A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF VIOLENCE IN THE *MASS EFFECT* UNIVERSE

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis offers a critical discourse analysis of violence in the video game *Mass Effect*. After the Sandy Hook School shooting in December, 2012, *Mass Effect* was believed to motivate the shooter. Following this accusation, conversations arose defending and blaming the video game for the shooting. Rather than taking a side, I use Fairclough's textually-oriented critical discourse analysis to explore the constructions of physical and discursive violence, especially discourses of gender, sexuality and race, in *Mass Effect.* Physical violence is the more overt presentation, making it easy to link the game to the shooting; discursive violence, however, is less obvious. I also explore how players engage with, and potentially resist, physical and discursive violence through online conversations and opportunities to change the game. Finally, I offer implications for video game developers, parents, teachers, players, and the public.

DEDICATION

For Brandan

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AI.....Artificially Intelligent

Atari VCS....Atari video computer system

BSAA.....Bioterrorism Security Assessment Alliance

CDA.....Critical Discourse Analysis

CT.....CTMod

CTRA.....CTRaidAssist

DLC.....Downloadable Content

ESRB.....Entertainment Software Ratings Board

FTL.....Faster Than Light

ICT..... Interplanetary Combatives Training

LGBTQ.....Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, and Queer

MIT.....Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Mod.....Modification

MMO.....Massively Multiplayer Game

MMORPG..Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game

NES.....Nintendo Entertainment System

NPC.....Non-Playable Character

P3.....P300

PC.....Personal Computer

RPG.....Role-Playing Game

RTS.....Real-time strategy

TBS.....Turn-based strategy

TED.....Technology, Entertainment, Design

WoW.....*World of Warcraft*

CHAPTER 1

Situating the Study

Imagine being able to explore the universe in a space ship capable of travelling faster than light (FTL). Along the way, you are able to make friends, recruit a crew and form relationships with members of diverse species. You are also given the opportunity to take part in heated battles and fight for the survival of the entire galaxy. These are just a few of the experiences available for the player within the *Mass Effect* universe. *Mass Effect* is a series of video games that provide a compelling in-depth story, along with the ability to customize and make choices influencing outcomes. In some news reports, it has also been linked to violent events. For these reasons, and more I discuss later, *Mass Effect* is the video game I have chosen to analyse in this thesis.

Video games have become fully integrated into the everyday lives of millions of people (De Aguilera & Mendiz, 2003). However, a common reaction from researchers, parents, and educators has been to boycott video games due to assumptions about their negative effects (De Aguilera & Mendiz, 2003; Ferguson, 2008; Sherry, 2001). A recurring theme in research and media associated with video games involves linking them to real-life disasters, like school shootings (Anderson & Dill, 2000; Ferguson, 2008).

Approaching video games in a critical manner allows the investigation of their influence within popular culture (Squire, 2002). It also explores how branches of media construct video games (and, by extension, the identity of the gamer) for the general public.

I begin this chapter by positioning myself in thinking critically about video games. Following, I outline how I researched and performed a critical discourse analysis of violence in the video game *Mass Effect*. I continue with a discussion of the Sandy Hook School shooting. I conclude with my research questions and an overview of the thesis chapters.

Positioning Myself in Thinking Critically about Video Games

When I completed the first year of my undergraduate program the first thing I thought about was all the free time I was going to have that summer. I had no other commitments but my job at a call centre. What would I do with my spare time? After catching up on some reading, sketching, watching movies, and going for walks, I found myself bored and aggravated at not having much to do.

My roommate recommended I become more involved in *World of Warcraft*[1] (*WoW*) with him. At that time *WoW* players were involved in the expansion of the *Wrath of the Lich King*'s latest raid, *Naxxramas*. While this raid did not yet allow the players the opportunity to face the Lich King himself, we confronted his minion Kel'Thuzad who was using Naxxramas as a location to spread a plague throughout the world. Taking on this raid was a challenge. We would meet three times a week, at 9:00 pm, for a minimum of five hours. Sometimes the sessions would last until 6:00 am. I spent the next three months completely devoted to my group exploring *Naxxramus*. I took on the role of a "dwarf tank," with the responsibility of protecting my teammates.

[1] *World of Warcraft* is a massively multiplayer online role playing video game set in a fantasy universe. It was created by the company Blizzard Entertainment and first released in November of 2004.

It took me over a month to learn to navigate *Naxxramas,* and the unique fighting styles for each boss. At last, when we defeated the final enemy, the evil Kel'Thuzad, I was overjoyed and excited at the upgraded armour and/or weapons I would receive as a reward. However, after a month of learning fighting styles, there was nothing for me! I was informed that the upgraded armour and weapons which the developer made available this time was not designed for my avatar. When the raid reset at the end of the week, I would have to try again because the availability of new armour and weapon upgrades was based on a randomized order and maybe next time something would come up for me. I immediately lost my excitement for defeating the boss. Even if Kel'Thuzad dropped an item that would be of use to me, I would have to compete with my teammates for it.

After taking part in this raid over and over again, I eventually obtained all the weapons and armour possible for my avatar. Finally, after so many nights of fighting to stay awake, as well as fighting to stay alive, my character had the best items and armour available in the game. Near the end of the summer, a new raid was added: *Ulduar*. Just like, that everything I had was out of date and, if I wanted to keep up with everyone, I had to start taking part in fighting new bosses to obtain new items. I immediately thought, how can all the effort I put in over the past few months mean nothing?

Even though I never continued past *Naxxramas,* the two other individuals I lived with went on to conquer *Ulduar* and the raids following until they finally defeated the Lich King himself. While I had lost the motivation to continue in *WoW,* they had, become more immersed in the game and the content. This was the first time I began to take up a critical theoretical analysis of video games and the discourses within and

about them. Why was I was finding myself disconnected from the game when so many other people were being pulled further in? Why was I becoming bored and having difficulty staying awake at nights when other people could play until six o'clock the next morning? Rather than wonder if there was a problem with *WoW*, my roommates had me convinced something was wrong with me.

The experiences I describe were among the first I had thinking about how I position myself in relation to video games. It was a strange sensation to see people I had close relationships with become more immersed in *WoW* while I felt like playing other games, or reflecting on my experiences. When I originally expressed my displeasure with how my avatar was suddenly outdated for the *Ulduuar* raid, my roommate simply said, "That's just the way the game is." Some of my co-workers were envious of my lack of interest in *WoW* and wished they had partners and/or children who felt the same. Playing a video game was still one of my favourite pastimes, but should every individual who plays video games enjoy playing every game made? We do not expect every person who goes to the movies to enjoy every single film. Just as people are complex individuals with varying degrees of interest, there are various genres of video games waiting to be played. Maybe *WoW* is just not the game designed for me.

Another issue I had with *WoW* was the redundancy of the tasks I had to perform in order to progress through the game. Two of the most common quests involve gathering items and/or killing. When creating an avatar, the primary storyline of the game requires that the player chooses one side of two warring factions. One of my first quests in *WoW* was to kill wolves that were threatening a Dwarf village and bring their pelts back to the non-playable character who issued the quest. I spent many nights

learning how to be an effective fighter and how to perform my expected role within the game. Nevertheless, I began to find all the fighting tedious to the point where there were nights when I fell asleep in the middle of a fight. Like many other games, violence is an essential element in *WoW* that helps define why the game is deemed to be fun. What are the implications when violence is constructed as fun or pleasure? What does it mean if I was falling asleep when I was supposed to be having fun while fighting? Since *WoW* was no longer fun for me, was I broken as a gamer or was I becoming disenchanted with its violent content?

As I was reflecting on the role video games play in my life, I began exploring video game news websites to see if there was anyone else who felt similar to me. As I read different websites, I began to notice how news reports about violent events often linked the crime to violence in video games. I felt a need to reflect on the power/knowledge relationships constructed via competing discourses about violence and video game players in these articles. Without realizing it, I began my long journey into exploring the construction of violence in video games and the video gamer identity.

Sandy Hook Shooting and Research Question

On the morning of December 14, 2012, a twenty-year-old White male forcefully entered the Sandy Hook Elementary School in the village of Sandy Hook, Newton, Connecticut and fired his gun (Baron, 2012; Dolnick & Grynbaum, 2012). As he began the massacre, he was confronted by the school's principal and psychologist. They were both killed. He then continued to kill several teachers, their aides, and students in two separate kindergarten classes. In total he shot 20 children and six adult staff members.

Additionally, before driving to the school, he shot and killed his mother at their home in Newton while she slept.

As first responders arrived at the scene, the shooter committed suicide by shooting himself in the head. Four weapons were found—a Glock 10 mm handgun, Sig-Saue-6r 9 mm handgun, a 12-gauge shotgun, and a Bushmaster .223 calibre rifle with high capacity magazine. The Bushmaster was the primary weapon used in the massacre (Connecticut State Police, Public Information Office, 2013). The weapons were all purchased legally and registered to the killer's mother (Luo & Cooper, 2012). It was the second deadliest mass shooting by a single person in American history, after the 2007 Virginia Tech massacre, and the second deadliest mass murder at a U.S. elementary school, after the 1927 Bath school bombings in Michigan (Schildkraut & Hernandez, 2013).

When a school shooting occurs, there is a search for information on why a person would choose to open fire in an environment like a school and what could have influenced the shooter into doing so (Ferguson, 2008). Mainstream news reports on school shootings often explore how branches of popular culture serve as a source of influence. In particular, news reports tend to position video games and the violent content within the games as a contributing factor to school violence (Anderson, Gentile, & Buckley, 2007; Ferguson, 2008; Gentile, et al., 2004; Harding, 2008). According to Harding (2008) this is a classic "chicken-or-egg problem" in which she asks if children become more aggressive after playing video games or are aggressive children more attracted to video games (¶ 3).

Sandy Hook is one example of many when a video game is linked to the shooter, even when there is no demonstrated causal connection. Within a few days after the Sandy Hook massacre took place, the public began to try to make sense of the event and the motivations for it. Initial news reports incorrectly identified the shooter's brother as the killer. Shortly after the brother's name was released, the records were corrected. A couple of days were more than sufficient for people to take action online (Ashcraft, 2012).

Details on a Facebook profile for the shooter were circulated widely, motivating people to search through his profile in an effort see if there were any factors hinting that he was going to commit the massacre at Sandy Hook (Ashcraft, 2012; Bishop, 2012). Some angry Facebook users noted that the brother had liked the video game *Mass Effect*. Reports from the highly conservative Fox News also connected the tragedy of the shooting to video games. This connection led some to believe that *Mass Effect* was directly linked to the Sandy Hook School massacre (Bishop, 2012). Many comments posted on the *Mass Effect* Facebook page blamed the game for the shooting, such as "ban this game and the people who created such sickness" (Ashcraft, 2012, ¶ 6). Almost an equal number of postings were made defending the game, particularly after the brother's name was cleared. BioWare[2] eventually altered the page so that it would no longer show the postings. Reportedly, the shooter's video game interests included other violent games such as *Splinter Cell* and *Call of Duty*. However, the list also included games like *Spiderman*, *Paper Mario*, *Luigi's Mansion*, and *Pikmin* -- games considered

[2] Bioware is a Canadian video game developer that was founded in February, 1995. It is the company responsible for the creation of the *Mass Effect* trilogy.

appropriate for any age) (Geigner, 2013). Geigner (2013) reported that the shooter was "obsessed" with the game *Dance Dance Revolution*, and he argued, "all this low-hanging fruit-picking over video games is stupid" (¶ 4).

In consideration of the manner in which *Mass Effect* was positioned in relation to the Sandy Hook shooting, I ask the following questions:

How is physical and discursive violence constructed in *Mass Effect?*

How do *Mass Effect* players engage with and/or resist physical and discursive violence in the game?

How does the portrayal of violence in *Mass Effect* reflect reports of public perceptions about the link between violence and video games?

This thesis is a critical exploration and analysis of physical and discursive violence, specifically discourses of gender, sexuality and race, within *Mass Effect*. My purpose is not to search for the potential benefits or harms from video games. Rather, I explore how constructions of physical and discursive violence within *Mass Effect*, and players' responses to the game, (re)enforce and/or challenge power relationships. Similarly to Frasca (2001), I am not primarily writing this thesis *on* gamers, but *for* them in order to promote critical interaction with video games as well as critical reflection on how players are positioned in relation to video games. My purpose in this thesis is to look beyond the good and bad of video games into the complexities of discourses that circulate around games.

This thesis involves a critical discourse analysis of *Mass Effect*. In the following chapter, I provide historical background on video games and review literature surrounding school shootings, violence, and video games, including critical approaches

dealing with discourses of gender, sexuality, and race. In Chapter 3, I describe critical discourse analysis as a methodology along with the design of my own approach towards analyzing violence in *Mass Effect*. In Chapter 4 I describe *Mass Effect* and present a critical discourse analysis of the game specifically the construction of physical and discursive violence. I conclude in Chapter 5 with a review of my research and analysis, as well as implications for video game developers, parents, teachers, players, and the public.

CHAPTER 2

Research on Video Games

In this chapter I describe the video games industry, as well as how different branches of research have analysed video games. I begin with a brief history of the industry. I then discuss how researchers tend to polarize video games, searching for potential harms or benefits. Following, I report on work that examines how the news media has linked video games to education and school shootings. I then explore studies that take different critical perspectives towards video games, examining issues such as gender and sexuality, and racial representations.

A Brief History of the Industry

A video game is an electronic game played by means of images on a video screen. It involves interaction between the player and the screen. A video game is unique from other mediums in the sense that, in order to function, it requires physical input of some form, which usually results in quick reactions within a limited time frame. A player must become in tune with the interface in order for the game to operate and to achieve success (Wolf, 2002).

Video games can be played on a wide range of devices including video game consoles, handheld consoles, arcade games, computers, cellular phones, and tablets. Video games can be played on different mediums and there are multiple genres of video games. Apperley (2006) identifies four genres of video games: simulation, strategy, action, and role-playing. The simulation genre involves games that simulate sports, flying, and driving, and games that simulate the dynamics of towns, cities, and small communities, such as the *Sims.* Strategy games have less focus on narrative content. The

strategy genre can be divided into two subgenres: real-time strategy (RTS), such as *Starcraft,* and turn-based strategy (TBS), such as *Final Fantasy Tactics*. Both RTS and TBS games generally have similar qualities of graphics as well as a bird's-eye view of the events taking place. Action games are also made up of two subgenres: first-person shooters and third-person games. First-person shooters such as *Halo* are played as if the screen were the player's own vision while third-person games such as *Resident Evil* have the avatar fully visible to the player. Each style allows the player to have different perceptual experiences with game environments. Role-playing games (RPGs) such as *World of Warcraft* are related to the literary genres. Apperley (2006) describes RPGs as being similar to pencil-and-paper role playing games like *Dungeons and Dragons* in which players develop avatars and acquire their characteristics. Role playing games also generally involve communities like online blogs, bulletin boards, or chat rooms that allow players to communicate and engage in the games cooperatively. Apperley argues that games do not need to be limited to one genre and often cross over. For example, *Mass Effect* contains characteristics of action, role-playing, and some elements of strategy games.

Kline and Dyer-Witheford (2003) trace the development of video gaming from its humble origins to its current status as a $20 billion global cultural industry. Early computer games were developed within the military-industrial-academic complex at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Artificial Intelligence unit in the 1960's. The group of people who conceived of video games were known as "hackers." Since then, the term "hacking" has taken on a negative connotation referring to someone who engages in digital theft and other felonies committed through the use of a computer.

However, Kline and Dyer-Witheford (2003) describe the term as originally referring to people who applied skills that were once legitimate and essential to the development of computer networks. Hackers would engage in unauthorized but accepted experiments with computers that were central to the work at MIT.

In 1962, hacker Steve Russell invented the first game for computer use, *Spacewar*. That same year, President Kennedy confronted the Soviets over the missiles in Cuba. Development of technology was creating a sense of nuclear angst. Americans experienced apprehension as they would stare into the skies waiting for signs of an atomic attack. Technology, however, also provided a sense of distraction from the problems of the Cold War. *Spacewar* enabled two players to steer rocket ships and fire torpedoes at each other through the use of control knobs. This brainchild of Russell's not only provided the consumer public with a distraction from nuclear threats, but was also the foundation of an industry (Kline & Dyer-Witheford, 2003).

In 1972, Nolan Bushnell was inspired by *Spacewar* to create the arcade game *Pong*. Nolan Bushnell and Ted Dabney started Atari Computers that same year. Arcades were the most popular environment to enjoy video games. Table models of games began appearing in pubs and pinball arcades throughout the early 1970's. Arcades were primarily male settings. Most of the games had themes of shooting, violence, and intense competition, which gave arcades a sense of being a dangerous environment. Darkened arcades became socially suspicious sites, and the young adult males who frequented them were deemed dishonest and dangerous. The video game industry faced the challenge of how to change this image in order to work its way into homes (Kline & Dyer-Witheford, 2003).

In 1975, *Pong* became a home video game which began the "Atari Era." Atari created *Home Pong*, a one-game console box with mounted controller dials that attached to a television. A contract was made with Sears for 150,000 units which became a best selling item. In 1976, Atari Video Computer System (Atari VCS) 2600 was released. This was the first console capable of playing and displaying a wide variety of games on cartridges. The Atari VCS 2600 was a giant step in creating a feasible market for home video games (Kline & Dyer-Witheford, 2003).

However, at the height of its own boom cycle, the video game industry began to experience problems. By 1980, Atari accounted for over 30 percent of Warner Communications' operating income. In 1982, maintaining the pace of innovation was difficult. Video game programmers' focus on fun was ignored by the company management, who focussed only on the product. Most of the new games being developed were mediocre and shoddily put together (Kline & Dyer-Witheford, 2003). By 1983, there were more than 200 different game cartridges on the market manufactured by about 40 companies. Many were regurgitated versions of older games like *Pac-Man*, *Space Invaders,* and *Asteroids*. It was not long before children were losing interest, storing their video game cartridges in the closet, and parents were unwilling to spend money on more cartridges. Warner laid off several thousand workers in 1984 and then sold off Atari (Kline & Dyer-Witheford, 2003).

The Japanese company Nintendo is considered the most successful in video games history because it managed to survive the video game crisis. The Atari crash removed Nintendo's major competitors from the market but also lessened North American confidence in its product. Nintendo took a bold step forward in 1985 with the

release of the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES). The company learned from and avoided the mistakes of the Atari crash. In 1988 the NES was the best-selling toy in North America. By 1992, the video games industry was booming again with over five million dollars in retail sales. Nintendo developed a commercial system which used technological advantage to consolidate a near-monopolistic control. The company maintained power over the quantity and quality of game production. Nintendo knew what its players wanted and how to market new products to them (Kline & Dyer-Witheford, 2003).

The history of video games reflects the complex interaction between popular culture and technological development. Bromley (1997) addresses this relationship through his model of technology-society interaction. The model is divided into two categories: the context of development and the context of use. Bromley states that technology and society interact both during the development of a novelty and during the use of the novelty. Video games were originally developed during a period heavily influenced by the Cold War and were used as devices for simulating military training (Macedonia, 2002: Squire, 2002). Today, video games still provide valuable contributions to military training by allowing soldiers to prepare for a number of situations including major firefights, peacekeeping, hostage rescue, urban warfare, and counter terrorism (Macedonia, 2002). With so much of its history connected to violence, it is not surprising that news media tend to connect video games to violent events like school shootings.

Jones (2008) describes video games "as a pervasive and significant form of expression in today's culture" (p. 1). As a multi-billion dollar industry based on leisure,

what impact does the video game industry have on society? How do we use video games today? Are they more than just a medium for entertainment? In their discussion regarding the interaction between society and technology, Surry and Brennan (1998) state:

> We need more research into how the social environment—the practices, habits, goals, hopes, fears, skills, philosophies, and plans of people—influence the way an innovation is used. We also need to know more about the ways an innovation influences the social environment in which it is used. (p. 7)

Instead of becoming a tool used solely for military training, video games have also become a medium for entertainment in which a player can interact with an entirely new world (Turkle, 2011). But, if there is more to video games than just having fun, what purpose do they serve? What is their attraction? What is their contribution to popular culture? What kinds of discourses are taken up about and within them, and how are they drawn out of games when events like school shootings take place?

Dividing Video Games into a Binary

Approaches to video games in both research and news media tend to split them into a dichotomy by searching for the potential harms or benefits they contribute. For example, a video game is very often associated with a negative context. To play a video game is to engage in an activity that is deemed to be a waste of time, antisocial and detrimental to one's health. Some argue it can also result in increased aggression and/or addictive behaviour (Anderson & Dill, 2000; Engelhardt, et al., 2011; Ferguson, 2008;

Przybylski, Ryan, & Rigby, 2009; Sherry, 2001) and can influence people to engage in physical violence like school shootings (Anderson, 2004).

Reading, on the other hand, is often thought to equal productive behaviour. To see an individual reading, depending on what she or he is reading, one might be more likely to assume that person is intelligent, open minded, visits museums, attends musical performances, and is more likely to volunteer in the community (Johnson, 2006). In contrast, video games are associated with producing individuals who are detrimental to society, and are linked in the news to negative events. Yet, Johnson discusses how both activities have a great deal in common. Both reading and video games involve remaining in one position for a period of time, they expose audiences to material that stimulates interest and discussion, they isolate people from the rest of the world by providing them with an alternative world to become engaged in, and both activities can provide intellectual stimulation (Johnson, 2006).

Further, many of the arguments made against video games can also be applied to reading (Johnson, 2006). Johnson asks us to consider a parallel reality where the opposite might occur and video games have been around for centuries when a new medium called "reading" is suddenly introduced. What if we lived in a world where parents told their children to stop wasting time on a book that only tells them what one author thinks and instead play a video game that is engaging, stimulates the mind, and allows them to socialize with other people online?

Johnson's argument relates to Feenberg (2001), who draws on Plato's era as an example of the struggle between societal reactions and technological development. When the written word began to grow in popularity, very similar attitudes existed. Plato

himself, using the voice of his teacher, Socrates, contended that the technology of the written word (over oral communication) possessed the power to destroy the dialogic relationship that occurs between teachers and students. Feenberg (2001) states that Plato's critique had merit in at least one respect: "It is worth keeping in mind that whenever a new educational technology is introduced, we ought to be wary lest reformers configure it in a way that closes off the process of intellectual exchange" (p. 83). Can reading a novel be seen as antisocial behaviour that under-stimulates the senses? For Johnson, attitudes towards video games can sound just as unreasonable.

