

Research Article

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“We’ve Forgotten Our Roots”: Bioweapons and Forms of Life in *Mass Effect*’s Speculative Future

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Abstract: Many cultural artefacts explore the relationship between populations and politics, including *Mass Effect*, a role-playing videogame that both critiques and affirms liberal and conservative biopolitical tendencies. Of particular interest is the biopolitical dynamics of the Krogan lifeform. Due to population difficulties deriving from both naturalistic and cultural tendencies, they were targeted by a bioweapon – the genophage. The genophage drastically transformed how they comprehend their own form of life, as the bioweapon infected the Krogan with a plague-like genetic modification targeting their reproductive organs. The player in the *Mass Effect* trilogy can cure the genophage or not, and reasons are provided to contextualize both options. In this article, I argue that the genophage problematic can be interpreted as a reflection on the attempt to affect a form of life from the outside. I emphasize what Tristan Garica describes as we-expansion: that *Mass Effect* leaves open the question of the possibility of expanding our sense of we. But *Mass Effect* also leaves open the question of we-contraction, in so doing it neither offers a utopian or dystopian political vision, but an agnostic one.

Keywords: political videogames, role-playing games and biopolitics, plague and governmentality

Introduction: Biopolitics, Forms of Life, and Science Fiction Videogames

Many cultural artefacts, including science fictional (SF) story-worlds and their texts, reflect on the possible relations between populations and politics. A population can be described as a complete set of individuals that share a common characteristic or inhabit a particular location. The term, as Michel Foucault famously argued, has a necessarily political connotation. The term possesses this connotation to the extent that populations can be comprehended as “statistical-political” concepts (Curtis 409). Foucault writes that “population comes to appear above all else as the ultimate end of government,” in the sense that the purpose of government is the “welfare of the population, the improvement of its condition, the increase of its wealth, longevity, health, and so on” (Foucault, *Governmentality* 216). The management of the population by government has been described as “biopolitics,” the politics of life (Foucault, *Society; Security*). The relation between populations as political–statistical concepts, the techniques and strategies of population management, and actually existing collectives of individual entities (not necessarily human subjects but usually so in Foucault) also entails a relation to territory and geography (Elden; Legg). Populations in this sense are also topographic, as populations occupy certain spaces. It is this relationship between space and bodies that is managed to greater or lesser degrees by government, constituting the “ultimate end” of government and the logistics of what Foucault terms

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“governmentality” (Foucault, “Governmentality”; Dean 16–37; Miller and Rose 2–25).¹ Often, when SF represents and reflects on the space–body (population–individual) dynamic, the inequalities between and within populations are emphasized. Across a variety of SF media, from literature to video games, one can detect the presence of populational inequalities and the governmentalities affecting their trajectories. To focus specifically on videogames, there are games that explicitly focus on managing or mismanaging how plagues and viruses move through and between populations, including Dark Realm Studio’s *Pandemic 2* (2008) and Ndemc Creations’ *Plague Inc.* (2012) (Servitje). In Arkane Studio’s *Dishonored* (2012), plague and disease are utilized as techniques of governmentality, tools that can be wielded to “kill off” the poor.² Other videogame franchises introduce biopolitical themes (including plagues) into their worlds through the introduction of alien lifeforms, the necromorphs in *Dead Space* (2008–present) serving as a significant example. The embracing of plague-like infection is related to (quasi)religious escapism in *Dead Space*’s world, as “unification” through transfiguration is a viable alternative to stark social and economic inequality.

In each of these examples, the relation between space, geography, and what Ludwig Wittgenstein enigmatically referred to as a *form of life* is emphasized. This concept is tricky, as it does not receive explicit and overt elaboration within Wittgenstein’s work. The phrase appears five times at “seemingly important junctions” within Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (Hunter 223). In each case, Wittgenstein connects the idea of speaking a language and his notion of a language game: “the term ... is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, a form of life” (11). To an extent, this stress on activity can be misconstrued, as not everything that one does is explicitly “active,” some “patterns” escape “notice” and become an unconscious element within a form of life (Baker 227). This could also include the way that plagues, illness, and disease can transfigure the contours and textures of a form of life, a point *Mass Effect* emphasizes. In speaking of *we* who (may) cope with plagues and illness in this way emphasizes that forms of life are “communal” or social (Baker 278; Cavell, “Declining” 254–255; *Claim* 30; Laugier, “Us”; “Voice”). Forms of life may have conventional aspects, but we do not construct the contours of life through purely conventional means, “they are *given*” (Cavell, *Claim* 30. Original emphasis).

Whilst forms of life are conventional, there is also something *natural* about them, in both the sense of a “second nature” (using the words I have learned within the linguistic contexts I am familiar with come naturally to me) and in the biological sense, the lifeform that is situated within a form, the bodily organism that speaks and gestures. Hunter refers to this as the “organic” sense of a form of life, the sense that emphasizes the *lifeform* (Hunter 235). Cavell reads the two senses (organic and social) simultaneously, differentiating between what he calls the “anthropological–horizontal” and the “biological–vertical.” The latter for Cavell:

Recalls the differences between the human and so-called lower or higher forms of life, between say, poking at your food, perhaps with a fork, and pawing at it, or pecking at it. Here, the romance of the hand and its opposable thumb comes into play, and the upright posture and the eyes set for heaven; but also the specific strength and scale of the human body and of the human sense and of the human voice (“Declining” 255).

Our bodies, senses, and voices that constitute the body (lifeform) are then conditioned into a form of life through differential norms and rules. Subjecting the body to normative integration is already biopolitical in the Foucauldian sense. But without the body and its sensual capacities, expressing one’s voice (verbally or otherwise) in language would be difficult if not impossible (Laugier, “Voice” 63–64).³ If forms of life “rest on

¹ Governmentality is the techniques, strategies, and forms (or modalities) of administrating and controlling space, temporalities, and life-forms (or forms of life) through instruments of power. As Foucault writes: the “numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations” (Foucault, *History* 140).

² *Dishonored* is not typically perceived as science fiction. Its world is fantastical, and there are quasi-alternative historical aspects that could be read as science fictional (specifically the relation between the world and its technology). I mention it here as it does reflect on the relation between geography, forms of life, and the biopolitical.

³ Game critics have emphasized that playing games is an embodied doing that utilizes the body and its organs. In this way, one can draw biopolitical connections between governmentality and gaming (Christiansen; Väliäho). I do not focus on such a connection in this paper.

nothing more than that we agree, or find ourselves agreeing, on the way in which we size up things or respond to what we encounter,” then there must be something that does the agreeing; some organs do the sizing up of things that one encounters (Das 170).

