



GAMING POLITICS: GENDER AND SEXUALITY ON EARTH AND BEYOND

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ハイキュー!!と古館先生に
ありがとうございます

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All interviewees have been anonymized. When informed by them, the name given to their avatar's is used so they can identify themselves in the research. Participants could self-identify with more than one identifier in each demographic category. A space "Other" was available where the participant could add any identifier not covered by the questionnaire.

1. **Alex** – White, Male, Heterosexual
2. **Alice** – White, CisFemale/Gender Queer, Lesbian/Queer
3. **Angelina** – White, CisFemale, Bisexual/Asexual
4. **Caesar** – White, Male, Heterosexual
5. **Chester** – White, Male, Heterosexual/Krogan
6. **Gibbs** – White, Transgender Male, Homosexual
7. **Jeremiah** – White, Male, Heterosexual
8. **Leah** – White, Transgender Female, Lesbian
9. **Mary** – White, Female, Bisexual
10. **Neil** – White, Female, Heterosexual
11. **Rahna** – White, CisFemale, Heterosexual
12. **Robin** – White, Transgender Male/Gender Queer, Queer/Bisexual/Asexual/Pansexual-Romantic
13. **Ron** – White, Male, Homosexual
14. **Torch** – White, Male, Heterosexual
15. **Victor** – White, Male, Heterosexual

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the characters, plots, and images in BioWare's videogame trilogy *Mass Effect* and its transmedia universe with the aim of informing what is political about videogames and where politics is found in videogames. By focusing on a critical assessment of gender and sexuality politics in the making and playing of videogames, this thesis highlights the configurative nature of interactions that inform videogames culture and discusses how the political appears in videogames content, production, consumption and media. I critically approach the extensive literature produced by scholars interested in videogames, particularly those of ludology, narratology and cultural studies, evaluating their theoretical and methodological contributions to the field. I expand the interdisciplinary nature of game and videogame studies through a) an interface with concepts from political sciences, and b) a dialogue with French-Brazilian perspectives of communication theory. Furthermore, I advocate that the current methodological approaches to videogames studies are insufficient to explore the complexity of videogames and, specifically, its political potential. Thus, aiming towards a comprehensive and in-depth study of *Mass Effect* as an example of 'the political' in videogames, I develop the configurative analysis framework. The framework proposes a holistic approach to videogames research based on the use of extensive sets of data and layered stages of analysis, accounting for the configurative dynamics within three spheres: medium-sphere, gaming-sphere and culture-sphere. This approach, built upon a theoretical refinement of the concept of configuration, allows the research to account for several instances of subject's interaction with gaming and the overall network of relations that encompasses and influences the industry, the gameplay moment, and videogames culture. The thesis concludes that videogames are a site where politics have persistently taken place since its origins. However, the use of videogames for political conversation of gender and sexuality is a movement that must emerge both from those involved in its production and the publics that consume it. Videogames can counter conservative discourses of hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity, enabling new forms and stages for the voice of marginalised publics to be heard.

Preface: Rebirth of a Gamer and Birth of an Aca-Gamer

The year of 2010 brought a cold autumn and a freezing winter to Copenhagen. I was an exchange student at Københavns Universitet in my first visit to the European continent and as every other student in an expensive and cold city, I spent a good amount of my time inside my large and eerily empty room. After what has been a long hiatus of gaming due to lack of a console and rushed years in University, I took the opportunity to familiarize myself once again with what was new in the gaming world. I decided to acquire a nice laptop for my six-month period there, with a dedicated graphics card and good processing capabilities so I could try some of the new generation of games. I have always been a Role-Playing Game fan – indeed, when I was 15 years old I finished *Final Fantasy 8* more times than any sane person should have during high school – and I soon found out that the RPG's of the moment were from this company called BioWare. Being also a Tolkien fan, I first played *Dragon Age: Origins* and got immediately captured by the “BioWare style” with rich worlds and complex narratives. After that, I decided to try *Mass Effect* (ME) for the first time.

I played the first game three years after its release, having no previous knowledge whatsoever. The experience was unique to me. I was not aware of the advances made in the so-called ‘Action-RPG’ genre as an avid ‘J-RPG’ player myself. Nonetheless I was immediately taken aback by the ME experience. The sci-fi, space opera feel of it made me love the game immediately. Upon finishing the first game I immediately started the second, wanting to sustain the thrilling experience I was having. What I found in the game is an enthralling world, with exciting and loveable characters, a fast-paced gameplay mixing RPG elements with shooting mechanics – something new for me at the time - and a romance mechanic and dialogue that felt more compelling than *Dragon Age*. Playing ME was often a rollercoaster of

emotions, with several difficult decision-making moments that would challenge my morals and values. Skip forward to 2012, when the third game was released and I had just started my first year as an MPhil student. Not the best time to engage yourself with such a game, but at that time my gamer self had returned completely and I was playing games on my XBOX 360 and my computer, consuming new and old games alike, a passion reignited, thanks to the freezing Copenhagen weather. Ironically, I played ME3 on that same laptop, now old and constantly over-heating, making play a slow process of burst of action intertwined with cooling-down periods for the survival of the machine.

After playing ME3 I felt great. Unlike many that were dissatisfied with the endings provided by BioWare, I enjoyed them as they were, believing the journey was more impressive and important than the end-goal. The excitement of experiencing the end of the series also came with a feeling of emptiness. It was partially solved by discussing the game on Facebook with a couple of friends. Those discussions sparked a significant realisation: there is more to be said about this game.

ME is, up to today, my favourite videogame. Little did I know back then that this would someday become the focus of my research object.

Introduction

In the year 2148, humanity discovers an alien artefact on one of Pluto's moons, later revealed to be a 'Mass Relay': a door to numerous other relays across the galaxy that allows faster than light (FTL) travel. Soon, humanity becomes part of an intricate galaxy-wide society formed by several other species, each with unique cultures, policies, ideologies and beliefs. It is within this sci-fi milieu that the game trilogy *Mass Effect* (ME), developed by BioWare, is set. This rich universe crosses the boundaries of gaming; it is a transmedia system comprised of books, comics, movies and user-generated content. It continues to be avidly discussed, many years after the release of its last instalment in 2012, by fans in online forums such as Reddit. It quickly became a 'classic' in the realm of videogames culture with its narrative-rich universe and loveable characters. Additionally, its gender- and physique-customisable protagonist, its complex branched narrative and the possibility to romance characters, attracted a diverse set of players. In this thesis, the characters, plots and images created by the BioWare team will be examined and will enlighten core questions regarding the relationship between videogames, society and the making of politics in everyday life. The core research question that guides the thesis is relatively simple and straight-forward: *what is political about videogames?* In order to answer this central question within the scope of an in-depth analysis of *Mass Effect*, the following questions are to be addressed:

1. *How are gender and sexuality portrayed and discussed in-game? What are the socio-cultural and political discourses that configure this portrayal both in terms of production and consumption?*
2. *What are the configurative dynamics between the politics of production and consumption in Mass Effect?*

3. *What is the role of affect in the mobilisation of Mass Effect publics¹?*
4. *Where are politics made manifest and configured within videogames as a medium, as a culture, and as a moment of interaction between player and game?*

Approaching these questions through a communications and political perspective I propose the hypothesis that videogames function as tokens for everyday political conversation and as cultural vehicles for the debate of sensitive themes in society. The hypothesis builds on William Gamson's work in *Talking Politics* (1992) where he argues that media, personal experience and popular wisdom are three key factors that inform and underpin political conversation. Videogames, as a medium itself and as a subject of discussion within the wider, established media landscape, do play a role, unconsciously or not, in how people can experience and engage in political matters. I approach identity politics with a focus on gender and sexuality, whilst advocating for an intersectional perspective, considering race, age, and class among other identifiers.

Indeed, games are fundamentally political as a medium inscribed in society and its cultural and economic circuits. Academics, industry workers, gamers, and artists routinely use it as a tool for doing politics. Academics create important political work, such as the LGBTQA+ archive (Shaw and Frieser 2016), within a plethora of academic and non-academic conferences, and are actively engaged with the videogames industry and gamers in talks and workshops; developers and other videogame professionals form a crucial part of initiatives

¹ The perspective of publics adopted here builds on the conceptualisation of John Dewey (2005; 2012), Louis Quéré (2003) and Michael Warner (2002). Publics are formed through shared experiences and the circulation of discourses. They come into being through affect and action. I discuss this concept further in Chapters 2 and 4.

such as Games for Change², GaymerX³ and other industry-wide initiatives; and artists reach diverse audiences via artistic protest such as Velvet Strike⁴ and museum initiatives, such as the *Rainbow Arcade* 2018 exhibit at Schwules Museum in Berlin⁵, among others.

I argue, however, that there is a crucial difference between these examples (and the academic works analysing these) and the study proposed. My interest is to discuss in-depth a mainstream example stemming from the triple A industry made for the “masses”, with high visibility and widespread reach, where the stakes are higher and a controversial decision made by a team member could result in the game’s failure or enable it to win countless prizes; where billions of dollars are at stake, as are the jobs and health of several employees working under duress during crunch time; where gamers are deeply invested (affectively) and continually invest money and time; and where communities are borne with the sole purpose of expressing love for the game via heated discussions, giving out tips to new players, and organising campaigns to protest against controversial decisions made by developers and publishers. The political I discuss here is, to an extent, the same as discussed by those mentioned previously. However, *where* the political lies and *how* it appears can be very different. For instance, games as political tools are also widely studied in Education as edugames and serious games. They encompass a category of games that uses ‘the artistic medium of games to deliver a message, teach a lesson, or provide an experience’ (Michael

² Games for Change is a non-profit organization oriented towards games that generate social impact. (Available at: <http://www.gamesforchange.org/>)

³ GaymerX is a non-profit organization dedicated to diversity and representation of LGBTQ+ culture in gaming and videogames culture. (Available at; <https://gaymerx.org/>)

⁴ Velvet Strike was a mod and artistic intervention in the game Counter Strike soon after the 9/11 terrorist attack – a “conter-military grafitti”. It was conceived by artist Anne-Marie Schleiner and put into practice with the help of Joan Leandre and Brody Condon (Available at: <http://www.opensorcery.net/velvet-strike/about.html>)

⁵ The exhibit told the history of LGBTQ+ gaming including games, documentaries, fan made modifications and regiter of online communities of non-heterosexual players. (Available at: <https://www.schwulesmuseum.de/ausstellung/rainbow-arcade-a-queer-history-of-video-games-1985-2018>)

and Chen 2006, p.23). According to Machado et al (2011) many serious games will deal with specific themes (health education, security training, flight training, etc), that require the participation of experts in the games' content and objectives. These games are developed to provide learning experiences to the player that are purposely social, intellectual, and/or political, in clear contrast with game productions in the mainstream industry in which BioWare is immersed, where profit is a key metric.

Notwithstanding the importance of these studies, the differences between those and Triple A games both in terms of production, content, and consumption make it more problematic to draw fruitful comparisons. It is the purpose of this thesis to uncover how the political appears in such blockbuster, profit-oriented videogames. To accomplish this, it is necessary to take a different approach from those used by education and serious games scholars to understand a very different form of videogame.

This research is positioned within the broader field of game studies, and 'videogame studies' as a growing field of its own. I attempt to open a dialogue with a field of studies scarcely used by videogame scholars in general, that of political science. Specifically, the understanding of politics as a *scene of dissensus* where individuals 'without-part' in society, those at the margins, confront the hegemony of consensus, which informs my own understanding of politics (Rancière 2004, 2011; Rancière and Corcoran 2010). I also work with concepts of civic cultures (Dahlgren 2003), collectivisation of public problems (Henriques 2004; 2012), voice (Couldry 2010), deliberation (Maia 2012), and publics (Dewey 2012, Quéré 2003, Warner 2002, Tarde 2005) in order to establish the political background of the thesis. Videogames, as a medium, belong to circuits of mediated public spheres (Curran 1991; Dahlgren 1995; Habermas 1989; Maia 2009, 2012 pp.59-119;), and act as an object of study

through the lens of communication theory and its unit of analysis: the interaction (França 2001a; 2001b: 39-60; 2008, pp. 71-91; França and Quéré 2003, pp. 37-51; Quéré 1995).

In this introductory chapter, I outline the research environment: the socio-political and cultural context in which *Mass Effect* and this study took place. First, I highlight the rise of conservative politics and right-wing populism, and its values that are in direct conflict with those highlighted by progressive campaigns preoccupied with marginalised groups. To understand the dynamics of videogames culture within this scenario, I follow with a discussion of the 'long event of GamerGate' (Mortensen 2016) and how it shows, at a small scale, the same problematic patterns that are radically changing the current political balance. GamerGate occurred after the first three instalments of ME were released. Nonetheless, both the build-up to the event and its reverberations continue to influence and impact upon videogames culture, serving as an important context for the discussions raised during the thesis. I proceed with a brief, anecdotal discussion of how popular culture is responding to conservatism and the hegemonic discourses where it finds its sustenance: patriarchy, masculinity, whiteness and heteronormativity. I account for the growth of social media as a place for political organisation and action, and how in these spaces a 'fourth wave' of a (cyber)feminism is emergent (Maclaran 2015, Durham 2017), alongside movements for LGBTQA+ visibility and Black activism, forming an alternative arena for 'doing' politics.

Lastly, I provide a 'reading guide' for the thesis. This 'guide' establishes some of the overarching themes of the work, the theoretical underpinnings and positions regarding gender, feminism and queer studies, as well as a discussion of the term 'videogames' and its various definitions. I conclude with a summary of each chapter.

A New Era for conservative values and right-wing populism

What the conservative sees and dislikes in equality (...) is not a threat to freedom, but its extension. For in that extension, he sees a loss of his own freedom (Robin, 2018, p.24)

I still remember somewhat vividly the reactions during the day after Donald Trump's election in 8th November 2016 and in the weeks that followed⁶. I was a Graduate Teaching Assistant at King's College London at the time, working on the Digital Cultures BA, and the topic of Trump regularly arose as we discussed big data, privacy, hashtag activism, online performances and celebrities among other subjects. I had to teach a seminar right after reading the news of Trump's victory, and I found that my students were as concerned as I was about what would happen. I knew the students already, having taught them a year before in a Digital Politics module where we discussed how people had been rallying all over the world using social media as place for gathering, discussion and organisation of political action. As we tried to collectively comprehend Trump's victory, we noticed the imbalance between our social media feeds, mostly 'anti-Trump' and in disbelief of his victory; and the many supporters Trump garnered through his Twitter presence. Even though we knew well about filter bubbles (Pariser 2011) and echo chambers (Sunstein 2009), we refused to believe, at first, that the disparity was this significant. Trump's election came in the same year as another seismic and devastating political event: Brexit. With many of my students from the European Union, it was no surprise that I saw their extreme worry about their situation both as students and as a future workforce, in a country where they suddenly no longer felt welcomed.

⁶ Notably, Dr. Peter Dahlgren's opening speech during the 2016 edition of the European Communication Research Association (ECREA) in Prague had many mixed feelings: shock, disbelief, fear, hope, curiosity. His opening act was a tentative understanding of what has just happened and how to remediate consequences of this unexpected turn of events.

In tropical Brazil, 2016 also witnessed harsh political disturbances, with the then recently re-elected President Dilma Rouseff being overthrown from the government in what was a questionable and controversial process. Her ousting seemed to have earlier roots in the 2013 series of protests that happened during the FIFA Confederations Cup that, among many causes, was in response to corruption by the government. These movements served to provoke a social unrest and dissatisfaction that became personified in the political figures of Dilma Rouseff, Lula da Silva and their partisans. There was a growth of sentiment of 'anti-petismo' and 'anti-lulismo', respectively referring to hateful demonstrations against the Brazilian workers party 'Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT)' and the former President, Lula da Silva. Since then, conservative political forces within military and religious backgrounds have emerged as main contenders in the presidential run. The main representative of this emergence is the politician Jair Bolsonaro, a former military man with a strong discourse against marginalised population who is often referred as 'Brazil's Trump' (see Phillips 2018 for a comprehensive profile of Bolsonaro) and then reframed as a worse version of Trump, being more closely connected to fascism and Nazism tactics of propaganda and hate speech (Ben-Ghiat 2019). Bolsonaro quickly rose in the preferences of a Brazilian populace which had become increasingly mistrustful of the so-called professional political players - although Bolsonaro himself is a politician who has had sequential mandates for 30 years. As a result of his growing popularity and the tactical use of fake news to further enhance the mistrust in the ruling party of PT and politicians in general, Bolsonaro was elected President of Brazil in the 2018 elections, carrying along with him several governors and congressmen and women from conservative parties (UOL Eleições 2018,2019).

It was among this chaotic and disruptive political scenario that much of this thesis was written. Although not a specific aspect of this research, those events were most certainly affecting the lives of my interviewees in Brazil and England, the online conversations of people worldwide, and my own feelings regarding the importance of identity politics in the current societal context. Likewise, the politics of identity I discuss within this thesis are intrinsically connected to the changing tides of world politics. These changes can be situated within a broader, worldwide political momentum that Thomas Greven refers to as the 'rise of right-wing populism' (Greven 2016, p.1). My discussion here is by no means an in-depth analysis of these global circumstances, but rather a theoretically grounded contextualisation of the research amidst the rise of populism and conservative thought.

Right-wing populism's 'central and permanent narrative' says Greven, 'is the juxtaposition of a (corrupt) "political class, "elite", or "establishment", and "the people" (ibid, p.1). Right-wing populism's main rhetorical strategy lies in the differentiation between 'us' and 'other', and this 'other' is relative according to each nation (ibid, p.4). For instance, Trump's *others* are Mexicans, immigrants and Muslims. The latter two are also othered in the Brexit narrative, alongside the EU itself as *other*, highlighting its character as an 'identity, not economics' (Kauffman 2016) based event. In Brazil, current *others*, according to emerging right-wing populism, are labelled as leftists, communists, socialists, feminists (and 'feminazis') and 'petistas' - those who support the workers party (PT) or have any sort of discourse that goes against those established by the current right-wing opinion leaders such as Jair Bolsonaro. Despite their significant differences, right-wing politicians and the population use these 'synonyms' to denote their concept of *other*. Furthermore, Greven highlights the characteristics of right-wing populism that can be seen in each of these cases: conservative

thought, authoritarianism, religious influence, disrespect of constitutional laws, weakening of media trust (heightened by the widespread use of *fake news*), anti-immigration, anti-Islam and others (Greven 2016, pp. 2-3).

Ronald F. Inglehart and Pippa Norris (2016) argue that two perspectives are most used to explain populism: 'economic inequality' and 'cultural backlash'. The former traces a connection between the current struggles of the workforce and society, such as 'rising economic insecurity and social deprivation', by considering them as factors which influence a turn of voters towards populist discourses and parties (Inglehart and Norris 2016, p.2). The latter is of more interest to my own research as it also frames populism as a 'reaction against progressive cultural change' (ibid, pp. 2-3). Much of the discourse of Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro deny rights to marginalised groups while reinforcing supremacies of race, class and gender, rejecting 'the rising tide of progressive values' (ibid, p.3). Although the institutional disputes of power between different political parties and ideologies is surely an exciting prospect of analysis, this thesis is more concerned with something else: what "leaks", in the everyday lives of people and how they make sense of politics, can be traced back to these disputes? And what in the everyday lives of people and their conversations serves as a support to the strengthening of these discourses? It is a dialogical process in its essence: populism cannot be achieved without a critical number of citizens that share similar mindsets.

What the victory of Trump did is not so much affect change on an institutional level, as demonstrated by his inability to put into practice his core campaign promises and a Republican agenda (Robin 2018, p.13), but rather it legitimated oppressive discourses against the marginalised population. An immediate impact of Brexit was the fear of a rise in violence against specific racial and religious groups (Burnett 2017). In Brazil, Jair Bolsonaro is often

openly aggressive to natives, black people, women and LGBTQA+ population⁷. He is also pro-gun possession and defends the return of the military dictatorship that ruled the country for 20 years, a period of censorship, torture and conservative dogma. These discourses seem to bring him *more* followers rather than less – indeed he is positively considered a ‘Legend’ by his followers – as he gathers media attention thanks to a ‘provocative, emotional and simplified’ discourse that is typical of right-wing populists (Greven, 2016, p.6).

In common, these cases seem to give people that already carry grievances against current governments, or against progressive discourses that seem to remove from them their rights/privileges, the *right* to be aggressive and oppressive. It is not as though such manifestations only started because of these events and did not exist before, but they seem to provide a much-sought institutional validation to voice prejudice without consequence. In videogames culture, the GamerGate (GG) controversy is a micro version of the ideological debates of the institutionalised political arena, but also as fertile ground for ‘trumpism’ where supporters could gather and learn strategies that would lead to his victory. GG mobilised the disputes between traditional and progressive values; a clash between politics of diversity and the maintenance of privilege. Journalists suggest that both GG and Trump supporters share not just values, but also strategies of visibility, including harassment of women and other marginalised groups, doxing, and the defence of false allegations or *fake news* (Lees 2016; Carson 2017, Marcotte 2016,2018). Brianna Wu, a key figure in the GG controversy shares

⁷ Among some of his offenses include: saying to a fellow parliamentary that he would rather his son be dead than gay; implying that black people that live in settlements named ‘Quilombos’ are lazy, overweight and ‘don’t even function to procreate anymore’, and that black women are promiscuous. He has repetitively been photographed and filmed while simulating killing former President Lula da Silva; he had many sons but his daughter was a mistake that came from a moment of ‘weakness’; and he defends the ‘traditional family’ that would be comprised of a heterosexual couple and children, while LGBTQA+ people are considered deviants, and he claims that the military should have killed more people during their period in power. (see Pompeu 2017)

this perspective. Having faced extensive harassment and doxing from GG supporters, she looked for the help of FBI and the US Government to find those responsible, but to no avail. Wu argues that the failure of FBI and the US Government to 'do anything about' GG is linked to the following 'rise of the 'Alt-Right' and Trump's playbook' as it shows that these actions will not face punishment (Wu in Carson 2017). Moreover, GG served as platform for the fame of alt-right opinion leaders that would be important in the subsequent Trump campaign for presidency. Important examples are the conservative media outlet Breitbart and two of their employees: Steve Bannon⁸, Breitbart's former executive chairman and chief executive of Trump's presidential campaign; and Milo Yiannopoulos, a former Breitbart senior editor (Lees 2016). The next section goes onto outline the GamerGate controversy as a pop culture/gaming culture example of a problem that spans all sphere of society. Despite its peak occurring in 2013-2014, GamerGate is a persisting event that thrives on the very foundations that support right-wing populism.

The GamerGate Controversy

GamerGate (GG) is a controversial event that started in the spring of 2014 and its impacts continue to reverberate within videogames culture. GG claims to be a movement to reclaim ethics in videogames journalism (Mortensen 2016, p.5). GG proponents argue that promiscuous relationships between developers and journalists are creating biased game reviews that do not reflect the actual quality (or lack thereof) of a certain game (Rhodes 2014).

⁸ Steve Bannon was also behind the election of Bolsonaro in Brazil according to the elected president's son, Eduardo Bolsonaro (see Bresciani 2018)

A second claim is that feminists and “social justice warriors (SJW’s)⁹” would be taking control of videogames industry with their political agenda (Chess and Shaw 2015, p. 210). Although evidence of some GG supporters actively discussing issues of ethics in journalism (see the subreddit KotakuInAction for instance), this is not what the movement is most known for.

GG’s core controversies were attached to misogynist harassment from the outset. The defining moment when the event erupted is related to indie game developer Zoe Quinn. Her ex-boyfriend, Eron Gjoni, reported online that she was cheating on him with several people from games media – a group that is referred to as “the Five Guys”, a pun associated with the famous burger chain (Chess and Shaw 2015; Mortensen 2016). This was taken as clear evidence that the good reviews she got for her game, *Depression Quest* (DQ), were the result of exchanging sexual favours with journalists. However, it was later proven that no reviews of the game were made by the supposed ‘five guys’, further discrediting GG’s allegations of a pro-ethics movement (Mortensen 2016, p.5). Zoe Quinn was then a target of *doxing*, harassment, misogyny and death threats. Similar treatment was experienced by other prominent critics of GG such as Anita Sarkeesian; feminist game scholars such as Adrienne Shaw and Mia Consalvo; and other female professionals in the game’s industry (Chess and Shaw 2015).

During the interviews conducted for this research, I asked respondents if they had any knowledge of GG and 12 out of 15 interviewees replied positively¹⁰. I noticed a difference in how the movement was described that was connected not just to gender but also to a

⁹ SJW’s are those concerned with the promotion of progressive thoughts. The term is often used by GG supporters to identify those against them.

¹⁰ Most replies would also start with expressions such as: ‘oh boy’, ‘sigh...’, ‘oh what a mess that was...’, ‘oh my god...’ among others.

perceived level of political engagement. Those who were open about their political position – mostly left/progressive/feminist – were quick to identify the event as sexist and would start their answers highlighting the issues of harassment. Those whose political positions were less obvious during the conversation would take a longer route and start with the ‘ethics in journalism’ position until reaching the aspects of sexual harassment. Interviewee Caesar for instance says that while he initially agreed with GG as he himself was sceptical of games media reviews, he disapproves of the harassment that came after. Interviewee Alex – a white, heterosexual and young male - asked me to clarify the question, emphasising that for him GG had two different moments and purposes:

What are you asking here? Are you thinking what I think about the original purpose of GamerGate? Or what it eventually became? Because the original purpose of GamerGate was avoiding conflicts of interest in videogames journalism, which is obviously a big – which is obviously something (Alex, interviewee)

If political engagement seemed to be a reason for how my interviewees approached the subject - gender, race and class might have also played a role - although the data available only allows for circumstantial conclusions. For instance, those who first expressed that GG was an ‘ethics in journalism’ movement were all white males, whereas those that start the discussion from the harassment standpoint are female, except for interviewee Jeremiah (also a white, heterosexual male) who, as a left/progressive person, also took this issue as his primary guide to provide an account of GG. Interviewee Leah, who has a background in history, highlighted the right and alt-right character of GG:

it was one of the first examples of the old right really coming together as some kind of force and I think that has kind of galvanised them to (...) work together

and to form a real group. They found a focus on something and they could say 'look well this is she criticising us, she's criticising our views'. It snowballed and I think it kind of never went away from that (Leah, interviewee)

As the peak of the event passed, academics saw GG as an opportunity to shed light on important cultural and political aspects of videogames culture – and society at large (Massanari 2017, Chess and Shaw 2015, Mortensen 2016). Torill Elvira Mortensen retells the complex and multifaceted story of GG, arguing that the movement had a swarm-like organisation, with no expressed leadership (Mortensen 2016, p.3). While some members of the large GG community had more popular opinions shared amongst the community, there was no single representative that could speak for GG. Its leaderless nature, says Adriana Massanari (2017) can be explained by its insertion within anonymous online boards like 4chan, 8chan and Reddit. Massanari focuses on her analysis of GG within the context of Reddit, arguing that online spaces enable the spread of 'toxic technocultures' linked to geek masculinity and oppressive discourses against marginalised groups (Massanari 2017, p.333). She considers that Reddit's communicative affordances, design, code, culture and policies allow the control of that space by dominant and leaderless geek masculinities, as they explore Reddit's limits, potential and loopholes to ascertain their visibility (ibid, pp.336-341). GG found a fertile environment in Reddit and persists in that environment through the subreddit r/KotakuInAction.

Lastly, Shira Chess and Adrienne Shaw (2015) approached GG through a 'conspiracy theory' lens that provided interesting results in tandem with the right-wing populism and conservatism ideologies presented before. The authors highlight that GG is 'a case study of a cultural moment in which masculine gaming culture became aware of and began responding to feminist game scholars' (Chess and Shaw 2015, p.208). Having eventually found out about

the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) through an online document, as a result of a ‘Fishbowl’ organised by Adrienne Shaw and others, GG supporters soon started an enduring conspiracy theory about the group. The conspiracy included millions of dollars that would be given by governments to feminist research projects (specifically through the USA based ‘Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency’, DARPA); non-existent links between Adrienne Shaw as the ‘tutor’ of Zoe Quinn and Anita Sarkeesian; and that DiGRA would transform the videogames industry into a feminist-SJW agenda (and by extension, destroy the hegemonic masculine culture of games). Conspiracies aside, what Chess and Shaw uncover is an important understanding that for GG supporters, ‘academia simply does not make sense from the outside. More than that it is perceived as threatening’ (Chess and Shaw 2015, p. 214).

A similar stance is seen in how right-wing populist parties and politicians deliberately use misinformation – or ‘information’ disguised in strong rhetoric – to make a counterpoint to the ‘other’ that they call enemy. Currently in Brazil there is a strong ‘anti-academia’ movement led by right-wing politicians and conservatives. They propose a project named ‘School without Parties’, with origins similar to USA initiatives such as *No Indoctrination* (Espinosa and Queiroz, 2017). Their key tenet is the belief that teachers are educating children based on ‘political ideology’¹¹ (Frigotto 2017). This has led to radical changes in the curricula of public schools, instructed by top-to-bottom political acts as opposed to open discussions with the population and experts. Disciplines like Geography, Sociology, Philosophy and History are no longer mandatory within this movement, and any sexual education that is related to a so-called ‘gender ideology’ is perceived as ‘leftist/communist/socialist’ indoctrination (Mattos et al

¹¹ It is important to note that the only ‘political ideologies’ attacked by the project and its supporters are those aligned with the left and progressive politics. On the other hand, they vouch for religious education, moral and civics (a subject that belonged to the Military Dictatorship era) and other topics related to right-wing values.

2017). Those accused of said indoctrination are persecuted and censured – mostly left wing or progressive teachers and scholars - with students who follow right-wing politicians, such as Jair Bolsonaro, filming those that are teaching content deemed ‘subversive’, a position he reinforced since his election and is supported by his name of choice for the Ministry of Education, the conservative scholar Ricardo Vélez Rodríguez (Penna 2017; Orso 2017). Moreover, there is also an institutionalised movement to undermine research within public Universities (free for every Brazilian citizen and knowledge-making institution) through severe cuts to funding. These movements stem from conservative organisations within the political arena of Brazilian politics: militarists, evangelical churches, agrarian sectors, pro-gun militants and right-wing politicians. In a stereotypical conservative fashion, positing academic knowledge as ‘leftist indoctrination’ discredits its legitimacy and widens the gap between dominant and subordinate classes by limiting access to education (Ciavatta 2017 p.8).

I would argue that GG is not so different: it similarly evokes a conservatism that, in Corey Robin’s words, ‘is the theoretical voice of this animus against the agency of subordinate classes’ (Robin 2018, p. 24). In GG, the (perceived) subordinate classes that the proponents intend to impede are feminists, SJW’s and academia (with feminist academia being of specific concern), and the marginalised groups that are meddling with a place that should not be theirs: videogames. To claim their voice in the controversy, GG supporters adopt an anti-academic stance that is based on the same selective belief that inspires the ‘Schools without Parties’ project. They refuse to consider any scientific evidence produced by feminist scholars

or any of those aligned with left/progressive politics that vouch for equality or diversity¹², reproducing behaviours that de-value academic production by non-white-male academics. Facts or academic rigour matter little. GG supporters take side in a dispute that is certainly part of a higher system of political ideologies, mimicking a dispute of ‘us’ against ‘others’ that is a key characteristic of right-wing populism (Greven p.1). Work from those with a similar ideological position will be well received by them as *real* evidence of the current state of affairs. The ‘filter bubble’ (Pariser, 2011) and ‘echo chambers’ (Sunstein 2009) contribute to the recirculation of information that reiterates these systems of belief – for Ggers, the core of the movement is their concept of ethics in journalism.

But was this *really* a movement for ethics in journalism or just another opportunity for the spread of conservative points of view? Interviewee Alice expresses an interesting rationale. She believes GG is a ‘reactive’ movement of ‘nerds’ whose safe space was games and who see women and LGBTQA+ as ‘invaders (...) people that up to then were not part of this (gaming culture)’. Alice’s perception chimes with both Massanari’s (2017) argument of a geek masculinity that influences the spread of GG and Chess and Shaw’s (2015) approach to gaming culture and gamers as a ‘somewhat marginalized group’. Alice further relates GG to current politics in Brazil, associating their ‘ethics’ as an ‘ammunition for non-ethical’ behaviour similar to how protests in Brazil were ‘against corruption’: in the end, both issues were not really

¹² The Kotaku In Action subreddit is an interesting space that shows the extent of GG controversy and its sexist and anti-academia roots. For instance, both Mortensen & Chess and Shaw papers mentioned here were criticised and scrutinised within KIA. As the community is very active in searching for any document that mentions GamerGate and its critics, I would not be surprised if at some point this thesis appears as a topic of discussion. It would not be the first time a work I published is made publicly available and is criticised by individuals not unlike those in GG. They share similarities for instance in the lack of understanding of how academia works – my undergrad dissertation was very criticised for being a waste of public money, with even my supervisor being attacked as someone that produced unimportant research (both in the field of popular media). At the time I was attacked on Twitter by a small group of ‘haters’ of an internet personality I was investigating. The parallels to how members of KIA reacted to the academic production of feminist game scholars is eerily familiar.

targeted. For instance, Alice highlights that it is unlikely that the indie developer is the one with the capital to pay for reviews, rather than the Triple A companies. The ethically ambiguous relationship between videogames media and the industry is not new as interviewee Torch reminded me of, mentioning discussions about it in the 80's:

it was on TV even, that the (magazine) *Ação Games* (Action Games) did a review giving the game a nil score. They had advertisement (of the game) in their pages. And in the next edition, the pages were all white. They said it was because they (the game developer) had stopped the sponsorship (Torch, interviewee)

There is nothing 'new' in the issues raised by GG regarding possible ethical problems in the relationship between developers and videogames. Rather, GG seems to fail in raising any real debate about 'ethics' in journalism as the movement is tainted by constantly unethical (and illegal) forms of action against their critics. Surely, as a result, GGers would rather deny association with those that detract from their goal and would instead distance 'themselves from what they perceive as the more ethically dubious (and illegal) actions of others' (Massanari 2017, p.333). However, they still gather under the same hashtag, and there seems to be little effort from GG supporters to establish a separation between them and these less extreme others.

As the videogames industry became a place dominated by boys and men, it also became a toxic environment for women, gays, lesbians, transgenders, queers, people of colour, among other minorities. Indeed, these are the exact same groups that suffer under the repression of conservative and right-wing thoughts worldwide. In this sense, GG as a 'reactive' movement primarily concerns itself with the prospect of the loss of privileges and 'ownership' of videogames culture. They react to the emancipatory desires of those at the margins who

desire to take their morally rightful spots in the cultural and social spheres, of being recognised as humans and equals in society (Butler 2004; hooks 2008).

I contend that GG is a micro manifestation of a macro scenario of conflicts between left and right, between progressivists and conservatives; of people against neo-liberal thought and its machinations to silence the voice of the oppressed while giving the illusion of a stage for them to speak (see Couldry 2010 and the Chapter 2 of this thesis). Robin defines conservatism as ‘a meditation on – and theoretical rendition of – the felt experience of having power, seeing it threatened, and trying to win it back’ (Robin 2018, p. 2), which summarises the rise of GG as well as the reason for its perpetuity. GG supporters felt threatened – by SJW, by ‘feminazis’, by left-ideology and indoctrination – and found in this movement a place where they could manifest their political positions. The real problem then is not on the plurality of political positioning that GG brings to the table, but the means to regain power, often manifested through oppressive acts such as harassment, doxing and death threats. In the next section, I briefly outline some initiatives from popular culture sources – cinema, theatre, fandoms – that resist the current rise of right-wing and conservative values.

Popular Culture Strikes Back

John Fiske (1989, p.159) in his classic *Understanding Popular Culture* contends that popular culture is ‘at its heart, political’, a claim that has before and since then had many examples corroborating it. Rather than an extensive theoretical discussion about the importance of popular culture for politics, I assume the position that a) popular culture is political; b) it plays an important role in everyday political conversations and c) it affects

mainly the ‘micropolitics of everyday life’ (Fiske 1989 p.161). Popular culture is a site of resistance and has recently been an important context through which to highlight issues related to the broad category of ‘politics of identity’. I briefly want to outline some of the contemporary resistance movements stemming from popular culture as they share similarities with the case of *Mass Effect* analysed in this thesis.

First, regarding content, the 2010s have seen long-established movie franchises undergoing significant changes. The new *Star Wars* trilogy (2015;2017) has a trio of protagonists comprising a woman, a Black man and a mixed Latino man. The first two movies of the new trilogy caused controversy, with discourses against the ‘SJW’s’ ideological appropriation of the franchise being prominent (Daubney 2017, Brown 2015, Polo 2015). Both *Wonder Woman* (2017) and *Black Panther* (2018) were commercial successes that defied common sense belief that non-white-male leads for hero movies, or movies with a majority of Black people playing important, non-stereotyped roles, would not attract a significant audience. The videogames industry’s first major female hero, Lara Croft, was remade in a more ‘realistic’, less sexualized design – and as Chess and Shaw (2015, p. 216) highlight, complaints about this redesign were made by the same people involved in the GG controversy. Claims for less stereotyped marginalised characters in games led to more equitable representations of sexuality and gender in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare/Electronic Arts 2014) and *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment 2015). The diversely cast musical *Hamilton* experienced astounding success with an openly progressive political stance. In literature, female writers of colour such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Malala Yousafzai are in the spotlight with stories that explore the world from their point of view. Television and streaming series – have also joined the fray with multicultural casts including *Sense 8* and *The*

Good Life; and discussions of sexual harassment, sexism and bullying featuring in *Jessica Jones* and *13 Reasons Why*, among others.

These diverse content examples are not isolated from a wider picture of inclusion in popular culture. While changes in the production side of popular culture are still minor and insufficient, they are nonetheless crucial for the establishment of actual inclusivity and diversity beyond the 'pluralist' mode of diversity (Shaw 2014, Saha 2017). *Black Panther* is the most recent example at this point of writing, with most of those directly involved in the production of the movie being people of colour (Mtshali 2018). Most importantly, they were in key positions of influence, such as director Ryan Coggler, writer Joe Robert Cole and production designer Hannah Beachler. These factors led to the critically acclaimed representation of Black people and Africa, with Beachler being the head member responsible for the inspired representations of an 'African utopia' (Bruney 2018).

Although the movie has had an immediate positive effect in a scenario of growing intolerance, its political impact might be diminished by the contradictory approach to diversity proposed by Anamik Saha: 'the emphasis on a more diverse media workforce is increasingly rationalized in neoliberal terms that stress the benefits of diversity for competition and economic growth, rather than for political, let alone ethical or moral, reasons' (Saha, 2017, p.78). Indeed, as a small part of the *Marvel Cinematic Universe*, the movie is primarily concerned with profit, and only secondly with its possible political impact. This is emphasised by an opinion piece featured in *The Guardian* signed by Khanya Khondlo Mtshali, cautioning us that despite *Black Panther* being important for the representation it provides on and off-screen, there is a risk of 'disrespecting our radical traditions, which are increasingly

being commodified by corporations whose interests have never been with people' (Mtshali 2018).

As follows, we cannot assert the political potential of popular culture as a site of resistance while disconnecting it from the wider spectrum of political movements. For instance, the film examples abovementioned have links with social protests against discrimination and violence such as the #BlackLivesMatter campaign, or the lack of racial representation in awards in the #Oscarsowhite protest (Durham 2017). In addition, the problems faced by women in the TV and Film industries have been extensively explored through campaigns such as #MeToo and the actions taken against powerful men in the industry – Harvey Weinstein and Kevin Spacey, among others – have shown that there is possibility for raising awareness and affecting change.

By no means is this an extensive list of current sites of resistance within popular culture, but it represents a small fraction highlighting the actions of those directly participating in the industry as they attempt to create a more inclusive popular culture. The role of fans cannot be underestimated in this endeavour, as I will go on to discuss in Chapter 7. From fan content, political discourses can emerge in claims for representation, and political, civic action can be organised through fan communities (Hinck 2012). The background provided in this introduction is part of what I refer to as a 'configurative dynamics of videogames'. I hope to have demonstrated how videogames, as part of popular culture, have also a considerable (and sometimes dormant) political potential that can be explored in the resistance of conservative thought. The next and final section of this introduction briefly explains core concepts of the thesis and provides an outline of the constituent chapters.

A Journey through the Thesis

Firstly, I will deal with some of the epistemological foundations of my research. Secondly, I will provide a short summary of each chapter and explain the structure of the thesis.

Videogames: Rather than try to give what would be at best a paraphrase of other definitions, and at worst an unclear description, I approach videogames as a malleable and fluid object of research. I draw from both a media approach, viewing videogames as a mediatic device (Antunes and Vaz 2006), and from a digital humanities approach due to its 'new media' status (Giddings and Kennedy 2006). Videogames are a cultural artefact that carry meanings and values (Crawford and Rutter, 2006), a text and place for storytelling (Murray 1999, Kücklick 2006), and a set of rules with which the player engages (Juul 2005, Salen and Zimmerman 2004). The Videogame comes in a number of forms and genres - from *Pong* (Allan Alcorn and Atari 1972) and *Space Invaders* (Tomohiro Nishikado and Taito, 1978), to *Myst* (Robyn Miller, Rand Miller and Cyan Inc., 1993) and *Adventure* (William Crowther, 1976), *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room 2012) and *Her Story* (Sam Barlow 2015), *Disgaea* (Nippon Ichi Software, 2003), *Patapon* (Pyramid and SCE Japan Studio, 2007) and *Mass Effect* (BioWare 2007); visual novels, educational games, serious games, mobile games and other variations that fall under the umbrellas of academic and popular understandings of 'digital games', 'computer games' and 'videogames'.

Examples which are *not* considered as a videogame include table top games, board games, and other 'analogical' game formats; although their digital versions, such as *Solitaire*, *Carcassone* and *Side Pocket* (Data East, 1986), a digital pool/snooker game, are videogames

(for further discussion on the issues regarding digitization of board games, see Rogerson, Gibbs and Smiths 2015;2016). Borderline cases, such as use of digital tools to support tabletop, merit further attention from videogame scholarship as it provides an interesting research entry into the blurring of boundaries between 'virtual' and 'real' (Leitner, Köffel and Haller 2009), but are not discussed in this thesis.

In Chapter 1, I argue that current definitions of videogames, which come from a range of disciplines, are simultaneously both too broad and too narrow. They tend to focus on one aspect of videogames while considering that aspect as a defining quality of it in accordance to a scholarly field of study. However, there is no single definition that will be able to account for everything a videogame is/can be as it is a medium in constant evolution, a medium we are still trying to understand and explore fully. My own 'definition' of games, so to speak, has its own 'defining quality': a medium of communication that has *configuration* as its main mode of interaction (Woolgar 1991, Eskelinen 2004, Moulthrop 2004, Dovey and Kennedy 2006, Harvey 2009;2015).

What is important to note, however, is that despite being often considered a 'subset' of game studies, videogames are a different object altogether. Undoubtedly, they are still games, but they cannot be reduced, per definition, as *just* a game: a set of rules and procedures aimed towards a certain outcome through the action of the player. Therefore, I aim for a less formalist approach to videogames study, and instead focus on one that is capable of accounting for the device itself (hardware and software); the processes of production and consumption; the games content (its 'text' and 'materiality'); the unique experiences of play; the communities of gaming; the configurative relationship between videogames, society and the public; and videogames culture.

Player/Gamer: I use both terms interchangeably. One ‘plays a game’ and is therefore a ‘player’, or one is a ‘gamer’ because one ‘plays a game’. Arguably, there is a slight difference: ‘player’ usually comes attached with a prefix to specify a ‘player of something’– football player, poker player, *Mass Effect* player – and can be qualitative such as ‘an outstanding player’. Gamer, on the other hand, refers to a very specific issue: engaging with a game, be it digital or not, although the label is mostly used for console/PC players. It is rare to see the word ‘gamer’ as part of a ‘a gamer of X’ structure, but the word can be qualitative in the same manner as ‘player’. Worthy of note are the adjectives ‘hardcore’ and ‘casual’ to define a type of gamer engagement (see Juul 2010 for a productive approach to these terms). In Chapter 4 I propose a re-discussion of the category known as “The Gamer”. I consider it a limiting terminology because of its loaded meanings, connected to a certain player of games that is male, heterosexual and often white, exerting hegemonic discourses of masculinity and heteronormativity.

Moreover, I contend that a taxonomy of player and gamer, unlike the studies of play and game that aim to differentiate and categorise both (Huizinga 1970 [1938]; Caillois 2001 [1958]), are not enough to understand the configurative dynamics energising videogames culture¹³. For instance, let us examine the definitions proposed by Bernard Perron (2003) differentiating players, gamers and what he names ‘gameplayer’. They are distinctions based on Roger Caillois’ (2001, p. 13; 27) categories of *ludus* - a rule-based system of play - and *paidia* – associated with free-form kinds of play. For Perron, player is associated with the former and indicates those who engage with a game without caring too much for its end goal; they roam the game universe and have no interest in the rules (2003, pp. 244-249); and gamer

¹³ This does not mean that they have no application. Taxonomies of play and game can be useful for the industry to guide videogame development and marketing (Clément 2014, pp 304-305).

to the latter, as those looking forward to the thrill of the challenge proposed by the rules of the game and through it achieve a state of victory (ibid, pp.242-244). Gameplayer is an in-between category, following the will of the gamer to 'win it all' while doing so playfully, 'taking advantage of the procedural authorship of the digital environment that creates a world of possibilities' (Perron 2003, p.253).

These distinctions, albeit interesting and theoretically grounded, seem restrictive for an analysis of videogames and its players/gamers, and do not acknowledge the inherent ambiguities and rhetoric of play (Sutton-Smith 1997). If I were to use these definitions to categorise the ways my own respondents engaged with ME, I would be unable to account for other modes of experiencing the game that go beyond a divide between player and gamer, *paidia* and *ludus*: the conversations fostered by ME, the unofficial transmedia universe created by the game fans, and the varied modes of play such as 'play as self' and 'play as other', queer and feminist performances of play, which I will discuss in Chapters 5, 6 and 7. Broader taxonomies such as Richard Bartle's (1996) proposal of four types of players – socialisers, killers, achievers and explorers – which are useful as they account for *modes* of play, are still unable to account for the dynamism found in the play of my respondents. I contend that there is little benefit to using taxonomies of players/gamers as they are unable to account for all possibilities of configurative action, and often frame individuals in a restrictive classificatory box, rather than acknowledging the fluidity of play *and* game. The vast literature that has examined how boys and girls play games has found, mostly, that although some differences are perceived, how people play is less connected to their gender than hypothesised at first (see Schott and Horrell 2000, Hayes 2007, Laurel 2001, Searle and Kafai 2012, Carr 2005). Such studies have gradually moved from a pre-determined assumption

of specific modes of play according to gender, to an understanding of play as multifaceted and configured by a network of relations.

Feminism: This thesis is, to an extent, feminist. It is not an explicit feminist analysis of *Mass Effect* (ME), nonetheless it does draw both from the political influences of feminism as a social movement and feminist studies as a scholarly field. I would argue, then, that the thesis is ideologically a feminist (and queer) work. Much of the current discussion of feminists and feminism worldwide is related to media representations of women and how they are related to persisting systems of oppression. This is a debate that I join in through the analysis of ME's female characters and a discussion of hegemonic masculinities and gender. Moreover, as I discussed previously, a 'new' feminism has risen in the era of digital technology, building on the affordances that such technologies provide. The web and its many social and communicational functions facilitated a re-organisation of feminism and new acts of protest to emerge (Durham 2017). Personally, I have been influenced by female and feminist scholars since my undergraduate years, having had them be my supervisors, colleagues and examiners. I also owe much of the feminist stance of this work to my many feminist friends from whom I learned a great deal throughout the years. To ground feminism and feminist studies academically, I rely primarily on the work of bell hooks (2004; 2008), advocating an intersectional feminism that has as its main goal the elimination of patriarchy as a system of oppression. Hooks provides invaluable insight and critique to feminism as a social movement and academic endeavour, and highlights issues of 'whiteness' and class within it. I also draw on Judith Butler's (1990, 2004) work on gender and sexuality, following her consideration of gender as socially constructed. Butler's political and philosophical discussion of sexualities

and their struggle for recognition, alongside a plethora of videogame feminist and queer studies are the main basis for the discussions undertaken in this thesis.

Media/Communication: I adopt a perspective of media that distances it from technological determinism; looking beyond media as more than just the materiality of a certain device, but as having an immaterial dimension. It is, therefore a place to produce meanings and symbols, of interaction and interpretation (Alzamora and Salgado, 2014, p.112). Media is where ‘society talks with itself, about itself’ (França 2012, p.12). It is through communication that individuals can make sense of the world and its symbols; that they can understand each other and establish a dialogue that may or may not take place in media. Vera França argues that there is much benefit in bringing the concepts of sociability from Georg Simmel and communication together, as the former ‘reminds us that communication is the place where the social is realized; that it happens within the structural configurations of society (of the established relationships) but is also a moment of comprehension and recreation of the social’ (França 2014, p.129). I discuss further these concepts in Chapter 1, as they are interlinked to how I approach videogame studies and configuration.

Culture: Although this thesis does not have the aim to cover the scope of cultural studies, the term ‘culture’ needs clarification as it names one of the analytical spheres proposed by my configurative framework of analysis (see Chapter 3). Rather than approaching it as a concept, I utilise “culture” as a complex word¹⁴, as a multiple set of ideas, senses, and meanings (see Williams 1958, 1965, 1983, 1992, Hall 2006, Eagleton 2000, Geertz 2017) which are more

¹⁴ According to Williams, it is ‘one of the two or three most complicated words in English language’ (Williams 1983, p.87) – a complication that is also found within the Portuguese language where ‘cultura’ also carries the same plurality of meaning and quality of indefinability – being used in several disciplines in research (e.g a culture of cells in Biology; a native culture in Anthropology; a goth subculture in Sociology).

fitting to the objectives of this thesis. A tight-knit, narrow conceptualisation of culture would fatally undermine its utility, although this has been fundamental within certain disciplines (Williams 1983 [1976], p.91), while a wide-scope conceptualisation of culture is just as pernicious, often carrying a variety of meanings too broad to be useful as an analytical tool (Eagleton 2000, pp.35).

Both Raymond Williams (1983 pp.90-91; 1992 p.11) and Terry Eagleton (2000, pp.23-25) argue that there are at least three predominant ideas of culture that could be advanced as a) a mode of utopian critique; b) a way of life of a certain community and the cultivation of the beings in it; c) intellectual and artistic endeavours and creations. According to Eagleton, these three senses of culture are hardly separable and are both reactions to what he considers a 'failure of culture as actual civilization – as the grand narrative of human self-development' (Eagleton 2000, p.24). Respecting the notion that these three ideas of culture are intertwined and form the basis of cultural analysis, I approach culture in a similar way to Eagleton, as part of an inseparable trio partnered with two other multifaceted words, the social and the political (Eagleton 2000, p.15). I propose that the 'cultural-social-political' affects human action by shaping what sort of interactions we have.

Culture, therefore, will here serve a dual purpose, as concept/ideas/senses and as a part of an analytical framework. As concept/ideas/senses, I concur not only with Eagleton and Williams' discussions of the complexities of the term and its uses, but also with the concept as adopted within a tradition of praxeological communication and media studies. According to França et al, the latter is 'inscribed in a reflexive dynamic that acts upon another reflexive dynamic (that of an interactional process)' (França et al 2014, p.69). In this sense, culture and media – media as a part of culture, a culture in itself, but especially as a place

where culture and its meanings are discursively discussed - are a “battlefield” where dominant ideologies and values are embedded, manifested, and discussed (França et al 2014, pp. 68-69). Similarly, the second use of culture, as part of an analytical framework, signifies one of its more common meanings, the ‘complex of values, customs, beliefs and practices’ (Eagleton 2000, p.37) that form what we can name a “videogames culture” (see Chapter 3 for further discussion on how culture plays out as part of a configurative circuit of analysis).

Configuration: Initial studies of the concept (Woolgar 1991, Eskelinen 2001, Eskelinen and Tronstad 2003) aim to understand the feedback-loop circuit between human and machine. This perspective is limiting if we position videogames as part of a broader complex media ecology, with unique affordances, because it fails to account for other ‘social and material conditions’ of videogames and ‘other rule-systems’, such as society, culture and economy (Moulthrop 2004, p. 66) Therefore, in accordance to my approach to media and communication studies highlighted above, I define configuration as a continuous, interactional process of mutual affectation between the medium itself (hardware, software), players/gamers, the videogames industry, societal values and culture.

The thesis is structured in eight chapters following the introduction. The first two present the theoretical basis of the thesis regarding both game studies, communication and media studies and political science. Chapter 1, ‘Foundations’, critically approaches the contributions of several schools of thought to the study of games; presents the contributions of Symbolic Interactionism to the study of games; and defines the concept of *configuration* in light of a praxeological approach to media and communication studies. In Chapter 2 I discuss concepts related to political science, establishing gender and sexuality as a ‘scene of dissensus’ and as a collectivised public problem. I put forward the use of political science concepts to

further enhance current understanding of videogame studies in relation to feminist, queer, gender and sexuality studies.

Chapter 3 delineates the dataset, methods and methodology of analysis. The thesis relies on interviews with fifteen gamers in Brazil and England; online conversations from Reddit and other online spaces; in-depth gameplay; and ME's official and unofficial transmedia universe. I develop a 'configurative framework' for the analysis of videogames based on a holistic approach that accounts for videogames using three spheres that mutually influence one another: the medium sphere, the gaming sphere and the cultural sphere. Each sphere contains a series of aspects of videogames culture that can be analysed in conjunction with another sphere.

Chapters 4 and 5 are concerned primarily with the analysis of the 'medium sphere' and how it is configured by dynamics from within this sphere and the two others. In Chapter 4 I analyse the gendered and heteronormative construction of "The Gamer" and how it affects videogames industry politics of game production. I also analyse BioWare's development team and how its lack of diversity may configure representation differently. Chapter 5 concentrates on the games themselves to analyse their characters. I study the controversial representations of femininity; the hypersexualization of male and female characters; the problematic depictions of race; and the limited, stereotypical performances of gender and sexuality that the game portrays.

Chapter 6 shifts towards the 'gaming sphere' to closely analyse affect in gameplay. I draw on theories of affect both from neuroscience, politics and pragmatism in order to assess the different modes of playing Commander Shepard – the main character in ME. I further

analyse BioWare's goal to create games that foster emotional and affective engagement through an exploration of love and romance with Alien characters. I analyse how the creation of a world that the player cares about configures their reactions to key moments of decision-making in the game. I follow with an exploration of the "Wow climax" and the memorable moments experienced by players (Jenkins 2007).

In Chapter 7 the focus changes to the 'cultural sphere', where I analyse user-generated content, online protest and fan activism in ME. I present these moments beyond play as important platforms for political practice and civic engagement. I analyse the use of fanfiction and user-generated content to express sexualities and romances beyond the normative code of the game, and the creation of sexual imagery as contradictory places of resistance and reinforcement. Sometimes, fan-made products act as counter-discourses to hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987) and heteronormativity; in others, they reinforce oppressive normative discourses. I also discuss the online campaigns for the inclusion of a Female Commander Shepard to the official marketing of the game (further discussed in Lima 2017) and a fundraising campaign originating from the frustration of gamers with the ending of ME3. I further argue why 'gamer activism' seems unattainable.

Lastly, Chapter 8 summarises the research findings, while pointing towards suggestions to the inclusion of political themes in videogames development and the recognition of videogames as a medium where 'doing' politics is not just possible but already a reality.

Chapter 1: Foundations

Videogames research is a relatively recent subject of interest in academia. Aside from some major works from the eighties and nineties (Turkle 2005 [1984], Greenfield 1984, Aarseth 1997, Cassell and Jenkins 1998), a solid research community emerged in 2001 with the first journals and conferences exclusively focused on the theme. In particular, this was marked by the release of *Game Studies* journal; the founding of the Digital Games Research Association; and the organisation of game conferences around Europe, such as the Game Cultures Conference at the University of the West of England (UWE) (Maÿra 2008, p.10). From 2001 onwards, numerous books and articles were published and videogame research expanded greatly with works from a considerable diversity of influences, ranging from sociology to computational studies. Videogames research is currently a significant and lively area of academic interest, with its own journals – *Loading...*, *Games and Culture*, and *Press Start* as examples - and relevant conferences, such as *DiGra* and *ICA-Games*. Though still in its infancy, videogame study struggles with finding its unique school of thought as videogames seem to be a malleable and hard-to-define medium (Newman 2004, p. 10).

What *is* a game? What *is* a videogame? As someone writing a thesis on the subject, I have been faced many times with this question. Understanding what a videogame is from the outside can seem like a mundane task, as examples abound since before the commercial release of *Pong*. This diversity of examples is, however, also a liability, as finding a definition that encompasses this variety is a hard task (Newman 2004, pp. 9-10). Videogames are, among other things, digital existences, sometimes mimicking an existent game or sport, sometimes creating forms of game which are unique to the medium's affordances (Gibson 1979). Unsurprisingly then that for academic purposes, videogames are of special concern to

those aligned with the field of game studies as they share a series of common characteristics, especially regarding the rule-based form of both games and videogames. To provide a comprehensive answer to the question of a definition of games and videogames, this chapter unfolds some of the key scholarship in the field. Moreover, I highlight the contributions of symbolic interactionism relating to videogames, linking said contribution to the development of a praxeological approach to communication and media (Quéré 1995), and the evolution of the concept of configuration (Woolgar 1991, Eskelinen and Tronstad 2003, Moulthrop 2004, Dovey and Kennedy 2006, Harvey 2009;2015).

1.1 Traditional players within videogames research

If we look at one of the seminal texts of game studies, Aarseth's *Cybertext* (1997), we can see that it has similar importance to another work published concurrently, Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1999), a key work for narrative and storytelling studies in digital media that can be applied to videogames. Additionally, a third fundamental book to videogame studies, Henry Jenkins and Justine Cassell's *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat* released in 1998, came from a sociological and cultural studies perspective. This is revealing not just because these works set the stage for an important debate at the point of conception of the field (see Frasca 2003, Murray 2005), but because they demonstrated that the academic interest in videogames could come from different fields and share a specific time frame. Furthermore, it is curious that the focus point of these works on 'ergodic' means of reading (Aarseth 1997), digital means of storytelling, and socially-embedded technological devices we call videogames, arose simultaneously from disparate fields. But the study of games and especially videogames is not limited to these three areas of study.

The extensive collection, organised in Jason Rutter and Jo Bryce's (2006) *Understanding Digital Games*, provides an excellent overview of the fields of research most interested in the study of videogames. It shows how extensive that interest is and the fascination with the complexity of this research object. In the analytical model I propose (in Chapter 3), I argue that the current state of videogames scholarship needs holistic, all-encompassing approaches capable of dealing in a single analytical work the many facets of videogames. Rutter and Bryce's book is a collection of thirteen chapters, each of them roughly presenting one possible research entry to videogames, from economy and business (Kerr 2006a, Alvisi 2006) to literary theory (Kücklich 2006) and education (Dumbleton and Kirriemuir 2006). In this section, I want to firstly provide an overview of which definitions of 'videogame' and its variants are proposed by scholars from different fields. Secondly, through a critical synthesis of their contributions, I then argue that a point of entry through communication theory, media studies and political science can advance the complexity of the field. They can provide theoretical and methodological progression, providing analytical strategies and frameworks that can facilitate research.

1.1.1 On videogames and what they are

Definitions of videogames stemming from distinct disciplines tend to focus on what scholars within each field would consider to be their 'defining quality(-ies)' in accordance to the set of theories, concepts, and methodologies they are familiar with. For instance, the field of education manifests interest in videogames as a pedagogical instrument, as 'tools which the player (or learner) can use to create, manipulate, experiment and explore not just raw data, but scenarios, experiments and strategies' (Dumbleton and Kirriemuir 2006, p. 226). It

is not reduced, however, to games developed with explicit educational purposes, such as “edugames” and “serious games”. There is much value as well in the use of more “traditional” games as teaching resources, such as SimCity. For example, as a module leader for an undergraduate course in Brazil back in 2012, I used *Warcraft III* in class to help students engage with concepts of tactics and strategy as proposed by Michel de Certeau (2013), in what was considered by the students an entertaining way to engage with concepts. Although not an explicit theme of this thesis, an educational approach is also linked to a political approach, as I argue that through games like ME we can learn about identity politics, about empathy, and otherness.

Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska argue that games share qualities with film as both are ‘consumed in the form of images on a screen’ (King and Krzywinska 2006a, p.112), arguing that *remediation* (Bolter and Grusin, 2000) is a fitting concept to define videogames. Their film studies approach proposes to study the similarities and differences between both cultural products, from both a ‘formal’ and a ‘social-cultural-political’ approach (King and Krzywinska 2006a, p. 113).

Meanwhile, research influenced by political economy, marketing, and business studies highlights other aspects of what videogames are: a growing global industry with an extensive market reach (Kerr 2006, 2006a, 2017); a capitalist system of production and consumption (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009); an offspring of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) development; and an entertainment industry that started with coin-op machines and is at present a common household item (Kocurek 2015).

Videogames' defining qualities are also identified by theorists aligned with the broader spectrum of identity studies – queer, gender, sexuality, race, class, among others. For instance, there is a critical understanding of 'gaming culture as masculine' (Bryce, Rutter and Sullivan 2006, p, 221) and as gendered play spaces (Carr 2005) that inform research within these fields (see Chapter 2 for further discussion of this literature). Videogames' interactional quality is argued to allow the practice of 'doing gender/otherness' in games, where these appear as spaces of performance, experimentation of otherness (Bryce, Rutter and Sullivan 2006, p.188), and as loci of identification and representation for those at the margins of gaming (Shaw 2014).

A media studies approach emphasises qualities that separates videogames from other media: 'digital games are computer software, constructed through a logical, procedural, mathematical sets of parameters with which the player intervenes and responds' (Giddings and Kennedy 2006, p. 160). This definition situates videogames within the 'new media' scenario, and the influences of Lev Manovich's (2001) discussions on what distinguishes 'new' from 'old' media seem to inspire how it is defined. Manovich's five 'principles' of new media (Manovich 2001, pp. 49-63) shed a light on Giddings and Kennedy's definition: 1) *numerical representation* – the 'mathematical' parameters and the code behind hardware and software; 2) *modularity* as digital games are software 'represented as collections of discrete samples' that can be combined and re-combined by the player (Manovich 2001, p.51); 3) *automation* as a game has several operations happening within its code, some beyond the control of the player, some that can be configured by them; 4) *variability* as there is not a single version of the game played but several versions configured by the players, highlighting Manovich's claim that new media 'gives rise to many different versions' of its creations (ibid, p.56); and lastly,

the principle of 5) *transcoding* that acknowledges the possibility of intervention and response, but also the dialogical relationship between the ‘computer layer and media/culture layer’ that results in a ‘blend of human and computer meanings’ (ibid, p.64). As a definition, it accounts both for videogames’ materiality and technology, and its interactional, communicational capabilities as a medium. It is broad enough to allow entries from, for example, those interested in the ludic operations of videogames, and those interested in narrative and how an audience receives it.

Another helpful definition for this thesis comes from a cultural standpoint. Garry Crawford and Jason Rutter argue that ‘digital games can be understood not only as texts but also as cultural artefacts which are given value, meaning and position through their production and use’ (Crawford and Rutter 2006, pp.149-150). Studying representations and discourses of gender and sexuality in ME is one of the objectives of this thesis, to further understand how videogames are ‘cultural artefacts’.

Another aspect of a cultural studies and communication approach is highlighted by those authors concerned in studying communities of play. For instance, studies on MMORPG’s such as *Everquest* (Taylor 2006) and *World of Warcraft* (Nardi 2010, Corneliussen and Rettberg 2011) are often concerned with the social and cultural ties that connect players in communities ‘through the use of material artefacts and symbolic devices’ (Hand and Moore 2006, p.170). Local ‘offline’ communities are also an object of research, especially in the interface of gender identity and the girl play of games considered to appeal to a traditional ‘masculine’ audience, such as the LAN café-based female Counter Strike clans (Beavis, 2005; Beavis and Charles 2007). To an extent, this research also dwells in the realm of communities,

observing ME fan interaction in online spaces like Reddit and the Unofficial BioWare Social Network (USBN), and the community of ME fans represented by my interviewees.

Literary theory is another relevant point of entry. Julian Kücklich considers videogames a 'hybrid medium' resulting from the convergence of diverse traditions and technologies (Kücklich p.95). The medium's capability of creating different narratives is present in studies of players' retellings of game experiences (Schott and Horrell 2000, Hayes 2007), studies of branched narrative designs (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum 2012), and ethnographical accounts of MMORPG's (Nardi 2010, Taylor 2006). These include the narratives of gamers – their experiences and their retellings (Juul 2001) – and narratives of games, even when it is about endless falling blocks (Poole, 2000). The narrative form, common to other media, gains a new dimension in videogames, as the narrative structure and storytelling remain attached to the ludic form. Murray (1999; 2004) argues that storytelling is a 'core human activity, one we take into every medium of expression, from the oral formulaic to the digital multimedia' (Murray 2004, p.3). It is part of human experience and how subjects perceive the world around them. The possibility of building an independent story at each interaction within a game is a structural quality of the videogame narrative. Alexander Galloway states that 'if photographs are images, and films are moving images, then videogames are actions' (2006, p.2). Therefore, videogames' use of storytelling ought to be intrinsically linked to the possibilities of ludic action to create unique experiences in this medium. Developing videogames that present a 'ludological' challenge within a compelling story is a preoccupation raised within the videogames industry (Skolnick, 2014).

Ludology is an approach that covers the study of games in general – therefore including every non-digital game – but with a current focus on the study of videogames

(Frasca 2003, p.22). Researchers within this field aim to find an encompassing definition of what a game is, concerned with the form of the game and the potential derived from said structures. It is a disciplinary approach popularised by Gonzalo Frasca (1999; 2003) as an encompassing 'set of theoretical tools that would be for games what narratology was for narrative' (Frasca 2003, n.p.). Espen Aarseth considers ludology 'an ambiguous term' (Aarseth 2014, p.280) that also refers to a specific 'approach to game research' and to 'a movement' from 1998 to 2001 that associated the 'ludology' label to scholars such as Gonzalo Frasca, Jesper Juul, and Markku Eskelinen (Aarseth, 2014 p. 280). Those commonly referred to as ludologists have developed substantial and quality work over the years, with particular methodologies and theoretical findings (see Juul 2005, Jarvinen 2008, Eskelinen 2001; 2004). However, a central aspect of both ludology and narratology – as the first is derived and used by the latter (see Frasca 2003, Eskelinen 2001;2004) – is their formalistic character. For both, there is much concern with the structure, with what *forms* a game: its procedural rules that are outcome-oriented or how its narrative is structured. In the case of ludology, the definition of games brought up by Jesper Juul aims to solve this limitation. For the author, games are a:

rule-based system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels emotionally attached to the outcomes, and the consequences of the activity are negotiable (Juul 2005, p.36).

Juul's definition does not limit games to their ludic form, yet it simultaneously reinforces the importance of the ludic for other factors that define a game, such as emotions and the possible narratives opened up by the "negotiable" consequences. Games are made up of rule systems, but these too are open to negotiation, to an extent, between the gamers and the game.

The last four definitions of videogames – as new media, as cultural artefact, as a hybrid medium potentially analysed as literary text, and as a system of rules and outcomes – are often referred to throughout this thesis. However, to provide a definite answer to *what a videogame is*, one must assume the risk highlighted by Franz Maÿra of transforming game studies into a discipline that, by accepting everything, becomes a ‘study of nothing’ (Maÿra 2008, p.6). All the definitions above are applicable, and some are more useful to the researcher in accordance to their research question, but all provide at least a glimpse into videogames’ potential both in its materiality and as an academic object of study. Defining what videogames *are* is important, but does not need to be the main concern of a game or videogame studies scholarship. Rather, Maÿra proposes that game studies ‘is a multidisciplinary field of study and learning with games and related phenomena as its subject matter’ (ibid, p.6). The theories evoked will vary, but the core goal is shared by the community of scholars: understanding games and videogames.