Whether pro or con, the discourses tend to devote attention to game content but rarely to what it actually *feels like* to be engaged in the virtual world. There is an experiential gap between people who play games and people who only hear about them second-hand. According to Johnson (2006), the gap makes it difficult to discuss games in a coherent way and results in the split between pro versus con opinions.

Jones' (2008) approach to video games links the experiential gap through his analysis of the context of video games. Jones states, "The meaning(s) of video games are constructed and they are collaborative. They are made by social interactions of various kinds rather than found in the software and hardware objects themselves" (p. 3). Drawing on Gennette, Jones approaches video games from a paratextual standpoint in which video game interpretations can extend in many directions from the game's own content. Jones describes Genette's concept of paratext as "a multilayered system of frames around a text that helps determine its reception, from naming the genre...or implied audience...to advance reviews printed as blurbs, or the footnotes and index" (p. 7). Paratext depends on factors like period, genre, culture, and author in order to have

meaning to the public audience that receives it. The manner in which the public reacts to specific video games can depend on similar factors. It is from Jones' description of paratext that I am drawn towards a deeper consideration of how violence is constructed in *Mass Effect*. Different approaches to video games reflect and spawn debates regarding whether they have a "bad" or "good" influence on popular culture.

The "bad" side: Are you a villain?

One of the strongest arguments against video games is that they promote negative attributes like addiction and aggressive behaviour. This approach claims there is a causal factor demonstrating negative consequences from video games, especially that gaming can be like a substance addiction for those who play (Anderson, Gentile, & Buckley, 2007; Ng & Weimer-Hastings, 2005; Young, 2009). Similar concerns were raised when the Internet expanded and began entering more homes in the 1990s. Like the television, people were worried what impact the neglect of physical exercise and radiation from too many hours spent in front of a video game would have on personal lives (Young, 2009).

Ng and Weimer-Hastings (2005) argue that gaming can become a way of life that can lead to dependency. One of the key factors involved in identifying an addiction is noticing when it interferes with everyday activities and an individual begins neglecting his/her responsibilities (Ng & Weimer-Hastings, 2005; Young, 2009). For example, Rigby and Ryan (2011) describe the experiences of a 24-year-old man named Peter who classified himself as being addicted to video games. Peter worked at a job that he did not find to be very challenging. At the end of each day he found more satisfaction going home and spending as many hours as possible playing with others online. With all

the hours he was devoting to online gaming, Peter could not help but ask himself: "What would I be doing otherwise?" (Rigby & Ryan, 2011).

A popular conception is that the individuals most vulnerable to online gaming addiction are male introverts. Peters and Malesky (2008), however, state that a specific group of individuals cannot be stereotyped as being prone to addiction based primarily on physical and environmental factors, but on personality types that are more prone to addiction. A concern involving problematic behaviour in video games is that people who are prone to addiction may be attempting to escape their everyday lives (Peters & Malesky, 2008). As a result, video game addiction is often regarded as a problem separate from other types of addiction like gambling.

The other most common argument regarding harmful effects from video games states that violent content in games desensitizes players to violence and promotes physically aggressive behaviours. Haninger and Thompson (2004) argue that the exposure of impressionable groups like children and teens to violent content is a public health concern, and doctors and parents should be made more aware that popular games rated T (Teen) are a source of exposure to a wide range of unexpected content. Kimmel and Mahler (2003) argue that violence is one of the most urgent issues faced by schools in North America. They describe multiple factors that can be considered when searching for answers to why some young people would open fire, harm, and kill other students and their teachers. One of the directions they explore is if the individuals are held under the spell of media-generated violence in video games. Klein and Chancer (2000) discuss the work of Poussaint, a psychiatrist at Harvard Medical School, who argues:

> In America, violence is considered fun to kids. They play video games where they chop people's heads off and blood gushes and it's fun, it's entertainment. It's like a game. And I think this is the psychology of these kids—this 'Let's go out there and kill like on television'. (p. 132)

Further, Bok (1999) suggests that the Internet and violent video games "bring into homes depictions of graphic violence . . . never available to children and young people in the past," which undermine kids' resilience and self-control (p. 78).

Since no study has successfully done so, Engelhardt et al. (2011) argue there is a need to find a causal relationship between media violence and increased aggression. In their experiment, participants' desensitization levels were measured using the amplitude of the P300 (P3) component of the event-related brain potential (ERP). This was elicited by photos depicting real violence, and aggression was measured through levels of unpleasant noise blasts (Engelhardt et al., 2011). Even though this study claims to have demonstrated a link between short-term exposure to media violence and desensitization, there is still no definite proof that one causes the other. Anderson, Gentile, and Buckley (2007) argue that even though there is no definitive research, the correlations found in studies provide sufficient evidence to support the link between video games and violence to imply causation. This is an excellent example of how polarized the research around video games can be.

Anderson, Gentile, and Buckley also address the question of how parents can reduce the negative influences on their children from violent video games. Their solution is for parents to minimize and/or eliminate exposure of the violent material to children in the same way harmful substances should be kept away. It is important to see

how video games are equated with harmful substances like drugs and lead paints in this argument. Studies like these impact public reactions to games, and promote a tendency to link real-life incidents of violence to video games.

One of the strongest arguments against video games is that video games make violence fun (Engelhardt, 2011; Przybylski, Ryan, & Rigby, 2009; Rigby & Ryan, 2011; Sherry, 2001). According to Rigby and Ryan (2011), people are disturbed by the impact violent video games have because brutal deaths in games can elicit smiles from players. They argue most of these same gamers would not smile at an image of a real person's head exploding on the pages of a daily paper. So, why does violence in video games appeal to players? Rigby and Ryan question if enjoyment of violent games lies in the deeper psychological needs they satisfy or if the violent acts just provide satisfaction in and of themselves. Further, because video games are interactive, concerns run deep about the effects of violence in games on players.

Rigby and Ryan's (2011) approach to video games states that rather than search for what is good *or* bad about video games, greater attention should be devoted to the good *and* bad associated with them. Violence is part of a "staple diet in video games...[W]hen it comes to engaging in worlds for people to play in, stories of combat and war just *work*" (p. 127, emphasis in original). They argue that combat and war-based games involve ready themes in which one can engage in multiple types of challenges, offer opportunities to connect with others, cooperate, and explore choices and strategies. Przybylski, Ryan, and Rigby (2009) take a different stance and argue that violence alone does not increase the level of satisfaction the player feels towards the game. While aggressive individuals may enjoy violence in games, experiencing

autonomy and competence within games provides the most enjoyment for in-game experience. As Johnson (2006) argues, everything that is thought to be bad can also be good for you.

The "good" side: Are you a hero?

Berger (2002) describes video games as works of art, related in many ways to the creation process of a film. Developers are inspired to create a story with depth when a game contains both emotional complexity as well as fun game-play. This allows the gaming experience to evolve beyond mere superficial entertainment. Freeman (2004) argues "many creative teams find additional inspiration when creating experiences that enrich the interactive participant" (p. 15).

Academic attention has also been focussed on the usefulness of video games. Flew and Smith (2011) argue that video games have transcended being used just for fun. Video games provide educational opportunities for surgeons and test pilots as well as develop skills towards problem solving, attention to detailed tasks, and quick decision making (Flew & Smith, 2011; McGonigal, 2012; Olson, 2010; Taylor, 2008). When an individual plays a video game, there is an interaction between the person and the physical machine taking place, and between the individual and the simulated culture provided by the game (Turkle, 1984).

Stetina et al. (2011) argue the common belief that video games enforce antisocial behaviour is misguided. For example, at first glance, when an individual is sitting in a coffee shop playing a video game on a laptop, it can seem like the person is being rude to others and does not wish to engage socially. Yet, this individual may be playing a game like *World of Warcraft* in which he/she is engaged in a quest with other players

from around the world that may very well determine whether or not the fantasy world will end. The computer allows us to learn how to navigate virtual worlds both alone and with others (Turkle, 1984). When playing online video games, players can play and engage in extroverted activities (Olson, 2010; Taylor, 2008). Many of the activities described thus far not only can be identified as "healthy" activities, but they also suggest many educational benefits can come from video games.

According to Taylor (2008), learning and experiences in an online realm can feel just as realistic as in the physical realm, and their division as two completely separate realms contributes to negative attitudes towards video games. Is there a difference between going on a quest in *World of Warcraft* and going to play pool with a group of friends? According to Turkle (2003), video games present an opportunity to live in simulated, rule-governed worlds where the experiences they present to the players invite them into an entirely new culture created by the computer, where they can also explore elements of themselves through online connections with other people.

One of the strongest benefits claimed is that video games promote socialization and cooperation among players (Chen & Duh, 2007; Ducheneaut & Moore, 2004; Ducheneaut, Nickell, & Moore, 2006). There are many skills that can be developed when playing games that require an individual to interact with others. Arguably, these skills can even contribute to improving the human condition (McGonigal, 2011). McGonigal (2011) is a game designer who devotes her research towards understanding how video games can "save the world" (p. 1). She argues by framing real-world problems (e.g., sexism, homophobia, and racism), as games, we can harness the appeal of popular games into helping to solve social problems. McGonigal (2012) argues that

just as exercise improves physical resilience, tackling pointless yet mildly challenging tasks can exercise a person's willpower. Emotional resilience can be achieved as well in which people can learn to be less afraid of failure and more open to searching for alternative strategies over the course of each day. Becoming engaged in little games like *Angry Birds* can help people in this manner (McGonigal, 2012).

McGonigal (2011) also asks why people devote so much time to video games. In her Technology, Entertainment, Design (TED) talks lecture McGonigal (2010) states that games are compelling for various reasons including instant gratification (push button, get reward), and the empowerment they provide. McGonigal identifies gamers as having the following traits:

> Urgent Optimism– the sense that any problem can be tackled and there is some chance of success, but that progress ought to begin *now*.
>
> Social Fabric– by the virtue of playing a game with someone we are more likely to trust them and ask for their cooperation in solving a problem.
>
> Blissful Productivity – a drive that gamers have that causes them to constantly work on a task until it is complete, and be happy while doing it.
>
> Epic Meaning– the sense that there must always be some larger story, some larger reason that connects the individual activities. (as cited in Sunhawk, 2011, ¶ 4)

McGonigal has developed several games that require use of these characteristics to improve conditions, such as world hunger and the energy crisis. For example, *World without Oil* is a game in which the player must adjust his/her lifestyle in order to survive

in a world where oil is no longer available. As the players progress through the game, they share their experiences with each other. Rather than focussing on causes, McGonigal perceives video games as tools that can be used to find solutions to problems in real life. The comparison of polarised approaches to video games also raises questions regarding the relationship between education and video games.

Education and Video Games

Just as there are pro versus con debates regarding video games in general, there are similar debates regarding the role video games can play in education. In this section I continue the discussion of video games, specifically their use in the classroom.

For some scholars (Anderson, Gentile, & Buckley 2007; Engelhardt, 2011; Haninger & Thompson, 2004; Ng & Weimer-Hastings, 2005; Peters & Malesky, 2008) the only traits that can be learned from video games are violence and antisocial behaviours. Video games and education are equated with oil and water and can never intermix. However, Helms (2013) states that "in North Carolina and around the country, students are playing such games as '*Minecraft'*, '*World of Warcraft*' and '*Angry Birds*' – and their teachers are encouraging it...Video games are not the great evil that people make them out to be" (Helms, 2013, ¶ 2-3). Similarly, Olson (2010) argues that electronic games are a part of children's everyday lives, and therefore, the question is no longer whether children should be playing games, but how to maximize potential benefits and minimize potential harms.

Helms (2013) offers Trish Cloud as an example of an educator who maximizes the benefits from video games. Cloud is a technology instructor who created a *Minecraft* club that has grown in popularity. She is also a member of a community of educators

who promote video games as tools to help students learn. They argue that well-designed video games can assist students in developing a wide range of skills including understanding physics, writing, reading, teamwork, and problem-solving (Helms, 2013). According to Squire (2002):

> Video games, as one of the first, best developed, and most popular truly digital mediums embody a wealth of knowledge about interface, aesthetic, and interactivity issues...In fact, the greatest benefit of studying games may not be as much generating theoretical understandings of human experience in technology or guidelines for instructional design, but rather, in inspiring us to create new designs. (p. 57)

The implementation of video games in education is often related to constructivist approaches to teaching and learning. Constructivism is an epistemological shift in the direction of learning from objectivism to interaction. A constructivist learning approach is based on "the belief that knowledge is constructed, not transmitted, and that learners play an active role in the learning process" (Dickey, 2003, pp. 105-106). Both parties share information, test understandings, and reflect on what has been learned. This type of environment promotes problem-solving skills as well as knowledge on how to research relevant and appropriate information. Dickey (2003) argues that virtual worlds like video games can provide an environment for constructivist learning. In the same way gamers engage with each other to play and have satisfying experiences, students can engage with video game content to learn.

However, even when educators see the educational value of using video games, parents who do not play video games may object to their use in the classroom. In

response, Helms (2013) draws on Cloud and Gillispie who say the answer is simple: parents should play the games with their kids. Gillispie says "just pay attention and be willing to set aside those tired stereotypes" (as cited in Helms, 2013, p. 2). This is an important counter argument to Anderson, Gentile, and Buckley's (2007) claim that parents should limit their children's exposure to video games.

In media reports, however, the link between pedagogy and video games is not often based on the search for how games can be used to enhance educational experiences. Rather, games are traditionally associated with negative events like school shootings.

School Shootings and Video Games

When video games first appeared, popular games were simple and considered harmless. Massacres like those at Columbine[3] and Virginia Tech, and now Sandy Hook, have prompted greater attention towards how much violent video games influence aggression. According to Altheide (2009), the tragic events of school shootings provide an opportunity to reflect on the nature and consequences of not just the shootings but also the meanings ascribed to various aspects of the events. Altheide specifically draws attention to the emergence of what he calls "Columbine Syndrome" (p. 1356) that sparked debate over various issues including gun control laws, availability of firearms within the U.S., and gun violence that involves youth. A great deal of research also

[3] The Columbine High School Massacre took place on April 20, 1999 in Littleton, Colorado. It involved a complex and highly planned attack with a fire bomb to divert firefighters, propane tanks converted to bombs placed in the cafeteria, 99 explosive devices, and bombs rigged in cars. Two senior students murdered 12 students and one teacher, and then committed suicide. Twenty-four students were injured along with three other people while attempting to escape the school (Altheide, 2009).

became focussed on bullying, the influence of violent movies and video games in American culture (Anderson & Dill, 2000; Bushman & Anderson, 2002; Ferguson, 2008), popular culture, surveillance, social control, and terrorism (Altheide, 2009; Kenyota, 2007). Over time the tragedy from the events of Columbine were merged with the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre on September 11, 2001. Altheide (2009) argues both events involved significant consequences which:

> [F]it into the expanding discourse of fear and terrorism in the United States, which may be defined as the pervasive communication, symbolic awareness, and expectation that danger and risk are a central feature of the physical and symbolic environment as people define and experience it in everyday life. (p. 1354)

Altheide suggests that elements of Columbine were combined with terrorism as part of a control narrative in schools, increasing fear, security measures, and surveillance.

One of the most common questions after Columbine was what caused these two young men to decide to take the lives of others and their own. As a result, video games were blamed (Anderson & Dill, 2000).

The perpetrators were known to have been avid players of *Doom*[4] (Ferguson, 2008). The archives of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, which tracks Internet hate groups, contains a copy of one of the killers' website with a version of *Doom*. He had customized the game to have two shooters, each with extra weapons and unlimited ammunition while the other characters in the game are unable to fight back. Anderson

[4] *Doom* is a science fiction video game first created in 1993. It was developed by the developer id Software and is considered ground breaking for being the first popular first-person shooter game.

and Dill argue *Doom* is a game licensed by the U.S. military to train soldiers to kill effectively. Also, for a class project, the killers made a videotape in which they dressed in trench coats, carried guns, and killed school athletes. An investigator for the Wiesenthal Center stated that they were "playing out their game in god mode" (Anderson & Dill, 2000, p. 773).

The April 2007, Virginia Tech massacre was a similar disaster in which a student killed 27 students, five professors, and wounded 17 others. Following this tragedy, another debate emerged regarding the role of violent video games as a cause. Anti-game activist Jack Thompson stated that violent games were a significant causal factor (Ferguson, 2008), and Phil McGraw ('Dr. Phil') used his public platform for villainizing video game players and people with mental health issues:

> The problem is we are programming these people as a society. You cannot tell me—common sense tells you that if these kids are playing video games, where they're on a mass killing spree in a video game, it's glamorized on the big screen, it's become part of the fiber of our society. You take that and mix it with a psychopath, a sociopath or someone suffering from mental illness and add in a dose of rage, the suggestibility is too high. And we're going to have to start dealing with that. We're going to have to start addressing those issues and recognizing that the mass murders [sic] of tomorrow are the children of today that are being programmed with this massive violence overdose. (as cited in Kenyota, 2007, pp. 812-813)

There are theoretical reasons to expect that violent video games have similar, and possibly larger, effects on aggression (Anderson & Dill, 2000; Bushman & Anderson, 2002; Harding, 2008). In their research, Anderson and Dill (2000) performed two studies to examine the effects of violent video games on aggression-related variables. They hypothesized that short-term exposure to video game violence would lead to increases in aggressive behaviour, and people who score high on aggressive personality measures will behave more aggressively when provoked than will low trait aggression individuals (Anderson & Dill, 2000). In their first study, Anderson and Dill concluded that real-life violent game play was positively related to aggressive behaviour and delinquency (particularly for men). In their second study, exposure within the laboratory to violent content in a video game increased aggressive thoughts and behaviour. Both studies utilized the General Aggression Model to conclude that men had a more hostile perception of reality than women (Anderson & Dill, 2000).

Further, Bushman and Anderson (2001) argue that the question of "whether" violent media increases aggression has been answered and greater attention needs to be devoted to exploring "why." They also utilized the General Aggression Model to test whether violent video games increased the tendency to expect others to react to potential conflicts with aggression after playing video games for just 20 minutes. Participants were not provoked or annoyed in any way. Bushman and Anderson conclude the General Aggression Model is an effective tool in predicting how exposure to violent media will influence people's aggressive responses to potential conflict situation.

However, Kenyota (2007) presents an alternative approach towards the link between violent video games and aggression. In his exploration of *Grand Theft Auto* and

government involvement in censoring, Kenyota (2007) shifts responsibility back on the video game developers and retailers, arguing if the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) considers a game to be too violent, it is the responsibility of the retailers and video game developers to take actions to regulate how the game is distributed and possibly even prevent it from being released. According to Kenyota (2007),

> Video games did not turn the Virginia Tech shooter into a killer. The research on violent video games has not found any causal connection between violent video games and children committing violent acts. The need to regulate violent video games because of the harm they supposedly cause is illusory at best. Legislators therefore need to stop attempting to regulate violent video games with laws that courts have repeatedly held are unconstitutional. (p. 813)

For Kenyota, self-regulation by video game developers should be the goal, with legislation remaining distant from decisions made regarding regulating violence in games.

Critical Exploration of Video Games

If the academic discourses around video games tend to be polarized, is there a space for the exploration of a middle ground? Squire (2002) says the answer is yes. He says there is a great deal more to explore than the dichotomy of potential harms and benefits from video games. Specifically, he argues that research needs to broaden into more critical explorations, including questions surrounding the complex relationships between video games and popular culture. How do we move from perceiving video games in polarized terms to critical exploration? In the rest of this chapter, I examine

research that takes a more critical approach to the connection between video games and violence.

Critical approaches to school shootings.

Approaching school shootings with a critical perspective can provide insights into how violent events are constructed in ways that serve interests of specific groups. For example, Frymer (2009) discusses how the aftermath of Columbine saw a substantial increase in scholarly literature and media coverage focusing on school shootings. As the details of the massacre were released, the media wasted no time in creating a full-blown spectacle that was fuelled by what he describes as a moral panic. Frymer describes how the media narratives that attempted to make sense of Columbine reflected a desperate search to provide an explanation of what had taken place. This created a media spectacle in which youth were constructed as alienated.

The search for answers to Columbine has drawn attention to the construction of the "natural adolescent" identity portrayed in the media (Lesko, 2001, p. 5). White suburban youth who do not fit into the media's normative construction are alienated and demonized, along with their interests like movies and video games. The explosion of magazine covers, primetime specials and newspaper headlines constituted a discourse of a new, more disturbing form of youth alienation linked to gothic subculture, focussing on icons like Marilyn Manson[5], films like *Natural Born Killers*[6], and video games like

[5] Marilyn Manson is the stage name of Brian Hugh Warner, who was born January 5, 1969. He is an American musician, songwriter, actor, painter, multimedia artist, and former music journalist. He is also reputed for his controversial stage personality and image as the lead singer of the Heavy Metal band Marilyn Manson.

Doom (Frymer, 2009; Larkin, 2009). Frymer (2009) argues "the spectacle of Columbine's objectification of 'alien' youth emanates from the same 'society of the spectacle' that generated the estrangement, rage, and violence leading to the crime itself" (p. 1388).

The discourses drawn out by the media constructed the Columbine shooters as pathological outcasts who were part of a strange alternative culture. According to Frymer (2009), the media objectified both individuals into a powerful media spectacle for its American audience, transforming Columbine into a story about a class of new, vicious, creatures to be feared by the public. The manner in which Columbine was presented to the public demonstrates how violent events can be used to construct identities and objectify human beings. Frymer argues, contemporary media seeks to objectify entire categories of people and, through persuasive language and vivid images, convert lives into "the mediated fantasies of celebrity, revenge and masculine dominance" (p. 1402). Also, because males are believed to make up the dominant demographic of video gamers (Olson et al., 2007), a straightforward link was made between the young male shooters and violent video games (Ferguson, 2008).

