In Transmedia Res:

The Ludic Nature of Transmedia Storytelling in *Mass Effect*

by

Gregory Carl William Blomquist

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

Department of English and Film Studies

University of Alberta

Abstract

Transmedia storytelling embodies how we interact with and engage in a continuously expanding story across media. In this dissertation, I argue that transmedia storytelling can be better understood through the concept of player agency within game studies, specifically how players choose to navigate these narratives across storyworlds and characters in BioWare's *Mass Effect* series. I examine how players must piece together and engage *Mass Effect*'s storyworld and its characters across media like a puzzle game. This transmedial puzzle can be effectively understood by applying concepts of ludology, including player agency, choice, and interactive engagement, to *Mass Effect*'s game-centric transmedia story. Video games can offer the most precise parallel to transmedia stories as player-focused experiences that rely on agency to work within and across media. I explore *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story through a transmedial application of concepts from game studies (ludology). Transmedial ludology, or the practice of understanding and examining transmedia stories as games, offers a critical perspective on how players engage storyworlds and characters that center on player agency. *Mass Effect* offers choices on how players decide to experience the potential arcs of the series, creating their unique experiences on various paths through and between media.

With the choices that arise from each path through the *Mass Effect* series, a player must organize and make sense of massive amounts of information as the transmedia story slowly unravels with new content. Players then construct a path through these interconnected stories to make sense of characters and the storyworld in direct contest with the transmedia story's inherently challenging amount of content. These stories, and how and in what order players engage them, build off one another and interconnect larger, more complex plotlines. The various media then connect to form the larger transmedia story, creating a singular experience based on

each player's engagement. As such, players must work as collectors, encyclopedists, and detectives to collect, organize, and investigate the complex puzzle created by BioWare. Players must then rely on knowledge from interactive media, networked consumption, and participatory culture to fully realize transmedia storytelling's potential. Unlike a single game, *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story is difficult, if not impossible, to control or master, and offers a space for creators and players to reframe and celebrate the ludic element of failure, not only in the games but the transmedia story. This new perspective on transmedia stories can redefine this drive for mastery in video games and reframe how scholars understand agency across media.

Chapter 1 begins with a discussion of the transmedial player figure within transmedia stories, including how transmedia relies on a central medium, or mothership, to guide the player when exploring and collecting *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story. Chapter 2 examines how transmedial players mirror *Mass Effect*'s in-game codex to create real-world encyclopedias through collective knowledge of the storyworld to challenge BioWare's sense of control and canon, resulting in both groups acknowledging the impossibility of mastering the transmedia story. Chapter 3 focuses on how transmedial players must track down, make sense of, and piece together *Mass Effect*'s characters from various texts and media like Frankenstein monsters, forming connections with these beings and gaining a clearer understanding of their place in the transmedia story. Chapter 4 explores how the transmedial player must come to terms with their limited power as a player-character through their ludic hybridity as both player, character, and player-character (as Shepard) within *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story. Throughout, I show how examining transmedia stories as ludic systems offers us new paths towards understanding player agency not as the promise of power, mastery, and entitlement but as a personal connection and responsibility to the construction of and interaction with storyworlds and characters.

Dedication

For my grandma, Bernice Watts, who always asked when I'd be finished my "book," and my

grandpa, Milton Watts, the storyteller.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation took everything I was willing to give it and without the support of so many people, I would not have finished it, so I want to take this opportunity to thank you all from the bottom of my heart.

First and foremost, I want to thank my supervisor Jonathan Cohn for all the advice, the many meetings, the countless readings, and the constant empathy over this many-year journey. Your patience, knowledge, and guidance allowed me to complete not only my dissertation but a dissertation of which I am immensely proud.

I want to thank my examining committee, Michael Litwack, Astrid Ensslin, and Sean Gouglas, as well as my committee chair, Eddy Kent, and a special acknowledgement to my external examiner Matthew Freeman whose feedback was as much generative as it was generous.

I also want to express my gratitude to Julie Rak, who guided me through the first stages of my project.

Thank you to all my instructors and mentors at the University of Alberta, with special thanks to Cecily Devereux, Mark Simpson, Annett Gaudig-Rueger, and Kim Brown for all the time and energy spent helping me navigate the many unknowns of graduate work and research.

I would also like to acknowledge the awards and grants rewarded to me by the University of Alberta English and Film Studies department, as well as the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) for the Doctoral Fellowship that helped fund much of my doctoral work.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

INTRODUCTION

Overview

Transmedia storytelling embodies how we interact with and engage in a continuously expanding story across media. In this dissertation, I argue that transmedia storytelling can be better understood through the concept of player agency within ludology, specifically how players choose to navigate these narratives across storyworlds and characters in BioWare's *Mass Effect*. I examine how players must piece together and engage *Mass Effect*'s storyworld and its characters across media like a puzzle game. This transmedial puzzle can be effectively understood by applying concepts of ludology, including player agency, mastery, and failure, to *Mass Effect*'s game-centric transmedia story. Video games can offer the most precise parallel to transmedia stories as player-focused experiences that rely on agency to work within and across media. I approach my over-arching analysis through a confluence of narratology and ludology that I call transmedial ludology, or the practice of understanding and examining transmedia stories as games. Transmedial ludology thus offers a critical perspective on how players engage storyworlds and characters that center on player agency, and how these players create unique experiences on various paths through and between media.

Through my investigation, several important questions arise: How do creators and players experience a story that is not bound to a single medium? How is this experience different from how we experience a story in a single medium: are certain media only capable of offering a particular degree of transmedia agency, and what affords this agency? How do storyworlds, characters, and even the players change over media and time? Does the current definition of transmedia storytelling encompass an understanding of a transmedia story in a ludic or game-centric mediascape like *Mass Effect*? How does examining transmedia stories as a ludic system

change how we understand and define player agency? Most importantly, does this game-centric logic only apply to transmedia stories that offer video game motherships? Are all transmedia stories working along these principles, or does *Mass Effect* follow these principles because it has a video game mothership? How applicable is transmedial agency, specifically, and transmedial ludology, generally, beyond the case study of *Mass Effect*?

My interest in transmedia storytelling is not unprecedented; however, my approach is innovative. In many ways, my research speaks to a phenomenon old enough to prompt questions regarding its relevance and application to contemporary media and definitions of agency. Transmedia is more active than ever and, with questions of its application, more complicated than ever. Video games are now central to transmedia stories and using the idiosyncrasies of the medium to explore how we engage transmedia is crucial to understanding transmedia storytelling. How we interact with and within a video game mirrors and encapsulates how we interact with a transmedia story. With the ostensibly participatory culture of transmedia, where players now often influence the growth of a series, video games offer a platform from which an over-arching analysis of transmedia storytelling can manifest. Though transmedia storytelling has existed in the popular imagination since L. Frank Baum's The Land of Oz, Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Tarzan*, and DC's *Superman* (Freeman 2017) and in blockbuster spectacles since *Star Wars*, this process is becoming more common in many contemporary series such as the Wachowski siblings' *The Matrix* and Disney/Marvel's *Marvel Cinematic Universe*. However, my interests lie in how game-centric transmedia stories may be unique in their engagement with these largely novel, comic, and film-centric transmedia series. As such, my dissertation focuses on one specific transmedia story: BioWare's *Mass Effect*.

Mass Effect is a science-fiction series developed by BioWare and published by Electronic Arts. The transmedia story includes twenty-seven stories told over five media, including video games, comics, novels, apps, and films. *Mass Effect*'s most recognized medium, or "mothership," is its video games, especially after BioWare remastered the original trilogy as *Mass Effect: Legendary Edition* in 2021. *Mass Effect* exists across two eras and galaxies: Milky Way and Andromeda. The Milky Way era revolves around Commander Shepard and their Normandy crew. In contrast, the Andromeda era takes place 633 years later and revolves around Pathfinder Ryder and their Tempest crew. The series is bookended with the novel *Mass Effect*: *Revelation*, released in 2007, and the novel *Mass Effect: Andromeda — Annihilation*, released in 2018, with the promise of a future *Mass Effect* game announced in December 2020.

While other transmedia scholars like Henry Jenkins (2006, 2009), Elizabeth Evans (2011), Colin Harvey (2015), and Matthew Freeman (2017) incorporate multiple case studies into their research, I chose *Mass Effect* as my single case study because it offers a strong balance of what Jenkins and Freeman refer to as "spreadability" (the dispersal of content) and "drillability" (the depth of that content). By focusing on one case study, my analysis connects each story and media to clarify how concepts from studying video games offer an understanding of the interplay between these stories and the choice-based and player-like engagement necessary to comprehend the transmedia story fully. Though I am focusing on *Mass Effect*, I also include several other series that compound the points I argue throughout this project. *Star Wars* and *The Matrix* offer interesting comparisons of how film-centric transmedia may affect this engagement. The main point of this analysis is that transmedial ludology is not limited to understanding only video game transmedia stories, nor is it contained to contemporary examples; however, game-centric transmedia exemplifies the ludic nature of transmedia storytelling.

Playful Convergence: Understanding Transmedia Storytelling and Ludology

In exploring transmedia storytelling through a contemporary case study such as *Mass Effect*, it is important to ground my analysis in the history of transmedia scholarship. Initially coined by Marsha Kinder in 1991, the concept of "transmedia intertextuality" (*Playing with Power* 1) is a marketing super system that enables consumers "to recognize, distinguish, and combine different popular genres and their respective iconography that cut across movies, television, comic books, commercials, video games, and toys" (47). Before transmedia intertextuality, movies, TV, and other media competed for consumers, and no over-arching franchises existed to create media confluence. Thus transmedia intertextuality erased these prior boundaries and proved the marketing power of multi-mediated engagement. For Kinder, this transmedia intertextuality is more connected to commercial commodification rather than narrative expansion occurring in multiple media franchises, which become "an ever-expanding supersystem entertainment" (1). Kinder's example is *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, which not only existed as a comic book series, a film series, and a TV series but also as the merchandise that included toys, clothing, and furniture.

Henry Jenkins further explored the term in 2006 as a phenomenon relating to media convergence and how it changes how we interact with and consume stories. In Jenkins' usage, convergence describes the "flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences" (*Convergence Culture* 2). Convergence, then, is intrinsically connected to transmedia storytelling, which Jenkins initially defines as follows: "A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best—so

that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics" (95).

However, in 2007, Jenkins streamlined this definition, explaining that "Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story" ("Transmedia Storytelling 101"). This definition has become the foundation for contemporary transmedia studies. As Jenkins later clarifies, it is important to note that "Transmedia storytelling describes one logic for thinking about the flow of content across media. We might also think about transmedia branding, transmedia performance, transmedia ritual, transmedia play, transmedia activism, and transmedia spectacle, as other logics" ("Transmedia Storytelling 202").

While there are countless transmedia logics, my focus throughout this dissertation is on transmedial play and transmedia storytelling. Transmedia play, as Meryl Alper and Rebecca Herr-Stephenson define it, "involves experimentation with and participation in a transmedia experience" and relies on players' abilities "to decode, remix, create, and circulate many kinds of media content" ("Transmedia Play" 366). It is important to note here that in examining transmedia storytelling and transmedia stories, I follow Gérard Genette's usage of "the word story for the signified or narrative content" and "to use the word narrative for the signifier, statement, discourse or narrative text itself" (*Narrative Discourse* 27). Thus, I use "transmedia story," transmedia storytelling," and "transmedia narrative" as related concepts that describe the various levels of the phenomenon in which transmedial players engage.

Jenkins' definition of transmedia storytelling remains essential for contemporary transmedia critics such as Elizabeth Evans (2011), Mélanie Bourdaa (2013), and Matthew

Freeman (2017), among others, who have argued that transmedia storytelling is a distinct narrative form. Yet, many scholars, including Brian Clark (2012), Marie-Laure Ryan (2015), Jan-Noël Thon (2015), Rüdiger Heinze (2015), and Matthew Freeman & Renira Rampazzo Gambarato (2019), question or outright challenge Jenkins' definition and the occurrence of transmedia stories. An important though often overlooked aspect of contemporary transmedia scholarship is the focus on novel-, film-, and TV-centric transmedia stories. However, game-centric transmedia stories like *Mass Effect* are often overlooked or even ignored. While Colin Harvey acknowledges that "transmedia storytelling, like videogames, is playful" (*Fantastic Transmedia* 16), Harvey does not examine transmedia stories as games. Similarly, Helen W. Kennedy's notion of "transmedia games" (2019) focuses on video games as adaptations, using the images and characters from film as playable objects.

Without an exemplar found in film- or TV-centric transmedia and often ignored in game-centric transmedia, the critical discussion tends to splinter regarding generative examples of transmedia storytelling. With critics unable to agree upon an exemplary transmedia story hit, the field remains in relative discord, with some scholars (Gray 2010; Freeman 2015; Blom 2021; Nakamura and Tosca 2021) paralleling Ryan's assertion that "transmedia storytelling is not an autonomous mode of storytelling but rather a marketing strategy that force-feeds storyworlds to the public through as many media platforms as available, in order to reach the widest possible audience" ("Industry Buzzword" 17). Nevertheless, Ryan is optimistic and rationalizes transmedia storytelling "is an experimental project that still needs to find its true calling" (17). Due to a continuing critical disregard of video games as transmedia motherships, previous scholars have not yet arrived at a conducive definition of transmedia that speaks to an inclusive

means of critique and engagement of video game-based transmedia franchises, which consequently (and evidently) misses an important area and potential for transmedia storytelling.

Transmedia stories are necessarily playful as players explore multiple, branching paths through these interconnected media and stories, collecting, organizing, and making sense of the storyworld and characters. Therefore, I argue transmedia stories can be analyzed through ludology. Ludology, inspired by early video game scholars such as Espen Aarseth (1997, 2007), Janet Murray (1997, 2004), Jesper Juul (2001, 2005), Marie-Laure Ryan (2001, 2003), and others, will be most conducive to my examination of transmedia storytelling because game-centric transmedia stories open a new avenue of inquiry into how player agency, mastery, and failure figure into the experience of transmedia storytelling. The core of my examination is understanding that a transmedia story functions like a game. Katie Salen Tekinbaş and Eric Zimmerman define a game as "a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that result in a quantifiable outcome" (*Rules of Play* 80). A transmedia story operates as this kind of meta-system with artificial conflict (attempting to complete the story) played across multiple spaces (each story) with their own set of rules (medium-specific means of engagement). What makes games unique, Juul argues, are "rules, goals, player activity, the projection of the player's actions into the game world, the way the game defines the possible actions of the player" ("Games Telling Stories"). What is significant about the definition of games is the player or active participant necessary to engage in the game.

Adhering to Jenkins' definition, I argue that transmedia stories must be pieced together by an active participant who engages the storyworld and its characters across the media. To understand the storytelling and the game-like aspect of transmedia storytelling, I rely on two connected fields of study: narratology (the study of stories) and ludology (the study of games).

Combining transmedia studies, narratology, and ludology, I examine *Mass Effect*'s transmedial puzzle through what I call transmedial ludology or the practice of understanding and examining transmedia stories as games. Transmedial ludology offers a critical perspective on how we can study crucial aspects of game-centric transmedia stories like *Mass Effect* that include concepts from narratology like storyworlds and characters and concepts from ludology, including players and player-characters, along with player agency, choice, and failure. In short, *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story works like a puzzle game and can be better analyzed as a game.

While transmedia scholarships acknowledges the importance of audience, scholars primarily focus on participants who create fan art, fan fiction, or other products known as "prosumers" or consumers who produce (Booth 2010, 2018; Hills 2012, 2015; Hellekson and Busse 2014; Harvey 2015; Delwiche 2017), ignoring how other consumers who do not create objects engage transmedia stories. To fill this gap, I analyze how game-centric series position players within not only the games themselves but the media around these games. Through this analysis, I illuminate how narratology and ludology are necessary for critiquing players' interactivity and agency to engage in transmedia stories in many ways. As Susanne Eichner notes, "Video games are widely considered as paradigmatic interactive media, distinguished from 'traditional' media by interactivity, thus providing the positive pleasure of agency for their players" (*Agency and Media Reception* 53). However, Eichner argues that "different media provide different forms and degrees of an interactive textuality" (66). Following Eichner's assessment, I argue that in transmedia stories, players must negotiate ludic aspects of mastery, agency and choice, success/failure, and character connection and representation, among others (Juul 2005, 2013; Isbister 2016; Muriel and Crawford 2018; Shaw 2014; Ruberg 2019). In examining transmedial engagement through ludology, my analysis offers new ways of

approaching transmedia storytelling, most often examined through narratology (Klastrup and Tosca 2004; Ryan 2004; Ryan and Thon 2014; Thon 2016) or film and TV studies (Gray 2010; Evans 2011; Clarke 2013; Mittell 2015) despite the twenty-first century being hailed as the (video)ludification of society (Raessens 2010; Walz and Deterding 2015; Zimmerman 2015; Mäyrä 2017).

Narratology is inherently transmedial in that stories exist across all media, a well-established notion from early narratologists. Transmedial ludology works the other way, offering a means of understanding how our engagement shifts when two or more media are connected through a story. However, ludology is not inherently transmedial (in that it can neatly be applied to non-ludic media). Nevertheless, transmedia stories are inherently game-like, and, as Eichner notes, "the experience of agency is in fact not restricted to particular media" (228). Indeed, my analysis echoes and expands upon Eichner's claim that "supposedly 'narrative media' can also "suggest a ludic mode of involvement" (228). Ludology, at its most comprehensive and most useful, is the study of games and play, which revolve around storied events. To play is to enact, and to play a game is to engage with an event that offers action, conflict, and resolution. To foreclose story and narrative from that study is asinine. Thus, transmedial ludology depends on the broad definition of ludology. Transmedial ludology studies play and game-like structures between and across media in a transmedia story.

Unlike film- or TV-centric transmedia stories, *Mass Effect* offers what Jenkins calls "a somewhat alien aesthetic—one that reflects the potentials of interactive media, networked consumption, and participatory culture" ("The Reign of the 'Mothership'" 247). As a game-centric transmedia story, *Mass Effect* relies on its video games as its "mothership," or the most recognized medium in the series, to guide its players across its various stories and media. As

interactive media facilitating networked consumption and participatory culture, video games can offer an understanding of transmedia storytelling as a player-focused process that relies on an active participant to piece together the puzzle. I call this participant the "transmedial player" who acts as a collector, encyclopedist, and detective to collect, organize, and investigate *Mass Effect*'s complex puzzle. I chose the term transmedial player, or player for short, to describe the participant who engages in the transmedia story as the player, reader, and viewer. Understanding *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story as a complex game between player and creator is a core aspect of understanding the ludic nature of transmedia stories. Every player is a transmedial player; transmedial play is not a binary notion. No matter how limited or focused, any engagement with a transmedia story necessitates the player being transmedial in their presence within the mediascape. Players must rely on the alien aesthetics of interactive media, networked consumption, and participatory culture to engage *Mass Effect*'s complexities, paralleling the video game concept of player agency.

My methodology follows André Jansson and Karin Fast (2018) while re-situating their discussion of transmediated constructions of self back to transmedial players through ludology. I seek to extend Katherine Isbister's claim that the "joining of player to virtual self through avatar-based action marks a core innovation that games have brought to media" (*How Games Move Us* 13) to game-centric transmedia. Within game-centric transmedia, players are implicitly expected to act as player-characters, empathising or identifying with a character as mediated versions of themselves within the transmedia experience. Transmediality thus demands the physical and virtual self overlap for a player to engage with a mediascape. The player explores transmedia series like we would an alternate-reality game (ARG) or a player-character in a game world:

piecing together a puzzle of the interconnected story as both a character within the system and the player situating this presence.

This participation allows transmedial players who interact with a transmedia story (as collectors, encyclopedists, detectives) to ensure its existence. As James Dalby explains, "Transmedia arguably cannot exist independently, they require audiences for their existence" ("Immersed In Difficulty" 82). Mirroring the transmedial player's experience of transmedia with that of the player's experience in a video game, I follow Astrid Ensslin and Alice Bell's notion that "Typically, yet not exclusively, digital fictions can be read, played, or experienced in multilinear ways, and reader/players often make choices about their journey through the text or storyworld" (*Digital Fiction and the Unnatural* 3). Transmedia stories then expand those choices across media; the transmedial players' involvement still follows Ensslin and Bell's understanding of the digital fiction players who "are therefore involved in the construction of these multimodal narratives and must interact throughout the reading experience" (3).

In addition to the previously noted scholars, my research employs various player-character, immersion, and agency theories (Lankoski 2011; Alton 2017; Dalby 2016; Hart 2017) to examine how the transmedia stories develop and resist previous understandings and definitions. Thus, my dissertation offers an assimilation of contemporary ludological approaches I apply to transmedia stories, examining how transmedia players' engagement with *Mass Effect* mirrors the player-character connection within its video games. As such, my dissertation offers a new perspective on transmedia storytelling that both complicates and complements approaches from previous scholars and contributes to our growing understanding of playfulness and agency in our contemporary mediascape.

Transmedial Agency, or Meaningful Action Across Media

Like transmedia storytelling, the concept of player agency is also divided. Agency is an oft-cited concept considered a fundamental though highly contested aspect of video games and game scholarship. Brenda Laurel was one of the first to discuss and define agency in video games, describing it as "the power to take action" (*Computers as Theatre* 117). However, Janet Murray is often considered the first to thoroughly examine the concept within video games and game studies, explaining that "Agency is the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (*Hamlet on the Holodeck* 126). Meaningful action has become the definitive aspect of agency, and games, like *Mass Effect*, promise this power. Returning to her definition, Murray later notes, "Agency is the term I use to distinguish the pleasure of interactivity, which arises from the two properties of the procedural and the participatory. When the world responds expressively and coherently to our engagement with it, then we experience agency" ("From Game-Story to Cyberdrama" 7). Agency belongs to both the player and the creator. As Murry explains, "Agency requires that we script the interactor as well as the world, so that we know how to engage the world, and so that we build up the appropriate expectations" (7). Agency thus becomes a multi-faceted concept that can mean different things for players and creators, becoming a site of concurrence as much as conflict.

Building off Murray's definition of agency and applying this ludological concept to transmedia storytelling, I understand transmedial agency to be the satisfying power to take meaningful action and make meaningful choices in engaging a transmedia story and seeing the results of our actions and choices. In short, transmedial agency is the power to choose how and when a player plays, reads, watches, or otherwise experiences different media within a transmedia story. My understanding of agency is also indebted to Theresa Jean Tanenbaum, who

reframes agency as a commitment to meaning. For Tanenbaum, "Committing to meaning entails the player in not only expressing intention within the communicative possibilities provided by the game system, but also in taking responsibility for the outcomes of those commitments within the web of understanding that arises from the working of the system and the interpretations of the player" (*Identity Transformation and Agency* 3-4).

Furthermore, my examination of agency also builds on Eichner's exhaustive overview of various types of agency. However, for Eichner, "the mode of agency is comprised of mastering action, mastering narrative, mastering choice, and mastering space" (170). Many game scholars share this consideration of agency. For Daniel Reardon, David Wright, and Edward Malone, "if a game features several meaningful choices within its narrative, a player's sense of agency, or power and control over a game's narrative, increases. Given enough meaningful choice content in a game, a player may develop a sense of authorship in the game" ("Quest for the Happy Ending" 42). Likewise, Joleen Blom's notion of agency ensures that "The player is still at the heart of the game" while extending their power "over a web of characters" (*The Dynamic Game Character* 145). Indeed, as Tanenbaum notes, "Current research into interactive digital narrative and story based games over-emphasizes one pleasure: that of unrestricted freedom to act. This is a reductive approach to the pleasures of agency" (5).

I seek to challenge these reductive and problematic assumptions. Transmedial agency is a direct response to Meghna Jayanth's call for "a definition of agency that can assimilate a loss of control, protagonism that works outside of primacy, games that function outside of the simulation of entitlement" ("Forget Protagonists"). Indeed, player entitlement shapes expectation, ownership, control, and mastery over games and game spaces. As *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story is difficult, if not impossible, to control or master, it offers an opportunity for

creators and players to reframe their engagement and celebrate the ludic element of failure, not only in the games but the entire transmedia story. As failure is often only found in games, this new perspective on transmedia stories can redefine this drive for ludic mastery in video games into a sense of wonder and connection in transmedia stories.

Transmedia stories offer content across media to such an extent that it can feel difficult or impossible to know everything about them. It exhausts the need to know and to control. The overwhelming scope of transmedia stories creates a space where both creator and player challenge mastery, control, and entitlement. With content arriving from the gaps between media or promised in the future, a series like *Mass Effect* is seemingly boundless, making it difficult to contain. Transmedia stories allow players to embrace a playfulness unburdened by a need for control and mastery. Jayanth reasons, "We limit his actions and his power—but NOT the player's agency" ("Forget Protagonists"). Jayanth thus re-examines agency and how it affects our engagement with the world: "Even if the player cannot directly affect something—if they can have an emotional response or reaction—for a game to allow them the space to have an opinion can be as powerful as allowing them to 'do something'" ("Forget Protagonists"). Jayanth's reconsiderations of agency return to Murray's emphasis on agency to enable the player to take meaningful action and have meaningful reactions.

Meaningful action and reaction are core aspects of transmedial agency within a mediascape like *Mass Effect*. Transmedial players can engage *Mass Effect*'s media when they want and how they want, all within the bounds of the present transmedia story. While each medium contributes to the unfolding of *Mass Effect*'s story, the video games offer the clearest example of how agency operates within its medium. The agency of the transmedial player is central to their ability to act upon the games and the larger transmedia story, observing and

experiencing the changes created through their actions. However, the transmedial player is only as free to act within the transmedia story as the player is free to act within the game. Miguel Sicart explains, "Agency is designed, too: designers think about ways for players to experience the game" (*Beyond Choices* 50). Rules are inherent to games because, as Sicart notes, "Playing a game is interacting with a rule-bound, rule-determined system by means of a number of game mechanics. Game designers create these systems, rules, and mechanics for interaction" (50).

It is important to note that agency is never uncontested freedom of choice or power to act. Agency is designed and guided by creators, akin to the mothership in video game transmedia stories. Creators offer a multitude of paths for players to explore games, guiding them toward encounters and experiences. Indeed, early discussions of agency stress that restraint is a necessary and unavoidable aspect of choice and agency. As Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska note, "Agency can only ever be limited, however, and much of its scope is usually directed towards the performance of particular gameplay tasks" (*Tomb Raiders and Space Invaders* 119). By understanding transmedia stories as game-like systems, this sense of limited agency that emphasizes meaningful action choice rather than mastery and control can illuminate the player's engagement in transmedia stories like *Mass Effect*.

Transmedial agency is the acknowledgement that agency can exist within and across media other than games. Transmedia stories are not traditionally understood or examined as games; agency is not often applied to how we engage with them. Yet agency is often misunderstood or exaggerated, with Eichner arguing that "Media experiences can induce feelings of omnipotence" (227). However, it is essential to my definition, as well as Murray's original definition, as well as Jayanth's articulation, that agency is not parallel with omnipotence. As I outlined earlier, seeking absolute power, mastery, and control of spaces—virtual or not—goes

against an agency built through connection and understanding of a storyworld and the characters in that storyworld.

In the order they choose, a player has agency in deciding whether to read a *Mass Effect* novel or a *Mass Effect* comic. There are countless orders and ways for a player to engage the *Mass Effect* transmedia story: chronologically, in-universe timelines, or media-to-media. As a game-centric transmedia story, *Mass Effect* offers players many choices in how to experience the twenty-seven different stories across media that will inevitably affect every mission, relationship, and connection in and across its media. An important notion of transmedial agency are the permutations of choice from an expanding mediascape. A player's permutations of choice spread outward with each story and media, creating a unique path for each transmedial player. Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig de Peuter note, "The basic logic in synergies is that, just like a high-quality interactive gaming experience, one path always spawns ten more" (*Digital Play* 226). How one player experiences the transmedia story is just one of the countless paths through *Mass Effect*. These nuances offer different players different ways of exploring the same story, even within subsequent playthroughs.

Choosing how and when to move through the space created by the *Mass Effect* mediascape is inherent in transmedial agency. While one player may play, watch, and read all the media, another may only ever play the trilogy of games, or another may only read the comics and watch a "Let's Play" of *Mass Effect: Andromeda*. This mediascape is the frame for a transmedial player's engagement with *Mass Effect*, offering them action and choice within a system of media that connects to form the transmedia story. This conception expands Jenkins' position that "Game designers don't simply tell stories; they design worlds and sculpt spaces" ("Game Design as Narrative Architecture" 674). Players then inhabit and cultivate these spaces with their choices

and actions. However, though many scholars ignore the transmedial nature of *Mass Effect*, the choices in the games are only one portion of this transmedial web of possibilities as the player also has control over when and how each other media is engaged in any specific transmedia playthrough. Nevertheless, these choices are still bound to the mediascape, and the frame created by BioWare. The illusion of uncontested agency within video games is as much at odds with the player's freedom to engage with *Mass Effect* as the other media. BioWare designed the *Mass Effect* transmedia story as a space of possibility and constraint, with choices in and around the games and other media for the transmedial player.

The power to take meaningful action in how a player navigates *Mass Effect* is an important notion of transmedial agency. Countless orders and ways for a player to engage *in Mass Effect*'s transmedia story and its twenty-seven different stories act as entry points and the subsequent paths. A player's choice spreads outward with each story and media, creating a unique path for each transmedial player as they explore the storyworld and construct its characters as an active participant in *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story. With the choices that arise from each path through the series, a player must organize and make sense of massive amounts of information as the transmedia story slowly unravels with new content. Players then construct a path through the complicated and interconnected stories in direct contest with the transmedia story's inherently challenging amount of content. These stories, and the player's paths through them, evolve into more complicated and complex plotlines. The various stories and media then create the larger transmedia story based on each player's engagement.

Chapter Breakdown

Framing my analysis through transmedial ludology, I use each of my four chapters to explore transmedial agency, storyworlds, character, and player-character, respectively, building off theoretical background overviews provided in Appendix B. Throughout, I show how examining transmedia stories as games (ludic systems) offers us new paths towards understanding player agency not as the promise of power, mastery, and entitlement but as a personal connection and responsibility to the construction of and interaction with storyworlds and characters.

Chapter 1 begins with a discussion of the transmedial player figure within transmedia stories, including how transmedia relies on a central medium, or mothership, to guide the player when piecing together *Mass Effect's* transmedia story like a puzzle. Here, I analyze the mystery around "the Benefactor" from *Mass Effect*'s Andromeda era, a mysterious agent who oversees and finances the Andromeda Initiative and is discovered to have murdered the Initiative's leader. The "whodunnit" murder mystery inspires transmedial players to use what Jason Mittell and Mélanie Bourdaa refer to as "forensic fandom" to examine the clues in and across media to attempt to discover the Benefactor's identity.

Chapter 2 examines how transmedial players mirror *Mass Effect*'s in-game codex as a blueprint to build the real-world Wiki that contains information about the games and the entire transmedia story. This collective knowledge and participatory culture attempts to organize the overwhelming information of the storyworld into a real-world encyclopedia that players often use to assess and validate BioWare's new releases. Player knowledge then challenges BioWare's sense of control and canon, resulting in both groups grappling with the impossibility of mastering the transmedia story.

Chapter 3 focuses on how transmedial players must track down, make sense of, and piece together *Mass Effect*'s characters from various stories and media, like Frankenstein monsters, forming connections with these beings and gaining a clearer understanding of their place in the transmedia story. I argue that characters such as Liara, or other squadmates like Tali and Wrex, exist as Paolo Bertetti's concept of the "transmedia character," where players must build them by following their stories across various media. They are often stitched together and pulled apart as each new addition can alter our interpretation of these characters. Transmedial players must build these characters through personal rather than canonical understandings of character motivation.

Chapter 4 then explores how the transmedial player must come to terms with their limited power as a player-character through their ludic hybridity as both player, character, and player-character within *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story. Player-character, as a concept from ludology, offers insights into how a transmedial player connects with Commander Shepard and Pathfinder Ryder as representations of the player in the games. Through operating between the three layers of Shepard as a character, the player-as-Shepard, and the transmedial player, specifically in the Milky Way trilogy, players must come to terms with an understanding of transmedia stories and of agency that abandons entitlement, reconfigures the protagonist, and celebrates loss.

CHAPTER I

A Game of Shadows: Understanding *Mass Effect*'s Transmedia Story

Introduction: *Mass Effect* and the Transmedial Player

In the Introduction, I explained that Henry Jenkins' definition of transmedia storytelling, where it operates "systematically" as a "unified and coordinated entertainment experience" ("Transmedia Storytelling 101"), has remained stable for over a decade. However, critics have been skeptical of its seemingly idealistic approach to storytelling where "each medium makes its own unique contribution" because examples of transmedia storytelling that exemplify the full definition are lacking at best and obscured at worst as transmedia stories are often examined through film and TV. Video games are not only new media from which transmedia stories arise, but game-centric transmedia storytelling is also an exemplar of how Jenkins' original definition exists in practice. As interactive media, *Mass Effect* offers its players a means to engage all the media within the series in branching, multiple avenues across media by themselves and collectively through forums, fandoms, and wikis. As I argue throughout this dissertation, these forms of engagement parallel how players interact with games. Examining transmedia stories as games allows scholarship to refocus early definitions and practices of transmedia storytelling not as impossible ideals but concepts that align with Jenkins' idealistic definition.

Here I use the term transmedial ludology to describe the process of studying transmedia stories as games, with a particular focus on how player agency is crucial to experiencing a transmedia story. Applying transmedial ludology to examine the *Mass Effect* series through transmedia storytelling and vice versa offers a reconsideration of how we theorize transmedia stories and understand the role of the player within the transmedia story, or what I refer to as the transmedial player. Exploring how the transmedial players' engagement emerges from their

presence in and between *Mass Effect*'s texts, I argue that understanding transmedia stories as games centers the ludic nature of players' multi-faceted work. Focusing on players' multi-faceted work in and between media allows scholarship to re-examine the function of the often ignored or invisible player, or user more generally, in transmedia storytelling. These players do not produce tangible effects like fan art, fan fiction, or other content (otherwise known as "prosumers"). They are thus seemingly invisible to transmedia scholarship because they resist categorization. Through this analysis, I will illuminate how ludology is necessary for understanding how players rely on agency and interactivity to collect, organize, and examine these transmedia stories in many ways; this multitude can and does mirror similar means of engaging with game systems. *Mass Effect*, as a game-centric series, represents and comments on transmedia storytelling through its narrative spread across media.

With Chapter 1, I am attending to difficulty of examining transmedial player activity as user experience because, Lev Manovich points out, "it is much more difficult to theoretically deal with user experiences of these structures" (*The Language of New Media* 71). Making my theoretical claims more provable is difficult due to the ephemeral nature of transmedial players and transmedial agency, specifically because this action and agency are hypothetical that accounts for most of the action within transmedial stories because, as James Dalby explains, "Transmedia arguably cannot exist independently, they require audiences for their existence" ("Immersed In Difficulty" 82). The observation that transmedia stories are coherent and consistent implies a force present that engages with them accordingly. However, this engagement inevitably creates gaps between texts and in between stories, so transmedial players must puzzle together the story in unique ways to fully understand and engage the transmedia story.

This chapter is structured into three main sections to fully explore the transmedial player's presence in *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story. First, I begin with a discussion of how transmedia relies on the most recognized medium in a series, referred to as the "mothership" in transmedia scholarship, to guide players in exploring and making sense of a transmedia story. In the case of *Mass Effect*, the video game trilogy and *Andromeda* are collectively the mothership, functioning as the centre of the mediascape. Guided by the mothership, players engage *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story in a similar way to how they engage *Mass Effect*'s games. They engage the video games relying on player-focused agency, choice, and branching paths through the narrative. This player-focused engagement exemplifies the ludic nature of transmedia storytelling that allows me to re-examine Jenkins' definition of transmedia storytelling and challenge contemporary disavowals of both the usefulness of that definition and the success of the transmedia stories that seek to follow this seemingly idealistic definition. How players choose to engage this collection or web of media is fundamental for re-ascribing the value of the mothership as the most recognized media in a series establishes expectations and offers a means of navigating through and interacting with the other media in *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story. In short, the mothership's position within the mediascape is the frame and guide for a transmedial player's engagement with *Mass Effect*.

There are important ludic qualities to transmedia storytelling and games offer many of the same characteristics of transmedia. Understanding transmedia stories as games allows scholarship to reassess the importance of player engagement in these mediascapes. Consequently, in the second section of this chapter, I explore how players work as detectives and investigators puzzling together pieces of a bigger picture of the transmedia story dispersed across time and media. Understanding transmedia stories, and *Mass Effect* specifically, as puzzles

illuminate the importance of player engagement in piecing together and navigating through a story across media. Puzzles in their multitude of forms necessitate the importance of a player to solve them. These gaps thus become the space where players can work with or against creators in creating a narrative path through *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story. Here, I analyze the mystery around "the Benefactor" from *Mass Effect*'s Andromeda era of media, a mysterious agent who oversees and finances the Andromeda Initiative, operating as an invisible hand that guides the mission. The Benefactor's identity is unknown, and they are assumed dead by the beginning of *Mass Effect: Andromeda* and the player's entrance in the Andromeda era, which inspired transmedial players to use forensic fandom to examine the clues in and across media to attempt to discover the Benefactor's identity.

In the third and final section of this chapter, I explore how the ludological notion of agency is an important aspect of this engagement as transmedia stories offer players the power to make choices in how and when they engage media within *Mass Effect*. Having this agency across media, players become transmedial players (individuals who use their learned behaviours and expectations from video games) upon engaging with any aspect of the transmedia story, exploring *Mass Effect*'s media like we would an alternate reality game (ARG) or a player-character in a game world: piecing together an interconnected story as both a character within the system and the player situating this presence. A fully realized transmedia story emerges through the transmedial player's engagement with it by hunting down, collecting, and piecing together its media into a user-dependent whole.

Focusing on the necessary participatory engagement needed for transmedia stories, I then offer the concept of transmedial agency to understand how players are guided by *Mass Effect*'s mothership and bring their expectations of action and choice from games to other media in the

Mass Effect mediascape (otherwise known as all the content within the *Mass Effect* transmedia story). As I discussed in the Introduction, transmedial agency directly responds to the call to action from Meghna Jayanth who seeks a kind player agency not reliant on entitlement. I believe the overwhelming scope of transmedia, along with the "whodunnit" style mystery of piecing together *Mass Effect*, creates space where mastery, control, and entitlement are challenged, if not dismissed, by both creator and player. With content arriving from the gaps between media or always promised in the future, a series like *Mass Effect* is seemingly boundless, making it difficult to contain. This difficulty allows creators, players, and scholars to reconsider the need or even possibility of mastery and control, creating space for a new understanding of agency.

Taken all together, I argue that understanding transmedia stories as games that rely on meaningful action and choice centers the ludic nature of transmedial players' knowledge-seeking work that necessitates tracking down, making sense of, and piecing the narrative across media. Understanding players as knowledge-seekers who embody collectors, encyclopedists, and detectives within the transmedia story becomes the core aspect of understanding the ludic nature of transmedia stories through transmedial ludology. Focusing on video game transmedia stories and their ludic motherships allows us to re-examine the original, ideal concepts of transmedia storytelling and reposition the player as central in Jenkins' notion of transmedia stories like *Mass Effect*.

1. The Shadow of the Mothership

Following the discussion outlined in this chapter's introduction, this section thus examines the ideal definition of transmedia storytelling in response to the practice of focusing on an original or most recognized medium, or what Jenkins calls the "'mothership,' the primary work which anchors the franchise" ("The Revenge of the Origami Unicorn"). As discussed in the Introduction, the way in which video games, as the recognized media in the transmedia story or "motherships," guide users as active participants in hunting down and gathering story across various media offers an exemplary means for how transmedia storytelling relies on interactive media, networked consumption, and participatory culture. While there are many definitions of medium (and its plural media), my use of the word connects to the material or form used by an artist, composer, or writer to capture their narrative(s). The medium is the physical or digital object for which creators write their stories and from which players engage with those stories; the medium is the intervening substance through which impressions are conveyed to the senses or a force acts on objects at a distance.

As I outlined in my Introduction, my analysis of the video game medium with transmedia scholarship seeks to understand how creators and players experience a story spread across different media and how storyworld, character, and player-character change with each shift. This analysis thus recenters Jenkins' ideal notion of transmedia stories. How players choose to engage these media is the fundamental aspect of transmedial agency (or the ability to choose how and when a player engages different stories and media in a transmedia story) that makes transmedia stories game-like in nature. For the focus of my examination, video games are a medium, whereas the *Mass Effect* video games are stories in the video game medium that rely on the formal qualities of video games (specifically player agency) to convey their stories. To extend

from the definition of media to "transmedia," there are several considerations to note. Rachael

Hutchinson argues "The 'transmedia' aspect of game texts characterizes not only series and

franchises that have continued for years but also singular videogame texts that use space, art and

narrative structures in interesting and innovative storytelling" ("Refracted Visions" 72). While

Hutchinson understands "transmedia" to work within a single medium, my definition of

transmedia is that of an adjective interrogated by Dalby: "in principle the term refers to a method

of describing a relationship between media touchpoints, linked either by design or an organic

connection, ideally producing an experience greater than the sum of its parts" ("Holarchic

Media" 1-2).

 With its games existing as the mothership, the *Mass Effect* series is a particularly clear

example of how a game-centric transmedia story delivers upon the promises made by earlier

transmedia scholarship that revolved around the potentials of interactive media (including player

agency to create their own pathways through the story), networked consumption (which allows

countless players to have both a unique and shared experience of the story), and participatory

culture (to ensure players can not only share their experience but build their understanding of the

story together in forms of real-world databases and online communities). Having the player rely

on the video game mothership of *Mass Effect*'s mediascape invokes the game-like practice of

finding, organizing, and investigating information, but instead of in a single game space, it

occurs across the multitude of stories across different media.

 Continuing to examine transmedia stories that rely on film and TV motherships is

important. However, the past and contemporary examples fail to explore the idealism of

interactive media, networked consumption, and participatory culture that makes transmedia

storytelling. This idealism results from Jenkins' original envisioning of what transmedia

storytelling could be, rather than what it was when he first engaged the concept. As I will establish in the next section, many contemporary transmedia scholars have since challenged the idealism of Jenkins' original definition largely through misinterpretation of Jenkins' vision of what transmedia stories entail. Understanding transmedia solely through film and TV displaces the user within the transmedia story, with scholars focusing on Jenkins' original definition's failures and false idealism.

Like many contemporary scholars, Rüdiger Heinze considers Jenkins' definition largely unattainable and argues "that current industry practices continue to regularly fail in their attempts to realize that ideal" ("'This Makes No Sense At All'" 22). For Marie-Larue Ryan, Jan-Noël Thon, and Heinze, this idealism of each medium making its own unique contribution to the transmedia story is often overshadowed by a focus on the most recognizable medium or mothership. That medium then offers what Lisbeth Klastrup and Susana Tosca refer to as "worldness." Klastrup and Tosca explain that "The idea of a specific world's worldness mostly originates from the first version of the world presented but can be elaborated and changed over time" ("Transmedial Worlds"). This first version becomes the standard to which all subsequent narratives aspire, as Klastrup and Tosca explain, with "the ur-actualization of the world and the core elements which seem to define its worldness" ("Transmedial Worlds"). Mark J.P. Wolf agrees, stating that "And the medium in which a world originates will help determine the world's potential for growth and adaptation" (*Building Imaginary Worlds* 248).

Most transmedia scholarship agrees that the mothership has important implications for a transmedia story. However, few scholars clarify that importance beyond the mothership functioning as an originating medium that sets expectations for subsequent media. As Wolf notes, the originating medium affects "the audience size and receptivity, the conventions and

audience expectations that come with the medium, and most importantly, the medium's unique combination of properties available for the conveyance of the world and its stories" (248). Indeed, for these scholars, this originating medium becomes the source of transmedial growth. However, the mothership's influence should not overshadow other stories within its mediascape. An ideal transmedia story uses that most recognizable medium to have each piece function independently while simultaneously developing a larger and richer narrative when all connected. Nevertheless, previous and contemporary examples of transmedia storytelling that does not rely solely on a mothership are few and far between, leading critics and audiences to reject an idealistic notion of transmedia storytelling that utilizes all its chosen media to tell a fully connected story.

An interesting example of critics and fans rejecting Jenkins' definition is *The Matrix*. *The Matrix* franchise is arguably the most famous attempt at transmedia storytelling being dispersed systematically, as Jenkins explains, "through three live-action films, a series of animated shorts, two collections of comic book stories, and several video games" ("Transmedia Storytelling 101"). However, as Jenkins claims, "*The Matrix* was a flawed experiment, an interesting failure" but, despite that failure, "its flaws did not detract from the significance of what it tried to accomplish" (*Convergence Culture* 97). In short, as Jenkins explains, its transmedia story did not deliver on its promise "to wind the story of *The Matrix* across all of these media and have it all add up to one compelling whole" (101). A major reason for the transmedial failings of *The Matrix*, Jenkins argues, is that creators and consumers lacked "very good aesthetic criteria" for transmedia storytelling because "There have been far too few fully transmedia stories" (97). While *The Matrix* did not have very good aesthetic criteria to achieve its potential, contemporary

transmedia stories, and the scholarship around them, still struggle with this criteria, often misunderstanding Jenkins' definition of transmedia storytelling.

The Matrix is an "interesting failure" because it succeeded in being "dispersed systematically" and promised to be a "unified and coordinated experience." However, it failed because each medium could not make its "own unique contribution." After all, as the mothership, the films did not guide viewers to engage the other media. While The Matrix did trigger what Jenkins considers "a search for meaning; they did not determine where the audience would go to find their answers" (122), there was no guidance to search elsewhere actively. As Jenkins reflected later, "Despite its box office success, The Matrix was regarded within the industry as a failed experiment, one that had expected too much of its audiences in terms of dispersing key elements of the story across multiple media and one that met with resistance" ("The Reign of the 'Mothership'" 253-254). This resistance, Jenkins notes, arose as "the public did not want to 'do homework' before sitting down in front of a Hollywood blockbuster" (253-254). While The Matrix attempted to offer a systematic and unified experience, the film, as its mothership, offered a primary channel of narrative that does not traditionally guide viewers and scholars to seek out the story in other media.

Unlike The Matrix, Mass Effect explicitly demands its players actively engage as much of the mothership's content as possible because creators often guide ludic experiences through design in the form of guides and tutorials. On the website for the Mass Effect: Legendary Edition, BioWare announced:

> The **more content you complete** across the entire trilogy, the **more likely you'll be**
> **prepared** for the final fights in its conclusion. If you only play Mass Effect 3, you'll have
> to do just about every option available in the game to be eligible for an ending that does

not result in massive galactic losses. Playing the first two games and carrying over your

progress is the most reliable way to get good results in the final hours of the Reaper War.

For comparison, if you previously played *ME3* with the Extended Cut (which included

Galactic Readiness rebalancing), **fully preparing for the final fight will be more difficult**

to achieve in the Legendary Edition. ("Galaxy at War Rebalancing," original emphasis)

Mass Effect: Legendary Edition's announcement centres the importance of exploration and

completion within the *Mass Effect* trilogy and highlights how preparing for the trilogy's

conclusion, or "the final fight," should be a player's focus from the outset of playing the games.

In other words, the game is more difficult if a player does not focus on gathering as many

resources (Galactic Readiness, squadmates, and player level and abilities, to name a few) as

possible. To not fully engage with everything the games offer is to make the experience more

difficult. The focus on completing as much content as possible across the trilogy of games to

prepare for the Reaper War conclusion highlights a core aspect of the *Mass Effect* experience and

sets a clear precedent by *Mass Effect*'s mothership. BioWare establishes the importance of

players hunting down and gathering all the games' content to succeed. Interestingly, BioWare

frames success as achieving the "best" possible ending where players may need to know and

plan how to achieve such an ending before they even start playing the game.

BioWare telling players how to best experience *Mass Effect* is a reality of creator-player

discussion in video games. With video games, designers often tell players how to interact with

the game either through explicit explanations including written tutorials or guides, such as

BioWare's announcement, or implicit explanations such as patterned repetition in design

parameters (i.e., forcing players to jump at certain times or click a series of buttons to open a

door). This guidance is not often present in other media. Unlike video games, non-ludic media do

not have tutorials to teach viewers how to engage with the audio-visual representations or to teach readers how to engage words or images on the page. These media work with assumptions around how their audience engages them; almost every video game explicitly introduces play mechanics and test players on these mechanics before moving forward. The game's particular system or mechanic must be clear when introduced to players, or progression is difficult or impossible. For BioWare, asking players to perform their roles in a particular way is not unusual, rather it is a standard design convention.

It is important to note that the *Mass Effect: Legendary Edition* announcement is not necessarily transmedial because it is situated around the release of the remastered game trilogy with no reference to other *Mass Effect* media, further highlighting the centrality of the video game mothership. The call for players to engage with as much of the three games as possible to "win" or achieve the best possible conclusion offers an interesting implication into how BioWare envisions their players' responses to their creations by focusing player engagement of *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story around its video game mothership. It also sets up the important paradox that it is impossible to "win" in the game trilogy. The ending of *Mass Effect 3* requires the player to sacrifice their connection with Shepard, as I will discuss at length in Chapter 4, situating an inevitable failure to complete the game in a way that satisfies player expectations. The announcement asks players to perform their roles as Jenkins' notion of "hunters and gathers" (*Convergence Culture* 21), as they would as transmedial players, within the single medium of the games. This announcement is a tutorial of how BioWare implies their players' connection with *Mass Effect*: to win, everything must be explored. BioWare frames its announcement as a guide on engaging *Mass Effect: Legendary Edition* to ensure the players are fully prepared for the final

fight by explicitly asking players to prepare by doing all the missions, exploring all the places and planets, and gathering all the crew members, all culminating with *Mass Effect 3*.

Examining the *Mass Effect: Legendary Edition* announcement offers a theoretical blueprint for how motherships operate in transmedia stories. BioWare's expectation for player engagement centring on the video game mothership is a much easier jump in logic than a film or TV series that does not have such an expectation, implicitly or explicitly. BioWare wants their players to "do their homework," to be prepared, by exploring the world, spending time with the characters, making the choices necessary to winning the Reaper War and, by extension, the trilogy. The most successful way to experience *Mass Effect: Legendary Edition* requires players to experience everything in the games. Players, therefore, must seek out all paths and objectives to prepare for and ensure a winning conclusion, which inevitably directs players to other media through in-game references and further developer announcements. With creating such a wide array of different media, BioWare establishes an implicit implication for the player they envision will experience the other media. BioWare's explicit implication that players will be rewarded a richer and less difficult experience by experiencing as much of the games as possible to gather as many resources as possible has profound meaning for the kind of player that they envision will play the games.

Mass Effect's video games are the mothership in the transmedia story not only because they offer over 100 collective hours of narrative immersion but also in that they attempt to expand the player's experience and choices from game to game through meaningful choice and action maintained through a save file transfer. With such an array of media dispersed across many channels, *Mass Effect* offers and expects various kinds of engagement from the player, creating what Espen Aarseth refers to as "the implied player." For Aarseth, "The implied player,

then, can be seen as a role made for the player by the game, a set of expectations that the player must fulfill for the game to "exercise its effect" ("Transgressive Play and The Implied Player" 132). Like Wolfgang Iser's original "implied reader," the player is implied because they are the creator's ideal subject who engages all the media by hunting down, gathering, and puzzling together each narrative to produce the larger transmedia story. However, this implication functions as a kind of constraint that a player can challenge and transgress, allowing them agency within the system that invoked them. For BioWare, the implied player is the player who will play as much as possible and continue that trajectory across games to ensure they earn the most rewarding ending. BioWare is creating their implied player through their *Mass Effect: Legendary Edition* announcement and makes it clear that the player who engages everything will experience the best version of the games and the *Mass Effect* transmedia story.

The implied player follows a similar expectation as the active participant needed for transmedia stories, or what I refer to as the transmedial player. This engagement is particularly important to early definitions and understandings of transmedia as Jenkins explains, transmedia storytelling "places new demands on consumers and depends on the active participation of knowledge communities" (20-21). However, these demands are not new and Janet Murray, discussing video games almost a decade prior, explains that video games "assume a sophistication on the part of the audience, an eagerness to transpose and reassemble separate elements of a story and an ability to keep in mind multiple alternative versions of the same fictional world" (*Hamlet on the Holodeck* 40).

BioWare directly engages with these implied players by creating this kind of content that requires players to hunt down and gather and, most importantly, puzzle together to create the transmedial experience. The implied player does not correlate with most players as few players

will go to the lengths to complete every quest chain, read every novel and comic, watch the film, and play all the games. It is an overwhelming and difficult task. This difficulty is a core component of the transmedial experience and specifically transmedial agency. The initial choice to begin this task of piecing together all of *Mass Effect*'s media is necessarily difficult. It requires players to ironically abandon the completion goal because a transmedia story is necessarily never finished. As I mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, Manovich's acknowledgement that "it is much more difficult to theoretically deal with user experiences of these structures" (71) aligns with the importance of embracing the difficulties of capturing user experience. Indeed, implied players are often difficult to find, and implied transmedial players are often even more elusive.

A particularly outspoken and passionate example of a player reporting their engagement with the transmedia story is then *GameInformer*'s associate editor Liana Ruppert who proudly positions herself as "someone that has over 31 playthroughs of the original trilogy, nine playthroughs of *Andromeda* (despite its flaws), and has read all of the comics and novels several times over" ("What A Tale of Two Galaxies Could Mean" para 1). Thus, this implied player offers a foundation upon which I have built my concept of the transmedial player because transmedial players like Ruppert celebrate values of dedication and willingness to enact BioWare's explicit and implicit expectations around their media. And while rarer than mainstream players, they are often willing to announce their presence and status as a sense of honour or accomplishment.

In creating the *Mass Effect* media to connect and offer a fuller perspective of the series, BioWare establishes a set of expectations that the player fulfills for the transmedia story to exist. Players will complete all the content in *Mass Effect: Legendary Edition* to ensure they are as prepared as possible for the final fight and through that preparation, they will come across *Mass*

Effect's other media (see Figure 1) or references to events that occur outside the games' stories. To then satisfy the transmedial player's need from completion, they will read all the books and comics, watch all the films, and play all the games to gain a sense of complete understanding of the transmedia story. BioWare asks the player to enact a kind of meta-engagement across all the media that mirrors playing the games. Exploring how the transmedial players' engagement emerges from their presence in the mediascape helps us better understand transmedia stories as games. These games center the ludic nature of players' multi-faceted work that necessitates tracking down, making sense of, and piecing together media to create a transmedia story.

