Narrativized Video Games:

Playing Cultural Influences and Intentionalities

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on story-based games that address in-game complex social issues in order to map their narrative affordances and decode their intentionality. That is, my main goal is to identify the affordances and resources that construct and structure a game narrative, as well as to analyze the capability of games to present symbolic representations. Video games are demonstrating great potential for the dissemination of ideas, a potential that is as powerful as any other cultural product. Sophisticated game narratives provide highly interactive environments that make a difference in players' experiences, since players must act within the fictional world. Through immersion and agency, players make their in-game choices; they act in favour of a side, an interest, a cause, or an ideology. Unlike other media that require only the viewers' passive attention, a digital game is an interactive medium that demands a player's constant awareness and input. Consequently, the impact of the game's arguments on its audience can be enormous, perhaps even as powerful as the effect of the industry of cinema or television on society, both of which are considered by media theorists as playing a highly influential role in the process of shaping social behaviours and spreading western culture to the rest of the world. In this research, I will be examining a group of games that are known as the *Mass Effect trilogy* (BioWare, 2012). These games are acknowledged by critics and players for their capacity to offer a rich and intricate game narrative, full of complex cultural and social issues as well as symbolic representations and persuasive discourse.

Dedication

For Mom and Dad.

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Introduction

The 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s were crucial for digital games. During this period, they evolved from experimental processes within universities and research labs to take their place in the global market as an influential medium (Mayra, 2008). In the latter half of the 1990s and early 2000s, the development of the Internet triggered a new social phenomenon within game culture, introducing massively multiplayer online games (MMOG). The relationship between the history of computing and digital games is therefore intertwined: technological improvements have not only boosted games' mechanics, but have also enabled creative freedom. As a result, games now offer elaborate content through an engaging narrative and realistic graphics, making them even more popular. Thus, the game industry is using compelling narrative content as a strategy to not only engage players with the games, but also to increase the number of players (audience). Such a tactic seems to be working quite well, since the game content, especially its storytelling, has become the main reason for one to purchase a video game (Entertainment Software Association, 2015).

The industry's efforts to keep the loyalty of gamer communities and to increase its audience is also noticeable through the growing visibility of mega events exclusively dedicated to video games, such as the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3), the Game Developers Conference (GDC), and the Penny Arcade Expo (PAX). The status of these events is growing at the same pace as video game popularity, which reveals an extraordinary interest on behalf of both consumers and developers for following the innovations promoted by this sector. Because of their high visibility stimulated by live transmissions across the world through different Internet channels, these events have become aesthetically assembled and commercially prepared to seduce and enlist legions of fans from all corners of the globe.

Such popularity has raised digital games to a privileged social and economic position. Games have become a particular, and highly profitable, form of culture. In 2014, U.S. consumers spent $22.41 billion on the game industry (Entertainment Software Association, 2015), and the worldwide

revenue reached $102.53 billion (Statista, n.d.). According to the Entertainment Software Association's report, 155 million Americans play video games, 51% of US households own a dedicated game console, and 42% of Americans play video games regularly (3 or more hours per week). In fact, Americans are dedicating more time to playing video games than to watching television or movies. Such widespread usage is bringing video games into a strategic position within the 'media diet,' demanding that attention be given to their system of symbols, as it may be having a substantial influence on our society (Williams, Martim, Consalvo, and Ivory, 2009).

Recent digital games are using all their systems' affordances to structure intricate narratives that are able to involve and compel players within the game world. Such narrative potential has stimulated a debate about the capacity of video games to offer coherent and complex storytelling, which has evoked passionate reactions from all sides in the game studies field. For some time, ludologists have questioned the ability of disciplines such as literature, sociology, psychology, and film studies, among others, to adequately investigate video games. They argue that game studies must focus on the structure and elements of a game, particularly its rules and mechanics. Narrative, they state, is just an incidental part of the game, not its priority (Frasca, 2003b). Perhaps Frasca's argument made some sense twenty years ago, but today games are demonstrating an extraordinary algorithmic power to create storylines. In fact, stories and mechanics complement each other in the overall work of building a video game. Some games might be more story-based; others might be more inclined towards problem solving; and still others might excel at mixing together stories and challenges. Thus, the appropriate approach to conduct a video game investigation will be defined according to the genre and features that a given game presents, as well as according to scholar's motivations for examine the medium.

By presenting an involving and complex narrative, games are becoming more persuasive and expanding their influential spectrum. Narrative is connected to our most common form of expression, serving as a guide to human thoughts (Ryan, 2004), and video games are using it as a palatable way to deliver their messages to their players. Thus, stories are more than just clues to interpret the game rules (Juul, 2005), since they allow games to make strong arguments about our

society, influencing social and cultural behaviours (Bogost, 2007; Leonard, 2003). The expansion of the game industry demonstrates that games are no longer just an entertainment product; rather, they have become a highly expressive medium able to embody ideological and cultural meanings. That is, as with any other cultural product, video games embody meanings and intentions that are able to shape social thoughts. Therefore, it is important to examine video games just as carefully as we do with any other cultural media (*e.g.*, books, movies, music, theaters, television), so that we can understand how they create their narratives and how they convey their meanings.

Even though this investigation approaches video games as cultural products, the analysis of the culture of consumption by gaming communities or gaming sub-cultures is not part of this scope of analysis; rather this thesis focuses on story-based games that address in-game complex social issues in order to map their narrative affordances and decode their intentionality. That is, my main goal is to identify the affordances and resources that construct and structure a game's narrative, as well as to analyze the capability of games to present symbolic representations. Video games are demonstrating a great potential for the dissemination of ideas, a potential that is as powerful as any other cultural product. A sophisticated game narrative provides a highly interactive environment that makes a difference in players' experiences, since players must act within the fictional world. Through immersion and agency, players make their in-game choices; they act in favour of a side, an interest, a cause, or an ideology. Unlike other media that require only the viewers' passive attention, a digital game is an interactive medium that demands a player's constant awareness and input. Consequently, the impact of the game's arguments on its audience can be enormous, perhaps even larger than the effect that the cinema or television industries have on society, both of which are considered by media theorists to play a highly influential role in the process of shaping social behaviours and spreading western culture to the rest of the world.

Acknowledged by critics and players for its capacity to offer a rich and complex game narrative, the *Mass Effect trilogy* (BioWare, 2012) is an example of a game that presents complex cultural and

social issues that are full of symbolic representations and persuasive discourse. The game introduces the Alliance Marine Commander Shepard, whose mission is to save the galaxy from the Reapers, a powerful ancient machine race. To have success in the game, Shepard needs to perform combat missions as well as enact political and diplomatic assignments in order to solve problems and make alliances with other races. *Mass Effect* allows players to transfer Shepard's profile from the first game into the following sequels, carrying over their record of choices and decisions from their previous campaigns. Accordingly, players also need to handle the consequences of their previous decisions, which results in an even more engaging and coherent narrative.

As a role-playing action game, *Mass Effect* is not only designed around winning combat missions, but it is also based on building relationships with other characters. The game creates its arguments through interactions involving in-game situations and dialogues, which have the potential to convey significant social and cultural meaning. The game, therefore, operates as an instrument to reinforce or subvert the established hegemonic power. For Bogost (2007), although video games are computational artefacts, they are not mechanical manifestations; as a product of human creation, digital games present a procedural rhetoric that reflects a determined cultural, social, and ideological influence. Yet, he suggests that video games build their arguments by modeling rules and behaviour instead of through words or images. In contrast, Cassar (2013) states that a video game is a multimedia vehicle that exhibits its rhetoric through different levels and instances, including the games' cinematic scenes, images, and textual expressions, as well as via the games' rules and gameplay mechanics. Accordingly, the intentionality of the game *Mass Effect* can be detected by not only its interactive map, and other mechanical components, but also through its large set of images and texts.

Issues relating to social dilemmas such as racism, sexism, and sexuality, as well as militarism, are part of the argument's scope in *Mass Effect*. Because these arguments are offered to players through the game's system, its set of images, and its textual expression, it is crucial to combine different theoretical tools in order to analyze their complex interrelation. Accordingly, the

theoretical framework designed to accomplish this analysis combines Bogost's (2007) procedural rhetoric approach with a cultural studies approach. As Williams (1981) asserts, a cultural system is a system of significations imbued with a complete and complex sets of activities, relations, and institutions, in which ideas and concepts, either produced or reproduced, are enfolded within the social structure. Accordingly, the influence of cultural products is associated with the relation between cultural producers and dominant groups, in which such connections expose how these relationships attach, influence, and shape cultural practices.

To guide this study, my research approach uses playing and non-playing methods (Aarseth, 2003) to determine the narrative structure of the game, as well as to identify the cultural and social discourses within and connected to *Mass Effect*. The analysis of the narrative structure was conducted by exploring an affordances' template that includes eight game aspects: object inventory, core mechanics, objectives, game interface, interaction mapping, character, narrative arc, and narrative space. To investigate the cultural and social arguments created by the game, I looked at four social and ideological topics: the representation of race, gender, sexuality, and imperial militarism. I then examined these topics with the aid of four sociological theories: Critical Race Theory, Feminist Theory, Queer Theory, and the Theory of Imperialism. My intention is to demonstrate that, through their rhetoric, video games can serve as an instrument for the established hegemonic power.

Chapter previews

Part I – Defining a theoretical framework via the narrative potential of video games

Chapter one — Inquiring into the capacity of video games to offer narrative content, I begin by revisiting the arguments from the ludologists, the narrative theorists, and the so-called 'middle ground' scholars in order to prepare the groundwork for examining video games. Ludologists hold the position that the game system (mechanics and rules) is the most important feature to be

explored in game studies, whereas narrative theorists and other game scholars argue that other disciplines are contributing to the study of games by enriching the debate around the them (Mayra, 2008; Simons, 2007). The 'debate' over narrative vs. mechanic has been losing strength, since a large part of the game community agrees that is possible to create narratives in video games. For this reason, the focus of game analysis seems to be moving towards exploring the different levels of stories that video games are able to offer as well as the possible meanings such narratives expose (Gee, 2005; Zimmerman, 2004). Yet, because the game engine is used as an instrument to create narratives, such an investigation cannot be dissociated from the power of the game mechanics.

Chapter two — Technological advancements are transforming video games into an even more complex medium. This complexity is extending the expressive power of games so that their meanings can reach players not only through their rules and mechanics, but also through their images, cinematic cut-scenes, and textual expressions. By improving their capacity to portray meaningful in-game situations, digital games suggest a connection between the way people play a game and the way they understand the world. In other words, video games are not just an entertainment product; rather, like all cultural products, they embody significance and intentionality. Thus, chapter two offers an overview of the evolution of video games from its origins in the movement of abstract shapes to its current status as an influential cultural product. In addition, it proposes a theoretical framework for investigating games with strong arguments by combining Bogost's (2007) procedural rhetoric approach with the cultural theories advanced by Williams' (1981) interpretation of the relations within cultural productions.

Part II – Case Study: *Mass Effect Trilogy*

Chapter three — This chapter offers a case of study based on the *Mass Effect trilogy*. By taking a close look at the game's affordances, I will examine how *Mass Effect* builds its narrative structure. The intention here is to map the narrative of the game by using its loyalty missions system to demonstrate how the mechanism of succeeding or failing these missions shapes the storyline, transforms the wheel of dialog choices, and, consequently, influences the ending of the

game. The aspects of the game to be considered in this investigation are split in two descriptive groups: the game's system, which includes object inventory, core mechanics, objectives, game interface, and interaction mapping; and secondly, the game's narrative, which includes character, narrative space, and narrative arc.

Chapter Four — This chapter focuses on the social and cultural representations in *Mass Effect*. My goal is to investigate and expose how the game uses its collection of imagery, cinematic scenes, textual expressions, and its gameplay mechanics to mirror (reflect and refract) society. Furthermore, in developing this analysis I will draw upon additional theoretical tools in order to investigate the representation of race, gender, and sexuality as well as the political parameters, notably the imperial militarism, that the game implies in its discourse. My intention is to ask, for instance, how does the game represent women? Is there a sexist agenda behind the game's arguments? How are racial issues treated in the game? Do the racial issues discussed in the game make *Mass Effect* a racist game? Taken together, these additional theories, as a supplement to Bogost's(2007) procedural rhetoric and Williams' cultural studies approach, are able to prepare distinct frameworks in which such representations can be examined, evaluated, and refined.

Conclusion — Finally, I conclude that *Mass Effect's* affordances are important not only for the structure of the game's complex narrative, but also for the creation of the social and cultural arguments in which such a narrative is revealed. While all the game's affordances have their role in exposing the game's rhetoric, three of them play key roles in making such intentionality more perceivable: the interactive map, the characters, and the objectives. As a cultural instrument, the game acts both to validate and to disrupt the established status quo. However, the stereotypical manner in which the game deals with some representational issues, allows me to affirm that *Mass Effect's* arguments reinforce the current social system more than they subvert it.

Chapter 1: Are video games able to offer narrative content?

Los Angeles, 1946. At that time, when the rest of the world was recovering from the World War II, the city is extraordinarily prosperous, having in Hollywood a shining beacon of the American Dream. However, this charming metropolis is, in fact, flooded with corruption and crime on every level, including inside the police department. Imagine a young decorated war hero working as a police officer, hired not only to aid the Los Angeles Police Department's (L.A.P.D.) effort to diminish accusations of depravity, but also bring some credibility to the organization. Now, envision this in a *noire* environment, full of darkness and glamour, secrets and seduction, death and love, moral ambiguity and ingenuity, in which the mood is augmented through a transformation of the colourful scenarios into a black and white 'reality'.

In this world, you assume the role of Cole Phelps, who pursues intricate cases during his assignment to five different 'desks' at the L.A.P.D. By solving the cases, Phelps sees his career quickly ascend, reaching the position of L.A.'s 'golden boy' detective. In order to accomplish each case, Phelps has to investigate crime scenes, follow-up on leads, and read facial expressions and gestures while interrogating suspects or witnesses. All of these tasks will guide him into the tangles of a larger case, revealing that the facts are more complex than they appear to be. Thus, by progressing through the ranks and different departments, you as Detective Phelps experience not only the triumph of his cleverness but also the collapse of his reputation and marriage after being trapped and publicly exposed.

Any number of media (book, graphic novel, play, movie, or television) could explore the short narrative described above; however, this story is a summary of the plot from the video game *L.A. Noire* (Team Bondi, 2011). With this short example, the shared ability of this medium to construct a narrative is exposed, but its similarities with other forms of media ends when the user takes control of the character and becomes the agent of what will be revealed through the game's story, rather than being a passive observer of the sequence of events. Even though it is true that not all games are narrative-driven, or that they all use the narrative context as the main feature to

immerse players in their world (*e.g.*, first person shooter such as *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward, 2003)), many genres do this quite well (*e.g.*, Role-Playing Games like the *Mass Effect trilogy* (BioWare, 2012). Action-Adventure titles such as *The Last of Us Remastered* (Naughty Dog, 2014), or even first person shooters like *Bioshock Infinite* (Irrational Games, 2013)) are examples of this form of narrative immersion. Sophisticated storytelling and interactive transitions between gameplay and cinematic cut-scenes, even more frequent in contemporary digital games, are encouraging scholars to categorize these games as a new kind of media, forged from a composition between video games and cinema. In this way, the rich and diverse worlds of computer games inspire a range of different reasons to make video games an object of study, allowing a variety of research areas to be interested in studying the field. Accordingly, Cassidy (2011) asserts that "Video games are an audiovisual, time-based medium, similar to film and television and much of their early study was conducted from film-studies perspective" (p. 292).

As digital games have evolved over the last four decades, their unique configuration of media components have made them a disputed object of study for a myriad of disciplines, including literature, ludology, sociology, psychology, and film studies among others. The debate surrounding the narrative capacity of video games has evoked passionate reactions from all possible sides in the field: ludologists, narrative critics, and self-proclaimed 'middle ground' scholars. While some maintain that there is no consensus over this matter, arguing that the issue was just put aside rather than actually being solved, it seems that this long battle is losing strength. Game community members now largely agree that it is possible to create narratives in video games, thus scholars are moving on to questioning, for instance, how to interpret games as stories. As stated by Klevjer, the debate between narrative and playability "is not a question of discursive levels ... but a conflict of agency" (cited in Cheng, 2007, p. 18) —at the same time that a narrative framework offers conditions for player's actions to be meaningful, it also, to some degree, constrains players' agency. The interactivity of computers is transforming human activities. This interactive attribute creates also a new quality for narratives, since digital media "situate us inside a system that continually produces a dynamic object" (Ryan, 2004, p. 329).

Regardless of whether the issue is really solved or not, I have decided to revisit the arguments from such a discussion for two reasons: (1) To reveal how this polarized debate is still important for a broad understanding of the game studies field; and (2) From my perspective, how the narrative component of a game configures one of the crucial elements of influence in players' behaviours. Thus, this chapter exposes the arguments of ludologists, narrative critics, and 'middle-ground' scholars, to prepare the groundwork for examining video games. In order to provide an overview of the discussion's context, this chapter is organized in the following sequence: the first section presents the traditional debate between ludologists and narrative analysts about the study of video games, though some scholars argue that this debate never took place in reality. This section offers arguments ranging from pure Ludology (Eskelinen, 2001; Frasca, 2001) to the importance of narrative theory (Newman, 2013; Simons, 2007), and discusses the inevitable confrontation between these arguments in addressing not only the capabilities of digital games for constructing a narrative structure, but also why narrative should or should not be taken under consideration when analyzing video games (Gomes, 2005; Juul, 2005; Ryan, 2001). The second part proposes a different approach to discussing the topic. Rather than feeding the discussion about a game's capacity to tell stories or the relevance of narrative in examining games, scholars are suggesting other lines of inquiry that game critics should consider, thereby shifting the debate to a more interesting level. For instance, while Jenkins (2004) considers a game's spatiality as a method for building narrative, Gee (2005) explores the different levels of stories presented by different genres of video games. All of the aspects offered by these new lines of inquiry take narrative as a game element to be a given.

1. "The debate that never took place"[1]

1.1 Ludological perspectives

[1] Extract from Frasca's (2003a) http://www.ludology.org/articles/Frasca_LevelUp2003.pdf

The arguments about the function of narrative in games have evolved over the years due to developments in the production of video games. For instance, ludologists' arguments have shifted from 'digital games do not have narratives at all' to 'how to interpret games as stories' and 'researchers usually ignore essential elements that make a game a game, and instead focus just on the literary aspects of the narrative.' Originating from the Latin *Ludus*, meaning game, Ludology is a science for describing the study of general games, including sports and board games, and more recently a particular branch dedicated to video games (Frasca, 2003b). This field of knowledge was created to fill a lack of a formal discipline focused on investigating games. This absence, ludologists believe, was the main reason that most scholars used different disciplines, including literary and film theory, to explore video games. For them, the endeavour to explain modern games using previously existing theories (*e.g.*, film studies and literary) is, in fact, to deny video games' capacity for simulation, which is its basic characteristic.

Accordingly, Eskelinen (2001) argues that unlike literature and films, which are interpretative, computer games are configurative. For him, to interpret a narrative work in general art, users must to have access to the entire piece. Books, for instance, must offer a complex chain of events, delivering a pre-configured package ready for interpretation, while for video games this aspect is not as crucial. A game requires its mechanics and rules to be interpreted first before its sequence of actions can be produced. Even though Eskelinen recognizes that games present a series of open events, he states that this does not necessarily configure a narrative.

For Frasca (2001), the use of media studies and narrative analysis to examine video games is, in fact, insufficient, since it does not take into consideration the simulation aspects present in digital games, thereby ignoring their ability to represent dynamic systems in the scope of the analysis. The main difference between narrative and simulation is that while narrative is a representation of signs, a simulation recreates not only the representation of a sign, but also implies its rules of behaviour. That is, a simulation requires interpretation of the signs and experimentation before the rules of behaviour can be inferred, which Frasca (2001) observes as "the ontological difference" (para. 5). For him, such features make it difficult to understand

games through any narrative approach. Nonetheless, in story-based games the interpretation of the signs that imply behaviours is directly connected to the narrative context, not only because narrative is a representation of a set of signs that stimulate behaviour, but also because a game uses the story to reveal its rules (Juul, 2005).

Ludologists highlight rules, strategies, and interaction patterns as the most important features in video games. For them, gameplay is a set of rules that guide the player's activities to achieve the game goal. They claim that gameplay is independent of narrative, since it does not change even if the narrative does. Accordingly, ludologists contest the storytelling capacity of games, arguing that combining narration with interactivity is always disappointing. For Juul (2001), "computer games and narrative are very different phenomena and, as a consequence, any combination of the two, like in 'interactive fiction', or 'interactive storytelling' faces enormous problems" (para. 2).

Despite the opposition between critics who focus on narrative analysis and ludologists, Ludology has as its goal the investigation of games at their structural level. Frasca (2003b) asserts that "as a formalist discipline, [ludology] should focus on the understanding of [game] structure and elements — particularly its rules — as well as creating typologies and models for explaining the mechanics of games" (p. 222). That is, for ludologists, narrative is just an incidental part of the game, not its priority. As simulations in which computer code generates signs according to rules that model behaviour, game analysis should be focused only on the rules of the games and the system of mechanics they describe.

