

THESIS

WONDER WOMEN IN THE VIRTUAL WORLD: HOW FEMALE SHEPARD REDEFINED THE FEMALE HERO ARCHETYPE IN VIDEO GAMES

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ABSTRACT

WONDER WOMEN IN THE VIRTUAL WORLD: HOW FEMALE SHEPARD REDEFINED THE FEMALE HERO ARCHETYPE IN VIDEO GAMES

AAA video game protagonists typically represent the white, heterosexual male. While standards are changing, there remains a considerable discrepancy between the number of male and female protagonists available. This study intends to examine how video game producers can move forward with creating resonant AAA protagonists by examining one of the first protagonists who presented unforeseen equality.

This thesis explores the character of female Shepard from BioWare's video game series *Mass Effect* (2007-2012) and what elements made her a fan favorite and marketable. Using Jim Bizzochi's video game narrative framework and Shunsuke Nozawa's concept of ensoulment related to voice work, this thesis argues that FemShep redefined the video game landscape. She served to create her own space as a character and not merely a gender-flipped construct of her male counterpart. By examining how she is constructed and handled in-game, the conclusion suggests that when the developmental focus is on creating the character, there is a market for strong heroes who are also female.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION – LEGACIES OF HEROES

I will always remember June 9, 2014. Like many gaming fans, I was eager for any news that would roll in from the Electronic Entertainment Expo. Abbreviated to E3, the convention is the premier trade for all developers, hardware creators, and publishers to announce and preview new products. At this industrial stage of cutting-edge technology, I heard one of the most ludicrous claims to grace a space where professionals sought to push the boundaries of graphics and realism. Video games were, and still are, known for the ability to create a variety of spaces, realistic or cartoonish, from the minutiae of the smallest hair, nail, or scale, to the tops of mountains or the bottom of seas. Video game creators slave to produce details avidly and rigorously rendered as producers and developers sought, and still seek, to compete for the growing market of avid players. Nevertheless, these marks of accomplishment and genius paled in difficulty when creating one component: the physically female form.

At E3 2014, Ubisoft, a French video game development and publishing company, premiered their newest *Assassin's Creed* game. The showcase consisted of four assassins for their new cooperative player mode – but they were all physically male. When asked why they chose not to include a possibly female assassin in their multiplayer, Ubisoft responded with the statement that “female avatars are harder to animate” and require “extra production work” to the consternation of fans (Burns, 2014). The allocation of resources to a variety of male options for players was not surprising, however. Video games are still viewed as a primarily masculine realm, but that did not make the answer any easier to swallow. Video game developers saw a

reactive social outburst on Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter, and other online sites as fans processed the news.

For a series that had sold well over 73 million copies at that point and has female characters throughout it, the claim was almost laughable.

Almost.

But on a more unpleasant note, I, and others, were once again reminded of what a small space that female and queer gamers occupy in the minds of those that produce content. It did not go away when James Therien, Ubisoft's technical director, was further questioned about the lack of female avatars in *Assassin's Creed: Unity* and explained that "it's a question of focus and production" and that having a female avatar would be a drain on resources with the need to construct new animations and costumes (Burns, 2014). Therien then stated in a subsequent statement indicated that they "recognize[d] the valid concern around diversity in video game narrative" (Campbell, 2014).

Had other programmers and developers not come forward to speak against Therien's claim, the video game player population may well have taken those statements as fact; most players are not well-versed in the medium's production. One such developer was an ex-Ubisoft employee, Jonathan Cooper. Cooper had worked as a designer on the game series before creating his own video game company, Naughty Dog, which Sony later absorbed. Cooper estimated that creating a female avatar "would be a day or two's work" and explained that most female avatars share the same skeleton and animation as male characters (Cooper, 2014). Activision Publishing CEO Eric Hirshberg also commented on Ubisoft's announcement, stating:

Any character you create required extra resources, gender aside. Any character that has a different look, voice, mechanics, or way of moving requires more work... But that's not a reason not to do something. We create lots of different characters with lots of different movements. (Makuch, 2014a).

This event was a stressful debacle for Ubisoft, considering that the 2014 Entertainment Software Association survey had revealed that the female player base now made up about 48% of the population, an 8% jump from the survey four years before (in 2010), as mobile gaming began to become prevalent (Grundberg, 2014; Sullivan, 2014). From an advertising point of view, given the prevalence of female gamers worldwide, it would have been better for James Therien to have made a non-comment, rather than inadvertently saying that they were pointedly catering to the male portion of the consumer base. In August 2014, only two months later, the gaming subculture witnessed the rise of Gamergate, the start of a harassment campaign against women in the industry that is still ongoing and consists of doxing, threats of physical harm, as well as verbal and emotional abuse. The historically white male audience's anxieties found an outlet as self-described "hardcore" gamers worked to push back against those calling for more inclusion in the industry. The "casualized" era of video gaming was on the rise with the increased use of smartphones and consoles that appealed to the general family (i.e., Nintendo's Wii) and presented a counter-hegemonic force. These players feared this force due to the belief that "casual" games would decrease resources spent on AAA games (Cote, 2020). A AAA game, an informal classification for a game, is often granted the highest development budgets and promotion levels. However, one of the downsides of being a AAA game is it also comes with the highest economic risk should it fail, which is why producers have been turning their eye to the development of low-risk "casual" games (Steinberg, 2007). These individuals feared the loss of

“traditional titles and genres such as First-Person Shooters and Action games” that tend to focus on traditionally masculine themes if producers and developers sought to court other (primarily female) audiences (Consalvo, 2012).

Although the following backlash to Therien’s statement ultimately led to Ubisoft including a female character alongside a twin brother a year later in *Assassin’s Creed: Syndicate* (2015), the issue was now in the mainstream eye. Female characters continue to be treated very differently than their male counterparts (Eberhardt, 2016). Anita Sarkeesian, the founder of the non-profit Feminist Frequency organization, in her *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games* web series, argues that representation is critical (Feminist Frequency, n.d.). As of the most recent 2019 ESA survey, 65% of the American population plays some video game type, with an average age of 34 for female gamers (ESA, 2019). While female Boomer (55-64) and Gen X (35-54) gamers preferred casual puzzle, card, and classic arcade games, their millennial (18-34) counterparts prefer casual and action games according to the survey; examples include the phone phenomenon *Candy Crush* and roleplaying games like *Assassin’s Creed* and *Tomb Raider* (1996-2018). Even though the gaming population consists of over 46% of women, there have been few female main characters to appeal to the population over the years.

Before 2001, the primary female action star in AAA video games was Lara Croft of *Tomb Raider* and Samus Aran from Nintendo’s *Metroid* franchise (1986-2017). While both are competent women who must think and fight their way out of the most challenging situations, both suffer from hyper-sexualization. Both women exhibit physical characteristics (slim waists, large breasts, etc.) that suggest that these avatars – like many other female characters in video games – were merely designed as eye candy for heterosexual male gamers (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009).

These representations are not isolated incidents within the gaming sphere. When there are female avatars in AAA games, they often take a backseat role or serve as eye candy than have any truly relevant plot-worthy assistance as games served to reinforce hegemonic world views. Studies of video game texts and paratexts have shown that male representation is present 60 to 85 percent of the time; when women are represented, they are portrayed in a sexualized fashion (Behm-Morawitz, 2017; Dill & Thill, 2007; Ivory, 2006). An example is breast physics, termed “jiggle physics.” These physics first appeared in *Fatal Fury 2* (1992), where female fighter Mai Shiranui featured unnaturally bouncy breasts (Hernandez, 2015). From there, jiggle physics became a staple of fighting games, and these physics also moved into other games. These design decisions were often coupled with female avatars subjected to outfits that seemed to consist of skin-tight silk or chain mail bikinis.

Meanwhile, their male counterparts received armor that could reasonably protect them, such as preventing them from being cut in half or letting them survive a gunshot (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009). Female characters are also more prone to be the targets of violence directed at them because of their gender. One prominent example is the “Whored Mode” of *Saints Row: The Third*, where the player, with the option to use a giant purple dildo, kills waves upon waves of prostitutes dressed in highly provocative clothing (Williams, 2020) (*fig. 1*).



Figure 1 *Saints Row: The Third* Female Models (Williams, 2019).

While players can, and do, immerse themselves in games where they play opposite gendered characters, some moments can cause disturbances and dissonance between them and the avatar. In her book *Gaming Sexism: Gender and Identity in the Era of Casual Video Games* (2020), Amanda Cotes sums up an experience in *Assassin's Creed II*:

In an early *Assassin's Creed II* segment, for instance, my character, Ezio, needed to sneak into his girlfriend's bedroom for an illicit tryst...[and] a mission required me to hide among scantily clad courtesans. These moments do not ruin my enjoyment of the series, but they do tend to draw me out of the action...my character's attitude towards women often diverged strongly from my own. (p. 23)

This quote demonstrates that because AAA games are primarily made by one audience for that audience, the gendered gaze can become a chain to bind players. Despite enjoying a game, there is a reminder for individual players how outcast they are from the hegemonic power structures which create these high-investment games. However, if the game industry shifted

towards minority audiences, as Gamergate individuals fear, they would be the ones who are at risk of being ousted from a traditionally masculine sphere and out of hegemonic power. When combined with the assumption that the game industry is a zero-sum game, it is clear why these individuals would lash out at those they viewed as responsible in an attempt to act as a counterforce to shifting ideologies.

This struggle is one of the main reasons why it is necessary to examine Bioware's original *Mass Effect* (2007-2012) trilogy. The series resonated with many gamers, male and female, to the point of being slated for a fully remastered trilogy edition to be released in Spring 2021.

With *Mass Effect*, players could choose whether to play as a male or female avatar, and this choice resulted in little narrative change at all. While the available romance options changed depending on gender, other elements such as backgrounds, narrative choices, and the ability to choose classes and allies remained the same. The characters' actions, which players choose, primarily define the game and present equal interchangeability between male and female avatars. However, little narrative difference did not mean *a lack* of narrative change.

Many roleplaying games with vital narrative components permit character customization that does not significantly alter the story. *Fallout 4's* (2015) Sole Survivor, MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft* (2004-2020) and *Final Fantasy XIV* (2014-2020) all allow players to choose male or female avatars. However, *Mass Effect* was one of the first AAA with this gendered change to be widely marketed games to all ages. Female Shepard (shortened by the fanbase to FemShep) remains a favorite despite a low marketing level during the first two games. When attempting to identify why such a character would be popular, some pointed out that 1) female gamers would jump at the chance to play a female character because of the limited number of

female heroes in the cybersphere, and 2) “the lines, character animations and various other tidbits are male-oriented in a way that makes FemShep more than your stereotypical RPG female protagonist” (Bishop, 2010) as opposed to characters like Lara Croft or Bayonetta who demonstrate far more fantasy style feminization. While this may seem counter to this thesis's hypothesis, it instead serves to create something new for the video game experience until this point.

The purpose of this study is to examine *Mass Effect*'s male and female heroes by inspecting the structure and formal characteristics used in the series to understand better how the game constructs and negotiates gender equalities in the virtual realm. First, this thesis will provide a literature review that reviews video games as rhetorical objects, the place of gender in video games, indicating how characters have been constructed and discussed and the difference between previous games and the *Mass Effect* series. The second chapter documents Shepard's diegetic creation as a soldier character and any differences that are highlighted between the male and female avatars. The third chapter examines voice and vision, where Jennifer Hale's choice as the voice actor of FemShep is analyzed as a possible reason why the character's popularity rose so quickly. The final chapter discusses the conclusions, limitations, and implications for future research areas.

There has been an increase in video game producers starring other demographics besides heterosexual white male hero: 2008's *Mirror Edge* has the main character of Faith Connors, a woman of mixed Asian and Caucasian descent; Telltale's *Walking Dead* video game series featured two different black protagonists in the forms of Lee Everett and Clementine; 2015 saw the release of *Fire Emblem Fates*, the first in the sixteen-part series to feature same-sex options for its main character. 2016 sparked controversy with fans around Christmas, with the reveal of

Blizzard's signature *Overwatch* character, Tracer, as a lesbian in an official comic (Frank, 2016b). Most recently, the action-adventure game *The Last of Us Part II*, released in 2020 had Ellie, as a female main character who is also queer (Lewis, 2018). While this is by no means a complete list, the numbers of non-white and/or male characters are still less than those that star a white male protagonist. Meanwhile, the Gamergate movement's ideas remain present as gender politics continue to be addressed in the video game community, though companies and players are beginning to take more progressive actions with the #MeToo and TimesUp movements (Lorenz & Browning, 2020; Urquhart, 2019). However, Ubisoft is now facing its own abuse allegations, as for the past two weeks, employees and former employees (primarily women) have taken to risking their livelihoods and well-being to report the abuse, assault, and harassment they faced day after day at the hand of executives, writers, and designers (Gach, 2020). While many of those individuals have been placed on leave (Martens, 2020), and current CEO Yves Guillemot and his team is working on putting new measures into place (Gibson, 2020). More action needs to be taken when considering the current state of representation in the video game industry.

With the ongoing tensions between the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces both inside and outside the industry, now is a crucial time to go back and examine why and how BioWare was able to "create a female protagonist that has attracted the attention of hundreds if not thousands of people" (Bishop, 2010), who is "nearly one of a kind in a vast sea of overtly sexualized female protagonists" (Payne, 2013). FemShep is vital not only for female gamers but for male gamers as well. They were able to identify with a female avatar, not as a sexual object, but as a well-written character and person. Instead of being given a "Female Hero," gamers were

instead given a character that fulfilled the heroic role while being female and an example of what equality could look like in the virtual landscape.

Literature Review

Video Games as Rhetorical Devices & Immersion

Cafes, classrooms, even everyday bus seats have begun to see an even more pronounced presence of gamers daily as games have become more portable with the rise of smartphones; even the word “athlete” has been redefined with the inclusion of high paying e-sports competitions (Wickens, 2020). Scholars have argued that the initial dismissal of games as a medium comes from the nomenclature. Games and play are viewed as instrumental for the young as they learn, but play is supposed to be abandoned as children mature and grow from juveniles into adulthood (Bogost, 2007).

One example of the flippant attitude towards the rhetorical importance of video games is the case of *Interactive Digital Software Association v St. Louis County*. This case resulted in the April 2002 decision in which U.S. District Judge Stephen N. Limbaugh stated that he “found no conveyance of ideas, expressions, or anything that could possibly amount to speech” in such productions (*Interactive Digital Software Ass'n v. St. Louis County*, 329 F.3d 954 (8th Cir. 2003)).

Limbaugh came to this conclusion after having observed only four video games (*Fear Effect* [1999], *Doom* [1993], *Mortal Kombat* [1992], and *Resident Evil* [1996]).not by actually interacting with the medium; essentially, the equivalent of looking at the cover of a DVD or VHS box and deciding that the movie was not worth watching. In his 2007 book *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Video Games*, Ian Bogost, a leading scholar during the nascent

era of video game research, remarked with some fascination that “despite their commercial success, videogames [sic] still struggle[d] for acceptance as a cultural form” (p. 7), considering that their counterparts of television and comics had become well established in importance. Bogost, and other scholars, believed that the medium represents “an important site of a shift toward a culture of simulation, whereby digital technologies make it possible to construct, investigate, and interrogate hypothetical worlds” (Bogost, 2007), with an intense power allocated towards the dissemination of philosophy, ideology, and dogma through what Bogost defined as “procedurality.”

For Bogost, procedurality is the act by which video games establish a “way of creating, explaining, or understanding processes” (p. 3), i.e., the method by which the game teaches players what is expected of them in order to achieve progression through the game. When playing any game, a player will always have a distinct goal, ranging from escaping a horror labyrinth to matching three candies of the same color to get them off a player’s screen to proceed through levels. Games must explain to the players the method by which they will be allowed to succeed to enable and persuade participants to achieve the goal through feelings of perceived accomplishment, while also encouraging them to change their behavior if they do not adhere to the rules of play or are unable to reach the goal despite adhering to the rules (Bogost, 2007). Bogost terms this act as “procedural rhetoric” and explained that procedural rhetoric could be used to “expose and explain the hidden ways of thinking that often drive social, political, or cultural behavior” (p. 128) and reflect hegemonic structures.

Since video games were a visual medium, studies tied more closely with the familiar aesthetics of cinema's established studies. As video games continue to evolve (AAA games in

particular), also attempt to create more realistic graphics to the point of photorealism to compete and adapt to an ever-demanding market:

Today the “cinematographicity” of games is evident on many levels: for example in the use of edited cut scenes and split screens on in the appropriation of “classical” camera angles and well-established techniques of flashback and flash forward that transport the eye through space and time. Furthermore, basic structures of cinematic storytelling, such as the hero’s journey and genre conventions, have been absorbed by digital games.

(Freyermuth, 2016, p. 119)

Much like their cousin mediums of comics, film, and television, video games work to perpetuate or subvert dominant images while having participants connect to these images using the concept of the “terministic screen.”

Coined in 1966, “terministic screen” is a rhetorical term Kenneth Burke created in his book of essays *Language as Symbolic Action*. Burke defined the terministic screen as a “screen composed of terms through which humans perceive the world, and that directs attention away from some interpretations and towards others.” Through these signs and symbols, players can come to terms with a network of beliefs through which they interpret ideas and associations. This plays out clearly with the image of the well-muscled cinema/video game hero or the unfounded belief that there must be a male hero on the box art to motivate players to buy video games (Bogost, 2007). This medium has the potential to facilitate identification, the creation, or solidification, of self-identity among users; but instead tends to perpetuate the hegemonic view further that life, society, and culture are determined by white, male protagonists (Villani, et al., 2012; Fox & Bailenson, 2009).