One cannot aspire to understand videogames without acknowledging its ludic and narrative form, nor to account for the economic systems that rule its industry and realise its potential as an educational tool. I argue that it is possible to account for most – if not all – of the aspects aforementioned if we understand videogames as a configurative medium, and a media and communication object of study. To better clarify the theoretical and methodological contribution proposed by this thesis, a review of the contributions of symbolic interactionism to gaming is necessary. The next section sets both the epistemological and methodological stance of the research, with the prominence of a communicational/configurative approach to the understanding of videogames.

1.1.2 Contributions from symbolic interactionism to understanding play and game

In this section, I assess the usefulness of the symbolic interactionism approach to the field of videogame studies. There is scarce explicit reference within videogames' research to some key authors that fall within the symbolic interactionism spectrum, especially George Mead, Gregory Bateson, and Erving Goffman (Consalvo 2009, Juul 2005, Jarvinen 2008). However, their contributions prove valuable to understanding videogames as a medium and a culture, as having not only action but also interaction as its key modes of communication. Moreover, these authors form the theoretical basis of Louis Quéré's (1995) praxeological approach to communication and media studies and inform my analysis of the political in *Mass Effect* in this thesis.

a) *Communication and language*

Bateson's approach to play and game is somewhat similar to Huizinga's idea of a magic circle. The latter argues that play happens in a space of its own that is separate from that of 'real' life, happening in 'a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own' (Huizinga 1970, p.8) However, Bateson's approach presents a relatively porous relationship between the moment of play and society, one that is less secluded and independent from society. Bateson argues that we read certain activities using signs that allow the observer to conclude 'this is play' and not 'this is a fight' (Bateson 1972, p.185). Such phenomenon is what Bateson terms *metacommunication*. Through the mental process of metacommunication, it

is possible to comprehend situations that denote others: playing doctor is not the same as being a doctor. Bateson points out that metacommunication is related to language, and possesses the same relationship to objects that a map has to territory, indicating possible meanings, signs, and directions one can follow in order to understand a situation (ibid, p.186). A similar claim is made by Mead (1934) for whom communication is a particular form of gesture that carries more significance and is grounded in language.

Mead argues that gestures are the core means of engagement through which a being interacts with the world and adjusts behaviour in relation to the other (Mead 1934, p. 13-14) According to Mead, our thought processes result from the 'internalization in our experience of the external conversations of gestures which we carry on', and we learn to incorporate these symbols into our everyday interactions (ibid, p.47-48). It is language, the shared symbols through which meaning is achieved, that is the crucial element to significant gestures. Therefore, the relationship between play and communication for both authors is that of mutual evolution, in which the learning of signs and gestures that say 'is this play?' are a consequence of the evolution of language signs that facilitate human communication. (Bateson 1972, p.186).

b) Frames of Gaming: Goffman's gaming encounters

The second concept of interest in Bateson's work regarding play is the framing of a situation. Bateson argues that two readings of play are possible, one that comes from the affirmation 'this is play' and another that comes from a question: 'is this play?' (Bateson 1972, p. 188). Each of these has its own rituals and specificities. When asked 'is this play?' the frame

changes to that of doubt, one where the situation is not immediately comprehended by the observers and additional information is necessary to understand it.

Bateson acknowledges that there are external influences on how a certain situation is read by an individual. Sometimes, an outer circle is necessary for the framing of play as play. This means that even when engaged in playful activity, participants and observers can have different framings simultaneously, permeated by previous experiences and external influences. According to Bateson, frames are simultaneously inclusive and exclusive regarding messages and signs that frame the social in a certain moment (ibid, p. 193). Huizinga (1970) understands play as a very detached moment in a fairly impermeable circle, whereas Bateson proposes a porous circle, a perspective which is later appropriated and enhanced in Goffman's work. Bateson's work allows for further readings – other framings of gaming – that value the social context in which game and play can take place.

It is the study of Erving Goffman on interaction and framing that contributes greatly to the approach that this thesis takes to videogames research. Influenced by studies from symbolic interactionism, Goffman in his *Fun at Play* essay brings fundamental contributions to the understanding of play as an interactional and social act. Juul (2005) based much of his concept of games on Goffman's ideas, but I argue that his take is a limited reading of Goffman's contribution to videogames research. Jarvinen's (2008, pp. 85-88) extensive review of contributions to ludology extracts more from Goffman than Juul did. Jarvinen understands the subtleties beyond the formality of the rules of a gaming encounter, acknowledging the communicational nature of a game situation 'between the game system and the player(s)' highlighting that 'there is also non-verbal communication involved, such as facial and bodily

expressions' (Jarvinen 2008, p. 275). There is, however, more depth in Goffman's contribution to play and game. Two of his concepts are especially useful: gaming and gaming encounter.

Goffman's in-depth study of encounters, 'a social arrangement that occurs when persons are in one another's immediate physical presence' (Goffman 1961, p.18) indicates that encounters are governed by certain principles: rules of irrelevance, realized resources, and transformation rules. *Rules of irrelevance* are those qualities that participants in a play encounter are willing to forswear (ibid, p.19). Goffman exemplifies this by stating that the shape of a chess piece does not matter for the game as long as the participants accept the rules and play it with whatever they have at hand (ibid, p.19). Such a statement, taken out of context, is a strong argument in favour of ludology, resembling Aarseth's argument regarding Lara Croft's avatar. However, Goffman further acknowledges that, outside the encounter, the device of play can acquire different meanings to the participants, as they can 'be fully alive to the game equipment as something to be cherished as an heirloom' (ibid, p.20). A parallel to the videogame world can be found in the discussions about console-ownership that started with the Sega and Nintendo fans in the early 90's (Harris 2014). Although not integral to the moment of gaming, such affective relationships to the game equipment may carry influences unbeknownst to the players – I constantly find myself at a disadvantage if I play the same game with a PlayStation controller after getting used to the Xbox 360 controller.

Rules of irrelevance dictate, at first glance, that whatever is not relevant to the moment of play is left outside of it. I would argue, however, that Goffman's approach is less radical than Huizinga's. Goffman utilises Bateson's concept of frame to argue how multiple frames interact, meanings conflate, and the play situation is sometimes confused by a clash of frames (Goffman 1961, p.20). Indeed, if play is a framed activity, so is driving, working,

watching a movie, or having a conversation about the future of a company's profit. Every social activity is framed by certain rules of irrelevance, and is at the same time influenced by other frames; a 'magic circle' encompasses not only play, but every human activity. A certain degree of detachment happens for every encounter, including play, but detachment does not mean isolation from external influences.

A second principle are the *realized resources*. If there are rules of irrelevance, one can suppose there are rules of relevance: if something stays out of a certain encounter, something stays in. Goffman argues that some events and roles can only occur in a situation of gameplay, which differentiates it from other encounters, even playful ones. Goffman stresses that games are 'world-building activities' but also suggests that serious activities have the same quality (ibid, pp.25-26). The realized resources are part of what builds the world of an encounter, be it playful or serious. They are the elements that give full meaning to the roles taken by participants. In contrast to the rules of irrelevance which can ignore 'locally generated sounds and locally performed body movements (...) whether automatically or studiously', the realized resources are available to the participants as 'locally realizable events and roles' (ibid, pp.26-27).

It is through the principle of *transformation rules* that any likeness of Goffman's proposal to Huizinga's magic circle fades (ibid pp.27-31). Goffman acknowledges here the elements that penetrate the frame, the encounter, and how these elements affect the encounter. Goffman argues that resources within an encounter often do not match their pattern in the outside world. This imbalance is easy to identify in videogames as it does not mirror society's demographics, but instead speaks to power relations and imbalances that happen in face-to-face interactions in a game situation. Remember, for instance, the different

perceptions regarding women's ability within videogames: it is externally perceived as terrible because "girls don't play", while often in a game situation they can be the best players in a match. Goffman points out that social attributes often enter the realm of the encounter and break expectations, and must be dealt with by the participants. An encounter, says Goffman, is like a screen, which 'not only selects but also transforms and modifies what is passed through it' (ibid, p.31). Helen Thornham's (2008) research on household dynamics of gaming is an example of how transformation rules affect a gaming encounter. She posits how external matters – for instance, the myth of the male gamer, the culturally established roles of women in the household, and their extraction from the gaming moment – play an important role in how play is organised at home. Some female subjects would for example perform inability – even when being proficient at gaming – while men would often take the position of capable players (Thornham 2008, p.139). Moreover, Thornham claims that it is important to acknowledge 'where and with whom' gaming occurs as it will unveil the 'power relations and social dynamics' embedded in play (Thornham 2008, p. 138)

Serious encounters can also have playful elements (Goffman, 1961, p.21), and each encounter in the social fabric creates itself around a single moment governed by certain rules (of irrelevance), with certain realized resources that influence a subject's interactional performance, and many factors that affect and transform rules at all times. Every interaction forms a world of its own, including play and game, and they do not happen detached from the world but are influenced by it. If there is indeed a moment of play in which the subject is disconnected from the ordinary world – such as Virtual Reality experiences of 'body detachment' (Kilteni, Bergstrom and Slater, 2013; Slater et al 2010) in their mental processes there is no complete divide. Their experience in other games, the environment they are in,

the decision-making process of one action over another, are always permeated by external elements - hence the importance of Mead's perspective on the mind, the self, and society: a triad that acts collectively in shaping human interactions.

Goffman understands game as a communicative action in a similar fashion to Galloway's (2006) claim of games as an action-based medium. For Goffman, a game is marked by a communicative activity, the *move*. The verbs to preceding a move are *made* or *taken*; a different way to communicate unlike messages or deeds (Goffman 1961, p. 32). We communicate in games through a specific action of making a move, taking a move. It is an intricate process that contemplates otherness, be it another human player or the algorithms behind a videogame code and rules, in a dialogical process where we evaluate the other before deciding how to proceed with an interaction. In a game, Goffman argues, we do that in a way where the opponent cannot be informed beyond the realized resources established by the game rules, as the competition is usually the objective of a game (ibid, p. 32).

Goffman presents his concept of *gaming* as something entirely different from what is commonly seen, emphasising interaction between players of a game:

the varieties of interaction that occur among persons who are face-to-face for the avowed purpose of carrying on a game, I shall call *gaming*, including here, in addition to playing, activity that is not strictly relevant to the outcome of the play and cannot be defined in terms of the game (ibid, p. 33).

A *gaming encounter* is the concrete unit, the focused gathering of participants in a game, whereas the play of games is comprised of players. Goffman considers that a gaming encounter creates an 'organic system of interaction' (ibid, p.33). Gaming can be interrupted without affecting a gaming encounter. A player can stand up and answer the phone without

disrupting the gaming encounter, which is a social affair. Gaming – the act of play – can be resumed at any time as long as the other participants are interested in maintaining the purpose of that encounter.

Goffman's focus on face-to-face interaction diminishes his contribution to understanding the relationship between human and machine – hence the importance of studying configuration, and understanding videogames as a medium and as a communicative system. However, Goffman's findings regarding human-to-human interaction and performance (Goffman 1959) can be broadened to human-to-media/human-machine interaction. His contributions to the study of 'framing' (see Goffman 1986; and Consalvo 2009 for a game-studies applicability of the concept) are also appropriated by scholars within media and communication studies, further demonstrating that, albeit focused on face-to-face interaction, Goffman's work can be reinterpreted and reapplied to our relationships with media objects (see Carvalho 2009; França 2006; Rettie 2009; Simões 2011; Silva 2015; Steier 2013).

The real challenge is perceiving to what extent his claims are valid for a situation where one engages individually with a game rather than as mediated interactions that happen while playing MMORPG's for instance. Configuration, as read through the lens of a praxeological approach to communication, is a concept that, working in tandem with this sociological understanding of gaming, can bridge the gap between Goffman's studies and more contemporary matters regarding human-computer interaction.

The next section is dedicated to discussing the concept of configuration, the praxeological approach to communication and media studies, and the basis for a configurative analysis framework.

1.2 Towards a configurative analysis of videogames

The concept of configuration can be traced back to Steve Woolgar's (1991) studies on human-computer interaction. Later, scholars such as Stuart Moulthrop (2004) and Markku Eskelinen (2004) adopted the concept to the study of videogames. The concept evolved from a strict relationship between human and machine that explained the relationship between gamer and game, to one that encompasses social and political matters – a network of relations (Lister et al 2003, Moulthrop 2004, Dovey and Kennedy 2006, Harvey 2015). In this section I will present the chronology of the concept within game studies and propose an expansion and operationalisation of the concept in dialogue with communication theories.

1.2.1 Understanding configuration

Woolgar first presents the idea of configuration in his ethnographic study of the release of a new machine, the Stratus 286 (Woolgar 1991), with a focus on the product's usability trials and how they were perceived and implemented by different sectors within the company (ibid, p. 61). He approaches the machine experimentally as a "text" in order to understand the user as a reader (ibid, p.61). The main hypothesis is that the machine configures the user by setting certain parameters (or rules, to use game studies language)

which the user/reader must conform to in order to successfully achieve the machine's goals. This relationship is not one-sided, as he highlights that the 'capacity and boundedness of the machine take their sense and meaning from the capacity and boundedness of the user' (ibid, p.68), indicating there exists a dialogic relationship. However, despite the presence of dialogical hints in his conceptualisation, his focus is on the configurative aspects of the machine towards the user. He argues that the machine configures users' identities through limiting the possibilities of interaction (ibid, p. 689), but does not engage profoundly on how the user configures the machine in the broad sense adopted in this thesis, as a dialogic, mutually affecting moment of interaction, surpassing the imposed limits of hardware and software.

Eskelinen and Tronstad (2003) further debate the concept and tackle some of the weaker points of Woolgar's work. Their approach relies on player action in order to configure different experiences of play, where such actions are framed by gameplay mechanics, by the form of and definition of what a game is. They argue for a configurative performance of the player that results from articulating 'the process whereby the game structure cues, guides, and constrains the player's activities (or gameplay)' (Eskelinen and Tronstad 2003, p.208). Eskelinen and Tronstad's discussion on ludology and configuration assumes that 'games are audienceless' (2003, pp. 196-197): for a game to exist an audience is not necessary, only the gamers. It is a questionable approach – gamers are audiences themselves, or publics as I will go onto argue – that is even more problematic in an era when YouTube and Twitch are prominent for their gameplay channels, providing a different experience of game consumption. The authors' use of 'audience' is to differentiate what they consider 'interpretative' practices (for example, in literature or film) from 'configurative' practices

markedly found in videogames, in which an ergodic system only needs interpretation for configuration to exist 'in order to proceed from the beginning to the winning or some other situation' (Eskelinen and Tronstad 2003, p.199). Configuration, therefore, is a concept that can overcome the formalist limits of traditional ludology as it gradually opens up the importance of the player in gaming beyond commanding action.

Moulthrop (2004) takes a step further in his comprehensive approach to configuration by crucially braving the wilderness of aspects and influences that a configurative relationship entails. Configurative practices demand from the reader 'active awareness of systems and their structures of control' (Moulthrop 2004, p.57) in order to manipulate these instances towards desired or undesired outcomes, given that failure can be a potential constant in the majority of games. Moulthrop acknowledges Eskelinen's conceptualisation of configuration, but argues that it is narrow and that the concept can prove more useful if it also takes into account the 'game's social and material conditions', which include other systems and their rules, such as citizenship (ibid, p. 66).

Moulthrop's approach repositions the concept of configuration, expanding its ties to the human-machine relationship by moving toward a societal configuration of play that considers the network of relations in which game and gamer exist. Dovey and Kennedy rethink configuration using Donna Haraway's 'cyborg theory', and so reinforce the dialogical aspects of configuration as part of the 'feedback loop circuit', where the 'player and the game' are 'agents in the processes of gameplay' (Dovey and Kennedy 2006, p.105). Both Moulthrop (2004) and Dovey and Kennedy (2006) argue for a configuration concept that goes beyond the limiting relationship of human-machine. Martin Lister et al (2009) further argue that this approach highlights *configuration* as a term with more leverage than *interaction*: the latter

‘implies a two-way communication’ and the former ‘a two-way, mutually constitutive process’ where user/gamer and software/game affect and configure each other within a feedback loop (Lister et al 2009, p.24). Colin Harvey (2015) proposes that the concept of configuration can benefit from an affective perspective when studying transmedia objects. Affect integrates with the body of configurative dynamics of the subjective experiences of gamers/publics with transmedia creations (Harvey 2015, p.123). Videogames, common targets of fans’ passions and often involving transmedia universes, benefit from this perspective of configuration that accounts for the affective and emotional ties between gamer and game (see Chapter 6 for further discussions about the role of affect in the configurative dynamics of videogames).

I argue that configuration does not limit itself to the cybernetic loop of the gameplay moment, but it is rather a phenomenon that occurs before and after play, and is inherently a communicational phenomenon. The next section focuses on discussing which aspects of communication theory inform my concept proposal for configuration and how it relates to a praxeological approach to communication studies.

1.2.2 A praxeological approach to gaming

The interplay between configuration and communication theory that I propose here lies on the ‘praxeological approach’ to communication as proposed by Quéré (1995), applied to the study of everyday practices of communication and sociability by França (2001a; 2001b; 2006;2008). A praxeological approach understands communication as a complex set of influences and experiences of everyday life, where we, as subjects in communication and of communication are constantly mutually affected by the other, the media, the environment,

the city, and a wide network of relations. These experiences shape how we interact with the world and interpret it (Quéré 1995, França & Quéré 2003). This perspective is heavily influenced by symbolic interactionism and pragmatism. Two aspects of this influence are worth exploring further to clarify how configuration can be approached through a praxeological perspective. The first stems from the studies of George H. Mead on his classic *Mind, Self and Society* (1934) regarding communication; the second is the concept of experience in the work of Dewey (2005 [1934]).

Mead intends, through his studies, to understand human action in society where action is, according to him, the condition to construct different experiences. *Mind* is the human ability to reflect on its own acts, permeated by communication which affects the mind and allows the subject to control the process of analysis that results in reflexive capacity. To Mead, communication comes prior to mind, it emerges through language, gesture; always in a social context. *Self* represents the 'social personality of the individual, the individual that can put itself in the other's place and become an object to itself' (França 2008, p.85). The self is split between the "me" and "I". It is in their mutual relationship, the convocation of the "me" by the "I" in the process of communicative comprehension to find answers, that the self emerges. Finally, society is, for Mead, composed of communication which materialises from cooperation between individuals; in the everyday practices organised through language.

For Mead, communication is attained through the exchange of significant gestures grounded in language. These gestures are means of engagement through which a being interacts with the world and adjusts their behaviour in relation to the other (Mead 1934, pp. 13-14). Brazilian theorist Vera França argues that Mead's communication processes rely on the dynamics of 'dual affectation' (França, 2008). She notes that, for Mead, significant

gestures provoke responses on the other, but also on one's self. Each gesture, each interactional moment, is a stimulant for both organisms interacting. This process occurs when the emitter of a certain message assumes the role of the other and reflects on his and their own answers, as Mead shows in his example of a boxing match (Mead, 1934, p. 68), where each gesture made by the adversary acts as a catalyst to a series of thought processes in one's self – past experiences and/or past communicative exchanges between a boxer and the other. Configuration is a concept that shares a similar perspective: it refers to the feedback loop of mutual affectation between the human, the machine, and all that surrounds and informs their interaction. Ultimately, it refers to shared meanings through experience and action, where subjects in (and of) communication are 'mutually implied, equally convoked and both (are) modified' (França, 2006, p.77).

Subjects in communication also undergo particular kinds of experience. Indeed, for França and Quéré, communication processes are inherently experiential in a perspective influenced by Dewey's (2005 [1934]; 2012 [1927]) studies of public and experience. Dewey (2012, p. 58) argues that the formation of a public is intimately related to the human capacity to be affected by something or someone. His construction of the concept of public connects to his concept of experience in relation to art (Dewey 2005 [1934]), but this reverberates across one's social life and is a key concept for pragmatism. Experience is innately biological, it belongs to the living creature and its feelings. It is also social as a result of the interaction with the world of things (Dewey 2005, p. 36). To Dewey, the formation of a public happens once subjects, when living an experience, are affected by (suffer from) it and act upon this affection. Quéré (2003) builds on Dewey's concept and considers the public as a form and mode of experience, reinforcing the agency of subjects in the face of suffering and affection.

Configuration is also a matter of agency, of being able to act upon: when one is configured by a certain device (for instance the limitations of a joystick), it is also able to act upon it, reconfiguring the rules of interaction established before. This was the case, for example, in a study of the Playstation 2 rhythm game *Rez*. The game used a specific controller named 'trace vibrator' that would vibrate according to the music played and was adopted by players as a sexual device for masturbation (Schott, 2005).

Media is one of the modes through which subjects can be affected and therefore act: otherwise termed as *experience*. Videogames form part of the media environment through their own form and mode of experience, as an interactional and relational device. Videogames are 'interactive' not just because of their obvious ludic and narrative properties, but also for their 'bodily and socially interactive [ones]. These factors shape players' relationships with game texts and if or how they identify with on-screen characters' (Shaw 2014, p. 98). Comprehending videogames from a praxeological perspective situates them as a configurative medium: inscribed in society as a cultural object and communicational practice; configured of and by symbolic gestures and mutual affectation; capable of affecting gamers; and creating unique experiences affected by (previous) and affective of (future) experiences. The subjects involved in such relationships are subjects in communication, organised in a network of relations that constitute the subject, its 'relationship with the other, with language and the symbolic (...) not subject on singular, but on plural; and not only subjects in interaction, but in discursively mediated interactions' (França 2006, p.77). It is through configuration that the diverse videogames publics emerge as a subject in communication (see Chapter 2 and Chapter 4, Section 4.1 for further explanation of these 'publics').

Configuration is, therefore, a mode of interaction and experience, characteristic of videogames. Rather than a broad, controversial term such as “interactive” that carries little meaning, treating videogames as a configurative medium encompasses both the human-machine interaction, the rule-based and narrative aspects of game and play (Juul, 2005; Murray 1999), and the broader network of relations that inform videogames culture, practice, and medium. I appropriate the term considering it as a praxeological dynamic of interaction grounded in the exchange of symbolic gestures in a process of dual affectation experienced simultaneously within three spheres of action: the medium-sphere, the gaming-sphere, and the culture-sphere.

1.3 Gender, Sexuality and Videogames

Academic inquiry in the crossovers between gender, sex, and videogames is diverse. From psychology studies about the effects of gender representation to the in-depth ethnographies of women at play, this rich literature is informed as well by several consolidated approaches: media effects, feminist studies, cultural studies, and queer studies being the more prominent ones. In this session I present a brief but comprehensive review of these studies under three umbrella-categories: a) representation; b) identities at play; and c) queer studies. They, to an extent, encompass the most common research interests and contributions to the study of gender, sexuality, and videogames made by scholars worldwide.

1.3.1 Studying and questioning representation

The concept of representation carries several meanings: from a political perspective, it is related to the idea of a representative democracy, where the will of the people are brought to the institutionalised political sphere by elected (purposely or not) representatives that would, theoretically, be able to speak for any groups in society (Kratz 2002, p.218). Another meaning is related to the symbolic, to ‘something that stands for something else’ (Kratz 2002, p.219), such as the game worlds that mimic aspects of our society. A third meaning is related to a politics of identity concerned with the presence/absence of certain demographics in media and in institutionalised politics. Specifically, marginalised demographics or, as in the term adopted in this thesis, the ‘without-part’ (Rancière and Corcoran 2010): women, LGBTQA+ people, black, Asians, and other underrepresented or misrepresented ethnicities.

Representation studies in videogames are often interested in assessing in-game representation – e.g. how many male or female characters exist – but have also contributed significantly to the discussion of gender disparity in videogames development workforce. In this sense, it seems to be intimately connected to this third use of the concept, but I argue it is connected to all those meanings. For instance, many studies are concerned with how these bodies are portrayed and designed in the game. And these modes of representation are political as they show who can and cannot speak by themselves or for others in our everyday lives.

Videogames studies on representation encompass both quantitative and qualitative methods and analysis, ultimately working towards common goals: assess which demographic groups are predominant in videogames culture (commonly the white, male, adolescent/young adult, heterosexual) and discuss how this group configures most of the

industry production and who is “allowed” to play and make videogames (see Anthropy 2012, Shaw 2010, Kocurek 2015, Ivory 2006); critically assess this imbalance, tracing its origins and proposing solutions towards a more diverse scenario (Anthropy 2012, Shaw 2009, Thompson 2013, Nooney 2013); uncover and understand the extent of representation of the non-technomasculine audience (Kocurek 2015) in games (Williams et al 2009, Leonard 2006, Hitchens 2011); among other objectives.

The common denominator is “representation”, however this word is utilised differently in works stemming from a variety of fields. For instance, studies from media effects tend to equalise representation to a quantifiable diversity when studying in-game representation. Psychology scholars concerned about effects of videogames on its players correlate this quantifiable representation to how, for example, hypersexualised female bodies in videogames can directly impact player experience, self-esteem, development or normalisation of a sexist mentality, probability of harassment, amid other aspects of player psychology (see Martins et al 2009; Burgess, Stermer and Burgess 2007; Fox, Bailenson and Tricase 2013; Behm-Morawitz and Mastro 2009; Dill, Brown and Collins 2008)

Related to the approaches of this thesis are studies from cultural, feminist, and queer scholars. These studies uncover the quality of these representations, what they tell us about the societies we live in, and what to do to increase representability in gaming. Indeed, their concern is with a politics of representation, in ‘how particular topics, perspectives and images become prominent, how their depictions are formed and interpreted, and the social relations and inequalities reproduced through representational practices, including their institutional settings’ (Kratz 2002, p. 220). Important studies include for instance the in-depth analysis of Lara Croft, a character that carries in her a duality of being a strong female character in a medium dominated by males, but also a highly sexualised body, not just in-game, but also in

the marketing campaigns related to the game (see Kennedy 2002, Carr 2002, MacCallum Stewart 2011). Recently, *Mass Effect* characters such as the alien race of the Asari and the main character Female Shepard have also been thoroughly analysed from the standpoint of representation (Adams 2015, Layne and Blackmon 2013, Østby 2016). This indicates a tendency for research to use character analysis as a route to understanding representation of marginalised groups beyond their quantifiable presence/absence. That said, this is not solely restricted to gender, with studies about the portrayals of race (Everett and Watkins 2008, Poor 2012, Brock 2011, Kafai, Cook and Fields 2010) and sexuality (Burgess et al 2007, Condis 2014, Martins et al 2009) comprising a significant part of studies about representation.

A third approach is concerned with studies of representation in the workforce, both regarding gender, race, and sexuality (see Laurel 2001; Fisher and Harvey 2013; Prescott and Bogg 2011; Williams et al 2009; Shaw 2009). They stem from preoccupations raised by feminist scholars, such as Cynthia Cockburn (1991), regarding the gender imbalance in the technology field; investigating the same imbalances and its causes and consequences in the realm of videogames development. Elisabeth Hayes argues for instance that gaming practices can 'be a gateway to mastery of a broader range of digital tools, or in other words, to trajectories of information technology (IT) expertise' (Hayes 2008, p. 183). Rather than just a consequence of a gender divide, videogames can provide the solution to further enhance diversity in the IT field. Anna Anthropy (2012) makes a similar case advocating for games development literacy and the ease of access of game-making software to all as a path to bridge the gender and sexuality gap in the industry, and simultaneously enhance representation and diversity in videogames content.

1.3.2 Identities at Play

The matter of identity and videogames has been thoroughly researched since the 80's, when Sherry Turkle explored the different ways of playing adopted by boys and girls (Turkle 1984). The same approach to understanding identities at play persisted in the following years, especially in the 'first wave' of videogames and identity/diversity studies (Richards 2013). The first wave is characterised by the search for differences in the experience of play according to gender. (Richards 2013: 270). It is represented by the research that led to the publishing of Cassel and Jenkins' (1998) book, with discussions mostly preoccupied with matters of representation and gender equity. Common themes were the marketing framing of videogames as a "boy-toy"; the constant repetition of the damsel in distress trope in videogames content coupled with the absence of female protagonists; and the necessity to develop games 'for girls' (Richards 2013). Responses to the lack of diversity led to the development of stereotyped 'pink games' for girls relying on famous characters such as Barbie, and later to 'purple' games that expanded beyond tropes of femininity to explore the universe of girlhood (Laurel 2001). Despite decades since this 'first wave', much of those initial concerns are a persistent problem in videogames culture. Marginalised groups, such as women and LGBTQA+ people, still struggle to find respectful content in games regarding representation; and safe spaces in online/multiplayer environments where they will not be received aggressively or have their gender/sexuality used as a manner of offending other players (Richards 2016, pp. 77-81).

The 'second wave' is still concerned with said identities but approaches those through socio-cultural critique, accounting for the discourses of power that influence societal dynamics – sexism, heteronormativity, capitalism, among others (Richards 2013, p. 272).

Historically, the second wave is demarcated by the years between Cassell and Jenkins' (1998) first book and its sequel, *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat* (Kafai 2008). Criticism towards the need for pink/purple games persisted, highlighting the problematic idea of games for girls as gender essentialist, with researchers pointing the necessity to study the context of women's play to understand their engagement with so-called boy-games. The work of Gareth Schott and Kirsty Horrell (2000), Elizabeth Hayes (2007) and T.L Taylor (2006) are interesting examples of this second wave as they explore gender, but with a comprehensive perspective on the context of women's play experience moving beyond a gendered-only distinction. These authors explore Triple A games, arguing that 'dominant assumptions' about female play do not account for the diverse ways they 'make meaning of, respond to, and take pleasure in such games' (Hayes 2007, p.24); a conclusion shared by Schott and Horrell's studies that looked at a varied demographic of young girls and older women (Schott and Horrell 2000, p.50).

In a response to the less prominent presence of race in studies about diversity (Kafai, Richards and Tynes 2016, p. 5), the third wave of videogames and gender research aims for an intersectional approach of gender, race, class, and sexuality (Richards 2013, p.278). The third wave ruptured the approach that treated the study of gender as based solely on gendered differences in gaming that was predominant in the first wave, and also to an extent in the second wave. Indeed, it moves from dual research interfaces such as gender and videogames or sexuality and videogames, to a more productive research approach, to intersectional identities and videogames. Moreover, the third wave re-emphasises the study of masculinity and the less investigated play of men (DiSalvo 2016, p.105) – despite this group being a dominant demographic in the industry. The focus moves from an acceptance of gamer

culture as inherently male-white-heterosexual, with defined sets of practice, to one that empirically observes boys' play and the intersectional differences regarding race (Searle and Kafai 2012, DiSalvo 2016) and sexuality (Shaw 2012;2014). Indeed, this thesis also demonstrates how there are different masculinities at play, both regarding content and gamer, and that men have diverse responses to gaming in how they choose games, how they play, and what excites and affects them as gamers.

During the third wave, focus was also given to the research of games industries and its demographics, analysing gender and sexuality while reinforcing the importance of sociocultural and economic context to games research (Johnson 2013; Shaw 2009), reinforcing that the 'identities at play' are not just of those who play and are played, but also those who produce videogames. Adrienne Shaw (2014) is one of the leading authors in this ongoing third wave, with a publication record that accounts for intersectionality, masculinity, and an in-depth understanding of the industry's gendered and heteronormative biases. Her ethnographic research on representation and identity of LGBTQA+ community in videogames is not restricted to sexuality, and considers an array of public and private factors that comprises the network of relations of her interviewees as important influences on gaming experience (Shaw 2014).

1.3.3 A queer eye for videogames

It is with a rising interest in and adoption of queer theory that videogames are now starting to be analysed in-depth through LGBTQA+ themes, building on previous literature dedicated (or that has shown some correlation) to the theme. In recent years, at least three major books dedicated to research exploring queer theory through the analysis of

videogames (Wysocki and Lauteria 2015, Ruberg and Shaw 2017; Harper, Adams and Taylor 2018) and a special edition “Queerness and Videogames” consisting of 11 papers in 2018 by the Game Studies journal, have been published and demonstrate the growing interest and importance of these studies. Moreover, industry and academic events dedicated to these discussions, such as GaymerX, and Queerness and Games Conference (Ruberg and Philips 2018), foster visibility and discussions beyond the boundaries of representation. Queer theory is part of a political and intellectual movement that can have a positive impact in videogames industry as ‘queer people are destabilizing and reenvisioning games from the bottom up’ (ibid).

The earlier work of transgender game design Anna Anthropy (2012) is an example of said movement, but more recent work can be found for example in Brazil, where young developer Victor/Victoria – who identifies as gay and drag – is both developing queer games and thinking about them in an academic environment. Victor/Victoria argues that games are, in general, set in hegemonic heteronormative worlds but that game developers can ‘create in fictional universes power relations that subvert those understood as hegemonic, as more legitimate’ (Valadares and Ribeiro 2018). Basing his games on the conscientious design of Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum (2014), Victor/Victoria says that one of his projects, *The Magic Wardrobe* tries to achieve this power inversion by subverting the “coming out of the closet” metaphor from its original negative meaning as a place of ‘imprisonment of LGBTQ+ people’, to one where the closet becomes a character/asset in-game that serves the purpose of giving the main character, Arthur, super powers every time he *comes out of the closet*. The work of both Anthropy and Victor/Victoria is of utmost importance here, as they write and develop games based on their experiences as LGBTQA+, and reflect upon them

either as an essay/manifesto (Anthropy 2012) or as part of a process of academic inquiry (Valadares and Ribeiro 2018).

Of importance in this strand of research is the collaborative archival work, organised by Adrienne Shaw, the “LGBTQ Video Game Archive”. Its efforts show, for instance, that the presence of LGBTQ characters in games dates back to, at least, 1986, with over 300 games compiled so far that include ‘explicit LGBTQ content and implicitly coded or queerly read content’ (Shaw and Friesem 2016, p. 3879). Their work expands the limits of queer theory and the study of sexuality in games, contending that LGBTQ content can appear in diverse forms; not just as game character personifications, but also as locations, actions, and artifacts (ibid, p. 3886). Shaw and Frieser comment that ‘existing research has only scratched the surface’ of what is available in terms of content (ibid, p. 3886), not to mention the other aspects of videogame culture that include game workers, games media, game fans, and their relationships with other media. Their suggestions of pathways to queer research have achieved fruitful results that can be seen, for instance, in the diverse approaches and uses of queer theory present in the Game Studies special edition. Queer theory can appear: in the interface between the study of fans and videogames, such as modding (Welch 2018) or fan fiction (Dym, Brubaker and Fiesler 2018); in videogames analysis as a queer economy based on collaboration and affective ties ‘shielded from wider capitalist systems’ (Goetz 2018); in questioning a hegemonic, heteronormative ‘status quo of control in videogames’ (Marcotte 2018); among others. Indeed, this thesis tries to follow these suggestions and analyses queer content present in the *Mass Effect* universe, not only regarding character representation, but also queer readings and modes of play, fan-made material, and the use of pornographic images that simultaneously subvert and reinforce the current sexual and gendered norm (see Chapter 7).

1.3 Concluding notes

The discussions of this chapter are fundamental to grounding this thesis within the rich scholarship of game and videogame studies. Firstly, the review of the contributions of several fields of academic inquiry to the study of videogames critically situates where I stand in the field; acknowledging the importance of research undertaken under those parameters, while pointing to the limitations they provide in terms of analytical resources. In order to overcome these limitations, symbolic interactionism, communication theory, and configuration must come into play to propose a comprehensive analytical tool. Secondly, this chapter provides the research background in gender, sex, and sexuality in gaming that informs the analysis undertaken in this thesis. Further in-depth discussion of these topics is threaded throughout the later analytical chapters; they dialogue with and critically assess these studies, thus providing new readings and understandings of identity dynamics in videogames culture.

Unlike the theories presented in this chapter that help define the pragmatic, epistemological, and methodological basis of the thesis, the subsequent discussions in the following chapter will shed light on the research hypothesis, bringing new conceptual contributions to videogames research stemming from political theory and its interface with communication studies.

Chapter 2: A New Frontier: Grounding Videogames Politically

2.1 Politics as a scene of dissensus

Defining politics is a complicated task: as Andrew Heywood (2013, p. 2) argues, the term is 'loaded' in advance, with several understandings of what politics stands for spread around society. Researching politics is first situating which aspects of it are relevant to the question. Heywood argues that politics as an 'arena' or a 'process' are two main broad approaches in political research. The former is a research approach that refers to a 'place' where we study the 'science of government' and other public affairs that happen in a confined, institutionalized space. The latter is concerned with the dynamics of political action within virtually endless spaces in society (ibid, pp.2-3). The concept of politics adopted here, grounded on Jacques Rancière's conceptualization of the police order and politics as a dissensus dynamic, is concerned firstly with politics as a 'process'. Nonetheless, Rancière's conceptualization of politics do not refuse the importance of institutionalized arenas and the formal state politics, as they are also a place of dissensus. Ângela Marques (2011) argues that Rancière's contribution lies on the understanding of these scenes not as conflict but as a consequence of a rupture that happens once individuals whose voices were not considered as important, insert themselves in the conversations that are happening and 'draw a new topography of possibilities' (Marques 2011, p. 33).

In *Ten theses on politics* (Rancière and Corcoran, 2010), Rancière's core argument is an opposition to politics as conditioned to power. Rancière criticizes the idea of politics being about those with power to partake in it and argues that the "without part" are essential for

politics to happen. Politics is, therefore, not about conflicts regarding power struggles, nor a simple opposition of ideologies and goals, but 'an opposition between logics that count the parties and parts of the community in different ways' (ibid, p. 35). These opposing logics he names 'the police order' and 'politics'. Their discrepancies appear in the 'distribution of the sensible', in how 'arbitrary forms of symbolization of hierarchy are embodied as perceptive givens, in which a social destination is anticipated by the evidence of a perceptive universe, of a way of being, saying and seeing' (Rancière, 2011, pp.6-7). For the police order, the distribution imposes norms and rules to the bodies, dictating how groups and individuals should behave and act in society. The police order is, then, not 'a social function', not an institution nor a state apparatus of repression, but rather a 'symbolic constitution of the social' (Rancière and Corcoran 2010, p.36). Politics, then, is the disruption of this constitution that happens through the partaking by the "without part" in society. The "without part" are those groups and individuals outside the sphere of visibility in society. Minority groups, such as women and LGBTQA+ for instance are considered "without part" in this definition as they remain at the margins of society while struggling to be heard and seen, of being part of and practicing politics.

Democracy, he argues, is 'the very institution of politics itself' (Rancière and Corcoran, 2010, p. 31) as it happens in the tension between the police order and the voice of those without part, the *demos* 'who speaks when he is not to speak (...) the one who partakes in what he has no part in' (ibid. p.31). The tension manifests as dissensus, not a dualist conflict but a 'gap in the sensible itself' (ibid: 38) often lived by the without part. Rancière politics is relational in nature, concerned about the process rather than an end goal, such as the establishment of a new government or institutions. Rancière's work demonstrates

simultaneously the imbalances of who detains retains the right to speak within society, and the subtle forms through which the disenfranchised fight their way towards facing the police consensus. Rancière understands the imbalance as not just a matter of power, but *also* of a consensual establishment of societal roles.

Rancière's conceptualization of politics brings to the forefront of the political those at the margins, while also aiming at a political beyond formal, institutionalized politics. It is a powerful approach to understand, for instance, how gender and sexuality are scenes of dissensus within society. However, Rancière's proposal is highly theoretical and fails to propose solutions to how the 'without part' can challenge consensus. It lacks a clear methodology to properly analyse 'scenes of dissensus'. In order to tackle these limitations of the theory, I propose first that it is needed necessary to discuss the establishment and acknowledgement by the publics and counterpublics (Fraser 1990; Warner 2002) of a 'public condition' (Henriques, 2012) of gender and sexuality politics. A discussion of civic cultures (Dahlgren, 2003) further helps establish how publics are called into being as citizens, an important step towards the recognition of public problems. However, I argue how this perspective limits the inclusion of those without-part. These perspectives provide a solid, critical ground to observe the operations of a scene of dissensus. Further, I evoke Rousiley Maia studies on media and political sciences, concentrating on the role of media for deliberation and political talk (Maia, 2012), to argue how despite its formalist and normative character, both norms of deliberation and everyday political talk are crucial for the 'without part' to effectively practice politics and foster civic culture. I argue that videogames can frame the *voice* of those without-part 'discriminating (their voice) *in favour* of ways of organizing human life (...) respecting the multiple interlinked processes of voice and sustaining them'

(Couldry, 2010, p.2). The role of media, and of videogames as part of a media ecology, is put in the spotlight to reinforce its potential as a political medium.

2.2. The public condition of a scene of dissensus

One of the core challenges for social movements is to make their cause be understood as a public problem, to make relevant their public condition (Henriques, 2012). Think, for instance, of a scenario where residents of a neighbourhood are faced with imminent gentrification. On one hand, a powerful discourse from economy and development, relying on “revitalization” as a buzzword; on the other, a community that can be shattered by modern and luxurious real estate developments. Property value will rise, and so will rent. Amenities found in the neighbourhood, such as local markets and businesses, will slowly be replaced by established chains, pop-up stores and hipster coffee shops; local residents are forced to move out, and the community vanishes. If the problem is more or less clear for the community itself, their internal coherence and will to fight may not be enough to convince higher powers of the need for change. They have, therefore, to attract attention to their cause by demonstrating to others that what they face is a problem. It is not an easy task: gentrification is a growing issue within big cities such as London, creating new sites for tourism and ‘instagramming’, nouveau riche commerce and private investment.

To make a problem visible, one must refer to the media (alternative or traditional), to campaigns and protest, and by raising awareness by demonstrating that the problem is not circumscribed to that community but rather reflects a series of antecedent, structural problems and carries consequences for society at large. This creates a sense of what Márcio

S. Henriques (2004) names the 'collectivization of a problem', fostering strong ties of co-responsibility transforming subjects in more than mere participants. They are agents in the process. In the anecdotal case in evidence here, rises in rents and the increased possibility of the same happening in new areas are some of the discourses that a local social movement could appeal to in order to convince others that *there is a problem*.

According to Henriques (2012), the public condition of a social movement is based on two premises: visibility and the formation of a public. There is a 'communicational nature' (Henriques 2012, p.10) to such processes as the former is much related to advertisement and news media, in the ability to propagate ideas and a cause through communication, and the latter is formed through conversation, shared meanings, experience and affect, all elements of a praxeology of communication (Quéré 1995; Dewey 2012 [1934]). In talking about videogames, gender and sexuality, visibility plays a major role as it is a place where minorities could see themselves represented in fictional. However, visibility by itself does little in terms of moving a problem from the private to the public dimension, and is not sufficient to rupture the police consensus in the realm of a politics of dissensus. I draw attention to the importance of a public (or publics) formation to the attainment of a public condition. The complex nature of the word *public* and its counterpart, *private*, a distinction that 'is not unitary, but protean ... not a single paired opposition but a complex family of them' (Weintraub 1997) merits further explanation, as it both refers to an opposition (or conflictual relationship to) concepts of private, and to a collective of individuals.

Private and public are concepts with different meanings and usages in the fields of Law, Economy, Geography, Feminist Theory, Political Science, among others. In economy whilst the private sector is connected to the market and private initiatives, the public sector

is tied to the State and its bureaucracy, to the people and their rights towards public goods, however blurred these distinctions may be in the actual ground of economics (Rainey, Backoff and Levine 1976, pp. 234-235). The economic approach is intimately linked to the definitions of Public Law and Private Law where the first is linked to proper laws and rulings of society, a 'systematic body of norms' regulated by the State (Bobbio 2007, p. 22); and the second to contracts undertaken between 'privates' and their unique rulings that 'regulate their reciprocal relationships' (ibid, p.18).

Geographically, the public and private are connected to the uses of space, whether public or private, and the complexities of political, social and cultural interactions that happen within (Lefebvre 1992, Tuan 1977, Haesbaert 2004, Madanipour 2003, Duncan 1996). Public and private spaces are not determined solely by its ownership nor its preconceived usability as they are 'a mirror of social relations and a main indicator of how a society organizes itself' (Madanipour 2003, p.1), therefore mutable and influenced by cultural, ideological and political practices of a society. This is highlighted in the work of feminist theory that further problematizes the dichotomy public/private as one that also has a gendered bias (Duncan 1996, Bondi 1998). Liz Bondi in her study about gender and the urban space reminds the emphasis given by feminist geographers and historians that the gender divide in how a city is organized is 'imbued with ideas about separate spheres for men and women', while men are part of the public domain, 'deeply masculine and associated with social, economic and political power' whereas women are associated with the suburb and its 'middle-class domesticity, femininity and dependence' (Bondi 1998, p.161)¹⁵. Feminist studies of the private/public show for instance how the street – a so-called public space – may be fearful

¹⁵ Fundamental to acknowledge as well that the conflicting nature of urban spaces is not just gendered, but also racialized, sexualized and class-related.

and violent for women in a different extent and nature that it is for men (Pain 1991, pp.416-417) ; unequal labour in the private space of home and the violence that may exist within it (Duncan 1996); and how videogame play is organized in the private space of the home (Kerr 2003; Thornham 2008), among other themes.

In political philosophy, the work of Hanna Arendt is highlighted. For the author the distinction between private and public is part of a larger conceptual effort to define politics and are the rationale behind her concept of *common world*, something that transcends the here and now, a commonality shared with those of the now, the past and the future (Arendt 1958, p. 55). This common world is a pre-condition to the existence of a public realm where individuals can come into interaction, discuss, resolve, share affects and their own identities. The political in Arendt is always *public*, concerned with the well-being of the perennial common world; the private is then unrelated to the makings of politics because said well-being does not derive from private matters. There is an unpolitical consciousness in the private individual that is 'not primarily interested in the world where the wrong is committed or in the consequences that the wrong will have' (Arendt 1972, p.60). The difference between public and private for Arendt is marked by the conscious, active participation in the public realm.

It is within its uses in political and social sciences that this thesis approaches the distinctions of public and private. There are striking similarities between these different schools of thought. Nonetheless, there is also a substantial difference when opting for one or the other as the guiding paradigm of the research. As posited by Jeff Weintraub, the distinction 'is not unitary, but protean' and its different usages 'rest on different underlying images of the social world, are driven by different concerns, generate different problematics,

and raise very different issues' (Weintraub 1997, p.2). In this thesis, it is the work of pragmatist John Dewey that informs the usage of private and, most importantly, public/publics.

For Dewey, the public nature of an action exists from the moment in which consequences of an act affect subjects beyond those directly involved in the action. This indirect consequence is the 'germ of the distinction between the private and the public' (Dewey 2012, p. 46). This is not to say, however, that the distinction between public and private is the same of individual and social as, Dewey argues, acts of an individual can have social repercussions even when enacted on privacy (ibid, p.46-47). Not feeling affected by something does not mean that an affectation did not happen – indeed, if we think about decisions made on a governmental scale, we are often unaware of its consequences but subjected to them nonetheless. The closet metaphor is useful: while a private affair, that remains hidden from society, one's sexuality is still deeply affected by an overarching oppressive discourse grounded on patriarchy, religion, misogyny, class, culture, norms and other encircling narratives. Even though an individual might opt to not disclose his/her sexuality, suffering the impact of socio-cultural-political-economical decisions is inevitable. Moreover, regarding both social movements and the logic of a scene of dissensus, where the voice of the without-part needs to be heard (visible) by someone (other publics) in a public arena so that politics happen, the move from private to public is crucial. As Henriques highlights this move is necessary to generate public interest on that matter, allowing it to 'be discussed as something (even if presumed) that takes into account the interest of all parties' (Henriques, 2012).

Dewey also provides a good definition of what public is regarding its character of an association of people¹⁶. For the author, connectedness and association are natural 'laws' of nature, as 'nothing has been discovered that acts in isolation' (ibid, p.51). That is not to say we do not act as singular beings, but rather that these singular actions are affected by and affecting of each other singularities, directly or indirectly, in a network of relations. To those 'indirectly and seriously affected for good or for evil' capable of forming 'a group distinctive enough to require recognition and a name,' Dewey calls 'the public' (ibid, p. 58). Despite this concept being intimately connected to affairs of the state and formal politics, it builds on a tradition of the concept and the author that has roots on pragmatism, with experience and action playing a major role. Experience, for Dewey, is also a matter of affect, of suffering and acting, therefore, of forming a public (Dewey 2005 [1927]; Quéré 2003).

The closeted individual can be part of a public and of a public debate - or part of *publics*, as there is no limit to how many associations one can make – if they share with others a certain form of experience that transforms oneself. It is necessary, then, that a collective sense of these identities appears and ruptures the sphere of consensus, joining the circulation of discourses that constructs a public, the debates and conversations within society, in order to make themselves heard. As Quéré (2003, p.133) argues, those that constitute a public 'acts and suffers' not individually alone but 'as members of a public'. The 'without part', as also a public, navigate from private, personal affairs, gradually perceiving the mutual experiences

¹⁶ For the approach of public as a mode of association, the neologism "Publics" instead of the singular "Public" works better for the definition proposed here. There not a sole public, "the public" or "a public", but several, formed through experience, shared meanings, text and affect. It is how it has been used in the Brazilian literature about the concept, especially by Márcio S. Henriques (2004; 2012), Daniel R. Silva (2015, 2017) and Rudimar Baldissera (2014; 2017) among others. When referring to a specific public, "a public" will be used as opposed to "the public" as the article "a" is indefinite, allowing the existence of multiple publics simultaneously. Other meanings of the word public will come with a complement – such as public opinion, public sphere and public space.

shared by others, forming a large enough group capable of fracturing the sensible and the police consensus.

Nancy Fraser (1990), in her critique on the dominant Habermasian public sphere, presents the *subaltern counterpublics*, a category similar to Rancière's "without part". If the bourgeois public sphere as described by Habermas (1989) echoes to the domination of a certain demographic - men, white, high income - both Fraser and Rancière are keen on demonstrating that other engagements are possible, other publics are in constant negotiation for being heard as a political being. It is important to note, however, that publics are by no means homogeneous groups, devoid of controversy. Its public condition may be achieved, but the internal work of a public is dynamic, as the 'permanent update of our perceptions (individual or collective) and of the controversies' is responsible for putting publics into a permanent state of 'becoming' (Henriques, 2012).

For instance, the data gathered via interviews for this research demonstrate the diversity of approaches of individuals to the matter of gender and sexuality within videogames. We could say that they belong to a public according to the definition brought here: their shared passion for gaming, and for *Mass Effect* in specific is a possible reason; their gender and sexuality identities, another. To illustrate, it is particularly interesting how the importance of gender representation (male, female and transgender) is perceived differently by my group of interviewees. While most white-male interviewees acknowledge some importance to character diversity, they also distance themselves from it as the problem does not affect them directly. Interviewee Caesar for instance says that although representation is 'interesting for those who like it' he is 'worried more about other things' such as technical quality and a good flow of the story. This is perceived as an issue by interviewee Neil, a

heterosexual female from England, who whilst believing that videogames and other cultural products can help with awareness, understands that for some 'something isn't a problem because you are not exposed to it' (Neil, interviewee). Even in cases where direct affection is perceived, such as the lack of transgender representation, three transgender interviewees – Gibbs, Leah and Robin - presented different approaches to the matter. Gibbs reflects more on his personal experience as a transgender gamer and how his identity might have influenced his playing choices, Robin is more vocal regarding transgender activism and the need for in-game representation. However, even within an openly marginalized public, voices can be in dissent. Leah, a transgender female, barely touches upon the subject during the long interview, even when questioned. She said being unsure whether changes in the media representation of transgender people would have made a significant impact in her earlier life. It is not to say that such problems do not matter for her, nor that she was/is not affected by broader discourses, but rather demonstrates the complexity of factors at play when it comes to the interplay between the public condition of a problem and the ability to recognize it within one's daily, casual activities. More importantly, it shows that people sharing similar backgrounds will have different, unique experiences (Dewey, 2005 [1934]) through life, that will affect their gameplay and relationship with videogames differently. A public's internal heterogeneity, despite its apparent external coherence, is what makes it powerful as a place for deliberation and political talk – it is on the disagreement, on the dissensus, that opinions are reshaped and strengthened.

2.3 Civic cultures and the dilemma of voice.

For a public problem to be acknowledged, a degree of civic engagement is also necessary. Individuals must raise their awareness and knowledge of both institutionalized political systems and structural inequalities of society. To acknowledge, for instance, gender or race inequalities as public problems, and be able to act upon those, publics should account for the historical, contextual understanding of how patriarchy and whiteness, respectively, have shaped the social tissue. It is only through the participation of people as citizens (or in their struggle to be recognized as such) that public problems can be tackled. Peter Dahlgren argues that citizens are 'social agents' that can, through media and other resources, take action and civically engage with political matters (Dahlgren 2003, p.152). The author is preoccupied in understanding the 'cultural prerequisites' that lead people into citizens and political agents, proposing a civic culture framework to study citizens media use and political engagement (ibid, pp.152-153). His proposal is an 'integrated circuit' that observes six dimensions: values, affinity, knowledge, practices, identities and discussion (ibid, p.156).

Values, says Dahlgren, are integral to everyday lives and in dynamic, dialogical relationship to democracy. He argues that values can be 'substantive' or 'procedural.' The former encompasses beliefs or qualities of a democratic society – liberty, solidarity, equality, among others. The latter are values put into practice, guiding social interaction and the functioning of society such as a support for a (legitimate) legal system, accountability and reciprocity. (ibid, p. 156). Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum (2014) propose a value-based development system for videogames that engage with a similar set of values. Through a 'conscientious design' the authors expect videogames to 'integrate values in the design process' (Flanagan and Nissenbaum 2014, p.165), an approach that could help foster a civic

culture among gamers. Moreover, a set of values shared and understood in daily life, brought to the development process of a game, can lead to what Dahlgren names as 'Affinity', a sense of belonging 'to the same social and political entities, despite all other differences' (Dahlgren 2003, p. 157). Affinity is needed to develop trust, a key component of a functioning democracy (ibid, p.157). A public, formed through shared experience and affect, also forms itself through this 'affinity'. Therefore, the formation of publics with a set of communal values and built on trust is necessary to civic cultures.

As I mentioned in the beginning of this section, the recognition and collectivization of a public problem depends on the awareness of individuals. Dahlgren highlights that 'Knowledge' is fundamental to a civic culture framework. Not *any* knowledge, but one that is verifiable and reliable. It does not have to stem from an academic source, but also from everyday lives (ibid, p.158). This is in line with William Gamson's (1992) findings regarding everyday political conversation. The knowledge of his participants stemmed from non-journalistic and non-academic sources, such as personal experience and popular wisdom. The recent debate regarding *fake news* must be acknowledged: knowledge as a resource for a healthy and functional civic culture depends on trust (of peers and of media sources) and factual truth. While the former is present and manifested even in the spread of *fake news* within certain publics, the latter is a problem that current media workers and scholars must challenge. Truly, checking sources can be part of the dimension of 'Practices', as they help verify the functioning of other dimensions of civic culture. Practices can be established and recurrent, such as elections or referendums, but should be open for 'spontaneous interventions' that impede a stagnation of democracy and political practices (Dahlgren 2003, p. 158). Popular culture –and videogames within it– can create such new practices, an

approach advocated by Stephen Duncombe in his claim for a making of progressive politics that takes advantage of modes of thinking and doing from 'an age of fantasy' (Duncombe 2007). Good examples would be the adoption of the Harry Potter franchise by fans as a starting point for engagement in solidary citizenship and creative political action (see Chapter 7 for further discussions about the uses of popular media and videogames in political activism).

Another dimension, 'Identities', is particularly important for this thesis. Dahlgren argues that citizenship and the citizen can be approached as another identity that several individuals carry within themselves. For his proposal of a civic culture, this identity has an important role as 'citizenship is central to the issues of social belonging and social participation' (Dahlgren 2003, p. 159). However, Dahlgren, albeit often critical to the Habermasian public sphere, incurs in a similar omission as Habermas, not acknowledging an important dimension that comes *before* citizenship itself: of being recognized as human and part of human society (Butler 2004, p.8). Fraser's critique of Habermas' public sphere as gendered is well known (Fraser, 1990), but it is worth noting that hers is also a public sphere that, at first, does not account for other inequalities, such as race and sexuality. Dahlgren does not present a discussion of how marginalized groups are denied rights of citizenship – such as protection from violence, access to healthcare, freedom of belief, marriage, reproductive rights, among others – and how they could then be citizens and part of a civic culture.

Judith Butler engages in a thorough discussion of the issue of recognition and what it means to be denied humanness and impeded of living a 'viable life' (Butler 2004, p.8, p.28). She highlights for example that those outside the normative standards of gender and sexuality face problems of 'persistence and survival' (ibid, p.9). Butler raises issues faced by intersex

and transgender people, among others, arguing that ‘the task of all of these movements seems to me to be about distinguishing between the norms and conventions that permit people to breathe, to desire, to love, and to live, and those norms and conventions that restrict or eviscerate the conditions of life itself’ (ibid, p.13). Similar critique is made by feminist scholar bell hooks regarding the interface of gender and race (2004;2008). She emphasizes for example the marginal situation of black masculinity, often de-humanized, objectified and stereotyped (hooks, 2004, pp.X-XI.) and a white-feminism that does not acknowledge black/non-white women, reinforcing discourses of racism and class (hooks, 2008, pp. 53-57).

Dahlgren’s proposal of a civic identity must account for the hardships of recognition by marginalized groups as their “entrance” to civic cultures may take a very different path, if any at all. To participate in the final dimension of his framework, ‘Discussion’, without being first acknowledged as a voice worthy of manifesting itself is impossible. Dahlgren argues that this is a ‘meta’ dimensions as ‘much of the substance of the other dimensions becomes actualised, circulated and reinforced’ through discussion (Dahlgren 2003, p. 159). Such conversations can take place in any arena, and it is not possible to define beforehand if a dialogue will be political or not (ibid, p.160). The fundamental problem of participation – who can participate – needs further acknowledgment by the author, which he does in a later work where he builds on Nick Couldry’s (2010) concept of voice to affirm that ‘deny it (voice) to others is, at least implicitly, to deny their humanity’ (Dahlgren 2013, p.54).

For Couldry, voice is both process and value. The former is the act of voicing, of ‘giving an account of one’s life and its conditions’ (Couldry, 2010 p.7). The latter is related to the former: voice as value pays attention to the effectiveness of voice as a process (ibid, p.2).

Couldry extends the current understandings of the importance of voice – of being heard – to acknowledge the quality of this process of listening to the other. His perspective is a critique of ‘neoliberalism’s reductive view of democratic politics’ (ibid, p.3), proposing instead a politics of voice where marginalized publics can actively participate in public life through a voice that is valued and effectively heard. Couldry (ibid, pp. 7-11) establishes several characteristics of voice as a process, highlighting its social aspect, dialogical nature and need for materiality; that it is emitted from a ‘distinctive embodied position’ and can be undermined by modes of social organization that devalue it.

Of relevance for my own argument is Couldry’s affirmation of the need for voice to have a material form and a space for utterance. Returning to Dahlgren’s ‘discussion’ of the dimensions of civic culture, citizens’ conversations occur in spaces where they can interact (whether online or offline, analogical or digital). However, these spaces have rules of interaction that can be pre-determined by their participants (such as rules of convivence on Reddit – see Massanari 2015), set by a certain platform owner (such as character limitation on Twitter), malleable according to the flows of interaction, or imposed upon the situation by societal values, socio-ideological positions and ‘transformation rules’ that can change a participant’s performance (see Goffman 1959; 1961). These rules set spaces for conversation that are ‘inherently spaces of power’ (Couldry 2010, p.130). A sociological approach to voice, argues Couldry, is placed in a sociological context that is also ‘in part, a political context’ (ibid, p.130). Further examination of marginalized voices and spaces for their manifestation demonstrate more difficulties in creating an inclusive civic culture. Access constraints will often affect primarily the marginalized publics, the ones without-part in a scene of dissensus. Spaces can be geographically difficult to access, demanding a sum of money that those facing

unemployment may not have; or those with mobility issues may not have the necessary support outside and inside the space to enter it. Online spaces suffer a similar problem, with access to information technologies being limited in several areas of countries such as Brazil – and even upon access, online spaces of discussion such as Reddit can have barriers for women and LGBTQA+ people as it is a space dominated by the white-male-heterosexual demographic (Massanari 2015, pp. 130-132).

Moreover, even once the limitations of access are overcome, their presence in the place of discussion can be deterred by norms and rules of the place. Even in managing to enter the arena to engage in conversation, their voice may be ignored, their accounts not taken into consideration, with their voice never being positively valued. A civic dimension of ‘discussion’ must account for more than the opportunity to discuss, but also the content, nature, context and depth of said discussion. Opening diverse and unexpected arenas for political discussion may benefit the establishment of a healthy civic culture. New arenas can present creative forms of political manifestation such as online LGBTQA+ walks (Goulart, Hennigen and Nardi 2015), hashtag activism (Gerbaudo 2012), the occupation of public spaces such as Occupy Wall Street (Vrikki 2016) and “Praia da Estação/ Station Beach”¹⁷ in Brazil (Albuquerque 2013; Jayme and Trevisan 2012) or the use of popular cultural festivities such as Carnival for political protest (Costa 2007).

¹⁷ The “Praia da Estação/Station Beach” is a political protest that started in 2010 as a response to a prohibition of events to take place in a square popularly known as “Station Square”. It was a place historically known for the gathering of diverse people in a region of central Belo Horizonte, the capital of Minas Gerais state in Brazil. Being one of the Brazilian states not bathed by the sea, activists decided to festively appropriate the square by using its wide-open space and public fountains as a mock-up beach. The protest was faced with resistance by the local government, that cut the supply of water to the fountains, leaving protesters to deal with an intense heat that emanated from the concrete floors and the scorching heat of Brazilian summer. To keep the protestors in safe conditions, activists hired a water truck to refresh participants. The event was not a one-off but rather kept happening as a space of sociability and of cultural and political action. (Jayme and Trevisan 2012; Albuquerque 2013)

As I argue throughout the thesis, videogames can be one of these arenas, bringing with it other forms to manifest politics, to present political discussion and offer another stage for voice as a process to be valued. For instance, developer and activist Anna Anthropy (2012) contends that videogames are a prime place for personal storytelling, and that it should be accessible to all who are interested rather than just a big market within the current capitalist system. Videogames can be another space where marginalized publics can be visible, a precondition for voice to be heard (Couldry 2010, p.130). However, this visibility must be valued, to allow the recognition of individuals as equals rather than just reinforce their condition of oppression, a visibility as an 'oppressed other' (Butler 2004, p.34). Without valuing voice, without recognizing those as humans before citizens, an effective civic culture will still be the place of dominance of a few that have the resources and conditions to do so. We must achieve what Dahlgren, based on Mead's concept of a generalized other and the study of the self, calls 'intervisibility', a situation 'where the gaze and recognition of general and significant others becomes central to the constitution of self, and identity' (Dahlgren 2013, p.55). In the following section, I explore further how media presents a valuable space for discussion, based on the discussion of deliberative democracy through a media studies perspective.

2.4 Deliberation and political talk: taking part in a scene of dissensus

Maia (2012, p.2) defines deliberation as a 'spatiotemporally dispersed process' where a 'collective process of reason exchange involving a plurality of distinct actors' happens. Her definition has Habermasian origins, but aims to overcome the limitations of his original proposition. The critique of Habermas' original work ranges from its over rationalistic approach (Mouffe, 2005), to a dominant, hegemonic bias of who can deliberate in the public

sphere (Fraser 1990), and the impossibility of an equal ground where all who could speak and be heard. Maia's approach acknowledges this criticism, but argues that Habermas does rethink his approach in subsequent texts, assuming the limitations and proposing changes to it (Maia, p. 62-65). Proposing a normative deliberative process outside 'procedurally regulated public spheres' (Habermas 1996, p.308) is necessary for those without-part to dispute the hegemony in a scene of dissensus. A space that is open to different forms of talk and participation outside the normative scope of rules of deliberation, conscious of the structural inequalities that hamper individuals and publics to achieve a public condition and a citizen identity, provide better conditions for the 'without-part' to question 'a certain distribution of the sensible and what remains outside it, confronting the established framings' (Marques, 2011 p. 26).

Maia's main contributions, however, are related to the interplay of media (with a focus on mass media), mediated deliberation and everyday political talk. Two premises explored by her research are worth probing further for this thesis: the centrality of media and the role of affect and emotion for deliberation.

According to the author, what we call 'the media' is a 'highly differentiated landscape', composed of a diversity of media products and genres, capable to 'open up routes that allow the public to engage with shared concerns and promote deliberation' (Maia 2012, p. 78). In her defence that mass media provide a fertile ground 'to the propagation and cross-fertilization of ideas among different kinds of actors' (Maia 2012, p.78), the author contends that research must move away from a traditional model of mass communication – one commonly connected to outdated communication theories, such as hypodermic needle theory or informational theories – to consider the complexity of a growing media system

which allows for wider participation of the publics (Maia 2012, p. 78-79). Her approach is similar to the one adopted in this work, that of a praxeological approach to communication, concerned with the mutual, dynamic influence between media and publics (Quéré, 1995). The media, and mass media in particular, is not a unidirectional, overly biased and almighty powerful place, but rather a plural space. The current rise of 'amateur' production due to the relatively low cost of web-based productions increase this plurality – where publics can inform themselves, and engage in deliberation. To the 'highly differentiated landscape' that is the media, I add videogames. Although it is unlikely that videogames have a 'mass media' quality regarding penetration, they are undeniably a growing industry, a big player in the global economy as well as in the sports domain with the popularization of e-sports (Kerr 2017; Dyer-Witford and Peuter, 2009; Taylor 2012). If Maia, among many other authors within political science (Curran 1991) and media studies (Dahlgren 1995, Couldry, Livingstone & Markham 2010), argue that media products carry a central role for deliberation processes and everyday political talk, it is necessary to understand how videogames fare in this scenario and what sort of contribution they provide. The analysis undertaken in this thesis aims to shed light onto this matter, discussing several manifestations of politics in videogames culture.

The second premise raised by Maia's studies is a useful indicator of how videogames can operate as part of a media environment capable of fostering political debate. Although none of the studies by Maia and her research team deal specifically with videogames, they do engage with entertainment-oriented, popular media, such as soap operas (Maia and Marques 2012). Considering the importance of a varied media landscape – including its products – Maia's review of deliberative theorists indicates that the myriad of factors at play in deliberation processes include 'informal arguments, greetings, personal testimonies and the

like as important to deliberation' (Maia 2012, p. 21). Of special interest is Iris Young's (2002, pp. 72-77) proposition of storytelling as an important tool for politics, as it 'helps one to articulate feelings of injustice and express self-understanding of oppression, humiliation, or exploitations experienced in daily contexts' (Maia, 2012, p.21). Although Young's storytelling is mostly related to personal stories, the proposal can be stretched to media-based forms of storytelling as they are, also, tools through which one can share a particular experience in order to make a political statement – something that activist and developer Anna Anthropy (2012) argues to be the path that videogames should take: simple games reflecting one's own experiences.

Maia and Marques' (2012, pp.183-206) study of the use of soap operas to generate political talk is a good example of how narrative entertainment-oriented media products, such as videogames, can generate and inform a wider public debate. Their study discusses how two Brazilian soap operas portrayed gay relationships and the provoked wider public debate. Narrative-based videogames such as *Dys4ia* and *Life is Strange* are prime examples of the use of storytelling to convey conversations of gender and sexuality within the configurative characteristics of videogames. In both cases, the media device (the TV and the console/PC, respectively), is utilized to convey a story that speaks to the public through emotion. It helps the increase in visibility of public problems and as a tool for collectivization (Henriques 2004), as 'feelings and emotions can help one identify a situation as normatively relevant and reveal the dimensions of the problem at stake' (Maia 2012, p.18). Narrative-oriented games can, therefore, benefit the establishment of a public condition of the problems faced by women and LGBTQA+ people.