1.2 Narrative Theory perspectives

Since the 1980s, game developers began to incorporate narrative elements to improve the game's experience. Recognizable characters and sequences of events able to generate a story can be perceived, for instance, in games like Pac-Man and Mario Bros, though they were offered in a simplistic and flat way. By following technological advancements, games became capable to provide more complex stories, yet, the medium's capacity to offer a full narrative experience was

still in dispute in the 2000s due to questions raised by the ludologists as well as by some narrative theorists.

According to Ryan (2004), digital media are challenging writers to create new narrative experiences able to produce a particular effect, or result, by using agency. She observes that digital environments provide a variety of genres that use different kinds of assets, such as interactivity, reactivity, multimedia and networking capabilities, volatile signs, and modularity. All of these characteristics are capable of having an impact on narrative, either in a positive or in a negative way. This challenge reinforces the idea that digital media demands a new approach to narrative analysis in order to take in account of these interactive components.

In fact, Ryan (2004) believes that games are not a narrative in the same sense as a novel or a film, but rather they use the story to attract players into their world and persuade the player's actions. As a result, such a story does not configure the player's main interest once they are absorbed by the game action. She claims that narrative makes computer games successful because it drives the players to solve problems, in which they perform a series of moves to achieve the main goal of the game. For her, the connection to the narrative happens because players dramatically enact the game's tasks. Nonetheless, Ryan (2004) points out that players do not engage with the general meaning of these actions that they are enacting: "players are usually too deeply absorbed in their tasks to reflect on the plot that they write through their actions" (p. 349).

In contrast, Newman (2013) argues that recent game researches have been demonstrating that gameplay as well as cut-scenes are active spaces for players' reflections, since the game activities might be understood as "socially situated 'lived experience' exploring the practices and contexts of play rather than solely attending to delineated moments of 'control' or 'interaction' with the computer" (p. 94). According to Newman, many video games evoke Todorov's basic narrative structure: equilibrium, disruption, and the inevitable resolution. Thus, it seems predictable that the use of narrative theory will contribute to the investigation of video games.

Newman (2013) also notes that, with the release of the PlayStation, video games adopted into their system non-interactive sequences (cut-scenes) as a key element of video game language. Games became able to play pre-recorded audio and pre-rendered videos, which allowed for the development of larger game worlds with a range of different levels, in which environments, characters, and actions are generated in real-time. He argues that those sequences can play multiple roles, such as establishing a scenario, location, and atmosphere, while also exposing the characters motivation by giving sense to players' actions. For Newman (2013), non-interactive sequences are used to explain:

> (a) the overarching and immediate game and level objectives; (b) the mechanics of the game and rules of play, (c) the interface and function of buttons on the controller and objects within the game world, (d) the mechanics for saving progress through the game. (p. 96-97)

That is, cut-scenes, he says, serve to both advance the narrative and offer instructions for how to use the game, as well as guidance on how to succeed on each game level.

Likewise, Simons (2007) observes that because players tend to narratively perceive the game – that is, they evaluate the results of their choices in a narrative form – narrative and games have more in common than ludologists and others scholars believe. He argues that the anti-narrative approaches are based on ideological reasoning rather than theoretical motivation, which "don't hold up against closer scrutiny" (Simons, 2007, para. 4). Ludologists argue that there is an incompatibility between narrative and games because the former is addressed for 'external observers' that absorb what happened, while the latter requires players to be immersed in situation that is still in progress. However, Simons claims this vision is a matter of perspective, since narrative is experienced in the time it occurs for those who are reading a book or watching a movie, just like the interactive game experience. That is, player's interact within the game world generating a sequence of 'tellable events' logically associated to each other.

Simons (2007) critiques the ludologists concept of narrative as a representation that just "produce[s] descriptions of traits and sequence of events" (para. 14), while a game is a simulation

that not only "retain[s] the – generally audiovisual - characteristics of the object but it also includes a model of its behaviour which reacts to certain stimuli according to a set of conditions" (para. 14). For him, actions and events within narratives influence and shape character behaviour. He believes that narrative representation is limited by a set of constraints, such as physical laws, biological and psychological traits, and historical and cultural situations in the same way as the algorithm constrains video games simulation. Thus, even though video game narratives differ in form from the narratives used by traditional fiction, they have the same function, that is, both prepare the environment for the development of a story. For him, narrative can offer a better way to experiment and simulates "models of behaviour" (Simons, 2007, para. 18), since it allows players to explore a variety of possible events within different contexts. Therefore, as narrative often plays a significant role in games, it does not make sense to keep rejecting the contributions of narrative theory to the field while focusing just on the benefits of simulation, since ludologists have already admitted that there is no clear boundary between games and narrative.

1.3 Ludology vs. Narrative Analysis

Since technological advances are improving the ways in which game designers can communicate with players, developers are pushing the boundaries to create not only increasingly intricate plots, but also more complex characters for their games. For each new game launched, it becomes more difficult for the opponents of the narrative approach to maintain their position that games cannot offer narrative content. Recent projects have also expanded the capabilities of main characters, as well as NPCs, to make them less predictable; that is, games' characters have started to cross the line from flat to round characters. However, even as some ludologists admit that games can tell stories, and some narrative scholars demonstrate caution in the use of narrative theories to investigate games, there is no consensus about this 'dispute' so far.

Even though Ryan (2001) has restrictions on analyzing digital games using the current available theories of narrative, she is clearly not advocating against the use of narrative analysis to examine games. For her, different media require different types of plot and different types of characters, which suggests an urgent need to define which type of plot and character are suitable for digital

media – and video games in particular. Thus, Ryan claims that the inability of literary fields to deal with game experience means that narrative theorists need to "expand the catalogue of narrative modalities beyond diegetic and the dramatic, by adding a phenomenological category tailor-made for games" (para. 33). Nonetheless, Gomes (2005) states that current games can offer a type of story that is rich enough to be called narrative, arguing that

> the construction of the diegetic universe under a systemic logic and the possibilities this paradigm opens for full interactor agency within the game are likely to provide important increments of complexity that could give narrative in the virtual world the artistic relevance it seems to lack today. (p. 4)

From the ludologists' side, Juul (2005) recognizes that video games have been improving their affordances and offering complex narratives. He admits that fiction in games has an important role in translating the rules of the game for players, since a video game's rules are generally hidden from them. For him, this practice becomes a "two-way process where the fiction of the game cues him or her into understanding the rules of the game, and, again, the rules can cue the player to imagine the fictional world of the game" (Juul, 2005, p. 163). Nonetheless, Juul argues that despite the development of computational capacity and data storage is enhancing the detail and precision of fictional worlds, a game's roots are still in its rules and in its playtime.

Despite the claim that games and narratives can establish a relationship, Juul (2005) argues that some narrative genres cannot be transposed to the game environment. Tragedies, for instance, are deeply rooted in uncontrolled events that are transmuted into something expressive through the tragedy, while "games are mostly about having power and overcoming challenges" (Juul, 2005, p. 161). He adds that complex themes such as love, ambition and social conflict cannot be created within games because such themes are not easy to reproduce in algorithmic form — the majority of the games that try to touch on such matters offer them, in general, as silly actions for players to perform.

Nevertheless, some genres of digital game are overcoming Juul's (2005) arguments, presenting a set of difficult choices that might lead to tragic consequences. Role-playing games such as the

Mass Effect trilogy (2012), which I will present and discuss in chapters three and four, are an example of digital games in which players are challenged by a set of complex choices involving political, social, emotional, ethical, moral, and sometimes tragic conflicts. This game series goes far beyond the simple goal of succeeding in combat missions by involving players in an intricate social simulation[2] system. The first game of the *Mass Effect* series was launched in 2007, two years after Juul's arguments, demonstrating how challenging it is to theorize about a medium that is in a constant process of technological and creative evolution.

Although Juul (2001) acknowledges that games can contain narratives elements, he argues that the relationship between narrative/reader/viewer and game/players is completely different. For him, the game's interactivity and its effect on players cannot be put aside in favour of solely analyzing the story of the game, since both the undefined state of the game world and the player agency influence the way that players perceive the game. He argues that rules, goals, player agency, player projection within the game world, and the manner in which the game shapes players' actions, are enough to be considered in the study of a game. However, if the narrative reveals the rules of the game to the players – using his own argument – it does not make sense to ignore its contribution to shaping players' actions and projections within the game world.

2. New Approaches for Game Criticism

2.1 Storytellers or Narrative Architects?

At the center of this polarized 'dispute,' Jenkins (2004) appears to be claiming the middle ground position for himself. He asserts that people can discuss many different relationships between games and narratives, arguing that not all games tell stories, but some of them have this

[2] Social simulation is defined here as the capacity of video games to emulates a real world situation within the game context, or game world.

aspiration. He argues that even though the game experience cannot be reduced to just its story, as some narrative scholars intend to do, ludologists cannot stick to the narrow and limited manner through which they approach narrative in games. Instead, Jenkins proposes a third way to study games, introducing the concept of spatiality, in which game designers present themselves as narrative architects rather than storytellers.

Arguing that game designers not only tell stories, but also model worlds and spaces where play takes place, Jenkins(2004) explains that the structure of the game space determines different kinds of narrative experience. Such experiences are provided by different spatial demands, where space and narrative influence each other in four ways: (1) evoking pre-existing narrative associations; (2) providing a staging ground where narrative events are enacted; (3) embedding narratives within the *mise-en-scène*; and (4) providing resources for emergent narratives. Although Jenkins (2004) recognizes the game designer's struggle to balance story and action in which they are "trying to determine how much plot will create a compelling framework and how much freedom players can enjoy at a local level without totally derailing the larger narrative trajectory" (p. 126), he also believes that game designers "are apt to develop craft through a process of experimentation and refinement of basic narrative devices, becoming better at shaping narrative experiences without unduly constraining the space for improvisation within the game" (p. 126).

2.2 Narrative significance

In his article "Narrative is not a game mechanic", Raph Koster (2012) observes that video games use narratives as a response—that is, as feedback offered by the system to guide players as to whether or not they are being successful in discovering the game situation, since any action inputted by players into the system generates a response from the system as a result. These responses not only guide players through the challenges of the game, but also encourage them to keep playing. This relationship, he says, motivates players' intuitive level rather than the logical level of learning. Such feedback might be seen as a fundamental part of the game cycle, since the human brain might recognize them as part of the game's rewards (Koster, 2012; Newman, 2013).

As digital games are multimedia, the feedback provided by the system does not just take the form of narrative; it can also be presented through text, visual art, sounds, and so on, in order to not only convey emotion, but also to enhance the game experience. Nonetheless, Koster (2012) claims that in most current video games, the balance between problems to solve and feedback is becoming exponentially disproportionate. For him, current games are following a pattern in which the greater the game narrative, the smaller the problem to solve — that is, the game's problems shrink as the narrative expands, which prevents players from perceiving the silliness of some tasks because they are involved in a grand narrative. Koster (2012) claims that regardless of game narrative improvements, a game designer should include a "rich set of systemic problems" (para. 23) in order to create a real game instead of an interactive movie.

Similarly, Zimmerman (2004) states that the dissatisfaction with game-stories reflects, in fact, a disagreement with the way games are representing the narrative system. For him, it is obvious that games can reproduce a level of narrative significance that is already present in other media. He claims that the most important aspect of this discussion is that one should understand how games can actually represent narrative meaning, or even how games can be a narrative system in a way that other media cannot.

It seems evident that stories and mechanics complement each other in the overall work of building a game, they are not two components in conflict with one or another; thus, it does not make sense to frame them in such a manner. Some scholars already have accepted the narrative aspects of digital games, moving on to other relevant discussion topics, such as the balance between the story and the problems to solve inside the game, while also questioning how games can represent meaning (Jenkins, 2004; Koster, 2012; Zimmerman, 2004). Current games, especially RPG and RPG-adventure games, offer players a high level of agency and symbolic significance in which a player's choices intervene substantially in the game's plot. These complex algorithmic structures make it difficult to analyze a game solely through its story or exclusively through its rules and mechanics. As I argued previously, rather than seeing them as conflicting forces, one can approach stories and mechanics as components that complement each other.

From this perspective, it is possible to affirm that the medium's maturity is reaching a level that is challenging scholars to analyze not only their set of rules and mechanics, as well as their sophisticated and complex stories, but also the symbolic representations behind the stories they are choosing to tell and how they are telling them.

2.3 The Multi-Level Stories in Video Games

Different video game genres use their affordances in different ways, providing different experience for players. Accordingly, Gee (2005) pointed out how video games allow people to create their own autobiographies, careers, histories, and even legacies. He observes that, for most players, video games are pleasant due to their interactivity, agency, and the meaningfulness of the play situation, claiming that "video games are good for your soul when you play them with thought, reflection, and engagement with the world around you" (Gee, 2005, p.1).

Stories are considered a facilitator for interpreting the game's rules and for giving meaning to players. Games, Gee (2005) argues, are able to generate four different levels of stories. The **First level** is the story created by the game designer. The **Second level** blends the virtual character (game protagonist) and the real character (player) into the game situation, in which both together will tell the game story through the player's choices and actions. The **Third level** is a modification of the second one that adds 'professional' skills and generates a kind of career story made through the virtual/real character actions. That is, players learn to think like a professional, embodying a specific behaviour in order to draw on in-game strategies to succeed in the game. Finally, the **Fourth level** comes up at the end of a turn, or the completion of the game, in which there is not only a projected career story, but also a story about a character/player's history, or legacy.

For Gee (2005), the second level of story is the most important one, since the same story will provide opportunities for different players to build their own meaningful experiences through their choices while playing the game. That is, "the virtual character in the game world ... is different for each player in a significant and meaningful way" (Gee, 2005, p. 26). Nonetheless,

although the second level of story can be a variant of the first level, configuring a unique trajectory for each player, it largely follows the story proposed by the game designer. Gee uses the game *Castlevania: Symphony of the Night* (KCET, 1997), to demonstrate how such games blend the virtual and the real character through the game experience. For him, both (the virtual and the real) characters have different game skills that must be combined in order to succeed in the game. The game *per se* does not require professional vampire hunter skills from players — it demands that the player act like a gamer, following the basics input instructions of the game.

Alternatively, Gee (2005) uses *Full Spectrum Warrior - FSW* (Pandemic Studios, 2004) and *Thief: Deadly Shadows* (Ion Storm, 2004) as examples of the third level of story, or career story, that a game might offer. Rather than binding rules, *FSW* and *Thief* connect professional knowledge, values, strategies, and skills into the game story elements. According to Gee, this type of game teaches players attitudes, values, practices, and strategies, among other skills, to achieve the goal of the game. Whereas in *Thief* players need to sneak between shadows, disappearing through them in order to collect artefacts without being see by NPCs and to achieve the goal of each game level, in *FSW* players must strategically act in order to 'professionally' command a squad, since the game is "designed in such a way that certain sorts of professional knowledge and certain types of professional skill are built right into the virtual characters, the soldiers (and into the enemies, as well)" (Gee, 2005, p. 44). That is, to enjoy an authentic professional identity both games require a new way of comprehending the world, which in *FSW* shows itself through the mechanics of path and cover, since players need to lead and protect their soldiers across different territories. *Thief*, on the other hand, uses the mechanics of light and shadow, as players must avoid being detected while they are performing a game mission.

Strategy games such as *Rise of Nations* (Big Huge Games, 2003), Gee (2005) says, add another layer into the game plot. The fourth level of story is presented at the end of turns, or at the completion of the game, in which there is not only the career story made through the virtual/real character actions, but also a story about the history of people, things, place, and time that was developed during the gameplay. In *Rise of Nations,* virtual characters and objects share with

players not only different skills, but also a developmental capacity, such that either "the actor or object has the capacity to change, improve, and develop over the course of the game" (Gee, 2005, p. 77). However, when and where it will change depends on the player's choices. This capacity for development happens through the game's timeframe —time in game runs differently than in reality, giving the players a sense of building a legacy by reaching a huge accomplishment when at the end of the game. For Gee, *Rise of Nations* extends the number of strategy elements of games like *FSW* and *Thief* by enhancing the level of trajectory, career, and history.

The development of stories in role-playing games (RPGs) follows a different path from the genres discussed so far, though they present the same layers of story structure. RPGs do not present an authentic professional character in the beginning of the game, as they normally start with a very inexperienced character. It is up to players to choose which career and abilities the character will develop throughout the game levels. Gee (2005) argues that an RPG has the capacity to involve players with their virtual identity on a deeper level, and by allowing "players to make and live out life histories, they open up a great space of making decisions about, thinking about, and playing with identity" (p. 93), which can make players reflect on what they wish to become as a virtual character. That is, the virtual character and player join together in their development over time by growing and living a personal history together.

According to Gee (2005), an RPG presents all the levels of stories identified earlier. In this genre, players can give more or less attention to the first level, depending on their particular interest, since many tasks are not related to the designer's story. Nonetheless, this level of story not only helps to emotionally involve players with the game world, but it also gives significance to the actions players have to perform. Regarding the second level, players are also able to expand their possible trajectories, since an RPG offers a more open world compared with other genres of games. In order to succeed in the game, players must solve the game's tasks using strategies related to the class or profession they have chosen to develop in their virtual character, which is the building block for the third level of story in RPGs. Finally, the fourth level in this genre is presented through the resultant history created by the development and changes of the

player/character, and how their actions, extending over both time and place, shape their own life history.

Even though Gee (2005) identifies the stages of story in different genres of games, he admits that he did not properly discuss the potential for stories in games. Nevertheless, Gee (2005) notices that

> stories can very often encode and transmit, in a palatable form, the taken-for-granted norms and values of a social group or culture, norms and values that may well need a good deal of airing out and critique for which the traditional story form is not always the only and best vehicle. (p. 117)

Gee's (2005) investigation is evidence that some games can offer narrative elements, and it also demonstrates that such stories are able to offer different levels of complexity depending on the genre of the game. Each level of story conveys meaning, encouraging players to reflect over the actions they have performed while playing the game. The player's level of immersion and involvement with the game situation, as well as their interpretations of their own actions, will fluctuate according to the cultural context in which the players are located and therefore it will vary from player to player. Despite such variation, it is important to consider the message encoded by the video games' narrative in order to analyze which influences the players might be exposed to.

3. Expanding the Boundaries for Video Game Criticism

The new affordances presented by digital games are reorganizing the field, leaving the opposition between narrative analysis and ludology behind. The reduction of the importance placed on this duality comes from the fact that stories and gameplay are not two elements in conflict with one another; thus, it does not make sense to frame them in such a manner. Both mechanics and stories contribute to the work of producing a video game, even though some games might be more story-based, while others might be more mechanic or puzzled inclined, and still others

might mix stories and challenges in a successful manner. The arguments from ludologists, narrative critics, and the so-called middle-ground serve to confirm that game studies is an interdisciplinary, or multidisciplinary area, in which narrative, game elements, and player experience can and must share space and methods for investigation.

A video game is a complex platform that uses its affordances to structure its storyline, embodying meaning and establishing a determined cultural logic in order to drive players' actions and encourage reflection. Assuming the role of the war hero detective in the charming, promising, and corrupt world of 1940s Los Angeles in *L.A. Noire* (Team Bondi, 2011), players enact different ways to tell the same stories and wherein each decision will drive a range of different interpretations (Gee, 2005). Yet, a question remains: based on the moral, ethical, and social parameters adopted through the game choices, how do players translate the actions they enact within the virtual world to reality?

Video games are demonstrating potential to convey cultural meaning and intentionality, increasing the capacity for the medium to influence players, which requires new methods of examination. This persuasive power of video games is rooted not only in their procedural system and mechanics, but also in their set of images, textual references, and composed narratives. Thus, the next chapter will present theoretical tools to approach games' persuasive potential, such as frameworks dealing with the methods of procedural rhetoric, as well as the cultural study approach, in order to investigate, understand, decode, and critique video games' messages and intentions.

Chapter 2: Video game as cultural products

Video games are extending their potential for telling stories by producing immersive interactions while also offering a more convincing environment. They have evolved from displaying abstract shapes to having realistic graphics and sophisticated narratives that compel and involve players within the game world. As a result of technological advancements, digital games are in a constant process of transformation, which places them in a multidisciplinary field of knowledge. Thus, it seems natural for game elements, narratives, and player experiences to share space within our methods of analysis. As suggested by Zimmerman (2004), game scholars must move on and address other relevant discussions involving, for instance, how games can represent meaning, rather than being stuck in discussions on whether video games can or cannot tell stories, or which discipline is the appropriate one to analyze them. Dymek and Lennerfors (2005) argue that the cultural and symbolic significance in video games are overcoming the boundaries framed by the debate between narrative critics and ludologists, since, for instance, "stereotypes remain stereotypes regardless whether being presented using simulation or narrative representation" (p.4).

By improving their capacity to portray meaningful in-game situations, digital games suggest a connection between the way people play a game and the way they understand the world. In other words, through the game situation players are able to exercise their reflective skills as a result of their engagement with the world around them (Gee, 2005; Newman 2013). Thus, it is possible to affirm that video games are no longer just an entertainment product; rather, they embody meaning and intentions as with any other cultural product. Accordingly, the game world is becoming something of a social simulation, absorbing and transmitting ideological significance through the meaning generated between the interactivity of game and play. As stated by Cassar (2013), a video game is a multimedia vehicle that exhibits its expressiveness over different levels and instances, in which ideology might manifest itself through games' cinematic and textual expression, as well as via a games' rules and gameplay mechanics. Therefore, it is crucial to

combine different theoretical tools in order to analyze games as a highly expressive medium and a cultural object.

