a woman (or female) as the player-character;

- feature a design for the woman lead character's body that was not hypersexualized;

- provide sufficient narrative to contextualize characters within the game-world.

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39 There is a normative cultural expectation that there is a correlation between "female" and "woman." It is generally the case that any character who is presented as "female" in a game is assumed to be a woman as well.

Mass Effect 2, the focus of my examination, fit all of these criteria. Released in January 2010, it was the second in a planned trilogy of third-person role-playing games. The previous game, *Mass Effect*, was released in 2007 and received both critical and popular support, winning numerous awards and receiving generally excellent reviews.[40] This meant that although *Mass Effect 2* was a recent release, a fanbase for the game already existed and was active online. *Mass Effect 2* was marketed on game-related websites and in game magazines, offered the option of a non-hypersexualized woman avatar,[41] and featured a well-developed game world in which the characters and narrative were situated.

Two other games, which I will discuss in relation to advertising in chapter 3, also fit the criteria. *Fable III* was released in October 2010. The third game in a series, it had an established fanbase of active gamers. *Fable II*[42] and *Fable III*[43] do give players the choice of a woman or a man as an avatar (although this was not an option in *Fable*[44]). *Fable III* was marketed in print and online in gaming-focused spaces. *Final Fantasy XIII*, the third game, was released in the U.S. in March 2010. *Final Fantasy XIII* was also part of an established series, and thus had an active fanbase. Unlike *Fable III* and *Mass Effect 2*, *Final Fantasy XIII* does not offer players the choice of an avatar. The only option for the player-character is Lightning, a woman.

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40 "Previews, Reviews and Awards." *Mass Effect Community,* BioWare, n.d.

41 The availability of this option was difficult to ascertain from the marketing materials; see chapter 3 for a more in-depth discussion of this point.

42 *Fable II*, designer Peter Molyneux, dev. Lionhead Studios, 2008.

43 *Fable III*, designer Peter Molyneux, dev. Lionhead Studios, 2010.

44 *Fable* only offers players a man for their avatar. *Fable*, designer Peter Molyneux, dev. Lionhead Studios, 2004.

<u>Selection of Game-Related Websites</u>

I selected game-related websites to examine for a variety of different reasons. They had some base criteria in common. Each had to be focused on gaming, and, because of the requirements for IRB approval, had to be open-access (i.e., a visitor had to be able to view the material I discuss without "signing in" to the website). Otherwise, the sites varied in purpose, interactivity, focus, and ethos.

<u>YouTube: Interactions in moving images and non-text media</u>

For example, with YouTube, part of my selection criteria included the site's popularity and accessibility. YouTube is user-friendly and has been designed to encourage viewers to interact with regard to the content, which is often user-created. Although YouTube does have content restrictions with regard to copied videos and "explicit" material, users are, by and large, free to create and post videos and to comment on others' creations. The nature of the creations posted—not static images and not exclusively text—also factored into my decision to include YouTube as a site of inquiry. This medium allows members of the game community to provide commentary in academically non-traditional ways, and it provides creators with tools that are unusual in more "formal" works, as well as greater access to audiences who might not be interested in academic statements.

<u>Sites of critical engagement</u>

I chose other sites because of their high level of critical engagement with games and the gaming community. Examples include The Border House[45] and Go Make Me A Sandwich.[46] These online places do not serve as gathering points for people who want to get rid of games or purge them of any politically incorrect elements. (Those

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45 Border House, *The Border House*, n.p., n.d.

46 wundergeek, *Go Make Me A Sandwich*, n.p., n.d.

sites also exist, but they are less nuanced and therefore less interesting and useful.) Rather, they are places where people assemble (albeit virtually) in order to highlight inequalities or assumptions that are encouraged, perpetuated, and / or reified in some games and in some areas of the wider gaming community. These sites exist as environments populated by individuals who play games despite their awareness of the problematic social implications inherent in many of the games. The writers at The Border House specifically address issues of importance to gamers who do not fit the normative conception of "gamer." In particular, their "About Us" information, displayed on all pages on the site, states that The Border House is

> a blog for gamers. It's a blog for those who are feminist, queer, disabled, people of color, transgendered, poor, gay, lesbian, and others who belong to marginalized groups, as well as allies. Our goal is to bring thoughtful analysis to gaming with a feminist viewpoint and up-to-date news on games, virtual worlds, and social media.[47]

Similar information is available on Go Make Me A Sandwich, where the author states that the site

> was started in response to my growing frustration with the escalation of sexist imagery being used to sell games. The purpose of this blog is twofold: 1) to raise awareness about things that often just go "in one eyeball and out the other" 2) catharsis.[48]

Both sites clearly operate in the contact zone[49], and, as is typical in such spaces comments and discussions can become contentious.

Official and unofficial sites related to specific games and series

The primary selection criteria for game- and series-specific sites, both "official" and fan-created, were that they focused on games and, as above, had content that was accessible without the use of a password or sign-in. On official sites, developers often

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47 The Border House, *passim*.

48 wundergeek, *Go Make Me A Sandwich*, *passim*.

49 Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone."

provide concept art, character designs, interviews with members of the design team, and access to press releases, and many official sites also include discussion forums for gamers.

Interactions examined: Gamer / game

Gamers read and write meaning on their experiences of a game most directly by interacting with, or playing, that game. As previously mentioned, for this project I have confined my examination to one particular game genre: single-player role-playing games. In this section I evaluate the ways in which gender is treated as an integral part of "who's playing," in terms both of the human player and of the character being played. I also examine gender as a phenomenon within the created world of the game.

Role-playing games, as the name implies, put the player in the "role" of a character in the game-world. Through the gamer / character's actions, changes are made to the environment and, often, to the character. When playing or discussing a game, the gamer / character distinction frequently becomes blurred, which adds to the challenge of distinguishing between the player's experience and the player's perception of the character's experience, both for the player and for a researcher.

In *What Video Games Have To Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, James Paul Gee proposes a three-part identity for the gamer-avatar relationship. These are the *real*, *virtual*, and *projective* identities. Gee uses italics to demonstrate this relationship of "player as character."[50] The "real" identity is that of the gamer; using italics as Gee does, this is "*player* as character," with the emphasis on the player. The "virtual"

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50 Gee uses a more specific example, "James Paul Gee as Bead Bead," where Bead Bead is a character he created for a particular role-playing game. See Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us*, p. 54-58. See chapter 4 of this thesis for more on this relationship between player and avatar.

identity places more emphasis on the avatar and the avatar's position in the game world. Gee presents this aspect of the tri-part identity as "player as *character*." The final aspect, the most complicated to explain, is "player *as* character." This relationship, Gee's "projective" identity, relates to the player's goals, desires, plans, and / or intentions for the character. This identity is a fusion between the character and the player. The player shapes the character's history, skills, and interactions according to how they want the character to develop and how they understands the character. This development occurs within limits imposed by the world in which the character operates and by the perspective of the player.

As a master role (West and Zimmerman), gender is also a component of this tri-part identity in a role-playing game. This master role it has the potential to influence all aspects of the "player-as-character" identity, and also has the potential to complicate the relationship between the player's perception of her or his (real-life) gender, and the player's perception of the gendered roles of the character(s) she or he is playing on screen. In this playthrough of *Mass Effect 2,* there was no significant disconnect between the player's gender identity and the gender identity of the avatar as perceived by the player and as demonstrated by interactions with other characters.

Mass Effect 2

Mass Effect 2 is a single-player role-playing game (or RPG). Reviewers, developers, and gamers would further classify *Mass Effect 2* as an action-RPG because the gameplay mechanics include having the player-character defeat enemies through face-to-face combat, in the process earning points and developing powers for the avatar that allow the player to progress through the story.

Basic information about RPGs

- The player takes on a *role* in the game world. This role is enacted in the game world through the *character* or *avatar*.

- As the game progresses, the character gains skills and abilities (or increases competence with existing skills and abilities). These skills are usually gained through exploration, solving puzzles, and / or defeating enemies (particularly in the case of action-RPGs; see below).

- The player can usually allocate points of some kind to the character in order to have the character develop skills and abilities in particular ways; i.e., there is often more than one framework into which a character's skills and talents will fit. For example, one player might choose to allocate points toward building the character's skill at fighting, while another might increase the character's speed, stealth, or agility in order to avoid fighting whenever possible.

- Good RPGs have in-depth narrative and an engaging story and offer players the opportunity to have a complex experience of the game-world.

Further information for defining action-RPGs

- The player-character faces enemies.

- Enemies are defeated through face-to-face combat. This may include armed or unarmed combat.

- Generally, defeating enemies grants the player points that can be used to increase the avatar's skills.

- Usually involves some kind of "boss fight" or several boss fights. Boss fights are fights against particularly difficult enemies. Defeating the boss usually involves strategic thinking, not just bigger weapons.

In *Mass Effect 2* there are a number of enemies who are pitted against the player-character and the Non-Player Characters (NPCs) who make up the player-character's team. These enemies include humans; a number of species of non-human organic life (primary types include the Turian, Batarian, Salarian, Vorcha, Asari, Krogan, and Collectors); one type of non-organic life (Geth), and some creatures who are only nominally alive (Husks).

Story

Mass Effect 2 is set in the mid-22nd century in the Milky Way galaxy, where humans are one of a number of space-faring species. The gamer takes on the role

of Commander Shepard, who appeared in the first *Mass Effect* game as a soldier for a multi-species, government-sponsored military organization. At the beginning of *Mass Effect 2*, an unknown enemy attacks the spaceship on which Shepard is serving. Commander Shepard, who is controlled by the player, is thrown into space and is seen struggling with a malfunctioning spacesuit while disappearing into the distance, silhouetted against a nearby planet. The game then proceeds into a cut-scene[51] in which the player is shown pieces of a body being gathered, followed by very scientific-looking tools and scans that imply that this body is being (re)created from the collected remains. This body will eventually become the player's avatar for the game: Shepard, brought back from the (very) dead.

Game-generated discussions with NPCs and cut-scenes reveal that a pro-human, non-government military organization named Cerberus (which has questionable goals and tactics) has fronted the money and technology to perform the scientific miracle of reviving Shepard. Cerberus' leader, the vaguely and evocatively named Illusive Man, believes that Shepard is the only person who has a chance of defeating the most recent threat facing the galaxy, one that has already cost a significant number of human lives. Following the reconstruction of the body and a short debriefing, Shepard, along with two Cerberus officers, is sent on what is essentially a galaxy-wide scavenger hunt to gather a team of people who are supposed to improve Shephard's chances of succeeding at this most recent mission to save the galaxy (again).

Shepard

BioWare, the company that created *Mass Effect 2*, did something very unusual in setting up the game. The programming allows the player to decide whether Shepard

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51 "Cut-scenes" are essentially mini movies, and are generally included in a game in order to move the story along. They usually involve minimal, if any, input from the human player.

is male or female.[52] For many gamers, particularly woman gamers, the option of having a woman avatar is very appealing. There are a variety of theories about why players may prefer playing one gender over another, ranging from greater comfort in identifying with a character of the same gender as the player[53], to a preference for looking at a female character[54], to the opportunity to explore different gender-identities than people are allowed to experience (at least without negative repercussions) in "real" life[55].

In particular, Sheri Graner Ray theorizes that women gamers may prefer playing woman avatars because of a sociological concept called "the pyramid of power."[56] This construction presents the idea that power can be represented by a pyramid, with the most powerful (and smallest number of) people on the upper levels. Individuals are, theoretically, comfortable at their own power-level and at the power levels below them, because they understand what is expected at these levels. However, if an individual is asked (or forced) to function above her or his power level, the task becomes increasingly uncomfortable, relative to the number of levels they are required to ascend, due to a lack of knowledge about acceptable behaviors and actions. Because modern U.S. (and most Western) society is patriarchal, men generally have more social power than women. This means that, while men are comfortable "stepping down"

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52 BioWare products frequently demonstrate a conflation of gender and sex, as is shown on the *Mass Effect* website under the "quick facts" information for all characters listed under "squad" or "characters." BioWare, "BioWare | Mass Effect | Universe," *masseffect.bioware.com*, EA International (Studio and Publishing Ltd.), n.d.

53 See, for example, Graner Ray, p. 95-100; Williams et al., p. 831.

54 There are many examples of players on forums saying that they'd prefer to look at a female avatar when playing. These comments are usually made by self-declared males. Statistical analyses of these kinds of comments could provide interesting insights and further development of ideas about gamer/character relationships.

55 See, for example, Esther MacCallum-Stewart's "Real Boys Carry Girly Epics: Normalising Gender Bending in Online Games," *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture*, 2.1 (2008): 27-40.

56 Kay Sutherland, *Sociology of Women*, St. Edward's University, Austin, Texas; February 25, 1995. Cited in Graner Ray, p. 95.

the pyramid to select a woman avatar, women are not as comfortable—and, indeed, may be very *un*comfortable—"stepping up" in the power structure to play an avatar who is a man. While I find this framework intriguing and with some merit, it does not take into account many instances in which this difficulty with "stepping up" in power levels does not appear to hold true, as for women who seem to have no difficulty selecting avatars who are men (and who may, in fact, prefer them). While this could be explained with ideas related to taking on the power roles of men, which some women might enjoy and others would find uncomfortable, these apparent deviations are not sufficiently accounted for in the formulation as it stands.

Whatever the individual reasons behind their choices, many players do demonstrate a consistent preference for a woman or man as an avatar, a decision that carries over from game to game, and the gender-identity of the player is absolutely not always the same as the sex-gender conflation represented by the character.

In addition to making Shepard's sex something players can determine, BioWare's designers do not appear to have created inherent differences in the character's strength, intelligence, endurance, etc., based on which sex that the player chooses. This is not always the case when players are offered a choice of character sex. This fundamental equality within *Mass Effect 2* is very significant. Gameplay can be negatively affected when the avatar's functional qualities are unbalanced, being affected positively or negatively by preliminary choices concerning the character's basic array of characteristics, sex, or class. (In RPGs, the player can often select a character's class. This essentially means the character's "job" or function within the game, and tends to be associated with a particular set of skills. For example, the player can choose to play a "thief," with expanded stealth skills, or a "wizard," with specified magical powers.) Frequently designers make adjustments for variations in stats between characters based on class, sex, and other factors, and these adjustments are not always done well. Sometimes "classes" are also conflated with normative gender roles; in games where

NPCs are present in the player's party, the "healer" and / or "defensive magic user" is often a woman. The "muscle" is almost always a man. In *Mass Effect 2*, the player can choose one of five classes for Shepard, but none is tied to the sex (and normatively associated gender) that the player chooses.