However, video games can offer new ways to look at things as they place players into situations that they usually would not be in. For example, *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004) presents players' chance to live through multiple real-life events in Los Angeles, including the 1980's crack epidemic and the 1992 Los Angeles riots. Likewise, video games offer the chances of presenting a new way to associate imagery with new ideology; *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* presents the life of someone living in poverty and showing the countless results of consumerism and the effects of different political policies. With their immersive capabilities, they can serve as means to help individuals re-associate previously held images with different meanings. The concept of immersion refers to the mental process by which players are enveloped within the narrative media and affected cognitively, emotionally, and physically (Green & Brock, 2000); scholars also address this process as the concept of *transportation*. If a player is immersed in the narrative, this can result in increased enjoyment of the game, make the game more persuasive as a rhetorical text, or even “alter the media user’s opinion or beliefs by showing them different ways of considering an issue” (Cote, 2020; 123). Creating a narrative world and putting a player in the role of a character opens players up to new ideologies and provides a teaching space that would be previously unavailable, i.e., by allowing individuals to experience an entirely different time period and cultures.

The issue arises in this creation of meanings as “videogames [sic] teach biased perspectives about how things work...which players ‘read’ through direct engagement and criticism” (Bogost, 2007). Producers often belong to the dominant social structure, which works to reinforce dominant ideology to keep power. This structure highlights one of the main issues of the video game industry even now in 2020. As both scholars and consumers, researchers are forced to return to the interrelated questions of why female video game protagonists are so

sexualized and stereotyped and why heterosexual, white males are so often targeted as potential purchasers for these games (Makuch, 2014a). The design and programming of virtual worlds are determined by scriptwriters, game designers, and the companies that seek to produce video games.

Although the percentage of video game developers has more than doubled since 2009, women make up a little more than 22% of the video game workforce per an IGDA study (Makuch, 2014b). In a game industry that employs over 146,000 people, number trends continued to show that nearly 75% of employees were male, 67% were white, and 81% were heterosexual despite those in the industry had hoped companies would diversify their workforce (Cheong, 2016). With much of the work and production force being white, heterosexual, and male, this suggests that the same dominant ideology regarding gender and sexuality (in addition to race, ethnicity, and social class) is going to be inscribed in in-game narratives and imagery, such as perpetuating the belief that the ideal protagonist is a white male.

Nevertheless, this is being combated by voices who still cry for diversified representation and continue to grow louder.

Establishing the Hero, Feminism, and Female Video Game Representation

In 1971 Nolan Bushnell's *Computer Space* arcade game was a novelty when released; it caught on quickly, though, resulting in a large expansion in the 1980s and 1990s, and video games have turned into a multi-billion-dollar-a-year industry (Wolf, 2010). The video game market has rapidly diversified during its development, producing stand-alone arcade video games to personal games for cell phones. From AAA games like *Grand Theft Auto* or *Far Cry 5* to

“casual games” (e.g., *Candy Crush*), video games have expanded and diversified their audience base as they move through different genres and systems.

However, there is one thing that has remained constant, and that is a primary focus on the male player base, despite reports that indicate a substantial number of female players. As pointed out previously, representation is critical. It is vital to one’s ability to recognize qualities they may hold and use to navigate the complex societies in which they live. As the field of video games continues to grow, images of character-complex female protagonists are just as important there as they are in any medium.

Initial RPG and puzzle games demonstrated a rudimentary cast. Previous archetypes allowed players to identify which role a character played in the story quickly. In *Donkey Kong* (1981), Nintendo’s signature character, Mario, made his appearance as the straightforward “Jumpman” protagonist. While Nintendo originally intended the Jumpman character to be a generic hero they could throw into any game, the character gained extreme popularity to the point that they gave him the name “Mario” in *Donkey Kong Jr* (1982). By placing this generic avatar as the protagonist, it permitted players to project themselves into the hero's role, and with it the connotations that our culture associates with heroism. For example, Jumpman’s journey starts when his pet gorilla (Donkey Kong) kidnaps Lady, who would later be known as Pauline. This action fulfilled what Joseph Campbell considered one of the dominant markers of a hero, a possibly traumatic event that leads to the adventure or the quest. Jumpman then saves the day by saving the girl who was kidnapped after accomplishing tasks and challenges at platform levels. Based on previous stories that users knew and could connect to, this allowed consumers to envision themselves as taking the heroic journey themselves, versus reading another’s story and drawing lessons that way. Despite adopting a third-party position, the fact that players could

identify with the avatar on the screen allowed them to participate in the heroic journey through the levels despite not being in the game.

The early games *Pac-Man*, *Mario*, and *Sonic the Hedgehog* show male presences going through various trials to complete their quest and were presented as “good figures” who sought fulfillment by both avoiding and defeating prowling evil characters to reach their goals. There were anima figures, but these fell into certain common archetypes; the weak damsel in distress found in *Donkey Kong* (1981), the seductive and deadly villainess in *Mortal Kombat III* (1995), or a female warrior who could defend herself, but remained sexually erotic, e.g., *Tomb Raider* (Wolf, 2010, p. 178). Although characters like Lara Croft may represent an empowering warrior protagonist that allows female gamers to express their sensuality, they also act as a form of voyeurism, which lets the male player control powerful female avatars who are also non-threatening as sex-objects.

When reviewing the costumes, marketing positions, and narrative positions of women in video games, it is understandable why there has been so much research done around the question of if video games encourage acceptance of misogynistic cognitions. Video games were initially constructed as masculine realms, even though girls were just as likely to be in the arcades as boys in the 1970s and 80s (Kocurek, 2015). However, because the technology industry was constructed under the terms of masculine power, video games, as a child of technology, went with it. By the 1990s, video games were focused on the young, male consumer base (Cotes, 2020).

The tales that play out on screens, whether they be on film screens, iPads, or televisions, contribute to the way that the idea of heroism is acted out and what qualifies as heroism. These stories emphasize and impart what individuals should aspire to and what individuals should

avoid. Each culture presents its desired traits differently, but for Western individuals, there is an emphasis on the individual who accomplishes individual strengthening. Ideally, this results in furthering society, emphasizing altruism, generosity, innovation, or courage. Popular culture suggests superheroes as ideal heroes, those with incredible individual powers, who use them to protect the greater populace, often at a cost to themselves. American heroic traits such as perseverance in the face of adversity, standing up for the underdog, and the American ideal of “pulling yourself up by your bootstraps” is prevalent in many AAA titles, as four of the major publishers (Sony Interactive Entertainment, Microsoft Game Studios, Activision Blizzard, and Electronic Arts) are all American based. Overall, there remains the fact that not all people are represented or can connect with these images.

The term “hero” is masculine, where female heroes must instead adopt the term “heroine” for it to be clear that they exist outside of the male space in placement all their own. Even “heroine” is adopted more as a reference to a hero’s love interest than it is to imply the woman is truly the hero of the story (Pearson and Pope, 1981). When a female does adopt the leading position of the hero, it becomes an issue of “the patronising [sic] promise...(of) being anomalous” (McDougall, 2003).

As in early video games, female characters were put into the Damsel in Distress archetype in cinema. In films and stories, these individuals were to be saved by the male hero and fall in love with him, typically becoming his wife for the Happily Ever After ending (Pope & Pearson, 1981). From being a tool to display the masculine hero’s prowess, women as heroes were regulated to the “Strong female characters” who were crafted to take on more masculine elements like physical strength or the ability to drink a man under the table. However, they are still ultimately saved by the male hero (Mlawski, 2008). Instead of presenting more emotionally

complicated *people*, Hollywood instead presented a woman with masculine traits who rejected femininity by adopting traits that merely made them the “strong, silent type” (Chocano, 2011). Films like *G.I. Jane*, Ridley Scott’s 1997 fictive American war drama about a female U.S. Navy SEAL, portrays Lieutenant Jordan O’Neil (Demi Moore) as adopting masculine power structure and removing any concept of femininity to accomplish her goal. This includes shaving her head despite the exemption, the choice of a gender-neutral name, and the removal of her menstrual cycle due to her training.

There has been a push by critics that “strong” should instead be replaced with adjectives like “well-written” (McDougall, 2013):

I think the major problem here is that women were clamoring for “strong female characters,” and male writers misunderstood. They thought the feminists meant [Strong Female] Characters. The feminists meant [Strong Characters], Female.

So feminists shouldn’t have said “we want more strong female characters.” We should have said “we want more WEAK female characters.” Not “weak” meaning “Damsel in Distress.” “Weak” meaning “flawed.” (Mlawski, 2008)

Mass Effect is not the only game that permits players to choose a female avatar, much less a leading female character. MMORPGs typically make available the choice between creating a male or female character. AAA games have also focused on female protagonists, and more AAA games now allow players to customize their hero, including gender and race. This includes sports games, as producers of *FIFA*, a well-known soccer game series, announced that they would be giving their audience the chance to choose to place female soccer players on their

teams as well as the traditional male stars (Campbell, 2015). However, *Mass Effect* is one of the first series in the 2000s that has allowed their characters the emotional range and depth to create actual people as main characters versus blank avatars. They allowed the demonstration of many moral and emotional choices that must be made through the series discussed in the following chapters. Combined with the fanbase, they created two distinct and separate characters.

This thesis will proceed to lay out in the next chapter how Female Shepherd is constructed as a well-written heroic female character, how she redefined the virtual sphere through the game's narrative construction and evolution of her personality, the mechanics and cinematography of the game, and in the precise creation of her character done by BioWare, down to the choice of her voice.

CHAPTER 2: MOLDING THE HERO FROM CODE

According to scholars, narrative is most simply broken down into “telling somebody that something happened” (Ryan, 2006) and that in telling somebody that something has happened, there is something worth taking away from the knowledge of the event. A narrative is more intricate than stating that “the grass is green” but instead expands on a larger event. Events, whether real or fictional, exist as “the raw material out of which stories are made” (Ryan, 2006). Narratives in video games often start at the beginning of a momentous event (or, like fictional movies and novels, can start *in media res*). The world of the game undergoes a dramatic change. In some games like *Harvest Moon* or *Animal Crossing*, this can be the player coming in to be a new farmer or mayor of a village. For other games like *Metal Gear Solid* or *Skyrim*, these events are more action-related, whether it is sneaking into vents to obtain information on a wanted criminal of the U.S. government or escaping the player’s execution when a dragon attacks the town.

Narrative in video games has been under scrutiny by scholars for the past few years. Researchers like Barry Ip in his 2011 article “Narrative Structure in Computer and Video Games: Part 1: Context, Definitions, and Initial Findings” and Sebastian Domsch in his 2013 book *Storyplaying: Agency and Narrative in Video Games* both explain those narrative elements in video games have become more sophisticated. Fans clamor for a story in the overall gaming experience but compared to other media, “there is comparatively little understanding of the extent to which traditional methods of storytelling are used in games” (Ip, 2011, p. 104). Because narratology is primarily based on studies done in film and literature, which lack the interactive

element that video games showcase, the full concept of narratological abilities within the game world presents new issues.

One such trial is that players are often allowed to skip diegetic and mimetic material altogether. Unlike books and movies, which present any information that the creators wish for participants to know, games can instead hide these elements. Players can often find extra information and history through notes, photographs, diary pages, etc., scattered through the world. Players may then read them at their leisure or simply proceed through without any care for extraneous information while completing questing objectives. While creators may offer trophies or awards for gathering all of these materials, or players may be motivated by the extra context given by these supplementary findings, there is ultimately no pressure put on the player for not understanding the full history of the world or characters inside the game. If a player is not interested in the extra content and further contextualization of the game world, they will simply choose not to participate.

For any of this motivation to be generated, there is a key factor. Like any fiction, video games request audiences to be open to immersion or the willingness to surrender to the pleasure of the story (Bizzochi, 2007). However, unlike other fiction, video games are far more interactive and reliant on the audience as players must physically move their avatar through the world, even if that movement is just going from screen to screen. According to scholars Ermi and Mäyrä (2005), immersion can be placed into three distinctive categories; sensory immersion, challenge-based immersion, and imaginative immersion.

Sensory immersion is one of the first trials that all games face. Digital games create an immersive experience through powerful stereophonic experiences and intense visuals. Challenge-based immersion occurs when a player experiences a “satisfying balance of

challenges and abilities” (Ermi & Mäyrä, 2005) and the pleasure derived from experiencing difficult content mixed with the ambiguity of the outcome when faced with proper cognitive or cognitive-motor trials. Imaginative immersion occurs when players identify with the world, characters, and stories. Players ultimately empathize with the characters’ challenges or lose themselves in the story's fantasy and imagination.

These three elements of immersion work together to form a gameplay experience; should one element fail, the illusion is unsuccessful, and a player lacks the sense of immersion to bond with the game. When immersion is achieved through this multi-faceted phenomenon, scholars can best examine video games using cognitive narratology. Participants are taught to interpret narrative devices based on previous experiences in other media (Ryan, 2010). When faced with specific signifiers, such as a dragon descending and lighting a town on fire, players can use prior narrative experiences to understand that as a hero, they will need to slay said dragon to restore peace and order before being told to do so. Games are coded through different media tropes, though these can also be used to subvert expectations, such as in *Undertale* (2015), where instead of killing monsters, one must work to befriend them to achieve the true ending of the game. By analyzing how *Mass Effect* uses these transmedial experiences, scholars can better understand how Shepard is accepted as a strong character who is also female.

Nevertheless, before we can address this construction, there is a second challenge in analyzing narrative in video games. There is the assumption that the narrative consists of a static storyline, as a narrative is a “representation of the immense that provides a cognitive structure whereby media users can tie on the effects, convert the complexity of events to a story that makes sense, and thus satisfy their pride or just to understand the physical and social worlds” (Lee et al., 2006). The notion of cause-effect relationships is still applicable to video games, but

not all games require a fixed narrative in an interactive medium. Much like a choose-your-own-adventure book genre, players can change events in the game and affect gameplay later in the world. As Bizzochi (2007) explained:

A playwright once described the script for a play as “a clock that sings.” Each part works in careful conjunction with every other part, and because of that, the expressive synergy of the whole far exceeds the individual contributions. Yet, tight control over details is precisely what the interactive process does not afford. In an interactive experience, a share of control is ceded to the interactor, and a critical degree of fine authorial control is lost.

When it comes to this balance, the *Mass Effect* games have been praised for their ability to balance player agency and BioWare’s authorial intent regarding the larger narrative. Jim Bizzochi and Joshua Tanenbaum in “*Mass Effect 2: A Case Study Design of Game Narrative*” (2012) related that *Mass Effect 2* is “widely considered to be an excellent example of contemporary game narratives by both scholarly and vernacular communities” (393) and expounded that the different design strategies used by BioWare helped bridge the gap between the creative company and the player base in a game which is shaped narratively by player choices.

Mass Effect 2 is a mixture of delightful surprises as information is scattered throughout the game in various methods. Results of choices from the first game are relayed sometimes at the most unexpected moments. If Shepard passes by the news terminal or an advertisement pillar, the player will receive information they might have put out of their mind after the first game; including reminders of previous crimes committed by organizations or even notes thanking (or reprimanding) Shepard for previous actions and how their actions shaped the course of the

universe. Shepard may also find their way helped or hindered by people they assisted/threatened in the first game. One such character is journalist Khalisah al-Jilani, an obstinate journalist who frequently butts heads with Shepard because she believes there to be anti-human sentiment in the council that Shepard serves in each game. In the end, Shepard can handle this situation in multiple ways. However, should they choose to punch al-Jilani at any point in time, they cannot recruit her help for the third game, which costs valuable military resources and support against the world-ending Reapers.

Bizzocchi broke the video game narrative framework into five different pieces: 1) the story world or the environment in which the game takes place; 2) character, or the beings who exist in the game world; 3) emotion, which consists of both the emotions of the characters in the game, as well as the emotions elicited in the players; 4) narrative interface, how narrative is represented in the functionality of the game interface; and 5) micro-narrative, or how smaller moments of the narrative occur and flow coherently into the broader context of the gameplay (2006).

By working through these five different elements, it becomes clearer how the *Mass Effect* series crafted two individual versions of their main character that captured the player base's imaginations.

A World after Mars: The Narrative World of *Mass Effect*

During their prime years, the company of BioWare was well-regarded for their teams who sought to “create engaging stories, well-crafted plots, multi-dimensional characters and dynamic settings full of secrets and adventures” (Zouidi, 2017) that served to entrance players further into the in-depth world-building of their settings. Before *Mass Effect*, the company had

already established themselves as accomplished storytellers with their previous titles, including their initial Dungeon & Dragons-world set success *Baldur's Gate* (1998), the LucasArts licensed *Star Wars Knights of the Old Republic* (2003), and their original Chinese mythology-based property, *Jade Empire* (2007). When *Mass Effect* was first released as an original science fiction epic in 2007 (an exclusive for the Xbox 360) after having been first marketed in 2005, the game was swiftly awarded the “Best Role Playing Game” and “Best Console Game” at the Game Critics’ Awards, as well as high ratings across platforms like Metacritic, IGN, Game Informer, Eurogamer and Game Spy for its in-world storytelling.



Figure 2 Mass Effect Game Title Screen

The story begins with the game’s first title screen (*fig. 2*). An arc moves from the silver M to the final S at the end of the title. What seems like a natural stylistic choice in the title of “MASS EFFECT” as an initial herald of the journey the player is about to go through as the camera hovers over the curve of a planet with a moon in the midground. The title exists outside

of space and time, perched above the unknown world. The player can assume this is Earth due to the single moon that is seen, though it is never verified in-game.