Figure 1. Mass Effect novels referenced in Mass Effect 2 (Mass Effect 2).

Like *The Matrix* asking viewers to "do homework" or *Mass Effect* asking players to prepare fully, transmedia assumes a sophistication on the part of its audience that is inherently centred on the transmedial player to collect, connect, and examine separate media as elements of an over-arching story. Their participation allows them to become the transmedial players who interact with a transmedia story, acting as collectors, encyclopedists, and detectives to ensure its existence. Returning to the original definition of transmedia storytelling reinvokes the importance of players at the center of these mediascapes who actively construct these stories. Players must construct these stories from various media, immersing themselves as participants within and outside each medium as guided by a mothership that asks sophisticated players to come prepared to do this necessary work.

2. Minding the Gap(s): Puzzling Together *Mass Effect*

The Matrix is an interesting and inspiring franchise, as a transmedia story or not, but when assessed through an ideal definition of transmedia storytelling, it failed to meet those ideals. Failing to meet the idealistic standard of Jenkins' definition does not result in a series not being worthy of enjoyment or study. An example like *The Matrix* offers an important baseline to understand transmedia storytelling as a narrative phenomenon. Success and failure are merely analytical conditions that can illuminate how contemporary transmedia stories compare to Jenkins' definition, offering us further insight into how transmedia stories function. *The Matrix* asked, "What is the Matrix?" and its answer offered a clear understanding of how stories can exist across media. *Mass Effect* sets out to do something similar and asks, "who is the Benefactor?" The answer is promised through a lengthy quest chain, a comic, and a novel, but each only reveals a piece to the puzzle, demanding that transmedial players continue to search until the answer is found, as I will explore in this section.

Transmedial players navigating *Mass Effect* are guided by the mothership to collect and connect all the information in the mediascape, much like players who must solve puzzles in games. This parallel is not a coincidence. As I will explore through this section, transmedia scholars often make this connection; however, the connection is lost without exploring and analyzing transmedia stories as games. In this section, I argue that understanding transmedia stories as puzzles centers the ludic nature of players' detective work that necessitates tracking down, making sense of, and piecing the narrative together across media to understand and engage the transmedia story fully. It is important to note that this engagement varies from player to player as there are no monolithic means of engaging transmedia.

Players become detectives to answer the question "who is the Benefactor?" in the "whodunnit" style mystery overshadowing the Andromeda era. *Mass Effect: Andromeda* is a video game part of the second era of *Mass Effect* in the Andromeda galaxy. Released on March 21, 2017, *Andromeda* takes place 633 years after the events of the Milky Way era and revolve around the missions of the Pathfinder, twins Sara and Scott Ryder, and their Tempest crew, a team deriving from the Milky Way galaxy races that have already arrived in Andromeda, including asari, turian, krogan, salarian, and human, as well as the newly introduced Andromeda race angara.

The game follows the Pathfinder and their Tempest crew as they protect the galaxy from the Kett race and the ancient mechanical race called the Remnant while establishing a new galactic society. Escaping the Reaper War as refugees, the Andromeda Initiative's four arks—the massive interstellar ships carrying the refugees and pioneers—are separated across the Heleus cluster. The Pathfinder is tasked with finding and saving the ships and their passengers. Quantifying the different sizes of each era in respect to the number of different media and amount of stories and media they offer, the scope of the Tempest's adventures is significantly smaller than its predecessor, with only a handful of media exploring the Heleus Cluster in the Andromeda galaxy, including one game, three novels, and one comic that span a total of thirty-eight systems and one hundred sixty-eight planets. At first glance, *Andromeda* revolves around surviving and working with others to overcome the threat of a common, colonizing enemy as the Kett assimilate their victims into new versions of themselves; however, the larger and more nefarious threat comes from within the Andromeda Initiative: the unknown identity and motivations of the mysterious Benefactor.

Players must discover the identity of the mysterious figure known only as "the Benefactor" who finances the Andromeda Initiative and kills the Andromeda Initiative's founder Jien Garson. The Benefactor remains unknown, only appearing in various guises each time they choose to reach out to Alec Ryder, the father of *Andromeda*'s player-character and leading member of the Andromeda Initiative. The player-as-Ryder never directly interacts with them and only knows them through clues, fragments, and hypotheses. The only thing known about the Benefactor is that they have access to immense resources, including finances, and have the political influence that allows them to bypass Citadel protocols and procedures. They use this power to aid in developing and completing the Andromeda Initiative as an anonymous investor, pushing the timeline forward with their resources. Only Alec Ryder and Jien Garson ever speak directly to the Benefactor. They both admit their reluctance and suspicion regarding working with this powerful but unknown agent and only maintain their partnership because the Benefactor is the only ally with the power and resources to ensure the Initiative succeeds.

Players attempt to discover more information about the Benefactor during an in-game quest chain entitled "Ryder Family Secrets." In this quest chain, the Pathfinder's AI support, known to the player-character as SAM, possesses memory nodes that are hidden across the many planets in *Andromeda*, forcing players to hunt down and gather them, often beyond common quest areas in hard-to-reach places. Through this investigation, the player-as-Ryder discovers a mysterious individual, who calls themself the Benefactor, over a series of missions unlocking Alec Ryder's memory logs. Through a flashback, the player-as-Ryder witnesses Alec Ryder meeting the Benefactor during an encrypted call, using a variety of false identities (see Figure 2), and convincing Alec to join the Initiative. The player later learns the Benefactor had the Andromeda Initiative's founder Jien Garson killed upon finding a datapad containing Garson's

last recorded entries explaining that "I don't have much time. I've been hiding in the sealed-off section of the Nexus since we got here… Someone's trying to kill me" (*Andromeda*). Players are tasked with discovering the Benefactor's identity and their motive for killing Garson. Like much of the media in *Mass Effect* and even the quests in each game, this quest chain is almost notably not required to finish the game, making it a lengthy, bonus quest chain challenging players to investigate Garson's death and the Benefactor's identity.

Figure 2. The Many Faces of the Benefactor (Andromeda).

The Benefactor question chain is a multiple task-based exploration that spans several planets and several media. Upon finding each clue hidden in different places across the *Andromeda* game world, the player-as-Ryder unlocks another one of Alec's memories, further filling in the information gaps regarding Ryder's family, the Andromeda Initiative, and the Benefactor. However, none of this information is fully revealed, and the Benefactor remains a mysterious figure at the end of the game. Interestingly, the quest chain ends with Ryder discovering that their supposedly deceased mother is one of the many humans suspended in cryostasis, waiting to be cured when medical technology has advanced enough to cure her disease. The Benefactor's identity, and their connection to Garson's murder, are left unknown,

promised to be flushed out in the other Andromeda media, and intended to be answered in subsequent releases, including the novel *Mass Effect: Andromeda – Nexus Uprising* and the graphic novella *Mass Effect: Discovery*.

Mass Effect: Andromeda – Nexus Uprising is one of many prequels to the game *Andromeda* and offers an elaborate background of why the Nexus is in such disarray when the Pathfinder arrives many years later. Released on March 21, 2017—the same day as the game *Andromeda*—the novel *Nexus Uprising* is the first book of the Andromeda novel trilogy. It follows the story of Sloane Kelly as she attempts to protect the Andromeda Initiative's flagship Nexus from mutiny during its centuries-long journey. The Nexus suffers serious damage when caught in an intergalactic storm called the Scourge, destroying many of the ship's main systems and automatically awakening the thousands of crew and passengers from cryostasis. Unable to handle the unexpected resource demands of thousands of people, the Nexus' leadership begins to disintegrate after the Initiative's founder Jien Garson is found dead in her quarters. As Nexus Security Director, Sloane struggles to bridge the disorganized leadership and the frantic crew and passengers until one of the leaders incites the Krogan population of the Nexus into a frenzy after killing one of their ambassadors. Though a full mutiny and bloody conflict are avoided, the remaining leadership deem Sloane a traitor for allying with the Krogan insurgents. Along with other rebels, she is exiled from the Nexus and forced to find a home out in the uncharted worlds of Andromeda. Sloane Kelly's backstory and connection to Jien Garson are important and overlooked pieces of information in *Andromeda*. In terms of the Benefactor mystery, it establishes who Garson was and hints at several different suspects of her murder. However, the novel does not answer who killed Garson or how she died; it only adds further clues to the investigation.

To continue the investigation inspired by the Benefactor mystery, BioWare soon followed *Andromeda* with a limited comic series called *Mass Effect: Discovery*. Released in four issues from May 24, 2017, to October 25, 2017, *Discovery* follows the turian Tiran Kandros who, on behalf of the Turian Hierarchy (the governing agency of the turian species), attempts to infiltrate the early phases of the Andromeda Initiative prior to the Nexus' departure from the Milky Way. Passing with an alias, Kandros accepts a job from the Initiative's founder Jien Garson to track down a quarian scientist who claims to have found ways to map the Andromeda galaxy's conditions in real-time. Kandros' search for the scientist reveals a full-scale attempt to infiltrate and disrupt the Andromeda Initiative. However, despite protecting the Initiative, Kandros' actions led him to be discharged from the Hierarchy for AWOL and dereliction of duty, only to be recruited by Garson following the mission.

Like *Nexus Uprising*, *Discovery* adds further information about Garson as a character and the troubling circumstances around the development and deployment of the Andromeda Initiative. Having found Garson's ideals and the Andromeda Initiative's goals inspiring during his time as a spy, Kandros takes a position under Sloane Kelley as part of Nexus Security, connecting these two characters. Though introduced as a main character in *Nexus Uprising* and an important NPC in *Andromeda*, Kandros' backstory is only established here. More importantly for the Benefactor mystery, the graphic novella offers a perspective on how the Initiative was viewed in the Milky Way prior to its departure and Garson's desperation to ensure the mission's success. It serves as another piece to the puzzle where transmedial players had to go out of their way to find out more information on the Initiative, its most important personnel and reveal the truth behind the supposed idealism perpetuated throughout *Andromeda*.

With the gaps between texts and different media, a transmedia story is always incomplete until proven otherwise, if at all. As new stories are released, the events depicted in the story may occur in a distant time or place. This dispersal of content forces the player to search the mediascape for meaningful information that can potentially illuminate or flesh out parts of the storyworld or a character, as I will explore at length in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, respectively. References in one medium or story become the basis of another. Players may either attempt to work around those missing pieces of the puzzle or insert their theories or assumptions. Indeed, as Rachael Hutchinson notes regarding the *Metal Gear Solid* series, "Just as in the diffuse narrative structures of the fighting game genre, the player must maintain an active role, sorting and piecing together the overall story in their minds" (*Japanese Culture Through Videogames* 167). A similar process occurs at the level of the transmedia story: when BioWare releases content that fits into known gaps or new spaces, players then fit that new information into their framework or reject it, as I will discuss at length in Chapter 2.

If an event is not depicted in one story or medium, perhaps only mentioned or referenced, then a gap manifests in the lack of closure presented by the reference. A transmedial player may expect that reference will eventually reveal its importance at a later instance, filling in those gaps or illuminating what Mélanie Bourdaa calls the "narrative shadows" ("Transmedia Storytelling" 135). Filling in these gaps or "narrative shadows" becomes a central challenge for players across the transmedia story. These anticipated (or hoped for) expansions are important for an audience, Anna Kérchy argues, as "They might offer insight into characters, motifs, unelaborated plotlines, bridge events, fill in gaps or resolve excesses in the unfolding of the story" ("Transmedial Commodification" 225). Additive comprehension extends the puzzle's frame and challenges the

player's act of filling in the gaps that exist between one piece of the transmedia story and another.

Piecing together a transmedia story by filling its gaps parallels a core aspect of games, especially puzzles. As Frank Rose argues, the transmedia story is "a vast, collective puzzle to be solved" where "Stories become games, and games become stories" (*The Art of Immersion* 6). Furthermore, this puzzle game occurs in and around the games and other media, having the player engage with dispersed content together and through one another. Wolf views this connection as crucial to the success and longevity of a transmedia story in that "Deliberate gaps, enigmas, and unexplained references help keep a work alive in the imagination of its audience, because it is precisely in these areas where audience participation, in the form of speculation, is most encouraged" (*Building Imaginary Worlds* 60). Ryan echoes these notions, arguing that fans' passion to explore these gaps "can be motivated by the desire to solve a mystery" ("Transmedial Storytelling and Transfictionality" 383-384).

Ideally, transmedia storytelling demands players revisit their relationship with video games, and all storied media, because these kinds of stories are no longer completed upon the credits of the movie, TV show, or game, or the last page of the comic or novel. Lingering and unanswered questions inevitably arise because these single stories are no longer self-contained and, instead, require their connected media to fully reveal the larger story. The gaps in *Andromeda*'s story create a mystery and *Nexus Uprising* and *Discovery* offer clues in making sense of the transmedia story. Bourdaa considers this detective work necessary in a transmedia story as such a "coherent universe will enrich current and canon storylines by bringing parallel stories on both main and supporting characters, relationships or secondary plots" and these details "will have a double purpose: trigger fans' engagement into forensic fandom and create

new stories" ("'Following the Pattern'" 205-206). Forensic fandom is a focused, ludic

engagement where players puzzle together these mysteries around gaps in and between media.

The Benefactor's mystery is a prime example of *Mass Effect*'s forensic fandom.

Reflecting on *Andromeda* and the Benefactor, writer Paul Tassi admits after completing his first

playthrough that "I felt there were so, so many loose ends in the story" ("Producer Talks Me

Through the Ending's Loose Threads" para 2). Indeed, with one of the biggest loose ends, Tassi

explains, resulting from "my storyline with the 'Benefactor' just ended with no answers" (para

8). Having the Benefactor being left a mystery speaks to the larger realities that transmedia

stories are necessarily incomplete, that all the answers are potentially inaccessible if only

focusing on one story or medium. Not having all the information is not necessarily a failure for a

transmedia story, but a direct counter to the need to master and control in games. Without a

resolution, the players are left wondering, and that wonder ensures new avenues of exploration

for the players and the creators as an undiscovered world or impossible horizon.

It takes ambitious creators and equally ambitious fans to engage transmedia storytelling.

Wolf notes that this act is often strategic and involves careful planning, with creators establishing

"structures like maps and timelines may suggest how gaps are to be filled by laying out places or

events that allow the audience to figure out what lies between them" (53). Like my own

conception of transmedial players being detectives, Jason Mittell argues that "This narrative

model encourages forensic fandom with the promise of eventual revelations once all the pieces

are put together" ("Strategies of Storytelling on Transmedia Television" 273). However, Mittell

sees this participatory puzzle as a reconfirmation of the creator and players' mastery of a

transmedia story: "If one goal of consuming a story is mastery of its fictional universe, then

"What Is" transmedia scatters narrative understanding across a variety of extensions so that a

collective team of die-hard fans can piece together the elaborate puzzle" (273). As I will discuss in the next section with a discussion of Reddit users, those fans then lay out the path for other players to follow or reject on their transmedial journey. While Mittell considers the goal to be mastery of a story, mastery is often impossible because transmedia stories rely on supposed failure and incompleteness to inspire players to explore the limits and depths of these stories.

Rather than seeking mastery, transmedial players seek out knowledge and immersion because they enjoy the playfulness, challenge, and satisfaction of exploring these stores. Unlike in-game currencies such as experience points, *Mass Effect 3*'s "War Assets," or *Mass Effect: Andromeda*'s "Andromeda Viability Points" (AVP), this information is valuable for transmedial players outside of the games. Players can level up their knowledge of the transmedia story as they seek out new pieces of the puzzle. The gaps between media are opportunities for developers to add more and diverse content and allow players to do their work—through different media literacies—of understanding these stories and linking this content together. These gaps between *Mass Effect*'s media are spaces of possibility for the transmedia story to expand in new and challenging ways. The act of filling these gaps comes as a means of fulfillment for both creator and players, and the satisfaction of choosing whether to engage with certain media or gaps centers upon either constituent's agency. Agency then becomes a site of convergence where the creator's expansion and framing and player's exploration and puzzling meet and emotional engagement drives these processes.

3. Seeking the Ideal: The "Alien Aesthetics" of *Mass Effect*

As I discussed in the Introduction, video games are interactive media that demand their players to read, watch, and play their way through the game. While all media borrows from preceding forms, video games offer a unique way of understanding transmedia stories with game-centric motherships through their interactivity and focus on player agency. Video games thus encapsulate what Jenkins explains refers to as an "alien aesthetic—one that reflects the potentials of interactive media, networked consumption, and participatory culture" ("The Reign of the 'Mothership'" 247). This "alien aesthetic" implies both an unfamiliar means of engaging 20th century media where interactivity and participatory culture were not originally core aspects of an audience's connection with those stories and a visual reference that situates the mothership within a sci-fi context as a spacecraft orbited by smaller ships in an extra-terrestrial fleet.

Transmedia stories necessitate the alien aesthetic of interactive media and participation. As I will explore in this section, these expectations from the mothership guide players in establishing agency through their choices to engage different media within the transmedia story. However, it is important to remember that this engagement varies from player to player as there are no monolithic means of engaging transmedia. The mothership may guide this engagement, but it is ultimately the player's choice to approach *Mass Effect* in ways that are often unseen across and between media. This nebulousness is part of the ludic nature of transmedia, and transmedial players are invoked through the inherently playful process defined by each player. In whatever form(s) it takes, their agency manifests these stories. The nature of transmedia storytelling only furthers the need to consider how agency and choice exist within interactive environments and across all media. The space of player and creator that exists between the varied and multiple media that form the series is one of convergence where agency and choice allow the

player to experience *Mass Effect* in whatever way they choose, and one of conflict between how BioWare frames that experience, as I will discuss at length in Chapter 2 and Chapter 4. This space allows an amount of choice and agency at different times for either BioWare creating the Benefactor mystery or the player attempting to solve it.

Unlike *The Matrix*, *Mass Effect* relies on its game-centric mothership to convey this alien aesthetic as the mothership does not only reflect "the potentials of interactive media, networked consumption, and participatory culture" but exists as interactive media that facilitates and inspires networked consumption and participatory culture. Game-centric transmedia stories (that present interactive media as their motherships) aid in developing players' understanding of interactive storytelling practices by teaching players how to progress successfully through games stories. They equip players with the interactive media knowledge and participatory expectation that they need to traverse the overwhelming content seemingly inherent in transmedia storytelling. Like all sophisticated media users, video game players are never single-medium fans because video games require knowledge of previous media to traverse their multi-modal forms.

The power of game-centric transmedia stories is that video games demand the player work to solve the puzzle, offering novel-like text, film-like cutscenes, TV-like episodes, comics-like gutters, and additional clues, rewards, or moments of pause. Games in the *Mass Effect* series borrow from all the media that came before—as all new media does—but simultaneously centre the player in the action and afford them a meaningful choice while taking that agency in precise moments. Transmedia mirrors that engagement across various channels: instead of novel-like text, film-like cutscenes, TV-like episodes, or comics-like gutters, it gives the player novels, film, TV, and comics as part of the necessary paths the player must explore to find the answers they seek. Evolving from previous media and centring on active participants and player agency

allows video games to exemplify the alien aesthetic of transmedia storytelling's potential that may not be readily apparent in film and TV transmedia storytelling. It is not a matter of replacing other media but centring the transmedial experience through agency and interactivity. Having video games exemplify this alien aesthetic is not redundant, it opens new avenues for exploring non-ludic media with new perspectives that allow transmedia stories to achieve their ideal form.

Channeling the alien aesthetic of transmedia storytelling's inherent need for interactive media, networked consumption, and participatory culture, these players attempted to finish the puzzle around the Benefactor's identity. This engagement is a core aspect of the transmedial player, the entity implied through the set-up of the mystery and various clues spread across media. As the puzzle is a communication between creator and player, BioWare created this frame intentionally. *Andromeda*'s producer Michael Gamble, quoted in Tassi's interview, explained that "The mysterious benefactor is intentionally left unresolved, as it has deeper ties to the meta-story of the *MEA* saga. By the time you find the killer, they're long gone…" (para 9). BioWare sought to create the mystery of the Benefactor because they anticipated transmedial investigation. The meta-story is another name for the transmedia story, the story told over time and across media that make up the Andromeda era, resulting in BioWare offering clues in *Nexus Uprising* and *Discovery* as part of what Gamble refers to as the "*MEA* saga." However, the "*MEA* saga" is only one large piece of the *Mass Effect* puzzle. Ruppert, when examining the *Mass Effect 4* teaser trailer released in December 2020, argues that "*Andromeda* hasn't abandoned the trilogy and the trilogy still has long-standing consequences to future life that we have yet to experience" ("What A Tale of Two Galaxies Could Mean" para 17). It is all connected, and, Ruppert explains, "there is so much more to explore out there and every bit of it

offers small pieces to a much larger puzzle that is the future of *Mass Effect*" (para 19). BioWare

left the puzzle unfinished because there are more pieces to come.

This dynamic between creator and players reifies the ludic nature of transmedia stories,

as Rose notes, "in telling their story in nonlinear fragments and leaving it to the audience to piece

them together, they created, in essence, a kind of participatory fiction" (146). The Benefactor

mystery frames this participatory puzzle structure in *Mass Effect*. My examination of transmedial

players using all the information available to them to discover the Benefactor's identity thus

offers a microcosmic example of how players, working as collectors, encyclopedists, and

detectives across these stories and media, must piece the transmedia story together. Transmedial

players constantly shift between these roles as ludic subjects.

Understanding transmedial players in a ludic system returns the focus on the audience

who must piece together the transmedia story, using their skills and knowledge as players,

guided by *Mass Effect*'s mothership. Transmedia invokes a sense of convergence with creators

and players because Jenkins, quoted by Leland Chee, insists that fans "love unmapped nooks and

crannies, the dark shadows we can fill in with our imagination" (Baker, "Meet Leland Chee, the

Star Wars Franchise Continuity Cop"). As a secondary plot and a long, obscure quest chain,

"Ryder Family Secrets" does not force players to engage it because it is not required to finish the

game. It exists in *Andromeda*'s unmapped nooks and crannies as a challenge for transmedia

players who want to discover as much as possible. Indeed, *PCGames* writer Henry Kulick notes,

"The revelation that the Benefactor even exists is only discovered through an optional, time-

consuming quest. For a lot of players who were just trying to get to the end of a cumbersome

game, they may have never even encountered the Benefactor's wake" ("Three *Mass Effect:*

Andromeda DLCs that would have changed history"). Players must piece together the stories not

explored in one medium that affects how the next progress and coheres. The discovery of *Mass Effect*'s past, present, and future requires a sophisticated charting where events can be understood concerning one another yet always allow for gaps between these connections to allow future media to illuminate our conception of the series further. The map will always be changing because each new addition will alter the timeline, forcing players to resolve new information based on their understanding and experience.

Guided by the mothership and offered an unmapped mystery from BioWare, players rely on their transmedial agency to choose when and how they explore the different paths through the Andromeda media. Choice, then, emerges from this progression and offers players a different form of agency. As Jim Bizzocchi and Theresa Jean Tanenbaum explain, "This is a form of 'bounded agency' where the player's actions can only deepen each narrative arc in the game, without derailing the direction of the story" ("A Case Study in the Design of Game Narrative" 401). This "bounded agency," as Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum argue, offers players the pleasure "in participating in a digital narrative that is not about authoring an outcome but is instead about submitting to the story that the author wants" (394). The nature of bounded agency also offers an important guide to understanding transmedial agency and engagement with the larger *Mass Effect* mediascape through ludology. As Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum explain, "The player's progress through game levels is one manifestation of a modified overall arc" (395). Through that over-arching path, Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum continue, "a player engages in a series of subsidiary narrative arcs down to and including 'micronarratives'" (395-396).

The over-arching path of the transmedia story contains a multitude of micro-stories in the form of its various media as well as even smaller portions in the form of the missions in the game that are not necessary to its existence but complement the narrative. These micro-

narratives, and the other media, bring the transmedia story to the player's attention though a player does not need to play these missions, nor do they need to read and watch the comics, novels, and films. How the player chooses to engage the order of missions in a game or the order of media in the transmedia story are unique and only emerge once these connections are established. The choice to engage with the other media in the series furthers the player's sense of meaningful action because many paths spread out before them. Each path represents one of the countless potential experiences and having the power to choose that experience is crucial for transmedial agency.

If a player chooses to begin their experience with *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story in *Andromeda*, continue through with the Andromeda era novels in succession, and read *Discovery*, the sense of the transmedia story relies solely on the Andromeda era. If they then choose to engage with the Milky Way era next, they inevitably frame their experience with the Normandy compared to the Tempest crew. Ryder is their point of reference, making Shepard's story perhaps more tragic knowing its terrible conclusion with the Reapers hundreds of years ago, or promising some insight into the Benefactor's identity. As Samuel Zakowski explains, "strings of unordered events are sequenced online by the player as parts of an emergent story line" ("Time and Temporality in the *Mass Effect* Series" 74). In their attempt to seek knowledge, the player moves between roles of collector, encyclopedist, and detective, following the paths through different media in an over-arching series of micro-narratives because, in transmedia stories, all the media become micro-narratives. The micro-narratives are pieces of an elaborate puzzle requiring the transmedial player to solve whatever they choose. The solution may result in one player arriving at a very different conclusion than another based on their experience across media.

Centering the Andromeda era around the Benefactor mystery offers players incentives to explore different and unusual pathways and media across *Mass Effect*. Chris Chenard rationalizes that "There's just enough information known about the Benefactor to make the character worth investigating, and BioWare can use that to its advantage" ("*Mass Effect 4* Should Reveal the Identity of *Andromeda*'s Benefactor" para 3), leading him to believe "the Benefactor would likely have a major impact on the events of *Mass Effect 4*" (para 3). Following a similar investigation and rationalizing, players took to various online forums, including *StackExchange*, *GameFAQs*, and *Reddit*, to discuss their various theories and main suspects, attempting to discover the Benefactor's identity collectively. Of the forums I examined, the *Reddit* thread consisted of 116 comments with commentors citing an array of media including *Andromeda*, the *Mass Effect* trilogy, *Evolution*, and *Nexus Uprising* to build their various claims ([*MEA* Spoilers]Who's the "benefactor"?). These Redditors offer clear explanation and attention to detail with one user called Gaussdril asking, "What if the mysterious benefactor is a collective of Geth who did not worship the Reapers and instead knew what they were planning?" They explain that "I don't believe it was the Illusive Man. See the original trilogy established that there was a collective of Geth who wanted to work with organics (Legion is a big example.) The first *Mass Effect* established that an AI can easily move money around" ([*MEA* Spoilers]Who's the "benefactor"?). They then cite several more missions from the original *Mass Effect* trilogy before hypothesizing that SAM could not identity a killer "because of a lack of DNA," pointing to the Geth not possessing human DNA ([*MEA* Spoilers]Who's the "benefactor"?). Multiple users offer theories on why or why not the Illusive Man or Liara T'Soni would be the Benefactor with user Rhorge stating, "As much as the illusive man and shadow broker (pre-Liara) seem likely, I'm thinking that the double alias would be kind of strange and a bit easy since those are

the two you'd instantly think of" ([*MEA* Spoilers]Who's the "benefactor"?). Drawing from various media, these transmedia detectives went beyond the game to search for clues around the series, bringing their evidence to stretch a collective red string across a global evidence board.

Without a complete answer, transmedial players cannot finish or "win" the Benefactor mystery and instead rely on one another to further their investigation. This detective work is thus inherently playful and communal. It points to the power of transmedial agency, offering an avenue of engagement with games or game-like systems that entitlement-based play. Here I return to Murray's definition of agency as "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (*Hamlet on the Holodeck* 126). Murray continues by explaining, "Agency, then, goes beyond both participation and activity. As an aesthetic pleasure, as an experience to be savoured for its own sake" (128-129). As I explained in the Introduction, transmedial agency is a direct response to Meghna Jayanth's call for "a definition of agency that can assimilate a loss of control, protagonism that works outside of primacy, games that function outside of the simulation of entitlement" ("Forget Protagonists"). Indeed, entitlement takes the shape of expectation, ownership, control, and mastery—misunderstood aspects of agency that are impossible within transmedia stories. Entitlement-based player agency has the idea that "I do this, so it should do that," or player-central stories make the player the most important factor in the story, minimizing or erasing the spaces and characters, which can then lead players to demand things from creators too. Transmedial agency forces creators and players within transmedia stories to get lost and have their need for completion and control challenged.

The mystery of the Benefactor and the unexplored spaces between stories work towards challenging the need for completion and control. This exploration can just be about enjoying the spaces and characters without knowing more about them. Transmedia stories offer more, but to

such an extent that it can feel difficult or impossible to know everything about them. It exhausts the need to know or to control. Jayanth reasons, "Even if the player cannot directly affect something—if they can have an emotional response or reaction—for a game to allow them the space to have an opinion can be as powerful as allowing them to 'do something'" ("Forget Protagonists"). Attempting to solve the Benefactor mystery sidelines the player's importance in the story, but not at the expense of their engagement or agency. The unsolvable nature of the mystery—at least with the current stories available—exemplifies the potential of a never-ending network of paths across stories and media means the story is always incomplete. Perhaps some stories, or mysteries, will never be concluded or resolved. Transmedial agency thus challenges the need for completion, control, and resolution in favour of engaging and reacting to the story as it unfolds through the meaningful action needed to progress it further.

Engaging these stories and media to uncover one of the biggest mysteries in the Andromeda era surrounding the Benefactor and the mysterious circumstances around Garson's death is a game played within the shadows of *Mass Effect*'s media. Without answers in the game, players are tasked with assembling media to discover the Benefactor's identity. With none of the media offering answers but enough clues to make the search interesting, transmedial players must shift between roles of a collector of the media, an encyclopedist of the story, and a detective seeking to puzzle together all the information. Ryan argues that "transmedia storytelling is not a game of putting a story together like a jigsaw puzzle, but rather a return trip to a favorite world" ("Industry Buzzword" 4). Instead, Ryan continues, "It satisfies the encyclopedist's passion for acquiring more and more knowledge about a world, or the collector's passion for acquiring more and more souvenirs, but not the detective's passion for reconstructing a story out of disseminated facts" (4). Contrasting Ryan, I argue that filling in the gaps between

the media that make up *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story does very much play out like a puzzle game or, more fittingly, like a mission meant to send the player across the series to locate crucial information. Not all puzzles are jigsaw puzzles, as is clear in the wide array of puzzle mechanics across games. Transmedia storytelling is very much a game of putting a story together. *Andromeda* satisfies the detective's passion for reconstructing Garson's death from disseminated facts spread across Andromeda era media.

While Ryan only accepts the encyclopedist and collector, these seemingly distinct categories of engagement are intrinsically connected at the site of the player as a knowledge-seeker. They exist and operate simultaneously in the transmedial player. An encyclopedia is the site of the collection once a collector has acquired enough information to organize it. The detective is the encyclopedist now examining that information into a cohesive story through clues (observable connections) between all of it. While the encyclopedist is crucial for the storyworld (as discussed in Chapter 2) and the collector is crucial for character (as discussed in Chapter 3), the detective's passion is precisely why these gaps are crucial to a transmedia story. The Benefactor is an important and useful example of how transmedia stories are necessarily incomplete, as even an important character like the Benefactor can remain anonymous and require players to search for clues in the game, the novel, and graphic novella, as well as extend their search to the earlier media in and around the Milky Way era of *Mass Effect*. Players must hunt down and gather these different texts together, using their media-savvy investigative skills to search the nooks and crannies of the series, hoping for more information on this elusive character. The Benefactor as a character and puzzle spans multiple stories across multiple media. The mystery is the ends and the means for the transmedial player as the Benefactor puzzle is an

example of how transmedia stories offer ludic engagement down each path, regardless of if the medium is a game or not.

With these gaps, players must piece together *Mass Effect* through engaging dispersed content together and through one another. The space between media offers the opportunity for players to connect the dots, making sense of what came before, during, or after any specific story as one more piece of the puzzle or a block sliding into place to unlock the next area. Thus, I view all three knowledge-seeking identities as interconnected and important to a transmedia story, as well as storyworld and character (discussed in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, respectively). These pieces of information (these stories) offer knowledge about the transmedia story as transmedial players collect and organize an inventory of knowledge that all fit together like a puzzle. Like my concept of transmedial players as multi-faceted knowledge seekers, Bourdaa, using a similar metaphor, insists that these gaps "act as pieces of a narrative puzzle" that demand "a hunter to unravel the clues, a detective to decode the clues and sometimes a lurker to observe the unfolding of the story world" ("Following the Pattern" 207). Hunter, detective, and lurker are yet another set of descriptors, but the point is the same: transmedia stories require players to do the work of piecing together the larger, interconnected story across media.

Conclusion: The Game of Shadows is Afoot

Transmedial agency works within an implied structure that appears as a seemingly linear means of engaging transmedia stories. The story is spread across media, and the transmedial player collects, organizes, and examines these micro-narratives, creating their experience of *Mass Effect*. However, *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story also offers transmedial players a means to work within and against the mediascape structure (and structuring) that reflects a ludic, non-linear engagement. Transmedia stories emerge through the transmedial player's engagement with them by collecting, organizing, and piecing together these stories and media into a user-dependent whole. Taken all together, in this chapter, I argued that the need for transmedial players to fill in the gaps between stories and connect the media that make up *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story plays out like a puzzle game. Furthermore, this puzzle can be effectively understood through transmedial ludology, allowing us to acknowledge that transmedia stories function like games. Through that acknowledgement, we can apply concepts of ludology including agency, choice, and interactive engagement to transmedia stories like *Mass Effect* to examine transmedia storytelling as multi-modal game systems that guide their implied audience through a game-centric mothership.

Earlier discussions around transmedia storytelling focus on the existence and negotiation of the multitude of narratives within a transmedia story and the ostensibly inevitable gaps that exist between them, yet largely assume participation from its audience. This chapter has thus examined how *Mass Effect*'s over-arching story exists as a seemingly incomplete puzzle that invokes its audience as active participants, or who I refer to as transmedial players. *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story is a puzzle game that requires players to piece it together and negotiate its gaps through networked and participatory interaction. This puzzle structure allows players to choose

when and where to create paths through *Mass Effect* and how and why they understand the story

and characters. The over-arching transmedia story does not have a beginning, middle, or end

because it grows with each addition while simultaneously able to exist as single pieces. This

expansion creates gaps and mysteries and gives players the room to have agency and choice in

their engagement. Of course, this expansion has limits that often manifest through BioWare's

media and the time and energy of any given transmedial player. Indeed, only after a certain

amount of time can *Mass Effect* reveal a new piece of a constantly growing puzzle. The

transmedia story releases micro-narratives in the forms of a game, book, comic, or movie—each

its own micro conclusion—to extend the narrative that inevitably arises from *Mass Effect*'s

timeline.

In this piecing together the puzzle, the story grows more complex as the transmedia story

expands in different directions through different player-centric paths. By engaging the

transmedia story's complexity, the player is rewarded for completing the puzzle that translates

into resources that help them complete *Mass Effect: Legendary Edition*, *Andromeda*, or gain

more knowledge of the series. This logic extends out from the video games as the mothership to

the other media from both the Milky Way and Andromeda eras and back again as each media

works to bolster one another. The transmedial player is thus the intended and implied fan and

audience who collects, organizes, and puzzles together each narrative to produce the larger

transmedia story. Transmedial players are knowledge seekers who represent collectors,

encyclopedists, and detectives. These roles are best understood as three aspects of transmedial

agency or how a player can engage a transmedia story. Using ludology to examine this

engagement, I will focus my subsequent chapters on how transmedial players collect data on

Mass Effect's storyworld, construct its characters, and investigate motivations and consequences as player-characters within the games and between the other media, respectively.

BioWare created a puzzle for the transmedial player to solve in framing the Andromeda era-spanning mystery of the Benefactor that occurs across *Andromeda*, *Nexus Uprising*, and *Discovery*. Players must then rely on the alien aesthetics of interactive media, networked consumption, and participatory culture that exemplify transmedia storytelling's potential. Through examining player agency, choice, and participatory culture, I hope to exemplify how transmedial ludology can help us better understand this player identity conflict that revolves around the collector, encyclopedist, and detective of *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story and, by extension, all transmedia stories. Players collect, construct, and investigate these stories together once creators make them. Transmedia thus offers a site of convergence for players and creators to engage the narrative at both ends. This conception expands Jenkins' position that "Game designers don't simply tell stories; they design worlds and sculpt spaces" ("Game Design as Narrative Architecture" 674). Players then inhabit and furnish these spaces with their knowledge in and across media. And through this conception, video games can offer the clearest understanding of transmedia storytelling as a player-focused process that relies on convergence and agency to work within the web of media. Understanding *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story as a complex game between player and creator is the core aspect of understanding the ludic nature of transmedia stories and leads to the second layer of my transmedial ludology framework and the second chapter of my dissertation: storyworlds.

CHAPTER II

Cosmic Architects: Transmedial Agency in *Mass Effect*'s Storyworld

Introduction: *Mass Effect* and Storyworld

My last chapter focused on establishing transmedial agency as a concept that can help scholars better understand the inherent playfulness of transmedia stories. I applied transmedial agency to player engagement around *Mass Effect*'s Andromeda era of media with a specific focus on the Benefactor mystery and how transmedial players used their agency through and between different media to investigate that mystery and inscribe meaningful engagement with the transmedia story. In this chapter, I explore how transmedia scholarship often adheres to the traditional consideration of canonicity being derived from a single author or author collective whose work is central to the meaning of the narrative and from where any forms of worldbuilding develop. Building off the logic established in my previous chapter, I seek to problematize this concept of storyworld by examining how creators and transmedial players are often at odds when organizing *Mass Effect*'s storyworld. Even once creators have designed or built a storyworld, it is challenging to keep it organized, as I will explore throughout this chapter.

BioWare created *Mass Effect*'s transmedial storyworld, but inconsistencies arise due to the immense mediascape's lack of centralized organization.[1] In short, there is too much to organize for even an author collective because the nature of transmedial storyworlds are overwhelming when they spread across time and media. On the other hand, players did not create *Mass Effect*'s storyworld. Therefore, they can focus all their energy on organizing it according to their understanding of the *Mass Effect* mediascape as they engage with each part of it. Players

---

[1] It is also possible this lack of organization arises from developers not having the necessary resources and support they require to ensure a transmedial storyworld is organized and well-documented. However, this line of inquiry is outside of this dissertation's focus and scope.

thus operate as a collective where inconsistencies are quickly found and removed in player-organized spaces (such as the *Mass Effect* Wiki) or quickly found and reported (such as inconsistencies in the different stories across media). Their processes then look parallel but have fundamental differences in that both creators and players attempt to control the *Mass Effect* storyworld, yet neither can achieve mastery by themselves: the creators will always guide the next stories and releases while the players will always hold the next stories and releases to a particular standard of accuracy. This chapter employs my adoption of David Herman's definition as "the worlds evoked by narratives" (*Basic Elements* 105). Here I examine how this concept operates in connection to the *Mass Effect* transmedia story to illuminate how storyworld plays an integral part in framing transmedia stories and how that frame necessitates player engagement.

Through this chapter, I argue that creators and players attempt to unify and coordinate game-centric transmedia stories through different means of knowledge-seeking and organization. Storyworlds are crucial to the transmedial player's organization and curation of *Mass Effect* as both containers of their knowledge and the testaments to the impossibility of mastering a transmedia story. Creators first design and build the storyworld. Players curate the storyworld by collecting and organizing the various stories and media in *Mass Effect*, creating their unique understandings of the storyworld and often adhering to their own sense of canonicity beyond the creators' vision. With their necessarily limited resources, neither group can control or master the storyworld due to its complexity and immensity. When divided by inconsistencies in the games, books, comics, or film, creators and players form a contentious dynamic. When bonded over their shared goal of mastering the storyworld, they are united in their inability, their failure, to control and master it fully. Thus, storyworld is a valuable concept that offers space for transmedia players to resist creator-sanctioned means of engaging a transmedia story in favour of

how they build their version of the storyworld. Though storyworlds and storyworld building are not equivalent to transmedia storytelling, how both creators and players engage and construct *Mass Effect*'s storyworld is a core foundation of its transmedia story and the necessary engagement needed to make the transmedia story exist. While world logic often relies on a sense of the creator's initialization of the world (or Klastrup and Tosca's "worldness"), a transmedia story's storyworld opens the sense of world logic to those who engage with it on their terms, creating their sense of the storyworld outside of creators' visions.

This disruption between creators and players offers space for player-focused ways to uniquely engage a game-centric transmedia story like *Mass Effect*. A core aspect of transmedial agency is ensuring players have that space to create their own paths through *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story. Transmedial agency thus advances a useful way of understanding the importance of player action and reaction in transmedia storytelling. Following my discussion of the "mothership model" from Chapter 1, I explore how the games offer players a means to understand the larger transmedial storyworld by offering them the example of the codex, an in-game database, to organize the overwhelming amount of content in the game(s) and other media. However, how creators and players arrive at that sense of storyworld can create a space of disruption where player knowledge contests creator control. This disruption creates a crucial space for players to map the storyworld in ways that parallel creator frameworks and centre on their choices through their engagement with *Mass Effect*. These choices include how and when they engage different stories and different media in the storyworld and the resulting curation that follows those choices.

This chapter is structured into several sections to explore the transmedial player's engagement with *Mass Effect*'s storyworld. I examine how the codex offers transmedial players a

guide for how they can organize information within the game worlds and within the larger transmedia story. The in-game codex then offers a blueprint for transmedial players to build the real-world Wiki that contains not only information in the games (similar if not the exact same information found in the codex), but the entire transmedia story. This discussion relies on examples of how players use the *Mass Effect* Wiki as a guide to progress through the transmedia story and explores how information around *Mass Effect*'s primary antagonists, the Reapers, are often purposefully obfuscated in the codex and other creator-centric information spaces for dramatic effect or inconsistency. This obfuscation can inspire players to challenge information as they seek it out, offering them different means of engaging and organizing the overwhelming storyworld, disrupting the traditional notion of canon and creator-centric notions of world-building. Examples of this disruption in this chapter include *Mass Effect 1*'s Sovereign codex entry and the *Mass Effect 3* "Leviathan" DLC (later mission), where players must incorporate new information into their storyworld knowledge; the novel *Mass Effect: Revelation* as a direct challenge to how certain texts follow or resist the title of mothership; and, lastly, the novel *Mass Effect*: *Deception*, where players rejected the novel from their curated storyworld due to many continuity errors despite being officially released by BioWare. Each of these examples arrives at a site of conflict between creator and player. The storyworld continuously challenges traditional world-building concepts and ludic elements of control and failure.

Throughout this chapter, I continually return to the idea that the immensity of *Mass Effect*'s transmedial storyworld is a challenge for both creator and player to navigate. This challenge initially leads creators and players to rely on organizing and controlling knowledge to negotiate the storyworld. However, creators and players arrive at different aspects of organization and control that are at odds with one another. This site of conflict affords players a

sense of agency over the *Mass Effect* storyworld, choosing how, when, and why they may or may not engage with all the information supplied to them by the creators. There is a contention between the creator's vision and the player's engagement that parallels the conceptions of control and failure within a game system. However, controlling or mastering the storyworld is impossible, and transmedial agency offers a different route through this overwhelming amount of content, celebrating failure as an inevitable and necessary means to engage *Mass Effect*, not only in the games but the entire transmedia story. The complexity and immensity of *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story lead to these confusions and contentions between creator and player; through the impossibility of controlling *Mass Effect*'s storyworld, the creator-player dynamic is created by design. Consequently, control and failure are dichotomies that cannot remain stable in the immensity of transmedial storyworlds.

1. "I Wish You Could See It Like I Do, Shepard": Organizing *Mass Effect*'s Transmedial Storyworld

Mass Effect's storyworld and the information within this narrative create a challenge for any single player navigating the transmedia story. The expanding transmedial *Mass Effect* storyworld has grown to include over a dozen comics and graphic novellas (in two anthologies), seven novels, one film, one amusement park ride, one mobile app, two mobile games, and four video games since May 2007, bookended with the novels *Mass Effect: Revelation* (2007) and *Mass Effect: Andromeda – Annihilation* (2018), before the remastered *Mass Effect: Legendary Edition* (2021). This decade of stories across various media, spanning centuries within the storyworld, primarily revolves around the Milky Way era with commander Shepard and the Normandy's crew. The Andromeda era, which I discussed at length in Chapter 1, then begins with *Mass Effect*: *Andromeda* and shifts the narrative 634 years after Shepard to the Andromeda galaxy with the protagonist Ryder and their Tempest crew.

This storyworld becomes increasingly complex as a player explores the Milky Way and the Andromeda galaxies (see Figure 3). Indeed, as Natalie M. Ward notes, *Mass Effect* offers "multiple languages, species, religious elements, and a long and complicated history to form a rich story-driven world" ("Mass(ively) Effect(ive)" 291). As the depth of content increases, so too does the size of the storyworld. Jim Bizzocchi and Theresa Jean Tanenbaum explain that the original trilogy traverses space "across a wide range of scales: the Milky Way galaxy, star regions, individual stars, solar systems, individual planets, space stations, multiple locations within each planet or space station" ("A Case Study in the Design of Game Narrative" 399). The transmedial player fluctuates between trying to encompass the galaxy through an over-arching

narrative and making sense of it at the literal surfaces of the various planets with smaller stories that make up this galaxy and the transmedia story.

Figure 3. *Milky Way galaxy (Mass Effect 2); Heleus cluster of Andromeda galaxy (Andromeda).*

Immensity is often a reality of transmedia stories, as Henry Jenkins argues that "The sheer abundance of allusions makes it nearly impossible for any given consumer to master the franchise totally" (*Convergence Culture* 99). Nevertheless, the precarious balance between size and mastery is a foundational one in transmedia storytelling, with Jenkins later noting, "This concept of world building is closely linked to what Murray has called the 'encyclopedic' impulse behind contemporary interactive fictions" ("Revenge of the Oragami Unicorn"). Janet Murray, while not fully defining "the encyclopedic impulse" (*Hamlet on the Holodeck* 87), explains that "The capacity to represent enormous qualities of information in digital form translates into an artist's potential to offer a wealth of detail, to represent the world with both scope and particularity" (84). To extend this discussion further, I consider that this artist's potential to "offer a wealth of detail, to represent the world with both scope and particularity" is met with the transmedial player's potential to consume this wealth of detail and to understand and attempt to control the scope of the world.

Indeed, the transmedia scholarship that inspired my understanding of Murray's encyclopedic impulse stresses the consumer or audience (the transmedial player in my project) having a drive for control and mastery of the storyworld. For Jenkins, this impulse is "the desire

of audiences to map and master as much as they can know about such universes, often through the production of charts, maps, and concordances" ("Revenge of the Oragami Unicorn"). Indeed, Mélanie Bourdaa echoes Jenkins' assertion, describing transmedia franchises as "an encyclopaedia of a universe" ("Following the Pattern" 212). The struggle to master these storyworlds and this encyclopedic impulse also happens to creators, despite the assumption that they are in complete control of their creations. Focusing on this creator myth, Bourdaa explains, "Producers and show runners develop an encyclopedic knowledge on their production since they cartography all the extensions" (212). However, this assumption becomes less stable through analyzing transmedial storyworlds through ludology.

Players and creators both struggle to master transmedial storyworlds. Bourdaa acknowledges the power of players within this engagement: "fans try to reconstruct this world, picking up, collecting and sharing information they found on the platforms. They are in charge of rewriting and re-agglomerating the encyclopaedia of the universe" (212). However, this dynamic between creators and players is much more unstable than Bourdaa explains. Players' engagement with the storyworld often rivals and potentially is at odds with the creators' vision and canon. This encyclopedic impulse for both creators and players is crucial to my understanding of how players engage transmedial storyworlds as ludic systems and the means to which players can gain a sense of agency within the *Mass Effect* storyworld. The Illusive Man, one of the major villains in *Mass Effect*, laments to Shepard that "I wish you could see it like I do, Shepard" (*Mass Effect 3*). He pities Shepard for not being able to see the world through his perspective, as though he has a more precise insight and a fuller picture of the universe and the Earth seemingly at the center of it. Scholars revering creators as the masters of their universes fall into the same fallacy. The Illusive Man seeks to offer Shepard the right way of seeing the world, and BioWare

subtly offers players a similar opportunity, using the games to guide the players' engagement with the rest of the *Mass Effect* mediascape to collect and build the storyworld through the information within and across the transmedia story. However, like Shepard challenging the Illusive Man, that perspective presents players with avenues for challenging the creators.

To aid the player in their goal of understanding the storyworld, *Mass Effect* contains this seemingly unwieldy amount of content within an in-game encyclopedic database called the codex that exists across all the games in the series. The codex is a repository of world lore, an encyclopedia of information about the *Mass Effect* storyworld that is organized once a player has discovered this information in the game world. Within the first moments of playing *Mass Effect 1*, the player is informed that an entry is automatically added to the in-game codex with an on-screen notification reading "Codex" (see Figure 4). This notification signals to the players that something noteworthy has occurred based on their actions. As the player-as-Shepard, and later the player-as-Ryder in *Andromeda*, explores their world, every time they encounter a point of interest, the codex is automatically updated with an entry on their engagement with the world around them. However, the codex is not merely a factoid container as the addition of new entries also gives the player experience points that allow them to progress in abilities and power. Thus, the codex is both part of *Mass Effect*'s world-building and the ludic mechanics of the games, all of which automatically occur upon the player's interaction with such points of interest.

Figure 4*. On-screen notification of Codex entry (Mass Effect 1).*

However, scholars misattribute the importance of the codex as an organizing principle for

not only the games' information and backstory but also the larger transmedia story. Regarding

the codex, Samuel Zakowski explains, "you could go through the entire trilogy without reading a

single letter of the codex" ("Time and Temporality in the *Mass Effect* Series" 64). While true

that the player could avoid reading any of the codex, a player necessarily must find the

information in question before it is deposited into the codex. The codex acts as a storage device

for storyworld knowledge that can be easily retrieved for review after the player has acquired it.

The active engagement of discovering this information denies any sense of discretion. As the

player-as-Shepard travels the Citadel for the first time in *Mass Effect 1*, they can speak with

various alien races not seen prior to their arrival. Once they have had a conversation with a

member of an alien species, a codex entry is created that offers further background that may or

may not have been discussed during the single conversation, regardless of if the player clicked

through all the conversation branches. However, that entry will not exist until Shepard speaks

with the character.

The entries are contained within the codex only because the player uncovers it during

their exploration of the storyworld. The player locates this point of interest, and the games

choose to make that point of interest noteworthy by literally making a note of it in the game's

codex. The player may not think it is crucial or even acknowledge it during the game or locate its

entry in the codex for further information. Nevertheless, the creators have deemed this

information necessary by predetermining its appearance in the codex. However, players may not

necessarily agree with its importance but are rewarded for exploring the storyworld. Intrinsically,

locating the information is as crucial as discovering its value in terms of reward. Thus, the codex

assembles a necessary network of information the player engages with in various ways and at

various levels while navigating the storyworld, but only once the player has found it. Player

curiosity is rewarded with information; how the players choose to engage that information

depends entirely on their engagement with the storyworld. Extrinsically, the reward for

knowledge and discovery of the information, rather than simply locating it, offers the player a

complete understanding of the storyworld. One must build this knowledge base through

conversations, finding datapads, and collecting items before automatically adding it to the codex.

The codex increases the player's immersion not by providing what Zakowski refers to as

"temporal relief to the storyworld" (64) but a more situated engagement with it. Immersion here

operates not solely in the ludic mechanics of playing the game but immersing oneself in the

storyworld and the information that makes up the storyworld. It is not a break in gameplay to

consult or study the codex, but a different aspect of engaging *Mass Effect*. Indeed, the multitudes

of different playstyles are impossible for BioWare to fully consider when designing these games

and building the larger transmedia story and this tension in how the creator tries to situate the

player in the game and how the player situates themselves reflects the importance of transmedial

agency in a player's experience of *Mass Effect*. The codex is the record of a player's experience

with the storyworld, both literally in that exploring the world garners experience for the player to

level up Shepard but also the experience of engaging the locations, characters, and information of *Mass Effect* gives the player a more immersive sense of the world. A player may never open the codex during their playthrough, but the codex is always present.

The codex exemplifies the transmedial player's encyclopedic impulse to hunt and gather the vast amount of information of the storyworld to make it traversable. It situates the player as part of the world in that, Zakowski explains, "The codex provides relevant background by immersing the player in the storyworld which extends beyond the story line" (66). The codex both ensures the consistency of the storyworld by making it accessible and easy to understand dictated by the games' creators while also offering a model for the player to build the larger transmedial storyworld in which the games are contained if they choose to follow its organizational scheme.