The developers at BioWare made another encouraging choice in the design of Shepard's body and clothing. The female version of Shepard is not hypersexualized. She is fit (which is in keeping with her active military background), not unnaturally thin, and does not have oversized breasts. While all of the clothing choices are fairly form-fitting, they do not reveal excessive amounts of skin (and do not over-emphasize cleavage), and also correlate to standard options for the other human members of the crew, both women and men.[57] The one questionable wardrobe option is an outfit that matches those worn by women on many of the human colonies that the player / character visits. This alternative is still not terribly revealing, but it does feature bare shoulders and a cutout on the back between the top and bottom of the outfit.[58] Shepard wears very practical armor at almost all times that the character is not on the ship that serves as the base of operations for the mission. When Shepard is female, the armor clearly shows that the character does have breasts, but they are not, by any means, the focus of the armor. The armor has been designed to accommodate this part of the body, not designed to accentuate it.[59] This is in strong contrast to many games, where the armor has been designed as a costume that would not protect the wearer and provides revealing views of the underlying body. In *Mass Effect 2,* additional pieces of armor can be purchased in various locations throughout the game and, again, these components are not designed to accentuate external female sexual characteristics.

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57 See Appendix A, image 1 for Shepard's four clothing options.

58 See Appendix A, image 2 for images of this outfit.

59 See Appendix A, image 3 for armor.

Nonetheless, there are significant differences between the character-creation screen for the male Shepard and the one for the female Shepard. The character-creation screen is where the player gets to determine, within defined parameters and using preset options, what the individual gamer's version of Shepard will look like. There is also a default version of Shepard, if a player prefers not to customize the avatar.[60]

The majority of the options for customizing the character are the same for the male and the female. The face area can be modified through sliders that change the eyes, chin, nose, skin color, complexion, hair, etc. However, one customization option appears only for the female version: makeup. In this category are blush, eyeshadow / mascara, and lipstick.[61]

The presence of these options sends a clearly gendered message: women (female) wear makeup; men (male) do not. A more even-handed way of handling this type of customization would be to allow players to provide a category called "decorative" for both the male and female versions of the character creation screen, and include things like freckles, tattoos, moles, and similar distinguishing features, along with makeup, if desired.[62] As it is, a player may feel that a mixed message is being conveyed: the female and male versions of Shepard are equally bad-ass, but only a female—implicitly a woman—might want to wear makeup while saving the galaxy.

NPCs (Non-Player Characters)

As mentioned previously, the player starts out by guiding Shepard on a quest to collect a team of NPCs who will increase the chances of success on the mission to save

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60 See Appendix A, image 4 for a comparison between the character creation screens.

61 See Appendix A, image 5, for a close-up of the options for the female character.

62 *Mass Effect* included scars as options for both male and female Shepard but the recreation of Shepard for *Mass Effect 2* made retaining these illogical.

the galaxy. The base game[63] includes 10 of these NPCs. In the downloadable content (DLC), released after the base game, two more NPCs were added.[64] Of the 10 base-game NPC squad members[65], two are optional (the decision about whether to include either of these characters in the squad is integrated into the story), and an additional three may be optional, although my playing experience indicates that the chances of completing the game successfully do not appear to be good without them.

Of the 10 basic squad members, all are important to the success of the mission. The more squad members the player has gathered (and the more these squad members "trust" Shepard, a condition met through what are called "loyalty missions"), the more likely the character is to succeed on the final mission. The sex balance and gender balance of the NPC squad that the player / Shepard tracks down is relatively even, and the species distribution is fairly diverse. (This assumes that we are currently functioning in a gender-binary game-world where sex and gender are generally considered to be congruent.) Of the 10 base-game characters, six are primarily coded "men" and four are primarily coded "women."

Two of the women are human and two are non-human (a Quarian and an Asari). The Asari are actually mono-sexual, so while the Asari are sexually female, it is unclear whether they are "women," since their species have no "men" to make up the other half of a binary pair.[66] Yet the Asari are physically similar to human females, and appear to be viewed as "women" within the game world. In addition, the fact that they

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63 I.e., the game as it was originally sold; additional content was released after the main game, primarily for download, and more content is slated for release, supposedly to bridge the gap in the narrative between *Mass Effect 2* and *Mass Effect 3* (scheduled for release in spring 2012). This additional content is called DLC—DownLoadable Content.

64 Both of these additional DLC characters are human. One is a middle-aged, apparently white, male mercenary, and the other is a relatively young, Asian, female thief.

65 I.e., those NPCs with whom Shepard will be working most closely in trying to save the galaxy.

66 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 30.

"appear to be women" to a player in modern U.S. society means that they function as "women" when viewed by many of these players.[67]

Of the men, one is human, four are non-human organic life forms (a Turian, a Drell, a Krogan, and a Salarian), and one is a sentient collection of machines (Geth),. Despite the "machine" identity, the synthesized voice for the Geth is definitely coded as more "man" than "woman."

NPC design

The character design for the squad NPCs continues some of the mixed-message work that the differing Shepard character-creation screens started.[68]

The men vary considerably.[69] Some are slender; some are massive. Some wear fairly basic uniforms and some wear (or have as part of their physical being) significant armor. The non-organic (machine) life form has a hole in his middle and has no real face. All are bipedal and none of them have fur, but otherwise they are quite dissimilar.

The women, on the other hand, seem designed less for variety and more in alignment with normative conceptions of attractiveness within certain cultural parameters. Three of the female characters have a "high-heels" stance. One of them, Tali, a Quarian, has a skeletal structure that forces this position. Quarians appear to be digitigrades, and the males of the same species have a similar stance. However, one of the humans (Miranda) and one of the non-humans (Samara, an Asari) are, without a doubt, wearing heels—and their footwear appears to be at least 3-inch heels.[70]

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67 See Rebekah Robson-May, "'Mono-gender' Performing 'Woman': The Asari in Mass Effect and Mass Effect 2 (A Multi-Genre Presentation)" (unpublished final project for E504, Colorado State University, 2011).

68 See Appendix A, image 6 for the squad selection screen with all 10 base-game characters.

69 See Appendix A, image 7 for labeled images of male squad members.

70 See Appendix A, image 9.

In addition to their impractical footwear (I have not seen either of these women pull a weapon out of her heel at any point in the game, and while one does use her foot itself as a weapon at one point, the heel did not appear to have helped), both these women are essentially wearing catsuits. Both characters are also fairly busty, and Samara's catsuit reveals significant cleavage. Why Samara, a Justicar (described in-game as a kind of a cross between a knight errant and a samurai or a warrior nun), needs to have her shirt slit down to her navel is never explained (or even discussed). (Asari do, apparently, have navels, as revealed in an overheard in-game conversation.) It is also not explained whether this outfit is a sort of a habit worn by all Justicars or if it is supposed to be Samara's personal choice of garment.

The other human female, Jack[71], does not wear either heels or a catsuit. However, her default outfit[72] is minimal. From the hips up, she is dressed in nothing but tattoos and some strategically placed straps. It is possible to unlock[73] a different—and somewhat less revealing—outfit for Jack, but her default is the mostly-not-there contraption.[74]

In at least two cases, the designers seem to have been aware of their design choices with regard to the women's clothing. One of the "bad guys" in the game comments at one point that she's not shooting yet because she's waiting for Miranda to get

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71 This character is initially called "the convict." The characters (and player) discover that this individual is named "Jack" before they meet her within the game's narrative. The characters express surprise when they discover that "Jack" is female. The male-coded name presents interesting questions about the character and about the designers' understanding of the characters—as well as how players are supposed to "read" the character—but none of those questions are within the purview of this paper.

72 Meaning the clothing that the character wears by default when s/he is first recruited to join the mission.

73 Meaning this is a component of the game that the player accesses by completing certain tasks. In this case the player must complete Jack's loyalty mission. All characters have unlockable outfits as a result of their loyalty missions, but most of those alternatives are re-colors of the original outfit. Some of the DLCs seem to have included outfits which are more than re-colors, but those are, of course, not included in the base game.

74 See Appendix A, figure 10 for close-ups of Jack, Miranda, and Samara's default clothing.

dressed—"or does Cerberus really let you whore around in that outfit?"—and two of the crew members have a conversation about Jack's sartorial choices, the man expressing interest in her state of undress and the woman warning him that Jack is extremely dangerous.

These women characters are presented as being strong, and they are as important (in fact, essential) to the mission as the men, but all of them are also presented as objects to be admired—and not in an "oh, look at that interesting character design" way, as is the case with the concepts for some of the men. Among the men, intriguingly imaginative species include Garrus (Turian), Mordin (Salarian), Thane (Drell), Legion (Geth), or Grunt (Krogan). As I mentioned, the females are more human-based and far less varied.

NPC functions

For the most part, the functions that the NPCs perform in this game-world are not highly correlated to normative U.S. understandings of gender roles. While the ship's pilot is a man (and has a condition akin to Osteogenesis imperfecta—"brittle bone" disease), the doctor is a woman. The "secretary" and ship's psychologist is a woman, but so is one of the two engineering experts. An Asari (one of the all-female species) is essentially a mob-boss who runs one of the space stations. Admittedly most soldiers the player encounters (at least those not in the player's crew or squad) are men[75], but some Human women and Quarian women are soldiers.

Within the squad there is also not much correlation between team function and ascribed gender. Of the six men, one is a tech specialist, one is more of a tactician, one is a scientist and former Special Ops member, one is the proverbial "muscle," one is a blend of tactician and soldier, and one is more a blend of tactician and Special Ops. All can use some form of the "biotics," which functions somewhat like magic

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75 Other than the Asari soldiers, gang members, etc., who are antagonists at some points in the game.

within this game world. These biotic powers are mental abilities. They manifest as offensive or defensive tools that can be used during confrontations.

Of the four women, one is a tech specialist, one is a tactician, one is a biotics specialist, and one uses both biotics and weaponry as her primary tools. Of these four characters, three are explicitly presented as being skilled at using biotics. This is in contrast to the men, none of whom is specifically presented as being particularly strong with biotics, despite the fact that several of the men are good enough in this regard to be equal to or better than at least one, possibly two, of the women.

Despite the fact that the squad members' functions do not seem to correlate highly with gender, the skills that are actually emphasized for squad members do tend to be gendered. As is often the case in digital games, the women are presented as more skilled with "magic" (biotics) and the men as more skilled with weapons. In this world, this imbalance is offset somewhat by the fact that biotics are often used offensively (so the women are not acting primarily as the healers / support system for the squad), and all the men are shown to use biotics competently, while all of the women are also effective at using non-biotic weapons.

Missions, NPCs, and gender

Gender is a factor in several of the missions that Shepard and the squad undertake. The instances of gendered interactions range from the minor (comments made by NPCs) to the major (the entire situation facing the squad on a mission).

A scattering of examples will make my point. NPCs make a number of comments that betray gendered biases, including, of course, the previously quoted remark about about Miranda's outfit—"does Cerberus really let you whore around in that outfit?" A mercenary recruiter for a mission to collect a squad member comments that (female) Shepard is "sweet" and tells her "[y]ou're in the wrong place, honey. Strippers' quarters are that way" before agreeing to let Shepard and her squad sign on

for the mission. (The player has the option of ignoring this comment—and then will be accused of having not much sense of humor—or can pull a gun on the merc and pretty much tell him to shove it or see if he *really* wants to take on the player-character in a "whose is bigger" match.) An Asari informs (female) Shepard that she needs to relax and that she might try finding a nice, warm man (a heteronormative as well as gendered comment). (Female) Shepard is propositioned and threatened by a rowdy Turian nightclub attendee who is behaving inappropriately toward an Asari dancer (the player, as Shepard, has the option of punching this particular Turian). All of these cases involve negatively stereotypical interactions with the females involved, complicated by overlays of what may or may not be taken as wit or humor. All dimensions of these game-play events are obviously gendered.

In terms of missions, the most clearly gendered is the loyalty mission for Jacob. The player, as Shepard, must find Jacob's father, believed to have been killed in the crash of a colony ship ten years earlier. In the course of the mission the player (and the characters) discover that Jacob's father was not killed in the crash, nor were the majority of the colonists. For the past 10 years the surviving colonists have been living on a planet whose flora cause mental degeneration in the people who consume it. In the case of the women, this mental degeneration leaves them in a child-like state and robs them of complex reasoning. In men the consumption also degrades complex reasoning, but has the added effect of making them violent. Jacob's father, Ronald Taylor, has managed to hoard the food supplies from the ship and so has been unaffected by the local flora. While several of the other commanding officers were initially in on the plan to keep the untainted food for a select group of officers (all men), Ronald arranged to be the only one of the group to survive. It is strongly implied that he is using the women as his own personal harem. Audio diaries from other colonists report that the women are not mentally sound enough to reject the sexual advances of those less-affected by the mental degeneration (men), and a conversations with the women them-

selves also indicate that they have been forced into sexual relationships with other colonists. Ronald Taylor makes it clear that he has taken advantage of this aspect of the relationships established between the men and women now that nearly all the other men have died or been killed.

This mission sets up the situation where Shepard and two squad members (one of whom must be Jacob) are required to rescue the women colonists from the sexual slavery inflicted upon them by a man in a position of power, as well as from the mental degeneration inflicted by the environment (which was exacerbated by the self-serving decision of the men officers to hoard the supply of untainted food). This gendered power imbalance is challenging enough to deal with when the player has chosen to play Shepard as a woman. If the player has chosen to have Shepard be a man, the power dynamic has the potential to become even more uncomfortable. As the story plays out in that case, a man in a position of power (Ronald Taylor) is subjugating women who are not in a state to effectively resist, and a man in a position of power (Shepard) has to save the women. Regardless of the identity of Shepard, this dynamic constructs gender roles in difficult ways that affect both game-play and the gamer's perception of the avatar's situation and choices. The women colonists are rendered powerless by circumstance. By having a woman (Shepard) lead the rescue mission, this powerlessness is somewhat mitigated. When Shepard is a man it limits the potential for resistance and victory to the male domain, diminishing some of the perception of agency from the women colonists which might have been restored with a woman as their rescuer.