According to the authors, looking at different media products outside the scope of news media – more commonly used for political media research – ‘enable us to transcend our own experiences by means of feelings such as solidarity and compassion to imagine the context of others’ (Maia and Marques 2012, p. 186). This is achieved through the prominent role of emotion and affective engagement for deliberative processes, challenging the notion of politics and deliberation as operating under a purely rationalistic logic (Maia 2012, p. 18). Emotion and affect can foster empathy and altruism, which, according to Maia, are helpful characteristics for individuals to ‘engage in reciprocal role-taking during deliberation’ (Maia 2012, p. 18). In videogames this role-taking emerges within the media-consumption itself. As a medium based on action, immersion and agency (Murray, 1999), players are constantly invited to experience the role of an ‘Other’ that is in their control. Potentially, videogames can teach gamers about other points of view about a certain matter and see how their choices unfold different outcomes. In ME, a game with a highly branched narrative, players can experiment several outcomes based on their choices, essentially deliberating with themselves, the game characters (and in a ‘meta’ deliberation with the game creators), and then decide the course of action. However, games like ME allow the player to test several possible outcomes to a specific situation, showing that videogames can provide an experience of the political for the publics that is different from other media¹⁸.

It is important to highlight that, despite the use of normative political concepts, Maia's work and this thesis are not concerned primarily with formal discussions in public arenas that will somehow lead to policy changes on an institutional level. Political talk and deliberation do not have, always, to operate towards a definite outcome (such as new policies or laws),

¹⁸ See Chapter 6 for an analysis of how affect and emotion are part of the political experience of otherness in *Mass Effect*.

nor be limited to institutionalized arenas. Neither does the use of media in this scenario function only as a source of information or the expression of political ideologies. They are also useful for publics to politicize themselves, enabling them to understand their position within a broader societal issue and to reflect on their own subjectivities. Moreover, within popular culture – from the quasi-realism of soap operas to the fantastical worlds presented in games and cinema – enables a stage where publics can experiment with alternative scenarios, perform otherness and engage in reflections about society and its problems (Dahlgren 2013, pp.140-141). Ideally, such reflections would lead to collective action due to the increase in awareness of a public condition of a problem and a sense of civic duty. It can result, for instance, in a thought provoking videogame that relies on personal experience (Anthropy, 2012) or more diverse, inclusive games (Flanagan and Nissenbaum, 2014). I argue that the processes of mediated deliberation (Maia, 2012. pp. 99-119) and political talk are elements of a network of relations that configures videogames. They enable and enhance, as I will discuss through this thesis, videogames' contribution to the scene of dissensus circumscribed by gender and sexuality. The public condition of this problem, and the publics involved in this scene, make use of the complex landscape of media possibilities to talk about political matters, disrupting the discourses and power structures enabling consensus. Videogames add to this scenario as cultural tokens, 'talk-about-able objects (...) in public conversations about broader societal issues' (Steinkuehler, 2006 p.100) configuring both game and gamer in their interactions.

2.5 Working with scenes of dissensus and the sensible

The above discussion on the public condition of a problem, the notion of public and its role in civic cultures, the centrality of media for deliberative processes where voice is valued and the conversational resources invoked for everyday political talk are useful to sketch criteria to identify, describe and analyse a scene of dissensus. Certainly, a scene of dissensus exists a priori, as the conflictual relationship between the police order and the without-part (Rancière and Corcoran 2010) happens surreptitiously. Think, for instance, on the course of relations that lead to a controversy such as GamerGate. It starts long before the idea of a videogame existed. Its discursive core is situated within patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987), on a precedent 'distribution of the sensible' (Rancière 2011, pp.6-7)) that sets apart certain members of society into those with and without-part (e.g., men and women; heterosexual men and gay men; White and Black people). Moreover, the technological evolution that led to videogames invention, and the growing gender divide in the ICT industries, for example, gradually established this controversy. GamerGate as discussed in the introduction to this thesis, is one of many conflictual spaces within a gendered and heteronormative scene of dissensus surrounding videogames culture. I do not argue here that for Rancière's concepts to exist, they must comply to certain conditions, but rather that in order to comprehend the dynamics of the dissensus and the sensible, a researcher must establish certain empirical parameters. I propose four steps to observe and analyse a scene of dissensus, its dynamics and its potential consequences.

The first is to set the public condition of a scene of dissensus, its visibility and capacity to form publics. Although dissensus occurs without it becoming a *de facto* public matter – and everyday struggles of people at the margins are evidential of this constant conflict of those

with and without-part - for analytical terms it is important to establish the public condition of a problem. Their 'publicness' vary according to the strength of linking ties within a public and degrees of collectivization (Henriques 2004); the fluidity between visibility and invisibility of the struggle; and the ability of publics to deliberate in a diversity of public arenas, from highly normalized, normative and structured to open, fluid and unregulated ones.

Secondly, once the public condition is settled, we need to map the bodies and institutions in conflict in the distribution of the sensible. Who are the publics? Who are the 'without-part' and who represents the police order? Regarding videogames, the publics can be broader and intersectional – gamers, LGBTQA+ people, women, men, non-gamers, industry professionals – or narrow and unique, such as players of a specific videogame, a group of friends that constantly plays together an MMORPG, or a particular set of employees of a development company that suffer a certain experience together, such as on-site sexism. The institutions can range from the government, as a regulatory or funding body, to the companies themselves – such as BioWare in the case study of this research. Once the scene of dissensus is perceived and established, carefully mapping its participants helps to understand the sorts of discourse that may appear and a rough view of the conflict.

Thirdly, map the means through which the publics rupture the sensible, make themselves visible, achieving public condition and defying consensus. For example, software such as Game Maker and RPG Maker are easier to use tools for games creation, and activists like Anna Anthropy advocate a development scenario where everyone can produce games using these tools (Anthropy 2012, p.11). Software that simplifies the complicated language of coding are a path for people to engage in the production of their own short games, which according to Anthropy has the potential to foster creativity, innovation and diversity both in

terms of game genres and themes (ibid, p.11). It is therefore an interesting tool used by gamers at the margins to defy the logics of videogames industry. Blogs, alternative videogames websites and magazines, and gameplay videos are also tactics that publics may utilize to challenge a certain distribution of the sensible and make themselves heard.

Fourthly, we must acknowledge the central role of communication, the centrality of media for deliberation, conversation and citizenship, mapping the places where these bodies and institutions interact. Which means of communication do they use? Which media do they access to inform themselves? Where do they debate? Which voices are brought to the discussion? Are they valued and considered to be important? Mapping the arenas where the publics interact, the places they frequent and devices they utilize can be helpful to trace the connections, understand the limitations and potentialities of communication. For instance, for this research, places such as Reddit, videogames specialized news websites, casual meet-ups with friends and conversational capabilities of MMO's were mentioned by interviewees as spaces of conversation.

Although by no means do these steps intend to undermine the openness and depth of Rancière's approach, neither establish themselves at the sole ways of capturing the scenes of dissensus, I believe that in observing these criteria one can draw a comprehensive picture of it. The public condition of a gendered, masculine and heteronormative scene of dissensus is surely established and in a constant status of visibility - although the without-part that comprise its public are often invisible on an individual level, the scene is visible and conflicting.

The next chapter goes onto describe how the videogames industry is configured by this broader scene of dissensus, discussing the male-focused history of gaming and

technology. Furthermore, I will introduce some key moments of *Mass Effect* to shed light on how the industry both cooperates with a given distribution of the sensible that privileges the 'technomasculine' audience as defined by Kocurek (2015) and simultaneously challenges this distribution, opening doors to the voice of the without-part.

Chapter 3: A holistic approach to videogame analysis.

As a relatively recent field of studies, Games Studies researchers originating from other areas of expertise often bring their own domain-specific insights, methods, theories and methodologies to the research of videogames. This thesis presents another step in that direction, mixing different methodologies and methods, offering an analytical framework of its own, albeit one based upon established videogame scholarship, to answer the question of *what is political about videogames*. As discussed in Chapter 1, ludology and narratology are two of the most influential modes of conducting videogames research, with cultural studies approaches experiencing a constant growth in the new millennium. Psychology and media effects, film studies and media studies are other schools of thought that add to the theoretical and methodological development of the field of Games Studies. This interdisciplinarity works in favour of Ian Bogost's wishes for a field that has a 'greater balance of attention to players and social phenomena as well as to the construction and operation of hardware and software platforms in the games themselves' (Bogost in Heineman 2015, ch.11, p.6).

Within my own research, I aim to offer a more cohesive methodology and analytical framework that tackles both aspects raised by Bogost. I propose a *configurative circuit framework* for the analysis of videogames based on the understanding that rigorous videogames research cannot be focused solely on one specific aspect of the object – its ludic form, narrative ability, social impact, methods of development, amongst others. Rather, it requires a holistic perspective that aims to understand the complexity of configurative dynamics that circumscribes the object of study.

This chapter firstly sets out to present the mixed dataset necessary for a configurative approach to take place. It is a multi-layered process of data collection and analysis that

structures the thesis, allowing for analytical depth. I detail the case in study: the trilogy *Mass Effect*. As Bogost notes, studies of specific game titles, in the same way that many studies of film or literary titles are conducted, are still a rare occurrence within videogame studies (Bogost in Heineman, 2015, ch.11, p.7). The option to investigate a specific franchise of games here tries to fill the gap identified by Bogost, providing an in-depth look at a mainstream 'triple A' game and how it can provide fertile ground for political awareness and discussion. Secondly, I argue for the importance of in-depth gameplay and an autobiographical approach to videogames research: adopting the subjectivity of an 'aca-gamer' is a necessary path towards videogame analysis. Having profound knowledge of the object under analysis, a characteristic associated with a fan identity, is arguably beneficial to add depth to the study of videogames. Thirdly, I present the data collected through interviews and how these were first analysed and became the focal point of the research from where the main themes were extracted and utilized for further data collection. Fourthly, I present the data collected online utilizing the themes generated by the interviews. Lastly, I explain the configurative framework, relating it back to the discussion of configuration in Chapter 1 and the operationalization of the 'scenes of dissensus' in Chapter 2.

3.1 The Mass Effect Franchise

The *Mass Effect* trilogy, produced by the Canadian company BioWare, has been a huge success among gamers, having sold over 14 million copies (retail only) since its release in 2007¹⁹. The in-game story follows the main character, Commander Shepard, in a battle

¹⁹ Data collected from VGChartz.com with the last update of the numbers being from 09th September 2017.

against an extra-terrestrial synthetic species, the Reapers, that threaten life throughout its fictional universe. The story is set in a distant future where space travel and exploration are commonplace. Earth has colonies scattered throughout the Milky Way and humanity has established diplomatic relationships with other species. The protagonist's mission is to gather troops from different species and unite them under the banner of saving the universe. The protagonist faces moral dilemmas (decisions to exterminate or save an entire species, for example), political controversies (a decision can have implications for diplomatic relations between species) and personal conflicts (sub-plots of xenophobia among certain species hamper relations within the team, for example).

The first *Mass Effect* plot revolves around the discovery of a traitor among the ranks of the *Spectre*: a special operative force in service of the *Council*, the main government of the galaxy that deals with galactic politics and inter-species issues, amongst other tasks of a political nature. Commander Shepard eventually becomes the first human Spectre while trying to prove that Saren is a rogue agent. Slowly the plot reveals that the real enemies are not the artificial intelligence life forms named the Geth²⁰, but the Reapers²¹. Every fifteen thousand years they reappear to harvest sentient and advanced species while leaving less evolved species safe, waiting for them to reach their evolutionary peak. However, the Council does not believe in the Reaper threat despite Shepard's evidence of their existence. By the end of the game, every menace is considered as an action of the rogue Turian Spectre, Saren, in alliance with the Geth.

²⁰ The Geth are a synthetic [Artificial Intelligence](#) species created by the Quarians, another alien species. The Geth forces are the main mobs the player must face in the first game and are also part of a secondary narrative arc that is important in-game: the Quarian-Geth conflict and the synthetic x organic life debacle.

²¹ The Reapers are ancient machines and the main enemies of the trilogy. Little is known about their origins and who first created them. Their purpose is to harvest advanced organic life in the galaxy, allowing for a new cycle of evolution to happen.

The plot of *Mass Effect 2* (BioWare 2010) starts a few months after the end of the first and we see the *Normandy*, the ship-character from the first game, being destroyed by what is later revealed to be a Collector ship. Shepard disappears after this attack and the action starts two years later when the player learns that pro-human and anti-alien organization *Cerberus* – that had several appearances during the first game and plays an integral role in the books – rescued Shepard's body and saved his/her life. Hired by Cerberus to do what the Alliance refused to – fight the Collectors²² who control the Reapers – Shepard reunites with some of the first game crew in an intense journey with a plethora of new characters and locations. *Mass Effect 2* has some of the most complicated and consequential decisions made by Shepard, with a final “suicide mission” that puts in check the relationships formed during the game, which relates and act on gamers’ emotional involvements with the characters.

The third and final instalment of the trilogy follows six months after the second game. In a vivid cinematic sequence, the Reapers invade Earth and the player races to extract Shepard from the planet in order to gather an army and find a way to stop the Reapers. The premise of the third game builds on a diplomatic Shepard trying to solve disputes between species with a history of mutual hatred. There is growing tension building up for the final battle with the Reapers. There is no apparent happy ending, no perfect scenario and in this sense, it is more crude and realistic regarding the outcomes of such a huge battle. “Victory”, something that is normally expected in videogames, takes a different turn here, which stirred controversy in the player community (Plunkett 2012, Kaiser 2012)

²² The Collectors are the main enemies of the second game. A creation of the Reapers, it is later discovered that they are a result of the harvesting that happened fifteen thousand years ago and wiped out the dominant Prothean species from the galaxy.

The trilogy has also merited attention from several game scholars around the world who have tackled different issues within the game or related to it. The works range from the presentation of religion in ME and its players (Irizarry and Irizarry 2014); the game's narrative from a games design and narratological perspective (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum 2012; Zakowski 2014); representation and play of sex and sexualities (Zekany 2015; Østby 2016; Adams 2015); modes of queer play (Krobova, Moravec and Svelch 2015; Layne and Blackmon 2013); in-depth character analysis of Female Shepard and femininity (Thériault 2017); videogames as critical and experiential communities (Junior, 2014); philosophical education through the use of ME (Aristidou and Basallo 2014); and ME as an example of a neoliberalism perspective on multiculturalism (Voorhes 2012; Patterson 2014). I discuss these works throughout the thesis, expanding the academic enquiry surrounding *Mass Effect* and its developers, tackling matters of gender and identity but also videogames industry, marketing, politics of production, among other themes.

3.1.1 Mass Effect universe and its population

The *Mass Effect* trilogy showcases several species, aside from humans. As a videogame created by humans, the different species carry unique characteristics based on real-life tropes, stereotypes and values (Flanagan and Nissenbaum, 2014). Each new species' characters seem to follow these tropes, either via their design or narrative roles. There are more than ten species that the gamer can interact with during gameplay in a variety of ways. It can be argued that they all represent, to some extent, a form of *otherness* as Poor (2012) argues regarding digitized (other) races in comparison to the digitized human race. However, they are also often too familiar, resembling “real life” ethnicities, nations and religions. They

can be 'squad mates', such as the Asari and Turian species, enemies such as the Geth and the Reapers, part of enemy troops, non-playable characters in general, and/or different key characters/mission characters.

The main species, however, are the Asari, Turian, Salarian, Krogan and Quarian as the "good guys" and the Geth, Collectors and Reapers as the "bad guys". The Asari were the first species to encounter the Citadel in the game's cycle and are the founders of what is known as the 'Council Space'. With a very long life span, living more than a thousand years, the Asari are portrayed as a wise species, with a strong military force and the most powerful biotic²³ species known. They are mono-gendered (but with stereotypically female characteristics) blue-skinned aliens with model-esque bodies, a key species for this study as they have unique characteristics and a plot that raise issues of gender and sexuality roles, tropes and social perception (See Chapter 5, section 5.1.1).

The Turians can be seen as allegories for what Stephen Kline et al call militarized masculinity (Kline et al 2003, pp.184-195) and they are predominantly represented as males in-game. The only female Turian in-game appears as part of a *downloadable content* (DLC)²⁴ in *Mass Effect 3*, and she also is formerly from the military. As the second species to encounter the Citadel, the Turians became the main military force of Council space. As a strict society in which each of its members undergoes military training and follows rigid codes of conduct, the Turians are a midpoint between Krogans' brute force and Salarians' strategic action.

²³ Biotics are powers that certain characters can use, similar to magic in other games. They can generate energy from their bodies that is used in a variety of ways, from attacking opponents to defending squad mates with biotic shields.

²⁴ DLC's are additional packages of content for an already released video game. It can contain anything from new weapons and character clothing to new characters and vast storylines to explore. They can be free – such as the ME3 Extended Cut – but are usually paid.

Extremely intelligent, with a hyperactive, short life span and a lack of sexual desire – these are the main characteristics of the Salarian species, the third to encounter the Citadel. Alongside Asari and Turian, they form the Council that rules over the area known as Council Space – to which a human is added because of events that transpire in *Mass Effect 1*. The Salarians greatest contribution to the games' canon is their relationship with the Krogan. This species were responsible for the Krogans' process of “cultural uplifting” that accelerates the evolutionary process and, consequently, corrupts the species in terms of cultural development. Subsequently, they were also responsible for the “genophage” of the Krogan species as their rapidly increasing numbers were considered to be a threat the ecology of the galaxy. The Krogans are a brute force species with a redundant biological system (with secondary and even tertiary organs) and incredible reproductive capabilities, making them hard to conquer as enemies, but conversely are strong allies as part of the players' squad.

The Quarians are a space-nomad species that became nomadic due to the Geth uprising, in which their creation, the Geth (machines with Artificial Intelligence) turned against their creators – one of the most compelling plots of the game, with layers of moral and political complexity the main character must contend with. Quarians utilize “environmental suits” and cannot come into contact with other species due to a very weak immune system resultant from their isolation within spaceships.

These five species, alongside humans, play a leading role in the *Mass Effect* plot. However, several other species play important roles, such as the Batarians that provide an important political and diplomatic subtext for the player; the Drell, a minor species that has a playable character during the second game; the Hanar, Elcor and Volus who are also sentient

and have relevant non-playable characters throughout the game - these species do not have the political strength to be a part of the Council that rules the galaxy.²⁵

3.1.2 Romance mechanics and digital sexuality.

The first game of the trilogy made the news due to its depiction of erotic scenes between Shepard and a love interest. In the first game, relationships were restricted to heterosexual or lesbian romance. The conservative North American channel Fox News²⁶ reported the “immorality” of a game depicting sex for children - despite the game being rated “Mature”. The footage spread online in 2007 and incited angry reactions from gamers as the program was misleading about the game and its content. The commentators interviewed had not played the game, apart from videogames journalist Jeff Keeley, from SpikeTV (Dutton, Consalvo and Harper 2011). In the second instalment, sex scenes are not present with the same partial “digital nudity” from the first. Romance is still possible and LGBTQA+ characters continue to be present in the narrative. However, in the third game, the sex scenes return, including a variety of gay and lesbian romances and characters of major importance. A fourth game in the franchise, *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, followed in the footsteps of BioWare’s *Dragon Age: Inquisition* by featuring more explicit sex scenes with the inclusion of female breasts and male/female buttocks for certain characters.

In the first game of the series, romance options are limited. Each gender of Shepard had two romance options. For male Shepard, both options are heterosexual, one with human

²⁵ Other species may be relevant for future analyses, but the ones included here are the most significant for the purposes of this thesis.

²⁶ The FoxNews program was “LiveDesk” and it dedicated 6 minutes and 45 seconds to the discussion of Mass Effect using the caption “SE’XBOX? New videogame shows full digital nudity and sex”. Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PKzF173GqTU>

Ashley Williams and the other with Asari Liara T'soni. For female Shepard, the heterosexual relationship is with human Kaidan Alenko and there is a possible lesbian relationship with Liara T'soni. At the end of a successful romance, the player is "rewarded" with a cinematic sex scene and the 'Paramour' achievement – a trophy or medal for gamers aiming to complete 100% of the game challenges.

In the second game, heterosexual romance options increased. The franchise sequel brought new romance options for female Shepard but still denied representation to a male homosexual Shepard. There are four bisexually oriented characters, resulting in four possible non-heterosexual relationships for female Shepard: with Asaris: Morinth, Samara and Liara (as a follow-up romance from the first game), and human Kelly Chambers.

The third game in the series added more romance options, including two gay romances for male Shepard: humans Steve Cortez and Kaidan Alenko. Kaidan, who up until that moment was a heterosexual character romanced only by Female Shepard, became a bisexual character. This change stirred controversy in the player community and is further discussed in Chapter 5. Female Shepard has five options for same sex relationships with Liara T'Soni, Samara and Kelly Chambers as follow-up romances from previous games; and Samantha Traynor and Diana Allers as new romance possibilities. Pilot Steve Cortez is the first male gay character to appear in the game, together with Communication Specialist Samantha Traynor, the first lesbian. The other female characters are portrayed as bisexual.

3.1.3 Game Mechanics

Aphra Kerr argues that the classification of games according to genre is a necessary, yet complicated, task as they are often influenced by several different modes of gameplay

(Kerr, 2006, p.38-40). Considered an under-theorised aspect of game studies (ibid, p.39), scholars Rachel I. Clarke et al's study on videogame genres provides an insightful critique of the current status of genre scholarship in the field. Their critique stems from their expertise in the field of library and information sciences and does an excellent job in generating the taxonomies of gaming that do not 'support retrieval of games for interested users' (Clarke et al. 2015, p.2). Clarke et al. contend that issues regarding the taxonomical plurality hampers identification of what a game will be about when purchasing it (Clarke et al, pp.2-5) - for example, Mark J. Wolf (2001) presents forty-two categories, while Steven Poole (2002) proposes just nine. Clarke et al. contend that there are no established criteria to categorise games, with most relying on genres originating in literature and cinema rather than medium-specific characteristics (ibid, p.2). The authors suggest that a taxonomy of videogames must respect the fluidity of genre (ibid, p.13), proposing three modes of classification: a) a prototypical categorization where a game can serve as an example of a genre (ibid. p14), b) a faceted classification that accounts for several aspects of a game (ibid, pp.14-15); and c) a taxonomy based on what "attracts and motivates us to play games" (ibid, pp.15-16). Considering Clarke et al and Kerr's collocations of genre, *Mass Effect* can be classified as a 'genre hybrid' in the sense that it mixes different categorisations of commonly used categories, such as RPG and Action, while serving as a typical example of the 'BioWare games' brand: story rich, with customisable main characters and a branched narrative.

Regarding the games' mechanics, the main action of ME relies on aesthetics with a third person view of the main character. The action is fast paced and continuous, although the player can pause momentarily to access skills of squad mates, issue commands and change weapons. Players will most often use ranged weapons, such as pistols, shotguns and sniper rifles, and occasionally melee attacks. Set in a sci-fi scenario, ME also has its own form

of magic, named *biotics*. By concentrating a certain amount of the fictional substance *element zero* in their characters' bodies, players can execute biotic attacks like throwing enemies, creating barriers, projecting energy through the ground or throwing explosive projectiles toward enemies. As a unique trait of the game, players can also specialise in using technological devices to decrypt vaults, control synthetic enemies and disrupt armour. These features illustrate the influence of Role-Playing Game mechanics', with a fully customisable main character in terms of appearance, gender, sexuality (albeit to a limited extent, as demonstrated further in this thesis), with skill trees, different for each class available, that grow with experience points. There are six classes in total, each with its specialisation and different skill trees. They vary from straight-forward soldiers to biotic and technology experts. The classes are:

- a) Soldier: experts in field combat, they can master the use of any gun available in-game and change the quality of their ammunition to cause more damage.
- b) Adept: they act similarly to 'mages', specialising in Biotic attacks.
- c) Engineer: they are technology experts, good for battles against synthetics, capable of reducing an enemy's status, such as defence and attack.
- d) Vanguard: a combination of Adept and Soldier, a versatile class specialising in close combat.
- e) Infiltrator: a combination of Soldier and Engineer, has a range of tech-based abilities while specialising in long-range damage with proficiency in the use of sniper rifles.
- f) Sentinel: a combination of Adept and Engineer, they are considered support characters, capable of raising the team's defence while reducing the enemy's attack and defence status.

Related to the RPG approach is the heavy focus on character development, a rich and complex Gameworld, and a set of mechanics to give the player 'bounded agency' where through the illusion of choice and the extensive branched narratives, the player 'can only deepen each narrative arc in the game, without derailing the direction of the story' (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum 2012, p. 401). The dialogue wheel in ME presents the player with a series of possible answers to a situation, increasing the possibilities of agency and action for the player (Fig.2). BioWare created a clever moral system based on character choices during the game. Two paths are possible: Paragon and Renegade, which cannot be mistaken for "good" or "bad" paths nor as a moral compass between good and evil. The videogame favours the imbalance between both paths as the player can gain some advantages in terms of dialogue choice if said choice has enough Paragon or Renegade points. The story continues despite the choices made, but it flows differently for each gameplay experience. Casey Hudson states that ME's moral scale is always about being 'out to do things for good, one way or another' (ibid, ch10. p.18), with Renegade being more ruthless and straight-forward, while Paragon seeks to mediate conflicts. Each provide a different gameplay experience, adding to the 're-playability'

factor: each play-through can adopt both moral paths or what *Mass Effect* players name “Paragade”, a mix between both paths.



Figure 1 - Dialogue Wheel in ME1. The blue line represents a Paragon choice and the red a Renegade option (Printscreen from author's own recorded gameplay)

3.1.4 Mass Effect as transmedia storytelling

A rich transmedia universe, populated by comics, novels, movies, and fan-made material gave impetus to why I chose this game as an exemplary case study with which to address the research aim of this thesis. Among the difficult challenges of defining transmedia storytelling within a range of definitions and terminologies (Harvey 2015, pp.16-17), Henry Jenkins' original definition serves the purpose of this thesis. For Jenkins, transmedia storytelling is a 'story that unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole' (Jenkins 2006, pp.95-96). In ME's official transmedia, the background of that universe is revealed; each character is fleshed out; gaps in the main game story are filled. However, each material serves as a 'point of entry'

(Jenkins 2006, p.96) to that universe, with the game trilogy being the central medium and likely the main entrance point for most players.

The table below summarises the official and unofficial transmedia elements of the *Mass Effect* franchise drawn from within this research. I categorise it according to the taxonomy of transmedia storytelling as proposed by Harvey (2015), that helps analyse fictional worlds that 'have a degree of flexibility built into their diegesis which enables the existence of multiple story worlds' (Harvey 2015, p.186). Each gameplay of ME creates a narrative world of its own due to the multiple narrative pathways. Moreover, the different levels of engagement of each player will configure how much of that transmedia universe they will explore or create. According to Harvey, transmedia storytelling can be divided into *directed*, *devolved* and *detached* transmedia storytelling, *directed and emergent user-generated content* (UGC). The first refers to situations where the intellectual property (IP) rights owner 'exercises strict control' over what can be created based on the original IP (Harvey 2015, p.187). The second, devolved, implies a relationship with a third party that is more distant but still has to follow certain standards and is 'careful not to tell stories that might anticipate forthcoming adventures' (ibid, p.188). Detached transmedia storytelling, while still connected to the legal matters dictating IP ownership and agreements, exists 'beyond' it. They exist in parallel to official storyline products but are often unable to refer directly to them or be taken as part of that same story line (ibid, pp. 188-189). Harvey considers that UGC 'elicited by the IP holder or vicariously by a licensee' to be 'directed UGC'. A good example is Bethesda's Creation Club²⁷, that offers players and modders a series of resources they can utilise for their own creations (ibid pp.189-190). Lastly, emergent UGC

²⁷ <https://creationclub.bethesda.net/en>

acknowledges the spontaneous creation of fans in the form of fanfics, fanart among others (ibid, p.190).

Category	Product
Directed Transmedia Storytelling	Mass Effect Trilogy Mass Effect Galaxy (iOS game) Mass Effect Datapad (iOS game) Mass Effect: Infiltrator (mobile game) Mass Effect DLC's: Bringing Down the Sky/Pinnacle Station Mass Effect 2 DLC's: Cerberus Network/Normandy Crash Site/Zaeed, The Prince of Revenge/ Arc Projector/ Kasumi, Stolen Memory/ Overlord/ Lair of the Shadow Broker/ Mass Effect: Genesis/ Arrival Mass Effect 3 DLC's: From Ashes/ Extended Cut/Citadel/ Leviathan/Omega/Mass Effect: Genesis 2
Devolved Transmedia Storytelling	Mass Effect: Paragon Lost (movie – animation) Mass Effect: Redemption (comics) Mass Effect: Incursion (comics) Mass Effect: Inquisition (comics) Mass Effect: Evolution (comics) Mass Effect: Conviction (comics) Mass Effect: Invasion (comics) Mass Effect: Homeworlds (comics) Mass Effect: Blasto: Eternity is Forever (comics) Mass Effect: He Who Laughs Best (comics) Mass Effect: Foundation (comics) Mass Effect: Revelation Mass Effect: Ascension Mass Effect: Retribution Mass Effect: Deception
Detached Transmedia Storytelling	Porn Parody – Ass Effect
Directed User-Generated Content	Modding
Emergent User-Generated Content	Fanfic Fanart Machinima Porn Parody – Ass Effect

Table 1 - Categorization of Mass Effect Transmedia products based on Harvey (2015) taxonomy.

As Table 1 illustrates, most of the official content seems to fall in between directed and devolved transmedia storytelling. The comics were released by Dark Horse Comics, a long-standing partner of BioWare and involved in other franchise transmedia universes. The books were published by Del Rey Books, the sci-fi and fantasy branch of Penguin Random House. The movie was a co-production by BioWare, FUNimation and T.O Entertainment, animated by famous Japanese studio Production I.G, responsible for the *Ghost in the Shell* series. Unfortunately, no data about the nature of these contracts and what they entail in terms of IP control was found, making it difficult to categorise these products accurately. However, considering the aspects raised by Harvey regarding fidelity to the original material, nature of production and level of fan engagement, I tried to provide an accurate portrayal of the transmedia universe of *Mass Effect*. Some products, such as the porn parody *Ass Effect*, are particularly hard to categorise, as they challenge legal boundaries of IP ownership, being a for-profit movie. It is unlikely BioWare authorised the making of a porn movie using its IP, but the ease with which one finds the video on major porn websites and no evidence of a lawsuit against it make classification of it as both 'detached' and 'emergent' more suitable.

The success of the franchise has enabled fans to engage in extended discussions and go beyond boundaries of the game experience. Characters mattered more because they were extensively fleshed out. Their personal identifiers, such as gender and sexuality, were personally (and politically) adopted by players and manifested in a myriad of ways that will be analysed throughout this thesis. ME fans created alternate endings for their beloved characters, and through a process of *modding*²⁸ developed and explored relationships that

²⁸ Modding is the practice of altering the code of the game to change anything with its scope, from the design of characters, to the layout of maps and scenario, inclusion of new weapons among others. Famous *mods* include the game Counter Strike that was modded from Half Life and the several mods made for *The Sims* (Sihvonen 2011). See chapter 7, section 7.1.2 for further discussion of the practice as part of the *Mass Effect* universe.

were not allowed in-game, such as a romance between a male Commander Shepard and male alien Garrus Vakarian (see chapter 7 for further discussion about modding). The transmedia universe and its fandom allow a deeper comprehension of both BioWare/Development Team's intentions and gamers' involvement with the universe. Fan-made material was collected randomly through Google search – using keywords – and comments made on Reddit and Unofficial BioWare Social Network (USBN) threads. Tumblr and DeviantArt are the main sites where fanart is hosted, while fanfics are commonly found on Archive of Our Own (commonly referred to as AO3).

The first three books of the ME transmedia universe follow the stories of Captain Edward David Anderson, from the military human organisation Systems Alliance, and Kahlee Sanders, who starts off as an Alliance officer, but in the two following books takes on a scientist role for the military. Often sharing the lead role, Kahlee can be considered the main character of the three books, closely followed by Captain Anderson in importance. Anderson is a vital character for ME's lore, being the one responsible for Shepard's command of the ship Normandy and helping the commander throughout the adventures. Kahlee is briefly mentioned in the game, and appears in one of the games' side quest regarding Grisson Academy in ME3. The books expand the story of these two characters and functions as a prequel to the games. A fourth book, *Mass Effect: Deception* is considered by fans to be non-canon, despite being an official product, due to its perceived inaccuracies regarding the universe constructed so far (Plunkett 2012a).

The iOS exclusive and mobile games also served to expand the story of some characters. ME: Galaxy focused on ME2's human squad mates Jacob Taylor and Miranda Lawson. ME: Infiltrator was tied to the lore of ME3, and follows a similar form of gameplay to ME: a third person shooter with class, skill trees and morality systems. It follows a protagonist

unrelated to the main cast of the trilogy, but nonetheless expands the depth of ME's universe. Throughout the game the player can gather War Assets for the fight against the Reapers in ME3. The ME: Datapad was a free app that connected to a player's ME3 game, allowing the player to check the Galaxy Map, receive messages and keep track of war assets. Both games are no longer available from the mobile stores, but the Datapad is still available as part of N7HQ, an official EA website²⁹.

The comics offer varied stories related to other characters on Shepard's team in all three games. Filling the gap between each game or telling the origin story of a character, the comics provide ME fans a chance to understand the behind-the-scenes stories of characters they learned to love throughout the games. A similar idea inspired the animated movie *Mass Effect: Paragon Lost*. It tells the background story of ME3's character James Vega when he led a squad of soldiers in a clash against the Collectors, the main enemies from the second game, a battle that ended with many of his fellow soldiers dead. Vega's past is often mentioned in dialogue with Commander Shepard during the game.

3.2 In-depth Gameplay

"So your work is to play games all day?" is a question often heard by videogames researchers. To a certain extent, the answer to that question is yes – although I undoubtedly played much less than those asking expect the answer to be. Nonetheless, it is of utmost importance that a researcher working on a videogames case study has a core set of data on gameplay. In order to approach the ME trilogy and understand its appeal, stories and

²⁹ <http://n7hq.masseffect.com/%E2%80%8E>

mechanics, an in-depth gameplay was necessary. A question emerged during this process: how would I transform gameplay into a usable dataset? At first, the intention was to map the game's conversations in each gameplay, a task rendered difficult due to the sheer volume of dialogue and the many hours of recordings each gameplay generated, which would add to the multiplicity and volume of data sources that this thesis utilises. For example, certain conversations are only triggered when specific characters are brought to a mission or to explore a city. I learned about many new dialogues that I had never heard of through my interviewees' comments and my exploration of Reddit and USBN. Therefore, rather than trying to map these highly branched dialogue options, capturing those experienced by the subjects in my data and myself proved to be a far more interesting way of garnering evidence of the game's configurative dynamics in shaping unique gameplays.

I then considered the approach of an in-depth exploration of the single-player world of ME, immersing myself deeper in that universe and its surroundings – transmedia worlds and fan made products, for example – while considering my own experience as valuable data. Although not an ethnographic study this thesis is surely influenced by proposals of a 'virtual ethnography' as made by different videogames' researchers (Giddings 2006; Taylor 2006, 2009; Nardi 2010). For instance, approaches that consider the game as the place of the ethnographer, often used in the exploration of MMORPG's such as the study of *Everquest* (Sony Online Entertainment 1999) players conducted by T.T Taylor (2006) and *World of Warcraft* (Nardi 2010), aim to understand the functioning of those virtual worlds while considering the role of the player in shaping it. It can, however, expand beyond the Gameworld itself and include "offline" events based on the game such as those attended by Taylor, where fans meet and 'chitchat about the game' (Taylor 2009, p.4), mixing traditional and virtual ethnographies. Despite being mostly a single-player game, I explored *Mass Effect*

as an outsider, understanding the culture and social interactions that form the *Mass Effect* universe. Later, this exploration went beyond the game itself and towards the communities of play surrounding it, investigating fans and players in online forums and via face to face interviews. A second form of virtual ethnography looks primarily at the player and the configurative dynamics between the player and the game, the bodily affects/effects of the game and the mental processes and feelings that occur during play (Harvey 2009). Seth Giddings' microethnography of his children's play is a good example, observing both their play, the space where it occurred and the games at play, drawing 'observations of the fluid relationships between virtual and actual space in this play event' (Giddings 2006, p. 87)

Utilising the open source and free software *Open Broadcast Software*, I recorded two out of three of my own gameplay sessions of ME, totalling 240 hours that carries every part of my gameplay. The recorded sessions took place at home, in my rented rooms across London, using my own desktop computer. Files were named according to the main event recording, using either the official in-game mission name, or the places I visited if the goal of the gaming moment was to explore dialogue with several non-playable characters. The first gameplay existed prior to the research. It was the first contact with the game as told in the beginning of this thesis, carrying a strong affective component and a series of fuzzy memories of the story. The second gameplay, undertaken during the first years of my research, allowed me to familiarise with the ME universe again before setting out on field work – interviews with players and collection of online data in forums and news websites. This approach had a practical rationale: by knowing the game profoundly informs the approach taken to both the undertaking and the analysis of the interviews explained in the next section. Being aware of facts, names, situations in-game made it much easier to relate to the interviewees and aided me in creating pertinent questions. This in-depth exploration also facilitated the collection

and analysis of data from social media and forums, where the knowledge of the game helped filter the long threads to find relevant comments and conversations.

The third gameplay took place after the interviews and continued throughout the writing of the thesis, both to keep the object fresh in my mind and to allow easy access to the game's content. In the third gameplay, I took notes capturing some of my reactions and thoughts regarding replaying the game after discussing it with a variety of people, and investing time in the understanding of it in light of many theories. This experience of play was distinct to the first two: configured by both an informed researcher mindset inflected by my learning from exchanges with interviewees, redditors and scholars alike. This third, "configured" play present, in analytical form, my feelings and thoughts of the game, its characters and the interpretations given by my interviewees, the online commentators and the discourses of BioWare about ME.

However, the data produced through my own gameplay could – and should – also be analysed thoroughly for a thesis where the concepts of configuration, experience, affect and politics are central. To approach this data more methodically, Paul Eakin's (1999; 2008) work on autobiography proved useful as a way of understanding the data collected through three gameplays of ME. His argument of autobiography as relational, embedded in and influenced by cultural discourses of identity, among others, is in line with my own proposal of videogames configurative characteristics and the adoption of a praxeological approach to communication (Eakin 1999, p.4). These gameplays tell a story of my(self), reflecting the changes that the research itself had on me; they tell who I was and am during play, in relation to not only ME but also to my other datasets.

To speak in the terms this thesis adopts, an autobiography of my play shows the complexity of configurative dynamics that affects gameplay. My interviewees' passion (or lack

thereof) towards certain characters and moments redefined how I lived them in-game, or how I approached them in the research; the deep changes in the world's political scenario, with a considerable rise of conservative thought, especially in my home country, deeply influenced the readings I made of ME's approach to gender and sexuality politics.

In sum, during the four years dedicated to this thesis, several configurative circuits were activated, spreading like a web, a network of relations, working on a definition of my(self) that is 'defined by – and lives in terms of – its relation with others' (Eakin 1999, p.43) Therefore, every analysis here is also informed by my own self, the one I got to 'know' and 'take care of' in the course of the research (Foucault, 1988), but also construct. As Eakin argues:

the allegiance to truth that is the central, defining characteristic of memoir is less an allegiance to a factual record that biographers and historians could check than an allegiance to remembered consciousness and its unending succession of identity states, an allegiance to the history of one's self (Eakin, 2008, p.64)

The self I am concerned with in this research is, however, not just my(self) but also those who played ME. And the next section details who they were and the contributions they made to the research.

3.3 Interviewing gamers: narrative analysis

The interviewees were selected via an online questionnaire³⁰ (N= 225)³¹ sent to mailing lists, posted on the ME Reddit forum and spread via Twitter and Facebook by several participants. From the initial sample, twenty-five subjects (25) were selected that fitted my basic criteria³²: that they had played and completed all three games at least once. The

³⁰ See Appendix 3 for a sample of the questionnaire.

³¹ Due to the already high volume of data gathered for the thesis, and the low N that would make it difficult to generalize conclusions about the overall ME community, the questionnaire was used only to gather and contact potential interviewees.

³² See Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 for the Information Sheet, Consent Form and question guide for the interviews.

selection aimed for a diverse set of interviewees who self-identified their gender, ethnicity, and sexuality³³. From the initial twenty-five selected, only fifteen replied positively to being

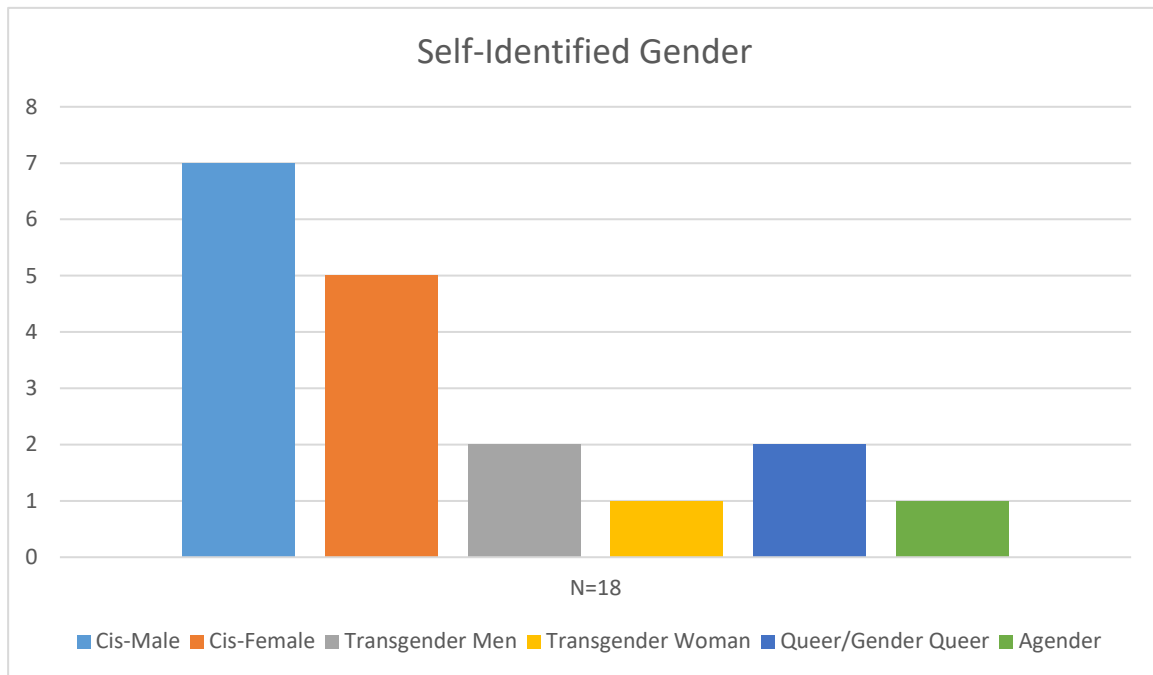


Figure 2 - Interviewees ranged from heterosexual to agender, questioning gender binarism

interviewed. All the interviewees are identified here using pseudonyms³⁴ and agreed to the Consent Form³⁵ in accordance to King’s College London ethics and policies of data management. The tables below show interviewees’ self-identified gender and sexual orientation (N=15). Notice that the total result does not equal 15 as they could choose more than one option.

³³ Geographical limitations were an issue due to budgetary constraints. Therefore, despite the questionnaire being open to anyone, the selected interviewees were mainly from two Brazilian cities – Belo Horizonte and Rio de Janeiro – and London.

³⁴ See “List of Interviewees”.

³⁵ See “Appendix 1: Information Sheet and Consent Form”

The narrative method approach that I adopted proved useful to extract the stories and experiences of these gamers and how they relate to broader socio-political contexts and the political conversation of the time. According to Margaret Somers (1994) a narrative method is a means through which to ‘make sense of the social world’ and ‘constitute our social identities’ (ibid: 606). There is a move, she argues, from a representational narrative approach to a social epistemology and ontology approach which allows the researcher to engage with “historically and empirically based research into social action and social agency that is at once temporal, relational, and cultural, as well as institutional, material, and macro-structural” (ibid: 607). Adrienne Shaw’s (2014) study on identification and representation of LGBTQA+

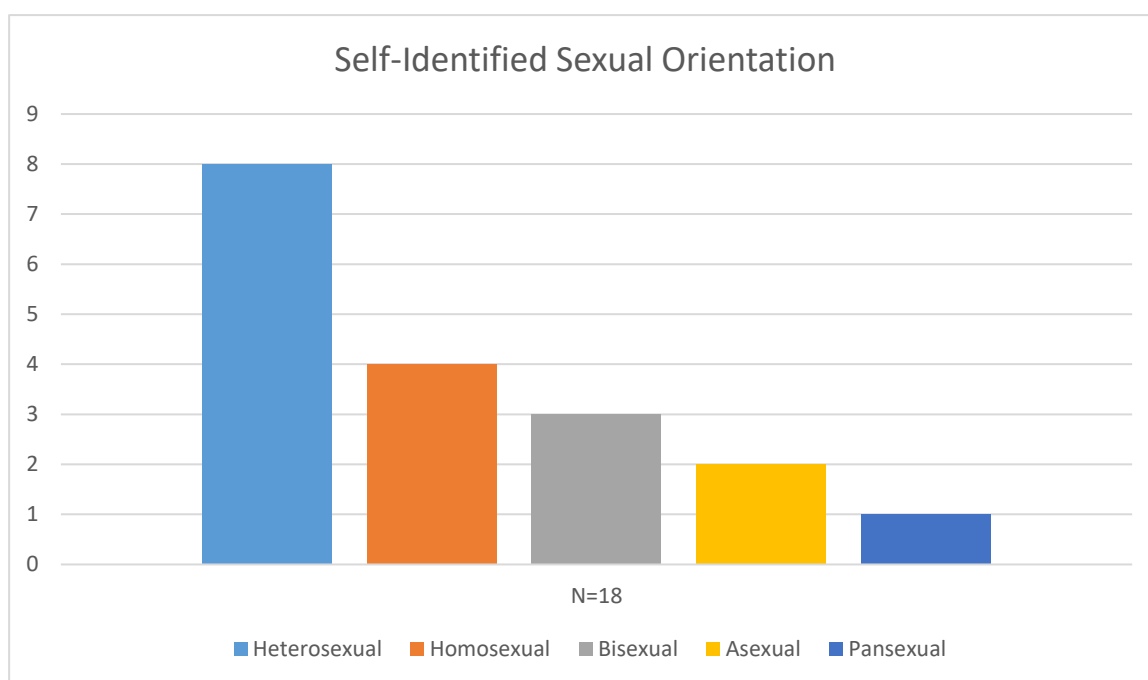


Figure 3 - Interviewees sexualities defy heteronormativity

gamers take a similar approach using interviews and ‘gaming interviews’ - questioning interviewees while playing with them. Her analysis of the data is intersectional and has a strong socio-cultural basis by situating the gaming moment within the scope of LGBTQA+ struggles for social reconnaissance.

Somers (1994) points to four dimensions of narrative which carry similarities to the configurative framework used for this thesis. The first dimension is the *ontological*, that which we use to make sense of our own lives, to define ourselves and our practices which is not something fixed, but something that “becomes” through social and interpersonal construction (Somers 1994, p. 618). The second dimension is the *public*, which forms a cultural background, a greater story that permeates our everyday lives and is ‘larger than the single individual’ (ibid, 618). These public narratives affect our perception of the world. They can vary from the narratives we learn from our family history or organisations – for instance, the victorious narrative of Steve Jobs influencing public perception of Apple – and even media can create narrative streams accepted by the greater public (ibid, p. 619).

The public dimension of narratives is intrinsically related to the visibility of a public problem as argued by Márcio S. Henriques (2012), discussed in Chapter 2. For instance, the GamerGate event presented in the introduction had two broader public discourses – the pro and anti-Gamer Gate - that were themselves affected by a third dimension, the *meta-narrativity*. This refers to the broader narratives that permeate social life, ideas of progress, enlightenment, or to the central concerns of this research: gender, sex, technology. These narratives, Somers argues, have a paradoxical quality of *denarrativisation* as they come from abstract ideas and concepts such as ‘social systems’ (ibid: 619). The last dimension is *conceptual narrativity* that advances the meta-narrativity through ‘concepts and explanations that we construct as social researchers’ (ibid: 620). Somers argues that public and ontological narrative alone are not enough to understand social action or institution-building; for that, one needs to conceptualise and create a vocabulary that can include, for instance, the social forces that act upon society (ibid: 620).

These four dimensions of narrative help enlighten the stories told by my interviewees and situate them within broader social thought. These dimensions resonate with William Gamson's (1992) focus group methodology where, through long sessions of discussion with a diverse group of participants, he found the key influential components for everyday political conversation: media, personal experience and common sense, which I discussed in the previous section. There is ontological narrative in the “personal experience”, while public and meta-narrative are both part of the “media” and “common sense” arguments used by his groups. Conceptual narrativity guides both the researcher approach and, to an extent, the conversations of the groups as they can have different degrees of knowledge regarding the topics in discussion.

Analyses of the interviews were the first step for this thesis. From there, and in tandem with my autobiographical play of ME, categories of analysis were extracted, which guided the data collection on Reddit, Twitter and the Unofficial BSN Forum. These categories respect Sommers' four dimensions of narrative, while adapting them to a context where we observe the configurative dynamics between videogame, player, industry and society beyond texts and narratives.

3.4 Online Data

Digital methods and Digital Humanities approaches provide valuable insights for this research. The studies of online communities (Rheingold 1993; Jenkins 2008; Papacharissi 2015; 2015, Baym 2015) and specific digital platforms' affordances (Massanari 2015) provide the theoretical and methodological ground for the collection of data in Reddit, Twitter and the UBSN forum. It is important, however, to highlight that this thesis is not concerned in

understanding the interactional dynamics inherent to these online spaces³⁶, nor develops a critical discussion of the concept of community in the digital era (see Turkle 2011, Evans 2013). The already established discussions, conceptualisations and theories about these spaces are important to contextualise – for instance, in talking about gender and sexuality in online forums such as Reddit, the demographics of the platform; its unique affordances and forms of control; and particular rules of interaction of that community must be taken into account (Massanari 2015).

The data collection in these platforms was made considering the main themes and categories generated by the analysis of the interviews. I adopted a particular approach for each platform in accordance to their usefulness for this research, whilst also bearing in mind their respective limitations.

3.4.1 Twitter³⁷

The Twitter data on ME consisted of tweets gathered using the hashtag #FemShepFriday, to track an event on February 10th, 2012 that was part of BioWare's marketing strategy for the third game's release. It marks the release date of the first trailer featuring the official Female Shepard. The controversy around FemShep's invisibility since the first game made BioWare finally appeal to the fans' desire for due attention to this character (Lima 2017).

³⁶ See Adriana Massanari (2015) for an analysis of Reddit as community and Zizi Papacharissi (2015) for the use of Twitter in political activism.

³⁷ This data was also used in a paper published on the journal *Kinéphanos*, entitled "Configurative dynamics of gender in Bioware's marketing for the Mass Effect franchise" (Lima, 2017). Although parts of that discussion and theoretical framework are present in this thesis, further arguments are raised in chapter's 4 and 5 based on this dataset.

Due to the date of the event predating what is possible to collect using the available free (but limited) tools such as Hashtagify³⁸ and Twitonomy³⁹ the tweets had to be manually collected. Once the tweets provided by the search were all loaded in Google Chrome, I downloaded an HTML file and organized the tweets in a simple Word file. 2,376 tweets were collected in total, with the older tweets containing #FemShepFriday dating back to August 5th, 2011, suggesting the game-player community created this hashtag before the company adopted it as part of its marketing strategy. Due to the time frame of this research, several tweets were likely lost either from deleted accounts, privacy policies adopted by users and the lack of appropriate resources to collect older tweets. Nonetheless, the volume of tweets collected is significant for the purposes of the thesis. The tweets were replicated in their full form in this thesis, blurring faces and usernames to respect user privacy.

3.4.2 Reddit

Reddit is an ‘aggregation platform’ that “enables the sharing of original and reposted content from around the web’ (Massanari 2015, p.3-4). Most importantly, it allows users to create their own ‘subreddits’: spaces for anonymous discussion of specific themes such as politics, games, books, movies and sex. One of these subreddits, entitled r/masseffect, is dedicated to the franchise. It is a place for the gathering of like-minded enthusiasts of ME, and is the central hub for all things ME within Reddit. Its sidebar contains links to other related subreddits, a FAQ, the community rules, a filter of posts by flair/category, and its affiliation to the “BioWare Subreddit Network” comprised of r/BioWare and game-specific subreddits such

³⁸ <https://hashtagify.me/hashtag/tbt>

³⁹ <http://www.twitonomy.com/>

as r/DragonAge. The amount of data available is overwhelming and unquantifiable – the subreddit has existed since at least 2009⁴⁰ – therefore data collection had to be limited.

At first, a sample of threads was collected using the following keywords: FemShep, Gender, Sex, Sexuality, MShep, Female Shepard. The threads had to have at least 100 comments and were valued by the community through the logics of the platform:

Posters are encouraged to upvote content they find useful, interesting, or that adds meaningfully to the conversation according to the site's reddiquette. Both comments and postings are then moved to the top of the page based on the number of upvotes minus the number of downvotes they receive. A large amount of karma [*the social currency of Reddit*] for a particular comment may indicate that individuals reading it found it valuable or agreed with it or thought that it added useful information to the conversation or thought that it was funny – in other words, it is difficult to know what might be motivating an individual redditor's vote (Massanari 2015, pp. 12-13)

The first sampling had over thirty threads that centred their discussions in these themes, and a number of others that ended up veering the discussion towards other themes of less interest to this research. After reading those and filtering out those who did not add much to the discussion (e.g short posts rather than extensive dialogue; repetitive content), the sample was reduced to four threads that had a considerable number of comments and extensive discussions about topics related to this research. I created several HTML files with the comments in each thread, facilitating access to the comments even offline. The comments were organized in the software *Evernote* according to themes, especially those that contained information relevant to the discussion and/or were elected for citation. Within the threads collected, the posts totalled 1,664. They discuss gender and sexuality; the adoption of Female

⁴⁰ As of the 13th of April 2018, the subreddit has 151.195 subscribers.

and Male Shepards by players; BioWare's official data; and personal life events connected to ME which enabled my research to map affective configurations. The comments and users are cited in full in the thesis as the platform itself is anonymous.

Owing to the hyperlinked nature of the web, my content analysis revealed a comment within the threads that led me to another subreddit, r/MassErect. This subreddit is dedicated to sharing fan-created pornographic imagery related to the game and created by fans. It became an object of my enquiry in the study of transmedia and fans (see Chapter 7, section 7.1.3), leading also to the exploration of other ME related pornography stored on 'PornHub'⁴¹. Learning what lay beyond the original set of data as a direct result to the information provided by the Reddit analysis was a fruitful exercise. Having an open data collection methods approach, important to the configurative study of videogames, helped add this new information to the thesis without creating a methodological impasse.

3.4.3 Unofficial BioWare Social Network (USBN)

The USBN forum was born after the official BioWare Social Network (BSN) went offline in 2015, before data collection for this research started. Originally the idea was to collect data from BSN. The fan-created USBN started in 2016 and since the release of *Mass Effect: Andromeda* has been heavily used to discuss the new addition to the franchise and other BioWare games. Nonetheless, despite the limitations caused by the gap between the game releases - 2007, 2010 and 2012 respectively - and the data collection (2017), the fact that there is still a significantly large number of people talking about the game on Reddit and USBN is an interesting research resource itself. Twenty-five (25) threads were collected with a focus

⁴¹ PornHub was launched in 2007 and is the largest website hosting pornographic videos from professionals and amateurs alike.

on character-threads and experiential threads. The games' characters are often highlighted by the interviewees and are of key importance to the heavily narrative-based world of ME as I previously explained. Moreover, the sense of nostalgia in the USBN community incited users to recreate classic posts from BSN to keep a personal memory of the many years of conversation and experiences shared previously. Within the threads collected, a total of 3,971 posts were analysed based on the search for keywords and themes according to the analytical scope of the thesis.

3.4.4 Secondary Data and BioWare: news media and other sources

Due to BioWare's refusal to collaborate with the project via interviews⁴², primary data regarding the franchise development, workforce and other themes of interest could not be collected. To fill this gap and add more information to the research I gathered news from several specialized and non-specialized games media such as Kotaku and Eurogamer. The objective was to collect BioWare's official discourses through interviews with journalists and an overall public image of the company in the media. Additionally, to research data on BioWare's workforce, I cross-referenced the ending credits of the games with the online videogames database MobyGames. Whenever possible, I tracked down the employees to gather further demographic data. It is a small, randomized dataset, primarily providing extra information for a more accurate analysis.

3.5 Making sense of the data: configurative narratives of dissent

⁴² The tentative access to BioWare was mediated by the research project ReFiguring Innovation in Games (Refig). Unfortunately, BioWare's legal department denied us access to its employees.

Consolidating such a diverse set of data into a coherent piece of research is a challenge. To do so, I propose an analytical framework based on the concept of configuration, theories and methods discussed previously. The framework aims to encompass different aspects of videogames analysis transversally and holistically rather than in fragments, which is the most usual approach taken from the narratologists and ludologists, media effects and psychology scholarship and even some cultural and media studies research. A configurative framework as presented here works better with a mixed set of data. Each dataset first requires an analytical step to extract relevant themes; subsequently the results of each minor analysis are compared, creating a more grounded set of categories for analysis. Once the categories of analysis are defined, these are then observed under the premises of a configurative framework, whereby the researcher looks at the configurative dynamics between videogames as a medium; the gaming moment; and videogames culture.

3.5.1 Exploring strengths and limitations of methodologies within game and videogame studies

The usual approaches to configuration often relate it to ideas of the cyborg as brought to life by Donna Haraway (1991). Indeed, gameplay is often seen as a cybernetic activity marked by the feedback loop that happens between game and player (Dovey and Kennedy 2006, p. 109). Eskelinen's (2004) position on configuration relies heavily on one aspect of this possible cybernetic relation that is concerned with the game rules that constrain and limit the possibilities of player engagement, while maintaining a game's "gameness" intact during the gameplay moment. It is, therefore, a rule-based activity where configuration seems to happen in formalist and strategic terms. Moulthrop (2004) questions such an approach and considers

configuration to be influenced by external factors, such as the social life, an approach that Dovey & Kennedy build on in their work. Harvey (2015) argues that configuration must also be understood as a matter of affect and engagement. I contend that configuration can be broadened as a conceptual and analytical tool to understand videogames, encompassing its 'game' qualities, narrative and storytelling affordances, socio-cultural positioning, interactional nature and political potential.

Dovey and Kennedy (2006, p. 89) suggest that using hybrid research methods are a good escape route from the ludological and narratological formalist approaches. Ludology, concerned with understanding videogames in its intrinsic characteristic of being a game, therefore subject to a system of rules tends not to worry about external – or even internal, as narrative – factors in its analysis. Although evolving definitions of game demonstrate a growing interest of ludologists to understand the complex relationship between gamer and game (Juul 2005, Jarvinen 2008), ludology is incomplete as an analytical resource (Dovey and Kennedy 2006, p. 89). The narrative perspective that guides a significant amount of work within videogames' research also tends to be limited in scope. Although Janet Murray argues that telling stories is a central human activity that forms part of our experience and affects how we interpret the world surrounding us (Murray 2005:3), few studies under this theoretical approach *de facto* engage with answering which are those experiences and how they affect play. Jim Bizzocchi and Josh Tanenbaum's (2012) work on *Mass Effect 2's* narrative is an exception to the norm, as they include the thoughts and feelings evoked during the gameplay of their Shepard in their analysis of the game narrative's poetics. There is a preoccupation with the form, with the possible narrative structures a digital game allows; a focus on the agency of players as a differential element based on action (Murray, 1999). However, the experiential dimension is lost, only to be recovered within the array of research

made by scholars from cultural studies, gender studies, digital culture, amongst others extensively cited in this thesis.

I argue that videogame studies can benefit from a triadic approach to configuration. Three spheres operate in this regard, separately and simultaneously: the medium-sphere, the gaming-sphere and the culture-sphere.

This framework is inspired by other researchers' methodological and analytical frameworks. This includes Thomas Malaby's (2007) 'processual framework', which considers game as an 'ongoing process', inseparable from the everyday experience, with the 'potential for generating new practices and new meanings, possibly refiguring the game itself' (Malaby 2007, p. 102). Malaby's proposal sparked core ideas of the configurative framework: an understanding of game not as a separate space or isolated from society, but as part of it; not as solely enclosed by its rules and procedural quality, but subject to change, unique to each session and person involved. A second influence came into play to help with structuring the framework. Stephen Kline et al's (2003) 'Three Circuits of Interactivity' – technology, marketing and culture - were a starting point, in tandem with Elton Antunes and Paulo B. Vaz (2006) triadic approach to the mediatic device, to shape and form the configurative framework. The main difference between the configurative framework approach I propose and that of Kline et al.'s (2003) is the importance given to 'processes of contemporary media industries in general', which is one of many aspects analysed here that considers the centrality of gamers' experiences in the configurative dynamics of videogames culture, an aspect that escapes the 'geometry' proposed by the three circuits of interactivity (Kline et al. p. 59). Kline et al. are influenced by the political economy of media (Kline et al. 2003, p.50), and therefore their model reflects a preoccupation with the 'mediatized global marketplaces' and how it

'situates interactive gaming and the intersection of dynamic processes in the spheres of technology, culture and marketing' (ibid, p.58). The movement here is to extend what Kline et al. call 'the culture sphere' as a domain that *also* encompasses marketing industry strategies (Lima, 2017) and technology as metanarratives (Somers, 1994).

The former, by becoming a meta-narrative rather than a specific part of the circuit, can more effectively explore what Kline et al intended: the "deep tensions" between game's marketing and the "transgression its imaginary worlds promise" (Kline et al. 2003, p. 57). As Woolgar (1991) argued, there is a considerable difference between the products marketed by companies and the ones actually perceived by the users, in what he believes is a configurative relationship. In videogame culture, cases such as #FemShepFriday are interesting examples of this deep tension and its consequences (Lima, 2017). Marketing is not a matter simply of consumption, commodities, marketers and consumers, and 'commodification vs play' (Kline et al, p.58), but rather it is a multi-layered configurative relationship. Said relationship is established between metanarratives (that include marketing itself) in a recognised scene of dissensus where ontological and public narratives, cultural, social and political configurative systems (Moulthrop 2004) clash in order to produce meaning both on private and public levels.

Similarly, understanding technology as metanarrative rather than a repositioning of the player as 'user' and the 'process of technological innovation and diffusion' (Kline et al. p. 55) allows for analytical depth when thinking about videogames as media and/or cultural objects. As a metanarrative, technological discourses, innovations, expectations, affordances and history inform the configurative relationships explored in the spheres of the medium, the gaming moment and its culture. These appear either as part of an ontological narrative of the

subjects or the public narratives constructed - for instance, the gender bias of technology and the militarised masculinity highlighted by Kline et al. (2003).

The configurative framework I propose aims to simultaneously take advantage of the strengths whilst questioning the limitations of the approaches proposed by Malaby, Taylor and Kline et al. Aided by the perspectives of a praxeological, relational approach to media and communication and politics as a scene of dissensus, departing from a critique of traditional strands of videogames research (see Chapter 1), my proposal adds extra layers of complexity to a holistic study of videogames.

3.5.2 The Configurative Framework.

Similar to Kline et al's model and Antunes and Vaz's (2006) proposal of mediatic device, the three spheres of the configurative circuit framework – the medium-sphere, the gaming-sphere and the culture-sphere - operate simultaneously, being 'mutually constitutive' (Kline et al. 2003, p. 58). The analysis can devote itself to one of these spheres in isolation, as 'semiautonomous moments' (Kline et al. 2003, p.58), while still considering the configurative influence of the other spheres - the loss of colouration in Figure 6 below indicates the incompleteness of each sphere. It can also search for the intersection of two or more spheres, focusing on the configurative interfaces of the categories of analysis. For example, how choice of hardware – Atari, PC, or an Xbox One - creates a particular type of game session, with its own specific interactions, rules and outcomes. Finally, I would argue that a cross-sectional analysis is the ideal. The superposition of the spheres creates layers of complexity: for each investigation, one element will have more prominence in the analysis of the phenomenon, but always being configured by and configurative of other aspects. It is crucial that the analysis

tries to capture as much of this configuration-reconfiguration dynamism as possible. Surrounding these three approaches are the metanarratives, public problems and scenes of dissensus, informing on a conscious and subconscious level the configurations of/at play within each sphere.

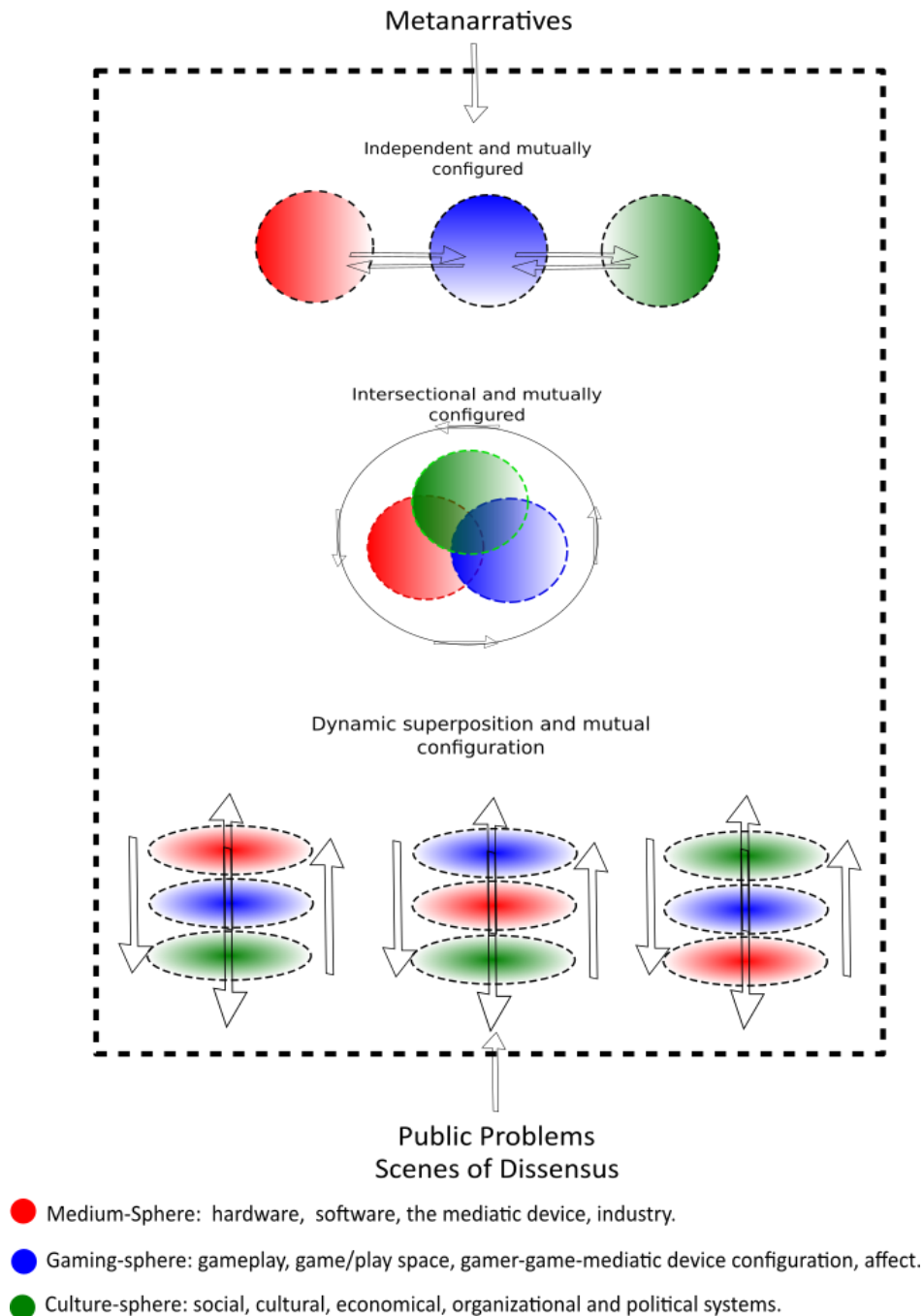


Figure 4 - Analytical dynamics of the configurative framework (author's own)

The medium-sphere relates to the videogame as a 'mediatic device', which is the specific materiality of texts and discourses, a process of meaning production, a means for interaction order and a process through which significant meanings are transmitted (Antunes e Vaz 2006, p.47). Videogames-medium is primarily concerned with hardware and software's affordances (Gibson 1979) of videogames, such as its ludic form and narrative capacity, the programmed code and its limitations.