Ferguson argues it is important for the public to be critical when reading research that seeks to "prove" a cause and effect relationship rather than test a methodological theory. According to Ferguson (2007),

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[6] *Natural Born Killers* is a 1994 American film based on a screenplay by Quentin Tarantino, then revised by director, Oliver Stone. It depicts two victims of traumatic childhoods who became lovers and mass murderers.

> The search for video game violence effects is a reasonable one. However researchers must be prepared to test their assumptions and the quality of the data that they are producing. When tragedies such as the Columbine High School shooting occur, it is tempting to look for 'scapegoat' answers to a complex problem. It is incumbent on researchers that they not let themselves be side-tracked by a priori hypotheses that may distract the scientific community and the general public from the real biological, social and family influences on violent behaviour. (p. 481)

For example, the shooting rampage at Virginia Tech sparked a spectacle with local, national, and global media sources following every twist of a shooting that could be represented (Kellner, 2008). News reports described the event as producing the highest death toll of any gun-related mass murder in recent U.S. history. Kellner (2008) argues that such a claim was false, irresponsible, and sets the stage for someone else to attempt to "break the record" (p. 2). The shooting also generated debates over gun laws and control, school safety, mental health care, and what causes teenagers and young students to kill their class-mates and teachers.

Following Kellner's analysis of news reports, Kyounghee and Shin Il Moon (2009) performed a comparative analysis of the Virginia Tech shooting reports between American and Korean newspapers and blogs. They questioned whether newspapers and blogs, which are meant to represent professional journalism and public interpretations, respectively, share consistent or distinct framing patterns. Kyounghee and Shin Il Moon found that certain framing patterns are consistent regardless of national differences. Newspapers of both nations emphasized the individual and societal aspects and

highlighted the current state of the issue. In addition, in both nations, victims tended to be under-represented in contrast with prevalent gunman stories. They argue that giving priority to the criminal coverage, rather than details of the victims, is a common journalism practice to attract more audiences.

Kellner (2008) argues "I therefore see the spectacle as a *contested terrain* in which different forces use the spectacle to push their interests" (p. 1). The constant search to prove arguments like video games cause violent behaviour are based on what Squire (2002) calls "wild logical leaps" to link behaviours in laboratories to violent acts when people actually get hurt. Squire demonstrates that research needs to broaden into more critical explorations. There is a great deal more to explore than the dichotomy of potential harms and benefits from video games.

"Video games of the oppressed".

Frasca (2001) investigates the manner in which video games can produce environments where players can engage in societal critique. According to Frasca, "in order to understand videogames, it is essential to understand this participatory form of representation" (p 15). Frasca modifies Augusto Boal's theatrical presentation known as "theatre of the oppressed" into "video games of the oppressed," where control over the videogame is shifted from the developer onto players who have the programmable skills to alter

the code that makes up video games. As a result, players are able to create mods[7] that directly give them control over what occurs in the video games and can alter the outcomes as they please. Controlling the videogame in such a manner allows the players to engage in critical analysis of events and explore possible outcomes. For example, in the popular game *The Sims*, the player can create a family with an alcoholic member (Frasca, 2001). However, in his description of videogames of the oppressed, Frasca acknowledges that only a few people with the talents to learn how to code and program video games would benefit by creating environments where they can question and discuss personal and/or social realities.

Frasca's interpretation of the player's relationship to video game content is related to Barthes' (1977) critical interpretation of literature. Barthes asks the question, how can we precisely know what the writer intended? He answers that we cannot. Barthes challenges his own readers to ponder over who is speaking and what they are speaking about. According to Barthes, in a Text, the author is just a guest. He argues,

> No vital 'respect' is due to the Text: it can be *broken*...it can be read without the guarantee of its father, the restitution of the inter-text paradoxically abolishing any legacy. It is not that the author may not 'come back' in the Text, in his text, but he (she) then does so as a 'guest'...he becomes, as it were, a paper-author: his life is no longer the origin of his fictions but a fiction contributing to his work. (Barthes, 1977, p. 7, emphasis in original)

[7] Mods are alterations of the program code of a video game to make it operate differently than its original version by someone other than the original creator.

Just as a reading becomes changed when it is separated from the author, a video game can be changed when a player engages in a story. In a sense, the video game developer becomes a "guest" as the player takes on the role of interacting and interpreting the story in the game. Even though a game has the same basic story, each time a player plays, different events can occur (through alterations like mods). Picking up on Barthes' (1977) point, even if the events were identical, every player would "read" them differently. Frasca argues this is an opportunity for the player to engage in critical thought, which will make the video game experience more enjoyable, because the player feels "in control' and can challenge the construction of discourses within the game.

Gender representations in video games.

Critical research on gender and video games covers a wide range of areas. Some argue that studying gender differences in gaming provides unique insights into differences in technological knowledge (Beavis, 2005; Kafai et al., 2008). Other popular areas of study include: gender differences in gaming habits, how women and men are represented in games, and women's contribution to game culture. Eklund (2011) argues that greater understanding needs to be devoted to why women play games and the role social mores in gaming culture play in discouraging women from playing.

In the same way that dolls are marketed to girls, and trucks to boys, video games are believed to be marketed to, and enjoyed by, a particular audience, i.e., video games are believed to be for boys because girls do not enjoy playing them (Jenson & DeCastell, 2010; Rettberg, Corneliussen, & Rettberg, 2008). However, Rettberg, Corneliussen, and Rettberg (2008) argue the numbers just do not support this discourse. There are many surveys and projects which document girls and women (particularly

over the age of 40) enjoying video games. They state, despite popular belief, video games are "not quite as dominated by either youth or men as the hegemonic discourse tries to convince us" (p. 66).

Historically, however, the early video games themselves were dominated by male heroes who sought to save the passive "damsel in distress." They also contained storylines which depicted violence against women and created spaces intended to attract boys and exclude girls. From the assumption that boys and girls possess different interests, the search began in the 1990s to create games intended for a female audience. Rather than games containing competition, speed, sports, and violence, games designed for girls focussed on stories with character-centred plots and issues of friendship and social relationships (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998). Critics argue these games not only reinforce stereotypes regarding women, but also dictate girls' interests (Jenson & DeCastell, 2010).

The idea that males and females tend to enjoy different styles of games implies that different genres of games can have different influences on each gender. For example, if violent video games are designed to appeal to a male audience, it can be argued aggression levels are higher in boys than in girls because they are desensitized by the violent content designed for them (Engelhardt, et al., 2011). Hence, when a male is responsible for a violent incident, the discourse of gender and video game preference makes it easier to connect video games to violence like school shootings. One manner of resisting this discourse is to explore the patterns and habits of female gamers.

The frequency of female players has grown over recent decades. What is it that has lured women into the culture? Burgess, Stermer, and Burgess (2007) argue that it is

part of the development in which video games have grown in popularity as a social entertainment technology. In order to appeal to a more mature female audience, games were designed with female protagonists like Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider*. However, Lara Croft is a character with a hypersexualized body. Her design raised questions as to whether she was meant to promote empowerment for women players, or provide males with something else to look at (Kennedy, 2002; Schleiner, 2001). According to Rettberg, Corneliussen, and Rettberg (2008), a number of other female protagonist characters were created with exaggerated body parts and partial nudity similar to Lara Croft. Compared to male characters with stereotyped masculine traits, like big muscles, the female characters were hypersexualized and designed to relay messages of sexual availability. Rettberg, Corneliussen, and Rettberg (2008) argue "the hypersexualized female characters at best send out ambiguous signals: they are females in untraditional positions, but at the same time the player is invited to play with a (masculine and heteronormative) cultural rhetoric of women as (sex) objects" (p. 67).

In addition to how women are represented in video games, there are questions surrounding the frequency with which women are represented. In their study Burgess, Stermer, and Burgess (2007) examined and compared 225 console video game covers from online retail sites. It was found that male characters appeared almost four times more than female characters. Males were also portrayed with more game relevant action, and when females were included, they were often exaggerated and sexualized. It was also found that violence and sexualization were portrayed more frequently for female characters than violence and muscular physique, which was associated more with males.

Burgess, Stermer, and Burgess (2007) argue, whereas video games' characters do not offer ideal role models, it is important to ask questions like:

> Are males and females portrayed as having equal amounts of action? Are males and females equally likely to be portrayed as primary characters? Are any characters relegated to being visual extras, and simply portrayed for their appearance? Is one sex more likely to fall into this category than the other? (p. 421)

In their exploration of gender representations in video games, Rettberg, Corneliussen, and Rettberg (2008) argue that in the MMORPG *World of Warcraft*, gender constructions include avatars that do not need to appear as traditional Western male or female characters. Instead, gender is constructed within the game through the background stories, visual representation of gender through the avatars, gender distribution among non-playable characters, and the in-game activities that make references to women and femininity. For example, in *WoW,* a player can construct the gender of the avatar in whatever way they desire, without fear of being treated differently by non-playable characters due to the consistency of the scripts.

The construction of gender in *World of Warcraft* can be obvious or subtle. While some gender stereotypes persist in the game, many are also challenged. Skjeie and Teigen (2003) argue that gender inequality is an accepted social norm within the game; however, we can also find movements towards social justice. For example, Blizzard Entertainment's games tend to ignore many traditional Western cultural representations of gender through the construction of female members of different species. According to Rettberg, Corneliussen, and Rettberg (2008), "the game is clearly moving away from the

tradition of hypersexualizing female characters in a male universe, as well as away from one-dimensional presentations of gender within strict gender stereotypes" (p. 81). Another question that arises is if the same can be said for representations of sexuality in video games.

Sexuality in video games.

One of the most common beliefs about video games is that their primary demographic is limited to heterosexual males (Vargas, 2003). The dominant discourse is that video games (and their players) are sexist, immature, and unwelcoming to anyone outside of the White, heterosexual male demographic (MacDonald, 2012). However, there are also video games that present sexuality in an egalitarian light. For example, games such as *Bully* and *Dragon Age II* have stood up for the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer (LGBTQs) players to experience romance (MacDonald, 2012).

While breaking sexuality norms can be accepted in multiplayer video games, they can become a negative focus of attention in single player video games (MacDonald, 2012). For example, the Canadian company BioWare gained attention when a player complained about the presence of gay characters in *Dragon Age II*. The individual stated that the game was a disappointment to the primary fan base – the straight male gamer. MacDonald (2012) describes BioWare representative David Gaider as being heroic in his reply:

> The romances in the game are not for the 'straight male gamer'. They're for everyone…The truth is that privilege always lies with the majority.

> They're so used to being catered to that they see the lack of catering as an imbalance. (¶ 8)

Outside the realm of MMOs and RPGs, gay representation is less frequent and usually less prominent. There have been gay and bisexual characters in some games, but action games and first-person shooters do not tend to place a great deal of attention on personal relationships.

Because they are games, it may be assumed that video games are not designed with a mature, serious consideration of equal representation of sexual identities. However, an appreciation of difference can create a culture of inclusion and acceptance in video games. MacDonald (2012) argues,

> It's also worth remembering that young gay and lesbian people need characters that they can relate to just as much as straight teenagers – if not more so, as they're more likely to face persecution in the real world. Games have long been a refuge for people who aren't quite like everyone else...As the struggle for equality in the real world inches slowly forward, it's comforting to know that in virtual worlds, some of those battles have already been won. (¶ 11)

Unfortunately, video game developers have also undermined possibilities for promoting social justice. For example, throughout the 1980s and 1990s the game and console developer Nintendo enforced a great deal of censorship that was not just limited to the depiction of blood and violence. The popular game *Super Mario Bros. 2* included a character, "Birdo," who was originally described in the Japanese manual as transgendered, but was later altered into a female villain; and in *Dragon Warrior III*, a

scene in a gay bar was removed all together. In order for these games to be permitted to be released for Western audiences, specific characters and/or scenes were required to be altered to follow Nintendo's Western policies of censorship (MacDonald, 2012).

Similarly, in 2006, the video game *Bully* attracted attention from the media because the players' male avatar Jimmy Hopkiss was able to kiss both male and female characters. This content resulted in both praise and disapproval from critics (Lumpkin, 2007). According to Shaw (2009), the media coverage of the optional bisexual and gay expression demonstrated that video games were evolving into a more inclusive entertainment industry. Earlier games like *Fable* and *The Sims* also provided options that challenged heterosexual narratives. Shaw argues, however, that specific media coverage of *Bully* emphasizes the rarity of LGBTQ representation in video games.

In her study of LGBTQ representations, Shaw (2009) notes that certain stakeholders must be involved. She argues:

> Factors affecting the representation of the GLBT community include the attitudes in the video game development community, the construction of the gamer audience, the expected backlash for having GLBT content, whether the structure of the industry allows it to face this backlash, and the potential for representing sexual and gendered identities in the medium. (p. 229)

Based on her analyses of interviews with video game designers and journalists, press articles, and message board discussions, Shaw states that there are specific reasons why LGBTQ representation exists in other forms of media and why it is not as common in video games. She says, while homophobia and heterosexism remain strong reasons why

LGBTQ representation is ignored, the game designers' lack of understanding of how to include LGBTQs may also play a part. No doubt how and when LGBTQ characters are represented and included in games also depends on whether the benefits from doing so outweigh the harms to the video game developer.

When LGBTQ characters are included in video games, questions are raised regarding how they are represented. Vargas (2003) describes public reactions to the video game *Bully*. He argues giving players the option to experiment with sexuality in games is a promising development in the industry that allows the player the choice to navigate Bullworth academy as he/she sees fit. Whether the player chooses to follow a gay or heterosexual path in *Bully*, the avatar Jimmy behaves in the same manner. In short, when a player chooses the option of gay expression, it does not suddenly alter the character's personality (Shaw, 2009; Vargas, 2006). However, Christian leaders and "pro-family" groups were quick to condemn the game and describe the gay content as being potentially harmful to minors (Vargas, 2006).

The manner in which people reacted to sexual identity exploration in the game *Bully* is similar to reactions towards violent content within games. Just as violence within video games is believed to be linked to motivating people into school shootings (Anderson & Dill, 2000; Engelhardt, et al., 2011), the freedom to explore gay activities is believed to motivate gamers to engage in what are deemed to be sexually perverse activities (Vargas, 2003).

Shaw (2009) argues that targeting the gay market relies on very narrow definitions of what it means to identify as a "gay gamer." She cautions that games with non-heterosexual, non-stereotypically gendered characters could also appeal to those

outside the LGBTQ community, and to demote LGBTQ representation to the realm of independent game developers "could result in a ghettoization of content similar to that seen in the 'girl games' movement" (Shaw, 2009, p. 248). The portrayal of LGBTQ characters is a fairly new issue in the video games industry. Shaw argues the best way to determine where it is taking us is to wait and see how the public will continue to respond.

Racial representations in video games.

Although many academics tend to view video games as toys for kids, Leonard (2003) describes how games create, inhabit, transform, and challenge commonly received ideas about race. He argues that despite the popularity of video games, it is impossible to appreciate their significance without considering racial images, identities, and ideologies. He states, "in short, race matters in video games because many of them affirm the status quo, giving consent to racial inequality and the unequal distribution of resources and privileges" (p. 2).

Based on a large-scale content analysis of characters in 150 video games, Williams et al. (2009) argue there is a gap in gamer appreciation of the way race is constructed in the images on video game packages. Their research also showed an over-representation of white, adult males, and under-representation of Hispanics and Native Americans in video games, thereby demonstrating that the racial construction of video game characters is unrepresentative of the actual population. They argue this is a missed opportunity for developers, and a potential source of identity-based problems for players.

One example of critically exploring the discourse of race is research into the process of how players create their video game avatars. For example, Pace (2008) investigated the dynamics of racialization through an analysis of how characters are created within *World of Warcraft*. In the game the player is represented by an avatar. Avatars can range from being digital replicas of players to idealized versions of the self or a virtual representation by a mythical creature. Pace argues racial stereotypes, and/or preferences for dominant stereotypes, are (re)enforced in avatar representations. When the player loads the page to create a new character, a randomly generated avatar is produced. The player is then able to make changes to create the desired avatar. Pace argues virtual worlds act as remediated cultural interfaces to facilitate the transcoding of racial groups into "cybertypes." Within *World of Warcraft*, white North American males were found to be the dominant cybertype in the character creation process. All other avatar types are treated as a deviation from this norm (Higgin, 2009; Pace, 2008). In addition Pace discusses how players tend to project negative real-life stereotypes onto virtual identities. African characters, in particular, are socially constructed as brutal and primal, far removed from the pristine nature of white humanity (Pace, 2008).

According to Higgin (2008), cultural attitudes in character creation result in the discursive disappearance of blackness from virtual fantasy worlds. Through his analysis of *World of Warcraft* along with *EverQuest* and *EverQuest II*, Higgin argues that the disappearance of blackness is a gradual process in which race is organized into a hierarchy within the games. Higgin does not perceive contemporary massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) as being neutral environments. Rather, due to Eurocentric attitudes embraced by the fantasy genre of MMORPG's, as

well as the gamer discourse of blacks as hyper-masculine and ghettoized individuals, players and designers fail to see blackness as appropriate to include in heroic fantasy (Higgin, 2009). As a result, reductive racial stereotypes are permitted to endure while productive and politically disruptive racial differences are ignored or neutralized through fantastical substitutes (Dickerman, Christensen, & Kerl-McClein, 2008; Higgin, 2009).

However, representation has to do with more than skin colour. Omi and Winant's (1993) argue that race is constructed through cultural representations of human bodies organized in different social structures. Similarly, Brock shows how depictions of race within virtual realms rely on both media imagery and social interaction. For example, in his examination of gamers' reactions to a developer's use of Africans as enemies in a survival horror videogame, *Resident Evil 5*, Brock (2011) illustrates how video games offer insight into how whiteness and white privilege are (re)enforced.

The manner in which video games depict cultural iconographies and characters has occasionally resulted in accusations of insensitivity and racism against developers, publishers, and gamers. For example, *Resident Evil 5* includes a scene showing a village of black people attacking a white man. Brock (2011) found that *Resident Evil 5*'s "depiction of raced and gendered characters trades upon stereotypes and these stereotypes are essential to players' understanding of the game" (p. 430). Hsu (2009) reports responses to the scene including comments such as: "Wow, clearly no one black worked on this game" (¶ 6), and "It looks like it's an advertisement to virtually shoot poor people" (¶ 9). According to Murphy (2004), recognizing how virtual bodies of the

avatars are constructed is important towards understanding what types of interactive online environments are being created for players.

Brock expands Murphy's argument by describing how video games construct virtual environments and characters as places for white male protagonists to conquer, explore, exploit, and solve. In other words, the content within video games is biased towards Western values of white masculinity. This influences thinking in terms of white privilege, conceptions of "other," and discourses based on coercion and domination (Brock, 2011; Dietrich, 2013).

An example of the privileged white male protagonist is the *Resident Evil* series' own character, Chris Redfield -- a hyper-masculine white male with large muscles, and a returning veteran to the games. The narrative within *Resident Evil 5* is primarily presented from his perspective (Ferguson, 2010). Brock (2011) questions why Capcom never included another character that already exited in the game as the protagonist. The character Josh Stone, for example, is an African American male captain for the Bioterrorism Security Assessment Alliance (BSAA), an organization founded for the goal to combat, prevent, and exterminate bio-terrorism. Chris Redfield and Sheva Alomar, the main characters, come from the same organization. Josh Stone is only the second African American male character to be depicted in the *Resident Evil* series. He is not a playable character in the original game, but can be played in multiplayer modes and later in downloadable content. In the main storyline, Josh appears periodically to assist the main characters. Brock argues if Capcom had decided to make Stone a playable main character, a great deal of negativity could have been avoided during the initial release of the game's trailer depicting Chris Redfield killing Africans. Brock

questions why an African hero is not even considered as an option for *Resident Evil 5*. Instead the story of the game constructs race based on Western norms of white supremacy (Brock, 2011).

In this chapter, I have explored research on video games. Although discussions about video games tend to fall into a pro/con debate, I have shown how researchers are finding ways to transcend this debate through critical analyses of constructions of gender, sexuality, and race in the games. In the following chapter, I describe the methodologies I used to conduct a critical analysis of the discourses taken up in *Mass Effect* and how they position the video game, and by extension, video game users.

CHAPTER 3

The Methods for Critically Exploring Discourse

In this chapter I describe the approach I take to answer my research questions:

> How is physical and discursive violence constructed in *Mass Effect?*
>
> How do *Mass Effect* players engage with and/or resist physical and discursive violence in the game?
>
> How does the portrayal of violence in *Mass Effect* reflect reports of public perceptions about the link between violence and video games?

I begin with a description of critical discourse analysis, followed by an overview of my research design.

Critical Discourse Analysis

> Rogers (2004) sets the stage for critical discourse analysis (CDA) in stating, CDA is both a theory and a method. Researchers who are interested in the relationship between language and society use CDA to help them describe, interpret, and explain such relationships. CDA is different from other discourse analysis methods because it includes not only a description and interpretation of discourse in context, but also offers an explanation of why and how discourses work. (p. 2)

One of the strongest influences on my own understanding of discourse comes from Fairclough (1992), who states, "discourse is, for me, more than just language use: it is language use, whether speech or writing, seen as a type of social practice" (p. 28). For Blommaert and Bulcaen (2000), the primary goal of CDA is to analyze "opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control

as manifested in language...More specifically, CDA studies real, and often extended, instances of social interaction which take (partially) linguistic form" (p. 448). CDA is also described as a problem-oriented interdisciplinary research approach that interprets discourses as being socially constitutive and socially conditioned (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000; Van Dijk, 2011). CDA seeks to identify characteristics of culture we communicate and interact with on a daily basis and asks critical questions about things that feel "natural" and taken for granted (Van Dijk, 2011).

A critical exploration of discourse is most commonly connected to the work of Foucault (1970). According to Foucault (1972/2012), "to speak is to do something" (p. 209). The distinguishing characteristic of discourse for Foucault is how systems of knowledge and power relations are expressed through and negotiated within language. Jardine (2005) describes Foucault as visualizing "each system of knowledge as a unique and interrelated dispersion...of elements also unique to that system of knowledge" (p. 94). Critical discourse analysis seeks to understand how individuals perceive the world through studying categorizations, ideology, politics, and personal and institutional relations.