This serves to inform the player that their primary role is not going to be on any one planet, but they will instead be in the vastness of space. While some aspects may be familiar, there is a mysterious element regarding what the audience knows and what they do not. An ethereal aura exists between the world and the darkness of space in the background; an alienness present in both the image and the non-diegetic sound emits from the computer's speakers. As the player moves from this screen, leaving the known, they take the first step in the Hero's Journey, which is "leaving the home." This would be equivalent to Luke Skywalker leaving Tatooine with Obi-wan Kenobi or Wall-E embarking from Earth after Eve in corresponding space epics. Using cognitive narratology theory, scholars can assume that the player acknowledges from these signifiers that they are ultimately heading into alien territory. The universe is vast, cold, and in fictional worlds full of dangerous unknown life forms and cultures. Space narratives like *Star Trek* (1966-2021), *Babylon 5* (1993-1998), *Lost in Space* (1965-1968), *Star Wars* (1977-2021), and even *Futurama* (1999-2003) can be used to understand the expectations for players as they embark on their new adventure. Science Fiction remains a place to explore the impossible and a place humanity goes to in search of equality. *Star Trek* is known for its idealized future where race and gender do not matter to human civilization as they venture through space.

After following the instructions to "Press Any Key" as displayed on screen, the play will continue through the character creation screen, detailed later. Following the character creation process, the player is eased into a black screen, and dialogue begins. The players are introduced to the back of a person as they overlook space out of a ship porthole while three separate voices begin to discuss Shepard. Based on the choices, the character made players listen as then

unknown Ambassador Donnel Udina, Captain David Anderson, and Admiral Steven Hackett discuss Shepard as a potential candidate. While their names are revealed in the subtitles, the player will come to know them as the human representative to the Citadel Council, Shepard's mentor, and the top-ranking official of the Alliance Navy, respectively. Through the spoken narration, it is determined that Shepard has established themselves as an up-and-comer in the Alliance military and is well known in the upper ranks. It is implied that during this conversation, many names have come up as Udina's first line is "Well, how about Shepard?" The conversation then branches depending on what background and military experience that the player has chosen for their Shepard. Whether male or female Shepard, the conversation does not change, which sets the tone that to her allies and those in charge, her gender represents no issue. While this initially can be construed as another occasion of a complete lack of acknowledgment of any type of gendered difference, it instead sets a tone where to her allies and those in charge, her gender represents no issue, even in more private dialogue, which contrasts against her encounters with enemies in later scenarios.

After this conversation, the game breaks into a white blocky scrolling exposition text much like the *Star Wars* series. This helps signal the audience what type of journey they are about to embark on and places Shepard on the same level as Luke Skywalker, Leia Organa, or even Han Solo. The text informs players that in 2148 explorers uncovered the "greatest discovery in human history," an alien technology that enabled intense scientific advancement among human society "enabling travel to the furthest stars" caused by "a force that controlled the very fabric of space and time" which the other civilizations of the galaxy called "Mass Effect." While this scrolls across the screen, a soft synthesized melody plays in the background until

reaching a crescendo as the title appears on the screen in large silver letters with a completely black background (*fig. 3*).



From there, the silver fades out, leaving the audience with the black background while a planet hangs along the curve that flows through the word “Mass” while the upper part of the letters glow deep blue, reflecting space. The sun hangs through the “A” and “S,” though the light also cuts through the black background. As the words completely fade and viewers are left with the sun rising over the previously unknown planet, the scene cuts to a Jupiter -like planet. A ship zooms by, and the camera slowly pans to watch it go. The scene then fades from view and cuts to the back of an unintroduced character, presumed to be Shepard, previously seen looking out the porthole in the first scene moving through the frame. As they move around the ship's bridge, an unknown voice informs players that the ship is heading towards the “Arcturus Prime Relay,” and the audience continues to watch the unknown personnel as they maneuver around various other officers and soldiers. Some greet the figure as “Commander” while others give respectful nods at their stations. These scenes are intercut with the ship flying, preparing for the Arcturus Prime

Relay travel, and a bright, hopeful tune plays over it. Finally, the camera pans around the character that it has been following to reveal their face, that of the chosen Shepard, in a big reveal.

By following the back of the character and leaving them a “mystery,” the players also get the chance to see other important characters and how they interact with each other, and how they will interact with the player. All these characters are respectful as soldiers are towards a commanding officer and sometimes genuinely friendly. The player is a leader, and there becomes a need to act as such, but what a good leader is will depend on the player and how they choose to proceed. It establishes the military setting as soldiers sit in their chairs and discuss reports, the precise image of a starship where everyone has their regular duties.

Then we are introduced to Shepard’s commander/mentor Captain David Anderson and Nhilus, an alien secret agent operative from the Council, whom we come to learn act as the ruling party of the universe and that Shepard would potentially be the first human secret operative. This is a goal that humanity has been opting for because it moves them closer to having a say in galactic policies, which they currently lack. After all, humanity is a “new” species in the galaxy. From there, the character arrives at a planet under attack and stumbles upon a coup in the making headed by Saren, the primary antagonist for the first game, and the Reapers, the overarching primary villainous alien race of the series.

This works to set a specific traditional stage that has become familiar to any fan of fantasy or science fiction: a setting in crisis, a shady villain in the background, and an opposing force that threatens a tenuous balance. The player will take on the hero's role, forced to find allies in the most unlikely of places to accomplish their goal and save their people/home/galaxy, etc. By not deviating from this pattern, it sets up players to accept Shepard, male or female, as the

hero no matter what they look like, what gender they are, or even what background they might have. These features are addressed when the game starts, and they decide what Shepard will look like and what they will be influenced by.

Our Soldier, Our Hero, Our Main Character

The transformation begins with the tangible title screen. When starting the game, the player must choose the option to “Start New Career” to begin the game. The wording is significant because the word “career” primes a different mental response than merely choosing to start a “new game.” Careers are lifelong fields that humans progress onto to move further into adulthood. Instead of evoking the feeling of play like the word “game” does. The players are not children here but adults about to embark on a serious mission. A career is not chosen lightly, as one must devote oneself to rigorous, often specialized training. The player signaled with this wording that they will be adopting the persona of a soldier who is no green adventurer, as some roleplaying games would start with, but instead a seasoned veteran with multiple dedicated years of service. It could be interpreted as a kick-starter for imaginative immersion so that players are more primed to identify with Shepard and their future missions. Commander Shepard is in no way a raw rookie. They can be assumed to have knowledge of the world and what has been happening during the events leading up to the game. Though this does prove a tad ironic, considering the player could ask about technology and species that Shepard would be quite aware of while living in this world. The game balances this within the diegetic world experience through the phrasing of questions, however. Hence, the player feels like they are still knowledgeable about the world and that Shepard merely is probing for information.

Once the player selects to start a new “career” (fig. 4), a computerized voice will address the player as if they were at an open terminal within the narrative world. The voice will inform the player they are attempting to access top-secret personnel files, which provides a sense of importance as the system proceeds to create a “secure” connection. This mimicry of necessary defense of military intelligence combined with the foreboding tune that plays as the computer brings up the information. The player then chooses if they would like to play as a default version of Shepard or choose to customize their version. Should a player choose not to play as a default Shepard, after entering their name, the system will detect a “data corruption” and prompt them to “reconstruct” the profile, which allows the player to physically alter the appearance of their Shepard as well as choose their background and military service history so that players can create their Commander.



Figure 4 Mass Effect Game Choice Start Screen

These small touches provide contextualization for the character of Commander Shepard as a whole. These are not delegated to one sex or the other, so it can be easy to assume that the female avatar was thrown together for the sake of appealing to a broader audience. This is

doubly true since the only initial differences at the beginning are the switching of pronouns during the initial cut scene. There is only one initial customization difference in that MaleShep can have his short, well-trimmed facial hair customized, while FemShep instead makes the customization of make-up available. Customization options for both males and females fall into a standard military issue with both women and men maintaining short hairstyles, or in the case of women, the option of a tight bun or short ponytail. While players can add fan-made modifications to the game that allow for more “feminine” hairstyles and facial options to the game (such as exaggerated eyelashes), the original version of FemShep fits nicely into the style of the American military.

From there, the camera sticks closely to Shepard. The camera in a video game serves as our identification with the character and factors into sensory immersion. If in the third person, there remains a barrier between the player and the game because the player is always aware of the avatar character, but it also proves to be less jarring moving into cutscenes for the player. Suppose the camera remains in a first-person perspective. In that case, it can create a deeper immersion as the player sees what they would only typically be able to, but the transition to cut scenes can be detrimental to immersion. The player is reminded that they do not look like the player's avatar.

The *Mass Effect* series is considered a third-person role-playing shooter, meaning that the camera stays over the shoulder or at a distance away. *Mass Effect* primarily keeps the camera at a medium shot distance, with the screen filled by Shepard's back. This can be compared to other games with primary female protagonists. Two of the more well-known female video game characters include Samus Aran of *Metroid* and Lara Croft of *Tomb Raider* fame, as discussed before, who are also part of third-person games. *Metroid's* first installment was released in 1986

and is classified as a science fiction game with shooter and platformer mechanics (fig. 5). Since then, the game has spawned multiple sequels and remakes as it remains a classic game for all players.



Figure 5 Metroid (1986) Game Screen

After Space Pirates seize samples of the fictional alien species known as Metroids from the Galactic Federation, the Federation finds itself relying on a sole bounty hunter to destroy the Pirates before they can use the creatures to destroy any who would oppose them. This bounty hunter is Samus, and the game was released after Nintendo's previous platformers (*Donkey Kong* (1981), *Super Mario Bros.* (1985), etc.) had been well received among the public (The Geek Critique, 2016). The game follows Samus' avatar in her power suit while the screen scrolls side to side depending on how the player moves Samus around. Metroid is largely considered the first science fiction video game to have a female protagonist reach American shores (Guinness

Records, 2012). However, there were previous games released in Japan that were not ported over to the United States.¹

Unlike Shepard, Samus does not divulge that she is female until the end of the game, and even then, the reveal is part of the “special” endings that the player receives from hitting specific objectives. Should the player hit these objectives, the screens proceed accordingly. After receiving a message congratulating the player on their accomplishment (*fig. 6*), the character of Samus moves to stand in the middle of the screen. They begin to flash a variety of colors (*fig. 7*), shifting to the shape of a woman who continues to flash the various colors (*fig. 8*). Finally, it settles to a pale feminine being in a bikini with reddish-brown hair (*fig. 9*). There is no question that Samus is a physically powerful female avatar, and she amazed players when her secret was revealed, though why the added swimwear was necessary remains a mystery. Even the instructions that came with the game referred to Samus with male pronouns, but because of this deception, it almost feels cheapened. Would Samus have been so popular without the reveal? When assessing the game, the consumer can immerse in the game due to the high exploratory difficulty of the levels and through watching the avatar move as it is directed. So, why did players have to be deceived into thinking they were playing a male avatar when they were playing a female one?

¹ *BaRaDuKe* (1985) was released by Namco a year earlier than *Metroid* for arcades. Also known as *Alien Sector*, Player 1 would play “Kissy,” while Player 2 would play “Takky”. Much like Samus, Kissy also removed her power armor at the end of the game to reveal she was a woman. *BaRaDuKe* is considered one of Namco’s most obscure titles and was not ported to the United States until 1997.



Figure 6 Metroid (1986) Ending Message





Figure 8 *Metroid* (1986) Flashing Samus Revealed



Figure 9 *Metroid* (1986) Samus Fully Revealed

This contrasts with *Mass Effect*'s with the character of FemShep, where the player is always confident of what sex they are. There are no secrets, and no reveals. Much less exposure of Shepard, of either gender, in a revealing bikini. This act of subversion is problematic because creators assume that male audiences would reject any trace of femininity unless in the form of a prize.

These exposure scenes became a regular part of *Metroid* games. *Super Metroid* (1994), released two years before *Tomb Raider*, is cited as one of the best video games of all time and is one of the establishing games for the subgenre termed “Metroidvania”² (Baker, 2016). The game featured top graphics and was the first to reveal Samus’s signature blonde hair (*fig. 10*). Like previous games, Samus spends the entirety of the game in her power armor until the end scene. The camera does maintain a third-person perspective throughout the game, a signature of platformers. At this time, while previous players may have known that Samus was a female, a whole new generation of players would not have.

There is no recognition of Samus as female except for these ending scenes, making it feel like a lie of omission by allowing men to immerse themselves into the role of a character advertised/assumed to be male. Samus is also still supermodel proportioned in a skintight suit. However, to their credit, the creators did give Samus the musculature to support the idea of her moving around in the Metroid Suit. Looking at the Samus Aran avatar, there are apparent abdominal muscles and muscular thighs, and biceps. However, these body elements would later be removed to make her appear more conventionally attractive; her 2017 iteration includes boob jiggle physics and the hourglass figure of male fantasy (*fig. 11*).

² The “Metroidvania” subgenre is classified by 1) non-linear exploration through a large world map that is interconnected by different rooms and corridors filled with respawning enemies, 2) the discovery of new power ups (actions, inventory items, abilities) that allow players to move to new areas, and 3) mild RPG elements. The word is a portmanteau of the *Metroid* and *Castlevania* series.



Figure 10 Metroid (1994) Samus Fully Revealed



Figure 11 Metroid: Samus Returns (2017) Zero Suit Samus

Two years later, video game consumers would be introduced to the other prominent female character of the 1990s, Lara Croft.

Lara Croft is recognizably the first female action video game character many came to know. When *Tomb Raider* was released, the conversation about her started, and it has not stopped since. Scholars still argue over whether the digital woman is a feminist icon or not as “it was obvious that she was designed as an adolescent male fantasy: chest twice as wide as her waist” (Romano, 2018), and the camera never let players forget it (*fig. 12*). The camera follows Lara, keeping her hourglass body shape in the full picture unless the player needs to turn around in certain cramped regions (*fig. 13*). This leads to the camera focusing on a close view. Due to the overtly sexual design, Lara defines the debate of female characters as a “repository for male fantasies” (Romano, 2018) versus strong leading characters that were also female.



Figure 12 *Tomb Raider* (1996) Lara Croft

Hailed as the female version of Indiana Jones, Lara comes from a rich, British aristocratic background making her highly educated even if she was not already a child prodigy. In terms of fellow fictional characters, she falls more in line with Batman's mentality than Jessica Rabbit. However, the question of her identity is often mixed with that of her sexuality.

The game developers knew this as well and acknowledged it with the different advertising campaigns for the character. The fact that the camera follows Lara at such a distance is hardly a mistake. Instead, it allows the player to continually observe the full figure fitted in tiny tan shorts with her blue top. The character remains a male fantasy figure despite her numerous physical and intellectual achievements; Lara is ultimately the creation of a male team who focused on giving their perceived audience (heterosexual males), and themselves, what they wanted.



Figure 13 Tomb Raider (1996) Lara Croft Camera Angle

FemShep, by contrast, is almost always shot with a mid-length shot, keeping her waist and above in the screen. Both she and MaleShep are framed so that the player can see over their shoulder, but the full body is not in the frame (see *fig. 14-20*). The only time the camera does threaten to go full-frame is during the sprint animation. Shepard desperately attempts to make it from barricade to barricade to avoid enemy fire. With the way the camera is focused, it keeps the player informed about the character they are playing while also emphasizing that the player is supposed to be concentrating on whatever threat is on the screen. *Metroid* shows the player's avatar in the center of the screen since the player must always be aware of potential enemies coming from any side. Simultaneously, *Tomb Raider* has the player focus on Lara Croft as she interacts with her environment.



Figure 14 Mass Effect (2007) Shepard on the Citadel Back Camera View



Figure 15 Mass Effect (2007) Shepard Combat Screen



Figure 16 Mass Effect 2 (2010) Shepard Cut Scene Camera Shot



Figure 17 Mass Effect 2 (2010) Shepard in Combat



Figure 18 Mass Effect 3 (2012) Shepard Military Garb



Figure 19 Mass Effect 3 (2012) Shepard Full Body in Cut Scene



Figure 20 Mass Effect 3 (2012) Shepard Dashing Back View

Cinematographically, *Mass Effect* emphasizes Shepard's potential enemies and the potential NPCs that Shepard can interact with to gain new information. FemShep is feminine, in being more petite than her male counterpart, without being highly sexualized, though she also suffers from impractical breast armor in some outfits. Particularly in action scenes, the camera focuses more on the action than the complete form of Shepard. This camera angle suggests that while players are supposed to concentrate on the action while also maintaining contact with the character. Shepard is first and foremost a soldier, which is what the visual style highlights.

Soldiers Don't Cry: Emotion in Mass Effect

In playing a military-style game, it is critical to remember that consistently the narrative of the hero has been remade through history, dependent on culture, time frame, and ideological goals. Commonly, though, the soldier's figure is seen as "heroic," pursuing glory for the betterment of whatever cause they fight for.

War is as much about ideology as it is about the act of fighting. In the annals of history, we can see that those who win become mythologized, those who lose remain mortal or become thoroughly vilified. To gain the support of those who could and would fight, those in power must convince others that their fight is "just." Freidrich Kittler argued in his essay "Media Wars: Trenches, Lightnings, Stars" that "war, as opposed to sheer fighting, has been for a long time an affair of persuasion. It came into being only when people succeeded in making others die for them" (p. 117). To make others die for them, they produced rhetoric establishing that being a soldier meant gaining "immortal glory" that they fight for what is "right" or fight for their country when they fight.