The codex offers a database of entries organized by creator-designed categories, outlining hierarchical taxonomies, divided into two categories: Primary and Secondary (see Figure 5). The codex offers a similar framework for players to organize vast blocks of knowledge into readable and referenceable data, including the different species, characters, history, technology, organizations, locations, weapons, and other information relevant to understanding the storyworld. This organization allows players to fully engage with their crewmates and NPCs, understanding political allegiances, expertise, and other abilities that form a foundation for narrative and gameplay.
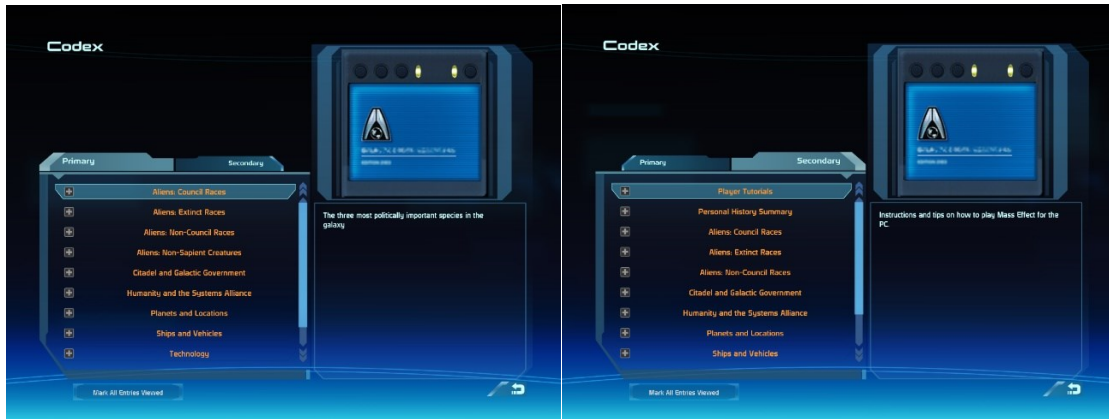
Figure 5*. Primary and Secondary categories of the in-game Codex (Mass Effect 3).*

Through the hierarchical organization of information in the codex, the means to which

players follow or resist that information, and its structure recenters transmedial agency within

Mass Effect's storyworld. If a player chooses to follow and believe the codex as offered to the

player in-game, they are accepting the creator's designated information hierarchy such as the

supposed centrality of the human Alliance in Citadel space or the assumed inferiority of non-

Citadel species, or the danger of artificial intelligence. The codex both organizes the storyworld

as designed by the creators and perpetuates their political and ontological assumptions of *Mass

Effect*. If a player chooses to reject the codex, they can follow their own understanding of the

storyworld, question assumed principles and given historical data, and engage both the games

and the non-ludic media accordingly. There is then a meaningful difference between the

experience of players who look at the codex and those who do not because the layers of

engagement—either acceptance or resistance—are not present to those who do not engage with

the codex. It is a path of storyworld building and organizing that only reveals itself if a

transmedial player chooses to find and follow that path. That path thus becomes another means

for the player to consider their transmedial agency in *Mass Effect* as a participant in the

transmedia story's meaning-making process.

With the codex, the player organizes and re-organizes the storyworld even if they are not interested in the larger events around them because they still have a central role in those events. As McLean notes, "this completes the illusion that Commander Shepard knows enough about the galactic culture to get by in conversation while allowing the player to access more detailed information at their leisure" (114). Shepard is never framed as an expert in any aspect of *Mass Effect*'s storyworld, and the dialogue options offer more questions than answers. Shepard is only ever gaining knowledge of the world, whereas the player both gains that knowledge and constructs that world. Indeed, as McLean continues, "it plays an important role in letting them know there is an extensive galaxy of different species, customs, technology, planets and politics that underpin their interactions" (114). The information always operates on various layers of the storyworld. Having the "Codex" notification appearing on screen after watching a cutscene, engaging in dialogue, or finding an item points the player to that event—big or small—being part of a larger, connected storyworld. Every notification reminds the player that they received information and were rewarded for it, potentially inspiring them to seek out as much information as they can to fill the codex and gain experience, especially following BioWare's recommendation to complete everything (as discussed in Chapter 1), even if they never open it in the game's options menu.

Using the codex as a guide, players have created a collective infosphere that includes the *Mass Effect* Wiki, subreddits, and online forums that assist players, scholars, and even creators in understanding the storyworld. By organizing the immense storyworld of *Mass Effect* into readable and searchable entries, the codex offers a model of organizing and understanding the storyworld through its structure and function within the games. The codex thus offers players a clear example of how to organize the immense amount of data they inevitably engage through

the games and transmedia story. Consequently, players follow the codex's information structure

when designing and curating the *Mass Effect* Wiki. Indeed, the in-game codex's structure of

organizing information into accessible content is borrowed for the fan-made Wiki that functions

as a real-world, collective codex. The Wiki is a massive, collective endeavour of transmedial

players cataloging everything included in the *Mass Effect* storyworld (*Mass Effect Wiki*). Thus,

the Wiki is an example of what Roberta Pearson refers to as the "infinite archive": an online

resource that "gives the illusion of completeness but censorship and copyright militate against

comprehensiveness, whilst search engine protocols structure the retrieval of data" ("The Mystery

of the Infinite Archive" 151). The Wiki is updated daily by thousands of fans globally with over

four thousand pages, ten thousand photos, twenty-nine videos, and over three thousand

discussions (see Figure 6).
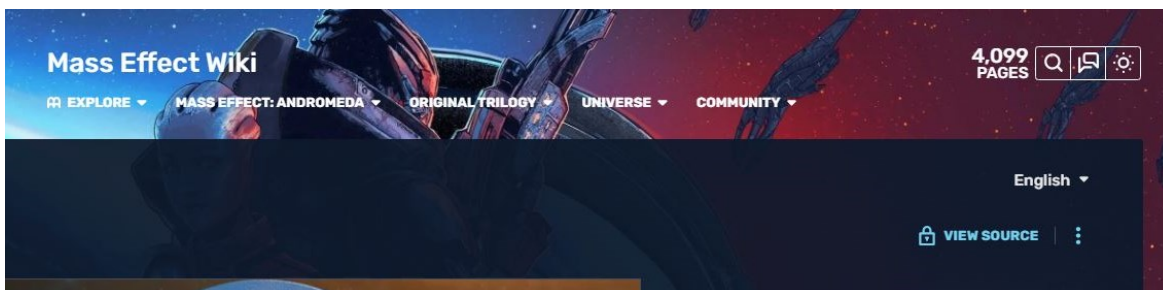
Figure 6. *Mass Effect Wiki.*

The Wiki is updated daily because thousands of players continuously engage with the

games, novels, comics, and film through replays, rereads, and rewatches. Entries are fleshed out

further, edited for clarity, or entirely new sections are added as this collective of transmedial

players discover new aspects of the different stories across *Mass Effect*'s different media or

connections missed in prior paths through the transmedia story. The front page of the *Mass Effect*

Wiki boasts itself as "Widely regarded as the most complete resource for *Mass Effect* on the

web, *Mass Effect* Wiki contains every bit of information you could possibly want to find about

this epic trilogy, including the games, books, and comics" (*Mass Effect* Wiki). As noted above, the Wiki offers a real-world codex of the *Mass Effect* storyworld; however, while the Wiki mirrors the information structure of the in-game codex, the Wiki relies on collective knowledge and distribution of information that is constantly updating.

In contrast, the in-game codex is static and finite upon the completion of each game. On its own, the in-game codex cannot attempt to capture the immensity of the storyworld. Thus, the most important difference between the codex and the Wiki is the transmedial engagement and collective curation of the Wiki. The Wiki represents the product of transmedial agency, where players have explored all aspects of the *Mass Effect* storyworld and created a database to curate that data as well as offer others a place to learn and understand the transmedia story beyond the creators. Discussing *Battlestar Galactica*, Bourdaa explains that "The mere existence of the Battlestar Wiki, created by fans, shows the importance of providing a detailed cartography and mapping of the universe of a given television series so that audiences can work to unravel all its secrets and understand all its mysteries and mythologies" ("Transmedia Storytelling" 140). With *Mass Effect*'s storyworld being so immense, with different aspects of engagement demanded upon the transmedial player, transmedial storyworlds are overwhelming. As such, players employ the *Mass Effect* Wiki, subreddits, and online forums to circumvent this immensity, curating the storyworld into organized entries, timelines, and other means of accessible information.

As a crucial means of collecting information inside and outside the games, the codex is a clear guiding principle for organizing the transmedial story where this immense storyworld is difficult to traverse. Using the codex as a reference for data organization, players similarly use this organization for the Wiki at the level of the transmedia story, creating subsets of information

as the transmedial player progresses through the storyworld. While a clear guide in organizing the storyworld, even the codex is fallible to the immensity and complexity of *Mass Effect*'s storyworld. The storyworld often reveals itself to be more complicated than the codex entries describe, putting into question the information that the players gather from various sources. Indeed, I will draw on the example of the Reapers from the Milky Way era as they are presented in the codex compared to how they exist in the storyworld. This contrast in their presentation can cast doubt on the codex's seemingly doubtless validity, which I argue is helpful to understand how the codex's design allows for transmedial player interpretation within the games and across the transmedia story.

An important example is the original entry for Sovereign in *Mass Effect 1*. The codex describes Sovereign—the Reaper threat and main antagonist of the game—as "the flagship of the rogue Spectre Saren. An enormous dreadnought larger than any other ship in any known fleet, Sovereign is crewed with both geth and krogan" (*Mass Effect 1*, "Codex: Sovereign"). This codex entry, contained in the "Ships and Vehicles" section of the database, Zakowski presumes, "deliberately 'mis-illumines' the nature of Sovereign in order for the later revelation in the main story line" as "a carefully orchestrated plot twist, that is, a major surprise" (67). Thus, the in-game codex represents the drama of the game, and in some ways, it creates the drama by withholding or presenting information at key moments. Further, the codex becomes a seemingly authoritative memory of the player's most important experiences in-game, whether the player feels the same way about those moments and the information contained within the codex.

The codex and the Wiki then offer players different understandings and importance of narrative moments in the games; however, the Wiki then furthers that sense of importance by highlighting how such moments connect to the larger transmedia story. After the player-as-

Shepard discovers Sovereign's identity, the subsequent Codex entries explain that "Sovereign was the first Reaper encountered by the modern Citadel races. Military leaders initially assumed that Sovereign was a geth or Prothean flagship commanded by Saren Arterius, a rogue Spectre. The truth was far more alarming. The massive ship was itself intelligent, and Saren proved to be under its control" *(Mass Effect 2*, "Codex: Sovereign"). As an intentional withholding of information from the player, the original entry creates dramatic suspense; however, it also allows transmedial players to distrust this information supplied as seemingly objective backstory and canon (see Figure 7).
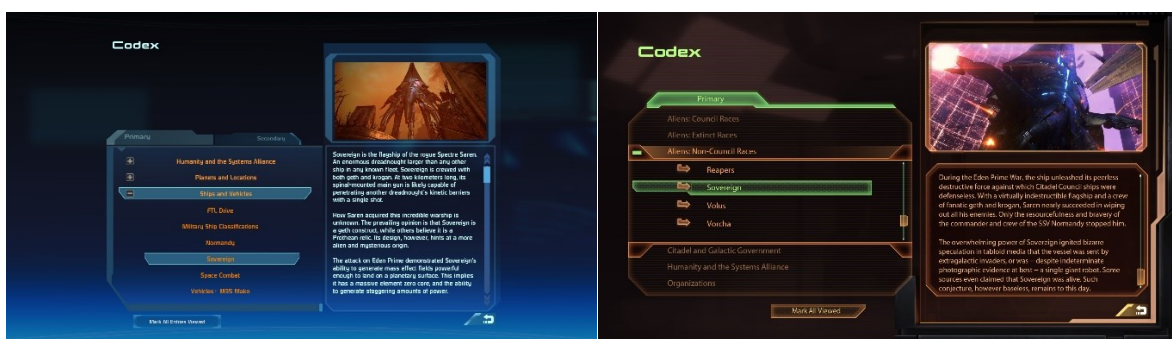
Figure 7. Codex: Sovereign (Mass Effect 1 and Mass Effect 2).

Parallel to the true nature of Sovereign in *Mass Effect 1*, this moment becomes, Zakowski argues, "an instance of surprise in that the past was 'mis-illumined' in the sense of 'overly simplified'" (68). Moreover, the codex yet again becomes a space of contention, calling to question how canonical information is offered and, more importantly, used by BioWare in their process of framing the *Mass Effect* storyworld. Once the player-as-Shepard meets Sovereign and they reveal their identity, another reframing is immediately introduced: Sovereign explains that "We simply are. We are eternal" and "We have no beginning. We have no end. We are infinite" *(Mass Effect 1*). This information becomes the new foundation from which Shepard's mission builds. Saren is now the puppet of Sovereign, the true villain of *Mass Effect 1*, and Shepard resolves to stop this "eternal" "infinite" threat in whatever way they can.

This false claim regarding Sovereign and the Reapers is both means of keeping players in the dark and reinforcing both a colonial way of knowing and reflecting a bureaucratic means of knowledge sharing that is hindered through censorship and control of information. The player-as-Shepard knowing the truth of Sovereign creates a gap in the codex's function as an encyclopedic repository. It then implies there is a disconnect between Shepard's knowledge and the information available in the codex as though there is a mediator of the codex's content as if it was a Citadel-sanctioned database where the council monitors the information placed in the codex. As the player-as-Shepard uncovers more mysteries across the Milky Way galaxy, the once seemingly authoritative entries can reveal themselves false or falsified—either in the game as narrative suspense or inclusion errors. Yet how the codex is revised and questioned opens a space for players to critically consider how and what they include in their understanding of the storyworld. For the players who attend to the complexities of *Mass Effect*'s storyworld, the codex's fallibility sets players up to be wary of the seemingly given information, relying on their sense of the storyworld and hesitance to accept creator-sanctioned details at face value. Indeed, the codex exemplifies and complicates the creator-sanctioned means of establishing *Mass Effect* canon that may directly oppose the transmedial player's understanding of the storyworld if they consider such information invalid to their experience.

The codex is always a present and crucial component of *Mass Effect*'s core ideal revolving around exploration and discovery within the games and across media. However, that very exploration and discovery can lead to fallibility that can inspire players to challenge creator-sanctioned information presented unquestionably in the codex. On the other hand, this kind of challenging of creator-sanctioned information could be by design, or at least encouraged by BioWare as form of engaging players and community building. The creators can and do

celebrate the transmedial player and their agency in and across *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story. McLean argues that "*Mass Effect* doesn't require that the player be interested in the details but puts forward the important effort to make sure the details are still available" (114). The games thus guide the transmedial player's desire to organize this world-building information, even to the detriment of the creators' understandings of the storyworld. As Zakowski argues, "The codex, by presenting its information authoratively as unproblematic backstory" assures players that "there is no reason to doubt the validity of the data in the codex until the past is problematized in the main story line" (67). Yet this validity is not consistent even through the games, let alone the transmedia story.

While the creators offer a frame for this picture, the transmedial player must organize all the information into a totality and use their agency to decide what is vital to their understanding of the storyworld. The transmedial player's agency allows them to rework their understanding (and organization) of a storyworld to match the order in which players engaged a specific story and medium. This process allows players to place their understanding of any story or media's importance into their storyworld that may or may not align with the creator's vision. Players completing the picture of a storyworld through their choices create a unique experience that does not rely on a path outlined through the creator's vision. The creator thus becomes a facilitator in offering world information for players, but players build and complete the storyworld in their ways. This work thus allows for varying degrees of engaging with the games and the larger transmedial storyworld. A player can reject the given world data to focus on a chosen path through the storyworld. This rejection can be the questioning an in-game codex entry or the refusal to read, watch, or play another entry in transmedia story to keep their understanding and interpretation of the storyworld consistent or unchanging. The choices of how a player orders

and engages *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story builds a different picture of varying degrees, all

within a seemingly fallible framework established by BioWare. This fallibility is a crucial space

where players can define their sense of the storyworld through personal engagement and

understanding while also choosing what information to suspect or reject, such as the information

about Sovereign. Expanding upon this discussion, the following section explores how this

player-focused knowledge can and does work against BioWare's vision beyond the games.

2. Canons, Codices, and Conflict—Oh My! Challenging Creator Hierarchy

As players create their sense of the storyworld, whether they follow the codex or not, they work with and against the creator-sanctioned canon. For this section, it is useful to clarify that canon refers to both the creator's designated narratives and information contained in *Mass Effect*'s media and the collectively curated information of the storyworld on the Wiki that are both present and often conflicted with the information of the storyworld in a transmedial player's head. Player canon and creator codex thus become conflicting concepts of storyworld information. Canon exists outside the in-game codex as the facts and agreed-upon events that occurred in the storyworld as accepted by both creators and players. The codex exists within the transmedia story as an artifact of the storyworld that can and does obfuscate the player's knowledge of the storyworld. However, it can also offer a template for how players organize the transmedial storyworld in collective databases like the Wiki. Before I examine how the codex and the Wiki operate within a space of contention between player and creator, I will first explore canon and authorship in transmedia scholarship.

Transmedia scholars still rely on traditional understandings of canon and authorship that do not readily apply to game-centric transmedia stories. On the one hand, some scholars focus on the author-centric canon, which is the canon that revolves around and relies upon the creators' vision of the storyworld, and how the narrative is presented across the transmedia story. Canonicity both exists in the text while also depending on how a transmedial player engages that text in relation to and dependent upon their engagement with the transmedia story. Mark J.P. Wolf echoes this traditional sense of canon, explaining that "canonicity is associated with quality and how true a work is to the world's subcreator's vision" (*Building Imaginary Worlds* 266). Wolf then reasons that "the best material is often also the most canonical, with less canonical

material dropping off somewhat in quality or varying from the author's original ideas" (266).

Marie-Laure Ryan also perpetuates this dichotomy when asking: "Imagine that an author writes a

novel, then another author writes a sequel or prequel to it: can the two texts be said to refer to the

same world?" ("Transmedial Storytelling and Transfictionality" 367). Ryan relies on authorial

canonicity and cohesion, admitting, "I have no trouble calling the world of the various *Star Wars*

films the same world—they were all conceived by a team headed by George Lucas" (367). These

notions of canon offer no space for audience interpretation, relying solely on a narrow

understanding of how different types of media is created.

On the other hand, some scholars include the audience in their notions of the canon. In

this vein, William Proctor and Matthew Freeman argue, "For some fans, canon attaches an aura

of authenticity and legitimation to the textual universe" ("The Transmedia Economy of *Star

Wars*" 222). Legitimacy is important for Jan- Noël Thon who notes that "it would seem that the

relevance of the question of a given licensed work's canonicity remains largely limited to those

cases where that work's storyworld could, at least in principle, be comprehended as a

noncontradictory expansion of a previously represented storyworld" ("Converging Worlds" 37).

Canon for these scholars, then, focuses on the creator, often a specific individual who maintains

the coherence and cohesion of the storyworld where the audience adheres to that sense of

storyworld. This understanding ignores the often-invisible agency of personal engagement of the

transmedial player and collective encyclopedic impulse, like the *Mass Effect* Wiki, that creates

their coherent storyworld through their engagement with it that may or may not align with the

creator's vision.

Unlike these scholars, I am not convinced that players uphold a traditional sense of canon

tied to authorship but rather uphold a sense of understanding the storyworld in ways that cohere

with their chosen paths through the transmedia story. In other words, it is not a matter of a canon,

or the singular vision designed and legitimatized solely by the creator(s) at all, but a matter of if

these stories connect in a way that offers an engaging experience for the player. Filling in the

gaps within and between the different stories across media in *Mass Effect* forces BioWare to

reach into the unknown and follow their core beliefs of storytelling to find if players will agree.

Building *Mass Effect* as a transmedia story is both a gamble and a safe bet because a transmedia

story offers different types of consumers different media with hopes that the implied transmedial

player will engage with all the content in *Mass Effect*'s mediascape. Canon thus offers creators a

sense of agency over the works and reifies themselves as the controllers of their creations at the

expense of players. On the other hand, players who seek to organize and understand the

storyworld in their way can be at odds with creators, especially if new material does not fit into a

player's knowledge or experience. Canon, then, is the tool of the creators, whereas transmedial

agency is the means of the player, often causing the two to be at odds.

Transmedial agency highlights the knowledge and passion necessary for expansive

transmedial storyworlds to exist. As William Proctor posits, "vast franchised narratives possess a

range of continuities and several different canonical systems, largely dependent on the choices

and positions of each individual reader, and fans are experts in navigating alternative worlds

such as these" ("Transmedia Comics" 59). While this notion aligns with my position on players,

Proctor then disregards this focus on fans, claiming, "That said, it largely remains that the

primary text, whatever that may be, maintains its power over the array of transmedia satellites

orbiting the mothership" (59). Unlike Proctor, I do not view audience choice, or transmedial

agency, as at odds with the importance of the mothership. As I discussed at length in Chapter 1,

the mothership helps guide and often defines how a transmedial player engages *Mass Effect*. The

player's agency in the games reflects the transmedial player's agency in the transmedia story, allowing the player to choose how and when they engage with the various stories and media that make up *Mass Effect*'s storyworld. Motherships offer players a means to take control of their experience and make meaningful choices throughout the different stories across media.

Authorship, authenticity, and canon are much more malleable than the previously discussed scholars state, as players dictate their sense of a storyworld. Mothership is also a malleable designation of texts in a series where transmedial agency simultaneously relies on and chooses which text offers the most effective means of understanding a transmedia story. Authorship and the status of originating text do not guarantee that a specific medium is or remains the mothership. Indeed, the novel *Mass Effect: Revelation* offers an interesting example of this reality. Released on May 1, 2007 (six months prior to the first game), the novel *Revelation* is the first story in the *Mass Effect* transmedia story created and published by BioWare with *Mass Effect 1*'s Lead Writer, Drew Karpyshyn, writing the novel. As the first media within *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story, *Revelation* establishes the setting, characters, and events through print, in contrast to video game's largely visual and audio delivery systems, that set the transmedia story into motion with Staff Lieutenant David Anderson as the protagonist and Spectre agent Saren Arterius as the antagonist.

Interestingly, in publishing *Revelation* before releasing *Mass Effect 1*, BioWare sets up the transmedia story with a move that is guaranteed to focus readers and players on these questions of canon and canonicity. When engaging adaptation, readers, when watching a movie or play a video game, often question all the choices of the directors and the differences between the storyworld established by the book as compared to the film or the game. Consequently, the nature of transmedia storytelling tends to generate this kind of experience of putting the player at

odds with or a distance from the game. It is ironic yet generative then that the mothership both pulls non-ludic media towards and away from it and the transmedial player must thus come to terms with the weird proximities established by this tenuous connection between media in terms of storytelling and representation.

As the first story released in *Mass Effect*'s mediascape, *Revelation* establishes important details of the storyworld. The novel revolves around Anderson, First Lieutenant Kahlee Sanders, and Saren as the three characters work together to track down and disturb the batarian Edan Had'dah and artificial intelligence scientist Dr. Shu Qian who are conducting secret AI research. When Anderson, Sanders, and Saren discover Edan and Qian were using an ancient alien relic to advance their research, Saren betrays them, stealing the research, destroying the facility, and falsely accusing Anderson of the damage. These accusations prevent Anderson from becoming the first human Spectre, a promising moment in human galactic history later achieved by Shepard at the beginning of *Mass Effect 1*. Disheartened, Anderson resumes his military work while Sanders is promoted to a new, classified project—preventing them from pursuing a fledgling romantic relationship. During the Epilogue, Saren discovers an alien relic called Sovereign, a supposedly powerful ancient warship from the age of the Prothean extinction. Motivated by his hatred of the Alliance and desire to see Turians take their place as the superior race in the Citadel, Saren begins to plan how he will find and unlock Sovereign's power and use it to bring about an era of Turian supremacy.

Revelation is thus the starting point of and the counterpoint to the games' representation of canonicity as *Mass Effect*'s mothership. *Revelation*, set in 2165, sets up the events that led directly to *Mass Effect 1*'s conflict eighteen years later when Shepard arrives on the galactic scene. The novel's last line is written from Saren's perspective and claims, "And Sovereign was

key to it all" (*Revelation*). "All" in this line directly refers to Saren's plan for Turian supremacy; however, read in the context of the novel as the harbinger of the transmedia story, this line directly refers to the ever-expanding plot across the entire Milky Way era: the coming Reaper invasion and the resulting war. Sovereign's arrival in the Milky Way begins the Harvest cycle after 50,000 years and sets off galactic events larger than the novel, the game, or any medium can contain. Once Shepard becomes the first human Spectre to track down and eliminate Saren, Anderson, now a veteran soldier, reluctantly acknowledges his connection to Saren, explaining, "I had the chance to become the first human Spectre and I failed. Saren made sure of that" (*Mass Effect 1*). He then quickly summarizes the last portion of *Revelation*'s plot and their final mission together, notably omitting anything regarding Kahlee Sanders. This conversation marks Anderson retiring from active duty and giving Shepard command over the Normandy as a way of passing the torch to Shepard. Shepard is now tasked with fixing Anderson's failure and bringing Saren to justice. Anderson accepts his new path and admits, "But you're the one who can stop Saren. I believe in you, Shepard. If that means I have to step aside, so be it" (*Mass Effect 1*). Like the novel *Revelation*, Anderson begins *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story and, like the novel, steps aside to bring in the future of the story for both the game *Mass Effect 1* and Shepard.

In terms of building the storyworld, *Revelation* establishes Anderson, Saren, and Sovereign as significant players in *Mass Effect*'s storyworld and introduces and describes at length important locations like Earth, the Citadel, and the Batarian planet Camala. Additionally, the Lead Writer of *Mass Effect* wrote the novel, offering authenticity and legitimacy to the text— important notions for transmedia scholars. Nevertheless, *Revelation* does not possess the privileged position of mothership within the transmedia story because BioWare and players both choose to focus on the game, ascribing the position of the mothership to a non-originating text.

Revelation thus operates in a unique position within the transmedia story as potentially the first media that players may engage, making it a kind of the originating text in the series, but not the central medium on which the transmedia story relies for its meaning and direction. It almost presupposes that the narrative of *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story is just background for the transmedial play, which is the prescribed means of engaging the transmedial story and creates a discontent between how transmedial players engage with the mediascape, requiring the transmedial players themselves to organize each media's importance in terms of their own experience with each story.

Following the definitions from the previously discussed scholars, *Revelation* qualifies as *Mass Effect*'s mothership, making *Revelation* an important counterpoint to previous theories on motherships as outlined in Chapter 1. However, *Revelation* is not *Mass Effect*'s mothership because the novel does not situate the transmedial player at the centre of the storyworld. As explained in Chapter 1, game-centric transmedia stories rely on their game motherships to guide their audiences through their mediascapes. Transmedial players are implied users for transmedia stories because they are trained to seek out information within and between stories through their experiences within game spaces and gameplay loops that center on finding clues, solving puzzles, and progressing through a narrative that requires active participation to complete. While not holding the mothership role in *Mass Effect*, *Revelation* offers a starting point for the storyworld but does not guide the transmedial player to traverse *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story. It offers transmedial players an avenue to delve deeper in *Mass Effect*'s storyworld if they seek to fully engage the transmedia story.

Previously established expectations of transmedia stories and storyworlds like *Star Wars* break down with game-centric examples like *Mass Effect*, which was designed as a transmedia

story from the beginning and where media are shuffled in terms of their mothership status. As Matthew Freeman notes, "The *Star Wars* world lacked the hand of consistent authorial control across media, which resulted in a discourse of separation between the films and their transmedia extensions" (*Historicising Transmedia Storytelling* 34-35). Cody Mejeur echoes *Star Wars*' inconsistencies, arguing "it seems strange to call the *Star Wars* galaxy, itself an agglomeration of inconsistent and contested narratives, characters, and worlds, a singular storyworld" ("Chasing Wild Space" 199). Singular storyworld or not, these understandings of this divide operate as what Proctor and Freeman attribute to a "'moral dualism' between the 'good' object of the originating, 'master' text and 'bad' object of the licensing model is one which continues to persist" (227). This dualism breaks down with *Mass Effect* as the "originating, 'master' text" was a novel that was then redefined as a prequel to the video game mothership once *Mass Effect 1* was released.

Despite offering the potential of transmedia storytelling's alien aesthetic, game-centric transmedia stories are relatively new compared to TV and film transmedia. To recall from Chapter 1, Jenkins explains that the alien aesthetic "reflects the potentials of interactive media, networked consumption, and participatory culture" ("The Reign of the 'Mothership'" 247). Thus, notions of transmedia storytelling inspired by TV and film collapse when contrasted to transmedia stories like *Mass Effect*. There is, of course, the push for all transmedia stories to move past the limited definitions of pre-ludic transmedia. However, Wolf stresses the need for storyworld consistency: "Without an attempt at completeness, you have the beginnings of expansion beyond the narrative, but not enough to suggest an independent world" (34). This need for consistency appears paramount. Wolf argues, "without consistency, all the disparate and conflicting pieces, ideas, and designs will contradict each other, and never successfully come

together to collectively create the illusion of another world" (34). However, that conflict is a necessary consequence of creator-player convergence in game-centric transmedia stories.

Unlike Ryan, Thon, or Wolf discussed earlier, I believe that players and creators are both responsible for the building of a storyworld. As Wolf explains, "If the encyclopedic impulse for explanatory interludes is taken a step further, a series of fragments can form an aggregate picture of a world and the culture and events within it" (30). This acceptance of aggregation through fragments is often necessary because storyworlds, as Wolf notes, "can often be difficult to see in their totality" (2). Storyworlds, Wolf argues, demand that "much time must be spent to learn enough about a world to get an overall sense of its shape and design" (2). Indeed, the overwhelming nature of a transmedial storyworld like *Mass Effect* is difficult even for its creators. As Ryan posits, "the materials are so numerous and the story so rich that hardly anybody has a complete overview of the storyworld" ("Transmedial Storytelling and Transfictionality" 363). With the immensity of these worlds, transmedia creators and players are set up to fail to complete or fully conceive of a storyworld due to its immensity, relying on one another to fill in knowledge gaps. Players are tasked by the games, the mothership, to seek out as much information as possible and follow the codex's example to collect and organize this information into understandable pieces. Consequently, players can often understand a storyworld more clearly than its creators, as exemplified in the novel *Mass Effect: Deception*.

In terms of how creators and players can both become lost within storyworlds, the novel *Deception* offers an interesting example of how BioWare is not immune to their overwhelming canon and, most significantly, may rely on players' collective knowledge of the storyworld. It is impossible to truly know when the codex is wrong based on narrative suspense or inconsistencies or errors. This inability to know whether its misinformation is on purpose or not creates a

suspicion that can fuel a player's sense of control over the storyworld. The creators frame themselves as fallible, simultaneously proving the impossibility of controlling the storyworld and challenging the player to pursue their sense of control. However, this pursuit leads to inevitable failure and reveals the inherent playfulness of transmedia stories, which relies on and reifies failure as a fundamental aspect of the experience.

Released as the fourth novel during the Milky Way era on January 31, 2012, *Deception* connects the previous novels' protagonists, Captain Anderson and Kahlee Sanders, with previous minor character Gillian Grayson as they attempt to uncover past crimes of the terrorist group Cerberus. While the novel takes place between *Mass Effect 2* and *Mass Effect 3*, it is full of continuity errors that players, using their encyclopedic knowledge of *Mass Effect*, found to be impossible to rectify, and collectively created a sixteen-page Google document outlining the numerous errors, discontinuities, and other information that did not align with their understanding of the storyworld ("Errors in *Mass Effect*: *Deception*"). Such errors include "Batarian pirates slave-raid on the turian homeworld of Palaven" (impossible due to the Turians having the most formidable military in the galaxy), "Two volus are described as wearing masks that don't completely cover their faces" (Volus would die if any part of their body were exposed to an atmosphere not of their homeworld), and multiple instances of "timeline issues" (where characters are younger in flashbacks or older in the present story). *Mass Effect* players had both their personal experience and the collective Wiki at their disposal to quickly catalogue the inconsistencies present in the novel. Indeed, several Redditors even reference the Wiki in their reactions, with Redditor Korbie13 stating, "Now that I've finished looking through the page, I'm definitely not reading it. ...there's a wiki for this series! Most of these are inexcusable!" ("Errors in *Mass Effect: Deception*").

Players understandably rejected the novel from their advanced knowledge of the storyworld through online protests and forum discussions demanding BioWare remedy the situation with some even players even posting videos of them burning the book (Purchese, "Fans pick apart canonical errors in *Mass Effect: Deception* book").[2] The online protests and discussions were effective. Only three days after the novel's release, BioWare's Chris Priestly posted this message on the now-defunct BioWare social forums:

> *Mass Effect* fans have been asking for a comment on recent concerns over *Mass Effect*: *Deception*. We have been listening and have the below response on the issue. The teams at Del Rey and BioWare would like to extend our sincerest apologies to the *Mass Effect* fans for any errors and oversights made in the recent novel *Mass Effect*: *Deception*. We are currently working on a number of changes that will appear in future editions of the novel. We would like to thank all *Mass Effect* fans for their passion and dedication to this ever-growing world, and assure them that we are listening and taking this matter very seriously. (Priestly, BioWare)

Following this message, BioWare and publisher Del Ray Books promised to fix errors in the novel through subsequent print editions.

The errors are easy to understand if we reject the traditional notion of canon. Furthermore, these errors could suggest BioWare views *Mass Effect*'s other non-ludic media as updateable or patchable in the same way they understand the games. This understanding and response reveals the potential for how transmedia stories can transform the media connections

---

[2] It is important to note that the book burning is not an example of transmedial agency, but harassment and violence against both the creators of these stories, and especially *Deception*, as well as a fascist censoring of meaning making in a storyworld that requires both players and creators to build it. Book burning is a violent act against knowledge and knowledge seekers so using this type of fascist imagery to demand BioWare be more stringent with their content (a fascist ideology) is both deeply ironic and troubling.

within these over-arching narrative structures by placing them in weird proximities. *Deception* was a missed opportunity at celebrating or bringing into being a more freeform audience-led transmedia engagement. In addition to pointing out the consistencies, transmedial players could have also used these inconsistencies as the basis for interesting stories and new gaps to explore the storyworld. The need to control and master the storyworld thus reduced the opportunity for playfulness between stories and between media. It is interesting to note, however, that most transmedia stories now plan for inconsistency by building in multiverse and time travel elements so creators and audiences can make sense of those stories through their own canons.

These weird proximities and re-articulation of books (and other non-ludic media) being not solid, static objects, but narratives that can be altered after their original release reinvokes and expands upon Jenkins' alien aesthetic: transmedia stories alter our understanding of media and challenge the supposed solidity of non-ludic narrative as something that players can directly influence. Maintaining a static perspective on non-ludic media, Tom Dowd, Michael Niederman, Michael Fry, and Josef Steiff argue, "How so many errors had crept into the *Mass Effect*: *Deception* novel is hard to understand," noting that "The uproar was embarrassing to BioWare, especially since they positioned themselves in the video game market as a company all about storytelling" (*Storytelling Across Worlds*). It would be easy to dismiss this focus on continuity by believing BioWare does not care about the novels as much as they care about the games, or, like Wolf points out, think that "less canonical material dropping off in quality or varying from the author's original ideas" (266). This example, however, speaks to my argument that even creators are not immune to the immensity of their transmedial storyworlds. While BioWare considers novels as updateable, they are confronted by transmedial players and scholars who think of the games as finished, static products upon release. There is a deep irony here of how different

media is understood in terms of its malleability and creating a mediascape where different media are engaged side-by-side only centers that irony: transmedia stories challenge our conception and expectation of how we engage different media, creating both a convergent understanding of media malleability and recasting previous expectations of that malleability.

Game-centric transmedia challenges creator hierarchies and present a unique problem that parallels the unique aspect of video games over other media: user interactivity and transmedial agency. *Mass Effect* cannot rely on the creators' hierarchy of information because players are tasked with constructing the storyworld from the outset, and established information is presented as fallible. While the codex relies on hierarchical categorization, that hierarchy does not reflect how or when that information is acquired at the game level or the transmedial level. It is simply a means of guidance from the mothership to help situate players in the overwhelming amount of information in the storyworld; it is one path to help drive players' encyclopedic impulses. BioWare may have designed *Mass Effect*, but it is only realized when a player explores and organizes the narrative. Even if this agency is illusory, players abide by this illusion and have demands over the narratives and storyworlds they explore.

Players engaging the storyworld is a core aspect of transmedia storytelling and one of the foundational means of transmedial agency. While creators frame their storyworlds, setting the boundaries of their worlds, often through canonical and hierarchical structuring, transmedial players do the work of organizing all the content that forms the storyworld, willing to challenge creators if they lose themselves in their massive projects. In reconsidering how the expectation of media malleability and media-specific engagement overlaps or entirely collapses in transmedia stories, it is helpful to consider ludology a means of studying game-centric mediascapes like *Mass Effect* where all media are approached with expectations initially grounded in video game

literacy. A crucial but overlooked aspect of transmedia storytelling is that media convergence attempts to reject media specificity while still ironically reinforcing those different literacies. The lenses of different media literacies are refracted back upon a system that assimilates its various media while still expecting those media to offer different engagement channels. This convergence is a necessary and perhaps unexpected result of transmedia storytelling's alien aesthetics: transmedia stories will add each medium's distinctiveness to its own. Those literacies will adapt to service the collective. Resistance is futile. Understanding transmedia stories as game-like systems centres player agency within the storyworld, and this position is constantly in a state of conflict with how players come to understand their specific experiences of the storyworld, a discussion I turn towards in the next section. With this consideration in mind, the following section explores how further applying ludology to how transmedial players engage transmedia stories can offer a continuingly nuanced means of understanding how creator-player convergence works in practice.

3. Breaking the Cycle: Circumventing Closure with the Unknown

Players' drive for knowledge, what Murray refers to as the "encyclopedic impulse," and creators' need for control run into inevitable obstacles. The immensity of storyworlds challenges the notion of completion and closure; thus, the ludological concept of failure is a valuable point of discussion in this section. Jesper Juul notes that "failure is an integral element of the overall experience of playing a game" (*The Art of Failure* 9). Importantly, as Juul continues, "Failure brings about something positive, but it is always potentially painful or at least unpleasant. This is the double nature of games" (9). Storyworlds offer a similar double nature. As Wolf explains, "an imaginary world's open-ended and work-in-progress nature can work against the sense of closure often desired for the purposes of analysis and scholarship" (3). This continuous expansion denies a sense of totality. It emphasizes that storyworlds are inevitably incomplete, with Lubomír Doležel suggesting that this incompleteness is a "necessary feature of fictional worlds" (*Possible Worlds of Fiction and History* 37). Elizabeth Evans argues this incompleteness is how "Transmedia storytelling makes particular use of fictional worlds, exploiting the fact that the viewer only sees part of that world and will be encouraged to subsequently seek out information on those hidden parts via the extensions onto multiple platforms" (*Transmedia Television* 11). This incompleteness drives both the creator and the player to seek out the limits and depths of the storyworld.

Examples of creators being overwhelmed by their storyworlds offers a necessary reframing of creator hierarchy and canonicity where creators and transmedial players both offer necessary means to building and organizing a storyworld. Indeed, as Gail Simone explained regarding the use of world bibles in a now-deleted Twitter post: "I was told in each case that no [such] official documents exist, and they 'just use the fan wikis online' Not because they are lazy

or for cost-cutting measures, but because the fans 'keep better track of this stuff, anyway'" (*Twitter*, 11:18am, 2020-09-12). Interestingly, Patrick Weekes, Lead Writer of BioWare's other main series *Dragon Age* replied, "We DO have internal wikis at work, but we sometimes look at the external ones as well. The internal ones often have outdated stuff that we ended up not using. The external ones are the most reliable way to check what we actually shipped" (*Twitter*, 11:42am, 2020-09-12). What is shipped refers to the final version of the media released, often with entire sections of content cut or changed substantially. While BioWare can make games and other non-ludic media without fan resources like the Wiki, these stories can risk being inconsistent (such as Sovereign's codex entry) or disappointing (such as *Deception*) to the most invested audiences and transmedial players. One can assume the lack of an updated in-house wiki, and ignoring the fan-made Wiki, lead to these errors in *Deception* despite being an official release (and why a lead like Weekes can now explain that their documentation is often out-of-date as content constantly grows and changes).

The reactions from readers against *Deception* furthermore centralize the engagement of players within a transmedia story, that their attention to detail and encyclopedic impulse to master the *Mass Effect* storyworld is often at odds with, or more robust than, the creators. The impossibility of holding all transmedia story knowledge in one's mind depends on the immense amount of content within the transmedia story. Matt Hills describes this immensity as "a hyper-diegesis," or "the creation of a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen or encountered within the text, but which nevertheless appears to operate according to principles of internal logic and extension" (*Fan Cultures* 137). As noted by Mejeur, "Hills's emphasis on an 'internal logic' here is significant: hyper-diegesis operates by establishing a larger space that presumably operates by the same or similar rules to the represented space"

(200). Even the unknowable space not yet part of a storyworld must adhere to its canon, and players will carefully adhere to that.

The games' codex is crucial to a transmedial player's ability to understand the storyworld and make a meaningful choice when engaging with it. The codex helps players negotiate their understanding of the storyworld with or against the creators' vision by offering an example of how to organize information with the expectation that some of that information is fallible. The mothership guides players to gather information and offers reasons to be wary of its value, so players have attuned perspectives of the storyworld. The mothership reinforces that canon can be contested. As Proctor and Freeman explain, "The concept of canon, then, with its connotations of stability and permanency, is one that is capable of being revised and reconceptualized" (232). Indeed, Proctor and Freeman also note the importance of players: "Rather than rudimentary binary distinctions between 'canon/non-canon,' then, the process is a complex interaction that is dynamic, negotiated and participatory" (238).

The complex interaction between creator and player in understanding the storyworld's boundaries is a core principle for my understanding of the transmedial player and transmedial ludology. Similarly, Proctor and Freeman understand world-building "requires 'active participation on the part of consumers'" (239). This dynamic between creator and player offers a more robust narrative experience that relies on the notion that video games encapsulate a kind of agency not established or fully realized in other media. While often only attributed to video game players, this agency is a core aspect of how I understand the ways transmedial players engage the game-like structure of a transmedia story. As such, the example of players rejecting *Deception* offers insight into how transmedial agency operates within and around these media as collectors,

encyclopedists, and detectives who collect, organize, and investigate *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story.

Traditional understandings of canon create the illusion of an authorship hierarchy, which is challenged when players reject creator authority. Transmedial agency, then, offers scholars a means to better understand how the mothership functions in the *Mass Effect* as a guide for transmedial players to build the storyworld as they explore it without being beholden to a creator-sanctioned hierarchy. The player chooses what is the most critical information in the storyworld and organizes their understanding of it accordingly. Unlike the creators' hierarchy of canon, there is a potential for every story and medium to have equal status for the transmedial player in terms of importance to the storyworld. These stories, albeit a few rare exceptions like *Deception*, all build upon the storyworld with little to no contradiction requiring no messy delineations or rejections. They exist as potential choices for the transmedial player to collect, organize, and investigate as knowledge-seekers.

Creators' and players' desire for control over these worlds is at odds with each other and the nature of these worlds, so neither can completely understand storyworlds because they often outgrow their creators and players. As I have discussed several times throughout this chapter, Murray's concept of the encyclopedic impulse is essential in understanding transmedial players' often-unspoken desire to complete these storyworlds. While not every player will choose to do so, many players finish all the media, edit Wiki entries, and collaborate on forums to gain a fuller understanding of the storyworld in their futile attempt to control or master these worlds. Wolf notes that "completeness, then, refers to the degree to which the world contains explanations and details covering all the various aspects of its characters' experiences, as well as background details which together suggest a feasible, practical world" (38). However, Wolf acknowledges

there is a balance needed for audience engagement: "Imaginary worlds in general, and transmedial imaginary worlds in particular, are very good at balancing the two basic needs of audiences, that of novelty and familiarity" ("Transmedia World-Building" 143). The growth of the storyworld in location and scale speaks to the avenues in transmedia stories that players and creators can explore.

Completion is thus an illusion that creators, scholars, and players perpetuate to make sense of storyworlds. Moreover, this understanding of these worlds ensures that the encyclopedic impulse is not lost. However, the challenge of completing a storyworld is both an obstacle and a reward for players and creators. The drive to complete the encyclopedia, or, in *Mass Effect*, the codex (to have complete knowledge of the storyworld), can be a powerful motivation that keeps both creators and players returning to transmedia stories. BioWare attempted to balance novelty and familiarity with the original *Mass Effect 3* "Leviathan" DLC, which became a standard mission in *Mass Effect: Legendary Edition*. Before *Mass Effect: Legendary Edition* was released, new stories in the *Mass Effect* trilogy were realized through downloadable content (DLC), such as the "Leviathan" DLC released for *Mass Effect 3* several months after the game's launch. With the release of *Mass Effect: Legendary Edition*, all the DLC are now part of the base game, accessible at any time without additional cost. Included in the *Legendary Edition*, the Leviathan mission no longer functions as a reward for transmedial players seeking out and purchasing the DLC. Now, the Leviathan mission acts solely as a crucial moment that restructures the timeline of the *Mass Effect* storyworld.

In the "Leviathan" DLC/mission, human resistance leader Admiral Hackett orders Shepard and the Normandy crew to investigate the disappearance of a scientist whose team studied ancient messages that mention a creature capable of hunting and killing Reapers. The

galaxy-wide search for the scientist and his team eventually leads Shepard to a remote planet

called 2181 Desponia. Deep in the planet's ocean, they discover an ancient alien race that calls

themselves the Leviathan. The Leviathan denies the established knowledge of the Reapers,

explaining that "They are only echoes. We existed long before. Something more" (*Mass Effect 3*,

"Leviathan"). The Leviathan recount how they are the originating sapient species who created a

powerful AI called the Intelligence to help them foster the growth and survival of subsequent life

"with the mandate to preserve life at any cost" (*Mass Effect 3*, "Leviathan"). However, the

Leviathan explains, the Intelligence designated them as a threat to life in the universe and "It

chose our kind as the first harvest. From our essence, the first Reaper was created. You call it

Harbinger" (*Mass Effect 3*, "Leviathan"). This recounting of events from a source never thought

to exist previously is a final piece of the puzzle of the Reaper's identity, explaining both their

origin, motivation, and appearance (see Figure 8), challenging Sovereign's own story from *Mass*

Effect 1, as discussed earlier.

Figure 8. *The Leviathan in Mass Effect 3 "Leviathan" (Mass Effect 3).*

This knowledge becomes a correction to the history and codex of the *Mass Effect*

storyworld beginning in *Mass Effect 1*, giving the once seemingly infinite Reapers an origin. As

Hackett muses upon completing the mission, "It rewrites galactic history as we know it" (*Mass Effect 3*). It also explains their appearance and motivation and challenges the assumption that the Reapers extinguished their original creators. The codex does not make note of revisions and displays the information as unchanged; the Wiki, on the other hand, uses references and links to other entries to clarify revisions. The mission also offers significant improvements to the player's experience in *Mass Effect 3* by increasing the amount of War Resources the player can use against the Reapers to increase the game's win parameters.

The "Leviathan" mission thus alters the storyworld in significant ways, both narratively and mechanically. It changes the storyworld's timeline and the narrative around significant events such as the origin of life or significant implications such as the Reapers' purpose and their identity and gives the player more resources to defeat the once seemingly unstoppable beings. In engaging with the "Leviathan" mission, a player understands the storyworld's chronology as ever-expanding and in constant flux as new timelines and spaces become accessible[3]. Initially, a player may never choose to play the DLC, unaware of the implications that arise from meeting the Leviathan (and the subsequent game resources that are rewarded for completing the mission), thus building their storyworld with this gap unknowingly part of their understanding. However, in adding the DLC as a standard mission, BioWare permanently rewrote galactic history after a series of false claims meant to keep the player in the dark and gaps in the puzzle present. In constantly revising the information regarding the Reapers, the game is implicitly stating that

---

[3] The mission's name is no coincidence and the impact of "Leviathan" on both the storyworld and the in-game codex bears a striking parallel to real world codices like the Bible, Quran, or certain histories (like the American Constitution) that seemingly resist change and deny revision despite the various act and modes of translation, amendment, and interpretation these kinds of text motivate.

complete knowledge of the storyworld is impossible, even for the creators whose own understanding of the storyworld grows between different releases, including DLCs.

With this storyworld growth, *Mass Effect*, as Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum argue, "exemplifies what Henry Jenkins (2004) would call a 'narrativized game architecture'—story is distributed across a variety of locations and scales" (399). The games offer a means to and expectation of exploring these various locations and scales in search of a story. These stories all extend in various temporal or spatial directions. However, as coordinated as these stories across media may be, this span of a decade worth of narrative, with space and time (both diegetic and non-diegetic) existing across its released media, inevitably becomes unwieldy. This vast amount of storyworld is framed by BioWare and offered to players in various forms that offer medium-specific means to convey this information.

Ryan notes this difficult balancing act between interactivity or offering meaningful choice and narrative coherence, arguing that interactivity "does not facilitate storytelling, because narrative meaning presupposes the linearity and unidirectionality of time, logic, and causality, while a system of choices involves a nonlinear or multilinear branching structure" (*Avatars of Story* 99). This notion is seemingly in direct contrast with narrative meaning, which Ryan explains, "is the product of the top-down planning of a storyteller or designer, while interactivity requires a bottom-up input from the user" (99). These two seemingly contradictory elements can indeed exist together, but the system must have the necessary pieces, which as Ryan theorizes, "It will consequently take a seamless (some will say miraculous) convergence of bottom-up input and top-down design to produce well-formed narrative patterns. This convergence requires a certain type of textual architecture and a certain kind of user involvement" (99). Jenkins' "narrativized game architecture" (as the practice of distributing story

across locations and scales) and Ryan's "textual architecture" (the convergence of bottom-up input and top-down design to ensure that distribution is fully realized) both rely on the understanding of creators in control of storyworlds, knowing these spaces because they designed and built them.

These assumptions of canon, creator, and authenticity falsely uphold creators in a central position as narrative and game architects. Following this logic, Bourdaa argues that creators are "true story architects and geographers of a story world. They are in charge of the coherence and unity of this entire universe they have scattered throughout multiple platforms" ("Following the Pattern" 212). However, as I have continuously argued throughout, creators are not the "true story architects and geographers of a story world," and though they may be "in charge of the coherence and unity of this entire universe," they regularly fail to control their creations. The concept of "true story architects" continuously reifies the hierarchical and canonical stipulations placed upon creators, despite often also becoming lost within their transmedia storyworlds.

This logic is out of the creators' hands once it becomes part of the storyworld precisely because players build these worlds alongside or in contradiction to the creators' vision. Wolf acknowledges that even these "true story architects," as Bourdaa describes them, must adhere to this consistency because "Once a world is developed enough, even its author can become beholden to a world's logic and the rules that result from it" (*Building Imaginary Worlds* 53). Nevertheless, Wolf still maintains that players' work adheres towards their sense of canon, and "demonstrates the desire for authenticity from the point of view of the audience, who are often concerned with demarcating what is 'official' for a world or franchise" (271). Players will challenge creators when new information does not fit their previous understanding established understanding of the storyworld, as seen by *Deception* discussed earlier.

In distributing stories across various locations and scales and media, BioWare may function like architects with blueprints to explore *Mass Effect*'s storyworld; however, the work of building the storyworld remains core to the player's transmedial agency. Building the storyworld includes multiple avenues of engagement, including collecting information in the codex. Creators design these worlds and build the media that give rise to these storyworlds, but players put these pieces together. Building a storyworld extends the transmedial player's position within a transmedia story as a collector, curator, and detective, as established in Chapter 1. Piecing together *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story is also the act of building its storyworld. How and when a player collects, builds, and investigates this information is part of the larger transmedial puzzle connecting all of *Mass Effect*'s stories across media. The encyclopedic impulse is to discover as much as possible about the storyworld. Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum explain, "Narrative revelation at all these scales is liberally parsed throughout the storyworld and revealed as the player achieves her ludic goals" (399). Both ludic and narrative goals are interwoven and crucial to the understanding and engagement of *Mass Effect*'s storyworld since I argue that the ludically-inscribed "goal" for the transmedial player in a storyworld is to gain knowledge of this story content.

The inherent challenge of completing transmedia storyworlds as a ludic goal forces creators and players to think beyond failure. Instead, the media available becomes an essential means of connection that often revolves around building relationships between these nodes while maintaining each node's unique identity, rather than moving past a space towards an ever-expanding, unknown horizon. Getting lost in *Mass Effect* offers the opportunity for creators and transmedial players to move away from the need for control and mastery of the storyworld. Getting lost means to lose sight of the bigger picture and the position one has within that

mediascape so the transmedia story can exist beyond the need of creators and players to shape it to their will. There is an inherent playfulness that getting lost invokes in a storyworld like *Mass Effect* and that playfulness can work against the need for canonicity or, at least, disrupt the hierarchical and authorized system in place with the adherence to canonicity.

Forced to accept failure as an integral aspect of experiencing the storyworld, both creators and players must reconsider their expectations of how they can exist in the story. As Colleen Macklin notes, "Failure encourages us to try out new, unexpected strategies" ("Finding the Queerness in Games" 256). Failure is crucial to player agency (and, by extension, transmedial agency) as, Macklin continues, game spaces "give us the space to explore unfamiliar pleasures and desires. They permit—in fact they encourage—transgression, a quality inherent to play" (256). Transmedial ludology offers a means to acknowledge and understand how transmedia stories function as game systems that welcome failure not as problematic but as an inherently playful aspect of transmedia.

The drive to overcome the immensity of *Mass Effect*'s storyworld is nearly impossible for both creators and players, even with the mothership as a guide, and the task inevitability signals failure. Transmedial players parallel Juul's explanation of game players: "Game players have chosen to engage in an activity in which they are almost certain to fail and feel incompetent, at least some of the time" (2). Players map the storyworld as creators expand it, sometimes moving beyond those original architects. Nevertheless, a dynamic (or convergence) exists between creators and players because they work at two different ends to construct the storyworld. When players are forced to revise their understanding of the storyworld, such as coming to terms with new information about the Reapers upon the original release of the "Leviathan" DLC, their knowledge of the storyworld is not undone. It is an updated entry for the

codex that necessitates additions to their information. And when creators become overburdened by the immensity of these storyworlds and lose themselves, as they released *Deception* with its significant breaks in continuity and consistency, there is a clear engagement and dynamic between creators and players, with players rejecting such information and filling it in with their knowledge. The first example is a creator-led canon revision; the second reinforces a player-led revision.

Hierarchy is not clear in these engagements, and how the storyworld expands is a complex engagement, often a contention, between creator and transmedial player. This dynamic does not offer a clear sense of control, and with the immensity of *Mass Effect*'s storyworld, there is no completion, no win condition, for those who seek to know everything within it. This recontextualization must challenge the notion of completion and closure to reframe the incompleteness of storyworlds as not a detriment but as the driving force for creators and players to seek out new limits and depths of *Mass Effect*'s storyworld.

Conclusion: The Joy of Being Lost in Space?

Mass Effect's grand sense of scale and the tenuous connection between creator and player inevitably create opportunities for players to engage the storyworld in unique ways. These opportunities, I argue, are where players are the most in control of their ludic experience of the storyworld, organizing their version of the storyworld together as reflected in their choices and priorities in ways that are often unique to themselves and resistant to how the creators may have envisioned. This means of engagement exists throughout the transmedia story at both the level of individual media, such as the *Mass Effect* games' choices, and the transmedia story at large. Transmedial players collect these stories to construct the storyworld. It is the core mechanic present in the games and the core aspect of the transmedia story at large to construct the storyworld through personal engagement attempting to overcome its complexity.