What I call the gaming-sphere is what occurs during a gameplay session: the body's connection to the machine, the feedback loop of actions and responses, and the hardware's haptic communication. As argued by Seth Giddings, the videogame 'not only configures its player through the technical possibilities and constraints' present in the game's code, but is designed to 'configure its player continually during play itself' (Giddings 2006, p.196). The importance of analysing this continuous configuration during play and understanding the intricacies of this interaction cannot be understated. I argue that is, however, equally necessary to expand what we understand as a gaming moment (or 'encounter' according to Goffman's terminology) and what it involves. The gaming-sphere also encompasses the experiences of the gamer previous to play, the social discourses, the network of relations that configures a gaming encounter, and its organic interactions (Goffman, 1961, p.33), where each decision made is informed by several external factors.

Finally, the culture-sphere expands the role that the network of relations plays within videogames practice. It analyses videogames as part of the social tissue, an important element of a so-called digital culture, and its relationship to established discourses, products, and the organisation of everyday life. Videogames are a

'lens through which to address the new in the here-and-now, the everyday, the lived and commercial aspects of popular media culture as technoculture, as new (...) configurations of technologies, media texts, modes of consumption, bodies, subjects, and their respective (yet overlapping) agencies' (Giddings 2006, p.24).

The culture-sphere, in which culture is, as discussed in the introduction, a battlefield where ideologies and values, discourses, and meanings are confronted, discussed, and proposed. Its primary concern is analysing *videogames culture* as a character in this battlefield. In this scenario of dispute, it is important to understand videogames as a medium and the relationship formed between the

'medium, people and cultures (...) how subjects and the different cultural formations appropriate of a medium, establishing unpredicted uses, detours, and placing humans as agents in the relational process between communication/media/culture' (França et al 2014, p.69)

Videogames culture is configured by multiple "characters": the social discourse on gender and sexuality; the everyday politics on macro and micro levels; the capitalist system and the neoliberal ideology surrounding videogames production, among other influences. All these aspects act as configurative elements of videogames practice and culture. It is important to stress here that culture in this context is understood not as deterministic of modes of being and acting upon the world, nor as arising from human interference, but rather as 'providing road markers for likely patterns of doing and thinking, but never directing automatically'. (Dahlgren 2003, p.153). All these cultural markers are part of a network of

relations and act as configurative elements of (and are configured by) videogames practice and culture. They configure, for example, industry decision-making regarding which games to develop, which marketing strategies to adopt, and which publics to cater to.

I contend that this proposal recommends significant changes in the theoretical development of *configuration* and moreover devises a methodology of research based on it. Moreover, naming it as a *configurative circuit* points to the dynamic aspect that said analysis needs to adopt. An ideal application of the framework would aim for the superposition and cross-sectional analysis of the three spheres, creating layers of complexity: at each moment, one or another element would have more prominence in the analysis of the phenomenon, but would always be configured by and configurative of other aspects.

Configuration is a process; videogames configure (subjects, industry, culture, society ...) and are configured by (subjects, industry, culture, society ...). The limitations resulting from the amplitude of this analytical framework are a response to the limitations found in models of analysis in the field of game studies, restricted in their possibilities and in their exclusive focus on self-sufficient spheres or aspects of videogames culture. My holistic approach has its problems, such as the lack of focus on singular aspects which can lead to an incomplete analysis; and the possibly overwhelming amount of data required for proper consideration of every aspect which can hinder short-term research projects. I contend, however, that videogame studies, which is increasingly becoming accepted by established and traditional academic fields, have the momentum to move forward towards longer, more encompassing projects that explore the objects in study to their full capacity.

Chapter 4: BioWare and Mass Effect within a gendered and heteronormative videogames industry

Videogames research has, since its first published works, dealt with matters of diversity within the highly male-gendered and heteronormative industry. For instance, Turkle (2005, pp. 65-90) discusses the different ways in which boys and girls interacted with ICT in the early 80's, including the play of videogames. Videogames' industry itself had issues of its own, with the 80's crash representing a turning point in the industry, which, to recover itself, dramatically shifted its marketing focus from family-oriented entertainment to a young masculine public. However, it is from the late 90's, with the publication of Cassel & Jenkins 'From Barbie to Mortal Kombat' that proper attention to the issue was given by academia. For the industry and the gamer public in general, this became a public problem much more recently, especially in the 2010's, with the rise in popularity of feminist discourses, the spread of online social networks as public arenas of discussion and GamerGate.

This chapter adds to this body of discussions, following Gabrielle Richards 'three waves' approach (Richards 2013), arguing that a 'fourth wave' of studies seems to be taking place in which there is a growing interest in queer studies research, in political understandings of the complexities of identification, representation and diversity within videogames culture, and in uncovering the rationale behind conservative gaming practices and toxic masculinity. The relationship between videogames research and gender/queer/sexuality studies will be analysed in two aspects:

- the gamer as a ‘technomasculine’ audience reflecting ‘an idealized vision of youth, masculinity, violence and digital technology’ (Kocurek 2015, p.21) and the problems derived from it;
- the making of games and the problematic absence of diversity in the industry.

The first part of this chapter will discuss the category of *the gamer*, how it was constructed and why it hinders videogames development and research. I argue that observing gamers as publics - multiple and diverse, connected by different experiences - is a fruitful approach to understand the configurative dynamics of videogames. The second part focuses in the industry and BioWare, discussing the gendering of videogames industry and how it affects the games developed, analysing BioWare’s position in the current scenario.

4.1A Controversial History of Diversity I: Who is The Gamer?

Videogames culture is intrinsically connected to an ideal consumer characterised by an adolescent-white-male-heterosexual demographic that is technologically-savvy, militaristic and competitive (Kocurek 2015, p.10). Newman (2004, p.49-58) argues that such a stereotypical portrayal is a myth, as there has always been diversity of gamers, but it remains as the dominant social perception of what gaming culture looks like. A recent report by Entertainment Software Association (ESA 2015) demonstrates how this perception is misinformed, especially with the rise of casual gaming that helps diversify this public (Juul, 2010). Women comprise 44% of the gamer community, with adult women surpassing the number of under 18-year-old males (33% against 15%). However, videogame developers ranging from independent to triple-A industries, often target the same demographic for new

games, what Thornham (2008, p.127) states to be consequential to a gendered thought of videogame practice in terms of both production and use.

Despite recent changes in the market - from the rebranding of Lara Croft to a less sexualized and more realistic character in *Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics 2013; MacCallum Stewart, 2014), to the commercial success of female-led games such as *Child of Light* (Ubisoft Montreal 2014), among other examples - there is a persistent divide between the demographic constitution of the gaming public, and what “real” gamers claim to be the representative face of the industry. According to Shaw (2013), being a gamer, as an identity, ‘is defined in relation to dominant discourses about who plays games, the deployment of subcultural capital, the context in which players find themselves, and who are the subjects of game texts.’ (Shaw 2013). This section specifically discusses some of the dominant discourses in the construction of the public face of *the gamer*: hegemonic masculinity, heteronormativity and the gendered construction of information and communication technologies. These are configurative of “The Gamer” identity alongside the other aspects mentioned by Shaw. I conclude the section questioning the category of “The Gamer” as is used currently by the industry and by academia alike, and proposing that understanding gamers as publics is necessary to advance the comprehension of their roles within videogames culture.

4.1.1 Hegemonic Masculinity and The Gamer

The definition of hegemonic masculinity by Connell (1987) is valuable for understanding the establishment of videogames as a gendered medium skewed towards a male demographic. Hegemonic masculinity is the belief that society is subordinated to powerful models of masculinity. This ideal is embodied by few men, ‘fantasy figures’, from

films for instance. Its power lies in the constant reinforcement of its symbolic power, achieved 'in a play of social forces that extend beyond contests of brute power into the organization of private life and cultural processes' (Connell 1987 p.184). Societal structures such as media, religious doctrine and the organization of labour operate in creating a divide between hegemonic men and those subordinate to this structure, such as gay men and, especially, women. The maintenance of hegemonic masculinity is ideological and often surreptitious, offering some freedom to its subordinate groups, while ultimately denying them the right to speak, and keeping the consensus by avoiding the construction of scenes of dissent capable of challenging the hegemony.

Within the context of videogames, several studies demonstrate how hegemonic masculinity is influential to the representation of both hegemonic and subordinate groups. Fox and Tang (2014) argue that online gamers often demonstrate conformity to hegemonic masculine ideals, such as the need of dominance over women and the heteronormativity of their self-presentation online (Fox and Tang 2014, p. 13). For instance, Fisher (2015) argues that the portrayal (or absence) of female characters in video game magazines can orientate towards 'definitions of who women are in the gaming world' (Fisher, 2015, p. 7). Fisher's findings show that video game magazines reinforce the imagery of women in games as sex objects and irrelevant sidekicks. Female characters are presented as unimportant by the magazines he analysed, 'scattered across the pages to attract attention' without 'descriptions of the women, mentions of the women's function within the games, or even the women's names' (ibid, p.14)⁴³.

⁴³ Fisher's findings are in accordance to an earlier study conducted by James D. Ivory (2007) about gender representation in online reviews of videogames, where female characters lack representation quantitatively and are often more sexualized. Other studies of note in this aspect are Burgess et al (2007) analysis of female representation on video game covers; Summers & Miller (2014) historical overview of portrayals of sexism in video game magazines over twenty years; Lynch et al (2016) content analysis of female representation in

Indeed, *Mass Effect* suffers from the same fate, with its lead female character being forgotten during the marketing campaigns of the first and second games (Lima, 2017). For instance, interviewee Rahna, when asked how she learned about *Mass Effect* informed that she first heard of it in a video from Anita Sarkeesian⁴⁴ speaking about the invisibility of female characters in videogames marketing, and the fact that she could play as a female character was fundamental for her decision to purchase the game. Similar comments are found on Reddit and USBN, with gamers highlighting the lack of female/minority-led games and how having this option matters to them:

I think it's more important to older female gamers because for people like us, over half their life they were given no choice to play as their own gender. With more and more games coming out that allow an actual choice we tend to cling to them like crazy. It's probably different for younger female gamers because the choices have been available a lot earlier in their lives. It's not a still shiny new toy like it is to older female gamers. (/delphiniumfalcom at r/masseffect)
There are just so many games where the protagonist is male. I don't mind playing a male character in those situations, but if I get a choice of playing a man or playing a woman, I'm going to play a woman every time. I really feel like there needs to be more games with female protagonists. (/hurrmmmione at r/masseffect)

See, that's the thing, though. For a long time, we've been stuck with the same kind of protagonist. And because things are changing, a lot of companies are looking at their properties and thinking, "Should I have a minority as the protagonist?" And we're at a point where if the property does well, the company will consider it a fluke or focus entirely on the wrong things that made

videogames since the 80's and Martins et al (2009) similar analysis of female body imagery. They all bring similar results regarding female over sexualisation, with a curious correlation of sexuality and violence, contradicting the expected association of violence with militarized masculinity in videogames.

⁴⁴ Anita Sarkeesian was a key figure in the GamerGate controversy and a vocal feminist activist that intends to confront the consensus of masculinity within videogames, not conforming to the constructed discourses of hegemony. She and others play a vital role in the politics of identity within the realm of videogames and popular culture in general.

the property a success (...) It's why I'm saying celebrating a minority protagonist should be encouraged. (/smashbangcommander at r/masseffect)

Despite the changes in the gaming demography as shown by the ESA research, Fisher has observed that the analysed gaming magazines are still tied to the 'outdated stereotype' of the technomasculine public (Fisher, 2015, p. 13). The rise of casual gaming (Juul 2010) and the surveys demonstrating the diversity of the gaming public have 'not eliminated the common perception of the gamer as a young white man with a penchant for technology' (Kocurek 2015, ch.7, p.28).

The public face of "the gamer" can therefore be understood as an expected consequence of the hegemonic masculinity discourse. The under-representation and sexualized representation of women, alongside the invisibility of LGBTQA+ videogame characters are but one result of hegemonic masculinity dominance in the cultural, social and economic spheres. As Kocurek explores in her book, the gendered perception of a gaming public reflects what 'boyhood can and should mean in the United States' (Kocurek 2015, Introduction, p.11), an ideal that we can hypothesize to be culturally spread through the dominance of USA's cultural industry. This ideal boyhood is linked to the formation of the technomasculine public. Kocurek's concept itself is based on what masculinity should mean, a position of power and dominance, the development of skills and interests for boys that is opposed to that of girls. Kocurek believes that the gendering of videogames industry is the sum of several factors that we can correlate with hegemonic masculinity:

(...) the greater relative freedom of young boys to move through and participate in public culture; the alignment of computer and video game technologies with both military interests and competitive male-dominated

sports; the subsequent affiliation of video gaming with violent thematic content; and the ongoing association of technological skill with masculinity (Kocurek 2015, Introduction, p. 10)

Surely, these factors play into the consolidation of a presumed public for gaming - the one Kocurek refers to as the technomasculine. However, it also reflects the partial cultural dominance of hegemonic masculinity thought. Partial dominance because an establishment of a hegemony needs a constant state of play, a 'balance of forces' that allows other groups to be 'subordinated rather than eliminated' (Connell 1987, p 184). Hegemony controls through the illusion of freedom: partial space is given to subordinate groups to manifest, protest and challenge the hegemonic discourse, but within certain boundaries. In this regard, Rancière's concept of politics comes with a refreshing optimism by giving the without-part more power in the disputes within a scene of dissensus. Feminist movements since the 19th century have constantly gained rights previously only given to men; issues of gender and sexuality are now perceived as public problems by many governmental institutions and NGO's (although, as argued before, it is still questionable to which extent the collectivization of the problem is manifesting in social change). Hegemonic masculinity will always be challenged, sometimes with success, sometimes not, and videogames can and should play an important role in this challenge, as it is a growing and influential cultural industry.

4.1.2 Heteronormativity and The Ga(y)mer

Another system of oppression that feeds into the public understanding of *the gamer* identity is heteronormativity, a system of beliefs regarding male and female behaviour, sexuality and relationships – erasing any non-binary, non-heterosexual manifestations of

sexuality (Clarke et al 2010, p.120). It is not unrelated to hegemonic masculinity, but a further symptom of it, with gay men being representatives of subordinate masculinities (Connell, 1987, p. 186). Interviewee Robin critically and ironically defines as the classic videogame protagonist for himself a “white, male dude, with a beard, 40 years old and misunderstood by the world that lost his wife and child”. Deviations from it are still quite rare, despite a noticeable increase in female protagonists within Triple A games such as *Final Fantasy XIII*, *Bayonetta*, *Tomb Raider*, *Horizon Zero Down*, *Dishonored II* and of course, the *Mass Effect* franchise. Gender itself is an issue, but not the only one. LGBTQA+ representation is even more problematic, with rarely important characters in games and an even rarer chance of non-heterosexual leads. In the scene of dissensus that is the male-centric, cisgendered and heteronormative videogames culture (Shaw 2009), initiatives such as Adrienne Shaw’s “LGBTQ Game Archive” act as a locus of resistance, of dissent. Her project maps LGBTQA+ characters within the whole realm of games, from indie to mainstream, serving not only as a valuable source for academic research but also as a database for ‘gamers at the edge to find games that suit their personal needs’⁴⁵ (Shaw 2017). Indeed, as interviewee Angelina said games that allow for a non-heteronormative, non-binary gameplay and story are often favoured by those perceived to be at the margins of gaming culture.

Interesting work has been done regarding heteronormativity and games, especially stemming from the works of Adrienne Rich (1980) and her definition of ‘compulsory heterosexuality’⁴⁶ (Consalvo 2003; Krobova et al 2015, Østby 2016) and Gayle S. Rubin’s

⁴⁵ I participated in this project, writing the first entry for the Mass Effect trilogy which can be found here: <https://lgbtqgamearchive.com/games/game-series/mass-effect/>

⁴⁶ According to Adams : “Rich defines compulsory heterosexuality as a privileged norm from which homosexuality is a punishable, but possible, deviation”(2016 p.41).

(1984) 'charmed circle'⁴⁷ (Adams 2016; Shaw 2015). Of particular relevance to this thesis are the works of Meghan B. Adams (2015) and Tereza Krobova et al (2015) that analyse BioWare and/or Mass Effect. According to Adams, games are not compulsory but compulsive with regard to heterosexuality, where the former can be resisted while the latter is unavoidable (Adams 2016, pp.41-42). For the gamer in most games there is no other option but to play as a heterosexual character who is 'often literally unable to perform queerness or self-identity as anything other than heterosexual' (ibid, p.41). To escape the confines of heteronormative gaming, Krobova et al's (2015) study indicates that queer gamers, whom are not 'a homogeneous group that jubilantly accepts LGBT content in role-playing games' (Krobova et al. 2015, p.8) use three different strategies of play: imaginative play, stylized performance and role-playing. These three strategies are also present in my interviewees accounts of play and the conversations captured on Reddit and USBN.

Krobova et al identify imaginative play as 'an "oppositional" queer reading of a game' (ibid p.6). Interviewee Robin engaged in queer imaginative play, highlighting how he defied gender binaries through his experience playing as an agender Commander Shepard: 'I wanted to play something in my world (of *Mass Effect*), where I am interpreting the game, even though the game does not always help, I wanted to do something different. Then I created a character and I read it as agender' (Robin, interviewee). Robin used cues left in the game's lore to build a universe, a *headcanon*⁴⁸ where his character was recognized as an 'agender'.

⁴⁷ Rubin's charmed circle is a "model for the sex hierarchy with an inner 'charmed circle' of acceptable practices such as monogamy and heterosexuality and, surrounding the 'charmed circle', the 'outer limits' of another circle containing unacceptable practices such as intergenerational sex or BDSM" Adams, 2016, p.44)

⁴⁸ According to *FanLore* headcanon is 'a fan's personal, idiosyncratic interpretation of canon, such as the backstory of a character or the nature of relationships between characters. This can be affected both by professional transformative works (...) and by fanworks.' (Source: <https://fanlore.org/wiki/Headcanon>). For example, elements that are not thoroughly explicated in the game, such as the background story of a character, can be 'headcanonized' by fans. This is the case of interviewee Jeremiah that created a fanfic and headcanon to ME character Jack. Headcanon does not have to follow a story's canon and can contradict it at times, as seen in the play of 'agender' Shepard by Robin.

His rationale for it is that the several species inhabiting that universe must have a sort of 'auditory transplant to capture all languages because I cannot believe at all that Turian and Asari speak English'. For him these translations are imperfect and unable to account for all cultural differences regarding gender perception. Therefore, every time he spoke to a character in-game, he thought of which reactions they would have according to their own personalities and culture. For instance, he believes that teammate Wrex, a ferocious Krogan warlord, could have an odd reaction at first but, ultimately, would not care. Robin understands the Krogan as a species that does not care about gender but about your prowess as a warrior. Robin's experience is part of the 'outer limits' of a charmed circle, taking 'advantage of polysemy in order to adjust character's sexualities in his or her own imagination' (ibid p.6).

Stylized performance seemed to be less present in the discourse of my interviewees and the data collected. According to Krobova et al. 'the player deliberately performs as a queer character by marking the character with stereotypical signs of his or her sexuality' (ibid, p.6). *Mass Effect's* traditional customization does not allow too much freedom for stylized performance, aside minimal cosmetic changes that can carry meaning to the player. Outside a queer perspective, stylized performance has been perceived as problem by some interviewees, such as Torch and Rahna, who were not satisfied with ME character customization. The lack of changes in body fat were mentioned by both, arguing that it affected their construction of a character that closer resembled them.

Lastly, role-playing is associated by Krobova et al with BioWare titles in general and 'involves a degree of identification with a queer character within a game's pre-designed narrative' (ibid. p.7). With the games romance mechanics allowing for queer performances in the three games, players can play a role that mimics their own self. However, that is not how

every *Mass Effect* player approaches role-playing. In a thread about Female and Male Shepard on Reddit several posts questioned that how people play an RPG can affect their choices regarding the main character's gender and sexuality: performing oneself or someone that they cannot be in real life:

It comes down to how you play games. I'm more interested in playing games about people different from me. That can be gender, religion, personality, race, etc... I don't imagine myself -as- the character. (/j3ddy_l33 at r/masseffect)

There are a few different types of role-playing gamers. You are of the type that plays with the intent to picture yourself (or at least an avatar of yourself) in the game. Other people (using myself as the example here, because it seems fair) seek to create completely alternative personalities to play the game as. (/malastare- at r/masseffect)

I am one of those people who 'play as themselves' in RPGs (at least one character). I do not see it as a flaw, because the character is obviously not me, but could be an idealized version of myself, or a version of myself put in that situation, or a version of myself with those powers. I often dreamed about having magical powers etc, and the game allows me to do so. So, basing the choices on 'what would I do in that situation' is not bad, IMO. It is just a different approach from 'being someone completely different'. (/Aries_cz at r/masseffect)"

Performing as the other (gender or sexuality) is common practice among *Mass Effect* players. For this research I played both as a Female and a Gay Male, exploring identities that are distinct to my own; however, the characters decisions throughout the game plays were based on my own personality, my own ideals and own values. Moreover, identifying with characters does not necessarily mean that they must be carbon-copy of ourselves. One can identify with another not because of gender and sexuality, but as a result of shared values, experiences, personality, cultural taste, or even banal features like favourite food. This is

echoed by several other players that experienced 'otherness' and prefer to do so when gaming, indicating that the role-playing strategy of queer play is often adopted by the traditional incarnation of "The Gamer" as well:

I'm a straight cisman, but often I find it easier to identify with female video-game protagonists than male. I have a *really* hard time projecting myself into "muscle-bound, lantern-jawed, stubbly bass-voiced badass." (/Aretii at r/masseffect)

I felt Femshep was me, the fact her sex was different was no more unusual than Maleshep wouldn't be an overweight, outrageously pasty white Irish lad. (/c0mpliant at r/masseffect)

These performances are configured by the game itself: there is a code behind it that limits what the gamer can do, even though there are countless possibilities (but not limitless). In this regard, even though BioWare 'has grown to consistently reject the traditional compulsive heterosexuality of video games' (Adams 2016, p. 45), there are still queer performances beyond even the openness of imaginative play. One of these is raised by Angelina, who is bothered by the compulsive sexuality of *Mass Effect*. Identified as an asexual, she dislikes the fact that she cannot develop a romance with the characters she likes without consummation. Another 'outer circle' of sexual practices also prohibited by the code is polyamory, which is once again left to the headcanon of players: 'As a polyamorous person, in my head-canon Shep gets with Liara *and* Garrus. And Garrus also gets with Tali. And they all live happily ever after' (/MangoBitch at r/masseffect).

Moreover, the absence of openly transgender characters in *Mass Effect*, and the limited number of gay characters (only Steve Cortez and Samantha Traynor, in ME3; Every other character is either heterosexual or bisexual) are also limiting, and even though imaginative play is feasible within the game's lore, I concur with Shaw (2014, p.35) that the onus of diversity cannot be in the hands of the players. True diversity must be reached

through proper inclusion of characters in games, in tandem with more acceptance by the gaming community that gamers are a diverse group. A possible path lies in contextualizing historically queer games as a persistent presence in videogames development (Shaw 2017, p. 91), therefore diminishing the anti-LGBTQA+ content discourse that populates several gaming forums and is reaffirmed by a vocal group of gamers who write provocative homophobic and sexist comments as often seen during the GamerGate controversy. My respondents and the redditors mentioned in this section demonstrate that even if they fit identifiers pertaining to the traditional understanding of *the gamer*, they are open to performing otherness in games. They can defy the limitations of heteronormative and patriarchal discourses configured in videogames and often prefer to play as a female character. Why is it, then, that in the public discourse around videogames there is an insistence of this questionable identity of the technomasculine gamer as the *only* one?

4.1.3 It's a hetero-white-boy thing.

I would argue that there are two reasons as to why the technomasculine as the embodiment of The Gamer gained prominence within the videogames domain, beyond reinforcing ideals of hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity. The first is related to the industry crash in 1983 and the need for it to reinvent itself, ending in 1985 with the success of the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) in the USA market (Wolf, p.103-106). The rebranding of videogames was led by Nintendo⁴⁹. After thorough audience research, the

⁴⁹ Nintendo is one of the companies responsible for yet another shift in recent videogames marketing. After the failure of GameCube, Nintendo rose again through the release of Wii, developed, designed and marketed as a family-friendly device and a 'social platform' for everyone (Jones and Thiruvathukal 2012, p.153-157). This movement of a return to a videogames marketing targeted at everyone is interesting and could be explored in

company realized that videogames were perceived by families as a toy mostly given to boys (Lien, 2014; Kline et al. 2003, p. 119). Their move, then, was to rebrand their products with a very specific consumer in mind, a move that was subsequently followed by other brands in the industry, especially Sony with the release of the PlayStation and, more recently, Microsoft and its Xbox. It is not to say that by defining a core consumer, the rest of the demographic was completely forgotten. But they were certainly rendered less prominent, which slowly led to the rise of a male-dominated industry and culture. Aphra Kerr (2006, p.100) observes in her study about the launch of *Playstation 2*, for instance, that once a console had a considerably established base, using their 'hardcore males' target, marketing tended to focus on other audiences to broaden the market and give extra life to the console.

A second reason is intimately connected to the need of 'boy-toy' to rebrand the marketing discourse surrounding videogames. In a paper about the shifts in the marketing strategy of the ME franchise, I argue that the gendered history of marketing and the gendered history of videogames is connected (Lima, 2017 p. 172-173)⁵⁰. There is a shift from a male-oriented marketing strategy for the first two games, towards the presentation of an official look for a Female Shepard during the marketing campaign for ME3, culminating with an equal use of male and female main characters in *Mass Effect: Andromeda's* marketing. According to Maclaran (2012;2015) the representation of women in marketing gradually becomes less stereotypical and more empowering. Coming from a feminist point of view, Maclaran argues that we are now experiencing a fourth wave of feminism which is highly technological, using social media to campaign about women's rights, blending 'the micropolitics that

further research, considering the strength of capitalism and profit in how videogames industry configures itself to strive in a competitive market.

⁵⁰ Available at <https://www.kinephanos.ca/2017/configurative-dynamics-of-gender-in-biowares-marketing-for-the-mass-effect-franchise/>

characterised much of the third wave with an agenda that seeks change in political, social, and economic structures much like the second wave' (Maclaran, 2015 p. 1734). Maclaran also argues that understanding this wave is fundamental for current marketing practices that must cater to this shift. If marketing strategies ought to reach a wider public, BioWare's strategy, especially from the first and second games, is outdated and does not speak directly to the concerns of fourth wave feminists, and current society-wide debates on gender and sexuality. As Maclaran proposes, marketers should now avoid the usual 'middle-class heterosexual men and women' target of their marketing research, and focus instead on exploring 'intersectionality in relation to multiple femininities and masculinities' (Maclaran, 2015 p. 1735). Potentially, a shift in marketing can lead to a different public perception of *The Gamer* as it is a powerful configurative element in videogames culture, as seen in the centrality it takes in Kline et al 'three circuits of interactivity' (2003) and its role in setting-up the audience (Kerr, 2006, p.98-101).

However, industry and marketing alone cannot be responsible for the public image of *the gamer*. In fact, much of it results from a bigger problem, the gendering of the ICTs, which configures the different relationships that people have with gaming from an early age depending on their gender. Several authors (including Jenson & de Castell 2010: 53-54, Bryson & de Castell 1996; Cockburn 1992; Wajcman 1991; Dovey & Kennedy 2006: 78-83) argue that technology is a male-dominated field despite the contributions of women such as Ada Lovelace to computational studies or Roberta Williams (Sierra Entertainment) to the videogames industry. Interviewee Caesar, who is a professional in the IT industry, raised this issue during our conversation. He remembered that some of his lecturers in university – attended by only female students – discussed the gendered history of the ICTs, with the severe decline in women in the industry during the 80's. His opinion is that there is now a

constant effort to attract more women to the computational curriculum and in his professional life he believes that it is changing, albeit slowly: 'where I work there is some balance, it is 40-60 I think, so I see, at least in this industry, the company I work for is interested in raising diversity, here and in the US as well'.

The invisibility of prominent women such as Ada Lovelace in the history of technology has pushed women away from the IT field for years. Or, as Jenson & de Castell (2010:54) argue, the technology used and/or created by women were erased, pushed away from the history of technology. Females are discouraged to attend IT universities, and even in childhood the differences between toys directed at boys and at girls point to clear divisions on the expected social role of men and women (Rheingold and Cook 1975; Blakemore and Centers 2005, Hayes 2008). Girls will often get dolls (to practice motherhood), kitchen toys (to practice housewife duties), and cosmetics (to reinforce the need for beauty to get married). Boys, on the other hand, are encouraged to play with chemistry sets (a push to science), building blocks (LEGO, for example), toy-shaped drills and hammers, and of course, videogame consoles or computers, more often marketed as a "boy thing".

When asked about their first contact with videogames my interviewees show a sharp gendered contrast in some cases. For every male interviewee, winning their first videogame was a natural step in their childhood. It is an expected gift to receive and when they talk about it, no gendered issue is noted. In the case of female interviewees, the picture is somewhat different, and in most cases a masculine figure was related to their contact with gaming. For example, Rahna's case is a very typical one, with her parents denying her a videogame because it was a "boys thing", and her male cousins barely letting her play with them. A trip to the USA made by her father granting her the first handheld console, a pink Game Boy. But she notes that a proper console was still out of reach as that was considered to be more

boyish. It is only when she started a relationship – she is heterosexual – that she owned her first console, shared with her boyfriend (a Playstation 3). Interviewee Mary's two older brothers were her pathway into gaming, and although she says that in her home it was never an issue for her to play games, it is true that her consoles were 'handed down from them'⁵¹ (Mary, interviewee). Robin, a transgender male interviewee has a strong male figure populating his first experiences with videogames: an uncle seen by the family as a 'videogame addict' and the main 'partner-in-crime' in his life as a gamer.

In a study about gaming practices in the household, Helen Thornham (2008) adds an interesting twist to these configurative dynamics of gender, technology and gaming, by hypothesizing that gendered identities, relations and typologies 'are produced *within*, rather than straightforwardly determinant of, gaming activities'. (Thornham 2008, p.127). The ways we interact during the gaming moment produces its own particularities regarding gendered relations, resulting from "personal and private negotiations and rationales for individual feelings of exclusion" (ibid, p.132). However, no interaction is neutral, isolated, and pure. Rather, it is configured by previous experiences, knowledge, identities, hierarchies and other discourses. Thornham is right in assuming that certain meanings are produced within that context of interaction, but this production is derivative of hegemonic discourses that affect how she reads the "negotiation with the power dynamics of the home", which include "the position of the home and the domestic sphere within socio-cultural perceptions" (ibid, p.140). Moreover, male and female trends in gaming practices captured by Thornham resonates with

⁵¹ Not every female interviewee traces her beginning as gamer within a gendered context. However, they do problematize gender in other moments of their gamer life, and those moments are analysed throughout the thesis. For Angelina and Alice for instance it seemed that their gamer life 'just happened'; it was always a part of their everyday lives growing up. There are surely subjective factors that also play in the adherence of women to gaming, with more progressive households being more likely to not say videogames are a "boy-toy", but further research is needed to generate evidence for that. Another aspect that may play a big role are cultural differences between countries. Certain gendered practices seemed to be more common in the discourse of Brazilian interviewees rather than the British interviewees.

the public discourse of who is *the gamer* and what is expected of gaming in social and individual contexts.⁵² The gendering of ICT is a main factor leading to the gendering of videogames. Thornham's findings reveal more of this correlation. Her interviewees often relate to the idea of men being naturally apt to deal with (gaming) technology while women apparently need constant guidance because they are not good enough (ibid, p. 132). Salter and Blodgett (2012, p. 413) argue that 'participation in the dominant hyper masculine public (of videogames) remains a difficult and potentially harmful and isolating action for women and other minority groups', an issue that stems from a persisting masculine-coded games and technology culture that sets women and others as second-class citizens.

These reasons as to why the technomasculine public became the public face of gamers are formed by long-standing issues: the strength of the dominant discourses presented previously: hegemonic masculinity, heteronormativity, patriarchy, and the social expectations of gender performance. As Moulthrop (2004) discusses when he talks about configurative circuits, the gaming circuit is not isolated from others – social, political and cultural circuits. One argument of this thesis is that the complexity of configurative dynamics that affect gaming culture must be understood to capture the depth of the medium's importance in current society. These hegemonic metanarratives dictate much of what is done

⁵² The study was published in 2008, after four years of research. Thornham points out that at the time, the studies she relied on indicated that the male gendered videogames scenario "has become a dominant and persuasive one in videogame culture" (Thornham, 2008, p. 132). Since then, much has changed in the videogames domain, although there is still a persistent ideal of the technomasculine public. It seems however that there is more acceptance beyond the stereotypical nerd gamer that is often criticized by Thornham's interviewees, and a more inclusive and diverse scenario in terms of games content, production and consumption. A follow-up to her study would be interesting in order to map possible changes in how gaming is perceived in the household with the rise of e-sports industry, the return of Nintendo as a main player in the market for family-oriented and hardcore gaming; while accounting for the "fourth wave" of feminism and the prominence of this debate in light of the increase in conservative forces worldwide. In such a short period of time, much has changed both in society and in the videogames industry and culture, which can alter significantly the results of Thornham's study if done nowadays. As highlighted by Shaw (2011), the negative viewing of games can affect perceptions of the importance of representation in games, and considers that "the site for struggle" is not just about building a gamer audience "but also the construction of games as a particular type of media" (Shaw 2011, p. 39), one that is not a reason for shame but just another product in our media consumption.

today in society, from how one should behave to which products one should consume to which games should a company develop.

The establishment of *the gamer* as the white-male-heterosexual boy seems to be just another example of a male-centric society that repetitively caters to non-male audiences *just enough* to keep the system of dominance running. However, *the gamer* as it is now presented, is a fragile construct, one easily disturbed when its hegemony is contested – and the intense backlash seen within the GamerGate controversy is a good example of that - and a rather weak identity with no other function but the reinforcement of a male-centric world. Playing to such a narrow identity is limiting for the industry's profits, for the academic understanding of the phenomena and the social acceptance of videogames as part of our media ecology.

4.1.4 Who or what is the gamer after all

Shaw interestingly differentiates between who identifies as a gamer and who *counts* as a gamer (Shaw 2011, p.29). There is a significant difference at play here. It is one thing to understand what it means to self-identify as a gamer, as part of a certain group, related to one's 'reflexive articulation of their identities' (ibid, p.30); it is a different thing to look into who counts as a gamer for the industry and for the discourses around videogame culture popularized in everyday life. The latter is deeply influenced by hegemonic masculinity, heteronormativity and patriarchy as demonstrated above. As videogames researchers, understanding this dichotomy is fundamental. To move the discussion further from Shaw's perspective where identity plays an important role alongside critical theories such as feminist and queer (with which I agree, but I believe there is more to be explored on these matters) I propose that *the gamer* should not be a well-defined demographic or category and only a

matter of identification, but rather understood as *a* public (or publics⁵³) constantly in formation. In this case, just as Shaw concludes, we can aim for a perspective that cares for “the lived experiences of those who engage with these games outside the dominant audience construction – indeed outside of identifying as gamers” (Shaw 2013). This allows us to understand individuals and their practices within videogames culture without the need for a restrictive label.

The concept of public is not new. Gabriel Tarde (2005) wrote in 1901 that the notion of the public was created with the press, which by spreading literature and news in a certain way created the first publics among its readers, who formed bonds of solidarity through the sharing of the knowledge of the material spread by the press (Tarde 2005, p.11). Years later John Dewey (1954) argued that publics are also those indirectly affected by something – for instance, the gendered discourses behind videogames culture. According to Almeida (2009, p.18), ‘what differentiates (*for Dewey*) the public life from the private life are the consequences of the actions taken’. The public nature of a certain action exists from the moment in which its consequences affect beings beyond those involved directly in the action. Individuals will “suffer” something – the impact of being part of the *Mass Effect* universe, or winning their first console and games, seeing their first advertisement about videogames – and from this suffering they will act:

We take then our point of departure from the objective fact that human acts have consequences upon others, that some of these consequences are perceived, and that their perception leads to subsequent effort to control action so as to secure some consequences and avoid others. Following this clew, we are led to remark that consequences are of two kinds, those which affect the persons directly engaged in a transaction, and those which affect

⁵³ Further discussion about the definition of publics was made in Chapter 2, Section 2.2.

others beyond those immediately concerned. In this distinction we find the germ of the distinction between the private and the public (Dewey 1954, p.35)

More recently, Warner (2002) developed an interesting discussion about the concept of public. For him, there is a distinction between *the* public as a 'kind of social totality' - for example the label here discussed as "the gamer", or "the geek", "the nerd" - and *a* public as a 'concrete audience', one that can be perceived for instance in closed spaces like a Comic-Con. He argues for a third definition of public, one that 'comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation' (Warner 2002, pp.49-50). A public for Warner is a self-organized entity that comes into being through the reflexive circulation of discourses, a virtual entity that feeds on attention, being mobilized and de-mobilized according to the strength of the discourses that are circulating (Warner 2002, pp. 60-68).

The prominence of *the gamer* as a fixed demographic is a result from the perception of the gamers as *the* public rather than *a* public: as a static group of individuals rather than numerous shape-shifting publics that share a certain repertoire and experiences as proposed by Dewey (1954;2005) and Quéré (2003); or public that are part of the circulation of certain texts at a given time. *The gamer* is not static and studying it as such, traps us in an endless circle of criticisms that fail to push the discussion forward. Surely, it is important to understand why this public face of the gamer became that of the white-male-teenager-heterosexual, and this thesis, alongside several other works published so far, deals with this elephant in the room. However, I also contend that it is more important for the industry and for academia to understand the several publics that are constantly mobilized and demobilized within videogames culture. The chronology of games marketing shows how the industry often changes their target demographic to solve financial problems. But that is not enough:

recognizing that there are several interested publics, that they emerge and need attention to continue to exist, and that they do have a somewhat transient nature, is crucial to implementing change.

For academia, tackling the complexity of publics is necessary – something Shaw (2014) undertakes when discussing and questioning traditional assumptions regarding identification and representation of minorities. To diminish the consensus of the powerful discourses presented above – among others hegemonic masculinity, heteronormativity, patriarchy – it is a fundamental first step to give power to the publics through the circulation of their texts, their experiences and their shared meanings. Understanding these publics – or counterpublics to use Warner's terminology for those at the margins, the without-part – and their dynamics of formation, mobilization, movement and de-mobilization, can help clarify the current dilemmas faced by the videogames industry with regard to their consumer base. It is not about who counts and who identifies as a gamer, but why these very diverse individuals all call themselves gamers and how they perceive their own public. Both industry and academia can benefit from this, and move on from the current divide between a market definition of the gamer (who counts) and subjective means of identification which are, as Thornham's interviewees often present (2008), tainted by prejudice towards people who like playing games. This thesis is mainly concerned with the distinct publics surrounding *Mass Effect*, with special attention given to the without-part and their movements as a public and a political entity, created through their positioning in the public sphere. It is important to note, however, that a public does not exist nor acts in isolation. In a scene of dissensus, several publics populate arenas of discussion, each with their own ideologies, agendas, expectations, passions, and modes of action. The next section observes yet another set of publics: those involved in the creation of videogames.

4.2 A Controversial History of Diversity II: Who Makes Games?

BioWare was founded in 1995 in Edmonton, Canada, and has from the start been known for its narrative-rich games, exploring worlds and characters in-depth, with a positive stance regarding queer and gender diversity. A BioWare game always comes with certain expectations, as interviewee Chester highlights: ‘This is the base for BioWare games, right? Besides a cool story, a nice narrative, is that you have the freedom to create your own narrative’. He also adds that a character gender customization is expected for these games, and not making it possible would be ‘a shock, a big contradiction’. However, even though it is possible, it is not met without controversy. This section discusses gender and sexuality in relation to videogames development, focusing on the case of BioWare and *Mass Effect*. I follow a similar structure as the previous section, first tackling issues related to gender and development based on the available information regarding the *Mass Effect* team composition; I then discuss BioWare’s challenges in creating a game that challenges the heteronormativity common to the videogames industry.

4.2.1 Gender and Game Development

In the development of *Mass Effect*, most of BioWare’s team are male, and possibly most are white males. Although the data does not reveal the specific characteristics of those individuals, the lack of female workers is telling⁵⁴ of the severe gender imbalance among videogame making professionals. With respect to “lead” positions, in the first ME, these are

⁵⁴ The evidence here is based on the information of the development team composition available on MobyGames.com and at the ending credits of each game. Unfortunately, BioWare did not allow their employees to be interviewed nor share information about the team for this research.

occupied by male professionals. Non-lead positions are also mostly held by men, with women appearing mostly in non-technical jobs. For the development of *Mass Effect 2* the team had a female lead gameplay designer, and it is only in *Mass Effect 3* that the first female writer is hired. The recent *Mass Effect: Andromeda* has three women in leading positions, including writers. There is little change from 2007 to 2017, reinforcing the trend in the male-dominated industry and the current balance of gender and gaming in the production field. The picture below (Fig. 5) shows part of the team that worked on *ME: A*. It reveals a white-male majority; if we exclude ethnicity, the predominance of the male demographic is staggering. Praised as a company that fosters diversity in their games, the workspace on the other hand reveals a different story. One of the causes could be solely numerical: there are apparently not many female developers out there, but why is this the case?



Figure 5 - *Mass Effect: Andromeda* Team. Source: <http://blog.bioware.com/2012/11/12/an-update-from-bioware-montreal/>

Thornham (2008, p. 132) argues that the perception of videogame practice as a 'boy thing' potentially affects women's attraction to gaming. There appears to be a clear divide that puts men inside videogaming culture while excluding women from this medium. In tandem with the controversial construction of "the gamer" as a specific demographic, rose the lack of diversity in terms of development studios. Indeed, as Williams et al (2009) found, the number of in-game representations mirrors the gender balance of the workforce. They argue that videogame creation relies on the self-identification of developers with the in-game characters, leading to an imbalance of gender representation in the industry. This supports Williams' (2006) remarks where a male-dominated industry creates male-led games, attracting more males to gaming and interest in technology. More male developers are then generated, whose focus will be more male-led games. This inevitably leads to a vicious cycle of male dominance in games development heightened by the fact that in the industry 'the people who do the hiring and who define the culture are largely white and male' (Heineman, 2015, Conclusion p. 6).

The International Game Developers Association (IGDA) report shows that a wide gap between male and female developers still exists (Weststar and Andrei-Gedja 2015). According to the report, self-identified female developers comprise 22% of the demographics of game industry, while 76% self-identified as male. However, the IGDA data does not provide accurate descriptions of which functions women assume on the development teams. Even if half of these female employees have a leadership position, it is still a very limited presence in the industry. The reality seems worse however. According to a survey conducted by the website Gamasutra in 2014, 'of more than 4.000 game developers (...) women make up only 5 percent of all programmers and engineers and 20 percent of management positions and earn, on average, about 15-20 percent less than men in these jobs' (Heineman 2015, Conclusion p.5).

The pay gap is not exclusive to this industry, but a problem shared in the economy in general; meanwhile, the low number of female programmers is closely related to the problem of a gendered ICT field.

Boys get in touch with technology sooner than girls and Wajcman argues that this difference affects how women choose their eventual career paths (Wajcman 1991, pp. 150-153). Interviewee Caesar remembers that in the University he attended there was diversity, but only in other buildings – his degree on computational studies was male-dominated. Women, LGBTQA+ people seemed, for him, to be absent from his building, which has mostly mathematics, technology and physics related subjects. He hypothesizes that it can be related to the stereotype of a nerd, which in the past was seen with prejudice and often the target of bullying, but now became a trend, with the geek being the new chic. Notwithstanding, he comments that in the computing industry it ‘is not a problem being a nerd, and computation is not just for nerds; if you like this kind of challenge you can also come here (to this field)’ (Caesar, interviewee). Shaw (2009) and Johnson (2013) argue that gendered and heteronormative videogame development companies hinder diversity and points that the industry can benefit from a more diverse work environment. Kerr argues that gender balance on the workspace, while not necessarily leading to an increase in the female player base, is needed as women ‘are under-represented in the industry at present’, an issue that persists with insufficient improvement since the book’s release 13 years ago. Kerr cites Brenda Laurel’s “Purple Moon” company as an illustrative example (Kerr 2006, p.98). Part of the “pink games” movement in the nineties, Purple Moon aimed to develop videogames for girls, but closed its doors after six years on the market.

The Purple Moon example had merits in joining academic research, feminist activism and capitalist ventures in an effort to insert a much-needed diversity in a highly gendered industry. It seems, however, that it was also a victim of its time. Not only did it suffer with Mattel dominating the sector (Kline et al 2003. p. 271), but it also could not make use of the current advantages of social media⁵⁵. It is conceivable that the current scenario of online activism, with the rise of a ‘fourth wave’ of feminism (Maclaran 2015), intersectional and challenging of gender binaries, roles and stereotypes, could have helped the company to flourish. Purple Moon’s main problem at the time, and main cause of criticism, was its adherence to gender roles and expectations, convinced that girls needed games developed *just* for them. The criticism levelled at Purple Moon comes from a questioning of what ‘girl games’ are and if they really should exist. In the research process that led to the creation of Purple Moon the focus was placed on the medium sphere, in how and which mechanics and storytelling aspects would appeal to girls. These would then be tested in consumer research, investigating girls’ discourses and desires (Laurel 2001, p. 36). Purple Moon games are grounded on the captured reality of girls’ lives resulting from the interviews conducted, while their critics argue for games grounded on theoretical possibilities and understandings of the real. From a configurative circuit perspective, it seems their research took limited consideration of wider social, cultural and economic aspects into the development of their games, especially regarding intersectional feminism (hooks, 2008) and discussions of gender as a social construct (Butler, 1999).

⁵⁵ Additionally, current initiatives such as crowdfunding could help cut costs and create a solid consumer base outside the traditional models of consumption and production, betting on the formation and maintenance of a public that actively participates in the creation of the game. Crowdfunding has been used with increasing success by comic book writers in Brazil, forming a strong community and consumer base (Lima and Henriques 2012). Initiatives like Purple Games could benefit from a similar strategy.

The main criticism on Purple Games relates to their aim of developing a game that re-enacts the everyday life of girls providing them with spaces for ‘emotional rehearsal’ (Laurel 2001, p.45). While it allowed gamers to reflect on their own lives and surely had an important impact in the industry and in the adoption of gaming by girls, it is problematic as it reinforces and normalizes what girls *can do* following sexist and patriarchal standards. Laurel claims that she wanted to develop games outside the scope of militarization, arguing that it is not something that would attract girls (ibid, p.10), although their research points otherwise, namely that girls ‘didn’t mind violence so much as they disliked the lack of good stories and characters’ (ibid, p.40). Her findings, analysed from a configurative perspective, demonstrate a perspective on girl-play that is subconsciously limited by patriarchal and sexist discourses surrounding what girls can openly enjoy. As female subjects in my research often mention, they do like to shoot and kill in games, and additionally like to experience a story with depth. However, the same is said by many of my male respondents, challenging established consensus of gendered modes of play.

Interviewees who are more politically aware and declare themselves as feminists, or feminist-supporters, can challenge these normative roles and expectations of what it means to be a girl by following what Bell Hooks considers the basis of feminism: an awareness of it as a struggle against sexism and patriarchy, against limitations imposed on female bodies (hooks, 2008, p. 10,). They are less inclined to accept games that reinforce certain stereotypes of femininity and prefer games with a clear feminist stance. Assuredly, aiming to compete in the “Triple A” market, Purple Moon had to worry about profit, sales, satisfying investors and competing with giant Mattel and their very established Barbie franchise. A “tamer” approach to girls’ games (and feminism) had a better chance to succeed at the time than games that

would challenge gender and sexuality roles and fight patriarchy. And indeed, Purple Games was highly successful among their player base, creating a loyal, engaged community in Purple Moon's website, with the company's demise leaving girl-gamers and their parents heartbroken (Laurel, 2001, pp. 29-30).

Purple Moon's limitations can be explained by Shaw's (2014) core argument of the differences between representation and identification, where the guarantee of minorities portrayed in lead roles does not guarantee that the same minorities will feel immediate identification. Moreover, developing specific games for boys and girls does not contribute to more inclusivity in the industry. On the contrary, it reinforces a gendered divide that benefits hegemonic discourses of masculinity, maintains the invisibility of queer, non-binary identities, and the strength of *the gamer* as a unique public rather than a plural constellation of publics.

Games have the potential to operate in a similar form as feminist awareness groups from the past that 'emphasize the importance of learning about patriarchy as a system of domination, how it became institutionalized and how it is perpetuated and maintained' (hooks, 2000 p.13), becoming vehicles for change rather than reinforcing prejudiced representation of women. The *Mass Effect* franchise is one amongst many examples of games that, despite being apparently aimed at the stereotyped gamer, resonates with a plethora of gamers from diverse backgrounds. Nine out of 15 of my interviewees do not fit the "white-hetero-male" portrayal; Reddit and USBN also having a similar demographic distribution in their ranks, albeit with a male majority in both cases. Girls do not *have* to play a Barbie game or a game that simulates their (USA-centric, clichéd) school life – they can however, and so can anyone else in fact. They can also be, as many gamers in my data say with varying words,

‘a badass female space marine’ (/wintersmoke on r/masseffect), shoot aliens, be good at it and have fun.

An alternative thought regarding the politics of production is offered by activist and game developer Anna Anthropy (2012). In her manifesto, she argues that the main path towards a “real” change in videogames content is not workforce diversity in the development studios, but the popularization of game-making technologies so that potentially everyone could develop their own games mirroring their own experiences and identities. She believes this would partially solve a problem she identifies as the industry being a ‘gatekeeper to game creation’ (Anthropy 2012, p.76), which submits developers to a high level of control and ends up producing very similar kind of games, marketed towards the pre-made audience of *the gamer*. Indeed, another aspect of the politics of production is related to decision-making processes regarding the production and release of certain games over others: which videogames will be sold to the carefully constructed audience, and how much potential profit will be made from that title. Growing the market to cater for a diverse audience is simultaneously a move the industry should do and is reluctant to do (Kerr, 2006, p.98). BioWare opted to take that leap, albeit in limited fashion as demonstrated throughout this thesis.

4.2.2 BioWare and LGBTQA+ Gamers

From BioWare’s early games, such as *Baldur’s Gate*, players could be either male or female, a trend that persisted with its successful *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* and

*Jade Empire*⁵⁶, the latter also allowing gay romance. With *Mass Effect* in 2007, BioWare added a layer of complexity in its stance towards diversity in games with its enhanced romance mechanics – gradually allowing more non-heteronormative relationships – and a somewhat “utopian” lore where one’s sexuality is not a problem, as interviewee Angelina highlights:

Something I find quite annoying in BioWare games is the fact they work with a very utopian world. Gender matters are not dealt with; sexuality is not dealt with. I’ll give an example that is not *Mass Effect*, but *Dragon Age: Origins*. When you have the origin of the City Elf character, there is a scene of rape, of harassment, that is not highlighted in game (as a problem). And in *Mass Effect* especially gender and sexuality is never discussed. I think that, you know, this can’t exist (Angelina, interviewee)

This utopian in-game scenario that challenges heteronormativity can both be a problem and is a helpful element for those at the margins of gaming. Even though Angelina is bothered by it, she also points out that it does not affect her love for the game and for BioWare in general. This utopian scenario, she says, helps her accept herself more, because being gay is naturalized and accepted in that universe. Something she believes to be helpful for those in the process of self-understanding and acceptance. When the content of a game paints a world where minorities are fully accepted, the benefits to those who play the game can be considerable. Alice also believes that part of her identity – a woman, a lesbian – is treated better in the universe of *Mass Effect*, and that games ‘can create a space, somewhat

⁵⁶ Alice highlights that her experience with *Jade Empire*, a game she started playing because of *Mass Effect* and her interest in BioWare previous games, was unsatisfactory from a representation standpoint. As a lesbian gamer that plays more often with a female lead, she dislikes the heteronormativity coded in the game. The in-game romanceable characters can be male or female for the player, despite the gender of the avatar. However, she says that “if you flirt with both, the game does not ask you who you want, unlike *Mass Effect* that often puts you against the wall. No, it (*Jade Empire*) automatically understands that you (as a female character) wants the guy. The game never asked me, I was just playing and it happened. I had to go back like, 6 hours of gaming to be able to (date her). I was pissed!”

a safe space, where you can express your sexuality, your points of view, whatever you want' (Alice, interviewee). At the time she started playing ME, she already identified herself as lesbian, but notices that after each time she played the game she felt 'more comfortable, in a certain way, of expressing (my sexuality), of not...being ashamed was never the right term, but maybe a little bit less guilty you know...' (Alice, interviewee).

The in-game representation of non-heteronormative relationships is not without controversy. For instance, only lesbian relationships are allowed up to the third game, something often referred to as a strategy to please the technomasculine fan-base: the lesbian fetish is a recurrent trope in pop culture products and, although it does give some representation and identification to lesbian gamers, it can be problematic in its delivery. Robin considers that BioWare seems to be always expecting "cookies"⁵⁷ for its diversity stance, even when they are doing just the minimal expected effort, whilst reinforcing the hetero and cis-normative nature of gaming in general, for example denying the player the chance to play as a transgender character. Angelina, who self-identifies as asexual, is bothered by the mandatory sexual relationship in every *Mass Effect* game to consummate the romance, which is converted into a medal of achievement, the Paramour, needed for those gamers that like to achieve 100% completion of the game.

Condis (2014) in her study about BioWare and gay people points to the internal controversies of the company regarding diversity, that banned terms like "gay" and "lesbian" from its forums and avoided political conversations in that space whilst also adding LGBTQ characters to their games. The company suffers from a kind of 'Schrodinger's Cat' dilemma, simultaneously fostering and not fostering diversity in its products. If on the one hand they

⁵⁷ A 'cookie' is sarcastic slang utilised when a person, institution or company wants to be praised for something they did. Often used when they behave according to a certain politically correct agenda, but do it poorly or with secondary intentions other than actual support.

provide the gamer public with interesting storytelling with a relatively wide array of characters outside the masculine, heteronormative and white cliché, on the other hand they often do so relying on stereotypical representations of minorities (see section 4.3). Moreover, as Condis highlights, the diversity stance has a close correlation to profit, as it opens the market to a public that is highly invested in cultural products with “inclusiveness”, making it “money-making proposition” (Condis 2014, p.12). This is something Alice reinforces: “if you want a public that is loyal, it is the queer, LGBT public. Because we do not have a lot of things, so when something appears, we will, you know, sell our souls to these people”. In post-modernity, where identity politics are playing a major role within a neo-liberal thought, it seems natural that companies such as BioWare responds to this with more diversity in their games.

4.3 Where do we go from here (or writing new pages in the history of diversity)

In this chapter, after highlighting the main issues related to the construction of “the gamer” category and the heteronormative gendering of videogames industry, I argued for an approach that acknowledges gamers as a set of diverse publics. This approach can be beneficial not only from an academic point of view, broadening the spectrum of analysis and adding new methodological and theoretical possibilities to the study of videogames, but also for the games industry. Studying and understanding publics is, fundamentally, mapping their formation; their movement in the public spaces (what keeps them pulsating and how these connections are formed); how publics can be mobilized and de-mobilized; how publics can be called into action; and how they function as an important, reliable consumer base. Approaching gamers as publics has the potential to diminish the issues of a demographics-

based consumer base: rather than connecting people through somewhat monolithic categories unable to answer the question of *what do people want to play*, a perspective of *publics* provides a more complex and complete picture of what moves us as individuals and what are the commonalities we share.

The reconfiguration of *the gamer* into gaming *publics* is not just related to the sphere of consumption. Institutionalized publics are also an important part of videogames industry. As discussed in section 4.2, several publics in the industry are silenced, silent or absent, and as further analysis in this thesis demonstrates, the silencing of these voices impacts game development considerably. These publics are mobilizing themselves constantly – see for instance initiatives like GaymerX and QGCon, I Need Diverse Games, or the LGBTQ Videogame Archive - all spaces where these publics can form, inform, gather and act, effecting change in the spheres of production and consumption. Professionals and fans alike form a collective voice, as publics, to regain control of the public discourses about themselves in videogames culture. A feminist, transformative stance in videogames industry could raise consciousness on equality and diversity and act against oppression. As hooks (2008, p.17) argues, we must reclaim feminism origins as the fight against sexism as a system of oppression, and media can play a major role within this (hooks, 2008 p.17)

As the character analysis undertaken in the next chapter demonstrates, despite BioWare's fame as a diverse and inclusive company, their efforts to develop games that cater to publics at the margins are limited. These limitations are strongly related to the very same issues discussed in this chapter, affecting gamers and game industry alike by reproducing dominant patterns of representation, where even diversity is portrayed under the austere gaze of a hegemonic, heteronormative and white masculinity.

Chapter 5: Controversies of Diversity in *Mass Effect*

The galaxy (*of Mass Effect*) is on one hand rather rigidly heteronormatively structured, but on another hand, it is also (contradictorily) notably queer. (Østby, 2016, p.150)

As outlined in the previous chapter, the BioWare team is far from diverse. Nonetheless, the company has grown a faithful consumer base as a result of their seemingly diversity-oriented stance towards queer identities and strong female leads. As well put by the Kim Johansen Østby quote above, the development of *Mass Effect* is contradictorily queer despite being heteronormative not only in its content but also in the politics of production. Here, I intend to explore these contradictions, which appear beyond the scope of heterosexual and queer identities, but also in the representations of gender and race through the analysis of some of ME characters to understand the extent of impact that a white and male-centric team has in how a character is written, designed and coded.

Some of the concepts used in this chapter merit further clarification. For instance, regarding femininity, I side with R.W. Connell (1987, pp.186-187) who argues that the construction of femininity is a reinforcement of the subordination of women to men. Whereas we can talk about "hegemonic masculinity", the idea of hegemonic femininity is, considering the current state of society, an impossibility as femininities:

are not constructed in the way masculinities are; they do not confer cultural power, nor are they able to guarantee patriarchy. They are, instead, constructed as a variety of negations of the masculine (...) Femininity is, thus, defined as a lack, an absence of masculinity (Kessler & McKenna, 1978). There can be no hegemonic femininity, because being in a hegemonic position is also about being in a position of power; it is about being able to construct the world

for oneself and others so that one's power is unchallenged and taken (more or less) for granted as part of the order of things (Paechter, 2006, p.256)

On the other side of the gender binary spectre, the concept of 'militarized masculinity' developed by Stephen Kline et al. (2003) is important to understand the context in which Mass Effect characters have been created. Kline et al identify that one of the key issues in the industry is a 'player identity' that is shaped and shapes a successful formula of 'digital death, destruction, and dominion' (Kline et al 2003, p.55). If this identity is constantly questioned by academics and journalists alike, it likely remains strong in the industry. Militarized masculinity is both a matter of game-making genres, valuing 'strongly gender-coded scenarios of war, conquest, and combat' (Kline et al, .247); a marketing effort to define 'the industry's most reliable customers' (Kline et al. 2003, p.195); but also, a potentially subversive aspect of the gaming industry, less gender-coded than it seems at first. The analysis of ME throughout this thesis shows that there is an interest of female players (and non-hegemonic-masculinities) in the play of these "boy" games, indicating the possibility of what could be referred to as a "militarized femininity" appearing in the game's content but also in the experience of play of certain individuals.

Lastly, although race and class are not extensively discussed within this thesis, they are nonetheless important identity markers that merit further study. In this section, the ME characters Jacob Taylor and James Vega present a good opportunity for an intersectional analysis of male representation in videogames. The discussion focuses on the stereotypical discourses of Black and Latino sexuality, taking into account perceptions of race, gender and, to some extent, class. Scholarship in the field of race and games is extensive and worthy of attention, with studies ranging from quantitative studies of non-white characters (Williams et al 2009) to qualitative analysis of videogames content, production and play and its interface

with race (Higgin 2009, Poor 2012, Kafai et al 2010, Brock 2011, Everett and Watkins 2008). This scholarship is useful in framing my character analysis in a wider context of videogames and race. For a theoretical account of black male masculinity, I would refer to bell hooks (2004) as a key reference. Drawing from her critique and Charles Ramírez Berg's (2002) studies on Latino stereotypes in Hollywood cinema, I aim to discuss how race plays into the political fold of gender representation.

A secondary aspect worth noting for this discussion is related to the distribution of race in the workplace. Despite the lack of evidence of the BioWare team's racial composition, IGDA's 2014 Developer Satisfaction Survey indicates that Africans, African Americans and Hispanic/Latino accounted for, respectively, 2.5% and 8.2% of the employees (Edwards et al, p.9). It is safe to assume that BioWare's team will follow a similar pattern of (non) diversity. In the writers' team for Mass Effect 2 and 3, where Jacob and James Vega feature, no Black or Latino writers were part of the team. The character analysis that follows indicates that this lack of diversity in the writing team could lead to the creation of male and white-centric biased views of female, Latino and Black characters. However, as pointed by both Adrienne Shaw (2009; 2014) regarding gender and sexuality in games, and Anamik Saha (2017,2017a) regarding race in the cultural industries, increasing diversity in the sphere of production is not enough to effect change. Saha argues that 'such efforts are undermined at the cultural distribution stage of production' (Saha 2017a, p.303). Fostering diversity in the workplace is important, with more marginalized groups having access to jobs in the profitable and innovative ICT industry. Nevertheless, a neoliberal approach posits the recognition of publics without-part as under a market logic (Saha 2017, p. 79). Moreover, it places the burden of representation not only on the consumers (Shaw 2014, p.35) but also on the workers that are

subjected to precarious conditions, serving then as ‘an ideological function of racial’, gendered and heteronormative ‘capitalism’ (Saha 2017, p.80)

This section will analyse the characters of the game in terms of their stories and how they relate to expected gender roles. In the first section, I return to the discussion of hypersexualization and representation has a long-standing history in academia, accounting for both male and female objectification. First, I debate stereotypes of femininity in the Asari species and how these are consequential of male-centred game design. Subsequently, I discuss the notion of ‘militarized femininity’ based on the studies of Stephen Kline et al (2003) in the investigation of the character Ashely Williams. I follow with an examination of two contradictory characters, further acknowledging the difficulties of BioWare in writing female characters: Miranda Lawson – a genetically perfect woman that, despite being extremely intelligent, is portrayed as eye-candy for the male audience, and Jack, an apparently non-normative female character. Lastly, I discuss the representation of male characters, highlighting stereotypes of Black and Latino masculinity and the role they play in constructing Jacob Taylor and James Vega. The second section focusses on the representation of sex and sexualities in ME. Within this, I discuss the optional (yet mandatory) nature of sex in Mass Effect and how it affects the plurality of choices offered to the player. I then go onto debate the late inclusion of male-to-male romance and the different portrayals of bisexuality for male and female characters. I close the chapter deliberating the extent of diversity in ME based on the distinction traced by Shaw (2014) between diversity and plurality.

5.1 On buttocks, cleavage and six-packs: male and female representation in Mass Effect

Before women's liberation all females young and old were socialized by sexist thinking to believe that our value rested solely on appearance and whether or not we were perceived to be good looking, especially by men (hooks 2008, p. 33)

Despite being challenged by feminists in the 1970's, the socialization mentioned by bell hooks is still persisting in the hypersexualization of female characters in videogames, a long-standing problem faced by the industry. hooks argues that three factors hindered the consequences of these initial efforts of feminism to defy sexist socialization: a) the media focus on portraying feminism negatively, b) the economies of the beauty and fashion industry and c) internal conflicts between a radical feminist thought that dismissed 'female longings for beauty' as a non-feminist issue and a perspective that values female beauty as any beauty, not just that standardized by media and sexism (hooks, 2008, pp.33-37). Decades later, the problem not only persists but the public discussions about the female body in media, and particularly in videogames, are as prominent as ever. These discussions appear in the GamerGate controversy and in the voice of feminist and youtuber Anita Sarkeesian, among others. Moreover, as stated in the introduction, values connected to conservative thought and right-wing populism are spreading (Greven 2016) whilst a rise of feminism in the age of social media, amid other forms of online activism, help counter these discourses (Durham 2017; Vrikki 2017). The current political scenario fosters intense conversation about identities and their representation, once again challenging the socialization of a female (and male) beauty that serves only to men rather to self-knowledge and empowerment. With the Mass

Effect trilogy being released between 2007 and 2012, and its legacy remaining influential, analysing the representation of female and male bodies in the game, supported by the varied sources of data this research relies on, brings some new evidence and questions to the field.

Lara Croft has been a core example of female character within the feminist study of videogames since her appearance in 1996 – one that led to a possible ‘Lara phenomenon’ with more dominant female characters that are ‘tough and competent’ (Jansz and Martis 2007). Helen Kennedy argues that Lara is both ‘hero (active) and heroine (to be looked at)’ (Kennedy 2002), a dual nature also found in FemShep (see Chapter 7) and other ME female characters analysed in this chapter. This perspective is shared by Diane Carr, adding that Lara is ‘hyperbolic gendered’ as subject and object (Carr 2002, p.180). Counter-arguments to the possibilities opened by Lara Croft as a videogame feminist icon were leveraged for instance by Espen Aarseth. He argues that Lara Croft is ‘irrelevant’ as the female game character is no more than a digital avatar and replacing her would not affect his play (Aarseth 2004, p.48). Indeed, from a strict ludological stand-point, what matters is an analysis of the game form, its rules, and outcomes, the results of a feedback circuit of action on-screen. For this purpose, Lara Croft being a female, curvaceous and ‘sexy’ avatar has no implication. This approach, however, denies, for example, the socio-cultural importance of Lara as ‘feminist or cyber-bimbo’ (Kennedy 2002).

In her study of the 2013 Tomb Raider, Esther MacCallum-Stewart argues that the academic focus on criticizing Lara Croft's hypersexualized body detracts ‘from her multiplicity. Lara can be tool, icon, and avatar; moving through a series of different ludic and paidic stances as she is played’ (MacCallum-Stewart 2015, n.p). For the author, this kind of analysis is skewed, unable to see her as more than an object for the male gaze even when criticizing this same

gaze, and not accounting for the body dimorphism that is 'rife across all genders' in gaming (ibid.).