Bogost (2006) suggests a procedural criticism method for examining the expressiveness of digital games, which combines literary studies and technology theories, as an alternative to analyzing games' discourse. Echoing in part Frasca's (2001; 2003b) and Juul's (2001; 2005) ludological perspective, but going further in defining an interdisciplinary scope of analysis, he suggests that video games build their arguments by modeling rules and behaviour rather than using words or images. Bogost's (2006) comparative (literary and technological) approach is based on a procedural expression instance called *unit operations*, which he defines as a "type of configurative or procedural artifact, one built up from units of tightly encapsulated meaning" (p. xii). That is, unit operations are smaller processes that might be connected to other smaller processes in order to build a procedure that is able to imply significance. Bogost (2006) clarifies that while system operations are general structures that seek to comprehend and explain a phenomenon as a whole, unit operations are "modes of meaning-making that privilege discrete, disconnected actions over deterministic, progressive systems" (p. 3).

Nevertheless, for understanding games as complex platforms that use their various affordances to convey meaning, Bogost's (2006; 2007) approach might be insufficient to analyze such complexity, especially because features such as imagery and words have been increasingly highlighted within video games, revealing the potential symbolic significance of these aspects. It does not mean that his methodology should be ignored; on the contrary, what I am suggesting is that one should combine Bogost's method with other theoretical tools in order to better understand the symbolic complexity that video games offer. Williams (1981) wrote that as cultural products produce, reproduce, and transform meaning, they have an impact on society while also being affected by it. This is also true for video games. Therefore, to explore the cultural impact of video games on society, it is necessary to adopt theoretical frameworks from Cultural and Media Studies, especially those involving perceptions of cultural objects and power relations.

Accordingly, this chapter presents a theoretical framework to investigate games as an expressive medium located within a specific culture. In the first section, I will use Mayra (2008) and Burden and Gouglas (2012) to describe the evolution of video games, particularly the introduction of narrative and audio-visual representation, to clarify how video games became expressive cultural artefacts with a high potential to include social and ideological values. Mayra argues that players use the context created while performing the gameplay to fill in the game elements with meaning, which is consistent with Burden's and Gouglas' idea that the inherent interactivity of games reveals a potential opportunity for social and cultural engagement. The second part revisits Williams (1981), Fiske and Hartley (1978), and other theorists involved in the field of Cultural and Media Studies in order to understand how different instruments of media, including video games, make use of ideology to preserve the established hegemonic power.

In the third section, I will focus on the symbolic representation of digital games, exploring Bogost's (2006; 2007) concepts of unit operations and introducing the concept of persuasive games — the potential for video games to induce players to act through the game's procedural rhetoric. That is, according to Bogost, despite the fact that video games are computational artefacts they are not mechanical manifestations; rather, they present a procedural rhetoric that reflects 'the methods of human expression'. Finally, the fourth section discusses how, taken together, these theoretical tools might be useful for the interpretation of video games' intentionality and how they may help reveal the cultural significance and messages that they carry.

1. The evolution of video games

Throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, digital games evolved from their first commercial beginnings to the current concrete establishment in the global market. In his book *An introduction to game studies: Game in culture*, Frans Mayra (2008) observes that the 1970s were noticeable in the development of computing technology because digital games moved from being experimental

processes inside universities and research labs to taking their place outside of the academy. The relationship between the history of computing and digital games is closely connected, since technological improvements directly affect the computational capabilities of video games, enhancing not only their aesthetics aspects (graphics), but also their mechanics and simulations (gameplay). For Mayra, each generation of digital games has offered remarkable visual differences and complex interactions, making previous games appear as a various forms of a developing 'grammar and lexicon' of gaming. He observes that, despite its instability in the earliest years, the technological race between game companies played an important role in raising game business in global economics.

The next decade was marked by the clear expansion of game products, establishing game culture behaviour around the world. In the 1980s, with significant advances in design processes, games introduced rudimentary fictional storytelling and identified the importance of a recognizable game character to motivate action. In addition, the technical advances of a game's platform allowed aesthetic level design to become a strategic component for a successful gameplay experience. These extensive games gradually grew into fictional worlds, which increased the amount of attention paid to the symbolic and representational dimensions of the game-world. This decade witnessed the huge success of the Mario Bros. series, as well as the introduction of different genres to the public, such as text adventure games (interactive fictions), RPGs, and Rogue-like games.

The 1990s were the era of three-dimensionality in games, introducing polygons, rendering and texture into the game environment, as well as the use of audio-visual techniques such as cinematic cut-scenes and camera views. According to Mayra (2008), the affordances provided by the use of 3D affected digital games in their dual structure: (1) the game core (gameplay) and (2) the game shell (symbolic representation). Besides enhancing the gameplay experience through the sense of immersion, the significant elements of the three-dimensional game (or simulated environment) also yielded conflict in terms of the interpretation of a game's intention —that is, its representational dimension. Mayra describes three distinct components of immersion in

games: (1) sensory immersion, which presents interactive images and sounds; (2) challenge-based immersion, which enables freedom of movement; and (3) imaginative immersion, in which players are absorbed emotionally and intellectually by the game. In parallel to Jenkins' (2004) spatiality argument, Mayra claims that the enhanced power and memory capabilities, in conjunction with three-dimensional affordances, encouraged designers to push the limits to attain an even more realistic appearance in digital games, allowing for the expansion of the fictional world and the spatial aspects of the game environment, as well as opening an a new avenue of possibilities to improve storylines.

From the late 1990s to the early 2000s, a new social phenomenon arose in game culture with the introduction of multi-user dimension (MUD) and massive multiplayer online (MMO) games. The development of the Internet made it possible to play games socially online, whereby multiple players could join the same game to cooperatively or competitively share experiences. Mayra (2008) argues that as social environments, the virtual world of online games raises many social, cultural, and psychological issues, expanding the approaches and considerations scholars need to adopt in order to analyze these new types of games.

Over the years, video games have evolved along a path that makes it difficult to not recognize their cultural potential. The variety of design opportunities opened up through the introduction of 3D simulations has expanded the scope that one must take to studying the medium, since its capacity to imply meaning embodies not only the actions of play, but also the messages games can communicate. These advances have shifted the status of digital games from being merely entertaining abstract shapes to meaningful cultural products.

1.1 Are games cultural products?

Game studies is a new academic and interdisciplinary field of knowledge. It is focused on expanding the overall picture of games as cultural products by studying games and players in their respective contextual frames. Nevertheless, the perception of video games as art, or the

potential for an algorithmic experience to become an artistic practice as well, has not reached a level of consensus among scholars.

As a point of clarification, even though art and culture present different definitions and proposals as concepts, they are related to each other. While the term art is commonly connected to a product that has the property of belonging to high culture specifically, culture is a broad term that covers "knowledge, beliefs, art, moral, law, customs, and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Sardar & Van Loon, 1997, p. 4). Williams (1981) asserts that the idea of culture includes the way members of a society communicate with each other by exploring the elements of society, such as the family structure, the organization of production, and the institutions that 'control' social relationships. That is, culture is a broad concept that comprises in itself the 'whole way of life' —an expression coined by Williams. Following this thought, this thesis considers the perception of art by using the lenses of cultural studies, which surpasses the limited idea that a product of art must belong to high culture, and rather recognizes as art a range of different ways in which a society might express itself.

Opponents of the idea that digital games might be art still assess them as a lowbrow and dangerous medium, arguing that they do not have the merit to be recognized as art or as an expression of high culture — for them, games are a mere entertainment product. On the other hand, proponents of digital games as art, argue that part of the issue is related to the maturity of the medium (Bogost 2007; Juul 2005; Mayra 2008). Looking at the history of culture, it is easy to notice that the debate around cultural values of different media is not new: photography, comics, television, and movies were also subjected to critical scorn in the past, even the Elizabethan theatre did not get favourable judgements from its contemporary critics. For these critics, the Elizabethan theatre was considered a "popular experience for a large proportion of people from all sections of society" (Fiske & Hartley, 1978, p. 14). Although games still have a long path to follow in order to definitively legitimize themselves as a product with cultural value, most of the game community is already convinced that video games can be seen as a form of art.

Burden and Gouglas (2012), for instance, observe that the main difficulty in the discussion about games as a form of art is to define what art is. They advocate for video games as art based on three main arguments: (1) they meet Gaut's ten points to define an object as art, "including possessing positive aesthetic properties, being expressive of emotion, and being intellectually challenging" (para. 18); (2) they have received recognition from the art community, that is, artists and art institutions are acknowledging and granting art status to an object or a medium (*e.g.*, MoMA's video game collection[3]); (3) the influence of similar media that already hold the status of art as kind of legitimization via genealogy. Film, for instance, can be seen as a previous generation that is helping to legitimize video games as art. The algorithmic enhancement of ordinary human activities through the adoption of computation and interactivity can provide familiarity with video game affordances and mechanics, which might stimulate thinking and discussion about computational creativity and how to address the issue of video games as a form of artistic practice. Burden and Gouglas (2012) also point out the inherent interactivity of video games as a potential opportunity for social and cultural engagement, since "the quality and thematic complexity of some modern video games invites such critical discourse" (para. 24).

The growing popularity of digital games throughout the last few decades puts them in a privileged position, one that is its own particular form of culture. Mayra (2008) argues that our perception of reality is socially and culturally constructed, since "our social existence affects what kind of meaning we are able to associate with phenomena" (p.13). He affirms that the interaction between game and play carries meaning and creates significance within a specific cultural context. Such meaning can be reached through symbolic and non-symbolic manners once games make sense as a system of interaction for their players, in which even an internal and silent gameplay experience can also produce a rich immersive engagement between players and the game. For him, players take the created context and use it to fill the game elements with meaning

[3] http://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2012/11/29/video-games-14-in-the-collection-for-starters/

while they are in the process of engaging in the gameplay. It is what the semiotician David Myers calls an "aesthetic of play" (as cited in Mayra, 2008 p. 16).

Currently, digital games are understood to be part of popular culture along with movies and pop/rock music. Their universe of digital games also plays a role as a subcultural phenomenon, in which they can be perceived not only through players' behaviours, but also through the physical and virtual environments that surround the activity of playing the game. Members of game subcultures usually share the same practices, interests, and values, which, taken together, helps to produce a common identity. This cultural phenomenon has made scholars recognize that the study of games not only needs an aesthetic and formal approach, but also needs to be dedicated to the social and cultural study of play and the players themselves. Accordingly, the next section adds to the discussion the concepts of culture and ideology to address the issue of how cultural products make use of the symbolic instruments of a culture and/or an ideology to convey meaning.

2. The use of culture and ideology by different cultural products

Some game critics defend the idea that there is a connection between the way people play a game and the manner in which they understand the world. Video games can represent how imaginary and real systems work (Bogost, 2007), and building and playing in different worlds constitutes a room for socialization; that is, they might be a place where people learn the implicit rules of society through the explicit rules of play. Ergo, a game designer's view of social reality influences the cultural practices embedded in, and communicated by, the game. Fiske and Hartley (1978) observed the same effect in television: the medium's content reflects and reinforces cultural decisions and social pressures. Even though the world of television is obviously different from reality, both worlds are related to each other since the virtual mimics the real, using it as a built reference. Yet, the virtual world "reflects, symbolically, the structure of value and relationships beneath the surface" (Fiske & Hartley, 1978, p.24). To discuss structures of value and relationships, however, it is necessary to recognize in which cultural contexts these structures

are placed. Thus, we must comprehend the concepts of culture and ideology first in order to identify and analyze their role in the video game's content.

The notion of culture can be explained as a process of cultivating something; however, for our purposes, we need to approach the concept of culture as related to the active cultivation of the human mind. For this reason, culture will be addressed through the following three aspects: (**1**) **a developed state of mind** (**person of culture**), (**2**) **the process of this development** (**cultural activities**), and (**3**) **the means of these processes** (**culture as art and human intellectual work**) (Williams, 1981, p.11). These aspects share space within the anthropological and sociological frameworks, in which they are used to indicate the everyday practices of a specific people or social group.

According to Williams (1981), defining the meaning of culture is not a simple task; it involves the formative elements of a specific culture, which implies not only anthropologic parameters, but also its particular extensions. That is, to define culture, the emphasis should either reside in the 'informing spirit' of everyday life that comprises a variety of social and cultural activities, such as language, style of art, intellectual work, etc., or be determined by social processes mostly grounded in a particular political and economic order. For him, examining these two positions, categorized as idealist and materialist respectively, might help and guide the investigation of the relations between cultural activities and other forms of social life, at the same time influencing the sociology of culture in its own practices, where each position carries its own interest in relation to the term culture. Williams argues that cultural practices are not just a result of an established social order; they are also important components of that structure. Materialist and idealist aspects, he says, share elements in order to build a system of significations where "a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored" (Williams, 1981, p.13).

Nevertheless, these codes are a mutable system continually evolving to embrace the needs and practices of the members of a culture, reinforcing the idea that "anything that a man does or makes contains encoded signs of his culture, and the way in which he does or makes it is determined to a considerable extent by his culture's conventions" (Fiske & Hartley, 1978, p.60).

That is, communication successfully takes place when members of an audience convey their response to these functions with references to their own peculiar contexts. Yet, the importance of sign and signifier in the cultural sciences is not only connected to the fact that cultural products modify the human mind through social development, but also because they are a human creation.

Since cultural products create and transform meaning, it is possible to affirm that their process of production has an expressive intentionality, which makes ideology another fundamental concept for the sociology of culture and the cultural studies fields of knowledge. According to Cassar (2013), "there is no place where ideology is more at home than in culture" (p. 333), which therefore makes it difficult to dissociate one from the other. Appropriately, Williams (1981) defines ideology as

> formal and conscious beliefs of a class or other social group ... or the characteristic world-view of general perspective of a class or other social group, which will include formal and conscious beliefs but also less conscious, less formulated attitudes, habits and feelings, or even unconscious assumptions. (p. 26)

However, Williams observes that an effective ideological critique cannot be restricted to formal and conscious matters, for the reason that cultural manifestations generally expand beyond these edges, taking place in an unconscious format. Sardar and Van Loon (1997) argue that the ways one examines cultural objects is also related to cultural practices and their relations with power, which exposes not only how power relationships work, but also "how these relationships influence and shape cultural practices" (p.9). For Zizek, these relations might be extremely challenging to perceive, since ideology, he argues, overcame the false representation of reality, becoming part of reality itself, however, a distorted one at that (cited in Bogost, 2007).

A cultural system is also a system of significations imbued with a complete and complex set of activities, relations, and institutions, in which ideas and concepts, either produced or reproduced, are developed within the social structure (Williams, 1981). Accordingly, the influence of cultural products is associated with the relation between cultural producers and

dominant groups, in which such connections expose how these relationships attach, influence, and shape cultural practices. Thus, in an organized social system, the activities performed by cultural producers are framed into an (exclusive or inclusive) ideological purpose.

Similar to movies and television, video games have their own language with distinct syntax and grammar, which includes complex and subtle codes of representation that embrace both the literal visual representation and the most abstract symbols and metaphors. For Sardar and Van Loon (1997), such metaphors "often allude to real world objects and symbols and connote social and cultural meaning" (p.157). Usually, the medium's message expresses cultural indicators related to the symbolic representation of that society's value-structure, in which, "despite its obvious connection with power or dominance over other, it is not the dominance of one personality over another, but of one social role over another social role" (Fiske & Hartley, 1978, p.34).

Even though the discourse content of cultural objects usually contains ideas and formal beliefs from the specific social and cultural groups in power, Williams (1981) critiques the notion of a general ideology, arguing that the complex processes involved in producing not only a culture, but also an ideology, are ignored when considering all cultural production as ideological or designed by ideology. For him, social and cultural processes are dynamics, and therefore, they are more complex than they seem to be. Williams (1981) observes that

> social practices and social relations which produce not only 'a culture' or 'an ideology' but, more significantly, those dynamic actual states and works within which there are not only continuities and persistent determinations but also tensions, conflicts, resolutions and irresolution, innovations and actual changes. (p.29)

Nevertheless, in a modern capitalist economy, cultural institutions, notably mass media institutions, are no longer marginal or play a minor role in our social order; rather they play a very important role within the entire social and economic system. As noted by Sardar and Van Loon (1997) the universalization and the maintenance of western economy and its cultural patterns

have been aided by the promotion of cultural products around the world such as pop music, television shows, global news network, and especially by Hollywood movies. The huge influence of mass media over society aroused the desire of the game industry to pursue an analogous strategic position, transforming video games into a persuasive mass medium. This ambitious move is clearly noted in the speech of Reggie Fils-Aime, president and CEO of Nintendo of America at the E3 expo 2006:

> Do you know anyone who's never watched TV, never seen a movie, never read a book? Of course not. So let me ask you one more question, do you know someone, maybe even in your own family, who's never played a videogame? I bet you do. How can this be? If we want to consider ourselves a true mass medium. If we want to grow as an industry. This has to change. (cited in Newman, 2013, p. 59-60)

The game industry strives to situate video games as a mass medium, a cultural product. Currently this industry is collecting sales records (Fox &Tang, 2013; Leonard, 2003), competing on an equal level with movie industry[4] and seeking their cultural and social influence within society. As cultural objects, video games represent a high potential for conveying cultural and ideological meaning to influence players, in which the interaction between a game's design and a player's decisions in the game requires players to behave according to parameters that enclose their actions within the system, the real, and the imaginary. Correspondingly, the next section addresses the potentiality for video games to be persuasive, discussing how the medium embodies and implies symbolic meaning by reflecting onto their fictional worlds the structure of value and relationships of our social and cultural order.

3. Video games' procedural rhetoric

As I have been arguing, digital games make use of their procedural system to create a discourse, which is implicit in their narrative content through the incorporation and dissemination of ideas

[4] http://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/entertainment/articles/2014-02-/19/video-game-industry-evolution-2014

and behaviours – just like movies, television, literature, and music. According to Ryan (2004), this strategy is based on our own characteristics as a species, since narrative is connected to our most common form of expression —language and cognition, serving as a guide to human thoughts. Thus, narrative affordance is one of the channels used by the dominant powers of society to establish, reinforce, and legitimize themselves and their perspectives of the world. For Ryan (2004), "narrative is a textual act of representation" (p.9) that combines different types of signs to encode its meaning. Fiske and Hartley (1978), observe that this arrangement of signs must be agreed upon in some way by the members of the culture to whom that code communicates. Accordingly, the capability of video games to encapsulate these codes and embody their meaning as expressions of intentionality is what Bogost (2007) calls procedural rhetoric.

Video games are software systems that use a robust engine to create and run a game. These engines, Bogost (2006) argues, are instruments that allow for the generation of expressivity in games, since a "game engine dramatically increases the scope of unit-based abstraction compared to other forms of cultural production" (p. 55). For him, the advancement of technology is intrinsically tied to the advancement of the medium and its production process, enhancing the fuzziness between materialism and functionalism within a game engine's unit operation. This synergy demonstrates the "importance of a hybrid material-functional analysis of the unit operations of game engines in game criticism" (Bogost, 2006, p. 59).

Engaging in the discussion about literature and technology, Bogost (2006) introduces a comparative video game criticism method blending these two fields of knowledge to provide a formal game analysis approach. Perceiving an excessive attention from game scholars on the functional style of video games (how games work), privileging the ludic over the literary, he argues that scholars should dedicate more attention to analyzing the expressive capacity of video games to "inform, change, or otherwise participate in human activity" (Bogost, 2006, p. 53). For him, through comparative criticism, it is possible to understand the game mechanism and its persuasive potential affordances.

In spite of the fact that video games are computational artefacts, they are not mechanical expressions; rather, they present a procedural rhetoric that reflects intentionalities. That is, there is no neutral decision in building an interactive game (Bogost, 2007). Therefore, it is possible to affirm that digital games not only carry cultural value, but are also capable of being vehicles for persuasion, where their procedural rhetoric can be constructed in a powerful fashion, usually using narrative as support. Facing these features of computer games, players need to be able to understand and critique the ideological significances they might present.

Recognizing that there may be a possible ambiguity in the terms procedural and rhetoric, and trying to avoid any misunderstanding around the concept, Bogost (2007) offers an overview of both terms separately, then puts both terms together to explain the concept of procedural rhetoric. In discussing procedure, he uses the idea of procedural as the computational capability described through scripting code to perform a set of rules (or processes) that invoke interpretation; that interpretation, however, is not inherent in the system, but is projected on to it by the user. Rhetoric, on the other hand, is analyzed through the historical evolution of the term, since it shifted following the emergence of new tools or media, moving from verbal rhetoric, the ancient persuasive oratory power, to visual rhetoric used by photography and movies to persuade an audience, and finally to digital rhetoric, in which traditional rhetoric has being adapted to incorporate and deal with digital spaces.

Verbal, written, and visual rhetoric's methods are insufficient when applied to computer software, especially video games, due to their procedural expression. Such devices require a technique able to assess their own specific system. The procedural rhetoric method, Bogost (2007) argues, allows researchers to examine the arguments games make through their mechanics and processes, focusing on the juxtaposition of the games' affordances and the language system they comprise. That is, such a rhetoric "is a subdomain of procedural authorship; its arguments are made not by the way of the construction of word or images, but through the authorship of rules of behaviour, the construction of dynamic models" (Bogost, 2007, p. 29).

Thus, using their procedural rhetoric, video games attempt to represent, communicate with, and persuade players through a particular point of view.