Regarding the complexity of *Mass Effect*'s storyworld, McLean argues, "video games are well-suited to the task of telling science fiction tales. There's a lot more time and space in which to create a consistent world and drive player engagement, and *Mass Effect* uses this to put itself in an enviable position: the universe of the game exists outside of its main story" (116-117). However, focusing on *Mass Effect* as a game first and storyworld (and other media) second only creates a disconnection between how creators frame transmedial storyworlds and how players understand them. Transmedia stories are well suited to tell science fiction tales because of the ever-expanding storyworld in which these stories can exist and grow. Transmedial players and creators alike are thus tasked with coming to terms with the impossibility of completion and mastery over *Mass Effect*.

As I have argued through this chapter, transmedial ludology, or understanding transmedia stories as game-like systems, offers a helpful perspective on how players engage storyworlds that

centers on transmedial agency. The encyclopedic impulse to explore a storyworld's information is as inherent in traditional world-building as it is in transmedia world-building and video games. Thus, this inherent similarity between these scales of worldbuilding rejects Kristine Jørgensen's position that "the difference between these games and traditional narratives are also pronounced: they are meant to be played and experienced by players, and even the narrative elements in the games are meant to be manipulated and played like mini-games in the greater game system" ("Game Characters as Narrative Devices" 327). For *Mass Effect*, the "greater game system" is the transmedia story itself and a player experiences and manipulates each media like mini-games, missions across space and time where the player, like the player-as-Shepard or player-as-Ryder, must come to terms with the overwhelming storyworld. *Mass Effect* offers choices on how widely players decide to experience the potential arcs of the transmedia story, shifting between a microcosmic and macrocosmic scale at numerous instances throughout the storyworld, creating their unique experiences through various paths across and between media. With the choices that arise from each path through the series, a player must organize and make sense of massive amounts of information as the transmedia story slowly unravels with new content. These stories, and how and in what order they are consumed, build off one another and interconnect larger, more complex plotlines. The various media then connect to form the larger transmedia story, creating a singular experience based on each player's engagement. Players then construct a path through the continuously complicating and interconnected stories to make sense of a storyworld in direct contest with the storyworld's inherently challenging amount of content.

Exploring the contentions between the creator-sanctioned canon and the player's knowledge, I have argued that examining transmedial storyworlds like games complicates the creator/player hierarchy by allowing the transmedial player more power to own their experience

of a transmedial storyworld. Through the guidance of the games' codex, transmedial players organize the storyworld to negotiate the unwieldiness of *Mass Effect*'s information and show players that information can and will change over time and across media. Creators and players alike will try and structure the storyworld in ways that make sense to them, assigning importance to certain stories and media over others or rejecting stories that do not fit into their sense of the storyworld. Despite the creator's need to control their creative vision, this need for control paradoxically hinders the transmedial storyworld's potential to remain challenging and dynamic.

As *Mass Effect*'s transmedial storyworld is difficult, if not impossible, to control or master, it offers a space for creators and players to reframe and celebrate the ludic element of failure, not only in the games but the entire transmedia story. As failure is often only found in games, this new perspective on transmedia stories and storyworlds can redefine this drive for ludic mastery in video games into a sense of wonder and connection in transmedia stories. The rejection of control, mastery, and hierarchical assumptions is further exemplified in the next layer of transmedial agency that centers on the characters within these storyworlds. In Chapter 3, I will explore how the connection to transmedia characters becomes the driving force for players to engage transmedia stories on a more interpersonal level than storyworlds. The shift from the massive nature of the storyworld to the interpersonal nature of character creates its challenges, which will be explored in-depth in the next chapter.

CHAPTER III

The Lazarus Project, Revisited: Constructing *Mass Effect*'s Transmedia Characters

Introduction: *Mass Effect* and Character

While the concept of storyworld has maintained a privileged position in contemporary transmedia scholarship, character offers a crucial understanding of how transmedial players engage in transmedia stories like *Mass Effect* at an interpersonal level. Following my examination of storyworld as both the site for canonical hierarchy and player resistance, this chapter focuses on a discussion of character, which employs Fotis Jannidis' notion of character being "a text- or media-based figure in a storyworld, usually human or humanlike" ("Character" 14). Contextualizing and analyzing the different media that illuminate asari character Dr. Liara T'soni's multi-dimensional character offers insight into how *Mass Effect* operates as a transmedia story and how Liara and her fellow crewmates function as examples of Paolo Bertetti's transmedia character. Bertetti defines a transmedia character as "a fictional hero whose adventures are told across different media platforms, each one giving more details on the life of that character" ("Toward A Typology of Transmedia Characters" 2345). Bertetti later refines that definition as "a fictional entity whose occurrences are told across different media platforms, each one providing more details about its being and doing" ("Buck Rogers in the 25th Century" 203).

Here I examine how character operates in connection to the *Mass Effect* transmedia story to reinscribe the importance of character in contemporary transmedia stories. Following Rüdiger Heinze's use of heterarchy, I argue that characters like Liara are helpful case studies in understanding transmedial player engagement and the structure of *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story. As a core character in *Mass Effect*, Liara is an intellectual and charismatic asari who befriends Shepard and becomes the Shadow Broker—a powerful entity who controls much of the

Milky Way's information networks. Of the twenty-seven stories released, Liara is present in eight—the most of any character in the series—including the games *Mass Effect 1*, *Mass Effect 2*, *and Mass Effect 3*, the comics *Mass Effect*: *Redemption* and *Mass Effect*: *Homeworlds*, the film *Mass Effect*: *Paragon Lost*, as well as voice recordings in *Mass Effect*: *Andromeda*, and an appearance in the *Mass Effect 4* teaser trailer. The more players engage in Liara's story, the more they engage with *Mass Effect*'s story. Understanding *Mass Effect* as a transmedia story through its characters rather than only through its storyworld offers scholars and consumers a means of re-examining how hierarchy can and often does fail to highlight the importance of player connection with non-player characters (NPCs) in these media.

This chapter is structured into several sections to fully explore the transmedial player's engagement with character(s) in *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story. First, I examine how *Mass Effect* offers transmedia players a means to work within and against the structure (and structuring) of the storyworld to build these characters through in-game loyalty missions and character-driven stories, focusing on the importance of building connections with NPCs. Second, I then employ Bertetti's definition of transmedia character to explore how characters in *Mass Effect* exist as constructs and constellations that require players to chart and build them. Building off this definition, in the third and final section, I argue transmedial players must build these characters with the media in which they exist, relying on local rather than global understandings of character motivation that is best understood through heterarchy, which Carole Crumley defines as "the relation of elements to one another when they are unranked or when they possess the potential for being ranked in a number of different ways" ("Heterarchy and the Analysis of Complex Societies" 3). Engaging characters through a media heterarchy rather than a hierarchy

thus offers a fluid, player-focused exploration of transmedia stories that relies on the depth of connection rather than the breadth of control that I examined through storyworld in Chapter 2.

Characters are constructed over time through players' engagement with them; they are often stitched together and pulled apart as new information arises that changes the character. No single story offers a complete picture of these characters as each new story revolves around a character or set of characters, connecting them into the larger *Mass Effect* storyworld. Each new addition can potentially alter our interpretation of their stories, pushing the narrative further into the past or further into the future. Indeed, as Samuel Zakowski argues, "The characters' past gives the impression that the *ME* universe extends beyond the time and space of the main story line" ("Time and Temporality in the *Mass Effect* Series" 71). Players working within the constraints of the transmedia story construct these characters from various media they choose to engage, stitching them together like Frankenstein monsters, where they are often inconsistent and contradictory, but also fluid and dynamic, across the *Mass Effect* mediascape.

Storyworld ostensibly demands a coherency and consistency that manifests as either a creator's canon or a player's organization that creates space for contention and need for control. Characters, on the contrary, are defined by their fluidity and complicated nature, making them critical aspects of how we can understand transmedia storytelling beyond hierarchy, control, and mastery. Much like the possible paths that players choose to play through the *Mass Effect* transmedia story, as examined in Chapter 1, transmedial players will construct *Mass Effect* characters by piecing together media in the transmedia story in unique and different ways, allowing them the connection to these characters and another means of participating in the transmedia story.

Throughout this chapter, I continually return to the idea that the intimacy inspired by building relationships with *Mass Effect*'s characters is a new way for both creators and players to understand transmedia stories through connection rather than control. As I examined in Chapters 1 and 2, control is a misconstrued aspect of agency where players expect complete influence over a story or storyworld; agency (with a focus on transmedial agency) emphasizes meaningful action and reaction that improves a player's experience without the need for mastery or domination. Character, like storyworld, is a site of coherence, where all other aspects of the transmedia story converge; however, how the transmedia story converges is more unstable and adaptative than storyworld organization, as discussed in Chapter 2. Transmedial players navigating *Mass Effect* must follow and act like Liara as the Shadow Broker across and through the *Mass Effect* transmedia story, in her central position within the information network of the *Mass Effect* storyworld—whose power comes from connecting all the information—and who uses the information she collects, organizes, and investigates to alter the course of galactic events in often unseen ways. Liara, and her role as the Shadow Broker, thus becomes a guide for the transmedial player who collects, builds, and investigates the information across the *Mass Effect* transmedia story. The transmedial player then is constantly displaced from their role as protagonists as they collect, organize, and investigate the over-arching puzzle that is *Mass Effect*'s transmedial characters. Through this process, transmedial players function as allies rather than commanders for these characters, mediators rather than masters of their stories.

In this piecing together the puzzle, the story grows more complex as the transmedia story coheres, and the player is rewarded for completing the puzzle that translates into narratively driven relationships and ludic-centred resources. As the games centre on building and bolstering a team of unique characters, the games—as *Mass Effect*'s mothership—thus guide transmedial

players to continue that connection across other media in the transmedia story. This logic extends out from the games as the mothership to the other media and back again as each media works to support one another in new and nuanced perspectives on *Mass Effect* characters. Each piece of the transmedia puzzle works together to frame the storyworld, characters, and player-character that, in turn, bolsters the transmedial players' connection to the transmedia story.

The transmedial player is thus the intended fan and audience who collects, organizes, and puzzles together each narrative to produce the larger transmedia story. These actions are best understood as three aspects of transmedial agency, or the ways in which a player can engage a transmedia story. Building from Chapter 1 and Chapter 2, my examination of how transmedial players investigate *Mass Effect* and organize its storyworld offers the vital groundwork for understanding how transmedial players construct its characters. Players thus use their agency to construct characters across media and, over time, build these Frankenstein monsters as they build the transmedia story. Going beyond storyworlds, understanding transmedia stories through character offers an effective and powerful means of active and participatory engagement for transmedial players that centres on connection rather than control and an accessible point for understanding transmedia stories as game-like systems.

1. Crashing the Mothership, or How the Normandy Got Her Crew Back

While Shepard and Ryder are the protagonists of the *Mass Effect* games, they rely on their companions to complete missions, and the games would be impossible without them: the narrative would stand still, and the story would end. This logic extends to the transmedia story as well, and a transmedial player can only traverse the *Mass Effect* storyworld with the help of *Mass Effect*'s entire cast of characters. As one of the few characters who cannot die in the series and therefore exists in the past, present, and future of *Mass Effect*, Liara is a crucial character in the transmedia story and can guide players towards a better understanding of how all the characters work with one another to form a constellation of meaning. Indeed, as Alex Woloch notes, "There is never a purely isolated conflict between one character and the form" (*The One vs. The Many* 18). Rather, Woloch continues, "the space of a particular character emerges only vis-a-vis the other characters who crowd him out or potentially revolve around him" (18). Jens Eder, Fotis Jannidis, and Ralf Schneider extend this notion further with the metaphor of a constellation: "Characters do not tend to appear on their own in narratives. In most cases they are part of a constellation of at least two, and frequently many more, characters. This constellation puts all the characters of a fictional world in relation to each other" ("Characters in Fictional Worlds: An Introduction" 26). Thus, in this section, I will examine Liara's companions krogan Battlemaster Urdnot Wrex and quarian engineer Tali'Zorah nar Rayya (later, vas Normandy) to offer different examples of how characters function and structure the transmedia story before examining Liara's centrality within *Mass Effect* at length through the rest of this section and the chapter.

Character constellations work on both the local and global structure of a transmedia story. As Eder, Jannidis, and Schneider explain: "A character constellation is, however, more than the

mere sum of all the characters. Its structure is determined by all relationships between the characters" (26). Jens Eder expands on this concept, explaining that "The constellation positions the individual characters in a network of relations with other characters, a network of hierarchies, functions and values, interactions and communications, similarities and contrasts, attraction and rejection, power and recognition" ("Understanding Characters" 30-31). As much as Liara or the Benefactor discussed in Chapter 1 are constructs of media, *Mass Effect* is a construct of character media, a galaxy (or, more accurately, two galaxies) of character and media constellations constructed by transmedial players.

Transmedia stories are not beholden to one text or one character but an interconnected constellation of texts and characters. This understanding of a transmedia story as a constellation of characters and media challenges the notion, as discussed by Woloch, that "any character can be a protagonist, but only one character is" (31). Perhaps in terms of a single narrative, yes, but *Mass Effect*'s constellation of media allows characters who would otherwise be secondary an opportunity to be the protagonist in their specific story. A squadmate NPC, while being an important member of a mission or game, is not the main motivator of that story, sidelined in favour of the main protagonist and player-character. Transmedia stories thus allow a character like Liara, a squadmate and potentially romanceable NPC, room to grow outside the influence of the player, becoming the hero of their own story. Indeed, beyond the *Mass Effect* game trilogy and *Andromeda*, each other story in non-ludic media stars Shepard or Ryder's squadmate or secondary character from the Milky Way or Andromeda era, respectively.

A constant flux of protagonists thus raises the potential for what kind of stories are told. Meghna Jayanth argues that a common trope in narratives of the singular (often cisgendered white) hero "fails because immersion is social—we want to play with others, we want to engage

with people who feel real—and people demand things of us. Being the speciallest snowflake is a lonely fantasy" ("Forget Protagonists"). *Mass Effect*'s NPCs are crucial aspects of the story, as friends and companions, and, as Miguel Sicart reminds us, "players care about choosing the company that they want to keep. Character-driven narrative in ethical gameplay succeeds when the choices affect story development and players' understanding of the characters in the game" (*Beyond Choices* 13). Indeed, Jayanth notes, "NPCs can help us make games that go beyond the power fantasy" ("Forget Protagonists"). A storyworld—especially one as complex as a transmedia storyworld—is multifaceted and impossibly large, making it inevitable that one hero cannot succeed in mastering or saving it.

Mass Effect can expand into a transmedia story because there is no one protagonist. Secondary characters or NPCs in one text become protagonists in subsequent texts, expanding the storyworld across space, time, and media. Jayanth argues that by allowing NPCs agency, players can see beyond a single hero and understand that "It was already happening without him—he wasn't the one oppressed, so he can't do the liberating—and often, the issues our NPCs struggle with are political and systemic—beyond the ability of one person to solve" ("Forget Protagonists"). Players and designers can offer NPCs agency by giving them their own stories and problems they need to solve, without the aid or influence of the player.

Nuanced and complicated stories require nuanced and complicated characters. Thus, Jayanth concludes, "NPCs are a key part of the worldbuilding" ("Forget Protagonists"). Through characters, Jayanth argues, "We explore wider political, social and cultural themes through personal concerns and entanglements—the world feels complex because the way our NPCs think about, react to, engage with the world is complex and often contradictory—this is a much more elegant and natural way to unfold backstory, politics, plot" ("Forget Protagonists"). In this sense,

characters are core aspects of storyworlds. As Jayanth explains, "Worldbuilding through NPCs in this way actually makes the world feel more coherent and alive than offering the player a journal entry or a singular, definitive perspective—it gives the player the space to make up their own mind, rather than having their mind made up for them" ("Forget Protagonists"). Following different characters through different media goes beyond a codex entry and comes to terms with the inconsistent and complicated reality of characters as constructs that shift, grow, and spread out. *Mass Effect* relies on the Normandy and Tempest crew, whom all offer unique perspectives into the storyworld at varying levels of depth, and players must gather these diverse characters through diverse media to build a narrative that cannot be contained in a single mode or medium.

The depth in which players explore the *Mass Effect* storyworld primarily revolves around the NPCs with whom Shepard and Ryder engage. *Mass Effect 2* is exemplary in its focus on NPC connections and the possibility of narrative and gameplay failure through those chosen connections. The nature of loyalty missions in *Mass Effect 2*, where Shepard must explore the galaxy to help specific crew members and build relationships, both allows their Normandy crewmembers to function at their prime but also deepens the connection between player and NPC (see Figure 9). This process offers an essential guide to understanding transmedial agency and engagement with the larger *Mass Effect* storyworld through character. Jim Bizzocchi and Theresa Jean Tanenbaum note this significance, explaining that "*Mass Effect 2* is notable for the diversity of characters inhabiting the world, from the random nonplayer characters (NPCs) conversing in the environment, to the minor characters encountered in missions, to the more fully fleshed out members of Shepard's squad and crew" ("A Case Study in the Design of Game Narrative" 397). As Shepard or Ryder, transmedial players collect and, more importantly,

connect with these NPCs: it is the core mechanic of the games and the core aspect of the transmedia story at large.
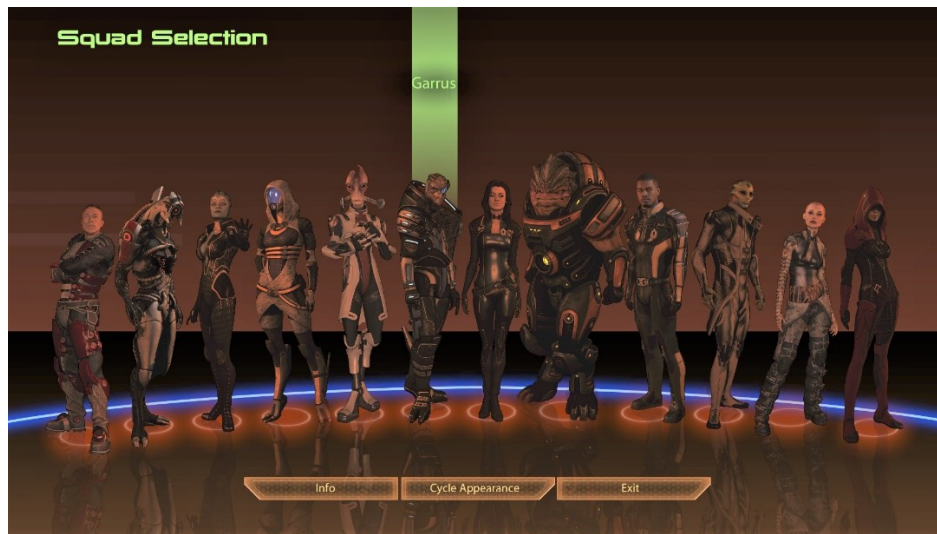
Figure 9. *Loyal squadmates ready for Suicide Mission (Mass Effect 2).*

While *Mass Effect 2* exemplifies the player connection with NPCs, the focus on building relationships with crew members begins *in Mass Effect 1*. In *Mass Effect 1*, players have the choice to accept a mission from their krogan companion Wrex, helping him regain his family armour (*Mass Effect 1*, "Wrex: Family Armor"). However, this mission only becomes available if the player has repeatedly spoken to Wrex following missions earlier in the game. To unlock this mission then requires seeking out and speaking with Wrex continuously, building a relationship and respect with him through new dialogue options. Once enough conversation and time has passed, he asks Shepard to help him locate and recover his family heirloom. Furthermore, completing his mission will unlock a dialogue option during a later mission that convinces Wrex to trust the player's judgement over his species' chances of survival (see Figure 10). On Virmire, Wrex struggles with destroying a facility working on a cure for the genophage, a disease that sterilizes krogan, even though the implications of this cure would result in Saren using these genophage-free krogan as mindless killing machines. If his loyalty mission was not

completed prior, there is the potential that Ashley Williams kills Wrex during the disagreement in fear of him attacking Shepard. Besides being a heartbreaking and shocking moment, Wrex's death has further implications across the game trilogy, where a replacement krogan NPC named Urdnot Wreav fills his role but does not offer the comradery or motivation present in Wrex's story if he lives.
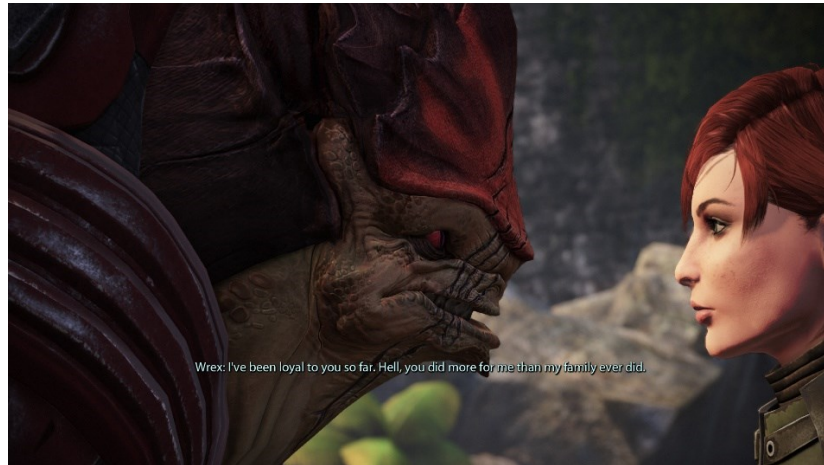
Figure 10. Wrex with Shepard on Virmire (Mass Effect 1).

Building a relationship with Wrex is not automatic and necessitates specific player choice and engagement. Speaking with Wrex on the Normandy after every critical mission, listening to and accepting his "Family Armor" mission, completing the mission, which requires a player to go out of their way to visit a planet not part of the main story and objective, as well as choose to return the armour to Wrex after the mission, are all crucial to building his trust and ensuring his survival. Having Wrex survive Virmire offers the player more paragon points, having Wrex as a squadmate for the rest of the game, and the emotional and narrative pay-off of helping him rebuild his home planet of Tuchanka and rid the krogans of the genophage in *Mass Effect 2* and *Mass Effect 3*, respectively. Building a relationship with Wrex ensures he becomes part of the transmedia character constellation of *Mass Effect*'s mediascape and further builds out the player's experience.

Seeking out, speaking with, and playing through the games with Wrex and his fellow squadmates requires the transmedial player to assume the role of knowledge seeker that builds off Jenkins' notion of transmedia fans as "hunters and gathers" (*Convergence Culture* 21). In the mediascape and in the games specifically, the transmedial player collects their crew, organizes missions based on their priorities and motivations, and investigates their stories to build these characters in unique and engaging ways. Applying that notion to *Mass Effect 2* specifically, Kristine Jørgensen argues, "The most central narrative technique in *ME2* is to provide information about characters through gathering data about them. In order to seek out the future companions, Shepard gathers information through collecting clues and asking other characters about information" ("Game Characters as Narrative Devices" 325). This process, Jørgensen explains, "provides the designers with a high degree of control over the narrative process, at the same time as the player feels involved in the progression of the plot" (325). Like storyworld discussed in Chapter 2, character thus offers a site of convergence for creators and players; however, character centres on connections and emphasis on personal relationships rather an envisioning and organizing a massive storyworld. The transmedial player is both central and secondary to the process of building these character constructs and their collective constellations.

Players in *Mass Effect* are literal Shepards who gather teammates in the same manner they gather media and are the information brokers like Liara organizing and making sense of the mediascape. It is important to note that just because players are playing as Shepard, it does not foreclose the opportunity for players to also identify with other characters in the transmedia story. Indeed, it is this identification with other characters that makes players willing to cross into different media to engage in stories of these other characters. Game-centric transmedia stories add additional layers to this conception of fan activity, taking these "hunters and

gatherers," which evolved into collectors, encyclopedists, and detectives in Chapter 1, who build characters and teams. In *Mass Effect*, this hunting and gathering are not enough as players need to complete loyalty missions to ensure their teammates' dedication—and the player's knowledge of their potential—to complete all the missions in the *Mass Effect* games, with a particular emphasis on the Suicide Mission in *Mass Effect 2*.

Mass Effect 2's Suicide Mission is a character constellation-building exercise that operates within a single medium. The process of arriving at this moment in-game through building a relationship with each character mirrors the process of building these characters as Frankenstein monsters at the transmedial level. Completing the quarian companion Tali'Zorah nar Rayya's loyalty mission, requiring Shepard and Tali to find out how her father died during a suspicious scientific experiment (*Mass Effect 2*, "Tali: Treason"), ensures Tali has the resolve to assist the Normandy crew during the Suicide Mission. If Tali's loyalty mission is not complete upon starting the Suicide Mission, she may die or allow other members of the crew to die if she is required to perform one of the many critical roles during the mission. And, like Wrex, if Tali dies in-game during the Suicide Mission, she is replaced with another quarian character named Admiral Xen, and without Tali to help broker a peace treaty with the Geth, the player cannot diplomatically resolve the Quarian/Geth War and cannot save both races (and secure the War Assets that are rewarded if the conflict is resolved) in *Mass Effect 3* (see Figure 11).

Tali: I look at all this... this picture of hope and peace. And all I see is everyone I've lost.

Figure 11. Tali on Rannoch after the Quarian/Geth War (Mass Effect 3).

It is important to note that while Tali is crucial in securing peace in the Quarian/Geth conflict, she is also only one of the thirteen crewmates who have their personal loyalty missions in *Mass Effect 2*, each that further develops their character and ensures their part in the success of the Suicide Mission. Like Wrex and Tali, these characters have varying levels of influence over the games and the transmedia story, and the Suicide Mission, along with its required loyalty missions, is a core experience necessary for the transmedial player and their chosen companions to further the *Mass Effect* story. Indeed, as Jørgensen concludes, "The most important event in which the companions and their loyalty matters is the Suicide Mission, the end game mission where the players will use all the resources they have gathered in the conquering of the enemy base ship" (326). This choice is crucial to the transmedial player's engagement with the storyworld, mirrored in a microcosm of the games and the macrocosm of the transmedia story.

Investing time and resources into crewmates ensures success in *Mass Effect 2*. As Jørgensen explains, "The loyalty quests are micro-narratives in which the companions take on the role of narrators themselves, either by telling Shepard about their past lives and present motivations or through their behavior" (325). As such, these micro-narratives offer a clear

example of how all the stories and media in *Mass Effect* work together to give shape to the various characters on the Normandy. Furthermore, these loyalty missions are also an essential part of the game. As Jørgensen notes, "gaining the companions' loyalty gives them unique abilities, and also because they force the player to use that companion during the mission, thus learning how they work in battle" (325-326). This in-game incentive to learn more about Shepard's, and later Ryder's, companions offer a tutorial for players who seek to engage with the rest of the transmedia story, situating this game mechanic of *Mass Effect*'s mothership as a crucial guide for transmedial players across the mediascape.

The game, as part of the mothership, guides players in their engagement with characters. Not only do the loyalty missions extend the main arc of the trilogy, but they also fill in the gaps and provide a ludic incentive for taking the time to follow these characters through their stories. The other media follows a similar pattern: filling in the backstory of these characters lays largely beyond Shepard and the transmedial player's direct influence. The backstories, the gaps that have led to the game's present, are crucial to the storyworld. As Zakowski points out, "This past is not part of the main story line, but of the storyworld—as such, the storyworld is tightly integrated into the story line in *ME 2* through the loyalty missions of Shepard's squad mates" (70). With these moments that extend character's lives in different directions, Zakowski continues, "The characters' past gives the impression that the *ME* universe extends beyond the time and space of the main story line; the characters' actions in the present create the illusion that they have a mind of their own" (71). The complexity of the characters is what drives this transmedial engagement. The over-arching story of *Mass Effect* is to seek out and learn more about the Normandy and Tempest crew, and through seeking out and learning about these

characters, the story grows. In other words, the transmedia story shapes the characters as much as the characters shape the transmedia story.

Loyalty becomes a defining aspect of *Mass Effect,* and these micro-narrative engagements extend past the games into all aspects of the transmedia story: to succeed as ideal Shepards, players must ensure their entire mediascape flock is well-tended. *Mass Effect 2* continues to be a useful example of how players must seek out characters to build the narrative at the transmedial level. However, it is in the narrative gaps of the two years between *Mass Effect 2*'s prologue and main story that much of the transmedial growth occurs. *Mass Effect*: *Redemption*, the four-part comic series first released between January 6 and April 7, 2010, and later released as a single volume or graphic novella, opens within a month of *Mass Effect 2*'s prologue when the SSR Normandy is destroyed by the Collectors and Shepard is lost. Occupying a space within the two-year narrative gap between *Mass Effect 2*'s prologue and main story, the comic follows Liara as she travels through several star systems, tracking down Shepard's body to give it to the human terrorist organization Cerberus and thus situating the central drama of *Mass Effect 2*. *Redemption* situates Liara as a critical character in the transmedia story as the protagonist of the graphic novella whose mission ensures Shepard's survival and the future of the series. In addition to moving Liara into the protagonist role, *Redemption*, like *Mass Effect*'s other non-ludic media, demand different strategies of engagement with the larger transmedia story.

Following Liara to another story and another media forces transmedial players require a media literacy based on comics and graphic narrative, mainly through the means of understanding the graphic novel form and utilizing—among many strategies—what Scott McCloud refers to as "closure." Shifting from player to reader, the consumer must use different levels of engagement to negotiate the unique interplay of images, text, and emptiness. As

McCloud explains, "The comics creator asks us to join in the silent dance of the seen and the unseen. The visible and invisible. This dance is unique to comics. No other art form gives so much to its audience while asking so much from them as well" (*Understanding Comics* 92). The reader receives a different kind of power where they, in Pascal Lefèvre's words, "can linger on a panel, scan the complete page, or return to panels or whole sequences at will" ("Some Medium-Specific Qualities of Graphic Sequences" 23). This time to traverse space, Greg M. Smith argues, gives "readers the opportunity to handle images and examine lines at their own pace, comics open up possibilities for contemplation " ("Comics in the Intersecting Histories of the Window, the Frame, and the Panel" 233). This idea, of course, is one of many possibilities of comics and transmedial agency offers the space for a multitude of means to engage media. *Redemption* is both a vital closure within the original gap of *Mass Effect 2* and a means to reflect on the other gaps in the *Mass Effect* transmedia story, offering the contemplation to negotiate the various gaps that exist in the storyworld's chronologies. The media literacy necessary to engage with *Redemption* is thus similar to the transmedia literacy necessary to engage with the *Mass Effect* series. The player may be passive as Shepard in the various graphic narratives, but they must be an active reader by way of decoding the formalities of graphic narrative to move through and expand the overarching story.

  Redemption is as much a moment of stasis for the player and Shepard as it is of progress for Liara and other characters. Understood this way, the player's engagement with the series changes with this graphic novella, as with each story not explored in the games, and another character takes centre stage, unravelling mysteries, uncovering identities, and creating a fuller understanding of the storyworld without the main protagonist. Discussing a parallel experience with *Battlestar Galactica*, Mélanie Bourdaa argues "the comic books served as a site for

audiences to find Easter Eggs, but also to discover new and important narrative elements that enrich their understanding of the series and the characters" ("Transmedia Storytelling" 135). The player must engage another media literacy, exploring *Mass Effect* as a transmedial player, connecting this story into the larger storyworld while navigating the panels, pages, and gutters in this graphic novella. Through its attention to the over-arching story, it seeks to further enrich the transmedial nature of *Mass Effect* in its entirety by offering another level of agency to the player, expanding their own abilities as they explore new areas of both narratives and media.

Redemption occupies the space and time not accessible for Shepard during the narrative of *Mass Effect 2*, focusing instead on Liara. The graphic novella follows Liara as she travels through several star systems, tracking down any evidence regarding Commander Shepard's whereabouts. Despite no longer being part of Shepard's crew and travelling the galaxy alone, she quickly asserts her prowess as one of the galaxy-saving heroes from *Mass Effect 1* when she incapacitates the threatening crew of the ship on which she arrives at the space station Omega. Noted in this chapter's introduction, Liara is an asari, a race of mono-gendered aliens that resemble blue-skinned human women with flexible, cartilage crests on their scalps, who all possess varying degrees of biotic aptitude—a set of abilities that closely mirror telekinesis (see Figure 12). As established in *Mass Effect 1*, Liara is a powerful biotic and renowned scientist, allowing her to efficiently traverse several planets and systems on her mission.

Figure 12. Cover art of Liara (Redemption).

Liara's story expands the player's knowledge of the *Mass Effect* universe and situates

Liara as a prime mover in the action that establishes the rest of the series following the

Normandy being destroyed. Liara's work in finding Shepard's body and enlisting new

characters, including Miranda, the Illusive Man, and Cerberus, are pivotal moments in *Mass*

Effect. With Liara able to help get Shepard's body to Cerberus and allowing them to begin

working on restoring Shepard to active duty, the series' narrative can progress, and the main

story of *Mass Effect 2* begins when Shepard awakes reconstructed two years later. The

conclusion of *Redemption* also leads directly to Liara's situation hunting down the Shadow

Broker two years after these events and is signalled through the graphic novella's ending notated

with "To be continued—in *Mass Effect 2* from BioWare!" (*Redemption*). Yet the conclusion

does not arrive until *Mass Effect 2*'s "Lair of the Shadow Broker" mission, originally a DLC

released months after *Mass Effect 2* when Shepard helps Liara hunt down and kill her long-time

nemesis and take the title of Shadow Broker. The graphic novella, like the "Leviathan" mission

discussed in Chapter 2, repositions important aspects of the storyworld out of chronology,

highlighting specific media to inspire a player's choice of direction through *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story.

Liara is central to *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story in ways that Wrex and Tali are not. Liara cannot be replaced in *Mass Effect 2* or *Mass Effect 3* as she cannot die in-game, and her presence in the non-ludic media also furthers *Mass Effect*'s over-arching story. Unlike the loyalty missions, these events in *Redemption* happen outside the game and are further complicated by the absence of Shepard in these connections. Like Shepard in the games, Liara travels to new places and seeks out allies, who then become important characters in the *Mass Effect* storyworld, to assist her in finding Shepard after the Collector attack. The rewards for experiencing the graphic novella and the "Lair of the Shadow Broker" mission (or earlier DLC) in terms of the narrative parallel that of any medium: affective experience and more knowledge of the characters, while the mission's ludic implications offer more resources such as weapons and armour and military strength during the climactic battle against the Reapers. Originally, the players must actively find and purchase both the DLC to play it in *Mass Effect 2* and the graphic novella to understand the chronology of *Mass Effect 2* like any individual media in the *Mass Effect* storyworld.

Like the loyalty missions, choosing whether to experience new additions (and how and when to do so) changes a player's understanding of that story as well as that specific character. Reading *Redemption* allows the transmedial player to create stronger bonds with Liara by seeing her actions and understanding her motivations. Liara's motivations for helping Cerberus find Shepard in *Redemption* have significant transmedial resonance. The Illusive Man knows she was "very close with Commander Shepard" (*Redemption*) and plays on her feelings for Shepard to influence her into working with them. This closeness as her motivation suggests, subtly perhaps,

that Liara exists as the series' canonical romance choice because a Shepard of any gender can romance Liara in *Mass Effect 1*. Or, if Liara is not the canonical romance partner, to again not supersede player choice, she holds a higher status amongst the rest of the Normandy crew in both personal connection and self-reliance. She appears to be the only one searching or capable of searching for Shepard despite all the main crew members from the first game having survived the Collector's attack. Whether or not she is romantically or personally motivated to find Shepard, she remains resolute and offers the simple reason that "I need to see Shepard" (*Redemption*) as to why she is willing to put her life at risk.

Liara's need to see Shepard for herself despite being on the Normandy during the Collector's attack allows the reader to choose the meaning of her insistence: whether it continues and reflects the romance Shepard—as the player—potentially began in *Mass Effect 1* or simply as a loyal squadmate who has the means to search for her friend when others could not. Either option becomes another branch of meaningful choice that the reader has when the player does not. The potential for different readings is a way of expressing the same experience of meaningful choice so important to the transmedia story in different media. Connecting Liara to Shepard in a more prominent way than other major squadmates from the games emphasizes the personal developments between Shepard and Liara that continue to grow in *Mass Effect 2* and beyond.

Like all the non-ludic media in the Milky Way era, *Redemption* exists as a story separate from Shepard, establishing both the beginning and end of Liara's story development in *Mass Effect 2*. Through the graphic novella, Liara moves from a helpless witness of Shepard's death to Cerberus operative rescuing Shepard from the Shadow Broker and the Collectors to preparing to become the Shadow Broker herself, one of the most powerful characters in *Mass Effect*. Filling

these gaps clarifies the motivations and storylines of several key characters that the game

otherwise loosely develops through only a single story. *Redemption* thus offers a story that *Mass*

Effect 2 does not, despite the importance of the story to the game, and allows Liara her own

space in the storyworld to explore her development as a character outside her partnership with

Shepard. Through engaging the graphic novella, players use their agency to fill in the gaps

between stories and media, using the detective work discussed in Chapter 1 to deduce how and

when a character's story intertwined with another event told years earlier or later in the same or

different medium. The scavenger hunt of the transmedia player requires focus and attention to

detail, collecting and organizing all this information into meaningful patterns that form the

experience of their unique pathway or playthrough of *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story.

These breaks in Liara's story allow her character development across media, offering a

multi-dimensional representation of her as an important and interconnected part of *Mass Effect*'s

transmedia story. The reader thus employs closure to fully understand Liara's goals and

motivations which speaks to the impossibility of marginal details because there are no marginal

stories or media in transmedia storytelling. Without a mothership to anchor them to a specific

time and place, the characters of these franchises disperse across media, and where they go, the

storyworld grows with new characters, new settings, and new stories. Character constellations

thus guide players across these stories and across these media. Liara's motivations fill in the gaps

between media and other characters because, as Eder, Jannidis, and Schneider argue,

"Motivation is, finally, an important factor in the constellation of characters, which places

individual characters in a network of relationships" (26). Liara's motivation, like the transmedial

player's, is to seek out as much knowledge as possible to prepare for the next challenge, whether

it's to save Shepard or save the galaxy.

2. Freed my Frankenstein? Constructing Transmedia Characters

Characters are fundamental to story and their allure is multifaceted. While fundamental to story, they also exist beyond it, with Seymour Chatman arguing, "We appreciate character traits for their own sake, including some that have little or nothing to do with 'what happens'" (*Story and Discourse* 112). Furthermore, the media that build these characters are not released sequentially. Rather, they systematically expand the story in different directions that require players to not only hunt down and gather them (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* 21) but also organize them accordingly. This process, as I explained in Chapter 1, can be understood through the three roles of the transmedial player as a knowledge seeker: collector, encyclopedist, and detective. Each new addition can potentially alter our interpretation of their stories, pushing the narrative further into the past or further into the future. Players must construct these characters from various media, stitching them together like Frankenstein monsters, often inconsistent, contradictory, and complex. Storyworld demands a coherency and consistency that manifests as either a creator's canon or a player's understanding, such as players rejecting the novel *Deception* because it did not fit their sense of the storyworld, as discussed in Chapter 2. Conversely, characters are fluid, complicated, and often contradictory, making them key aspects of how we can understand transmedia storytelling.

Storyworlds rely on their characters and events to invoke a sense of familiarity for the transmedial player. Characters demarcate the limits of a story. If familiar characters appear in an unusual setting, through narrative coherence, the universe expands to encompass this new event. Even familiar settings can obscure the storyworld in which they exist. Without *Star Wars*' recognizable character Luke Skywalker present in the storyworld, the desert planet Tatooine could be *Dune*'s Arrakis. Likewise, Earth or Mars could be any version of these planets found in

a sci-fi series without Shepard or the immediately recognizable asari design of Liara. Indeed, as Bertetti argues, "What is essential is the recognisability of transtextual entities like worlds or characters: an audience must always be able to recognize the world or the characters on which this expansion is based" ("Buck Rogers in the 25th Century" 202). One of the many things that defines these spaces are the characters and players that exist within these storyworlds. The storyworld of *Mass Effect* expands in various directions, both spatially and temporally, as its characters are often uncontainable in a specific setting. Unbound by strictures of transmedial storyworlds postulated by contemporary scholarship, character-based engagement is a crucial process for players invoking these transmedia stories.

Carlos A. Scolari, Paolo Bertetti, and Matthew Freeman (2014) point to character as one of the earliest transmedia logics, which seemingly challenges Jenkins' "world-centred" definition of transmedia storytelling. Bertetti notes "the character-centered logic that, in our opinion, is the basis of many older forms of transmedia expansions" ("Conan the Barbarian" 36). And, as Bertetti continues, "Under this logic, which merges with the logic of transmedia storytelling, as intended by Jenkins (2006a), centred on the idea of a shared, fictional world, transmedial fictional coherency and consistency are less central" (36). The focus revolves around audience reception, with Bertetti acknowledging, "What is instead more important is the recognisability of the character and his identity" (36). Indeed, how easily a character can be identified and connected to the previous version of themselves in different stories and media is crucial to the transmedia character's construction and connection to the player. Lincoln Geraghty notes a similar reality in *Star Wars*, explaining that "certain characters throughout the history of the franchise have been used as transmedia signposts, directing audiences to other media texts that surround the original movies" ("Transmedia Character Building" 117). Transmedia signposts are

key to exploring the storyworld, and Geraghty continues, "Key characters in effect represent those 'immoveable objects' when used strategically in marketing campaigns. They become texts in themselves: synecdochal signifiers of the *Star Wars* transmedia universe" (118). This notion of "immovable objects" extends beyond *Star Wars* to all character-based or character-focused transmedia stories. For *Mass Effect*, then, the crews of the Normandy and the Tempest are the core experience, the "immovable objects." While the mothership guides player engagement with the mediascape, it is the mothership's crew that inspires players to explore these galaxies and construct these characters.

Liara and other *Mass Effect* characters like Wrex or Tali are constructs of media, built or stitched together by players as they engage with the various stories that make up their character. They exist, in Bertetti's definition above, as transmedia characters. Characters are inherently transmedial. As Greg M. Smith argues, "Character relationships and iconography are some of the easiest qualities to import across media because they appear to be the properties of a diegetic world and not characteristics distinct to a medium" ("Shaping The Maxx" 33). Mark J.P. Wolf also sees character as one of several key aspects of transmedia: "Perhaps the simplest literary indication that a world exists beyond the details needed to tell a particular story is a transnarrative character" (*Building Imaginary Worlds* 66). They are the driving force of storyworld growth, and, Wolf explains, "When multiple characters, objects, and locations from one story appear in another story, the world in which they all appear becomes larger than either story" (66). As transmedia characters, the characters of *Mass Effect*, like Liara, reach beyond a single story, a single text, or a single world. Through this reach across media, they define *Mass Effect* as transmedial.

As I examined in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2, the complexities of understanding transmedia storytelling through motherships and storyworld, respectively, cause scholars to question Jenkins' definition of transmedia storytelling. Brian Clark further questions the idealism of Jenkins' fully transmedia story, arguing that "Sometimes people make things that really do require attention across multiple media to make sense of: those projects are shambling Frankenstein monsters, novelty acts or inaccessible conceptual art. That's why there's never been a big 'transmedia hit'" ("Transmedia is a Lie"). Marie-Laure Ryan focuses on Clark's consideration of inaccessibility, noting that "The only two media between which people will easily switch are novels and movies. If transmedia development is to extend further, it must be dictated by some narrative necessity, rather than being treated as inherently desirable" ("Industry Buzzword" 16). As I have noted throughout this dissertation, game-centric transmedia are misunderstood at best and ignored at worst in contemporary transmedia scholarship despite exemplifying the "alien aesthetic" necessary to evolve transmedia storytelling to its full potential, as I discussed at length in Chapter 1.

The focus on commerciality and film and TV stagnates the critical understanding of transmedia storytelling. Focusing on film- and TV-centric transmedia, Ryan reasons, "The difficulty of justifying the distribution of narrative information over many delivery systems could explain why, as media developer Brian Clark (2012) has argued, there are no great transmedia hits" ("Industry Buzzword" 17). However, I argue that characters, especially video game characters within game-centric transmedia, not only justify the distribution of narrative information over many delivery systems but also offer a clear understanding of why transmedial players are willing and able to collect, organize, and investigate these pixel people across media. Nevertheless, Ryan rationalizes Clark's notion of a commercially successful transmedia story

further and explains, "There are certainly many hits that became transmedia—what I call the snowball effect—but Clark is saying that there are no projects conceived as transmedia from the very beginning, no native transmedia projects that *became* great successes" (17, original emphasis). While *Mass Effect* is a noteworthy example of the contrary, it is an important consideration to examine further to fully unpack its implications regarding transmedia storytelling.

Mass Effect's popularity arises from its varied and interesting cast of characters, all with unique personalities and backstories beyond the protagonists Shepard and Ryder. *Mass Effect* gathers these diverse characters through various media to build a transmedia story. The transmedia story thus relies on its array of characters to overcome Ryan's concern of transmedia justification. No single story, or mothership, offers a complete picture of these characters as each new narrative revolves around a character or set of characters, further developing their personality and traits and connecting them into the larger mediascape. The place, time, and event may be different for each addition, but the characters are constant: first and foremost, *Mass Effect* is about the crew though not necessarily Shepard or Ryder. Thus, Liara and her fellow squadmates are indeed "shambling Frankenstein monsters" because players build them as they build *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story, but this Frankenstein metaphor offers insight into the power of transmedia characters.

Clark's dismissal of transmedia projects as "shambling Frankenstein monsters" that fail to achieve the title of "a big 'transmedia hit'" is problematic on several levels: why is transmedia storytelling so elusive, what constitutes a "hit" (and the nature of success), and what does "big" represent (scale or quality)? While other transmedia scholars have engaged these questions, no prior analysis has engaged Clark's metaphor of the Frankenstein monster. Indeed, it is a useful—

though perhaps coincidental—point of engagement that speaks to the ways in which transmedia stories (or their supposed failings) are characterized. Thus, I seek to understand the character of transmedia storytelling through both its (contentious) definition and execution and the characters that exist within my case study. *Mass Effect* is a useful case study in that its narrative revolves around characters that are advanced both narratively and technologically. As Leo Hartas and Dave Morris note, "As technical restrictions fall away, game designers find they are free to create whomever they imagine, and, like a digital Frankenstein, bring them to life" (*The Art of Game Characters* 6). Frankenstein and his monster thus haunt Clark's assessment of transmedia, as well as Hartas and Morris' assessment of video game characters, and offers a useful metaphor to better understand transmedia characters.

Transmedia characters in game-centric transmedia stories who are constructed through different media over time further emphasize this Frankenstein metaphor. Essi Varis offers Frankenstein as a metaphor for characters across all media, and I find that metaphor conducive for my project as well. For Varis, "the troubles of fictional characters are very similar to the troubles of Frankenstein's conflicted creature: both have been purposefully crafted, yet demonstrate full agency and many other human qualities" (*Graphic Human Experiments* 61). Furthermore, Varis continues, "Only a figure as paradoxical and complex as the amalgamated Creature could ever be emblematic of the fragmentary existence of characters" (111). Applying this metaphor to *Mass Effect*, Liara is Frankenstein's monster, being put together by means analogous to transmedial players connecting various media of *Mass Effect* into a cohesive whole through the stories spread across its mediascape. The pieces are there, and how they are (re)organized allows for a solidified or recontextualized understanding of whom Liara is as a

character never solely defined by one story or through one medium. However, this understanding

is uniquely defined by each transmedial player who engages Liara's story across media.

Liara's non-linear, non-hierarchical character development across media is a useful

example of how *Mass Effect* operates as a transmedia story. Liara's narrative, like *Mass Effect*'s

transmedia story, appears fragmented, skipping back and forth along a timeline and across the

galaxy depicted through its media. Beginning in *Mass Effect 1*, Liara is introduced as a

researcher out of her depth who joins Shepard's crew as a Prothean expert and powerful psychic

companion; in *Mass Effect 2*, as an independent information broker working as a consultant for

the Normandy; and *Mass Effect 3*, as one of the most powerful characters in the galaxy as the

Shadow Broker during the Reaper War. Parallel to Liara, players are caught out of their depth

when first introduced to the *Mass Effect* storyworld, caught in transmedia res, as the player's

story always starts within an overwhelming convergence of characters, places, and events. As

they continue down their chosen path through the transmedia story, they may branch out from

Shepard's story and learn more about the characters and storyworld through novels, comics, and

film. Finally, upon completing their journey through *Mass Effect*, however many different stories

and media they engaged, the player is now an experienced, well-versed participant who is central

in the transmedia story.

Liara, as a transmedia character, is greater than the sum of her parts when her story is

experienced across media. Each story acts as another piece to the puzzle in constructing her

character, offering different perspectives from various times and spaces during her development.

Furthermore, each story and medium references or builds upon preceding stories and media.

Understanding transmedia characters as puzzles echoes Rachael Hutchinson's discussion of

Tekken fighters where "All these pieces of story and characterization act like a puzzle, which

players must piece together in their minds as they play through the game" (*Japanese Culture Through Videogames* 73). This process reflects the transmedial agency required of players to build these characters. As Elizabeth Evans argues regarding TV characters: "Characters exist beyond individual moments, with specific scenes, lines, or moments of performance building to create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts" ("Shaping Sherlocks" 103). While she may appear as an overwhelmed beginner upon her introduction in *Mass Effect 1*, Liara in the game is more interesting because of her work alongside Cerberus finding Shepard in the graphic novella *Redemption*, and Liara in the graphic novella and comics is more interesting because of her appearance in the film *Paragon Lost* where she helps a group of marines fight the Collectors. Liara follows *Mass Effect* as much as *Mass Effect* follows Liara, and the player is tasked with collecting, organizing, and investigating each instance of her presence, constructing her character over time and across media (see Figure 13). The game offers her doctoral knowledge of Protheans, powerful psychic abilities, and combat prowess, the film shows that her intellect and determination are matched by her charm and loyalty to friends and allies, and the comics allow for freeze frames of Liara's vulnerability that are swept up in the other media.
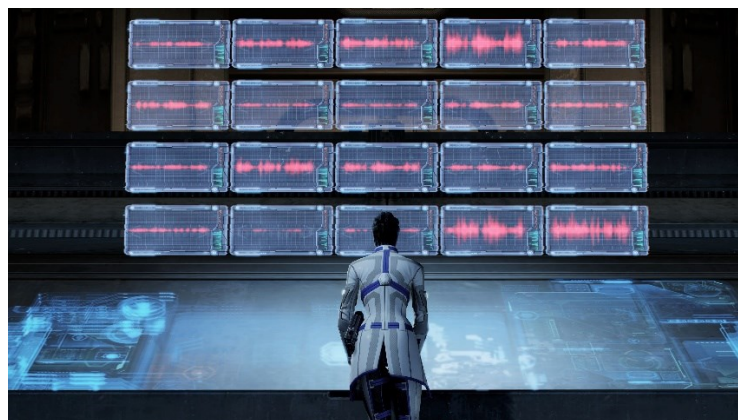

Figure 13. *Liara as the Shadow Broker (Mass Effect 2)*.

Players build transmedia stories and characters between narrative events, engaging these gaps (as I discussed at length in Chapter 1) as opportunities to establish a stronger sense of cohesion. Players then build and understand characters the same way they build and understand transmedia stories. Murray Smith notes this building as a basic but crucial means of understanding character as players will "organize the particular qualities conveyed to us about a character around and upon those more basic capacities of the human players" (*Engaging Characters* 30). Eder, Jannidis, and Schneider argue this process goes further as "Viewers, readers, listeners or users do not only grasp a character's corporeality, mind, and sociality in the (fictional) world. They are building on those processes to understand the character's meanings as sign or symbol, and to reflect on the character's connections to its creators, textual structures, ludic functions, etc." (15). Like transmedia stories, characters are greater than the sum of their parts. *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story and its characters are a puzzle game that requires players to piece it together and negotiate these constructs through networked and participatory interaction.

If an event is not depicted in one medium—only mentioned or referenced—then an opportunity manifests in the lack of closure presented by the reference. A gap exists waiting to be filled. When Liara tells Shepard that she found their body and gave it to Cerberus upon their reunion in *Mass Effect 2*, nothing is represented, only referenced. The game's narrative does not pause at this moment, and no space is given for its closure: it is a story for another space and thus another time, coming to light only when the players read *Redemption* and play the "Lair of the Shadow Broker" mission. Liara thus becomes more whole as a character construct, a key piece to the *Mass Effect* puzzle, and a guiding star *in Mass Effect*'s constellation of characters. *Mass Effect 2* is rich with these moments, allowing the two years between the game's prologue and the game's main story to flourish with other stories focusing on the Normandy crew after the crash.

The mothership is both honoured and left behind as the players follow these characters across media. If the opening of *Mass Effect 2* and its subsequent media proves anything, you can crash the Normandy, but that doesn't kill (the need for) Shepard and crew. The transmedial players—unable to occupy Shepard in these stories—build these media together in the same way Shepard builds their team. Like the detectives searching for clues around *Andromeda*'s Benefactor, discussed in Chapter 1, players use those knowledge seeker skills to find crewmates and complete companion loyalty missions at the end of the *Mass Effect 2* and across various media to finish the unique puzzles of *Mass Effect*'s transmedia characters.

Tracking down Liara's media and uncovering her motivations leads to a greater understanding of her character. As Jørgensen argues, "Instead of relying on player characters, these games focus on the development of supporting characters" ("Game Characters as Narrative Devices" 315). Taking a player-character out of the central role and allowing NPCs space to develop hints at new ludic engagement, one that transmedia storytelling exemplifies. Jayanth recognizes this change as a powerful means of re-contextualizing the player's position in the power fantasy trope of games and "allows NPCs to have more development and depth, to pursue their goals without being constantly over-riden by the protagonist's overdeveloped sense of importance" ("Forget Protagonists"). Transmedial agency thus moves away from a player-centric mode of agency celebrated by scholars such as Joleen Blom who argues, "The player is still at the heart of the game, but a theory of the dynamic game character relocates the focus of the player's agency from being within a single entity, to an agency over a web of characters, over which the player (often) does not have any avatarial agency" (*The Dynamic Game Character* 145). Instead of offering the player more agency, decentering the player in their connection to

NPCs allows these characters to grow and for the player's relationship with them to be built on

an emotional connection rather than one situated on control.