In another loyalty mission, Shepard and Samara must find another Asari, Morinth. Morinth has a genetic abnormality the means that when she mates with another being[76] she both kills her partner and becomes stronger through the experience.

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76 Asari can mate with any other species (as well as with other Asari, though that is frowned upon; "purebloods" are the only Asari who can have the genetic condition described). Asari reproduce by combining their own genetic material with that of their partner. The resulting child is borne by the Asari and is always an Asari.

Asari are very long-lived. (Several of the Asari that the player encounters are over 1,000 years old and are presented as being middle-aged.) Morinth has been on the run for about 400 years, killing other beings and becoming ever-stronger; Samara has been pursuing Morinth since her initial flight. In order to defeat Morinth, Samara explains that Shepard must attract Morinth and allow Morinth to take Shepard home. Then Shepard must resist the strong allure and power through which Morinth will attempt to subdue Shepard. In the course of the mission it becomes apparent that Morinth is also one of Samara's three daughters, all of whom have this same genetic anomaly (to differing degrees). Morinth is the "smartest and strongest" and the only one to resist the life of seclusion that is normally the lot of Asari born with the condition, which manifests during puberty and always indicates sterility. The gendered assumptions underlying the structure of the mission—that Shepard must help Samara track down Morinth, a woman who uses sex and seduction to kill her partners—is problematic enough in terms of gender representation. With the added information that Morinth is unable to reproduce, and that Morinth is Samara's daughter, gender becomes even more entwined with issues of motherhood, family, and morality. In addition, the player can choose to help Morinth kill Samara (rather than distracting Morinth so that Samara can kill her) and can then have Morinth on the squad in Samara's place. If the player chooses to save Morinth, she becomes a potential romance option—although if this option is pursued it will result in Shepard's death.

Background NPCs and gender

Additional significant gendered elements exist within the structure of the society represented in the game world. There are three primary commercial centers (and one secondary center) where a variety of game elements take place, from gathering supplies, to learning about the world of the game, to undertaking missions. Each of the three primary commercial centers contains a bar or nightclub. Let us look first

at the Citadel, a location that acts as a trans-governmental hub and which functions a bit like the European Union in that it is an umbrella governmental group that oversees the activities of a number of mostly-autonomous nations. The bar on the Citadel is called Dark Star. The activities include drinks, dancing, and at least one conversation between a Quarian woman and a Turian man that deals with issues of interspecies romance. While this bar provides space for dancing and drinking, it is overall it is pretty unremarkable. Next we come to Illium, an Asari-run planet where almost anything is legal. The club here, Eternity, has, in addition to a bar, at least one table dancer. This dancer is an Asari. She, on her table, is surrounded by three men (a Human, a Salarian, and a Turian) who are attending a bachelor party, organized by the Human for the Salarian. The player can listen in on the conversation between the men. It ranges from social customs related to marriage, to the reproductive urges of the various species, to the possibility that Asari might use mind-control to cause people to find them attractive. The dancer does not speak. The third location is Omega, a space station that is not quite a black market and is run by gangs that are overseen by a mob-boss-type Asari. Here the final nightclub, Afterlife, has table dancers (one of whom Shepard can observe up close), pole dancers, and also, according to exchanges with both the Asari in charge and a mercenary, strippers and prostitutes. In all of these places, roles which are strongly gendered as activities that women do (or , more accurately, as activities that men generally do not do)—table dancers, pole dancers, implied strippers—are performed by Asari, who, while presented as mono-sexual, read in almost every particular as women.[77] This reinforces the player's likely conception that Asari are women, strengthens the sex / gender correlation, and recreates the understanding that "women perform these kinds of social roles"—even in the now-future 22nd century.

These instances all document the presence of women in what can easily be understood as objectified roles. In addition, there are places in the game where

77 Robson-May, "'Mono-gender' Performing 'Woman': The Asari in *Mass Effect* and *Mass Effect 2*."

women are conspicuous in their absence. For example, the only Krogan women the player encounters are dead (they are under sheets and the only real impression one can gather is that they are significantly smaller than the Krogan men). There appear to be no Turian, Batarian, Salarian, Vorcha, or (apparently) Elcor women in the game. (It's difficult to tell about the Elcor. Based on the voice acting and timbre, the Elcor in the game all present as masculine.) There is a fairly even distribution of Quarian men and women (slightly weighted in favor of the men) and of Humans. Finally, while there are, of course, no male Asari, at least one Asari appears in all the cultural centers of the game world. Because of the previously discussed correlation between Asari social roles and those roles performed by women in modern U.S. society, this makes it seem that there are more women in the game overall than are actually represented on a spe-cies-by-species basis.

Conclusion

Shepard, when played as a female and as a woman, is an example of a generally well-done, strong, capable main character. Yet the gendered elements of the world of *Mass Effect 2* are problematic. The game tackles many social issues involving moral judgment, such as xenophobia, engineered genetic defects, corruption in government, genetic manipulation and cloning, self-determination, violence, and the ethical treat-ment of criminals. It presents these issues with depth and complexity, offering no pat answers. Sexism and gender bias, however, are treated as background issues and are not confronted or even questioned.

Acknowledging that sexism and gender-bias exist in the world of *Mass Effect* but not creating any scenarios where gamers are encouraged to think about what these things mean, and how they are perpetuated, means that these issues become, in a way, non-issues. The failure to address sexism and gender bias reduces these issues to be-

ing understood as "normal" ways of interacting and understanding the world that don't need to be unpacked and examined.

Given the utility of imagining alternative worlds and potentially solving problems (including the saving of the universe), the overlooking of issues of sexism and gender bias seems not only remarkable but potentially worrisome.

CHAPTER 3:

THE GAMER / MARKETING INTERSECTION

Gamers, like many consumers, use marketing materials as part of their deci-

sion-making process when determining whether to purchase, or in this case play, a

specific offering. If the marketing materials make it very clear that only certain types

of players are expected to buy the product, gamers not in this target demographic may

never consider playing certain excellent games—games that the gamer might enjoy—

due to narrow, focused advertising and marketing efforts. Gareth Schott and Siobhan

Thomas' "The Impact of Nintendo's 'For Men' Advertising Campaign on a Potential

Female Market" provides an example of how this works.

The messages conveyed in advertising—through language use, image choice,

and design elements, to name just a few features of modern marketing materials[78]—

can reveal more about who the marketers *think* will be interested in a product than

they do about who might *actually* be interested in it. The advertising for many digital

games reveals a clear assumption that the individual whom the marketers think will be

playing is a man. In this section I will discuss aspects of several marketing campaigns

for three RPGs and will demonstrate the ways in which these materials indicate that

they are designed to appeal to a gamer who is a man and / or their components deni-

grate or trivialize women, even to the extent that they fail to acknowledge the exis-

tence of an available woman avatar.

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78 I am discussing official marketing materials, not fan-based creations.

These assumptions about who is playing games, which I assert is directly related to the highlighting of avatars who are men[79], may have the (presumably un-intended) side-effect of decreasing the number of gamers who believe that the game being advertised is something they would enjoy playing. It's a marketing ploy that shoves part of the market out of the picture, and it also has the potential to uphold the generalized knowledge (part of the external grammar of the semiotic domain) within the gaming community that "women don't play (real) games."[80] That is to say, male-biased, sexists, and sometimes downright misogynistic marketing materials eliminate the category of "women" as potential players in the group conceived of as "gamers." Because of the ads, women may not think that the more complex games like RPGs are appealing, and they therefore gravitate (if they play games at all) toward puzzle games and other products that are not considered "real games" by the "hardcore" gaming community. This circular process does not benefit either the game-development com-panies or the potential women gamers.

In this section I will discuss some of the marketing materials for three RPGs. All of the games were released in 2010 and either have the option of a woman as the player-character or present a woman avatar as the only player-character.[81] My primary focus will be on the materials developed for *Mass Effect 2*, but I will also look briefly at those developed for *Fable III* and *Final Fantasy XIII*. In discussing these materials I will concentrate on elements that indicate assumptions about audience, such as word-choice, images, and layout, with special attention paid to places where the approach

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79 See, for example, Graner Ray and Williams et al.

80 See chapter 1 for more on the distinctions between "real" games, as understood through the external grammar of the gaming community, and other games.

81 Understanding a game's marketing materials in the context of the semiotic domain of gaming de-pends on working within a framework of the conventions of the game's genre. For the purposes of this evaluation, I am limiting myself to the single-player RPG genre. Expanding the field of inquiry would require more chapters than this thesis can accommodate.

taken by the marketing campaign or team disguises (or ignores) features of a game that have the potential to attract gamers outside the target demographic.

The target market for advertising is important because the primary decision-maker for game purchases is most likely the person who will play the game. If gamers did not use marketing materials as tools for determining which games they are (or are not) interested in playing, game companies would not continue to spend large amounts of money on marketing campaigns. Marketing materials that inform some potential customers—either passively or actively—that a product is not intended for them exclude those customers from the ranks of potential buyers. In game-related advertising, the materials are not designed to appeal to women. Women become less likely to purchase the game than they might be if the ads were designed differently. This again feeds the belief that women (in the cases I am discussing), don't play "these kinds of games," and so the marketing materials—and, potentially, the games themselves—should not have to take this audience into account. The external grammar of the domain informs the internal grammar, which reinforces the eternal grammar, creating the norms of the semiotic domain.[82]

Methodology

In my interpretation of these materials I draw on a variety of sources, some standard and some unusual. Underlying most of the discussion is the sex-gender correlation assumed in normative 21st-century U.S. culture. As I have mentioned, this is discussed in detail by Judith Butler and by Candace West and Don Zimmerman. While these general theories of gender and performance certainly inform my descriptions and interpretations of the images discussed, they do not provide sufficient tools for analyzing the visual rhetoric employed by the images in the marketing materials, or for interpreting some of the content of the images.

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82 Gee, *What Video Games Can Teach Us,* p. 30-36.

Although Anne Wysocki proposes some methods for performing analyses of visual rhetorics in "The Sticky Embrace of Beauty," her interpretations are too general for my purposes. My analysis requires close attention to detail. I will supplement her ideas with an approach to visual rhetoric that draws on a number of different disciplines, including:

- web page usability studies, especially of eye-movement patterns when viewing pages (image-based or text-based)[83];

- basic principles of art analysis, interpretation, and theory;

- extensive experience of costume and clothing, with an emphasis on the historical, political, and cultural significance of garments, as well as their aesthetic and theatrical functions;[84]

- the sport of fencing.[85]

The games

In keeping with the focus of the previous section, I will focus primarily on the marketing efforts for *Mass Effect 2,* although I will also look at *Fable III* and *Final Fantasy XIII*.

For *Mass Effect 2,* released in January 2010, the marketing efforts I will discuss include box art, video trailers, print advertisement, and a web page (although I will only consider the "wallpapers" that are available on the site). Although I will not be discussing these, there have been additional tie-in media for *Mass Effect 2,* including mass-market paperbacks and short graphic novels, as well as talk about the possibility

83 A sampling of resources: Steve Krug's *Don't Make Me Think!: A Common Sense Approach to Web Usability* (Berkeley, Calif: New Riders Pub, 2006); Jakob Nielsen and Marie Tahir's *Homepage Usability: 50 Websites Deconstructed* (Indianapolis, IN: New Riders, 2002); Vincent Flanders and Michael Willis' *Web Pages That Suck: Learn Good Design by Looking at Bad Design* (San Francisco, Calif: SYBEX, 2001); and John Cato's *User-Centered Web Design* (Harlow: Addison-Wesley, 2001).

84 Costume designer and head of costumes, Carousel Dinner Theatre Children's Theatre, Oakwood Friends School. One excellent reference on costume and fashion is François Boucher's *20,000 Years of Fashion: The History of Costume and Personal Adornment* (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1987).

85 Fencing instructor, Fort Collins Parks and Recreation Department, 2003 to present.

of a feature-length movie.[86] The general marketing message of these products is that you, as Shepard, must save the galaxy and that there are a broad range of possibilities in terms of how you can approach this challenge, with the consequences of your decisions having an effect on future games.

Fable III was released in October 2010, and its marketing campaign also included print and web advertising, box art, video trailers, and a web page with screenshots that appear to be intended for use as computer desktop wallpapers. One of the emphases in the overall marketing message for the "Fable" series is the flexibility of the game and game-world. Players are supposed to be able to make virtually any decisions they want, and the avatar and the game-world change in reaction to the player's choices.

Final Fantasy XIII belongs to a subcategory of games sometimes called "Japanese Role-Playing Games" or "JRPGs." These titles are imported to the United Stated, having originated with Japanese developers. The "Final Fantasy" series is among the most popular JRPGs in both the U.S. and Japan. In the U.S. the series' popularity is due in large part to the success of *Final Fantasy VII*, originally released in the U.S. in 1997 (for PlayStation[87]) and 1998 (for Windows PC[88]). *Final Fantasy XIII* was released in the U.S. in March 2010. The marketing campaign included box art, print ads, video trailers, and a website (which also included wallpapers). Choice and player decision do not play much of a role in these games, and thus are not stressed in marketing materials. What is central are lush visuals, detailed storylines, and complex world-building.

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86 This extensive, cross-genre marketing of the game is a clear example of the multi-pronged marketing discussed in Scott Lash and Celia Lury's 2007 book *Global Culture Industry: The Mediation of Things* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008). See in particular chapter 5, "The Thingification of Media: Animism and Animation" and chapter 7, "Flow: The Practices and Properties of Circulation."

87 Square Enix, "2000 – 1996 | Square Enix," *Square Enix North America* (Square Enix Co., Ltd. 2009, 2010).

88 Square Enix."2000 – 1996 | Square Enix."

Mass Effect 2: **The marketing materials**

The marketing materials for *Mass Effect 2* include the box art and box copy, the print ads, and a video trailer, as well as screenshots and wallpapers available on the game website. In what was likely a move to increase viewers' ability to identify the "Mass Effect" brand at a glance, Commander Shepard was given a consistent look across all marketing materials.