Bogost (2007) identifies ideological procedural representation by investigating games like *America's Army* (United States Army, 2002) and *A Force More Powerful* (BreakAway Games, 2006). For him, the former not only simulates the US Army code of conduct (duty, honour, warfare, etc.), but also offers a representation of the external political context involving the US Army, showing it as the 'universal hero'. The latter, meanwhile, is a strategy game focused on democracy, freedom, and free market principles, and it promotes the western cultural and ideological point of view for these topics. Hence, Bogost observes that video games, as with any other popular culture object, play an important role in reinforcing, or sometimes challenging, the established status quo.

By using a similar strategy, I will not only explore how the game *Mass Effect* uses its affordances to structure its complex storyline, but I will also identify the ideological and cultural representations the game is able to offer to its players. Nonetheless, besides the investigation on the procedural element, I will also examine the visual and textual components of the game. Since, in some cases, a video game's production has also become a compelling procedural audio-visual medium, their set of images and texts —besides their procedurality— also requires attention once both are endowed with rhetoric.

4. Framing the approach to investigating a video game's intentionality

Throughout his seminal work, Bogost (2006; 2007) offers a remarkable contribution to the study of video games by acknowledging a new type of rhetorical capability tied to the computational core. Nonetheless, this method of investigation is limited, since it puts heavy weight on the analysis of game mechanics and processes to the detriment of games' collection of imagery and words. As put by Cassar (2013), a video game is a 'confluence of media' that is able to express its

intentionalities over different levels and instances, including the game's audio-visual (cinematic cut-scenes) and textual expression (dialogues) components, as well as via the game's rules and gameplay mechanics.

In understanding games as complex platforms that use their various affordances to deliver meaning to players, it is necessary to combine Bogost's (2006; 2007) approach with other cultural theoretical tools to analyze such complexity. On the one hand, game engines are instruments capable of generating expressivity through their conventions of procedural signs, which, according to Bogost, not only regulate the artistic, cultural, and narrative expression of the games, but also control the gameplay behaviour, facilitating the interaction between the game and the player. On the other hand, it is also crucial to understand the symbolic potential of some of the other game features (*i.e.*, artistic and narrative) in order to decode them once they are part of the game's message.

Cassar (2013) states that video games are able to disseminate ideological content to reinforce a specific world perspective, which is consistent with Williams' (1981) assertion that the influence of cultural products is defined by the relationship between cultural producers and dominant groups. Such connections expose how these relationships attach, influence, and shape cultural practices. Likewise, Leonard (2003) affirms that "video games represent a powerful instrument of hegemony, eliciting ideological consent through a spectrum of white supremacy projects" (p. 1). From this perspective, it is possible to affirm that video games reflect and refract society in a general manner. Thus, it is clear that to have an appropriate understanding of such complex ideological, cultural and social relations depicted in video games, it is crucial to combine Bogost's (2006; 2007) procedural rhetoric approach with the concept of ideology and its role in shaping cultural objects.

With this framework in mind, I will analyze the *Mass Effect* series in the next two chapters. My intention is to not only define how this game uses its affordances and resources to construct its narrative, but also to understand how can we read the representational aspects proposed by the game. Accordingly, the next chapter describes the construction of the narrative structure of the

Mass Effect universe through the affordances of their system, while the subsequent chapter will be dedicated to analyzing the symbolic and cultural representations that the *Mass Effect* series conveys in its game world.

Chapter 3: The narrative structure in *Mass Effect*

The industry's efforts to improve artificial intelligence, aesthetics, and mechanics in video games are improving playability, immersion, and engagement, especially through the narrative content. As discussed in the first chapter, many games offer a narrative defined by the game designer, yet, as Gee (2005) has taught us, they can also present different levels of story that are built by the players' own performance. Depending on the genre of the game, its narrative construction has different levels of dependence on the game designer. Many games present a single linear story style, such as in *Batman Arkham City* (Rocksteady Studios, 2011), *Assassin's Creed 3* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2012), *Max Payne 3* (Rockstar Studios, 2012), *L.A. Noire* (Team Bondi, 2011), *Bioshock Infinite* (Irrational Games, 2013), or *Tomb Raider: A survivor is born* (Crystal Dynamics, 2013), among others. Nonetheless, in other game genres the narrative aspects might be multiple, as portrayed through the players' choices. Even though the decisive parts of the narrative plot have been previously defined by the game designer, it is up to players to shape their own approach to reach the final story of each level. In games like the *Mass Effect* series, players' choices shape the side stories, in which they are free to choose different approaches to moral, ethical, and social relationships with other characters, which then come to form the conduit for the main storyline of the game.

Players and specialized critics recognize *Mass Effect* for its capacity to offer a rich, complex, and intricate game storyline in terms of plot development. The series has sold over 10 million copies as of March 2012 (D'Angelo, 2012). *Game Informer's* critics named the *Mass Effect* series as one of "the most intricately crafted stories in the history of the medium", while NBC News proclaimed the game as "one of the best sci-fi series of all time" (BioWare, 2012). The *Mass Effect* games have collected over 300 awards, including best game at the BAFTA Game Awards in 2011 for *Mass Effect 2*[5]. Considering its narrative reputation, *Mass Effect* configures itself as an interesting case to

[5] See http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1540125/awards?ref_=tt_awd

study the procedural construction of the game's narrative. My analysis will be focused on the loyalty missions, presented in one form or another throughout the trilogy, but officially introduced in the second game. The intention here is to map the game narrative and demonstrate how the mechanisms (or procedures) of succeeding or failing these missions shape the storyline, transform the player's wheel of dialog choices, and consequently influence the ending of the game. Even though the emphasis is on the configuration of the loyalty mission system, I also intend to explore other procedural features of the game to determine their role not only in enhancing the level of immersion offered by the game, but also their role in aiding to assemble the *Mass Effect's* narrative structure.

This chapter will be divided in two main parts. The first part presents the games and their core narrative, while the second uses Aarseth's (2003) playing and non-playing methods of analysis to not only study the role *Mass Effect's* procedural affordances play in building the general narrative structure of the game, but it will also help to point out how the mechanics of loyalty missions play a role in shaping a different story for each individual player. To develop this investigation, I used a template based on Consalvo and Dutton's (2006) and Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum's (2012) methodologies. The template address eight aspects of the game to be examined: object inventory, core mechanics, objectives, game interface, interaction mapping, character, narrative arc, and narrative space. Both playing and non-playing strategies will make use of the humanities method of close reading. While the playing format will examine these aspects from my own in-game performance as a female Commander Shepard, the non-playing strategy will be a complementary assessment of the same aspects, examining the games' paratexts, which range from walkthrough videos to specialized websites, including the *Mass Effect* official website and *Mass Effect* Wikia website.

1. *Mass Effect* Trilogy

1.1 *Mass Effect*

Mass Effect is a single-player, third-person shooter, science fiction action role-playing video game developed by BioWare Corp. and was released on November 20, 2007, exclusively for the Xbox 360 due to its publisher, Microsoft Games Studios. Electronic Arts, BioWare's new publisher, re-launched the game in 2008 for the PC platform as well.

Mass Effect's story introduces the Alliance Marine Commander Shepard, whose mission is to save the galaxy from a powerful ancient machine race known as the Reapers. In the first game, Commander Shepard has to investigate and defeat Saren Arterious, a Turian rogue council's spectre, who is now operating under the Sovereign's orders. The Sovereign is a Reaper vanguard committed to facilitating the Reapers' return so that they can accomplish their own organic genocide cycle triggered each 50,000 years. To succeed in his plan, Saren has a large supply of Geth troopers under his command and the support of the Matriarch Benezia, his second-in-command. Benezia is a powerful Asari biotic and also a renowned spiritual leader among her race's pairs. Initially, she attempts to guide Saren to a less destructive route; however, owing to the powerful influence of the Sovereign, Benezia becomes enslaved to Saren's will.

The Geth are a race of networked artificial intelligence created by the Quarian as labour and war tools. As the Geth evolved, they started to question the purpose of their existence, which made the Quarians decide to exterminate them. Thus, an inevitable war erupted in which the Geth reduced the Quarians to a nomad race.

1.2 *Mass Effect 2*

Released by Electronic Arts in January 26, 2010, for Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, and the PC, *Mass Effect 2* continues commander Shepard's saga to save the galaxy from the imminent Reaper Attack. The plot takes place two years after the events of *Mass Effect*. At this time, a new enemy has mysteriously abducted an entire group of human colonies at the border of the galaxy: The Collectors. They are a powerful and enigmatic insect-like humanoid race living beyond the Omega 4 Relay in the Terminus System, and are also working for the Reapers. Since they are rarely see in the system, some Citadel citizens believe that they are just a myth.

In this game, commander Shepard dies in the first cut-scene of the game, only to be resurrected two years later by Cerberus' Project Lazarus. Shepard is 'forced' to ally with Cerberus, a pro-human paramilitary organization, in order to investigate the cause of the abduction of the human colonies and to stop these disturbing events. To attempt this so-called suicide mission, Shepard needs to assemble the most elite team in the galaxy, joining soldiers, assassins, mercenaries, and specialists together in the same group. The game is centered on not only the investigation of what is going on in the human colonies, but also on the recruitment process of the squad team. *Mass Effect 2* is based on the level of the squad members' commitment to Shepard during the game. The crew's commitment is directly connected to a player's performance on the loyalty missions, which is crucial for the final battle. In the last mission, a so-called 'suicide mission', either Shepard or the crewmembers can definitively die trying to defeat the Collectors, affecting the sequence of the game.

1.3 *Mass Effect 3*

Electronic Arts released *Mass Effect 3* on March 6, 2012 for Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, and the PC. The third game, which completes the story arc of Commander Shepard, also offers a multiplayer cooperative mode, as well as a new interactive control component: using the Kinect sensor for Xbox 360 players can answer questions during the dialogues by using their voice.

While in the two previous games the return of the Reapers was announced as a mere possibility, it is in the last game that it finally becomes real: they place themselves in strategic points across the galaxy, and start an attack on Earth. During the assault, Commander Shepard is forced to leave the planet to find help in the Citadel council. However, the council's primary concern is gathering forces to protect the Citadel, leaving Shepard alone to convince more advanced races to join her/him in this decisive battle.

2. The implications of game affordances to the narrative

Games become an expressive medium when they are able to persuade players through their game situation. For Bogost (2007), video games expose their "art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions" (p. ix). Thus, the persuasive characteristics of *Mass Effect* can be observed in some aspects of the game's affordances that help to build its narrative structure. In this game, players start to influence the game story the moment they select Commander Shepard's features. As a role-playing action game, *Mass Effect* is not only designed around winning combat missions, but is also highly based on building relationships with other characters in the game. Thus, the decisions about Shepard's gender, class, history, and psychological traits all have an impact on the game's dialogues, the wheel of options for the players' choices, and, consequently, the game as whole.

Besides its rich plot, what makes *Mass Effect* such an engaging narrative is the fact that its system allows players to carry Commander Shepard's profile from the previous game into the next. That is, for the whole game's sequence players carry a record of choices and decisions from the previous campaigns; accordingly, players also need to handle the consequences of their previous decisions, providing more coherence to the game story. Even though such consequences might be very unpleasant in some situations (speaking from my own game experience), this procedural dynamic induces players to better study and plan their strategy in the game, including going back and replaying some levels to improve their performance. Another interesting affordance offered by the game system is the possibility to fail some missions, with the exception of combat missions. These affordances were considered a novelty in the medium as they have a huge impact on the way the game conducts its storylines.

Although *Mass Effect* offers a large and diverse collection of topics for analysis, my study's intention for this chapter is related to the narrative structure of the game and how the side missions help to shape this structure. As such, a clarification regarding the taxonomy needs to be made here. What I am calling side missions are a kind of loyalty mission that are roughly present in all the games of the trilogy. However, since game developers officially introduced the loyalty mission nomenclature in the second game, when I refer to 'loyalty missions' I will be denoting

Mass Effect 2, and the term 'side missions' will be used as a reference to squad missions in any of the other games.

As I have said above, *Mass Effect* is grounded in building and developing relationships between Shepard and other characters of the game; hence, the way the Alliance marine approaches and attracts her/his squad mates' confidence and admiration is connected with the player's performance during conversations and side missions. Through conversations and having success on the side-missions, Shepard might not only capture the loyalty of her/his crewmembers, but may also develop affectionate and even sexual relationships, which also brings to the table the possibility for inter-racial and homosexual relationships.

By investigating the narrative structure of the game and the influence of the loyalty missions in such a structure, I intend to examine how procedural elements can contribute to the plot development of the game, and I will also discuss how Shepard's performances over the game's missions drive the storyline and influence the ending of the game. To better present this analysis, I have divided the eight aspects to be analyzed into two descriptive groups: (1) **Game Mechanics or Game System**, which will emphasize the mechanics of the game, which includes object inventory, core mechanics, objective, game interface, and interaction mapping aspects; and (2) **Game Narrative**, which consists of the game's storyline, and also includes character, narrative arc, and narrative space.

2.1 Game Mechanics or Game System

According to Sicart (2008), "game mechanics are methods invoked by agents, designed for interaction with the game state"(para. 24). That is, it is the manner by which players (and the system) add inputs into the game system in order to modify the game state. Through its mechanics, a game is able to generate an immersive environment for players and engage them with the game's story and world. Thus, some of the mechanical affordances might be used as persuasive tools to build the structure of the game narrative, encouraging players to engage with the story, take actions within the game, and reflect over their attitudes (Bogost, 2007; Gee, 2005;

Newman, 2013). From this perspective, I will examine how *Mass Effect* uses its affordances to build an immersive environment and to structure its storyline.

2.1.1 Object Inventory

For Consalvo and Dutton (2006), the analysis of the objects of a game might contribute to a general understanding of the game studies field, since it can represent the most relevant components for play action, provide comparisons between games, establish patterns in games or genres, and raise questions connected to the ideological aspects of the game. For instance, in cataloguing the game objects and their properties, scholars can better comprehend the role of these objects inside the game, which can also reveal something about the gameplay and the game as a whole, including its purposed narrative.

Following this line of thought, it is possible to say that *Mass Effect* uses objects to help players to advance in the game and evolve its storyline. As a military/action/RPG game, these objects are a diverse collection of armoury, weapons, med-gel (healing dispositive), and technical and upgrade kits that players have to find and collect around the game world. There are also different types of containers (*e.g.*, cell, toxic, chemical, explosive) spread throughout the battlefield that players can use, by shooting them, to easily strike enemies. It is important to note that the amount and importance of the objects change considerably from the first game to its sequels. In *Mass Effect 1* the collections of armoury, weapons and technical and upgrade kits are larger and more variable than its subsequent games, which gives more freedom for players levelling up their characters.

The *Mass Effect* games are basically divided in two parts: (1) combat sections and (2) character relationships. Since winning battles is such an important goal of the game, weapon and armour models, as well as their upgrades, are important objects for players so that they can have success in battles and make progress throughout the game. Similarly, non-player characters (NPCs) are also significant objects, especially because it is through the interaction and relationship between players and NPCs that the game evolves. The relationships between characters not only shapes the side stories, but also influences the main storyline in many ways.

As an RPG game, *Mass Effect* requires from players a broad exploration of the game space to find objects. Players must also trigger conversations with other characters, even with secondary and tertiary NPCs, since they provide background information, which makes the narrative more suitable and gives context to the combat sections. Some conversations between NPCs, even those not directly involving Shepard, deliver some background information to help players understand what is going on in that specific situation. In addition, data pads and virtual intelligence are objects used to provide background information necessary for a basic comprehension of the game story.

Thus, one can clearly see that the set of objects in *Mass Effect trilogy* plays an important role in the shaping of its narrative structure. Although some of those items are more oriented towards supporting the game's progression (armoury, upgrade kits, med-gel, ammunition, and so on), others are more significant for building and evolving the game's storyline (NPCs). Nonetheless, even the progression-oriented items can also contribute to unfolding the general narrative of the game, since the progression of the game also aids in the progression of the game's main story. It even aids the player's 'performance' on the missions, as they are also the subject of conversations between Shepard's and the Normandy's crews, stimulating their social relationships and the side stories of the game.

2.1.2 Core Mechanics

2.1.2.1 Controls

The set of controls in a video game directly reflects on the quality of the immersion experienced by the players and influences their engagement with the game world. McGloin, Farrar, and Krcmar (2013) suggest that "a more realistic and natural gaming interaction should allow users to access more relevant and contextually dependent cognitions. This, in turn, allows users to more quickly and easily make sense of the virtual environment leading to increased perceived realism and immersion" (p. 66). A bad set of controls can easily break the immersion experience, since an inappropriate response to the player's input encourages them to look at and think about the

controller, which momentarily disconnects them from the game world. Ergo, the improvements of such an affordance are reflected in the enjoyment, immersion, and engagement of players with the game.

Although *Mass Effect* presents similar control functions in all three games, at least for the Xbox 360 platform, some of the game mechanics underwent modification in the second and third games in order to solve problems presented in *Mass Effect 1*. The first game had some bad controls, which caused many frustrations on behalf of players: even though the general character controls are fairly good, some functions, like taking cover and controlling the squad members in the battlefield, can be a bit hard to figure out at first. The vehicle Mako[6] is also hard to drive, revealing very unstable control. In fact, such a bad experience was so frustrating for players that developers decided to remove the vehicle from the subsequent releases of the game.

Another interesting control feature presented in both *Mass Effect 2* and *Mass Effect 3* is power mapping. Using this, players can attach specific powers to specific buttons as hot keys, instead of accessing the power wheel. It is a quick and efficient way to trigger powers in the middle of a battle, which avoids the necessity of breaking the action time by freezing the screen to select a power and instead keeps the players 'within' the battlefield.

Having a direct influence on the narrative situations, the mechanics of Shepard's psychological traits were also altered from the first game to its sequels. In *Mass Effect 1*, Shepard's psychological traits were more connected with the interactive aspect, chiefly the squad points board in the game mission computer, since players first need to invest points in charming or intimidating features in order to have paragon or renegade options displayed in the wheel of choices. However, in *Mass Effect 2* and *Mass Effect 3*, the paragon (charming skills) or renegade (intimidating skills) mechanics are connected with controller buttons, in which players need to respond to the

[6] Mako is a spacial tank used by Shepard and her/his crew members to explore, survey, and accomplish missions in different planets.

paragon or renegade signal displayed on the screen. As can be noticed in the figure 3.1, players need to be quick to perform a response that follows the symbol indicated on the screen by pressing a button to trigger either paragon or renegade behaviour.

It is fascinating to note that the integration of the paragon or renegade attitude with the controller device may have an interesting effect on the players will to be either a paragon or a renegade, since such a change enhances the action and reaction aspect of the game. That is, while investing points in charm or intimidation, players have a better control over their psychological traits, but in reacting to a situation players might be more vulnerable to automatically triggering the button whenever a symbol comes to the screen without noticing which symbol it exactly is. This type of mistake has the potential to change the overall behaviour of Commander Shepard and consequently influence the game story.

2.1.2.2 Weapon system

The mechanics of the weapon system was improved from *Mass Effect 1* to the subsequent releases of the game by placing more emphasis on getting a headshot. The aim lock mechanism in the sniper rifle was also improved, making it more stable and solving huge frustrations in the first game. The weapon capacity system was also changed throughout all of the games. In the first game, the weapons easily overheated, and took quite a long time to cool down. In *Mass Effect 2* and *Mass Effect 3*, it was changed from a time-based system to a reload system, which requires players to look for ammunition around the game space. Such a modification may have enhanced the

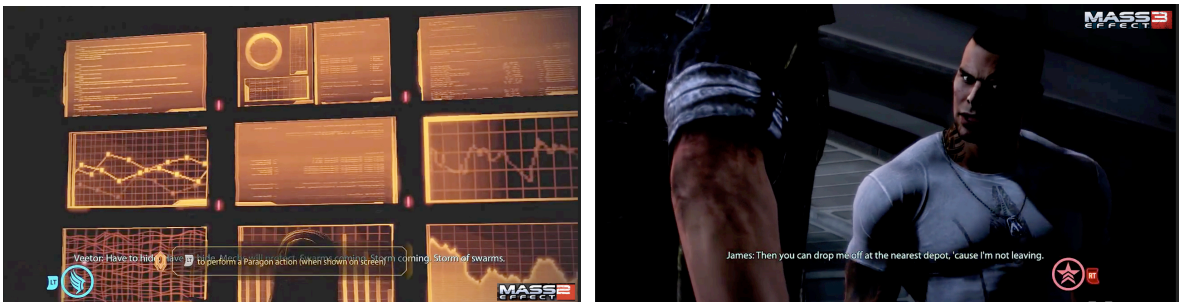

Figure 3.1: Paragon and renegade mechanics. Images captured from Tetra Ninja's (*Mass Effect2*, 2010) and Ve3tro's (*Mass Effect3*, 2012) Youtube channels.

player's game experience in the combat sections, since they are able to see themselves in a critical situation by knowing that they have almost no ammunition and lots of enemies to deal with.

2.1.2.3 Mini-games

All *Mass Effect* games offer small challenges in which players have to decrypt or hack some sort authentication system to access game objects. Although the mechanics and objectives of these mini-games changed in the games' sequels, they are an interesting way to not only create a surprising element by keeping players connected with the game's ludic part, but they also provide background information that serves to connect together pieces of the game's general story. For instance, in collecting minerals at different planets or stars in *Mass Effect 1*, players need to land and use the Mako vehicle to find relics, artifacts, medallions, minerals, metals, writings, insignias, and so on, and in most of these surveys, players need to perform a hacking mini-game to access the objects. Some of these objects such as the Matriach Benezia's writing, serve as another source of background information for players to engage with the rich and complex storyline.