This focus on character allows the game's narrative and, by extension, the transmedia

story to shift the players from their role as protagonists to the role of mediators in other

characters' stories. The games encourage a character-driven engagement that does not put the

player-character at the core of these narratives, or, as Jørgensen explains, the games "set the

player character aside to let supporting characters be the progressive powers of narrative" (315).

Jayanth echoes a similar point, arguing that "Giving NPCs control and power can create

interesting effects and experiences in games, beyond romantic fulfillment as well" ("Forget

Protagonists"). This process is unusual in games as it shifts the PC from a central role. Jørgensen

acknowledges this break in convention, noting that "Giving the protagonist role to a character

that is not the player-character (PC) is an interesting and sophisticated way to present a narrative,

but it has different consequences in games compared to traditional narrative media" (324).

However, this change can strengthen the narrative. Jørgensen argues that "Providing supporting

characters with motivations and agendas that may carry the narrative progression opens for a

coherent narrative experience. This does not mean that there is no player agency, or that the

game's narrative may progress on its own without the presence of the player" (328). The player

remains an active participant in the transmedia story through their transmedial agency in

choosing how and when they engage *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story across media, as well as

space and time.

3. Shadowing the Shadow Broker: Transmedia Detectives and Media Heterarchy

In building characters across media, players remain active participants in the transmedia story without necessitating their need for control and mastery over the narrative. Following Liara, and her fellow squadmates, through the games, comics, and film allows transmedial players the joy of exploring *Mass Effect* with a focus on connection and companionship. Players must simultaneously build transmedia stories as they build transmedia characters, using these characters as guides for exploring and making sense of *Mass Effect*. Where these characters go, players are sure to follow. Transmedial players navigating *Mass Effect* must follow and act like Liara, in her position as the Shadow Broker, across and through the various texts that cohere into *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story. Thus, in this section, I explore how Liara becomes a guide for the transmedial player who collects, builds, and investigates the information across the *Mass Effect* transmedia story. Following the Shadow Broker, the transmedia players are displaced from their role as main protagonists as they collect, organize, and investigate the over-arching puzzle that is *Mass Effect*'s transmedia characters.

Liara's importance as a character who can exist in the past, present, and future of the series and *Mass Effect*'s evolution as a transmedia story is especially noteworthy in the *Mass Effect 4* trailer released in December 2020. At the 2020 Game Awards, BioWare showcased a teaser trailer for what fans and critics soon began to refer to as *Mass Effect 4*. The trailer shows two galaxies, which fans presumed and then BioWare later confirmed to be the Milky Way and Andromeda, before sweeping through images and voice-overs of crucial events leading up to and during the *Mass Effect* game trilogy, including the iconic roar of a Reaper. The camera's perspective then pans to a ship landing on an unknown planet and cuts to a hooded individual hiking up a snow-covered hill with what appears to be a dead Reaper in the background (see

Figure 14). Upon reaching the summit of the hill, the still-unknown figure bends down and finds

a broken and discarded N7 emblem, a consistent symbol of Commander Shepard. The trailer

ends with a side-angle shot of the figure's face, revealing them to be Liara, who smiles (see

Figure 14) before the screen fades to black and the *Mass Effect* logo appears with a "Will

Continue" beneath it. Following the announcement, Michael Gamble, Project Director at

BioWare, personally invited transmedia detectives to investigate the mysterious new trailer by

tweeting, "This trailer has much to unpack. Look. And listen closely" (*Twitter*, 7:45pm, 2020-12-

10). Gamble also participated in fan and critic speculation, confirming the structure Liara climbs

was, in fact, a Reaper, further inspiring transmedial detective work.
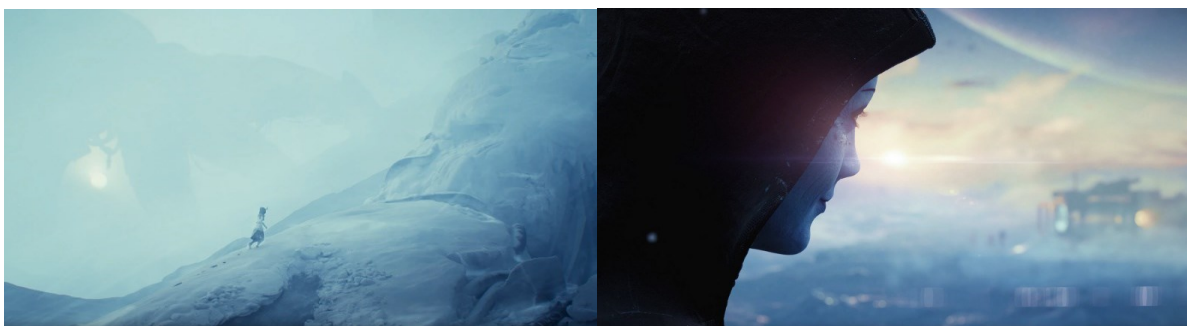
Figure 14. *Liara climbing the Reaper; Liara revealed ("The Next Mass Effect - Official Teaser Trailer").*

With the release of the *Mass Effect 4* trailer and Gamble's suggestions, fans immediately

took to the internet to discuss and dissect the meaning of what transpired in the trailer. One of the

first, and arguably most important, confirmations was that the figure was indeed Liara, though

much older than in the trilogy, as she has noticeable wrinkles on her cheeks and around her eyes.

Interestingly, the biggest clue to announcing her identity was her freckles, an important note to

her character design, as they offer insight into when *Mass Effect 4* could potentially take place

based on Liara's appearance. Liana Ruppert, reporting on the trailer, explains, "The freckles,

face shape, and that little smirk is obviously Liara" ("What A Tale Of Two Galaxies Could

Mean"), which connects *Mass Effect 4* to the original game trilogy by centring Liara in the trailer. However, Charlie Stewart points out that "Asari live for centuries, so Liara's appearance in the trailer doesn't actually help narrow down how long after the defeat of the Reapers *Mass Effect 4* will take place" ("*Mass Effect 4*'s New Trailer Has Huge Implications for *Mass Effect 3*'s Ending"), which only adds more gaps to be filled by transmedial detectives before BioWare offers more clues or answers. Liara's identity, despite being older, offers a defining clue for transmedia detectives as, Bertetti notes, "Audiences are elastic and tend to accept heterogeneous development patterns and variations, providing the differences do not overstep certain limits" ("Buck Rogers in the 25th Century" 202). Furthermore, the confirmation of the Reapers in the trailer inspired Ash Parrish to speculate that "Reaper in the background possibly confirms two big pieces of information: the destroy ending is canon and Liara, right now, is not in the Andromeda galaxy" ("What The Hell Is Going On In That *Mass Effect* Trailer?"). It is helpful to note here that the postulation around the "Destroy" ending works within an ongoing debate around which ending of the *Mass Effect* trilogy is canon, and *Mass Effect 4* could have important implications regarding creator canon and storyworld trajectory of *Mass Effect*'s future.

Situating Liara, and the destroyed Reapers, in the trailer and, seemingly, the next *Mass Effect* game, BioWare offered transmedia detectives new avenues to explore how, when, and where this next game would take place. Like Liara, these players are searching for answers and must manipulate time and space to puzzle together her character construct as she explores the aftermath of the Reaper War. The *Mass Effect 4* trailer reinvokes the various events echoed in its opening as crucial moments in the *Mass Effect* transmedia story that transmedial players as collectors, encyclopedists, and detectives must gather and make sense to better understand the past, present, and future *Mass Effect*, as well as the past, present, and future of Liara.

The emphasis on transmedial player's need to move backwards and forwards through *Mass Effect*'s story, as well as across media, to build and understand characters like Liara offers a means to recontextualize transmedia scholarship's understanding of Jenkins' definition of transmedia storytelling. As I discussed in the previous section, the resistance from scholars like Clark and Ryan to acknowledge "transmedia hits" and the suspicion of "shambling Frankenstein monsters" speaks to the fraught definitions and understanding transmedia stories. Indeed, Rüdiger Heinze considers Jenkins' definition largely unattainable, arguing that "he is certainly right about the intention, but I am not so sure he is right about its successful implementation resulting in a 'systematic,' 'unified,' and 'coordinated' fictional universe" ("This Makes No Sense At All" 87). Instead, for Heinze, "the intended result is ultimately impossible, simply because of how storyworlds and fictional universes work" (87). Heinze posits a re-examination of storyworlds through heterarchy, where a constantly shifting system of stories or media "may be continually re-ranked" (84). While the concept is a promising one, transmedia scholarship still maintains a hierarchical structure that privileges the creator, as I examined in Chapter 2, and transmedia stories still require a mothership to fully achieve its potential. However, the concept of media heterarchy offers an even clearer understanding of *Mass Effect* though, not only through its storyworld but through its characters, as I will explore in this section.

Applying heterarchy to *Mass Effect*'s transmedia characters helps illuminate how it functions as a transmedia story. Warren McCulloch originally introduced the concept to explain how nervous systems are "unpredictable from any theory founded on a scale of values" because they have "a heterarchy of values" that reject an ordering around a highest good ("A Heterarchy of Values Determined by the Topology of Nervous Nets" 3). Carole Crumley later notes that "many structures, both biological and social, are not organized hierarchically" despite "few terms

identity other kinds of order" ("Heterarchy and the Analysis of Complex Societies" 2). Without a

term to identify these other kinds of order, Crumley argues, "This conflation of hierarchy with

order makes it difficult to imagine, much less recognize and study, patterns of relations that are

complex but not hierarchical" (3). Thus, Crumley employs heterarchy to understand these

systems and defines it as "the relation of elements to one another when they are unranked or

when they possess the potential for being ranked in a number of different ways" (3). Heinze

employs it to describe a constantly shifting system of media where stories "may be continually

re-ranked" (84). Indeed, Heinze considers heterarchy to be one of the defining features of

franchises, as it allows us to understand how consumers must constantly reimagine a universe as

it expands with each new entry. As Heinze states, heterarchy "perfectly describes the relation and

dynamics of storyworlds and storyworld constituents within fictional universes such as

constituted by a franchise/transmedial world" (84). With *Mass Effect* constantly releasing new

media, it follows Heinze's consideration that "the question of the 'value' of each constituent of

the fictional universe—not only of the latest addition—as well as the heterarchical constellation

of the entire universe arises anew" (85). Each new novel, game, film, or comic can potentially

alter our interpretation of the *Mass Effect* story, pushing the narrative further into the past or

further into the future.

By examining *Mass Effect*'s characters, with an emphasis on Liara, I argue heterarchy

can further illuminate the nature of transmedia characters and transmedia stories in general. *Mass*

Effect, as a transmedia story, can then be better understood through Liara's character

development: these shifting media establish a clearer sense of Liara as a character, albeit in a

non-linear, non-hierarchical way. Indeed, *Mass Effect*'s media constantly shift the heterarchy of

its character, and they nevertheless unify to reveal Liara and other *Mass Effect* characters as

multi-dimensional characters. As part of a "unified" and "coordinated" experience, each story offers and builds upon a common denominator: Liara is an intellectual and charismatic asari with blue skin and freckles and psychic abilities that allow her to manipulate time and space who befriends Shepard and becomes the Shadow Broker. Space and time are important here because, as Heinze argues, heterarchy "needs to be conceived diachronically as well, principally because heterarchy as a concept by definition entails temporality and change, and concretely, because the fictional universes of franchises come into existence and are consecutively expanded bit by bit with every new storyworld that situates itself in this universe" (85). Like Liara, the players must manipulate time and space (by moving back and forth through the storyworld's timeline) to puzzle together her character construct. Indeed, each instance adds a crucial medium-specific layer that gives life to her character in ways that a single-medium story could not. This development follows Jenkins' notion that "each extension adds something we did not know before and thus deepens our emotional connection to the material" ("Transmedia What?"). In this sense, *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story offers more depth to and opportunity for both Liara's development and its storyworld.

As a transmedia character, Liara's identity is enough to ground the *Mass Effect 4* trailer within the *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story, giving clues as to how the next game could be both a sequel to the original trilogy and offer some connection to the Andromeda era. As Jenkins argues, "Often, characters in transmedia stories do not need to be introduced so much as reintroduced, because they are known from other sources" (*Convergence Culture* 120). This trailer, and Liara's presence in it, opens new paths for transmedial players to fill in the gaps of where this piece of media fits into the *Mass Effect* puzzle. The trailer thus becomes the latest addition in the *Mass Effect* story, forcing transmedial detectives to rearrange their understandings

and assumptions of their heterarchy that arises from the unique path through the transmedia story. That rearranging is inevitably troubled by the gaps still unsolved in what *Mass Effect 4* represents to the ongoing narrative, and Liara yet again offers a central position in *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story. Liara's presence, age, and motivations become key clues or questions that drive these detectives to look back to the *Mass Effect* mediascape for potential clues and forward to new avenues where those answers will inevitably arise.

Players are willing to follow characters across media for many reasons, with one crucial aspect being motivation. In allowing the players to step back from their role as protagonists, much of the media that make up Liara's character allows players to play a different game, one that coheres with the overarching puzzle of *Mass Effect*'s transmedia characters: understanding their motivations and inner thoughts. Indeed, as Blakey Vermeule argues, making sense of people is a kind of game: "We play the game in three-dimensional space and time. We make sense of people through a massive coordination effort, tracing how other people make sense of them. The game pieces consist of other people's minds or fragments of their minds" (*Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?* 37). This process is not static, of course. As Vermeule notes, "Their minds are always moving, and our perception of them determines how they move. This leverage triggers a massive round of reflexivity. The path we take to make sense of other people is always a detour up and down the layers of reflexivity" (37).

Understanding character motivation is rewarding on its own terms and challenges the drive for control and hierarchy. For Eder, Jannidis, and Schneider, "Motivations in many cases are the core of the personality of fictional beings, particularly in their interaction with other characters, so that the basic motivations of characters are a major element of their evaluation and interpretation" (25). Understanding a character's motivations fills in crucial gaps of a character's

nature and, as Eder, Jannidis, and Schneider note, "Motivations differ according to whether they are localised in the person itself or in its environment, whether they are egotistic or altruistic, whether the person is aware of and willing or able to reflect on them, how stable and influential they are, and whether they are consistent or contradictory" (25). What is important is not a hierarchy of meaning and canonical organization but the aspects of characters that make them interesting and encourage players to seek them out and follow them from one story or medium to another.

Challenging hierarchy also requires an understanding of how transmedia stories connect various media together into a singular experience. The fluid, complicated nature of transmedia character challenges stability and requires players to work across media to build these "shambling Frankenstein monsters" into meaningful constructs. Indeed, Emma Beddows notes, "Characters transcend aesthetic motifs coded to form and become a structure for the text to carry story across platforms" ("Buffy the Transmedia Hero" 152). As Beddows argues, "the transmedia text finds structure through recognisable and repeating motifs; however, in a continuity structure the motif is functionally adaptive. In other words, the embodied character evolves rather than repeats across platforms" (152). Brian Richardson argues, "for a character to be transportable between texts, it must have an independent essence that endures in different situations" ("Transtextual Characters" 539). Beddows agrees, claiming that "Characters are functionally adaptive in this context; as the story evolves across platforms so too do they. In this role, characters are able to reconcile contradictions between semiotic contexts by bridging the spaces between them" (154). Understanding transmedia stories through character dismisses the question: who or what is the definitive version of Liara? These multiple layers of the story create

an ever-growing concept of these characters that are flexible, offering and coming to terms with contradiction and player heterarchy.

While characters are often fluid and resist hierarchical organizations for their meaning, there must always be character commonalities or resonances between narratives to ensure a base level of coherence and consistency. Parallel to the possible paths created by a player's transmedial agency, the transmedia character extends from the player's unique understanding and experience of the storyworld heterarchy. Heinze explains, "how one experiences this fictional universe and each storyworld, and how one makes sense of each part and the 'whole,' significantly depends on which particular constituents one 'receives' in which particular order (not to mention each recipient's particular memory capacities)" (81). This process stresses the impossibility of closure in transmedia stories, with Heinze noting that "Even if we assume for a moment that the 'complete' reception of a fictional universe was possible, the reception process would still have to be consecutive (i.e., storyworld after storyworld), so that at least during this process, the universe would be dynamic and open" (81). There is no centrality, no origin of meaning since each addition challenges a stable order. Heinze notes, "Every new constituent, every new storyworld alters the fictional universe and its heterarchical order, both objectively and in dependence on the particular receiver and her previous engagement with that universe" (84-85). Each new media can potentially alter the interpretation—and the overarching puzzle— of the *Mass Effect* timeline, pushing the narrative further into the past or future.

These heterarchies then are not simply reliant on creator knowledge but also player experience in continuously re-ranking their importance to a player's unique experience of *Mass Effect*. As Heinze explains, "We might thus differentiate between the (mostly theoretical) 'global' heterarchy, which is independent from the particular receiver and takes into account the

entirety of a fictional universe at a given point in time, and the numerous 'local' heterarchies, which depend on the particular receiver and their knowledge of, and engagement with, the fictional universe" (85). The globally focused players thus understand Liara at the transmedial level, whereas locally-minded players may not have the deeper knowledge of the mediascape to know when a particular event, like rescuing Shepard's body as discussed in the previous section, took place as there is no signaling or a clear indication of when and where an event occurs in the transmedia story. A globalized perspective necessitates a constant shifting (or layering) of a media-specific lens to situate oneself in the media experience while recalling previous experiences to both map and read the current piece of the larger story.

Puzzling together experiences across the ever-shifting space and time of transmedia stories is one of their most common means of player engagement. In other words, as Matthew Freeman explains, "transmediality is about the strategically organized temporal relationships amongst a range of platforms and channels" ("'We don't get to stay the same way we started'" 302). Players must shift through time and space to understand how specific narratives fit into the transmedia character's constellation or overarching story. Transmedia stories allow, as Jenkins posits, for "fleshing out secondary characters, filling in back story, and providing 'missing scenes' which round out the action depicted on the screen" ("The *Heroes* Comics as Transmedia Storytelling"). As Jørgensen notes, "Psychological depth is then established through elaborate backstories, as well as character growth and development. Backstories have an important role in making the companions both deep and interesting, as their histories explain their attitudes and behavior in ways that make them unique and original" (318). Indeed, for Freeman, "fleshing out secondary characters and filling in backstory via the serial forms of prequels and sequels can be understood as the two key strands of how character-building takes shape in transmedia

storytelling" (*Historicising Transmedia Storytelling* 26). Players thus build Liara as they build *Mass Effect* while simultaneously using Liara as a guide for both processes.

Like my examination of Liara or Wrex and Tali previously, Jørgensen examines how players build the turian Garrus Vakarian, also known as Archangel. As Jørgensen explains, "Through distributing information little by little, and by presenting Archangel as a mythical figure as well as a tactical genius and by only providing a few, brief hints at his identity, the game makes sure that the player receives a lot of information about the companion" (325). Small clues building into the larger investigation frames Garrus as an important character with clear motivations. Curiosity mixed with accessible backstory built through investigation exemplifies Vermeule's notion of mind reading where readers take on the role of brilliant detectives like Sherlock Holmes so they can "circle around the idea of Machiavellian intelligence, meaning that they play on our need to fathom the deepest motivations of other people" (62). Thus, the metaphor of puzzles and games returns when Vermeule argues many Machiavellian narratives "center on games or puzzles that point the way to deeper registers of reflection and that are eventually absorbed into the story" (96). Like the mystery surrounding *Andromeda*'s Benefactor discussed in Chapter 1, hunting down Archangel or following Liara across media signals to transmedial players that the game is afoot.

It is important to note that players are not all guaranteed to feel that way about puzzling together characters, as I argue with Liara or how Jørgensen argues with Garrus. Christopher B. Patterson sees this detective work as problematic for character growth in that *Mass Effect* "uses the 'depth' of supporting characters to put the player in the curious position of managing—and often manipulating—those characters, reducing the value of their psychological complexity to abilities that must be manipulated and employed during battles" ("Role-Playing the

Multiculturalist Umpire" 208). And, of course, the Machiavellian or Holmes character can reduce those around them or become, as Jayanth points out, "the obnoxious jerk who gets away with his behaviour because he can somehow solve all the problems" ("Forget Protagonists"). However, only focusing on a character's value as a battle strategy ignores the time and energy it requires to find and recruit or reconnect with each NPC, let alone the time and energy it takes to construct their transmedia character constellation.

Transmedia storytelling thus limits that power fantasy from overwhelming the NPC: the players are constantly displaced from the central role in these stories. Focusing on characters in central roles that need to be followed and built over time creates the opportunity where, Zakowski argues, "the characters' actions in the present create the illusion that they have a mind of their own" (71). Engaging media within a transmedia story by following a character or characters rather than a player or creator-sanctioned timeline allows a transmedial player a different path through *Mass Effect*. In seeking depth of character rather than control of game mechanics or storyworld, players have the freedom to engage these characters as they desire. Creator intention is thus dismissed upon the reality of players' engagement that does not necessarily follow the implied path established by release order or advertising. Instead, characters like Liara, Garrus, and other NPCs lead the way through *Mass Effect*'s vast mediascape.

Conclusion: Old Paths Towards New Horizons

Mass Effect's reliance on players to construct both its characters and its overarching

story, as suggested through the video games' focus on micro-narratives and loyalty missions,

rejects the hierarchical assumptions of many contemporary, successful transmedia stories.

Nevertheless, *Mass Effect* is not doing something new; it centres on its characters by following

Jenkins' ideal concept of transmedia storytelling, offering a "unified and coordinated

entertainment experience" through a systematic dispersal of its fiction "across multiple delivery

channels" ("Transmedia Storytelling 101"). However, *Mass Effect*'s focus on characters allows

us to reconsider notions of "unified," "coordinated," and "systematic" at the site of the character

rather than the storyworld. Character reinforces the idealism of transmedia storytelling that is

also fluid and complicated, relying on the fuzzy narratological concept of character as well as the

unstable notion of characters. These monstrous media constructs resist singular definitions and

prescriptions by moving and changing across media, such as Liara's personality and motivations

changing as she grows as a character across the games, comics, and film. Furthermore,

transmedia storytelling offers the opportunity to explore character development in a multifaceted,

nuanced way through engagement with various stories and media over time. These opportunities,

I argue, are where players can engage their transmedial agency at the interpersonal level in the

transmedia story, piecing together their version of characters as reflected by how and when they

experience each story along their unique path through *Mass Effect*.

As I have argued through this chapter, transmedial agency offers a new perspective on

how players engage characters through concepts of NPCs, loyalty missions, and, most

importantly, puzzles. In applying both Bertetti's definition of transmedia character and Heinze's

use of heterarchy to *Mass Effect*, I have explored how its characters like Liara are developed

through a systematic, non-hierarchical distribution of content, offering exemplars of transmedia characters and transmedia storytelling that necessitate a focus on player engagement with its media as collectors, encyclopedists, and detectives piecing together this grand puzzle. *Mass Effect*'s characters have no single media object or narrative that fully encompasses them and rely instead on an interconnected constellation of relationships across stories and media that can be connected through the choices made by transmedial players. As transmedia characters, Liara and her fellow crewmates stretch across these narratives, and where they go, *Mass Effect* grows, expanding with new characters and stories in non-linear and non-hierarchical directions.

By expressing its transmedia story through unique and developed characters like Wrex, Tali, Garrus, and especially Liara, *Mass Effect* becomes one of Clark's "shambling Frankenstein monsters" ("Transmedia is a Lie"), not as a failure, but as an acceptance of these characters' complexity. Like Victor constructing the monster, we construct Liara by following her through these media, gaining a better understanding of who she is as a character as well as a better understanding of the over-arching transmedia story in which she is a central force as the information-gathering Shadow Broker. Furthermore, through focusing on its characters and challenging a media hierarchy, *Mass Effect* offers important aesthetic criteria for transmedia storytelling that contributes to the growing body of transmedia scholarship. Reliance solely on storyworld as the central foundation for transmedia storytelling necessarily limits the definition and criteria of the phenomenon following a growing wave of transmedia research. I have endeavoured to return the concept of character as crucial for the phenomenon, aligning past and present visions of transmedia storytelling.

Character-based transmedia stories were the beginning of this kind of storytelling, and though character has ostensibly been usurped by storyworlds, I have argued it is also the

potential to reassess the ways scholars examine these stories, allowing for a more players-focused understanding of transmedia storytelling. That is not to say that storyworlds do not matter in transmedia storytelling, only that characters drive these stories and give meaning to the worlds that exist around them in different ways often ignored through storyworld-focused analysis. This dynamic nature of shifting the narrative back and forth between storyworld and character and the players from collector to encyclopedist to detective is only further exemplified in my third and final aspect of transmedial agency: the player-character. In the next chapter, I explore how players exist as multiple frames of the ludological notion of player-character during and between not only the games by the entire transmedia story. The shift from the massive nature of storyworld to the interpersonal nature of character to finally the convergent nature of the player-character creates its own challenges and unique insights that will be explored in-depth in the following chapter.

CHAPTER IV

Re-Synthesis: Transmedial Agency through *Mass Effect*'s Player-Character

Introduction: *Mass Effect* and Player-Character

In this chapter, I will examine how the ludic concept of player-character operates in connection with the *Mass Effect* transmedia story. Choosing to not use the term "avatar" due to its problematic nature (as outlined in Appendix B), this examination employs my notion of player-character being the figure that represents both the player's actions and presence in a video game and the character that exists within (and beyond) the game. Like storyworld and character discussed in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, respectively, the player-character operates as the third and final "transmedial logic," in Jenkins' words, or means through which content flows across various connected media, that I will examine through my understanding of transmedial agency. Player-character is the most personal and convergent means of understanding the process of engaging transmedia stories as game systems.

Understanding how creators and players articulate and understand themselves is at the heart of a transmedia story. Furthermore, player-character is the concept that exemplifies how transmedia stories both shape and rely on transmedial players and vice versa. To review Chapter 1, my understanding of a transmedial player is the intended or implied user who exists as a reader, watcher, and player as they engage with the media network that makes up the transmedia story. The transmedial player is the intended fan who will hunt down, gather, and puzzle together each narrative to produce the larger transmedia story. This focus on players then reaffirms Jenkins' idealized definition of transmedia storytelling, which requires participants to "assume the role of hunters and gatherers, chasing down bits of the story across media channels, comparing notes with each other via online discussion groups, and collaborating to ensure that

everyone who invests time and effort will come away with a richer entertainment experience"
(*Convergence Culture* 20-21). Their participation allows them to become the transmedial players
who interact with a transmedia story, acting as collectors, encyclopedists, and detectives to
ensure its existence. Transmedial players, specifically through player-character, must construct
these stories from various media, immersing themselves as participants within and across the
multitude of stories and media in *Mass Effect*.

As I examined in Chapter 2, storyworld demands a coherency and consistency that
manifests as contention between a creator's vision and a player's organization. Furthermore, as I
examined in Chapter 3, character is a fluid and complicated construct that challenges the creator-
designed hierarchy necessitating player-led media heterarchy. The player-character, then, is a site
of convergence, where the other aspects of the transmedia story manifest directly at the site of
the player. Building from Chapter 1, player-characters are the third and final way of
understanding how players frame and experience a transmedia story through transmedial agency.
In connection with and through storyworlds and characters, player-characters offer a means of
exploring player engagement directly within the games of the *Mass Effect* mothership, as well as
the overarching transmedia story.

This chapter is structured into several sections to explore the transmedial player's
engagement in the *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story. First, I examine how within game-centric
transmedia, participants are implicitly expected to act as both players and player-characters, not
so much empathizing or identifying with a character (though that is a possibility) but as mediated
versions of themselves within the transmedia story. Here, I seek to extend Katherine Isbister's
claim that the "joining of player to virtual self through avatar-based action marks a core
innovation that games have brought to media" (*How Games Move Us* 13) to game-centric

transmedia. Second, I then explore how this joining of the player to the virtual self can be paralleled through a three-fold framing of player identity with particular emphasis on the player-Shepard dichotomy within the *Mass Effect* game trilogy of the Milky Way era. Extending that frame outwards, I explain that transmediality thus demands the physical and virtual self to overlap for a player to engage with a mediascape. Third, I re-examine the divisive *Mass Effect 3* conclusions (and subsequent controversy) through the lens of the transmedial player-character, contextualizing how this connection creates an immediacy of choice and consequence that spreads across the entire transmedia story while exploring how transmedia agency can further explain the potency and pragmatics of *Mass Effect*'s controversial ending(s).

1. Commanding Shepard: Understanding the Player-Character in *Mass Effect*

The player assumes the role of Commander Shepard or Pathfinder Ryder—either male or female—in the *Mass Effect* trilogy and *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, respectively (see Figure 15). The player-as-Shepard or the player-as-Ryder then builds their team of diverse and multi-dimensional characters as they accept and complete missions throughout the galaxy, helping various planets and communities stem the incoming Reaper invasion in the *Mass Effect* trilogy or the Kett invasion in *Andromeda*. As discussed in Chapter 3, players can foster relationships with their crew members, including romances, and their success on decisive missions relies on their team's loyalty. The choices player makes—including dialogue options, mission outcomes, and important decisions regarding crew or other NPCs—shape the player's experience of the *Mass Effect* games.
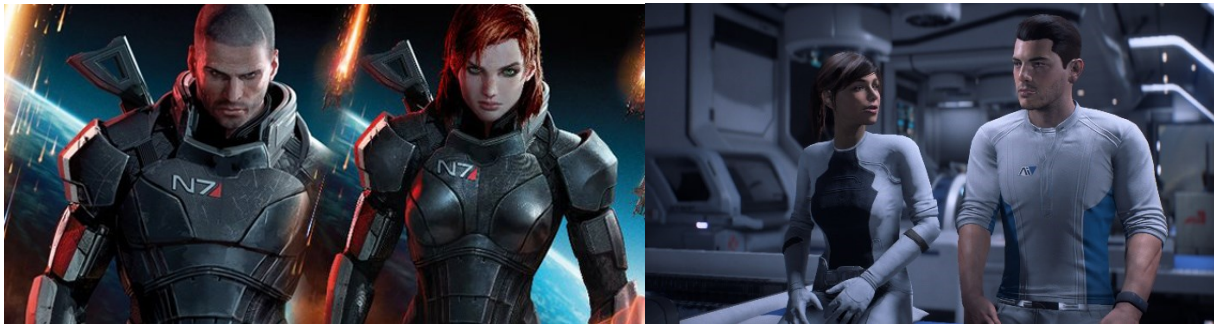
Figure 15. MaleShep and FemShep in Mass Effect 3 Promotions (BioWare); Sara and Scott Ryder (Andromeda).

The transmedial players' access to the storyworld and the characters is through the player-character Shepard within the game trilogy. Player-character—as a concept—offers a means for players to engage in the game and a ludic metaphor for how players exist within the transmedia story. Shepard is simultaneously inconsistent and consistent due to their nature as a player-character for transmedial players. Every Shepard is a different Shepard in a somewhat different mental representation of the *Mass Effect* storyworld and the transmedia story. As Jim

Bizzocchi and Theresa Jean Tanenbaum argue, "There is a core of character traits, values, and design decisions that comprise Shepard, and which are unchanging regardless of how the player chooses to interact with Shepard" yet "the specific personality traits of Shepard are mutable: the player interacts with the character at the level of attitude rather than identity" ("A Case Study in the Design of Game Narrative" 397). Like the transmedial player within the storyworld and transmedia story, Shepard has branching potentials that are either enacted or dismissed depending on a player's organization of the storyworld and paths through the *Mass Effect* games.

As a player-character, Shepard is both loosely and firmly defined outside their connection with the player. The only canonical aspect of Shepard is that they were born on April 11, 2154, graduated from the Systems Alliance N7 special forces program and was a veteran of the infamous Skyllian Blitz before being assigned to the SSV Normandy in 2183 with the rank of Commander (*Mass Effect 1*). This portion of their backstory is immutable and largely establishes Shepard's position at their introduction. The player-character enters at this point in Shepard's trajectory and then soon earns the title of the first human Spectre in Citadel history (*Mass Effect*). Beyond this introductory background, the player-as-Shepard then decides each significant aspect of their identity moving forward, and personally determines the weight of those choices. Theresa Jean Tanenbaum notes, "As with *Mass Effect*, where the narrative performance is less about *what* Shepard does and more about *how* she does it, these stories could create powerful mechanisms for the player to make meaningful performative choices that inflect the mood of the story without undermining the authorial style and message" (*Identity Transformation and Agency* 280). Like the storyworld and character, the frame of the player-character exists but the overarching puzzle and possible pathways through the *Mass Effect* transmedia story relies solely on the player to put together and enact.

Interestingly, Shepard does not exist in a fully realized form in other non-ludic media across the transmedia story, allowing the transmedial player's effort in shaping their player-character to remain unique. Nevertheless, Joleen Blom ignores this atypical means of character building, arguing instead that "The nature of Shepard's identity is not one that depends on the continuity of the character's identity between the game instalments and comics, but one that relies on the player's influence over Shepard's characterisation process" (*The Dynamic Game Character* 179). However, instead of celebrating these gaps as a means for players to maintain the sense of their Shepard across media, Blom states that "This involvement gives the false impression that the developer, as some benevolent author, grants the player the agency to imagine Shepard into the comics however they want" (179). However, Blom argues, "what the author actually provides is a preferred reading (see Hall 1973), a dominant reading in which the reader can only infer Shepard as a character in the comics that they have helped construct in the game series in the first place" (179). However, I do not believe BioWare offers a false impression and, as content creator and game designer Mark Brown notes, "When BioWare gets it right, the ownership of Shepard is shared equally and fairly between the player and the character" ("Game Maker's Toolkit – Commanding Shepard").

Contrary to the above quote, Blom then offers a conflicting assessment from her earlier comments regarding Shepard, and further agues that "The amount of agency the player has over Shepard's characterisation process has placed the invisible hands in jeopardy. The *ME* comics depict Shepard only on the level of the indicator. Any indicator conceals Shepard's identity so that no concrete manifestation of Shepard emerges" (191). This understanding would imply that BioWare creates a space for players to maintain their version of Shepard in non-ludic media, which I argue they do. As Blom continues, "The player has to imagine the character, and

substitute the indicator with their manifestation of Shepard they created over the course of the characterisation process in the game" (191). Indeed, due to the depth and variety of choice in the *Mass Effect* games, other media are not reliant on the games for their story and meaning. Shepard's various attributes, including ethics, character class, and gender, work together with player choices in game that are never contradicted in *Mass Effect*'s non-ludic media to ensure every player's Shepard is represented in the larger transmedia story. Consequently, Shepard's in-game identity and the player's choices are largely avoided in other media (see Figure 16), creating narrative gaps in those stories, or what Mélanie Bourdaa refers to as "narrative shadows" ("Transmedia Storytelling" 135). Such shadows or gaps allow millions of players (all with their unique Shepards) to engage with the novels, comics, and film without feeling non-canonically connected to the larger transmedia story. In this way, the non-ludic media are player-neutral, building the story around a loose reference or complete absence of Shepard to ensure each transmedial player's player-character is always the closest representation of their own experience through the storyworld and their connection to the characters.

Figure 16. Shepard's lack of identity (Redemption); Shepard in the shadows (Conviction).

One of the most devastating and interesting developments around Shepard's character occurs at the beginning of *Mass Effect 2* when they die during a Collector attack. Two years of in-game time follow and Shepard is then resurrected by Cerberus following the game's prologue.

While Shepard's scars may quickly heal, other characters constantly ask Shepard if it's still them, with Ashley Williams going as far as to say, "I'd like to believe you, Shepard. But I don't trust Cerberus. And it worries me that you do. What did they do to you?" (*Mass Effect 2*). Reuniting after the two years since the Normandy was destroyed and Shepard returning from the dead, Ashley's question implies that Cerberus remade Shepard more loyal to the extremist group. While the player-as-Shepard may be sure of themselves having returned to duty to fight the Reapers and not experiencing firsthand the two years when Shepard was presumed dead, the other characters made peace with Shepard's death, continued with their lives, and went on fighting those they considered threats, which includes Cerberus. However, Shepard mirrors the player's experience in piecing together the present-day events of *Mass Effect 2*, and like the transmedial player piecing together the transmedia story, Shepard must piece together what occurred in their absence and how they fit into this new reality. Shepard comes back, offering players the opportunity to revise their original versions of their player-character, or to continue down the path they established earlier in the transmedia story.

Some of the most important and least important choices a player can make in the *Mass Effect* game trilogy revolves around Shepard. Indeed, Daniel Reardon, David Wright, and Edward Malone suggest, "Central to the game's narrative are a series of decisions Shepard makes regarding seemingly minor and more significant events in the story. In all, the player makes 53 separate choices in the game, ranging from Shepard's background story to recruit or leave behind potential crew members" ("Quest for the Happy Ending to *Mass Effect 3*" 48). These choices are unique to the player and crucial to a player's engagement with the game without sacrificing access to and engagement with the larger transmedial storyworld. However, the most critical choices regarding the player-character are situated around Shepard's identity

and the three significant valences (or the main attributes) that define that identity. As Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum argue, "the primary valences for differentiation across playings are the ethical trajectory of the main character—Commander Shepard—and his or her character class. Character gender is a third significant source of variation, and although it has no systemic implications (unlike the other two) it does have substantial impact on the experience of the narrative" (396). Despite their lack of systematic effect, these valences more strikingly play out at the level of possibility and, with this possibility, the notion of seemingly infinite ways for players to nuance their experience of the transmedia story. However, these three valences of ethics, character class (Shepard's role or profession as a game character, rather than socio-economic class), and gender are inconsistent in terms of their importance to the games and the other media.

These character valences—ethics, class, and gender—operate on the character and storyworld engagement spectrum. The most important of these three valences is ethics. Shepard's ethics and morality are gamified as Paragon or Renegade scores. Paragon represents an altruistic version of Shepard who seeks diplomacy and kindness, whereas Renegade represents a brutal version of Shepard who seeks directness and conflict. *Andromeda* dropped the Paragon/Renegade binary for a more nuanced selection between "conversation tone choices" that include "emotional," "logical," "casual," and "professional" (*Mass Effect*: *Andromeda*); nevertheless, the means to negotiate interactions and encounters remains the same. These choices are more important than other traditional RPG traits like weapon and armour proficiency or combat skills because they offer different routes through the narrative in terms of character development and dialogue rather than fighting and killing enemies.

Choosing either Paragon or Renegade (or a neutral, third) path through the games does not shift Shepard away from the Reaper War. Instead, it offers an ethical pathway for the

player's means of engaging with NPCs and the world around them. As Kristine Jørgensen explains, "players decide the direction of Shepard's personality, but regardless of whether they choose to make the PC a 'renegade' or a 'paragon' or something in between, Shepard's appearance and voice-acting suggests that the PC is a charismatic and energetic commander with an attitude" ("Game Characters as Narrative Devices" 320). Shepard—despite being a developed character as a player-character that can reflect the transmedial player's choices and identity to some degree—is a core aspect of the series canon. For Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum, "The player character of Shepard does some important narrative work, by allowing the player to inflect the attitude of the primary frame on the game world, while simultaneously providing a stable embodiment of the core ethos of the story" (399). Having transmedial players embody Shepard through the games carries a significant amount of ontological weight for the transmedial player's goal of organizing this storyworld while also ensuring the creators' canonical trajectory of the game trilogy. It also offers a framing perspective for the transmedial players' connection to the characters.

Character class is the second character valances that defines Shepard's unique playstyle and variation from one player to another. Players can choose from one of six classes: Adept, Soldier, Engineer, Vanguard, Sentinel, and Infiltrator. Like ethics, character class augments how a player plays the game, but the game still progresses along its main arc if Shepard is a Soldier or an Engineer. The player may have different abilities and therefore access to different parts of the game and its systems, such as hacking into databases and vaults for more credits and equipment, but this choice has the least effect on the narrative experience compared to the other valences: class solely affects combat and small portions of the storyworld. Shepard's class may have the least effect on the narrative experience of the games; however, it has the most effect on the ludic

experience of the games. *Mass Effect: Legendary Edition* offers five difficulty levels (casual, normal, veteran, hardcore, and insanity) that dictate enemy health, AI, and damage output with higher levels of difficulty requiring players to rely on cover and squadmate synergy and strategy to move through the game space. While these difficulty settings can be changed at any point during gameplay, they offer escalating challenge for players that may force players to reassess their relationship with Shepard and their chosen squadmates on a particular mission. Staying alive (not having Shepard's health drop to zero) becomes a priority during confrontations and can inspire players to seek more diplomatic means of engaging NPCs to prevent lethal engagements.

Character class then adds another layer to difficulty. The Soldier class offers combat bonuses including increased health and damage output, whereas Engineer has fewer physical traits but offers players access to different technical abilities including hacking enemy weapons, deploying shields, and healing squadmates. Furthermore, the Adept, Vanguard, and Sentinel classes allow Shepard to access biotic abilities often only available to certain squadmates (such as Liara or Wrex) that can manipulate the space and time of the combat encounter, slowing down enemy reactions, changing the gravity of an area, or creating barriers to protect squadmates. Choosing the Soldier class makes combat less difficult because increased health and armor ensures player-character survivability and having access to the widest array of weapons ensures player-characters will not run out of ammo when fighting difficult enemies. Engineers and tech-focused classes have less health and armour, making combat more lethal and forcing player-characters to rely on their squadmate synergy to overcome challenging encounters. Character class defines how player-characters approach combat and exploration in the games, potentially

opening or closing avenues of exploration of the storyworld and engagement with different characters.

Finally, gender is the third valence but first choice a player must make when starting the game trilogy. While Shepard's gender does not affect gameplay, it defines the squadmate romances available to the player-character and minor changes to character dialogue, significantly affecting how the transmedial player engages their squadmates and other characters. If a player chooses to be male Shepard (MaleShep), their potential romance options include Ashley Williams in *Mass Effect 1*; Miranda Lawson, Tali'Zorah vas Normandy, and Jack in *Mass Effect 2*; and Miranda Lawson, Tali'Zorah vas Normandy, Ashley Williams, and Steve Cortez in *Mass Effect 3*. If a player chooses to be female Shepard (FemShep), their potential romance options include Kaiden Alenko in *Mass Effect 1*; Jacob Taylor, Garrus Vakarian, and Thane Krios in *Mass Effect 2*; and Garrus Vakarian, Thane Krios, and Samantha Traynor, Javik, and James Vega in *Mass Effect 3*. Both MaleShep and FemShep can romance Liara T'Soni in all three games, as well as Samara in *Mass Effect 2* and *Mass Effect 3*, Kelly Chambers in *Mass Effect 2* and *Mass Effect 3*, and Diana Allers in *Mass Effect 3*. It is important to note that MaleShep can also romance Kaiden Alenko in *Mass Effect 3* despite not being able to romance him in *Mass Effect 1* and *Mass Effect 2*, offering a new gay romance option with the character in the third game. The Shepard's gender and relationships are in-depth and evolve over the course of several games if players choose to continue them with many scholars offering thorough analyses of these romances (Dutton, Consalvo, and Harper 2011; Spahn 2014; Adams 2015; Østby 2016; Zekany 2016; Harper 2017; Lima 2017, 2018; Adams and Rambukkana 2018; Krampe 2018; Youngblood 2018). Furthermore, Mark Meer (MaleShep's voice actor) and Jennifer Hale

(FemShep's voice actor) offer nuanced versions of Shepard that bring another layer of the character's identity during spoken dialogue and scripted events.

To further bolster the player-character connection between the transmedial player and Shepard is the opportunity to transfer one's saved files to the next game in the trilogy. Transferring save files to each subsequent game carries over these valences and important decisions in one game to another and ensures those actions have lasting consequences through the trilogy. The transmedial player builds a history with Shepard as Shepard, and the choices and consequences become part of the storyworld. Of course, the most important of those lasting consequences is a player's connection with the player-character Shepard. The player-character connection between the player and Shepard is crucial to the *Mass Effect* trilogy experience. Their choices, successes, and failures are all shared by Shepard and the player as two sides to the player-character hybrid made only more important because there are trilogy-wide consequences in the player-character's choices.

The player-character is a concept equally taken for granted as a fundamental component of games and deeply contested as an ontological paradox. In early game studies scholarship, Mary Fuller and Henry Jenkins stress that player-characters should not be mistaken for characters or protagonists in a narrated story because "In Nintendo's narratives, characters play a minimal role, displaying traits that are largely capacities for action: fighting skills, modes of transportation, preestablished goals" ("Nintendo and New World Travel Writing"). For Fuller and Jenkins, "The character is little more than a cursor that mediates the player's relationship to the story world" ("Nintendo and New World Travel Writing"). Rune Klevjer later attempts to nuance this distinction, noting, "'Little more than a cursor' seems to imply that the avatar is no more than a tool, a capacity for action, an instrument" ("Enter the Avatar" 18). Nevertheless, this

implication is common in game studies. For James Newman, these parts "player" and "character" do not make a cohesive whole: "the 'character' is better considered as a suite of characteristics or equipment utilised and embodied by the controlling player. The primary-player-character relationship is one of vehicular embodiment" ("The Myth of the Ergodic Videogame"). Such scholarship thus minimizes the player-character to a cursor, tool, or vehicle and removes the emotional and profound connection between the player and the character.

Ignoring this important connection, Newman thus seeks "to challenge the notion of identification and empathy in the primary-player-character relationship and, consequently, the privileging of the visual and of representation-oriented approaches" ("The Myth of the Ergodic Videogame"). Newman argues that character can fade from view during gameplay as "we may begin to arrive at a point where we don't have to think about Lara [Croft] in playable game sequences in terms of representation—we don't have to think about her in terms of representational traits and appearance—we don't even have to think about 'her' at all" ("The Myth of the Ergodic Videogame"). However, this idea that the character's representation can be ignored is a deeply problematic assertion that exposes the privileged assumptions certain players and scholars have of games, players and scholars who are not marginalized in gaming spaces and game worlds, whose representation is plentiful and widely considered the default. In other words, "she" and "her" matter, even if some scholars do not have or want to think of "her" at all. Representational traits and appearance are a core component of player-characters in general and *Mass Effect* through Shepard's three valences, especially as FemShep is a widely celebrated version of the character.

Gender, as the character valance and *Mass Effect*'s first choice regarding the player-character Shepard, may appear only at surface level, but Shepard's gender has wide-ranging

effects on players. The choice of Shepard's gender does not alter the narrative arc, but it does alter the experience. For Chris B. Patterson, gender choice is "Foremost among these strategies of dynamic control" because "it greatly adjusts the tone and attitude of the role-play experience" ("Role-Playing the Multiculturalist Umpire" 222). Indeed, the *Mass Effect* experience cannot be summarized through Newman's position that "On-Line, Lara Croft is defined less by appearance than by the fact that 'she' allows the player to jump distance *x*, while the ravine in front of us is larger than that, so we better start thinking of a new way round" ("The Myth of the Ergodic Videogame"). However, "she" is crucial in defining and understanding player-character because these entities are not simply cursors or vehicles for player embodiment.

FemShep is a core aspect of player connection and engagement with the *Mass Effect* transmedia story. As Patterson notes, "In BioWare's marketing of the first and second *Mass Effect*, FemShep went completely unacknowledged, and 82% of players ended up choosing the buzzcut White male protagonist" (222). However, as Patterson continues, despite this imbalance, "BioWare gamers have been claiming since the first *Mass Effect*, playing as FemShep is vital to the *Mass Effect* experience, as the character's voice actor, Jennifer Hale, plays the role with a much more flexible, ambiguous and empathetic style" (222). BioWare's Drew Karpyshyn, the lead writer of *Mass Effect 1* and *2* and the author of the first three novels, *Revelation*, *Ascension*, and *Retribution* in the transmedia story, mirrors this consideration. In Tom Bissel's book exploring game development, Karpyshyn notes that Hale's voice can subtly shift the player's experience because "it still allows you to feel like you are the character. It doesn't distance you, and that's very hard to do" (*Extra Lives* 115). This closing the distance between character and player is a core aspect of the player-character connection. That connection allows the other valences a foundation from which they can grow to form a fully realized character that is equally

developed as their own entity and the player's access to the storyworld. Indeed, there is a balance in character development and voice acting that allows for a more individual player-character experience that is often recognized in BioWare's games, with particular emphasis on Shepard's character.

Gender choice as one of Shepard's valences and character representation cannot be minimized by Newman's idea that "On-Line, the 'character' is a complex of all the action contained within the gameworld. By which I mean that On-Line, 'being' Lara is as much about being presented with puzzles as it is having the techniques and resources to solve them" ("The Myth of the Ergodic Videogame"). It also dictates how the player engages with the other characters in the games and other media, as illuminated by *Mass Effect*: *Redemption* discussed in Chapter 3, where Shepard's appearance remains ambiguous to refuse a canonical gender. Klevjer also resists Newman's divisions, stating, "My objection would be that Lara Croft or Mario, considered as 'On-Line' player extensions, are far more than 'sets of available capabilities'" (*What is the Avatar?* 62). However, Klevjer then backtracks, arguing, "At the same time it is important to emphasise, as Newman does, that computer game avatars are primarily mediators of agency rather than characters in the literary or cinematic sense of the term" (62). Klevjer furthers this notion, later arguing that "Many have noted that the character dimension of avatars like Mario or Lara Croft appears to be relatively insignificant in comparison to their function as a mediators of players' agency in the gameworld" ("Enter the Avatar" 18). Separating player-character from the character and their function as "mediators of players' agency" is a problematic consideration because the character part of the player-character spectrum is at the core of player agency in how they engage the storyworld.

As I have argued through this chapter, playing as Shepard is the core experience of the *Mass Effect* game trilogy. Shepard offers both the creator's intended narrative path and the player's desired means of self-expression. Indeed, as Hanna-Riikka Roine notes, "the processes and elements enabling the player to role-play the character lie at the heart of this experience of play, as both the game's progression structure and the meanings this structure potentially evokes are linked to the playing of the character" ("How You Emerge from This Game Is up to You" 77). As Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum explain, "By directing the participation of the player into narrower channels of self-expression, however, such as inflecting Shepard's personality, or choosing which squad member loyalty missions to complete, the game provides meaningful opportunities for active engagement with the established storyworld" (402). Player agency and creator vision then can coincide if these limitations are meaningful. Meaning only ends when participation is closed, or these choices are suspended by a new canonical trajectory.

Player-characters offer a space to imagine potentials as agency is connected to both the game system itself and the on-screen representation of the player within it. Ignoring the system limitations and constraints that simultaneously open and close various opportunities for players to engage in the game allows scholars to exaggerate players' influence as player-characters have in these worlds. They are not what Andrew Burn and Gareth Schott refer to as "the player-as-god" ("Heavy hero or digital dummy?" 218). Marie-Laure Ryan, among others, also pushes this notion, arguing that "the user plays god to a virtual world" (*Avatars of Story* 113). Ryan's explanation, however, speaks to the idea of potential: "the user is cast as a character situated in both the time and space of the virtual world. His actions determine the fate of the avatar, and by extension, the fate of the virtual world" (116). Player-character is much more complicated than parallels to cursors or grandeur of Deus ex machina. In emphasizing the player, the character is

diminished; in emphasizing the character, the player is diminished. This tendency towards exaggerating a player's power in a game stems from the usage of "avatar," as I outlined in Appendix B, with scholars conflating the Hindu religious notion of reincarnated godhood with players inhabiting the game space through a digital presence.

Using the term "avatar" turns the profound to profane but not in some semantic and ontological way—it appropriates the mytho-religious contexts of Hinduism—an already colonialized and appropriated culture and religion. When discussing the problematic nature of "avatar," Lars de Wildt, Thomas H. Apperley, Justin Clemens, Robbie Fordyce, and Souvik Mukherjee explain, "Our intention is not to turn people away from this term but rather to open a space for reflexivity around the avatar that acknowledges its fraught background—to reorient the avatar" ("(Re-)Orienting the Video Game Avatar" 14). However, usage of the term continues throughout games scholarship, often without acknowledgement (Burn and Schott 2004; Linderoth 2005; Gazzard 2009; Jørgensen 2009; Pearce 2009; Black 2017). Continuing this trajectory is and always was unnecessary when a neutral, more accurate term "player-character" exists. Players are not gods reincarnated into digital bodies. Furthermore, this connection to godhood is deeply problematic to notions of agency, which I will further explore later in this chapter.

The player-character connection is a relationship rather than a mastery; it is a connection between player and character, and player and system(s). This connection is important to the video game experience. Daniel Black argues that "the player seemingly has the experience of acting through a virtual body upon a virtual space—some kind of direct, preconscious engagement with virtual body and space is necessary in order to play the game" ("Why Can I See My Avatar?" 183). However, Black notes that this connection is not straightforward: "In

effect, there is the player, and there is the game character, whom the player effectively becomes while playing the game. But, in reality, how the player is positioned relative to the game world, and which vantage point on it the player is invited to identify with, is much more complex" (190). For *Mass Effect*, the games make space for the connection to Shepard reliant on the player's engagement.

The player continually negotiates their position as player and game character. As Black notes, the "player always is—and always must be—an embodied physical presence who does not look out onto the virtual environment through the game character's eyes but looks at a screen with her own eyes and does not engage in embodied activity in the virtual environment but rather manipulates one or more control devices" (194). Nevertheless, the emotional and physical investment in playing as a game character is part of a player's shifting identity while experiencing the game as both embodied, physical player in the real world and the virtual body in the game world. Playing a video game enacts this process continuously. Black argues that "We routinely shift the boundaries of our bodily experience in multiple ways and to multiple degrees, and the simulated spaces and bodies of video games generate sensory, kinesthetic, and affective engagement by inviting us to extend this capacity into their virtual worlds" (197). The player must assume the role of Shepard (or Ryder) and the consequent identity is a new reality for whatever amount of time and point of suspended disbelief through the gameplay experience.

If the player plays the game, they must inevitably engage, at some level, with Shepard and the task of overcoming the Reaper invasion. Petri Lankoski argues that this kind of engagement requires what he sees as "two processes: goal-related and empathic engagement" ("Player Character Engagement in Computer Games" 294). For Lankoski, "In goal-related engagement, players derive their goals from a PC [player character], and this in turn structures

the affective experience of a player" (306). One could only think of the often-innocent statement: "I keep dying on this level," or "that boss keeps killing me." This particular investment is vital for Shepard's survival from mission to mission because their success is also the player's success. If they die or fail, the player also fails and progression halts. The second aspect of engaging with a character, which Lankoski calls empathic engagement, "is essentially about reacting to the character's actions" (306). The transmedial player must recognize Shepard at some level of empathy or even antipathy (as their goals still align with the character).