As scholars, we can go through the decades and observe that the soldier's American image shifts drastically; compare military propaganda from the 1950s to anti-military

propaganda in the 1970s³. The soldier's current myth is two-sided; that of the glorious figure who goes above and beyond, and the one fraught with trauma as post-traumatic stress disorder is now more recognized. These are individuals who watch their brothers die in their arms, who are forced to take life in order to preserve the things they love, or individuals who can go over the edge and wield a tyrannical fist or even twist and devolve into monsters who exploit their authority and kill at will. The horrors of war bring out the best and worst, and it is the soldier of Shepard who orients the civilian into what the world is like, admittedly through the proffered lens of the creative team. War can be glorified, demonized, or be demonstrated as a morally grey issue that holds no truth and no answers as to the true nature of the events.

One such example happens toward the middle of the first *Mass Effect*. Species 37, also known as the Thorian, makes thralls of a small colony of humans. Discovered and unleashed by ExoGeni Corporation, the company behind creating the settlement, the Thorian can mind control other creatures and uses them to tend to it. When Shepard first lands at the colony called Zhu's Hope, they are busy fighting Saren's forces of Geth (robotic A.I.). While there are hints of the colonists acting strangely, the player cannot openly confront anyone and instead must focus on following the story missions. After Shepard returns from ExoGeni headquarters, the settlers turn aggressive as the Thorian attempts to defend itself from destruction. The player then can kill the settlers like regular enemies or take the extra time to try and physically melee the colonists to incapacitate them instead. But a bad shot or a misplaced grenade, and the player adds the civilian to their body count. The player may not even realize before they see the name over the body that they killed a colonist instead of a regular enemy. It could be viewed as necessary, as they are a

³ Propaganda remains a contentious term with both positive and negative connotations and its own complex history. I use the term in the original concept of the term, that of propagation.

threat to the player's life, but ultimately, they were people in the wrong place at the wrong time. Had it not been for corporate greed and curiosity, they would have been safe somewhere else, but the choice is ultimately the player's and informs the Universe's perception of Shepard.

The Heroic Soldier in the American narrative is often portrayed as a defender of Truth, Justice, and the American Way™. Captain America and Captain Marvel from the Marvel comic and movie series will undoubtedly come to mind for those familiar with the pop culture phenomena. Whether military recruiting videos or romanticized service films like *The Green Berets* (1968), *Patton* (1970), and *American Sniper* (2014), only the best of the best can stand up and protect America from the worst of her enemies. These are often juxtaposed against movies like *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), or *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), which portrays the horrific responses of soldiers to war and the lasting psychological effects. This is more recent in the history of military developments as America, and other countries, are changing their way of dealing with soldiers who come back traumatized from their service (DoD, 2011). The American military has currently added mental fitness training for soldiers to help assist in the growth rates of PTSD, depression, and other harmful psychological effects (Dickstein et al., 2010; Shalev et al., 2011).

In *Mass Effect*, emotional outbursts are part of the goal of the game. Relating to the concept of imaginative immersion, part of the game's mission is to persuade individuals to relate to the situation at hand emotionally. This is encouraged in the larger narrative of the story, with the difficult decision in the first part of the trilogy of choosing a squad mate to be the necessary sacrifice to put a dent in Saren's plan. In terms of the smaller missions between the larger narrative, players are inspired to feel sympathy, anger, disgust, etc. The game strives heavily for imaginative immersion, and Shepard's passion is part of what makes them heroic in nature.

Despite feelings and breakdowns being perceived as negative or highly emotional states being considered feminine, the game works to show emotion is the human constant.

Shepard and real soldiers are not emotionless machines in war; they are people with their difficulties dealing with horrific events. While the player can choose options that portray Shepard, male or female, as stoic and outwardly untouched by the horrors going on around them, there is no denying through cut scenes and actions are taken that the character of Shepard can be exceptionally emotionally open. By enforcing this emotional directness through the point system described below, it encourages players to be more receptive through the character about their feelings and passions as they go through the game.

It is also significant that these many chances of the emotional demonstration are also given to MaleShep in the same manner as FemShep. For example, in the loyalty mission of Quarian squadmate, Tali, the player and their party discover her father's body. Upon seeing his last message, Tali is visibly upset, though Quarians have smoky masks that do not allow facial features to show. Players are given a chance to take a quick action to bring Tali in for a hug and comfort her. Should the player choose to take the quick action, they are shown pulling her up from where she kneels beside the corpse with a “Hey, c’mere” before offering her solace. While Tali is a love interest for Male Shepherds, this option is available for FemShep, males who are romancing Tali, and males who are not romancing Tali. It is perhaps one of the most touching moments in the game for the pure atmosphere of the scene as Tali, an ordinarily stoic character, breaks down with a “Dammit, dammit” while her voice quavers.

The imaginative immersion element relies on the poignant bond between the player and the avatar, between the player and the characters in the world, and between the player and the fantasy setting. The developers aim for these emotional connections to reinforce these immersive

experiences. By encouraging the passionate responses in both genders of Shepard and actively portraying both dealing with negative and positive outbursts, it reinforces that emotions are ultimately a part of being *human*. Men should not be forced to hold in their emotions, and women should be able to express theirs. Depending on how players choose to express themselves in these moments, they can gain Renegade or Paragon points.

Right Trigger to Throw Him Out the Window: Narrative Interface in Mass Effect

When the player chooses the backstory for Shepard, these choices gift more than flavor text. The player's choices at the beginning of the game also factor into one of the most well-known aspects of the *Mass Effect* trilogy, the Paragon and Renegade morality system. Morality in *Mass Effect* is presented through a point gauge system. Starting with the first game, a key factor to these points is the chosen Shepard history. These act as initial point awards that count towards the total Paragon and Renegade points the player can accrue. By choosing a different combination of backgrounds and military history, the player may start on a specific path without realizing it. For example, choosing the “Spacer” and “War Hero” combination, the player would begin with 20 Paragon points, the max at the beginning of the game. Likewise, if a player were to choose the “Earthborn” and “Ruthless” combination, they would begin with 20 Renegade points, which are likewise the most Renegade points a person could have at the beginning of the game. If a player instead chose the “Colonist” and “Sole Survivor” combination, they would begin with equally split Paragon and Renegade points. While this might have seemed to come at the expense of the player’s inexperience, these instead present as guidance at the beginning of the game to help inform the player of what their character acts like. The player also chooses the first line spoken by the character to give them a sense of the morality system, which BioWare termed “Paragon” and “Renegade.” Dialogue is decided on using a dialogue wheel, which can

present anywhere from two to six different dialogue options depending on the situation.

However, it is not until after this initial dialogue that the player realizes they are building up points based on the specific options.

Players also do not initially know what qualifies as a paragon or a renegade statement as all three statements appear in regular white font color. For instance, during this first line, Shepard can choose to respond in one of the three following ways. Should Shepard choose “Cut the chatter!” the avatar will sharply reprimand Joker and Kaidan, the two-gossiping people in the scene, saying, “You two are soldiers! Act like it!” which earns the player Renegade points. If the player instead chooses the top dialogue option of “I agree,” Shepard will give an affirmation of Joker’s worries and earn Paragon points instead. However, should the player choose the middle option of “You’re overreacting,” which prompts Shepard to tell Joker that he “always expects the worst,” which gains the player zero points for either category.

Players can track the percentage of points they have earned in paragon and renegade options on their character sheet, displaying two gauges (*fig. 21-23*). The paragon gauge is blue and fills from left to right, while the renegade gauge is red and fills in a downward arc from right to left. These points permit the player to open more dialogue options, allowing them to resolve situations with charm or get what they want through intimidation. Points are tallied on the “Squad” page, where the player can spend points on different abilities. Despite the presence of different classes, the last two options on Shepard's character sheet in the first game are always “Charm” and “Intimidate.” Players must use points in these sections, or important dialogue options will be grayed out. Players can lose out on discounts at stores (charm option) or increased value of selling items to merchants (intimidation option) should they place no points in these categories.

How these points are utilized is entirely dependent on how the player wishes to go about the game. This is also dependent on if the player reads what the different talents do. Should the player not read the description of the two elements, it is possible that a player would not spend any points on either and wind up with an inefficient Shepard. These necessary dialogue options force the player to take a hard stand with nearly all the choices in the game, which adds to the heroic and soldier persona that Shepard presents. Shepard can be lackadaisical or uncertain, but these are not choices that are rewarded. This fits with the idea that Shepard is not a green adventurer. However, instead, someone who is already fully formed as a person by extra-diegetic elements, the player is privy to only through the “Codex” where the “Personal History Summary” lies under the secondary tab. This is by no means a complete history, so quite a bit is also left to the player's imagination and decision as to different personality traits their Shepard may have and how they would react to different situations.

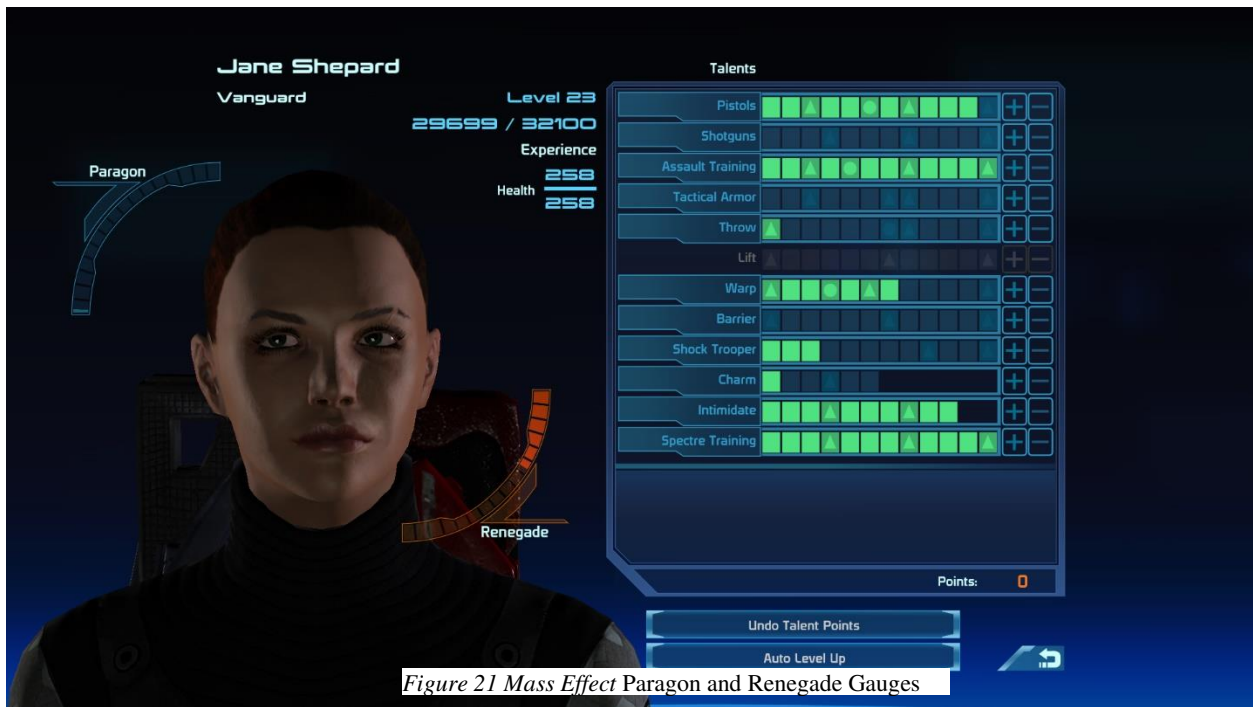


Figure 21 Mass Effect Paragon and Renegade Gauges



Figure 22 Mass Effect 2 Character Screen with Gauges



Figure 23 Mass Effect 3 Character Screen with Reputation Bar

While the “Charm” and “Intimidate” point abilities were taken out of *Mass Effect 2* and *Mass Effect 3*, there are still Paragon and Renegade options available through dialogue. The games also produced a new quick action feature that encouraged players to hit the left or right trigger (if playing on a controller) to perform an action that would give points for one side. Though producers also gave quick trigger options where points could be generated for one side with no gain for points on the other. For instance, in *Mass Effect 2*, when talking with a mercenary during an infiltration, should the player hit the right trigger button as it becomes available, the player will push the mercenary out the construction building window his death, netting renegade points. Should the player choose to let the mercenary go, the game does not give them paragon points; they instead simply continue on their way to the main objective. As the narratives continue, these options proceed to pop up, keeping the user on their toes so they can be aware when these quick action abilities become available. This way, they can choose whether to add to their Paragon and Renegade scores to open later conversation and negotiation options required for gameplay.

The terms “Paragon” and “Renegade” also present a different cue for individual players to view Shepard as heroic and represent two different soldier elements commonly played out in other media. A paragon is someone to aspire to, a person who perfectly embodies a virtue or quality so entirely that individuals cannot help but admire them and aspire to their behavior. This is the classic heroic soldier who does everything by the book if possible, saving lost kittens and injured combatants along the way as they strive to perform their duty perfectly. The word “renegade” suggests an entirely different idea of a soldier and hero, however, venturing into anti-hero territory. Though this does not inherently mean that this character is wicked, they have abandoned or turned away from the traditional rules of play. This is a differentiation of the

“good” and “evil” alignment scale that was used in previous games like the *Fable* (2004-2014) series. This helps justify actions as there is no right or wrong way to play the game; it all depends on how their Shepard is oriented towards the world. They can be the quintessential good cop, or they can refuse to play by the rules and be Dirty Harry Callahan, doing whatever is necessary to get things done in pursuit of their goal. This, coupled with Jennifer Hale’s voice acting, which will be discussed in chapter three, grants FemShep a rare role for female protagonists in video games and helps orient the persona as a three-dimensional character rather than the strong female archetype.

As scholars, we can compare these choices to previous depictions of anti-heroes and heroes portrayed by female characters. In previous media, where women primarily performed masculine actions to come off as “strong,” the developers decided to go another way. They did so in the smaller narratives of the game. Instead of just having Shepard perform as a male though whether in a female or male skin, they opted to go with more subtle points of difference that highlighted the differences men and women face.

The Small Pieces Add Up – Analyzing Micronarrative

Several instances arise when pinpointing areas that define the difference in being female in the series. This thesis will focus on two distinct situations from *Mass Effect* and *Mass Effect 2*.

In the original *Mass Effect*, during the player’s first principal mission to prove the primary antagonist’s guilt in a colony’s massacre, the player must interact with the character Harkin. Found in “Chora’s Den,” a kind of gentleman’s club where men of different races sit while female humans and members of the Asari race perform in futuristic lingerie, he greets Shepard one of two ways depending on the gender as shown below:

Harkin (if approached by a Male Shepard, and in a disgruntled and flippant tone):

“Alliance Military, pfft, I could have been a marine, you know? Instead, I joined the goddamn Citadel Security. Biggest mistake of my life.”

Harkin (if approached by a Female Shepard, and in an oily, cajoling tone): “Hey there, sweetheart. You looking for some fun? ‘Cause I gotta say that soldier getup looks *real good* on that bod of yours. Why don’t you sit your sweet little ass down beside old Harkin? Have a drink and we’ll see where this goes.”

While it may seem heavy-handed, this was long before the #MeToo movement, and this would have reflected the easy sexism that was/is still prevalent in the gaming industry. Having Harkin approach FemShep in this manner opens male gamers to the same harassment felt by women. Before this point, they have played as Shepard and know her capabilities and have made decisions as her, presumably having formed an attachment to the characters and surroundings after gameplay if we follow immersion theory. This is a moment for gamers of all genders to acknowledge Shepard's difficulties as a woman and serve to make her different from just a reskinned version of Shepard as a man. This moment is the beginning of the micronarrative that differentiates FemShep and MaleShep from more than just their choice of pronouns or their love interests programmed in-game. The creators also made this part of the main story, and non-optional means it is a barrier that must be experienced and cannot be bypassed.

In *Mass Effect 2*, a similar situation arises when the player recruits their first teammate, “Archangel,” who turns out to be Garrus, a former squadmate from the previous game who proved to be extremely popular with fans. For his vigilante actions in punishing major crime in “lawless” Omega, the three dominant mercenary groups, led by the largest organization, the Blue Suns, are taking all hands in order to kill him finally. FemShep approaches where they are

recruiting and is directed to a Blue Suns Trooper who greets the player with “Weeeeell, aren’t you sweet? You’re in the wrong place, honey. Strippers’ quarters are that way” in a saccharine tone. Meanwhile, the MaleShep and his squad mates are greeted with a straightforward “You three look like you could do some damage. Looking for a good fight?” as the trooper surveys the character and their two squad members in their party. This is again towards the beginning of the game, shortly after the player is brought back into the world and is one of their first significant missions. The *Mass Effect* team chose to bring up the concept that gender mattered with these micronarratives and gave them a place on-stage in a AAA game that was viewed as being primarily consumed by the male demographic. By putting these situations in, the developers presented the harassment and sexism that many women face. They also even gave women who played the game the chance to cathartically snipe back at these characters through Renegade options, or even the chance to shut them down through paragon options.

Though seemingly small, these micronarratives make up a larger tapestry of other moments in-game that bring players face to face with casual sexism performed by the general populace. The fact that the team did not put these in smaller side missions and made the player go through them as part of the main story was an excellent way to highlight the difference in males' assumption of ability towards females. Also, by giving Shepard multiple ways of addressing the harassment and presenting the maltreatment as villainous or disgusting characters, the player grows to connotate these sexist remarks negatively. These moments are also contrasted with crewmates and superiors' actions which make no assumptions based on sex or gender.