The survey mechanic has also changed in the subsequent releases of the game. In *Mass Effect 2* the collection of minerals is carried out through scanning planets and launching probes, which was interesting at the beginning but quickly became boring and repetitive. Thus, in *Mass Effect 3* instead of scanning individual planets, players can scan small systems, receiving information on the location when something is detected. The scanner quest in the third game brings another ludic feature to the game, one that is inspired by older arcade games: since the Reapers are now everywhere, scanning systems can catch their attention, and if the Reapers perceive the scanning action, players need to escape the system before the Reapers attack.

The mini-games' rewards have their own purpose in the game story. For instance, acquiring the writings from Benezia helps players to make sense of part of the game story, and collecting different types of minerals allows players to upgrade weapons, armory, and biotic powers in order to progess through the game. Even though players can skip some of these tasks, it is a fact that the more tasks players can accomplish, and the more experience, information, resources, and credits

that they can acquire, the better they will perform and understand the game. Thus, mini-games are another aspect of the game that keeps players engaged with the game goals and its main narrative line.

2.1.2.4 Artificial Intelligence System

Unlike *Mass Effect 1*, in which players need to figure everything out, the second and third games present a quick tutorial at the beginning. In the first moments of both games, the system indicates basic movement controls such as take cover, sprint, and shoot, among others. The Artificial Intelligence (AI) for both sequels was also improved. The squad members are more active in battles and show more initiative in terms of combat tactics and strategies. For example, they warn Shepard if she/he is shooting them instead of the enemy: they shout, "that is me Shepard!" in the middle of the battle. The NPCs—notably the crewmembers—also became more active in developing their personal relationships and in demonstrating more friendship and complicity between them. Such relationships provide more elements to develop the side stories of the game, which may or may not influence Shepard actions.

Mass Effect 2, and especially *Mass Effect 3*, present a very strong enemy AI that has new assets at their disposal. They are more intelligent: their movements while taking cover are more clever and their attacks come from different sides. Another interesting enemy asset is the grenade mechanic: it not only forces Shepard to keep moving to avoid being hit, and also changing her/his cover points, but it is also used to protect the enemies from Shepard's aim (smoke grenade), requiring players to re-plan a reaction in some situations.

All of the three games use check points in the game world to trigger cut-scenes, random conversations, or add more enemies to the battlefield, which Sicart (2008) describes as context mechanics. Such a mechanic affordance is an interesting tool to involve and engage players within the game world, since it improves the actions of the game and provides contextual information to keep the story going.

The sound effects present themselves as a rich game asset to create an immersive atmosphere, such an affordance is used not only to boost the epic and dramatic points of the game, thereby enhancing its emotional appeal, but also to indicate when an action sequence is coming.

2.1.3 Objectives

The objectives of a game might be understood as a persuasive tool for players to engage with and with which to reflect over their actions (Bogost, 2007; Gee, 2005; Newman, 2013). In *Mass Effect* games, the game's objectives serve to not only conduct players' actions, but they also build the structure of the narrative plot of the game. *Mass Effect's* objectives are similar when looking at the big picture of the general narrative, though there are some particularities present in each game. *Mass Effect 1* and *Mass Effect 2* display objectives in the same way, divided into missions and side-quest (or assignment) lists, which players can consult anytime using the journal option in the mission computer. In *Mass Effect 3* this dynamic changes; the assignments and missions share a unique list, but it is also in the mission computer's journal option.

The missions are related to the main objective in the game, and are consequently connected to its main story. Generally, the main mission in *Mass Effect 1* is to stop Saren and the Sovereign; in *Mass Effect 2* it is to assemble the best team in the galaxy to destroy the collector's base; and in *Mass Effect 3* it is to convince the advanced races to join the Alliance forces to save the galaxy from the Reapers' threat. However, as a progressive game, the main mission in *Mass Effect* presents sub-missions where players need to succeed in order to move forward. The assignments could be understood as less important missions, which do not completely compromise the game's main objective if players decide to not play them, but they can be immensely helpful in terms of developing the main characters' skills, as well as the relationships between Shepard and the other NPCs.

The RPG feature of *Mass Effect* also imbues the game with another essential objective: the creation of relationships between Shepard and the squad members. These relationships can be kept on just a friendly level, or they can evolve into something more affectionate, or even towards

a more sexual level. Through their agency, players can decide which kind of relationship they want to develop and with whom. Nevertheless, it is important to clarify that not all NPCs are able to have affectionate or sexual relationship with the protagonist. The romance options mainly depend on the gender players chose for Shepard.

Outside of the general development of relationships in all three games, one of the main objectives in *Mass Effect 2* is to make the squad team loyal to Shepard. Thus, players need to succeed in the loyalty missions, where each member of the squad team asks for Shepard's help to solve different personal problems. Ultimately, these missions are important not only in shaping Shepard's performance on the last mission of the second game, but they also play a role in defining some of the consequences in the third game.

2.1.4 Game Interface

Bizzocchi and Tanembaum (2012) use the term *narrativized interface* to refer to a narrative that can be incorporated into the interface itself, wherein design practices absorb and display much of the storyline experience. According to them, there are "narrativized game metrics, which not only provide direct ludic feedback on the state of the game play but also add to the narrative urgency of the moment" (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2012, p. 400). Most contemporary games present a narrativized interface on different levels, especially because these productions are heavily invested in the visual aspects of the game. A narrativized interface helps to create coherence between the general story of the game and what is displayed on the screen, enhancing the level of immersion for players. Accordingly, the *Mass Effect* games present a narrativized interface, in which the graphic interface merges, complements, and enriches the game storyline in a significant way.

Since *Mass Effect's* plot is centered on a futuristic sci-fi story, the interface displays a high-tech design. All *Mass Effect* games present futuristic elements using different design patterns for information and images boxes, line designs, text fonts, glows, holograms, virtual screens and tech devices used by NPCs, and so on.

As can be noticed in the figure 3.2, an interesting coherence between the game narrative and the interface screens can be seen through the colours they present. In the first and third games, these screens are predominantly blue; in both games, Shepard is connected with and represents the Alliance forces. In the second game these screens are predominantly orange (Cerberus' colour), as over the course of the second game Shepard is connected to and represents the Cerberus organization.

All three games provide information regarding experience points (XP), credits, paragon or renegade points, and character's level status within the game screen, though they display this information differently. In combat mode, the game emphasizes Shepard's and the squad's health and shield condition, enemies' information (shield and health bar), number of med-gels, number of grenades, a map, and the type of weapon Shepard is using, including the gun status (overheating or the amount of ammo available). Such information guides the players to build their combat strategies and progress through the game levels. The game also indicates local points to examine and objects to find, including weapons, upgrade kits, and minerals.

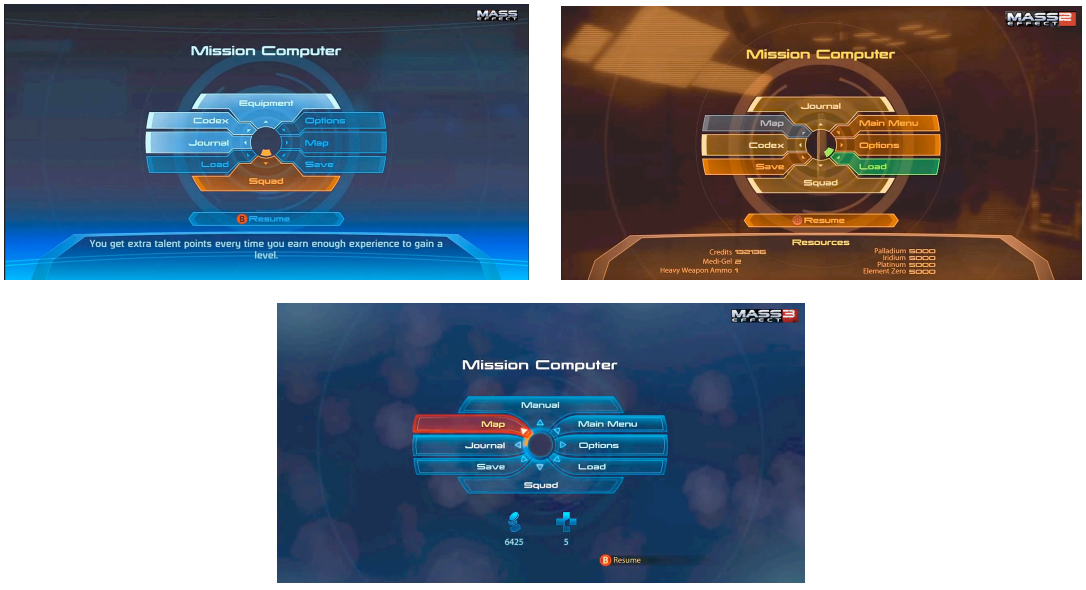

Figure 3.2: Interface colours helping to delineate a coherent narrative. Images captured from Tetra Ninja's Youtube channel (*Mass Effect1*, 2007; *Mass Effect2*, 2010; *Mass Effect3*, 2012).

The indication of Shepard's health condition, especially when she/he is close to death, changed dramatically over the course of the three games. *Mass Effect 1* presents Shepard's critical health condition with a subtle red colour covering the fringes of the screen; in *Mass Effect 2* this indication becomes exaggerated with large red veins and blood occupying the borders and extending to the centre of the screen. Finally, in *Mass Effect 3*, although the health indication interface is still exaggerated, game developers attempted to find a middle ground between the subtle indication of the first game and the exaggerated blood and veins in the second. This interface not only represents the narrative urgency of the moment, as suggested by Bizzocchi and Tanembaum (2012), but it also serves as an anchor to keep players immersed in the game situation (Fig. 3.3).

The last two games bring a new interface feature, the private terminal, through which Shepard can access emails, squad skill points, and advanced training, which is a kind of mini-combat tutorial. In addition, the private terminal is another communication channel between Shepard and NPCs, including the squad team. The third game also presents another new interface feature,

Figure 3.3: Shepard's critical health condition screen, which provides a sense of urgency to the game situation Images captured from Tetra Ninja's Youtube channel (*Mass Effect1*, 2007; *Mass Effect2*, 2010; *Mass Effect3*, 2012).

the war terminal. Since the objective of the game is to gather allies to fight the Reapers, in the war terminal players can check and manage the alliance's information through a progress bar that indicates the minimum force necessary to defeat the Reapers. There, players can count how many army races, weapons, equipment, and fleets Shepard has accumulated so far. This, overall, determines how effective these assets will perform in the final battle. Naturally, the closer the bar is to being full, the better the chances are for the player to win the war. The interface segment *Theaters of War*, also located in the war terminal, displays borders on the galactic map, showing which regions (or conflict zones) the Reapers have reached so far.

As Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum (2012) observe "narrative can be built into the 'look and feel' of the interface" (p. 400). Ergo, the complex, intricate, and richly detailed universe of *Mass Effect* actually needs to use its interface as a narrative support tool to help its story make sense and keep players involved with the game world.

2.1.5 Interaction Map

According to Consalvo and Dutton (2006), an analysis of the interaction map affordance involves investigating the player's choice while interacting with the other characters from the game. For them, by using this strategy, scholars could understand how much freedom players have in the decision-making process within the game, and how this freedom could shape the game as whole.

In *Mass Effect*, the interaction between Shepard and NPCs is essential for the development of the game, and the dialog wheel of the game is one of the most important interaction features, since it can shape players decisions and how these choices alter the course of the storyline. The dialog wheel is able to present complex interactions between Shepard and NPCs, since it can support up to six options on one screen and each option can open more and more dialogue choices, which demonstrates how intricate some of the in-game situations can become.

By controlling Commander Shepard, players can interact with NPCs (as well as with other game situations) using the "paragon" (charming skill) or the "renegade" (intimidation skill) attitudes.

In acting as a paragon, players choose kindness and noble attitudes to deal with complex situations; as a renegade, the player's approach will be more ruthless and pragmatic towards solving a given problem. In both modes, players can avoid direct combat in some situations, since Shepard would solve the issue with arguments instead of violence. There is also an extreme option offered in some situations, like the one involving Wrex on Virmire, which I will explain in section 2.3: this approach can guide players into dangerous situations with big consequences (Fig. 3.4).

The frequency with which players request a squad member to perform a combat mission does not influence his/her commitment to Shepard or their personal relationship in general. Squad mates are ultimately influenced by the mode in which players decide to engage in a given conversation through the dialogue choice options, as well as how successful the player is at completing the required missions.

2.2 Game Narrative

Narrative elements are added into the game system to aid developers in constructing or enhancing the game's storyline, as well as its ludic parts, providing more sense and significance to

Figure 3.4: *Mass Effect's* dialog wheel exposing a renegade option in red, and an extreme option in yellow. Image captured from Jacob6875's Youtube channel (*Mass Effect*1, 2007).

the game. As stated by Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum (2012), "game narrative remains an important issue with significant cultural, economic and scholarly implications" (p. 393). For them, narrative contributes to the pleasure produced by the game in a powerful way. Thus, in order to understand how narrative components build a game narrative experience, I will examine three elements I believe are useful to connect together game and narrative in *Mass Effect*: character, narrative space, and narrative arc.

2.2.1 Character

The diversity of characters in *Mass Effect* games is remarkable: from the general NPCs that inhabit the game world environment to Shepard's squad members, and the main character *per se*. The roles these characters play differ from each other within the narrative context, especially in comparing the case of Shepard, whom the players directly control, and the NPCs that support the narrative and general actions. Through my own experience playing the game, and from my observations from watching other players completing the trilogy, I will briefly describe the influence of the game system on its narrative structure, especially on the way players build Commander Shepard's features. In addition, I will present, in a general manner, the NPCs' personalities within the game.

2.2.1.1 Commander Shepard

In *Mass Effect*, players can experience a range of social, ethical, political, moral, and emotional situations, even tragedy or catharsis, which are not usually explored in a video game context (Juul, 2005). In most of these circumstances, players are able to adjust their attitude and behaviour during the course of the game in order to experience (or avoid) extreme and difficult situations, as well as to provide embodiment and engagement with the NPCs and storyline as a whole.

As seen in figure 3.5, to build Commander Shepard players must define gender, ethnicity, origin, reputation, and military class. These features establish most of the core identity, morals, and

Figure 3.5: Building Shepard screens. Images captured from Smosh Games' Youtube channel (*Mass Effect 2*, 2010).

values of the main character, influencing dialogue choice options and guiding the narrative of the game. As players can carry commander Shepard's profile from the previous game, *Mass Effect 2* and *Mass Effect 3* allow players to change her/his military class, but keep ethnicity, gender, reputation, origin, and the player's decision records. The flexibility in changing the military class is an opportunity for players to experiment, if they wish, with another range of powers unlocked by different classes.

Although the core identity is pre-established, the commander's personality traits are variable, shaped through the decision-making process in the game. As cited in the interaction map section, Shepard's attitude (*i.e.*, paragon or renegade) has an impact on certain situations and relationships with NPCs. Even though the paragon or renegade attitudes present quite similar narrative consequences, they will provide different reflections and insights about moral, ethical, and emotional experiences for players. Most importantly, this range of possible behaviours opens up a new avenue for one to explore character development in video games, whose characters are usually categorized as flat characters due to their foreseeable attitudes inside a controlled environment (Ryan, 2004).

Mass Effect devotes an important part of the game to the development of relationships; thus, while Shepard's personality traits affect the commander's social life, other features, such as gender, play an interesting role in influencing the friendly/loving options for Shepard, and, consequently, how players deal with those possible choices, which brings to the table social discussions about gender, racism, and sexuality. Although Shepard's gender is irrelevant in terms of combat

performance and her/his general relationship with NPCs, this feature will define with whom Shepard can be affectionately involved, including homosexual relationships. In *Mass Effect 1*, for instance, if playing as a male character, players will catch Ashley Williams's attention; on the other hand, if they choose the female Shepard, Kaidan Alenko is the romantic option. However, there is another possibility that can happen regardless of Shepard's gender: she/he can also be emotionally involved with the Asari, Dr. Liara T'Soni, which introduces a possible female homosexual relationship into the game. In the second game, even though the range of possible romances increases for both genders, homosexual involvement is again only possible for the female character. The third game brings the possibility to continue a previous relationship or invest in a fresh one, including an option for a possible homosexual relationship for the male Shepard.

2.2.1.2 Non-players Characters

The game developers did extraordinary work by using NPCs as a tool to support the narrative of the game. *Mass Effect's* NPCs present strong ethical and moral points of view when involved in discussions about the world, which also make them easily exposed to particular contradictions and difficulties when dealing with certain topics. Such situations can also be a platform for players to exercise their own point of view about a variety of ethical, social, and political matters in order to either subvert or reinforce the established perspectives. NPCs usually expose not only internal conflicts, but also their problems with other races. Although NPCs are well defined in terms of identity and personal behaviour, they can be persuaded to see things from a new perspective when chatting with Shepard.

The *Mass Effect* universe exposes a variety of complex characters, whose personalities contribute to a unique and detailed narrative. The NPC dialog lines are well written, as they include a clever sense of humour (shaped by convincing voice acting) that not only substantially enriches the game story, but also enhances the player's immersion and engagement with the game. Even secondary and tertiary NPCs are important tools the game uses to give players access to

background information, which makes the narrative easier to understand and gives context to some combat sections. Through the relationship asset, NPCs are definitely the driving force that keeps players engaged with Shepard's journey (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2012; Jørgensen, 2010).

2.2.2 Narrative Space

Mass Effect's detailed narrative space is a fundamental aspect of the general game system, enhancing its ludic and the narrative aspects. The game offers a range of different levels within the game world: (1) the Milk Way System, where players can explore smaller systems, stars regions, individual planets, stars, and space stations; (2) the Citadel, and its embassies, presidium, c-sec quarters, and markets, etc.; and finally (3) the decks of the Normandy vessel, including the combat control area, engineering, med bay, pilot cockpit, starboard observation deck, and so on. All of these places are suitable for battles, quests, and conversations, where, depending on the situation, the game space can constrain or offer more freedom for the players to explore (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2012). By investigating the game space, players can discover the background stories of other races and cultures that helps to fill in the gaps in the narrative sequence.

The juxtaposition between the game space and its narrative is carefully designed to make players explore the environment in order to find objects, places, and pieces of information that will be useful in combat sequences, as well as to aid in the understanding of the game plot. This approach is consistent with Jenkins' (2004) concept of narrativized game spatiality through which he suggests that game designers should present themselves as narrative architects rather than storytellers, since they model worlds and spaces where play takes place. For instance, in the elevators in the first game, or the news stations in *Mass Effect 2* and *Mass Effect 3*, players have access to information about different game situations, possible side-quests to be added to the mission computer's journal, or comments on the consequences of side-quests and missions Shepard just finished. In addition, in the first game, elevators are places where the squad members talk to each other, arguing about a variety of topics.

There are also some points of interest distributed in the game space, wherein by reaching these points, players can trigger different conversations between Shepard and the squad members that provide background information on the respective place. For instance, upon reaching the Ward location at the Citadel in *Mass Effect 1*, Shepard can start a conversation with her/his squad mates about the place when interacting with this point of interest:

> Kaidan: "Big place."
> Ashley: "That is your professional opinion, sir?"
> Shepard says: "This isn't a station; it is a city."
> Kaidan: "There must be millions here. It can't be possible to track everyone coming and going."
> Ashley: "This makes Jump Zero look like a porta-john. And it's the largest deep space station the Alliance has."
> Kaidan: "Jump Zero was big. But this is a whole 'nother scale. Look at the ward arms. How do they keep all that mass from flying apart."
> Shepard: "The council represents more races than I thought. No wonder they're careful with newcomers."
> Kaidan: "They probably just want to keep everything running. It has to be hard keeping all these cultures working together."

Normandy's videoconference room is another space in *Mass Effect* that is directly related to the game narrative. There, Shepard can contact other non-player characters to discuss missions, their consequences, and even to acquire basic information about what is going on outside of the Normandy. This spot is used to fill in gaps and connect together different pieces of information in order to offer more coherence to the game storyline. In the first game this spot is mostly used to connect Shepard to the Citadel council; in *Mass Effect 2*, it connects Shepard exclusively to the Illusive Man; finally, in *Mass Effect 3* the room is intensively used to keep up with the frenetic flow of information about the reapers' attacks, which connects Shepard to a range of NPCs, especially with the Admirals Hackett and Anderson from the Alliance Military force.

All three games present a well-designed maze architecture, encouraging player exploration (except for some side-missions in *Mass Effect 1* that repeat the same space and enemies' assets).

To keep players stimulated to explore the game environment, the Citadel's and the Normandy's space maps are different in all three games, even though these places are common in the entire trilogy. As an example, I would like to highlight the training room in the spectre's office in the Citadel, in the third game, in which the different map is more connected to the game system than to its narrative. In this place, players can test weapons to figure out how they will behave, their efficiency, and how their mechanics work before going into a combat sequence. Through this usability test, players can define which weapons are easy, good, and/or 'natural' to use. The designers intentionally changed the game space of such places to persuade players to keep exploring the game, maintaining an element of surprise within these environments.