We become these characters but not at the expense of their identities. Mario is still Mario even if we are playing as him; Lara is still Lara even if we are playing as her. While video game characters can be framed as tools or vehicles, it minimizes the crucial identification both with and as the character within the player-character connection. The player and character create a virtual bond that allows the player's emotional connection to Shepard to complete the games. Connected through mechanical, technological, and virtual means, each represents two halves of a ludic whole: the player is Shepard, and Shepard is the player. This engagement does not negate Shepard's identity any more than it negates the player's identity; their agency becomes the player's agency, and their experiences become the player's experiences. Even at the most basic level, we are concerned for their well-being because they represent our well-being during the game and the story. Even simplistic "cursor-like" entities still possess an ontological weight: the mouse cursor in Blizzard Entertainment's real-time strategy (RTS) games in the *StarCraft* series represents the orders you give as a commanding officer in a military, and the units you control are characters that respond to your commands. Indeed, to minimize the player-character is to minimize the player experience.

2. Send in the Clone! Hybrid Realities and Divergent Potentials

Much like the player connection to the player-character, choice—especially regarding how the player moves through the storyworld as Shepard—must operate on a level of tiers. As a character, Shepard is the human soldier who leads the galaxy against the Reapers. Shepard cannot shift from that position as that role is central to the narrative that must occur for the games—and series—to progress. If players have too much control throughout the game and over Shepard as a character, it inevitably runs against the logic and structure of the series. Meghan Blythe Adams and Nathan Rambukkana explain this risk of deviation as "player choices could be seen as running afoul of both Shaw's and Rubin's charmed circles both—which could explain why at times games will be especially pointed in rebuffing such attempts, even going so far as to punish players for attempting to subvert normative game play" ("Why do I have to make a choice?"). These choices in the game act as a microcosm of the players' choices in how they choose to engage the series, challenging or reifying the creator's vision.

Furthermore, within or against this hierarchy of storyworld or heterarchy of character, players must maintain multiple stratospheres of play: participants in the transmedia story and the video game spaces. Players thus exist in the real, the virtual, and the transmedial. Applying transmedial agency to the notion of player-character, I argue that this hybridity can be best understood through the player's subjectivity in games. Shepard is interesting because they are as much the player as their own character and exist in a nebulous position within *Mass Effect*'s non-ludic media, which ensures the transmedia story is more meaningful for players who created and cultivated a unique Shepard.

Moving beyond the problematic notions of character as vehicle or the player-as-god, Katie Salen Tekinbaş and Eric Zimmerman offer a more nuanced concept for understanding

player-character: "This three-fold framing of player consciousness—as a character in a simulated world, as a player in a game, and as a person in a larger social setting—elegantly sketches out the experience of play" (*Rules of Play* 454). Salen Tekinbaş and Zimmerman's concept of player-character acknowledges the various levels of the player within and outside the game, bringing these interconnected identities under one concept. This three-fold framing parallels my conception of transmedial agency from most immediate to most abstract: Shepard as a character, the player-as-Shepard, and the transmedial player. The spectrum of connection from Shepard to the transmedial player also speaks to the notion of the player-character. Many scholars have examined this hybridity previously, though not in connection with the player-character connection within *Mass Effect*. To fill this gap, I will examine *Mass Effect 3*'s "Citadel" DLC, *Mass Effect*: *Foundation*, and *Mass Effect: Infiltrator* to explore how this hybridity is a present though often unresolved aspect of Shepard's presence.

Released at the end of *Mass Effect 3*'s initial development cycle, the "Citadel" DLC, now a standard mission in the *Legendary Edition* called "Citadel: Shore Leave," offers a moment of reflection and the conclusion to events set in place at the beginning of *Mass Effect 2*. The player-as-Shepard reconnects with old companions to unravel an identity theft set in motion when Cerberus reconstructed Shepard and secretly cloned them. Aptly named, the DLC/mission occurs across the Citadel as Shepard and their companions use their shore leave to fight their way through a conspiracy revolving around the ex-Cerberus agent Maya Brooks and the Shepard clone that she stole during the events around *Mass Effect 2*'s Lazarus Project. During the final confrontation, Shepard and their companions must fight the clone aboard the Normandy. The fight ends not when Shepard defeats the clone but when the clone throws themselves from the ship, thinking they are an inferior version of the player-as-Shepard, when they realize Shepard's

status as a galactic hero is only possible because of their companions. Shepard's identity was forged through companionship, not conflict, as the Shepard clone had initially believed.

Facing their clone, a construct of themselves, the player-as-Shepard encounters the ethical consequences of the ludic hybrid (see Figure 17). Connected through mechanical, technological, and virtual means, the player and character represent two halves of a ludic hybrid as the player-character: the player-Subject is the character-Other, and the character-Other is the player-Subject. Shepard's clone thus becomes a disruption of this connection, representing a different possibility of how Shepard could have arrived at their present moment, outside of the player, instead controlled by Maya Brooks. Thus, the "Citadel" DLC or "Citadel: Shore Leave" mission, not only a heartfelt conclusion for the Milky Way trilogy, offers a moment of reflection of the player-as-Shepard's trajectory through the *Mass Effect* trilogy.

Figure 17. Shepard confronting their clone (Mass Effect 3).

This reflection is more apparent through the accompanying comic series called *Mass Effect*: *Foundation*. *Foundation*, released between July 24, 2013, to July 23, 2014, is a thirteen-part comic series that offers the backstory for the Cerberus agent Rasa, originally introduced as the antagonist Maya Brooks in the "Citadel" DLC or "Citadel: Shore Leave" mission, as she moves through the ranks of Cerberus ultimately stealing a clone version of Shepard from the

Lazarus Project. The comics reveal Rasa's influence over the entirety of the *Mass Effect* trilogy,

including her interactions with various Normandy crew before, during, and after their service

with Shepard, including direct encounters with all the companion characters in *Mass Effect 2*. As

a high-ranking member of Cerberus during the two-year gap in *Mass Effect 2*, Rasa is

responsible for putting together the dossiers that lead Shepard to their companions and allowing

them the resources to assist Cerberus with their human Reaper construction unknowingly. In

short, Rasa is a shadowy puppeteer that allows Cerberus to use Shepard during the events around

Mass Effect 2. The most significant event during the *Foundation* series occurs when Rasas steals

Shepard's clone from Cerberus' Lazarus Project to take revenge against Cerberus for her

mistreatment. In stealing Shepard's clone, Rasa begins to plot a scheme to take down Shepard

and replace them with the clone before gaining access to all the resources she needs to destroy

Cerberus (see Figure 18).

Figure 18. Rasa stealing Shepard's clone (Foundation).

Foundation thus sets the stage for both *Mass Effect 2* and *Mass Effect 3*'s "Citadel" DLC

or "Citadel: Shore Leave" mission. However, Rasa's possession of Shepard's clone connects

back to the anxiety of the ludic hybrid in that the clone, with its cybernetic enhancements and

ostensibly superhuman abilities, becomes the tabula for Rasa's identity theft. Rasa turns the clone into her personal weapon, disrupting the player-character connection and challenging the player-as-Shepard with Shepard's double in the DLC/mission. Rasa becomes the player to the Shepard clone's character, training them to become a living weapon capable of confronting Shepard and almost successfully dispatching and replacing them. However, Rasa uses the Shepard clone as a tool, a vehicle, to achieve her ends, rather than developing the Shepard clone as an individual like the player does with the player-character Shepard. Ignoring and rejecting the Shepard clone as a character, Rasa (occupying the controlling player figure position) is the realization of earlier scholars' limited or limiting view of player-characters who consider the player-character to be either a cursor or a vehicle controlled by a god. Thus, Rasa functions not-so-subtly to critique the oppressive way of treating NPCs as extensions of the player and dismissing the character component of the player-character.

In a series largely situated on the violence of the other (whether alien, robotic, or monstrous), focusing on the tenuous connection between player and character and the hybridity of player-as-Shepard invokes a connection with the other. The player-as-Shepard and Shepard's clone work at different ends of this ludic spectrum. One celebrates the player-character, human-computer connection implicit in video games and the alternative realizations of how and what Shepard could be if not part of the player-as-Shepard. The clone posing as Shepard draws a mirroring parallel on the possibilities and closures placed upon the player and the emphasis on the player-character connection. Rasa's Shepard clone exists as a Shepard from another possible timeline, a playthrough not realized, incompatible with the player's experience of the *Mass Effect* storyworld and larger transmedia story. The destruction of the cloned double, a common science fiction trope, leans towards the ontological impossibility of two identical beings existing

within the same storyworld and same player playthrough. In short, the "Citadel" DLC or

"Citadel: Shore Leave" mission must inevitably end with only one Shepard prevailing to return

the galaxy to order and re-establishing the player-character and transmedial player's path through

Mass Effect as the true playthrough.

The ludic hybrid with Salen Tekinbaş and Zimmerman's three-fold frame is an

interesting means of understanding the player-as-Shepard and the conflict with Shepard's clone

because it speaks to the technological convergence that operates at the site of the player-

character and, by extension, the transmedial player. Combining the posthuman and the video

game, Sherry Turkle argues, "Working out your game strategy involves a process of deciphering

the logic of the game, of understanding the intent of the game's designer, of achieving a 'meeting

of the minds' with the program" (*The Second Self* 68). Thus, Turkle concludes that "The video

games reflect the computer within—in their animated graphics, in the rhythm they impose, in the

kind of strategic thinking that they require" (68). Similarly, Ted Friedman argues that the

connection between player and computer in video games creates a symbiosis: "Flowing through

a continuous series of decisions made almost automatically, hardly aware of the passage of time,

you form a symbiotic circuit with the computer" ("Making Sense of Software" 5). This

symbiosis aligns with the ludic hybrid as Friedman posits that "The computer comes to feel like

an organic extension of your consciousness, and you may feel like an extension of the computer

itself" (5). That extension operates as a "meeting of the minds" where player and computer,

player and character, merge.

Turkle and Friedman's notions of the player-as-computer symbiosis reflect my

configuration of the player-as-Shepard spectrum through Salen Tekinbaş and Zimmerman's

multiple levels of the player-character who exists at the site of the game, the person, and the

societal structure around them. At the level of the game, Shepard exists as a fully-realized character with a backstory, companions, and a mission; at the level of the person, the player-character is a situated entity of game and player, acting together as a person in the *Mass Effect* storyworld; and at the level of the societal structure around them, the transmedial player encompasses each of these ontological tiers while being an individual within a larger space, the *Mass Effect* transmedia story. These layers are not stable, and the player must move between them while simultaneously occupying all of them during their engagement with the transmedia story.

The "Citadel" DLC or "Citadel: Shore Leave" mission in connection with *Foundation* emphasizes the experience of engaging with others and coming to terms with one's need for connection, offering a rare moment of reflection in an otherwise chaotic galactic war. Playing the DLC/mission is an experience that momentarily undoes the drive for mastery in its attention to the posthuman ethics of cloning and doubling while reading *Foundation* offers space to reflect on these ethics and the possibility of parallel, if not conflicting, paths of identity. Shepard must come to terms with their rebuilt self, and only through engaging with and overcoming their cloned double can they challenge the appropriations set upon them by Cerberus. This overcoming may appear to celebrate video game's legacy of mastery and control, which Klevjer stresses when summing up the connection between Turkle and Friedman: "Friedman's 'cyborgian consciousness' and Turkle's 'deciphering' articulate a particular kind of 'symbiotic' relationship that emerge from computer game play, accounting for how players (through hard learning and struggle) get into the cybernetic loop of mastery and control" (*What is the Avatar?* 102). However, this mastery and control is only one aspect of this connection that I seek to move beyond with my exploration of transmedial agency.

Mass Effect plays to the trope of overcoming and mastering the other with Shepard's clone, but the player-as-Shepard speaks to a different cybernetic loop. A rebuilt, cybernetic Shepard as a player-character is a critical paradigm shift for *Mass Effect* that refocuses agency and empathy upon the posthuman. Acknowledging a posthuman shift in contemporary narrative, Rosi Braidotti asks, "What if these unprogrammed-for others were forms of subjectivity that have simply shrugged off the shadow of binary logic and negativity and have moved on?" ("Posthuman, all too human" 205). Through Shepard, the player can—for at least the length of the DLC/mission—move towards a subjectivity that shrugs off these shadowy binary logics and negativity of the (cloned and cybernetic) other by confronting this new social imaginary at the game, the person, and the societal structure. Indeed, both *Foundation* and the DLC/mission are still mired in this anxiety with Shepard's clone. However, the hybrid subjectivity of the player-character is centred in this mission and reflected in the player-as-Shepard through the transmedia story.

Unfortunately, my third example, the mobile game *Mass Effect: Infiltrator*, does not seek to reject the shadow binaries of logic and negativity surrounding the cybernetic or cloned other. Released for iOS on March 6, 2012 (the same day as *Mass Effect 3*), *Infiltrator* parallels and articulates the posthuman anxiety seemingly inherent to the player-character connection. *Infiltrator* revolves around the horror of scientific experiments and cybernetics. The only game to not center on Shepard, Ryder, or one of the Normandy crew, players play as Randal Ezno, a rogue Cerberus operative. Through the short campaign, players infiltrate a Cerberus research facility and must fight their way out of the facility upon discovering the horrific experiments. The game concludes with a confrontation between Ezno and his advisor Inali Renata, who is now augmented beyond recognition as a cybernetically-enhanced monster. In *Infiltrator*, there is no

potential to overcome any posthuman anxiety, and Ezno kills Inali. The cybernetic connection is further compounded by the game being only playable on mobile devices, everyday technology that has become an extension of the human with their ubiquity in our lives and interactions. Playing as Ezno, who has his augmentations, on a mobile device in pursuit of overcoming Cerberus' horrific cybernetic augmentations on enemies and former colleagues offers an ironic engagement that simultaneously ignores and obsesses with the connection that permeates through the *Mass Effect* games, storyworld, transmedia story, and the transmedial player's relationship with all of them.

These three examples thus speak to the dynamics of the player-character lost in Fuller and Jenkins' notions of cursor-like entities, Newman's vehicular embodiments—through notions of "on-line" and "off-line" personas—and Klevjer's argument that they are "mediators of agency rather than characters in the literary or cinematic sense of the term" (62). As I examined in the Introduction and Chapter 1, despite agency being a core component of the player-character connection, few scholars fully unpack how that sense of agency affects the bond between player and player-character. Alison Gazzard exemplifies this tradition of centring agency as a definitive quality of player-characters, noting that "The main components of the avatar are having a sense of agency and seeing the result of those actions" ("The Avatar and The Player" 191). As I mentioned above, the concept of "mediators of agency" has important caveats that obscure how the player-character enables players to act within and upon the game space that often ignores the constraints inherent in (ludic and playable) media.

It is important to note that not all scholars ignore the character aspect of the player-character. For Daniel Vella, "on a basic ontological level, agency is only possible at all thanks to the presence of an entity belonging to the gameworld that acts as a manifestation of the player

and allows her to encounter the other entities in the gameworld at their own level" (*The Ludic Subject and the Ludic Self* 166-167). The presence of an entity is crucial to understanding player-characters beyond cursors, vehicles, and mediators; first and foremost, player-characters are entities in the gameworld. Vella continues, stating that "it also becomes apparent that the specific contours of player agency in a given game are a direct result of the particular nature of the ludic subjectivity she takes on" (167). Consequently, Vella claims that "It is, as such, impossible to think of player agency in the abstract without thinking of how it is determined by the playable figure" (167). I agree with Vella that agency cannot be disconnected from the virtual representation of the player in video games; however, the ludic subjectivity, the entity belonging to the gameworld, and the playable figure are indivisible as a hybrid reality where player and character cannot exist without one another. This notion challenges traditional and problematic concepts of agency like Blom's concept of the "dynamic game character" where "The player is still at the heart of the game, but a theory of the dynamic game character relocates the focus of the player's agency from being within a single entity, to an agency over a web of characters, over which the player (often) does not have any avatarial agency" (145). While important in games agency does not need to centre around the player, especially at the cost of the story, storyworld, or other characters.

Moving away from player-focused storytelling and freedom of action can free up storytelling and, as Meghna Jayanth posits, is "vital to the progress of games narrative as a craft, and to videogames as a medium" ("Forget Protagonists"). To return to my arguments from the Introduction and Chapter 1, agency within transmedia stories aids us in reconsidering video game agency. It is the answer to Jayanth's call for a new definition of agency beyond control and entitlement. This loss of control and entitlement is important to understanding how players

navigate their expectations of agency and choice and guides my understanding of transmedial agency. Shifting in and out of the role of the protagonist by engaging various media removes a central sense of entitlement. The transmedial player does not extend to a web of characters and media. Instead, they facilitate that web so characters can grow and storyworlds can expand without the direct influence of a player-as-god. Players are Shepards more so than they are commanders. Thus, in the next section, I will explore the contested concept of agency and its transmedial counterpart and how they operate in the *Mass Effect* games and the *Mass Effect* transmedia story, specifically around the controversial *Mass Effect 3* ending(s).

3. Controlling, Synthesizing, and Destroying the Player-Character Connection

To better understand the *Mass Effect 3* conclusions and subsequent controversy in a new light, it is important to examine the transmedia story in connection with the games as the most recognized media or "mothership." As discussed in Chapter 1, understanding the transmedia story through its mothership enables players to approach *Mass Effect*'s mediascape with a game-like understanding. Tethered between their choice over how they engage each media and how creators established prescribed means of consuming these media, transmedial players will construct *Mass Effect* by piecing together stories and media in unique and different ways. There is a contention between the creator's vision and the player's engagement in the transmedia story that parallels how a player engages in a game system. Preparing for the original launch of *Mass Effect 3*, BioWare promised players on their official website:

> Experience the beginning, middle, and end of an emotional story unlike any other, where *the decisions you make completely shape your experience and outcome*. Along the way, *your choices drive powerful outcomes*, including relationships with key characters, the fate of entire civilizations, and even radically different ending scenarios. ("*Mass Effect 3* website," emphasis mine)

BioWare thus highlighted an experience for players centred on their agency, focusing on decision-making and shaping narrative outcomes. However, this experience was always more complicated than promised, as highlighted in the media leading to *Mass Effect 3* and, by extension, this promise proposed by BioWare.

While Shepard and, by extension, *Mass Effect* have core traits or experiences, which largely revolve around the original positioning of Shepard in the storyworld, how they are experienced is different for every player. While Shepard's age, species, and N7 and Spectre

status are immutable, along with defeating Saren at the end of *Mass Effect* 1, each other choice is dependent on the player. Indeed, Samuel Zakowski considers "the *ME* trilogy is part of a subgenre of games which leaves the player in control of much of the narrative as well—in this sense, the number of PWs [possible worlds] which can be created by the player increases exponentially due to the different combinations of decisions and moral choices (and the cascading effects they entail) on one hand, and the delinearized, player-driven temporal order of events on the other" ("Time and Temporality in the *Mass Effect* Series" 76). While Blom does not acknowledge Shepard's core identity when stating "Without the player, no concrete identity of Shepard will emerge in the game series," Blom does consider that "Shepard's appearance in the comics requires—even depends on—the player to project their Shepard onto the comics' indicators of Shepard" (179). Important ontological work occurs here and, as Blom notes, "What the indicators do is stimulate the player to substitute the blueprint with the manifestation of Shepard they created over the course of the characterisation process in the game" (179). However, in the moments within non-ludic media that include Shepard—such as the "Arrival" DLC/mission and the comic *Mass Effect: Conviction*—the identity of Shepard is not diminished without the player since the transmedial player still understands their Shepard accordingly to their actions within the games and how those actions interconnect with stories outside of their direct control.

One of the clearest examples of creator-sanctioned canon and restriction starkly contrasting with player curation and expectation arises from the conclusion of *Mass Effect 3*. Culminating in a battle on Earth to defeat the Reapers, Shepard's choices to negotiate the unwinnable war against the Reapers include the option to "control" the Reapers, "synthesis" with them, or "destroy" them, which loosely follows and displays the colours connected to the

Paragon, neutral, and Renegade choices throughout the series, respectively, and a fourth choice

to "refuse" added later in a DLC before becoming part of *Mass Effect Legendary Edition*. After

making their choice, the player watches a final cinematic cutscene that shows the Reapers either

leaving Earth ("control" choice), helping rebuild Earth ("synthesis" choice), deactivating and

collapsing ("destroy" choice), or winning the war ("refuse" choice). In the "control" and

"synthesis" choices, Shepard sacrifices their human identity to merge with the Reapers (further

extending the cybernetic potential of Shepard as a player-character). In contrast, in the "destroy"

option, there is an ambiguous suggestion that Shepard survives with the cinematic ending with a

scene of an unknown N7 soldier taking a gasp of breath beneath some rubble before the screen

fades to black (see Figure 19). Though arguably the most important to the conclusion of the

game trilogy, these choices were also deemed the most disconnected from the game trilogy's

story by a vocal minority of players (Reardon, Wright, and Malone 2017; Burgess and Jones

2018).

Figure 19. Shepard alive in "Destroy" ending? (Mass Effect 3).

To bring closure to the trilogy and expand the storyworld in new directions, BioWare

offered players the three endings for *Mass Effect 3* to reflect their choices. However, as Reardon,

Wright, and Malone note, "The game designers expressed their artistic vision in the narrative and design of the game, but players were not satisfied with the three endings they were given" (43). Players, relying on a version of player agency that revolves around complete freedom to act or complete control of *their* stories, saw this lack of agency as deception. Indeed, "satisfactory" endings created a sense of dissonance for players. As Reardon, Wright, and Malone explain, "Empowered by promises that the company had made in its advertising—promises that players would make meaningful choices and determine outcomes—the players protested, and their protests became a revolt after the game designers, reasserting their artistic claim to the game space, created a fourth ending that was deliberately less satisfying than the original three" (43). Reardon, Wright, and Malone's use of the terms "satisfying," "empowered," and "meaningful" are noteworthy in framing this supposed dichotomy that reflects a common misunderstanding of agency that I will discuss later in this section.

Like inconsistencies of *Deception* rejected by transmedial players based on their storyworld organization as examined in Chapter 2, these endings proved ineffective for players. Despite such exemplary player choice offered throughout the trilogy, these endings supposedly stripped that player choice away. As Jacqueline Burgess and Christian M. Jones explain, these players "felt that they had no choices or not enough, and thus their agency was reduced or removed. Interestingly, this critique was only focused on the game's ending" ("Character Attachment and Agency in the *Mass Effect 3* Ending Controversy" 5). The controversy was present precisely because *Mass Effect 3*'s ending(s) did not appear to parallel the agency and opportunity for meaningful choices throughout the trilogy, abruptly concluding a trilogy of player options and choices with four seemingly inconsequential and inconsistent choices to conclude the trilogy's narrative. Indeed, the game trilogy offers a multitude of choices

throughout the three games, often with the opportunity to alter a trajectory through further choices or player actions. With *Mass Effect 3*'s final choice, this final moment did not reflect the centrality of ongoing, evolving player choice and meaningful action, which challenged or disrupted these player's entire *Mass Effect* experience.

Though these choices decided the fate of the galaxy, they were supposedly inconsistent with the narrative trajectory up to this point and forced players into seemingly out-of-character actions. Specifically, the "destroy" option, which has been the single trajectory of Shepard's mission since *Mass Effect 1*, becomes a deeply problematic conclusion when held against the information available from both creator canon and player organization. As Burgess and Jones explain from their analysis of players on the BioWare forums, "Players noted this meant that 'by having all the mass relays blow up Shepard basically destroys the entire galaxy' and 'Shepard just killed the galaxy'" (8). In arriving at these considerations, players recall the event from the *Mass Effect 2*'s "Arrival" DLC/mission where the destruction of a mass relay annihilates the batarian solar system in which it existed. Thus, relying on the tacit knowledge that destroying all mass relays in the galaxy would destroy all the solar systems in the galaxy with mass relays, all of which held life. Burgess and Jones conclude that "the content in the ending did not appear to be integrated into the previously established game world. Players expressed the view that their play as the PC of Shepard was responsible for the destruction of the game world and story that they had been engaging and interacting with for the approximately 100 hours it took to play the three *Mass Effect* games" (8). However, nowhere in the games is it stated that the mass relays would explode (or do explode) with Shepard's choice and destroy the galaxies in which they operate. The explosion at the end of the "Arrival" mission/DLC that destroyed the Batarian system was because the asteroid smashed into the mass relay, causing the mass effect field to

become unstable and explode. This rationale is thus flawed because the star child explains that

mass relays will discharge causing little harm to nearby planets (*Mass Effect 3*), whereas the

mass relay exploded in "Arrival" and destroyed the sector in which it existed (*Mass Effect 2*).The

content then could not be integrated into the previously established game world because it was

never established in the first place. Here, transmedial players wield assumed or never fully

articulated information at the expense of creators, reversing the controversy of the novel

Deception, where creators lacked previously articulated information, as discussed in Chapter 2.

Nevertheless, this supposed loss of agency caused *Mass Effect* fans to re-inscribe their

agency through other means. Players were unsurprisingly divided on these choices regarding

who chose which one and how these choices largely did or did not satisfy the series' promise of

meaningful player choice. Online protests erupted, and fans even sent cupcakes to the studio as a

form of disapproval. Following the colours of *Mass Effect 3*'s different final cinematics (see

Figure 20), where the Reapers were either "synthesized" (green), "controlled" (blue), or

"destroyed" (red), the cupcakes were decorated with green, blue, and red icing, respectively. All

the cupcakes were vanilla to further the point that each in-game choice was, in fact, the same

"flavour" with nothing significant differentiating each choice aside from the colour accents in the

cinematic. In response, BioWare released the "Extended Cut" and added a fourth option,

"refuse," where Shepard can shoot the star child or refuse the other options, resulting in the

Reapers winning the war. Reardon, Wright, and Malone note that "What the Extended Cut did

not do was change the game's actual ending; the narrative inconsistencies and absence of choice

were still included in the game" (52). Vinicius Carvalho explains that "the Extended Cut is not a

contradiction, but an unexpected manifestation of a sense of enfranchisement inherently

stimulated by the series" ("Leaving Earth, Preserving History" 136). Indeed, the options

available to the player were intended to reflect the series' promises regarding the centrality of player choice—exhibited through cumulative save transfers between games and choice affecting the storyworld and gameplay over the entire trilogy; however, their finality only emphasized the lack of meaningful choice in their resulting consequences.

Figure 20. Different coloured final cinematics (Mass Effect 3).

These fans' resounding disappointment was due to the disconnect between BioWare's promise of player agency and the lack of agency players felt. Reardon, Wright, and Malone explain that "BioWare's advertising of *ME3*—for example, its promise that 'the decisions you make completely shape your experience and outcome'—created a sense of authorial entitlement among players who interpreted such statements as an invitation for collaboration in the further development of the product" (52). Yet, as Reardon, Wright, and Malone continue, "the company could not take advantage of this opportunity for collaboration with customers even if it had wanted to, because the artistic self-interest of the game designers, who were essential employees of the company, stood in the way" (52). This dichotomy is striking and conflates artistic vision with self-interest to reframe authorship in a nefarious and selfish way. As I discussed in Chapter 2, the contention between creator and player is significantly more nuanced. Each group has a personal connection to the story. In an interview, Casey Hudson, Game Director of *Mass Effect 3*, explained that BioWare was unwilling to change the game's different endings, despite thousands of players protesting, "because that's not our story, we wouldn't know how to write that story" ("*Mass Effect 3: Extended Cut* Interview with Casey Hudson, Mac Walters, and

Jessica Merizan"). As I discussed in Chapter 2, the site of contention between how creators and transmedial players respectively imagine their storyworlds is fraught with expectation, control, and inevitable senses of failure because of the impossibility of claiming ownership over a transmedia story for either the creators or the players.

This player disappointment arrives from the promise of freedom to act rather than meaningful outcomes. Indeed, as Burgess and Jones explain, "player choices in the *Mass Effect* games can emotionally affect them and their outcomes can have a lasting significance, transform the game, and provide players with feelings of agency" (4). However, as Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum report, "Our analysis of over 25,209 posts from players of *Mass Effect* reveals that players report no agency in the *Mass Effect 3* ending cut-scenes" (11). Furthermore, Burgess and Jones note, "in addition to players feeling they had lost their agency, they also believed that the vehicle for making these choices—their PC of Shepard—had too" (5). Interestingly, Burgess and Jones conclude, "the perceived lack of agency afforded to the player character of Shepard, as opposed to the lack of agency felt by the player" (7). This lack of agency afforded to Shepard, rather than the player, speaks to the ludic hybridity of the player-character that ensures the character is not erased or reduced to a cursor or a vehicle, or have the player's agency conflated with godhood.

These advertised promises regarding player choice countered BioWare's desire to close the trilogy on their terms. Consequently, as Reardon, Wright, and Malone explain, "The illusion that the game designers had artistic control of the game space was one of the ways that the company incorporated their tactical use of company resources into the company's strategic production" (54). Furthermore, Reardon notes, "What disrupted this symbiotic relationship was that the company—wittingly or unwittingly—extended an invitation of cocreation to the players,

and the players bought into it and claimed the game as their own aesthetic space" (54). These endings challenged the transmedial synergy of *Mass Effect* at the level of the game by closing the complex webs of engagement and storyworld through displeased fans refusing to continue infusing it with money. Indeed, Burgess and Jones noted that "the players' comments indicate that they were not willing to replay the *Mass Effect* games or buy other games in the series and merchandise because of the ending" (11). Feeling discounted at the level of the character in the simulated world and players in the game, these fans rejected *Mass Effect 3* as people in the larger social setting of the player-character's three-fold frame.

Players are often swept up in the notion of agency and its ostensible promise of freedom to act. Burgess and Jones offer that "if agency is understood to focus on meaning and transformation, rather than complete power and control, then there should be no conflict between agency, narrative, and storytelling in video games—especially if a player believes they have created a meaningful transformation or outcome through play and engaging with the story" (3). Then, the trilogy's conclusion was even more egregious to fans who assumed their experience and understanding of the storyworld were disregarded. These choices did not align with the players' engagement of the storyworld up to this point and instead defaulted to a forced means of closure for the creator-sanctioned canon. Simply put, canon did not match player curation.

Much of this controversy thus centres on a fraught understanding of player agency. Burgess and Jones note that "The contention that the player is constrained through limitations appears to conflate agency with freedom from restrictions" (3). Here I return to Janet Murray's definition of agency as "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (*Hamlet on the Holodeck* 126). Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter 1, Murray notes that "There is a distinction between playing a creative role within an authored

environment and having authorship of the environment itself" (152). Murray further explains that agency can only exist within the possibilities as presented: "Certainly interactors can create aspects of digital stories in all these formats, with the greatest degree of creative authorship being over those environments that reflect the least amount of prescripting. But interactors can only act with in the possibilities that have been established by the writing and programming" (152). Consequently, Murray reasons, "Agency, then, goes beyond both participation and activity. As an aesthetic pleasure, as an experience to be savoured for its own sake, it is offered to a limited degree in traditional art forms but is more commonly available in the structured activities we call games. Therefore, when we move narrative to the computer, we move it to a realm already shaped by the structures of games" (128-129).

Meaningful transformation or outcome, rather than freedom to act, can help begin to reframe the creator/player tensions around *Mass Effect 3*'s ending(s). Indeed, as Burgess and Jones point out, players "desire meaningful transformation and outcomes, while being aware of and satisfied with the limitations the developer has placed on them within the game" (4). Burgess and Jones thus conclude, "Players' feelings of agency is based on their perceptions and the *Mass Effect* game trilogy would appear, at least until the ending of the third game, to be an example of agency, choice, and narrative coming together in a video game context to provide players with meaningful transformations and outcomes" (4). In recentering Murray's original definition in the understanding of agency in games, meaningful transformation and outcomes result from that satisfying power to take meaningful action. Action results in transformation and outcome, but it is always limited. Without limitation, the problematic notions around the player-as-god who is driven to usurp creators becomes an oppressive potential—limiting creativity and playfulness for both creators and players. For Reardon, Wright, and Malone, "Given enough meaningful choice

content in a game, a player may develop a sense of authorship in the game" (42). However, as noted above, a sense of authorship and literal authorship is not the same. Indeed, Murray outlines this difference when establishing her definition of agency: "The interactor is not the author of the digital narrative, although the interactor can experience one of the most exciting aspects of artistic creation—the thrill of exerting power over enticing and plastic materials. This is not authorship but agency" (153).

Transmedial agency is important for reframing the *Mass Effect 3* ending(s) because agency is a not a matter of control or power dynamic between player and creator, but a celebration of meaningful action and, important for this discussion, meaningful reaction. As Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum argue, "the extent to which a player can change (author) the outcome of an interactive story is less interesting than the channels along which the player participates and the negotiation between the player's desires and the modes of participation afforded by the system" (394). The power to choose is the core of agency, and this power is necessarily and inevitably limited. Daniel Muriel and Garry Crawford also reflect this notion of agency, arguing that "In video games, players' agency is delimited by the system—what they can see, say, and do" ("Video Games and Agency in Contemporary Society" 8). Muriel and Crawford continue, noting that "Players are limited or enabled by the video game but also by the technology, the developers, other players, and many more social actors (human and not)" (8). Jayanth argues for this reconsideration of how game stories can recenter the concept of limitation, arguing, "We need to think about 'agency' as an effect, a technique—within a wider context—agency should not necessarily be a goal in of itself" ("Forget Protagonists"). As discussed in Chapter 3, this limitation is an important recognition for video game scholarship as agency, operating within systems of constraint, should reflect that limitation in their storytelling as something to

understand not only as a goal within a system but the means of engaging the world—both virtually and physically.

Framing agency as parallel with authorship connects back to the player-as-god discourse that surrounds player-character scholarship and relies on an understanding of agency framed through power and control. Power and control should not be celebrated aspects of player agency. The player reaction to the *Mass Effect 3* ending(s), ranging from mild forms of protest like online discussion to passive-aggressive protest like cupcake deliveries, or violent actions like developer harassment, must be critiqued instead of celebrated for their apparent connection to agency. By focusing on the limitations of the player and protagonist, games can focus on the world in ways that challenge the assumed position of privilege occupied by player-characters (especially when imagined as gods). Engaging in a world where oppression and injustice are unavoidable, the player-character can realize, as Jayanth explains, "the issues our NPCs struggle with are political and systemic—beyond the ability of one person to solve" ("Forget Protagonists"). To directly counter the "player-as-god" discourse around player-character, players are not the Deus ex machina that can fix all the problems in a world, but rather, are participants in that world. Their agency is bound to that participation.

Necessary in this examination of *Mass Effect 3*'s conclusion is the spectrum of player-character and how agency operates on both sides of that hybridity. As I discussed in the Introduction, player power and action have limits and, as Jayanth reasons, "We limit his actions and his power—but NOT the player's agency" ("Forget Protagonists"). Jayanth thus re-examines the definition of agency and how it affects our engagement with the world: "Let's define player agency very simply as 'the ability to interact meaningfully with the game world'—let's even qualify that—it's about making significant changes to the game world" ("Forget Protagonists").

Jayanth points out that "The words we need to look long and hard are 'meaningful' and 'significant'" ("Forget Protagonists"). She thus concludes, "Even if the player cannot directly affect something—if they can have an emotional response or reaction—for a game to allow them the space to have an opinion can be as powerful as allowing them to 'do something'" ("Forget Protagonists"). Reacting to a story is as important as acting in a story and transmedial agency celebrates both aspects of this kind of player engagement. Limiting the player's actions and power in either the games or the non-ludic media opens news opportunities for how the player can connect with the transmedia story. Failure and heartbreak are as important as success and joy and refusing to acknowledge both in such powerful moments like *Mass Effect 3*'s ending(s) remove important avenues of player agency. Both acting and reacting to the tragic and profound implications of *Mass Effect 3*'s conclusion(s) can and should be central in understanding how agency operates within the game and across the transmedia story.

Agency within transmedia stories aids us in reconsidering video game agency. It is the answer to Jayanth's call for "a definition of agency that can assimilate a loss of control, protagonism that works outside of primacy, games that function outside of the simulation of entitlement" ("Forget Protagonists"). Transmedial agency is that new understanding: a sense of agency that is diffuse, that increases and decreases across media as players engage with the grandeur of storyworlds, personalities of characters, and the connection of the player-character. As Burgess and Jones explain, "the focus on seeing agency as players desiring literal and unilateral control and authorship appears to have confused the kind of agency they actually desire" (3). Indeed, the obsession with control and mastery cost those players what Tanenbaum considers "the experience of the player as a meaningful participant in the game-as-story: an experience that arises from an act of *surrender* to the power of the story" (279, original

emphasis). This confusion is key to understanding the *Mass Effect 3* controversy at the microcosm and transmedial agency at the macrocosm. Offering transmedial players agency has profound ontological consequences when the creators attempt to re-invoke their desire for the story's direction. However, agency is not lost in how these players and scholars frame it. Conflating agency with absolute power and control arises from players and previous scholars claiming godhood at the expense of player-characters and the storyworld. Players, especially transmedial players, are not the virtual embodiment of gods situated by scholars who reduce player-characters to cursors, tools, or vehicles. Transmedia stories resist such spectrums because they cannot be controlled, and transmedial players cannot assure complete power.

Satisfying power arises when things work as expected and, as Murray muses, "When things are going right on the computer, we can be both the dancer and the caller of the dance. This is the feeling of agency" (128). This dance is inherently playful. In moving in and across *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story, the transmedial player must come to terms with the moment that each story must end to ensure the mediascape continues to expand and grow because the gaps between stories and between media offer a cadence and reflection for the transmedial player to react to the events of one story and choose their next destination. Transmedial players can thus dance across these paths and connections while choosing how and when they do as willing participants, never as all-powerful gods. To paraphrase Braidotti from earlier, to engage in the transmedia story requires players to shrug off the shadow of binary logic of cursors, tools, and vehicles or mediators and gods. Transmedial players must move beyond such social imaginary that abandons entitlement, reconfigures the primacy of the protagonist, and celebrates a loss of control. Only then can we truly embrace the playful experience of transmedia storytelling.

Conclusion: Shrugging off the Shadow of Binary Logic

Like storyworld and character, the player-character is a core aspect of understanding transmedia stories as game-like systems. As I discussed in this chapter, the concept of the player-character is the most personal and convergent means of understanding the process of engaging transmedia stories and understanding how both creators and players articulate and understand themselves is at the heart of a transmedia story. Furthermore, player-character is the concept that exemplifies how transmedia stories both shape and rely on transmedial players and vice versa to enact and project a sense of themselves into and across these media through their connection to Shepard and, by extension, Ryder. As a developed character within a storyworld, Shepard not only connects the player to the game but the player to the creator and the necessary limitations that arise from that engagement. The player-character, then, is a site of convergence between player and media, where all other aspects of the transmedia network manifest. Player-characters are the most effective way of understanding how players frame and experience a transmedia story through personal experience. Going beyond storyworlds and characters, they offer the most intimate means of exploring player engagement.

Throughout this chapter, I have continuously emphasized that the player-character connection exists at the level of the games as well as at the level of the transmedia story. How players understand themselves as Shepard arrives from both the ludic hybridity of the player-character and how the mediascape frames Shepard beginning with Shepard's backstory and character valences. Transmedial players are implicitly expected to act as player-characters, not so much empathizing or identifying with a character (though that is a possibility) but as mediated versions of themselves as examined in *Mass Effect 3*'s "Citadel" DLC or "Citadel: Shore Leave" mission, the comic *Mass Effect*: *Foundation*, and the mobile game *Mass Effect Infiltrator*. The

position of the transmedial player thus demands the physical and virtual self to overlap for a

player to engage with a transmedia story. However, this connection still allows Shepard and the

player to exist separately as the transmedial player traverses non-playable or ludic media, where

a projection and idealization of Shepard can occur, altering a transmedial player's connection to

Shepard and their reaction to how Shepard moves alongside them in the transmedia story.

Indeed, the ludic hybridity of the player-character positions the transmedial player in the three-

fold framing of Shepard as a character, the player-as-Shepard, and the transmedial player.

Consequently, the player-character reifies the fraught notion of agency in ludology first

explored in Chapter 1 with how this position situates the transmedial player within a dynamic

between creator confinements and the freedom of immersion within the transmedia story. The

discussion of choice and consequence within *Mass Effect* is most evident regarding how players

and critics understood *Mass Effect 3*'s controversial ending(s), where players felt the conclusion

was a disservice to themselves and Shepard. However, for scholars and players who rely on a

sense of agency that is conflated godhood, power, and control can lead to violence (such as the

book burnings noted in Chapter 2, or the developer harassment noted in this chapter). Despite its

centrality in video games, violence should not be a central source or means of player agency

when engaging worlds, characters, or understanding player-characters. Narrowing our

understanding of player agency narrows the possibilities of our ludic experiences in games and

across media.

Reframing the notion of agency as the satisfying power to enact meaningful

transformation and outcome for both the transmedia player and how the player engages in the

transmedia story requires players to shrug off the shadow of binary logic of cursors, tools, and

vehicles or mediators and gods. Transmedial players must move beyond such social imaginary to

abandon entitlement, reconfigure the primacy of the protagonist, and celebrate a loss of control. Such a reframing thus addresses Jayanth's call to reconsider agency as an effect or technique to engage stories in meaningful ways, rather than a goal or means to control those stories. Transmedial agency invokes the dynamic relationship between player and creator in the transmedial logics of storyworld, character, and player-character, abandoning the drive to master and control *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story in favour of refocusing upon the inherent playfulness of these overwhelming and ever-changing mediascapes.

CONCLUSION

Contribution to Knowledge

The ideas within this dissertation arose while I attended a developer panel at a game convention in the fall of 2015. I had just started my Ph.D. and had only recently started engaging in game studies. Up to that point, transmedia storytelling as a named concept did not genuinely exist for me until I listened to one of the game's developers explain that there would be no single-player campaign, or story mode, in their newly announced game *Overwatch*; instead, the story would develop around the game through various sources including videos, webcomics, and graphic novels. That comment made me consider the nature of narrative and our expectations as players when buying and playing a contemporary video game. *Overwatch*'s storyworld was full of diverse and unique characters ripe with story possibilities; however, the developers chose to expand that storyworld through other media, leaving the video game player to enjoy the gameplay experience with only hints of story possibility. This absence of a story was a strange reality for someone like me, who developed as a scholar from a narrative-based background. I was left wondering how the experience of a story across different media would manifest once players could engage with it.

Returning home from that trip, I immediately began researching single stories told across media and quickly found Henry Jenkins' work on transmedia storytelling, alongside other like-minded scholars, as well as the many stories I have engaged throughout this dissertation which examine and challenge Jenkins' definition of the phenomenon, building what is now known as transmedia studies. Relying on my newly acquired knowledge of game studies and transmedia studies, I noticed significant parallels between games and transmedia stories. While *Overwatch* and, to my realization, childhood favourites *Star Wars* and *The Matrix* were some of my first

forays into transmedia storytelling, it was BioWare's *Mass Effect* that not only challenged my assumptions of storytelling in a video game but storytelling across media.

I started *Mass Effect 1* in the spring of 2016, and over less than a week—delayed by graduate coursework and preparing my Long Thesis Proposal—I finished the game trilogy with *Mass Effect 3* as the sun was rising on a Monday morning, having stayed up all night in a push to complete it before class that day. I went to bed with more questions than answers. When I woke up a few hours later, I found the graphic novella *Redemption* and read how Liara worked with Cerberus to find and resurrect Shepard before beginning her ascension towards becoming the Shadow Broker. *Redemption* filled in several of the narrative gaps during *Mass Effect 2*'s two-year prologue, gaps that were never further explored in the games. I realized the games were only the surface of the *Mass Effect* story. I started collecting and organizing all the games, comics, novels, and films that made *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story, plumbing the depths of its storyworld and spending more time with the characters I befriended as Commander Shepard. This investigation became the foundation of my research.

Throughout this dissertation, I have argued that transmedia stories like *Mass Effect* can be examined as games and the participants needed to make sense of them as players. Furthermore, the concept of player agency illuminates the necessary engagement needed from these participants to piece together *Mass Effect*'s story across media and explain how these participants choose to navigate these narratives across storyworlds and characters. Piecing together *Mass Effect*'s story plays out like a puzzle game, and this puzzle can be effectively understood through transmedial ludology. Transmedial ludology, or the practice of understanding and examining transmedia stories as game-like systems, offers a critical perspective on how players engage storyworlds and characters that center on transmedial agency.

Through that acknowledgement, we can apply concepts of ludology, including player agency, choice, and interactive engagement, to transmedia stories like *Mass Effect* to examine transmedia storytelling as multi-modal game systems that guide their implied audience through a video game mothership. *Mass Effect*'s video game mothership, the most recognized medium in the series, guides its players through the various stories and media that make up the transmedia story.

For *Mass Effect* players guided by the video game mothership, the transmedia story is the complete ludic experience. A player experiences and manipulates each media like mini-games and missions across space and time. *Mass Effect* offers choices on how widely players decide to experience the potential arcs of the series, shifting between a microcosmic and macrocosmic scale at numerous instances throughout the transmedia story, creating their unique experiences through various paths through and between media. With the choices that arise from each path through the series, a player must organize and make sense of massive amounts of information as the transmedia story slowly unravels with new content. Players then construct a path through the complicated and interconnected stories to make sense of characters and the storyworld in direct contest with the transmedia story's inherently challenging amount of content. These stories, and how and in what order they are consumed, build off one another and interconnect larger, more complex plotlines. The various media then connect to form the larger transmedia story, creating a singular experience based on each player's engagement.

Understanding *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story as a complex game between player and creator is the core aspect of understanding the ludic nature of transmedia stories. As a transmedia story that relies on its video game mothership, *Mass Effect* offers what Henry Jenkins refers to as "a somewhat alien aesthetic—one that reflects the potentials of interactive media, networked

consumption, and participatory culture" ("The Reign of the 'Mothership'" 247). As inherently interactive media facilitating networked consumption and participatory culture, video games can offer the most precise understanding of transmedia storytelling as a player-focused process that relies on convergence and agency to work within and across media. As such, players are collectors, encyclopedists, and detectives who collect, organize, and investigate the complex puzzle created by BioWare.

Players must then rely on the alien aesthetics of interactive media, networked consumption, and participatory culture that exemplify transmedia storytelling's potential. Through examining player agency, choice, and participatory culture, I have shown that transmedial ludology can help us better understand this player identity conflict that exists within *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story. Players puzzle these stories together once creators make them. Transmedia stories thus offer a site of convergence for players and creators to engage the narrative at both ends. Consequently, the transmedial player is the intended fan and audience who collects, organizes, and investigates each narrative to produce the larger transmedia story. Transmedial players are knowledge seekers who represent collectors, encyclopedists, and detectives. These roles define three aspects of transmedial agency or how a player can engage a transmedia story.

Building off Janet Murray's definition of agency and applying this ludological concept to transmedia storytelling, I understand transmedial agency to be the satisfying power to take meaningful action and make meaningful choices in engaging a transmedia story and seeing the results of our actions and choices. My understanding of agency is also indebted to Theresa Jean Tanenbaum, who reframes agency as a commitment to meaning, as well as Susanne Eichner's understanding that "the experience of agency is in fact not restricted to particular media"

(*Agency and Media Reception* 228). Indeed, my analysis echoes and expands upon Eichner's claim that "supposedly 'narrative media'" can "suggest a ludic mode of involvement" (228). However, for Eichner, "the mode of agency is comprised of mastering action, mastering narrative, mastering choice, and mastering space" (170). Many game scholars share this consideration of agency being bound by control and mastery. Tanenbaum notes, the over-emphasis of an "unrestricted freedom to act" is "a reductive approach to the pleasures of agency" (*Identity Transformation and Agency* 5).

I sought to challenge these profoundly problematic assumptions by using transmedial agency as a direct response to Meghna Jayanth's call for "a definition of agency that can assimilate a loss of control, protagonism that works outside of primacy, games that function outside of the simulation of entitlement" ("Forget Protagonists"). Indeed, entitlement shapes expectation, ownership, control, and mastery. The rejection of control, mastery, and power is exemplified in each layer of a player's experience of transmedia stories: including storyworld, character, and player-character. As *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story is difficult, if not impossible, to control or master, it offers a space for creators and players to reframe and celebrate the ludic element of failure, not only in the games but the entire transmedia story. As failure is often only found in games, this new perspective on transmedia stories can redefine this drive for ludic mastery in video games into a sense of wonder and connection in transmedia stories.

Research Goals

Mass Effect offers critical aesthetic criteria for transmedia storytelling that contributes to the growing body of transmedia scholarship. However, *Mass Effect* is not doing something new; it centres on its characters by following Jenkins' ideal concept of transmedia storytelling, offering a "unified and coordinated entertainment experience" through a systematic dispersal of its fiction "across multiple delivery channels" ("Transmedia Storytelling 101"). However, *Mass Effect*'s focus on the storyworld and characters allows us to reconsider notions of "unified," "coordinated," and "systematic" at the site of the player-character who must negotiate these various channels of content. Player-character, primarily considered a purely ludological phenomenon, is the concept that exemplifies how transmedia stories both shape and rely on transmedial players and vice versa to enact and project a sense of themselves into and across these media through their connection to Shepard in the Milky Way era and Ryder in the Andromeda era. This dynamic nature of shifting the narrative back and forth between storyworld and character and the players from collector to encyclopedist to detective is only further exemplified through the player's sense of agency through the transmedia story.

Reframing the notion of agency as the satisfying power to enact meaningful transformation and outcome for both the transmedia player and how the player engages in the transmedia story requires players to reassess the need for control, the drive for mastery, and the search for power. Transmedia stories offer none of these problematic understandings of agency. Transmedial agency functions outside of entitlement, reconfigures the primacy of the protagonist, and celebrates a loss of control. Transmedial agency invokes the dynamic relationship between player and creator in *Mass Effect*'s storyworld, character, and player-character, challenges the drive to master and control in favour of refocusing upon the inherent

playfulness of this overwhelming and ever-changing transmedia story. Such a reframing thus addresses Jayanth's call to reconsider agency as an effect or technique to engage stories in meaningful ways rather than a goal or means to control those stories.

Through my investigation, I answered several important questions about creator and player experience, definitions of transmedia storytelling, and how player agency functions in transmedia stories. Creators and players experience a story that is not bound to a single medium through dialogue and space of contention that reveals neither is ever in control of nor has a complete understanding of a transmedia story. The player experiences a transmedia story in much the same way they experience a single story on a single medium; however, transmedial agency shifts depending on the specific medium as it is inherently connected to the affordances of the medium as well as both player motivation as knowledge seekers and the design principles of those creators designing the experience. Connecting those stories as an immense narrative puzzle requires players to shift in and out of different modes, including the collector, encyclopedist, and detective. In transmedia stories, storyworlds, characters, and players change over media and time, constantly reforming through a complex media heterarchy that is guided by *Mass Effect*'s video game mothership. As such, the current definition of transmedia storytelling encompasses an understanding of a ludic or game-centric mediascape like *Mass Effect* because *Mass Effect* exemplifies not only Jenkins' original definition but also the alien aesthetic necessary for a transmedia story to function as a narrative across media.

Examining transmedia stories through ludology helps us reconsider how we understand and define both transmedia stories and game concepts like player agency, control, and failure. Specifically, my research offers us new paths towards understanding agency not as the promise of power, mastery, and entitlement but as a personal connection and responsibility to the

construction of and interaction with storyworlds and characters in *Mass Effect*'s game-centric transmedia story. Broadly, my research offers us new paths towards understanding transmedial agency as a core principle that describes the necessary and playful engagement of an active participant—or transmedial player—who constructs and interacts with a transmedia story. Moreover, and most importantly, transmedia agency and, by extension, transmedial ludology expands beyond game-centric transmedia. This game-centric logic does not only apply to transmedia stories that have video game motherships because all transmedia works along these principles as over-arching stories that necessitate an active participant to piece them together. While *Mass Effect*, as my singular case study, offers critical aesthetic criteria for game-centric transmedia storytelling, transmedial agency and transmedial ludology offer broader applicability to all transmedia storytelling because all transmedia stories can be understood and examined as ludic, or game-like, systems.

Further Considerations and Future Work

Transmedial ludology and transmedial agency are valuable means of understanding transmedia stories that require a participant to read, watch, and play through a collection of media to connect a series of stories into a complete experience. This experience mirrors the pleasure and challenge of playing a video game. That experience can be examined using narratology, specifically character and storyworld, and ludology, specifically player-character, as well as player agency, choice, mastery, and failure. However, my use of transmedial ludology is not exhaustive and is necessarily incomplete. Focusing on those mentioned ludological concepts meant other aspects of video games and game studies were left unconsidered. My future research aims to explore different aspects of transmedial ludology and how scholars can apply it to their analysis of not only game-centric transmedia but all transmedia storytelling.

The field of transmedia storytelling is still early enough in its inception that critical vocabularies and approaches possess productive gaps and contradictions. My project is neither the first nor final word on transmedia storytelling or *Mass Effect*; instead, it is part of an ongoing and robust discussion. As BioWare promised during the *Mass Effect 4* reveal trailer in December 2020, "*Mass Effect* will continue" ("The Next *Mass Effect* - Official Teaser Trailer"), and with it, the storyworld, characters, and player-characters. Since then, BioWare has released new hints every November 7th—known as N7 or *Mass Effect* day—challenging "investigators" to decipher their meaning. These engagements fuel the ongoing speculation and transmedial detective work regarding the series' future. The future of transmedia storytelling and *Mass Effect* research is promising, and I hope this dissertation serves to help build that future.

WORKS CITED

Chapter 0 (Introduction)

Aarseth, Espen. *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

—. "I Fought the Law: Transgressive Play and the Implied Player." *Situated Play*, Proceedings of DiGRA 2007 Conference, 2007.

Alper, Meryl, and Rebecca Herr-Stephenson. "Transmedia Play: Literacy Across Media." *The National Association for Media Literacy Education's Journal of Media Literacy Education*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2013, pp. 366-369.

Alton, Chris. "Experience, 60 Frames Per Second: Virtual Embodiment and the Player/Avatar Relationship in Digital Games." *Loading… The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association*, vol 10, no. 16, 2017, pp. 214-227.