There is currently a flurry of accusations being released in the video game realm, specifically in Ubisoft and Twitch’s communities. Women are coming forward about dealing

with the harassment and abuse they have experienced at the hands of specific individuals and the communities, which leads our eyes more towards treating women and other minorities in the field. What players are being exposed to in these scenes is probably an everyday occurrence for being demeaned or dismissed for being a minority. It is an opportunity for male players to show them what these aggressive encounters come off as, which is to say harassment. Shepard has the option to address these in-game because she is a big, bad space marine, but it serves to remind us of all the women who do not have that option. If a male player can successfully connect with Shepard, it means they are entrenched in the female narrative; then, hopefully, these moments would give them pause.

We can compare these narrative opportunities with one in the *Tomb Raider* (2013) reboot game from Crystal Dynamic. During the new game promotion, Ron Rosenberg, the executive producer, remarked that players would want to “protect” Lara Croft from being raped by island scavengers during her kidnapping. This is made even more disturbing by the fact that art director Brian Horton wanted to display how youthful Lara was in this new game by stating:

Her skin is still bare on the arms and there are going to be rips and tears on her clothes, but it won't be about being revealing. It's a way of saying that through these tough situations, there is a beauty and vulnerability coming through. I think that is sexy in its own way. (Phillips, 2013)

Crystal Dynamics was quick to try and head off a public relations nightmare by stating that the game was intent on exploring the origins story of Lara Croft and that there was no “attempted rape” scene. Instead, the scene in question dealt with Lara’s first time killing another human being during a section with a “threatening undertone in the sequence and surrounding drama” (Griffiths, 2012). The image was already stuck in the minds of many, which ultimately colored

the scene in-game. Even if the comment had not been made, though, watching a 30+-year-old male wrestle a young woman to the ground has unsavory connotations at best. Global brand director Karl Stewart gave the following statement to PC Gamer, which shows one of the issues in gaming:

No sexual element. He doesn't care who you are. He has got you cornered and you are female, so there is an element of 'oh he's creepy, and this is slightly intimidating', but straight out it's: bite his ear, kick him in the nuts and shoot him in the head. (Francis, 2012)

For a man, this shows a substantial disconnect between the experiences of men and women. This act of violence in-game also serves to frame the game in a more misogynistic light as the assault is used as a drama moment. It is also, by this comment, supposed to be just wiped away according to the creators as if it is nothing. The rhetoric of rape and its prevalence in the video game community has often been under fire, where players regularly comment on “getting raped” or “raping” other players or bosses. The way a group talks about rape “produces the cultural significance of such violence because it interprets and evaluates rape...and to a certain degree how such acts are to be punished” (Sielke, 2004, p. 372). While gamers are not commenting on the actual act, it instills the gamer world's cultural conscience with the concept that rape just happens. The emphasis on Lara's inexperience and the concept that attacks are just going to happen is rape, and the violence associated is something the player just must get through.

While the Mass Effect occurrences are more subtle compared to *Tomb Raider* and arguably more effective when contrasted. Rape as a trope is an unfortunate element that pervades media, from books to comics, television, and film. According to RAINN, “1 out of every 6 American women has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime,” which

underscores how disconnected the Crystal Dynamics statements were. There was also an emphasis by Rosenberg that when a player sees Lara facing these types of desperate situations, they will “start to root for her in a way that you [the player] might not root for a male character...they don’t project themselves onto the character. they’re more like ‘I want to protect her’” (Phillips, 2013), which presents a significant question as to immersion. Suppose imaginative immersion is about being able to connect with the character and the world. Why would male players need to feel protective of a female avatar to care about the character? They should care about her as a human and not just a potential object to be possessed or protected, which, this thesis argues, is why Shepard’s portrayal as a character is more potent.

Shepard is not someone who needs to be protected. Players can instead empathize and sympathize while recognizing the emotional turmoil that lies with someone charged with holding the galaxy on their shoulders, male or female. The small occurrences of discrimination in *Mass Effect* are more poignant because they represent everyday microaggressions versus the drastic shortcut other storytellers may take. Shepard's draw is that they are a person first, someone dealing with real difficulties, but ultimately someone who has an inner strength that is displayed through vulnerability and everyday actions.

By walking through Bizzocchi’s five pieces of video game framework (the story world, the character, the emotion, the narrative interface, and the micro-narratives), scholars have a clear framework to work with. We can compare the creation of FemShep’s character to characters who have come before and those who currently exist in the gaming world. We can also begin to explore the process through which male players may be able to identify toxic behaviors in their own community and hopefully address their own actions. Through BioWare’s

story-telling abilities and the amount of care put into the character, it is no wonder *Mass Effect*'s FemShep was able to become such a fan favorite.

CHAPTER 3: THE MOST PERFECT INSTRUMENT – VOICE ACTING AND THE LIVING CHARACTER

In 1980 members of the Screen Actors Guild took part in a 95-day strike, which resulted in actors receiving an increase in minimum salaries and a share of movies made for pay-tv (Saloman, 2008), previously making it the longest-running strike in the guild's history. A colossal 340-day strike beat this after the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists branch of the guild started their strike in October 2016. From here on referred to as SAG – AFTRA, this branch of the Screen Actors Guild was able to arrange for a three-year contract with major videogame companies, which introduced a sliding-scale bonus and pay, the requirement of additional transparencies for roles, and have opened the door on addressing the vocal stress faced by performers during recording sessions (Greene, 2016). These were small wins compared to what the thespians genuinely wanted, however. Actors consistently speak about how labor-intensive voice acting can be, and the summation of the strike has left a bad taste in the mouths of thespians in the guild as issues such as “compensation for gaming...not nearly the same as traditional media” remaining a problem (Wilbur, 2007).

Before the 2016 – 2017 strike, business transactions had been repeatedly tense between SAG – AFTRA and major video game producers, who held against giving any type of concession out of the fear that the strike would inspire unionization amongst other branches of the video game production industry. These included programmers and developers who work on the games. One of the companies' main arguments was that giving into the strike would not be fair since actors would receive more compensation than those who put in the work to code and create the games (Maiberg, 2017). The 11 developers and publishers targeted (including

Activision, Electronic Arts, Insomniac Games, Take -Two interactive, and WB Games) have shown no signs of loss now, but that is because “production cycles in the videogame space are very long,” according to Gabrielle Carteris, the president of SAG – AFTRA so there will be no sign of the damage done until much later (McNary, 2017).

Even if they are not showing the damage now, something brought the companies to the table, though; otherwise, the strike would still be going on. Actors undeniably bring games to life with mannerisms and quirks to make the leading characters feel more realistic and genuine. Actors also provide various sound effects and background vocals that filter through the games, including ambient speech, death cries, etc., that are often taken for granted. These gifts bring to the industry that has inspired fan following and adoration for different characters (Lufkin, 2018). Conventions can attract even more ticket sales if they host a popular voice actor as “some performers who voice popular characters have huge followings on social media platforms like Twitter” (Lufkin, 2018). Actors like Keith David have 47.9 thousand followers on Twitter, Cree Summer has 65.3K, Jennifer Hale has 77K, and Laura Bailey has over 415,500 followers. If even a fraction of these followers are encouraged to attend a convention, it is understandable why conventions do their best to pull in the talent that they can.

This chapter will review the industry of video game voice acting and what challenges actors face, including the physical strain and training techniques. Then we will move to focus on Jennifer Hale’s career and her previous influence before moving onto her acting in the video game franchise of *Mass Effect*. Finally, we will analyze comments from the fan base regarding Hale’s performance and their opinions regarding MaleShep and FemShep.

Vocal Performance History

While video games initially lacked any type of vocalization, with narrative and instructions being conveyed through text, speech synthesis was inevitable as the next technological step; game companies like LucasArts even had to dedicate an entire department to game speech (Gnatek, 2004). Once hit arcade games like *Berzerk* (1980) began to incorporate synthesized lines, the race to include more realistic voices was on.

The initial cost of computer compression used to get robots to say such things as “Chicken! Fight like a robot!” and “The humanoid must not escape!” was supposedly an outrageously large \$1000 per word. Despite the cost, Stern Electronics, the developer, reportedly still incorporated a 30-word vocabulary to give the game a larger draw (International Arcade Museum, 2017). In 1983 the arcade game *Sinistar* moved the industry from voice synthesis to voice clips as John Doremus, a radio personality, provided the voice of the titular villain Sinistar. His threatening iconic lines such as “I Hunger!” and “Run, coward!” are still recognized through the video game community and referenced in other games such as *World of Warcraft*, *Team Fortress 2*, and *League of Legends*, as well as television shows like *South Park*, and podcasts. With the movement to CD-ROM technology in the 1990s, more possibilities opened as video games were released on discs that could hold nearly 600 megabytes of data. As game developers had more storage to fill audio, which “used to be an afterthought,” moved to the point where it shared “center stage alongside other elements of video games” (Gantek, 2004). The days of text-based adventures were soon relegated to indie games as AAA producers focused on incorporating the new technology and bringing more realism to games.

Production budgets have only grown as video games have become more popular. As games started to “generate profits that rival Hollywood blockbusters,” theater-level acting has

become the standard instead of the rarity. Video game voice actors were once plucked off the street, but “as graphics have improved, so has the desire for more believable and meaningful performances from voice actors,” explained Dr. Roger Alan Altizer, Jr. (Lufkin, 2018). As the co-founder and associate director in the University of Utah’s Entertainment Arts and Engineering program, Altizer has closely examined video games and observed that “while it is more expensive to have voice actors in games than not, players have come to expect it as a staple” (Lufkin, 2018); even mobile phone-based games have included voice acting.

The more budget in the game, the more producers feel the pressure. Video games are “an inherently audiovisual experience” (Tucker, 2018); this includes everything from the background tracks to ambient noises. Dan Houser, Vice President of Creativity of Rockstar Games, head writer, and producer, also explicated in an interview regarding the making of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004) “we need audio to carry a lot of the weight because we are trying to convince people this is a huge and vibrant world...San Andreas has something like 600 different speaking parts, well over 10 hours of radio content and nearly 100,000 voice samples” (Gnatek, 2004) as they attempted to recreate the physical world to make for an immersive environment.

Compared to other research done on video games (e.g., media effects and representation), there is extraordinarily little done on voice acting in the field, despite the cult-like followings that some voice actors establish. It is part of the reason this thesis wanted to examine voice acting and what role it plays in our establishment of heroic profiles, specifically with to the popularity of Jennifer Hale, to successfully identify what elements of voice acting help establish FemShep as a well-rounded heroic character.

Vocal training is intense, and it is just one of the issues performers face in the industry as their articulation must be precise to try and reduce the number of takes to get the lines just right.

Any mistakes can mean another take, and with a microphone that catches nearly every sound in the booth, there is intense pressure on the actors. When recording sessions could last from four to eight hours while doing the same line repeatedly, voice actors do what they can to be as prepared as possible. Performers are expected, if they want to get a part, to undergo vocal training to learn about “placing the voice correctly, controlling the breath, and supporting the voice correctly” to sound its best and lower any risk of vocal injury (Blumenfeld, 2004, p. 15). Because of the delicate nature of vocal cords, any type of damage can mean a potential loss of income or permanent employment loss. Pharyngitis and laryngitis can often occur when actors do not have the proper training, and these conditions are both painful and can become chronic. This is often why voice actors are advised to consistently carry lozenges or other throat soothers as they will read lines for hours (Blumenfeld, 2004; Blu et al., 2006).

Vocal actors are often considered their own little subset. While some Hollywood names may be able to make it in the industry (e.g., Phil Lemarr and Mark Hamill), it can be challenging to manage. Interviews with voice actors often emphasize this; take this interview from IGN

Unfiltered with Cissy Jones:

Interviewer: So, what...what is-? What do you learn in voice in, in voice acting school?

Cissy Jones: *laughs* Well, you learn how to voice act. Um...

Interviewer: I mean, is it, is it like more of a confidence thing? Or a technique? Or...I guess all of it, right?

Cissy Jones: Yeah. So, I came at it with no background at all. So, for me, it was really learning acting. There is a lot of subtleties in voice-over that aren't necessary for an on-

camera career or, or, a theatrical career. Um, ya know, you...you don't have the luxury of facial expressions or body language. You have to convey that with your voice, right?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Cissy Jones: So, it's, it's learning how do you convey an eyebrow raise? Um...little things like that. But then also learning the differences between the genres of animation versus video game, versus commercial, versus promo, versus narration, versus trailer, and on and on.

Interviewer: Wow.

Cissy Jones: So, yeah, they're all...very specific muscles you have to learn to train.

(McCaffrey, 2018)

These video game roles are more prone to strain according to the demands of those who perform in other areas like commercials. In these positions, vocal performers are often required to shout, scream, exclaim, or whisper; all these actions tire out and risk straining the vocal cords. 12-year veteran Lani Minella, most well known as playing Nancy Drew in the video game series, stated that “nowhere else do you have to differentiate between being killed with a bullet or a rocket launcher” (Gnatek, 2004). Courtenay Taylor, the voice actor of the Female Sole Survivor in the game *Fallout 4*, was once out of work for three months after a vocal cord hemorrhage which required her to attend speech therapy while voicing a game (Frankel, 2017). Likewise, further in her interview Cissy Jones describes one recording session for video game screaming that left her vocal cords bleeding, and she lacked any ability to talk. In the article “The Man You’ve Killed the Most” by Kirk McKeand, Yuri Lowenthal, the “man who knows a thousand ways to die” often finds himself having to record not just main character lines but also lines for

background characters. In talking about one particular session regarding his role as a Splicer in Bioshock, he had this to say:

It was vocally stressful, but I just ploughed through the full four hours of screaming and killing and getting set on fire...going absolutely mad, and there was so much joy in it that my voice held out. I felt a lot more relaxed when I got out of that session. (McKeand, 2013)

Like many voice actors in the industry, Lowenthal must be flexible, but they all proclaim to love their work. On top of the risk of injury, recording sessions can last anywhere from four to eight hours, as stated before, depending on whether the director hears what they want with the line. While some studios are moving to motion capture to make the movement to realism, most studios maintain their recording booths. This means that actors are often trapped in the small area for hours on end with only the sound engineer and director, often with “some studios turn[ing] off the air-conditioning to kill any extra noise” (Gnatek, 2004). Directors oversee pronunciation and other technical elements, but “in the recording studio, it is the actor who tells the story” (Blumenfeld, 2004, p. 72), which is why choosing just the right actor is so important and so much time is put into it.

But how do people tell a story they do not even know? Actors are often expected to “deliver these lines in a vacuum, devoid of context” (Horwitz, 2012), with no clue as to what game they may be providing lines for as companies refuse to say what parts actors are reading (Needleman, 2016). While they may receive basic instructions, many actors do not know where their voices end up unless brought up by fans. Part of what makes voice actors interesting study material is that they can make characters popular through their performances and gain a following for themselves. There is a reoccurring pattern in various stories from performers where

their knowledge of how exactly their voices will be used is something they do not even know. This is partly why they went on strike in the first place. President of Scholastic media since 1995, and producer of over 300 productions, Deborah Forte, expanded on the issue facing many actors as “voice acting is like compressing all five senses into one... Through sound, we need to be able to imagine a complete person... Those who do it well can convey everything through their performance- attitude, age, gender, personality, etc.,” (Blu et al., 2006, p. 153), making it a complicated technique to master. If an actor cannot create a successful performance and the lines come off as stilted or mechanical, the game suffers, or worse, becomes a meme. For example, we can look at William Shatner as *Star Trek*'s Captain James T. Kirk. With his random staccato pauses and strange jumps in pitch and inflection, his over-the-top mannerisms remain a staple go-to for any example of overacting.

The alternate side of the scale is even played on in *Mass Effect*, where a tongue-in-cheek advertisement plays on the Citadel in *Mass Effect 2*, promoting an all Elcor cast of Hamlet. The Elcor are massive aliens who resemble elephants without the trunk, and as a race, are remarkably slow. Their species relies on astonishingly slight body language, subvocalized infrasound, and scent. These subtleties are lost on other species, so they will preface whatever they say with what emotion they are trying to convey. What follows is a bit of one of the advertisements which play out in the most monotonous of tones:

Gertrude: Uneasy: What wilt thou do. Thou wilt not murder me. Help. Help. Ho.

Polonius: Shocked: What ho. Help. Help. Help.

Hamlet: Startled: How now. A rat. Dead for a ducat. Dead.

Polonius: Agonized: O. I am slain.

Gertrude: Horrified: O me. What has thou done?

Hamlet: Shaken: Nay. I know not. Is it the king?

Gertrude: Horror gives way to anger: O. What rash and bloody deed is this.

Hamlet: Venomous Sarcasm: What a piece of work is a man!

Moreover, at the end, an Elcor provides this final line after the play is stated to be fourteen hours long: “Insincere endorsement: You have not experienced Shakespeare until you have heard him in the voice of Elcor.” With the game creators intentionally throwing in such jokes, it is hard to say that they are not aware of voice power.

Jennifer Hale: A Profile

With so little research done in the field of voice acting, scholars must ask, “what elements make a voice heroic?” What essentials do people look for in a leader? Particularly a female leader? What determines whether we find voices realistic in an artificial video game setting?