Following the critique of MacCallum-Stewart, that analysis of body imagery in videogames is often 'counter-productive' and ignores broader aspects of the character in the name of a defence of proper physical representation of digital, immaterial avatars, I move beyond the body in order to understand a) the damaging and stereotypical discourses that inform both the creation and the critical reading of these bodies and b) the re-imaginings of these bodies by the gamers in their unique experiences of play.

As the discussion demonstrates, gamers can reconfigure the readings of objectification at times, complexifying the current discussions of the graphical representation of human and non-human bodies. In narrative-heavy games like Mass Effect, the storytelling, the construction of these characters, the emotional, affective engagement they may provoke cannot be omitted from the analysis. Moreover, it is crucial to consider what has been discussed in the previous chapter. First, the controversial construction of an ideal public - the gamer - that informs the politics of production and the creation of content. Second, the male and heterosexual dominant scenario of game development. Both lead to the fact that, in Mass Effect, a group of men are trying to write powerful female characters and arguably not being entirely successful in doing so.

5.1.1 The Asari Paradox: between empowerment and stereotypes

Shepard. What can I say? What do you want me to say? I just killed the smartest and bravest of my daughters. There are no words. I will try another time. For now, show mercy on a broken old warrior and let us leave. (Samara, Mass Effect 2)

Look into my eyes and tell me you want me. Tell me you'd kill for me. Anything I want. (Morinth, Mass Effect 2)

I **am** Omega. But you want more. Everybody needs more something. And they all come to me. I'm the boss, CEO, queen if you're feeling dramatic. Omega has no titled ruler, and only one rule. Don't. Fuck. With Aria. (Aria T'Loak, Mass Effect 2)

The unique Asari species have been a frequent object of academic enquiry for those interested in researching Mass Effect, gender, and sexuality in videogames. For instance, Summer Glassie's (2015, pp.161-173) analysis tackles the non-normative understanding of gender, sex and sexuality that the Asari provide due to their unique "monogendered" or "unisexual" trait as a species. Kim Johansen Østby (2016) discusses their 'queer potential' that can 'defy heteronormativity and a binary division of gender' highlighting however that such queerness is 'tamed' (Østby 2016, p.158). Pascale Thériault (2017) questions the extent of the subversive potential of Asari characters, often portrayed as sex workers and written as a species capable of sexually engaging and reproducing with any other species in the universe, representing 'a kind of fantasy in the galaxy, a sort of lesbian Amazons with great libido, always available for sex' (Thériault, 2017, p.161).

Building on this scholarship, and simultaneously trying to offer a complementary perspective from that of my colleagues, I discuss the Asari considering the configurative circuit of games development and how external discourses and understandings of femininity are embedded in the creation of the main Asari characters. Being a game mostly written by

men addressing a man/boy audience, it is with no surprise that their handling of strong female characters appears to rely on their own understanding of what it means to be a strong woman. Notwithstanding the effort and praise that BioWare justly receives for its diversity stance, the contradictory nature of their writing of female characters – a constant imbalance between stereotyping and empowering – shows that there is still much to be done.

Despite their construction as a “monogendered” species, the way we read and understand those characters clearly stems from a human understanding of gender binaries, also appealing to the “lesbian fetish” they assume to be of interest to the average technomasculine audience. This fact is not exactly a secret, as the developers admit that they wanted ‘a race of beautiful, blue alien girls (...) having some human qualities, which allowed them to be desirable as potential love interests’ (Helper et al 2012, p. 17). Moreover, the species lore has a clear woman-centric perspective, adopting gendered vocabulary in the establishment of the Asari's history. For instance, one of their monotheistic religions worships the Goddess Athame: in the third game, when visiting a monastery on Lessus, an Asari world, the player can see many statues built to worship their Goddess in a similar manner to Catholic Christians worship of Jesus figures. This proximity with everyday experiences of players permits an analysis of these characters from a perspective of ‘emphasized femininity’ (Connell 1987, p. 187) and how they are put into practice by the men behind Mass Effect, effectively creating less powerful female representations than BioWare is known for.

Another aspect of Asari culture that reveals their female-centric writing is their biology and three ‘climacteric life stages, marked by biochemical and physiological changes’ (Codex, Mass Effect). These stages are Maiden, Matron, and Matriarch, titles that reinforce the female reading of that species from the standpoint of the human player, creating this race of beautiful blue aliens. The Maiden phase is when the Asari go out in the galaxy to engage in

various activities usually considered risky, like sex work or mercenary missions. It is a time for adventure, exploration, and freedom before they enter the Matron stage where they are expected to reproduce and settle. The Matriarch stage, achieved after centuries of life – Asari have an average life span of over 1000 years - portrays the Asari as wise sages and they either occupy positions of prestige within their society or achieve great lengths in their chosen careers.

These stages are not, however, obligatory – Maiden's may choose to never go out and explore, and Matrons may not reproduce nor settle down. Another example of a non-conventional Asari life stage is mercenary Aria T'Loak (Fig. 6), the ruler of Omega, an abandoned space station that denies the political ruling of the Galactic Council. In-universe information indicates that she is over 1000 years old and in her Matriarch stage. However, instead of acting as a wise councillor for the species in their home planet or other Asari worlds, Aria's wisdom and power come from her long life as a mercenary, which makes her one of the most powerful and feared figures in the Milky Way.

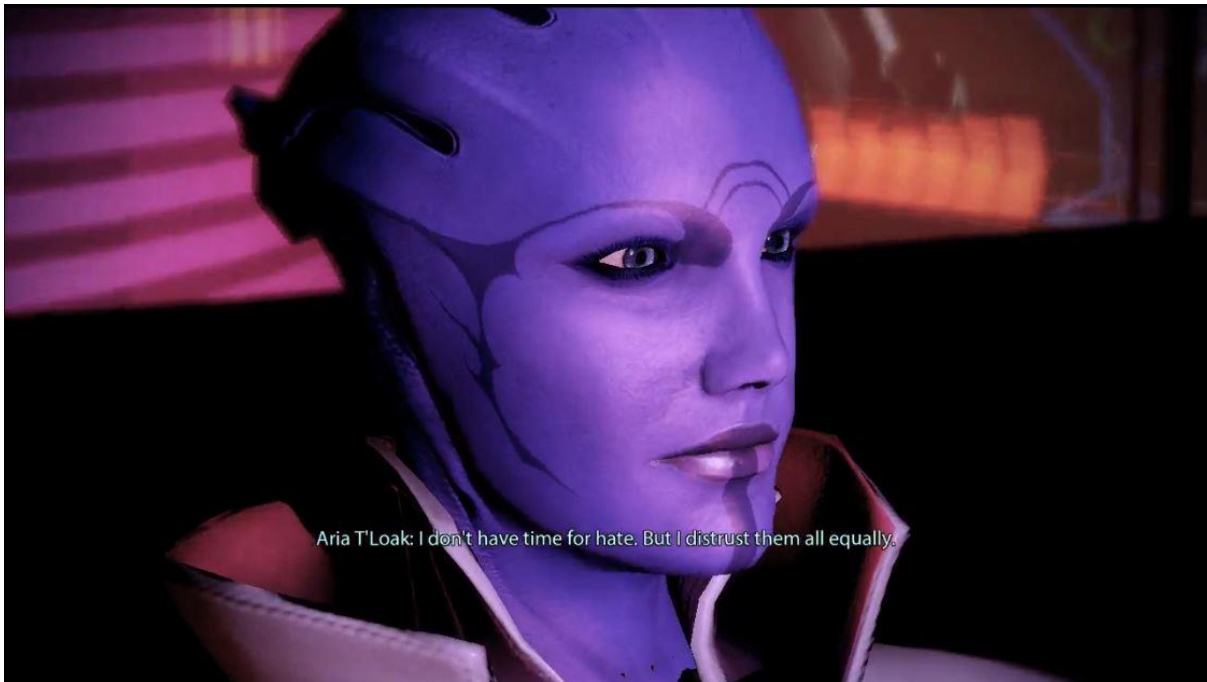


Figure 6 - Aria T'Loak, the ruthless leader of the mercenary world of Omega is voiced by actress Carrie-Anne Moss. Aria's face is modelled on the actress's features. (Printscreen from author's own recorded gameplay)

The female-centric writing of the species makes it intelligible for the player, who can relate better to a world that feels more familiar rather than completely alien. As Glassie suggests, when creating the Asari 'the developers complicate the unconscious way players approach and respond to characters they label as male or female based on appearance and other markings associated with gender' (Glassie 2015, p.163). However, in order to do so, they must keep a level of intelligibility that ultimately hinders the queer potential of the species or even their representation as a strong all-female society. Writers could have created an openly powerful female species, but they complicated themselves when trying to write them outside a gender binary that they, as mostly cisgender males, have little understanding of. This led to several in-game inconsistencies regarding the species descriptions, oscillating between monogendered and unisexual (Østby 2016, p. 151), while also referred as an "all-female" species despite Asari squadmate Liara T'soni (and, by extension, the writers

themselves) stating that concepts of male and female do not exist for the species. This series of contradictions 'allow players to push Liara and her species into the category of female' (Glassie 2015, p.169). The writers themselves could not escape the thrall of their understandings of femininity when writing Asari characters.

Take, for instance, Samara (Fig. 7), a powerful Asari Justicar – a kind of special ops force, composed by the most powerful and well-trained Asari warriors – Samara makes her appearance in Mass Effect 2 in an action-packed sequence that shows all her battle prowess as a fierce, menacing Asari. Samara, now in her Matriarch phase after being a mercenary in her maiden years and giving birth to three children in her Matron years, voluntarily decided to give up on what she achieved in life (her family), her freedom and any worldly possessions in order to be a Justicar. This major change in her life has a reason: her three children were born as Ardat-Yakshi, a genetic condition that only affects progenies of two pureblood Asari. These are a pariah in the Asari society, lesser beings that are potentially dangerous. Although two of her three children accepted their genetic condition and opted to join a monastery for Ardat-Yakshi in the planet Lessia, where they can live protected from outside prejudice, a third daughter, Morinth, refused being trapped in the Sanctuary. She flees and becomes a mass murderer. To hunt Morinth down and make justice, Samara makes the ultimate sacrifice in becoming a Justicar. In a small amount of information that the player can read from Samara's dossier, a short conversation between her and her two daughters in the Sanctuary reveals that in order to stop Morinth, Samara cannot be in touch with her two other daughters

again. Although they express their feelings of care and worry for their mother at first, they ultimately accept (rather than understand) Samara's decision.



Figure 7 - Samara, The Asari Justicar. Her outfit has a large cleavage that was not present in some earlier designs for the character. (Printscreen from author's own recorded gameplay)

Samara, being the only playable character who is also a mother, seems to embody the writers' understandings of Motherhood. Firstly, to become a mother she must move on from her young, playful phase, and settle down. Secondly, upon giving birth to three children with genetic anomalies, she faces hardship as a mother trying to do the best possible for their children's safety. When one is on the loose and presents a danger, she gives up everything because she believes that is her duty as a mother. She can no longer be the free wandering soul from the past, nor the at-home attentive Mother, neither a present Mother for her two other children. In giving up her own self to be a Justicar to pay for her daughter sins, Samara represents a distorted, contradictory "perfect motherhood". Surely, Samara is an all-powerful Asari, but at what cost?

Oddly, Samara's design does not fit her trajectory in life and feeds into the hypersexualized female trope, with a considerable cleavage and large breasts. The developers

justify her design saying that ‘it would be acceptable to have some skin showing due to her armour's near-invisible kinetic-barrier technology’ (Helper et al 2012 p.80). My interviewees tend to agree that Samara (and Asari's representation overall) are too sexual. Rahna, who had “The Art of the Mass Effect Universe” in her hands during the interview, pointed that Samara had ‘more clad’ designs, while both her and Angelina considers her cleavage ‘absurd’ and ‘unnecessary’.

Interviewee Neil offers an interesting insight regarding mature women’s sexuality, saying that ‘you could argue that it’s unusual and liberating for a mature female character to be sexualised rather than kind of frumpy or inaccessible’ nonetheless finding it at odds with her personality and storyline as ‘essentially celibate and very mature’ (Neil, interviewee). Indeed, when discussing ‘emphasized femininity’, Connell (1987) argues that certain patterns of expected feminine behaviours of women include ‘sexual receptivity in relation to younger women and motherhood in relation to older woman’ (Connell 1987, p.187), and Samara's representation can, at first, seem to present an alternative to these emphasized femininities.

However, the justification BioWare gave - that her skin cannot be shown due to some ‘natural armour’ - seems flimsy at best. Even after killing her daughter and feeling like an “old broken warrior”, Samara returns in the third game wearing the same outfit, still bonded to her Justicar code. The persistent hypersexualized portrayal is at odds with the emphasis given to her mother and warrior roles. Samara can be romanced by both Male and Female Shepard, but it is not a fully-fledged romance as she is bound by the Justicar code. A kiss may be exchanged during the Citadel DLC⁵⁸, but the conditions to achieve so are not straight forward

⁵⁸ The Citadel DLC came after the controversial ending of ME3. It takes place outside the main storyline, sometime before the final mission. It is supposed to be an homage to the series, a light-hearted extra content that allows players to explore more of the main characters, play mini games, engage in battle with previous characters like Wrex and throw a party for the team. The photo that illustrates the cover of this thesis was taken

and easily achieved by any player. An alternative ‘emphasized femininity’ of Samara is unrealized in this scenario, as her mother identifier is privileged over other identifiers. Samara is a contradictory character for the player. She is an embodiment of a powerful warrior, of “perfect motherhood” and an example of the MILF⁵⁹ trope: the mature, sexual ultimately unattainable and a constant object of gaze and a trophy for few to achieve.

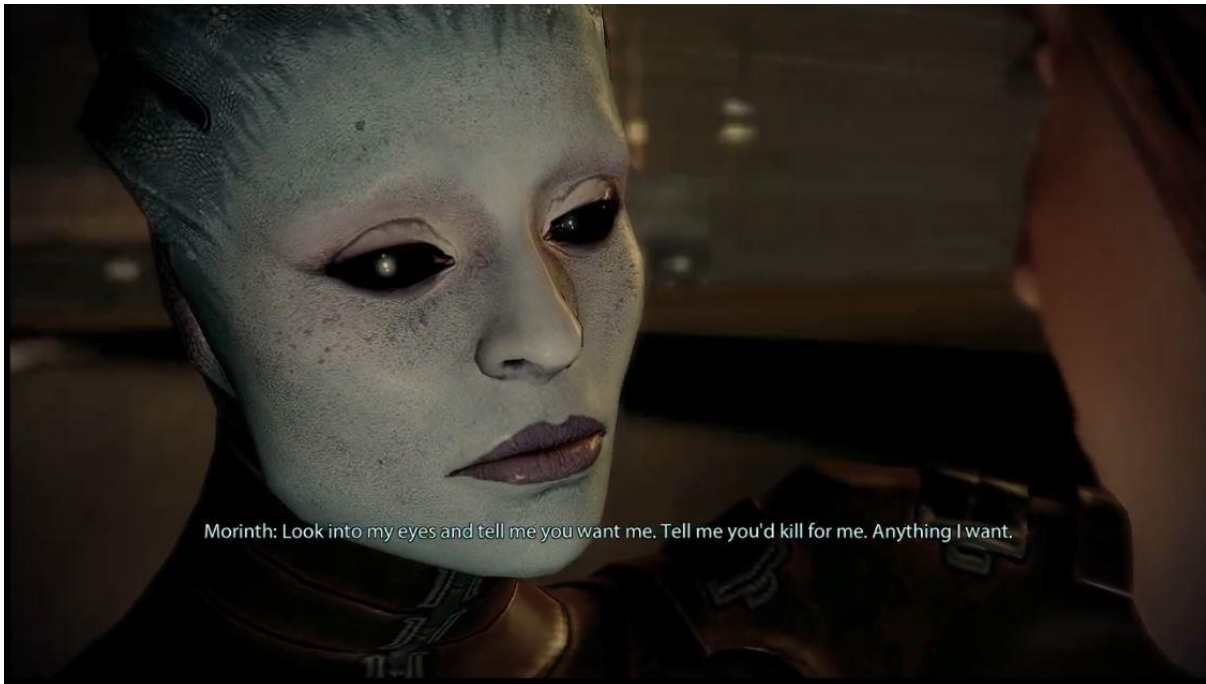


Figure 8 - Morinth, the Ardat-Yakshi is shown in darker colours to reiterate the difference between her mother and herself. It also evokes the image of black widow spiders.

Her daughter, Morinth (Fig. 8), is also an interesting Asari to analyse that speaks to a different understanding of women and their limits as sexual beings. A femme fatale would be a good first definition of Morinth, a character mostly known for two characteristics: being a murderer and loving sex (or ‘melding’, to use Asari terminology). It is not, however, the best fit for the character. Being an Ardat-Yakshi means that her partners will die at the conclusion of the sexual act. Moreover, with each encounter and death, Morinth grows mentally

during my second playthrough of the Citadel DLC party organization mission. Curiously, this DLC can be played after the game is over despite the death of Shepard (and maybe other characters).

⁵⁹ The acronym is short for “Mothers I’d Like to Fuck” and was popularized by the movie franchise *American Pie* with the character ‘Stifler’s Mom’ (or Jeanette) being the archetype of a MILF.

stronger, being able to manipulate her victims with her biotic abilities. Morinth is, therefore, more of a *black widow*.

Morinth has a very similar design to her mother, Samara, and Asari in general, a standard pattern of a “hot body” with large breasts and buttocks. It is, however, the black widow trope of this character that seems to be the most problematic. Surely, she is a very powerful Asari that happens to be a murderer, but in a game and universe filled with violence, and with other squad mates having a body count even higher than hers, that in itself is not a problem. The fact that her modus operandi for killing relies upon seduction and in the death of the partner due to sex provides, however, a complicated reading of death as a punishment for a sexually liberated character. If we forget Morinth’s murderous nature, the fact that her every sexual encounter leads to death seems a metaphor to a sexually liberated woman that is punished for engaging in sexual activities outside the acceptable confines of a monogamous and heterosexual relationship. Morinth, unlike Samara, does not allow for subversion of Connell's manifestations of emphasized femininity: she is a young maiden whose only purpose in-story is to be a sexual predator. Although not the prey and therefore not performing a kind of femininity that is tamed for the men to use (Connell, 1987 p.188), the punishment inflicted on her partners is, in fact, a punishment on herself. Not only she is unable to develop any longstanding affective connection due to the death of her sexual partners, but the character’s fate is also certain death, either by the hands of her mother or the Reapers in *Mass Effect 3*⁶⁰ after being transformed into a monster.

⁶⁰ In *Mass Effect 2*, if the player opts to let Samara die, Morinth can be convinced to join the team and romanced. If the player wants to consume the romance, Shepard will die at the end of *Mass Effect 2*, after the suicide mission, being the only situation where, in a headcanon play, Shepard would not be present to fight the Reapers in *Mass Effect 3*. This situation is not, however, explored by BioWare.

Both Aria, Samara and Morinth, and the Asari species in general, suffer from a limited male-centric vision of what constitutes a powerful representation of women. As Connell highlighted, 'power, authority, aggression, technology are not thematised in femininity at large as they are in masculinity' (Connell, 1987, p.187), an absence that reflects in the masculine-coded, heteronormative and patriarchal ways that Asari are written. A powerful ruler like Aria is often coded under 'militarized masculinity' (Kline et al 2003, pp. 184-195) ideals: fierce, strong, feared and ruthless, and even her design and demeanour have a slightly more "masculine" feel than most Asari in the game, often portrayed as fragile and/or sexual. They follow a pattern of being simultaneously strong, unique and stereotyped, fitting into boxes of an emphasized femininity that limit those characters, diminishing their strength as a powerful representation of non-normative sexualities and non-binary genders.

These issues are often associated to the discussion about workforce representation: there is a predominantly male (and likely white and heterosexual) development team, including writers, trying to develop a powerful female species to the best of their ability and knowledge. However, as Judith Butler posits regarding femaleness and femininity, 'the very attribution of femininity to female bodies as if it were a natural or necessary property takes place within a normative framework in which the assignment of femininity to femaleness is one mechanism for the production of gender itself.' (Butler 2004, p.41). In assigning their understandings of what being female/woman means – one that stems from a privileged male position – *Mass Effect* writers reproduce damaging stereotypes and purposely design attractive bodies (as being sexy is a quality attributed to Asari by the development team) that reinforce a unilateral, masculine and reductive perception of the female gender.

5.1.2 Is there a Militarized Femininity? An analysis of Ashley Williams

Just because I can drill you between the eyes at a hundred meters, doesn't mean I can't like sensitive stuff... (Ashley Williams in *Mass Effect*)

Ashley Williams is a human female soldier who joins the team right at the beginning of the first Mass Effect. She is considered by her fans to be a woman with a strong personality and very “realistic” traits. Rather than a clichéd female side character, Ashley has a well-developed background story as the daughter of a military family, that gives her character complexity and depth. Her writer, Chris L'Etoile, is praised by the community in USBN for showing Ashley's weaknesses and complicated backstory as part of her strengths as a fighter and as one of the few characters, if not the only one, that stands up to Commander Shepard, questioning decisions and standing her ground. Ashley is considered by many a racist character, due to her expressed inability to differentiate aliens from animals, coupled with often xenophobic positions regarding alien dominance in the galaxy, defending the need for humans to extend their influence and power. Her fans, however, do a very different reading of the character, arguing that calling her racist is unfounded, and that she, as a loyal member of the Alliance – the human species military organization – ‘(...) is not mistrustful of aliens because of their biology or some sense of natural superiority of humans, but that since they are beholden to foreign governments, they may not have the best interests of humanity in mind’ (/gkonone, on USBN).

The context of the quote that opens this section is the following: in a conversation between Shepard and Ashley, she mentions her family problems – raising her sisters due to the frequent absence of her father – and recites a part of the poem “Ulysses”. Shepard shows

surprise, saying that it is unexpected that she likes poetry, to which she answers liking “sensitive stuff” despite being a soldier, but adds a request to not tell this “secret” to anyone. The phrase carries two complementing assumptions that, ultimately, reinforce a pattern of male-heteronormative discourse present in the game overall. The first is that one should not expect a soldier to like ‘sensitive stuff’, following on the militarized masculinity ideal (Kline et al 2003, pp.246-268). If Ashley is predominantly a soldier, she cannot be read as an emotional being but just a military avatar, as that would show some weakness of character as she is supposed to just be a killing machine. The second reading shifts Ashley identity from that of primarily soldier to primarily woman. If soldiers are not supposed to be emotional, Ashley’s sentence clarifies and reminds the player that despite all that, she values sentiment, “sensitive stuff” - a feminised trait. This serves as a gendered flag, a reminder that women are emotional and that it should be a part of their character. Indeed, no other soldier-male character had to openly state their ability to feel or be sensitive. It comes naturally in the sad history of both Kaidan Alenko⁶¹ and James Vega⁶², that is not unrelated to their identities as soldiers, but instead reinforcing it, making them even stronger once the player learns the perils they had overcome. Ashley’s sentimental outing serves the purpose of reaffirming the gendered expectations given to women. Moreover, Ashley asking Shepard to keep it a

⁶¹ In one issue of the official comic book “Mass Effect: Foundations” the story he tells Shepard and the player during the game is explored in depth. Kaidan, surviving exposition to the radioactive element zero when his mother was still pregnant, developed Biotic powers. Due to that, he was recruited to be part of Jump Zero, a training facility for human biotics. There, he got close to a human named Rahna while facing many struggles being trained by a fierce, violent and humanity hater Turian named Vyrmnus. In a bid to defend Rahna after she is physically punished by Vyrmnus, Kaidan accidentally kills him and loses Rahna’s friendship and trust, and is expelled from Jump Zero.

⁶² James Vega past is explored in the animated movie *Paragon Lost*. There we see Vega being the leader of a squad based on the human colony Fehl Prime. Befriending many in that community, he suffers immensely when they are attacked by *Mass Effect 2* main enemy’s, The Collectors. With his friends and lover dead, Vega that is exterminated by the Collectors, losing not only friends but also an Asari, Vega finds himself hopeless and unfit for military services in the comic *Mass Effect: Conviction*, but is then recruited by Commander Anderson to guard Shepard, leading into the third game.

reinforces that love for poetry would be a sign of weakness typical of women and clash with her identity as a soldier.

It is not the only issue with her character. Ashley body and face were redesigned in *Mass Effect 3*, acquiring a *femme fatale* look, seemingly acting as a substitute for *Mass Effect 2*'s Miranda Lawson on the field. Her redesign contradicts the background of the character as a serious soldier that prioritizes battle efficiency before appearance. If her character was not originally hypersexualized (but was sexualized, and seen as attractive by many players, men and women alike, and a possible love interest for a Male Shepard), the makeover did transform her into 'eye-candy'⁶³. Ashley is now portrayed using heavy make-up, high heels and a perfectly long and loose hair that seems unfitting with her military persona (see Fig. 9).



Figure 9 - Ashley transition from ME 1 to ME 2 and ME 3. (Source: <https://me3cosmiclove.wordpress.com/2012/11/13/cs-femshepard-and-sexism-rough-rough-draft>)

Note that in the first two games, Ashley has light make-up and her hair is tied behind her back. It is in line with the helmets she often uses during the action and to military standards. Her body is always covered in armour and is curvaceous and womanly, which fits the biotype of the army in a future where genetic enhancement seemed to have erased obesity (and in fact, any fat bodies). In the third game, however, her face has more make-up,

⁶³ PC version players could deploy a mod to bring Ashley's old design back to ME3.

with glossy lips and a dark, long stretched hair. She also wears high heels into the field that were not present before, and her breasts seem significantly larger – a trend that also affected FemShep whose breasts got progressively larger through the games.

The physical transition of Ashley goes in the opposite direction of feminist achievements regarding body freedom. Hooks (2008) highlights how the act of removing the bras – and consequently other restrictive pieces of clothing, was a ‘ritualistic, radical reclaiming of the health and glory of the female body’ (hooks 2008, p.33). If high heels were put aside by many feminists, putting them back into Ashley so that she could fit the role of “sexy human female” reinforces femininity that is intimately tied to the beauty industry. In hooks’ critique, she clarifies that ‘feminist thinkers acknowledge both the value of beauty and adornment’ (ibid, p.37), but that these cannot be dissociated from a critical approach that highlights the dangers of transforming beauty and looks into the only or most pressing issue that women should worry about.

The producers openly state their rationale for the design change being linked to attractiveness: ‘For Ashley’s reappearance in the series, we let her hair down and gave her sex appeal’ (Helper et al 2012, p. 132). The rationale implies that before she had none, despite being a love interest for Male Shepard, as she was just the embodiment of the good soldier. Ashley arguably reappears as a copy of iconic Lara Croft⁶⁴ in her qualities and problems, for instance intensifying the character’s interest to a predominantly male market (Kline et al 2003, p.264). Moreover, fans complain of the severe lack of development for the character after *Mass Effect 1*, some speculating that Ashley’s writer Chris L’Etoile leaving the project caused the changes.

⁶⁴ Coincidentally, a year after the release of *Mass Effect 3* with its original Lara Croft “clone”, the new Tomb Raider that brought a non-hypersexualized but still sexualized Lara was released. (MacCallum-Stewart, 2014).

When discussing the games' nature as a vehicle for militarized masculinity Stephen Kline et al (2003), trace back to videogames origins as a military endeavour "conjured into being by technologically adept and culturally militarized men" (Kline et al 2003, p. 257). They posit the question if a "militarized femininity" would be an adequate response to the gendered scenario of videogames and the several clashing assumptions about how to attract girls to the medium (Kline et al 2003, p.262). A character like Ashley Williams – and, for that matter, Female Shepard (further analysed in Chapters 6 and 7) and other female-coded members of the crew – embodies characteristics that create a valuable presentation of a "militarized femininity" within a military and sci-fi videogame. Ashley Williams is portrayed as a skilled soldier, a real threat in the battlefield, and does not lack in terms of killing skills, fitting to a military-themed videogame. Moreover, she is designed to be a possible romantic interest to the player, adding a certain depth to the character, benefitting from BioWare's tradition in story-heavy games. Although her transition towards a femme fatale identity is questionable, the character overall seems to cater to interests of both male and female players alike. Brenda Laurel's research during her period in Purple Games indicates that girls do like action games, but also want to experience a story and be part of a rich world. Laurel says that she wanted to develop games outside the scope of militarization on the basis that it is not something that would attract girls (ibid, p.10), but their research suggested otherwise: girls 'didn't mind violence so much as they disliked the lack of good stories and characters' (ibid, p.40).

Mass Effect caters to many of these preferences: it is an action-packed game, with customizable equipment, enemies to kill and characters to level-up; it has an immersive story that extends beyond the medium itself; it has characters written to create an affective bond with players; these are varied in terms of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and species. Surely, as

mentioned previously in Chapter 4, Laurel's "Purple Games" suffered criticism for its essentialist approach to gender roles. Nonetheless, a lot of the aspects raised by her research do echo the reasons given by my female interviewees in their choice of playing ME. Interviewees like Mary highlighted that the ME story 'convinced her to keep playing' despite her difficulties with the game mechanics; Angelina, Robin and Rahna expressed their liking of story-oriented, character-driven games. However, that is also a trait I found in many of my male interviewees and in the data collected online, with Alex, Caesar, Chester and Torch especially highlighting their preference for story-heavy games. Moreover, interviewees such as Mary, a military woman herself, do like the idea of playing a game where she can shoot people even if she admits not being that good at it. The extensive research produced to understand how and why girls play do provide a more diverse set of reasons for girl play that is grounded in their experience of playing originally 'male-oriented' games (see Jenson, Castell and Fisher 2007, Carr 2005, Jenson and Castell 2011). For instance, Quake clans like RiotGrrls and Psycho Men Slayers show that women are also interested in showing their prowess in shooting games and share the same taste in gaming as the average technomasculine public (Kline et al 2003, Kennedy 2006, Jenkins and Cassell 2008). Gaming, reminds Elisabeth Hayes, is not configured just by gender but 'its interplay with and enactment in combination with personal histories and cultural factors that play out differently in individual's lives' (Hayes, 2007, p.24).

Considering the subjectivity of play does not impede analysis of modes of gaming that is correlated to a notion of publics. As discussed previously in this chapter, the label of "the gamer" is highly problematic. Thinking in terms of the formation of publics allows a better understanding of the issue of a "militarized femininity". There is no one way of playing a game, no matter which category of gender or sexuality you belong to, and acknowledging this fact

is an important step towards a more inclusive game making industry. Publics, in their inherently dynamic nature, will gather around their objects of affection, and experience them in unique, personal ways. Characters like Ashley Williams, powerful examples of female prowess in military scenarios - despite the contradictions of BioWare in their creation of strong female characters – provide an interesting model of a “military femininity” that is, in its essence, different from “military masculinity”, while keeping some of its traits regarding stylized violence as part of gameplay. There is still a profitable market for endless Call of Duty releases and a revival of Mortal Kombat with even more explicit gore, and these follow the trends of traditional ultra-violent militarized masculinity coupled, in the case of Mortal Kombat, with an exploration of hypersexualized female bodies⁶⁵. However, games like ME find a balanced ground where “military femininity”, the mash-up between Laurel’s idealized female public, the existence of Quake female clans, and an awareness of the issues faced by women in the industry both regarding representation in and off-game, can flourish. Surely, the hypersexualization of characters in ME, including Ashley, continues to be an issue. The next section will tackle this problem in more depth.

5.1.3 Miranda Lawson and Designed Perfection

Well, you should probably know that I've had extensive genetic modification. Not my decision, but I make the most of it(...) It's just a fact. My reflexes, my strength, even my looks – they're all designed to give me an edge. No point in hiding it. (Miranda Lawson, *Mass Effect 2*)

⁶⁵ Worth mentioning that these games also naturally attract female publics, but are mainly perceived as a heavily male realm.

The quote above is an excerpt from a dialogue between Miranda and Shepard (both male and female) when both are acquainted and in friendly terms after initial misunderstandings in their relationship. The player can engage in several dialogues throughout the game that reveal more information about a character. The revelation about Miranda's modified genome, albeit having no real implication on the game, effects how the character is perceived. Miranda's design has actress and model Yvonne Strahovski, who also provides the voice acting, as the basis. Alongside Ashley Williams and artificial intelligence/robot, EDI Miranda is openly acknowledged to have a sex-appeal oriented design by BioWare developers (Helper et al 2012 p. 84). Indeed, as seen in the figure below, her genetically engineered body is curvy and white, with long black hair and clear eyes - a recognised standard of beauty⁶⁶.

As my research shows, players responses to her design are mixed. While some, male and female alike, praise her features and characteristics as a combination that leads to a strong female character, they are also critical of the overtly objectifying angles the in-game camera uses in dialogues with the character. They often focus on her buttocks and breasts rather than on her face (an example of this is pictured in Fig. 10), essentially de-humanizing an important character when she speaks.

there were bits of the game that really jarred me out of immersion but also were really flippin' annoying that the obsession with Miranda's butt, like every shot of Miranda is either head and boobs, or butt, and that there's no sort of – it's all about that and I know they put the story is that she's, she's genetically designed to be better than the normal human and physically perfect and

⁶⁶ Previous designs for the character were even more sexualized, with a long V-Cut one piece showing cleavage and the belly, other with seemingly larger breasts and more skin showing.

everything, but all of the female characters, their boobs seem very accentuated.
(Neil, interviewee)



*Figure 10 - The camera angle clearly favours a sexualized, objectified portrayal, ignoring Miranda's face when she speaks.
(Printscreen from author's own recorded gameplay)*

The in-game justification for Miranda's astonishing looks again reveals the duality that characterizes BioWare's inclusion-oriented development at least regarding Mass Effect: if she is genetically engineered to be the apex of beauty, it is natural that she uses it to her advantage. Granted, her battle skills and intelligence are also highlighted throughout the series, especially in her quest to find her younger sister, Oriana, in a different take of the 'Damsel in Distress' trope where the rescuer(s) is also a "damsel", represented both by Miranda and a FemShep, and possibly a third female squadmate if the player so chooses. Nonetheless, trying to disguise Miranda's hypersexuality with the other aspects of her

persona and going beyond the idea of a “body to be looked at” relies on making her an artificial creation that, as she says is “still human” and “make mistakes like everyone else”.

It seems that for BioWare writers of Miranda a woman cannot have “an edge” unless she is genetically modified. That a naturally intelligent, strong and agile woman cannot exist in that (or any) universe. Indeed, her battle prowess as a part of the team is not noticeably different from other human characters, nor is her body design that distant from Ashley Williams, Samantha Traynor and Diana Allers in *Mass Effect 3*. If her wit and intellect do appear often as a plot point, this is not exclusive. Liara manages to become the galaxy's most important information trader, the new Shadow Broker, showing just as much skill regarding intelligence without the need for a genetic engineering excuse. It is still Miranda's body the most visible aspect of this “designed perfection” backstory that works in favour of a discourse aimed at the technomasculine audience as highlighted by Leah:

I think it really does play to the crowd more than anything else (...) particularly putting her on the box art, putting her on the original trailers and things. (...) you've got someone who's wearing something that looks like some kind of painted-on skin. I think that was more of a cheap gimmick that was really quite unnecessary. (Leah, interviewee)

5.1.4 Non-Normative Naked Body or just another eye-candy?

I feel like... I'm pissed off. I'm a dangerous bitch. But then, I'm a little girl again. Shit, it's complicated. (Jack, *Mass Effect 2*)

If Miranda's oversexualized body fits the standards of the industry, another character in ME is worthy of attention due to the different issues her body exposition raises: Jack. She is a biotic female human introduced in *Mass Effect 2*. Her design follows a “punk rock” style,

with shaved hair and a body covered in tattoos. Her clothes are unique, consisting of trousers and two straps covering her nipples, while her tattoos serve as a form of “clothing” (Fig 11).

According to the developers:

Once it was decided that Jack would be clothed in tattoos, various directions were explored for how to tell her backstory through them. We also sought ways to best show off her tattoos while covering her chest to some degree. Concerns about how exposed she was led to some of these changes (Helper et al 2012, p. 79)

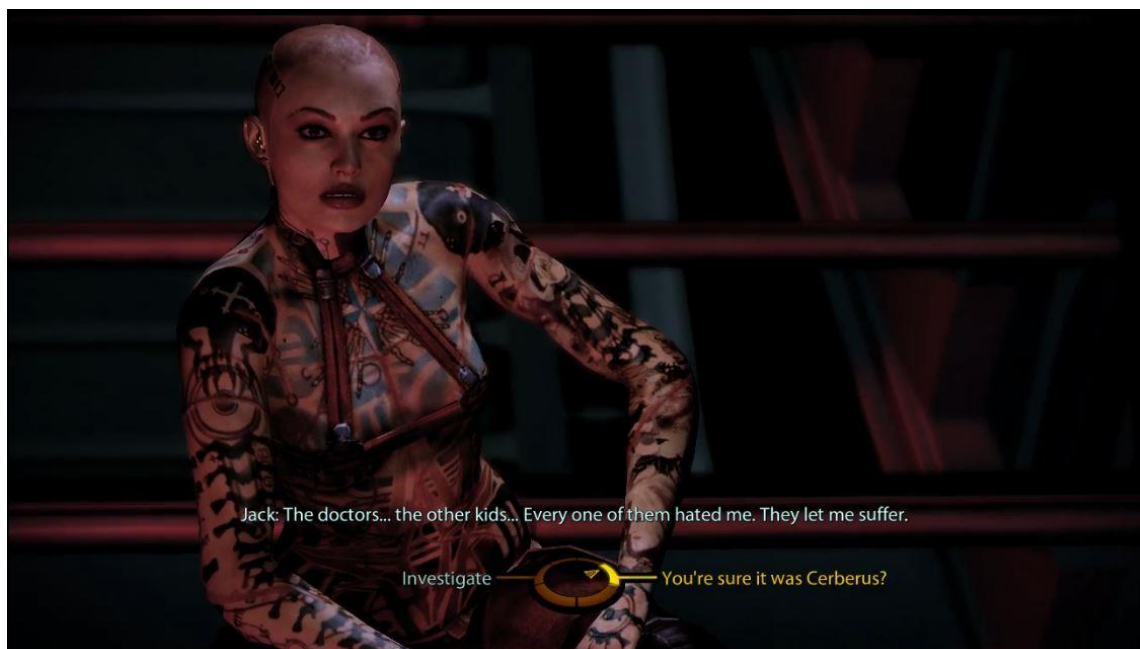


Figure 11 - Jack in Mass Effect 2. Her 'punk rock' look is indicative of her strong personality, while her tattoos are aligned with her transgressive persona. (Printscreen from author's own recorded gameplay)

These concerns were also shared by my interviewees, who find themselves at odds with Jack's design, thinking it befitting of the character personality, but also problematic for following a trope of naked/sexualized female bodies in videogames. For instance, Rahna says that Jack being practically naked does not bother her because she agrees with the producers “tattoo clothing” idea. Neil believes that, in comparison to characters like Miranda, Jack's

semi-nakedness 'didn't seem, I suppose, exaggerated or exploitative' as that fits the character's backstory as a child that suffered abuse as part of an unethical series of experiments conducted by the fictional human supremacy group Cerberus. Being raised as a weapon and less than human against her will, Jack led a life of crime until meeting Shepard and the team, and as players, we deal with this "emotionally broken" character, as put by Jeremiah, and can see her evolution in the third game if the player kept her alive. As a human character with a different background to the military and/or scientific backgrounds of other humans, Neil says that it is not surprising that 'she is that aggressively different in everything she chooses to do (...) Jack is fucking crazy and really messed up!'. Interviewee Jeremiah, who chose Jack as one of his favourite characters and wrote a fanfiction about her unexplored past, believes that having "literally a strap covering the nipples" as clothing is absurd even considering her story, but is glad that she is at least a unique strong female character.

Jack's body is partially non-normative, escaping from the "perfection" of Miranda's. It is still a slender, athletic body, but outside the norm of model-like bodies that populate popular culture products, aligning with alternative, countercultural representations of women, aligned with punk, gothic and rock themes. In an interview with her voice actress, Courteney Taylor, available in a USBN thread dedicated to Jack⁶⁷, she comments that she 'was really into punk rock music' and used to 'run around with girls who had shaved heads and tattoos', giving the actress a familiar "look" to interact with. Moreover, she is written and read as a powerful, rebel female character, deeply affected by a harsh past, with many emotional scars that are hard to heal, shutting her off from the world and unable to trust others.

⁶⁷Available at: <http://bsn.boards.net/post/4114/thread>

Albeit the nakedness of her body, she is not necessarily a hypersexualized character (while still being sexual, sensual and attractive), and Courtney Taylor believes she “was so original looking in the world of games – I loved that she didn't have long hair, thigh boots, and huge boobs”. For some, like user JayKay on UBSN, there is a narrative connection between her design and her story as “the person who exposes the most skin is actually one of if not the most closed-off of all the characters” (/JayKay on UBSN). Jack's evolution during ME2, from a closed-off, emotionally scarred woman to someone that can face her past and traumas, learn from them and evolve is reflected in her design change for ME3, where she shows up with more clothes and a different haircut (see Fig. 12).



Figure 12 - Jack during the mission to rescue students from Grissom Academy. She was also submitted to an 'uplift' in her looks, with larger breasts and more make up. She appears more sexualized here than when she was partially naked. (Printscreen from author's own gameplay)

Now she is employed as a teacher at Grissom Academy, an institution linked to the human Alliance government that hosts and trains biotic children, treating them fairly, unlike the institution she was held growing up. Her current situation shows her emotional growth due to interactions with Shepard and the crew (and the player), overcoming to an extent the

traumas she was submitted to⁶⁸. She is no longer available as part of the crew, but plays an important role in the final instalment of the game and, if she is still an active romance from the previous game, new scenes are available in the game and the Citadel DLC.

5.1.5 HyperMasculine bodies: racial stereotypes and queer desire in James Vega and Jacob Taylor

Sneaking into the Captain's quarters? Heavy risk. But the *prize*... (Jacob Taylor, Mass Effect 2)

Being a soldier is the only thing I've ever been really good at. And not 'cause I try. Hell, I'd've kicked my ass out years ago. Last time I had a command, I lost almost everyone. And they promoted me for it. I guess I'm just not sure if I'm ready to lead again. I don't know if I want that responsibility (James Vega, Mass Effect 3)

While the bulk of the literature regarding character representation in videogames deal with the hypersexualized female bodies, the same attention is not given to representations of male bodies. However, as MacCallum-Stewart reminds us, "gaming is a genre where dysmorphia is rife across all genders, and where vastly overinflated male bodies contend with offensive stereotypes of perceived Otherness, including race, gender, ableism, mental ability and sexuality" (MacCallum-Stewart 2015). Considering the intersectional nature of identities, the bodies of male characters in *Mass Effect* represent the complexities of a politics of identity that aims to understand the stereotypical oppression that white hegemony imposes upon Black and Latino men. James Vega and Jacob Taylor are problematic cases of male

⁶⁸ Depending on choices made by the player in the second and third game, she can either be killed in ME2 suicide mission, or captured and brainwashed by Cerberus and transformed into an enemy that the player will face in battle afterwards

representation, especially when compared to their (mostly) white counterparts⁶⁹. Both are objectified in the course of both games, following on tropes of black masculinity and the “Latin lover”, with BioWare doing little in narrative terms to move beyond these stereotypes.

Previously, when discussing Connell’s (1987) conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity, I highlighted that the author considers gay men as an example of subordinate masculinity. I argue that an intersectional perspective must also account for the role of class and race as other aspects that fit certain men into a subordinate category. Unlike white males, representations of men of colour in videogames are restricted to the repetition of certain tropes, mostly being terrorists, criminals, and the enemy, rather than the heroes (Leonard 2006 pp. 84-85; Everett and Watkins 2008, pp. 147-149)⁷⁰. Games with a man of colour protagonist, such as *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, show just one possibility of black masculinity existence (Leonard 2006, p.85), related to a life of crime. The game also emphasizes black male hypersexuality of ‘compulsive obsessive fucking’ (hooks, 2004, p.68) through the presence of sex workers the player can interact with⁷¹. Rather than an affirmation of masculine power, however, hooks argues that it is an indication of extreme powerlessness’ (ibid. p.68) whereby the black male body is reduced to its primal sexual nature. Black sexuality, argues hooks, is subsumed to white hegemony, to a form of seeing and doing sexuality that is western and white in nature. It is a subjugated masculinity, ‘feminized and tamed by a process of commodification that denies its agency and makes it serve the desires of others, especially white sexual lust’ (ibid, p.74).

⁶⁹ Both Male and Female Shepard can be designed with non-white looks, which can change the perception of the player regarding non-white representations.

⁷⁰ Another common representation of non-white bodies is related to physical prowess, a natural-born ability that enables black men to excel at sports and Asian (or to be specific, Japanese, Chinese and Korean men and women) to be martial arts experts, contrasting the “hard work” that white men must endure in order to be on par with them (Leonard, 2004).

⁷¹ GTA: San Andreas also has an infamous sex mod derived from a hidden piece of code in the game that allows the player to control the avatar action during sex. The mod is known as “Hot Coffee” (Wysocki 2015, p.200).

The character of Jacob Taylor (pictured in Fig. 13), a possible love interest for a Female Shepard in *Mass Effect 2* (ME2) is a black male soldier from the criminal organization Cerberus⁷². He deviates from a performance of black masculinity in games of ‘talking trash and crushing bodies with sheer force’ as he is an eloquent, studied character (Leonard 2005, n.p). Jacob is, however, one of the two male characters objectified by female characters in the game for its perfectly shaped body. Teammate Kasumi Goto, the only playable character of Asian descent, shows an interest in Jacob and, in conversation with a Female Shepard that is romancing him, often highlights his sexual nature and body features. For instance, she says to Commander Shepard that what Jacob wants is to use “his biotics to get you out of that uniform”; wonders which clothes to wear to seduce him if he “is back on the market”, admittedly spies on him while he is working out, shirtless, and describes the scene as “mesmerizing”. In the Shadow Broker DLC, the player can see a series of videos of several characters, secretly recorded by Liara (the current Shadow Broker, a galactic information trader). One of these videos has Jacob doing push-ups while shirtless.

⁷² Perceived in game by many as a terrorist organization fighting for human supremacy in the galaxy, therefore putting Jacob in a similar role of a criminal.



Figure 13 - Jacob and FemShep during their love-making scene in Mass Effect 2 (Anonymous Source. Available at: <http://cdn.ddanzi.com/201306-images/1252075.jpg>)

The problematic representation of Jacob is not limited to his objectified design that is also the target of “body shots” similar to Miranda’s (Østby, 2016, p.132), but also his actions. Towards the end of their romance, before he and FemShep engage sexually, he appears by her door and says that he is walking a dangerous path, but that the prize – FemShep – is worth it. In the third game, if Jacob is still alive after the ME2 suicide mission, the player learns that in the six months that he and Shepard have been separated while she was held captive by the Alliance, he started a relationship with another woman and is soon to be a father. It is the only male romance that openly objectifies FemShep as a “prize”, and the only romance in the game that allows for the romanced to cheat on Female Shepard while MaleShep has no similar plot. Interviewees and other subjects in my data often express disliking of Jacob’s character due to his actions from a feminist standpoint – i.e. that only women are subject to infidelity in the game - but do not note the correlation with race and the perception of non-white men as hypersexual and promiscuous (Everett and Watkins, 2008, p.149). That the one

controversial and openly sexist romance plot builds on this stereotype of blackness adds insult to injury in the representation of the only playable black character in the game⁷³.

James Vega appears just in the third game as the first male and human companion to join the team. Vega is an extremely muscular character, wearing a tight shirt that emphasizes his big arms and six-pack. He also appears shirtless in several scenes, in often gratuitous situations in a clear objectification of his body as eye-candy. Following the stereotype of the Latin lover, 'the possessor of a primal sexuality' (Berg, 2002, p.76) James is flirtatious, something that he admits to being second nature, part of who he is. As a USBN commenter summarizes

I mean, he flirts all the time because he thinks it's fun, but then he gets all coy when Shepard starts to ask him where this is all leading? I think that his writer Mac Walters stated something similar, that they scrapped the romance with James in the end because he was a military guy through and through. (/Fraggle on USBN)

Being apparently an "all muscle no brains" sort of character, Vega is present in one of the most amusing moments of the game. When asked to fix a communication antenna, Vega is unable to comprehend why he was chosen to do so as he does not carry the knowledge necessary to fix it. Ultimately, he decides to kick it until it works again.

According to Charles Ramirez Berg classification of Latino stereotypes in Hollywood Cinema, James Vega could fit both the 'Latin lover' and 'the male buffoon' impersonations: a sensual, charming man and a comedic, simple-minded character (Berg, 2002, pp. 71-76). While both are traits of his character, James Vega is also related to the "militarized masculinity"

⁷³ Other black characters include Commander Anderson, Shepard's guide and one of the lead characters in the first three books of *Mass Effect* and Steve Cortez, who seems to be a Latino/Black mixed character.

ideal, being an authentic soldier, following to his best the military codes of conduct and respecting hierarchy. This part of his identity and personality is challenged during the Citadel DLC. In it FemShep can approach Vega, insisting on having a one-night stand with him in a series of dialogues that ME fans tend to dislike due to the predator-like approach of FemShep. Commentators on the USBN forum consider the situation as moral and sexual harassment based on the power imbalance of that relationship: she is a Commander while he is a soldier under her command. The dialogue feels out of character with any but a "Renegade" FemShep and only happens if no other person has been romanced until that moment. In order to engage with FemShep, Vega admits it has to be a once-in-a-lifetime situation, where he is mostly drunk and unable to judge what is going on in order to forget that she is his Commander and he should respect the military hierarchy.

His flirtatious nature as a Latin lover, explored throughout the game, seems at this moment to have been nothing but a shield, a manifestation of male power not unlike the one highlighted by bell hooks (2004) regarding black masculinity. The extended transmedia universe of *Mass Effect* (as outlined in chapter 3) adds evidence to this: the animation movie *Paragon Lost*, set before ME3, shows the backstory of Vega, the difficulties he and his squad faced and the loss of his love. The chronology of events reinforces the possibility that, during the period the player can engage with James Vega, he uses flirting as an emotional shield that is forcibly disrupted by FemShep in the Citadel DLC. This aspect of Vega's story that reveals a hard past and some emotional frailty is what made interviewee Ron attracted to him, wishing that he could also be an available gay romance. Ron highlights that James Vega fits a body type that is very attractive to many gay men, bulky and strong (see Fig. 14). Ron's boyfriend jokes about him 'falling in the trap of heteronormative gay men stereotypes', being attracted to a non-gay character that is designed to be attractive for this demographic. However, Ron

argues that his attraction really derives only from his backstory as he is not into the strong body type, and believes that Vega is also a victim of hypersexualization, with his shirtless scenes being unnecessary.

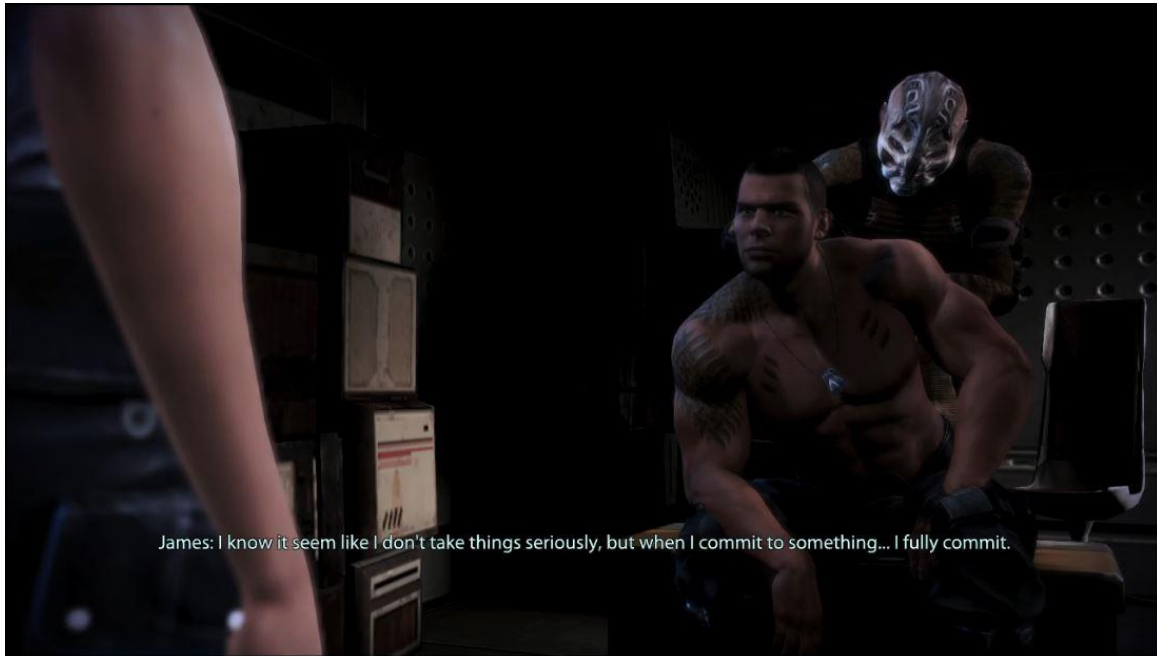


Figure 14 - James Vega getting a new tattoo during Mass Effect 3. The tattoo celebrates his acceptance in the N7 program, the elite soldiers from humankind. His sentence in the image hints both at this playful, flirty persona, and his deeply ingrained sense of mi

Both James Vega and Jacob Taylor being “objectified”, despite being in the dominant male category, do fall under subjugated categories regarding their race. Such cases reinforce the need for an intersectional approach that also accounts for marginalized and stereotyped masculinities – or as hooks (2008, p.66) claims, provides new alternatives to masculinity that are not subsumed to patriarchal expectations. Even though they have more complexity in their narrative, both have as starting points damaging racial stereotypes, extensively propagated in popular culture. Both act as male eye-candy for both some female and gay male publics as gay interviewee Ron highlights in our conversation, and although male hypersexualization is not the same as female hypersexualization, it is just as problematic and shares some of its roots, such as the predominance of a white-male normativity over their

bodies and sexuality. Moreover, beyond the stereotypes of non-white characters common in videogames that David Leonard highlights – criminals, terrorists, muscular and uneducated (Leonard 2006, p.85), these sexual stereotypes also add to the problem, reflecting ‘dominant ideas of race, thereby contributing to our common-sense ideas about race, acting as a compass for both daily and institutional relations’ (ibid, p.85). That these two male minority characters are stereotyped and objectified reinforces the heteronormatively structured world of Mass Effect narrative as argued by Østby (2016), whilst demonstrating that this world is also male and white normative.

5.2 Sexuality and Mass Effect

Mass Effect is a game that garnered mainstream media attention upon its release due to the “realistic” sexual content the game presented. Conservative news channel FoxNews presented the game as one full of digital nudity and explicit sex scenes, claiming it was a danger to the children (despite the game being rated as mature). This news was not received well by ME players and other gamers alike, generating varied responses from those that considered FoxNews piece as uninformed and unreal. (Dutton et al 2011). Indeed, one of the main voices in the program, Cooper Lawrence, admits later not having played the game before making harmful comments about it (Dutton et al 2011, p.291). The controversial imagery that led to FoxNews reports about ME were those that portrayed a sexual relationship with Liara, either partnering with a Female or a Male Shepard. Curiously, sexual scenes that are strictly heteronormative – FemShep and Kaidan, MaleShep and Ashley – did not seem to stir the same controversy. Alien sex and lesbian sex were the real “problems” seen by FoxNews. This leads to the expected conclusion: a conservative news channel sees all

that is out of the heterosexual norm as a deviant behaviour that can badly influence children. The outcry about sexual content in ME is a good starting point to discuss what Tanja Krzywinska names 'the misappearance of sex' (Krzywinska 2015) in games and that Rob Gallagher contends as being a melancholic 'sexlessness' of games (Gallagher 2012).

A study by Dan Mills (Mills 2015) presents an extensive account of the sexual games produced in the 80's which shows that ME is not the first (nor will be the last) to portray sexual encounters. And it is not, as well, the worse in doing so. In 1982, unlicensed games developed by the company Mystique populated Atari 2600 with an array of games where sex was central (Mills 2015, pp.76-77). Miller highlights, however, that 'although they generally demean women, many of these games, paradoxically, had companion games that switched gender roles' (Mills 2015, p. 77). Nonetheless, Mystique games are sexist and offensive not only to women but other minorities as well. Custer's Revenge is the most famous Mystique game. It depicts the rape of a Native American woman by a white American cowboy. Atari sued the game developers as they did not want their brand to be tarnished by this sort of controversial content (Mills, pp.90-91).

If sexual content in games has been present for so long, it is only recently that authors like Gallagher (2012), Krzywinska (2015) and Brenda Brathwaite (2007) and collections such as Rated M for Mature (Wysocki and Lauteria 2015) started to raise an important question: how to make better use of videogames to create proper portrayals of sex and sexuality? Krzywinska argues that a starting point should be acknowledging the 'libidinal economies of games' (Krzywinska 2015, p.106) and the misappearances of sex. For the author, sex, sexuality and erotica can be present in games beyond the imagery and the story, appearing through game mechanics as well, and Anna Anthropy's *Dys4ia* (2012) is a good example of it. Often, argues Krzywinska, to derive sexual and erotic pleasure from a game requires a 'creative

engagement on the part of the player' (ibid, p.113), something that resembles the desire my interviewees demonstrated in engaging romantically and/or sexually with characters that the binding code of the game did not allow. To escape this limitation, they creatively work with their headcanons, or engage with fan-made imagery and stories that explore these possibilities - see Chapter 7 for further exploration of these.

In this section, I want to further explore the virtues and issues of sex and sexuality representation in Mass Effect through the analysis of its mechanics and characters. First, discuss the 'libidinal economies of games' (Krzywinska 2015) through questioning the mandatory nature of sex as a result of romance mechanics in Mass Effect and the limited diversity it provides. Then I discuss the introduction of male-to-male romance, both in terms of its late introduction with gay characters Steve Cortez and Samantha Traynor and the controversy surrounding Kaidan Alenko's coming out as bisexual.

5.2.1 Mandatory sex and the limits of diversity

As innovative as the romance mechanics implemented by BioWare in their games are, they are yet insufficient as tools of engendering diversity. Two seemingly contradictory reasons help us to shed light on that. The first is that the "side quest" nature of romance in general and non-heterosexual romances in specific reduces the visibility of these character's sexuality for the players. Rather than being introduced as natural parts of the plot, the romances are quests the player must pursue. Often, as interviewees Mary and Gibbs said, players can be accidentally dragged into it when pressing the right buttons during dialogue. Being optional rather than integral to the game diminishes its impact as an example of diversity in games. According to Adrienne Shaw (2014, p.35), this puts the burden of

representation into the player rather than something that comes naturally from the creators. Moreover, it impedes others who are outside the LGBTQA+ publics be in touch with this kind of content that can potentially challenge their perceptions about sexualities.

The second reason is the mandatory nature of sex once these romances are in motion, impeding certain performances of (a)sexuality. The romance must be stopped before sex or the player and character must proceed to the scene that indicates the start of sexual intercourse. This issue is raised by interviewee Alice, challenging the current standings of the presence of sex in games:

This is something I never thought about until I saw a text of someone online, I can't remember where I read it, but it was from a female gamer if I'm not mistaken, that identifies as asexual. She felt the game was kind of at fault with her in this sense because *Mass Effect* has all this sex thing, a very clear development of it. It's like, you start with flirtation, then advances a bit the relationship, and at some point, the relationship exists as a matter of fact when the characters have sex. The sex is seen as the absolute act. And this person, as an asexual, did not feel represented because sex is romanticized (Alice, interviewee)

Although one could argue that games with little to no sexual content can have “asexual” characters or allow for asexual performances, the libidinal economies of games and their heteronormative nature both present a sexualized textuality that is ‘dissembled, allegorized, evoked, or sublimated’ (Gallagher 2012, p.408) differently in each game, and do so within the scope of a heteronormative aesthetic. These will cater, first and foremost, to the intended technomasculine public as the game ‘endorses a troubling schema in which powerful women are either lesbians or fetishized sex objects’ (Hart 2015, 153) as discussed previously. Because diversity is optional, effectively a ‘gay button’ (Shaw 2013) that can be activated or not and

keeps the non-heterosexual content hidden from the player, those publics without-part must actively search for videogames that offer a non-normative performance of sexuality. If within the LGBTQA+ spectre, lesbians and gay men, followed by bisexuals (albeit controversially as explored in the next section of this thesis) have at least *some* representation, transgender people and asexuals are for the most part often forgotten.

In the ME universe, one playable character seems to be the closest to a representation of asexuality in that universe. Salarian scientist Mordin Solus states having no interest in sexual activity beyond reproduction and even for these purposes, seems to be a virgin. Mordin argues that Salarians reproduce differently and have very little sex drive. As a redditor who seems to have a biology degree background hypothesizes regarding Alien biology and sex, Salarians:

... [the game] stated multiple times that they don't really feel sexual arousal, but romantic love seems possible, although seemingly restricted to other species (such as Asari). Given this and the entire idea of breeding contracts, they likely fertilise externally, placing eggs and sperm in a pool, fertilised eggs become females, unfertilised eggs become males, which are essentially clones of the mother. Have cloaca, so sexually incompatible with humans. (/ManimalR on Reddit)

Their biological features seem to impede any sexual relationship with Shepard, which reinforces the asexual nature of Salarians in the context of ME. However, Mordin seems to not be interested in romance, something Mary states she likes about the character. Although a non-human character, Mordin was written by and interpreted by humans raising a possible reading of it as asexual. It is important to note however that the spectrum of asexuality is

vast⁷⁴, including romantic interest and monogamous relationships akin to non-asexual ones. Unlike Adams (2015, p.45) who believes that performing asexuality in *Mass Effect* is possible by not engaging in any of the available romances, I argue that a more suitable situation would allow those who are asexual but not aromantic to fully enjoy the mechanics offered by the game. To do so, the act of sex should be optional in the relationships, allowing players that are either asexual or even uncomfortable with watching erotic or sexual scenes to opt-out. Narratively, it could include possible break ups if the partner is not comfortable with the idea of a relationship without sex, effectively adding layers of complexity in how romantic relationships flow. This is something discussed by redditors /smansaxx3 and /claricia, as they express the wish to have a Salarian asexual romance as a possibility:

There are so many cool things BW (*BioWare*) could do if they could delve further into this realm (albeit a little less explicitly lol) like I want to have a platonic salarian romance where you face the hurdles of loving someone and having a relationship without having the physical aspect to it! (/smansaxx3 on Reddit)

Yes, *please*. I want an asexual salarian romance so badly. Imagine a salarian confused over how he's feeling because suddenly his adorable friendship feelings for your character are blossoming into something stronger and he's never felt this before. He's getting *flustered* and starts stuttering and it's so *baffling*, not necessarily because he doesn't know what's happening, but because it's never happened to *him* and he's not sure how to handle it because it's making him act somewhat irrational. So you get to do a whole bunch of adorable things and just :3 yes. (/claricia on Reddit)

⁷⁴ 'Asexual people have the same emotional needs as anyone else, and like in the sexual community we vary widely in how we fulfill those needs. Some asexual people are happier on their own, others are happiest with a group of close friends. Other asexual people have a desire to form more intimate romantic relationships, and will date and seek long-term partnerships. Asexual people are just as likely to date sexual people as we are to date each other.' (The Asexual Visibility & Education Network). Available at: <https://www.asexuality.org/?q=overview.html>

Sex as a reward and end goal of a romantic relationship is perceived as problematic by some players not only because it negates the existence of asexuality, but also because it seems to be a digital version of harmful beliefs regarding sex, romance and gender that are informed by a heteronormative frame. For instance, if the game gives you a Paramour medal for engaging in a sexual relationship (and with most of the romanced being female), it transforms women and men into trophies, objects that can be conquered and prizes to be valued. Rather than games becoming 'a progressive sexuality learning space' (Ware, 2015), these videogames' 'gay button' representations of non-heterosexuality seem to re-enact social practices disguised under the "diversity" policy while hiding the possibility of experiencing it. Moreover, as the redditors above demonstrate, improved levels of diversity can be achieved by telling compelling stories outside the scope of mandatory, heteronormative sex. Surely, as the next part will discuss, gay relationships are also present in the game, a move that challenges the status of gaming as the realm of the heterosexual male. However, these homo and bisexualities seem subjected to a heterosexual imperative in how, why and when they are presented.

5.2.2 On the absence of gay men and controversial bisexualities

because bi women are fiiiiine, only queer boys are icky?? (/enkindlethat on Reddit)

The quote above is part of a brief discussion about the introduction of the character of Kaidan Alenko as a romantic possibility for Male Shepard in ME 3. It refers to the fact that despite lesbian romance being available since the first game, and expanded in the second, only in the third instalment BioWare created two non-heterosexual options for Male Shepard. The redditor is likely alluding to the male fixation and acceptance toward lesbians (as a sexual

desire) that led to their presence being widespread in gaming, while the same is not true for gay males. It is impossible to disconnect BioWare choices of representation from the differing social acceptance of gay people as their game-making is configured by the current discourses about it. It is not to say that lesbians do not suffer prejudice – on the contrary – but that their presence in cultural products is widespread, much due to the possibility of presenting it in ways that please the male gaze, patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity⁷⁵. Gay males, on the other hand, are often erased or portrayed only from a stereotypical perspective of the feminized gay man – a trope which is very common in videogames, with a range of “feminine” male characters read as gay by players. The issue escalates when bisexuality is considered. In TV series, bisexual women are twice more common than male (according to Deerwater, 2016), and while both representations suffer from bisexuality tropes and controversies, male bisexuality, due to its invisibility, needs further attention:

Several of these characters – male and female – fall into outdated patterns and dangerous tropes of villainy and duplicity that are far too often associated with bisexual, but as bi males remain nearly invisible, the missteps really stand out. In shows such as *The Royals* and *Mr. Robot*, men seduce other men for power or information. Their sexual fluidity is associated with immorality rather than indicative of real interest, and reinforces harmful stereotypes of bisexuality being a strategic means of manipulation, rather than a unique identity (Raina Deerwater, 2015⁷⁶)

⁷⁵ Fair and diverse representation of lesbians, focused on presenting fleshed out characters and in-depth stories rather than an eye candy for men is also present in many media products. A few examples would be iconic series *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer*, *The L World* and *Girls*; and current series *One Day at a Time*, *Everything Sucks!* and *Orange is The New Black*. In video games, *Life is Strange* is considered a milestone in lesbian representation. Worth noting that these mainstream productions are mostly Anglo-American, except for *Life is Strange*, creation of a French studio, Dontnod Entertainment. Still, they are culturally westernized and anglicized, therefore limited in what and how they portray lesbian characters.