Anderson, Amanda, Rita Felski, and Toril Moi. *Character: Three Inquiries in Literary Studies*. University of Chicago Press, 2019.

Bal, Mieke. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. University of Toronto Press, 1997.

Blom, Joleen. "Characters in *Fire Emblem Three Houses*: A Ludo Mix Perspective." *Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2021, pp. 101-130.

—. *The Dynamic Game Character: Definition, Construction, and Challenges in a Character Ecology*. 2020. IT University of Copenhagen, PhD dissertation.

Boellstorff, Tom. *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*. Princeton University Press, 2015.

Booth, Paul, ed. *A Companion to Media Fandom and Fan Studies*. Wiley Blackwell, 2018.

—. *Digital Fandom: New Media Studies*. Peter Lang, 2010.

Bourdaa, Mélanie. "'Following the Pattern': The Creation of an Encyclopaedic Universe with Transmedia Storytelling." *Adaptation*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2013, pp. 202–214.

Burn, Andrew, and Gareth Schott. "Heavy Hero or Digital Dummy? Multimodal Player–Avatar Relations in *Final Fantasy 7*." *Visual Communication*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2004, pp. 213-233.

Chatman, Seymour. *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. Cornell University Press, 1978.

Clark, Brian. "Transmedia is a Lie." *Facebook*, 21 April 2012, www.facebook.com/notes/brian-clark/transmedia-is-a-lie/10150841850433993/.

Clarke, M. J. *Transmedia Television: New Trends in Network Serial Production*. Bloomsbury, 2013.

Dalby, James. "Immersed In Difficulty: The Problem of Suspension of Disbelief in Transmedia and VR Experiences." *Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies*, vol. 6, 2016, pp. 67-85.

Delwiche, Aaron. "Still Searching for the Unicorn: Transmedia Storytelling and the Audience Question." *The Rise of Transtexts: Challenges and Opportunities*, edited by Benjamin W.L. Derhy Kurtz and Mélanie Bourdaa, Routledge, 2017. pp. 33–48.

de Wildt Lars, Thomas H. Apperley, Justin Clemens, Robbie Fordyce, and Souvik Mukherjee. "(Re-)Orienting the Video Game Avatar." *Games and Culture*, vol. 15, no. 8, 2019, pp. 962-981.

Eder, Jens. "Understanding Characters." *Projections: The Journal for Movies and Mind*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2010, pp. 16-40.

Eder, Jens, Fotis Jannidis, and Ralf Schneider, editors. *Characters in Fictional Worlds: Understanding Imaginary Beings in Literature, Film, and Other Media*. De Gruyter, 2011.

Eichner, Susanne. *Agency and Media Reception: Experiencing Video Games, Film, and Television*. Springer, 2014.

Ensslin, Astrid, and Alice Bell. *Digital Fiction and the Unnatural: Transmedial Narrative Theory, Method, and Analysis*. The Ohio State University, 2021.

Evans, Elizabeth. *Transmedia Television: Audiences, New Media, and Daily Life*. Routledge, 2011.

Fuller, Mary, and Henry Jenkins. "Nintendo and New World Travel Writing: A Dialogue." *Cybersociety: Computer-Mediated Communication and Community*, edited by Steven G. Jones, Sage Publications, 1994, pp. 57-72.

Freeman, Matthew. Branding consumerism: Crossmedia characters and storyworlds at the turn of the 20th century." *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 18, no. 6, 2015, pp. 629–644.

—. *Historicising Transmedia Storytelling: Early Twentieth-Century Transmedia Story Worlds*. Routledge, 2017.

Freeman, Matthew, and Renira Rampazzo Gambarato, eds. *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies*. Routledge, 2019.

Frow, John. *Character and Person*. Oxford University Press, 2016.

Gazzard, Alison. "The Avatar and The Player: Understanding the Relationship Beyond the Screen." *Games and Virtual Worlds for Serious Applications Conference*, 2009.

George, Richard. "Exclusive *Mass Effect* Short Story." *IGN*, 8 May 2012,

www.ign.com/articles/2010/06/21/exclusive-mass-effect-short-story

Genette, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Translated by Jane E. Lewin,

Cornell University Press, 1983.

—. *Narrative Discourse Revisited*. Translated by Jane E. Lewin, Cornell University Press, 1988.

Gray, Jonathan. *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*. NYU

Press, 2010.

Hart, Casey. "Getting Into the Game: An Examination of Player Personality Projection in

Videogame Avatars." *Game Studies*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2017,

gamestudies.org/1702/articles/hart.

Harvey, Colin B. *Fantastic Transmedia: Narrative Play and Memory across Science Fiction and

Fantasy Storyworlds*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

Heinze, Rüdiger. "'This Makes No Sense At All': Heterarchy in Fictional Universes."

StoryWorlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies, vol. 7, no. 2, 2015, pp. 76-91.

Hellekson, Karen, and Kristina Busse, eds. *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*. University of Iowa

Press, 2014.

Herman, David. *Basic Elements of Narrative*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

Hills, Matt. "Storyselling and Storykilling: Affirmational/Transformational Discourses of

Television Narrative." *Storytelling in the Media Convergence Age*, edited by Roberta

Pearson and Anthony Smith, Palgrave, 2015. pp. 151–173.

—. "*Torchwood*'s Trans-transmedia: Media Tie-ins and Brand 'Fanagement.'" *Participations*,

vol. 92, 2012, pp. 409–428.

Isbister, Katherine. *How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design*. MIT Press, 2016.

Iser, Wolfgang. *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974.

Jansson, André, and Karin Fast. "Transmedia Identities: From Fan Cultures to Liquid Lives." *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies*, edited by Matthew Freeman and Renira Rampazzo Gambarato, Routledge, 2019, pp. 340-349.

Jayanth, Meghna. "Forget Protagonists: Writing NPCs with Agency for 80 Days and Beyond." *Medium*, 5 June 2016, medium.com/@betterthemask/forget-protagonists-writing-npcs-with-agency-for-80-days-and-beyond-703201a2309.

Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. NYU Press, 2006.

—. "Game Design as Narrative Architecture." *Computer*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2002, pp. 118-130.

—. "The Reign of the 'Mothership': Transmedia's Past, Present, and Possible Futures." *Wired TV: Laboring Over an Interactive Future*, edited by Denise Mann, Rutgers University Press, 2014, pp. 244-268.

—. "Transmedia Storytelling 101." *Pop Junctions*, 21 March 2007, henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html.

—. "Transmedia Storytelling 202: Further Reflections." *Pop Junctions*, 31 July 2011, henryjenkins.org/blog/2011/08/defining_transmedia_further_re.html.

Jørgensen, Kristine. "'I'm overburdened!' An Empirical Study of the Player, the Avatar, and the Gameworld." *Proceedings from DiGRA 2009: Breaking New Ground: Innovation in Games, Play, Practice and Theory*, Brunel University, 2009.

Juul, Jesper. *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games*. MIT Press, 2013.

—. "Games Telling Stories? A brief note on games and narratives." *Game Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2001, www.gamestudies.org/0101/juul-gts/.

—. *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*. MIT Press, 2005.

Kennedy, Helen W. "Transmedia Games: Aesthetics and Politics of Profitable Play." *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies*, edited by Matthew Freeman and Renira Rampazzo Gambarato, Routledge, 2019, pp. 72-81.

Kinder, Marsha. *Playing with Power in Movies, Television, and Video Games: From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. University of California Press, 1991.

King, Geoff, and Tanya Krzywinska. *Tomb Raiders and Space Invaders: Videogame Forms and Contexts.* Bloomsbury Academic, 2006.

Klastrup, Lisbeth, and Susana Tosca. "Transmedial Worlds—Rethinking Cyberworld Design." *Proceedings of the International Conference on Cyberworlds*, 2004.

Kline, Stephen, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig de Peuter. *Digital Play: The Interaction of Technology, Culture, and Marketing*. McGill-Queen's Press, 2003.

Lankoski, Petri. "Player Character Engagement in Computer Games." *Games and Culture*, vol. 6, no. 4, 2011, pp. 291-311.

Laurel, Brenda. Computers as Theatre. Addison-Wesley, 1991.

Linderoth, Jonas. "Animated game pieces. Avatars as roles, tools and props." *Aesthetics of Play Conference: Online Proceedings*, University of Bergen, 2005.

Margolin, Uri. "Individuals in Narrative Worlds: An Ontological Perspective." *Poetics Today*, vol. 11, no. 4, 1990, pp. 843-871.

—. "The What, the When, and the How of Being a Character in Literary Narrative." *Literary Character*, vol. 24, no. 3, 1990, pp. 453-468.

Mäyrä, Frans. "*Pokémon GO*: Entering the Ludic Society." *Mobile Media & Communication*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2017, pp. 47-50.

Meadows, Mark Stephen. *I, Avatar: The Culture and Consequences of Having a Second Life*. Pearson Education, 2007.

Mittell, Jason. *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*. NYU Press, 2015.

Moi, Toril. "Rethinking Character." *Character: Three Inquiries in Literary Studies*, edited by Amanda Anderson, Rita Felski, and Toril Moi. University of Chicago Press, 2019, pp. 27-76.

Montfort, Nick. "Fretting the Player Character." *Electronic Book Review*, 27 February 2008, electronicbookreview.com/essay/fretting-the-player-character/.

Murray, Janet. "From Game-Story to Cyberdrama." *Electronic Book Review*, 5 January 2004, electronicbookreview.com/essay/from-game-story-to-cyberdrama/.

—. *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace.* The Free Press, 1997.

Muriel, Daniel, and Garry Crawford. *Video Games As Culture: Considering the Role and Importance of Video Games in Contemporary Society*. Routledge, 2018.

Nakamura, Akinori, and Susana Tosca. "The Mobile Suit Gundam Franchise: A Case Study of Transmedia Storytelling Practices and Ludo Mix in Japan." *Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2021, pp. 1-32.

Newman, James. "The Myth of the Ergodic Videogame: Some thoughts on player-character relationships in videogames." *Game Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2002, www.gamestudies.org/0102/newman/.

Pearce, Celia. *Communities of Play: Emergent Cultures in Multiplayer Games and Virtual Worlds*. MIT Press, 2009.

Pearson, Roberta. "Transmedia Characters: Additionality and Cohesion in Transfictional Heroes." *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies*, edited by Matthew Freeman and Renira Rampazzo Gambarato, Routledge, 2019, pp. 148-156.

Price, Martin. "The Other Self: Thoughts About Character in the Novel." *Imagined Worlds*, edited by Maynard Mack and Ian Gregor, Methuen and Co., 1968.

Raessens, Joost. *Homo Ludens 2.0: The Ludic Turn in Media Theory*. University of Utrecht Press, 2010.

Reardon, Daniel, David Wright, and Edward Malone. "Quest for the Happy Ending to *Mass Effect 3*: The Challenges of Cocreation with Consumers in a Post-Certeauian Age." *Technical Communication Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2017, pp. 42-58.

Rehak, Bob. "Playing at Being: Psychoanalysis and the Avatar." *The Video Game Theory Reader*, edited by Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron, Routledge, 2003, pp. 103-128.

Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith. *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. Routledge, 1983.

Ruberg, Bonnie. *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*. NYU Press, 2019.

Ryan, Marie-Laure. "Beyond Myth and Metaphor: The Case of Narrative in Digital Media." *Game Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2001, www.gamestudies.org/0101/ryan/.

—, ed. *Narrative across Media: The Languages of Storytelling*. University of Nebraska Press, 2004.

—. *Narrative As Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

—. "Story/World/Media: Tuning the Instruments of a Media-Conscious Narratology." *Storyworlds across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*, edited by Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon, University of Nebraska Press, 2014, pp. 25-49.

—. "Transmedia Storytelling: Industry Buzzword or New Narrative Experience?" *StoryWorlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies,* vol. 7, no. 2, 2015, pp. 1-19.

—. "Why Worlds Now?" *Revisiting Imaginary Worlds: A Subcreation Studies Anthology*, edited by Mark J.P. Wolf, Routledge, 2017, pp. 3-13.

Ryan, Marie-Laure, and Jan-Noël Thon. "Storyworlds across Media: Introduction." *Storyworlds across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*, edited by Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon, University of Nebraska Press, 2014, pp. 1-24.

—, eds. *Storyworlds across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*. University of Nebraska Press, 2014.

Salen Tekinbaş, Katie, and Eric Zimmerman. *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. MIT Press, 2003.

Schmid, Wolf. *Narratology: An Introduction*. De Gruyter, 2010.

Schneider, Ralf. "Toward a Cognitive Theory of Literary Character: The Dynamics of Mental-Model Construction." *Topics on Film and Literature*, vol. 35, no. 4, 2001, pp. 607-639.

Scolari, Carlos A., Paolo Bertetti, and Matthew Freeman. *Transmedia Archaeology: Storytelling in the Borderlines of Science Fiction, Comics and Pulp Magazines*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Shaw, Adrienne. *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture*. University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

Sicart, Miguel. *Beyond Choices: The Design of Ethical Gameplay*. MIT Press, 2013.

Tanenbaum, Theresa Jean. *Identity Transformation and Agency in Digital Narratives and Story Based Games*. 2015. Simon Fraser University, PhD dissertation.

Taylor, T.L. *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture*. MIT Press, 2006.

Thon, Jan-Noël. "Converging Worlds: From Transmedial Storyworlds to Transmedial Universes." *StoryWorlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2015, pp. 21-53.

—. *Transmedial Narratology and Contemporary Media Culture*. University of Nebraska Press, 2016.

Walz, Steffen P., and Sebastian Deterding, eds. *The Gameful World: Approaches, Issues, Applications*. MIT Press, 2015.

Wolf, Mark J.P. *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation*. Routledge, 2012.

—, editor. *Revisiting Imaginary Worlds: A Subcreation Studies Anthology*. Routledge, 2017.

Woloch, Alex. *The One Vs. The Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel*. Princeton University Press, 2003.

Zimmerman, Eric. "Manifesto for a Ludic Century." *The Gameful World: Approaches, Issues, Applications*, edited by Steffen P. Walz and Sebastian Deterding, MIT Press, 2015, pp. 19-22.

Chapter 1

"[MEA Spoilers]Who's the 'benefactor'?" *Reddit*, 25 March 2017, www.reddit.com/r/masseffect/comments/61h2mi/mea_spoilerswhos_the_benefactor/.

Aarseth, Espen. "I Fought the Law: Transgressive Play and the Implied Player." *Situated Play*, Proceedings of DiGRA 2007 Conference, 2007.

Baker, Chris. "Meet Leland Chee, the *Star Wars* Franchise Continuity Cop." *Wired*, 18 August 2008, www.wired.com/2008/08/ff-starwarscanon/.

BioWare. "Galaxy at War Rebalancing." *EA*, www.ea.com/games/mass-effect/mass-effect-legendary-edition/news/gameplay-calibrations#galaxy-at-war.

Bizzocchi, Jim, and Theresa Jean Tanenbaum. "*Mass Effect 2*: A Case Study in the Design of Game Narrative." *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, vol. 32, no. 5, 2012, pp. 393-404.

Bourdaa, Mélanie. "'Following the Pattern': The Creation of an Encyclopaedic Universe with Transmedia Storytelling." *Adaptation*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2013, pp. 202–214.

—. "Transmedia Storytelling: Character, Time, and World—The Case of *Battlestar Galactica*." *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies*, edited by Matthew Freeman and Renira Rampazzo Gambarato, Routledge, 2019, pp. 133-140.

Chenard, Chris. "*Mass Effect 4* Should Reveal the Identity of *Andromeda*'s Benefactor." *Screen Rant*, 20 December 2020, screenrant.com/mass-effect-4-andromeda-benefactor-who-reveal/.

Dalby, James. "Holarchic Media: When transmedia just isn't Transmedia enough." *Academic Letters*, article 2210, 2021, pp. 1-5.

—. "Immersed In Difficulty: The Problem of Suspension of Disbelief in Transmedia and VR Experiences." *Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies*, vol. 6, 2016, pp. 67-85.

Heinze, Rüdiger. "'This Makes No Sense At All': Heterarchy in Fictional Universes." *StoryWorlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2015, pp. 76-91.

Hutchinson, Rachael. *Japanese Culture Through Videogames*. Routledge, 2019.

—. "Refracted Visions: Transmedia Storytelling in Japanese Games." *Replaying Japan*, vol.

Inaugural preparatory issue, 2018, pp. 68-76.

Iser, Wolfgang. *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan

to Beckett*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974.

Jayanth, Meghna. "Forget Protagonists: Writing NPCs with Agency for 80 Days and Beyond."

Medium, 5 June 2016, medium.com/@betterthemask/forget-protagonists-writing-npcs-

with-agency-for-80-days-and-beyond-703201a2309.

Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. NYU Press, 2006.

—. "Game Design as Narrative Architecture." *Computer*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2002, pp. 118-130.

—. "The Reign of the 'Mothership': Transmedia's Past, Present, and Possible Futures." *Wired

TV: Laboring Over an Interactive Future*, edited by Denise Mann, Rutgers University

Press, 2014, pp. 244-268.

—. "The Revenge of the Origami Unicorn: Seven Principles of Transmedia Storytelling (Well,

Two Actually. Five More on Friday)." *Pop Junctions*, 12 December 2009,

henryjenkins.org/blog/2009/12/the_revenge_of_the_origami_uni.html.

—. "Transmedia Storytelling 101." *Pop Junctions*, 21 March 2007,

henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html.

Kérchy, Anna. "Transmedia Commodification: Disneyfication, Magical Objects, and *Beauty and

the Beast*." *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies*, edited by Matthew

Freeman and Renira Rampazzo Gambarato, Routledge, 2019, pp. 223-232.

Klastrup, Lisbeth, and Susana Tosca. "Transmedial Worlds—Rethinking Cyberworld Design."

Proceedings of the International Conference on Cyberworlds, 2004.

Kulick, Henry. "Three *Mass Effect: Andromeda* DLCs that would have changed history."

    PCGames, 7 September 2020, www.pcgamesn.com/mass-effect-andromeda/dlc.

Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. MIT Press, 2001.

Mittell, Jason. "Strategies of Storytelling on Transmedia Television." *Storyworlds across Media:*

    Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology, edited by Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël

    Thon, University of Nebraska Press, 2014, pp. 253-277.

Murray, Janet. *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. The Free Press,

    1997.

Rose, Frank. *The Art of Immersion: How the Digital Generation Is Remaking Hollywood,*

    Madison Avenue, and the Way We Tell Stories. W.W. Norton, 2012.

Ruppert, Liana. "The Next *Mass Effect* And What A Tale Of Two Galaxies Could Mean." *Game*

    Informer, 23 December 2020, www.gameinformer.com/opinions/2020/12/23/the-next-

    mass-effect-and-what-a-tale-of-two-galaxies-could-mean.

Ryan, Marie-Laure. "Transmedia Storytelling: Industry Buzzword or New Narrative

    Experience?" *StoryWorlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2015, pp. 1-19.

—. "Transmedial Storytelling and Transfictionality." *Poetics Today,* vol. 34, no. 3, 2013, pp.

    361-388.

Tassi, Paul. "*Mass Effect: Andromeda*'s Producer Talks Me Through The Ending's Loose

    Threads." Forbes, 25 March 2017, www.forbes.com/sites/insertcoin/2017/03/25/mass-

    effect-andromedas-producer-talks-me-through-the-endings-loose-

    threads/?sh=14085ec91671.

Thon, Jan-Noël. "Converging Worlds: From Transmedial Storyworlds to Transmedial

    Universes." *StoryWorlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2015, pp. 21-53.

Wolf, Mark J.P. *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation*. Routledge, 2012.

Zakowski, Samuel. "Time and Temporality in the *Mass Effect* Series: A Narratological Approach." *Games and Culture*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2014, pp. 58-79.

Chapter 2

@GailSimone. "I have an interesting thing to say." *Twitter*, 12 September 2020, 11:18am.

@patrickweekes. "We DO have internal wikis at work." *Twitter*, 12 September 2020, 11:42am.

Bourdaa, Mélanie. "'Following the Pattern': The Creation of an Encyclopaedic Universe with Transmedia Storytelling." *Adaptation*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2013, pp. 202–214.

—. "Transmedia Storytelling: Character, Time, and World—The Case of *Battlestar Galactica*." *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies*, edited by Matthew Freeman and Renira Rampazzo Gambarato, Routledge, 2019, pp. 133-140.

Bizzocchi, Jim, and Theresa Jean Tanenbaum. "*Mass Effect 2*: A Case Study in the Design of Game Narrative." *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, vol. 32, no. 5, 2012, pp. 393-404.

Doležel, Lubomír. *Possible Worlds of Fiction and History: The Postmodern Stage*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010.

Dowd, Tom, Michael Niederman, Michael Fry, and Josef Steiff. *Storytelling Across Worlds: Transmedia for Creatives and Producers*. Routledge, 2013.

"Errors in *Mass Effect: Deception* (Google Docs)." *Reddit*, 30 January 2012, www.reddit.com/r/masseffect/comments/p411r/errors_in_mass_effect_deception_google_docs/

Evans, Elizabeth. *Transmedia Television: Audiences, New Media, and Daily Life*. Routledge, 2011.

Freeman, Matthew. *Historicising Transmedia Storytelling: Early Twentieth-Century Transmedia Story Worlds*. Routledge, 2017.

Herman, David. *Basic Elements of Narrative*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

Hills, Matt. *Fan Cultures*. Routledge, 2002.

Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. NYU Press, 2006.

—. "The Reign of the 'Mothership': Transmedia's Past, Present, and Possible Futures." *Wired TV: Laboring Over an Interactive Future*, edited by Denise Mann, Rutgers University Press, 2014, pp. 244-268.

—. "The Revenge of the Origami Unicorn: Seven Principles of Transmedia Storytelling (Well, Two Actually. Five More on Friday)." *Pop Junctions*, 12 December 2009, henryjenkins.org/blog/2009/12/the_revenge_of_the_origami_uni.html.

Jørgensen, Kristine. "Game Characters as Narrative Devices: A Comparative Analysis of *Dragon Age: Origins* and *Mass Effect 2*." *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2010, pp. 315-331.

Juul, Jesper. *The Art of Failure: An Essay on the Pain of Playing Video Games*. MIT Press, 2013.

Klastrup, Lisbeth, and Susana Tosca. "Transmedial Worlds—Rethinking Cyberworld Design." *Proceedings of the International Conference on Cyberworlds*, 2004.

Macklin, Colleen. "Finding the Queerness in Games." *Queer Game Studies*, edited by Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw, University of Minnesota Press, 2017, pp. 249-258.

Mass Effect Wiki. Fandom, masseffect.fandom.com/wiki/Mass_Effect_Wiki

McLean, Matt. "*Mass Effect*: Leveraging a Science Fiction Childhood." *Well Played 3.0: Video Games, Value and Meaning*, edited by Drew Davidson, ETC Press, 2011, pp. 113-118.

Mejeur, Cody. "Chasing Wild Space: Narrative Outsides and World-Building Frontiers in *Knights of the Old Republic* and *The Old Republic*." *Star Wars and the History of Transmedia Storytelling*, edited by Sean Guynes and Dan Hassler-Forest, Amsterdam University Press, 2018, pp. 199-209.

Murray, Janet. *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. The Free Press, 1997.

Pearson, Roberta. "'Good Old Index': Or, The Mystery of the Infinite Archive." *Sherlock And Transmedia Fandom: Essays on the BBC Series*, edited by Louisa Ellen Stein and Kristina Busse, McFarland & Company, 2012, pp. 150-164.

Priestly, Chris. "Del Ray and BioWare comment on *Mass Effect: Deception*." *LiveJournal*, 3 February 2012, masseffect.livejournal.com/1218179.html.

Proctor, William. "Transmedia Comics: Seriality, Sequentiality, and the Shifting Economies of Franchise Licensing." *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies*, edited by Matthew Freeman and Renira Rampazzo Gambarato, Routledge, 2019, pp. 52-61.

Proctor, William, and Matthew Freeman. "'The First Step into a Smaller World': The Transmedia Economy of *Star Wars*." *Revisiting Imaginary Worlds: A Subcreation Studies Anthology*, edited by Mark J.P. Wolf. Routledge, 2017, pp. 221-243.

Purchese, Robert. "Fans pick apart canonical errors in *Mass Effect: Deception* book." *Eurogamer*, 31 January 2012, www.eurogamer.net/articles/2012-01-31-fans-pick-apart-canonical-errors-in-mass-effect-deception-book.

Ryan, Marie-Laure. *Avatars of Story*. University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

—. "Transmedial Storytelling and Transfictionality." *Poetics Today,* vol. 34, no. 3, 2013, pp. 361-388.

Thon, Jan-Noël. "Converging Worlds: From Transmedial Storyworlds to Transmedial Universes." *StoryWorlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2015, pp. 21-53.

Ward, Natalie M. "Mass(ively) Effect(ive): Emotional Connections, Choice, and Humanity." *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2008, pp. 289-292.

Wolf, Mark J.P. *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation*. Routledge, 2012.

—. "Transmedia World-Building: History, Conception, and Construction." *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies*, edited by Matthew Freeman and Renira Rampazzo Gambarato, Routledge, 2019, pp. 141-147.

Zakowski, Samuel. "Time and Temporality in the *Mass Effect* Series: A Narratological Approach." *Games and Culture*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2014, pp. 58-79.

Chapter 3

@GambleMike. "This trailer has much to unpack." *Twitter*, 10 December 2020, 7:45pm.

Beddows, Emma. "Buffy the Transmedia Hero." *Colloquy*, no. 24, 2012, pp. 143-158.

Bertetti, Paolo. "Buck Rogers in the 25th Century: Transmedia Extensions of a Pulp Hero." *Frontiers of Narrative Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2019, pp. 199-218.

—. "Conan the Barbarian: Transmedia Adventures of a Pulp Hero." *Transmedia Archaeology: Storytelling in the Borderlines of Science Fiction, Comics and Pulp Magazines*, edited by Carlos A. Scolari, Paolo Bertetti, and Matthew Freeman, Springer, 2014, pp. 15-38.

—. "Toward a Typology of Transmedia Characters." *International Journal of Communication*, vol. 8, 2014, pp. 2344-2361.

Bizzocchi, Jim, and Theresa Jean Tanenbaum. "*Mass Effect 2*: A Case Study in the Design of

    Game Narrative." *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, vol. 32, no. 5, 2012, pp. 393-

    404.

Blom, Joleen. *The Dynamic Game Character: Definition, Construction, and Challenges in a*

    Character Ecology. 2020. IT University of Copenhagen, PhD dissertation.

Bourdaa, Mélanie. "Transmedia Storytelling: Character, Time, and World—The Case of

    Battlestar Galactica." *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies*, edited by

    Matthew Freeman and Renira Rampazzo Gambarato, Routledge, 2019, pp. 133-140.

Chatman, Seymour. *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. Cornell

    University Press, 1978.

Clark, Brian. "Transmedia is a Lie." *Facebook*, 21 April 2012, www.facebook.com/notes/brian-

    clark/transmedia-is-a-lie/10150841850433993/.

Crumley, Carole. "Heterarchy and the Analysis of Complex Societies." *Archeological Papers of*

    the American Anthropological Association, vol. 6, no. 1, 1995, pp. 1-5.

Eder, Jens. "Understanding Characters." *Projections: The Journal for Movies and Mind*, vol. 4,

    no. 1, 2010, pp. 16-40.

Eder, Jens, Fotis Jannidis and Ralf Schneider. "Characters in Fictional Worlds: An Introduction."

    Characters in Fictional Worlds: Understanding Imaginary Beings in Literature, Film, and

    Other Media, edited by Jens Eder, Fotis Jannidis, and Ralf Schneider, De Gruyter, 2011.

    pp. 3-65.

Evans, Elizabeth. "Shaping Sherlocks: Institutional Practice And The Adaptation Of Character."

    Sherlock And Transmedia Fandom: Essays on the BBC Series, edited by Louisa Ellen

    Stein and Kristina Busse, McFarland & Company, 2012, pp. 102-117.

Geraghty, Lincoln. "Transmedia Character Building: Textual Crossovers in the *Star Wars*
Universe." *Star Wars and the History of Transmedia Storytelling*, edited by Sean Guynes
and Dan Hassler-Forest, Amsterdam University Press, 2018, pp. 117-128.

Freeman, Matthew. *Historicising Transmedia Storytelling: Early Twentieth-Century Transmedia
Story Worlds*. Routledge, 2017.

—. "'We don't get to stay the same way we started': The walking dead, augmented television,
and sociological character-building." *Frontiers of Narrative Studies*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2019,
pp. 287-304.

Hartas, Leo, and Dave Morris. *The Art of Game Characters*. Harper Design, 2005.

Heinze, Rüdiger. "'This Makes No Sense At All': Heterarchy in Fictional Universes."
StoryWorlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies, vol. 7, no. 2, 2015, pp. 76-91.

Hutchinson, Rachael. *Japanese Culture Through Videogames*. Routledge, 2019.

Jannidis, Fotis. "Character." *Handbook of Narratology*, edited by Peter Hühn, John Pier, Wolf
Schmid, and Jörg Schönert, De Gruyter, 2009, pp. 14-29.

Jayanth, Meghna. "Forget Protagonists: Writing NPCs with Agency for 80 Days and Beyond."
Medium, 5 June 2016, medium.com/@betterthemask/forget-protagonists-writing-npcs-
with-agency-for-80-days-and-beyond-703201a2309.

Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. NYU Press, 2006.

—. "Transmedia Storytelling 101." *Pop Junctions*, 21 March 2007,
henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html.

—. "Transmedia What?" *Immerse*, 15 November 2016, immerse.news/transmedia-what-
15edf6b61daa.

—. "'We Had So Many Stories to Tell': The Heroes Comics as Transmedia Storytelling." *Pop Junctions*, 3 December 2007,

henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/12/we_had_so_many_stories_to_tell.html.

Jørgensen, Kristine. "Game Characters as Narrative Devices: A Comparative Analysis of *Dragon Age: Origins* and *Mass Effect 2*." *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2010, pp. 315-331.

Lefèvre, Pascal. "Some Medium-Specific Qualities of Graphic Sequences." *SubStance*, vol. 40, no. 1, Issue 124: Graphic Narratives and Narrative Theory, 2011, pp. 14-33.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art.* HarperPerennial, 1994.

McCulloch, Warren S. "A Heterarchy of Values Determined by the Topology of Nervous Nets." *Bulletin of Mathematical Biophysics*, vol. 7, 1945, pp. 89-93.

Parrish, Ash. "What The Hell Is Going On In That *Mass Effect* Trailer?" *Kotaku*, 11 December 2020, kotaku.com/what-the-hell-is-going-on-in-that-mass-effect-trailer-1845864620.

Patterson, Christopher B. "Role-Playing the Multiculturalist Umpire: Loyalty and War in BioWare's *Mass Effect* Series." *Games and Culture*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2015, pp. 207-228.

Richardson, Brian. "Transtextual Characters." *Characters in Fictional Worlds: Understanding Imaginary Beings in Literature, Film, and Other Media*, edited by Jens Eder, Fotis Jannidis, and Ralf Schneider, De Gruyter, 2011. pp. 527-541.

Ruppert, Liana. "The Next *Mass Effect* And What A Tale Of Two Galaxies Could Mean." *Game Informer*, 23 December 2020, www.gameinformer.com/opinions/2020/12/23/the-next-mass-effect-and-what-a-tale-of-two-galaxies-could-mean.

Ryan, Marie-Laure. "Transmedia Storytelling: Industry Buzzword or New Narrative Experience?" *StoryWorlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies,* vol. 7, no. 2, 2015, pp. 1-19.

Sicart, Miguel. *Beyond Choices: The Design of Ethical Gameplay*. MIT Press, 2013.

Smith, Greg M. "Comics in the Intersecting Histories of the Window, the Frame, and the Panel."
*From Comic Strips to Graphic Novels: Contributions to the Theory and History of Graphic
Narrative*, edited by Daniel Stein and Jan-Noël Thon, De Gruyter, 2013, pp. 219-237.

—. "Shaping *The Maxx*: Adapting the Comic Book Frame to Television." *Animation Journal*,
vol. 8, 1999, pp. 32-53.

Smith, Murray. *Engaging Characters*. Oxford University Press, 1995.

Stewart, Charlie. "*Mass Effect 4*'s New Trailer Has Huge Implications for *Mass Effect 3*'s
Ending." *GameRant*, 12 December 2020, gamerant.com/mass-effect-3-ending-new-me4-
trailer-canon/.

"The Next *Mass Effect* – Official Teaser Trailer." *YouTube*, uploaded by Mass Effect, 10
December 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lg-Ctg6k_Ao.

Varis, Essi. *Graphic Human Experiments: Frankensteinian Cognitive Logics of Characters in
Vertigo Comics and Beyond*. 2019. University of Jyväskylä, PhD dissertation.

Vermeule, Blakey. *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?* Johns Hopkins University
Press, 2010.

Wolf, Mark J.P. *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation*. Routledge,
2012.

Woloch, Alex. *The One Vs. The Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the
Novel*. Princeton University Press, 2003.

Zakowski, Samuel. "Time and Temporality in the *Mass Effect* Series: A Narratological
Approach." *Games and Culture*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2014, pp. 58-79.

Chapter 4

Adams, Meghan Blythe. "Renegade Sex: Compulsory Sexuality and Charmed Magic Circles in

    the *Mass Effect* series." *Loading… The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association*,

    vol. 9, no. 14, 2015, pp. 40-54.

Adams, Meghan Blythe, and Nathan Rambukkana. "'Why do I have to make a choice? Maybe

    the three of us could, uh...': Non-Monogamy in Videogame Narratives." *Game Studies*,

    vol. 18, no. 2, 2018, gamestudies.org/1802/articles/adams_rambukkana.

Black, Daniel. "Why Can I See My Avatar? Embodied Visual Engagement in the Third-Person

    Video Game." *Games and Culture*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2017, pp. 179-199.

Bissel, Tom. *Extra Lives: Why Video Games Matter*. Vintage, 2011.

Bizzocchi, Jim, and Theresa Jean Tanenbaum. "*Mass Effect 2*: A Case Study in the Design of

    Game Narrative." *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, vol. 32, no. 5, 2012, pp. 393-

    404.

Blom, Joleen. *The Dynamic Game Character: Definition, Construction, and Challenges in a

    Character Ecology*. 2020. IT University of Copenhagen, PhD dissertation.

Bourdaa, Mélanie. "Transmedia Storytelling: Character, Time, and World—The Case of

    Battlestar Galactica." *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies*, edited by

    Matthew Freeman and Renira Rampazzo Gambarato, Routledge, 2019, pp. 133-140.

Braidotti, Rosi. "Posthuman, All Too Human: Towards a New Process Ontology." *Theory,

    Culture & Society*, vol. 23, no. 7-8, 2006, pp. 197-208.

Brown, Mark. "Game Maker's Toolkit – Commanding Shepard." *YouTube*, uploaded by Game

    Maker's Toolkit, 15 June 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=bm0S4cn_rfw.

Burgess, Jacqueline, and Christian M. Jones. "Character Attachment and Agency in the *Mass Effect 3* Ending Controversy." *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society,* vol. 37, no. 3, 2018, pp. 1-13.

Burn, Andrew, and Gareth Schott. "Heavy Hero or Digital Dummy? Multimodal Player–Avatar Relations in *Final Fantasy 7*." *Visual Communication*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2004, pp. 213-233.

Carvalho, Vinicius Marino. "Leaving Earth, Preserving History: Uses of the Future in the *Mass Effect* Series." *Games and Culture*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2015, pp. 127-147.

de Wildt Lars, Thomas H. Apperley, Justin Clemens, Robbie Fordyce, and Souvik Mukherjee. "(Re-)Orienting the Video Game Avatar." *Games and Culture*, vol. 15, no. 8, 2019, pp. 962-981.

Dutton, Nathan, Mia Consalvo, and Todd Harper. "Digital pitchforks and virtual torches: Fan responses to the *Mass Effect* news debacle." *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, vol. 17, no. 3, 2011, pp. 287–305.

Friedman, Ted. "Making Sense of Software: Computer Games and Interactive Textuality." *CyberSociety: Computer-Mediated Communication and Community*, edited by Steve G. Jones, Sage Publications, 1994, pp. 73-89.

Fuller, Mary, and Henry Jenkins. "Nintendo and New World Travel Writing: A Dialogue." *Cybersociety: Computer-Mediated Communication and Community*, edited by Steven G. Jones. Sage Publications, 1994, pp. 57-72.

Gazzard, Alison. "The Avatar and The Player: Understanding the Relationship Beyond the Screen." *Games and Virtual Worlds for Serious Applications Conference*, 2009.

Harper, Todd. "Role-play as Queer Lens: How 'ClosetShep' Changed My Vision of *Mass Effect*." *Queer Game Studies*, edited by Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw, University of Minnesota Press, 2017, pp. 125-134.

Isbister, Katherine. *How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design*. MIT Press, 2016.

Jayanth, Meghna. "Forget Protagonists: Writing NPCs with Agency for 80 Days and Beyond." *Medium*, 5 June 2016, medium.com/@betterthemask/forget-protagonists-writing-npcs-with-agency-for-80-days-and-beyond-703201a2309.

Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. NYU Press, 2006.

Jørgensen, Kristine. "Game Characters as Narrative Devices: A Comparative Analysis of *Dragon Age: Origins* and *Mass Effect 2*." *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2010, pp. 315-331.

Klevjer, Rune. "Enter the Avatar: The Phenomenology of Prosthetic Telepresence in Computer Games." *The Philosophy of Computer Games*, edited by John Richard Sageng, Hallvard Fossheim, Tarjei Mandt Larsen, Springer, 2012, pp. 17-38.

—. *What is the Avatar? Fiction and Embodiment in Avatar-Based Singleplayer Computer Games*. 2006. University of Bergen, PhD dissertation.

Krampe, Theresa. "No Straight Answers: Queering Hegemonic Masculinity in BioWare's *Mass Effect*." *Game Studies*, vol. 18, no. 2, 2018, gamestudies.org/1802/articles/krampe.

Lankoski, Petri. "Player Character Engagement in Computer Games." *Games and Culture*, vol. 6, no. 4, 2011, pp. 291-311.

Lima, Leandro Augusto Borges. "Configurative Dynamics of Gender in BioWare's Marketing for the *Mass Effect* Franchise." *Kinephanos*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2017, pp. 165-197.

—. *Gaming Politics: Gender And Sexuality On Earth And Beyond*. 2018. King's College

    London, PhD dissertation.

Linderoth, Jonas. "Animated game pieces. Avatars as roles, tools and props." *Aesthetics of Play*

    Conference: Online Proceedings, University of Bergen, 2005.

"*Mass Effect 3: Extended Cut* Interview with Casey Hudson, Mac Walters, and Jessica Merizan."

    YouTube, uploaded by Mass Effect, 22 June 2012,

    www.youtube.com/watch?v=3y7xk1_x8ko.

"*Mass Effect 3* website." *BioWare*, 21 February 2012, masseffect.BioWare.com/about/story/.

Muriel, Daniel, and Garry Crawford. "Video Games and Agency in Contemporary Society."

    Games and Culture, vol. 15, no. 2, 2020, pp. 138-157.

Murray, Janet. *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. The Free Press,

    1997.

Newman, James. "The Myth of the Ergodic Videogame: Some thoughts on player-character

    relationships in videogames." *Game Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2002,

    http://www.gamestudies.org/0102/newman/.

Østby, Kim Johansen. *From Embracing Eternity to Riding the Bull: Representations of*

    Homosexuality and Gender in the Video Game Series Mass Effect and Dragon Age. 2016.

    University of Oslo, PhD dissertation.

Patterson, Christopher B. "Role-Playing the Multiculturalist Umpire: Loyalty and War in

    BioWare's *Mass Effect* Series." *Games and Culture*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2015, pp. 207-228.

Pearce, Celia. *Communities of Play: Emergent Cultures in Multiplayer Games and Virtual*

    Worlds. MIT Press, 2009.

Reardon, Daniel, David Wright, and Edward Malone. "Quest for the Happy Ending to *Mass Effect 3*: The Challenges of Cocreation with Consumers in a Post-Certeauian Age." *Technical Communication Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 1, 2017, pp. 42-58.

Roine, Hanna-Riikka. "How You Emerge from This Game Is up to You: Agency, Positioning, and Narrativity in The *Mass Effect* Trilogy." *Narrative Theory, Literature, and New Media: Narrative Minds and Virtual Worlds*, edited by Mari Hatavara, Matti Hyvärinen, Maria Mäkelä, and Frans Mäyrä, Routledge, 2016, pp. 67-86.

Ryan, Marie-Laure. *Avatars of Story*. University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

Salen Tekinbaş, Katie, and Eric Zimmerman. *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*. MIT Press, 2003.

Spahn, Julia. "Posthuman = Postgender? (De)stabilising Binary Oppositions in *Mass Effect*." *Paidia*, 15 December 2014, www.paidia.de/posthuman-postgender-destabilising-binary-oppositions-in-mass-effect/.

Tanenbaum, Theresa Jean. *Identity Transformation and Agency in Digital Narratives and Story Based Games*. 2015. Simon Fraser University, PhD dissertation.

Turkle, Sherry. *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit*. Twentieth Anniversary Edition, MIT Press, 2005.

Vella, Daniel. *The Ludic Subject and the Ludic Self: Analyzing the 'I-in-the-Gameworld.'* 2015. IT University of Copenhagen, PhD dissertation.

Youngblood, Jordan. "When (and What) Queerness Counts: Homonationalism and Militarism in the *Mass Effect* Series." *Game Studies*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2018, gamestudies.org/1803/articles/youngblood.

Zakowski, Samuel. "Time and Temporality in the *Mass Effect* Series: A Narratological

    Approach." *Games and Culture*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2014, pp. 58-79.

Zekany, Eva. "'A Horrible Interspecies Awkwardness Thing': (Non)Human Desire in the *Mass*

    Effect Universe." *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2016, pp. 67-

    77.

Mass Effect

Dietz, William C. *Mass Effect: Deception*. Del Rey Books, 2012.

Hough Jason M., and K C Alexander. *Mass Effect: Andromeda – Nexus Uprising*. Titan Books, 2017.

Jemisin, N.K., and Mac Walters. *Mass Effect: Andromeda – Initiation*. Titan Books, 2017.

Karpyshyn, Drew. *Mass Effect: Ascension*. Del Rey Books, 2008.

Karpyshyn, Drew. *Mass Effect: Retribution*. Del Rey Books, 2010.

Karpyshyn, Drew. *Mass Effect: Revelation*. Del Rey Books, 2007.

Mass Effect 1. Developed by BioWare, published by EA, 2007.

Mass Effect 2. Developed by BioWare, published by EA, 2009.

Mass Effect 3. Developed by BioWare, published by EA, 2012.

Mass Effect: Andromeda. Developed by BioWare, published by EA, 201.

Mass Effect: Blasto – Eternity is Forever. Written by Mac Walters, and drawn by Omar Francia, Dark Horse Comics, 2012.

Mass Effect: *Conviction*. Written by Mac Walters and drawn by Omar Francia, Dark Horse Comics, 2011.

Mass Effect: Datapad. Developed by BioWare, published by EA, 2012.

Mass Effect: *Discovery*. Written by Jeremy Barlow, and drawn by Gabriel Guzmán, Dark Horse Comics, 2017.

Mass Effect: Evolution. Written by Mac Walters, scripted by John Jackson Miller, and drawn by Omar Francia, Dark Horse Comics, 2011.

Mass Effect: Foundation. Written by Mac Walters with Jeremy Barlowm and drawn by Tony Parker, Omar Francia, Drew Geraci, Matthew Clark and Garry Brown, Dark Horse Comics, 2013-2014.

Mass Effect: Galaxy. Developed by EA Mobile, published by EA, 2009.

"*Mass Effect*: He Who Laughs Best." Written by Mac Walters and Jeremy Barlow, and drawn Garry Brown. Dark Horse Comics, 2013.

Mass Effect: Homeworlds. Written by Mac Walters, Jeremy Barlow, Patrick Weekes, John Dombrow, and Sylvia Feketekuty, edited by Dave Marshall, and drawn by Eduardo Francisco, Garry Brown, Omar Francia, Chris Staros, Dark Horse Comics, 2012.

"*Mass Effect*: Incursion." Written by Mac Walters, and drawn by Eduardo Francisco, Dark Horse Comics, 2010.

Mass Effect: Infiltrator. Developed by IronMonkey Studios, published by EA, 2012.

"*Mass Effect*: Inquisition." Written by Mac Walters, drawn by Jean Diaz, Dark Horse Comics, 2010.

Mass Effect: Invasion. Mac Walters, Written by Mac Walters, scripted by John Jackson Miller, and drawn by Omar Francia, Dark Horse Comics, 2011-2012.

Mass Effect: New Earth. Designed by Cedar Fair and Electronic Arts, and located at California's Great America, 2016.

Mass Effect: Paragon Lost. Directed by Atsushi Takeuchi, and written by Henry Gilroy, Funimation, 2012.

Mass Effect: Redemption. Written by Mac Walters, scripted by John Jackson Miller, and drawn by Omar Francia, Dark Horse Comics, 2010.

Valente, Catherynne M. *Mass Effect: Andromeda – Annihilation*. Titan Books, 2018.

APPENDIX A

Overview

  Mass Effect is a science-fiction series developed by the Canadian studio BioWare and published by Electronic Arts. Bookended with the novels *Mass Effect: Revelation*, released in 2007, and *Mass Effect: Andromeda – Annihilation*, released in 2018, *Mass Effect* spans twenty-seven stories over five different media, including four games, seven novels, eleven comics or graphic novellas, two mobile games, one app, and a film, as well as a remastered collection of the first trilogy of games, and a sequel to the trilogy announced in 2020. *Mass Effect*'s storyworld is separated into two eras and galaxies: the Milky Way and Andromeda. The first era of the series takes place in a futuristic and fictitious version of the Milky Way galaxy in the mid-22nd century when humans have reached intergalactic travel by way of ancient alien technology found on Mars and an alien structure originally classified as Pluto's moon, Charon. This technology from the ancient alien race called the Protheans revolves around a previously unknown element—Element Zero—that can alter the mass of objects, creating a phenomenon referred as a "mass effect," that enables faster-than-light (FTL) space travel, force fields, and artificial gravity. Thus, humans harnessing Element Zero—or "eezo"—is the technological leap that situates the *Mass Effect* universe within its sci-fi boundaries: time and space are defined by eezo's power to collapse the Milky Way into a traversable neighborhood of galactic communities. Protheans also left structures called Mass Relays—such as the one mistaken as Charon—that act as FTL portals around the galaxy, enabling their users to instantaneously move to neighboring solar systems. Harnessing the Prothean technology, humans travel to distant systems in the galaxy, becoming the newest member of an established galactic community of different sapient species, all of whom had also found and harnessed Prothean technology, overseen by a democratic Citadel Council. Humanity's entrance into this intergalactic society

also coincides with a transmedial player's entrance into this transmedia story, paralleling human's attempts to make sense of their new position in the galaxy.

The Milky Way era revolves around the exploits of the human soldier Commander Shepard and their Normandy crew, a team of individuals roughly representative of the Citadel's galactic community, including the species asari, turian, krogan, salarian, drell, quarian, geth, prothean, and human. The Normandy crew represents a diverse cross-section of Milky Way species with the rest of the galaxy including batarians, Collectors, elcor, hanar, keepers, leviathans, praetorians, rachni, raloi, Reapers, volus, vorcha, and yahg. The era follows this team on the spaceship SSV Normandy, and later the Normandy SR-2, as they save the galaxy from an ancient race of mechanical entities known as the Reapers, who follow recurrent cycles of mass genocide of organic species every fifty thousand years, and their various agents. Each game focuses on an antagonist connected to the Reapers, including a powerful turian Spectre named Saren Arterius in the first game, a corrupted version of the Protheans called the Collectors in the second game, and finally the Reapers themselves in the third. The scope of the Normandy's adventures is vast with each story exploring various worlds including Earth, the Citadel, Omega, Thessia, Palaven, Rannoch, and other major planets or space stations that total over seventy clusters with over a hundred systems, and hundreds of planets. The Milk Way era begins with *Mass Effect*: *Revelation*, released May 1, 2007, and ends with the amusement park ride *Mass Effect*: *New Earth*, opened on May 18, 2018.

The Andromeda era takes place 633 years after the events of the Milky Way era and revolve the missions of the Pathfinder, twins Sara and Scott Ryder, and their Tempest crew, a team deriving from the Milky Way galaxy species that have already arrived in Andromeda, including asari, turian, krogan, salarian, and human, as well as the newly introduced Andromeda

species called the angara. The era follows this team before and during their time on the spaceship
Tempest as they protect the galaxy from the Kett, and the ancient mechanical entities called the
Remnant while establishing a new galactic society. While the scope of the Tempest's adventures
is significantly smaller than its predecessor with only a handful of media, they explore a
comparable amount of space in the Heleus Cluster of the Andromeda galaxy, including a total of
thirty-eight systems and one hundred sixty-eight planets. Its media begins with the video game
Mass Effect: *Andromeda*, released March 21, 2017, and ends with the novel *Mass Effect:*
Andromeda – Annihilation, released November 6, 2018. For both these eras and their respective
galaxies, clusters, systems, and planets are linked together and build off one another,
interconnecting into larger, more complex plotlines, much like the media that connect to form the
larger transmedia story.

This connection between these two eras is crucial to understanding transmedia through
ludology as these media, and the stories, worlds, and characters contained within them, represent
a vast array of choices and paths for individuals engaged in transmedial play (who I refer to as
the "transmedial player," or "player" for short). Understood as a confluence of reader, viewer,
and player, the transmedial player makes their way through the transmedia story, learning about
the worlds and rules, connecting with the characters, and acting upon or with both to create an
experience unique to them. These paths are unique to each player, and may change upon
revisiting the series, as the twenty-seven stories offer a countless number of permutations or
paths through the series. However, I chose to outline *Mass Effect* chronologically by release date
of each text, approximating the player who engaged the series as each piece of content was
released. This Appendix thus offers a brief overview of each release as they became available
and sectioned into four phases that revolve around each of the four main games.

Milky Way, Act 1: The Spectre Menace

Released on May 1, 2007, the novel *Mass Effect: Revelation* is the first media created and published by BioWare. The novel introduces Rear Admiral John Grissom who awaits Second Lieutenant David Anderson to brief him on an upcoming mission to defend the human research station Shanxi from extraterrestrial threat. The prologue establishes the year as 2157—nine years after humanity discovered Prothean technology on Mars—where humanity has entered an era of interstellar expansion with huge leaps in technology based on Prothean technology. Eight years later in 2165, Anderson is now Staff Lieutenant aboard the SSV Hastings, responding to a distress call at Sidon, in the Skyllian Verge—the farthest reaches of human-occupied space. Within the time since Anderson's meeting with Grissom in the prologue, humans had entered the First Contact War with the Turian Empire at Shanxi that resulted in hostile conflict before humans are welcomed into a previously unknown larger interstellar community. The novel revolves around Anderson, as well as First Lieutenant Kahlee Sanders and the Spectre agent Saren Arterius, as the three characters works together to track down and arrest the batarian Edan Had'dah and artificial intelligence scientist Dr. Shu Qian who are conducting secret and illegal AI research. While Anderson, Sanders, and Saren discover Edan and Qian are using an ancient alien relic to advance their research, Saren betrays them, stealing the research, destroying the facility, and falsely accusing Anderson of the damage. These accusations prevent Anderson from becoming the first human Spectre, an elite soldier under the jurisdiction of the Citadel Council. Disheartened, Anderson resumes his military work while Sanders is promoted to a new, classified project—preventing them from pursuing a fledging romantic relationship. During the epilogue, Saren discovers the alien relic is called Sovereign, a powerful ancient warship seemingly from the age of the Prothean extinction. He also learns that Qian and Edan had both

been psychologically affected by exposure to Sovereign. Motivated by his hatred of the Alliance and desire to see turians take their place as the superior race in the Citadel, Saren begins to plan how he can unlock Sovereign's power and use it to bring about an era of turian supremacy.

The video game *Mass Effect 1*, released on November 20, 2007, is the first game in the *Mass Effect* video game trilogy that centres on the human soldier Commander Shepard and their crew aboard the Alliance starship SSV Normandy. During the first game, the Normandy crew includes the asari Liara T'Soni, turian Garrus Vakarian, krogan Urdnot Wrex, quarian Tali'Zorah nar Rayya, and humans Ashley Williams and Kaiden Alenko. Undertaking a secret mission to track down the rogue Spectre agent Saren Arterius—originally introduced in *Mass Effect*: *Revelation*—for the Citadel council, Shepard is designated the first human Spectre and given command of the Normandy. As the player-character Shepard, players gather their crew and hunt down Saren across the Milky Way galaxy with important locations including the human colony Eden Prime, the Citadel, largely uninhabited ice world Noveria, abandoned Prothean planet Feros, tropical Virmire, and lost Prothean home world Ilos. As the player-as-Shepard explores these worlds, they must make crucial choices that affect the entire game trilogy. Three noteworthy choices include saving or killing the alien insectoid Rachni Queen, killing or negotiating with Wrex, and choosing to save either Ashley or Kaiden during the final mission of Virmire. Through uncovering various Prothean artifacts during their adventure, Shepard learns about the ancient race of mechanical entities known as the Reapers who cause galaxy-wide genocide against advanced species every 50,000 years, and specifically that the Reaper Sovereign is controlling Saren in order to gain control over the Citadel and use its power to teleport its race into the Milk Way from beyond dark space, beginning their invasion. The game ends with a final confrontation with a now-possessed Saren as the Citadel races band together to

destroy Sovereign before it can take control of the Citadel. Shepard is granted full status as the first human Spectre and a human representative is welcomed to the Citadel council, cementing the human's place in galactic society. Victorious, Shepard and their crew focus their attentions on stopping the Reaper invasion set in motion through Sovereign's attack.