Both Cavellian senses of (a) form of life can also be read in relation to space and territory, as forms of life inhabit and exist within some geographical area and in relation to it. It seems difficult to conceive of a form of life completely abstracted from geographical situatedness, as patterns are practiced in space – from labouring to engaging with cultural artefacts (Curry; Stirk). As the COVID-19 pandemic illustrated, techniques of governmentality interject here, constraining the kinds of practices one can conduct in and through space. The politically oriented interpreters of Wittgenstein also seem to connect forms of life to biopolitics (Gakis, “Marx”; Gakis, “Political”; Di Gesu). By extension, one can draw connections between populations of lifeforms and their forms of life. For the cultural critic interested in what about our world is represented through SF, the Wittgensteinian concept of form of life can be pushed beyond organic (in the case of hypothetical AI and synthetic lifeforms) and anthropocentric boundaries (in relation to nonhuman forms of life, including hypothetical extra-terrestrial alien lifeforms).⁴ The above examples of contemporary SF videogames generally focus on human forms of life. But this restriction is not a necessary one. In this article, I draw upon the concept of a form of life, applying the concept to the fictional world of *Mass Effect* (*ME* here onwards) and the lifeforms that exist within it. I reinterpret “forms of life” in light of Tristan Garcia’s political philosophy of *we* as explicated in the arguably post-Wittgensteinian work *We Ourselves* (3–6).⁵ I argue that this allows the critic to better map both the internal tensions within a *we* (the lifeforms that constitute a form of life) and the external tensions affecting *we* from the outside, including biopolitical factors. What we see in cultural texts like *ME* are forms of *we*, and how these *we*-structures involve both horizontal and vertical aspects. Specifically, I focus on the Krogan, a non-human lifeform that has been affected by a plague-like bioweapon: the “genophage.” In the story-world, the Krogan form of life has been radically impacted by the genophage, as the bioweapon targets the reproductive capabilities of the Krogan. The Krogan-genophage case is politically interesting because the story world both rationalizes the use of the bioweapon and simultaneously provides evidence for the ethical grotesqueness of the weapon’s effects. It also presents the critic with interesting political metaphors, realized through popular art, regarding the extension and contraction of forms of *we* and the lifeforms that constitute them. In a (post?)COVID-19 world, seeing pandemic discourse from this sideways on view through the matrix of *we*-extension and contraction may be productive, especially regarding the relation between *we*’s and external interference.⁶

We, Lifeforms in *Mass Effect*

In the *Mass Effect* (*ME*) trilogy of RPG games, players take on the role of a human military officer called “Shepard” (players can choose a first name but this has no impact on the game).⁷ In some RPGs, characters are

⁴ It should be noted that there is a difference between considering nonhuman forms of life as an element of fictional creations (typically produced by humans, but the possibilities of AI art may complicate this point) and actual nonhuman forms of life. Wittgenstein’s famous “lion remark” points to the difficulties of comprehending nonhuman forms of life *as* forms because participating in nonhuman language games is profoundly difficult. However, I do not follow Wittgensteinians that declare this an impossibility *a priori*.

⁵ There is evidence for considering Tristan Garcia’s political and social philosophy as post-Wittgensteinian. Garcia, contrasting his ontology and metaphysics with Graham Harman’s, notes how he combines elements from “Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* and From Hegel”. It is not farfetched to compare forms of *we* with forms of life, even though the latter is drawn from Wittgenstein’s later philosophy and not from the earlier *Tractatus* (Garcia, “Crossing” 17–18).

⁶ It should be noted that this is not the first application of Garcia’s political philosophy to science fictional worlds (see Reid).

⁷ RPG generally stands for “role-playing game” and not necessarily “role-playing videogames.” However, this distinction is not impactful as my focus is solely on videogames. That said, this is a simplification of what the *ME* games are, as *ME* draws from other videogame genre conventions (including action and shooter game conventions). Videogame genre is a complicated affair and is not analogous to film, literature, or television (Arsenault; Apperley).

presented as malleable “blank slates” that can be modified by the player through the dynamics of the “character sheet.” In *ME*, the player can choose both a background (“pre-service history and psychological profile”) and a class.⁸ This functions like a character sheet for the *ME* player. Shepard is then thrown into the story world, inheriting a speculative human history (and future from the standpoint of our present). In the first act of the first videogame in the trilogy, *Mass Effect 1* (BioWare, 2007), Shepard is recruited into an interstellar special operations group called the “Spectres” that works for the dominant interstellar political body, the “Citadel Council.”⁹ From here, players can make differential choices that impact the trajectory of interstellar issues, including intervening in the Krogan-genophage problematic. This arc develops over the entire trilogy of games and decisions made in earlier games are tracked in later games through the use of save-file exporting – from *ME1* into *Mass Effect 2* (BioWare, 2010), then into *Mass Effect 3* (BioWare, 2012).¹⁰ Through save-exporting, radically different narrative outcomes are possible. In the Krogan-genophage instance, the player can “cure” the genophage or not (through manipulating and altering the “cure” so it does not function as intended). *ME* as a role-playing videogame affirms both narrative possibilities and does not canonize one kind of choice as the “right” one. In this way, the games are politically agnostic in addition to being narratively indeterminate.

This agnostic indeterminacy is intentional. Casey Hudson, the creative director supervising the production of each videogame in the *ME* trilogy claims that this feature is something inherent to the medium:

I think one of the really neat things about videogames as a medium is that there can be a message in them without making a statement. With a passive medium like a book or a movie, it kinda [sic] has to, it can raise questions that makes you think about it, sometimes it makes a statement. But the great thing about a videogame is that you can explore an issue and let a player explore their thoughts on the issue interactively ... you can explore [ideas] and experience some of the consequences and think about what you think [without] the game having to make a statement on it.¹¹

Whilst Hudson’s comments may invite sceptical rebuttal, his sentiments here are nonetheless reflected in *ME*. But there is something that is not indeterminate or agnostic: the story-world that contingent narrative events are situated within and are a (possible) element of. The Krogan form of life, transfigured by the genophage, is a world feature that the player at the interactive level and non-Krogan agencies at the narrative level can influence. Whatever choices are made, a form of life and its we-structure is altered from the outside in *ME*’s world. Critics frequently emphasize the neoliberal or colonial dynamics of the world-building in *ME*, pointing to the Krogan as exemplifying *ME*’s conservatism.¹² While this critical perspective can be supported by textual evidence, I instead emphasize an alternative reading that stresses that *ME*’s indeterminate agnosticism constitutes a reflection of how forms of life may interact. Such interactions are, to paraphrase Roberto Unger, *non-necessitarian*: one cannot know in advance what encountering other forms of life would be like (Unger). I argue that the conservative and liberal (or “progressive”) readings of *ME* are two answers to one general question: how far does “we” extend? Politics as the question of the “first person plural” motivates Tristan Garcia’s post-Wittgensteinian philosophy of “us,” what he refers to as the “grounds of we.” A we for Garcia is an imperfect and inadequate political concept, as “when it comes to we, there is neither justice nor political truth” (Garcia, *We* 233). Nonetheless, For Garcia, we is “the subject of politics” in the first instance: when we vocalize ourselves politically, we generally speak in the name of this or that we (ibid 6). In this way, the lifeform who speaks is connected to the form of life where a community (“us”) receives vocalized

⁸ “Class” in this sense does not refer to socio-economic status. An RPG class defines the kind of abilities and statistics that the character possesses. In *ME*’s world, this includes weapon and “biotic” proficiencies, *ME*’s version of space magic.