⁷⁶ Source: <https://www.glaad.org/blog/male-bisexual-representation-slowly-changing-better-tv>

Returning to R.W Connell's (1987) studies, a bisexual man seems to be a non-existent category for hegemonic masculinity. Those that present non-standard sexualities would be immediately considered gay rather than being a group on their own – although both would fall under a subordinated masculinity definition. Mary believes that there is a general acceptance of women as bisexual, but that this identity is occluded in men, adding that she has 'no idea why that is, but people don't really think of it, they think it's like man have to be gay or straight' (Mary, interviewee). In Mass Effect, the bisexual character, Kaidan Alenko, was received with a mixture of praise and backlash that can be partially linked to the difficulty of accepting men as bisexual or acknowledging that 'you can discover your sexuality later on!' as interviewee Gibbs reminds in our conversation. Being a part of the previous games as a love interest exclusive for Female Shepard, his "sudden" bisexuality left a bitter taste as it was not, according to several players, done in a narratively convincing way, nor seemed to be added to the game as a meaningful part of it:

There's absolutely no problem with Kaidan as a character himself nor his appeal to both gender but my major issue with MShep/Kaidan was mainly how ME3 romance was simply created by swapping bodies inside FemShep/Kaidan narrative. This lackadaisical treatment is very unfair to MShep/Kaidan fans themselves who deserve their own narrative without being treated as an alternate (/aoibhealfae on USBN)

He wasn't bisexual to start off with. That is my problem. I'm glad it didn't happen to Ashley because it would remind me of DA2 where everyone was bisexual just to please everyone. It makes the characters feel unique if everyone was different. It would also feel like it came out of nowhere just like

it did for Kaidan. If Kaidan/Ashley were bisexual from the start, I'd have no issue with it. (/obbie1984 on USBN)

They definitely should have explored more Kaidan's romance with MShep in ME3. Even when I like the way it is, it's more about the headcanon I created around why they don't start a relationship in ME1 than what the game actually gives you. (/dalinne on USBN)

However, his inclusion as a romance for Male Shepard is important to gay interviewee Ron. After having Kaidan's bisexual and romanceable future in ME3 revealed to him by his boyfriend, Ron decided that this would be his goal in every playthrough. At first, Ron expressed concern about male gay representation: 'I was afraid, how was it going to be approached? Could it be cliché? Videogames are generally very stereotyped, sometimes like a mockery, making fun of it' (Ron, interviewee). His concerns come from experience. As a gamer since childhood, he does not expect games to have gay characters because that is not what he is used to. Akin to the findings of Shaw (2014) representation is not paramount for Ron to play a game or he 'would play almost nothing right?' (Ron, interviewee). However, he is pleased when the possibility is available in newer games where storytelling can be more complex.

Regarding Kaidan "coming out" in the third game, Ron believes that he is unable to qualify it as a natural or forced narrative, but highlights the importance of having this theme brought to light in a game: '(...)defending Kaidan, I think that it is how real life can be. I don't know if they thought about it when they made the game, I believe they didn't, but there are a lot of guys in the closet' (Ron, interviewee). Even in the futuristic utopia of ME, where prejudice seems considerably diminished, being a bisexual man seems to be a taboo. But not one that comes from the game's lore, but from the developers and the circuits of social and

political configuration that affects what they add or not to the game. Moreover, as Gibbs highlights, ‘the future is supposed to be more accepting but you can't read into it, people who are bisexual, probably act straight as a sort of preservation’ (Gibbs, interviewee), tracing a direct link with “real world” issues faced by those pertaining to LGBTQA+ identifiers. Kaidan coming out in the third game is not by any means unrealistic if acknowledged the real-life examples of closeted men and women.

The problem is not just the poor representation of male bisexuality, but its invisibility in comparison to the extremely normalized female bisexuality⁷⁷ in BioWare games and ME in particular. Bisexual females are present from the first game, with FemShep and Liara (and, by extension, every Asari in the game), and the options multiply in the following games: Morinth, Samara, Kelly Chambers and Diana Allers. Female characters are open about their bisexuality, whereas Kaidan seems to be what commentators at USBN name a “Shepardsexual”, interested only in Male (and Female) Shepard, not expressing attraction for any other men in the game. A USBN user argues that the insistence, by Bi-Kaidan critics, in the argument that in the first game he only shows attraction to women is a reflex of ‘heteronormativity’, adding that ‘BioWare bi men never show an interest in men’, being always hidden behind constant affirmations of preference towards women, reinforcing a ‘trope that sadly we have to endure’ (/nickclark89 on USBN). The issues with male bisexuality in ME are, then, both qualitative in how they are presented, and quantitative, as it is restricted to one character despite a clear interest of players in romancing other male characters, like Garrus (see Chapter 7) and ME 2 squadmate Thane Krios, a member of the Drell species. The latter had, it seems, been

⁷⁷ The treatment of female bisexuality has an important exception: character Jack was openly referred as liking both men and women, but is only available as a love interest for Male Shepard despite being canonically bisexual.

originally thought as a possible bisexual, as fans found the voice overs for this romance hidden in ME 2 files⁷⁸.

Despite bisexuality being present since the first game it is only in the third that two characters appear who identify as gay: Samantha Traynor and Steve Cortez. Both are NPC's that cannot be a part of the player's squad. Cortez participates in some missions as the pilot of the transportation vehicle, while Samantha is rarely seen outside of the Normandy.

Samantha is a quirky character of British descent, and as a player, I still remember discovering by accident her lesbian identity during my first gameplay of Mass Effect. Playing a paragon Male Shepard, I found her character deeply intriguing, smart and fun, deciding to set her as my love interest for that playthrough. Alas, I was soon shut down and saw my Shepard react with an awkward face while saying 'Oh. Sorry. I didn't realize...'. It was, however, a pleasant turn of events for me as a gamer new to that world of romance mechanics at the time. After playing Dragon Age 2 and its entirely bisexual cast, Samantha felt real and so did the whole situation of flirting and thinking she is "into me", but ignoring the clear queues the game left that she could be a lesbian – for instance, her attraction to the voice of EDI, a female-coded A.I.

The belief that the player can, with enough interaction, romance any female character was established by previous BioWare games I played. However, underlying these gaming experiences there is what Nicholas Ware identifies as the 'nice guy syndrome' (Ware 2015). The "nice guy" is a popular term referring to men that treat women well and, for doing so, believe they are entitled to more than just a friendly thank you (Ware 2015, p.227). Ware (2015) argues that when games have designed romances – such as the case of Mass Effect –

⁷⁸Dialogue available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mhfzyGbnAYA>

where a sequence of “right” conversation choices can lead to sex as a reward, we have a somewhat gamified version of the “nice guy” problem. Samantha's response to Male Shepard's advance is problematic, with her being apologetic as if she was at fault for not being hetero or bisexual and leading him on by being friendly as if BioWare is apologizing to their male players that wanted to have a relationship with Samantha. The dialogue happens after a chess match where Traynor is victorious, and after she starts telling a joke to Commander Shepard, the player is faced with two choices of dialogue follow-up, one of them being “What about playing in bed?”, that leads to the following conversation:

Male Shepard: *... and the other is interested in playing another game* (the tone of voice and his eyes face turning to look at the bed and back to Samantha indicate which game he meant)

Samantha: *Ha. Such as...? Oh.* (When the camera turns to her, she seems to have not noticed Shepard's intention at first, but soon realizes the sexual undertone)

Male Shepard: *Hey, I'm sorry. You seemed interested...* (Shepard, who was supporting himself on his legs with his arms, approaching Samantha, immediately backs down while saying it)

Samantha: *Oh, no, I apologize. I try to be friendly, but you're not really my type. Remember how I liked EDI's voice?* (she immediately stands up, and starts apologizing)

Male Shepard: *Oh. Sorry. I didn't realize...* (Shepard looks embarrassed)

Samantha: *Not at all. I can't wait to tell my friends that I broke Commander Shepard's heart and crushed him at chess.* (Samantha sits down again and uses her humour to break the awkwardness of the situation)

From that moment onwards, nothing really changes in how they treat each other during the game. It can be either from complete acceptance and understanding of the situation, or an absence of it in future dialogue lines as her sexuality seems completely pushed

aside unless you are romancing her with a Female Shepard. This is the opposite situation to Steve Cortez, a gay male character, as his backstory is connected to his sexuality. He lost his husband during a Collectors⁷⁹ attack, and this is brought up in conversations with him with both Shepard's, with or without romancing him. His sexual identity plays a bigger role in how the character is presented; it is a conflict that a Male Shepard must help him overcome to make the romance a possibility. Ron thinks that Steve Cortez was not very convincing, but appreciates the casualness in how his relationship with the deceased husband is portrayed. As a character late introduced into the franchise, Cortez still managed to gather fans. A USBN commentator, for example, says that 'The "dead husband" thing can seem daunting at first, but I feel that Cortez is very much an individual and not just personifying his tragedy' (/spiritvanguard on USBN), a point of view shared by many in a thread dedicated to the character. Robin says that in a play-through where she intended to romance Kaidan with a Male Shepard, she felt deeply emotional with Cortez's back story and dropped Kaidan with no regrets. Interviewee Robin believes the character is very realistic and not a clichéd gay character. Interviewees Mary and Gibbs, however, tend to disagree with it as they are both bothered by the trope of the 'sad gay/transgender story' very common in books, movies and games. Commenting on how he finds the movie *Boys Don't Cry* "horribly depressing", Gibbs, a transgender gay man, wishes that LGBTQA+ stories could be less about the struggles faced by them and instead show 'how fun it is to be LGBT'. His friend Mary, who identifies as bisexual, agrees with Gibbs and wants stories that show that LGBTQA+ can (and are) happy too.

⁷⁹ Collectors were the main enemy species in the 2nd instalment of the game.

Although a fleshed-out character Steve Cortez being an NPC works against the representation of gay men. Unlike Samantha Traynor, who is positioned in a central location in the Normandy - beside the Galaxy Map that the player must constantly utilize, facilitating interaction with Samantha as well – Steve Cortez is hidden in Normandy's shuttle bay, where squadmate James Vega is also present and tends to draw the attention of the player. Steve Cortez only “forcefully” appears to the player when he shows up in cutscenes driving the shuttle car, but in these situations, his backstory is unimportant and not brought to light. In order to find out about this character story, the player must pursue it. For example, a USBN commenter admits she did not know nor remember meeting Cortez until later in the game:

I'm ashamed to say that I ignored him in the first part of the game, and didn't make it down to the shuttle bay until almost halfway through the game. When I started noticing just how nice he was, I thought I'd better pay him a visit , and realised that there were two crew members hanging out in the shuttle bay (yeah, James got really mouthy with me) (/roselavellan on USBN)

If Samantha's sexuality seems to be indiscernible for the player if not romancing her, she is at least a more likely member to interact with during the game. Cortez can be completely ignored by the player. The mere presence of non-heterosexual characters does not equal to diversity, but as Shaw says, to plurality, as it only appears when minorities are ‘targeted as a market’ (Shaw 2014, p.218). There are many non-heterosexual characters in Mass Effect, but their significance is questionable. The “gay button” is present here again, with these representations being entirely optional rather than integral to the story being told. Moreover, the treatment of bisexuality as a token for diversity is problematic. It ignores unique traits of bisexual identity by making it ubiquitous (for female characters) or invisible

and unimportant. Indeed, most of the ‘romanceable’ characters can be considered “shepardsexual”, willing to date the player's avatar but no one else, with few exceptions to note: Jacob marries someone else in the third game; Garrus and Tali get together if they are not romanced; it is heavily hinted that James Vega and Ashley Williams hooked up after their intense flirtation during the Citadel DLC. These couples are all heterosexual. Steve Cortez had a husband but does not have any other romantic interest aside Shepard; Jack, who is canonically bisexual, remains single if not romanced; all the Asari have the same fate, and so does Samantha Traynor, Kelly Chambers and Diana Allers, all non-heterosexual characters that are denied a relationship if not with Shepard. Rather than a coincidence, these reinforce the heteronormative character of ME as argued by Østby (2016), where even queer representation is present only through its normalization through a heterosexual – and I would add, through a masculine and patriarchal – lens.

Despite BioWare’s efforts in making a considerably diverse game, it falls short in both reaffirming patterns of female and male ‘perfect’ bodies and a strict heteronormative perception of romance, even when these are same-gender romance. The examples discussed here point then to the addition of plurality rather than diversity. Same-sex romances and ‘powerful’ female characters were added to be one among multiple choices rather than a necessarily integral part of the game. In the conclusion for this chapter, I unpack this discussion based on Shaw (2014) distinction between the terms, arguing that the shift in the politics of production towards diversity and equity depends on the adoption of a feminist, racial and intersectional stance.

5.3 Plurality or diversity?

The character analyses undertaken here demonstrate the controversial and often contradictory nature of BioWare's attempts at improving diversity. There is a clear conflict between creating fleshed out, interesting characters with diverse backgrounds, and delivering that in the form of repeated stereotypes and tropes. The Asari are the best example of BioWare's difficulty in handling powerful female characters. Firstly, there is a tentative occlusion of gender that they seem unable to cope with in the writing, navigating between gender as meaningless, as pointed out by Liara in the first game, and gender as integral to that species as reflected in their gendered life stages – Maiden, Matron and Matriarch. Secondly, the creation of an all-powerful female species, albeit worthy of praise, was problematic as it relies mostly upon their sexualization. Asari power is always linked to their attractiveness and it is speculated in-game that they have the ability to manipulate the mind of other species to fit different standards of beauty⁸⁰. The Asari are just one of the many characters that suffer from these contradictions, with BioWare also being unable to move beyond tropes of race in the case of Jacob Taylor and James Vega, and prioritizing a heteronormative portrayal of romance and sex, valuing the “lesbian fetish” and not including male gay romances until the third game.

I argue that a strong reason for such contradictions lies in the politics of production and content (Lima 2017c) discussed in the previous chapter regarding the gendered workforce in the videogames industry. The first and second versions of ME, which set the rules and lore of that fictional universe, were created by a predominantly male team, most

⁸⁰ In ME2 the player can eavesdrop a conversation happening during a bachelor's party. A human, a Turian and a Salarian – all male – are watching an Asari dancer in a bar. The Salarian questions why humans find Asari attractive as they 'look just like Salarians'. The human reply saying she looks exactly like humans, while the Turian says both are wrong and they look just like Turians. The human character then raises the suspicion of 'mind control'. It is unclear whether they do have this ability or not, but heavily implied throughout the series that they may look slightly different for each species.

likely to be white and heterosexual as well. Several authors argued how diversity in the workplace can lead to the creation of diverse narratives (Shaw 2009, Johnson 2013, Anthropy 2012, Williams et al 2009) – although as Adrienne Shaw reminds us, it is not a solution in itself as there are issues on the realm of economics with the ‘fear of backlash’ to the addition of gay content leading to profit loss and content censorship (Shaw 2009, pp.239-242), and in how to add gay content in a way that is narratively and mechanically meaningful.

The issue of diversity cannot rest only in the production cycle but shared by all elements and participants of a configurative circuit. Adding diverse developers, writers or designers to videogame studios is necessary, but may not reflect in an actual change in which games are produced. Reasons for the lack of change are varied: limited (or non-existent) workers autonomy to effect change in what is created (Saha 2017, p.83); minorities being hired to mostly subordinate positions rather than leading ones, as those are still the realm of the white-male (Saha 2017, pp.79-80); being workers of a capitalist venture with a profit-oriented goal therefore leading to producing content that will cater to the category of “the gamer” as discussed before. Saha frames his diversity discussion in terms of race, highlighting that there is a reinforcement of whiteness that happens because of diversity policies (Saha 2017, pp.80-82) as they fail to address other layers of this problem. I would further add that the conditions for production under which games (Triple A’s especially) are developed, even with policies of diversity in the workplace, are more likely to reproduce whiteness, heteronormativity and hegemonic masculinities. Altering just one aspect of the configurative network encompassing videogames culture is not enough towards a real, effective change in politics of diversity, inclusion and equality.

Prioritizing the possibility of marginalized groups to write and design their own stories does not mean that non-marginalized developers, writers and designers are unable to present

a proper history of marginal groups. As stated by interviewee Mary it would be best to ‘play a game that was all male characters but they were fleshed out’ rather than ‘having a female token character who does not do much’ (Mary, interviewee). Diversity or lack thereof in the industry does not guarantee a sensible and original portrayal of marginalized groups. Nonetheless, it may diminish the risk of these stories addressing representation by adding *plurality* rather than *diversity*, with the former being more present in current content of videogames (Shaw 2014, p.218-226).

Mass Effect, albeit more advanced in their presentation of characters outside the white-male norm than the average Triple-A developer, still relies more on plurality where these characters are tokens of representation, optional content and therefore ‘cannot fulfil the socially progressive goals of media representation’ (Shaw 2014, p. 225). The “burden” of representation should not be in the hands of the consumers, but the developers who should question themselves not ‘whom they should represent and how’ but rather ‘why they have represented whom they have and why they have ignored others’ (ibid, p.225). Several groups are underrepresented in *Mass Effect*, but there are reasons for that stemming both from within the industry and outside of it. There are reasons as to why lesbian/female bisexual romance is prominent while male gay romance is not; to why black and Latino characters are still very connected to stereotypical media representations; to why bisexuality is simultaneously ubiquitous and absent in the case of character Jack.

I argue that these are connected to the configuration of videogames industry by broader social and cultural discourses that privilege certain groups over others, that favours certain voices while silencing others, effectively creating an artificial consensus of “the gamer” as the central figure in the industry. The gendered and heteronormative scene of dissent that was always present in videogames and became more visible with the publicness of

GamerGate is being challenged. These changes must come from a shift in the politics of production, distribution, content, and consumption that includes not only a diverse workforce but mostly a real effort of writing and designing non-stereotyped characters. However, if change comes in the form of plurality rather than diversity, as optional rather than an integral part of a game`s narrative – or even mechanics, as Anna Anthropy`s *Dys4ia* brilliantly does (Lima 2017a, pp.135-137) – there is the danger that marginalized groups will still keep being portrayed as just that: marginalized.

In the following chapter, the thesis shifts in its configurative analysis, superposing the gaming sphere to the medium and culture spheres to study the role of affect in the configurative dynamics of ME. I explore how BioWare designs ME to affectively engage players through their characters through the memorable experiences relayed by my subjects.

Chapter 6: Tales of (Mass) Affect

In the previous chapters I presented discussions about gender and sexuality in the realm of videogames culture, ranging from the technomasculine construction of the industry and its idealized audience to current representation of the without-part in the context of *Mass Effect (ME)*. Chapter's 4 and 5 were focused on two aspects: the videogame industry and the politics of production, leading to a political reading of ME content. Respecting the proposition of a configurative circuit which posits that an analysis of videogames can (and should) be considered from as many angles as possible, this chapter and the following will turn its attention to the gamers and their configurative dynamics within the culture, gaming moment, and medium spheres.

Casey Hudson, lead producer of BioWare's *Mass Effect* and *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, believes a good game can teach something about everyday life, about relationships and empathy, as it allows the gamer new experiences. 'I think a game can allow you to explore how you feel, not only about different situations and different characters as part of a relationship, but also about how you might do things that you can't do in real life (e.g., to role-play a character of a different gender),' (Casey Hudson in Heineman, ch.10,p. 16). BioWare, he adds, has the objective to create a sense of experience for players that 'connect in a more memorable way through emotions' (ibid, ch.10, p. 6). There are many ways through which a game such as ME can create such situations, for example, by creating dense and charismatic characters, forcing dramatic moments of decision making, and allowing romance to occur between different characters.

To explore how ME creates an emotionally engaging universe for its players and how the player develops this engagement, I start with a discussion of affect, building on the current studies about affective engagement in politics and in videogames. I argue that a perspective of publics and affect as proposed by John Dewey (2005, 2012) and Louis Quéré (2003) is effective to understand the role of the latter in forming and mobilizing a range of gamers/publics. I then proceed to discuss comprehensive examples of how affect appears in the context of *Mass Effect*.

Firstly, I challenge the binary of *play as self x play as other*, arguing that a move beyond this dualism is needed to comprehend the affective play in the control of Commander Shepard. Secondly, I discuss BioWare's creation of an emotional connection between players and their characters (Heineman 2015, p.6), discussing players engagement with Non-Playable Characters (NPC's) and alien squad mates and the challenges posed by the game's branched narrative and choice mechanics. Thirdly, I dialogue with Henry Jenkins about the understanding of game as art (Jenkins 2007) to discuss the "wow" moment for my interviewees in their play of *Mass Effect*. I conclude by presenting some of the deeply personal statements given by my interviewees as further evidence of the presence of affect as a key component in videogames culture and how it can be used for political discussion.

6.1 A pragmatist approach to Affect

Affect has always energized rituals of public and private life, although discussions of its place in politics tend to assign it a backseat to reason. Placing the emphasis on rationality, conventional political thinking tends to view feelings as something that ought to be organized by the cognitive processes of reason prior to entering the civic realm (Papacharissi, 2015 pp.9-10)

The role of affect in politics is a relatively recent topic of discussion due to its perception as irrational, and therefore outside the scope of politics as highlighted in the quote above by Zizi Papacharissi. However, as discussed in Chapter 2, emotion and affect are essential components of the concept of politics as a scene of dissensus, helping foster the collectivization of public problems and deliberation. The argument I want to raise in this chapter is related to this “energizing” character of affect in both private and public life. The aim is to understand how the politics of gender and sexuality configurative of videogaming culture relates to a politics of affect and affection. Gender, argues Dahlgren, is an element that ‘accentuates the centrality of affect’ in current political and media studies, as it both challenges a ‘strict separation between politics and the public (...) and popular culture and the private,’ (Dahlgren 2013, p.140). Indeed, as the analysis under discussion here demonstrates, gender and sexuality, among other personal identifiers, are part of a configurative relation between player, game, politics and culture that is mediated by affect.

I have previously discussed John Dewey’s and Louis Quéré conceptualizations of affect as a fundamental part of having ‘an experience’ and its role in the formation of publics (see sections 2.2 and 4.1.4). Papacharissi situates both affect and publics, which she calls *affective*

*publics*⁸¹, in a similar terrain as Dewey and Quéré, where affect and action are interlinked (Papacharissi 2015, pp.12-14). The capacity to affect and to be affected is essential for the formation of a public in the context of a praxeological approach to media and communication. The formation of publics and its action in the world are manifestations of the energizing nature of affect. Publics are not only born out of affect, but are also capable of affecting⁸² and enacting change through processes of subjectification and desubjectification (ibid, p. 14).

Patricia T. Clough notes that the current affective turn in social sciences registers a 'change in the cofunctioning of the political, economic and cultural' (Clough 2007, p.1). This change is marked by the valuing of emotion as a human characteristic alongside rationality; as animals ourselves, emotions are a fundamental part of our lives (Maturana, 2002, p.68). For Humberto Maturana 'there is no human action without an emotion that establishes it as such and makes it possible as an act' (Maturana 2002, p. 22). The action of publics is motivated by an emotional engagement that not only affects its formation but also the transformations in the cultural, political and social spheres in which affect theories are implicated⁸³.

In this thesis, I define affect from a pragmatist perspective. Affect is the energy, the combination of emotions and actions capable of forming and mobilizing a public. Mobilization occurs through a feedback loop of emotions and actions. It is a driving force that energizes the members of a public, forming experiential connections with each other. Affect is what

⁸¹ The author defines affective publics as those 'called into being by the discursive affordances of Twitter', not only forming and being a public as 'network publics that are sustained by online media but also by modalities of affective intensity' (Papacharissi 2015, p. 118). I contend however that every public is inherently affective as they are born out of affection and action. In the concept utilised in the thesis, there is no public without affect.

⁸² See for instance the extensive bibliography on how mobilized publics led to significant political changes in the Arab Spring, Indignados, Occupy and other political movements worldwide (Gerbaudo 2012; Vrikki 2017)

⁸³ Chapter 7 shows how emotional and affective engagement play an important role in the creation of "emergent user-generated content" (Harvey 2015, p.190), amplifying the universe of *Mass Effect* through non-official channels and potentially leading to transformations in the configurative dynamics between player and developer

connects us as publics, being the continuity between our bodies and the social, positioning ourselves as beings capable of acting upon the world and recognizing the other as similar to ourselves, be it as a woman, as part of the LGBTQA+ community, or simply by playing ME. Just as affects feelings and emotions are limitless, so too is our belonging to publics. Our capacity to be affected, to feel and to think, to touch, smell and see, to enact action through and from the body, to belong, is virtually infinite.

We belong to several publics simultaneously. For instance, the love for ME that forms the publics manifested on Reddit and USBN is formed also by individuals belonging to different publics. The love I allude to here is defined by Maturana as an emotion that is foundational to the social, the 'emotion that constitutes the domain of conducts in which operates the acceptance of the other as a legitimate other in coexistence, and it is this mode of coexistence we infer when we talk about the social.' (Maturana 2002, p.23).

The love that initiates the formation of feminist groups of women and lead some of those to be affectively engaged as a public with ME are different from those carried by misogynistic others, who form a public that has sharp contrasting ideologies and values to feminist women. While the former may find in ME a game where female characters are given depth and importance - despite the issues of hypersexualization highlighted in Chapter 5 - therefore perceive it as a good example for feminist gamers, the latter do not play ME for those same reasons. Indeed, their connection to ME stems from a "natural" path that is delineated for them by a masculine technoculture that expects men to like and play these kinds of videogames. Nonetheless, they may encounter themselves inhabiting the same virtual and immaterial space as publics affected by and affective of ME.

6.2 Affect and RolePlay

Technologies of the self (...) permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations in their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality (Foucault, 1988, p.18)

It is very interesting to what extent you go only because of a game, that you know more about yourself from the reflection that the game provides (Chester, Interviewee)

Role Playing Games with varying degrees of character customization, such as ME, allow for several performances of play within their plurality of choices. Although not a mandatory tool, customizing the main character can evoke different feelings for each gamer, from indifference to identification. In this section, I want to discuss the ways of playing Shepard and how this play is connected to one's personal life, beliefs, values and understandings of play. Moving away from a dualism of play as self/ play as other, I contend that play, in the context of character-driven games, carries an autobiographical experience of reflection of the self. By getting in touch with their 'self', gamers exercise fundamentals of the political, contemplating the self in relation to others, to the space inhabited, to normative discourses and ideologies.

The self, says George H. Mead, exists in relation to another, which he calls a 'generalized other' (Mead 1934, pp. 160-161), and an individual's actions respond to this

otherness, to expected patterns of behaviour, to previously agreed (or imposed) upon norms and regulations, making “society possible” (Mead 1934, p.161). Roleplay (or role-take to use the same terminology as the author) is a fundamental activity in Mead’s conceptualization of the ‘self’, as he was concerned with the ‘empirical analysis of the human behaviour’ that is ‘intimately related to everyday experience’ (Blumer and Morrione, 2004, p.57). It is in taking the role of others that we start to understand ourselves as objects and therefore recognize ourselves as social beings, as individuals we and others can act upon (Blumer and Morrione, 2004, p.58). Herbert Blumer, in his studies about the work and influence of George Mead to sociology and social interaction, argues that the main benefit of this process of the realization of the self as an object that is built through the other is the ability of ‘interaction with oneself’ (Blumer and Morrione, 2004, p.63). The communicative processes of interaction that are often between ourselves and the other are now also internalized, radically transforming ‘our position with regard to our surrounding world and impacts an entirely new character to the formation of our actions’ (Blumer and Morrione, 2004, p.63). In Chapter 1 I discussed Goffman’s⁸⁴ settings of a gaming encounter and how they are informed by external factors rather than being encircled in a magic circle separate from the world. I argued that “internal” factors of the self must also be considered in tandem with the external influences on our self. To research gaming and affect we need to account for the negotiations in the mind of players when making decisions; the “headcanon” they write for their character’s behaviour; their tentative mimicking of themselves in the other; and their experimentations with otherness through play.

⁸⁴ Erving Goffman is highly influenced by both George Mead and Herbert Blumer. Their contributions can be seen for example in Goffman’s concepts of performance, encounter and framing, where everyday experience, the social and the symbolic interactions are central. (Goffman 1959;1961)

To perform, be it as ones' 'self' or as the 'other', as a digital avatar in a game, is a way through which politics can be manifested. In her discussion about the 'affective publics' formed in Twitter, Papacharissi argues that the platform serves as a stage for performance where people can tell 'stories not just about news and current events but also about themselves' (Papacharissi, 2015, p. 96). These performances of the self are political, claiming 'symbolic capital' through 'performed and reinvented identities' (ibid, p.97). I argue that a similar political capacity through performance and affect is at play in videogames. They offer a space for safe performing, both in online multiplayer games such as *Everquest* (Taylor 2003), and in single player games such as the *Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* (Hayes 2007) and ME. These will always carry previous experiences, one's own values, beliefs and understandings of the world, while presenting the player with unknown and new challenges that may or may not effect changes in their self. Papacharissi argues that a performance allows individuals to 'traverse from private to public (...) from the personal to the political or from the individual to the collective and back' (Papacharissi 2015, p.98). The experiences presented in this section investigate this traversal.: they question how *performing* Shepard is an act of negotiating between the self, the other and a network of relations. Moreover, regarding the understanding of public problems such as gender and sexuality, games such as ME can function as 'affective mechanisms' (ibid. p.120) to increase awareness.

Rather than a taxonomy of play such as Krobová et al's modes of queer play (Krobová et al 2015) or gendered research of play styles (Schott and Horrell 2000; Hayes 2007, Taylor 2003), it seems more fruitful for this thesis to acknowledge the fluidity and subjectivity of play. This section investigates how players negotiate with themselves the actions of their controllable characters while playing narrative-driven games where the controllable avatar is

important. Affect, I contend, configures the way these gamers act upon and through Shepard, blurring the divide between play as self and play as other. Essentially there is no possible way to separate mind, self, body and the other in play. The internal communicative processes indicated by Mead and Blumer are in line with the process of knowing oneself and taking care of our self as proposed by Foucault (1984). I argue that in our negotiations about what to do next in the game, mental processes informed by our understandings of ourselves and society come into play. To understand the different ways of role playing Shepard raised by interviewees, redditors and USBN members alike, it is fundamental to understand the affect that energizes play both on an individual and public level. The self is affected, affective and affecting of play, and this section discusses the complexities of controlling an avatar and how it is concerned with the self and the other, the private and the public, and everything in between.

6.2.1 Me-Shepard's and Other-Shepard's

I know who I am IRL, and I'm not at all unhappy with myself IRL, but I know that I'm not a bold space marine forcefully leading a team of veterans into battle (/DamienStark on Reddit)

Playing as a Female Shepard for the first time as part of this research was quite an experience. Having heard and read many times about Jennifer Hale's outstanding performance, I was intrigued and excited to have this experience in such a narrative-driven game. Never being much of a Male Shepard fan myself, I had great pleasure playing as FemShep, which later translated into me adopting play as female characters in other games whenever possible. My own experiences of playing as a female character vary: when playing

Mass Effect: Andromeda as a queer woman of colour I felt deeply connected to the character and each decision made by her was considering mine and “her” persona; on the other hand, I struggled to finish my gameplay of *Dragon Age: Inquisition (DA: I)* (BioWare, 2014) as I was unable to connect with the main character I created, a female Qunari named Silver. She is as different from me as any other female (and/or alien-monster) character could be, yet I was not as affectively engaged with her in the same way I had been with FemShep and FemRyder. Why is that the case? Playing as “other” is not strange to me, however the huge difference in sentiment between these gameplays poses a question about the complexities of role-playing, and the difference – if any – between playing as “myself” and playing as “the other”. It is not a mere distinction of identity traits, but modes of play: I can play as another gender while performing actions very similar to the ones I would take in her place; or I can perform a different persona altogether even when playing a male character. We cannot dismiss the mechanics and narrative aspects of games as they too affect how we engage. The endless, long and uninteresting side quests of *DA: I* were off-putting for me, and so was the loosely integrated narrative of the franchise. Unlike ME where you play with Shepard all the time, the Dragon Age franchise has a different protagonist in each game, which for some, like me, can make it harder to connect to the lore and care about those characters. How does affect come into play in how gamers roleplay their Shepard? Previously I mentioned a Reddit discussion about the ways of playing an RPG game – as oneself and as the other – which I would like to expand upon here (see 4.1.2).

Playing as oneself is usually described as creating a character as physically and/or psychologically similar to the player as possible, and during play, making decisions based on their personal beliefs, ideologies and ethics. Additionally, Joshua Irizarry and Ita Irizarry (2014,

pp. 230-232) argue that those playing as oneself in *Mass Effect* also bring their religious beliefs to their construction of Shepard – an external resource that transforms, to use Goffman’s terminology (Goffman 1961) the gaming encounter between gamer and game. Not having a default religion, Shepard can embody the players religion (or lack of) and configure their ‘understandings of Shepard’s values, in-game conversations, and decisions’ (Irizarry and Irizarry 2014, p. 232). Although religious matters were not highlighted by my interviewees, the retelling of their experiences of play follow a similar pattern of the self as configurative of play. Victor says that in his first play of *Mass Effect* he wanted Shepard to be himself, and even gave his name to the character, describing his play as ‘being part of the story (...) I tried to think what would I do in real life, in that situation’ (Victor, interviewee). Angelina places great importance in games where she can play as a woman as part of her feminist stance regarding media representation, a position echoed by other female interviewees such as Rahna and Alice. Interviewee Mary says that while she does not ‘consciously play a game or pick up a game just because it has female characters in it’ she values and cherishes those that have ‘good, strong female voices in it’ (Mary, interviewee).

Playing as the Other would be the exact opposite, using character creation mechanics to design someone that is distant from the players ‘self’, as I did with FemShep and FemRyder, and during the game made choices based on that specific character’s story and personality developed according to the player’s headcanon for it. That is the case of redditor DamienStark, quoted in the start of this section. He is ‘baffled’ by those that play a game as ‘their real-actual-self’, and has played *Mass Effect* as FemShep. He wants to ‘experience an interesting story which *isn’t* about me’. From his comment, DamienStark seems tired of the usual lead character in games being the ‘gruff man-hero bro soldier guy’ and thought it would be a more

interesting route to see the story of that game through the impersonation of a powerful female character. Damien acknowledges his agency at play: he is still the one in charge of 'shaping that story' but argues that he managed to detach from the character completely.

If these two forms of play seem sufficient at a first glance, a further look into the experiences of my interviewees, redditors and USBN users alike demonstrates that modes of play vary beyond the deceptive duality of play as self x play as other. For instance, some declare that even when role-playing otherness, it is harder to make decisions that conflict with the players moral compass. Robin enjoys creating a character and roleplay it, but ends up 'always falling back into being too much a goody two-shoes (...) I can't be renegade, I can't be a bad person in games' (Robin, interviewee). Even while playing as other, Robin is unable to completely dissociate himself from that fictional avatar. Often, this is complicated by matters of affective engagement with characters, complicating play. For instance, a full-on Renegade play of ME has a high probability of killing every companion during the games, especially in the Suicide Mission of *Mass Effect 2*. That seems to obstruct some players goal of a Renegade play as they feel bad about killing squad mates. Gibbs for instance says he 'started playing renegade, and through the game gradually became more Paragon because I couldn't handle it. I accidentally killed Miranda because... I was annoyed at her (...) and I was like 'oh my god! I'm a horrible person' (Gibbs, interviewee).

This feeling of guilt for performing in a way that leads to bad outcomes is related to game design, to the medium unique affordances (Isbister, 2016, pp. 25-26). Comparing videogames to other media like cinema and books, Katherine Isbister argues that player agency in the outcome of an interaction creates 'an additional palette of social emotions' that game designers can explore (ibid, p.X). Gibbs said his playthrough started with a Shepard that

was a little racist and xenophobic but he likes to think that 'Shepard evolved alongside the other characters as well, and became less of a racist prick' (Gibbs, interviewee), implying that his play of Otherness slowly evolved to a play as himself due to his inability of acting mean to others. By evoking guilt, ME provides affective and affecting experiences for the players that challenges their perceptions of themselves and how far they can stretch their ethical boundaries in a (real) consequence free scenario (Flanagan and Nissenbaum 2014, p.45). What is interesting in this case is how the in-game consequences, beyond the matters of resources that could facilitate gameplay, affect the player psychologically, with an array of feelings that are not usually connected to gaming. Katherine Isbister, Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum argue that game developers and designers can embed these emotions and play with values in their creations, unlocking an array of possibilities through the use of choice mechanics and a branched narrative design, among other aspects of game design (Isbister, 2016 p.22; Flanagan and Nissenbaum, 2014, pp.33-72)

Playing as ones 'self' also does not mean avoiding experimenting with Otherness, or behaviours that are not immediately linked to yourself. A USBN commentator says the characters 'are obviously not me but could be an idealized version of me' (/Ariez_cz on USBN). Games allow the self to operate in fantastic scenarios, imagining a version of ourselves that have 'magical powers' (/Ariez_cz on USBN). Indeed, the core idea of many (if not all) games allows the player to experience otherness and simulate situations beyond their everyday lives.

In *Mass Effect* you are in control of a highly trained military avatar that can, if the player wishes, use Biotic energy to throw enemies into the air. If there are players with a military background, such as interviewee Mary, who may be able to perform a traditional Soldier role in real life, it is unlikely that they would engage in battle against aliens and

intelligent machines. Playing as oneself is always limited both in terms of storytelling and mechanics, with the former being limited by the original creators of the game and the second by constraints of the code. ME allows the player to create a look-alike avatar, adding more possibilities for the play as self/Other. Torch is a gamer who loves customization mechanics and told me he spends 'three, four hours doing it. I have fun (*customizing*)' (Torch, interviewee), and even calls his wife to see if the character resembles him. However, he wishes he could fatten the character to make them more like himself, an option unavailable in ME. Beyond the limits of customization, a game, even when relying on branched narratives which depend on player choice, are still formed by a series of codes and pre-recorded lines that limit the extent of configuration of the game by the player.

Another mode of play that challenges this binary happens when players excuse themselves for acting differently than what they had up to that point. Interviewee Rahna said that she always plays the same character, despite 'enjoying this escape from reality thing': Paragon FemShep, Adept as she enjoys being a biotic, faithful to Kaidan in every single play. She prefers to not create a character completely different from her, instead creating her own self with a twist of 'how I would be [sic] if I were a superhero' (Rahna, interviewee). Questioned about her loyalty to the Kaidan romance in every gameplay, including in the second game where no romance with Kaidan is possible, she replies that she is unable to cheat on someone in real life, and is unable to have that behaviour in-game as well. She does not want to betray who she is and her values even in a scenario where it carries no real consequences. However, in certain parts of the game and in replays, as part of exploring other narrative branches in the game she felt it was acceptable to 'act renegade' without betraying herself and her FemShep.

The self is not a fixed entity, but constantly in construction. Individuals are not unable to change or adapt to the circumstances nor act in contradictory ways. The freedom and risk-free situation of gaming is an optimal terrain for experimentations of the self that cannot happen outside of gaming, either due to the impossibility of emanating energy beams from our bodies or to legal constraints – the act of killing is not punished in most games, whilst it is a criminal offence outside of gaming.

Moreover, in the case of ME, there is also a possibility of enacting Otherness and experiencing it to an extent, which can in turn generate awareness of wider political problems. With ME being the first ‘mature game’ he played upon his return to the gaming scene, Jeremiah felt it was a good idea to start playing as himself in the game, but says that nowadays he prefers building a character – although he admits having difficulty in creating someone too different from himself. He tells the story of his first play as a FemShep and in a conversation with Alice he mentioned that ‘within two hours of game, a guy hit on me in a bar’ to which she replied ‘yes, that is being FemShep, but not just FemShep, fem in life’. Jeremiah reflects about his play as FemShep, arguing that although he did play female characters before, the choice and romance mechanics, the possibility of connecting with other characters are ‘deeper than what I played before’. He praises the possibility of playing someone else as ‘an opportunity to see the world with other eyes. That there are other stories in the world told from the point of view of these eyes, you know’ (Jeremiah, interviewee). Jeremiah’s development of an affective connection with the game helped him perceive worlds beyond that told or seen through the perspective of the white-male-heterosexual, highlighting the importance of giving room and volume to other voices to tell their stories. He is vocal regarding the need for a change in the politics of production in videogames, stating that

producers 'must keep risking' and challenge the minority of 'white hetero men that felt like the kings (*of videogames*) and are now feeling threatened' (Jeremiah, interviewee). He attributes his stance mainly to the maturity of gaming he met upon his return to *Mass Effect*, which affected him on a personal level: 'I can place *Mass Effect* together with movies and books that defined my character as a person (...) that made me who I am today and like what I like today' (Jeremiah, interviewee).

Within this section, I demonstrate the myriad ways to play as Shepard, as well as how these are negotiated by players. In doing so, they reflect about themselves and the Other, even if this Other is a virtual character in a game, or a species whose survival depends on your choice. Play is an autobiographical experience where the self, this 'dynamic, changing and plural' (Eakin, 1999, p.98) object, can experiment and/or reaffirm values and ideas; where one's morals and ethics are challenged. In writing Shepard's history, the player writes their story as well, in a cyborg-like way (Haraway, 1991). The relationship of the avatar and the player that blurs the distinction between both and instead points to a hybrid being manifested (Krobová et al 2015, p.3). Players operate within and beyond the constraints imposed by the game narrative structure and coded behaviour as these machinations of the self cannot be foreseen by the developers. These operations of the 'self' happen in the conversations with ourselves that evaluate the situation and organize which action to take upon being stimulated (Blumer and Morrione, p.64) and can manifest bodily such as the example of players putting the controller away to think what to do next, often due to their deep emotional engagement to the game and its characters. The next section will explore these connections with *others* further, in the processes of decision making and how BioWare's world building helps create a sense of *caring about* that configures players engagement with the game.

6.3 Me, Myself and The Crew

Mass Effect was really built around an experience that kind of lives in the eyes of the characters around you (Casey Hudson in Heineman, 2015, ch10. p.8)

If the correlation between self and the avatar controlled by the player is palpable regarding matters of affect, identification and representation, Non-Playable and Partially Playable Characters⁸⁵ (NPC's and PPC's) pose a different conundrum. In the case of ME, not only squad mates but a series of other characters are fleshed out through the three games and its DLC's and transmedia products. What can the relationship of gamers with these characters say to us regarding identity politics and affect? Are there any differences between a gamer's interaction with NPC's and the PPC's? The former are in the game for specific reasons, such as starting a quest, presenting a new plot device or, just populate the world, engaging in conversations with other NPC's that the player can overhear. The latter go into battle with you during the game and the player can control some actions, engage in extensive dialogue and develop closer engagement.

This section explores these differences, pointing to aspects of game development, both from mechanics and narrative standpoints, that effects emotional engagement with NPC's and PPC's. Following the studies of Jim Bizzocchi and Joshua Tanenbaum on the narrative poetics of *Mass Effect 2* (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum 2012), I discuss how the narrative design of the game fosters affect and subjective experiences of play. Moreover, Samuel Zakowski's work on time and temporality in ME2 adds more complexity through the

⁸⁵ I consider the squad mates as "partially playable" as their skills, weapons and armour are controlled/chosen by the player. In the Xbox360 version of *Mass Effect 3*, Kinect could be used to issue voice commands to the squad, adding an interesting level of interaction with these characters.

discussion of the game's 'temporal thickness (...) a past and a present to this world and the characters inhabiting it' (Zakowski 2013, p.65). I contend that the creation of an emotionally engaging world and in-depth characters help create a sense of an agency that matters. In exercising agency, the players dwell on the reflection of their 'self' and their values.

6.3.1 Interacting with NPC's: storytelling, world-building and affect

Interactions with NPC's move players beyond 'para-social' feelings into consequential social experiences with accompanying social emotions and behaviors (Isbister, 2016, p.33)

During the three games of ME the player engages with a series of side stories with different degrees of importance. These range from larger narrative arcs that span the three games such as the Krogan Genophage and the Quarian-Geth dispute and have major impacts on the outcome of play, especially in the third game, affecting your resources for the war against the Reapers and your relationship with squad mates. Other "micronarrative arcs" (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum 2012, pp. 395-396) take place during the story, involving NPC's with whom the player can interact in limited, pre-set scenarios, as they explore places such as the Citadel, Omega and other inhabited planets. These micro arcs serve to enrich play experience, showing the player a world that is in constant flow in which they can act upon and shape its destiny.

Take for instance the NPC Conrad Verner and the many paths his micro arc can take depending on player interaction. Conrad is presented in the first game as a fan of Shepard, asking for an autograph in a conversation in the Wards area of the Citadel. Already in the first interaction with him, player responses to the dialogue options offered can lead to very

different outcomes. A “renegade”, ruthless approach will lead to Conrad’s death as he tries to fight a group of Turians to prove he can be as strong as Shepard. Approached through a “paragon” and courteous manner, Shepard can either “charm” or “intimidate” Conrad to not take up arms, the first leading to him thanking Shepard for “setting him straight” and the second leading to Conrad refusing Shepard as a hero. It is a brief, simple interaction that has many outcomes quite different from each other. If he survives, Conrad appears in the subsequent games. In ME 2, Conrad is shown impersonating an Alliance officer. A series of dialogue and a short side quest once again leads to two outcomes, one with Conrad opening a charity foundation named “Shepards” and the other leading to his death.

The player reunites with Conrad in the final instalment of the game providing he is still alive. His charity was attacked by Reapers and Conrad manages to save the kids housed there. The player can also discover more about Conrad’s family and friends, and how his life is under the Reaper’s attack. Although no new decision can be made regarding Conrad’s life, an interesting turn of events occurs: in a situation where Conrad tries to save Shepard from being shot, he can either die or survive. His survival, however, is bounded by actions taken by the player in the first game regarding another NPC named Jenna, in a short side quest, “Citadel: Rita’s Sister”. Conrad is only saved if in game one the player participated in a side quest where Shepard meets Jenna. She returns in the third game, making an appearance by sabotaging the Cerberus Agent’ weapon that would kill Conrad. The fate of the two characters, albeit unknown afterwards, is hinted as them getting acquainted and possibly being a couple.

The depth of narrative design put into this converging of two micro narrative arcs adds to the complexity of this fictional world. The myriad of outcomes leads to several ‘possible worlds (...) worlds in which different paths were taken, different choices were made, and

different effects were dealt with' (Zakowski, 2013, p. 72), adding to the 'temporal thickness' that extends play further than the main narrative arc, a result of the combination of branched narratives and choice mechanics.

Although no interviewee mentioned the case of Conrad, it is one of the micro narrative arcs that resonated with me the most during my first gameplay. It was a funny, interesting side story that I never forgot and always thought fascinating due to its loose relation to the main plot, but closely linked to the construction of the mythical figure of "Shepard, The Hero of The Galaxy" and what he/she could mean for the characters - humans especially – in the universe. Conrad Verner is one of those characters who are deeply affected by the actions of Shepard and the changes he/she can make in the galaxy. It adds flavour and texture of the narrative; it adds movement and flow to that world beyond the moment of play, a 'persistence of character that extends beyond their brief contact with the player' (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum, 2012, p.399). Surely, we can save or kill Conrad many times, but everything that happens in between those encounters *matters* to their interaction in-game, and, potentially, matters to the player as well⁸⁶.

Another aspect of this world that favours the construction of an emotionally engaging game is the dynamics of temporality. According to Samuel Zakowski, there is a temporality beyond that of the player-Shepard that gives a sense of a world that does not stop or is not centred around Shepard (Zakowski, 2013, p.65). This, he argues, can come in the form of the Codex which provides extra valuable information to the player about the past of that galaxy and informs decision-making (ibid, pp.65-68); or in the evolving squad mates (PPC's) from

⁸⁶ In *Mass Effect: Andromeda* the player can have a brief encounter with Conrad's sister, Cassandra Verner. ME: A has many characters whose surname reveals their relationship with the original trilogy characters, in an effort to expand the narrative richness that connects both.

being 'frozen in time' in the first game, bounded to a certain area in the ship, to freely moving around Normandy, the Citadel and other locations in the third game, extending a 'present independent from Shepard' for these characters (ibid, pp.69-71). The 'temporal thickness', he argues, helps with the player immersion in the game. I would add that NPC's also operate in the configuration of a temporal thickness, of a world that keeps in motion outside the main narrative. An interesting case is remembered by Rahna:

I like (...) how they go back to things from other games. Sometimes they bring back characters and I'm like "damn, they remember this person exists? Like that couple we interfere if they would do a surgery in their unborn child or not and they come back until the end of the game you know? They are there, in the corner, doing small talk, but they (BioWare) go back to it, don't leave it as a plot hole (Rahna, interviewee)

The situation mentioned by Rahna involves helping a couple that is inside the Citadel during the first game, an optional mission entitled "Citadel: Family Matter". As a player, we can start a conversation with a couple, Rebekah and Michael, helping them decide what to do either by reconciling the couple or being unable to. This very small thread of story has a happy ending that the player can hear about in both sequels. In *Mass Effect 2*, the player cannot engage with the couple and only overhear them, but in the third game Shepard can talk to the couple and support them once again. It is a micro narrative arc even more peripheral than Conrad's, with no correlation whatsoever with the overarching plot of the Reaper Invasion, or the personal journey of Shepard in becoming a galactical hero. Outside of netting a few Paragon or Renegade points in the first and third game, the side quest can be considered useless for the player from a ludic standpoint. However, it narratively adds to the story creating temporalities slightly outside of the player-Shepard time which 'contributes to

the illusion of realism' (Zakowski, 2013, p.71), immersion, and affection, to the creation of a universe that seems more worth fighting for as it has lively characters rather than blank-slate NPC's. I argue that these micro narrative arcs help by creating a rich and populated world that the player can care about. In doing so, BioWare produces an environment where emotional ties can be constructed, fostering immersion and flow on an affective level.

The next section discusses the love for the Alien PPC's in *Mass Effect* and what identification with this "extreme" otherness can tell us about videogames as a political medium.

6.3.2 Loving the Big Scary Alien

You've been a champion to the Krogan, a friend of clan Urdnot, and a brother to me. To every Krogan born after this day, the name 'Shepard' will mean 'hero' (Urdnot Wrex, *Mass Effect 3*)

Replaying *Mass Effect* while writing this thesis kept the feelings and emotions fostered by the game at the forefront of my mind. A day of frustrating play could result in less inspired writing, while getting into the flow of the game could lead to more hours of play and fewer hours of writing. Nonetheless, the play-while-you-write approach was mostly beneficial. Just a day before writing these lines I decided to replay the section of *Mass Effect 1* that leads to Shepard commanding the Normandy for the first time. The chill on my spine as I entered the ship that allowed me to get in touch with the "entire" galaxy for the first time persisted and got stronger with the excitement of knowing what lay ahead. More than that, it was also the first time where I could have a longer dialogue with the three alien squad mates who joined

me while I explored the quests in the Citadel: Garrus Vakarian, Wrex and Tali Zorah. The first interactions with them were crucial in establishing the personality of my Shepard.



Figure 15 - Wrex explains the Genophage to Shepard in Mass Effect 1 (Printscreen from author's own recorded gameplay)

I intended, just as some of my interviewees had, to do a Renegade-oriented gameplay, with a xenophobic Shepard. Decided, I went down to the Cargo Bay to talk with Wrex (Fig. 17) – a Krogan, big, strong, ferocious, with a scar in his face, with a design much closer to menacing depictions of aliens than to the fetishized alien design of the Asari. Wrex is quite a beloved character by fans – Chester considers him a best friend and formed a bond with him that he considered ‘a form of love, definitely a bromance’ – and his storyline can branch differently upon player choice, with him possibly dying in the first game or being alive until the third where he becomes a Krogan Warlord. However, in the third game he can also be lied to and killed because of player choices.

In the Cargo Bay, during my first dialogue with Wrex, I wanted to act ruthlessly, dismissing the weight of the Krogan Genophage. but I could not. I managed to choose an

inappropriate answer at first, comparing the species' quasi-extinction to mankind's difficulty in establishing themselves in the Galaxy. This created a false symmetry much like the claims of racism against white people or 'heterophobia'. However, Wrex's response, helped by the tone of his voice and somehow by his eyes made me feel heartbroken. I was not able to continue that performance against a character who was clearly suffering deeply from the cruel fate of his species and was hopeless in a revival of Krogan's. It did not help that I knew beforehand that Wrex could be the one responsible for a revolution for his species, becoming a leader and a saviour. Knowing that this initial hopelessness would become the shimmering hope of an entire species if I provided him the right answers, I could not continue a play that would ultimately lead to his death. The agency given to me also came with great responsibility and configured my gameplay (Isbister 2016, p.44). How is it possible that a completely alien character, with whom I have a first complete dialogue at that time, could impact on me so much as a player to the point of feeling sadness and guilt? I will explore a few of the reasons involved in how affective engagement with these characters fosters emotion and challenges one's own ethics and moral values.

Alien characters are usually considered by *Mass Effect* fans to be better written than their human counterparts. As interviewee Caesar summarized, 'all of them had nice stories' while humans 'are in the army, remain in the army, will end in the army' (Caesar). Well written characters help create a bond between player and these PPC's. Regarding the aliens, Neil says:

they were as integral as the humans, and it – I think I was pleasantly surprised that, I could develop an emotional attachment to the aliens on the Normandy as well as I could with the humans. They were, I thought, the characters were (pause) well... I don't know if it's well-written? Or well-acted? Or well-realised? Or maybe all of them? But they all seemed, like actual people, rather than, sort

of, one-dimensional 'this is the person who does this', 'this is person who is my friend', 'this is the person who will argue with me', 'this is –' you know, sort of really simplistic, um, they have a purpose and they fulfil it kind of characters (Neil, interviewee)

How a character is designed both in terms of looks and movement, of voice and story, are integral to how we connect with them. In their claim for a practice of games design that considers societal values and has a 'conscientious design' (Flanagan and Nissenbaum, 2014, pp.12-13) Flanagan and Nissenbaum argue that to do so, it is important to 'examine the kind of relationship that a game intends to establish between players and characters' (ibid, p. 38). I have quoted Casey Hudson's interview before, where he gives an insiders perspective in how BioWare develops their games. He says that BioWare is interested in creating games that tackle the player emotionally, where there is a sense of shared experience with those digital companions that is similar to the ones we have with friends and family (Heineman 2015, ch.10, p.5-7). Therefore, the relationship BioWare wants to establish between their players and their characters is akin to the social interactions we have daily, ranging from friendship to unfriendly interactions, from love to breakups, from the joy of victory to the death of a beloved one.

They do so firstly through the creation of compelling narrative arcs for each PPC, exploring their past, present and possible futures – adding to the temporal thickness of the *Mass Effect* experience. These take a deeper dimension in the second game through the 'Loyalty Missions' the player can undertake to make a character loyal and more likely to survive the Suicide Mission at the end. However, it is also present in the first game as well, when a short quest to find Wrex's family's ceremonial armour plays a big role in his survival when the player is faced with the prospect of his death.

Doing so prompts Wrex to state his loyalty to Shepard and this can be used to save him. In the third game another player action can lead to Wrex's death. In order to cure the Genophage and gain the Krogan as assets for the war against the Reaper's the player must refuse to side with the Salarian Dalatrass⁸⁷ who wants to sabotage the cure. A Renegade Shepard will also lie to Wrex about it. If the player opts to side with the Dalatrass, Wrex will find out and face Shepard with the truth, leading to a battle between the two, and to Wrex's demise. Rahna, who also tried to engage in a renegade play through, said that for her 'it is impossible to do this, impossible, I would never betray Wrex you know? I can't imagine myself choosing that son of a bitch of a Dalatrass over him, what do these people have in their head?' (Rahna, interviewee). Her sentiment is echoed by Mary who 'never realized that there were people that played through the entire game(s) without having Wrex as a companion' (Mary, interviewee) and several redditors who cannot understand how people can kill Wrex in the first game, or have never met him at all. According to BioWare statistics for ME 3, 64% of players did not meet Wrex in the game, implying they were all fresh players who did not play through the first ME.

BioWare explores human emotion by recreating a series of situations where the player action is central in the process of affection. Agency, 'the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices' (Murray, 1999, p.126), alters the destiny of these fictional characters, and also configures the experiences of play for each game. Wrex's survival in the first game alters not only the flow of the game but also how the player will act in certain ways in the future. The presence of other characters, such as Mordin, who play an important role in the Genophage, can also configure how players read their

⁸⁷ Dalatrass are the leaders of Salarian species clans, always female.

relationship with Wrex and his narrative arc. Through our shared experiences with these characters we develop a sense of camaraderie that makes us *care about* them in likely deeper ways than movies or books can make us. Being agents in their destiny, albeit limited by the code and embedded narrative, the emotions invoked seem to be of a different order, a consequence of ‘deep and meaningful pseudo relationships’ that raises ‘questions about the role of media in our everyday lives’ (Isbister 2014, p.44) and the extent of popular culture’s influence in knowing ourselves.

In his book, which aims to bridge the gap between game design and narrative design, Evan Skolnick poses a question which game writers should be concerned about as it is constantly in the mind of players: ‘What’s at stake and why should I care?’. He emphasizes the role of the storyteller to find ways to engage the player and make them care (Skolnick 2012). In *Mass Effect*, developers approached the question through a carefully crafted mix: they gave importance and depth to NPC’s and PPC’s alike; they expanded the notion of agency in play through a branched narrative and choice mechanics that create several possible worlds (Zakowski, 2013); and they foster emotional engagement with squad mates and crew through what we can call an *affective game design*.

There is no pre-defined emotion that the player will feel, only an expectation from the developers that particular scenes will lead to a certain emotional impact. It is, however, embedded in the developing processes a play with the player’s ethics and morals, with personal and societal values, with an alien-disguised familiarity. The Krogan Genophage can be read as an allegory to other real stories of mankind massacres, such as the Holocaust, followed by a discussion of reproductive rights and birth control that rests on the regulation of *other* bodies. My own socio-political context and that of a part of my interviewees, which I

summarize in the introduction to this thesis, changes the feelings evoked by Wrex and his narrative arc. It sounded strikingly similar to the debate regarding abortion in Brazil that is led by right-wing, conservative forces that are on the rise: a group of old and religious white men were in charge of deciding whether women should be allowed abortion even in cases of risk pregnancy, foetus acephalia and pregnancy which is a result of rape. It is extremely unlikely that BioWare thought that a correlation with real-world problems related to the rise of conservative and right-wing values was a possibility, therefore weakening the political use of a values-oriented design. It serves nonetheless as a good example of how a videogame is, through an emotionally compelling narrative, capable of energizing affects, in turn leading to a reflection on and/or discussion of broader themes.

6.4 Wow!

What is a “wow!” moment if not an expression of a deeply emotional moment, one of awe and surprise, of intense feelings and affect? “Wow” could be an acronym for what I would like to call *Wor(l)ds of Wonderment*: virtual, unreal (yet familiar), fantastical places where the carnality of our bodies and limits of our mortal existence are no longer something worthy of concern. Wow is both a word and an acronym that expresses ‘the sense of wonderment, astonishment, absolute engagement’ (Jenkins, 2007, p.1) that one can feel regarding anything that makes *an experience* possible. During the conversations I had for this research, there were many times a “wow” moment appeared: an exciting action scene, an unexpected turn of events, a liking for a certain character which had enticed players into the wor(l)d of wonderment of ME. I will explore some of those instances to see what they tell us about affect,

about politics, about the self, the mind and the body that forms us as publics in constant interaction.

Jenkins argues that not every popular culture product is capable of creating a 'wow' moment as they often rely on 'well-trod formulas' (Jenkins 2007, p.3). For a wow moment to exist, Jenkins argues that creators should instead 'twist and transform those' formulas into something unique, memorable (Jenkins 2007, p.3). Much of what Jenkins says about the wow factor can be related to John Dewey's concept of experience and specifically what he calls *an experience*⁸⁸.

For Dewey, experience is a continuum, a result of our interaction with the world and how it affects us. However, experiences can also be 'inchoate': a result from a modernity that impedes us from reaching singular experiences, those lived to its fulfilment that he names *an experience* (Dewey 2005, p.36-37). 'An experience' ends in *consummation* rather than *cessation*, having an 'individualizing quality and self-sufficiency' (ibid.p.37). It is an 'enduring memorial' of how a certain moment or thing should feel, creating a unity, a possibility of specifying that experience, removing it from the social tissue, framing it and exclaiming 'that was an experience!' (Dewey 2005 p.37). It is not to say that an experience ceases once it reaches consummation, but rather that it acts as a keystone for subsequent actions and new experiences. The results of an experience are continuous. The memory of that moment and other experiences a person had or will have suffer the reverberations of an experience. The consummation of an experience does not mean to sever time in before and after, but rather to fade into something unique and transformative for those involved.

⁸⁸ Dewey's concept of experience is connected to experiencing art that is not limited to that exposed in museums nor to a contestable divide of 'real' and 'popular' art (Dewey 2005, p.4).

A wow moment that interviewee Alex shared appears to manifest this quality of being *an* experience and setting it as a pattern of expectations. Alex mentions that starting a game for the first time has something 'very special about' it that is connected to the first screen of the game that prompts a player to press start in order to proceed to the menu. ME's initial screen is, according to Alex, 'one of the best I've seen' due to a combination of his passion for sci-fi themes and the 'splash screen music for *Mass Effect 1*, as one of the most calming pieces of music in video games. (...) That *alone* was enough when to say 'wow'" (Alex, interviewee). Although manifesting interest in the game before playing it, Alex was a bit wary that the old graphics would hinder his experience, but that changed when he had his second 'wow' moment during his first gameplay: 'The first time I truly realised the scope of Mass Effect, is in that scene where you come to the Citadel for the first time. And that sort of – that's the first time the 'oh wow' feeling of Mass Effect really sort of went, this is a *very* big world.' (Alex, interviewee). Having an awareness of the 'collective social consciousness' of ME as he played the game after the trilogy was released redditor Alex demonstrated surprise in enjoying the game so much, in an emotional and affective level, despite being aware of what the game was about and its major emotionally impactful moments.

Dewey is critical of the separation of art and everyday life, of what we now admire as art in museums from their original meanings, and believes that to experience art one must do so having it as part of our everyday lives (Dewey 2005, pp.4-8). The examples Jenkins explores in his book come from popular media, movies, games and books that a good part of the population consumes routinely. They are part of our everyday interactions with art on personal and collective levels. Jenkins argues that products that are popular 'evoke broadly shared feelings' among society, making it relatable (Jenkins 2007, p. 4). One of the feelings that ME captures is power. Much of the game is about having power: you play a highly trained

military individual, who can be enhanced and uses biotic abilities. The player is capable of overwhelming swarms of enemies, solving long-standing diplomatic issues, challenging an all-powerful artificial intelligence species and ultimately saving the entire universe. The game is full of moments where a “wow” factor can be achieved, such as mastering and unleashing a powerful Biotic attack; something both interviewees Rahna and Neil felt very passionate about, as what makes you feel wonderment is also quite personal and subjective. As I will go onto explain, there is one segment in ME 2 where this dominating power the player has is temporarily challenged and removed.

At a certain point in the game, all the squad mates are outside the Normandy ship when it is attacked by a collector ship that captures the crew members. Only one character can contact Shepard and the others and regain control of the Normandy: the pilot Joker. However, Joker has a disability resulting from ‘Vrolik syndrome’, a condition that causes his leg bones to be weak and easily breakable, severely compromising his mobility. In this segment, the player is in control of Joker and is not only stripped of any possible powers but must slowly move and avoid contact with the Collectors.

Alice raises an interesting question about power in games, arguing that ‘when a game removes power, it shows you are impotent. I think it is a much more powerful message than other media could do, because you are removing a vital element of videogames that is power, the capacity to do things’ (Alice, interviewee). Stripped of his power when controlling Joker, Chester felt ‘helpless in that situation, but for the narrative was a great choice’ (Chester, interviewee). He adds that it gave him a sense of urgency that he felt lacking in the game overall, and this segment was ‘fantastic’ and unforgettable. Jenkins argues that a videogame can achieve a memorable moment when it ‘makes you want to move, when it convinces that you really are in charge of what’s happening in the game’ (Jenkins 2007. p.29). *Mass Effect*

conveys that well: its branched narrative design coupled with choice mechanics give a sense of agency to the player. However, the “wow” moment that is Joker’s sequence, shows that games can also be memorable when *removing* the illusion that you are in charge, challenging the established conventions of the medium.

I concur with Jenkins that not every popular art has the potential for earning the ‘wowing’ factor (Jenkins 2007, p.1). Surely not every game causes a lasting impact in the industry and the gaming community as *Mass Effect* managed to achieve. The longstanding online communities discussing the game and the excitement heard in my interviewees voices when talking to me were evidence enough that it is a “wow” kind of game. Jenkins says that games are ‘a new lively art’ that ‘open up new aesthetic experiences and transform the computer screen into a broadly accessible realm of experimentation and innovation’ (Jenkins 2007, p .23).

A moment such as controlling Joker, that subverts expectations of play while using affordances of the medium to create an emotional scene where the player experiences powerlessness, effectively exemplifies what Jenkins meant. Creating ‘strong emotional impressions’ is something videogames do (Jenkins, 2007, p.24), but not all games achieve it successfully. A possible reason for ME’s notoriety as a world of wonderment for the player arguably lies in the proposition of BioWare, as stated by Casey Hudson, of making games that are supposed to emotionally engage the player. It may not work for everyone – interviewee Caesar for example states that he felt little connection to the characters and thought the romance mechanic had no resemblance with real life interactions – but it still manages to effectively evoke affect and emotion in a large player base.

Worlds of wonderment in videogames appear when it, as a new “lively art”, can find the balance between mechanics of play, rules of the game, narrative and storytelling potential,

fostering an affective engagement that generates a world that successively “wows” the player; that creates deep, everlasting connections with that universe and its characters.

6.5 Concluding, affectively

In this chapter I have shown how different modes of play, a game’s mechanic and narrative affordances and a character design that intends to create emotions can affectively configure gamers experience with the game, but in their personal lives as well. Before ending it, I would like to present some of the most emotional testimonies from my interviewees. They effectively represent what has been discussed so far regarding the capacity to being affected and to generate affect. A simple game can change one life; become a permanent cherished memory; help accept and understand oneself and the other; give the opportunity to perform and experiment not only the fantastic but also very real possibilities such as gender and sexuality. As discussed in Chapter’s 4 and 5, there are severe limits in how BioWare presents non-normative identities but considering their position in the videogames industry their efforts are still worthy of attention. The stories shared here are not always political at first, neither are they necessarily linked to gender and sexuality. They are, however, powerfully affective, important memories that were re-lived by my interviewees during our conversations.

For many of my subjects, ME was *an experience*. An experience is also an event, a point in time that due to its strong impact has lasting effects and affects. Discussing big events – such as the terrorist act of 9/11 or the Holocaust - Louis Quéré considers that those have a hermeneutic power, an ability to cause a rupture in the social tissue and a discontinuity in the

lives of individuals (Quéré 2012). An experience is an event of personal nature, but that has the same quality: 'an event can take place in different stories (...) in which the narrator introduces itself in the narrative and reconfigures the event as an event of or in his own life' (Quéré 2012). Take for instance the importance of *Mass Effect* to interviewee Chester. Unimpressed with the game in his first experience with it, he decided to try it again after his girlfriend broke up with him. This moment of sadness in his life reconfigured the feelings he had at first regarding the game and were important for him to overcome the situation:

Mass Effect was very important in my life specifically. (...) In 2008, the first serious girlfriend I had broken up with me, and I was like, very upset with that. I was frozen for 3 months, without doing anything. I believe Mass Effect was one of the things that helped me get out of this very upsetting thing I was going through. It's super geek to say this, but seeing how Shepard dealt with things, not necessarily being Renegade or stuff like that, but only seeing that 'look, there's shit happening, you got to deal with it' you got to keep going, I found that really interesting. I tried to adapt to my life, to my context. I found that very nice. (Chester, interviewee)

He states that his play experience helped his self-esteem and gave him courage to deal with problems. Connecting with Shepard and having agency in that world contributed to his growth and a better understanding of himself. A similar account is made both by Alice and Angelina regarding their sexual identities. For both having Female Shepard as a main character was a reaffirmation of female empowerment and the importance of representation beyond the male-heterosexual protagonist. Angelina feels that videogames helped her accept better who she is, her identity because 'in the game it is very natural, the characters do not question each themselves about it' (Angelina, interviewee). This led to a substantial change in how she plays games, putting more importance in games that provide the opportunity to

play as a non-normative character. In Shepard she develops ‘an intimate relationship with the character, very personal’ and that the character inspires her to be better: ‘I have her more as an idol than a game character. It is someone that I wish to follow some of the values she has’ (Angelina, interviewee). Beyond matters of identity, Angelina is enticed by who FemShep can be in that game, which is a result both from the writers, designers, coders and players in the configurative dynamics of gaming.