In order to help me grasp a critical approach towards discourse, I draw on Foucault's (1971) notion that forms of knowledge and techniques of power operate within discourse to discipline and train people. This process interprets humans as being objectified for the benefit of dominant groups. Foucault suggests that human beings (whether willing or not) comply with and maintain the rules of society through the process of being disciplined. Jardine (2005) discusses Foucault's process of discipline as occurring through "the exercise of classification, surveillance, normalization, reward,

and punishment—all terms which are desperately familiar to educators" (p. 24). I also notice that these terms are characteristics of discourses that have arisen in school shootings. Foucault's attention towards disciplining forces focuses on how they affect us individually. This includes beliefs, expectations, values and practices that dictate what we should say, do, feel, value, and think. At the same time, these forces operate to punish us when we fail to comply with the standards built into them (Jardine, 2005).

Rogers (2004) describes Foucault's work as grounded in power-knowledge relationships, especially power imbalances between people and institutions. In Chapter 4, I investigate these social and political contexts by exploring the discourses taken up in *Mass Effect* and in the online discussions related to *Mass Effect*. I question the power relations between video game developers, players, and the people who post online comments. This enables me to ask questions regarding the discourses which are being taken up in the positioning of video games and video game users.

Foucault demonstrated how subjects are positioned according to institutional relations of power. My own research approach is influenced by the argument that there is no universal truth regarding the link between violent video games and aggression. I lean toward Foucault (1972) who says:

> A critique is not a matter of saying that things are not right as they are. It is a matter of pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought, the practices that we accept...Criticism is a matter of flushing out that thought and trying to change it: to show that things are not as self-evident as one believed, to see that what is accepted as self-evident will no longer be accepted as

such. Practicing criticism is a matter of making facile gestures difficult. (p.154)

Similarly, critical discourse analysis explores the relations between discourse, power, dominance, and social inequality (Van Dijk, 2011). In Chapter 2, I described the polarized debate that constructs video games as either "good" or "bad" for players. This has become the "familiar" approach towards video games possibly due to a gap that exists between those who do and do not play. Through critical discourse analysis, I seek to challenge this approach by flushing out discourses of violence that are taken up in *Mass Effect*, to show what they do and to demonstrate how they can be resisted and challenged.

CDA is, therefore, not interested in investigating linguistic discourses, but in studying complex social phenomena. Luke (1995) describes critical discourse analysis as generating agency among students, teachers, and others by providing them with tools to see how texts favour particular interests and how texts position individuals and generate relations of power in various environments (work, classrooms, policy, and video games). Applying critical discourse analysis to dimensions of popular culture (like video games) enables me to investigate issues similar to those studied by Luke.

I will be engaging with what Luke (1995) calls "discourse events." A discourse event is a boundaried occurrence of social interaction around or with a written or spoken text. An actual text can include items such as a newspaper, magazine or a comic strip. Luke describes the text as being used within the context of a larger event that involves interaction between participants. He states:

> Discourse events are themselves constrained by their institutional location, by the regularized procedures, rules, and constraints of particular social institutions...But the 'rules' of social institutions, as we will see, do not finally determine or restrict what people do in local events and sites. In face-to-face events in classrooms, discourse often unfolds in uneven, contested, and unpredictable social configurations. (p. 13-14)

Although Luke explores primarily face-to-face interactions, I consider the experiences of online communication to be as stimulating as face-to-face interactions. Hence, the discourse events I explore are within the *Mass Effect* game and websites devoted to *Mass Effect,* including their discussions, blogs, and posts about of the game. I also discuss how media discourses of violence in video games are (re)enforced and/or challenged by the discourse events within and about *Mass Effect*.

A careful systematic analysis and self-reflection at every point of one's research is required in order to perform a critical discourse analysis (Van Dijk, 1993; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Because I am aware of my own relationship to video games, I utilize my ability to ask critical questions to help position myself and reflect on the data. Using critical discourse analysis allows me to position myself as a critical gamer, exploring the discourses operating within *Mass Effect* and in online discussions about the game, while also recognizing the impact of my own privileged position.

Research Design

For my critical discourse analysis, I draw on the works of Fleiger (2005) and Fairclough (2002). Fleiger analysed the power relations evident in the discourses taken up in inclusive education policy documents. For her work, she utilized Fairclough's

(1992) method of textually-oriented discourse analysis. Fairclough (1992) sought to "show how more systematic and detailed textual analysis can add to a variety of current approaches to discourse analysis, without of course wishing to minimize what these approaches achieve without it" (p. 194). Fairclough explores texts as practices of discourses. Textually-oriented discourse analysis provides an opportunity for reflection on how texts reflect the power of institutional knowledge and practice. Fleiger describes her approach as a blending of textual analysis with social and political theories.

Fleiger (2005) focuses on how language is used to structure text, and the social conditions involved in the production of text. Following Fairclough (1992) she interprets discourse along a three dimensional plane: actual analysis of the text, the analysis of discursive practices, and the analysis of social practices. I will engage in a similar approach in order to explore physical and discursive violence in *Mass Effect*, and the language used in online discussions.

According to Fleiger (2005), the analyst is able to establish relationships between texts and their social conditions through three distinct components of the analysis process: data gathering, analysis, and results. I will utilize the same techniques as Fleiger to critically explore the discourses involved in the construction of violence in *Mass Effect*.

The first step in this process is to define and describe the project. I begin with a detailed description of the *Mass Effect* game. There are three games in the series which make up one story that follows the experiences of the main character, Commander Shepard. I describe the complexities of the story, the primary mission, relationships with other characters, and the role violence plays in the primary storyline of the game.

I then perform a critical discourse analysis of physical and discursive violence in *Mass Effect,* looking primarily at discourses of gender, sexuality, and race. In addition, I consider how online discussion websites function as an opportunity for players who wish to discuss, openly and anonymously, any issue that arises from playing the games. The language used in these comments, combined with the storyline in the game, have provided me with valuable insights into how discourses of violence are constructed in and around *Mass Effect*, along with how gamers position themselves in response to the game.

A critical analysis of the connection between the discourses within *Mass Effect* and discussions on the websites allows me to understand more broadly and complexly how physical and discursive violence reflect certain ideas, ideologies, values, and beliefs, and interact with reported information in news media.

CHAPTER 4

Exploring Physical and Discursive Violence in the *Mass Effect* Universe

As previously discussed, the linking of *Mass Effect* to the Sandy Hook School shooting draws attention to the violent content in the game and suggests that it incites violence in young people. However, in this chapter I show how *Mass Effect*, while reproducing violence, also challenges discursive violence in complex and intertwining ways. I begin this chapter with an overview of the *Mass Effect* storyline, followed by a critical analysis of physical and discursive violence in the game.

Overview of the *Mass Effect* Storyline

At the beginning of *Mass Effect,* the following text appears:

> In the year 2148, explorers on Mars discovered the remains of an ancient spacefaring civilization. In the decades that followed, these mysterious artifacts revealed startling new technologies, enabling travel to the furthest stars. The basis for this incredible technology was a force that controlled the very fabric of space and time. They called it the greatest discovery in Human history. The civilizations of the galaxy call it... *MASS EFFECT*. (*Mass Effect* Wiki, 2014)

Mass Effect is a series of interactive, role-playing, third person shooter video games based on a science fiction genre. *Mass Effect* was developed by the Canadian company Bioware and is available to play on the Xbox 360, Playstation 3, and Microsoft Windows systems. The third installment, *Mass Effect 3*, is also available on the Wii U. The series has been considered a major success (GameRankings.com, 2007). All three games have received critical acclaim for their storyline, characters, relationships, romances, voice

acting, and the emphasis on player choices affecting the experience. The video game website GamesRadar.com (2012) describes *Mass Effect* as creating "a rich, multi-layered canon that you can lose yourself in" (¶ 1), and Cooper (2012) regards *Mass Effect 2* as being among the greatest games ever made due to the strong gameplay and entertaining story.

The *Mass Effect* game trilogy has become a part of video game culture. There are several discussion websites, novels, comics, and other merchandise, all based on the *Mass Effect* universe. The games contain violence, profanity, and sexual content which also means they are rated "M" for mature by the Entertainment and Software Ratings Board (ESRB). Before purchasing, players are notified about the violent content by a message on the packaging that states "Content Descriptors**:** Blood, Language, Partial Nudity, Sexual Themes, Violence" (ESRB Ratings, 2012, ¶ 1), and purchasers must show identification verifying they are over the age of 17 years. This regulation is enforced by the Retail Council of Canada Commitment to Parents program[8], which states a retailer cannot directly sell a video game to anyone under the designated appropriate age based on its rating (Entertainment Software Ratings Board, 2014).

Mass Effect combines action role-playing game aspects with a third-person perspective interface, in which the player assumes the role of Commander Shepard (see Figure 1). The protagonist can also use two artificially intelligent (AI)-controlled squad members in battle. These characters usually consist of members who are recruited into

[8] The Commitment to Parents program is designed to assist parents in making informed entertainment decisions for their families regarding the purchase and/or rental of interactive computer and video games. It combines ratings education with voluntary ratings enforcement from the retailer (Retail council of Canada, 2014).

Shepard's crew. *Mass Effect*'s in-game history describes Humans as developing space travel capabilities, and discovering technological devices from a mysterious civilization. These devices, known as mass relays, are capable of producing faster than light (FTL) travel. The mass relays allow Humanity contact with a neighbouring species known as Turians (see Figure 2), and the "First Contact War" arose due to cultural misunderstandings. The events of the First Contact War are short and result in Humans joining a vast intergalactic community of species and cultures, all interacting in complex ways. The first *Mass Effect* game takes place 26 years after the First Contact War.

Figure 1: Default female and male Shepard (from *Mass Effect* Wiki, 2014)

The opening in *Mass Effect* introduces the protagonist, Shepard. The player is given the opportunity to either choose the default options (see Figure 1) or customize Shepard's details including first name, gender, facial appearance, combat-training, and personal upbringing. The default Shepard is male and is named John; the female Shepard is named Jane; both characters are Caucasian, and in the Soldier class. As the story progresses, the player can modify other aesthetic characteristics such as armour and clothing. Chronologically, Shepard is 29 years old in *Mass Effect*, 31 years old in *Mass Effect 2*, and 32 in *Mass Effect 3*. Shepard is an N7-graduate of the Interplanetary

Combatives Training (ICT) program, and a member of the Systems Alliance Navy. This means that Shepard is a veteran soldier of the highest level of proficiency. In the first game, Shepard is given authority over the space faring ship, SSV Normandy.

Figure 2: A Turian male soldier (from *Mass Effect* Wiki, 2014)

The first game in the trilogy introduces Shepard's mission to save the galaxy from a race of giant mechanical beings named Reapers (see Figure 3). The primary enemies of this game are Sovereign and Saren Arterius. Sovereign is a Reaper vanguard who plans to awaken the hibernating Reaper fleet in extra-galactic dark space to invade the Milky Way galaxy, and destroy all sentient organic life capable of space travel. The

character Saren Arterius is a law-enforcement member of the Turian species who betrays his oath to protect the galactic community to serve Sovereign. The attack is part of a mysterious cycle of destruction known as the "Harvest" which takes place every 50,000 years (*Mass Effect* Wiki, 2014).

Figure 3: A Reaper attacking a city (from *Mass Effect* Wiki, 2014)

Mass Effect 2 is set two years after the events of the first game. Shepard is killed at the beginning of the game and resurrected two years later by a covert organization devoted to the advancement of Humans called Cerberus. Shepard works with Cerberus to investigate abductions from Human colonies, and to battle a mysterious species known as the Collectors. The Collectors are revealed to be performing the abductions in service of the Reapers.

The third game of the trilogy focuses on Shepard's final story. Here the goal is to unite all space-faring species of the galaxy to counter the all-out Reaper invasion. In the

third game, answers to many questions are pursued, such as how to stop the invasion, the origins of the Reapers, the history of species from ancient civilizations, etc.

The story of each game occurs in chronological order with decisions from one game affecting outcomes in those that follow. In keeping with this continuity, I will discuss all three games as one, and make reference to a specific game in the trilogy when required.

A key characteristic that distinguishes *Mass Effect* from other video games is how elements of the story can be altered based on decisions made by the player. As Shepard, when interacting with non-playable characters (NPCs), the player makes perspective decisions, depending on the situation. When this occurs, the player can choose from multiple sets of dialogue response options ranging from calm to aggressive. Additionally, *Mass Effect 2* introduced a feature in which the player can choose to interrupt cut-scenes[9] with similar dialogue responses. Depending on the type of response chosen, the player can gain morality points that can either go towards a Paragon (peaceful) or Renegade (aggressive) scale. Shepard's Paragon and Renegade scores affect the availability of peaceful or aggressive dialogue options which have a direct impact on the story. For example, a higher score in one scale will result in unlocking specific conversation options to either charm or intimidate. Shepard must obtain skill points in order to make Renegade or Paragon conversation options available. There are also multiple mini-games available to the player which can involve drinking, dancing, and romancing characters. As the game progresses decisions can result in gaining the

[9] A cut-scene is a sequence in a video game the player has no or very limited control over. It breaks up the gameplay and advances the plot, character development, and introduces characters.

loyalty of selected crew members, upgrading aspects of the ship, and improving weapons and armour. The storyline in *Mass Effect* is made up of a complex path with multiple options to follow, several endings, and different difficulty levels.

The *Mass Effect* games appeal to a variety of players. One of the most intriguing features of this game series is how there is ultimately no right or wrong path to follow. It is all about the decisions the player chooses for Shepard. If, however, there is a decision made that was not desired, the player must either restart at a previously saved point, or wait to start the entire game over again after playing through. It is important to note, in many cases, decisions that cannot be reversed involve violence and even the deaths of other characters.

Exploring Physical and Discursive Violence

It is undeniable that violent content is a characteristic of most video games (Engelhardt, et al., 2011; Ferguson, 2008; Przybylski, Ryan, & Rigby, 2009; Sherry, 2001). As I discussed in Chapter 1, video games are assumed not only to contain but also to promote violence. In order to assess whether such blaming discourses are warranted, it is important to understand how violence is portrayed in *Mass Effect* (Ashcraft, 2012). Therefore, I now ask, why was *Mass Effect 3* the video game specifically centered on during initial reports of the Sandy Hook shooting? What kinds of violence are present in the game? Does the representation of violence in the game promote/incite violent acts in the real world? In order to assess whether such blaming discourses are warranted, it is important to understand how violence is portrayed in *Mass Effect*.

Two types of violence are evident in *Mass Effect*: physical and discursive. Krug et al. (2002) describe physical violence as:

> The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation. (p. 1084)

This definition associates intentionality with the committing of physical acts of violence, regardless of the outcome. Levin-Rozalis, Bar-On, and Hartaf (2003) describe physical violence as being linked to and the inability to properly cope with, anger. They argue that physical violence (particularly in men) is the result of emotional conflict and problems with authority figures. As a result, people resort to physical violence primarily because they cannot mentally find alternative methods to cope with their anger when provoked. Similarly, Chan et al. (2012) argue that the use of physical violence (particularly child abuse, neglect, and intimate partner violence) can have negative longitudinal effects. In this case, physical violence is utilized as a form of punishment towards another.

The second form of violence I explore in *Mass Effect* is discursive violence. According to Yep (2009), discursive violence involves words, tones, gestures, and images that are used to differentially treat, degrade, pathologize, and represent individuals. Discursive violence problematizes the distinction between words and deeds, and focuses on real-world effects of discourses (for example discourses of gender, racism, sexism, homophobia) (Armstrong, 2001; Jiwani & Richardson, 2011). Meyer (2014) argues institutions use hate crime laws to problematize discourses of gender, sexuality, and race in order to expand police and prosecutorial power. According to Van Dijk (2011), discourses of gender, sexuality, and race shape and are shaped by power

relationships in social institutions in society. He further argues that major social changes are unlikely to take place without closer attention devoted to language.

As I describe below, both physical and discursive violence are present in *Mass Effect*.

Physical violence in *Mass Effect*.

Physical violence is extremely common in video games. It is also the most overt form of violence depicted in *Mass Effect*, primarily portrayed through punching motions, and shooting with ranged weapons (lasers, guns, etc.). The basic plot in *Mass Effect* calls for physical violence in that it is about an invading force coming to wipe out all space-faring sentient life. As a result, Shepard must take up arms to fend off attackers. Physical violence is just one of the reasons why *Mass Effect* is rated "M" for "mature" (Greenwald, 2008).

However, in *Mass Effect*, shooting and other acts of violence are just a few of many different actions the player can perform. Other aspects of the game-play include piloting space ships around the galaxy, exploring different planets and space stations on foot, and engaging in conversations with other characters. Additionally, the main character has to be in specific areas, with missions unlocking the ability to fight in order to perform violent acts. For example, Shepard is not allowed to remove his/her weapons at any time and murder innocent bystanders. If a non-threatening individual is targeted with a weapon, either the character ducks and comments on it, or Shepard becomes incapable of performing the violent act at all.

In addition to fights between two characters, *Mass Effect* portrays physical violence through warfare and genocide. For example, Shepard's actions in *Mass Effect 2*

results in the genocide of over 300,000 members of the Batarians. In the story, the mission involves one of the Reapers' attempts to covertly invade, and Shepard is the only one able to stop them. The only solution available is to destroy the mass relay device so that the Reapers cannot use it to transport their fleet. Unfortunately, this same explosion kills all life within the range of an entire solar system inhabited by Batarians. Shepard is captured and prevented from warning the Batarians until the mass relay is about to be destroyed. On the surface, these events appear as though Shepard allowed the genocide to occur. However, his/her communication signal is blocked by the Humans whose minds have been indoctrinated by the Reapers. Therefore, regardless of whether or not the player attempts to prevent it, the story ends with Shepard destroying the mass relay, and the deaths of over 300,000 Batarians. There is no solution that both saves the lives in the solar system and stops the Reapers. Mass violence occurs in the absence of either intention or anger; it is an unavoidable part of the *Mass Effect* storyline.

The genocide raises questions such as, is physical violence always wrong, or is it sometimes warranted by particular contexts or situations? On what basis do we judge the morality of a violent act? Are decisions like these too much power to give to one person? Being able to ask such questions demonstrates how becoming immersed in the storyline of *Mass Effect* opens up opportunities for gamers to explore the complex ethics of physical violence. For example, one online post regarding the loss of the 300,000 lives states[10]:

[10] Note: Quotations that I have taken from articles, online discussions, and websites are taken word-for-word. These quotations include spelling and grammatical errors that are part of the original document.

> Sometimes we get stuck with decisions we haven't personally had a hand in in games. That being said, I remember those Batarians going kaboom, and I don't feel bad about it at all (my Shepard tried to warn them...oh well). (I Killed 300,000 Batarians? I Don't Remember That..., 2011, ¶ 45)

Another online discussion began with the statement: "He blew up an entire Batarian system (Arrival)...Shepard is a great character and an awesome protagonist, but if any Soldier in modern day tried this, he would have been executed on the spot" (Shepard Should Have Been Given the Death Penalty, 2013, ¶ 4). A response states: "It was a matter of sacrificing the 'few' to save the many" (Shepard Should Have Been Given the Death Penalty, 2013, ¶ 22). This online conversation demonstrates how the use of physical violence in *Mass Effect* can be negotiated by the players.

Physical violence in *Mass Effect* is also represented in armed forces such as gangs, mercenaries, police, and military. These groups gain and attempt to maintain power for specific individuals. For example, the Citadel Council has remained the dominant governing force in power in the galaxy. One way the Council maintains power is through their elite law-keepers, known as the "Spectres."

"Spectre" stands for **Spec**ial **T**actics and **Re**connaissance[11]. They are agents given exclusive authority from the Citadel Council. They are made up of an elite group, which may be selected from any species, with the primary responsibility of preserving galactic stability by whatever means necessary, including the death of other inhabitants of the galaxy. They are generally considered above the law and are left to their own

[11] Thank you to Dr. Jane McLean for pointing out the parallels the discourse patters of a post-9/11 world and the U.S.A. Patriot Act.

methods to accomplish their mission. However, in the event of blatant misconduct, an individual's Spectre status can be revoked by the Council. Depending on the nature of the task, and their personal preference, Spectres may work either alone or with others. In the first *Mass Effect*, Shepard is granted the honour of being the first Human Spectre.

Spectres have no command structure and only answer to the Citadel Council. In some cases the Council prefers not to know the details behind Spectres' completed missions. Due to their status of being officially considered above any law, Spectres behave however they desire, either with diplomatic reason or brutal force. To be a candidate for the Spectre status, one typically has years of military or law enforcement experience. In addition, there is a screening process that involves background checks, psychological evaluations, and a long period of field training under an experienced mentor. Spectres are chosen for their special skills, and may use unconventional methods to uphold the law (*Mass Effect* Wiki, 2014).

Spectres promote a sense of justice and security for the law-abiding citizens of Citadel Space, along with fear and violence towards anyone who opposes the Citadel Council. The Spectre defends good people, punishes villains, and makes fast decisions without having to deal with delays from local authorities. Some law enforcement officers become anxious and intimidated when Shepard investigates their missions. Spectres do not have a moral code or sacred commitment to the pursuit of justice. They are much more direct in their approach and do not need to justify actions, unless the Council requires it. For example, during a bandit attack a Spectre can wipe out an entire village, without concern for the lives of the villagers, just to prevent them from harming others.

Spectres' immunity from the law, lack of rules and regulations, and their "ends justify the means" discourse suggest that a direct application of physical violence can get the job done while avoiding consequences. The concept of the Spectre suggests that the use of physical violence is justifiable. In *Mass Effect*, however, few are chosen to be Spectres; and candidates must undergo extreme psychological assessments. A Spectre is trusted with using physical violence as a last resort. The status given to a Spectre is a source of potential concern for people who link *Mass Effect* to violent events like the Sandy Hook School shooting.

Discursive violence in *Mass Effect.*

Although the *Mass Effect* games do not depict as much physical violence as games like *Call of Duty* and *Grand Theft Auto*, Greenwald (2008) argues that *Mass Effect* is only appropriate for a mature audience due to its representation of discursive violence through "mature themes of violence, genocide, and backstabbing politics" (¶ 6). Whereas *Mass Effect* contains many examples of physical violence, I argue that forms of discursive violence related to gender, sexuality, and race are even more prevalent.