The novel *Mass Effect: Ascension*, released June 22, 2009, follows the events of *Mass Effect 1* and continues Sander's adventures from *Mass Effect: Revelation*. The novel introduces the Illusive Man—the mysterious leader of Cerberus—who, while watching the news after Commander Shepard defeated Saren at the Citadel, thinks it is the right opportunity to ensure humanity dominates the galactic community, proving its superiority over the other council species. While he waits for the full reports regarding Sovereign, he orders to begin the next phase of the Ascension project. Introduces Paul Grayson, a Cerberus agent, whose daughter Gillian is a part of the biotic aptitude program called the Ascension Project. Shifts to Kahlee Sanders as lead position at the Jon Grissom Academy, a teaching facility for the gifted that also houses the biotic aptitude program called the Ascension Project. Grayson—now operating under the guise of a Cord-Hislop executive to assist Cerberus—heads to Grissom Academy to see Gillian. The Illusive Man has convinced Grayson that he is concerned for Gillian's wellbeing and that it is time for Grayson to remove her from the Ascension Project so Cerberus can directly train and research her. Fearing for Gillian's safety, Sanders and her colleague convince Grayson to help them take Gillian into hiding among the quarians. Cerberus discovers their location and attacks the quarian ship; however, Sanders, Grayson, Gillian, and the quarians defeat Cerberus' agents and escape once again. Gillian remains with the quarians for her safety and Sanders takes Grayson back to Alliance space to answer for his crimes as a Cerberus agent. However, Grayson escapes her custody and Kahlee returns to her Grissom Academy to resume her leadership of the

Ascension Project. The novel ends with Grayson calling the Illusive Man from a secure line and explains to him that he will never find Gillian and makes him promise to leave Kahlee alone or he exposes the Illusive Man and Cerberus to the Alliance. Satisfied that the Illusive Man will hold up his end of the bargain, Grayson cuts the line, leaving an infuriated Illusive Man staring at the blank vid screen.

Mass Effect: Galaxy is an iOS mobile game released on June 22, 2009, that offers an origin story for the *Mass Effect 2* companion Jacob Taylor as he fights batarian terrorists during a vacation prior to joining Cerberus. During his mission he meets his future Cerberus colleague, and Normandy crew member, Miranda Lawson, who offers him information on further contacts who assist him on his mission. Jacobs locates these contacts on various planets and locations in the Nemean Abyss region of space, which lays outside Citadel jurisdiction and was previously unexplored in earlier media. In the Nemean Abyss, the player-as-Jacob explores the space pirate haven Tortuga, the Ahn'Kedar Orbital Platform, and the batarian controlled mining colony Bekke, tracking various targets before discovering the batarian terrorist leader Jath'Amon plans to attack the Citadel council with a bioweapon. Jacob and Miranda succeed in saving the council before Jath'Amon can release the virus and defeat the batarian terrorists. With the Council safe and the terrorists defeated, Jacob resumes his vacation on the luxury passenger starship Arcturian Jade where he and Miranda celebrate their successful mission. Completing the game unlocks additional dialogue between Jacob, Miranda and a batarian named Ish, who betrayed Jacob during *Mass Effect: Galaxy*, in a mission on Omega in *Mass Effect 2*. However, Jacob and Miranda must both be present in the player's party to access the dialogue, making the dialogue an Easter egg that rewards players for completing *Galaxy* and having both companions in their party.

Milky Way, Act 2: Attack of the Collectors

The four-part comic series, *Mass Effect: Redemption*, first released between January 6 and April 7, 2010, and later released as a single volume or graphic novella, opens within a month of *Mass Effect 2*'s prologue when the SSR Normandy is destroyed by the Collectors and Commander Shepard is lost. The comic follows Liara T'soni as she travels through several star systems, tracking down any evidence regarding Commander Shepard's whereabouts. During her travels she meets the drell Feron, who is a rogue Shadow Broker agent, the Cerberus agent Miranda (an important member of Shepard's team in *Mass Effect 2* previously introduced in *Mass Effect: Galaxy*), Cerberus leader the Illusive Man, and the asari pirate queen Aria T'Loak. With these various contacts, Liara tracks down the Shadow Broker's players who attempt to sell Shepard's body to the Collectors. Upon the confrontation with the Shadow Broker players and the Collectors, Liara reclaims Shepard's body—while Feron is captured by the Shadow Broker's players—and brings it to Cerberus, who assure her that they will be able to resurrect Shepard. The graphic novella ends with Liara now focusing her efforts on taking down the Shadow Broker and finding out where the Broker is holding Feron with the data he was able to gather on the Shadow Broker's base. The last panels depict Liara flying off into the blackness of space with a frame reading "To be continued—in *Mass Effect 2* from BioWare!" (*Redemption*). Interestingly, the comic—being released prior to and finishing after *Mass Effect 2*'s release—functions as both a prequel and a paraquel to the game, offering crucial background information regarding Liara's presence in the game. It also establishes the backstory for *Mass Effect 2*'s "The Lair of the Shadow Broker" DLC where the player-as-Shepard helps Liara find and kill the Shadow Broker, saving Feron, and allowing Liara to take up the mantle of the Shadow Broker.

The video game *Mass Effect 2*, released on January 26, 2010, is the second game in the *Mass Effect* trilogy that centres on the human soldier Commander Shepard and their crew aboard the Alliance starship SSV Normandy. The game's prologue depicts the Normandy being destroyed during a Collector attack with Shepard seemingly dying during the explosion. When the game begins, the player-as-Shepard learns they have been brought back from the dead after two years by the human supremacist group Cerberus. The game thus revolves around Shepard rebuilding their crew while working for Cerberus to pay off their life debt. The Normandy crew includes several of the original companions from the first game, such as Garrus Vakarian and Tali'Zorah nar Rayya, and new members, including human Kasumi Goto, krogan Grunt, drell Thane Krios, geth Legion, asari Samara (or her daughter Morinth), salarian Mordin Solus, and humans Jack, Jacob Taylor, and Miranda Lawson. Previous crew are present in the storyworld but have their own motives that prevent them from joining Shepard. With this largely new cast of companions, the player-as-Shepard fights the Collector threat across the Milky Way on old and new locations including Horizon, Omega, and beyond the Omega-4 Relay into unknown regions of space. Through their fight against the Collectors, Shepard discover these creatures are Reaper-controlled Protheans who were assimilated during the previous harvest cycle. *Mass Effect 2*'s arguably most important mission is the Suicide Mission where the player-as-Shepard must choose various crew members for specific tasks upon their attack on the Collector's base. If the player has not completed each companion's "loyalty" mission, there is possibility of failure upon each choice, potentially leading to the game being unwinnable. The game ends with a final confrontation with a Collector-created human Reaper and, upon learning the Illusive Man hopes to use the human Reaper for Cerberus, the player-as-Shepard abandons their association with the

organization. Shepard and their crew refocus their attentions on convincing the galaxy that the Reaper invasion is now inevitable.

Released on June 21, 2010, the comic "*Mass Effect:* Incursion" follows Omega boss Aria L'Toak as she takes down a group of Blue Suns and Collectors who meet on Omega to exchange human slaves. After she rids her station of the threat, Aria receives more intel from the Collectors that lists the populations of the most significant human colonies including Earth, hinting that the Collectors are specifically targeting humans for some unknown reason. The comic functions as a predecessor to the events in *Mass Effect 2*, specifically one week before the Collector attack on the Normandy during *Mass Effect*'s prologue. During an interview with IGN, lead writer Mac Walters, explains that *Mass Effect: Incursion* was created to flesh out a conversation between Liara T'Soni and Aria T'Loak in the previous comic *Mass Effect*: *Redemption*: "We wanted to continue to explore the original comic book, *Redemption*, and find a snippet in there. The idea I had was that I had a moment [in *Redemption*] where Liara meets Aria on Omega, and Aria has a very negative reaction to a mention of the Collectors. And I thought that I didn't really mention why that is. It makes sense if you think about it, but maybe there's a story behind it. So that's the genesis of these 8 pages" (George, "Exclusive *Mass Effect* Short Story").

Released July 27, 2010, the novel *Mass Effect: Retribution* completes the novel trilogy written by then BioWare lead writer Drew Karpyshyn and follows the events of *Mass Effect 2*. It reconnects Anderson, Sanders, and Grayson, as well as the Illusive Man and Aria T'Loak, as major characters. Anderson and Sanders have remained at their military and research careers, respectively, while Grayson has assumed a new identity to avoid Cerberus. After the Illusive Man kidnaps Grayson and begins experiments with Reaper technology on him, Sanders

reconnects with Anderson, and they enlist turian special forces to help them rescue Grayson and interrupt Cerberus' illegal operations. During the attack on the Cerberus base, Grayson escapes but his Reaper implants begin to assimilate his body and the Reapers influence him to infiltrate Grissom Academy and take control of the station's technology and biotic students for a small army. Meanwhile, Aria tracks the Cerberus assassin Kai Leng to avenge her murdered daughter though Kai Leng evades her as he pursues Sanders, Anderson, and Grayson. A final confrontation between Sanders, Anderson, Grayson, and Kai Leng occurs on Grissom Academy and Kai Leng kills Grayson before he can further implicate Cerberus' crimes. Kai Leng then escapes during the confusion across the academy. Three days later, Anderson has recovered enough to return to the Citadel, and he asks Kahlee to join him both to study Grayson's body and to be with him. Recognizing the Reaper's threat having spoken to them through Grayson and acknowledging her feelings for Anderson, she agrees to join him, concluding the growing romance between the two characters through the novel trilogy. The novel ends with the Illusive Man contacting Aria to make peace and offers to pay her to send all the files on the Reapers she found during their raid to study the data. She agrees and they disconnect the call on relatively good terms. Once the call disconnects, the Illusive Man stares out his window, thinking about the immediacy of the Reaper's attack, trying to prepare himself for the inevitable.

"*Mass Effect*: Inquisition" is a comic released on October 26, 2010. This comic shifts its focus away from the Normandy crew and other major characters in the Milky Way to Captain Bailey of the Citadel security force, C-Sec. Originally introduced in *Mass Effect 2*, Captain Bailey is a friendly NPC with whom Shepard works with on several minor missions around the Citadel. After discussing the chance of salmon fishing with his child back on Earth, Captain Bailey reports to Councillor Udina about a compromise in C-Sec, specifically the head of the

organization: Executor Pallin. That night Bailey investigates a murder scene and finds Pallin there. Pallin maintains he is being framed for the charges and they get into a gunfight and Bailey manages to kill him before Pallin takes him down. Bailey is unconvinced Pallin is guilty despite the supposed evidence and feels guilty having to kill him; however, Udina is sure of Pallin's guilt and rewards Bailey by promoting him to Commander. Bailey is hesitant to receive the promotion but accepts it in the end, knowing it will prevent him from taking a vacation home on Earth to see his family anytime soon. The comic thus offers a rare insight into the everyday workings of the Citadel where individuals not set on saving the galaxy struggle to find meaning and motivation to carry on giving the *Mass Effect* storyworld depth from the seemingly mundane.

The comic *Mass Effect: Evolution*, released between January 19, 2011, and April 20, 2011, takes place during the First Contact War when humans passed through their first mass relay and waged war with the turians, and offers an origin story for the Illusive Man. A pro-human mercenary group, including Jack Harper, Eva Coré, and Ben Hislop, attack a turian group raiding a destroy human colony on Shanxi and take a captive named Desolas who tells them the turians are on Shanxi looking for a relic. Once they arrive at the camp, Jack and Ben enter a cave and find a strange relic guarded by mysterious hooded figures that appear to be cybernetic-advanced turian. After taking the incapacitating the turian, Ben and Jack attempt to interact with the relic and both are knocked unconscious when the relic emits a powerful psionic wave. While the humans are vulnerable, they are taken captive by turian reinforcements. Jack awakes after being in a coma for weeks where he finds himself and Eva prisoners on the turian ship. They are with a turian named Saren, brother of Desolas years before he becomes a Spectre, and he tells them the war is over. During the trade of Jack and Eva for turian prisoners, Jack suddenly

understands the language Desolas speaks to his hooded bodyguards. Jack tells the Commander

that he heard the figures mention getting back to the artifact and convinces him to send him and

Eva to investigate. Before they board their ship, Jack almost faints, explaining to Eva that he has

been getting headaches and ominous visions since his contact with the artifact. He also knows

that the turians took the artifact to Illium and they chart a course there. Saren ambushes them

with an entourage of hooded figures, calling the artifact the "Arca Monolith." On their way to the

turian capital Palaven, Saren explains that Jack and Ben have changed the same way his

researchers did when they touched the Arca Monolith. Saren takes the humans to Palaven to

intercept Desolas before he can re-open the Temple Palaven at the heart of the turian capital city.

The turians seek to use both monoliths in unison to create a more powerful turian race. Hoping to

stop his brother, Saren calls in a security breach to the Palaven council and they bring in armed

forces. During the resistance, Jack and Eva escape and Desolas is knocked unconscious, but Ben

is killed in the fight. When Desolas awakes, he receives a call from Saren explaining to him that

he had to choose the safety of the turians and must destroy the temple to contain such power until

he can figure out how to wield it. With his brother still inside, Saren destroys the temple,

promising to both mourn and avenge him. The comic ends after some time as passed with Jack

Harper is in a space station sitting in his iconic chair now as the Illusive Man, having created

martyrs of his two friends and sending out his pro-human manifesto to human broadcast

channels, planting the seeds of Cerberus. The comic ends with the words "The Beginning..."

The comic "*Mass Effect:* Conviction," released on September 1, 2011, follows the

destruction of a Batarian system in *Mass Effect 2*'s "Arrival" DLC. It offers the perspective of

human James Vega who attempts to come to terms with Shepard's crime while dealing with

understandably outraged batarian survivors. Set after the events of *Mass Effect 2* and the

"Arrival" DLC and still months before *Mass Effect 3*, the comic exists in the fallout of player-as-Shepard's actions, offering a nuanced view of how these grand choices made in-game affect the larger storyworld and the characters within it. The comic opens on Omega days after Commander Shepard destroys a batarian system and the Alpha mass relay. James and a few batarians are playing a card game when a broadcast describing the political fallout following "Arrival" starts on the screen. James rips the screen out of the wall to silence the report and the batarians accuse him of pro-human/anti-batarian racism. A brawl erupts that spreads to the streets before Admiral Anderson breaks it up. He escorts James away from the scene and informs him that he needs more training following an incident on Fehl Prime. Anderson brings James aboard the Normandy SR-2 headed to Earth and informs him that he will be guarding the ship's prisoner: Commander Shepard.

Released between October 19, 2011, and January 18, 2012, the comic *Mass Effect: Invasion* acts as bridge between *Mass Effect: Retribution* and *Mass Effect 3*. The opening refers to the Grayson Affair, the events that take place in the novel Retribution, with Aria T'Loak brokering deals to let Cerberus use Omega as a supply hub for their research through the Omega-4 Relay. A band of mercenaries attempt to rob a Cerberus vessel when strange creatures—that look like altered blue Collectors—break from the ship and proceed to run unchecked through Omega with Aria's lieutenant Anto and his group trying to take them down. More rogue ships head towards Omega but General Oleg Petrovsky and the Cerberus fleet manage to aid Omega's defensive. Aria agrees to establish a blockade with Petrovsky and upon Aria boarding his ship, Petrovsky kidnaps her to gain control of Omega. Omega is thrown into disarray upon Aria's capture and Cerberus's occupation, with various mercenary groups vying for the station's control. Though Aria can escape her captors, she is unable to defend Omega from Petrovsky and

he claims Omega for Cerberus after neutralizing the competing mercenary groups. In the chaos, Aria takes a shuttle off Omega in hopes of regrouping her forces and reclaiming her station with reinforcements. With Cerberus in control of Omega, Petrovsky waits for Aria to inevitably return. The comic ends with Aria in a ship flying just outside Cerberus' blockade, watching the station from afar. It then ends stating: "To be continued in *Mass Effect 3* coming soon from BioWare." Indeed, during *Mass Effect 3*'s "Omega" DLC, Aria approaches the player-as-Shepard and asks them to assist her in reclaiming Omega from Cerberus. During the DLC, Aria is finally able to kill Petrovsky and reassert herself as leader of Omega, offering her aid to Shepard against both Cerberus and the Reapers going forward.

The novel *Mass Effect: Deception*, released on January 31, 2012, offers an interesting example of how BioWare and players are often at odds regarding the *Mass Effect* universe. Released as the fourth novel during the Milky Way era, Deception connects the previous novels protagonists Captain Anderson and Kahlee Sanders with previous minor character Gillian Grayson as the they attempt to uncover past crimes of the terrorist group Cerberus. While the novel takes place between *Mass Effect 2* and *Mass Effect 3*, it is full of continuity errors that readers found to be impossible to rectify, and collectively created a sixteen-page Google document outlining the numerous errors, discontinuities, and other information that did not align with their previous knowledge of the universe ("Errors in *Mass Effect: Deception*"). *Mass Effect* readers had a full database (in the forms of personal knowledge and the collective Wiki) at their disposal to quickly catalogue the inconsistencies present in the novel. Only three days after the novel's release, BioWare's Chris Priestly posted an apology on the now defunct BioWare social forums, and following this message, BioWare and publisher Del Ray Books promised that the subsequent print editions would fix errors in the novel.

Milky Way, Act 3: Revenge of the Reapers

Mass Effect: Infiltrator, released on March 6, 2012, for iOS devices, revolves around the horror of scientific experiments and cybernetics conducted by Cerberus. The only game to not center on Shepard, Ryder, or one of the Normandy crew, but the previously unknown Randal Ezno, a rogue Cerberus operative. Through the short campaign, players infiltrate a Cerberus research facility and upon discovering the horrific experiments, must fight their way out of the facility. The game concludes upon a confrontation between Ezno and his advisor Inali Renata, who is now augmented beyond recognition as a cybernetically-enhanced monster. In *Infiltrator*, there is no potential to overcome any posthuman anxiety and Ezno kills Inali.

Mass Effect 3, the final installment of the Milky Way game trilogy, was released March 6, 2012. Resuming six months after the *Mass Effect 2* "Arrival" DLC, *Mass Effect 3* chronicles Shepard and the Normandy's crew final confrontation with the Reapers. The scope of the Normandy's final adventure is vast with various worlds including Earth, the Citadel, Omega, Thessia, Palaven, Rannoch, and other major planets or space stations visited in much of the previous media. Over the course of the game, the player-as-Shepard must travel across the galaxy to rally each species against the Reaper invasion and create a Reaper-killing weapon called the Catalyst. As the player-as-Shepard explores these worlds, they must make crucial choices that affect the trilogy's conclusion. Three noteworthy choices include whether to give the Krogans a cure for a genetic virus that makes their people sterile called the genophage, deciding the end of the Geth and Quarian conflict, and how to end the Reaper threat. Culminating in a battle on Earth to defeat the Reapers, Shepard's choices to negotiate the unwinnable war against the Reapers include "control" the Reapers, "synthesis" with them, or "destroy" them. These choices loosely follow and display the colours connected to the Paragon, neutral, and Renegade

choices throughout the series. A fourth choice was added later in a DLC, "refuse," which allowed the Reapers to destroy all advanced life in the galaxy. After making their choice, the player-Shepard watches a final cinematic cutscene that shows the Reapers either leaving Earth ("control" choice), helping rebuild Earth ("synthesis" choice), the Reapers deactivating and collapsing ("destroy" choice), or the Reapers winning the war ("refuse" choice). In the "control" and "synthesis" choices, Shepard sacrifices their human identity to merge with the Reapers. In the "destroy" option, there is an ambiguous suggestion that Shepard survives with the cinematic ending with a scene of an unknown N7 soldier taking a gasp of breath beneath some rubble (*Mass Effect 3*). Regardless of the choice, the Normandy crew escapes the resulting destruction and lands on an unknown planet to mourn Shepard.

The now defunct *Mass Effect 3: Datapad* was a free-to-use app for iOS devices, including the iPhone and iPad, released on March 12, 2012. Connected to *Mass Effect 3*, players could check the status of their galaxy map, receive messages from characters, and access a mobile version of *Mass Effect 3*'s in-game codex. During its announcement, BioWare explained that the Datapad would allow players to "stay in touch with all of the information in *Mass Effect 3*" and "with an in-app mini-game, you can deploy troops and fight the war against the Reapers... All of that in one little app" (announcement video found at https://kotaku.com/receive-texts-from-mass-effect-characters-with-the-mass-5883150). The mini-game BioWare describes was a mini-game that interacts with the *Mass Effect 3* Galaxy at War system allowing players to gain difficult-to-earn War Resources to increase their victory rating that dictates the end of the Reaper War in *Mass Effect 3*. During its availability, players had access to a hand-held ARG experience akin to Shepard and Ryder's access to the in-game Codex. Albeit not possessing the complete database as found in *Mass Effect 3*, the Datapad interpellates transmedial players within the *Mass*

Effect storyworld, allowing them to experience a previously inaccessible engagement with the games. It reifies the virtual experience and complicates the divide between transmedial player and player-as-Shepard/Ryder.

The comic *Mass Effect: Homeworlds* is a four-part comic released between April 25, 2012, and August 29, 2012, following four of Shepard's companions: James Vega, Tali'Zorah Nar Raya, Garrus Vakarian, and Liara T'Soni. In the first section entitled "Homeworlds: James Vega," James is searching for his uncle Emilio Vega or his father Josh Sanders among the Reaper invasion survivors on the Citadel. His search causes him to think back on when he negotiated his father's substance abuse before joining the Alliance military, before his uncle Emilio finds him and explains that his Dad's threats are a bluff and that James should follow his own life. Inspired by his uncle's support, James joins the military and largely lose contact with both. Liara interrupts his reminiscing, explaining that Shepard wants them back aboard the Normandy for their next, unknown mission. They share a quiet moment and Liara wishes James good luck with his family.

The second story "Homeworlds: Tali'Zorah Nar Raya" follows Tali during her pilgrimage when she comes across the Geth. A Turian called Commander Jacobus, under orders from Saren, is leading a Prothean artifact expedition on the planet, using Geth as soldiers. Tali finds a message about Eden Prime and a coming Reaper invasion from the Geth before Jacobus destroys it. Tali attempts to speak with the Citadel Council and share her new knowledge but Jacobus intercepts before Tali can escape by seemingly killing him in an explosion. Tali makes it to the hospital and makes a deal with a Shadow Broker agent to get the data to other sources. He suggests she hides out at Chora's Den while he brokers the deal. The comic flashes through Jacobus' death, Sovereign's attack on the Citadel, the Human Reaper during the Suicide Mission,

and, finally, Tali standing on the reclaimed Rannoch during *Mass Effect 3* with her father's message plays out, ending with his promise to build them a house on their planet.

The third part "Homeworlds: Garrus Vakarian" begins with Garrus as a child on Palaven, doing target practice with his father before jumping to present day on Omega where Garrus—as Archangel—holds off a mercenary attack while recording an audio log of his story. The comic follows Garrus as he remembers the death of his mother, his graduation at the C-Sec Academy and the fallout he has with his father after discovering him to be a dirty cop. Following Collector attack on the Normandy, he tracks criminals to Omega, and he quickly begins building his reputation taking down mercenaries and thugs as the Archangel (taking the name from an elderly couple who call him an "angel" after he saves them from thugs). With his new reputation, he builds a squad of vigilantes and pushes them to purge Omega of its crime. Eventually his second-in-command Sidonis betrays him, killing his squad, and sending mercenaries to his hideout. Preparing for a last stand, he calls his Dad, and they forgive each other and, while still on the phone, Garrus spots N7 armour in his sights, telling his Dad that he needs to go and that the odds just got a lot better. Shepard is only represented through the N7 emblem and no other part of them is seen. The comic ends immediately before the player-as-Shepard arrives at Archangel's base during *Mass Effect 2*.

Finally, the fourth section "Homeworlds: Liara T'Soni," starts as Liara, in her Shadow Broker's base, is listening to Omega being taken by Cerberus as depicted in *Invasion* before she and Admiral Hackett discuss countermeasures to the impending Reaper invasion. She decides to travel to her home planet Thessia and to try finding more information on the Protheans in the archives. Her search eventually leads her to exploring underwater Prothean ruins on the hanar planet Kahje. In the ruins, Liara finds encryption codes of other Prothean archives across the

galaxy, specifically one on Mars. The Illusive Man contacts her asking to share information on the Reapers, and Liara agrees only on the condition he gives her his information first. Her offer exposes his lack of information and her counters with threats; however, she is neither convinced nor phased and tells him "next time you send someone to kill me, it had better be an army" before disconnecting the call. She then informs Hackett that she is on her way to Mars to investigate its Prothean archive, and where the player-as-Shepard finds her in *Mass Effect 3*. The comic ends with a small banner that says, "To be continued in *Mass Effect 3*!"

Released during N7 Day—a celebration of *Mass Effect*—on November 7, 2012, the comic "*Mass Effect:* Blasto – Eternity is Forever" dramatically departs from any previous media in the transmedia story. Its protagonists the hanar Blasto and asari Cerulean Star are both Spectre players tasked with hunting down the radical krogan scientist Kronus. Blasto, a recurring comical character in other media, is an intergalactic action movie star in the storyworld prior to this story. The comic, framed as a James Bond parody, blends Blasto's identity as a movie star with the potential (if not fictious) reveal that they are also a Spectre agent in disguise. Thus, the story potentially challenges, albeit playfully, previous instances of Blasto as threads of fiction (the action star in a Bond-esque plot) with facts including the now-radiated world of Virmire where the story takes place. Including Virmire as its setting, "Eternity is Forever" situates itself after *Mass Effect 1* when Cerulean Star mentions that "Virmire is still uninhabitable" after the nuclear blast that occurs during a primary mission in the game. Virmire is the planet where the player-as-Shepard must choose between saving either their crewmates Ashley or Kaiden—one of the first major, irrevocable choices in the trilogy. The comic is much lighter in tone than the mission that precedes it with Blasto referencing popular culture including Dirty Harry when it asks the krogan: "This one thinks the krogan scum must ask the question—does it feel fortunate?

Do you, scum?" or Kronus, riffing off Bond villains, says, "And now, if you would be so kind...

die!" ("Eternity is Forever"). Countering its film homages and video game expectations,

Cerulean Star denies the helpless trope, explaining "I'm not a damsel in distress... I only play one

on the vids." After killing Kronus, with Blasto quipping, "It appears his time was up," blowing

up the facility, and saving the galaxy from Kronus' plot to create a machine that can freeze time,

Blasto and Cerulean exchange flirty dialogue before embracing one another on a beach as the

sun begins to set, all in action movie cliché parody.

Released on November 29, 2012, *Mass Effect: Paragon Lost* is an animated film that

follows James Vega's early military career against the Collectors on a human colony called Fehl

Prime. Stationed on Fehl Prime, Vega and his troops must protect the colonists from the

Collectors who have on abducting humans for unknown purposes. As the fight continues, Vega

and his team find crucial data from the Collectors that could offer a means of defeating them

later; they also find an antidote that cures the human colonists from a kind of paralysis that the

Collectors use to abduct them. However, the Collector assault becomes overwhelming and the

team member with the Collector data is ejected out of their spaceship, hurtling towards the

planet's atmosphere. Like the player-as-Shepard in the games, Vega is thus forced to choose

between evacuating the colonist before the Collectors destroy the planet or save his team

member with the information that would offer a way to defeat the Collectors later. Vega chooses

to save his teammate and the data, leaving the colonists to die. Vega and his team are later

commended for their actions and Vega is promoted to N7 training with the promise of meeting

his hero Commander Shepard—who is discovered to be alive following the Collector's attack on

the Normandy. The film ends with Vega returning to Fehl Prime and making a promise to the

colonists' monument that he will do everything he can to make their sacrifice mean something.

"*Mass Effect:* He Who Laughs Best," released on May 4, 2013, is a comic that offers Joker's backstory before his time a Normandy's pilot. During the human Alliance's preparations for a test run of the Normandy under the turian's overseeing, Joker commandeers the Normandy and runs the test course without authorization. The Normandy, a test ship built between human and turian engineers as an offering of peace after the First Contact War (the first and only human/turian conflict), was meant to be piloted by hand-picked candidate between the human and turian leaderships. Fearing the Normandy has been compromised, they attempt to shoot the Normandy down; however, Joker's aptitude as a pilot—despite the military and turians' prejudice against his disabilities—proves unmatchable by their attempts. Joker finally contacts the base and identifies himself. Upon returning to base, the turian general commends Joker's talent and suggests that having Joker promoted to Normandy's pilot, reasoning that the best human pilot should fly the best turian-designed ship to strengthen turian-human relations. Anderson agrees that once Joker has been punished for his in insubordination, he will be assigned to the Normandy. The comic ends with Joker's shock that his cavalier and potentially dangerous hubris secured him a future as Normandy's pilot.

Mass Effect: Foundation, released between July 24, 2013, to July 23, 2014, is a thirteen-part comic series that follows the Cerberus agent Rasa, originally introduced as the antagonist Maya Brooks in *Mass Effect 3*'s "Citadel" DLC, as she moves through the ranks of Cerberus ultimately stealing a clone version of Shepard from the Lazarus Project. Each issue revolves around one of Shepard's companions in *Mass Effect 2*, including Urdnot Wrex, Ashley Williams, Kaiden Alenko, Jacob Taylor and Miranda Lawson, Jack, Thane Krios, Mordin Solus, Kasumi Goto, and Zaeed Massani, offering further backstory for each character, and explaining or setting the path for how they arrive at the events of *Mass Effect 2*. Taken together, the comics reveal

Rasa's influence over the entirety of the *Mass Effect* trilogy including her interactions with various Normandy crew before, during, and after their service with Shepard, as well as direct encounters with all the companion characters in *Mass Effect 2*. Rasa, as a high-ranking member of Cerberus during the two-year gap in *Mass Effect 2*, is responsible for putting together the dossiers that lead Shepard to their companions and allow them the resources to unknowingly assist Cerberus with finding the Collector's human Reaper construction. The most significant event within *Foundation* follows Rasa as she steals Shepard's clone—created during the Lazarus Project as an organ bank—and leaves Cerberus to train the clone Shepard to destroy Cerberus, an arc that comes to close with the *Mass Effect 3* "Citadel" DLC.

Opened on May 18, 2016, *Mass Effect: New Earth* is an amusement park ride at the Great America theme park in Santa Clara, California. Taking place just prior to *Mass Effect 3*, the ride situates the audience as vacationers on a Geneva-class interplanetary cruiser to the planet Terra Nova for a vacation, captained by Conrad Verner, a character who makes several subsequent appearances during the Milky Way trilogy games. During the cruise, the planet is attacked by a Reaper during the Reaper invasion. The ride includes a mixture of 3D visual and audio effects, as well as smells and tactile sensations, and motion simulation seats. Several popular characters make appearances including Conrad Verner, Wrex, and Garrus. In addition to pre-recorded and pre-rendered material on screen, several actors portray Conrad Verner, who interacts with the audience, the ship's control panel, and character cameos. While the actors' lines are largely scripted, the introduction and conclusion speeches change accordingly to audience participation.

Andromeda, Act 1: A New Beginning

Released on March 21, 2017, *Mass Effect: Andromeda* takes place 633 years after the events of the Milky Way era and revolve the missions of the Pathfinder, twins Sara and Scott Ryder, and their Tempest crew. The team is derived from the Milky Way galaxy species that have already arrived in Andromeda, including asari, turian, krogan, salarian, and human, as well as the newly introduced Andromeda species called the angara. Escaping the Reaper War as refugees, the Andromeda Initiative's four arks—massive interstellar ships carrying the Milky Way refugees and colonists—are separated across the Heleus cluster, and the Pathfinder is tasked with finding and saving the ships and their passengers. The game follows the Pathfinder and their Tempest crew as they protect the galaxy from the Kett, and the ancient mechanical entities called the Remnant while establishing a new galactic society. The scope of the Tempest's adventures is significantly smaller than its predecessor with only a handful of media exploring the Andromeda galaxy, including a total of thirty-eight systems and one hundred sixty-eight planets. Unlike the Milky Way game trilogy focusing on the defeating galactic threats and fighting the Reaper War, Andromeda revolves around surviving and working with others to overcome the threat of a common, colonizing enemy as the Kett literally assimilate their victims into new versions of themselves. The Pathfinder is tasked not with rallying military power against a Lovecraftian cosmic horror but rather with instilling new life into planets where the terraforming technology of ancient race once ensured the growth and development of life. Each major mission in the game focuses on returning a planet to its natural balance by way of Remnant technology while the over-arching story focuses on the repair and advancement of the Andromeda Initiative's space station called the Nexus.

Released on March 21, 2017—the same day as the game *Mass Effect: Andromeda*—the novel *Mass Effect: Andromeda – Nexus Uprising* is the first book of the Andromeda novel trilogy. It follows the story of Sloane Kelly as she attempts to protect the Andromeda Initiative's flagship Nexus from mutiny during its centuries-long journey. The Nexus suffers serious damage when it is caught in an intergalactic storm called the Scourge, destroying many of the ship's main systems and automatically awakening the thousands of crew and passengers from cryostasis. Unable to handle the unexpected resource demands of thousands of people, the Nexus' leadership begins to drastically disintegrate after the Initiative's founder Jien Garson is found dead in her quarters. Sloane, as Nexus Security Director, struggles to bridge the disorganized leadership and the frantic crew and passengers until one of the leadership incites the Krogan population of the Nexus into a frenzy after killing one of their ambassadors. Though a full mutiny and bloody conflict is avoided, the remaining leadership deem Sloane a traitor for allying herself with the Krogan insurgents and she, along with other rebels, are exiled from the Nexus and forced to find a home out in the uncharted worlds of Andromeda. *Nexus Uprising* is one of many prequels to the game *Mass Effect: Andromeda* and offers an elaborate background of why the Nexus is in such disarray when the Pathfinder arrives many years later. *Nexus Uprising* also explains how Sloane becomes the leader of the Outcasts on the Andromeda planet Kadara when the Pathfinder meets her, offering her a tragic background that challenges her seemingly brutal character.

Released in four issues from May 24, 2017, to October 25, 2017, the comic *Mass Effect: Discovery* follows the turian Tiran Kandros who, on behalf of the Turian Hierarchy (the governing agency of the turian species), attempts to infiltrate the early phases of the Andromeda Initiative prior to the Nexus' departure from the Milky Way. Passing with an alias, Kandros

accepts a job from the Initiative's founder Jien Garson to track down a quarian scientist who claims to have found ways to map the Andromeda galaxy's conditions in real time. Kandros' search for the scientist reveals a full-scale attempt to infiltrate and disrupt the Andromeda Initiative. Kandros recruits his cousin Nyreen—first introduced in *Mass Effect 3*'s "Omega" DLC—and Aria T'Loak to help him take down the saboteurs. However, despite being able to protect the Initiative, Kandros' actions lead him to being discharged from the Hierarchy for AWOL and dereliction of duty. Having found Garson's ideals and the Andromeda Initiative's goals to be inspiring during his time as a spy, Kandros takes a position under Sloane Kelley as part of Nexus Security. Though introduced in as a main character in *Mass Effect: Andromeda – Nexus Uprising* and an important NPC in *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, Kandros' backstory is established here, and the comics offer a perspective on how the Initiative was viewed in the Milky Way prior to its departure.

The novel *Mass Effect: Andromeda – Initiation*, released on November 28, 2017, is the second installment of the Andromeda novel trilogy. The novel offers a backstory for the Tempest crew member Cora Harper when she joins the Andromeda Imitative as the original Pathfinder Alec Ryder's second-in-command. Cora takes a mission to investigate the theft of important Initiative technology and Ryder gives her a virtual intelligence implant called SAM-E, an acronym for "Simulated Adaptive Matrix, Experimental version." With SAM-E in her head, Cora eventually travels to the asteroid research facility Quiet Eddy where rogue scientists have been experimenting with illegal artificial intelligence using code from Ryder's Simulated Adaptive Matrix (SAM) system. At Quiet Eddy, Cora discovers the AI hybrid has taken over the facility and started experimenting on human subjects, creating abominations that massacred the scientists and civilians who were unaware of the original research and its deadly consequences.

Cora—using SAM-E to enhance her natural abilities—fights her way through the facility and rescue the survivors. Returning to Earth, Cora and Ryder are caught in a terrorist attack against the Initiative that causes SAM-E to go offline. Disheartened at the loss of her companion, Cora grieves SAM-E before Ryder explains that SAM-E was a test to see if she could support the full SAM system as contingency if Ryder died during the Andromeda Initiative. Consequently, Ryder is only able to transfer SAM into individuals who share his DNA, including his son and daughter Scott and Sara, who become the Pathfinder in the game *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, instead of the original plan for Cora to succeed him if necessary. The novel ends with Cora coming to terms with the loss of SAM-E and her and Ryder preparing for the Initiative's departure.

Released on November 6, 2018, *Mass Effect: Andromeda – Annihilation* is the final novel in the Andromeda trilogy that takes place before *Mass Effect: Andromeda* and explores the disastrous events that lead to the sixth Andromeda Initiative ark Keelah Si'yah's emergency signal discovered at the end of the game. The novel follows Senna'Nir vas Keelah Si'yah and his team as they attempt to discover how a deadly pathogen is killing crew and passengers in cryostasis. Resorting to awakening crew and passengers from their cryo-sleep thirty years before their destination to isolate themselves from the pathogen, Senna is then forced to deal with the ship's rapidly degrading life support systems as it struggles to response to the sudden rise in demand. Meanwhile, panic spreads among the colonists, as the pathogen causes brain swelling, leading victims to hallucinations and violence. Senna eventually discovers the ark's quarian, and long-time friend, Qetsi is responsible for creating and distributing the virus. His team is then able to create a vaccine once they have isolated and studied the pathogen. Qetsi is sentenced to death, and she is used as a living retrovirus, able to deliver the cure en mass before she dies. The novel

ends with the bodies of the dead being ejected through the ark's airlock and the survivors

returning to their cryostasis with Senna attempting to put the horrific situation behind him and

deal with the aftermath when they finally arrive at the Nexus.

APPENDIX B

Theoretical Trifecta: Storyworld, Character, Player-Character

While core concepts in ludology and transmedia storytelling, storyworld, character, and player-character can trace their roots to narratology. There are several variations on how narratologists divide narrative; however, Seymour Chatman offers what I consider the clearest foundation for these concepts. When discussing the core aspects of narrative representation, Chatman states that "signifieds are exactly three—event, character, and detail of setting" (*Story and Discourse* 25). Building from Chatman, I will use this section to outline the narratology foundations of storyworld, character, and player-character that inform their transmedial evolution as discussed in my dissertation. This brief review is by no means exhaustive and offers a foundation for the in-depth discussions of each concept in my respective chapters.

Storyworld

In Chatman's understanding, the setting becomes a representation of a lived-in reality that contains the other aspects of the story (the characters and events that transpire); however, Gérard Genette uses the term "diegesis (diégèse)" to explain what he calls "the spatio-temporal universe designated by the narrative" (*Narrative Discourse* 27, original emphasis). This diegesis is more than a simple background for the succession of events, encompassing an entire system of meaning. As Genette explains, "the '*diégèse*' is indeed a universe rather than a train of events (a story); the *diégèse* is therefore not the story but a universe in which the story takes place" (*Narrative Discourse Revisited* 17, original emphasis).

Genette's concept of diegesis has many representations that rename the spatio-temporal construct (including, of course, Genette's term "universe"). While Wolf Schmid includes

"situations, characters," and "actions" as the elements of a "represented world" (*Narratology* 31), David Herman understands storyworlds as mental models of "the situations, characters, and occurrences… being recounted" (*Basic Elements* 106). However, as Marie-Laure Ryan notes, there is hardly "a concept as elusive as that of 'world'" ("Why Worlds Now?" 3), which speaks to the necessarily complex means of understanding and negotiating this concept, as I will discuss in Chapter 2. Mark J.P. Wolf also notes the various ways in which this concept appears in scholarship: "Imaginary worlds have been referred to in a number of ways" such as "'subcreated worlds', 'secondary worlds', 'diegetic worlds', 'constructed worlds', and 'imaginary worlds'" (*Building Imaginary Worlds* 13). This variety, as Wolf explains, arises from the idea that "each term emphasizes different aspects of the same phenomenon" (13).

For the sake of consistency and simplicity, I will thus employ David Herman's definition of a storyworld as "the worlds evoked by narratives" (*Basic Elements* 105) for my understanding of storyworld as a transmedial concept and how *Mass Effect* offers such a phenomenon. This choice, however, does require some caveats. As Jan-Noël Thon acknowledges, "Despite the fact that comparatively few existing studies actually use the term 'storyworld' to refer to the worlds represented by narrative representations, it has become clear that some elements of the corresponding concept are rather well established by now" (*Transmedial Narratology and Contemporary Media Culture* 46). Indeed, the term has important narratological groundings. Herman argues that "one of the most basic and abiding concerns of narrative scholars has been how readers of print narratives, interlocutors in face-to-face discourse, and viewers of films use textual cues to build up representations of the worlds evoked by stories, or storyworlds" (*Basic Elements* 106).

Understandably, fictionality is crucial to the understanding of storyworlds, with Ryan and Thon arguing "a world criterion, which stipulates that in order to pass as fictional, the storyworld must comprise invented elements; a cognitive criterion, according to which readers or spectators must engage in a game of make-believe; and an institutional component, describing the cultural practices and representational conventions that relate to the medium ("Storyworlds across Media: Introduction" 8). At its most basic, Wolf argues, "it is the world (sometimes referred to as the storyworld or diegetic world) that supports all the narratives set in it and that is constantly present during the audience's experience" (16-17); and at its most explicit, Ryan explains, a world is the "connected set of objects and individuals; habitable environment; reasonably intelligible totality for external observers; field of activity for its members" (*Narrative as Virtual Reality* 19).

Through this short review, it is important to note that a storyworld is not simply a container for other narrative elements. I follow Wolf's point that "The term 'world,' as it is being used here, is not simply geographical but experiential; that is, everything that is experienced by the characters involved" (25). Indeed, as Carlos Scolari, Paolo Bertetti and Matthew Freeman note, "a fictional world is not only a state of things or a common setting, but also a combination of transformations acted within it" (*Transmedia Archaeology* 27). These transformative and experiential aspects of offer substantive presence for these storyworlds, moving beyond simple backgrounds for stories, and Thon stresses that "to the observation that storyworlds—as worlds populated with characters and situated in space and time—consist not only of existents, events, and characters but also of the spatial, temporal, and causal relations between them, which are essential for understanding the various locally represented situations as part of a more global storyworld" (*Transmedial Narratology* 46).

Ryan further suggests that there are six components of which storyworlds are composed: "Existents: the characters of the story and the objects that have special significance for the plot ("Story/World/Media" 35); "Setting: a space within which the existents are located" (35); "Physical laws: principles that determine what kind of events can and cannot happen in a given story" (35); "Social rules and values: principles that determine the obligations of characters" (35); "Events: the causes of the changes of state that happen in the time span framed by the narrative" (36); and, finally, "Mental events: the character's reactions to perceived or actual states of affairs" (36). The details that transform storyworlds into complex narrative constructs stem from their relationship to our world, and I will examine the transmedial ramifications of these considerations at length in Chapter 2.

Character

While there may appear to be a theoretical consensus of what a storyworld is, character is an ostensibly elusive concept. Indeed, as Roberta Pearson notes, "The definition of events and settings is fairly non-contentious, but narratologists have argued for decades about the definition of character" ("Transmedia Characters" 149). Early narratological theory on character relied on semiotics and structuralism. As Chatman notes, "For Vladimir Propp, characters are simply the products of what it is that a given Russian fairy-tale requires them to do. It is as if the differences in appearance, age, sex, life concerns, status, and so on were mere differences, and the similarity of function were the only important thing" (*Story and Discourse* 111). Amanda Anderson, Rita Felski, and Toril Moi echo this assessment, explaining that "Building on Vladimir Propp's work, they [narratologists] tended to see character solely as a function of action. From a corpus of Russian folktales, Propp distilled seven such roles: the hero, the helper, the villain, the false hero,

the donor, the sought- for person (often the princess), and her father" (*Character: Three Inquiries in Literary Studies* 3-4). Narratologists refer to this category of character as an actant with Uri Margolin defining actant as "a purely functional category involving the one who accomplishes or undergoes an act or doing, hence an agent defined in terms of a narrative case grammar and its roles ("Individuals in Narrative Worlds" 844). Mieke Bal, following decades later, also favoured this notion, arguing that "*Actors* are agents that perform actions" (*Narratology* 6) and "Events, actors, time, and location together constitute the material of a fabula. In order to differentiate the components of this layer from other aspects, I shall refer to them as *elements*" (8, original emphasis).

This conception stayed in vogue for most of the 20th century, with Chatman noting that "French narratologistes have largely followed the Formalist position that 'characters are means rather than ends of the story'" (112). Margolin also mentions, "In classical narratology, character is modelled primarily as a narrative instance and defined in terms of communicative activities, their properties, and interrelations; hence the fundamental significance for this model of the narrator/narratee/narrative agent distinction, as well as the auto-/homo-/heterodiegetic modes" ("Individuals in Narrative Worlds" 844). As discussed by Anderson, Felski, and Moi, "Tzvetan Todorov further synthesized these narrative roles, but they too considered characters not as psychological or moral beings but as narrative actants, textual constraints, or effects of interconnections in the textual weave. For Roland Barthes, for example, character was an illusion of individuality created by the proper name" (4).

A second major thread of theorizing character arose in the late 1960s, with Martin Price acknowledging the possibility of seeing characters "at once as persons and as parts of a design" ("The Other Self" 290). Thus, began the dualistic nature of characters summed up by Shlomith

Rimmon-Kenan as "Whereas in mimetic theories (i.e. theories which consider literature as, in some sense, an imitation of reality) characters are equated with people, in semiotic theories they dissolve into textuality" (*Narrative Fiction* 35). This dualism inspires Bal to concede that "They are fabricated creatures made up from fantasy, imitation, memory: paper people, without flesh and blood. That no satisfying, coherent theory of character is available is due to this anthropomorphic aspect" (113). Margolin agrees, stating "literary character (LC) is not an independently existing entity with essential properties to be described, but rather a theory-dependent conceptual construct or theoretical object, of which several alternative versions exist in contemporary poetics" ("The What, the When, and the How of Being a Character in Literary Narrative" 453). Furthermore, as Margolin continues, "Although a possible individual is evoked or called into existence by a specific originating text, it is not reducible to words" (453). Thus, Margolin later concludes that characters are "constructs" in that "They are stipulated by story texts, not discovered, and are therefore determined by the descriptive conditions associated with them. They are introduced and sustained exclusively by means of a set of semiotic procedures or operations" ("Individuals in Narrative Worlds" 847).

The dualism remains in the 21st century, with Ralf Schneider noting "the double nature of literary characters: on the one hand, they are based on real-life experiences with living persons; on the other, they are the result of processes of literary construction" ("Toward a Cognitive Theory of Literary Character" 607). Alex Woloch explains character to a concept of character-space, which too relies on this dualism: "The character-space marks the *intersection* of an implied human personality… with the definitively circumscribed form of a narrative" (*The One Vs. The Many* 13, original emphasis). Jens Eder, Fotis Jannidis and Ralf Schneider—attempting to rationalize a singular concept of character—point out that "They remind one of real

persons, but at the same time they seem to consist of mediated signs only. They are ›there‹ but they do not appear to exist in reality – we do not meet them on the streets, after all" (*Characters in Fictional Worlds* 4). Despite this lack of presence, Eder, Jannidis and Schneider continue, "They do exert an influence on us, but we cannot interact with them directly. They are incredibly versatile, they change over time and appear in different forms in different media" (4). They then stress the "the ontological incompleteness of characters" (11) as a critical aspect of characters.

Jens Eder echoes their conceit, arguing that characters are best understood as "to envisage film characters as *identifiable fictional beings with an inner life* that exist as *communicatively constructed artifacts*" ("Understanding Characters" 18, original emphasis). Eder notes that "characters are neither signs 'in the text' nor mental representations 'in the head' but collective constructs with a normative component" (18). John Frow follows a similar concept to Eder, Jannidis, and Schneider, claiming characters are "ontological hybrids" in an attempt to "explore the tension between thinking of characters as pieces of writing or imaging and thinking of them as person-like entities, and I seek to resolve that tension by proposing that fictional character must—in ways that I think are logically difficult to hold together—be seen to be both at once" (*Character and Person* 2). For Frow, this hybridity then necessitates "'Character' is a figure, then; at once a figure of speech and a figural representation, the figure that stands out from a narrative ground and, more generally, the human shape or form" (9). Yet, following this conceptual trajectory of character, Frow's "ontological hybrid" offers nothing different than those who have claimed the dualistic nature of characters beforehand.

My problematizing Frow's seemingly definitive notion of character is shared and eloquently outlined by Anderson, Felski, and Moi. They acknowledge that "John Frow's *Character and Person* has the ambitious aim of producing a theory which can account for both

character and persons across different media" (6). Toril Moi subsequently argues, "I think Frow's way of setting up the problem of characters as well as his conviction that we need to talk about characters as 'ontological hybrids' are attempts to solve a nonexisting problem ("Rethinking Character" 50). Moi explains, "The term 'ontological hybrids' does no work. We end up knowing what we already know: that we often respond powerfully to literary characters and often discuss them in terms we also use about real people" (57). Moi points out, "I think Frow forgets how to 'look and see,' forgets to remind himself of our ordinary and everyday practices with characters" (58). Instead, Moi continues, "To understand what characters are, we need to look at how we talk about them. If we do, we will discover that we seem to have no fundamental intellectual problem in dealing with them" (58). I agree with Moi as characters are a natural means to engage narrative, and how we understand them need not be conceptually obscure. I rely on this approach when examining the transmedial player's connection to *Mass Effect* characters in Chapter 3.

Player-Character

Whereas character is a largely dismissed or fraught concept in games studies due to the lack of narratological consensus as I discussed above, player-character is a core tenet of game scholarship. The concept of the player-character (or avatar though the term is problematic, as I will discuss in this section) is, at its most basic, the representation of a player in a video game. Nevertheless, early scholarship troubled the notion of representation of the player-character as merely a tool rather than a fully realized figure or character. Mary Fuller and Henry Jenkins argue that avatars offer "traits that are largely capacities for action, fighting skills, modes of transportation, preestablished goals… little more than a cursor which mediates the player's

relationship to the story" ("Nintendo and New World Travel Writing"). Additionally, James Newman argues that the "primary-player-character relationship is one of vehicular embodiment… a suite of characteristics or equipment utilized and embodied by the controlling player" ("The Myth of the Ergodic Videogame"). However, Bob Rehak offers a more robust understanding of the player-character, explaining that "appearing on the screen in place of the player, the avatar does double duty as the self and other, symbol and index. The avatar's actions are linked to those of the gamer, but at the same time they are also a mediated on-screen representation" ("Playing at Being" 103).

Andrew Burn and Gareth Schott likewise discuss the concept as neither one nor the other but both: "the avatar is a two-part structure, partly designed in conventional narrative terms as a protagonist of popular narrative, and partly as a vehicle for interactive game-play" ("Heavy hero or digital dummy?" 213). Nick Montfort emphasizes the control aspect of Rehak's definition, noting that "In interactive fiction, the 'player character' is that character who the interactor (or player, or user) can direct with commands" ("Fretting the Player Character" 139). As video game technology developed further, the notion of vehicular embodiment was dismissed in favour of the social implication of the player-character's virtual presence of the player in MMO (massively multiplayer online) games. Indeed, T.L. Taylor argues that "Avatars are objects that not only represent people in the virtual world, but influence and propel the formation of identity and relationships" (*Play Between Worlds* 96). Mark Stephen Meadows follows a similar definition explaining that "An avatar is an interactive, social representation of a user" while also being "a literary device. It's a protagonist that is used for interactive narratives" (*I, Avatar).* Tom Boellstorff acknowledges, "Representations of persons in virtual worlds are known as 'avatars' (*Coming of Age in Second Life* 6). Celia Pearce returns the concept to a more general

understanding noting that "All virtual worlds include player representations, also known as avatars, another feature that distinguishes them from first-person shooters" (*Communities at Play* 19).

Throughout this overview, I have used the term player-character while citing scholars using and focusing on the term avatar. While many scholars acknowledge the term originates in Hinduism (Burn and Schott 2004; Linderoth 2005; Gazzard 2009; Jørgensen 2009; Pearce 2009), none of them discuss the problematic notion of employing a culturally appropriated religious term nor how it began its circulation in game culture. Boelstorff acknowledges the origins of the term in tech culture, explaining "the virtual embodiments of persons as avatars, a term used in many online worlds. This Sanskrit word originally referred to the incarnation of a Hindu god (particularly Vishnu)" (128). Boelstorff continues, noting, "While "avatar" ("avie" or "av" for short) historically referred to incarnation—a movement from virtual to actual—with respect to online worlds it connotes the opposite movement from actual to virtual, a decarnation or invirtualization" (128). However, there is also no discussion of its problematic nature.

Lars de Wildt, Thomas H. Apperley, Justin Clemens, Robbie Fordyce, and Souvik Mukherjee argue that "Explicitly acknowledging the uneven power relationship in the cultural appropriation of the avatar from India to North America has several important consequences for scholarship of video games" ("(Re-)Orienting the Video Game Avatar" 12). These consequences include first: "Video games are culturally hybrid"; second: "While video games are a global phenomenon, they draw from (and are experienced in) multiple, uneven local contexts"; and third: "Power and privilege shape how we experience and understand games" (12). Nevertheless, de Wildt, Apperley, Clemens, Fordyce, and Mukherjee explain "Our intention is not to turn people away from this term but rather to open a space for reflexivity around the avatar that

acknowledges its fraught background—to reorient the avatar" (14). Similarly, in her analysis of dynamic game characters, Joleen Blom discusses "the problematic appropriation of the term 'avatar' in tech culture—and game studies scholarship" (*The Dynamic Game Character* 24), yet also employs the term through the rest of her analysis.

While it is important to situate the term in game scholarship, I acknowledge the term is problematic as an act of cultural appropriation and I chose not to use the term to parallel a core tenant of transmedial agency: to reconsider the power and control of players over worlds and characters. Instead, I employ the more robust and non-appropriative term of "player-character." I will use "player-character" to encompass the figure that represents both the player's actions and presence in a video game and the character that exists within (and beyond) the game. Indeed, the term is older—in the context of games—and more accurate in its notion of what it represents. Its legacy is important for understanding how players engage in the process of shifting back and forth between embodied and represented in games. Furthermore, games are fundamentally hybrid, layered, and complex systems of meaning and the concept of "player-character" as player, character, and both simultaneously mirror that multi-faceted reality. Following this brief review, I will return to a discussion of player-character within the context of *Mass Effect*'s transmedia story in Chapter 4.