Ron also has fond memories of *Mass Effect* importance to him. He was happy that the game had characters like him – gay men – but what really made him love it was a combination of this and the fact that his boyfriend was the one that recommended and presented him the game. They shared their experiences of it, learned together and the game was one more component of their romantic relationship. Alice, Victor and Jeremiah are also friends, and one recommended me to the other for interviews because they like spending time discussing the game. The two men - Jeremiah and Victor - feel somewhat indebted to Alice as she was the one who convinced them to play it. Moreover, Victor and Jeremiah stated learning a great deal about feminist thought, diversity and social justice during their daily interactions at University and in the play and discussion of ME and other games.

Mary and Gibbs, another two friends who were interviewed together, showed how much their love – the recognition of the other as legitimate – influenced the conversation we had about ME and videogames in general. They used to share a flat, and Mary was the one ‘forcing’ Gibbs to play *Mass Effect* until he eventually fell in love with it as well. Their passion about it was clear in our conversation, and is with something Mary said that I would like to finish this chapter. It summarizes the importance of ME to her, the feelings evoked during her play, the affective attachment she had - sentiments echoed by most of the subjects in my data. It is a game of affect: a complex, enticing universe with enthralling characters and a

vibrant community surrounding it and keeping it alive, a community that will be further studied in the next chapter, where I focus on the analysis of user generated content and the unofficial transmedia universe of ME.

I think ME is my favourite game. If you can only pick one series, one game to play for the rest of your life, I would definitely take Mass Effect because it is such a big game, the romance is so great. As soon as I started playing and I met Kaidan I was like obsessed with him. He is mine in-game husband. In *Mass Effect 2* I didn't romance anyone (*because Kaidan can't be romanced*) and it was so sad, because that scene before the Suicide Mission⁸⁹ and you have a cutscene with someone, I just had a cutscene of my FemShep holding a picture of Kaidan. I really appreciated they put the scene in here, because those were literally my thoughts right now and then. I could not wait until the third game so I could romance him again. (...). I've never cared that much about a fictional character before I played Mass Effect. I played like a whole 20 hours game and just not romanced anyone even though the possibility was there because I was heart sunk over a character from the first game. It does offer something that other games don't. (Mary, interviewee)

⁸⁹ Before the player starts the final mission of the second game, there is an exclusive scene for each love interest romanced during the game. If you do not romance anyone or romanced a character in the first game that is not present in the second – Liara, Kaidan or Ashley - the scene is replaced by a photo of the love interest from ME1,

Chapter 7: Beyond Gaming: fans, creativity and activism.

I like to discuss a lot. I am from the Tumblr generation, so I stay there talking about games, talking about series, talking about, currently, anime a lot (interviewee Robin)

The rich universe of *Mass Effect* is not only created by BioWare and their team. Indeed, after releasing a game, the player base seems to take the distribution helm from the company who becomes the less important actor in keeping the game alive. One of the reasons for the trilogy being sustained by its fans is the changing landscape of media, which has gradually made connections between different publics possible. As a warm-up question for the interviews, I asked my interviewees about their media consumption and favourite cultural products. Alongside mentions of liking series, music, books and cinema, the use of social network websites and social apps was highlighted by all of them. Some, like Robin, Alex, Alice, Jeremiah, Neil and Rahna also mentioned their use of those loci to discuss gaming and ME, such as the Facebook group 'The Left Side of the Force' where Rahna frequents to discuss videogames. Hence, it is important to briefly introduce these platforms since they form an integral part of the configurative cultural and mediatic scenario that affects gaming. Moreover, it is on these sites that the game is continued by the community through their conversations and often fan-made productions.

The first game of the original trilogy was released in 2007 and the last in 2012, while this research was undertaken between 2014 and 2018. The media landscape has significantly changed in the in-between 11 years. For example, Facebook was not yet widespread in Brazil in 2007; instead, the public was deeply engaged with Orkut, a community-based social

media website later acquired by Google and discontinued in 2014 (see Fragoso 2006; Recuero 2008). Reddit, having launched in 2005, was still relatively unknown then, whereas today it has great adherence especially between the geek male demographic, unfortunately becoming a fertile locus of toxic masculinity (Massanari 2015, pp.127-158). Tumblr started in 2007 and has since then become an important site for fandoms (Hillman, Procyk and Neustaedter 2014) especially among a younger demographic (Bury et al, 2013; Duggan and Brenner 2012). At the same time YouTube, which started in 2005, was a growing player in the media environment in 2007 (see Burgess and Green 2009 for a comprehensive study of YouTube first years). As a matter of fact, the FoxNews controversy regarding sex in ME used YouTube as one of its key sites of discussion, with the original video reproduced in several channels and video responses by players of the games (Dutton, Consalvo and Harper 2011, p. 288). Instagram only appeared in 2010 but soon became a top player in the global social media landscape, while messaging apps like WhatsApp and Snapchat are currently relevant communication technologies (Greenwood, Perrin and Duggan 2016). Defunct apps that caused a stir, like Vine (Newton 2016); zombie websites like Fotolog⁹⁰, among several others, made a buzz and disappeared in this same short span that saw considerably changes in the media landscape, e.g. Facebook gaining even more power.

The World Wide Web has been used for online activism from an early stage, for instance by hip hop media activist groups in the USA (Durham, 2017). However, it was from 2011 onwards that the use of social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, for activism and protest became a widespread popular knowledge and trend because of events such as the Arab Spring (Gerbaudo, 2012, p.2) and Occupy Wall Street (Vrikki, 2016). Further in this

⁹⁰ Recently back from the dead after being deactivated in 2016, Fotolog was the “Instagram” of the 2000’s and widely popular in Brazil (Recuero 2008a).

chapter I explore two ME-related “activism” cases on these platforms: the #FemShepFriday marketing event on Twitter and what led to it; and a fundraising campaign that took place on Facebook as a community response to what was understood as a frustrating ending of ME3.

Media platforms we use to communicate and congregate change fast and are adapted by their user basis according to their needs changing both their technological goals but also their business plan. The shift however cannot be assigned merely to technological innovation: the buzzword of “participation” is in the standard lexicon of pundits, academics, journalists, entrepreneurs, tech gurus, children, teen and adults alike, carrying a quirky excitement about it. Social media seemed to be an answer to everything, from sex education to political action. The “highly interactive” new media (not so new now) brought promises of endless participation, agency, interactivity, immediacy (see Rheingold 2003; Shirky 2008; 2011) along with new displays of anxiety, fear, control and isolation (see Morozov 2012, 2014; Turkle 2011). A renewed ‘do it yourself’ culture emerged, with more visibility to creators outside the media conglomerates (see Burgess and Green 2009a; Van Dijck 2009, and the critique to amateurism by Keen 2007). This participatory culture challenged, and is still challenging, the power of traditional mass media by giving to and recognizing the ‘voice’ of the people; by creating tools for action, social media have led to significant changes worldwide, like the rise of internet-based party Podemos in Spain and Movimento 5 Stelle in Italy (Gerbaudo 2017). It has also however led to developing and enforcing neoliberal politics, raising problems centred around free labour, data surveillance and net neutrality (see Terranova 2013; Jordan 2015). Videogames did not stay in the past but have shifted, with motion-capture technology being taken to the living room and the current buzz around virtual reality changing the established norms of interaction with those devices; with e-sports on the rise (Taylor 2012)

and “Let’s Play” channels on YouTube and Twitch adding new layers to the ways we consume media (Postigo 2014; Hamilton, Garretson and Kerne 2014).

There is, however, a key component in all this that really keeps everything working as a functional engine, replacing its broken parts, making sure there is enough oil to move forward: people. It seems a rather obvious statement that without the adherence of people the history of each of these technologies would have been quite different. Being obvious though does not make it less important: it reminds us of the centrality of human action to technological development; it reminds us that creative, unexpected uses of these technologies may have aided revolutions. This chapter deals with the people and their role in enriching *Mass Effect*’s universe by using the online and offline, digital and analogical spaces available to them in order to exercise their creativity, reflecting their appreciation of the games and other aspects of their self. I examine and discuss how these creations challenge limits imposed by BioWare regarding gender, sex and sexuality; how they express personal ideologies; how they potentially open channels of dialogue with the developer and, how they configure the decision-making processes of BioWare regarding *Mass Effect*.

Respecting the configurative nature of this research, it is important in order to account for the technological and behavioural shifts regarding media consumption in these past years. They can tell us a lot about videogames, its publics and the manifestations of the political. Even though Reddit was not significant in 2007, it became central for *Mass Effect* players in 2010 when user *bendh18* created the sub-reddit *r/masseffect* as a place where people could discuss the game and their love for it. A quick search on *Tumblr* will offer an overwhelming

amount of results with fan made material. Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, DeviantArt⁹¹, Pinterest⁹², Instagram, 4chan⁹³, these online spaces are, until today, important to the history of ME. They are public arenas where ME players' voices can be heard and valued; their work can be spread; arenas where their passion for the game can be felt. A particular group of people has a key role in all this. Scholars call this group "fans", a much-studied category in the realm of popular culture (see for instance the works of Fiske 1989; Lewis 1992; Jenkins 2006; Baym 2000; Hills 2002, among many others).

In this chapter I set my argument in dialogue with studies undertaken by fan studies scholars in several topics, ranging from slash fanfiction to porn parodies and fan-activism. The first section analyses the ME unofficial expanded universe, created by fans and/or companies, with a focus on creations depicting sex and sexuality. Within this, I discuss homoeroticism in ME fanart and fanfiction of the "MShakarian" couple – Male Shepard and Garrus. Subsequently, I discuss the practice of modding and machinima, using "nude mods" as an example that is both sexually subversive and normative. Lastly, I discuss pornographic imagery based on ME to highlight other instances where female body imagery is abused to conform to hegemonic masculinity.

The second section of this chapter analyses the BioWare marketing strategy "#FemShepFriday" to assess the role of *Mass Effect* fans in giving Female Shepard an official design. Based on Jenkins et al (2016) discussions about fannish civics, participatory culture and fan activism, I discuss possible causes as to why videogames publics are undeveloped

⁹¹ Deviantart is a website dedicated to form a community of artists dealing with different strands of visual media, such as drawing, photography and video.

⁹² Pinterest is a visual-based collection website where users can pin images, videos and gifs of their interest.

⁹³ 4Chan is an anonymous image and text based board. It is famous as the probable birthplace of internet activist group Anonymous, but also as a source of toxic masculinity, harassment and pornography (Coleman 2014)

concerning activist practices. Comparing *Mass Effect* to examples of *Harry Potter and Hunger Games* fan-activism, I trace the origins of the problem to two main reasons: the difficulty in videogames to be perceived as a “serious” media that can still be entertaining; and the comfortable position of dominance of “the gamer”, unwilling to question social injustice as they often challenge male privilege. The chapter concludes discussing the reasons sex, sexuality and gender are the likeliest candidates for an activist revolution within videogames culture.

7.1 (My) World of Mass Effect: a political perspective of fans

Isn't it a testament to how great this game is that we can connect with these characters on this level for our own reasons? It's the best story telling ever. (/djcecil2, Reddit).

Before starting the research that would form the basis of this thesis, I was just a guy that played *Mass Effect* and really liked it. I had the occasional discussion with a couple of friends on Facebook about some aspects of the game, but never delved too deeply into the expanded content, official or otherwise. Having played for the last time in 2012, I still had a good grasp of the overall story and characters when I wrote the outline of this project, but only the residual memories of details like romance remained. And for a long time – even after starting the PhD – I had one single belief: that the alien teammate Garrus could be romanced by both Female and Male Shepard (MShep). The romance between MShep and Garrus seemed too obvious, even not having done that myself. Moreover, a YouTube video confirmed they had those interactions. Idyllic images that looked completely official appeared every time I googled “Garrus and Male Shepard”. Then, as part of my research, I started

reading the Codex and getting to know the game again before starting a new gameplay. My world was crushed: there was no romance between MShep and Garrus. Or, at least, not officially. But in the hearts and minds of several eager *Mass Effect* players, they were a beloved item.

The video I saw on Youtube and which confirmed my then (false) suspicion is known as a *machinima*, a video montage created by someone – usually a fan of a certain game – using the images of the game to recreate the narrative, presenting either new angles to the original story or completely new and unrelated storylines. The images I found were nothing more than perfectly done ‘gamics’, ‘a kind of graphic novel’ having as material the images from the game, its code and data, broken down and reconfigured (Sihvonen 2011, p.20). Was I right or wrong in my assumption regarding Garrus and MShep romance? I believe, both can be true. In terms of the developer’s game, I was completely wrong as it is not allowed by the code constraints. However, taking into consideration the *Mass Effect* that exists after its release – and is kept alive by its fans in several forms, I am right: Garrus and MShep are in love, have real romantic interactions and a story together. The fact that it is not an official BioWare storyline is unimportant. Creating this romance outside the configurative limitations of the code is an act of resistance, a shout of “this is what we want in our game”, a manifestation of shared desires, fantasies and creativity.

Previously I discussed how Robin performed his “agender” Shepard in the game, which is an act of dissent within the confines of the code (see Chapter 4, Section 4.2.1). Going beyond it, practices like modding, creating machinimas, fanart and fanfiction open an even broader stage for the practice of both personal and public political matters, allowing other spaces of dissent to be created. In Chapter 5, I presented the case of Kaidan Alenko and Steven

Cortez, exploring the controversies of their portrayal as, respectively, bisexual and homosexual characters. It is a change that came later in the game than expected, supported by certain publics while challenged by others. Again, they were both changes within the boundaries of the code, albeit stimulated by external factors, such as community pressure, possible “tokenization” of LGBTQA+ characters and a change of scenario in progressive politics. Nonetheless, they are “in the game” just as EA’s slogan reminds us every time.

What happens outside the realm of the binding code of BioWare is another expression of politics that occurs in two levels. The first is on an individual level: the personal acts of creation based on that original world that will reflect one’s thoughts, ideologies, identity, and understandings of the world. The second level happens in public spaces: the discussions of fans in several forums about how they would like certain characters to be a couple; how BioWare should have added male-to-male romance earlier; the sharing of their original fan creations and the conversations about it, and even a rudimentary form of online activism to claim justice for Female Shepard in the marketing discourse (Lima 2017).

Regarding the individual level of political action, one that can happen unconsciously, I would first like to refer to the discussions about politics and the political from Chapter 2. There, I outlined the concepts of voice (Couldry 2010), scenes of dissensus and politics (Rancière 2004, Rancière and Corcoran 2010) and civic cultures (Dahlgren, 2003) respectively, as part of an understanding of the collectivization of a public problem (Henriques 2004; 2012) in order to perceive and analyse cases of dissent. Those same concepts are very useful to clarify why these individual acts of creativity carry political character, and have been used within the realm of fan studies to shed light into fan activism (see Jenkins et al 2016 for several accounts of fan activism). So far, the voice of those without-part in the scene of dissensus

has been exposed here through interviews and comments, as a process of storytelling (Couldry 2010, p.7), observing debates, the exposition of different points of view and the establishment of dissent. There are other forms, however, in which users use their voice to engage civically, such as the “poaching” tactics widely studied in fan studies (Jenkins 2006a). Fans arguably “poach” through the creation of fan arts, fanfics, mods and machinimas, but how does that happen in the extended universe of *Mass Effect* and what are its relationships to the political manifestations and discussions of gender and sexuality?

7.1.1 Homoerotic love, fan arts and fanfics

Women in general make more fanworks than men in my experience. I have yet to be in a fandom where the vast majority of the fan art and fan blogs and fan fiction aren't created by women. I doubt it has to (do) with who's more into the material or not, who's more obsessed. I think it has to do with the ability for fanworks to be transformative, the potential to take something and tweak or twist or change it to better reflect your experiences and what you want to see and get out of media. Creating fanworks is such a powerful tool for people who are not represented and/or not represented well in media. (/hurrmmmione, Reddit)

Take, for instance, the set of images below (Fig. 16), all created by fans of ME to represent the romance of Garrus and MShep. These images are not devoid of intentionality: they mark a situation where a vocal community of ME players are not satisfied with the limitations imposed on them by BioWare. Moreover, being a homosexual romance, it challenges the hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity that is prevalent in gaming culture. These fans who, individually or collectively create images, videos, stories that give life

to this romance, are one of many publics configuring the *Mass Effect* universe beyond the constraints of the game. In doing so, they engage in civic practices of identity politics, in reaffirming their desires and beliefs, and very often their identity and/or political stance regarding the perception of male-to-male romance. It is not a new practice, as slash fanfiction⁹⁴ has since its conception been a disruptive form of art, a result of ‘poaching’ of original texts appropriating ‘those works as their own, remaking them in their own image, forcing them to respond to their needs and to gratify their desires’ (Jenkins 2006, p. 60). It is one of many forms where the voice of those without-part can be brought forward and challenge consensual discourses of sexuality by proposing alternatives views, by resisting imposed meanings of those texts (and society).

⁹⁴ According to Green, Jenkins and Jenkins (2006, pp.61-88), slash is a highly sexual form of fanfiction, a “pervasive and distinct” kind of writing that is markedly focused on male-to-male romance and sexuality written by women. The authors contend, however, that the “parameters of slash are under constant debate and negotiation within media fandom”. (ibid, p.63)

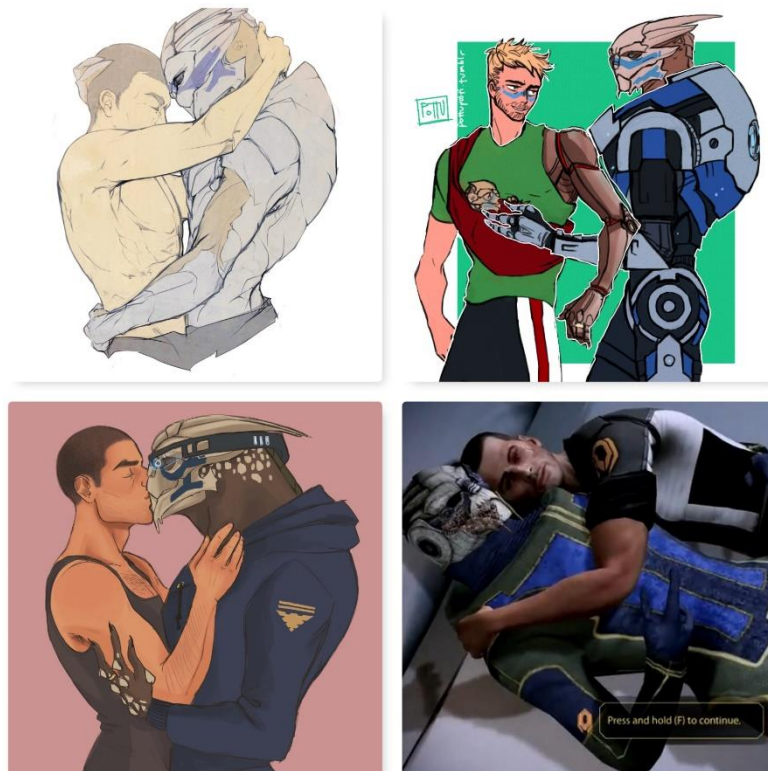


Figure 16 - Collage of fanarts and gamics of Male Shepard and Garrus, the Shakarian couple (Sources, from upper left to bottom right: Meken, DeviantArt⁹⁵ ; Anon⁹⁶ ; Glitterfang⁹⁷ , Tumblr; Anon⁹⁸)

It is not, however, as a straight-forward correlation as it sounds. Although the data is insufficient to inform us about the creators of those works, evidence from the extensive research on fan-art fanfiction and vidding indicate that these are mostly populated by women (Jenkins 2006, p.175; Coppa 2009; Popova 2017). It is likely that the same is the case for the Garrus and MShep coupling as indicated by several comments from female interviewees and female-identified online commentators that express desire for that romance to happen. According to Jeffery Dennis (2010), homoerotic fanart, despite hinting at an acceptance of

⁹⁵ The original file has been deleted. A copy is available at: https://asset-7.soup.io/asset/3025/6669_7459_500.jpeg

⁹⁶ Available at:

https://66.media.tumblr.com/ca5917746846bba1c85cea05a8355e1a/tumblr_oo5iqsgGGY1vi5b0eo2_r1_1280.png

⁹⁷ Available at: <https://glitterfang.tumblr.com/post/156319412381>

⁹⁸ Available at:

<http://photobucket.com/gallery/user/SEANBBQ/media/cGF0aDovMTI2NTY2NTEwNTI5MCM5qcGc=/?ref=>

queer identities by its creators, is often made by women who reaffirm heteronormative expectations of sexuality through their art. In his research, Dennis finds that many female creators of homoerotic fanfiction 'dismiss the existence of real-life gay men' and their fantasies about characters such as Spock and Kirk are restricted: they are not gay men, but simply two men in love that would not engage in other same-sex relationships (Dennis 2010, p.8). Surely, not every female fanfic artist shares the same mind set (that seems to be openly homophobic as described by Dennis), however it is important to highlight that a progressive stance towards sexuality would be gender-less. Women are marginalised, and so are LGBTQA+ people, but their multiple identities will not always intersect; homophobic women and sexist gay men exist, be it due to other cultural aspects (such as religion), or the heavy hand of hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy that raises men. Therefore, it may be that a MShep and Garrus representation (and any other male-male pairing of ME characters) is not embedded in a discourse of diversity but of heteronormative fetishism:

The most significant differences were found between male and female artists; female artists tended to stay within the confines of the slash or yaoi traditions, depicting same-sex desire as a species of heterosexual desire in an entirely gay-free world, while male artists tended to strike out on their own, valuing same-sex desire without a heterosexual default and placing it within the context of realistic gay relationships. (Dennis 2010, p.11)

Concurrently, Dennis' findings show that heterosexual men often engage in the creation of homoerotic fan art, either due to the challenge of creating a non-normative romance or because they "enjoy queering the original texts". The author claims that homophobic male artists are probably outside the demographic that would create these arts,

while homophobic female artists seem to draw (or write) in order to “domesticate” the characters into a heteronormative framework of homoeroticism (Dennis 2010, pp.24-26). Further studies about *Mass Effect* fan fiction and fan art need to be undertaken to ascertain whether it follows the tropes identified by Dennis or if it is aligned with the politics of diversity my female and queer interviewees claim for in the gaming scenario – inclusive, respectful and well-written - and in their experiences with *Mass Effect*.

7.1.2 Modding: tactics of subversion, tools of replication.

Surely, not all products stemming from fans are of explicit political character. Some fanfiction, like Jeremiah’s prequel story of character Jack and Rahna’s extended story about Kaidan work with world-building from an affective perspective. They write these stories because they care about those characters and want to connect more with them and not necessarily as political statements of any kind. In the modding scenario, mods can aim to improve textures, ambience, character design and other technical aspects of a game, or add completely new narratives and storylines to it, resulting in stand-alone games such as *Counter-Strike* which resulted from modding *Half-Life* (Kücklich 2005), or the MShep and Garrus romance plot being possible to the player.

According to Tanja Sihvonen, modding are the ‘various ways of extending and altering officially released computer games, their graphics, sounds and characters, with custom-produced content’ (Sihvonen, 2011, p. 12). The author argues that modding as a practice is often male dominated. Most academic studies concentrate on specific genres of modded games – First Person Shooters (FPS) and strategy games – providing results that in her view are ‘rather male-focused and (...) limited’ (Sihvonen 2011, p.189). Likewise, the predominance

of male modders is yet another consequence of the highly gendered ICT scenario previously discussed. In the case of ME, most mods are related to visual and technical improvements. As Sihvonen highlights, mods can ‘act as vehicles for carrying explicit social and political messages, for instance, by taking part in the negotiations of technological agency, identity and gender’ (ibid, p.186). One manifestation of these negotiations can be found in the widespread practice of creating ‘nude mods’. These are texture mods that replace a character’s clothing either with a revealing outfit or a fully naked body. Wysocki contends that these nude mods are remarkably, and expectedly, heteronormative and pleasant to the male gaze (Wysocki 2015 p. 203).

Although some commentators have stated that the ME engine, unlike *Skyrim*⁹⁹, did not allow modding of fully naked male characters, naked female characters mods are easily found¹⁰⁰. As said by a user in a thread on the NexusMods, which asked about the availability of naked MShep’s mods, it is possible to “do texture hacks” but “you can’t really go any further than that’ (Vindekarr on NexusMods). Unfortunately, as good as they are, the Mass Effect games aren’t particularly moddable, and so far, nobody’s gotten further than basic texture hacks”. The opinion is shared by user /vasht trigun0420 in a thread on Reddit about nude mods for *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (ME: A), arguing that the “engine for this game is notoriously anti-modding”. Here it is important to note that the engines differ from the original trilogy to ME: A. The former uses the Unreal Engine 3 while the latter uses EA/Dice Frostbite 3. Nonetheless, both cases seem to make it difficult to mod anything beyond texture hacking according to the fan community. Whether it is technically possible or not to include

⁹⁹ Skyrim mods allow for fully naked male bodies, including adjustments regarding penis size.

¹⁰⁰ A short list can be found here: <http://www.girlplaysgame.com/2014/03/03/best-mass-effect-nude-mods-nsfw/>, curiously a woman-run gaming website.

male genitalia in the modding of ME, the practice of “nude modding” does serve to reinforce discourses of hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity when focusing on new forms of exploring the female body in digital games.

Wysocki highlights that male nudity through mods does exist, but in ‘far fewer examples’ (Wysocki 2015, p.203). Even in Sihvonen’s study of *The Sims*, a game where the majority of modders are female, the situation is similar with an ‘over-representation of the female body (parts)’ being ‘striking’ (Sihvonen 2011, p. 181). This near absence of male nakedness in tandem with a plethora of female naked characters is a political act that reinforces the maintenance of consensus, of the false divide between “The Gamer” and others at the margins by reducing the female body to an object of lust. Just as the Garrus and MShep romance carries significance regarding non-normative masculinities, nude mods of female *Mass Effect* characters carry a statement of their own, that of female bodies having the sole function to appease male desire even when they are well-written characters and strong willed.

Perceptions of modding practices are arguably contradictory and are seen as transformative when it comes to *The Sims* mods and its uses by female players; yet it is overtly sexist and heteronormative when it comes to male modders (Sihvonen 2011, pp. 179-180). Mods, being both an individual effort and a collective, public resource, play an interesting role in the culture of videogames, both by allowing oneself to hone his/her skills, develop his/her own interpretations of the game; configuring the company’s game and creating a persisting “extra-life” for older games. In this sense, even within its contradictory contents, mods act as the actors who sustain tactics of subversion, where publics can enact configuration in the domain of both data and culture. Modders can resist developer-imposed discourses of what

can be part of a game, recreating it and allowing for different designs and even romance storylines in the case of ME. Essentially, modders and mod-users can make their own game that is significantly different from the creator's game or a revamped version of it. In theory, modders also have the skills and tools to challenge societal and cultural discourses of gender and sexuality, using it as a political tactic to defy consensus. In the case of *Mass Effect*, however, the "nude mods" act not as a tactic of the without-part to challenge consensus but as tools of replication, representing female bodies as objects for male pleasure¹⁰¹.

7.1.3 When a Triple A goes Triple X: porn, gender bending and non-conforming sex and sexualities.

a) "Ass Effect", fan engagement and heteronormative sex

User-generated content is not solely the product of fans. Other commercial enterprises often profit creating and selling unofficial merchandise of famous cultural products (Escurignan 2017) or parodying famous franchises, threading a thin line amid the categories of detached transmedia storytelling and directed/emergent user-generated content (Harvey 2015, pp.188-190). Porn parodies are a stand-alone genre, believed to cater to a more diverse audience rather than just heterosexual males (Booth, 2014, p. 397). *Ass Effect*, a very predictable pun for a porn parody of ME, is a short movie produced by Digital Playground, a porn-movie production company from Los Angeles.

The movie starts with a meaningful sentence related to the official lore of the game: "*The insidious hand of pro-human syndicate Cerberus has penetrated the Citadel Council*". This

¹⁰¹ See for instance the 'nude mods' available on Nudepatch.net: <http://nudepatch.net/games/mass-effect-3/>

is followed by a sentence that situates this movie within ME3's storyline, when Councillor Udina is killed after participating in a plot to overtake the Council with the help of Cerberus operative Kai Leng: "*Councillor Udina's desperate treachery was stopped – but who is deadly assassin Kai Leng? And how can he be stopped?*". This shows knowledge of the creators about the game, giving it an aura of "fan made" production, adding authenticity to the parody. Paul Booth (2014, p.397) argues that parodies and fanfiction share a close relationship, with both being an offspring of the original creation, using its lore and characters as basis for a new story. In this sense, the initial lettering of *Ass Effect* situates the fan into a fairly familiar ground, connecting to the affective relationship they have with that work. The initial screen ends with a final jest with the main character's name: "*Shephard needs answers*". This leads to a brief dialogue between a Male Shepard and Liara. From there, nothing else happens but heteronormative sex between the two actors.

According to Booth, porn parodies need some semiotic connection with the original material, which can come from the setting provided by the initial lettering and dialogue in *Ass Effect*, or through proper characterization in terms of acting, make-up, 'props, locations and names' (ibid, pp. 398-399). The comments in PornHub are quite revealing of this connection, with most indicating knowledge of the original material, to the point of criticizing the characterization of Liara. One commentator says that 'her head-prosthetic is a disaster' and complements indicating his/her knowledge of 'terrific' *Mass Effect* cosplay artists that 'would've helped with some advice' (goodfoot on PornHUb), ending with a display of enjoyment regarding Liara's performance, delivered by actress Rachel Starr. Fans in the comments also use in-game lore to comment. One of them comments with the expression 'embrace eternity' (Garuda56 on PornHub) – a line Liara says when the player is

about to meld/have sex with her in the game. While one user is satisfied with the parody of his 'fav action RPG game' (jerkoff2u on PornHub), another is disappointed by the lack of FemShep's participation (Unknown on Pornhub). A viewer notes that MShep's attire seems to be official merchandising, wondering 'what BioWare thinks of that' (HerrGW on PornHub).

These comments show an unexpected engagement of *Mass Effect's* fans with a non-official "transmedia" object. Even in a parody, they expect some fidelity, and will complain or praise accordingly. However, the parody fails to account for the diversity of in-game identities, catering primarily to a heterosexual male audience thereby reinforcing patterns of both the videogames and porn industries that are demeaning of women and reductive of what sexualities entail. Both the unexpected fan engagement, the respect to ME's lore and the reiteration of a heteronormative, patriarchal view of sex and of women show the expected intricacies of the configurative dynamics of videogames. The interactions between Pornhub users and the movie is configured in this case not just by the languages of porn and lust, but also – and maybe mostly – by their experiences with ME. On the other hand, despite following the lore to an extent, the movie configures ME romance through explicit heteronormative sex, not exploring the varied possibilities of sexual encounters that ME's universe can provide.

b) User-generated porn

Still in the realm of sexuality practices in fandom culture, a relatively common practice is the gender bending of characters. This is a process that can work in different ways. For instance, fanfiction is famous for bending the genders of characters in series like *Stargate: Atlantis* (Busse and Lothian 2009) and BBC's *Sherlock* (McClellan 2014). Fictional creations like

the fanfic scenario Omegaverse, ‘a science-fictional setting which blends elements of animal and human sexuality, and ideas about gender inequality, domination and submission in frequently sexually-explicit stories’ (Popova, 2017), bend the rules of gender altogether, creating different readings of characters’ gender, sex and sexuality. These operate both in the level of identification and representation – a desire for inclusion and diversity within often heteronormative, masculine products – and as fetishist practices, experimenting with sex and sexuality beyond the norms and conventions of society and biology. Although the examples analysed here are not part of this Omegaverse, Milena Popova’s study does provide an interesting dialogue with the sexual nature of some non-official ME creations.

Popova argues that ‘sexually explicit fanfiction’ is used as ‘a critical tool to examine the relationship between power and consent’ including affective and emotional engagement (Popova 2017, p.3). Similarly, I contend that the objects in analysis here do reflect perceptions of gender and sexuality, albeit in my case, a masculine, normative perception towards non-conforming practices.

The pornographic content created by some *Mass Effect* publics is usually posted in the subreddit r/MassErect forum, another obvious sexual pun. Heteronormative porn content is dominant in r/MassErect when it comes to male characters, often performing fetishes such as threesomes, or being dominant (and sometimes violent) in the sexual encounters with female characters. The “lesbian porn” of ME also follows the pattern of a masculine gaze of lesbian sex, emphasizing angles and positions normally seen in the porn industry, capitalizing on the girl-on-girl fetish. Less content is found, however, with homosexual males engaging in sexual acts – a subjugated group in Connell’s (1987) definition of hegemonic masculinity. However, in PornHub the three videos containing male-to-male sexual encounters of *Mass*

Effect characters have garnered more than 200.000 views, indicating interest either from the ME community or others that enjoy this genre of porn.

A particular phenomenon worthy of analysis is the *futanari* imagery found in machinimas and fanfiction of several popular products. Futanari is a Japanese term referring to ‘a kind of character, almost always feminine, possessing both genitals (male and female) or a woman that possesses penis and testicles’ (Leite Jr, 2012, p. 118), comparable to some representations found in the Omegaverse but historically present in Japanese creations, such as doujin pornography. From still images, to gifs and machinima (often hosted in PornHub), these works add male genitalia to *Mass Effect* female (or female-coded, as in the case of the Asari and E.D.I) characters and have them engaging in sexual activities either by themselves or with another female character. However, there is no indication of sexual activity with male characters in this situation. A possible hypothesis lies in the dominance of the phallus as a tool of power to subjugate women. In this case, an inversion where the woman has the phallus and penetrates the men, albeit not unusual both in porn and “real life” sex, is non-normative, and does not conform to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity. It shifts the balances of power, giving the woman control of the situation whereas the man is the “passive”, “subjugated” element in the sexual act. This shift would be a disruption in the hegemonic configuration of heteronormativity and masculinity metanarratives in videogames culture where the imagery of ‘militarized masculinity’ prevails. It is with no surprise, then, that *futanari* imagery in ME have them engaging only in same-sex relationships.

Mass Effect’s *futanari* stars almost every female character, with the Asari, Miranda and Female Shepard being the most common characters to appear. The Asari’s in-game definition as a monogendered species fit the *futanari* imaginary well, as they remain

somewhat a mystery regarding their presence/absence of sexual organs. In a Reddit thread, “(NSFW) We’ve all wondered about it...”, discussing sex in ME, a redditor speculates that they have ‘external sexual characteristics either vestigial or used mainly from social bonding, they do seem to derive pleasure from penetrative sex’ (/ManimalR on Reddit), based on the information from the game's codex, his/her own knowledge of biology and the sex scenes available in-game that indicate penetrative sex. As discussed in Chapter 4, Asari seem to be able to manipulate minds of other species with the purpose of being seen as attractive – in that sense, any player that prefers penetrative sex can create his/her own “headcanon” Asari as having a penis or any other phallic structure, as they would apparently be able to adapt themselves to the character’s preferences.

However, when looking at ME’s futanari imagery, the rationale for their creation is less about canon and non-canon representations of Asari and more about replications of porn tropes. In a study about ‘monster toons’ and Studio FOW – a famous group of creators of machinima porn, futanari or not – Susanna Paasonen highlights that these ‘routinely places female game characters in scenarios of sexual humiliation and submission’ (Paasonen, p.17). *Mass Effect’s* futanari material follow tropes of traditional porn: they mimic romantic situations that quickly lead to sex; “spontaneous” orgies; non-consensual sex and rape in a gangbang video featuring Miranda being “punished” by a group of Asari’s. Unlike Booth’s (2014, p.406) conclusions about slash fanfiction as ‘a critique of patriarchy’ and porn parodies as ‘a hyperbole of patriarchy’, futanari porn, albeit sharing the aesthetics of slash fanfiction and porn parodies, seems to make no statement aside reinforcing the objectification and sexualization of the female body and a fetishization of non-normative bodies and sexualities (e.g. transvestites, transgender people).

7.2 Fan-activisms: the case of FemShep

I'm a woman who's pretty vocal about Shepard being better as a woman, just because it feels amazing to have a good female lead for once. I just love how she's not really changed because she's a woman. She inspires me and challenges me to be better, and to never accept being a victim because of my gender. (Shout out to extreme feminists making all women seem like victims... fuck off) To me there is no other gender for Shepard. Damnit, I love all the women in this game. I love the guys in this game too. I wish more games were like this. (/Lisu, Reddit)

Before probing into the main theme of this section – that is the fan mobilization to make BioWare create an official design for Female Shepard- let us analyse this character considering broader understandings of the “technomasculine” public of videogames. What is it that makes this customizable character so powerful among ME players? What differs FemShep from the likes of Lara Croft or other customizable female characters in different RPG’s? Understanding this, and connecting it to the invisibility of female characters in videogames, is vital to comprehending the dialogue between *Mass Effect* players and BioWare in the creation of “official” FemShep and why that is such a significant concern for future consideration and research.

7.2.1 The multiple readings of FemShep

Pascale Thériault wrote an insightful paper analysing Female Shepard and her contradictory character, both seen as a ‘token’ female lead and a subversive character (Thériault 2017, p.148), contending that within her contradictions FemShep ‘represents an

alternative performance of gender' (ibid, p.149). Regarding FemShep as a token of female representation, Thériault points out that she follows what Anita Sarkeesian names as the "Ms. Male Character" trope: FemShep is not a character per se, but simply a "female skin" of the male character, for whom the mechanics and story are designed. Alex Layne and Samantha Blackmon (2013) argue that this 'gender-blind' stance of BioWare, whereby a 'non-gendering' of a character is in fact a design based on 'traditionally, historically, and contextually male characteristics' fails to acknowledge any 'femaleness' in FemShep (Layne and Blackmon, 2013). Although 'femininity' in itself is controversial and contested from several feminist perspectives for its gender and sex essentialism – for instance, Butler's (1999;2004) theory of gender as a performative social construct – the authors make a fair point when questioning BioWare's actual diversity policy when a possible reading of FemShep is as just a "skin" of MShep. Their reading of the game's portrayal of Female Shepard is, nonetheless, contradictory. For instance, they argue both for a FemShep that has her femaleness acknowledge by BioWare 'based on her biological sex', and that what they call 'players post-play narrative modding'¹⁰² is the only way to create FemShep as a 'real' woman while simultaneously advocating a feminist play that does not reduce femaleness to femininity.

To discuss the lack of "femaleness" in FemShep, Layne and Blackmon (2013) argument is based on ideas related to stereotypical gender roles, related to femininity. They argue for example that it is unrealistic to have team mate James Vega challenge FemShep for a pugilistic battle, oddly reinforcing not a feminist view of gender equity but the controversial statement that women are unable to better men in physical combat (Layne and Blackmon 2013, para.26). Moreover, in the game's lore FemShep is a high ranking military officer with extensive training

¹⁰² Post-play is referring to "any significant changes to the narrative or to a gamer's perception of the narrative that happens post game development and without actually changing the code" (Layne and Blackmon 2013)

both in arms proficiency and physical combat. A similar problem is found on how Layne and Blackmon approach FemShep's relationship with Krogan's. Layne and Blackmon state that Krogan's valuing of females for 'their reproductive value above all' fails to recognize that they are also highly respected because of the issues the species has regarding reproduction (ibid, para.26). The authors further argue that Krogan's mindset, should not allow FemShep's recognition by Krogan's due to her 'militaristic endeavours' but rather due to her ability to reproduce (ibid, para.26). That seems to reduce FemShep "femaleness" to a series of stereotypes: physically weak, a body made for reproduction and sex, unable to be recognized as a strong woman despite her military prowess. This approach is in sharp contrast to the critique raised by Butler (2004, p.15) who traces a link between femininity and normative production of gender. In this sense, Layne and Blackmon assignment of traits of femininity to FemShep reinforces a social construction of what women are capable to do due to their gender rather than questioning the construct itself and the constrictions derived from it imposed on the female body and reproduced in mediatic representations.

Interviewee Robin has a very different reading of Krogan's criteria for respect, understanding that they value non-Krogans based exactly in their battle capacity: 'for Krogan's, it's like, if you prove yourself in battle, you can be whoever and whatever you want' (Robin, interviewee). Grunt's loyalty mission in *Mass Effect 2* is a good example, where both Male and Female Shepard are recognized by the Krogan as their "battle master" upon completion; additionally, both Shepard's get invitations for breeding purposes by Krogan males and females due to their battle prowess. The gendered reading made by Layne and Blackmon is problematic; it normalizes male and female roles rather than pointing to the subversion of these expectations when FemShep is respected by her strength rather than a

supposed “frailty”. Thériault’s assessment of FemShep seems more on par with her subversive potential both in-game and as part of the subjective, particular gameplays “modded” by the players: ‘FemShep rejects traditional signs of femininity, without being entirely masculine, nor really sexualized in the games’ (Thériault 2017, p.164).

Layne and Blackmon’s contradiction is heightened when the authors present a brief discussion of the choice to save a child in the beginning of *Mass Effect 3*. Playing a Female Shepard and saving the child equals to writing FemShep as a ‘maternal figure rather than a militaristic one’ (Layne and Blackmon para.29). This conclusion not only disregards the fact that militaries are trained to rescue people in any situation despite their gender (and Male Shepard can also save the child), and seems to reduce FemShep to a one-dimensional soldier character, but presents an inconsistency in their own work. In Layne and Blackmon’s research there is simultaneously a call for an appropriate acknowledgment of femaleness that is connected to social perceptions of femininity and masculinity; and a refusal of the same feminine traits through feminist ‘post-play narrative modding’.

There are better examples to discuss femaleness in ME, with in-game moments that do acknowledge her gender, negatively and positively, through exclusive dialogue. One of these moments happens in *Mass Effect 2* when a bouncer in Omega questions FemShep’s ability to handle a tough situation by making an openly sexist remark. The scene, when the player opts to do the “Renegade Interrupt” with FemShep goes as following:

Inside Aria’s nightclub in Omega, a Batarian mercenary, part of the Blue Suns group is recruiting strong fighters to an assault against The Archangel, an asset that can be hired by the player to be part of the team and who we later find out is teammate Garrus. His interaction with FemShep starts:

Batarian Mercenary: Who is next?

FemShep walks toward the desk. Camera goes from her to the mercenary.

Batarian Mercenary: Well, aren't you sweet?

The camera angle now captures FemShep's back and the Batarian Mercenary in front of her.

Batarian Mercenary: You're in the wrong place, honey. Strippers' quarters are that way.

The left side of the screen blink with the Renegade Interrupt mark. Upon clicking the Right Mouse button and initiating the action, FemShep reaches for her gun

FemShep: Show me yours, tough guy. I bet mine's bigger

Batarian Mercenary: Impressive. So, you're here to fight, then?

Sexist remarks are, it seems, the key moments where FemShep is negatively recognized rby her gender, and unfortunately this appears not in a form of empowerment but as a belittling comment. Surely, the Renegade reaction in this case does provide an interesting response, however it is one that is essentially masculine and phallogentric with the childish "mine is bigger than yours" comparison that even features a quasi-lustful glare of FemShep to her gun. Even a strong rebuke of FemShep to a sexist comment comes from a pattern of masculine language. This dialogue on one hand challenges the idea of FemShep being simply a "skin" of MShep due to the unique lines, but on the other reinforces the traditional masculinity of gaming, in a game written by men, providing, as discussed in chapter

4, a male perspective on what powerful female characters are and how they should behave.¹⁰³

To defend Layne and Blackmon's (2013) core argument, this example seems to serve their cause better. It shows a damaging representation of femaleness, treating women as frail beings that can only serve the purpose of sexual pleasure, or affirm their power through a phallic representation of strength.

A second and more famous example within the fandom is part of *Mass Effect 3*. In a quest to rescue Eve, a female Krogan that can be the solution for the Krogan Genophage, a unique dialogue ensues with FemShep after Eve is successfully rescued – resembling an attempt to show “girl power”, praising sorority and the strength of women:

Inside the Normandy's MedBay, FemShep and Eve talk. In the end, Shepard extends her hand, thanking Eve for the conversation. And then Eve says:

Eve: I'm glad to see humans treat their women with respect. Your people have placed a lot of responsibility on you

FemShep: No more than your people have put on you

Eve: Hehe, then maybe we can show the men how it's done

¹⁰³ Another example of in-game sexist dialogue with FemShep happens in the first game. In *Mass Effect 1* a conversation with an NPC, human cop Harkin, starts with him calling her “sweetheart” in a patronizing manner, followed by a judgement of FemShep as someone “looking for some fun” and that “that soldier getup looks real good on that body of yours”. As BioWare writers did not seem to see a limit to harassment, the character persists: “Why don't you seat your sweet little ass down beside old Harkin? Have a drink and we'll see where this goes”. This opens three sentence choices for FemShep to reply: “not right now”, “forget it” and “you're disgusting”. In my gameplay, I responded clicking on the last option, “you're disgusting”, which prompted FemShep to respond: “I'd rather drink a cup of acid after chewing on a razor blade”. Again, that seemed not to be enough to calm the harasser, that replies: “You trying to hurt my feelings? You gotta do better than that. After twenty years with C-Sec, I've been called every name in the book, princess.”. Another set of dialogue options appear for FemShep, and I chose “Don't call me that”, leading to FemShep replying “Call me princess again and you'll be picking your teeth up off the floor.” This is followed by a defensive response of Harkin, and one that implies that there was no need for FemShep to be stressed over his harassing behaviour: “Okay,okay. Just relax.”

FemShep: Deal.

This piece of dialogue does not happen if the player uses a Male Shepard, being FemShep exclusive. Its presence indicates that some thought has been put into making FemShep unique from the developers' perspective rather than just from the personal experiences of players and their 'conscious choices (...) that make her female' (Layne and Blackmon 2013, para.28). The standard dialogue, that happens with both Shepards, is already quite interesting, with Eve repeatedly stating the importance of female Krogan to reinstate their place in Krogan's society, and the conversation does have a different feel when made with a Female Shepard, something shared by interviewees Angelina and Rahna, with the latter stating that the dialogue feels like two women willing to 'show men how things should be really done' (Rahna, interviewee). In the end of the conversation is when Eve and FemShep share their unique lines.

Regarding Layne and Blackmon's 'post play narrative modding' that shares some similarities to my configurative proposal, the whole "save Eve" quest can be powerfully feminist: for instance, with an all-female team rescuing an important female character – or as interviewee Rahna puts it, the 'hope for the Universe' saving the 'hope for the Krogan' (Rahna, interviewee). Furthermore, the sequence is tied to the story-arc of the Krogan Genophage that has links to feminist causes such as abortion, birth control and reproductive rights. Interviewee Mary says she never took much time thinking about it, but does believe that Eve's rescue and FemShep's dialogue

feels like something that does apply to women more than it does men. So, when you are like, talking to her, you can have a little sort of buddy moment when you are back on the ship, just talking about how guys are stupid or

whatever haha, it does feel like quite natural and that it is something that makes sense story wise to have a FemShep doing it. (Mary, interviewee)

Thériault (2017, p. 161-162) argues that Eve has a traditional performance of gender, with her femininity 'reprimanded by violent and oppressive males' and despite being a political, revolutionary character fighting against the oppression of Krogan's (and Krogan's females in specific), still 'essentializes the dichotomy male-female saying that women are more pleasant and caring than men'. This rests, once again, in the problems of having a mostly male team of writers (ME 3 had one female writer in the team), often relying on gender stereotypes that seems acceptable from the outside, but when looked in-depth, fail to acknowledge strength beyond established gender roles.

Therefore, Thériault's proposal of FemShep as an alternative performance of gender seems closer to the reality experienced by my interviewees, redditors and USBN users, while Layne and Blackmon's 'post-play narrative modding' (2013) is also perceived in the personal experiences of play such as the "agender Shepard" created by interviewee Robin. FemShep's subversive potential is present even in moments where the "Ms Male Character" trope is obvious. The physics of FemShep walking, running and sitting in the game are exactly the same as MaleShep, and a particular scene stirs discussion due to her "male-like" positioning (see Fig. 17). The scene, described by Thériault as problematic (Thériault 2017, pp.152-153) is perceived as subversive by certain subjects in my data. For them, seating with her legs open despite wearing a dress is challenging the norms of gender that aim to control how women should behave. As Theriault himself highlights, having a body socially constructed and perceived as feminine, embodied in a male mechanic and design, allows the 'subversion of gender, of resisting (gender) conventions and denaturalizing femininity' (ibid, p.159).

FemShep is, then, a character that is loved and cherished despite (and because of) her controversial nature; being both a reflection of one's identity as in the case of Mary, who is a woman in the military and feels that FemShep represents something very close to her life; and an opportunity to perform one's own values and ideals playing as "the Other", with some men choosing to play as FemShep not because of her looks but due to the feel that she is "a strong, well defined female protagonist that works in the context of the universe" (/j3ddy_l33, Reddit).



Figure 17 - A meme of FemShep "manspreading" (Anon)

7.2.2 The "vocal minority" that made a difference

Femshep lovers are an insanely vocal minority, if you would spend like a week on this reddit you'd think it was 99% Femshep to 1% Maleshep. (/Pr0spect, Reddit)

Couldry's (2010) conceptualization of voice shows the reader that voice is not just about being able to tell one's own story, but to be valued positively by the possibility of manifesting oneself. As he states when discussing the sociologies of voice, 'an attention to voice means paying 'attention, as importantly, to the conditions for effective voice, that is, the conditions under which people's practices of voice are *sustained* and the outcomes of those practices *validated*' (Couldry 2010, p.113, emphasis in the original). In discussions about Female Shepard in the Reddit forum, the idea of FemShep's fans being a "vocal minority" is often brought to the table. Usually, the term has derogatory connotations, whereby the voice of the minority is not validated but perceived as noise by the community. Although voice can be expressed and will not be censored in that space, the undertones of it being unimportant (or that it should be ignored) are problematic. They derive, surely, from the constructed perception of videogames as a realm of the technomasculine audience, a realm unable to sustain the voices of the without-part, much less to validate those as important voices. The vocal minority is, nevertheless, crucial: in publicly stating their affective relationship with FemShep these fans can access 'fluid or liquid forms of power that are meaningful to publics seeking to break into the ideological mainstream' (Papacharissi, 2015, p.119). In the case of Female Shepard, however, there is both a (limited) validation of such voices by the company – and to which extent this is linked to core ideals of neoliberalism and its relationship to voice will be discussed further on – and a political debacle among the publics that comprise *Mass Effect* fandom regarding the recognition of those voices.

Female Shepard's absence from the first and second game's marketing campaign was thoroughly felt by the players, who demanded from BioWare the recognition of FemShep as an important version of the lead character, meriting an official design of her own and proper

space in the marketing campaign for the third game (Lima 2017). Twitter is one of the places fans used to complain, a “new” technology of voice where the individual power – a tweet – can be part of a collective act of activist power through the hyperlinked hashtags (Fig. 18). Zizi Papacharissi (2015, p. 117) argues that the “logic of hashtags” facilitate a sense of belonging. If you click a hashtag, you will be linked to every tweet using it, effectively connecting oneself to others who share the same ideal. Publics who were immaterial, hard to grasp, are easily visible in their process of formation and in action through the creation of “affect mini-worlds” (ibid.) through hashtags.

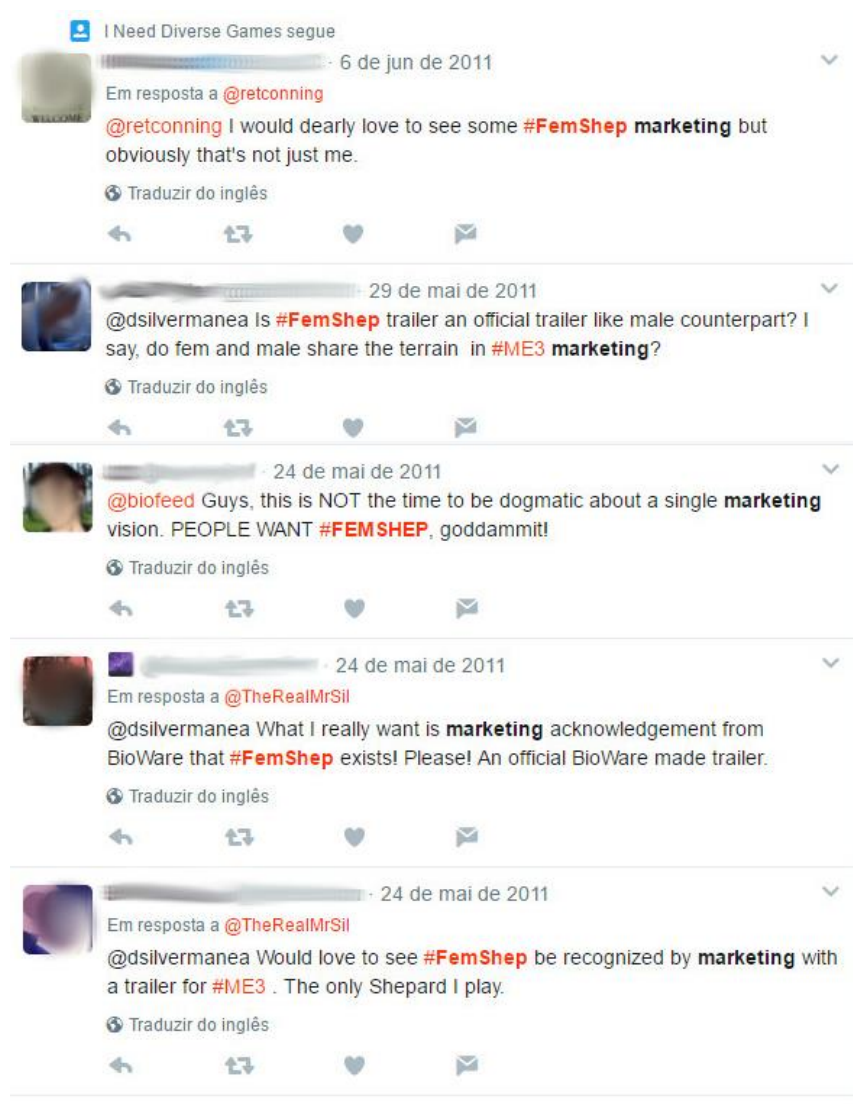


Figure 18 - Tweets claiming for FemShep marketing before the release of Mass Effect 3 (Printscreen from author's own archive)

Couldry (2010, pp. 139-143) argues that new technologies have enabled new voices to publicly emerge. Moreover, there is an 'increased *mutual awareness*' of these voices and how they are made manifest throughout these online spaces, enabling 'new scales of organization' (ibid, p.141) that can lead to both large scale political events like the Arab Spring to more minor, low effort 'clicktivism' practices that can alter the marketing campaign of a game. Lastly, Couldry argues that new technologies shift our understanding of 'what spaces are required for political organization', erasing geographical constraints, allowing complete strangers to recognize each other voices and echo them, generating 'new intensities of listening' as both individuals and institutions must consider the new diversity of voices at all times (ibid, p. 140-141). Therefore, public online spaces like Twitter and Reddit are crucial sites of resistance and dissent (and of consent and maintenance of it, as the negotiations within these spaces are intrinsically related to politics, power and hegemony) where publics carrying different voices can gather, deliberate and act.

The discussion of FemShep's fans being a "vocal minority" interlaces with another subtext in the Reddit community, that of 'hardcore' and 'casual' players, "die-hard" fans and "normal" gamers. For the redditors, there are basically two groups of *Mass Effect* players: those that effectively live and breathe that universe to its full extent, replaying it, discussing it online and/or offline, know most or all the information available on the game; and those that bought the game(s), played it (maybe all of it, maybe not), and moved on. In a thread discussing the official statistics BioWare released in 2013 about the third game (Fig. 19), redditors expressed shock to the fact that most players seem to have never met Wrex, the majority played the game as the standard Soldier class and James Vega is apparently more popular than he should be.

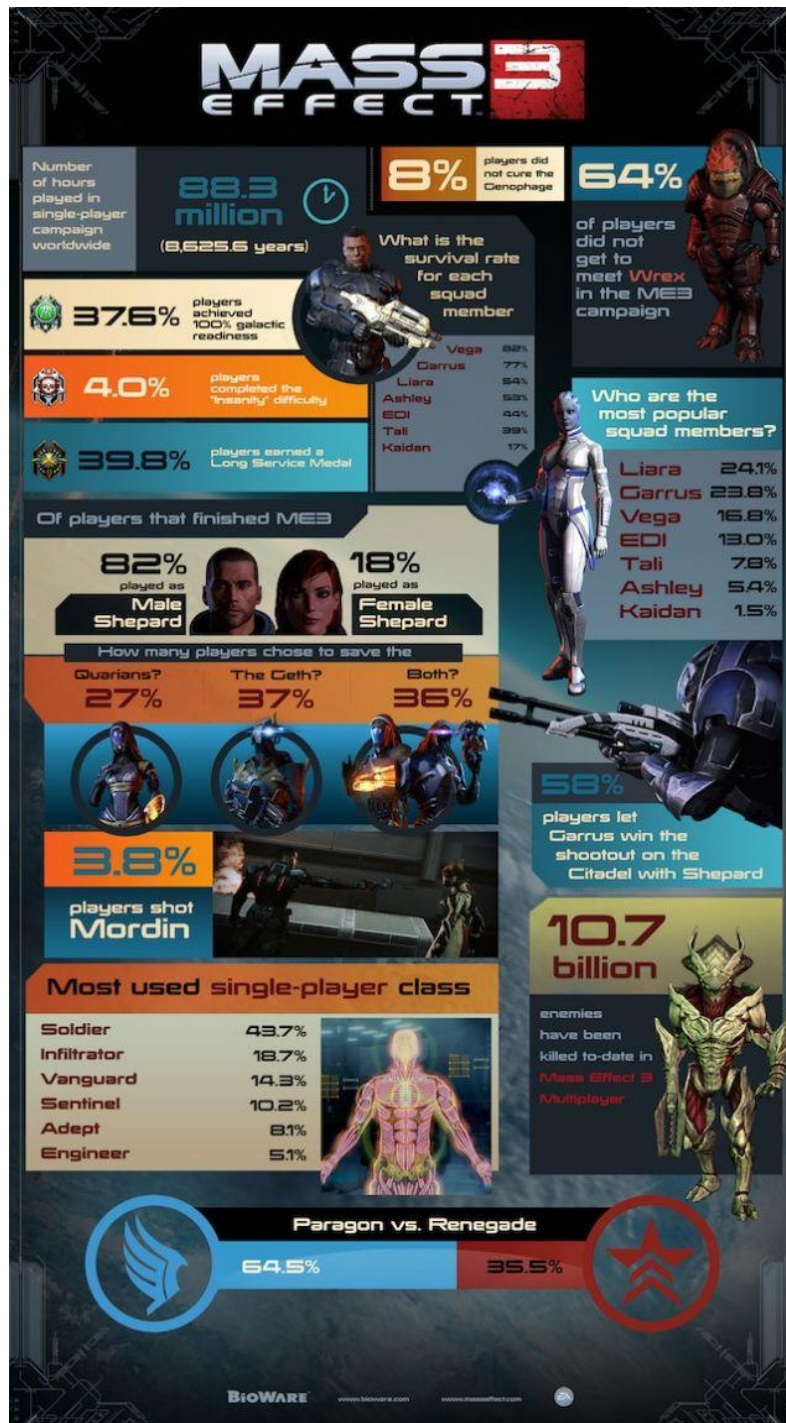


Figure 19 - BioWare officially released statistics on Mass Effect 3. (Source: BioWare. Available at: <https://kotaku.com/5992092/two-thirds-of-you-played-mass-effect-3-as-a-paragon-mostly-as-soldiers?post=58513842>)

However, the data about how many people have finished the game as FemShep stirs more controversy: 18% of players, a figure that feels too low given the “vocal minority” of FemShep players in that community. Several redditors argue that this imbalance can be due to factors such as the official statistics not taking into account replays; the parallel universe

that Reddit is in itself, a very niche social forum, where mostly die-hard fans or people looking for some sort of advice related to the game will find out; the perceived predominance of males as the demographic for the game. A previous poll made by the r/MassEffect administrators revealed different numbers with FemShep players being about 30% of the respondents. Why is it then that FemShep is such an important character as to generate public outcry for her invisibility? Redditors have endlessly discussed it through the years, and a few reasons appear with prominence: the lack of strong female leads in videogames in general; the possibility to immerse yourself better with a character that shares your identity; the possibility to play as “the Other” and experience Otherness; and the talent of voice actress Jennifer Hale, responsible for bringing FemShep to life. Redditors conclusions are not farfetched, and each of them were mentioned by one or more of my interviewees as reasons to play or not as FemShep.

I contend that the conjoint of the factors mentioned are crucial to understand the dynamics of configuration surrounding Female Shepard’s. The male-oriented construction of the games industry, alongside the constant presence of female players now more recognized due to an increase in the establishment of gender and sexuality as public problems, led to an adoption of Female Shepard as an icon of equality in videogames for many players. As Thériault (2017) suggests, her dual nature as “Ms. Male Character” and a subversive persona leads to a third form of performance not only of gender but also of sexuality that is configured by the player. For a “vocal minority”, this possibility entails a chance for their voices to be heard, both by others who share a similar need and experience and want to join a choir of voices and by those who believe it to be noise, a non-existent problem pertaining to “social justice warriors”. As a redditor remembers, ‘there’s no reason for MShep players to be vocal.

They already always get to play as a dude' (/superninfreak on Reddit). When all the voices in a scene of dissensus speak the same and are valued the same, vocal minorities are of utmost importance to break the hegemony, to oppose and challenge those that believe that the gender of a character is unimportant, such as /sharinganuser:

Probably because it's cool now to have a strong female lead and probably because the people that value gender over a good story are often the same types of people who are vocal in these types of things. I'm a gamer. I'm a game developer, even. I love all games. What I don't like is pandering. A good story doesn't need a "woman who kicks ass who isn't objectified." it needs to be a good story. Look at rise of the tomb raider. That game is amazing because of the story, the fact that Lara Croft is a female has absolutely zero impact. Femshep did it right, Sheplooo did it the same way. I personally prefer Sheplooo as Mark's performance went above and beyond Jennifer's. There are thousands of fans who prefer broshep, as I'm sure there are thousands more who prefers femshep. One is just more vocal than the other. (/sharinganuser, Reddit)

Statements like this one go back to the issue of collectivization of a public problem: media representation of minorities are of no concern for those that are, every day, represented in every item of mainstream popular culture. For many white heterosexual males and even scholars such as Espen Aarseth (2004), a female lead like Lara Croft may have “zero impact” on how the game is played, but both the original and refigured versions of the character are important to the history of female (and feminist) gaming (Kennedy 2002, Carr 2002, MacCallum-Stewart 2012). Surely, “not all men” think alike, and several male redditors prefer playing with a strong female character as they also grew tired of the average white-

male protagonist. It is the female players, however, that make the strongest statements as to the importance of playing as FemShep. It is their voice, above all in this matter that must be, in Couldry's terms, validated. BioWare, to an extent, did so when catering to fans demands regarding their marketing campaign strategy:

In the space of 10 years, BioWare's marketing strategy has changed, configured by: a cultural sphere where the social discourses on gender are in constant (and rising) debate; by the action of players demanding more representation; and by the company's need to adapt its discourse to attract a wider public and, consequentially, increased profit. (Lima 2017, p.189)

Following the public's demand for more attention to FemShep in the marketing campaign, BioWare launched the #FemShepFriday campaign to celebrate (and of course, spread) the release of the first *Mass Effect 3* official trailer featuring Female Shepard's official design¹⁰⁴. Although official data about the success of the campaign was not available, a search and analysis of tweets containing the hashtag #FemShepFriday had over 2000 results, with the majority celebrating the release. Few contested the relevance of it or the limited diversity it proposes as, in the end, FemShep was a very "normative" design, a curvaceous, freckled, white skinned and green-eyed redhead. (Fig. 20).

¹⁰⁴ Both I (Lima 2017c) and Thériault (2017) explained and analysed the process of selecting the official design for FemShep. This was marked by controversy, with it resembling a beauty pageant contest, where the "prettiest girl" would win. Among all the designs, it was with no surprise to most of the community that a cliché blond Shepard was chosen, with a dark-skinned FemShep as a runner-up. Thériault and I both speculate that this is related to the player base that voted, likely most white males, reiterating the dominant patterns of beauty.



Figure 20 - Official Female Shepard design (Anon, available at: <http://www.dorkly.com/post/64504/8-characters-you-didnt-know-were-aimed-at-women>)

Adrienne Shaw (2014) argues that the transfer of responsibilities for diversity towards the publics rather than a conscious movement made by the companies is prejudicial and typical of neoliberalism (Shaw 2014, p. 35). If on one hand BioWare seemed to have listened to the voices of dissent – a step that Couldry considers fundamental to the understanding of voice as social processes – it did not *really* let them speak as much as giving them the illusion of choice. The company fails to ‘respect the inherent differences between voices’ therefore ‘failing to recognize voice at all’ (Couldry, 2010, p. 8): there is certainly a movement to implement diversity, but this is done within a safe framework of norms of gender and sexuality that ignores for instance, intersectionality. It ignores that by giving to the publics the ‘burden’ of choosing their representation (within, again, a limited scope) removes the moral and ethical responsibility of the company once a decision is made “by” the publics, “for” the publics. This creates a series of illusions: the illusion of choice, of inclusivity, of agency and of configuration. These illusions help shape BioWare’s public image (see chapter 4), and lead to a “fanbase’ for its games that praises their efforts:

It is amazing though how BioWare still looks here at the 10% of active community members and caters some of the games aspects towards such a small pool of player's, comes to show the importance of every games "hardcore fans" to keep developers somewhat informed of what there (*sic*) player base thinks. (r/Auriventris, Reddit)

Listening to the voices whilst limiting their interference, keeping them tamed and under control, is a symptom of the neoliberalism criticized by Couldry, 'a rationality that denies voice' (Couldry 2010, p. 135) and, surreptitiously, operates within the imposed limitations of voice to reach their economic goals. As Megan Condis highlights in her analysis of another BioWare product, *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* and its repercussions, the implementation of queer content – one of the unheard voices of the without-part – 'were made possible because BioWare's profit motive coincided with the expressed desire of *some* users, though the company risked the ire of other users when they made their decision' (Condis 2014, p.12). BioWare's "gamble" to reach a wider audience through inclusion cannot be seen solely as a "good" or "bad" issue, but as a natural dynamic of neoliberalism, prioritizing voice not as a value, but as a profitable resource. There was/is a considerable consumer base that wants to feel represented in media products, and exploring this loophole of social justice can lead to increasing profits with the impression of a 'counter-neoliberal rationality' that asserts the values of voice while 'challenging the legitimacy of forms of institutional organization and self-discipline which deny that value' (Couldry, 2010, p. 136). BioWare's marketing strategy shift had palpable results, as redditor /ParagonSupes_Man affirms:

And this (*the official data from BioWare in Fig. 21*) is for Mass Effect 3, that had tons of marketing and hype specifically to show off female Shepard. Look at the [Google Trends](#) and see the term "fem shep" was nearly non-existent until the marketing for ME3 made it so. I would put cold hard cash down saying that 95% of all ME1 playthroughs were with male Shepard. I was on the Xbox forums and I remember about 6 months after launch I made a post asking if there were any dialog changes if you played as the girl version and of the hundreds of comments, only 2-3 people actually had any experience finishing the game as the girl. So yeah, these numbers aren't surprising at all. (r/ParagonSupers_Man, Reddit)

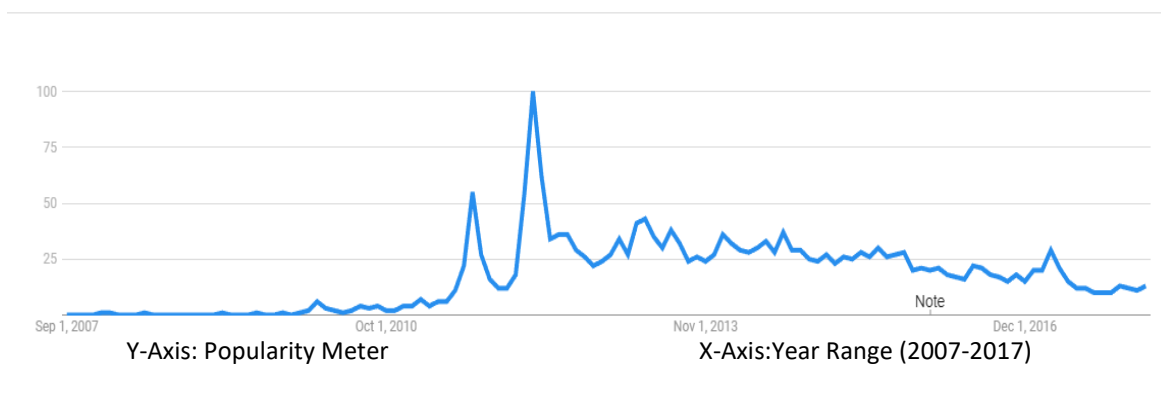


Figure 21 - Popularity of the term "FemShep" according to Google Trends from 1st September 2007 to 22nd February 2018.