⁹ The “Citadel” is the central hub of interstellar political life and is the de jure seat of political power in the story-world. The Citadel Council is a multicultural and multi-species alliance. The Council’s primary goal is maintaining peace and stabilizing the military-political relations between major world powers. It is thus some kind of space UN with the exception that it enforces its rule through the deployment of the Spectres or member state militaries. Below, I describe such entities as “geostrategic we’s” (Garcia, *We* 19).

¹⁰ I refer to the *ME* trilogy throughout by combining *ME* with numbers: *ME1*, *ME2*, and *ME3*.

¹¹ Casey Hudson made these comments in an interview for the supplementary product *The Final Hours of Mass Effect 3*. This can be purchased from the EA store alongside *ME3*.

¹² I focus on these arguments in the section below.

we expressions. We's are internally and externally divided, as they are forms of visibility that are more or less transparent. The concept is not exhaustive as there is "not only one we" (ibid).

Garcia writes that we's are like "concentric" or "overlapping" circles that both intersect and resist one another, in the sense that one can belong to multiple we's simultaneously. For instance, Shepard can belong to the wider we of humanity, the narrower we of the Systems Alliance military, and the even more intensely narrow we that is the crew of the Normandy spaceship (including the team that Shepard manages in each video game). For Garcia, the only possible model of we "requires us to stack up we's on top of one another like a pile of transparencies" (ibid 64). Not all transparencies are similar in kind, as belonging to a political party or a military organization is not synonymous with an ethnic identity or being born into a poor or wealthy family.¹³ Garcia argues that there are two oppositional tendencies that run against each other – extension and contraction (ibid 162–184). On the one hand, there is we-extension. This is what could be described as the "liberal" position in the most general sense as it aims to extend who can be counted as we – who counts as within *our* form of life. On the other, there is we-contraction, the generally conservative impulse. Contraction is conservative as it seeks to restrict who counts as "us" – it distinguishes us from them.¹⁴ This elastic Garcian tension between extension and contraction is difficult to discern in the Wittgensteinian account. Wittgenstein in the *Investigations* remarks that we may struggle to "find our feet" with those from other countries and by extension other forms of life (Wittgenstein 233). But this struggle does not necessarily mean that we-forms do not expand and contract, in which we can eventually "find our feet." Garcia's account also leaves open the question of the relation between scales of we-formations. He describes the nation-state as a large "geostrategic we," and we could imagine smaller and larger scales of we-form than the nation-state (Garcia, *We* 19).¹⁵ In *ME* for instance, the "Citadel Council" constitutes a supra-national geostrategic we that contains national we's within it.

Following the Foucauldian biopolitical account sketched in the introduction, it is geostrategic we's that manage, administrate, and control populations (or fail to do so). In this way, an account of how forms of we (and the lifeforms that constitute them) are influenced, transformed, and transfigured through the elastic processes of we-extension and contraction can be discerned. In the case of *ME*, both extension and contraction are affirmed as plausible and depending on one's perspective, legitimate and justified. I return to this question of "we" and "us" in broad stroke terms in the conclusion. Before returning to we, I first outline the contours of *ME's* world. In so doing, I position *ME* as generic SF and connect such a positioning to *ME's* critical reception. Here, I argue that the speculative fictional mode affords a greater degree of indeterminacy as it leaves open the question of future forms of life and what shapes they may take (including the human). Following this, I then contextualize the Krogan-genophage problematic, emphasizing the dialectical tension between world conditions (including territorial-geographical and environmental facts) and interactive contingencies. It is here where the dynamics of extension and contraction are emphasized, as both possibilities can be explored by the player, but no definitive answer to what one ought to do concerning we is ever postulated. As Garcia argues, "there is no escaping the extensions and contractions of ourselves" (ibid 201).

¹³ Garcia talks of "we's-of-ideas" (horizontal) and "we's-of-interests" (vertical). The former refers to senses of we that one can select, and the latter refers to senses of we that are given, that one is "thrown" into (to paraphrase Heidegger) (Garcia, *We* 42–43). I return to this distinction below when discussing the genophage.

¹⁴ Garcia makes explicit reference to Carl Schmitt's "friend-enemy distinction" as it appears in *The Concept of the Political* (Schmitt 26; Garcia, *We* 174–178).

¹⁵ In *ME*, the human government – the Systems Alliance – is a geostrategic we in this sense as it aids in the flattening of internal populational differences. The Citadel Council is a larger scale we that includes nation-state(like) governments within its we-formation. Including humanity within its we-form constitutes an extensive move, whilst excluding other governments (e.g. the Batarian Hegemony) could be comprehended as a contractive move.

The Critical Reception of *Mass Effect's* Story-World Politics

ME's fictional “secondary” world is grounded within our actual world. *ME* is situated in relation to our human histories and the history of our cosmos.¹⁶ It is a “changed” world that is “presented as [a] logical extension of [our] reality” (Rose 22). *ME* is characteristically SF as it is “composed within the semantic space created by the opposition of human versus nonhuman” (ibid 31). SF can be comprehended as a form of logical or “cognitive estrangement,” the operation by which the cognitive organization of an imaginative framework differs from the empirical environment without necessarily negating the logical relation between the speculative and the empirically actual (Suvin). To be more precise here, *ME* is best described as a space opera. Space opera SF is one of the “most common” forms of SF because of the popularity of the interstellar and the extra-terrestrial as generic tropes, but is arguably one of the “least respected” forms because it does not concern itself with the logical or cognitive aspects of so-called “proper” SF (Westfahl 197). The term space opera was historically pejorative, created by writer Wilson Tucker to describe “hacky, grinding, stinking, outworn space-ship yarn, or world-saving interplanetary fiction” (ibid). Tucker in particular seems to be referring to the SF of writers like E. E. “Doc” Smith and Edgar Rice Burroughs, but the pejorative sense of space opera is still often used in the contemporary critical vocabulary. In recent years, the “New Space Opera” has somewhat improved the subgenres' reputation (Winter). This new wave of space opera is for critics “introspective, experimental work with more immediate sociological and political relevance to the tempestuous social scene of the day” (Dozios and Strahan 4). *ME*, like the “quality” space opera television before it (including *Babylon 5*, *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, and *Battlestar Galactica*), contains relevant social and political commentary whilst retaining certain generic trappings from the “legacy” space operas. When critics do agree that there is some sociopolitical import in *ME's* world (especially when debating the Krogan-genophage problematic), they argue that *ME's* politics are straightforwardly neoliberal or conservative.