<u>*Mass Effect 2* game box</u>

The cover design for the game box features three characters.89 The figure closest to the viewer, shown turned three-quarters of the way toward the viewer and seen only from mid-thigh up, is a human male, and is most likely to be coded as White—or possibly Latino.90 Not entirely clean-shaven, he projects a "tough guy" persona, his pose active, apparently in a crouch, as he stares intently ahead. He is dressed in full armor—although he is not wearing a helmet—and he carries a futuristic-looking gun that glows slightly, with a small trail of smoke emanating from its muzzle. In addition to this male figure, two other humanoid figures appear on the cover. The figure at the most distant point of the visual triangle formed by the characters is a human-appearing woman with fair skin and dark hair. She wears a low-cut, skin-tight white top.91 She is aiming a gun at an unknown target, her loose hair blowing in a strong breeze that does not seem to affect anything else in the image, except, perhaps, the smoke wafting from the barrels of the guns held by the other two figures. At the lowest point in the visual triangle is a male-appearing being. His face is primarily green and is covered with what look like scales or plates.[92] He is dressed in full armor, again minus the

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89 See Appendix A, image 11 for the front cover image.

90 As you might guess, this is Commander Shepard.

91 This is Miranda.

92 Thane.

helmet. Like the other figures he holds a gun, and, as is the case with the gun held by the other male figure, a puff of smoke surrounds its barrel.

Turning over the box, the back cover copy reads[93]:

1) (headline) *They don't expect you to survive*

2) a) *Entire human colonies on many worlds are vanishing. As Commander Shepard, you must assemble the galaxy's deadliest team to save mankind against impossible odds.*

   b) *They call it a suicide mission.*

   c) *Prove them wrong.*

3) [near image 1, which shows a human male figure, presumably Commander Shepard, flanked by Thane (male Drell) and Mordin (male Salarian)] *Assemble a team of powerful operatives — the success or failure of your mission depends on your ability to earn their loyalty.*

4) [near image 2, which shows the back and shoulder of the same male Shepard firing at a very large robot (called a mech)] *Wage intense combat with a wide range of devastating weapons, tech attacks, and biotic powers customizable for each team member.*

5) [near two images of landscapes with no discernible figures] *Explore a massive galaxy full of exotic environments, undiscovered treasures, and hidden enemies.*

All the images that a player is intended to read as "Shepard"—the main character and the role that the gamer will assume in the story—are of the same male Shepard. Nowhere on the box is there any indication that the player can customize the main character—not even that the player can customize the looks of the *male* Shepard, much less that the player can choose to play as a female. The only person who is likely to be coded as female on the box is the cover image of Miranda, in her cleavage-revealing, form-fitting top (as opposed to the armor worn by the males), holding a gun in an active pose but without the visual cue of the smoke-puff to indicate that she is capable of doing anything mission-useful with the weapon.

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93 See Appendix A, image 12 for the back cover image.

<u>Video trailer</u>

The video trailer continues the campaign to have Shepard coded as a man. The trailer is made up of game footage and pieces of cut-scenes from the game. All of the characters in the trailer refer to Shepard as a "he," and any time the character is shown Shepard is the same male version. As with the game box, there is no mention of the fact that the player can choose a female avatar.

<u>"Wallpaper"</u>

Many game companies create "wallpaper" featuring characters, scenes or other game-related art. These images are free for consumers and are generally intended to serve as computer desktop backgrounds, providing the game company with free advertising and the fans with detailed artwork and a visual symbol of their gaming preferences. Twenty-eight wallpapers for *Mass Effect 2* are available on the BioWare Mass Effect site.[94] Fifteen feature easily recognizable characters. Of those, four clearly show Shepard's face, and all are of the same male Shepard used in the other marketing materials. One of these is a version of the image that appears on the front cover of the game box. Another, depicting more characters, was used in an advertisement in *Edge* magazine, a game publication from the United Kingdom.[95] In this image the default Shepard stands closest to the viewer, in front of a triangle created by the four characters flanking him. Thane and Jack (dressed in her default tattoos and straps) make up the more distant part of a four-person side that starts with Shepard and Grunt, while Miranda and Grunt flank Shepard. Miranda's position does not display her cleavage, but her hair still seems to be blowing in a breeze provided expressly for that purpose. All the male figures carry obvious weapons. Miranda does hold a gun; however, it

94 BioWare, "BioWare | Mass Effect | Media : Wallpapers," *masseffect.bioware.com* (EA International (Studio and Publishing Ltd.). n.d.).

95 "Are Mass Effect 2 Ads Suffocating Commander Shepard?" *throwingcontrollers.wordpress.com* (Throwing Controllers: The Video Game Blog. 4 February 2010). See Appendix A, image 13, for the relevant image.

is small and easily overlooked. Jack does not carry a physical weapon, although her hands glow with blue light.

Three wallpapers focus on a single female figure. In one, an Asari in light, close-fitting armor appears to be about to unleash an attack using glowing blue light which emanates from her hands.[96] In the second, Jack, dressed in her usual minimal attire, points a large gun toward something outside the frame.[97] The third image depicts Kasumi, a character available through DLC.[98] She is semi-crouched, balanced on her bent right leg, the other leg nearly straight in front of her, toward the right side of the image. Her left hand provides visual balance for the image, stretching out at the same angle as her left leg but aiming a gun toward something out of the frame to the left side. Like the Asari, Kasumi is wearing light, form-revealing armor.

In contrast to the female figures, all the wallpapers that feature a single male figure show that male figure in much less figure-exposing clothing. Three of the six wallpapers that feature a non-female, non-Shepard character show that character in heavy armor. Two, Thane and The Illusive Man, are not in armor. However, The Illusive Man is only shown from the neck up, and Thane's jacket, though open at the chest, is a substantial garment, covering his arms and including a metallic-looking stand-up collar that could be interpreted as a gorget-like feature.

Overview and interpretation of the *Mass Effect 2* materials

There is general, wide-spread acknowledgment in the game community that it makes sense for BioWare's team to use a consistent Shepard in the marketing materials so that players recognize the continuity between the games. As a marketing strategy this is a reasonable choice. However, the execution of this strategy has resulted in

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96 Appendix A, image 14.

97 Appendix A, image 15.

98 Appendix A, image 16.

something more significant than a de-emphasis of the fact that the player can choose to play Shepard as a woman. The materials actually *obscure* the fact that the player has this choice. They do this so well that even someone studying the games in detail can be unsure whether the option of playing Shepard as a woman was added in *Mass Effect 2*, or if it was a choice that was available in the original *Mass Effect.*[99]

BioWare paid a voice actor to record dialogue for a female Shepard and the company used resources to ensure that there was a female "skin" for Shepard[100]. Pieces of other characters' dialogue were recorded multiple times in order to change the pronoun use when the characters were discussing Shepard. This indicates that the fact that players can choose to have a female Shepard was not a last-minute decision, but rather was a deliberate and thoroughly implemented choice on the part of the design team and production company. Yet it is extremely difficult to figure out that this option exists without either playing the game or talking to people who have already played the game. Even from a purely financial standpoint, this seems like an illogical way to present the game. If viewers cannot tell that the option of playing the game with a female avatar exists, players who would be more comfortable in the role of a female character (and/or are less comfortable taking on the associated gender role of "man" than of "woman,") are hardly likely to purchase the game, even though they might actually enjoy it. Further, because there is one standard White male Shepard in all advertising materials, BioWare is unable to capitalize directly on the fact that they have created an option for players to "become" a very strong, complex woman as the lead character in this series.

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99 Because my play-through involved *Mass Effect 2* and I had not played *Mass Effect,* it took literally months of research before I stumbled across clear evidence that the option of playing a female Shepard was present in the first game, not a new possibility that had been added to the second.

100 However, they did not create a separate "skeleton" for the female version of Shepard, an omission that has been noted in fan forums. I will discuss these types of forums more in chapter 4.

The trend of ignoring the existence of a female Shepard is continuing with the publication of advertising materials for *Mass Effect 3*[101]. The video trailer available on the "Mass Effect" website continues to feature the same, consistently designed male Shepard from the previous marketing materials, and, again, there is no mention of whether a female Shepard continues to be available. Potential consumers can only guess that the option may continue to exist in the third game, encouraged in this assumption by the structure of the trilogy, which encourages players to import saved character files from the previous game (or games) into the latest "Mass Effect" game.[102] As it is, the exclusively male-centered advertising misses the fact that for some players (men and women[103]) the option of playing as a woman may be a significant selling point.

Fable III: The marketing materials

The marketing materials I will be discussing for *Fable III* are print ads, box art, and video trailers. One central theme of marketing for the "Fable" series has been the amount of latitude given to players in their choices within the game world. The narrative structure is fairly non-linear[104] and allows players to approach gameplay in a variety of ways. Another central feature of the series is that many things in the game change as a result of the player's choices. The world itself will develop differently; other characters (i.e., NPCs) will react to the avatar in particular ways based on decisions made by the player; and even the appearance of the avatar will be modified depending on the player's choices. However, even with all this flexibility worked into the structure

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101 Revised game release date of spring 2012 from December 2011.

102 Thereby making the experience more individual, personal, and emotive, as choices made by the player in games 1 and 2 have noticeable effects in the following games.

103 As well as those who identify as neither men nor women.

104 Meaning that the game does not have a pre-determined beginning, middle, and end, through which players must progress in the same, or nearly the same, order.

of the game, it was not until *Fable II* that a player could chose a female or woman avatar. As with the "Mass Effect" series in both *Fable II* and *Fable III* it is extremely difficult for a potential purchaser to figure out that it is possible to play as someone who is not male (and a man).

Marketing materials are a large part of the reason it is difficult to determine that there are options for the sex (and the normative gender role associated with that sex) of the player's avatar. *Fable III*'s print ads feature only the male option. The most common ad for the game includes the (minimal) text: "On October 26th[105] the King of Albion faces his greatest threat. His brother."[106] The clear implication is that the player will "be" either "the King of Albion" or "his brother." Neither of those forms of address implies a woman character—unless "king" is a gender-neutral title in this game world (it's not).

The box art continues to ignore the option of a woman player-character.[107] In keeping with previous "Fable" covers, *Fable III*'s (U.S.)[108] cover shows a figure that is almost certainly intended to be read as male. He is holding a pistol, has a sword on his back, and is reaching for a crown that sits on a reflective surface. The reflection shows a different version of the crown.

The back cover prominently features another male figure.[109] Dressed somewhat differently than the figure on the front cover, it is likely that this is intended to be another version of the main character. None of the smaller images on the back cover shows an individual who appears to be intended to be read both as the player-

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105 The date on which the Xbox 360 version of *Fable III* was scheduled for release.

106 Appendix A, image 17.

107 Appendix A, image 18.

108 The U.K. versions of the covers are more gender-neutral; those that I have seen do not have a human figure on the front at all. The closest they come is a depiction of an arm.

109 Appendix A, image 19.

character and as female or a woman. None of the back cover text changes the impression that the player-character must be a man.

The video trailer completes the job of erasing the female avatar option from the apparent list of choices a player can make. The only avatar shown is male (in a tricorn hat, leading a revolution).

In fact, the marketing materials did such a good job of hiding the female avatar option that before including the game here I went to the website to try to determine whether this option was still available. Based on several of the screen shots,[110] particularly those showing a single human figure with a dog (the option of a canine companion is a feature of the series), it appears that a female avatar is, indeed, still a choice, though it is unclear whether all female avatars must be dressed in form-fitting clothing that emphasizes the figure's breasts and / or legs.

Final Fantasy XIII: **The marketing materials**

The "Final Fantasy" series as a whole presents a challenge with regard to the roles given or assigned to women. The series' break-out hit in the U.S., *Final Fantasy VII*[111], included three women characters as party members. These were Tifa, Aeris/ Aerith[112], and Yuffie. Tifa performed a primarily offensive role, rather than a defensive one, and was able to hold her own against pretty much any enemy the party encountered at least as well as the men idid, and she often dealt more damage to enemies than the guys did. Aerith primarily performed the "healer-magician" role often assigned to women in games. Yuffie, acquired relatively late in the game, was a thief with both

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110 Appendix A, images 20-13.

111 *Final Fantasy VII* (Costa Mesa, CA: Squaresoft, 1997: computer file for Playstation game console) and (San Francisco, CA: Eidos Interactive, 1998: computer file for PC).

112 The "official" transliteration of her name has gone through changes. The current version seems to be "Aerith," though I believe that when I first encountered the game in 1999 or early 2000 her name was presented as "Aeris."

offensive and acquisitional roles.[113] Tifa was also (briefly) the player-character when the primary main character was out of commission for story-related reasons.

Final Fantasy VIII[114], the next in the series, included more impressive women (as well as some really annoying ones), and *Final Fantasy IX*[115] also included a fairly strong woman lead character (though she was not the primary character). *Final Fantasy XII*[116] included a woman as one of three primary characters.

That being said, *Final Fantasy XIII* is the first non-sequel Final Fantasy title[117] where the player's primary avatar is a woman.[118] The main character, Lightning, is the leader of a band of five NPCs, consisting of three men and two woman. The majority of the women in the party are not confined, even initially,[119] to being healers and defensive spell-users. While one (woman) character does appear to fill that role, the other two women (including Lightning) definitely do not.

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113 Yuffie had the ability to steal items from some of the creatures and people that the player encountered in fight situations.

114 *Final Fantasy VIII* (Costa Mesa, CA: Squaresoft, 1999 and 2000).

115 *Final Fantasy IX* (Los Angeles, Calif: Square Electronic Arts, 2000).

116 *Final Fantasy XII* (El Segundo, CA: Square Enix, 2006).

117 *Final Fantasy X-2* (Los Angeles, CA: Square Enix, 2003), usually read as "ten-two," was *Final Fantasy X*, part 2. This was the first time a "Final Fantasy" game had a sequel—i.e., a game that took place in the same world as a previous game, and followed the stories of characters who had appeared in the previous game. All the three main characters in *Final Fantasy X-2*—including, of course, the primary one—were women. Yuna, the main character in this game, was also a character in *Final Fantasy X* (Los Angeles: Square Enix, 2001). In *Final Fantasy X* it was possible to have the character develop impressive offensive magic skills, but her default initial role was defense and healing magic.