Although I discuss each category separately later, they are interconnected. As Skahan (2014) points out, video games tend to privilege the straight White male because nearly the entire video game industry is built to appeal to him. Skahan continues:

> *Straight, White male players are constantly validated and catered to with the constant flow of White macho men starring in games.* Players of *colour*, female players, and LGBTQ+ players, on the other hand, hardly ever receive anything close to this level of validation, if they even receive it at all, which can be emotionally devastating. When people use the term

> ‘privilege,’ this lack of devastation is what they mean: the privilege to not need to understand because it doesn't disadvantage you. That does not mean that those with privilege should feel guilty for their privilege, but they should be aware of the obvious advantages of being privileged, particularly with their influence in the eyes of game publishers. (¶ 19, emphasis in original)

In the following sections, I discuss the presence of discursive violence as I draw out discourses of gender, sexuality, and race in *Mass Effect*. However, I also provide instances in which White, heterosexual, male dominance is resisted and/or challenged.

Discourses of gender in Mass Effect.

Concerns regarding the representation of gender arise in the storyline of *Mass Effect*. What impact does the representation of women and men have within the game? Does it empower or oppress them? In this section I briefly discuss the social construction of gender, along with the importance of hegemony, language, and undoing gender. From there, I explore the representation of women in *Mass Effect*, and the construction of femininity. Following, I perform a similar exploration of the representation of men in the game and the construction of masculinity. I conclude this section by examining the construction of Shepard’s gendered identity.

Tyson (2006) states, “while biology determines our sex (male or female), culture determines our gender (masculine or feminine)...[T]he word *gender* refers not only to our anatomy but to our behavior as socially programmed men and women” (p. 92). Whether we are consciously aware of it or not, gender is a part of every aspect of human production and experience.

It is helpful to view gender through the lens of hegemony. Gramsci (1994) discusses hegemony as involving ruling classes gaining and maintaining power without the use of physical force. Hall (1985) describes this relationship as involving techniques such as interdependence and dominance. According to Connell (2002), hegemony recognizes the "importance of differences among men *in gender terms* as well as...a connection between two important social patterns, hierarchy between men and women and hierarchy among men" (p. 90). Connell argues patriarchal language and masculine conduct distort everyday realities of social conduct. They operate to express ideals, fantasies, and desires, which "naturalize gender difference and gender hierarchy" (p. 90).

The notion of women's inferiority is rooted in patriarchal ideologies. Historically, the dominant belief that men are superior to women has been used to justify and maintain the economic, social, and political power of men. Tyson (2006) argues that "patriarchal programming" operates to continually undermine women's self-confidence and assertiveness, and then uses the lack of those qualities to justify the myth that women are naturally submissive (p. 87).

According to Kelan (2010) gender can be "undone" through a poststructural approach. A poststructural perspective seeks to trouble and displace gender through enacting gender in ways that defy conventional parameters. Kelan argues that challenging the gender binary by revealing contradictions can assist in understanding gender constructs. For example, in the workplace, female information and communications technology workers who wish to create a more gender-neutral environment can do so by creating what Kelan (2010), drawing on Butler, describes as "gender trouble" (p. 189). Gender trouble involves performing gender in a way that

constructs multiple forms of masculinities and femininities, as well as practices like "being a worker, not a woman" (Kelan, 2010, p. 184). Perceiving people as co-workers, rather than considering their gender, challenges the gender binary by showing the multiplicity of options that people have available, thereby undermining ideas of single and unitary gender meanings.

Fron et al.'s (2007) "Hegemony of Play" is of particular importance to my study as it helps explain how the game industry perpetuates the status quo by allowing the majority of players to shape game design decisions. Consequently, video game content is typically designed with heterosexual, White men in mind as the target audience; women are typically added as a tokenistic response, and often objectified. Is this true of *Mass Effect*? How does the representation of women compare to men in the game? I would argue that women characters in *Mass Effect* are constructed in a manner that represents what Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) identify as "emphasized feminity" (p. 831), i.e., they are depicted in tight-fitting outfits and have very noticeable sexualized characteristics. Even women in positions of power are objectified in *Mass Effect*, represented as objects of the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975). Further, Szymanski, Moffitt, and Carr (2011), argue when greater attention is focussed from outside sources on women's bodies, women feel pressured to self-objectify.

The more unique representation of gender in *Mass Effect* is through depictions of a species known as the "Asari" (see Figure 4). A notable characteristic of the Asari is they are "mono-gendered" (*Mass Effect* Wiki: Asari, 2014, ¶ 2). Stereotypically, however, they are constructed as feminine with breasts, hourglass figures, maternal personalities, and a tendency to favour compromise and cooperation over conflict. Asari

were also among the earliest to achieve interstellar flight, following the most recent cycle of destruction from the Reapers. Asari are native to the planet Thessia and are often considered among the most powerful and respected sentient species in the galaxy. They are reputed for their elegance, diplomacy, and biotic powers[12]. These traits have contributed to the Asari playing key roles in the creation of the Citadel Council, which serves as a governing force for the galaxy.

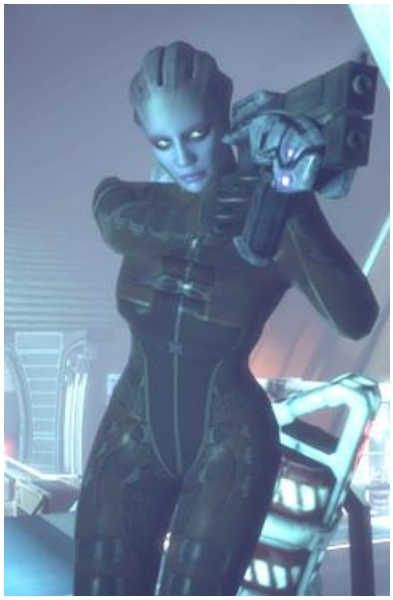

Figure 4: An Asari commando (from *Mass Effect* Wiki, 2014)

A typical Asari is a purple blooded Humanoid with a skin complexion that ranges from blue to purple. Additionally, some Asari have facial markings. Rather than hair, Asari possess semi-flexible, cartilage-based scalp crests that grow into shapes. These

[12] In *Mass Effect*, biotic powers are the abilities of some life-forms to knock enemies over from a distance, lift others into the air, create a protective shield, or create a gravitational vortex to tear objects or enemies apart.

structures are rigid and remain in place. They are also known to have a vigorous cellular regenerative system, which results in the typical Asari living over 1000 years of age.

Asari are renowned for being perceived as attractive to others. This is advantageous considering their method of reproduction, which involves attracting others, whether through telepathic influence or a neurochemical process involving pheromones is unclear. Whatever the method of attraction, the Asari are capable of mating, and successfully reproducing, with any other gender and/or species. Although they have one gender, Asari are not asexual. Each Asari provides two copies of its own genes, resulting in the offspring always being an Asari, regardless of the species or sex of the "father." If both parents are Asari, the one who does not give birth is labeled as the father. The second set of genes is altered in a unique telepathic process called melding, also known as the "joining." This process allows each Asari to form an intimate telepathic link with a mate. Socially, the Asari encourage cross-species mating in order to promote genetic diversity among their people, and avoid potential genetic defects that may result from mating with fellow Asari. Shepard's interactions with Asari become an ethnographic exploration of their culture, especially in regards to the construction of gender and sexuality.

The Asari construction of gender is different from that of Humans. Though they resemble females, at least to Humans, Asari have no social concept of gender differences. The identities of "male" and "female" have no real meaning for them. However, a predominantly feminine and matriarchal language is utilized to describe their culture. For example, the three significant stages of an Asari's maturity, marked by

biochemical and physiological changes, are known as the "maiden" stage, the "matron" stage, and the "matriarch" stage (*Mass Effect* Wiki: Asari, 2014).

The term "maiden" traditionally refers to a girl, or an unmarried young woman (Rublack, 1997). The nuance of maiden, in a patriarchal society, values characteristics like female chastity, purity, and innocence. However, the maiden stage for Asari involves a biological urge to explore, which typically results in activities like erotic dancing and mercenary work. This stage suggests Asari must engage in reckless and potentially harmful behaviours before being able to settle down, start a family, and behave responsibly. The immature behaviours of the Asari relate to the idea held in many cultures that young people need to "sow their wild oats" before settling down. Groening (2013) argues "it is often advantageous for these students to take the time off from school to explore the many other paths of life; they are often more motivated students upon their return to academics" (p. 77). Drawing on Walkerdine (2006), I argue the practices Asari engage in can be related to stereotypical negative activities young women Humans may engage in, like binge drinking and erotic dancing in bars. When the Asari ages and becomes more "wise," the Asari can take on traits deemed more "masculine" like stability, responsibility, and rationality. The maturity cycle of the Asari relates to the real-life experiences of women who struggle, and are pressured to take on "masculine" traits to feel like productive members of society, yet must still maintain a traditional feminine identity.

The Asari construction of gender encourages players to think outside traditional binaries. When Shepard converses with Asari, players experience discomfort from having to think differently about gender, which is unavoidable since Shepard's crew

includes Asari. There are two main Asari characters who join Shepard's crew: Liara T'soni and Samara. In the first *Mass Effect* game, Liara is recruited to the crew of the Normandy partially because of her archeological expertise, but also because her mother is one of the villains. In *Mass Effect 3*, Shepard and Liara sit down for a meal at a restaurant where the bartender is another Asari who is identified as Liara's estranged "father." Liara invokes her friendship with Shepard to seek advice as to whether or not she should risk confronting the long lost parent.

In *Mass Effect,* Asari, and women in general, are portrayed as empowered beings. Female members of different species take on various positions of importance, including law enforcement, religious icons, and information brokers. It is interesting to note, then, that women are not associated with a weaker state of being. While the *Mass Effect* universe struggles with many issues, ostensibly, inequality and sexism are not among them. Women in the storyline of the game are represented as equals, and are not denied rights based on their gender.

However, not all reviewers would agree with my gender analysis of *Mass Effect*. For Raymond (2009), although *Mass Effect* takes great strides in promoting inclusiveness and diversity, the game constructs women as unable to make decisions for themselves, necessitating a male protector. Similarly, Corneliussen and Rettberg (2008) question if female characters' rights in video games should be based on their similarity to men, or if women should claim their rights based on their differences from men. Corneliussen and Rettberg caution that exploring these questions risks reinforcing inequality by constructing women as a special group. I therefore question the extent to

which *Mass Effect* allows women to create their identities as women, rather than as men in (objectified) women's bodies.

To explore this question further, I consider Samara, the Justicar. Traditionally, law enforcement would be designated as a man's role. However, among the most influential and feared law enforcement officers in *Mass Effect* are the elite Asari known as "Justicars." Justicars are part of an ancient monastic order with an unwavering code of justice. Justicars swear an oath known as the Oath of Subsumation. They pledge to protect the innocent, punish the guilty, and defend the common law. The Justicar Code is the central force in every Justicar's life. The Code is composed of more than 5000 sutras that describe every possible situation a Justicar may encounter. Every Justicar must know the entire Code by heart. They must also renounce all family and worldly possessions to wander Asari space, righting wrongs. They rarely leave Asari space, unless their pursuit of justice requires them to do so. People fear and respect Justicars. There are very few Justicars due to high mortality rates during training, and the danger that comes from living as one.

Samara, a Justicar recruited by Shepard in *Mass Effect 2*, is almost 1000 years old. Samara is extremely dedicated to the oath she has taken and is portrayed as being among the wisest and strongest characters in the game. Samara compares the code and duties of the Justicar to that of knights from Medieval Christendom, or the Japanese Samurai, who were all men. Throughout the game, Samara maintains composure and dedication to Shepard's mission as well as a personal mission to pursue a serial killer who is later revealed to be Samara's daughter. Also, Samara expresses a wide range of emotions and characteristics, both stereotypically "feminine" and "masculine." During

conversations with Shepard, when the situation calls for it, Samara can be compassionate, caring, nurturing, and honest. In battle, Samara is courageous, intelligent, physical, assertive, and level-headed.

To further explore gender representations in *Mass Effect*, I draw on a Human female member of Shepard's crew named Miranda Lawson (see Figure 5). In the story, Miranda has no mother, and comes from a wealthy and influential father who genetically engineered her from his own genome to be the "perfect" Human woman. In other words, she has specific skills which are genetically enhanced, such as intelligence, strength, biotic powers, fighting skills, physical perception senses, speed, and a longer lifespan. All her life, her father imposed his perfectionist attitude on Miranda, always demanding more, physically and mentally. Finally, when she could stand her father's control no longer, after exchanging gunfire with his guards, she ran away. Thanks to her talents, Miranda has successfully eluded her father for years (*Mass Effect* Wiki: Miranda Lawson, 2011).

Figure 5: Character Miranda Lawson (from *Mass Effect* Wiki, 2014)

On the surface Miranda is distant and professional. At one point in the game, she asks Shepard for help with a personal crisis, admitting she has a twin named Oriana. Miranda reveals that she has gone to great lengths to protect Oriana from their father. Unfortunately, he learned Miranda managed to successfully establish a secret identity for Oriana and is pursuing her. Miranda requests Shepard's assistance to ensure Oriana's safety by relocating her. Because of Miranda's efforts, and Shepard's assistance, Oriana is able to live a safe life. Upon the successful completion of this mission, Miranda is willing to open up and engage Shepard in conversations. She reveals personal emotions,

details about her father, and the stress of constantly trying to be "perfect," despite her freedom from his control.

Miranda's personal struggle can be read as representative of a woman's struggle to establish herself as an individual, independent from a patriarchal authority. Returning to Corneliussen and Rettberg's (2008) question mentioned earlier, is Miranda an empowered woman, establishing her own identity, or is she a woman struggling to identify herself through traditional "masculine" representations?

Further, according to Sommer (2011) and Winterhalter (2012), it is ironic that when Miranda shares personal information with Shepard, it cannot be ignored how often the audience is viewing her backside. For Winterhalter, even when events occur in *Mass Effect* that are intended for the player to see a female character as more than her appearance, she is still subject to objectification. Sommer (2011) discusses how Miranda is a potential relationship option for Shepard (both male and female). He also describes Miranda as the sexiest and most interesting character in *Mass Effect.* For Sommer (2011), "Miranda is a culmination of all the characteristics that make the perfect female-human science fiction character. And, let's face it, the fact that many shots in the frame the focus on her derriere certainly helps add to her sexiness" (¶ 1).

Are men in *Mass Effect* viewed from an angle which objectifies them as well? In *Mass Effect*, men are generally represented similar to Connell's (2002) depiction of heterosexual, hegemonic masculinity, i.e., with large muscles, and fit bodies. Rregitsky (2012) argues that *Mass Effect* provides heterosexual men with a great deal more to look at (albeit objectified female characters' bodies) than non-heterosexual men. Also, one of the most common representations of men in *Mass Effect* is through a military identity.

Most of the male characters in *Mass Effect*'s main storyline are members of some form of military organization, and understandably, they are generally depicted as physically fit. However, men are still portrayed in hypermasculine ways. For example, a character introduced in *Mass Effect 3*, Lieutenant James Vega (see Figure 6), is an ideal representation of heterosexual, hegemonic masculinity. James is a Human Systems Alliance Marine and an experienced soldier who prefers taking action over dealing with the complicated political workings of the galaxy (*Mass Effect* Wiki: James Vega, 2014).

Figure 6: James Vega exercising (from *Mass Effect* Wiki, 2014)

James has two primary areas of interest: women and his military career. As he accompanies Shepard through different areas, he does not hesitate to express his attraction through comments such as how women on the ship make him "even more distracted" (*Mass Effect* Wiki: James Vega, 2014, ¶ 39). While James is not presented as an available romantic option for Shepard, he openly flirts with female Shepard, but avoids such conversations with male Shepard.

James is also an extremely fit soldier. He can typically be found in the Normandy's shuttle bay, beside weapons bench, bantering with his good friend, Steve

Cortez. The first time Shepard visits James in the Shuttle Bay, he is doing pull-ups. In short, he is a self-identified military "grunt" who reflects hypermasculinity. Rosen, Knudson, and Fancher (2003) describe hypermasculinity as involving expressions of extreme stereotyped masculine attributes, mostly involving physically violent activities. James responds mostly with physical violence before expressing his emotions. Boldry, Wood, and Kashy (2001) investigate the persistence of gender stereotypes in military training. They argue that male cadets are stereotyped to possess the motivation and leadership skills necessary for effective leadership performance. James is constructed as a stereotypical heterosexual male and an ideal soldier. He has big muscles, and tattoos, and, before he is willing to share personal information, a person needs to demonstrate that they can stand up to him physically. One of his catch phrases is, "adrenaline's better than oxygen any day" (*Mass Effect* Wiki: James Vega, 2014, ¶ 1).

By visiting James frequently, Shepard is able to build up a friendship with him. Eventually, James and Shepard engage in a sparring match. During the fight, James begins to open up and share some of his experiences. Shepard learns that, before he joined the Normandy, James' entire platoon was killed, and he was the only survivor. He blames himself for the deaths of his teammates, and as a result, is reckless and has ceased to care whether he lives or dies. Shepard advises James that he needs to deal with his emotions for the sake of the mission. At the conclusion of the match, James thanks Shepard for the "pep talk" (*Mass Effect* Wiki: James Vega, 2014, ¶ 38).

In *Mass Effect*, men are objectified differently than women, mostly in ways that enforce hypermasculinity. For example, men are viewed from angles that show off their muscular bodies, and their actions suggest hypermasculinity. For example, Shepard

meets James shirtless while getting a new tattoo on his back. Shepard asks James if the tattoo will prevent him from returning to duty. James brags about how the pain will not be enough to stop him. The visual depiction of James is specifically focussed on his biceps and muscular back, while he brags about his tolerance of physical pain. Just as the player sees a female character from her backside, James's muscles are foregrounded.

How do players respond to the representation of women and men in *Mass Effect*? According to Walkerdine (2006), women who play video games negotiate complex performances which demand qualities traditionally assigned to masculinity alongside others that are traditionally assigned to femininity. Walkerdine argues that women experience difficulties competing to win while at the same time feeling pressured to display sensitivity, caring, and co-operation.

For example, having the rank "commander" might have different meanings for a woman who is playing *Mass Effect* than a man. Does the female version of Shepard have any distinct traits that separate her from her male counterpart? According to discussions on the online BioWare Forum, other than differences of opinion regarding the quality of the voice acting, there is no discernible difference in how Shepard is represented. Both versions of Shepard have the same lines and same motions when expressing themselves. One of the arguments on the BioWare Forum site states:

> I can't even stand playing female because of how forceful she sounds in every single sentence, I mean is she angry or something? To me male shep comes off sounding more cocky if anything, thats the only difference I see in either. One's a chick trying to act like a guy, and ones a cocky ass guy. (Female Shepard vs. Male Shepard Experience, 2010, ¶ 30)

The manner in which female Shepard is compared to her male counterpart in this post describes a woman behaving like a man. The female version of Shepard is portrayed as forceful and angry. The male Shepard behaving in the same way, however, is seen simply as a "cocky ass guy." This statement reflects a social expectation that women will behave in certain (e.g., passive, submissive) ways, supporting a view of *Mass Effect* as a game made to appeal to White heterosexual men.

According to reports from BioWare marketing, only about 18% of *Mass Effect* players play as female Shepard (Walker, 2011). Why is this? One online response of a player who does play female states:

> I never play a male character either, if I can help it. I don't roleplay, and would much rather stare at a woman's ass / play dress-up with a female barbie :P. It does make Bioware's ham-handed romances annoying though… feels like I'm having to smack down the overly aggressive male characters every time I speak to them or they think it's a sign I want to sleep with them. (Walker, 2011, ¶ 35)

This statement reflects attitudes towards women in a patriarchal society. It demonstrates that even though women may be presented in empowered positions, they are still not regarded equally. Why is it that more people prefer to create a male Shepard over a female? Is it because more players are male? The previous comment does not support this. Perhaps it is easier to accept that a man is more capable of saving the universe?

In *Mass Effect*, women are also viewed as sexual objects more than men. Stermer and Burkley (2012) reviewed the prevalence of sexualized content in video games, and discussed the relationship this content has with players' attitudes toward women. They

argue that sexualized content is both highly prevalent in video games as well as linked to increased sexist attitudes and perceptions of the real world.

Similarly, Walkerdine (2006) argues that despite how video games may appear to empower women, they can remain as sites enforcing contemporary patriarchal ideals. Winterhalter (2012) argues *Mass Effect* is a patriarchal environment wherein sexist attitudes from players result in online responses such as, "if male entertainment bothers females so much, perhaps more FEMALES should produce their own damn entertainment. The majority CHOOSES not to, as idiots such as yourself would rather bitch about what males created" (¶ 17).

If *Mass Effect* demonstrates a privileging of the heterosexual male, is there a way the player can resist objectification, stereotyping, and oppression within the story? Can the construction of Shepard's gender provide such opportunities? At the beginning of the game, players are able to choose any gendered character, and design the main character's face as they desire. However, Rregitsky (2012) questions why customization is limited to the face. Other physical characteristics from the neck down are locked into a stereotypical muscular male or a shapely female body shape. Therefore, other than the availability of sexual partners, having different voice actors, and being addressed as "he" or "she," there is not a great deal of difference in Shepard's presentation of the self. For example, outside of having different characters flirt with them, both gendered versions of Shepard behave in similar ways. Both say the same lines, and have similar reactions to events as they occur. Also, neither version of the character takes on characteristics traditionally associated with either gender. Because Shepard is a member of the military,

he/she is expected to behave in a specific way in keeping with masculine military culture.

However, when Shepard performs an action that is either praised or condemned, the choices are attributed to the character's personality, not gender. For example, if Shepard is presented with an opportunity to discipline an individual who was caught with illegal substances, the player can choose to forgive the character, and encourage him or her to redeem themselves, or to physically harm the character as punishment. While these choices are gendered in themselves, the choice is left with the player, and is not based on Shepard's gender. At a later point in time, if the action is being reviewed, Shepard is neither praised for being compassionate, nor condemned for being heartless based on gender. As in real life, attributing these characteristics to Shepard's gender reflects the social construction of gender in which men and women are expected to perform differently. Benton (2013) argues there needs to be greater understanding of how people are directed toward gender roles by cultural texts, and how people often deviate from their culturally constructed roles when playing video games.