Patterson's critique of *ME's* politics focuses on the relationship between player agency, human exceptionalism, and *ME's* vision of multiculturalism. *ME's* political world revolves around an interstellar space station, which is the de jure seat of government, the Citadel. The Citadel Council is a “multicultural federation” composed of different forms of life (Patterson 213). There are three major Council powers, the Turian Hierarchy (the Turians are a bird-like species based somewhat on Roman military culture), the Asari Republics (the Asari are mono-gendered humanoids that are bioitically proficient due to their modes of sexual reproduction – they are also known for their long lifespans when compared to humans and Turians), and the Salarian Union (the Salarians are a species of humanoid amphibians that are known for their hyper-metabolism and their short-life span of around forty years). To reemphasize, each of these powers (forms of we constituted by distinct lifeforms) can be conceived of as geostrategic we's that can be contained within larger we's (e.g. the supra-national we of the Citadel Council) and contain smaller we's (e.g. certain human-interest groups, including colonial governments). Humans in the closing act of *ME1* also join the Council as a major power. But there is an inequality between these major powers and minor powers – “associate” members in the world's own terminology – like the Volus (an ammonia-based humanoid lifeform that requires life-suits to survive in non-ammonia-based ecologies) and the Elcor (an elephantoidal species). There is also the Quarian, a humanoid dextro-protein species that was exiled from their home world following a war with synthetic machines they created, the Geth. The Geth were created to serve as a labouring population for the Quarian. Eventually, the Geth would revolt against their Quarian masters, defeating them in armed conflict. The development of synthetic forms of life (advanced artificial intelligence) was outlawed by the Council. In response to the Quarian's machinations, the Council politically barred the Quarian from both associate or membership status.¹⁷ *ME*, at the level of world-building, imbues the different species or races with differential

¹⁶ The notion that story-worlds are secondary worlds that are subcreated from a primary or actual ‘first’ world derives from Tolkien but receives extensive theorization elsewhere (Wolf).

¹⁷ The issue of synthetic life is one of the primary issues “explored” (to paraphrase creative director Casey Hudson) by the *ME* trilogy. As my focus is on organic forms of life in *ME* and their relations, I do not discuss this point further here.

attributes (e.g. the Turians are strong soldiers, the Asari are strong biotics, the Quarians are good mechanics and engineers, and so on).

The player in the trilogy interacts with these world-building features through systems of squad management and tactical gameplay:

By putting the player in a position to evaluate racial attributes and manage teammates, [ME] challenges the player to derive military labour from otherwise disinterested teammates. [ME] makes racial attributes useful to the player insofar as they can be used to identify the military labour those characters can provide (Patterson 215).

The player is afforded a unique position flowing from their role as a Spectre operative in *ME1* and *ME3*, and as a “renegade” of sorts in *ME2*. But in this sense, the powers of the Citadel Council are simply extended de jure to the player, and for Patterson in this sense, the Council embodies “the values of a dominant imperial power” (ibid 219). This is expressed quite clearly in how the Council relates to its primary political opponents, including the Krogan (I return to this point in the sections below in detail). Gerald Voorhees also makes the argument that *ME* games (he focuses on *ME1* and *ME2* as *ME3* was not yet released) “profess the unmitigated superiority of neo-liberal multiculturalism as a form of dealing with difference” (Voorhees 259). He goes on to argue that the games make “make claims about the correct approach to managing difference” (ibid 262). Both Patterson and Voorhees stress the fact that multicultural value is derived from the “others ability to contribute something useful” (ibid). I find these critiques of *ME* miss the mark (in part): they both tacitly assume that the player will endorse the multicultural liberalism that is representative of the “Paragon” playthrough. *ME* employs a structural system of “performance sliders” that track the moral and ethical choices the player has made (Travis 242). These are coded blue for “Paragon” (the liberal and tolerant “good” choices) and red for “Renegade.” The “Renegade” choices are not simply “evil” or “bad,” which distinguishes *ME* from BioWare’s earlier 2003 title, *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, as the choice to play a “Sith” character entailed straightforwardly choosing evil options. The Renegade choices range from expressing some kind of blunt utilitarianism to being incredibly rude to certain characters in dialogue. The multiculturalism of the Paragon Shepard can be negated by the Renegade Shepard who, through their actions, can affirm and enact a straightforwardly human-oriented hegemonic empire, refiguring the Council to serve the interests of humanity *sui generis*. Multiculturalism may not in fact be the correct approach and the videogames provide an alternative option to this: a violent form conservative “contractivism.” In my view, the “procedural rhetorics” of the *ME* trilogy are more open to alternatives than Voorhees and Patterson assume.¹⁸ But the critique of *ME* as imperialist, neoliberal, or colonialist does not necessarily focus on player agencies, as such critiques may also focus on world-building details.

Fuchs et al. argue that *ME1* in part “promised to change, or at least amend, the syntax of the imperial adventure formula” through introducing the player to a world that was not “excessively anthropocentric” (1484). Fuchs et al. do not seem to stress that the management of persons by the squad leader (the player) is the main source of *ME’s* neoliberal or imperialistic politics. Rather, the authors focus on *ME’s* extractivism, especially as the emphasis on resource extraction increases in *ME2* when compared to *ME1*.¹⁹ As Fuchs et al. argue, the “extraction of resources from planets across the galaxy takes a more prominent role ... as these are key to succeeding” (ibid 1486). In *ME2*, the player requires specific minerals to upgrade both their fighting capabilities on the ground and their spaceships’ offensive capabilities in space. The success of certain missions (though the player is allowed to fail – the cost being the lives of crewmembers) is determined by whether certain upgrades have been obtained or not. The player is encouraged to engage in a minigame where planets are scanned, and resource deposits are identified. Then, at a later point, the identified resources are extracted and can be utilized by the player. For Fuchs et al., *ME1’s* commercial success “fuelled a market-driven

¹⁸ To clarify, “procedural rhetoric” is a form of rhetoric that draws upon rule-based systems to convince the user (in this case the player) of certain kinds of arguments. Because of the focus on rules and operations, this form of rhetoric is distinguished from other forms of rhetoric, including verbal and visual forms (Hayden; Bogost).

¹⁹ Extractivism denotes the systems, both political and infrastructural, that facilitate the extraction of mineral resources from the Earth. For a critical account of the phenomenon (Arboleda).

serialization strategy in which the sequels and the gameworld quickly conformed to anthropocentric, imperialist normativity” (ibid 1484). This, in my view, moves in the right direction as it focuses on story-world dynamics that could be diegetically located in non-videogame forms of narrative expression. That Spectres or rogue ex-Spectres could extract minerals from planets for profit, within or beyond Council space de jure, is a world feature and not necessarily a game feature.

Callahan’s critique of *ME*’s representation of ethnicity and race also targets story-world features. Callahan argues that human race and ethnicity are elided in *ME*’s world-building, and this applies to non-videogame texts like the novel *Mass Effect: Revelation* as much as it does to the trilogy. I think Callahan is correct, but I do not share the sceptical conclusions he draws out from this insight. Callahan notes that it is “a common space opera supposition that politicized ethnic identity positioning will have largely disappeared as populations become more mixed” (Callahan 1). This assumption cannot be maintained as actual or empirically viable for us of the present (though our forms of we may be better if we did leave race and ethnicity behind as political concepts) – but in a speculative “what if” scenario, it is plausible that the distance between ethnic or racial populations would lessen in their intensity. As far as the single-player modes of the *ME* trilogy are concerned, it is also true that the human perspective is forced: the player “cannot chose to not be human” (ibid 9). But this does not hold for *ME3*’s multi-player mode, so this is not true in general.