118 I am also limiting this to the single-player *Final Fantasy* games. There has been a very successful online incarnation of the Final Fantasy series (*Final Fantasy XI*, Square Enix, 2004) and a less-successful incarnation (*Final Fantasy XIV,* Square Enix, 2010) in which players can choose their own sex and, by implication, gender, but in this project I am not looking at MMORPGs.

119 The "Final Fantasy" series generally includes a method for changing a character's skills and talents as the player progresses. This method means that, as new skills become available, the player can take a character who initially was given primarily defensive skills and add skills that allow the character to perform a more active role in confrontations.

The print ads for this title are unusual for several reasons.[120] One is simply that they feature a woman character as the main focus and that they do so without showing her under-dressed, positioned so as to draw maximum attention to her physical form, or being protected or overshadowed by another (masculine) character. The main character, Lightning, is certainly depicted in an attractive way, but she is not hypersexualized. She is shown in fairly active poses, both in the main image and in the smaller, inset images. She is not shown as a damsel in distress and she does not seem to have a man nearby as her protector (nor does she appear to need one). Based on footage of the game, this continues to hold true. While there are men in the party, they are not there to "protect" Lightning. Along with the women party members, the men are there to back her up, fight alongside her, and provide additional narrative information. They are not there to protect the fragile woman from the big, bad monsters.

Marketing, the gamer, and assumptions

It seems clear from the majority of the advertising campaigns that I have discussed that there is a target market for the games, and that it does not include women. Based exclusively on marketing materials, *Final Fantasy XIII* does seem to have a broader target market. However, the primary reason I included it is because it is extremely unusual, both in terms of wider RPG conventions (by featuring a woman as the lead character) and within the "Final Fantasy" series itself (as the first non-sequel "Final Fantasy" game in the long-running series in which the primary player-character is a woman).

There is strong evidence that the target demographic for most video games remains young males who are heterosexual and, often, assumed to be White. This is despite the fact that, according to the Entertainment Software Association[121], the

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120 Appendix A, image 24.

121 Entertainment Software Association, "Industry Facts," *The Entertainment Software Association* web

median age for gamers in 2009 was 35 and 40 percent of the gaming market consists of women.[122]

Some people, including developers, appear to be questioning the belief that the majority of gamers fit the "target gamer" profile.[123] Still, women who appear in advertisements for games are overwhelmingly in secondary roles, minimally dressed, and / or are present primarily to be looked at and admired—if they appear in the ads at all. This reinforces that idea that women are not the intended audience for games, even when the unadvertised alternative of a strong female avatar has been programmed into the game.

These dynamics frequently mean that women who do play digital games have to negotiate their own sense of identity and gender with the options they are provided when it comes to the character they can portray in the game world. When a woman avatar is available but the only clothing options accentuate the female figure while appearing to do little to protect the wearer, as is often the case, a woman gamer concerned about gender depictions in games faces a dilemma. Does she choose an avatar who is a man—usually idealized, and not hypersexualized? Or does she choose an avatar who is a woman, offered in a form that perpetuates the objectification of women, but with whom she may be able to negotiate gender interpretations within the gamer / game-world interaction? In the constructed world of the game, which does not have to replicate any particular mode of interaction based on any one set of cultural expectations and assumptions, why does she have to make this choice?

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site.

122 As I mentioned earlier, I find it highly unlikely that this number would be nearly this high if the ESA was not including players of "casual games" in its accounting. Casual games are very different than the games I am discussing here, and most casual gamers—who frequently will not self-identify as gamers—will not be reading or watching media that is likely to expose them to the marketing campaigns that I have been discussing.

123 See chapter 4 for more about this trend.

Negotiation of meaning: expanding the playing field

While players can (and do) write meaning into a game that may not have been conceived by its creators, the game creators and designers can write beliefs and expectations about the player into the world they create. The game-world can demonstrate assumptions about how people will interact (or how they want to interact) with others. Some examples of this are the options given to the player for interacting with non-player characters (NPCs) in the game, or how NPCs interact with each other. They also include how players want to interact with the character they "become" in the game-world. These assumptions, in turn, can (and do) limit the ways in which players are permitted to read the game, and, therefore, how they can "write" their understanding of the game.

The online communities, in which players "talk back" to games and their designers, show how these dynamics can result in activism for gamers and for characters.

The game community and mediation of the gamer / community, gamer /

developer, and gamer / game interactions

Much of game culture has been, and remains, dominated by men.[124] Many early games were pornographic and were designed specifically to appeal to heterosexual men.[125] In fact, much of the success of early gaming systems has been attributed to the creation of non-licensed pornographic games for home console systems.[126] Although the connections between pornography and gaming have become looser since the mid 1990s[127], the tendency to objectify the female body, and the associated tendency to ignore gamers who are not heterosexual men, lingers. I think that it is in part because of this history that gamers who are not heterosexual men are often marginalized, both actively and passively, by many of the normative practices of mainstream gaming culture.

As more and more gamers interact online, these marginalized groups become better able to work together to attempt to effect changes within the larger game culture. In these online contact zones[128], gamers (and non-gamers) work to define—and

124 Entertainment Software Association, "Industry Facts," *The Entertainment Software Association* web site.

125 Damon Brown, *Porn & Pong: How Grand Theft Auto, Tomb Raider and Other Sexy Games Changed Our Culture* (Los Angeles, Calif: Feral House, 2008).

126 Ibid, "The Porn Era: Spaceships," p. 22-34.

127 Ibid, *passim*, but see parts 1 & 2 for more on this transition.

128 Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone."

redefine—who "gamers" are, what and how they play, and how they interact. This ne-

gotiation happens in many ways, some of which include:

- advocacy for gamers themselves;

- support for characters who are viewed as under-recognized or
  under-appreciated;

- options for interactions among gamers and within games;

- modification of—or at least awareness of—exclusionary, abusive, and /or
  violent language use; and

- critiques of games and elements of games that recreate aspects of game
  culture (and of the surrounding culture) that some gamers view as
  problematic.

As is frequently the case in contact zones, the interactions surrounding the

negotiation of identity can be heated, unpleasant, and explosive. They can also be

thoughtful, measured, and illuminating. In this chapter I will explore some of the ways

in which online gaming sites function as contact zones, providing a location for the re-

negotiation of identity and culture counter to those understandings that have become

normalized in the semiotic domain of gaming.

Autoethnography and online game culture

Much of the information about game culture included in this chapter is the

result of autoethnographic study. Authethnographic research offers an opportunity

to examine a culture from the inside out and from the outside in simultaneously. As a

complete member-researcher (CMR)[129] in the gaming community, I have been ex-

posed to the external grammar[130]—that is, the ways in which individuals understand

the modes of interactions when they are performing within a domain and as members

of that domain—of the semiotic domain on a first-hand basis and am able to provide

129 Leon Anderson, "Analytic Autoethnography," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35.4 (2006), p. 378-82.

130 Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us,* p. 26-36 in particular.

possible interpretations for behavior that may not be apparent to those who are not immersed in this subculture. Additionally, as a member of the community for many years, I have an in-depth perspective on the general ethos of the game culture as it manifests online. I have augmented this first-hand knowledge with research, including examining aspects of gaming and game culture as it existed before I was a participant, as well as how it exists in some of the areas in which I am not active. While an autoethnographic approach has a grounding in Rhetoric and Composition, using the experience of the individual to highlight more generalized and generalizable experiences also has a history in some branches of feminist theory. Lorraine Hansberry, an American playwright cited by sociologist Patricia Hill Collins, states that ". . . in order to create the universal, you must pay very great attention to the specific. Universality, I think, emerges from the truthful identification of what is."[131] Autoethnography allows us to pay "great attention to the specific" individual experience and interpretation as the basis for exploring more universal realities.

Of course there are some challenges when basing research in autoethnography. One potential objection to this methodology is that objectivity is compromised, although it has been argued—convincingly, I think—that true objectivity is impossible to achieve. Another approach to dealing with issues of objectivity is taken by researchers who base their inquiries in a version of standpoint theory. This method attempts to address the problem by having the researcher state her or his position and likely biases up front—i.e., identifying the "standpoint" from which they are viewing the issue— thereby making the places where objectivity is most likely to be compromised clear to others. Explicitly laying out the perspective helps define the terministic screen[132] through which the researcher is approaching the culture in question.

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131 Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 545.

132 Kenneth Burke, "Terministic Screens," *Language As Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966): 44-62..

Another challenge is that, as a member of the group being studied, I have internalized some of the vocabulary, cultural expectations, assumptions, and general knowledge of the community. This means that it is sometimes difficult to know which elements of the culture are common knowledge in the general population, and which are a more specialized common knowledge—for example, common knowledge among those who are comfortable with, if not necessarily content with, the epistemologies shared by various locations in the gaming subculture.

The final challenge with autoethnography that I will address here relates to the question of using the personal and individual to illuminate the general. Of course the individual experience and perspective cannot be generalized with abandon; care must be taken to avoid overgeneralizing based on a single perspective. However, as long as the researcher endeavors to remain aware of the individuality of the situation while working to reach broader truths, I think that the value of this approach is worth its risks. It offers an intensity of experience and of insight that cannot be obtained in other ways.

Online forums and the online game community

Online forums related to gaming have existed for many years. At the present time (early 21st century) and in the current place (the United States), these to fall into categories according to the purposes they serve. These purposes encompass some-times conflicting ideas from gamers, developers, and the norms about the generalized "gaming community."

Excluding the online communities devoted to MMORPGs, MMOs, and MMOGs, which are outside the scope of our current focus, some types of online fan-related communities include:

- game- or developer-specific forums, such as BioWare's general forums or the *Mass Effect* forums on the BioWare website, the official *Final Fantasy XIII* forums, and the fan-created "Final Fantasy"[133] communities;

- general game-related sites that usually have interactive features and user-generated content, such as 1Up, the website related to *GamePro* magazine;

- general usage sites with game-related areas, such as YouTube;

- game-related blogs with articles and user comments, such as The Border House and Go Make Me A Sandwich;

- less interactive blog-type sites, such as Fat, Ugly, or Slutty.

Online communities also promote different forms of interaction among and between members of the gaming community. These include (but are certainly not limited to):

- allowing players to discuss their experiences of a game with other players;

- providing a forum in which to obtain assistance in completing parts of a game;

- pooling knowledge related to a game.

All of these are examples of *collective intelligence*, a concept proposed by Pierre Levy and further developed with relation to media fans and the internet by Henry Jenkins.[134] Using Levy's constructions, game culture is an example of a self-organized group[135]. Such a group, much like James Paul Gee's affinity groups[136], is formed as a result of participants' similar interests. In these communities, individuals have access

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133 I use quotation marks here to indicate that the sites are devoted to two more more games in the franchise, rather than to one particular game.

134 Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2006). In particular, pages 134-140 of chapter 6, "Interactive Audiences? The 'Collective Intelligence' of Media Fans," present Levy's ideas and Jenkins' interpretations in detail.

135 Ibid, p. 136-7.

136 Gee, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us*, p. 27 and 35, for example. Also James P. Gee and Elisabeth Hayes, *Women and Gaming: The Sims and 21st Century Learning* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), particularly p. 106-7.

to the collective knowledge of the group, which is significantly greater than any one individual can retain.[137]

In addition to their function as a gathering place for collective knowledge-sharing and discussion, online game communities also provide forums[138] through which gamers can interact with other gamers in a more general way. This can be especially significant for those gamers who do not have a local network of friends who are also gamers. Through these forums, online communities allow even relatively isolated gamers to interact with a broader segment of the gaming subculture than is likely to be available in any one "real life" (i.e., not online) location.

However, many of the existing game-related interactive spaces are also places where sexist, misogynist behavior and language are tolerated, ignored, or even seen as appropriate and "normal" for the domain. This can make negotiating these spaces challenging for some individuals. Some online communities address these challenges directly and provide a space in which gamers can critique, evaluate, and work to modify game culture as it currently exists. Some of the ways in which this happens are obvious: the exposure of behaviors and language that is offensive and potentially abusive, for example; and some is more subtle, such as support for characters and games that fans feel are under-appreciated.

Game-related forums and knowledge pooling

Game-related forums allow players to pool knowledge and compare game experiences with other players. The Mass Effect wiki[139] is one example of this type

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137 Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers*, p. 139.

138 Forums in the general sense of "place to gather and discuss" as well as in the more internet-specific type of forum.

139 Mass Effect Wiki, *Mass Effect, Mass Effect 2, Walkthroughs, and more* (n.p., n.d.).

of community knowledge-gathering forum, as is Final Fantasy Online[140], the Final

Fantasy wiki[141], the Fable wiki[142], and even sites like Mod the Sims, where people

discuss how to mod, or "modify," the games in "The Sims" series (currently *The Sims*

3) so that they function in ways other than those anticipated by the designers.[143] In

addition there are sites like UHS (the Universal Hint System)[144] that provide hints

and walkthroughs[145] written by gamers to help others complete a game. GameFAQs is

another site that offers walkthroughs and information about games[146]. The materials

on this site include full walkthroughs of games, but they also frequently have shorter,

more focused in-depth walkthroughs and information for specific aspects of a game.

For example, GameFAQs includes eight *Mass Effect 2* walkthroughs and in-depth

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140 Final Fantasy Online, *An Unofficial Guide to Final Fantasy* (n.p., 2002).

141 Final Fantasy Wiki, *Final Fantasy Wiki* (n.p., n.d.).

142 Fable Wiki, The. *Fable, Fable 2, Fable 3, and more* (n.p., n.d.).

143 Examples of this include modifications to existing code—such as making jobs pay more (or less) than the official versions, allowing players to place objects in unusual locations, creating scripts that "pose" characters in specific positions, changing how existing objects work (making a shelf hold many more items than it was originally scripted to); adding ways to customize character-creation (additional adjustments for noses, waists, eyebrow ridges, and shoulders, to name just a few); creating new objects for the game (furniture, clothing, hair, wings, swords, cigarettes, fangs, or houses); and many other changes and additions.
In the case of "The Sims" series, the expectation of the developers is that fans will create significant quantities of content and the game is fairly well-designed to accommodate this content. The only real requirement I know of for creators of custom content for the series is that designers are not supposed to charge for their creations. This rule is not always followed, but there are a number of excellent sites that do offer content for free (as required).