2.2.3 Narrative Arc

Mass Effect presents a substantial number of story progressions, or sub-narratives, within the three games. These narratives are linked to each other in many ways, and the implications of each one can unfold into more complex situations as the game progresses. Although there is still not a consensus between scholars on interactive media's capacity to create a consistent narrative plot (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum, 2012; Ryan, 2001), the *Mass Effect* games present a fairly coherent narrative, especially due to the affordance that allows players to carry commander Shepard's profile from previous games into the subsequent ones, thereby affecting the game in both terms of the gameplay and the storyline experience.

Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum (2012) divide *Mass Effect's* narrative into three different levels: closing, intermediary, and detailed stages, wherein each presents its own form of narrative motivation. For them, the closing stage of the narrative arc is trigged by the player's personality trait choices (paragon or renegade) and the consequences those approaches entail. The intermediate level offers a variety of narrative arcs for players to navigate, including the game quests, with each of them presenting challenging and complex events involving either combat performance or political, ethical, and social decisions, which also influence relationships with NPCs. Finally, the detailed stage includes each combat and conversation sequence scene that carries their own arc

and meaning. Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum discuss the narrative levels above specifically in reference to *Mass Effect 2*; however, their observations can be extended to the other games as well since the same narrative *modus operandi* is found in all games.

To better explore this complex connection between the micro-narratives and their implications on the main narrative structure in *Mass Effect*, the next section will present the narrative arcs of the Loyalty Missions (or similar side-quests) throughout the game trilogy.

2.3 *Mass Effect's* narrative structure through the lens of the loyalty missions

The loyalty missions present themselves as an important component of the second game's storyline, though the other games also present side-quests that play a similar role. The core goal of these missions is to work on Shepard's relationship with her/his squad members in order to acquire their sympathy and confidence.

The first game demands that players perform two squad members' side-quests: one involving a Krogan, Urdnot Wrex, and the other involving a Turian, Garrus Vakarian. Each mission requires a different approach in order to succeed. In Wrex's quest, players need to perform a combat sequence, whereas in the Garrus' assignment players need to demonstrate the ability to play with words, rather than using firepower. Even though the game has two quests directly connected to Shepard's squad members, Wrex's mission is more significant in terms of story arc, since it can improve the relationship level between them and also shape some of the storyline options for future missions.

By having success on Wrex's quest, players are able to establish a respectful and admirable connection between him and Shepard. However, Virmire's mission brings an extreme situation that can put the Krogan's life at risk. Such a tricky condition is also presented in some loyalty missions in the game's sequel, demonstrating the potential *Mass Effect* has for developing an intricate narrative and complex characters by using their procedural affordances. Although most

side-quests are optional, they are still important for stimulating Shepard's altruism or ruthlessness, which thereby has an effect on the game's outcome, as well as its main plot.

Mass Effect 2 assigns one loyalty mission for each member Shepard attracts to her/his squad, including NPCs gathered from downloadable content (DLC). The effect of these missions on the entire narrative of the game is huge because they are closely related to the player's performance in the final game mission. Although, *Mass Effect 2* allows players to avoid performing some loyalty missions, the consequences of that decision can seriously affect the end of the second game, as well as some of the events in the third game. By being successful in all of the missions, players can guarantee the loyalty of all their squad members, which results in a better performance in the second game's final battle. The tricky part is, however, like the situation involving Wrex at Virmire in the first game, that right after performing Jack's and Legion's loyalty missions, Shepard needs to solve a personal disagreement between Jack and Miranda, and between Legion and Tali, respectively. Depending on the approach players uses to solve these conflicts, Shepard can lose the loyalty of two of the squad members involved in these conflicts, even if the player has succeeded on all their loyalty missions.

The loyalty missions are a smart game mechanism because they allow players that have just failed a mission to continue playing, which is not very common in video games. These missions offer two different approaches, the first of which is designed as a combat sequence, making failure more difficult as the system restarts the combat whenever Shepard dies. The second approach relies on the player's word skills (by diplomatic or intimidation tactics) rather than combat performance. This approach makes the missions very tricky since the subtlety of the dialog choices can make the player choose the wrong option and fail the mission with no chance to start it again. If players desire to replay these missions to succeed, they need to have saved the game just before they started the quest, or accept the fact they have to replay everything from the last saved game until they reach the specific mission. Otherwise, players have to accept that they have failed and deal with the consequences.

Even though the entire *Mass Effect* narrative is affected by a player's decisions from all three games, the consequences from the second game's loyalty and suicide missions are crucial for the game's storyline. In the first game, players deal with the possibility of losing Wrex. In choosing to kill Wrex in Virmire, players face his brother Wreav in the game's sequel. Although the impact of that decision compromises the friendship with the Krogans in the subsequent games, it does not directly influence their decision to become Shepard's ally in the third game. The Krogan's alliance is connected with curing the genophage rather than Wrex's life.

Nevertheless, the implications of failing some loyalty missions in *Mass Effect 2* are also connected to losing members of Shepard's team in the final mission, and the consequences of these losses can be enormous for the game's general narrative structure, since they might have an effect on the choices available in the third game. For instance, Mordin Solus, Legion, and Tali'Zorah are key squad members: keeping or losing them has a large impact on the third game's storyline.

2.3.1 Mordin Solus

Mordin is a Salarian scientist who plays a crucial role in the development of a cure for the genophage in *Mass Effect 3*. Therefore, losing him in the suicide mission can compromise not only the cure, but also the Krogans' aid in the game's final battle. Consequently, without the Krogans, Shepard can also lose the Turians' help, as their commitment to Shepard is first connected to the Krogan's decision to help them. By losing the Krogans and Turians, Shepard fails to gain an important part of her/his military alliance in the fight against the Reapers, which can compromise the main objective of the game.

Nevertheless, there is a chance to manipulate the genophage's cure without Mordin Solus. Padok Wiks is another Salarian scientist who believes that his Salarian fellows were wrong to interfere with the destiny of any species, even the Krogan. Thus, he can take up Mordin's mission on Sur'Kesh and Tuchanka in order to help with the cure for the genophage. Yet, if players want to guarantee the cure for the Krogan, they would be better to keep Mordin alive.

2.3.2 Tali'Zorah and Legion

These characters are connected to the same extreme setting, which arises from a "domestic" war between Quarian and Geth in *Mass Effect 3*. To solve this situation between both races and protect both sides, Shepard needs to have Tali and Legion close to her/him. Thus, they must survive the suicide mission; otherwise, the only option Shepard has to put an end to the war is to exterminate one of the species.

Facing these circumstances, players should make coherent and rational decisions that will lead them to acquire either a Geth or Quarian alliance. Accordingly, the better choice is to protect the character who is accompanying Shepard in the mission: if Legion survives, then protect the Geth; if Tali survives, then protect the Quarians. However, the extreme decision to annihilate an entire race not only changes the wheel of choice in the game's final decision, thereby diminishing the number of options for the game's ending, but it can also have a significant impact on a player's emotions.

From my playing experience, losing other members did not have a large impact on the game's narrative structure. NPCs, like Jacob, Jack, and Samara, did not make any difference in the course of the story within the game sequence. However, what would happen if Miranda or Thane is lost remains unknown. Both characters play an important role in *Mass Effect 3*: my own playing performance, as well as the walkthrough videos I have watched, do not give me such information. In the third game, Thane helps Shepard to save the Salarian councillor when Cerberus attacks the Citadel, even though he dies fighting Kai Leng in this situation. Miranda helps Shepard in the Sanctuary mission, Sanctuary is a Cerberus research facility used to transform human refugees into Husks, a type of zombie Reaper. There, Miranda attaches a tracking device to Kai Leng, helping Shepard to find the Cerberus Headquarters.

It is significant to note that Shepard's behaviour can also define the destiny of some squad members, including former squad members, regarding who lives or dies in the game. It seems that by acting more like a 'jerk', Shepard puts her/his squad members at risk. Even after a few

attempts, I, myself, could not act as renegade or play in a "*I do not care style*"; however, I have watched players that enacted such behaviour to better analyze the consequences of the game's choices. Such an attitude increases the chances of losing squad mates in both *Mass Effect 2* and *Mass Effect 3*. For instance, in the second game, the leader of the second group (it is up to players to choose who will play the role of group's leader) can die at the end of the second part of the suicide mission. Yet, if players act more as a paragon, then this character will survive. Likewise, in the Sanctuary mission in *Mass Effect 3*, Miranda can be mortally wounded during a fight with Kai Leng; thus, the player's attitudes will determine Miranda's fate at the end of this mission.

Similar to the first game, *Mass Effect 3* presents some "ally" side-quests, especially some that involve the Krogans and Turians. Nevertheless, as the game narrative arc ends with this game, the consequences of those missions most likely do not have an essential influence on the storyline.

3. The great narrative of *Mass Effect*

Even though decisive parts of narrative's plot are pre-defined by the game developers, some video game genres allow players to shape their own approach to reach the final story of each game level by giving them some influence on its general narrative. As I have demonstrated, *Mass Effect* players' choices can shape these side stories, in which players 'freely' choose different approaches for Shepard's professional and personal relationships with the NPCs in the game. These mechanisms allow players to build not only an epic story, but also a legacy (Gee, 2005).

Through the game affordances, *Mass Effect* builds an epic story that allows players to immerse themselves within its environment. This engaging narrative, structured by the game system, allows players to carry Commander Shepard's profile from the previous game into its sequels. By uploading the main character, players can carry forward their choices and decisions from the previous campaign; accordingly, players need to deal with the consequences of those decisions, which provides a coherent and consistent narrative to the game.

Based on the player's performance in the loyalty missions of the second game, the game system provides different situations for players to face in the subsequent releases of the game. The mechanism of success or failure in these missions opens different narrative paths — as a consequence of players' choice — through which the game unfolds its storyline and thereby impacting the manner in which each player experiences the game. Such an influence can even alter the ending of the game plot, reducing the options for the player to decide the destiny of the galaxy. As Bogost (2006) argues, the game's engine generates expressivity in games, since it not only regulates the artistic, cultural, and narrative of the game's expression, while also controling the gameplay behaviour and facilitating the interaction between the game and the player.

Having this understanding of how *Mass Effect* uses its procedurality to structure and develop a stunning narrative, we are now able to move forward on to the next topic: symbolic representation in games. Video games have been demonstrating a great potential for transmitting cultural meaning and intentionality, thereby increasing the medium's capacity to influence players. Such a potentiality is chiefly perceived through the narrative context of a game. Games are now offering strong arguments on a range of topics through not only its mechanics, but also its textual expression and collection of images and cinematic scenes. Thus, the next chapter will be dedicated to investigating the manner in which *Mass Effect* choses to represent race, gender, and sexuality, as well as the political position the game defends in its discourse.

Chapter 4: *Mass Effect* and the Matter of Representation

Games like *Mass Effect* use all of the affordances video games have to build a massive narrative structures, allowing players to experience a highly immersive trip into the game world in which they can shape their own approach to 'designing' the final story on each game level and influencing the general game storyline. This new level of story in video games is part of the game industry strategy to raise the bar of game experience through the enhancement of playability, immersion, engagement, and thereby consequently preserving players' loyalty to their game titles. Nevertheless, these intricate narratives are not neutral. There is a range of meaning integrated into the narrative system, regardless of the media used to tell the story. Accordingly, video games generate meaning that is implied through the gameplay and which is situated in somewhat of a social simulation, which helps to explore the practices and contexts of play (Newman, 2013).

This emulation, predominantly grounded in the game narrative, not only engages and immerses players into the game world, but also legitimizes the platform as an influential cultural product. Warnes (2005) argues that games are an "expression of the culture that produces them" (p. 3), in which their content not only shaped by, but also reflects a given society's structures. For him, game scholars must dedicate themselves to the exercise of interpreting games, including both the understanding the process of how games work as games, and what they mean as sign and signifier. Likewise, Leonard (2003) affirms that "video games represent a powerful instrument of hegemony, eliciting ideological consent through a spectrum of white supremacy projects," (p. 1) since they produce and reproduce the common sense perception of society, especially regarding the representation of race, gender, sexuality, and nationalism.

The connection between the video game medium and the hegemonic structure proposed by Leonard (2003) is in consonance with the relationship between cultural practices and power discussed in chapter two. The influence of a cultural product is associated with the relations between cultural producers and dominant groups, wherein such connections expose how these

relationships attach, influence, and shape cultural practices (Sardar & Van Loon, 1997; Williams, 1981). Similarly, Mayra (2008) argues that games and play carry meaning, since the interaction creates significance within a specific cultural context. Such meaning can be reached through both symbolic and non-symbolic expression once a game make sense as a system of interaction for their players.

In the same way, Bogost (2006) emphasizes the persuasive potential of video games, claiming that game analysis should focus on its expressive capacity to "inform, change, or otherwise participate in human activity" (p. 53). Bogost's approach privileges the game's models of rules and behaviours rather than its collection of images and texts. Games are complex platforms that use their variety of affordances to deliver meaning to players; thus, Bogost's approach might be insufficient for analyzing such complexity. On the one hand, game engines are instruments able to generate expressivity through their conventions of procedural signs, which not only regulate the artistic, cultural, and narrative expression, but also control the gameplay behaviour, facilitating the interaction between the game and the player. On the other hand, it is crucial to understand the potential symbolic significance of these game features (*i.e.*, artistic and narrative), once they are part of the game's message package, in order to decode them. As argued by Gee (2005), "stories can very often encode and transmit, in a palatable form, the taken-for-granted norms and values of social groups or culture" (p. 117).

Thus, continuing with the *Mass Effect trilogy* as a case study, this chapter is dedicated to the analysis of representation from inside to outside the game as a dialectical process. That is, how the game uses its images, cinematics, textual expression, and gameplay mechanics to overcome the game world and begins to take place in the world at large. My focus is on answering the question of how can we read *Mass Effect* through its representation of race, gender and sexuality, and how can we determine the game's political ideology by using the discourse present in its in-game situations. In developing this analysis, nonetheless, additional theoretical tools will be required; thus, I will briefly introduce critical race theory, feminist theory, queer theory, and the theory of imperialism to handle the specific social topics and political issues I will address during

my analysis of the game. Taken together, and under the umbrella of Bogost's (2006; 2007) procedural rhetoric and cultural studies theory approach, these (interconnected) theoretical frameworks present lenses through which the different scenarios purposed in *Mass Effect's* narrative situations can be examined, assessed, and refined.

1. The matter of Symbolic Representation in *Mass Effect*

What makes *Mass Effect* an interesting game to explore and play is in large part due to its rich and engaging narrative. The game's writers have invested the game with points of view that deal with complex themes such as racism, sexism, sexual orientation, and militarist approaches. Because of the well-constructed set of characters with strong personalities, these topics very often permeate the storyline, exposing conflicts in an unusual manner, that is, by avoiding oversimplification. Unlike most games, especially war games, that reduce complex situations to the duality of good or evil, *Mass Effect* exposes different points of view from each race or character involved in each dispute, highlighting the motivations, the reasons for conflicts, or prejudices between races. As an RPG, the game lets players judge and define the 'right' path to follow. Mostly, players' decisions will depend on their perspectives inside and outside of the game, that is, players might build Shepard's renegade or paragon traits based on their point of view about the world, or they might just build it seeking the advantages of being a paragon or a renegade in order to master the game. Affordances like these help us to assess how effective the game's arguments are at making players change their own perspectives on such topics. According to Gee (2005) and Newman (2013), games are able to evoke players' reflections on their in-game decisions; however, it is still not clear how these reflection exercises are able to really change players' points of view.

On some forums there is evidence of discussion about how much *Mass Effect* serves racist purposes, or how much sexist attitudes the game presents[7]. Thus, by exploring these issues, my goal for this chapter is to examine how the game uses its collection of images and text, and their cultural significance, in order to understand what kind of message the game is transmitting. That is, through the deployment of racial representation, is *Mass Effect* closer to a racist or an anti-racist project? How might the depiction of gender within the game relate to the discussion of gender in the real world? Is *Mass Effect's* portrayal of sexual relationships reinforcing the heteronormative structure of social relations, or does the game subvert this approach? In addition, what is the role of the excessive militarist approach in the game's discourse? This critical analysis will, therefore, establish a parallel between the fictional world of the game and its relation to the real world, thereby expanding the analysis of the previous chapter by considering some in-game situations as a mirroring opportunities for players to practice self-reflection on their choices.

1.1 Race representation in *Mass Effect*

According to Leonard (2006), video games are more than entertainment; rather, they are cultural projects full of ideological meaning. For him, the racial stereotypes games present "reflect ignorance or the flattening of characters through stock racial ideas but dominant ideas of race, thereby contributing to our common sense ideas about race, acting as a compass for both daily and institutional relations" (Leonard, 2006, p. 85). This is consistent with Poor's (2012) argument that the cultural Other usually presented in video games aids in the exploration of otherness in the American context by focusing on the black/white relation. From this perspective, *Mass Effect* might present some racial issues over the representation of African American people. The lack of features associated with people of colour is quite noticeable in some NPCs, even if they do have a darker skin colour. For instance, even though the Earth Ambassador Udina (Fig. 4.1

[7] See: http://masseffect.wikia.com/wiki/Forum:Racism_in_Mass_Effect;
http://www.escapistmagazine.com/forums/read/18.194608-How-is-Mass-Effect-sexist

left) has a soft dark skin colour, his facial features are not close to common traits displayed by people of colour. Likewise, the NPC Gianna Parasini (fig. 4.1 centre) also presents dark skin colour; however, her facial features are closer to those a Caucasian woman than those of an African American. The Alliance captain Anderson's (fig. 4.1 right) visual appearance is closer to a representation of an African American person, but still, his racial traits might be considered a bit soft for the feature representation of a people of colour.

The racial representation in video games is what Leonard (2003) defines as an agenda of white supremacy that is being imposed by the established hegemonic power. Such an agenda is questioned by anti-racist movements and in theoretical discourses such as Critical Race Theory (CRT). Having its roots on the post civil rights era of the 1970s, CRT emerged from a group of scholars and activists interested in understanding the relationship between racial structure and power. The movement's goal is to expand racial issues beyond civil rights and ethnic studies by incorporating economics, history, and general group interest approaches (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). The CRT argues that white supremacy, in which a system of laws functions to maintain racial power over time, is enacted to preserve the marginalization of people of colour. The theory criticizes the diffusion of colour-blindness behaviour that refers to the belief that racism does not exist anymore, and that race is no longer a key factor in comprehending people's lived experience.

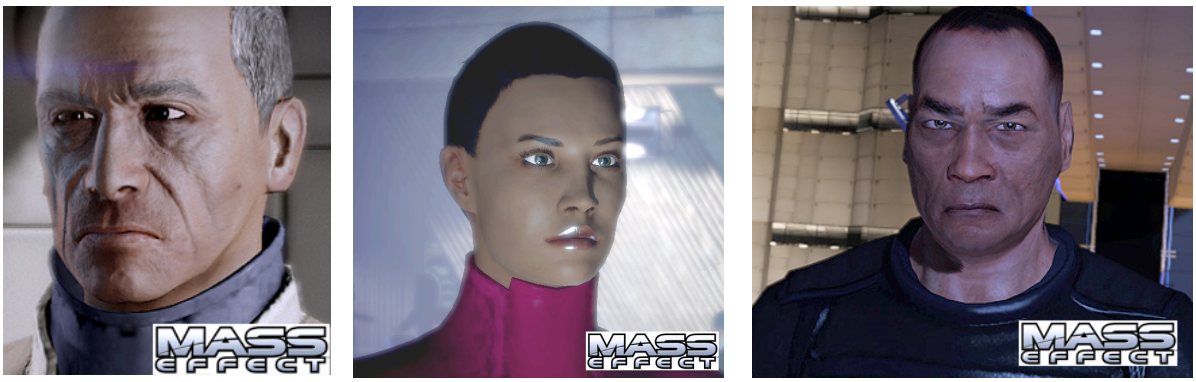

Figure 4.1: From the left to right: The facial features of Ambassador Udina, Gianna Parasini, and Captain Anderson. Images retrieved from *Mass Effect* Wikia website.

Critical Race activists and scholars include as basic tenets the idea that racism is not an aberrational phenomenon in society; rather it is an everyday practice. Thus, they argue that storytelling might be used as an instrument to oppose the status quo, serving as a form for revealing and questioning the discourse of racial oppression rather than reinforcing it. They also expose the idea of "interest convergence," or material determinism, in which the rights of ethnic groups advance only if they are in line with the interests of both white elites and the Caucasian working-class. The theory reaffirms the concept of social construction, which holds "that race and races are products of social thoughts and relations" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 8). In addition, Critical Race Theory makes a claim for not only a revisionist interpretation of American history — especially civil rights and law progress — "that re-examines majoritarian interpretations of history trying to replace these with explanation more in agreement with the knowledge of minorities" (Dymek & Lennerfors, 2005, p. 5), but also the idea of commonality of oppression, which supports the idea that each race or minority group has the authority to address issues about race and racism, promoting the notion of a unique voice. That is, in summary, what Critical Race Theory proposes is the emancipation of races from the dominance of other races (Dymek & Lennerfors, 2005).

According to this theory, it is possible to affirm that *Mass Effect* reinforces colour-blindness behaviour. In representing the colour but not the characteristics of people of colour, the first game fails to offer a symbol that is able to stimulate the pride of belonging to such races. The lack of people of colour represented among the important characters in the first game is noticeable: there are none among Shepard's crew, and just one in the entire game — Captain Anderson (Fig. 4.1 right).