Not all of the critiques and appraisals of *ME* have been negatively slanted. Some have, hyperbolically, stated that *ME* is the “most important science fiction universe of our generation” (Munkittrick). Tauriq Moosa, writing for the Guardian, has more recently described the stories set within the *ME* world “some of the best sci-fi ever made” (Moosa). In a less hyperbolic tone of voice, I would argue that *ME* narratives contain socially, culturally, and politically relevant explorations of matters of concern. At the level of cultural politics, Zekany notes how fanfictions poach and alter the way that sexual relations in the world are portrayed, weirding and further queering in-world sexual relations. Lima reports on the ways that gender in the *ME* trilogy is navigated and deconstructed by queer and nonbinary players. Kuling goes far enough to stress that there is a relationship between the queerness of some of *ME3*’s sexual relations and Canadian identity. However, it should be noted that certain queer characters were not originally in *ME1* and *ME2*, and that homosexual relations with one recurring character were not actually possible in *ME1*. But both Kuling and Callahan stress the influence of Canadian-ness on the *ME* trilogy, the former in terms of openness to difference and the latter in terms of the difference between American and Canadian forms of multicultural discourse (Callahan 6). Whilst I accept the neoliberal and imperialist critiques of *ME*’s world-building, I do think there is more to say about the relation between politics and forms of life in *ME* that cannot easily be comprehended by the vocabulary used by Patterson, Voorhees, Callahan, or Fuchs et al.

Another difficulty presented by most critiques of *ME* is that they focus exclusively on player agency. Whilst this is reasonable (the *ME* trilogy is often the critical focus, as it is in this article), much of the political content is not something that can be “explored” by either of the games.²⁰ Critics have argued that our cultural moment is somewhat defined by the omnipresence of distinct story-worlds, intellectual properties, and media entertainment franchises (Wolf; Thon).²¹ Briefly, a story-world can generally be defined as the “surrounding context or environment embedding existents, their attributes, and the actions and events in which they are more or less centrally involved” (Herman 13–14). This focus on existents encapsulates the kinds of things that populate a story-world, not solely focusing on characters who “live, act, think, and feel” within the story-world’s immediate spatiality (Fludernik 6). All kinds of objects, including natural ecologies and things that populate them, define the “core features” or the “worldliness” of a story-world (Klastrup; Klastrup and Tosca). Ryan further contrasts *static* world components with *dynamic* ones. Static world components include inventories of existents (species, objects, social institutions, and the individual characters), folklore relating to the existents (backstories, legends, and rumours), a space with certain topographic features, a set of natural or unnatural

²⁰ I note here that not all of *ME*’s critics focus solely on the videogames. I simply want to note the general critical tendency. One example here is Callahan, who relates the ethnic elisions of the videogames to the ethnic politics of the *ME* novel *Revelation*.

²¹ This brief discussion of *ME*’s worldliness is inspired by Zakowski’s article on *ME* and temporality.

laws, and a set of social rules and values (Ryan 364).²² On the other hand, dynamic components include physical events that bring changes to existents and mental events that give significance to the physical events (i.e. the motivations of the agents and the emotional reactions of agents) (ibid). *ME's* politics should be comprehended as existing within the tension between static and dynamic world components, as the player's character is both a static world component augmented through player-driven dynamic ones. In the Krogan example, there is an explicit tension between the static events that they have been subjected to – the genophage – and the dynamic events that relate to this, including the possible decline and collapse of their form of life as meaningful and purposive. It is here where Garcia's post-Wittgensteinian conceptual vocabulary becomes useful in deconstructing the plague-like genophage problematic and its effects on the Krogan form of life, as it allows the critic to follow both the dynamics of extension and contraction without affirming an ultimately "correct approach to managing difference," as the static and dynamic world components can always be arranged otherwise (Voorhees 262). The vocabulary of we ourselves can be put to use in the examination of "the transmedial representation of (usually fictional) characters, worlds, and stories across narrative media" (Thon 12).²³

The Krogan we between Extension and Contraction

In *ME*, the Krogan are presented as an aggressive lizard-like species that evolved in an environmentally and ecologically dangerous world, where life-expectancy was low and clan warfare was common. In events antecedent to *ME1*, Citadel space was invaded by an insectoid-like lifeform, referred to as the Rachni. Needing additional soldiers to fight the Rachni, the Salarians "uplifted" the Krogan, giving them advanced weaponry and other technologies so they could combat the Rachni threat.²⁴ To an extent, the Krogan were also "culturally" uplifted by the Salarians, as their form of life was drastically altered by this rapid technological change (Dvorsky 133–135). Here, we see Patterson's point about the usefulness and military labour at the level of non-interactive world components, as this uplifting and militarization did not involve any human whatsoever (215–19). The Krogan nearly exterminated all the Rachni – the survival of Schmittean friends is interlocked with the extinction of enemies.²⁵ One of the Krogan strengths utilized by the Council in their (defensive) war against the Rachni was their rate of sexual reproduction. Due to the natural environment of the Krogan home-world (Tuchanka), the Krogan developed this reproductive rate through evolutionary-genetic means due to the sheer quantity of native predators in Tuchanka – from animals to vegetation. The high reproductive rate of the Krogan is a natural tendency (a natural law-like phenomenon) that follows logically from the proposed fictional environmental facts. These geographical and environmental facts (static components) have an impact on the Krogan form of life, as their motivations and attitudes (dynamic components) are shaped by

²² I am somewhat simplifying Ryan's account and paraphrasing for economic reasons. Ryan also discusses different kinds of world-text tensions, but I do not have the space to discuss this issue here.

²³ Thon contrasts this media studies approach to other approaches to story-world representations across media, arguing that this approach deemphasizes "representational strategies in favor of what those strategies represent" (Thon 12). This is true of this article. As I am not well versed in the debates and controversies in narratology, I leave more technical discussions of worldliness and representation aside. The key point here is that political talk about *ME's* story-world cannot be solely reducible to their presence in videogames, even if that is the critic's primary analytical focus.

²⁴ The concept of uplift is explored in numerous works of SF, from David Brin's *Uplift* story-world to H.G Wells' *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. The concept "refers to the processes of changing nonhuman animals ... into sentient, or more sentient beings" (Roy-Faderman 78). In *ME's* fiction, nonhuman lifeforms uplift other nonhumans, so the humanness of uplift is deemphasized.

²⁵ A few queen eggs are discovered at a later point in time and scientists resurrect the Rachni in an attempt to create an army of expendable shock troops. Much of this occurs in *ME1*, and the player can interact with the Rachni queen, who states that their initial aggression was provoked by other forces – the main antagonists of the *ME* trilogy: the Reapers (an AI civilization of sorts that harvest all advanced organic forms of life every 50,000 years to prevent organics from creating synthetics that would extinguish organic life permanently). The player can choose to kill the Rachni queen or allow her to live, and again reasons are provided to make both options plausible if not preferential.

such facts. Continual warfare and demonstrations of strength are deemed culturally necessary when one lives in such an environment. But the evolutionary conditions that allowed the Krogan to survive on their home-world lead to biopolitical problems post-uptift.