144 *Universal Hint System* (Universal Hint System, 1998-2011). I have used UHS since the early 1990s; it has been in existence, in some form or another, since 1988, according to the "About Us" page.

145 A "walkthrough" is detailed information about how to complete a game or a portion of a game.

146 These are mostly user-created walkthroughs, sometimes of entire games and sometimes focusing on specific aspects of games. One rather interesting feature of the walkthroughs is that the authors who post retain copyright to their work. Another interesting and odd thing is the format of most walk-throughs, which tend to be "plain text." I am not sure if this is a requirement, but it is ubiquitous. Walk-throughs look like they were made in TextEdit or some other program that saves things to .txt files, and the fonts tend to be "typewriter" or monospace.

"FAQs"[147] including ones related to the DLC (DownLoadable Content), the hardest dif-
ficulty level, finding money, upgrading weapons and armor, locating (and identifying)
planets, and the contents of the various shops.[148] For *Final Fantasy XIII* there are three
complete walkthroughs (and one partial walkthrough) and over 30 more specific FAQs
on subjects including character abilities; enemies; equipment; how to do a "speed
run"[149]; where to find items; and song lyrics (for songs in the game) in Japanese (kanji
and kana), romaji, and translated into English.[150] *Fable III*, a more recent release than
the other two games, has only one full walkthrough (and one partial), but still includes
in-depth FAQs on five topics including how to make money (in-game), side quests[151],
and weapons and clothing.[152]

These types of game-related, play-focused online spaces tend to be places
where a gamer's sex or gender seem to be largely irrelevant in terms of interactions
with the materials. While there are discussion forums on GameFAQs, it is not at all
necessary to access these boards in order to find the content one is most likely to visit
these sites to acquire. However, gender can still become a point of interest in some
locations. For example, on the Mass Effect Wiki gamers can find out about possible
love interests (LIs)[153] for Commander Shepard. This source makes it clear even to

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147 While this generally means "frequently asked questions," the meaning here is specialized and is more
like "guides."

148 GameFAQs, "Mass Effect 2 FAQs, Walkthroughs, and Guides for PC" (GameFAQs, CBS Interactive Inc.
n.d.).

149 Getting through the game very quickly.

150 GameFAQs, "Final Fantasy III FAQs, Walkthroughs, and Guides for Playstation 3" (GameFAQs, CBS
Interactive Inc. n.d.).

151 "Side quests" are tasks or missions that are not required to finish a game but that can have benefits
within the game (added experience, money, tools, skills, or some other thing), may add depth to the
game environment or narrative, or may just be fun.

152 GameFAQs, "Fable IIII FAQs, Walkthroughs, and Guides for Xbox 360" (GameFAQs, CBS Interactive Inc.
n.d.).

153 These are relationships that can earn the player a "Paramour" achievement medal. There is an inter-

non-players that the only options available are relationships that affirm the character's heterosexuality.[154] Players of a male Shepard are given the option of having a romance with Miranda, Jack, or Tali'Zorah (Tali), while players of a female Shepard are given the option of having a romance with Jacob, Garrus, or Thane.[155]

Game forums and recreation of the overwhelming majority of (adolescent) male gamers

In *Collective Intelligence*, Pierre Levy theorizes something he calls "the cosmopedia," which Henry Jenkins calls the "knowledge space."[156] Levy notes that, within this cosmopedia "[u]nanswered questions will create tension [. . .] indicating regions where invention and innovation are required."[157] In the online gaming community some of these "unanswered questions" relate to sex, gender, and the treatment of players and characters. On the website Fat, Ugly or Slutty, manifestations of these tensions, as they arise in player-to-player interactions, are highlighted. Although the page creators make it clear that they are posting these interactions because they find them humorous, they also state that "If having these messages posted online makes someone think twice about writing and sending a detailed description of their genitals, great!"[158]

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action available to both male Shepard and female Shepard with a female crew member, but this person is not considered a "love interest."

154 The potential romances with Asari are a bit of a grey area. Samara is not a real romance option for either male Shepard or female Shepard. While Morinth is an option for both, it's an option that results in Shepard's death. Also, the Asari are only sort of "women"—there is a lot of discussion about this from developers and gamers, and even official sources disagree. Therefore they only kind of count as same-sex for a female Shepard and only kind of count as opposite-sex for male Shepard, given the gender-binary associations with "woman" and "female" that are normative in U.S. society.

155 Mass Effect Wiki, "Romance," *Mass Effect, Mass Effect 2, Walkthroughs, and more* (n.p. n.d.).

156 Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers,* p. 136.

157 Cited in Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers*, p. 137.

158 Fat, Ugly or Slutty, "About" (*Fat, Ugly or Slutty,* n.p., n.d.).

Some of the submissions are audio, some are video, and some are screencaptures or photographs of text conversations. There are many, many examples of offensive, derogatory language on the site. These go beyond the expected ribbing that is normal in some of these competitive game interactions. Gamers report messages in which they are propositioned, insulted, threatened, or asked questions about their bodies and sexual practices. A few of the less-graphic examples include:

- A non-female gamer who prefers playing female avatars reported a conversation in which another gamer declared "your deffinetly *[sic]* a chick / go make me a fucking sandwich"[159] and the message becomes significantly more graphic, disturbing, and threatening in the following two lines of text (not reproduced here).

- Another gamer is helpfully informed "YOUR A GIRL ! STOP PLAYING VIDEO GAME CAUSE YOUR AN IDIOT AN YOU SUCK AT THEM !"[160]

- A third is asked "hey girl you wanna trade nude pics?"[161]

This type of behavior is not limited to player-to-player interactions, either. One tournament administrator for a gaming site had been dealing with a dispute between two teams and received the following message from a member of the team named "exodus": "equinox called u a fat bitch and a whore"[162].

The advantage to sites of this type is that they bring this behavior out into the open. They provide evidence that gamers are facing this type of interaction, offer a space for comment, and, because the screen names of the offenders are nearly always included in the posts, they can provide a sort of unofficial database of the names of individuals who make these comments.

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159 Fat, Ugly or Slutty, "With a Side of Seriously Disturbing" (*Fat, Ugly or Slutty*, n.p., 1 May 2011).

160 Fat, Ugly or Slutty, "Sorry, I'm too much of an idiot to stop" (*Fat, Ugly or Slutty*, n.p., 24 May 2011).

161 Fat, Ugly or Slutty, "Playing Doctor" (*Fat, Ugly or Slutty*, n.p., 5 May 2011).

162 Fat, Ugly or Slutty, "Gossip Folks" (*Fat, Ugly or Slutty*, n.p., 11 May 2011).

Wundergeek, a contributor to the website The Border House and creator of the site Go Make me A Sandwich, also undertook a project to demonstrate the widespread use of misogynist language on several major gaming sites.[163] Through her unscientific analysis, wundergeek was able to find clear evidence that such language is widespread on the eight sites she examined, and that one site in particular appeared to be particularly noteworthy for the prevalence of this type of language. Although the initial results were not weighted in terms of site traffic, membership, or coded for specific, usage, wundergeek modified some of her results in light of some comments made by readers. In the secondary analysis she added more terms to her list, showed traffic patterns for the sites[164], and provided some context for her research, including her choice of search terms and how she understood the results[165].

Although these examples demonstrate extremes of language use, they are significant in that they also show that there are significant areas in the gaming subculture where this type of language and these behaviors are viewed as acceptable. Through sites like Fat, Ugly or Slutty, The Border House, and Go Make Me A Sandwich, gamers are attempting to change the external grammar of the semiotic domain of gaming by discussing, educating others, and bringing to light the practices they see as insulting, demeaning, threatening, or otherwise unacceptable.

Identity, gaming, avatars and players

As I mentioned earlier, in *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, James Paul Gee discusses three aspects of identity that come into play when a gamer takes on the role of a character in a game. The *real*, *virtual*,

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163 wundergeek, "Google Results - misogynist language used in major gaming sites" (*The Border House,* n.p., 16 March 2011) and *Go Make Me A Sandwich*, n.p., 16 March 2011).

164 wundergeek, "Google Search Results: Revised" (*Go Make Me A Sandwich*, n.p., 17 March 2011).

165 wundergeek, "Google Results: a little context" (*Go Make Me A Sandwich*, n.p., 18 March 2011).

and *projective* identities together form the whole concept of "player as character." To expand on the description of these identities from chapter 1, the "real" identity is that of the gamer; using italics to clarify the relationship as Gee does, this is "*player* as character," with the emphasis on the player. Included in this identity are aspects of the player's identity that may (or may not) have a bearing on the player's ability to take on this role—identities such as "I am a bad strategy-game player," "I have good hand-eye coordination," or "I am a man." The "virtual" identity is more about the character, and would be written as "player as *character*." This includes things like the character's abilities at any given time (Is the character good at fighting? Persuasive? A talented magician?) as well as the character's position in the game world (soldier, thief, royalty, woman, etc.). The final aspect, the "projective" identity, is "player *as* character." This relationship relates to the player's understanding of the character, including the character's history and ambitions, and the ways in which the player would like to see the character interact with the world. This identity is a fusion between the character and the player; the player shapes the character's history, skills, and interactions according to how she or he wants the character to develop and how she or he understands the character. The world in which the character operates provides limits to the type of development that will occur, as does the worldview that the player brings to the game.

Each part of the tri-part identity is necessary for the full identity of "gamer" for any given game. As I discussed in chapter 3, game companies frequently feature only (White) male avatars in their advertising for single-player role-playing games. This has the potential to make the tri-part identity of "gamer" very tenuous for some players. The phrase "player as character" becomes much less meaningful for a player who prefers a woman avatar when gaming, but who never sees a woman avatar depicted in marketing materials. When an important aspect of one third of the virtual identity (player as *character*) is never acknowledged (the possibility of playing the game as a female and as a woman—the corresponding gender is implicit because of the

normative notions of a gender binary that equates "woman" and "female"[166]), the other two thirds of the identity lose part of their referent. Therefore, the projective identity (player *as* character) changes, and, I would argue, by extension the real identity of the gamer who chooses a female avatar (*player* as character) is obscured.

This is further complicated by Gee's concept of "damaged identities,"[167] in which an individual has aspects of their own identity that preclude them from taking on a role at all—at least until the identity is repaired. For many women the idea of being a "gamer" is not even part of the schema of who they are or can be. This is, in part, due to game culture—made up, in part, by other gamers, online forums, marketing efforts, etc.—which rarely, if ever, show women involved in gaming *as gamers*. Therefore the identity of "gamer" for women is, passively or actively, discouraged.

Some of the ways players have to combat this erasure of self, and to work to repair the damaged identity of "gamer," are to make the "invisible" female avatars visible; to bring to light the sexist, misogynist attitudes common in many inter-gamer interactions; and to point out the disparities between commonly held beliefs in many gaming communities and the realities encountered by marginalized gamers. Online communities have emerged as places that make it more possible to implement these actions, where people can gather support, and where players can find encouragement. These communities can also provide explicit examples of why this type of revisioning of the woman in game culture is important, necessary and / or practical based on individual experiences and on interactions in sectors of the gaming world.

Online communities and "talking back" against dominant views

Some *Mass Effect 2* players have carved out locations in which they can work to redefine and complicate the assumptions made about who they are and the meanings

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166 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 30.

167 Gee, *What Video Games Can Teach Us*, p. 61-2.

they are "supposed" to get from a game. They are also using these opportunities to inserting their understandings of Commander Shepard and the quest to save the galaxy back into the broader envisioning of the world of Mass Effect within the game community. One place where this has occurred is in BioWare's own Mass Effect forums. These forums include one expansive thread related to "FemShep"—female Shepard—called "FemShep Fan Thread- She Exists! No Matter What Marketing Says!"As of May 2011, this thread contains 1287 pages of discussion. This is certainly a call to action to the developer to acknowledge that an entire aspect of Shepard's possibly identity has been obscured. It has also become a place for general discussion about players' impressions of Shepard as a female and as a woman and for recording their experiences in interacting with the Mass Effect world when using this version of Shepard.

Other less extensive threads on BioWare's site also address issues related to female[168] Shepard. Some of the topics include: marketing[169]; gender identity [170]; animations—whether the same animations were used for male and female Shepard's walk and run[171]; clothing and armor[172]; facial customization[173]; gender and character[174]; and

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168 In this section I will generally refer to the character as "female" Shepard / FemShep or "male" Shepard / MaleShep. The sex is the quality assigned by the game, and the gender binary present in normative U.S. cultural assumptions equates this with "woman" and "man," which mean that "female" Shepard is equivalent to "woman" Shepard in most of these locations.

169 BioWare, "Screens of Femshep in ME2?" *Mass Effect Community* (BioWare / EA International (Studio and Publishing Ltd.), 12 September 2009).

170 Ibid; BioWare, "We Want A FemShep Screenshot!" *Mass Effect Community* (BioWare / EA International (Studio and Publishing Ltd.), 15 September 2009); BioWare, "My FemShep is great and all but…" *Mass Effect Community* (BioWare / EA International (Studio and Publishing Ltd.), 27 February 2008).

171 BioWare, "Seperate *[sic]* animations for MaleShep/FemShep?" *Mass Effect Community* (BioWare / EA International (Studio and Publishing Ltd.), 24 August 2009).

172 BioWare, "Can FemShep wear heels in combat?" *Mass Effect Community* (BioWare / EA International (Studio and Publishing Ltd.), 4 December 2009).

173 BioWare, "dev question-FemShep Default Face," *Mass Effect Community* (BioWare / EA International (Studio and Publishing Ltd.), 22 December 2009).

174 BioWare, "Shepard vs. FemShep," *Mass Effect Community* (BioWare / EA International (Studio and Publishing Ltd.), 4 July 2008).

voice acting[175]; to name just a few. The previously mentioned "FemShep Fan Thread" has even spun off into a separate website, FemShep.com[176].