The first spike of the graph¹⁰⁵ indicates, roughly, the time when the claims for FemShep marketing started in social media, with the second spike referring to the month (February 2012) when BioWare's #FemShepFriday took place. Since then, mentions to FemShep kept somewhat stable, with a steady decrease over late 2017 and early 2018. This data is strong evidence that, despite being there since the first game as an option, FemShep was secondary to BioWare interests, a simple addition of "diversity" through a token female protagonist rather than an important aspect of the game. This was noted by a redditor that

¹⁰⁵ According to Google Trends, the "popularity" axis indicates the interest in the researched keyword overtime. 100 represents the period where it achieved the most mentions, while 0 represents either no mentions or insufficient data about it.

believes that if FemShep was the only option 'she'd be the emblematic example of a well-written female character in game', but feels that her being optional is 'kind of a low blow' as for most players 'she's a sideshow, not the main event' (r/lankist on Reddit). The limited visibility of FemShep is akin to making voice available, to give an impression that it matters and is there to be heard, but limiting it by making it "invisible", not valuing it when leaving it outside their marketing strategies. This reinforces the perspective of FemShep being, for the developers, just Ms. Male Character, but that happened to be well written and became an icon to a considerable amount of *Mass Effect* players, transforming her into a character of subversion, of dissent, rising to the challenge amidst a heterosexual and male normative medium.

7.3 Where are the gamer activists?

Even though fans did manage to change BioWare's strategy – although to which extent that was not a previous outlined strategy or a seized opportunity, we cannot know – it would be farfetched to say that it serves as a solid example of "fannish civics", of a participatory politics akin to HPA's and others. Similarly, the fan generated content discussed previously, albeit sometimes carrying something we can call "political", do not serve as a unified body of content aiming towards a greater cause. Why though? Why are gamers and games not in the same level of other instances of fan activism - despite being a hugely popular medium with a considerable fanbase?

Fans use of their object of fannish desire to spread political messages or carry on activist activities is a topic widely studied by academia (Jenkins et al. 2016; Hinck 2012; Kligler-Vilenchik 2016; Sandvoss 2013). However, videogames, despite their popularity and

penetration are curiously absent of most analyses of 'fannish civics' (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2016). Surely, there are many studies within videogame's scholarship dealing with other aspects of the political, such as queer politics (Shaw 2014) and identity/race (Leonard 2006). As a relatively recent field in academia, in comparison to fan studies, only few efforts identified activist practices stemming from (Evans and Janish 2015) or happening within videogames (Goulart, Hennigen and Nardi 2015). It is not a problem solely from an academic standpoint as much as a consequence of videogames culture not having, it seems, sufficient examples to be studied in that regard.

To understand this issue, the discussion of 'fannish civics' by Neta Kligler-Vilenchik (2016) provides a useful starting point. According to Kligler-Vilenchik, fannish civics stem from fannish practices, 'activities conducted by members of fan communities in relation to their object of affection, either collectively or on their own' (Klinger-Vilenchik 2016, p. 115), such as the examples discussed previously in this chapter, both in terms of fan-creations and of fans demands. However, the move from 'fannish practices' to 'fannish civics' is not as compelling within ME community as it was with Harry Potter Alliance, where the group managed to organize collectively in order to enact change in the form of fan activism, building on their enthusiasm for their object of affection. If these practices are 'rooted within the practices of a pre-existing fan community' in terms of text and community bond (ibid, p.116), it does feel odd that a long established subreddit such as r/masseffect, with a considerable amount of people, has never led to any sort of activism beyond game-related complaints. The conditions for the emergence of activism are all there: there is enough critical mass; there is a shared affection for the game; there is a demonstrable will to keep it alive as an object of fannish desire; there exists shared knowledge of DIY tools to create and recreate virtually any

aspect of the game; there are themes of political interest; and a space for deliberation. Despite these conditions, *Mass Effect* fans seem not to respond, as HPA did, and through the fandom 'explain abstract ideas – like inequality, discrimination, and disenfranchisement – and to create an activist commitment' (ibid, p.117).

As demonstrated in this thesis, political themes are present in the game's lore, extensively discussed within virtual spaces like Reddit and USBN, and the interviewees in their daily interactions with fellow gamers. Henry Jenkins and Sangita Shrestova, in a concluding chapter of their book *By Any Media Necessary* (Jenkins et al 2016), say that their studies demonstrate a distancing of youth from matters of institutionalized politics, and politics altogether, as they do not see their actions as inherently political (or do not want to be bundled in the same basket), but as 'giving a shit' (Jenkins and Shrestova 2016, p. 254). The refusal to engage with politics is also present in discussions in online gaming forums, with the widespread assumption that politics do not belong in videogames, especially by male individuals. Surely, it can be one of the reasons behind the low adoption of videogames as a political medium for activism.

Interviewee Alex speculates that videogames are a hard place for political action because it puts 'everybody on equal footing' as they would have the same resources and potential development of expertise in game and less of a reason to act. However, he seems to ignore the other factors configuring play, including social and political discourses that impede some groups to have easy access to the technology. This equal footing may happen solely within the game realm itself, but it is hard to achieve. Nonetheless, Alex also raises an interesting point: that games are very good to inspire ideas, but not to inspire action. He shares a pragmatic position to politics where 'political affectation needs action as much as

anything else' (Alex, interviewee). Although he can perceive critiques at the level of discourse, for instance a critique to capitalism in *Fallout* and *BioShock*, he does not see how political action in the form of protests can emerge from games culture.

Alex's difficulty in seeing games as a source for political action may be related to a lack of structured call to action that comes in the form of civic engagement and civic imagination. Jenkins et al (2016) work draws on Peter Dahlgren's conceptualization of civic engagement (see chapter 2) to discuss what they name 'civic imagination (...) the capacity to imagine alternatives to current social, political, or economic institutions or problems'. A utopian-world as interviewee Angelina calls the ME universe is the materiality of civic imagination: it shows a possible universe where many of our current problems regarding identity politics seem to have been overcome. Fans use the franchise to feel better about themselves, as interviewees Alice and Angelina both describe how playing the game and seeing their sexuality somewhat normalized in it affected them. Moreover, creative practices such as fan art and fanfiction allow the publics to engage in alternative scenarios within and beyond the boundaries established by BioWare's code and IP-ownership.

There is arguably a wasted potential of *Mass Effect* as a 'public engagement keystone (...) a touch point, worldview, or philosophy that makes other people, actions, and institutions intelligible' (Hinck, 2012, p.11). Ashley Hinck argues that organizations such as Harry Potter Alliance see themselves as 'publics that act in the public sphere' (ibid, p.7) using *Harry Potter* as the focal point for understanding each other (and their struggles) through an intense identification with their object of fannish affection, exercising their civic imagination and acting upon it. There was, however, in ME history a short period where such potential as public engagement keystone was quasi-realized. Originating in a Facebook community named

“Demand a Better Ending for ME 3¹⁰⁶”, created a few days after the release of ME3, organized a fund-raising campaign to the NGO *Child’s Play*. Paula T. Palomino (2015, p.80) speculates that the anonymous leadership behind the group had some marketing knowledge, ‘seeing as actions taken such as the creation of a website, Facebook page, Twitter account and the donation campaign were well-elaborated” and gathered ‘quick results’, also using YouTube to advertise and convoke publics into action¹⁰⁷.

Players organized themselves based on a shared affect: their disappointment with ME3 ending. They became publics, gathered through experience and capable of action. A subset of members of this disappointed public, gathered on the above-mentioned Facebook group, decided to find a course of action to pressure BioWare for changes. To garner visibility for their cause, the solidary fund-raising to a videogames-related NGO that acquires consoles and games for children’s hospital aisles seemed a good path. In the span of a month, they raised enough funds and consequentially media visibility and BioWare’s attention (Orland 2012, Yin-Poole 2012). The group went mostly silent after one month of intense activity, coinciding with BioWare announcing the release of an Extended Cut DLC (Palomino 2015, p.80). Currently, the Facebook group (with 52,417 likes) remains inactive, with the last important post being a statement from the administrator indicating that they were suffering with harassment and were giving up on the group. They also opted to create a new page – Retake Gaming¹⁰⁸ - where they hoped to keep the group’s goal, stating that ‘If this one group could do so much in such a short amount of time, imagine what a combined effort of a much

¹⁰⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/DemandABetterEndingToMassEffect3/>

¹⁰⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6YU0QK-6QNM>

¹⁰⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/RetakeGaming/>

larger segment of gamers could do'. The new initiative, however, had no effect and the Retake Gaming page had only 2.162 like and is inactive since October 2012.

With their goal achieved – a better ending for ME and the funds raised for the NGO – the group dispersed, and the germ of a wider movement of the same nature as HPA did not bloom. The case, however, does leave a glimpse of hope, demonstrating that there is enough critical mass for organized activist groups to stem from the shared affection for a game. Being born out of a discontent with the ending of ME might have been a reason: the cause of the campaign was ephemeral and niche, with little appeal beyond that specific moment. There was no development of a 'civic engagement' mentality as the campaign was unable to fully function as a public engagement keystone, evoking broader socio-cultural and political preoccupations and discourses that could muster further actions. As Dahlgren argues, 'civic' is a precondition for democratic politics (Dahlgren 2003, p.155), and in failing to achieve a civic role, videogames culture, industry and players are hindering the road towards being adopted as place for and of politics.

Further to the specific reasons that may be involved in the ephemeral quality of the aforementioned example, I would like to highlight a few reasons that can be linked to the difficulty of videogames to become a medium for fan activism: the persistence of the "boy-toy" branding; the stigma of social isolation and addiction; the limited reach of videogames in comparison to other medium (since videogames are more expensive to acquire than books and movies); the development of a niche audience rather than a broad one. Two reasons, however, seem to be of the most significant consequence: the difficulty in perceiving entertainment videogames as a "serious" (not to confuse with serious games) medium that can be a vehicle for change; and the discursive predominance of the white-male-teen as the

essence of “The Gamer”, a much too comfortable position, adopted by individuals who are often unwilling to question social injustice as doing so will undermine their own privileged position.

Interviewee Chester emphasizes that videogames are ‘a very new aesthetic form’ that is unfortunately understood by many as a high-tech toy and entertainment system for ‘escapism’ (Chester, interviewee). Moving from this stigma is an obstacle that arguably every medium has suffered from, and videogames are still unable to do so even within the “indie” sector. Independent producers’ freedom to innovate both in terms of story and mechanics suffer from other limitations, while often small studios end up merging with bigger ones to publish their work or simply serve as third-party developers (Martin and Deuze 2009; Kerr 2006). Videogames are still neophytes when it comes to political content. Cinema, for instance, is well established as a medium where pressing matters of society can be discussed even in blockbusters such as *Marvel’s Black Panther* and its importance concerning representation of Black people, culture and history. Videogames on the other hand suffer resistance from its community that defends their medium as not a place for politics, but for disconnection of reality and relaxation. What this defence leaves aside however is that contentious political topics not only can, but do appear in every manner of videogames, either as a subtext or as a fundamental part of the plot. For example, poverty, crime and minorities are important themes of *GTA: San Andreas* (Ducombe, 2007, pp.48-69, Leonard 2006), while *Mass Effect* has subplots ranging from identity politics to metaphors of ethnical cleansing and profound discussions of artificial intelligence, science and ethics. Jeremiah highlighted during our conversation that he believes games to be a medium that needs more maturity, and that it should come from gamers, as he believes them to be immature and conservative:

There is a public that is conservative not only politically but also conservative in their understanding of videogames and defend that it must be an empty fun, a product that will entertain you 2-3 hours a day, purely mechanical and that should not try to explore any social or political aspect because that detract from the essence of videogames (Jeremiah, interviewee)

GamerGate is a prime example of the public mentioned by Jeremiah. “Pro-GamerGate” groups made many efforts to remove identity politics from the discussion through framing their main complains to be ‘ethics in journalism’ (Mortensen 2016, p.5). In doing so, there is a de-valuing of other voices in that debate, denying their needs to exist in the realm of gaming. Similarly, to a degree, the inability of some of my male interviewees to perceive the importance of diversity in games relates to the individualistic perception that this is not their problem since it does not affect them directly.

Caesar, a white heterosexual man, although not refusing nor complaining about the presence of diversity, admits that for him ‘this need of representation in games is interesting for other people. I normally don’t care, I don’t identify with a character (...) I don’t care if it is a man or a woman, black or white’ (Caesar, interviewee). A similar stance is shown by Torch in our conversation regarding homosexual representation. Torch puts LGBTQ activists in the same box as sexist men and homophobic people, due to a more radical stance that, he says, ‘in my mind no one needs to say (that LGBTQA+ people exist), but maybe the rest of the world needs’ (Torch, interviewee). The difficulty in understanding the nature and extent of the public problems faced by the LGBTQA+ community escapes him.

These silent, apparently less damaging discourses of acceptance within certain parameters reveals the second main issue to the absence of fan-activism stemming from videogames, the comfortable position of the male in this scenario. These men I spoke to, and

others in Reddit and USBN, do not see themselves as acting against diversity in the way they speak about it. They are accepting of non-normative sexualities, while simultaneously denying the importance of making those voices available. It is easy to do so from a position of extreme representation, in an industry that caters to them 99% of the time – and the 1% that does not risk receiving the same treatment as Anita Sarkeesian and Zoe Quinn had, of abuse and harassment. The complains of FemShep’s “vocal minority” of fans, for instance, show how there is a passive-aggressive subtext of “support” to these voices, while limiting them to a minority that should not be taken that much into account. Still being the domain of the white-male-heterosexual, not only games but spaces where they are discussed, such as Reddit – a predominantly male forum (Massanari 2015) – it is hard for the same kind of organic processes of self-organization that characterize HPA activism to happen within videogames in general or in specific games.

Considering these two factors as central causes to the lack of proper organized activism within videogames, it seems fitting that identity politics are the first to use videogames as a ‘public engagement keystone’ (Hinck 2012) with initiatives such as #INeedDiverseGames, a without-part gamers response to the GamerGate controversy, being a good start into the ways in which gamers worldwide can gather around a medium-related issue to fight for society-wide problems. What remains to be seen is activities in the same vein as Lucas Goulart Inês Hennigen and Henrique Nardi (2015) described regarding the LGBTQ march in World of Warcraft, originating from specific games and their communities of gamers, happening either inside it or outside of it, just like the practices that inspired Jenkins et al (2016) book. The authors describe an event known as the *Proudmoore Parade* that takes place in the game universe since 2004 as a response to a Blizzard statement prohibiting

players from assuming their sexual identifiers as they considered it to be outside the scope of a fantasy game (Goulart, Hennigen and Nardi, 2015, pp. 405-406). Aesthetically, the parade had similar elements to offline LGBTQA+ parades, with watchwords, fun slogans and colourful clothing (ibid, p.406). The authors conclude that the Proudmoore Parade reconfigured the game elements into sexualized subtexts to show that 'sexuality *is* in the game' (ibid, p.412) unlike what Blizzard had manifested. These issues can challenge the dominance of the techno masculine audience, enacting acts of 'resistance to heteronormativity and a challenge to a homogenous visibility, masculine and heterosexual' (ibid, p.412). As publics affected by Blizzard statement, and connected through shared identifiers (or a respect and acceptance of non-normative sexualities), they defy the ingrained perspective of the male gamer. This kind of protest is necessary to mark videogames as an inclusive terrain and is perceived by interviewee Jeremiah as an important step towards change in videogames culture:

You have a minority of white-hetero men that felt they were the king of it all, the king of that medium, and now they are feeling threatened, that they will lose space. Let them scream, and if they are screaming is because they feel that things are changing, and if they are changing is for the better. If they are combative is because good things are happening. (Jeremiah, interviewee)

The political dimension in the *Mass Effect* unofficial extended universe is then less of a "public campaign" of political activism and more a series of individual acts of resistance, representing one self that can resonate with others and thus create the germ of a public through the shared experiences of affect provided by the game and its extended universe. These publics and their fan productions can be forms of resistance or tactics used by the without-part to make visible, possible, realities that are closer to theirs. There is a strong

affective component to the political quality of *Mass Effect's* unofficial extended universe. Players want to shape that world to fit their expectations, their desires for the possible outcomes that encompasses those of their “headcanons” within that fantastical utopian universe. The political here is primarily affective, speaking from a place of care, passion, fannish desire, creativity; and ends up questioning (or reaffirming) invisibilities and un-listened voices of videogames culture.

In the next, concluding chapter, I summarize the key findings of the discussion undertaken throughout the thesis. Moreover, I indicate paths towards an effective adoption of the diversity discourse that builds on core tenets of the political, the culture of participation, and the importance of media in the deliberation of core societal themes.

Chapter 8: Gaming Politics, Political Gaming, Games of Politics, Politics of Games?

Having reached the final part of this thesis, a structured approach to the concluding statements will help to both clarify the contributions and limitations of the research and indicate future paths of enquiry. This concluding chapter firstly presents a summary of the most relevant findings and contributions of this thesis. Secondly, I discuss where the political is found within videogames, mapping the aspects of gaming culture that are more prominent as political spaces. I then follow with three sections that are propositions for future research actions which can also potentially contribute to videogames development. These are framed under the following questions: why we should investigate and operationalise the ‘political’ in videogames; how political themes can be brought into videogames; and what the possible paths are to further solidify a political approach to videogame studies and development.

8.1 Main Findings and Contributions

The purpose of this thesis was to uncover what is political about videogames. Through a case study of *Mass Effect* that went beyond the game itself to analyse the configurative circuit in which it belongs, the thesis provides both theoretical, methodological, analytical and empirical contributions to the study of videogames and politics. Some findings of this thesis are not solely limited to its case study and can be broadened to the study of videogames in general, whilst others are more specific in nature, adding to the research around BioWare and/or ME. The subsections that follow explore the main contributions to this thesis.

8.1.1 Configuration and the Configurative Framework

The thesis is guided by one core concept: configuration. It is both presented as the nomination of the means of interaction afforded by videogames and as an analytical framework. I reframed the concept to encompass not only an immediate moment of interaction between human and machine, but also the modifications in the self and in the Other (be it human or machine, individual or collective) that happen due to and during several interactions. Furthermore, configuration is interwoven with social, political and cultural implications, as highlighted both by Stuart Moulthrop's suggestion to account for videogames 'social and material conditions' and other rule-systems (Moulthrop 2004, p.66), and Erving Goffman's principles of a gaming encounter (Goffman 1961) discussed in Chapter 1. Configuration is relational, dialogical and social: a persistent state of becoming where the elements engaged in a configurative interaction affect change in each other.

Having discussed and defined configuration, I proposed an analytical framework that uses the strengths of the concept for a holistic approach to videogame analysis. The framework encompassed three spheres: media, gaming and culture. Each of these spheres is concerned with specific aspects of videogames – their materiality and digital nature; their playful capabilities and the feedback loop of interaction between gamer and machine; and the network of relations that is both configurative of and configured by videogames. However, I contended that these spheres are not to be approached separately if we are to make better use of the framework. Rather, all three and their points of intersection and mutual configurative dynamics must be studied, which is the approach adopted in this thesis.

A good example is Chapter 7 and the discussion about FemShep marketing campaign. There, the model worked in its full capacity weaving in a coherent piece the mutual configuration happening among the three spheres and how it resulted in the creation of an official marketing campaign for FemShep. Chapter 5 also shows good use of the framework, favouring the medium-sphere in analysing a set of characters through the gaming experiences of myself; my interviewees and online fans of ME; the narratives and experiences of game developers and writers responsible for those characters. Moreover, the cultural sphere highlights the tensions between the representation of these characters in-game and hegemonic narratives of heteronormativity, whiteness, patriarchy, among others. Harder to perceive is the effectiveness of the model in its connection to affect and emotion traced in Chapter 6, where the gaming-sphere is predominant but the other two spheres play a lesser role than they ideally should in a configurative analysis where the spheres should be dynamically superposed and mutually configurative. Rather, it analyses the gaming-sphere in its intersectional relationship to both medium and culture sphere, according to the diagram presented in Chapter 3. For instance, the chapter highlights how gamers' personal experiences in life and in-game, their own identities, and their own system of values and beliefs configure the emotional bonds created with ME.

The framework requires a diverse dataset and mixed methods to provide the necessary ground for an in-depth analysis of videogames. In Chapter 3, I described the main sources of data – interviews, in-depth gameplay, Reddit, Twitter and other websites – and the methods behind collection and analysis of each of them. It was an intricate task to analyse such a diverse set of data, and it demonstrated how layered a configurative analysis can be. It firstly requires a good understanding of the specificities of each data type and what can be

extracted before an analysis of the dynamics between the three spheres can take place. The extensive dataset is both useful and problematic for a configurative analysis. It demands a lot from the researcher to trace the highest possible number of connections. Each type of data needed its own method of collection and methodology of analysis. In this thesis, the approach worked well but not without problems – for instance, the questionnaire and the official transmedia material were less utilized than initially expected due to the sheer volume of data already being handled.

In this thesis, the focus was a case study of a single game series, however the framework is malleable and allows for several approaches as outlined in Chapter 3 (see Fig. 6, p.142). What differentiates it from other similar approaches is the focus that must be given to a holistic perspective that is concerned, foremost, with understanding the configurative dynamics between different aspects of videogames and its three spheres. I contend that the holistic understanding of videogames proposed in this thesis is required if videogames are to fully acknowledge their political potential and value as cultural artefact and medium. Academics, critics, and professionals of the videogames industry must turn their attention to the configurative dynamics between medium, gaming and culture spheres. My proposition is for game scholars to move beyond analysis of specific aspects - for instance games narrative or mechanics – to provide a comprehensive understanding of the object in study as this thesis did with ME. For instance, I advocate that the framework can be used to study specific consoles; events like GamerGate and #FemShepFriday; explore subjectivities and affects in play; the business and economies of videogames industry; videogames design; among others. Further studies utilising the framework need to be carried out to endorse its effectiveness and usability.

8.1.2 The gamers and their problems: political science and videogames.

Although many videogame scholars and studies cited throughout the thesis deal with political themes or are political statements themselves, there has been limited critical attention given to the actual interface with political studies. Concepts such as ‘scene of dissensus’, ‘public problem’, ‘deliberation’, and ‘civic engagement’, among others, provide game scholars with further analytical tools to uncover videogames’ socio-political role as well as their ludic and narrative affordances.

To do so, it is also important to acknowledge gamers as political beings and not as unchangeable taxonomic categories. Rather than a static and stereotyped category of *the gamer*, that holds little value for analytical purposes beyond referring to a specific demographic, I proposed approaching gamers as publics: individuals that come together and are called into being a public through their shared affects and experiences. This allows research to move beyond demographic categories, providing researchers and industry with a more accurate picture of those configuring videogames culture. This approach accounts for the fluidity of interactions and identities that form publics, enabling a deeper understanding of the configurative dynamics at play in the production-consumption cycles of videogames industry.

Moreover, I evidenced how the discourse of many of my subjects is highly politicised, concerned about politics of identity and representation, which are embedded in the larger conflict between progressive and conservative values. They acknowledge and criticize the development of ME characters and how the game has been marketed, which I argue is an aftereffect of hegemonic masculinity and heteronormative thought. This fact is in itself political as it shows the struggles faced by those ‘without-part’ in challenging the established

consensus regarding which identities are accepted and how they can be represented. Indeed, through their engagement with ME universe, players organised themselves to protest for the inclusion of FemShep in marketing and of male-to-male romance in ME using the same channels and strategies that were involved in the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street. Although videogames have not yet gained the same ground as other popular culture products regarding civic engagement and political action, I argue that gamers (and developers alike) need to further occupy this activist ground if they are to be another effective site of resistance within popular culture products (Fiske 1989, p.159). I contend that concepts and methodologies from political sciences are not just useful, but extremely necessary to understand the current role of videogames in the disputes that are happening in several ‘scenes of dissensus’, especially those concerning marginalised identities.

8.1.3 Emotions in play and affective design

Every human interaction is marked by an exchange not just of language – verbal or non-verbal – but also of emotions, of affection. The use of affect proposed in this thesis, from a pragmatist perspective, defines it an energizing factor that combines values, emotions and actions capable of forming and mobilizing a public. I argued that studying how affective engagement appears in the play of ME indicates the potency of an ‘affective politics’ approach. I propose that affective engagement can facilitate the understanding of how gamers relate to videogames and their characters, universes, mechanics and storytelling, providing insight into how to develop more inclusive and political games within the Triple A scenario. Adrienne Shaw has extensively criticised the causal connection that is often traced between

representation and identification, in which the former does not guarantee that the latter will happen (Shaw 2014). Following her findings, I add that identification relies on a configurative design that allows gamers to be affected and to affect the game and others.

For instance, I would like to briefly refer to the fact that two very different interviewees - Alex and Alice - identified with the same character, Samantha Traynor. Alex is a British, young, white and heterosexual male, while Alice is a Brazilian lesbian ciswoman. Traditional approaches to representation and identification would face difficulty in explaining this situation. First, due to their focus on examining representation of marginalised identities, it is unlikely that representation studies would account for how the traditional gamer demographic identifies with game characters. The same theoretical and methodological approach would likely reduce Alice's identification with Samantha to the fact that they are both lesbians. However, that is not the reason why Alice identifies with her. Rather, she likes Samantha for the exact same reasons as Alex does: they both identify with her witty character and how she behaves in the face of adversity. Approaching identification through an affective engagement lens is what makes it possible to truly understand when and why gamers identify with certain characters.

Furthermore, I contend that an affective design of videogames can have a beneficial political outcome regarding matters of gender, sexuality and racial identities. Creating characters and a universe that foster empathy is the first step towards self-reflection about one's own values. Games like ME that evoke different societal values, facilitated by BioWare's openness with their fan base that enabled online spaces for them to gather, helped create diverse communities based on shared emotions and meaning, a diversity of affected publics of ME, where individuals with different values, experiences and opinions could meet and

deliberate. These communities of affect have initiated for instance the birth of an active fandom that, I argued, is also very political. Through their creations, fans manifest their own understandings of the game; they create and explore possibilities that were restricted by the code regarding sexuality and romance (therefore enacting other performances of gender and sexuality that are also political); and they organise themselves to affect the politics of production and content as shown in the case of FemShep's marketing.

8.1.4 Contributions to the scholarship in videogames, gender and sexuality

This thesis contributes to debates concerned with the relationship between gender, sexuality, and videogames. I argue that my research demonstrates that there is a complexity of identities, experiences, and modes of interaction that are not fully accounted for. For instance, I was surprised that some interviewees, who could be described as *the gamer* category criticised in Chapter 4, showed a variety of opinions and stances towards diversity in games that are not those frequently reflected in academic work and media coverage. I defend that further research must be undertaken in how the 'traditional' public formed by *the gamer* engages with gaming. Toxic masculinity is often seen in online forums and online games, and we should concern ourselves with finding ways to minimise it. It is in reality representative of a 'vocal minority' that uses web anonymity as a place to vent their biases, prejudices, and frustration. This is not to deny the issues I discussed in the introduction – that there is a considerable rise of conservative thought that is also present in videogames - rather to realise that these are political matters that go beyond a gender/sexuality/class/race divide. They also speak profoundly of one's values, ideologies, political beliefs, cultural, and

educational upbringing. Interviewee Victor for instance did emphasise how his worldview has changed once he got into University and started to interact with people that had a different background from his. He goes from considering all feminists as 'feminazi' to a person with a good grasp of the current inequalities of gender and very self-aware of his privileges as a white man in a patriarchal and racist Brazilian society.

My data collection was limited to 15 interviews, with seven of them being white males, and is by no means representative of a whole. Nonetheless it indicates that the experiences of white men in play is also considerably diverse and further study of it can provide more solutions to how videogames industry can tackle real inclusion and diversity. Following the suggestion of bell hooks (2008 pp.66-67), that feminism should also be concerned about raising men's awareness about patriarchy, this provides a 'clear vision of what feminist masculinity looks like' (ibid, p.66), I contend that further studies about the white-male-heterosexual gamer can challenge the current formulaic approach of this demographic.

It is important to highlight, however, the necessary spotlight and focus that is currently given to the study of the representation of marginalised groups in media, as this is imperative to the stance taken against conservative discourse. Interviewee Alice's political statement further reinforces this importance of not removing the focus from those who need it the most and making it another case of male-centrality:

You know I think many times people say, "ah it is an important thing (diversity in games) because it is opening the minds of the heterosexual player" and so on. This is important too, for sure, but what I think is the most important is to give self-esteem and voice to those who don't have it, for the person that is not heterosexual, not white, not a man and all that (Alice, interviewee)

Furthermore, the research also adds to the well-known scholarship approaching videogames as a gendered and heteronormative space where women, LGBTQA+ and people of colour are mostly marginalised. Even within the cultural context of a considerably diverse Triple A game such as ME, mentions of how videogames are a 'male world' appeared in the subreddit of Mass Effect – a very disciplined subreddit in comparison to others, but still affected by the overall demographic of the platform that values geek masculinities (Massanari 2015).

8.1.5 On BioWare and Mass Effect

BioWare is, I argue, a company that has a conflicting public image: the company has the public face of a fairly progressive company with values and intentions that are reflected in their games through same-sex romance and a transgender character in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. BioWare's consumer base considers the company as one of the few Triple A developers that tries to add diversity to games (and as I argued throughout, their fans are also critical of how BioWare does it). Nonetheless, the company has been involved in controversies such as the creation of a 'gay planet' in *Star Wars: KOTOR* (Condis 2014), the absence of a Female Shepard in ME marketing (Lima 2017, Thériault 2016) and the late addition of male-to-male romance in ME, indicating a conservative approach to these matters where marketing and neoliberal logics are involved. In order to analyse the role of BioWare and add to the current body of research in media and creative industries and diversity, I investigated the composition of BioWare's team and found that it follows the demographic patterns of the industry (Williams et al 2009; Weststar and Andrei-Gedja 2015). I learnt that BioWare's public

image as a progressive and inclusive company did not match its team composition, with ME's development being mostly led by white men.

Following the critique made by Adrienne Shaw (2009) and Anamik Saha (2017) regarding a correlation between diversity in the industry, content, and identification for marginalised groups, I argue that a change in the politics of production is needed for an effective inclusive and diverse workforce. This change must be connected to the current political debates raised by feminist, racial, and intersectional activists and progressive ideologies, reclaiming and valuing marginalised voices to challenge the control exerted by hegemonic, heteronormative and white masculinity.

This conclusion leads to the discussions of Chapter 5 where I argue that there is a contradictory approach of diversity in ME that stems from the conflicting public image of BioWare, being simultaneously progressive in its proposal and conservative in its delivery. Through the analysis of ME characters, I discussed the question of *'how gender and sexuality are portrayed and discussed in-game'*. Female characters are often in the borderline area of empowerment and stereotyping, reinforcing the male-gaze in how they were designed and written.

The character examinations showed that both male and female subjects in ME had sexualised approaches that relied on stereotypical understandings of 'femininity' and race. This is an intersection that merits further attention, both because there is still a substantial lack of people of colour featured as videogame protagonists – especially beyond stereotypical representations – and the few representations that arise are deemed problematic (see Leonard 2005; 2006, Ducombe 2007). In ME, what at first seems an acceptable representation

of Black and Latino males does not resist an in-depth analysis: they are built on tropes of both Black masculinity and the 'Latin lover'. Despite the advances in representation, with non-heterosexual romances and well-developed female and LGBTQA+ characters, the difficulty in finding *actual* diversity as opposed to just a plurality of options (Shaw 2014) shows that there is still much work to be done in that regard.

8.2 Where do we find politics

In the introduction to the thesis, one of the questions I outlined was "*Where is politics manifested and configured within videogames as a medium, as a culture, and as a moment of interaction between player and game?*" There are at least four places within videogames culture where matters of political nature are/can be present: videogames content, videogames production, videogames consumption and videogames media. The following paragraphs uncover what each brings to the forefront based on the findings of this research.

Videogame content is political since it reflects the dominant ideologies embedded in society, the shared values and meanings that make communication possible, and the rules of behaviour that inspire the functioning of society. For instance, I discussed how ME presented a storyline composed of several political story arcs, such as the Krogan Genophage and the Quarian and Geth problem. Aligned with the choice mechanics, these political storylines could be impacted by the player's choices and were considered by those in my data as challenging moments regarding their values and ethics. The in-depth analysis of the game narrative, mechanics, and characters presented arguments regarding the lack of diversity in content. Chapters 5 and 6 show the dynamics between content, production, and gameplay experiences. The gendered and heteronormative politics of production affected the kind of

content present in the game, with hypersexualized females and stereotypes of femininity and Black and Latino masculinities. The gradual opening of ME towards male-to-male romance for example shows how initial beliefs of what could be part of the game shifted. In this case, the political acts of players requiring different gameplay experiences that closely resembled their own life pressured the company to affect change in the levels of production and content. Additionally, the game content creates affective engagement, reinforcing community ties between the publics of ME and the knowledge of oneself, creating solid ground that could be explored politically.

As with every other artistic endeavour, there will be issues of authorship to consider even when it is a work made collaboratively. In the case of ME, it comes as part of the 'BioWare games' brand and what this implies: a narrative rich universe, with customisable main characters that are emotionally compelling, and play balanced between action and storytelling. But these are not the only characteristics of a BioWare game that emerge upon a close reading of their games. There is a clear preoccupation with diversity and representation despite the compelling criticism leveraged towards their processes (Condis 2014; Adams 2015; Voorhes 2012). The company seems to approach videogames on a number of levels: as a media device for leisure and entertainment where gamers are challenged by a set of rules and coded possibilities; as a place to tell complex stories and defy the gamers values and beliefs; and as a medium through which communities can be formed¹⁰⁹.

BioWare and other videogame developers are not isolated from the world. Their values as a company and those of their employees plays a part in which games are developed,

¹⁰⁹ BioWare has been praised for its ability to listen to its community of players and its will to build 'a strong community' (Casey Hudson in Heineman 2015) and foster the formation of online communities, although the official BioWare forum is now inactive.

what their content consists of and how it plays out. This leads into a second area where politics can manifest: games production.

I argue that a shift in the politics of production is necessary in the establishment of equality and inclusion policies. A 'politics of production' broadly refers to: demographics of the workforce; developer freedom and incentive to creativity; understanding the publics that will consume a game; and the games that are made available to the consumer. Change in just one of these aspects would be welcomed but that alone would be insufficient for effective change. For example, the addition of female writers to ME3 was too late to correct problems that originated in the development of the first game (see for instance how the words 'sexy' and 'attractive' were used by the development team to define the design of the female characters analysed in Chapter 5). I claim that a meaningful inclusion must be a comprehensive process that starts with uncovering and understanding the ingrained socio-cultural values that impede real diversity to take place. Without first tackling the roots of a public problem, any action taken carries the risk of being a façade instead of resulting in effective changes to the politics of production. Changes must happen in all structures of the complex cycle of videogames production and global distribution (Kerr 2006; 2017) if effective politics of diversity are to be implemented within the industry.

However, the business operation of digital games is one aspect of the configurative circuit I did not fully examine, being a possible path for future research instead. For instance, BioWare was acquired by Electronic Arts (EA) in late 2007, after the release of the first ME (Thorsen 2007). In Reddit, several posts show discussions of fans speculating the extent of EA's influence in the continuation of the series. A frequently acknowledged shift is the use of DLCs to expand a game's content. This became common practice in ME 2 and 3 and other

BioWare franchises post-EA acquisition. Yet, due to difficulty in obtaining primary data from BioWare to contrast with the fans' discussion and what is available in the media, I opted not to proceed with this particular analysis. It would be productive to explore the business and economical politics in place between EA and BioWare and what has been configured due to this relationship. Further research into this matter can benefit a holistic approach to videogames research, uncovering aspects that my research could not investigate regarding the politics of production. The main source of discussion came from players and secondary sources, such as the news, which are core places these publics inhabit where the political appears in videogames culture.

This thesis presents several examples of how politics appear in videogames consumption. It is there that my interviewees stated how playing FemShep felt empowering; how interviewees Alice and Angelina found in the 'utopia' of ME a place where their identities were accepted and respected; how playing as self and as other (and everything in-between) were political acts. Fan creations also manifest politics as they reflect the creators' principles and values by expanding the limits of that universe to be more inclusive or, at least, less heteronormative and masculine. Potentially, videogames can generate acts of solidarity and civic engagement from gamers. They can operate as 'public engagement keystones' (Hinck 2012) in which instances of political discussion and even activism can occur.

The political in videogames consumption appears in their discussions online in different spaces: interviewee Robin highlights how she is from the 'Tumblr' generation and discusses all sorts of issues online; the redditors and USBN forum users have shown how ME can foster long and inspired conversations of a political nature in their discussions of gendered play and in-game sexualities. Interviewee Rahna is a good example of the current generation

of 'cyberfeminism' (and other 'cyber'-protests and movements). She participates in two Facebook groups that are dedicated to discussing issues from videogames (and popular culture in general) with a political perspective in mind. "The Left Side of The Force", she says, is 'a group created by a woman and administrated by women, by minorities in general: women, black people, LGBTQ people, fat people' (Rahna, interviewee). The group is a place where they can freely discuss popular culture without the control of a geek masculinity that declares they hold the 'knowledge' of these topics. Traditionally political topics are avoided, but the group itself is a political act of those 'without-part' against a consensus and is also open to discussions of discriminatory acts within games industry. To fill the gap of their need to further discuss political matters, a second group was formed – "The Militant Side of The Force - where members actively discuss the political situation of the country (Brazil). In these cases, videogames are function as cultural tokens for everyday political conversation. This conversation is not bound by the exchange of words, but is made manifest in artistic endeavours such as fanart, fanfiction, and machinimas. These exchanges can take place in face-to-face interactions but also in the plethora of online spaces where people are enacting their political selves.

The various appropriations of ME by gamers discussed here are an example of 'affective politics' put into action by those 'mobilized and connected or disconnected through expressions of sentiment' (Papacharissi 2015, p. 215). Their shared love for the ME game series served as a starting point for further understanding themselves as political subjects and, in some cases, of wider political problems.

Lastly, I want to highlight the role of videogames media as a site for politics. By videogames media I refer to those media outlets dedicated to the coverage of gaming, offline

or online, professional and amateur. Although I have not discussed this topic at length previously, videogames media served primarily as a source of data. I contend that this media should actively participate in the political transformations of videogames. Videogames media had, for instance, a lead role in the GamerGate controversy, not just as a site to gather and spread information, but as a host for central actors in the GG crusade towards 'ethics in journalism' as discussed in the introduction. Further study into the findings of this research with the established knowledge produced in media and journalism studies will deliver interesting insights on the configurative complexity of videogames and the role of videogames media within it¹¹⁰.

8.3 Why (should we do politics)

I don't know why videogames should be this sacred thing that can't be touched
– Interviewee Mary contesting the 'games can't have political content' claims

Considering the contemporary debate surrounding the rise of conservative thought worldwide mentioned in the introduction, I contend that videogames, due to their wide appeal to both a younger audience in their formative years of political thought, and older demographics that have more established political mindsets, could be used as a platform for political and civic discussion. They can be used to present opposite worldviews through their unique configurative capabilities, proposing different approaches to the political debate regarding conservative and progressive views. The ME narratives deal with moral and ethical choices, accompanied by narrative arcs of a political nature, which demonstrates that even

¹¹⁰ See Kirkpatrick 2012 and McKernan 2013 for a comprehensive historical account of videogames media in the UK and USA respectively.

Triple A games can be a place that challenges gamers beyond the goals, trials, and rules of the game. Games can invite gamers to think in similar ways to literature and film. As argued by Peter Dahlgren, popular culture can be a prime space for enabling civic cultures as it 'offers a sense of easy access to symbolic communities, a world of belonging beyond oneself that can be at times seen as preparatory for civic engagement, prefiguring involvement beyond one's private domain'. (Dahlgren 2009, p.140).

As I explored in Chapter 6, experimenting with Otherness in these fantastical contexts can help in this 'preparation'. Brenda Laurel and Purple Games intended to provide spaces for experimentation and 'emotional rehearsal' for girls playing their games (Laurel 2001, p.45). BioWare's choice mechanics along with the moral scale system of Paragon and Renegade serve a similar function in ME; playing with a series of "what if" scenarios that foster different emotions in the gamers (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum 2012). Learning about the narrative and struggles of the other can potentially create empathy and raise awareness regarding public problems, as interviewee Neil highlighted: 'you can think that something isn't a problem because you are not exposed to it (...) anything that promotes discussion and probably arguments and conversation about difficult or taboo subjects is to be encouraged' (Neil, interviewee). A medium that is configured by action and agency can provide multiple approaches to these mental processes of comprehension, empathy and self-knowledge that are fundamental for a democratic society.

In an age where civil liberties are at risk, and conservatives brandish their anger and hate towards minorities without further consequences, it is even more important that popular culture rises to the challenge and presents an alternative stage for the voice of the oppressed to manifest. Rather than worrying about the potential profit loss in adopting a

political stance - a preoccupation raised by interviewee Leah who thinks 'there's a fear of how far they can take things without being commercially damaging' (Leah, interviewee) - videogame industries should remember the words of interviewee Gibbs: 'games can get attention just for being diverse in the first place. As long as it is done for the right reasons and they are not being like "oh, look at us, we are so great and we are being more diverse" you can still get attention for it' (Gibbs, interviewee).

We cannot leave aside the capitalist and neoliberal rationale as videogames are a billion-dollar industry. In this context, there are limits to what sort of diversity and inclusion will be visible as it will persistently be limited by the need for profit and the absence of diverse groups in the leadership of governments, entertainment conglomerates, and other cultural and creative institutions. It is, nonetheless, a reality that must be accepted: games should be political and diverse because there is a huge market willing to consume these products. Meanwhile, progressive politics must carve their way, within the confines of the capitalist systems of production in place, in order to foster values of equality, inclusion, diversity and respect of otherness.

Further political action lies in the hands of games media and gamers as starting points for discussion and as places to put pressure on 'what they (the industry) can get away with' (Leah, interviewee). Interviewee Alex considers that games are not a place where politics can easily be inserted because political themes are often taken to the extremes to be effective as part of a gameplay and narrative. He says, however, that they do have a cultural and social role to play and can provide 'societal commentary' to an extent.

I contend then that videogames as a highly political medium - both for the exposition of political content, for questioning hegemonic thought through its stories and mechanics, for

being capable of mobilizing publics towards action - has to challenge conformist thought if we are to question the rise of conservatism. Videogames must take their place as another cultural artefact that 'helps inform masses of people, that helps individuals understand feminist thinking and feminist politics', among other topics, in the same way that literature and other media does (hooks 2008, p.26). Moreover, using the medium's unique configurative affordances, the political in videogames can be tailored toward specific publics, and especially youth culture as they are the next in line to take positions within games industry and can affect change from the inside.

8.4 How to 'do' politics in videogames: proposals for the industry

But how can we bring about an effective change in the complex configurative circles of videogames? Beyond the necessary advances in the content of games that were mostly discussed through this thesis, this section presents some actions that can be taken by those involved in videogames culture. It is not an extensive list, neither is it a guide on 'how to develop political games'. They are recommendations of possible courses of action to a) foster diversity in the industry, b) initiate political conversation based on videogames; c) enhance the possibility of civic and political engagement through gaming; d) implement a possible future where what is now deemed as subversive becomes the norm.

For instance, videogame companies of all sizes can rely on consultancy services provided by specialists in the politics of diversity. It is common practice to hire specialists in fields like History and Geography to provide accuracy in storytelling and world-building. It does not seem farfetched that people with experience in political matters could also be consulted. Surely, LGBTQA+ people, racially marginalised people, and women are the best

sources for an active consultancy service that can 'double-check' a game in order to avoid at least the presence of caricatural and stereotypical portrayals of these groups.

Something interviewee Neil talked about resonates here. Imagining what she would do if put in a situation where she had to choose between a mostly male-run (yet diverse) company and one fully female run, she said that she would choose the latter. Her justification is 'not necessarily (because) of workplace harassment and discrimination' but the exhaustion of 'having to be the one person making the argument for "do we have to show cleavage?" every time'. Safe space policies and strict punishment to those that harass and discriminate colleagues can reduce the issues of her former preoccupation. However, a more complicated matter is a change of mentality that transforms videogame companies into places where the voice of those without-part will be effectively heard and considered. Conservative values of patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity are embedded in the industry already. To provide a solution and a better working space, companies could offer workshops and talks to their employees where they could learn about these societal imbalances and suggest what to do to diminish those. Lastly, videogame developers can/should study and apply socio-cultural and political design models such as the ones proposed by Flanagan and Nissenbaum (2014) and Anthropy (2012). Those can resolve issues related to videogames content that is offensive to marginalised publics.

Larger efforts should also be made towards the promotion of videogames literacy in formal and informal spaces of learning, and specialised and non-specialised media spaces. As a medium with its own specificities, videogames literacy can help diminish negative perceptions of videogames – such as the persistent debates of videogames influence in violent behaviour (Anderson et al 2010, Anderson and Gentile 2006, Ferguson et al 2008,

Ferguson and Konjin 2015) – while extending the realm of players to unreached demographics. Benefits of videogames for education and even health have been extensively studied (Gee 2003, Squire 2011, Kato 2010, Griffiths 2004) and provide a basis for further studies on how to use games for political engagement. I contend that further presenting videogames as part of school curricula, both in how to make them, play them and understand them, can bring even more benefits to a progressive and democratic society.

For instance, ME has been studied as a potential source for the study of philosophy for moral and ethical learning through its moral and ethical conundrums (Aristidou and Basallo 2014). The authors' paper demonstrates how key decision points in ME invoke philosophical dilemmas that can be used as examples for students to understand complex philosophical concepts (Aristidou and Basallo 2014, p.179). The results can be fruitful as Aristidou and Basallo point:

The specific types of concrete arguments coming out of the game not only helped them understand the grounds behind each philosophical position but also allowed them to test those arguments in the game and examine their consequences. Furthermore, it helped them construct counterexamples and counterarguments to each position (ibid, p. 179)

Educators worldwide can familiarize themselves more with videogames, not just educational games and serious games, but the Triple A and indie games played daily by many of their students. They can tell a lot about the world – history in the *Assassins Creed* franchise, the economies and politics of war in *This War of Mine*, moral and ethics in choice-based narratives such as ME, to name a few. Videogames are rich educational resources and it is also our role not just as researchers but educators to discover ways to implement them into the classroom in all levels of education.

8.5 What: next steps for future research

Moving forward from this research, I believe that further connecting political science concepts to the study of videogames is necessary. It could come in the form of more quantitative measurements of political engagement, using variables applied to other studies in the interface between politics and media. Measuring possible shifts in civic engagement and/or political stances about political topics before and after the play of some select games could provide further data to current research and for potential changes in the production of games.

Moreover, it could and should move to a qualitatively political approach, following the steps highlighted in Chapter 2, to operationalise the analysis of a scene of dissensus. This could help map and understand the actors involved in videogame controversies such as GG, or the presence/absence of certain games in the public debate about political themes. For example, games such as *This War of Mine* (11 bit Studios, 2014) could be studied regarding understandings about war, globalisation and capitalism, whereas a political analysis of *Papers, please* (3909LLC, 2013) comprehends and measures issues of immigration, xenophobia and preconceived values about otherness. These can be studied through a political lens as I have shown throughout this thesis, in dialogue with already established studies within videogames scholarship.

Furthermore, other game-specific investigation utilising the configurative framework analysis and a similar set of research questions would provide more material to support the conclusions made in this thesis. Although extensive, I would be wary to generalise them to videogames as a whole. *Mass Effect* is a 'unique' game in some ways, attracting players that

may not be interested in other genres or even similarly themed games. Therefore, not only different games but different publics that play can either contest or reinforce my findings. The issues I faced with in the scope of this research can also be diminished. The large amount of data collected was too much for a single person and a single thesis, with several interesting aspects left out at first. Coming from an academic tradition of research groups that contained people ranging from undergrads to professors has surely shaped how I developed this analytical framework. It seems better suited for long-term research projects tackled by researchers in different levels of the academic path. With each individual concentrating on a piece of data and relevant research questions, more depth can be given to each. A cross-study of these findings would provide a more accurate portrayal of videogames.

Beyond the use of my own framework, videogames scholarship should also be aiming for longitudinal and robust research efforts in general. In that regard, multi-institutional and international projects like the progressive 'Refiguring Innovation in Games (ReFIG)' led by feminist scholar Jennifer Jenson¹¹¹ with the participation of scholars based in Canada, USA, Ireland and United Kingdom, among others; Espen Aarseth's €2 million grant for a 5-year research project dedicated to creating 'a theoretical foundation for working with games of both the digital and analog variety' (Arildsen 2016); and the 7-year Finnish research project 'Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies'¹¹² led by scholar Frans Maÿra, among others, presenting several theoretical entries to the study of games; are prime examples of what a productive and bright future for videogames research looks like.

¹¹¹ The vast list of collaborators of this project can be found here: <http://www.refig.ca/people-partners/>

¹¹² <https://coe-gamecult.org/about/>

8.6 Final words

The journey of this thesis was not an easy one, as expected, but it does provide a glimpse of hope towards a future of videogames that is mature and progressive. Videogames can serve as tools for education and learning, but these functions should not be solely the realm of educational games and serious games. Any game has a civic potential of educating. ME, a profit-oriented Triple A game, has shown that it is possible to raise topics of extreme complexity and have gamers engage with them at a deeper, affective level, beyond the rules and outcomes of the games. Not every player will seize this opportunity, but the opportunities that are available are significant.

I envision and hope for a future where inclusivity and diversity in videogames will not be the trending word of the day, but will instead be a naturally assimilated part of culture. Although these shifts will be championed by those ‘without-part’ who will seize the medium as another place where their voice can be manifested and valued, white-males with years of industry experience must also do their part as allies. I see in the current waves of ‘cyberfeminism’ much of the foundations that will lead to change. There is more incentive for marginalised groups to engage and work with technology, and more spaces for learning and experimenting¹¹³. There is a generation of women, LGBTQA+ people, Black people, Asian people, Muslims, and Latinos, among other underrepresented groups, that are decisively taking a stance against conservatism both within and outside the realm of popular culture. They use the tools at their disposal and will, hopefully, grow to leading positions where they can effect change. The role of videogames in all of this is highlighted by how straightforward

¹¹³ Examples of organisations in charge of this change: ReFIG ‘GameJams’ and academic research; CodeFirst Girls (<https://www.codefirstgirls.org.uk/>); Women Who Code (<https://www.womenwhocode.com/london>) and Dames Making Games (<https://dmg.to/>)

it is to find simple tools to create games; with videogames becoming less a place for the geek-nerd and more a medium that everyone can interact with. As we understand it more and accept it more, videogames will surely be placed at the same level as other forms of art in their significance. To the question of '*what is political about videogames*', I can now provide a simple yet powerful answer: *everything*.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Information Sheet and Consent Form

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS

REC Reference Number: LRS14/150521

YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS INFORMATION SHEET



Gaming politics: gamers, gender and sexuality on Earth and beyond

Invitation Paragraph

I would like to invite you to participate in this research project, which forms part of my PhD research within the department of Culture, Media and Creative Industries. You should only participate if you want to; choosing not to take part will not disadvantage you in anyway. Before you decide whether you want to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what your participation will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

What is the purpose of the study?

The aim of the study is to understand whether we can consider videogames as a medium capable of fostering public conversations on socio-political themes such as gender (sexism, transphobia, misogyny) and sexuality (homophobia) issues. We will use a case study – the BioWare trilogy *Mass Effect* – to understand how developers address such issues, how players perceive them, and the different forms that the political appears within gaming practices and culture.

Why have I been invited to take part?

A crucial part of the research is to discuss the game's development and repercussion with the professionals involved with it. Your interview complements a varied dataset that contains interviews with *Mass Effect* players of varying backgrounds, extensive online conversations about the game and an in-depth analysis of the three games and the transmedial universe: books, comics and fan made material.

Do I have to take part?

Participation is voluntary. You do not have to take part. You should read this information sheet and if you have any questions you should ask the research team. You should not agree to take part in this research until you have had all your questions answered satisfactorily.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and will be asked to sign a consent form. At BioWare's discretion, I will then e-mail you to discuss the interview procedure. The interview topic guide will be available beforehand and approved by BioWare's legal department. The interview can be held where you suit better, be it on a private (home, work, other) or public place (a cafe, the university, a library, other).

The interview will take approximately one hour and follow a specific set of questions. You may be contacted afterwards to clarify any relevant aspect, but doing so is optional. The interview will be recorded, subject to your permission. Recordings of interviews will be deleted after transcription. Even if you have decided to take part, you are still free to cease your participation at any time before or during the interview and to have research data/information relating to you withdrawn without giving any reason up to two weeks after the interview.

Incentives

There is no financial incentive to participate in this research however any reasonable travel expenses will be reimbursed.

What are the possible risks of taking part?

There are no foreseeable risks in participating in the study. The main disadvantage to taking part in the study is that you will be donating around an hour of your time to take part. It is possible that you may find answering some of the questions challenging. This is unlikely but if it were to occur the interview could be terminated at any time.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

There are no direct benefits to taking part. However, the information we get from the study will help understanding videogames influence on current society and might benefit game development towards a more politically engaged production. Furthermore, I will provide you with a summary of a final report describing the main findings.

Will my taking part be kept confidential?

What is said in the interview is regarded as strictly confidential and will be held securely until the research is finished. Any information provided by you that might reflect your position in the company during development of the game will be treated fairly and we will follow academic standards to not let your identity revealed for the readers.

Your participation is entirely voluntary. If you change your mind, you are free to stop your participation and to have your data withdrawn without giving any reason up to two weeks after the interview. All data for analysis will be anonymised. At all times there will be no possibility of you as individuals being linked with the data.

The UK Data Protection Act 1998 will apply to all information gathered within the interviews and held on password-locked computer files and locked cabinets within King's College London. No data will be accessed by anyone other than me; and anonymity of the material will be protected by using false names. No data will be able to be linked back to any individual taking part in the interview. You may withdraw your data from the project anytime up to two weeks after the interview. All recordings of data on audio-equipment will be deleted after transcription.

How is the project being funded?

The project is funded by the Brazilian National Council of Science and Technology Development (CNPq). The current interviews are also funded by ReFig, a project supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The study has been approved by the King's College London Research Ethics Committee.

What will happen to the results of the study?

I will produce a thesis summarising the main findings, which will be sent to you. We also intend to disseminate the research finding on conferences and journals.

What if something goes wrong?

If you have any questions or require more information about this study, please contact me using the following contact details:

Dr. Sarah Atkinson
Department of Culture, Media and Creative Industries
School of Arts and Humanities
King's College London
1.05 Chesham Building
Strand Campus
London
WC2R 2LS
Email: sarah.atkinson@kcl.ac.uk
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Department of Culture, Media and Creative Industries
School of Arts and Humanities
King's College London
Email: leandro_augusto.borges_lima@kcl.ac.uk
+44 (0)75 12376406

If this study has harmed you in any way or if you wish to make a complaint about the conduct of the study you can contact King's College London using the details below for further advice and information:

The Chair, Social Science and Public Policy, Humanities and Law, Research Ethics Subcommittee Chair, rec@kcl.ac.uk

Thank you for reading this information sheet and for considering taking part in this research.

CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH STUDIES

Please complete this form after you have read the Information Sheet and/or listened to an explanation about the research.



Title of Study: Gaming politics: gamers, gender and sexuality on Earth and beyond

King's College Research Ethics Committee Ref: LRS14/150521

Thank you for considering taking part in this research. The person organising the research must explain the project to you before you agree to take part. If you have any questions arising from the Information Sheet or explanation already given to you, please ask the researcher before you decide whether to join in. You will be given a copy of this Consent Form to keep and refer to at any time.

I confirm that I understand that by ticking/initialling each box I am consenting to this element of the study. I understand that it will be assumed that unticked/initialled boxes mean that I DO NOT consent to that part of the study. I understand that by not giving consent for any one element I may be deemed ineligible for the study.

Please tick or initial

Please tick or initial

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet sent via email on the 2nd of November, 2017 for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information and asked questions which have been answered satisfactorily.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason. Furthermore, I understand that I will be able to withdraw my data up to two weeks after my interview
3. I consent to the processing of my personal information for the purposes explained to me. I understand that such information will be handled in accordance with the terms of the UK Data Protection Act 1998.
4. I understand that my information may be subject to review by responsible individuals from the College for monitoring and audit purposes.
5. I agree to be contacted in the future by King's College London researchers who would like to invite me to participate in follow up studies to this project, or in future studies of a similar nature.
6. I agree that the research team may use my data for future research and understand that any such use of identifiable data would be reviewed and approved by a research ethics committee. (In such cases, as with this project, data would/would not be identifiable in any report).
7. I understand that the information I have submitted will be published as a report and I wish to receive a copy of it.
8. I consent to my interview being audio/video/textual recorded.

Interviewee

Date

Signature

Leandro Lima

Date

Signature

Appendix 2: Semi-Structured Interview question guide

Semi-structured interview guide

1. What are you playing now?
2. How is your consumption of other media/culture?
3. Tell me about your experience with videogames. (When you started playing, how do you play, when, etc)
4. When did you hear about ME? What do you think of the game?
5. Question about the game key moments of decision making.
6. Question about the game take on gender and possible ramifications of it: how are women portrayed? Do you feel represented? Do you identify with characters? Did you feel oppressed or saw prejudice/sexism on the game narrative at some moment?
7. Question about the game take on sexuality: how was the experience of love/sex within the game scope? You think Bioware did a decent job on the matter?
8. Have you ever talked about games on day to day conversations? About what?
9. Do you think that games can be talked about politics of gender and sexuality just as we talk about cinema, literature, tv programs and so on as examples?
10. Do you think games are important to understand our society today?
11. Mass Effect is a mainstream game. You think that it is possible for such games to engage into politics of everyday life on these themes of gender and sexuality, among others? Do you think they should do it? Why?
12. Did ME have an impact in your life?

Appendix 3: Online Questionnaire Sample

Gender and sexuality politics in the Mass Effect universe

The aim of the study is to understand whether we can consider videogames as a medium capable of fostering public conversations on socio-political themes such as gender (sexism, transphobia, misogyny) and sexuality (homophobia) issues. We will use a case study – the Bioware trilogy Mass Effect – to understand how developers address such issues, how players perceive them, and if they use games as tokens for everyday political conversation on those themes.

The questionnaire takes 15-20 minutes to complete. On the next page, you will have access to the Information Sheet. Please read it carefully in order to proceed.

* Required

Information Sheet

I would like to invite you to participate in this research project, which forms part of my PhD research within the department of Culture, Media and Creative Industries. You should only participate if you want to; choosing not to take part will not disadvantage you in any way. Before you decide whether you want to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what your participation will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any queries or if you would like more information.

Why have I been invited to take part?

We are inviting Mass Effect players in general aiming to a diversity of age, gender, ethnicity, race, beliefs and sexualities, from United Kingdom and Brazil, in order to get a quantifiable overview of gaming practice. We favour the participation of people that played through the three games of Mass Effect but you can participate on the questionnaire even if you played one or two of the games.

Do I have to take part?

Participation is voluntary. You do not have to take part. You should read this information sheet and if you have any questions you should ask the research team. You should not agree to take part in this research until you have had all your questions answered satisfactorily.

What will happen to me if I take part?

Your data will be anonymised. You might be selected for the second part of the research, a semi-structured in depth interview, depending on your answers.

Incentives

There is no financial incentive to participate in this research.

What are the possible risks of taking part?

There are no foreseeable risks in participating in the study.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

There are no direct benefits to taking part. However, the information we get from the study will help understand videogames influence on current society and might benefit game development towards a more politically engaged production.

Will my participation be kept confidential?

1. Consent sheet *

Your answers will be anonymised and no data whatsoever will be publicized that can identify you. You will only be contacted by the researcher if selected to take part on the second part of the research, the

in-depth interview.

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and also, that I had the opportunity to clarify any doubts.

The UK Data Protection Act 1998 will apply to all information gathered within the interviews and held in password-locked computer files and locked cabinets within King's College London. No data will be accessed by anyone other than myself and anonymity of the materials will be protected by using false names. No data will be able to be linked back to any individuals taking part in the interview. You may withdraw your data from the project anytime up to two weeks after completing the questionnaire.

I agree to take part in the above study.

Demographics

being funded? This project is funded by the Brazilian National Council of Science and Technology Development (CNPq). The study has been approved by the King's College London Research Ethics Committee

2. What is your age? *

Mark only one oval.

What will happen to the results of the study?

18-24

25-32

I will produce a thesis summarizing the main findings. We also intend to disseminate the research findings in conferences and journals.

33-40

41-50

50+

What if something goes wrong?

3. Nationality *

If you have any questions or require more information about this study, please contact me using the following contact details:

4. Which city are you from? *

Dr. Sarah Atkinson
Department of Culture, Media and Creative Industries
School of Arts and Humanities
King's College London
1.05 Chesham Building
Strand Campus
London
WC2R 2LS

Email: sarah.atkinson@kcl.ac.uk

7. Do you have religious beliefs? *

Mark only one oval.

Leandro Lima
Department of Culture, Media and Creative Industries
School of Arts and Humanities
King's College London

Email: leandro.augusto.borges.lima@kcl.ac.uk

Check all that apply.

If this study has harmed you in any way or if you wish to make a complaint about the conduct of the study you can contact King's College London using the details below for further advice and information:

The Chair, Social Science and Public Policy, Humanities and Law, Research Ethics Subcommittee
Chair, ees@kcl.ac.uk

- Anglicanism
- African religion (Umbanda, Candomblé)
- Buddhism
- Hinduism
- Oriental Orthodox
- Presbyterianism, Congregationalism & other Reformed
- Baptists
- Methodism
- Judaism
- Charismatic and Pentecostalism
- Roman Catholicism
- Other: _____

91. **How do you identify yourself in terms of gender? Mark the options that apply to you. ***

Check all that apply.

- Cisgender
- Yes Transgender
- No Male
- Female: _____
- Gender Fluid

Mass Effect experience

This section aims to comprehend your experience with the gameplay of the Mass Effect series and its transmedia universe.

Other: _____

15. **Did you play the three games of the Mass Effect trilogy? ***

10. **How do you identify yourself in terms of sexuality? Mark the options that apply to you. ***

Check all that apply.

- Homosexual / Gay / Lesbian
- Queer
- Asexual
- Heterosexual / Straight
- Bisexual
- Pansexual
- Other: _____

Gaming Practices

This section aims to understand your relationship with gaming. Please consider "videogame" as an umbrella term to both hardware and software.

11. **When was your first experience with videogames? ***

16. **Which order did you play? (Check "other" if you did not play the three games) ***

Mark only one oval.

- 0-10 years old
- 1-2-3
- 10-18 years old
- 3-2-1
- 18-30 years old
- 2-1-3
- 30-50 years old
- 3-1-2
- 50+
- Other

12. **How long does your gaming session usually**

17. **When did you play? ***

Mark only one oval.

- Right after the games were released

13. **Which videogame devices you currently use/own? ***

Check all that apply.

- 2-3 years after the release
- 3-4 years after the release
- PC/Laptop
- Other: _____
- Console
- Smartphone

18. **How many times did you play Mass Effect 1? ***

Mark only one oval.

- Other: _____
- 2
- 3+

19. How many times did you play Mass Effect 2? *

Mark only one oval.

- 1
 2
 3+

20. How many times did you play Mass Effect 3? *

Mark only one oval.

- 1
 2
 3+

21. Your Commander Shepard gender was (include all gameplays) *

Check all that apply.

- Female
 Male
 Other: _____

22. Your Commander Shepard sexual orientation was (Include all your gameplays) *

Check all that apply.

- Gay
 Asexual female
 Bisexual male
 Asexual male
 Heterosexual female
 Heterosexual male
 Lesbian
 Bisexual female
 Other: _____

23. Did you romance any character(s)? (Include all your gameplays) *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes - one character
 Yes - two characters
 Yes - three characters
 Yes - more than three characters
 No
 Other: _____

Mass Effect and the Transmedia Universe

Check all that apply.
This section wants to find out which elements of the transmedia universe of Mass Effect appeal the most to the gamers

- Samara
- Morinth
27. Which of the following official material of the transmedia universe have you engaged with? *
- Steve Cortez

Check all that apply.

- Ashley
- Mass Effect: Infiltrator (iOsGame)
- Smartest Joe
- Mass Effect: Galaxy (iOS game)
- Tali
- Mass Effect: Revelation (book)
- Diana Allers
- Mass Effect: Ascension (book)
- Jacob
- Mass Effect: Retribution (book)
- James Vega
- Mass Effect: Deception (book)
- Jayik
- Mass Effect: Redemption (comics)
- Kelly Chambers
- Mass Effect: Evolution (comics)
- Kaidan
- Mass Effect: Invasion (comics)
- Liara
- Mass Effect: Homeworlds (comics)
- Jack
- Mass Effect: Foundation
- Miranda
- Other comics
- Thane
- Mass Effect: Paragon Lost (animated movie)

25. Which character(s) did you want to romance but the game did not allow? *

Check all that apply.

Other: _____

Legion

28. Which of the following fan-made material have you engaged with and/or created? *

Check all that apply.

Zaeed

Fanfiction

Game mods

Fanmade films/short films

Fanmade drawing

None of the above

Other: _____

Grunt

29. Have you created any fan-made material within the Mass Effect transmedia universe? *

Mark only one oval.

None

Other: _____

No

26. Did you engage with the transmedia universe of Mass Effect? (e.g books, comics, fan-made material). *

30. If yes, what did you create? *

Mark only one oval.

Yes Skip to question 27.

No Skip to question 31.

Participation on second phase of research

Please let us know if you are interested in participating on the second phase of the research which include an in-depth interview about your experience playing Mass Effect. Questions include topics related to gender and sexuality inside and outside gaming and may include your personal experience with these issues.

36. Did you enjoy the questionnaire? *
Mark only one oval.

Mark only one oval.

- Yes Stop filling out this form.
- No Skip to question 32.
- No Stop filling out this form.
- No Skip to question 35.
- Other: _____

Stop filling out this form.

Skip to question 32.

Contact e-mail and phone

32. Please give us your e-mail and/or telephone
(UK number only) in order to contact you for
further information about the interview. *



Powered by
Google Forms

Skip to question 35.

Thanks for participating

Thanks for participating in this questionnaire. Unfortunately you are not eligible for the remaining questions but your data is valuable to our research.

33. If you have any comments or suggestions regarding the questionnaire, please let us know.

34. Did you enjoy the questionnaire? *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes Stop filling out this form.
- No Stop filling out this form.
- Other: _____

Stop filling out this form.

Stop filling out this form.

Thanks for participating

Thanks for participating in this questionnaire!

35. If you have any comments or suggestions regarding the questionnaire, please let us know.

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