The customization of Shepard's gender offers possibilities, albeit limited to a male/female binary, for resistance through *Mass Effect*'s storyline. The ability to choose Shepard's gender, along with decisions made in various situations, provides opportunities to play as Shepard while resisting heterosexual, hegemonic masculinity. For example, Kinzel (2011) discusses her frustration with mainstream games limiting the protagonist to being "White and conventionally 'pretty'" (¶ 1). In response, she created a Shepard who:

> Is impatient, impulsive, committed to social justice, a survivor, and a queer woman of *colour*. The character I impose on the game avatar is multiracial…although that's not why I did it. I did it because I don't see queer women of *colour* as protagonists very often, not in video games, but not anywhere else in media either. (¶ 2)

Kinzel argues Shepard was written with the expectation that most people will play as a White man. Kinzel (2011) states:

> I am not surprised real-life dudes don't play as Lady Shepard.* Her character accomplishes something truly revolutionary, though whether it was intentional or not I cannot say. The most radical thing about Lady Shepard is that she does not exist for the enjoyment of heterosexual men… Lady Shepard does not have a giant rack; she doesn't shriek or prance. Lady Shepard carries herself like a soldier, reproducing Dude Shepard's businesslike movements and stride, step for step — which is understandable, because the actual animations used for both are exactly the same. (¶ 8, emphasis in original)

Equal representation of gender in *Mass Effect* is an uphill battle. I agree with both Skahan's (2014) and Kinzel's (2011) positions: video games privilege the heterosexual White male, and greater awareness of this privilege enables opportunities to resist it. Although Coullie (2013) argues, "because it's 'just a game played for fun' and because of the prevalence (or normalisation) of the male stereotyping, I simple never desired nor even considered alternative protagonists" (¶ 14). In the game, the player has the option of which gendered path to pursue. In other words, *Mass Effect* provides opportunities for

players to explore the social construction of gender and resist ideas that masculinity and femininity are fixed truths.

Discourses of sexuality in Mass Effect.

Sexuality is a common theme in *Mass Effect*. In this section, I begin with a discussion of sexuality and how it is constructed through dominant ideologies and discursive practices. Then, I discuss how *Mass Effect* constructs sexuality, and how it (re)enforces and/or challenges social relations of violence. I conclude with an exploration of the significance behind the social construction of a gay Shepard.

Traditionally, the biological and physical aspects of sexuality involve the reproductive functions and the basic biological drive within all species as well as the intimate bond between individuals (Hyde, 2012). However, Tyson (2013) defines sexuality as "our capacity to be kind, generous, tender, and understanding; our capacity to experience pleasure; the ways in which we define pleasure—all of these personality traits tell us about our sexuality" (p. 117). Sexuality cannot be understood by simple opposed categories such as "homosexual" and "heterosexual." Tyson (2013) argues "our sexuality, depending on how we choose to define it, may be different at different times during the week. Thus, human sexuality is a dynamic, fluid force: it's always changing and growing, and its boundaries are not permanently rooted in any one spot" (p. 123).

I avoid using the term "sexual orientation" due to how it, as Tyson (2013) describes, "indicates only one thing about us at any given point in time: it indicates whether we're romantically drawn to people of the opposite sex, people of the same sex, or people of both sexes" (p. 147). Tyson argues the traditional definition fails to consider other personality traits. Tyson (2013) also suggests that a focus on sexual orientation

leads to phenomena such as homophobia, which she defines as "the intense fear and loathing of homosexuality" (p. 121).

Tyson argues homophobia is responsible for hate crimes against gay men and lesbians, as well as heterosexism. Tyson describes heterosexism as institutionalized discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals, and the privileging of heterosexuality. Of particular interest to my analysis is the construction of sexuality and heterosexism within *Mass Effect* and bloggers' responses to the game, especially what Tyson (2006) calls a "homophobic reading," which involves "reading informed by the fear and loathing of homosexuality" (p. 318). Homophobia can also include the perpetuation of negative constructs, such as gay people are sick, evil, or both, have insatiable sexual appetites, seek to molest children, and "corrupt" young people by recruiting them.

Epstein, O'Flynn, and Telford (2003) suggest that heterosexism is fostered by school curricula that promote heterosexuality as the norm. They describe, for example, how children in elementary schools learn about diversities in families. While curriculum documents typically portray two parents, single parents, or divorced, a family with two gay parents is rarely mentioned. Epstein, O'Flynn, and Telford argue that the normalization of heterosexuality is harmful to children and young people of all identities, especially children with gay parents. According to Hegarty, Pratto, and Lemieux (2004), heterocentric norms prevent equal consideration for LGBTQs and persist even in climates that support equality and social justice.

Additionally, Epstein, O'Flynn, and Telford (2003) argue that language surrounding sexuality, both historically and culturally, has been organized and produced

in a manner that excludes consideration of LGBTQs. For example, children are taught, as a rule, that boys and girls can be partners; however, textbooks do not mention that two boys or two girls may be attracted to each other. According to Epstein, O'Flynn, and Telford, individuals frame and reframe their attitudes and identities according to the social context in which they are positioned. The existence of these rules contributes to the oppression of LGBTQs through their invisibility, simply due to the fact that "it never came up" (Kapeleris, 2010, p. 32). Nevertheless, these heteronormative discourses contribute to social relations of violence in which LGBTQs are ignored and oppressed.

Heterocentrism creates a hierarchy that is supported by heterocentric norms and discursive practices. Hegarty, Pratto, and Lemieux (2004) argue that official claims of support for equal consideration of LGBTQs are insufficient. This is because heterocentric norms continue to operate and elude detection due to discursive practices of language ignoring LGBTQs, while still passing for fairness.

Are such forms of discursive violence found in *Mass Effect*? Are players guilty of "homophobic playing" (Mann & Johnson, 2014, p. 64)? While heterocentrism renders lesbian and gay experiences invisible (Stufft & Graff, 2011), playing *Mass Effect* can present opportunities for unique approaches to sexuality, if the player knows where to look. Sexuality is not central to *Mass Effect*, but it is a recurring theme. There are erotic dancers in bars, people kissing in public, and relationships being pursued by characters in the background (both heterosexual and gay). Fron et al. (2007) argue the content of video games creates an ingrained "hegemony of play" (p. 1) which ignores the needs and desires of minority players such as LGBTQs. However, the portrayal of sexuality in *Mass Effect* can also be subverted by players wishing to resist such discursive violence.

As the game progresses, players can make choices such as whether or not to engage in sexual relationships. Rregitsky (2012) argues the representation of sexual relations between characters is poorly dealt with in *Mass Effect*, due to how easy it is to engage in a sexual relationship. Depending on the individual, it can take as little as five conversations to seduce an in-game character. When greater effort is required to seduce, conversation decisions remain straightforward. While multiple in-game characters are approachable, Shepard's romantic and sexual options are limited in *Mass Effect* and *Mass Effect 2* to heterosexual or lesbian encounters. It isn't until the third game the player can explore both heterosexual and gay relationships that include two men. For Rregitsky, this element of the story is too simple, and lacks depth. Further, the limiting of options for sexual relationships in the first two games demonstrates how *Mass Effect* was originally a game that reflected heteronormative ideas.

After the release of *Mass Effect 3*, scenes from the game were posted on YouTube, including the gay relationship scenes in the game. Boxer (2012) reports how after a few days of its availability on YouTube, the male same sex-relationship received 400 "likes" and over 2000 "dislikes." Homophobic comments were directed towards LGBTQs with one of the posts stating:

> I am a straight guy, and I personally think this was a horrible idea. For those of us who want a game where we don't have to worry about avoiding every gay, or sexual encounter this will become a very large annoyance for the gamers who simply want to game. If you want to see sex and homosexuality, that is your choice, but can't we keep it in a place for where the whole world doesn't have to be a part of it due the fact they

> want to buy a good game but not a porn and homosexual porn machine? I am a hardcore gamer and prefer to play as many games as are made well. If *Mass Effect* 3 (a very well made game) makes it a habit to put in gay sex in their game and it takes to all of the other games, I'm going to have to find a new outlet other than video games. They will loose business to those people who, although they don't have anything against gay people, that also doesn't mean they want to take part in it. For the straight people all around the world who don't want to have to put in extra effort to avoid something that sickens most straight men, I say this was a horrible choice and I really hope it doesn't stick. I have nothing against gay or lesbian people, however if that is your lifestyle it is meant for a place called home, where you can carry out your private business in PRIVATE, not in the video games we all have learned to love. (Boxer, 2012, ¶ 51)

Such responses can be linked to heteronormative discourses discussed by Hegarty, Pratto, and Lemieux (2004), who explore how LGBTQs are persecuted and oppressed for wanting equal representation in video games.

Even when gay men are included in *Mass Effect 3,* they are not equally represented. In all of the cut-scenes, Shepard expresses affection for his/her partner with the phrase "I love you," except for one scene with the gay male. This question was raised on the BioWare Forum website:

> So I watched both the Male and Female romances with Kaidan and there was some missing dialogue. To be precise I am refering to the coversation choice 'I love you'. This is in Shepard's room just before the 'love scene',

> leading to these lines.
>
> Shepard: 'You mean a lot to me Kaidan, I love you.'
>
> Kaidan: 'I love you too. Untill the end of time.'
>
> These lines only appeared on the Females romance, so unless the video was cut that means it is a female option only. Um.....why?
>
> (BioWare Forum: Male Shepard and Kaidan Romance, Missing Lines?, 2012, ¶ 1)

Later, in response to this and other similar comments, BioWare released a downloadable content (DLC) file named the "Extended Cut" (Chan, Driscoll, and Wong, 2012). *Extended Cut* included additional story content, gameplay, and alternative endings. *Extended Cut* also contained a scene in which the male Shepard says "I love you" to his male romantic partner. In this instance, protests from players resulted in allowing the gay male Shepard to admit his love openly for his male partner. This is an example of how players resisted the heterocentrism of *Mass Effect*.

The decision to withhold the "I love you" phrase from the original game and add it through DLC reflects the level of power held by the game developer. It also raises questions similar to those asked by Kaperlis (2010) regarding why such a simple phrase was never included from the start. Was it just an oversight? Was it due to fear of offending certain groups? Or was it a deliberate move to marginalize homosexuality? We will never know. The ease with which the situation was rectified, through the use of a DLC, precluded a deep consideration of the discursive representation of sexuality in *Mass Effect.* The game developer merely offered a tokenistic response as a concession to the wishes of some players.

Recently, similar questions were asked of video game developer Nintendo regarding their game *Tomodachi Life* -- a life-simulation game that uses Nintendo's unique virtual avatars to interact with each other in a variety of activities, and engage in friendships. Friendships can become romantic, but the players are limited to heterosexual relationships. Nintendo has stated that the world in *Tomodachi Life* is an "alternate world" instead of a real world simulator, and therefore will not officially include homosexual relationships (MacDonald, 2014, ¶ 2).

This controversial statement resulted in an online campaign to persuade Nintendo to allow same-sex relationships in *Tomodachi Life*. Despite the outcry, Nintendo has stated that they will not make changes to allow for same-sex relationships in the game (Macdonald, 2014). Unlike *Mass Effect 3*, Nintendo is ignoring open protests from the players.

However, the response to the addition of gay male characters in *Mass Effect 3* was mixed, including online homophobic statements such as:

> Well now, I do have a problem with gay people. Aka they are sick in the head and whatever excuse medics came up in USA when they realized they can't cure them did not just made them normal... Look, curing schizophrenia is not easy either. If possible at all. (Farr, 2012, ¶ 81)

It is important to note how this statement associates being gay with diseases and psychological disorders. This individual goes on to argue he/she had no negative attitudes before the release of the game, and somehow, allowing the open expression of gay activities between men in *Mass Effect* changed his/her mind. Like an earlier online

comment, this is reflective of heteronormativity, i.e., gays are accepted as long as they are ignored and live their lives out of public attention.

However, there was also support from some gamers who identify as straight. These online posts discuss how the storyline in *Mass Effect* is based on choices. If someone does not like the choice of creating a gay Shepard, they do not have to. One respondent said:

> Knowing gay people, talking to gay people gave me my opinion of them, and that opinion is that they're no different to straight people in any way other than who they're attracted to. The fact is that *Mass Effect* is a role-playing game, one with a particularly heavy emphasis on player choice. Having a gay relationship option is just another choice within that. (Boxer, 2012, ¶ 34)

Given how heated the discussion about Shepard's sexuality became, it is worth asking why it is such an important issue. *Mass Effect* is clearly more than just a game to players. If all that mattered was the gameplay, Shepard's sexuality would not matter. It is possible that, for some players, the Shepard character becomes a sort of avatar, through which they work out or explore their own sexuality. As Turkle (2012) says, children and adults use the Internet as a site for experimentation, or an "identity workshop" (p. 30). Similarly, Bessière, Seay, and Kiesler (2007) argue that *World of Warcraft* players create their own main character to be similar to their ideal self. The many discussions and posts online demonstrate that *Mass Effect* players experience a similar desire to explore their sexuality in the games. The customized character allows the player to feel a connection to Shepard, which increases immersion in the games.

Although the romances in *Mass Effect* were originally intended to be exclusively heterosexual, there is potential to resist heterocentrism, albeit, this window is limited. For example, in the personal computer (PC) version of the first *Mass Effect*, in part to overcome potential programming issues, the actors for Shepard, Mark Meer and Jennifer Hale, voiced all of the lines for both gay and heterosexual romance options. These voiced lines remain in the game, resulting in the availability of same-sex relationships for both male and female Shepard. In order to accomplish this, however, the player must modify the game. Moreover, even when this is done, and Shepard is gay, some of the dialogue options are missing and Shepard is addressed as a member of the opposite sex by the partner (*Mass Effect* Wiki, 2014).

Even when the game is not modified, players can choose to "read" it in resistant ways. For example, Farr (2012) offers a unique interpretation of *Mass Effect 3* by discussing how the linear storyline of all three games can be interpreted as a "coming out" experience for male Shepard. Farr (2012) argues:

> As time progressed, so did *Mass Effect*'s sexual politics. The way it played out, however, I was not merely watching Sebastian come out of the closet, his thoughts echoed my own. His particular journey was a necessity born out of the game's own options. (¶ 16)

Farr's discussion of the sexual politics in *Mass Effect* relates to Millett's (2000) argument that "sex has a frequently neglected political aspect" (p. xix). Millett discusses the role patriarchy plays in sexual relations, oppressing women and gay men. Farr engaged with the *Mass Effect* game's storyline, making decisions that demonstrate how the different options available within the game can be manipulated. Farr uses this

potential to create his own story in *Mass Effect* as a way to resist heteronormative discursive violence in real life through having Shepard do the same in the game.

In addition, Farr demonstrates how the *Mass Effect* story includes a subjective experience in which the player's choices interpret Shepard's behaviour in a specific manner. For example, when it comes to Shepard's sexual interests, the script remains the same regardless of the character's sexuality. That is to say, other than having different options for romantic partners available, and being addressed as a member of the opposite sex, both male and female Shepard speak identically to their partners, and use similar dialogue (*Mass Effect* Wiki, 2014).

The presence of a gay Shepard option also raises questions regarding how the character is represented. Just because the Shepard character can be gay, is his/her behaviour suddenly altered to "seem" gay? The answer is no. Whether the player chooses Shepard to be male, female, heterosexual, gay, lesbian, or pursue no romantic relationship at all, the social representation of the character is constant. For example, if Shepard is a gay male, he does not take on stereotypical traits that are often associated with gay men (Tyson, 2006). Outside of being attracted to a member of the same sex, gay Shepard and his/her partner behave in the same manner as they would if the heterosexual options were chosen by the player. The only factor that differs is the choice of the romantic partner.

On one hand, this can be seen as avoiding the stereotyping of gender roles; on the other hand, it can be seen as a tokenistic response suggesting the gay option was simply added to silence complaining players. I argue that the consistency of the social representation of Shepard promotes the acceptance of different sexual identities. Altering

Shepard's behaviour to include stereotypical constructs believed to define sexuality would have reinforced heteronormative ideas that sexual identity reflects biological, not socially constructed traits. Additionally, Shepard's behaviour remaining constant demonstrates resistance towards attributing socially constructed ideas of what constitutes sexuality with biological factors. According to Ryan (2003), homophobia has a devastating impact on self-esteem, psychological well-being, and promotes negative coping through use of alcohol and drugs. She argues, "family acceptance and the presence of a gay role model during childhood are among the most important resiliency factors" (Ryan, 2003, p. 143). Perhaps being able to create a gay Shepard who does not alter his/her representation based on his/her sexuality can promote resiliency in players as well. Kinzel argues that creating a Shepard who resists both heteronormativity and White privilege is more realistic, especially since Shepard also deals with racism and xenophobia in his/her adventures.

Discourses of race in Mass Effect.

As in discourses of gender and sexuality, discourses of race are evident through constructions of Shepard's identity and the interactions among the various species in the *Mass Effect* universe. I begin this section by exploring race as an ideology and institutional racism as a discursive practice. I then present an analysis of how racial identity is constructed in *Mass Effect*. This section concludes with an exploration of the construction of race through the Shepard character.

Keita et al. (2004) describe "race" as being difficult to define due to disagreements in approach. Some claim race is a biological entity, while others maintain it is socially constructed. Keita et al. state "[T]he meaning of race became formalized for

humans and restricted to units based on biological variation in keeping with general zoological practices" (p. 17). Similarly, Barbujani and Morning (2011) describe race as a classification system used historically by scientists to categorize humans into groups by different anatomical, cultural, ethnic, historical, religious, and/or social affiliations.

In contrast, taking up a critical perspective, Smedley and Smedley (2005) argue science racializes difference when it attempts to explain human population differences in health, intelligence, education, and wealth as the consequence of biologically based differences between "racial" groups. Despite evidence that racial groups are not genetically discrete, reliably measured, or scientifically meaningful, the concept of race persists and contributes to systems of oppression. Smedley and Smedley (2005) further explain how "race" is used ideologically to enforce social order:

> Race is a means of creating and enforcing social order, a lens through which differential opportunity and inequality are structured. Racialized science...can be expected only to maintain and reinforce existing racial inequality, in that its adherents indirectly argue that no degree of government intervention or social change will alter the skills and abilities of different racial groups. (p. 24)

For Smedley and Smedley, attention must be drawn towards who benefits from the social construction of race, and who suffers.

Tyson (2006) defines racism as the institutional segregation, domination, and/or persecution of one racial group over another. When societal institutions such as education and federal, state, and local governments, incorporate practices of racism, this is known as "institutionalized racism" (p. 361). Solorzano (1997) argues racism is made

up of four dimensions: micro and macro components; institutional and individual forms; conscious and unconscious elements; and a cumulative impact on both the individual and group.

Hall (1996) examines the role that racist discourses have played, historically, in power relations between Europe and other parts of the world. Hall combines Foucault's (1979) regime of truth and Said's (1985) study of Orientalism to show how Western discourses at the end of the 15th and 18th centuries produced institutions that perceived different cultures as "other" in order to position them as inferior to European cultures. Hall (1996) labels this discourse as "the West and the Rest" (p. 165).

Racism also plays a significant role in education. For example, according to Howard (2008), African American males, in U.S. schools, continue to underachieve on most academic indices due to racism. Despite various attempts to promote equality and social justice, school systems have failed to eradicate negative racial stereotypes. Howard argues this can be explained or challenged through critical race theory, and techniques such as counter-storytelling, which allows students opportunities to discuss race-related issues in an open manner –an opportunity that is lacking in many school environments. This work pushed me to ask if *Mass Effect*'s storyline provides an environment in which players can explore the social construction of race and thereby challenge racism and racialization?

Although *Mass Effect* uses the language of "species" interchangeably with "race," both terms assume biological differences among groups. In other words, from the outset, *Mass Effect* takes up a racialized discourse. While acknowledging this problematic, I will use the term "species" in describing the various beings that populate

the *Mass Effect* universe. I show how *Mass Effect* portrays different species in ways that reflect racialization and practices of discrimination in Western society, in which, as described by Hall (1996), non-Whites are discursively constructed as Other.

The *Mass Effect* universe is populated by dozens of distinct intergalactic species, each seen by others as possessing a unique set of racialized characteristics. My analysis of the construction of species in *Mass Effect* relates to Omi and Winant's (1993) racial formation theory, which argues that race is a socially constructed identity, wherein the characteristics and importance of racial categories are determined by social, economic, and political forces.

For example, the galaxy is governed by the Citadel[13] Council. There are three members of the Council who provide specific contributions based on the unique (and stereotypical) characteristics of their species. The Asari are typically constructed as diplomats and mediators, the Salarians (see Figure 7) gather intelligence and information, and the Turians oversee the majority of the military and peacekeeping forces. These roles are always assigned to the same species. The Asari history of being the first species to discover the Citadel floating in space has allowed them to be the most influential in Citadel Space. Furthermore, the Asari and Salarians have the most seniority and therefore, the most power on the Citadel Council. Any species granted an embassy on the Citadel is considered an associate member, bound by the accords of the Citadel Conventions. Associate members typically have ambassadors who bring issues to the attention of the Council, but have no impact on their final decisions.

[13] The Citadel is a colossal deep-space station that serves as the capital of the Citadel Council. It produces an artificial atmosphere capable of comfortably sustaining oxygen-breathing species.

Figure 7: A Salarian engineer (from *Mass Effect* Wiki, 2014)

One associate species, the Volus (see Figure 8), joined Citadel Space shortly after the Salarians, yet it has never been regarded as equal. They are originally from the planet Irune, which contains a high-pressurized greenhouse-like atmosphere that is able to support an ammonia-based biochemistry system. Due to their environment, the Volus must wear pressure suits, and special breathing apparatuses when interacting with other species. Volus are not as physically gifted as other species. They are shorter in height than other species and never seen outside of their protective suits. Little else is known about their appearance and physiology. They have their own embassy on the Citadel, but

were never invited to join the Council. As a result, many Volus are resentful and feel their culture is unrecognized, despite their contributions to the galactic community.