Jennifer Hale (*fig. 24*) is in the *2013 Gamer’s Edition of the Guinness Book of World Records*, where she was chosen as “the most prolific (female) video game voice actor.” The Canadian American has provided the voices of Ivy from the animated version of *Where on Earth is Carmen Sandiego?* (1994-1998), Black Cat (and others) on *Spider-Man: The Animated Series* (1995-1997), various Disney Princesses in *House of Mouse* (2001-2002), and multiple female heroes and villains in the animated series of DC’s *Justice League* (2002-2006) just to name an exceedingly small amount of her voiceover work. Any individual who had watched cartoons ten years before the original *Mass Effect* was released would have been familiar with her voice.

The producers of *Mass Effect*'s choice to have Hale play FemShep is a bold statement because of the range Hale can provide; this means that the character could have had multiple interpretations. Hale can play soft and sensitive, hot-headed, and arrogant, or chilling and seductive. For those well-associated with the beginning of her voice-over career, Ivy (*fig. 27*) in *Where on Earth is Carmen Sandiego?* was the first character she provided work for. An 18-year-old ACME detective, Ivy was the titular action girl and was established as a headstrong and athletic elder twin of the duo dedicated to stopping their infamous thief counterpart. The original role helped codify Hale's speech as heroic, and she brings this to FemShep.



Figure 24 Jennifer Hale (Picture retrieved from SBV Talent Agency, 2019)

Susan Blu, a veteran in the field of animation voice-over who graduated into voice directing, wrote that “animation work...is extremely colorful, and calls for very versatile actors with many different, often far-out, character voices. There is [sic] absolutely no inhibitions in animation work” (9) as “the best voice-overs are the ones that consumers find believable” (p.

12); this believability is part of what makes Hale's performance more popular than Mark Meers, her MaleShep counterpart, according to players who prefer her.

What does Hale have that other voice actors do not, that she was chosen for this project? We can gather this information by looking at the previous roles that Hale had played before *Mass Effect* was released. On top of doing the grunts for Samus Aran in *Metroid Prime* (2002), Hale had previously acted in three BioWare games: *Baldur's Gate*, *Baldur's Gate II*, and *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*.

In *Baldur's Gate*, Hale voiced Dynaheir, a human Invoker who falls into the Lawful Good alignment. According to her biography from the *Baldur's Gate* informational book, Dynaheir "is apparently from the far-eastern nation of Rashemene...she seems very sure of herself, is possessed with an old-world sensibility, and is very demanding of her companions," and it shows through the voice acting. Ignoring the unfortunate element of a white woman voicing a black female character, Dynaheir was given a commanding, unsubtle presence in her speech. Using "thy" instead of "thee" and "thou" like other characters, Dynaheir is sure to make her presence known whenever the player chooses her; doubly so should the player make her unhappy. A woman who has no qualms about expressing her opinion, much to the ire of many of the other companions, the player can recruit this character in the second chapter of the game. Suppose she is unhappy/annoyed with the party and player. In that case, she will demand, "Must I watch over this group as a nanny the child?!" and if the player chooses to appoint her as a Leader, she will say in a magnanimous fashion, "A wise choice to appoint the wiser." Please her, and the player will receive a compliment with a soft, tired sounding "Thy decency is refreshing when so many we meet are...lacking." Ultimately, Dynaheir has around 37 lines the player can

cause to occur depending on the situation; all reveal Dynaheir as a woman set in her beliefs and values who is unwilling to bend for anyone or anything.

Mazzy Fentan, a halfling fighter, and Hale's role in *Baldur's Gate II* was far more reserved. Though she still fell into the Lawful Good alignment, Mazzy shows more humility, with her lines being softer and more tactful. If Mazzy becomes unhappy/annoyed, she will state in a displeased tone, "I trust this current...direction we are on will not continue," while if the player appoints her as a leader, they will receive a modest "In Arvoreen's name, I shall do all I can to lead you through these perilous times." Even when breaking up with the player's party should they turn too much towards an evil alignment, Mazzy does not raise her voice the way Dynaheir would; instead, she states firmly that her association with the party is at an end. The only time Mazzy raises her voice is during her battle cries or during a morale failure. At around 52 instances of dialogue, the halfling demonstrates herself as someone of genuine faith in her god and a morally upstanding individual willing to take on any challenge.

In *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, Hale voiced Bastila Shan, which shows more of her range. Bastila Shan is a Jedi Master who can be swayed towards the Light Side or Dark Side, depending on the player's choice. Referred to as KOTOR by fans, the game is set thousands of years before *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* during an era where the Jedi have been scattered or turned to the Dark Side of the Force. One of the player's first goals is to find Bastila Shan before the Sith forces do, as she is a renowned master for her battle meditation technique. Once found, the player can recruit her as one of their party companions, and she is also one of the romanceable companions for a Light-side male main character. Initially, Bastila Shan is composed, with a hint of an accent, and softly spoken when she is part of the Jedi Order. There is a

hint of hesitation when she interacts with the main character, but this can also be connected to the game's twist in which Bastila plays a prominent role. As Jedi attempt to stay away from negative emotions, the calmness of Hale's performance makes sense. Even when discussing something upsetting or happy, she maintains a soft, reserved tone as she restrains herself from any emotion. This is explained in-game through Bastila's exposition of the Jedi position on families and romance.

Player: [chooses the option 'You aren't allowed to love?']

Bastila Shan: **Detached informative tone** Emotional entanglements can be dangerous. They can impair rational thought; they can lead to outbursts of uncontrolled emotion. A Jedi must be above such things.

Though Bastila can be short at times or even flustered, it does not compare to when she falls to the Dark Side. Her voice becomes tenser or flirtier depending on the situation. As she rebels against the Jedi Council, her voice fills with more fiery sharpness. However, it maintains a trace of the previous reservation to hint 1) she can be turned back to the Light Side, and 2) that shows that her habit of staying soft-spoken remains a key character trait. Bastila will never be a bombastic person, but the subtlety in her performance demonstrates the difference made in her character.

Players who enjoyed these games would have also looked forward to the new BioWare roleplaying game and would have been cued towards Hale as a character with a strong personality no matter whom she voiced. It was more of a question of what type of personality the character would have.

Transportation and Immersion

This would not be as important if *Mass Effect* were not a role-playing game (RPG), which relies on immersion. Not all players fully immerse and accept the “role” of the main character, but RPGs have complex narrative structures that allow for more complex stories and emotions for characters (Ip, 2011). These complex stories can cause “a convergent process, where all mental systems and capacities become focused on events occurring in the narrative” (Green & Brock, 2000, p. 701) as players allow themselves to be drawn into fictional involvement due to perceived stakes of well-written and developed stories. This concept of “transportation,” as coined by R.J. Gerrig in his 1993 book *Experiencing Narrative Worlds*, was used to explain how an individual could become “so completely wrapped-up in a narrative that the outside world begins to receive only secondary processing” (Mahood & Hanus, 2015); principal elements include emotional involvement in the narrative or with the characters, cognitive involvement with the story, lack of cognitive involvement with surroundings, and feelings of suspense with regards to the story (Green & Brock, 2000). While Gerrig was referencing written novels, other studies have shown that individuals can become transported by televised narratives and role-playing video games.

Protagonists tend to be the focal point of the story in video games; the audience will follow their journey and see how they change according to the narrative's plot. As discussed before, games must hit the necessary keynotes to entrap their audience in the world when it comes to immersion. Transportation is far more likely to occur when protagonists are more sympathetic and the work of high quality (Green & Brock, 2000); a reason that AAA games are judged more critically for anything that causes players to be broken out of their immersion in the game's setting. Transportation and immersion are critical for roleplaying games. When

individuals are invested in the story, they are more likely to continue playing the game than something they find boring or of inferior quality. These elements also help shape player emotional experiences, which can shape individual world views as there is a link between specific cognitions and emotional states (Peters et al., 2004).

Nevertheless, voiced characters are ultimately a double-edged sword. C.J. Miozzi expresses the issues with vocal performance in video games:

Players seeking escapism wish to take on the role of a story's hero, and a voice other than their own jars them from this fantasy. By leaving the protagonist a clean slate, the player can fill in the blanks as he sees fit... [but] in RPGs in which interaction is paramount, that lack of characterization actually serves to break immersion due to the jarring disparity between voiced NPCs and the silence protagonist. (2012)

What Miozzi considers a drawback of pulling the player out of the immersion by having the character has a different voice than the player is a valuable tool. The female voice has a legacy of being a subversive element in film studies. Though most work focuses on non-diegetic dialogue, many of the points brought up by feminist critics can be applied to diegetic lines uttered by Shepard in battle. With roots in film studies, Mulvey's feminist theory of the male gaze can be applied as much to the new digital counterpart as it was to its silver screen predecessor. By having a female voice consistently emanate from the screen, the spectator of the male gamer "is allowed a distancing awareness that makes a less ideologically complicit reading of the texts possible without necessitating a complete rejection" (Hollinger, 2017) of the intended message or viewpoint.

Though existing in a male-dominated space, Mass Effect creates a “terrain of contesting representations” (Ryan, 1988, p. 483). There is no way to escape Jennifer Hale’s performance in the narrative. Even if we were to disregard the cinematic cut scenes, her voice flows from the screen consistently. Through the game, whether in battle or when exploring the world, Shepard will make comments and observations or even share banter with their teammates. The player navigates the avatar around various areas. Players are even supplied with extra knowledge as Shepard’s communicator will occasionally flare up with diegetic lines from those located elsewhere in the world. While a player could theoretically turn off the sound and put on the subtitles, this serves to deprive said individual of a significant element of the game experience and these bits of information. Game developers have also offered the added incentive to have different lines based on the characters' characters on missions, adding replay value for consumers. This encourages players to go through the game or scenario several times, increasing their exposure to Hale’s voice by proxy when playing as FemShep.

While the gaze may be male dominated, by having Shepard’s voice perpetually coming from the screen, there exists a narrative battle “for control of the story between various competing elements in the text” (Hollinger, 2017) as word and image on screen combat each other. Though some male players may choose the female version of Shepard, they have “something to look at” as they play through the game, they still become immersed or transported due to the high emotional stakes portrayed in the game. Male gamers still become female Shepard in their own way. They are situated in a role that is not viewed as typically feminine while constantly being reminded they are female by the voiced dialogue. This serves to put the player in a place that refuses to allow for a singular space from which to read the text, denying

them a position that is “completely supportive of women’s positioning under the patriarchal status quo” (Hollinger, 2017).

But this reading also implies that any female voice would do. Instead, by choosing Hale, they appealed to a deeper part of human psychology. The human voice's role in perceiving and accepting information is not one we tend to think about consciously. However, for vocal directors, it is a fundamental element they consider when casting for roles. In the growing literature on voice pitch and frequency, a clear pattern has emerged. Human vocal pitch influences whom we find credible, male or female, or whom we find attractive. As one of the most reliable signals of age (Baken, 2005), a voice pitch is linked to several other essential factors. Higher-pitched voices are more attractive in women but are also “associated with negative emotions such as panic, fear, and stress” (Klofstad et al., 2015) and viewed as more emotional and less rational overall.

Meanwhile, lower-pitched voices in men or women are perceived as more dominant. Hale’s pitch is by far on the lower end of the frequency, especially compared to someone like fellow actress Laura Bailey. This is seen in the roles they are cast in as well; where Hale’s filmography is filled with more Action Girl roles than Princess roles, Laura Bailey can be found playing children or more traditionally feminine characters. While she is more active in anime, Bailey provides the voice of Gotenks in the dubbed *Dragonball Z* series (2002-2006), Mary Jane Watson in the *Marvel’s Spider-Man* (2018) video game, and Jaina Proudmoore in *World of Warcraft* (2008-2018) to name a few. There is, however, no hard rule regarding voice actors, so Bailey is featured playing Natasha Romanoff (aka Black Widow) from *The Avengers*. However, she does so in the humorous *Lego Marvel Super Heroes* (2013) video game series.

If Laura Bailey had voiced the female Shepard, it would have resulted in a significantly different character reading. Both men and women perceive female leaders with lower voices as stronger and more competent (Klofstad et al., 2013). Lower voices “have higher levels of testosterone, are physically stronger, and are more aggressive” (Klofstad et al., 2013), which appeals as a “reliable signal of physical prowess and strength,” as well as competence, integrity, and older age to individuals looking for a reliable leader (Tigue et al., 2012; Klofstad et al., 2012). The casting director specifically chose Hale based on her previous filmography and her audition because she was able to evoke the leader archetype and fit into the marine role in a manner that would appeal psychologically to the gaming population.

As an identified Marine, space or otherwise, there are certain traits that Shepard, male or female, must exhibit to come off as credible. The Marine Corps came into their power and prestige during World War I and World War II due to their wartime accomplishments. Histories of the Marine Corps are filled with stories of victories and battles that served “as a test of cultural mettle and institutional reputation” (Cameron, 1994, p. 23) to build up the military group as a modern American version of the Elite Warrior myth. Between their military escapades, their degree of selectivity and elitism, and their public relations program, the Marine Corps has come to be known as “the best of the best” in the American military tradition (Millett, 1991, p. 289). Therefore, Shepard's first words are decisive to help set up her credibility, particularly as a female Marine.

We can look at her previous video game roles that players would have been aware of; in each, Hale performs as a character solid in their foundations, whether right or wrong. This is reflective of most characters Hale's voices as well, not just her video game counterparts. Even when being turned to the Dark or Light side, Bastila Shan is confident in whatever stance she

finds. Killer Frost in *Justice League, the Animated Series*, was a psychopath with a love for killing, while in *The Real Adventures of Johnny Quest* (1996-1997), she portrays the idealistic, ambitious Jessie Bannon, daughter of Race Bannon. In 2000, Hale also gave an English-accented voice to the rebellious ex-Major Sarah Parker in the tactics game *Ground Control* and its expansion pack *Ground Control: Dark Conspiracy*. When choosing Hale, the production directors were choosing someone who had well established themselves as a thespian who could play the role of a solid female character, good or not-so-good. Bastila Shan had become a fan favorite, making her a voice actor recognizable by other people who had already played BioWare games with the additional elements of being a favorite character. It also left it open for interpretation of how Hale would be directed to go about her role as Shepard.

It emphasizes the initial voiced encounter between Shepard as they observe fellow shipmates Kaidan and Joker argue over the purpose of alien agent Nihlus onboard their ship. The conversation goes as follows:

Joker: I hate that guy.

Kaidan: Nihlus gave you a compliment...so you hate him?

Joker: You remember to zip up your jumpsuit on the way out of the bathroom? That's good. I just jumped us halfway across the galaxy and hit a target the size of a pinhead. So that's incredible!

Joker: Besides, Spectres are trouble. I don't like having him on board. Call me paranoid.

Kaidan: You're paranoid. The Council helped fund this project. They have a right to send someone to keep an eye on their investment.

Joker: Yeah, that is the official story. But only an idiot believes the official story.

It is at this point that Shepard has three different options through the dialogue wheel: The first, placed in the uppermost *Paragon* slot, is indicated as “I agree.”; the second in the *Neutral* slot gives the description “You’re overreacting.”; the final option in the *Renegade* option presents as “Cut the chatter!” Even without the full lines, there are definite personality associations within the hinted possibilities. The first line has the initial implication that what will follow will support Joker’s assertion that the alien presence on board is a potential spy. The second, an agreement with Kaidan and a dismissal that Joker is overreacting. From the exclamation point, the third final option is expected to be an admonishment directed at one or both men. Each of these options offers a potential reaction that the player has an emotional connotation with. The wrong tone or inflection and the character's construction potentially fall apart as expectation collides with the performance during this pivotal moment. The lines go as follows with Hale’s emphasis in asterisks:

Paragon Option: *Suspicious agreement* They don’t send Spectres on shakedown runs.

Neutral Option: *Playful familiarity* You always expect the worst.

Renegade Option: *Sharp Reprimand* That’s enough. You’re soldiers. Act like it!

Hale’s performance of these initial lines is in no way remarkable. However, by smoothly delivering the lines in a manner that portrays an individual personality, she assists in establishing the character's credibility and the game. Because Hale adds her emotional nuances to the lines, she breathes embodiment into Shepard's soldier persona. Jane Shepard becomes real as Hale’s performance melds what is, in all essence, a virtual doll into an actual being by combining it with a disembodied element. Shunsuke Nozawa describes the process as “the metaphor of *naka no hito*” (Nozawa, 2016, p. 170) and the concept of *ensoulment* where actors encapsulate themselves “inside” characters to give their typically limited bodies a sense of emotional and

psychological power. While players know that the two are not the same, performers accept a constant dual identity where they both are and are not the character. This is since fans understand the performance as a presence in its own right, but there is forever a connection with the performer as an element of that character that is inseparable from its fixed self. While this brings up questions of how identity is conceived and acted upon, those are best left for another study, and we will continue to focus on Shepard and her construction.

What can be agreed upon is that the voice is an emanation of the soul and serves as a valuable tool in understanding a person. One who is consistently sarcastic and quippy, like Joker's character, is portrayed by Seth Green. By 2007 Green had established himself in comedy based on roles like Chris Griffin in *Family Guy*, his appearances on *Saturday Night Live* and *MADtv*, and his work on the still on-going show *Robot Chicken* as the co-creator, director, writer, and executive producer, but this is just to name a few. By casting Seth Green as Joker, there was the expectation that Joker would be a humorous character. They capitalized on that with his first few lines, where he shows a disregard for the rank and pomp of military protocol. He becomes the “normal man” in the military and provides a character who does not care about the rules and ranks to speak his mind for an entertaining effect.