In *ME2*, numerous planets on the interstellar map screen (this is the way the player selects missions, but one can also learn things about the world from planetary descriptions, even if there are no selectable game-play missions to choose from) proximate to the Krogan home-world are described as “overmined,” “stripped,” and “overfished.” The Krogan, through overpopulation, exhaust the natural resources of the planets they colonize. Territory, geography, and Krogan bio-power inextricably connects the cultural (horizontal) and biological (vertical) senses of the Krogan form of life (Cavell, “Declining”; Cavell, *Claim*). This can be understood as the tension between what Garcia terms “we’s-of-ideas” and “we’s-of-interest.” The former (ideas) are “characterized by a we that a subject is able to choose and that can be changed at will” (Garcia, *We* 43). Changing one’s political affiliation from one party to another is an example. The latter (interests) are “inherited” senses of we (ibid 42). Garcia states that we’s-of-interests to “refer to every we in which a particular subject is raised” (ibid). The raising of subjects seems to be a cultural phenomenon (i.e. about ideas), and to an extent it is. Garcia does not seem to care for the bifurcation between natural and cultural forms of life, he explicitly notes that the “dividing line” between we’s-of-ideas and interests is “never fixed because there is no definitive border between absolute we’s-of-interests and absolute we’s-of-ideas” (ibid 43). Interests can be comprehended as a vertical or partially biological component because one raises *lifeforms* (lebensform), it is the live organism that is normatively integrated into a specific form of we and not others. Hence, we’s-of-interest possess an explicitly biopolitical component.

Krogan biological forms inheriting certain natural “determinations” (high reproductive rates, living long and dying slow, and so on) in part conditioned the Krogan’s colonial expansion into Tuchanka’s surrounding worlds.²⁶ Colonial we’s-of-ideas are inextricably linked with inherited we’s-of-interests, some of which are “natural” in Cavell’s sense. Krogan inter-clan conflict was declining as the Krogan were expanding throughout interstellar space. Inter-clan differences were placed to one side now an intense difference between Krogan and non-Krogan presented itself. Here, a fate similar to humanity occurred, whereby racial and ethical intensities between humans became less relevant in the face of an increased human-nonhuman distinction (Foucault, “Governmentality” 216). The Krogan at this point were also responsible for defeating the Rachni and keeping the Citadel Council in power. If the Krogan defeated the Rachni, then surely, they were entitled to more territory. The Krogan were facing the political realities of populational hyper-development. For the geostrategic Krogan we, biopolitical management and administration of the population became the ultimate end of government (ibid). The Krogan made diplomatic appeals to the Council, petitioning the council to grant the Krogan further living space (“lebensraum”), which were rejected.²⁷ The Krogan annexed territory through military force, initiating what is diegetically termed the “Krogan Rebellions.” This “Rebellion” would eventually develop into a military conflict between the unified Krogan clans and the Citadel Council, between the Krogan and the Council as distinctive geostrategic we’s (Garcia, *We* 19). The Krogan were defeating the Council, so the Council collectively agreed to implement a Salarian-developed bioweapon that would target the Krogan fertility rates: the genophage. This biopolitical technology driven from the sovereign power of the Citadel Council was utilized directly against the Krogan, drastically transforming their form of we at the biological level.

The player’s first sustained encounter with the Krogan is through the character Wrex, a bounty hunter who the player can recruit in the early game. Wrex notes how the genophage is “destroying our entire species” (*ME1*). The sheer quantity of prenatal terminations is destroying Krogan aspirations, leading to endemic levels

²⁶ Garcia uses the term “determination” to describe the acquisition of a quality. This is a simplification, but when Garcia discusses time and temporality, he seems to state that one’s life is determined by acquiring certain qualities and not others (Garcia, *Form*, 177–188; “Time”).

²⁷ This concept can be traced back to the German geographer Freidrich Ratzel (1844–1904) who defined living space as “the geographical surface area required to support a living species at its current population size and mode of existence” (Smith 53). The concept was appropriated and utilized by the German National Socialist movement, combining Ratzel’s geography with fascist biopolitics.

of cultural pessimism, cynicism, and depression. Wrex later claims that the Krogan have “forgotten their roots,” translatable as the collapsing of their sense of we, their *form of we*. The Krogan inherit the genophage situation, and this impacts the way Krogan lifeforms see the world, affecting their motivations. Limitations are placed on their capacity to form radically new we’s-of-ideas by way of inherited interests. Many Krogan males become mercenaries and bounty hunters in *ME*’s world. The perception is that there is no future for the Krogan as a people, their form of we is destined to perpetual decline and destitution. In such a scenario, one may as well die in battle for coin rather than live a pointless, hopeless, and futureless life. There is either the return to the *power politik* between Krogan clans (war waged often over breeding rights with supposedly fertile females) on their home world or selling their bodies as mercenaries off-world. Wrex tells the player character that he does not “expect” a human to understand them and their predicament. One can know the facts (one in a thousand Krogan survive pregnancy), but one does not know what it is *like* to experience such loss at such a scale. We struggle to find our Wittgensteinian feet with such people. One cannot really know what it is like for a Krogan to inherit this plague-like phenomenon. By extension, one cannot really comprehend the attitudinal and dispositional effects caused by such an inheritance. But one can see the general ecological–political problem that “uplifting” the Krogan has caused: the short-circuiting of Krogan’s technological development was not accompanied by evolutionary-biological checks and balances. It is this imbalance that leads to issues of overpopulation and resource depletion (if one takes the story-world at its word). Throughout the trilogy, the question of whether the genophage was the *right* response to the disjunction between the vertical and horizontal senses of the Krogan lifeform and the we such lifeforms constitute is raised. The trilogy explores the issue by posing different solutions to the “genophage problem,” and these possibilities are traced and tracked from one game to the next.

Tracing the Contours of the Krogan Biopolitical Problematic

The first solution to the genophage is offered by Saren in *ME1*, a Turian turn-coat Spectre serving the Reapers, advancing their goal of harvesting all advanced organic lifeforms. On the planet of Virmire, Shepard and the team (including Wrex) learn that Saren is experimenting on the Krogan organism. Shepard, operating on behalf of the Council and in conjunction with Salarian special forces, stipulates that the research and the facility on Virmire must be destroyed, along with this potential cure for the genophage. Wrex, for obvious reasons, questions this and his loyalty to the team. The reasons for destroying the facility are straightforward: Saren and his AI masters seek to control and dominate the cured Krogan, they do not seek to cure the genophage to improve or alleviate the difficulties faced by the Krogan. The player can either convince Wrex that Saren’s cure has to be destroyed or kill Wrex and move on with the mission. Critics are right to point out that this forced choice rests on a negation of choice: the player cannot choose to destroy the facility but save the genophage cure (Patterson 216; Hayden 186). Convincing Wrex is predicated on either a) completing a quest prior to the events on Virmire (retrieving Wrex’s stolen family Armor) or b) investing in the Paragon/Renegade system and using such dialogue choices when prompted. This choice greatly affects the trajectory of the Krogan-genophage issue in future games. Wrex in *ME1* is dissatisfied with the cultural trajectory of the Krogan. He openly declares his ambitions of leadership to re-orient Krogan attitudes away from existential pessimism to a tightening of the we-Krogan through the reintroduction of a hopeful and optimistic future-forward we-of-ideas into Krogan culture. Wrex is seeking we-extension that is predicated on what Garcia terms “idealist” (or liberal) promises (Garcia, *We* 163–171).²⁸ In general, Wrex wants to reform the

²⁸ Garcia discusses different versions of this “promise,” from Christianity, communism, to evolutionary optimism. The general idea here is that liberatory futures entail and require mapping out the different liberal promises that can be made about future lifeforms and their forms of life. Contrarily, the “realist” makes plausibility assessments about the promises proposed. The realist is not necessarily a dystopian, but the realist does call into question idealistic utopianism. Garcia seems to argue that we’s need *both* promises and assessments: it is not a zero-sum game.