Figure 8: A Volus mercenary engineer (from *Mass Effect* Wiki, 2014)

Because they are positioned as having a physical disadvantage, Volus mostly make their reputation through trade and commerce in various industries including property, resources, or other people. The Volus are gifted financial advisors in Citadel Space. However, the Volus' disregard for violence does not mean they are immune to physical attacks.

The Volus' lack in physical prowess results in other, more militant species constructing them as overly pacifistic and cowardly (*Mass Effect* Wiki, 2014). Culturally, Volus dislike war, unlike the galaxy's more aggressive species. If a physical confrontation arises between Volus, it is rarely lasts. The Volus home-world is reputed for having done away with warfare as an institution of the state, resorting to non-physical

violent options such as social humiliation, negotiation, or harsh economic settlements. Rather than having their own self-governing system, the Volus are members of the Turian Hierarchy. In return for military protection, the Volus pay a tax and assist Turian economic institutions. They are highly dependent on the defense they receive from the Turians. When a physical confrontation arises, the Volus support the Turians in any way they can, and the Turians do the same for the Volus.

The Volus constantly voice their objections to how they are excluded from the Council and other Citadel politics. They were the third species to form an embassy on the Citadel, and made valuable contributions to galactic economics with their commercial prowess. They fashioned the Unified Banking Act, which established the standard currency of interstellar trade, and continue to monitor the banking industry. Despite their important contributions to the Citadel and galactic society, they have never been offered a seat on the Council. Consequently, there is resentment from some Volus, particularly the Volus ambassador, Din Korlack. In order for a species to be invited into the Council, it needs to have provided some extraordinary service to the Citadel, such as the Turians' military support during the Krogan Rebellion. Council species are also required to provide fleets, resources, and economic aid in case of disaster, none of which the Volus can supply.

The case of the Volus shows how the Citadel governing system within *Mass Effect* applies a racial hierarchical system in which the Asari, Turians, and Salarians are the dominant species in the galaxy. This system also prevents other species from rising above their status for equal treatment. In *Mass Effect*, being a blue Asari is the equivalent of being a White, heterosexual male in real-life. It is the privileged state that carries the

most influence. Just like heterosexual, White males, the reason the Asari, Turians, and Salarians are able to maintain their status and power is because they promote the discourse of being the dominant force in the galaxy, while all other species, including Humans, are distanced from power.

Specifically, the Council uses stereotypes, such as the Volus being pacifistic, to construct them as an inferior species. This is similar to real-life situations in which more or less opportunities become available for individuals, depending on their place of origin, skin colour, and/or gender. The construction of the Volus as being cowardly relates to Slotkin's (1973) discussion of how physical violence is a primary characteristic of the myth of American identity. Slotkin argues this myth allows American citizens to (re)produce a sense of superiority over other, less violent, nations.

A different species, known as Quarians, (see Figure 9) are nomadic, Humanoid aliens. They are highly skilled with technology and synthetic intelligence. Roughly 300 years before the events of *Mass Effect,* the Quarians created an artificially intelligent species known as the Geth to serve as a labour force. The Geth eventually revolted and conquered their homeworld, Rannoch. The Quarians were driven out of their territory, and now live aboard a massive collection of starships, known as the Migrant Fleet, made up of salvaged, second-hand vessels and recycled technology (*Mass Effect* Wiki, 2014).

Figure 9: A female Quarian engineer (from *Mass Effect* Wiki, 2014)

Quarians have facial structures, hair growth, and red blood similar to Humans. However, they are generally shorter and less muscular in appearance. Quarians have three thick fingers on both hands, as well as three toes on each foot. Their lower legs are bowed backwards significantly. The most distinguishing feature of Quarian biology is their weak immune system. It is the result of centuries of living in sterile environments. All Quarians must dress in highly sophisticated enviro-suits. These suits protect them from disease or infection if they are injured. In addition to their suits, Quarians have

extensive cybernetic devices integrated into their bodies. A Quarian's lifespan is roughly similar to a Human's, but is prone to decrease if ever infected.

Their weak immune systems result in Quarians rarely being seen without their protective suits. They must be extra cautious of any food or beverage that enters their bodies, and ingest antibiotics regularly. This does not mean, however, that Quarians are weak by nature. Because they are raised in a nomadic culture, their priority is to protect and contribute to the Migrant Fleet. They have unique skills in regards to maintaining and converting technology, are expert miners, and formidable in a physical fight.

Generally, other species look down on Quarians, constructing them as beggars, thieves, and constantly under suspicion. Their loss of control over the Geth and the war for their homeworld resulted in the termination of the Quarian embassy on the Citadel and the banning of artificial intelligence. They also come into conflict with many species due to strip-mining systems currently inhabited as they pass through. Therefore, despite their many talents and skills with technology, Quarians are continuously oppressed and persecuted.

After their victory, the Geth did not conquer beyond Quarians' space. Little is known about Geth culture. They became isolationists. Any ships venturing into Geth space are met with immediate destruction. However, the Geth are not considered an official threat to the Citadel Council. Therefore, the Council refuses to provide any assistance to the Quarians. The treatment of the Quarians serves as an example for other species to respect the power held by the Council. They are also scapegoats, taking the blame for crimes they do not commit, and suffering more oppression than other species. The Council constructs the identity of being a Quarian as inferior to other species and,

consequently, Quarians live with a social stigma that makes it extremely difficult for them to advance. Because other species perceive Quarians as thieves and criminals, they do not trust them and do not like to hire them. Many end up selling themselves into indentured servitude.

There is, however, one similarity shared by the Volus and the Quarians: both require special suits to allow them to interact with other groups. Why are there not any special environments constructed for the Quarians and Volus to live, and in which other species would have to wear special suits to interact with them? Both species also require very specific diets, which are not often recognized. They are constantly forced to adjust to environments hostile towards their physiologies, but there are no concessions made to provide more comfortable conditions for the Volus or Quarians. As a result, both species are oppressed and considered inferior to others who can drink, eat, and breathe freely.

To better understand this construction of the Volus and Quarians as being "disabled," I turn to Abberley's (1987) discussion of the social theory of disability which explains the "problem" of disability as socially constructed and a form of systematic oppression. Abberley argues that, from a capitalist perspective, people with disabilities are not considered productive, and therefore disrupt the imperative of maximizing profits. The *Mass Effect* universe, like society in general, is affected through this propagation of the work ethic. Similarly, the Volus and Quarians experience discursive violence equivalent, in real life to persons with disabilities, i.e., they are discriminated against for their physiological differences, and are constructed as being weaker and inferior to other species.

Another species, known as the Krogan (see Figure 10), can be argued to be the complete opposite of the Volus. The Krogan are large reptilian bipeds from the planet Tuchanka. The planet is notorious for its harsh environment, scarce resources, and plentiful vicious predators. In consequence, the Krogan have evolved into violent warriors who focussed their technological advancements towards weaponry. Like the Asari, Krogan are capable of life-spans lasting over 1000 years. Eventually their home world was devastated in a nuclear war that reduced their people into warring factions. There is no stable political structure among the Krogan. Whatever faction holds the most power at the time is the one in control of the planet.

Figure 10: Krogan sentinel (from *Mass Effect* Wiki, 2014)

While the Volus value negotiation and humiliation to resolve conflicts, the Krogan go straight to physical violence. Their aggressive nature is used to construct the Krogan identity as unstable mercenaries, who can only resist their violent tendencies for the right price. They are also constructed as primitive and unintelligent. Most Krogan have a solitary attitude, trusting and serving no one but themselves. Their lack of social structure and government has most Krogan living with a generally violent and short-sighted disposition, focusing on personal gain. Additionally, the overly aggressive nature of the Krogan resulted in the loss of their embassy and official political status with the Citadel Council.

The construction of the Krogan has a historical origin. Originally the Krogan society was rich in culture and art, but lacking technologically until their interaction with the Salarians. The Salarians provided them with more advanced weaponry technology, and relocated them to another planet with less harsh conditions. While this appeared to assist the Krogan, the Salarians had ulterior motives. The Salarians "uplifted" the Krogan in order to turn them into an army against an enemy species known as the Rachni, who was at war with the Citadel at the time. The Salarians' plan succeeded and the Krogan were hailed as the saviours of the galaxy (*Mass Effect* Wiki, 2014).

Eventually, without the harsh conditions of their homeworld, the Krogan population swelled to uncontrollable numbers. This resulted in overcrowding and put a strain on resources. When the Krogan began settling in an Asari colony and refused to leave, war broke out and the Krogan rebelled. Eventually, the Citadel triumphed over the Krogan, when the Salarians genetically engineered a disease called the "genophage." The genophage severely hindered the Krogan ability to successfully reproduce.

Following the failure of their rebellion, the Krogan lost status and power, had their Citadel embassy revoked, and were generally oppressed by other species (*Mass Effect* Wiki, 2014).

While the Volus are constructed as cowardly pacifists and the Krogan as overly aggressive, Humans are perceived as an amalgam of both characteristics. In the *Mass Effect* story, Humans are constructed as intelligent, ambitious, adaptable, individualistic, and unpredictable. They have a strong desire to advance and improve themselves. They have been able to establish trade negotiations with the Asari and Salarians, while at the same time demonstrating that Human military forces can defend their people. Their ability to engage the Turians in the First Contact War demonstrated Human military strength. However, unlike many species in the Citadel galactic community, Humans have no close allies (like the Volus and Turian relationship). This is mostly due to how Humans are new members of the galactic community. As a result, other species also perceive Humans as impatient and immature. Without alliances or key political positions, Humans have to follow the Council's laws without much influence on its decisions.

The Human ambassador to the Council is a man named Donnel Udina. In the first *Mass Effect* game, if the player chooses to have Shepard save the Council, gratitude is offered through giving Humans their own seat. In the second game, Udina is chosen to be the Human Council member and vows to promote Human presence on the Citadel. Unfortunately, his presence becomes one solely based on appearances. He complains about how his arguments are constantly ignored and concerns are vetoed by the other Council members (*Mass Effect* Wiki, 2014).

This description of several of the many species in *Mass Effect* shows how the game constructs different species. Species are approached as bundles of culturally or racially determined predispositions: Volus are greedy, Quarians are thieves, Krogan are animalistic, and Humans are immature. While ethnicity can be positive, connecting people within a common historical origin, it becomes negative when it is used by others to characterize a group of individuals based on physical appearance (Bayton, McAlister, & Hamer, 1956). In this way, as in real life, institutional racism is part of the social structure by which a powerful minority restrict the access of a powerless majority to power and privilege.

Some players are aware of the racist discourses in the game. For example, on *Mass Effect* Wiki one individual started an online conversation addressing racism in the games by stating:

> Hey, so has anyone else noticed that *Mass Effect*'s writers used some pretty offenseve stereotypes in creating some of the different species for the games.
>
> The Volus look like something out of a Gestapo propaganda movie or a Truther conspiracy theory (physically inferior, control the banks, universally seen as deceitful/greedy, tend to be moneylenders/merchants/bankers, etc.).
>
> Somewhat less obvious are the Quarians who - according to the backstory - are basically gypsy stereotypes (treated as second-class citizens, seen as thieves because they tend to suck an entire solar system's resources dry, extremely insular, etc.).

> Even if this is just lazy writing (something the ME team are hardly unknown for) why has it gone unnoticed? (*Mass Effect* Wiki: Racism in *Mass Effect*, 2012, ¶ 1-4)

This person is recognizing stereotypes seen in real life and applying them to *Mass Effect.* However, not all respondents agreed. One stated:

> Because a lot of what you are saying just isn't true. For example, the volus *not* 'universally seen as deceitful/greedy'. They are very highly regarded and seen as extremely trustworthy. Nor is there any indication that they are greedy. They merely gravitate toward less physically demanding fields such as trade and commerce due to their physical stature. This is a common theme in sci-fi. Ditto for the Quarians. The Quarians are actually depicted rather romantically in the games, wandering the stars while seeking to reclaim their lost homeworld. Many Quarians characters are presented as noble, relatable characters the audience is meant to like. The stereotypes you point out are the in-game views some of the other races have toward them, which are portrayed in-game as being a bit bigoted. No, I've not seen any such offensive stereotypes in the species of *Mass Effect*. Rather, I've seen races that, by and large, fit typical sci-fi archetypes. (*Mass Effect* Wiki: Racism in *Mass Effect*, 2012, ¶ 7)

While this counter argument attributes positive characteristics to species in *Mass Effect,* it is still racializing them, i.e., constructing groups based on physical characteristics.

One way for players to resist racialization is to seek out the characters who reflect oppositions to offensive stereotypes; this can result in a more satisfying gaming

experience. For example, in *Mass Effect 2*, Shepard stumbles upon a Krogan male reciting poetry to an Asari who is struggling with the decision of whether or not she should marry him. She considers how he is kind-hearted, romantic, and nowhere near as violent as the "typical" Krogan. At the same time, she is nervous that he is merely pretending to be romantic, and only desires to mate (*Mass Effect* Wiki, 2014).

The Asari goes on to discuss how the Krogan differ from other species. If she married a Human or a Salarian, the Asari would only have to endure the relationship for a few decades, until the partner died. However, because Krogan have life-spans similar to Asari, she will have to remain committed to him for the rest of her life (*Mass Effect* Wiki, 2014). As Shepard, the player can choose whether to promote the relationship, or oppose it. If the relationship is endorsed, Shepard can follow up with the couple from time to time. This incident demonstrates how Shepard can engage in discussions about racialization with other characters.

Another example, in *Mass Effect 2,* is when Shepard has an option to become involved in an incident when a Volus reports missing currency. The Volus character accuses a young Quarian woman of robbing him when they previously bumped into each other. Upon further investigation, Shepard learns that the Volus dropped his currency in a store. However, before Shepard intervened, the law enforcement officer was prepared to arrest the Quarian solely based on the Volus' accusation and particular Quarian stereotypes. As Shepard, the player can either choose to intervene in this event and assist the Quarian, or ignore the situation and allow her to be arrested.

The treatment of the Quarian in this case is an example of a hate crime. According to Rayburn, Mendoza, and Davidson (2003), "the intent of the act is to

express condemnation, hate, disapproval, dislike, or distrust for that group" (p. 1055). Hate crimes involve attitudes, beliefs, and hostilities towards victims based on factors such as gender, sexuality, and racialization. Shepard's encounter is just one example of how Quarians are historically and pejoratively constructed. Although there is no definitive evidence to demonstrate that Quarians are criminals, they are always assumed to be guilty.

A similar incident occurs in the Citadel when Shepard passes by a member of the Hanar species (see Figure 10), who is preaching, and a Turian law-enforcement officer is nearby. The Hanar resemble Earth's jellyfish and are one of the few non-bipedal Citadel species. Hanar are known for their intense politeness and their strong religious beliefs (*Mass Effect* Wiki: Hanar, 2014).

Figure 11: Two Hanar conversing (from *Mass Effect* Wiki, 2014)

This is another incident in which the player can choose for Shepard to intervene in the arrest of the Hanar. By speaking with the officer, the player learns the Hanar does not have a permit to preach and refuses to purchase one. While investigating the issue, the Turian makes the statement, “I could arrest the jelly, but my captain wants me to find a peaceful solution to the problem” (GameFaqs: *Mass Effect* Funniest Quotes, 2008, ¶ 2). Use of the term “jelly” by the Turian law-enforcement officer is derogatory against the Hanar. This reaction demonstrates hostility and rudeness towards the species. Minikel-Lacocque (2013) describes incidents like this as involving “microaggression,” in which a racist attitude is expressed by an individual, or a member of a particular institution that would not normally support such a position.

This incident is illuminated by Dickter’s (2013) who points out that it is rare for individuals who are not the target to react to racist comments, even though confronting prejudice may reduce future discrimination.

There are, however, multiple ways Shepard could solve this issue. The player may use the in-game options to either charm, intimidate, or simply buy the Hanar an evangelical permit. The player can also choose to either stand up to the officer for making a racist comment, or join him in stating, “It's a stupid jellyfish that doesn't know any better” (GameFaqs: *Mass Effect* Funniest Quotes, 2008, ¶ 2). This encounter is an example of the player, as Shepard, being able to make choices within the game to either reinforce a racist attitude, and therefore, power relationships, or resist it by assisting the Hanar, by replying to the Turian officer, "You should be more tolerant. It's just trying to express its beliefs" (Simple Answers to Simple Questions, 2011, ¶ 17). In this way, the player, as Shepard, is given opportunities to explore and resist racism and racialization.

In addition, from the very beginning of the game, players have opportunities to explore the construction of race when customizing Shepard. Although Shepard's skin colour can be changed to reflect any complexion the player may desire, both male and female Shepard's default skin colour is White (see Figure1). Therefore, it takes effort to make Shepard look "different." Making the default Shepard White demonstrates the privilege given to White heterosexual gamers (Kinzel, 2011; Skahan, 2014). As Skahan (2014) states, most people "believe we live in this mythical post-discrimination society, which simply isn't the case, and the video game industry is a perfect example of this imbalance" (¶ 3). Why must there be a default setting for Shepard's skin colour and why must it be White? Rather than have a default, why not just give each player a randomly computer generated Shepard? I agree with Skahan (2014) who argues, "publishers need to develop an awareness of the *massive* pool of character traits and personalities they can pull from to create diverse casts of interesting, believable characters and actually create these characters" (¶ 24, emphasis in original).

Like gender and sexuality, Shepard's ethnicity is not a topic that is addressed directly between characters in conversations in *Mass Effect*. When Shepard interacts with other characters, his/her behaviour (whether peaceful or aggressive) is either attributed to Shepard's personality, or to stereotypical Human qualities, not skin colour. For example, in the first *Mass Effect*, when Shepard pleads with the Council for support against the Reapers, the Turian, Saren Arterius (who covertly betrays the Council) uses his influence and status to convince the Council to ignore Shepard, stating "your species needs to learn its place, Shepard" (*Mass Effect* Wiki, 2014, ¶ 1). This comment remains the same regardless of Shepard's skin colour. *Mass Effect* is organized in a manner in

which Shepard's skin colour does not impact the story. That is to say, when characters of different species interact with Shepard, they do not express hostility or friendship based on Shepard's skin colour. If anything, Shepard is judged according to how other species construct Humans as impulsive and immature.

Nevertheless, Shepard's skin colour is a common theme of discussion on *Mass Effect* blogs. One online discussion regarding the creation of a Black Shepard began with:

> I just showed my African-American friend this game and he complained how it was racist becuase the main character isn't a "****". He said that "White" people are depicted as heroes because they're freeing the galaxy. I told him that it's a person and what difference does it make the color of his skin is. What do you guys think? Are you with me on this one? (Kozlovskiy, 2010, ¶ 1)

In this case, the ability to customize Shepard as an African American creates opportunities to question why the hero is traditionally racialized as a White male.

The online discussion of an African American Shepard also resulted in comments such as:

> I think it's hilariously blown out of proportions. To complain about that in a game like this with all kinds of aliens is just borderline ridiculous. Not to mention you have Jacob, so the overzealous really have nothing to complain about. (Kozlovskiy, 2010, ¶ 4)

The discussion continues with different players arguing that there are supporting characters who are Black, which should be sufficient to provide equal representation. I

argue these responses reflect positions of White males, who are accustomed to having video games designed to normalize and privilege Whiteness.

Racialization is a form of violence seen in real life and in *Mass Effect*. It involves pejorative characteristics that are constructed into truths about particular species. In this section, I have discussed how the discursive construction of race in *Mass Effect* plays a role in ensuring power remains with specific groups. However, I have also shown how the customization of Shepard's identity and responses to situations opens up opportunities for players to discuss racialization in *Mass Effect* and explore ways to resist it.

Representations of race, gender, and sexuality are all forms of discursive violence used to maintain social order. *Mass Effect* is a complex video game that sets the stage for the player to engage with a variety of experiences. Sometimes the players' choices can make a difference, and sometimes they cannot. Throughout my exploration of the discourses of gender, sexuality, and race in this chapter, I demonstrate that *Mass Effect* presents players with opportunities to (re)enforce or challenge power relations and discursive violence. The decision of whether to take up or to shift the discourses of gender, sexuality, and race remains with the player. My analysis supports Kinzel (2011), who states, "our character should be what is most important in how we relate to one another, not our race or gender. Intentionally or not [*sic*], *Mass Effect* makes a convincing case for a culture in which this could one day be true" (¶ 13).

CHAPTER 5

Summary and Implications

When a video game is linked to a violent event, it is essential to ask questions regarding the extent of physical and discursive violence in the game itself. Van Dijk (1993) states, "although there are many directions in the study and critique of social inequality, the way we approach these questions and dimensions is by focusing on *the role of discourse in the* (*re*)*production and challenge of dominance*" (p. 283, emphasis in original). I begin this chapter with a summary of my research and analysis of physical and discursive violence in *Mass Effect.* Following, I reflect on some of the implications of my research. The chapter concludes with my final thoughts on the impact my research has had on my identity as a player and how I think about video games and violence in video games.

Summary

I began my research with an examination of typical positions taken on video games. I discussed how conversations about video games tend to be divided into a binary, exploring how games can have positive or negative effects on players (Johnson, 2006). I also showed how some commentators argue that video games should be treated like harmful substances, and therefore restricted or banned (Anderson, Gentile, & Buckley, 2007; Ng & Weimer-Hastings, 2005; Young, 1998), while others argue video games provide countless benefits (Flew & Smith, 2011; McGonigal, 2012; Olson, 2010; Taylor, 2008).

The two positions of positive or negative effects from video games have extended into other areas including education and news media. In education, there have been (and

continue to be) various attempts to integrate video games into the curriculum and explore the different skills students can learn from them. Parents and teachers are encouraged to become more involved in the video games children enjoy exploring and to maximize the educational benefits from video games (Helms, 213). Further, Rigby and Ryan (2011) argue that violence is an unavoidable characteristic of video games that contributes to making them "fun" and, as a result, we need to look into what is good *and* bad about video games rather than good *or* bad.

News media, however, has persistently linked video games to violent events, like the Sandy Hook School Shooting. News reports often blame the violent content in video games for the shooters' actions. When news reports linked *Mass Effect 3* to the Sandy Hook School shooting, I asked why. I undertook this thesis in order to analyse whether the connection was warranted by the extent of physical and discursive violence within the game.