In these locations, fans of the female Shepard have an opportunity to remind others in the gaming community that they exist and that their character exists, in addition to having access to other gamers who care about increasing community recognition for this character and for those who choose to play *Mass Effect* and *Mass Effect 2* with a female Shepard. This is particularly important because many gamers who choose to play Shepard as a female appear to self-identify as women. Usually underacknowledged, sexualized, minimized, insulted, or ignored, women gamers can use the platform of gaining recognition for a favorite female character to raise awareness about the existence of females (and women) who play digital games.

Although statistics from BioWare indicate that most players choose to play Shepard as a male, the number who play as a female is not insignificant (about 20 percent in *Mass Effect 2*[177]). Because BioWare treats the female Shepard option as invisible, the company essentially renders the experiences of many of these players invisible as well. Ways in which BioWare does this include:

- the continued absence of the female Shepard from all marketing materials[178], including the omission of information on game boxes to indicate that she exists;

- the lack of a human character model for the "default" female Shepard face (the male Shepard's default face, which is the character version used in the marketing, is based on a facial scan of Mark Vanderloo, a Dutch

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175 BioWare, "Hale" search string, *Mass Effect Community* (BioWare / EA International (Studio and Publishing Ltd.), 23 May 2011).

176 JamieCOTC, *FemShep.com* (n.p., n.d.), created spring 2011.

177 Maurice Tan, "Mass Effect 2 player choice statistics are surprising," *Destructoid* (ModernMethod.com, 23 November 2010) and Erik Brudvig, "Crazy Mass Effect 2 Stats and What They're Used For - PC Feature at IGN," *IGN UK Edition* (IGN Entertainment, 6 September 2010).

178 See, for example, the discussion on page 10 of BioWare, "I still don't understand why anybody cares what is 'canon,'" *Mass Effect Community* (BioWare / EA International (Studio and Publishing Ltd.), 22 July 2009).

model[179]; female Shepard has no such character model for any face options); and

- the invisibility of the character in general.

This is further exacerbated by players who claim that, because the default (marketing and character choice) Shepard is a man, the "real Shepard" is also a man.[180]

In addition to participating in forums on the developer's site, a number of fans have used their skills with video editing and machinima[181] to create videos that combat the erasure of the female version of Shepard and that address issues of gender and heteronormative bias in the game and in marketing materials. One of these videos is the "Mass Effect 2 Launch Trailer [FEMALE version]"[182]. In this revised trailer, the creator took the footage from the official game trailer, all of which focused on the male version of Commander Shepard, and replaced the relevant pieces with video captured from a played version of the game where a female Shepard had been used. This person recreated parts of the game world to more closely match their own experience of this world—rather than simply accepting the "official" version. Interestingly, the official position of the game's developers with regard to this fan creation seems to have been neutrality, and some people who worked on the game have come forward with complimentary messages for the creator of the alternative trailer.

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179 This is fairly common knowledge among *Mass Effect* fans. I have included some sources for thoroughness. BioWare, "Mark Vanderloo question for the devs," *Mass Effect Community* (BioWare / EA International (Studio and Publishing Ltd.), 7 January 2010); BioWare, "will there be a premade fem shepard?" *Mass Effect Community* (BioWare / EA International (Studio and Publishing Ltd.), 3 January 2010); Mass Effect Wiki, "Commander Shepard" Trivia section, *Mass Effect, Mass Effect 2, Walkthroughs, and more* (n.p., n.d.).

180 There are numerous examples of this. One can be seen at BioWare, "will there be a premade fem shepard?" See in particular comments by T1l, CdrCaseyShepard, Spaghetti_Ninja, GodWood. For a less narrow understanding of the "real" story and Shepard see BioWare. "whats canon ???" *Mass Effect Community* (BioWare / EA International (Studio and Publishing Ltd.), 28 September 2009).

181 A style of film-making that uses a game's engine to create original or modified stories.

182 *Mass Effect 2 Launch Trailer [FEMALE version], c*reator: spigyboy, *YouTube* (YouTube, 9 Feb. 2010).

Another example is "The Many Faces of FemShep" by sage.[183] The creator of this video requested that players of FemShep let her use their versions of the character to create a tribute video. The result is over six minutes long, incorporates in-game audio, video, and a soundtrack, and highlights many of the significant moments in *Mass Effect* and *Mass Effect 2* with Shepard as a female. The creator used 37 different female Shepards (including the "default" female from BioWare) provided by 27 creators (again, including BioWare). According to the accompanying post, the creator was inspired to make the video because of the need to celebrate "more strong women in fiction — especially science fiction"[184] and because the female version of Shepard is "something of a secret."

Other players have modded (modified) the game itself and have created videos using the game's own framework to replace male Shepard with female Shepard in some romantic interactions with other characters. By having FemShep romantically involved with, for example, Miranda or Tali, these player mods and hacks directly address players' dissatisfaction with having "their" character forced into heteronormative behavior. Another interpretation of this is, of course, that it is simply another manifestation of Mulvey's "male gaze," with an intended heterosexual male viewer and the objectification of two digital women. Certainly some viewers commented on the videos in ways that indicate that this is their interpretation of the pieces[185]. However,

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183 *Many Faces of FemShep, The, c*reator: sage, *Game Tourists* (n.p., 15 May 2011).

184 *Many Faces of FemShep*, sage.

185 Although the comments were usually not as theoretically-based and were more along the lines of "Bow chicka wow wow" (comment by Vorbisfile in Marvomedia, "Mass Effect 2 - Romance (Custom female Shepard and Tali)"), *YouTube* (YouTube, 27 February 2010); "Lesbian Sex+ RPG = nerds best friend" (comment by RoyalSwagGeneral23 in Revan657, "Mass Effect 2 - Miranda & Female Shepard Romance," *YouTube* (YouTube. 3 May 2010); and "Boobies! :3" (comment by wesleyfilms in Revan657, "Mass Effect 2 - Miranda & Female Shepard Romance").

other comments express appreciation for the work of the video's creators in the name of open-mindedness[186].

Conclusion

Gamers have made some of these online gathering places into locations in which negotiation and redefinition of the identity of "gamer" is debated. Challenging though it is to disrupt the workings of a semiotic domain, these advocates take advantage of the fact that terms, concepts, and identities are in flux in online communities—and that, in the virtual world, identities can be much less open to the ascription of gender or sex based on appearance than they are in the "real" world. This can make it more challenging for detractors of a call to change to ignore advocates of that change based on visual markers that have become coded to indicate a marginalized other. Of course language is still used to code people, as are the images used on many sites as visual identification for particular posters. However, these features can be manipulated far more easily than people can manipulate their physical appearances in the flesh.

In addition to providing gamers with a place to "sound off," some forums provide game creators and designers with access to player response to a game. Developers at BioWare, the producer of the Mass Effect series, have frequently made it clear, within the forums, in interviews, and via Twitter, that they value gamer feedback and use it to make decisions about games. Therefore this type of online interaction can have a significant impact on future games, and can allow fans to almost literally "write" their preferences and desires into later games in a series, or into games in development.[187]

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186 "Why can't Bioware be as open minded as the people who play Mass Effect?" Comment by Silent14411 in Marvomedia, "Mass Effect 2 - Romance (Custom female Shepard and Tali)."

187 One excellent example of this is BioWare's recent announcement that there will be same-sex romance options in *Mass Effect 3*. See Dawdle, "Mass Effect Producer Confirms Same Sex Love Interest(s) For Both Sexes In Mass Effect 3," *GayGamer* (FAD Media, 15 May 2011); Alex, "Some Good News," *The Border House* (Border House, 16 May 2011); and Twitter / @CaseyDHudson [Casey Hudson], ".@firsthour Yes, our plans..." *Twitter* (Twitter, 15 May 2011)..

Of course, not all fans' voices are heard (or listened to), but the online communities provide a remarkably strong platform on which gamers can set up a soapbox, rally support, and find others with similar ideas, interests, and concerns about a given game.

In short, online forums have the potential to provide a place in which players can argue for a broader interpretation of who "gamers" are. Henry Jenkins argues that fan communities are one of the best examples of Levy's concept of collective intelligence, particularly in that they are sites where "people are learning how to live and collaborate within a knowledge community."[188] Using Levy's conception of the "achievable utopia" and Henry Jenkins' exploration of this idea, fan communities—of which gaming is one—are a place where individuals are trying out methods of interacting, creating test areas for how culture could operate in the future.[189] Jenkins further proposes that the behaviors and interactions that survive this process are likely to manifest in "real life,"[190] a result which would clearly be problematic in some of the examples discussed in this chapter.

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188 Jenkins, introduction to "Interactive Audiences?: The 'Collective Intelligence' of Media Fans," *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers,* p. 134.

189 Ibid, p. 134.

190 Ibid, p. 134.

Chapter 5:

Why does it matter? They're just games, right?

Why does any of this matter? After all, they're "just" games. I argue that games are not "just" games. In modern U.S. society, games do many things other than entertain people. (As an aside, why shouldn't women have as much access to "just games," or entertainment, as men?) Games teach critical thinking and problem-solving in ways that are not available in many other areas. They provide spaces where the consequences of failure are low, thereby encouraging players to try things repeatedly, failing repeatedly while building their skills until they can accomplish a task—and good games are designed so that this process is actually fun. Online game-related spaces may be a testing-ground for future "real world" modes of interaction, and as such may influence non-virtual social mores (more about this shortly).

As games become more popular—the ESA estimates that over 70 percent of households in the U.S. include someone who plays digital games, and that in 2010 $25.1 billion was spent on video games, hardware, and accessories[191]—several aspects of current games become even greater cause for concern. These include the fact that they consistently under-represent women; they present those women who do appear as objects; and they encourage players to do the same via cinematic and game-play elements that reproduce instances of Mulvey's "male gaze." All of these increase the potential for skewed understandings of group makeup and individual and personal identities with regard to the group.

191 Entertainment Software Association. "Industry Facts."

In *What Video Games Have To Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, James Paul Gee states that "video games, like most other popular cultural forms, overstress young, buxom, and beautiful women in their contents. Furthermore, with several major exceptions, these women are often not the main characters in the games. However, as more girls and women play games, this will change." (11) This statement takes as givens some critical points that are not assured. While more women are playing games, the acceptance of sexist, misogynist attitudes in many parts of game culture is already well established. The expectations of the majority of gamers (still predominantly heterosexual males) influence the content of games, and the content of games reinforces the "correctness" of these expectations. These both work to discourage many women from playing digital games.

Online game culture offers many examples of places where women are made to feel like second-class citizens. In late March or early April 2011, a gamer, Bastal, posted to an online forum complaining that he, a self-identified "straight male gamer," felt that a recent BioWare game had not been made with the "straight male gamer in mind."[192] Among other things, Bastal was put out by the fact that a (male) NPC hit on his (male) avatar. He was also annoyed that the women the game included as potential romance options were, as he put it "exotic" and used the example of *The Witcher*[193] as a game that was clearly made for what he believed to be the most important demographic for RPGs. He further blasted critics of his post, arguing that the "privilege" they were saying he was displaying was nonexistent and that, in fact, the gamers being privileged were those who he felt had been catered to at his expense. Bastal repeatedly

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192 Bastal, "Bioware Neglected Their Main Demographic: The Straight Male Gamer," *BioWare Social Network* (EA International (Studio and Publishing Ltd.), March 2011).

193 Although I have not played this game I have done some research on it. It is arguably soft-core pornographic and certainly objectifies women. Many of the women in the game appear topless—with none of the men appearing similarly unclad. When the player has a liaison with a female character (encouraged by the game-play structure), the avatar is given a playing card with a generally risqué picture of the woman in question. In other words, one of the player-character's goals is "collecting" female souvenirs.

called on the idea that the majority of the market should get preferential treatment, and that it was his opinion that straight male gamers were the majority of the market for this (and nearly all) digital games.

A developer of the game being criticized responded very eloquently, stating that while yes, straight males do make up a significant part of the audience for the game, they are not the *most important* part of the audience. He further questioned any individual's decision to speak for all gamers of any sort. If the desires of Bastal's version of straight males were not being explicitly catered to, the developer explained, this did not mean that they were being discriminated against, saying that "[t]he majority has no inherent 'right' to get more options than anyone else."[194] The fact that Bastal felt that he was enough in the right that he was "posting the same thread over and over again,"[195] clarifying and refining his position while never working out what, exactly, this "privilege" thing people kept talking about was, is a particularly clear example of widespread assumptions of who "gamers" are. It also demonstrated a lack of interest in—and sometimes hostility to—the idea of questioning these assumptions.

Although the extent to which in-game behavior influences real-life behavior has been debated for years[196], it seems clear that there is some connection between gender construction in games, attitudes about female avatars and female gamers in mainstream game culture[197], marketers' and game designers' beliefs about "who gamers are," and the status of women as gamers and as characters in games. *Penny Arcade* is a long-running webcomic that focuses on gaming and game culture. In an incident that exhibits unmistakable ties between online culture, "real world" consequences, and

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194 David Gaider, "Bioware Neglected Their Main Demographic: The Straight Male Gamer," *BioWare Social Network* (EA International (Studio and Publishing Ltd.), March 2011).

195 Ibid.

196 Primarily with regard to violence in digital games.

197 If "mainstream game culture" isn't too much of an oxymoron.

the links between various subcultures on the internet, in August 2010 the creators of this comic ran a strip that made a one-off joke about rape.[198] Two days later, following an internet uproar about the inappropriate nature of this joke, the creators ran another comic, this time trivializing the concerns of those who objected to the original strip.[199] Then they went further, creating a t-shirt for their online store that proclaimed the wearer's allegiance to the creatures ("Dickwolves") who had perpetuated the rape from the first strip.[200] Although the t-shirt has since been removed from the online store, the entire incident demonstrated deep divisions in the gaming community, particularly ones related to acceptable and unacceptable behavior and treatment of women.