Krogan politically and culturally, focusing on greater species unity, the affirmation of Krogan existential importance, and ending inter-clan conflict. This is also entwined with contractive moves predicated on what Garcia terms “realist assessments” (ibid 171–178). In general, assessments of the possibility of extension and expansion of we are conservative countermeasures that aim at maintaining the borders of we, guarding the distinctiveness of we, a particular form of life. Wrex cannot necessarily achieve his political objectives without defeating the clans that seek conflict and will not align with Wrex’s new Krogan we-of-ideas. Realist assessments and political actions that transform the way inherited we’s-of-interest are received are required if there is to be a substantial change in the Krogan capacity to form radically new and idealist we’s-of-ideas.

This cannot be said for Wrex’s replacement in *ME2*, Wreav. Wreav is *all* realist assessment, withholding any liberal promise of we-extension. His direction for the Krogan is to intensify the power struggles between the clans. Wreav’s aim is not to unite them with the hope and purpose of transforming Krogan culture, but to dominate the different clans and build up support for a war of revenge against the Salarians and the Turians (at least). In *ME2*, another Krogan attempts to create a solution to the genophage. An exiled Krogan Doctor (and “Warlord”), Okeer, is experimenting with genetic technologies with the aim of artificially breeding new Krogan lifeforms not marked by the genophage plague. Okeer is looking to create and produce a “pure” Krogan – whatever that actually entails is unclear. Okeer dies and the player inherits a tank containing Okeer’s “magnum opus”: his pure Krogan specimen. Okeer, in synthesizing and combining Krogan genetic material, also arrives at a (synthetic) biopolitical solution to the genophage. If the player activates the tank, Shepard is confronted by the “pure” Krogan male. He attacks Shepard out of confusion. He does not know what the Krogan are and what he is. The Krogan is a quasi-adolescent that has missed acculturation to the Krogan form of life. He names himself Grunt, representing the first *weless* Krogan. Grunt has not inherited a we-of-interests (or, his biological interests are not connected to any form of life – he is a socially formless lifeform) and he is possessed by a generally contractive we-of-ideas through Okeer’s neurological imprinting. Later in *ME2*, Grunt asks Shepard to take him to the other Krogan, as he does not seem to be able to control his anger. On Tuchanka, if Wrex survives *ME1*, he greets the player here. If not, Wreav does it instead. Wrex and Wreav both have different opinions of Okeer. Wrex expresses his distaste whilst Wreav speaks favourably of him. Either way, Wrex (or Wreav) diagnoses Grunt’s anger problem as an adolescent issue: he is going through the Krogan version of “puberty.” Grunt is clanless and thus he has no order or control in his life and is tasked to go through a Krogan rite of passage, proving himself worthy of being a Krogan. This entails a transition from welessness to acquiring a we-of-interests, an immersion within a form of life (or “finding one’s feet”). But Grunt also chooses a specific clan, thus connecting his newly acquired we-of-interests with a determined we-of-ideas. Whilst Grunt is not a viable solution to the genophage problem, Grunt nonetheless represents something culturally new to the Krogan: a Krogan lifeform who does not place stock in the traditional and conservative forms of we.

The best possible genophage solution is tied to Mordin Solus. Mordin is a Salarian scientist and partly responsible for developing, enacting, and maintaining the genophage. The virus itself is emitted from an environmental stabilizer that was constructed on the Krogan home-world following nuclear war on the planet (the different clans utilized nuclear weapons in an attempt to conquer each other). Mordin joins the player’s team in *ME2* and asks Shepard if the player can assist him with finding his old assistant Maelon. Mordin suspects that Maelon has been kidnapped in the Krogan home-world. Gradually, it is revealed that Maelon is voluntarily working with a Krogan clan, experimenting on both female and male Krogan who voluntarily sacrifice themselves for the cause of curing the genophage. As Shepard and Mordin move through the abandoned hospital where Maelon is conducting his genophage research, Mordin indicates that the scientific practices conducted by Maelon are “barbaric” in character. Shepard *qua* player can challenge Mordin on the ethics of the genophage, stating that this was the logical outcome of the events that Mordin was involved in. Mordin asserts that the “Krogan forced the genophage,” that it was a “question of us or them”. When Mordin and Maelon meet, they debate the ethics of the genophage. Maelon argues that whilst the genophage may have been necessary in the past, the genophage is not necessary *now*. After the debate, Mordin either kills Maelon or he lets him live. There is also a further conundrum surrounding Maelon’s research data: does the player keep the research data gathered through unethical scientific practice? Choosing to kill Maelon and choosing to destroy the data have important consequences in *ME3*, as curing the genophage becomes much more difficult

and costly if the data has been destroyed or if Maelon is killed. That is, of course, if the player's intentions are to cure the genophage.

Mordin, affected by what he saw on Tuchanka and his encounter with Maelon, is driven to develop a genophage cure. Holding onto the data makes this process simpler. A cure can still be developed without the data, but if the data was not saved, a powerful and progressive Krogan would not survive *ME3*. The female Krogan Eve does not suffer from the genophage. Sampling her blood and genetic material is a vital ingredient of the genophage cure. Without Maelon's data, complications occur that lead to her death. Eve's death has political consequences, as she can contest and rebut the conservative–contractive tendencies of both Wrex and to a lesser extent Wreav. The move to cure the genophage virus takes place in *ME3*, as the player must broker a “multiracial coalition” in order to countermand the aggression of the Reapers—the advanced synthetic lifeforms harvesting advanced organic lifeforms (Patterson).²⁹ Whilst the Krogan demand the genophage be cured, the Salarian leader opposes the notion. The Krogan are again needed to militarily support the Council governments (including the Human Systems Alliance), and they will only participate if the genophage is cured. The Salarian leader privately communicates with Shepard, noting how the genophage cure can be sabotaged without the Krogan realizing it (or until the war is over and the Krogan can be dealt with then). This option both secures Krogan's loyalty and secures Salarian forces but constitutes a *de facto* betrayal of the Krogan.