In Chapter 4 I focussed on how forms of violence are constructed in the game, and how they (re)produce or challenge systems of dominance. Physical violence is the more overt construction of violence in *Mass Effect*, shown throughout the game, through actions such as shooting and punching. Physical violence is also intricately part of the storyline through physical conflicts like war and acts of genocide.

Discursive violence is the second form of violence I explored in *Mass Effect.* I analysed how discourses of gender, sexuality, and race are produced through different characters and species within the game. I discussed two ways discursive violence can be challenged: in the way characters are represented within the game, and in the decisions players make about how the main character, Commander Shepard, looks and acts.

While some characters are constructed to enforce power relations (both within the game and real life), others resist them through challenging norms. I have shown, for example, how the Asari are a species constructed as strong women. *Mass Effect*'s storyline also reflects real-life techniques used to (re)enforce a social hierarchy among the various species, ensuring the majority of power in the universe remains with specific groups. I showed how these power relations are reflected through multiple techniques in the story, including racial stereotyping, objectification, and the construction of a species' identity based on their ability or willingness to fight. However, I also explained how traditional power relations are challenged through characters like the Krogan who recited poetry in an attempt to win peacefully the affections of an Asari.

The second way to challenge constructs and power relations in *Mass Effect* is through the options available for the player. I explained how it is possible for players to challenge power relations by designing the main character, Shepard, to be different than the traditional Western, heterosexual, White male. For example, I described Farr's (2012) customization of the story, with his choices to be interpreted as a "coming out" experience for Shepard and Rregitsky's (2012) version of Shepard as an outspoken, lesbian, Black female.

Similarly, I have shown how online conversations reinforced oppressive constructs of, for example, Shepard's gender, sexuality, and race, but also provided opportunities for these constructs to be contested by players (Kozlovskiy, 2010; Rregitsky, 2012; Skahan, 2013). For example, some comments equated homosexuality with mental illness, whereas other comments challenged homophobia and heterosexism and supported equity and social justice for LGBTQs. These are a few of many examples

of how players can resist systems of dominance characteristic of Western culture through video games.

Implications

Taking steps to mediate young people's use of video games.

In media reports, it is often assumed that young people are unsupervised as they play video games. Therefore, it is important to consider the roles of video game developers, ratings boards, retailers, parents, and teachers in mediating young people's use of video games. Although I have shown how *Mass Effect* is a thought-provoking game that offers opportunities for the players to challenge hegemonic constructs of gender, sexuality, and race, it also contains mature-themed content which, I would argue, is not appropriate for everyone.

Currently, much of the responsibility for controlling young people's exposure to violence in video games is placed on the retailers, developers, and the Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB). The ESRB rating system is based on a three-part rating system: Rating Categories to suggest age-appropriateness, Content Descriptors to specify what elements of the content may have influenced the rating and may be of interest or concern to the consumer, and Interactive Elements, which inform about the potential of sharing personal information or location. The ESRB is the most commonly used rating system by video game developers and is considered by many to be the most effective entertainment rating system in the United States (ESRB.com, 2014). Retailers can also take actions by asking for proof of age and keeping mature themed merchandise away from young customers.

Although the Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB) does enforce strict requirements on retail stores to ensure only mature players have access to games like *Mass Effect*, the majority of ESRB ratings only refer to physical violence and mature content such as coarse language, nudity, and sexual themes. Therefore, I would suggest parents have a responsibility to be aware of and talk to their children about *discursive* violence in the games, such as racism, homophobia, and sexism. Many parents choose to keep kids away from video games altogether, but I believe this is a poor alternative to talking with them about the games, which they are going to be exposed to eventually, with or without parental mediation. I agree with Cloud and Gillispie (as cited in Helms, 2013) that parents should play video games with their children in order to help them identify and resist oppressive discourses.

I have shown how *Mass Effect* may not be the ideal game for a young child to play unsupervised; however, it can help a child with developing and exploring his/her identity. For example, if a twelve-year-old boy is curious about his sexuality, allowing him to play a video game like *Mass Effect* in which multiple options are available can help him explore and learn about different sexual identities. Moreover, the ability to explore sexual identities in the game demonstrates that specific characteristics need not be associated with specific identities. In short, with parental guidance, *Mass Effect* potentially offers an educational experience through challenging players to explore physical and discursive violence, and ethical issues stemming from violent situations, such as genocide and sexism.

Teachers also have a role to play in mediating young people's use of video games. For example, another game series known as *Assassin's Creed* puts the player in

the role of an assassin in different time periods with missions fighting for peace and free will. The story of the game takes place during different points throughout history like the American Revolution. While the events of the game are fictitious, they include many events typically taught in history classes. This game series provides players with a glimpse into historical elements from various eras and can inspire them to learn more about events that occurred. Further, teachers can encourage students to explore the conceptualization of the game through challenging learners to think about whose history is being represented.

Can playing *Mass Effect* be adapted to include in school curriculum as well? I believe it can. For example, assignments can be designed for students to study *Mass Effect*'s species, comparing them to real life oppressed groups throughout history and analyzing power relationships.

Experiments with using video games in the classroom show that it can be successful in producing unique learning approaches. For example, Shawn Young, a high school physics teacher, has combined gamification, education, and web development to create *Classcraft*. *Classcraft* is an online role-playing game teachers and students can play together in the classroom (*Classcraft*.com). The game involves the teacher playing the role of "Gamemaster." During class, students take on roles including magicians, warriors, and healers, each with unique powers, calling out actions they want the teacher to perform, and the teacher inputs the actions into the computer. Students gain benefits in the game such as learning new powers as rewards for performing positive tasks in class like aiding others and completing homework. By extension, misbehaviour such as disrupting class and bullying others is discouraged through punishments including losing

points, penalizing their team, or getting less time to complete assignments. While *Classcraft* is not a video game, it is based on the principles of "gamification."

Gamification involves using elements of video games in non-gaming systems to increase user engagement and user enjoyment (Deterding et al., 2011). By incorporating gamification into the classroom, teaching becomes about linking students' in-game experiences to course material. Rather than being a simple system for scoring points, *Classcraft* empowers students to take control of their learning process, reinforces teamwork, and promotes collaboration over competition. *Classcraft* acts as a supplement to lesson plans, thereby changing students' relationships with the learning content and with each other (*Classcraft*.com).

I am not arguing that video games are the solution to all educational challenges. However, there is no single instructional strategy designed to work for every student. When properly mediated by parents and teachers, playing video games like *Mass Effect* and engaging in online and offline discussions about them can create unique learning experiences for young people.

Towards a more critical reading of media reports and research about video games.

Another issue I raised in this thesis involved public responses to news reports and research regarding video games. As I discussed in Chapter 2, Kellner (2008) argues news reports which exaggerated details such as the death toll of the Virginia Tech shooting were false and irresponsible. Ferguson (2008), argues that the public can also be misled by research that seeks to "prove" a cause and effect relationship rather than test a methodological theory.

Enhancing awareness of how information in the media and in research is constructed might be helpful in moderating responses to these texts. What I am talking about here is media literacy, which Considine, Horton, and Moorman (2009) define as "the ability to access, analyse, evaluate, and effectively communicate in a variety of forms including print and nonprint texts" (p. 472). They also identify several essential premises of media literacy including: media are constructions, media representations construct reality, audiences negotiate meaning, and media messages may have social consequences or effects. Another important premise of media literacy is that media represent certain values and ideologies that serve specific interests and (re)enforce the dominance of certain groups. Media literacy entails challenging these values and ideologies and questioning who benefits the most from information reported.

A critical aspect of media literacy is education. Considine, Horton, and Moorman (2009) describe the need for students to get involved in critically discussing media constructions—their own as well as the constructions of others—in order to gain insights into the constructedness of news reports and other media messages. In schools, media literacy involves focussing classroom pedagogy on media texts and popular culture, as well as the context in which they are both created and consumed. For example, Hobbs (2007) argues implementing a curriculum designed to prepare students to critically analyze all aspects of contemporary media culture can have a positive impact on students. Hobbs recommends that teachers incorporate popular and digital media, television, journalism, and film into curriculum to help improve students' reading, comprehension, writing, critical analysis, and other academic skills. Through carefully planned lessons and activities such as class discussions and group projects, critical media

literacy education can increase motivation and build citizenship skills for teens. This approach should also be adopted for the general public with more messages about how to become more media literate, including how recognize deception in media and how certain values and ideologies shape our understanding of events. Introducing critical media literacy into curricula can promote a more critical reading of video games, prompting people to explore issues further rather than accept the representations in news and research reports at face value.

The notion that media messages are socially constructed is important, especially when news tends to be regarded as an objective summary of events happening in the world. It is important to ask why some things are reported when others are not. For example, when a famous celebrity dies, it is considered headline news, while the death toll of thousands of people dying of starvation is continuously ignored. As Hobbs (2006) argues, perceiving the constructedness of media messages allows us to understand how news is biased based on ideological decisions about who matters and who does not.

It is also important for students to understand that because media reports and research are constructed they can be deconstructed and challenged. For example, news reports are largely responsible for linking violent events, such as the Sandy Hook School shooting, to violence in video games and gamers. Similarly, in an online search for the video game *Assassin's Creed 3* on Google, the first news item related to this game is a report about a father who killed his screaming baby daughter because he became frustrated while playing the game (Hartley-Parkinson, 2014). This is just one example, among many, of media messages linking violent behaviour to the playing of video games. In this case, details about the individual such as psychological, medical,

and personal struggles were not elaborated on until later in the article. However, the point that he was playing a video game was highlighted in the title.

Why do media reports tend to blame video games? Flapping and Burnett (2013) argue that mainstream media has always been biased against video games, making them a source of blame for violent events. Also, the primary goal of many news media is to maximize their audience (Kyounghee & Moon, 2009), a goal they may achieve through techniques such as blaming video games for violent actions—i.e., through creating and sensationalizing a "scapegoat." Ironically, this constant argument from news sources that video games cause physical violence is a form of discursive violence against the games and, by extension, the identities of video game players.

In short, more questions need to be asked regarding who stands to benefit from messages in the media and research. Is the particular news source known for exaggeration? Are specific political interests being served? How credible are their "expert consultants" and researchers? I encourage everyone to question the validity behind news articles and research. Taking actions such as reading reports from more than one source, looking into where sources of information originate, and looking for articles that bring forward other perspectives can enhance media literacy.

Helping players become more aware of the construction of discourses in video games.

Discursive violence is not always as obvious as physical violence in video games and, therefore, demands close attention. I have shown the presence of discursive violence in *Mass Effect* through an analysis of the construction of gender, sexuality, and race in the game. For example, I analyzed how the default hero in most video games, including

Mass Effect, is a White, heterosexual male. Players need to be more aware of the implications of a default that suggests that a hero must have these characteristics.

My work supports Leonard (2006), who argues video game developers constantly create characters that reinforce stereotypes and, moreover, do not include enough opportunities for players to resist dominant ideologies. Leonard asks, "how can one truly understand fantasy, violence, gender roles, plot, narrative, game playability, virtual realities, virtual realities, and the like without examining race, racism, and/or other racial stratification — one cannot" (p. 83). When players are not given opportunities to examine and discuss discursive violence, the result is a problematic understanding of video games and the significance of their role in contemporary social, political, economic, and cultural organization.

In my analysis of *Mass Effect* I have shown how online blog sites have become environments in which players can discuss the construction of race, gender, and sexuality. However, there are also many posts by players who cling to stereotypes and deny the significance behind, for example, racist and sexist representations in *Mass Effect*. Players' reactions resemble those described by Leonard: they ignore experiences offered to them within the video game content and refuse to move beyond hegemonic perspectives. These negative reactions also demonstrate that it is not necessarily enough to make discussion forums available; other actions can be taken to resist hegemonic representations within video games themselves.

Leonard challenges game studies to move beyond superficial studies of games and to delve deeper into the importance of discourses such as race, racialization, and the larger implications of racist pedagogies. I offer a similar challenge to gamers: to seek out

and explore the discourses in video games. After all, most players are looking for depth and complexity in their games. As Gee (2003) argues, most gamers do not want short and easy video games. Consequently, video game designers are constantly faced with the challenge of creating long, challenging, and satisfying games. Enticing storylines help the players become immersed, and particular narratives make video games more realistic and promote thinking about the content. Good stories are more than just entertainment, they can help us learn and grow as people (Gee, 2003). If video games offer stories and experiences that delight and challenge their audiences, why not make a part of that challenge to recognize (and resist) the construction of discourses within the narratives?

For example, Frasca (2001) argues video games can provide players with situations that provide opportunities to confront sexism, homophobia, and/or racism, and the players can explore strategies of resistance. I would agree that it is important for gamers to explore how discourses are constructed in video games, allowing them to discuss and explore ways to resist discursive violence in video games and the construction of the gamer identity.

Helping video game developers and players to work together to resist discursive violence in video games.

Video games are considered a unique branch of media, primarily because players can take an active role in constructing the stories they become immersed in. Players may, therefore, also want to take a more active role in the creation of video games through beta testing, participatory development, and online forums that allow them to make their demands known to video game developers.

Video games undergo a great deal of review and testing before they are made available for purchase. In some cases, video games undergo what is known as "beta tests." Beta tests involve making limited versions of games available for the purpose of having volunteers provide feedback to the developers in order to improve performance and quality of the game before it is made available for retail purchase (Bates, 2001). In recent years, beta testing has become a popular technique used by video game developers to improve the quality of games before they are released to the public. I would argue it could also be an opportunity for developers to work with players to minimize discursive violence in the video games. Earlier, in Chapter 4, I questioned the power relations between video game developers and players who post online comments. Paying more attention to both online blogs and beta testing are two strategies video game developers can use to help develop the relationship with players, thereby ensuring gamers' interests are served when a game is designed. I would suggest that beta testing could be an effective tool in challenging discursive violence, provided it is used effectively, and feedback is not limited to the opinions of dominant groups such as heterosexual, White, male players.

Further, it would be beneficial for programmers to include players' feedback from the beginning of the video game creation, an approach known as participatory development. According to Mohan (2001) participatory development involves including local populations in development projects. Participatory development has become an increasingly accepted practice utilized by a variety of software development organizations, although Tim (2012) argues participatory development is a valuable technique that is not utilized to its full potential, particularly in video games. I am

reminded here of Frasca (2001) who argues that players enjoy video games when they can change details through creating mods[14] that give them direct control and modify outcomes as they please. Frasca acknowledges that only a few people with computer programming skills could benefit from creating video game environments where they can question and discuss social constructions. Participatory development provides all players with opportunities to become involved with the video game creation process and ask questions about the games' content. Greater organization from players to be active in this way will allow them to play a role in making video games that are socially just while reaffirming their identities at the same time. For example, as I discussed in Chapter 2, homophobia and heterosexism persist in video games because game designers lack understanding of how to include LGBTQs. My research supports Skahan (2014), who argues video game developers need to be more aware of the wide range of character traits and personalities available to them to create diverse casts of interesting, realistic characters. Rather than continue avoiding the issue and ignoring LGBTQ representation, I suggest the video game developers work with players to learn more about what LGBTQ players would like to see in games.

Another important forum in which players challenge social constructs and other forms of discursive violence is online blogs and social websites. As I have shown in Chapter 4, *Mass Effect* offers an example of players voicing their objections about a video game and being supported in their resistance to discursive violence. For example, earlier I discussed how the developers of *Mass Effect* did not consider the equal

[14] Mods are alterations of the program code of a video game to make it operate different than its original version by someone other than the original creator.

representation of minorities, such as LGBTQs, until players voiced their dissatisfaction with the game. Video game developers need to be made more aware of the desires of players. Expanding on this, Heir (as cited in Brightman, 2014) states,

> I find it very cynical to think that our audience is not smart enough to be able to accept and handle and embrace a gay protagonist or more exclusive women protagonists in games that aren't glorified sex objects and actually have personalities beyond supporting the men in the game. (¶ 9)

Online blogs and social websites have been effective environments in which players have expressed their frustrations with video games when they find content to be inappropriate or when desired content is missing.

However, there are also instances when developers ignore the demands of the players. As I discussed in Chapter 4, players expressed their objections to *Tomodachi Life*'s exclusion of gay characters. In the case of this game, Nintendo was made aware of what players desired from online post on their own forums, yet still chose to ignore players' demands (MacDonald, 2014). I am hopeful that my research will encourage developers to pay more attention to these online forums.

I am also hopeful that my thesis will encourage more players to contribute to online discussion sites in order to resist physical and discursive violence and take an active role in constructing a more positive and realistic portrayal of video game players. Resisting discursive violence is a positive contribution to the construction of the identity of "player," demonstrating that the role of player is not a passive one. Players are active members of a community who become immersed in games like *Mass Effect*, and through

online discussions, can share their thoughts, concerns, and desires for how games can be improved. This is an effective method of resisting discursive violence for both video game developers and players. By voicing their objections through online posts, players are able to change the primary fan base, and they can resist negative stereotypes that are imposed on players when video games are linked to violent events.

Future Research

Although video games have made rapid technological strides in a relatively short amount of time, the industry is still very young, and our understanding of what the games mean for our society is still in a state of flux. As I have shown, understanding video games is not as simple as asking if they are good or bad for players. An adult woman in a doctor's waiting room playing *Tetris* on her cellular phone and a teenage boy, at home, playing *Mass Effect* are both immersed in video game culture. Further research into the roles video games have in everyday life, why people play them, and what it is players are taking away from the games they play would enhance understanding of video game culture.

In relation to the links made between video games and media coverage of violent events, closer attention to how video games and video game players are implicated would help prevent the generalizations that proliferate and the demonization of players in the process. Greater attention can be given to how players' identities are constructed, where popular conceptions of the video game player come from, and how violence, both physical and discursive, is both constructed and resisted in video games.

In addition, research should explore techniques that would assist players in taking on a more active role in communities (both online and offline) to help define their

identities and resist discursive violence. As I have shown, *Mass Effect* is just one example of how social organizations operate to (re)enforce dominance and how people can successfully resist oppression. Further research may assist players in becoming more aware of techniques they can use to become more organized and involved in creating video game.

Further, given how video games are designed by men, for men, closer attention to video game design would benefit in studying the desires of the various audiences. For example, many games require a great deal of time to play that not a lot of people have available to them. Some games have different difficulty settings. Additionally, creating games that require less time to complete can appeal to people with stressful schedules.

Final Thoughts

As I conclude, I am reminded of Frasca (2001) who showed "videogames are not a trivial medium sentenced to merely serve as entertainment, but that they could also be a powerful representational form that encourages critical thinking, personal empowerment and social change"(p. 114). When I first began this thesis, I was outraged at how the media implicated *Mass Effect* in the Sandy Hook School shooting. As a video game player, I was determined to prove that video games are not harmful. The more I researched, however, the more I came to I learn that the construction of violence in video games is not as simple as choosing one side of a binary and sticking to it. Video games are a lot muddier and more complicated than I originally believed them to be. Eventually, I came to realize that I wanted players to learn what I have: that, with their fluid storylines and characters, video games offer players the opportunity to take an active role

in constructing both the narratives that shape this genre and more positive identities for the video game players.

As a result of my research, choosing a video game has become a very complicated process for me. When I enter a retail store, rather than impulsively buying a video game, I immediately consider what type of game it is, what kind of story content is in the game, who is included/who is left out, what is the ESRB rating and why, and I read reviews and players' commentaries about the game. Importantly, I consider what forms of physical and discursive violence are present in the game. For example, if the game contains a storyline with a gang member beating a sex worker, as in *Grand Theft Auto*, I ask why is this happening? How are these characters constructed? Do I have the chance to stop these events from happening? These are now the kinds of questions I consider.

Moreover, before undertaking this thesis, I was under the impression video games were limited to containing physical violence. Now as I play video games I am more aware of the presence of discursive violence such as sexism, homophobia, and racism. When I see constructions of discursive violence in video games, I now consider: How is it being constructed? Who was involved in the creation of the game and who benefits from such representations? Why is it present? Are there opportunities to resist hegemonic constructions? Further, I now recognize that discursive violence, as well as resistance to it, also occurs outside of games in discussions between players in the video game community.

As an active member of the video game community, I am now more attentive to news and events on video game websites, and I post my own comments online. I have

also taken an interest in online podcasts where players gather to discuss multiple issues surrounding video games, including video game development and answering questions from participants. I see podcasts as environments where players can become more organized and active in the video game culture.

Importantly, I am now more involved with discussions, both online and offline, regarding the violence within games and the linking of video games to violent events. I now give greater attention to the presence of physical and discursive violence in games, and to understanding the implications of that violence.

I believe that, as technology develops and personal devices, such as smart phones and tablets, become more common, what it means to be a "player" will be redefined and more people will discover they are part of video game culture too. In many cases, and in many cultures, video games are already part of everyday life. Social media websites like Facebook include video games, teachers use video games like *Minecraft* as educational tools, and players often use video games to help pass the time and stimulate the mind. As video game technology advances, so will players' use of games, whether it is on the television screen, or through a pair of digital projecting glasses, or a new technology not yet available. As the games become more prevalent, I am hopeful that their content will also continue to be negotiated.

As I conclude, the debate continues. Recently, I encountered in the news the story of Alexi Wildman, a Metro Vancouver construction worker whose daily life is stressful and frustrating. At the end of the day, Wildman is constantly met by delays on the Vancouver SkyTrain. As an expression of frustration, Wildman created his own video game called *Main Street Massacre*, in which the player takes on the role of Mack,

a construction worker who is also frustrated after a long day at work. Mack becomes annoyed with the crowded train, and finally, he snaps and vents his anger with a gun. The Metro Vancouver Transit Police describe *Main Street Massacre* as a "disturbing internet video game" while Wildman counters, "It's a work of art. It's a political statement. It's provocative, it was designed to be" (CBC news, 2014, ¶ 5, 11). Wildman argues the game is intended to express the pent-up rage he and others feel sometimes and does not encourage anyone to take violent action. The debate about *Main Street Massacre* serves as a reminder that it is time to move beyond the "pro/con" debate and think critically about constructions of violence in video games.

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