Ironically, the Penny Arcade Expo (also known as PAX), a convention for gaming and gamers, instituted a "booth babes"[201] ban in 2004[202] (the first year the Expo was held) and reiterated the ban after polling gamers in 2010.[203] This ruling has had the potential to create a more welcoming environment for women than exists at most gaming conventions. The sale of "Dickwolves" shirts in the *Penny Arcade* store, which would likely be worn by some attendees at this event due to the associations with the *Penny Arcade* webcomic, and the lack of concern the writer and artist for *Penny Arcade* displayed for those concerned about the impact these shirts (and the underlying message) might have, changed the perception of the ethos of the Penny Arcade

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198 Jerry Holkins and Mike Krahulik, "The Sixth Slave," *Penny Arcade*, (Penny Arcade, Inc., 11 August 2010).

199 Jerry Holkins and Mike Krahulik, "Breaking It Down," *Penny Arcade*, (Penny Arcade, Inc., 13 August 2010).

200 Anastasia Salter, "Future Fragments: Gaming with 'Dickwolves' and 'Sluts,'" *CC2K: The Nexus of Pop-Culture Fandom* (CC2K, 9 February 2011).

201 "Booth babes" are scantily clad women employed by exhibitors at shows. They are generally understood to be at the show or booth in order to attract potential customers by looking attractive, not by displaying their knowledge of the product.

202 Courtney Stanton (Kirby Bits), "Here is a thought: Why I'm Not Speaking at PAX East 2011," *Here is a thing* (n.p., 24 January 2011).

203 "PAX Booth Babe Survey Results," *Penny Arcade* (Penny Arcade, Inc., 31 February 2010).

Expo from a place that was (relatively) welcoming to women to one that trivializes concerns about assault and welcomes the glorification of rape.[204]

In terms of the gendering and gendered understanding of characters, the development team for *Mass Effect 2* made many choices that contribute to a much more complex conception of gender than is available in many digital games. Players are offered the option of playing a strong, confident woman who solves problems through action and intelligence, not by being attractive or alluring[205]. In most ways the female Shepard is understood by characters in the game world the same way that the male Shepard is. However, many gamers are unaware that this version of Shepard exists, and many of the other female characters (or entire species) are designed to highlight their attractiveness or sexuality, and are objectified to a greater or lesser extent.

 The understanding of gendered roles comes to the fore in BioWare's online forums, where players argue over whether the female Shepard is "attractive enough," and whether it's reasonable for a woman to be "given" the job of saving the galaxy[206]. Games are almost exclusively marketed to males (with the exception of games marketed to young girls, which tend to be simplistic and focused on stereotypically "feminine" activities such as shopping and clothes). Characters are often relegated to support roles, to serve as eye-candy, or provide an object to be saved. In instances where a strong female character exists, as in *Mass Effect 2,* she may be virtually erased from marketing efforts. Likewise, female gamers are often ignored, condescended to, objectified, and assaulted with abusive behavior (primarily verbal) and misogyny in many game-related forums.

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204 Salter, "Future Fragments: Gaming with 'Dickwolves' and 'Sluts,'" and Stanton (Kirby Bits), "Here is a thought: Why I'm Not Speaking at PAX East 2011." This is not to say that rape is, by any means, primarily a "women's issue."

205 Although some gamers complained about this. One stated that "What I mean is, what is the point of being a beautiful space babe if you can't ever use it as an advantage over men?" Comment from Roboman26, BioWare, "My FemShep is great and all but…"

206 For examples see comments from Ziost and jordox in BioWare, "My FemShep is great and all but…"

So, again, why should we care about women and digital games?

People who play games have access to skill-sets that are not as available to those who do not play games.[207] These include the ability to think about large-scale problems and to strategically act to solve them. Because more men than women play games, fewer women than men are developing these skills. The gaming subculture is a semiotic domain[208] in which the external and internal grammars[209] of the domain are such that non-males (also non-heterosexuals, and often non-caucasians) are, passively or actively, discouraged from participating. That there are semiotic domains where this kind of attitude is accepted as normal is worrisome. This becomes even more of a concern when taken together with the fact that individuals who operate in the semiotic domain of gaming have access to skills and ways of understanding the world that are difficult to access through other means, and that women (as well as other non-males, many non-heterosexuals, and many non-Whites) are therefore at a disadvantage in learning these skills.

This does not only affect gender equity in "STEM" fields, where women have traditionally been underrepresented (science, technology, engineering, and math). I think it also discourages women from developing skills that are best learned in a place where there are low consequences for failure, high rewards for success, and an implicit understanding that failure is an expected part of the process. Frustration, effort, mastery, rethinking, continued skill-building, and additional mastery are all part of

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207 See in particular Gee, *What Video Games Can Teach Us* and Gee and Hayes, *Women and Gaming.*

208 See Gee, *What Video Games Can Teach Us*, chapter 2 in particular.

209 External grammars are the attitudes and behaviors of people who participate in a given semiotic domain. Internal grammars are those features that define something as being a part of a domain. For example, the external grammar of gaming culture means that people who participate in gaming "know" that more males than females play games. The internal grammar of RPGs means that a gamer (i.e., a participant in the semiotic domain) can look at a game and say "yes, that is an RPG," or "no, that's not an RPG," or even "that's an action-RPG," or "that's not an RPG, that's an RTS (real-time strategy) game" See Gee, *What Video Games Can Teach Us*, chapter 2 in particular.

active learning.[210] These practices are not encouraged in today's schools, and they are encouraged by well-designed digital games.

Finally, games offer players the opportunity to take on different identities, including some that may not be available to them in "real life"—and may not be available to anyone in real life[211]. Trying on new identities and learning new ways of thinking offer the opportunity to understand the world in new ways. They can also help expand an individual's understanding of what is possible, what is right, and what is real. The connections many gamers feel to their avatars in role-playing games that allow the player to become immersed in the game-world and become part of the "player as character" identity, invite further study. Does this relationship really encourage those same players to speak up when aspects of their game experience are hidden? Does gamers' advocacy for an avatar, which also often includes advocacy for their own beliefs and existence in the larger gaming community, result in more assertiveness in "real life?"

Game culture is a subculture and, as such, reflects values that are present in the greater culture (whether through adoption, intensification, rejection, etc.). Many of the online sites I have discussed are spaces where there is a critique of both the external and internal grammar of the semiotic domain of gaming. By raising questions, speaking out, and talking back to marketers, other gamers, and the community in general, the gamers who are active on these sites are attempting to change the external design grammar of "gaming." Through their discussion of specific games (or parts of games), artwork, characters, mechanics, etc., they are attempting to change the internal design grammar—i.e., the games themselves. This type of advocacy, sometimes undertaken in places that encourage these efforts and sometimes in ones that are very hostile, is always present in the contact zones of game culture and it demonstrates the process

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210 See Gee, *What Video Games Can Teach Us.*

211 A 22nd-century space-soldier with a multi-species crew; a speeding blue hedgehog; or an all-powerful city-planner who lives for centuries, to name a few.

of individuals attempting to change an oppressive culture from the inside, from the margins.

To look even more broadly, however, games and the online communities provide what is potentially a very rich site for inquiry about how norms work in a culture, in particular how the internal and external grammar (Gee) of the domain manifests. The semiotic domain of gaming may be a particularly good place to examine these features because games are understood by participants in the culture as created things. The creation of content is often harder to see in other domains, and the construction is not necessarily widely acknowledged by members of other semiotic spaces. With games there are lists of designers, artists, programmers, producers, actors, modelers, etc. Researchers are faced with the possibility of actually asking content-producers why things in the game are the way they are, as well as being able to examine the effects of these decisions in practice. While neither gamers nor designers may understand the unconscious, deep, cultural reasons why things are done a particular way, they do know that decisions are made and that they are made for reasons. Questioning those reasons has the potential to lead to better games, deeper understanding of culture, and invite ways of understanding and viewing the world that might otherwise remain undiscovered.

While games offer the potential for deep learning, the ability to access spaces that cannot exist and identities that people cannot inhabit, and the possibility of broadened understanding of self and others, most limit themselves to reproducing normative cultural patterns and expectations. Some games have bucked this trend. *Choice of the Dragon* gives gamers the option of choosing a great many things about their (unseen) avatar, including sex (male, female, neither, unknown / undetermined, or "Do not pester me with impudent questions!"), number of limbs, and preferences in a mate. *Loom*[212] has an avatar who breaks the fourth wall and interacts with the game

212 *Loom*, designer Brian Moriary, developer Lucasfilms Games / Realtime Associates (Lucasfilms Games,

environment through music, along with a complex story that connects music, weaving, and the "fabric" of the world into a cohesive whole. *Portal* pits the player against a homicidal artificial intelligence (AI) with a passive-aggressive streak a mile wide, armed only with a "portal gun" that creates connected doorways that the player must combine with a understanding of how physics works (not always as the player would guess). *The Longest Journey* and *Dreamfall: The Longest Journey* invite players to question the reality of the world and the connection between reality and dreams, the forces of destiny, and difficulties in living with the consequences of decisions.

However, as games become more costly, developers and publishers are less likely to take "risks" in their products, thus limiting the potential for games to influence players' ways of interacting with and understanding the world.

1992).

Appendix A

Images for Chapter 2

All images for chapter 2 are modified from screencaptures from a personal run-through of *Mass Effect 2*.

Image 1
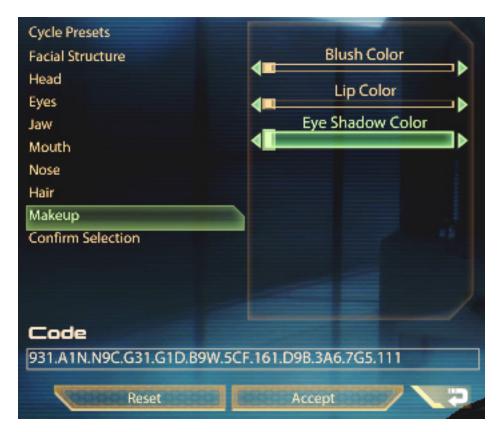The four non-armor outfits available for Shepard (female).

Image 2
Additional views of outfit 4.

Image 3
A basic armor configuration.

Image 4
Character creation screen comparison.

Image 5
Close-up of categories for female creation screen, makeup subsection highlighted.

Image 6
Squad screen, including all 10 squad members available in the base game.

Image 7
Labeled images of male squad members.

Image 8
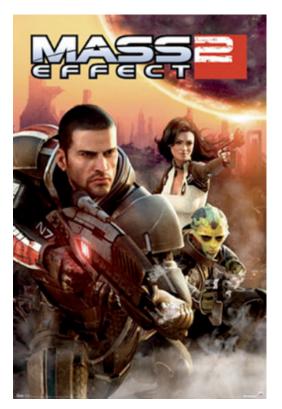Labeled images of female squad members.

Image 9
Heels: ideal footwear for saving the galaxy.
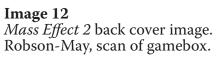Miranda and Samara.

Image 10
Miranda, Samara, and Jack in default clothing.

Images for Chapter 3

Image 11
Mass Effect 2 front cover image.
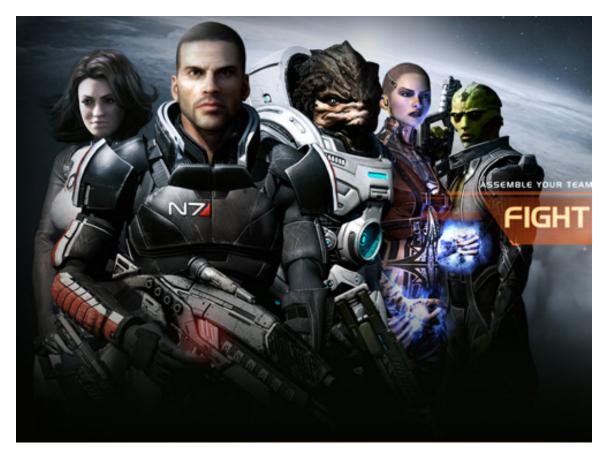Wikipedia contributors, "File:MassEffect2 cover.PNG."

Image 12
Mass Effect 2 back cover image.
Robson-May, scan of gamebox.

Image 13
Mass Effect 2 wallpaper.

Image 14
Mass Effect 2 wallpaper.
BioWare, "BioWare |
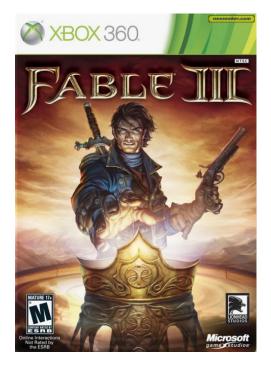Mass Effect | Media :
Wallpapers."

Image 15
Mass Effect 2 wallpaper.
BioWare, "BioWare |
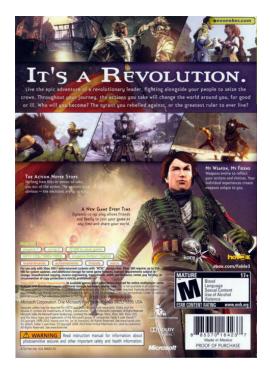Mass Effect | Media :
Wallpapers."

Image 16
Mass Effect 2 wallpaper.
BioWare, "BioWare |
Mass Effect | Media :
Wallpapers."BioWare,

Image 17.
Fable III advertisement.
GamePro issue 265 (October 2010). Back cover.

Image 18
Fable III front cover
(North American version) NeoSeeker.

Image 19
Fable III back cover
(North American version) NeoSeeker.
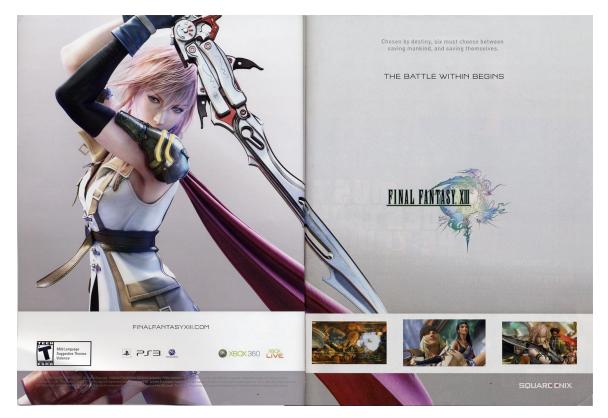
Images 20-23 from Lionhead Studios' "screenshots" page.

Image 20

Image 21

Image 22

Image 23

Image 24
Final Fantasy XIII advertisement. GamePro.

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