This decision to sabotage the Krogan genophage is coloured by speculative “what ifs”: what if the Krogan return to *lebensraum politik* if their population levels are not controlled? What if they exhaust the natural resources of more worlds? The question can be put like this: do the Krogan need protection from *themselves*?³⁰ The survival of different characters may lead to different decisions being made. Wreav further emphasizes that the genophage cure is a constitutive factor for future Krogan expansionism that may lead to a hegemonic Krogan future. This is framed as remembering what it “means to be a true Krogan.” Wrex rejects this vengeful rhetoric and notes how the genophage cure will lead to a genuine transformation of Krogan lifeforms and their forms of we. This entails a movement away from militarism and imperialism towards we-extension, cultural development, and dignified co-existence with other interstellar lifeforms – including the other Council members. If Eve does not survive, a strong female voice who advocates for the wider inclusion of female voices within the Krogan leadership will be lost. Eve notes how much of the violent Krogan nature is a male characteristic exacerbated by the genophage. Following the genophage, males have become “wandering killers, seeing targets to justify their existence, excuses to earn them honor”. Eve in other dialogue affirms, like Wrex, that she is fighting to “win a new future for our children.” From this perspective, certain Krogan mentalities, like Wreav's, must be placated. If Wrex and Eve both die, then no one will necessarily contest Wreav and Krogan like him (who are the majority). As Patterson notes, Wreav, as well as seeking revenge and supremacy, also seeks to control Eve by “forcing her to have his offspring” (Patterson 224). Patterson argues that any possible “interracial” alliance is “bound to the reproductive rights and control over the female body” (*ibid*). Any future Krogan must include female voices in its form of we, female voices must become a significant part of their form of we and not relegated to the political, social, and cultural background. This dynamic is also biopolitical: female we's-of-interest cannot be bracketed for the sake of an exclusivist male-oriented we-of-ideas.

The future of the Krogan is open and undetermined. Conservative (contractive) and liberal (extensive) tendencies are suggested, but neither is a necessary option. The arguments for the perpetuation of the genophage and those for its termination are both logically presented. Both arguments are plausible, but

²⁹ Another way to comprehend the coalition is to see it as a more or less expansive geostrategic we, formed to combat a Schmittean existential threat.

³⁰ This is how the Salarians frame the Krogan-genophage issue in the “Foundation” comic. The Salarian geostrategic we find it necessary to intervene, shaping and influencing the Krogan form of life externally. The Krogan and other non-Krogan characters contest Salarian external interference throughout the *ME* trilogy and in the “Foundation” comic series. This medium-specific reworking (the comic) of the *ME* story-world contains and references general world features or qualities that are political in nature. To reiterate a point made earlier, the videogame trilogy is not the penultimate source of aesthetic content. The critic can sample arguments from a wider gamut of medium-specific workings, what also problematizes Casey Hudson's distinction between issue-exploring videogames and statement-making media.

both decisions are not necessarily desirable based on the static and dynamic world components that are presented to the player. The trajectory of the genophage-Krogan issue is affected by outside forces, human forces in particular (*vis-à-vis* the player). As Hayden emphasizes:

The [trilogy's] story does not *prima facie* privilege a realist, liberal, or constructivist narrative of unfolding political drama, but allows political consequences to 'play out' in ways that highlight the implicit biases (or rhetorics) towards their ethical trade-offs (Hayden 185).

But whilst the biases and rhetorics are highlighted, it is always external forces interfering in the affairs of the Krogan. This is what gives the imperialist and colonialist critiques of *ME* bite. From the initial Salarian uplift to the Turian implementation of the genophage, forces from beyond have manipulated the future trajectories, textures, and contours of the Krogan we. However, the human case is different. The presence of Shepard does indicate a different alternative: the possibility of we-entanglement and co-existence following from the creation and development of a new we, a more elastically extensive we that both includes the Krogan and other forms of life. What the *ME* trilogy seems to suggest is that whilst extension is a goal worth striving for, one cannot abandon realist assessments.³¹ To put it another way, idealist promises about greater universality, freedom, unity, and so on have a price.³² The politics of the story-world are not *necessarily* neoliberal, even if the game design structures do express neoliberal managerial tendencies, as Patterson and Voorhees argue. *ME*'s indeterminacy and agnosticism, even surrounding potentially controversial issues like the genophage dilemma, seem to keep the possibilities of we-extension open whilst being realist about the possibilities of contraction. There is no such thing as a "frictionless" politics. The *ME* trilogy also presents numerous critiques of imperialism and colonialism. In the Krogan case, we have two kinds of imperialist critique: one aimed towards the Krogan themselves who over-extend their territorial boundaries; one aimed towards the Salarians and the Turians for their potential mismanagement of difference and ultimately for their usage of plague-like-bioweapons. The genophage issue in *ME* also attests to the connection between forms of life and biopolitics, that one cannot think about we without also thinking about that which supports we, what was once described as the "lifeworld" (Husserl 108–109).

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that the politics of the *ME* trilogy cannot be captured only through critiques emphasizing neoliberal, imperialist, and colonialist dynamics. These readings of the *ME* trilogy and *ME*'s story-world are reasonable, and textual evidence does support them. My primary critique of this emphasis is one of overdetermination: there are counter tendencies and counterpoints in *ME*'s storytelling and world-building that critique imperialist and colonialist tendencies. Neoliberalism as a concept is not something that is directed towards the world itself, it is generally directed towards game design practices and their outcomes. This critique then is more a critique of the milieu in which BioWare as a company produces games. But the degree of emphasis here is contestable. As Mark Rose argues in the case of SF, "form is finally inseparable from content" (Rose 27). In this case, one could state that neoliberal form is cashed out as neoliberal content. I am somewhat sceptical of this inseparability, as it does not seem clear if the story-world is the content or the form in this instance. Of course, this does not mean that *ME*'s world does not possess conservative tendencies. As I argued before, it seems that *ME*'s conservatism is more radical than neoliberalism. Some pro-human characters are essentially anti-alien fascists. There are also cases of anti-human fascistic characters in the world as well, so the intolerance of difference is not something specifically human. Using Garcia's terminology, we-

³¹ The closing chapter of *We Ourselves* does affirm this orientation, but I am sure that one could reverse the emphasis.

³² Garcia closes *Form and Object* with a small section titled "The Chance and the Price." I take this closing section as affirming the notion that for there to be chance, there is a price to be paid. In the political domain, the chance for extension implies the cost of contraction (Garcia, *Form* 433–438).

contraction is a general feature of *ME's* world. On the other hand, we-extension is also an open possibility in *ME's* story-world.

These dual movements of extension and contraction seem to be modes of manipulating story-world components (both static and dynamic). These story-world components, I argue, are used as part of a reflection on what is entailed in the attempt to affect a form of life – or form of we – from the outside. *ME's* conclusions are indeterminate and agnostic, implying that interactivity between different forms of life is anti-necessitarian. *ME* resists liberal-progressive readings because it insists on the viability and credibility of conservative and contractive manoeuvring. But *ME* also resists conservative and reactionary readings because it stresses the inevitability, plausibility, and productivity of liberal and extensive politics. It resists commenting on what ought to be the case and simply presents counterfactual scenarios that can be “played out.” This, in my view, is what separates *ME* from comparable story-worlds. It is not utopian because it does not insist on the universal aspiration for identity de-intensification (or the collapsing of specific forms of life into some global or radically universal we, where cultural distinctiveness is flattened), but it is nonetheless not dystopian because it does not insist on authoritarian solutions to biopolitical problematics. The *ME* trilogy, I argue, sincerely aims to explore the issues it focuses on. It is truly agonistic and anti-necessitarian about how difference should be managed, and how forms of life should be governed. This anti-necessitarian impulse is something that can generate a more elastic and open sense of we ourselves in its players.

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