Nonetheless, the second game seems to solve this issue. For instance, as it is noted in figure 4.2, the game introduces believable African American characteristics into a character, the Cerberus Operative Jacob Taylor, and it also includes him in Shepard's squad team. Jacob's well-designed representation goes beyond the people of colour traits he represents, and it is also reflected in his straight character, his loyalty, and his morals, which is an unusual representation of African

Figure 4.2: Jacob's facial feature. Image retrieved from *Mass Effect* Wikia website.

American people by entertainment media in general, since very often they are stereotypically portrayed as morally ambiguous, criminals, or people that belong to culturally inferior ghettos (Dymek & Lennerfors, 2005; Leonard, 2003).

Right at the beginning of the second game Jacob demonstrates his moral sense by telling Shepard about Cerberus and the Illusive Man:

> Miranda: "My boss wants to speak with you."
> Shepard: "You mean the Illusive Man? I know you work for Cerberus."
> Miranda: "Ah, Jacob. I should've known your conscience would get the better of you."
> Jacob: "Lying to the commander isn't the way to get him to join our cause."

Another straight morality confirmation comes from the Illusive Man in his answer to Shepard's doubt about whether or not to trust Jacob. He says, "Jacob is a soldier, one of the best. He's never fully trusted me, but he's always been honest about it." However, it is revealed in the loyalty mission for Jacob that his family's relatives do not share his morality. His father, Ronald Taylor, is depicted as a rogue military officer that trapped his own squad in order to control them.

Even though Jacob represents an unique appearance and morality within the scope of race representation in *Mass Effect*, there are other questionable issues involving the character: Jacob has no real significance within the game. Players can feel sympathy for Jacob at the moment they meet him; however, his feeble biotic powers, particularly compared with other biotic squad fellows like Samara and Jack, plays against him throughout the entire game. As one of the objectives of the game is to win battles, players avoid using Jacob as soon as they have another squad member option available. In fact, players could even let him die in the suicide mission, since he has no important role in the sequence of the game. Thus, the steps some games are taking to be more inclusive within the industry (Hamilton, 2013) will be more effective when developers move beyond character creation that merely represents different ethnicities (which is essential),

and instead focuses on also empowering these characters, giving them meaning and the means to make a difference in the game and prove their value to the group.

Besides the black/white and visual/moral representational issues, there are many other racial aspects that demand investigation in *Mass Effect*. Because the game presents many different races in its universe, racism or racist attitudes are often raised in the general debate surrounding the game. These racist approaches appear at different levels, involving conflicts between alien-to-alien and alien-to-human. Interacting with some human NPCs is quite revealing in terms of the racist views these characters have over non-human species, for example:

(1) Talking to Shepard about Nihlus' presence in the Normandy, Navigator Pressly says, "I don't like turians in general." (2) In revealing his reason for becoming a C-Sec officer, Officer Lang admits, "C-Sec gets a lot of respect here. We uphold the law. People – **even aliens** [emphasis added] – appreciate that." (3) When exploring the Citadel's places with Shepard, Ashley declares, "I can't tell the aliens from animals." (Fig. 4.3), and (4) A human protestor shouts, "No blood for aliens," while Shepard walks in the Citadel Wards in *Mass Effect 1*.

The game's writers depict humans as an irrelevant race, placing them in a position wherein they frequently need to prove themselves to aliens. On the one hand, such a thing provides room for players to understand the reasons for intolerance and a character's ambiguity in relation to non-humans. On the other hand, the game presents the motivations for advanced species to not trust humans. For instance, manifesting his opposition to making Shepard a Council Spectre, Executor Pallin observes, "You humans are eager to take all the power you can get. And you're being given a lot." And furthermore, during an audience with the Citadel's council, Saren says, "With Nihlus gone, his files passed on to me. I read the Eden Prime report. I was unimpressed. But what can you expect from a human."

Figure 4.3: Exploring the Embassies at Citadel with Ashley. Image captured from Smosh Games' Youtube channel. (*Mass Effect*1, 2007)

As a RPG, *Mass Effect* exposes these kinds of conflicts, enabling players to judge the which is the 'best' approach to solving them. In playing as a commander who will not agree with such intolerance, players can use Shepard's arguments to make NPCs change their perspectives. For instance, Navigator Pressly appears to renounce his original beliefs when he takes a more tolerant attitude towards non-human crew at the Normandy in subsequent conversations with Shepard:

> Shepard: "Speak freely, Pressly. I want to know if you have a problem with non-humans."
> Pressly: "It's not that, Commander. Humanity has always handled its own problems. Saren attacked one of our colonies. We should be the ones to stop him. We don't need their help."
> Shepard: "Some people think asking for help is a sign of weakness. That's just being stupid and stubborn. No matter how strong you are, allies can make you stronger."
> Pressly: "I guess so. Maybe I'm just stuck in the old ways of thinking. Don't worry, commander. This won't be a problem."

In the next conversation, Shepard asks the same question about the aliens in the Normandy and Pressly says, "I trust you commander. If you think they belong here, then so do I." It is not clear, however, if the navigator is really re-thinking his perspectives or if he has decided to suppress his beliefs in the presence of his commander.

In contrast, the situation in Ashley's case is quite different due to her strong personality—even trying hard, Shepard is not able to change her perspectives about aliens. In re-encountering Shepard after two years in the Horizon mission (*Mass Effect 2*), Ashley confirms her loyalty to the Alliance forces and reaffirms her position about aliens saying, "I am not fan of aliens, but Cerberus has a history of being extremist."

Besides the conflicts between human and aliens, there are many other equally complex situations involving different alien races in the game. The dispute between the Krogans, the Turians, and the Salarians, for instance, is quite a challenge for players to deal with. Again, the game exposes the point of view of each race in order to provide enough background information to help players make their choices. Indeed, the persuasive arguments of the game engage players in ethical and moral dilemmas in order to find a way to solve the game's social puzzles; however, it is not the only way the game depicts racial issues.

Games can simulate other and imagined worlds where races are used to define character. For Warnes (2005), such fantasy creatures represent the cultural and social conditions of colonized otherness since

> race is more than just the material for certain games. Its transference from the realm of the real to that of the imaginary is part of the method of cultural fantasy, causing to surface in mediated and consoling ways difficult questions about ongoing oppression and inequality, and about the fluid identities of most modern societies. (p. 5)

The issues between the Krogans, the Turians, and the Salarians, and the way the latter two (advanced Citadel races) subdue the former (non-Citadel race) presents an interesting connection to Warnes' perspective, since it exposes the way that Citadel races used the Krogans as a war-tool to fight their war with the Rachinis.

Warnes' (2005) arguments connect with the depiction of *Mass Effect* races in the context of the binary groups into which they are split—Citadel races and non-Citadel races. The Citadel races

are composed of the Asari, Salarians, and Turians, which are recognized as the most powerful races in terms of both military force and political power, and the only members of the Citadel council; plus Drells, Elcors, Hanars, Humans, Keepers, and Volus. While Batarians, Collectors, Krogans, Geths, Quarians, Vorchas, Leviathans, Yahgs, and Reapers compose the non-Citadel races. From this duality, it is possible to quickly make a connection between stereotypical racial features presented by the game and their role in the Citadel space. Accordingly, Citadel races are self-presented as both allies and as being civilized, in which even those that are not part of the most advanced races have their role in keeping order in Citadel space. For instance, Hanars are known for their passivity and spirituality through their religious speech; Volus not only deal with the financial market, but also trade information in order to develop a stable economy in the galaxy; and Keppers are responsible for maintaining everything in the Citadel. On the other hand, non-Citadel races are surrounded by rumours of them being uncivilized, criminal, dangerous, and threatening races. Krogans are known as aggressive mercenaries incapable of being civilized; Quarians are a nomad thief race; Batarians and Vorchas are described as terrorists, while the Reapers are the biggest threat Citadel races have faced in last fifty thousand years.

Relating *Mass Effect's* racial portrayal to the ongoing oppression in modern societies, Leonard (2003) observes that a video game offers the perspective of dominant ideologies, since it is capable of "breaking down real boundaries between communities through virtual play, while simultaneously teaching its player about stereotypes, US foreign policy, and legitimization of the status quo" (p. 2). Thus, it is reasonable to read the Citadel races as being related to western dominant nations, represented by the US and their political allies, at same time as the non-Citadel races are portrayed as the enemy to be fought and eliminated, reflecting the manner in which some nations (such as Middle East countries) are depicted through America's 'war against terror' discourse.

Issues of racism are evident in *Mass Effect's* discourse. Racial tensions and stereotyping portrayed throughout the in-game situations are further complicated by the fact that the story involves multiple races with conflicting interests, rather than the usual binary good vs. evil presentation

seen in this kind of medium. This depiction motivates players' engagement not just with the narrative of the game, but also with its ethical parameters in order to solve the conflicts according to her/his judgement (inside or outside of the game).

1.2 *Mass Effect* and Gender

Discussing the normative male position in technologies, Jenson and Castell (2010) argue that women have been excluded, or have even had their contributions forgotten from the history of technological innovation because of the effects of patriarchy. This structure has impacted women's recognition not only in the field of technology as a whole, but also within the game industry, since despite the fact that the number of female gamers is increasing, video games are still perceived as a male space. Previous researchers have revealed that in video games women are usually underrepresented, marginalized, and portrayed in stereotypical forms that appeal to men. Other studies demonstrate that players tend to normalize sexual harassment after playing games with sexualized characters. Morawitz and Mastro (2009), for instance, investigate the short-term effect that exposure to gender stereotyped video game characters has on players in terms of gender-related beliefs and self-concepts. Their examination of *Tomb Raider Legend* (Crystal Dynamics, 2006) shows that sexualized female characters, such as Lara Croft, result in less favourable attitudes towards women's physical and cognitive capabilities even among female participants. Thus, considering the manner in which cultural media usually represents gender through their objects, one can see that gender depiction reveals itself as a fundamental issue to be investigated in order to not only address the issues of gender representation, but also to influence a self-adjustment in terms of gender portrayal by cultural media, including video games. Thus, feminist theory's main goal is to understand the nature of gender inequality (Gedro & Mizzi, 2014).

Since feminist theory emerged from women's political movements, it does not seem reasonable to introduce feminist theory without going over a brief history of feminism, which is often split into three phases. First 'wave' feminism is generally correlated to the women's suffrage movements that were characterized by a focus on inequalities existing between men and women,

such as the legal exclusion of women from voting, property rights, employment, equal rights in marriage, and positions of political power and authority. Second 'wave' feminism is related the women's liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and therefore concentrates on issues like sexuality, reproductive rights, women's roles and labour in the home, and patriarchal culture. Finally, third 'wave' feminism is connected with the feminist politics and movements that began in the 1980s and continue on today. In this phase, feminism emerged from a critique of the politics of the second wave, since many feminists felt that the earlier generations had over-generalized, and therefore they seek to recognize that the forms of oppression experienced by white, middle-class, heterosexual women, were different from those experienced by women with different backgrounds (ethnicity, nationality, education, language, sexuality, class, employment, disability, and so on) (Gedro & Mizzi, 2014; Sadar & Van Loon, 1997), which furthermore reveals an interesting association with the Critical Race Theory (CRT) movement.

Feminist theory analyses the assumptions behind cultural and social privilege and access, keeping the debate going over the "three on-going processes: excluding, marginalizing, and trivializing women [and the current extensions] and their accounts of social and political life" (Beasley, 1999, p. 4). The theory strongly critiques the delineation of sexes and the social oppression practiced through the division of social positions by gender, which is not just a characteristic people carry from their birth, but rather, it is formally connected to social practices and rules "that assign rigid masculine and feminine roles to man and women" (Gedro & Mizzi, 2014, p. 447). Embracing a broader approach to formulating solutions to social injustice dilemmas, feminist theory has shifted its assumptions and inquiries towards debating stereotypes, discriminations, inequalities, and restrictions, that also involve issues of racism, ethnicity, homophobia, and classism issues, and attempts to bring these issues into the public sphere. Thus, the social 'structure-as-practice' of the theory may provide a useful lens for investigating all dimensions of the gender representation problem while also suggesting potential solutions, since the game world '*refracts*' as well as '*reflects*' the social structure of the physical world (Cross, 2014).

From feminist theory perspective, *Mass Effect* would be categorized as a game that empowers women in some aspects, but fails in others because it reproduces common sense ideas of gender representation. The game is very well-known, and acknowledged, for its set of powerful female characters such as Liara T'Soni, Samara, Miranda Lawson, Ashley Williams, Aria T'Loak, Eve, Nyreen Kandros, Morinth, Tali'Zorah, Jack, and EDI, among many others. The complexity and power of these characters are revealed to players while they advance through the story. Even though the game universe is full of interesting and strong female characters, the portrait of the female Shepard figure is one of the first female characters to be recognized by players as a strong character with great sensitivity, confidence, and assertiveness.

Commander Shepard is the (customized) main character of the game and a vessel for players to explore the game world. It is interesting to note that the qualities used to describe Shepard are always characteristics of the main character, regardless of whether players choose to build a male or a female character. In fact, this is a crucial point for female representation: the irrelevance of Shepard's gender in terms of the character's general performance within the game, either in combat missions or in general relationships with NPCs, represents a relative form of gender equality between men and women. This simulation of equality promoted by the game opens a door for a positive impact on players, particularly male players, in relation to gender competence. From this perspective, *Mass Effect* not only escapes from the usual male normative reading that popular media work with, but also, apparently, it is consistent with the conception of equality that feminist movements and feminist theory are fighting for.

Surprisingly, the female version of Commander Shepard was a popular choice among players, exceeding even the developer's expectations. Bioware's statistics for *Mass Effect 2* and *Mass Effect 3* show that, overall, 20% of the players chose to play with the female character, which is an impressive figure considering that all of the promotional material for the *Mass Effect* series is centred on the male character. For David Silverman, marketing director at Electronic Arts, the low number of female characters in games could be one of the possible reasons for players' choices: "There aren't enough female heroes in games in general, so it's something that people

Figure 4.4: Female Shepard sitting in a typically masculine manner. Image captured from Lamoura's Youtube channel. (*Mass Effect2*, 2010)

can rally around and celebrate" (cited in Hillier, 2011, para. 13). In other words, players want more strong female characters populating their games, which is, in terms of social gains, an important contribution that the game has made.

Despite all the good qualities the female Shepard might gather around her through her strong characteristics, as well as through the equal in-game performance of the leading character whether its gender is male or female, Shepard's animation is not conventionally feminine. Female Shepard presents the same animation style as male Shepard, that is, all of the basic actions of female Shepard, such as sitting (Fig. 4.4) —she usually sits with open legs, never crossing them (at least, not in a typically feminine manner)— walking, dancing, and drinking (Fig. 4.5), as well as other facial expressions and body language are portrayed in a more typically masculine manner.

Figure 4.5: Sequence of female Shepard drinking like a man. Image captured from Lamoura's Youtube channel. (*Mass Effect2*, 2010)

The man-like animations are more frequent during the usual conversations with NPCs, since it is through these moments that Shepard uses them to act 'normally' or strike 'normal' poses. Because such animation does not match with the culturally constructed notion of feminine movements, such animation for the female Shepard can be disorienting for female players, creating a disconnect between the character's figure and her attitude on many occasions. In fact, this game experience provides a sensation that players are controlling a man in a woman's body. Perhaps, this limitation is due to restrictions in production budget. Yet, the significance of this message is quite ambiguous, since it could represent the liberation of the female gender by rejecting the idea that femininity is "natural," or it could be read as a reinforcement of the common idea that women should act like men to maintain themselves in a leadership position. In any case, female Shepard's animation definitely makes us think about and question things as basic as the physical movement of characters in relation to their gender.

In spite of the game presenting a set of powerful female characters, the *Mass Effect* series fails to portray gender progressively by following a number of sexualized stereotypes extensively used by media in general. Most female NPCs, even those having strong personalities, have hyper-sexualized bodies. The game's camera use is very generous in showing players the curves these bodies can display by carefully strolling around them. As perceived in the figure 4.6, this kind of

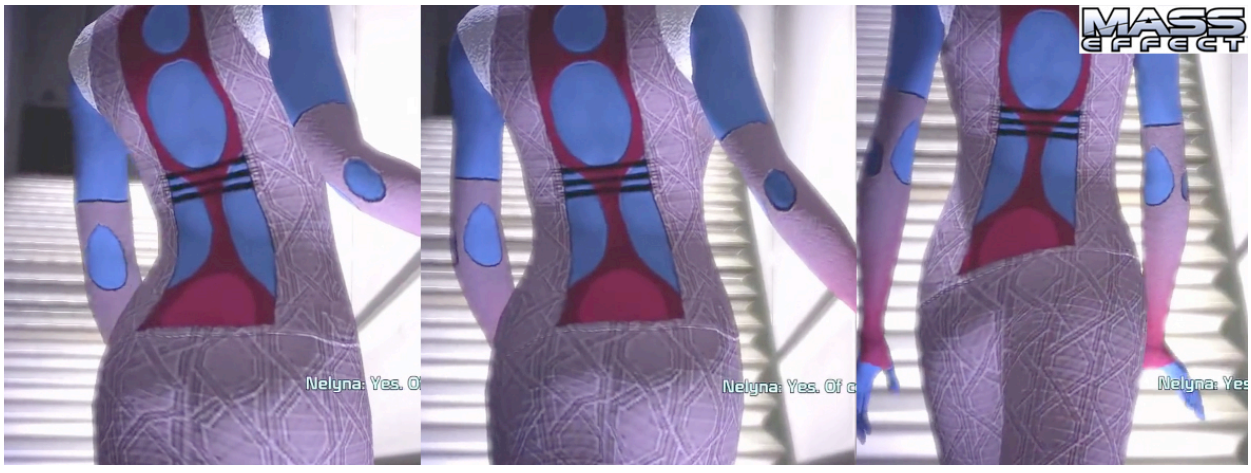

Figure 4.6: Camera carefully surrounds Sha'ira's 'body'. Image captured from Tetra Ninja's Youtube channel. (*Mass Effect1*, 2007)

camera movement is noticed during the introduction of Consort Sha'ira in *Mass Effect 1*, and in many other scenes involving Miranda, for instance. Actually, Miranda Lawson is an interesting example to discuss, since game developers used Miranda's egocentric father as an excuse for such a sexualized depiction. In the story, Henry Lawson is a man guided by his compulsiveness for perfection, thus, through eugenic methods, he designed Miranda to be genetically perfect: strong, healthy, intelligent, along with biotic powers and beauty—her body shape is defined chiefly by her curves. The interesting thing is that Miranda's sister, Oriana, who was also designed to be genetically perfect, has a 'normal' body shape and proportion. Although Oriana appears in *Mass Effect 2* and *Mass Effect 3*, her figure is not so much explored, since she participates in only a few of the scenes in both games. Perhaps, this fact explains why she exhibits a normal appearance despite being a genetically superior woman.

Another example of a sexualized gender stereotype that *Mass Effect* disseminates through its narrative, though in a subtle manner, is connected to the portrayal of dancers in the galaxy's nightclubs. It is curious to note that in a game with so many races, all the dancers come from one specific race: the Asari (Fig. 4.7). The Asari are a non-gendered race for which male or female definition has no real meaning. However, the Asari population displays a unique gender phenotype: they all look like females. The subtlety of the situation exists in the manner in which it occurs: the dancers are just part of the big scenarios where some actions/conversations take place, and Shepard has no real interaction with them in the game, except for the option to go into the clubs to have a private erotic show with an Asari. The issue here is the developers' choice to portray the nightclub dancers as a race that is easily recognized for its female features. Such an attitude not only displays the stereotype of women only being eye-candy for male players, but also reproduces the objectification of women's bodies—the most common trend for general gender simplification found in entertainment media. Even though game developers might have been inspired by real night clubs that exploit women's bodies for male entertainment to create the game's clubs, they could have used this room to inquire about such cultural practices, creating, for example, a dialogue line in which Shepard could have questioned the exclusive use of the Asari for that function. Indeed, the subtlety of the situation exposes also the dangers of its

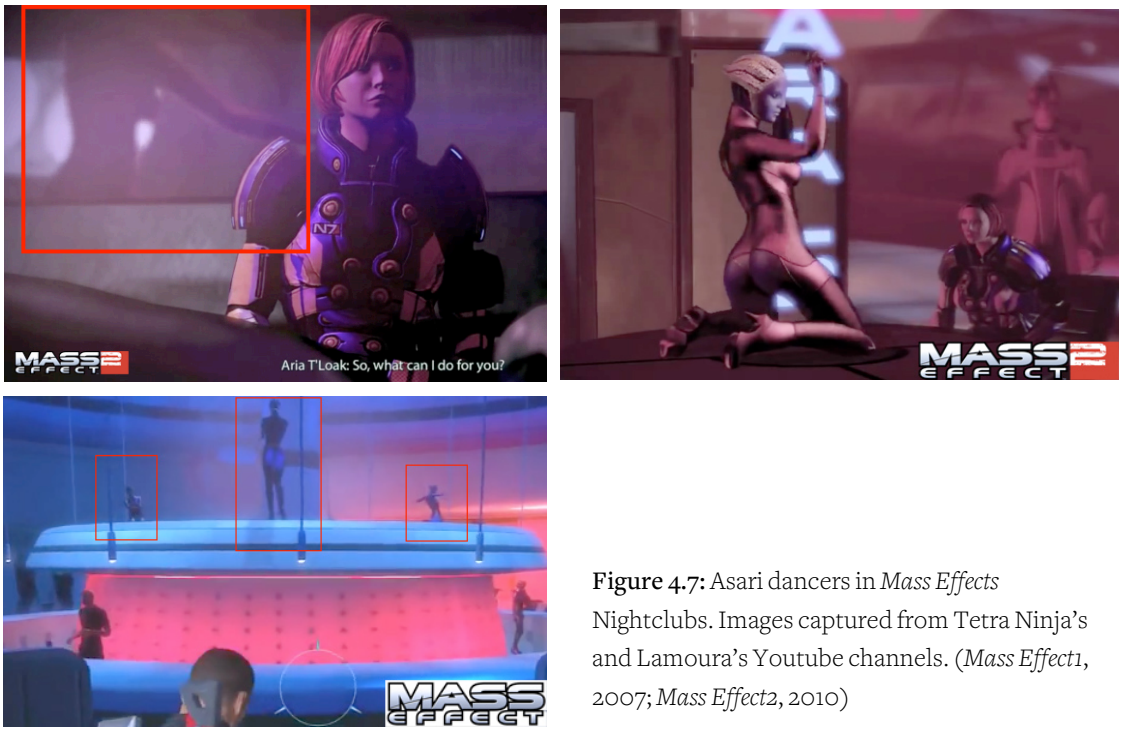

Figure 4.7: Asari dancers in *Mass Effects* Nightclubs. Images captured from Tetra Ninja's and Lamoura's Youtube channels. (*Mass Effect*1, 2007; *Mass Effect*2, 2010)

meaning, since the message the players receives while walking around, seeking the NPCs to whom they need to talk, is that women exposing their bodies in a sexualized manner is normal.