That is not the only thing Green is known for, however. Fans of Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) will protest, citing his role as Daniel “Oz” Osbourne as the most critical role they remember him performing. There Green played a stoic, thoughtful, philosophical character who acted as Willow Rosenberg's main love interest for seasons 2, 3, and 4 before his exit. They incorporate these elements as well. During dire moments and conversations with the pilot, players will find that Joker has a deeper understanding of politics and situations in the galaxy than he may appear. By utilizing Seth Green as the voice actor, they

can give players hints at the deeper character underneath the character's flippant outer exterior that becomes clear during gameplay. The text relies on players being familiar with Seth Green to signal the nuance of the character. Yes, he is a comedian, but there is a deeper side to Joker, which comes out as the player endures countless trials with him at the helm of the ship.

When applying the concept of *naka no hito*, the audience understands that Seth Green is not Joker, but Joker contains elements that the audience will relate to Seth Green. Voice actors, because their labor space is in front of a microphone and not visible in front of the audience, is “necessarily effaced in the narrative text in which their characters appear” (Nozawa, 2013); their value is determined by how well they bring identity to their characters. Instead of breathing life into themselves as they act out on the screen instead, they breathe life into dolls that become elements of their identity that they show to the audience. On top of this, voice actors must also adhere to the desires of the vocal directors. In a C2E2⁴ interview when she asked about performances that had been “phoned in,” Hale explained it in the best terms she could while speaking with the interviewers:

Hale: When you get those uneven shows where some people are brilliant, and some people are phoning it in? And others you’re like what are they doing? And others are like, well, that was interesting. The director is not as keyed into the actors. Directors have so much to think about. Some are just more connected to the acting and the actors. Or producers, like, if you look at the *Battlestar Galactica* reboot series, I mean Ron Moore and...I just fully nailed, like, character development and humanity. Some shows come to everybody. Every show’s got an angle. Every game’s got an angle. Are we coming at this from the humanity of it? Are we coming at it from the brilliance of it? Are we

⁴ C2E2 is the Chicago Comic and Entertainment Expo, first established in 2010.

coming at it from the action of the story? And then it's up to the actors to hold their own, you know, standards. Where they expect them to be. And then I've been on sets where I've been asked to do stuff, and I'm like it's going to look awful. I'm gonna look like the worst actor in the world.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Hale: And the whole crew is glaring at you because it's the eighth or tenth time the director's asked you to do it again, and you know it's *wrong*.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Hale: But you have to do it because all those people need to go to lunch. So, you do that really bad take, and that's the one they put in. You're like, okay, ah, oh well.

Interviewer: Yeah, sometimes you've just gotta power through it.

Hale: It's not about me. As an actor, the bottom line is it's not about you. It's not...you don't matter. You're simply a vessel for what the writer wrote and what the people need.

These vocal performances are ultimately mediated, modulated, and manipulated through technology and staff. The audience is receiving an edited appearance that fits a character and/or the story at large. These restrained elements are then encased into a very public mask in the form of the character, which the audience then connects straight back to that voice actor, but the actor is also not important at all. When a person “whose job centrally involves an art of becoming a nobody” (Nozawa, 2016, p. 189) is viewed, people will then look at the different personae they have taken on as no proper understanding of the real person exists. Unlike Hollywood celebrities who tend to have very open lives, voice actors are relatively unknown outside their roles.⁵ This can lead to an unfortunate cross between the character and the voice actor.

⁵ This is not to say that voice actors do not mediate their lives the way more well-known actors do. Voice actors will also have agents and/or agencies who help craft their image for the public, but much less tends to be known overall.

In 2020, Laura Bailey received death threats and abuse over her role as Abby in *The Last of Us Part II*. These threats have nothing to do with the role's acting performance, but instead because of actions her character performed in the game (Tassi, 2020; Mamiit, 2020). No form of harassment should be tolerated, but this is alarming in how the lines between actor and vessel have crossed. Because of a controversial action that fans did not take well, Bailey became the target of ire because her voice was identified with Abby. It does reveal a connection that fans make between performer and character.

The line between actor/persona and between the intertextual personas can blur. Similarly, Hale's previous performances help to show and create depth in Shepard's character. Younger audiences would have been cued to her voice through previous occurrences in animated media, while older audiences would have experienced her in other video games. These performances would have tied together and created expectations for the audience members as to what to expect.

This hypothesis is all conjecture without actual fan discourse to support it, of course. After examining dialogue in the fan forums, Youtube videos and their accompanying comments sections, and various articles on the popularity of Hale's Shepard versus Meer's Shepard, a pattern emerged. Including all discussion would have made this chapter potentially endless, so this thesis will focus on comments that represented overall trends. These comments are included in their completeness and through multiple years to avoid any claim of bias when presenting commentary from the fanbase.

Videos comparing MaleShep to FemShep on their performance of various lines are prevalent on Youtube. These videos clip together scenes, alternating from one character to the other so that viewers can hear the performances back to back instead of having to alternate

playthroughs. These videos also allow players who have no intent to do multiple playthroughs to experience one version or the other for any three games. One of the videos that compare performances is “*Mass Effect* Voice Acting Male and Female Shepard,” compiled by user seePyou has over 169,000 views and is presented by Youtube as the most relevant and most viewed comparison of the two Shepards from their end of game speech from the first *Mass Effect*, set before the final battle section and climax of the game.

The user gave this preface to the video:

Mass Effect main character voice acting varies vastly between the two genders. My opinion is that the female voice actor, Jennifer Hale, has done a vastly superior job at bringing a character to life than her opposite number, Mark Meer, who always sounding (sic) the same. This goes directly to the immersion of the story and when I first played ME with a male protagonist I was slightly annoyed at this flat voice acting, especially (sic) when I reached the Normandy speech. Out of curiosity (sic), I started a female character and speed (sic) up to that point. From the very first delivery of that speech send (sic) shivers down my spine. I do not think many people know this, so I made this video to show exactly how different it is and what people are missing from an awesome voice acting. (User seePyou, 2009)

And when observing other comments related to the performances, this became a running theme. When taking comments from Youtube, The Escapist forums, Reddit, and other sites, there were many threads about MaleShep vs. FemShep. Unfortunately, the BioWare Fan forums were taken down in 2016 (Frank, 2016), so this thesis could not pull comments from that source of fan discourse.

The top comment on this video can be seen in Figure 25. This first comment is perhaps the most representative of comments found on message boards.



Figure 25 Youtube Comment by user Arse Biscuits (2009)

Overall, suppose a man finds Hale’s performance of Shepard as more intriguing and enjoyable, and he identifies himself as male in the comment. In that case, he will comment on his pleasure and qualify it because he is male and *still* enjoys it. It is a strange defense when considering the number of women who play roleplaying games where there is a male protagonist. The amount of self-identified male users that qualify their statement by reassessing their connection with their masculinity while putting forward that they prefer FemShep because of Hale’s voice acting is part of what spurred this study. Female players do not go out of their way to state that they prefer male avatars as women or are women and still prefer a male avatar despite the gender difference. Male users' defensiveness adds credence to the idea that preferring a feminine character is supposed to be avoided. The concept of video games, both to developers and users, still resonates as a ‘boys club,’ but FemShep can still have these people relate and prefer her. With the amount of abuse revealed in the video game industry, both in commercial and non-commercial channels, it becomes imperative to generate more profound respect for female and POC gamers. Hale can bring these people towards identifying with a female main character, not because they know her previously or because they in some way want to protect her, which is a step forward in the gaming sphere.

This defensive trend continues in Figure 26, a comment from Reddit user LordoftheKinks, which delves into a further explanation of why he chose FemShep over MaleShep. In terms of choosing one gender over the other, we can then compare this comment with Figure 27, where another user states the same preference, but more derisively, and Figure 28, which contains two users' comments about the voice acting differences between Meer and Hale.



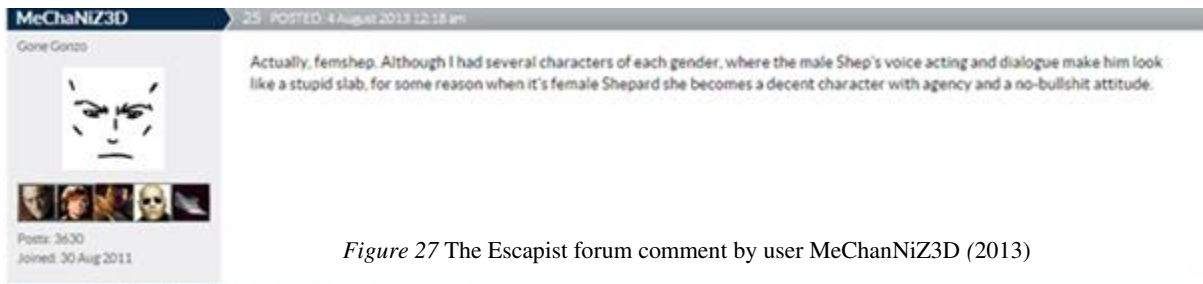
lordofthekinks · 1 point · 6 years ago · edited 6 years ago

My only full playthrough character is femshep (soldier). And I only continued that character after ME1 (had another maleshep infiltrator character too from ME1) because I liked Hale's voice acting better.

Though I think Mark Meer really doesn't deserve all the stick he gets from femshep fans. I thought he did a great job. It's just that I preferred Hale. My maleshep character is as paragon as I can stand (I just can't select the super-righteous sounding dialogues), and he sounds great.



I'm a guy, btw.

Figure 26 Reddit Comment by user LordoftheKinks (2014)



MeChanNiZ3D · 25 · POSTED: 4 August 2013 12:18 am

Gone Gonzo



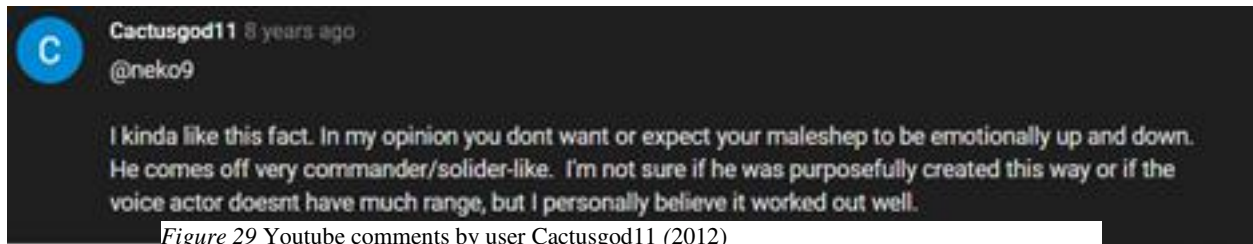
Posts: 3630
Joined: 30 Aug 2011

Actually, femshep. Although I had several characters of each gender, where the male Shep's voice acting and dialogue make him look like a stupid slab, for some reason when it's female Shepard she becomes a decent character with agency and a no-bullshit attitude.

Figure 27 The Escapist forum comment by user MeChanNiZ3D (2013)



I compare these comments because it again represents a typical pattern when it comes to comparing the voice acting between the two characters. Hale's performance has a relative trend of being held in higher regard by the users who do see fit to comment on these discussions. In the Figure 29 comment, we can also begin to see the integration of the paragon and renegade system into choosing a specific gender for the paragon or renegade alignments. This also became a pattern, as users choosing FemShep for their renegade playthrough while maintaining MaleShep for their paragon playthrough became prominent in comments. Simultaneously, the reason for the gender difference theory, evidence for an intertextual link between what players preferred and what they had seen previously, did stand out.



MaleShep as a paragon, according to users, comes off as the more quintessential sci-fi hero, soldier, and is compared to Picard from *Star Trek* (fig. 30). Meanwhile, FemShep is likewise compared to Ripley or Sarah Connor, who are both more renegade in their actions.



Figure 30 Escapist forum comments by users Hagi and Eddie the Head (2013)

Ellen Ripley from the *Alien* series repeatedly goes against orders and the will of the Weyland-Yutani Corporation as she survives the opposing Xenomorphs. *Alien* (1979) and *Aliens* (1986) were both praised for their use of a woman as the hero, a decision made by Ridley Scott that is still considered “one of the most famous gender swaps in film history” (Robinson, 2015). Sarah Connor is one of the protagonists from the *Terminator* series and is also considered a strong female protagonist. In *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), Sarah Connor had transformed from the ordinary college student from the original 1984 film to a full-fledged warrior, which is where the primary comparison comes from.

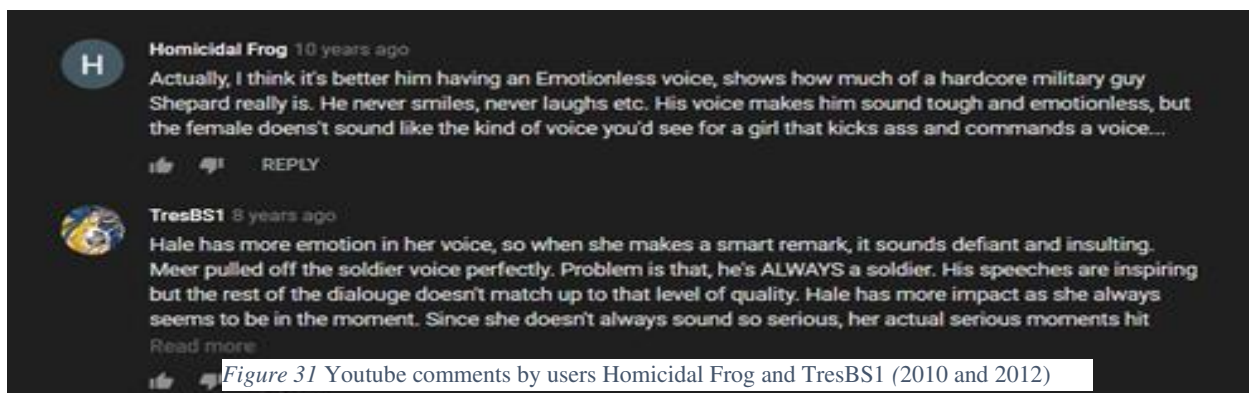


Figure 31 Youtube comments by users Homicidal Frog and TresBS1 (2010 and 2012)

When examining what brings people to identify with certain characters, scholars must look at the previously mentioned texts. Previously this thesis discussed Samus Aran and Lara Croft, but audiences are also drawing comparisons between all other forms of media. These obligatory intertextual comparisons are part of why FemShep is important. When looking to create future science fiction or action series, FemShep has the potential to point out that, like Ripley, there is potential in replacing male heroes with female ones. If they are to cast a female hero, it needs to be one with personality, not just a figure who is simply a token woman in a masculine role.

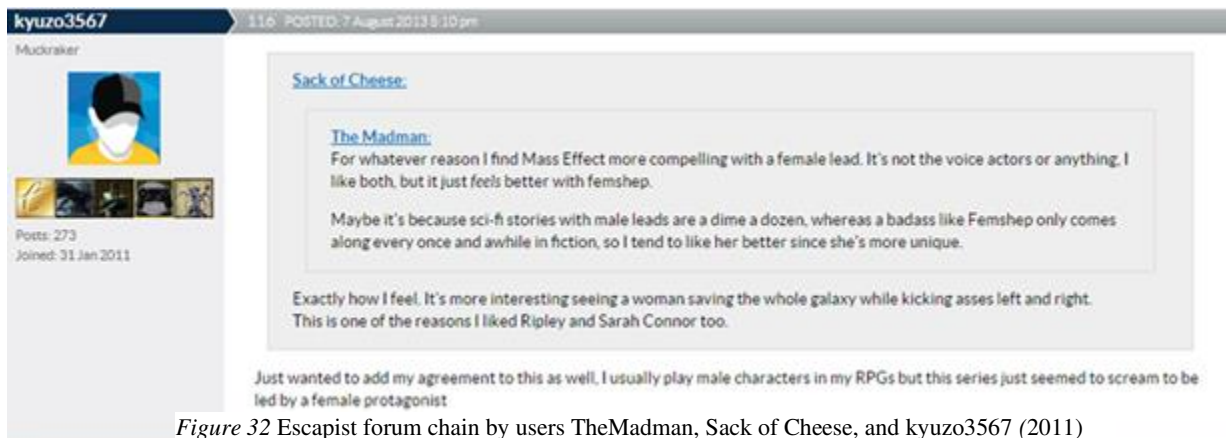


Figure 32 Escapist forum chain by users TheMadman, Sack of Cheese, and kyuzo3567 (2011)

The reason MaleShep is viewed as what a “soldier should sound like” (Fig. 29-32) because science fiction and action, as genres, are oversaturated with male heroes who fit a logical stereotype. They are allowed emotions, but these emotions usually are anger and frustration, which is why FemShep may sound “a completely different person between dialogs/cutscenes,” as one user stated. Female characters can get away with having more emotion, but in that way, males should be able to. When looking to the future, particularly idyllic futures, gender equality is a common theme. To get there, we must evaluate the current stereotypes and personalities we hold close to the cultural chest. We learn how to be heroes from watching and understanding representations of heroes in media and stories. There is a call for more female heroes in media from the audience, but there is a lack of support by companies who

still believe that video games are a masculine realm (Kuchera, 2012; Payne, 2013). This is coupled with the fact that those who work on video games are also mostly male, and people will write what they know (Makuch, 2014a). The industry is flooded with white, heterosexual men, and it will take work to make sure more options are available. Part of this work shows companies that with the right backing, a game with a female protagonist can be just as, if not more successful, than its male counterparts. To do that, though, the protagonist needs to be more than a woman with masculine traits. They must be a character with a life of their own, which means having a person full of personality behind them.

The data and research represent why there should be a more defined study as to why people find one voice more credible than the other. While not everyone has a preference or even finds Hale's performance engaging, there is an explicit gathering of fans who play the Shepard female version because of her. There are plenty of reasons why one might choose to play a male or female Shepard; the player might too deeply identify with their gender to give themselves over to an alternate one or prefer to watch one body shape over the other. Hale's performance brought about a portion of this popularity. Hale's voice contributes to Shepard's character and how people interpret and react to her, making her a figure that a community rallied behind to prove that she was marketable.

Voice acting is a powerful tool that can draw audiences in and be utilized the same way strong narrative and game design is. The impressions that an actor makes an impact whether audiences see them or not. Performances touch the heart more than a mute main character does, and Hale's performance of FemShep is a draw to the character for those who usually would not play a female protagonist. Due to the other characters she played, the more mature sound of her voice, and the emotional range she put into Shepard, she became the token Shepard for many in

the community, which had yet to be seen in video games before. Hale's powerful performance breathed life into what could have been a bland figure or another barbie doll in the video game world, and instead, FemShep rose to be as heroic as her counterpart. The influence of voice actors still has quite a bit of area to be explored, but this is a potential jumping-off point for the research; but in the meantime, scholars can enjoy one of the top 100 video game characters in the universe.

CHAPTER IV: THE END OF A JOURNEY IS THE BEGINNING OF ANOTHER

This thesis started several years ago, and in that time, I have seen multiple scandals, disappointments, and joys go through the gaming community. Most recently *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020), which had gained attention from marginalized audiences by offering the potential of creating a transgender or non-gender conforming protagonists. When the game was launched on December 10, 2020, it was not only criticized for the issues, glitches, and unfinished nature of the game, but for the limitations on character representation they had been promised. Pronouns for the protagonist were not decided by players, but instead on the vocal option they chose during their character creation (Borsari, 2020). While players could customize everything from hair to genitalia, if a character had a “feminine” voice, i.e., high pitched voice, they would be referred to as she/her, while if they had a deeper “masculine” voice, they would be addressed as he/him which, along with heavy sexualization of trans bodies, lead to denouncement from trans activists and complaints from the player base (Driscroll, 2020).

As the video game community and industry continue to experience growing pains from hegemonic ebb and flow, scholars will be presented with new digital pathways to dig out ideological work embedded in code. The only question that remains is where to start and how to proceed. This thesis examined Shepard as a preliminary study on the importance of the female hero in cyberspace, and what elements came together to make her a fan favorite by analyzing the importance of the immersive elements of narrative and vocal performance. In this concluding chapter, this thesis will review the research questions with the evaluations, consider the broader relevance of this research on the field of Media and Communication Studies, scrutinize the limitations of the study, and suggest future paths of research.

Review

This study focused on female characters in video games and the effect of strong characters of heroic women in cyberspace. This thesis was also inspired by a fascination with voice acting, particularly as someone familiar with anime and the ardent fan following held by voice actors in Japan. Because of a lack of literature in the Western field, this thesis decided to explore and examine Western video games to understand how voice acting influenced audiences. FemShep was naturally the intersection between the two as the first female character to warrant her own separate box art and trailer of a AAA game where players could choose the protagonist's gender.

Beginning this study, one of the central questions I wanted to examine was what made FemShep effective and why. Why, out of all the female characters included in games, did FemShep warrant her own personal cover art for the final game of the installment. While she was not the first female video game hero, and certainly not the last, my hypothesis was that she took a step forward for all female characters, as she was able to differentiate herself from her male counterpart, and for the game to have two different figures based on voice work and small changes to the narrative.

Chapter Two broke down how narrative helped frame FemShep in an equal role using Bizzocchi's five narrative framework elements. Bioware, then well-known and admired for their storytelling abilities, took the raw material and forged their way into immense popularity by bringing *Mass Effect* to the people. Instead of the fantasy realms, their previous games had inhabited, they decided to make this new tale within a realm of the way life could be. With the setting of space, a place of possibility, they encouraged the players to throw away previous knowledge. By making the character an elite soldier, they set up the protagonist as someone

respected, mature, and accomplished. This, combined with the gameplay aspect of the renegade and paragon options, worked to reveal a nuanced character, male, or female, that allows consumers to negotiate or murder their way through the galaxy. By adding these elements of gameplay where players could choose based on personal values whether to forge diplomatic relations or proceed through force, the player can craft a character based on their opinion of what a hero is and how they should act. By giving both male and female Shepard a chance to be emotionally vulnerable, the game developers also presented the ability to combine masculine concepts of heroism with traditionally feminine traits.

Jennifer Hale focused on Chapter Three and how vocal performances assist audiences in their interpretation of characters. The vocal performances of characters endear them to the player and make them feel more like a person. Instead of being faced with a blank avatar that leaves no impression, the voice brings with it ghosts of former media and impressions that carry through and inform the audience about the purpose and personality of a character. The examination of Hale's background and former roles showed viewers the related roles that she would have been known for and how the residue from those roles would have also influenced how Mass Effect's audience would have viewed FemShep. Finally, through the analysis of in-game text and spoken lines, the concept of *Naka no Hito* can be seen in play as the "shell" became something more with the added emotional intonation and other aspects that Hale brought to the text to make female Shepard a discernably different character from her male counterpart.

Combining these elements of narrative, gameplay, and vocal performance provides a subversive reading of how video game female heroes were previously portrayed. Besides the pained grunts and screams, Samus Aran was voiceless and hidden, presumed to be male until the end of the game before being greatly sexualized in the following games. Laura Croft was given

the voice, which forced her into the more masculine territory as voice actress Shelley Blond was made to act in a non-emotive manner. The character also remains heavily sexualized. She is an amalgamation of male eye candy with traditionally masculine traits to make her an acceptable "hero," such as removing any emotional responses from the situation. Shepard was animated with Hale's voice acting and the team's direction, which allowed her to be as emotively different from her male counterpart.

Video games may function as escapist fiction, but they also function as places of rhetorical dissemination. In games they enjoy, players will identify with the protagonist and take in what elements make them powerful. Like little boys impersonating John Wayne in the golden age of cowboys on the silver screen, they can adopt mannerisms that they come to associate with those characters. Media scholars have often argued whether audiences are passive or active when consuming artifacts, but video games are far more active than the media before it. Players must always be in the game's flow to understand the narrative, objective, or to survive as they move through levels. If a player must take a break in AAA games, they will either pause or save and exit. While playing, there is very rarely a passive moment as players actively work and proceed through goals. Even if players know that situations are not truly real, they still identify with the protagonist's avatar and absorb the actions, consequences, and morals on the screen.

Video games may be hyper-exaggerated or hyper-realistic; either way, they present as pedagogical tools to teach what is necessary to the concept of heroism and who is and is not to be admired and respected in society. Using the building blocks of character archetypes combined with vocal performances gives players more memorable characters. Instead of entirely blank slates, they gain a personality all of their own. Compared to non-descript protagonists of games like *World of Warcraft*, where besides race and sex, the story remains the same no matter how

many character iterations go through the questline. The player is a silent protagonist, merely nodding and looking blankly on as the world moves around them.

A major staple of the *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* franchises is the replay value, where players can customize their backgrounds and choices (to name a few elements), which means fans will play through a game multiple times to see all the difference in their choices. These give the games more staying power as players are more likely to spend more time on this game than on games that lack choices. It also means the game resides longer with players. Because it offers more than other games, it is more likely to be picked up and recommended to other consumers. The more familiar participants are with the game, the more staying power it has, which means these games' ideological and rhetorical power has a greater chance of being used in everyday situations.

This thesis's primary contribution to Communication Studies is to argue the rhetorical importance of voice and elements of narrative, which should be further explored. In an era of immortalization through digital media, it is crucial to observe how these voices are recorded and impact people. There has been so little done in voice acting and the study of the impact of voice in the media arena that it serves as a new frontier. From the physicality of voice to the technology utilized to modulate voice and the many technological coordinators who tune the voices before the game is released.

Limitations

There are many limitations when doing a thesis. For example, the main constraints of space when breaking down every point of dialogue for every character or every scene within the

game. This study's main limitations are sample size, focus on the singular western interpretation of heroic myth, and the viewpoint of white feminism.

Mass Effect was chosen as the case study for reasons previously stated in this thesis: 1) the *Mass Effect* series continues to be rated as one of the "best video games of all time" from a variety of sources, even with the controversy surrounding *Mass Effect 3*'s ending; 2) it was the first game series with different gender options to produce both male and female versions of the main character in marketing; 3) FemShep continues to be one of the most popular female main characters in gaming. By examining the whole series of three games, there was a well-rounded understanding of Shepard as a character and the ability to view what differences existed between male and female gameplay and interactions over time. Likewise, the focus on only Hale's voice acting performance served to provide a strictly defined limit to the examination. This thesis provided a clear jumping-off point for other research into voice acting by tightening the scope and focusing on Shepard's performance.

This thesis must acknowledge the limitation of "identity tourism" brought up by Lisa Nakamura in her 2002 work *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet*. Just because a player can embody another identity, does not mean they will do so respectfully, much less use their new position to challenge the views they have. In fact, they may "perpetuate old mythologies about racial differences" (Nakamura, 2002) or differences regarding sex and gender identities as they operate from places of privilege. The player only has to turn off a game to remove themselves from an unlikable situation, or proceed back to an old save file, there is nothing truly at stake for the participant. However, this is the importance of time spent on creating an immersive world that players want to be transported to. If the narrative and the

characters are strong, players will be more willing to lose themselves in the role and world of the game.

The second limitation is the focus on AAA games, and specifically role-playing games. However, where studies have primarily focused on online spaces of multiplayer interactions, solo play games are also necessary areas of study (Cotes, 2020). While multiplayer spaces may be easier to observe and access, by neglecting to observe solo-play, scholars may be failing to see areas of research that are not readily visible based on solo-play habits and challenges.

This focus on the single player narrative of the *Mass Effect* trilogy and female Shepard may be overly congratulatory, that is because *Mass Effect* was one of the first of its kind. Instead of presenting an interchangeable avatar, through small narrative changes and vocal work the game, instead, crafted two heroes, the same but not. The Female version of Shepard in the game series *Mass Effect* was the start of a more realistic and robust portrayal of female characters in video games. She became popular, and therefore marketable. Furthermore, a key element of her popularity was the vocal performance of Jennifer Hale and the life that she breathed into the figure. Without Hale's performance as FemShep, the character's potency would have been lacking, and she may not have been the hit with fans that she was.

However, this does not mean that the game is not without its flaws. The game's emphasis on its military setting, for example, serves the same purpose that the more recent superhero films like *Wonder Woman* (2017) and *Captain Marvel* (2019), which serve to make "the characters' woman-ness more palatable to readers, viewers, and corporate executives who feel uneasy about women entering...overwhelmingly male domains" (Cocca, 2020). While they do present an element of inclusiveness by portraying female characters, their strength and accomplishments are still focused under authoritarian military use which serves to reinforce the status quo. Like their

Hollywood, a limitation also exists in that video games, even to 2020, still are primarily made by men and in masculine systems. While these views are changing, there remains a lack of minorities in higher positions and in creative positions of major video game corporations. This is changing with the rise of indie companies, but the systems of choice remain limited.

The hero myth as a western concept is yet another limitation. While this study is a preliminary examination of female heroes in video games, and more importantly, in voice acting, it comes from an undoubtedly Eurocentric understanding of what a hero is/should be. In the conception of the monomyth, the focus is very much on the masculine, singular hero. By thinking of heroic mythology in general terms, there is the risk that the universal may overthrow the symbolic and psychological functions of hero mythology in differing cultures.

When comparing Western mythology with heroic myths from China and Japan, the cultural discrepancies are apparent. In Campbell's notes of the monomyth's heroic figure, they are "symbolic carriers of the destiny of the everyman" (Campbell 1949, p. 36), and they venture from the everyday world into that of the supernatural to benefit their fellow man. While this applies to traditional Nordic and Greek myths (i.e., Heracles or Sigurd), it falls apart when examining the Chinese novel published during the Ming Dynasty *Journey to the West*, primarily credited to Wu Cheng'en. While the titular Buddhist monk Xuanzang is framed as the hero, it is the Monkey King (Sun Wukong), Zhu Bajie (Pigsy), and Sha Wujing (Sandy), who perform most of the action. Xuanzang and his companions' story is considered an allegory about the process of enlightenment through the power of cooperation and the virtue of unity versus the story of a singular heroic figure.

We can also examine *Nansō Satomi Hakkenden* (The Legend of Eight Dogs), the Japanese novel written by Kyokutei Bakin. The story of eight divine-born half-brothers, each

delivered to a different region, the brothers eventually come together to restore peace and order to the blood-soaked land of feudal Japan. Each of the brothers represents one of the eight fundamental virtues related to Confucianism: filial piety, righteous obligation, loyalty, faith, brotherhood, benevolence, wisdom, and courtesy. It is only through the combination of all eight virtues that the group can bring an end to the constant battles that threaten the realm; the story emphasizes the themes of family honor, loyalty, and the concepts of bushido and Confucianism combined with Buddhist philosophy.

The final limitation is that the author approaches this study with a dominant cultural position as an ethnically white feminist. While having the ability to be customized as multiple races, Shepard is still presented as white in marketing materials. Jennifer Hale is also a white actress and brings that connotation to any work she does. A more expanded examination of video games with female leads of color, such as Clementine from *The Walking Dead* video game series, should be done. Unfortunately, there remains a vast discrepancy in the video game world concerning the amount of minority heroic characters, whether male or female.

The list of black or Hispanic video game characters, in general, remains dreadfully short to begin with. The same can be said of voice actors of color in the video game industry.

Uncharted 4: A Thief's End featured brown-skinned South African Nadine Ross with Laura Bailey's voice, a white voice actress from America. Aveline de Grandpré from *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* is voiced by Amber Goldfarb, a white Canadian, despite being half French and half African. As mentioned above, even the character of Clementine is given voice by Melissa Hutchinson, another white American voice actress. There still exists a bias on screen, even if we cannot see the actor's face, preferring white voice actors over actors of color. Some viewers will have more issues identifying with Shepard simply because the voice does not match her

appearance or her marketing appearance at all. I realize I benefit from being part of the select groups that development companies aim for, white and middle-classed, and come to the study with that limited scope.

While white voice actors are leaving the roles of black characters so that people of color can represent them, the roles are still few and far between, to begin with (Romano, 2020).

New Opportunities of Study

While this is a preliminary examination into female video game construction as heroes and how voice acting plays a vital role in understanding characters, multiple research avenues could be pursued. Future research could first focus further on Western voice acting and the importance of vocal performances in the industry. While voices have been briefly analyzed in political studies, Communication Studies lack in that region. As video games and foreign shows, and podcasts gain further popularity, it would be beneficial to devote additional time to studying vocal acting importance. Specifically, how messages are interpreted through different characters based on their position in the story. Ideally, this would consist of a pre-test/post-test model qualitative study on the impact of voices and how players are affected by them through playtime. By observing players from their preconceptions to their post-play understandings of characters after experiencing their voices. There could also be a study done about conceptions of voice by having multiple people read the same line with different voices and have individuals record their beliefs about the individual behind the voice.

Another area of study that could be pursued is the development of vocal acting in the Western world versus its Eastern counterpart, particularly in Japan. Japanese voice actors maintain cult-like status, the same as cinematic celebrities in America. How do the two areas

correlate, and where did the paths diverge? Scholars could look at marketing, trajectories of animated features vs. cinematic features, and the many talents required of Japanese voice actors versus American actors, vocal, stage, or cinematic.

"Digital blackface" is another leaping-off point that studies could focus on, and the effect of having white voices played through the masks of black and Hispanic characters. There is no lack of available actors of color who would like to break into the voice acting business. It would be valuable to evaluate the industry's discrepancies in hiring practices (Jackson, 2020). It would also be a valuable area of study to see how the message and reading differ from a white voice versus an actor of the proper race. Along these lines, scholars could also examine the portrayal of POC bodies in the realm of video games and how they have evolved. A valuable artifact for such a study would be the original *Final Fantasy VII* against the new remake in 2021.

In that vein, it would be another area of study to pursue female characters' evolution in video games. With the #MeToo movement and more revelations of inequality, female creators have attempted to break through and reveal their visions. The *Last of Us 2*, released in June of 2020, focuses on the small girl from the first game that the player had to protect and keep safe. Players will control Ellie, now 19, as she fights for survival in a post-apocalyptic setting. Likewise, Senua from *Hellblade* (2017), Aloy of *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (2017), and Cassandra from *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* (2018), would also be useful comparisons for female characters' growth in virtual media. As we move forward as content creators, scholars, and audiences, we must assess and acknowledge that though we continue to move forward, we still ultimately lack representation. Even with a new influx of female characters, there is always more room to explore and subvert expectations. There need to be more POC heroes, more female heroes, and other minority heroes representing the population at large, not just heterosexual white males.

Ultimately, this thesis serves as a starting point. This thesis examined Shepard's heroic personage in the *Mass Effect* series and what elements of the game helped portray her as equal to her male counterpart without erasing her femininity. This was a study not about [Strong Female] Characters, but [Strong Characters], Female, and the compelling pieces that made her up and how they worked in harmony. Utilizing narrative, game mechanics, and voice acting, Bioware was able to gift the video game community (intentionally or unintentionally) with a progressive step towards presenting female video game characters as memorable and marketable.

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