Previous studies demonstrate that such gender representation reaffirms the submissive role of the female gender in the patriarchal world outside of the game. In examining the influence of playing sexist video games with sexist attitudes, Stermer and Burkley (2015) report that players who have played games with high levels of sexist content show high tolerance with sexism, in contrast with players that do not play such games. Similarly, Fox and Tang (2013), by using the influence of the masculine norms on socio-cultural stereotypes as a framework, have found that the combination of a social dominance orientation and the two main modes of the masculine approach (the desire for power over women and the need for heterosexual self-representation) in video games leads to sexist practices among players. According to them, "participants who endorsed masculine norms were more likely to report sexist attitudes about women's participation in video games" (Fox & Tang, 2013, p. 317).

Although these findings suggest a highly persuasive power of video games over players' behaviours, it is also important to observe what kind of influence the developers want to expose players to. By using feminist theory as a lens to explore the gender representation presented in *Mass Effect*, it is possible to affirm that the game carries two types of signification: (1) the representation of strong female personas, and (2) the sexualized stereotype often used by regular cultural media. The game is coherent with the conception of equality demanded by feminist movements by offering an equal gameplay between men and women, as well as providing a set of powerful female characters. Yet, the game serves as an instrument to disseminate a stereotyped representation of women by reinforcing patriarchal culture. According to Cross (2014), the feminist theory approach not only serves to identify gender representation as a problem, but it is also able to provide potential solutions. For her, pointing out the issues might encourage a fight against those kinds of discriminatory ways of thinking, thereby shifting the problem into a public and visible sphere, which might also open up new directions for game design to represent gender's narrative in virtual worlds.

1.3 The representation of sexual diversity in *Mass Effect*

BioWare's productions are generally known for raising social issues in their virtual worlds, which also applies to issues of sexual diversity and sexual orientation. Even though lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender relationships are not common in video games—in fact, games have traditionally struggled with the exploration and depiction of romantic relationships in general—*Mass Effect* seems to be an exception to this rule. The game offers the means by which players can move their social relations beyond the heteronormative point of view: same-sex relationship options have been available for players to explore since the first game. In *Mass Effect 1* and *Mass Effect 2*, however, the opportunity for developing a same-sex relationship only existed for female Shepard. Nonetheless, BioWare did not officially comment on these romantic possibilities in either game, which might be understood as a way to avoid being involved in such controversy. Yet, to provide a better approach to discussing the topic and analyzing the representation of

sexual orientation in the *Mass Effect* games, it is necessary to provide a brief introduction to Queer theory, as well as the issues it problematizes.

Historically, the term queer has been connected to abnormal social practices as a perjorative symbol of perversion. Nonetheless, most recently the term was recovered in an attempt to undertake a movement of resistance in order to transform the oppressive nature of the term into a positive political interpretation of gendered diversity (Gedro & Mizzi, 2014). Queer theory looks at, studies, and has a political critique of anything that falls into normative and deviant categories, particularly sexual activities and identities. That is, as stated by Gedro and Mizzi (2014), the queer movement "attempts to break down the continual use of the categories and labels that stereotype and harm those who are in marginalized positions, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people" (p. 450).

The theory uses the concepts of heteronormativity and performative to understand the creation of discourses that structure social relations. According to Gedro and Mizzi (2014), heteronormativity compels individuals' relations and the practices of social institutions to follow the norm of heterosexuality, while performative gender identity is connected to the way individuals perform and identify their gender "according to these social rules and practices" (p. 451). Following feminist theory and gay/lesbian studies, queer theory rejects the idea that sexuality is determined by either biology or by standards of morality. Rather, for queer theorists, sexuality is guided by a range of complex social codes that shape the notions of what is normative and what is deviant at any particular moment.

As I have said before, the option of getting involved in a same-sex relationship in both *Mass Effect 1* and *Mass Effect 2* is just available if players chose to play the female version of Commander Shepard. In the first game, female Shepard has two options to develop an affectionate relationship: Kaidan Alenko and Liara T'Soni. In chosing Liara, female Shepard will perceive herself as being involved in a same-sex relationship, since Liara displays a female phenotype. Even though Liara, technically, cannot be gender-categorized because there is no similar standard among the Asari culture, by following human cultural standards she is perceived as a

female, and thus the relationship with Shepard might be understood as a non-heteronormative relationship. In *Mass Effect 2*, even though the studio apparently went back to directly engaging players in same-sex relations, female Shepard can superficially maintain her relationship with Liara, or start a new relationship with Kelly Chambers, a Cerberus Yeoman. For the second game, there are no graphic sex scenes between same-sex characters, but rather only subtle insinuations of such involvement. BioWare officially announced their inclusive policy in the next *Mass Effect* sequel: the third game not only expands the set of possible romantic relationships, but also introduces same-sex relationship for the male Shepard as well.

Besides the possibilities Shepard has for developing same-sex relations, the game provides some assumed gay and lesbian characters. Even though the depiction of the shuttle pilot Steve Cortez was questioned by some 'gaymers' (for some of them the character has no other personality other than being gay[8]), it is the first time in the game series that a character openly assumes a sexual orientation other than the usual authoritative heteronormative structure of social relation. As one can see in the figure 4.8, the introduction of Cortez' sexual orientation is very direct and

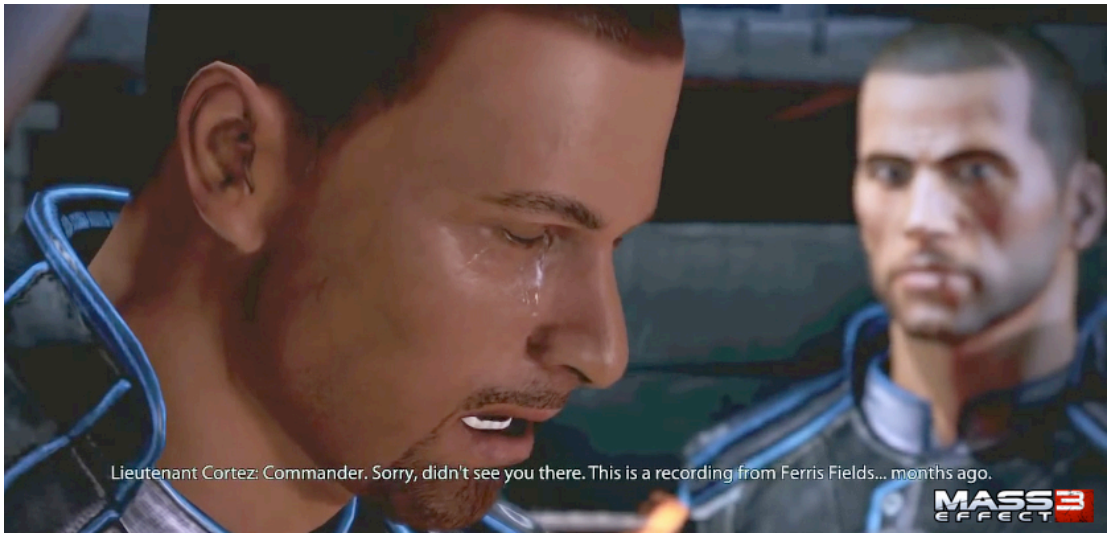

Figure 4.8: Cortez talking about his husband with Shepard. Image captured from Tetra Ninja's Youtube channel. (*Mass Effect3*, 2012)

[8] See http://www.gamefaqs.com/boards/995487-mass-effect-3/62240758

depicted in an emotive situation. Cortez is in Normandy's shuttle bay area when Shepard comes in and listens to a recorded conversation:

> Recording of Cortez: "I'm coming to get you."
> Recording of Robert: "Don't you dare. They're everywhere. You'd just get taken too... I love you, but I know you. Don't make me an anchor. Promise me, Steve."
> Recording of Cortez: "No, don't..."
> Cortez: "Commander. Sorry, I didn't see you there. This is a recording from Ferris Field... months ago... I lost a lot of friends that day. I lost my husband... I grieved. Said goodbye, made my peace."
> Shepard: "You were talking to him when the Collectors hit?"
> Cortez: "I was organizing a construction at a remote station a few clicks south of the main colony... Robert managed to get outside of the field the Collectors put up. Instead of running, he called me."
> Shepard: "I'm sorry for your loss. He obviously cared a lot about you."
> Cortez: "... to be honest, I've never felt as alone as I do right now."

In the same way, though in a subtle manner compared with Cortez, the Specialist Samantha Traynor also exposes her sexual preferences while presenting herself to the Normandy's commander:

> Traynor: "wait... since when does virtual intelligence make requests?"
> Shepard: "EDI's an AI. Fully self-aware."
> Traynor: "Oh, I knew it! I knew Joker was lying!"
> EDI: "Jeff requested that I pretend to be a simple VI to protect myself. I apologize for the deception."
> Traynor: "Thanks, EDI. And I apologize for all those times I talked about how... attractive your voice was..."

Traynor can only be romanced by Shepard if players decide to play as female Shepard. Likewise, Cortez is only available for romance if players chose to play as male character. It is also interesting to note that both Cortez and Traynor are members of the Alliance military force, which is also another positive accomplishment in dealing with the topic, since the military sector are well-known for its conservative standards.

Another possible same-sex romances for male Shepard is with the Major Kaidan Alenko (Fig. 4.9). In *Mass Effect 3* Kaidan is portrayed as a bisexual character, since female or male Shepard can romance him. The natural manner in which Kaidan reveals his interest for Shepard during a dinner encounter at the Citadel's Presidium is noticeable:

> Kaidan: "It's just – you plan a career, you focus, then suddenly the world's ending and it's too late to... find someone."
> Shepard: "Someone?"
> Kaidan: "We've have been friends for a long time, Shepard. Ever known me to be with anyone? Guess I'm choosy, or patient, or... I don't know... Maybe what I've never found – what I want – is something deeper with someone I already... care about... That's what I want. What do you want?" Shepard: "You and me? Is that what you're saying, Kaidan?"
> Kaidan: "It feels right, doesn't it?"
> Shepard: "Be nice to have someone to turn to when things get grim. Someone to live for. Maybe love"
> Kaidan: "Someone?"
> Shepard: "You, Kaidan. Huh. It does. It does feel right. After all this time... you and me. I like that. A lot."
> Kaidan: "And that... makes me so happy."

Figure 4.9: Kaidan revealing his feelings for male Shepard. Images captured from Hekil Yang's Youtube channel. (*Mass Effect3*, 2012)

Despite her first attraction to EDI, Traynor also develops a love interest for female Shepard during the game. Other possible same-sex relationship options for female Shepard are: (1) Liara, who is still a romance option for Shepard in the third game, in which players are able to continue their story from *Mass Effect 1* or start a new relationship with her; (2) the Alliance News Network War Correspondent Diana Allers; however, she does not make the option that clear, especially if Shepard has already demonstrated feelings for someone else; and (3) Kelly Chambers (if she survived the Collector's abduction in *Mass Effect 2*) can also be romanced if they have started the relationship in the previous game. Same-sex love interests are also presented for the female Shepard in a natural manner. For instance, when female Shepard finds Liara at the Presidium and they both start a conversation (Fig. 4.10):

> Liara: "I love this part of the Presidium. It reminds me of where I grew up."
> Shepard: "Where's that?"
> Liara: "Armali, back on Thessia. My mother and I lived beside a park. I spent hours there."
> Shepard: "Doing what?"
> Liara: "Reading, exploring, getting in trouble digging for ruins in the grass."
> Shepard: "You're kidding."
> Liara: "I was very young!"
> Shepard: "Yeah, that's actually pretty cute."
> Liara: "No one else thought it was funny. The lecture my mother gave me! But she did buy me my first history book the next day… I miss her, Shepard."
> Shepard: "What was she like?"
> Liara: "She was confident and kind. She loved to wear yellow. I thought she was the most beautiful woman in the world."
> Shepard: "You'll be okay, Liara."
> Liara: "Maybe you're right. Thank you, Shepard. I feel better… I wish we could spend more time together like this. Just… friends."
> Shepard: "I think we'd be good together, Liara. I --"
> Liara: "Shepard, I didn't think – not that I… I mean, I could see how…"
> Shepard: "Sorry, no pressure."
> Liara: "No, no. I can tell you my answer now. I like you a lot too, Shepard. And I'd… like it very much."
> Shepard: "I would, too."

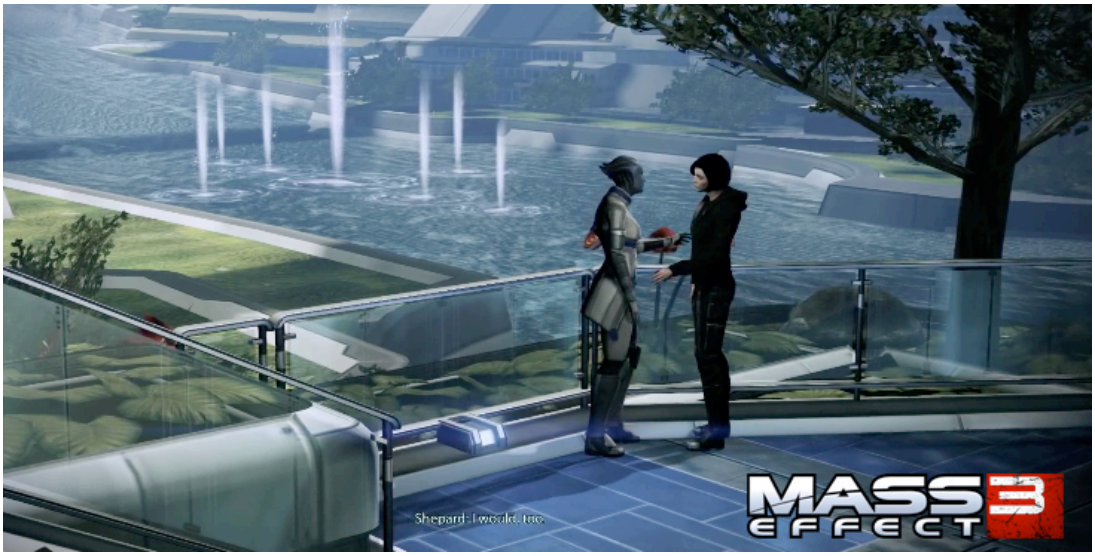

Figure 4.10: Female Shepard starting her relationship with Liara. Image captured from FluffyNinjaLlama's Youtube channel. (*Mass Effect3*, 2012)

Certainly, the narrativized simulation of *Mass Effect* provides a chance for players to decide which path they are more comfortable following, or even to inquire about how open they are to virtually experiment with the other. In acknowledging the presence of queer identities and relationships in this content in such a natural manner, the game contributes to legitimizing the existence of such identities and relationship as a forms of non-deviant behaviour. *Mass Effect* echoes the queer discourse and acts as a good influence by naturalizing personal choice as it is: a particular and individual choice. Similarly, Greer (2013) argues that queer play should follow the logic of sameness, in which "the potential for non-heterosexual identification or role play is primarily constructed and validated on the same terms as playing straight" (p. 5). Ultimately, by including such a topic within the in-game situation, the game developers are also performing a valuable action against bigotry in what is well-known as a sexist and homophobic gaming environment.

Those who advocate for queer representation have, historically, struggled to make their voices count, and this more inclusive approach from some game studios is certainly a big step in the right direction to make this happen. As it was put by executive producer Casey Hudson when commenting on the addition of same-sex relationships in *Mass Effect* 3:

> At some point, people realize that the things that are missing from the simulation become conspicuous absences. If we had a character that is exactly the way we designed that character, and that character had a single love interest and there were no options, I think people would see it like a movie or a book — where that's just the way it is. By adding things into it, people felt that we should just go several steps further and add in these other things that they would like to see. Our goal is always to be inclusive, so that's why we made changes for Mass Effect 3. (cited in Anders, 2012, para. 5)

1.4 Imperial militarism in *Mass Effect*

As stated by Leonard (2004), "the power of popular culture—in this case, video war games—resides in its dominance of representation and its regulation of meaning" (p. 6). According to him, war games serve as a tool to consolidate the imperialist militarization ethos beneath the idea of America's safety as being of unique and supreme importance no matter the cost. From this perspective, the dystopic reality of *Mass Effect* might present quite similar imperialist and militarist values, with some in-game situations also mimicking political decisions based on the US agenda against terrorism.

According to Galtung (1971), imperialism is an ideological process focused on dominance and power relationships. Imperialist actions are based on the control that one group, often a state power, has over another group of people or countries. That is, it is a relation of dominance between collectives, one that is usually performed by central (dominant) nations over peripheral (dominated) ones. For him, taking imperialist practices as just an action that aids the capitalist economy and promotes market expansion, as suggested by Marxist-Leninist theory, is a reductionist approach, since imperialism presents itself as a complex and interconnected structure that needs to be understood from a general context before driving into its specific manifestations.

Galtung (1971) describes five types of imperialism in which central nations impose themselves on peripheral ones: (1) **Economic**—in which the center finances processing and the means of production, while the periphery supplies raw materials and markets; (2) **Political**—where the

center provides decision models and the periphery obeys and imitates; (3) **Military**—in which the center offers protection and means of destruction, while the periphery provides discipline; (4) **Communication**—where the center produces news and the means of communication, while the periphery dispenses events and goods; and finally, (5) **Cultural**—in which the center provides teaching and the means of creation (autonomy), while the periphery absorbs and validates the center knowledge (dependence).

These five approaches might be classified as either "formal" or "informal" forms of imperialism, also known as "hard-power" and "soft-power" investments, from central nations over to the peripheral. Formal or hard power operates as a direct, physical, and aggressive approach, while informal or soft power configures an indirect and subtle approach in which the influences issuing from the dominant groups are not easily perceived by the dominated.

My focus is to discuss how imperialism in video games reflects this cultural type of imperialist approach. This tactical attitude might be categorized as an informal (or soft-power) strategy used by dominant nations to not only keep control over peripheral ones, but also to reinforce and to legitimate the dominant nation's idea of its own power. Roach (1997) defines cultural imperialism as the domination of the international mass culture, notably by the massive exportation of America's mass culture, mass media products, and information and communication technologies, to the rest of the world, especially towards nations in Latin America, Asia, and Africa.

As a mass medium product, video games have also been used to disseminate such imperialist principles through their storylines. Leonard (2004) exposes the significant cooperation between the US military and the game industry as a government strategy to promote US militarism solutions and to legitimize the US government's policies and actions after 9/11, which he defines as "the cultural promotion of war in the form of a pedagogy of peace" (p. 1). According to him, since 2001 the US Department of Defense uses video games as part of military training, and in 2003 the US military developed a game (*America's Army*) to attract and recruit new soldiers. As Leonard (2004) points out, these war games serve as an ideological instrument that not only

exposes the technological superiority of the US army, but also promotes the "present and future glory of the US Armed Forces" (p. 5). Likewise, in an interview for Barron (2003), Huntemann affirms that even though the connection between games and militarist ideology precedes the advent of video games, she acknowledges the huge expansion of investments in such themes in digital games after 9/11. Through them, she asserts, players are allowed to spy, steal, destroy, and kill to ensure America's freedom. Since most of these games present the same content as newspaper headlines, Huntemann argues that in blending fiction and reality, video war games are reinforcing even more of the ethos of American hegemony.

Transposing this logic on to *Mass Effect's* narrative, it is possible to perceive a similar military approach, though it is presented in a futurist dystopian manner. The game also refers to 9/11, mirroring some of the US government's attitudes through the Citadel Council's actions. After the Geth attack on the Citadel in the first game, the changes to the Citadel's security protocols are made explicitly clear in order to not only reinforce the bureaucracy, but also to increase control over immigration. Players perceive that something has changed when they land at Citadel for the first time in the second game. As seen in figure 4.11, Shepard is able to ask few questions to investigate the new situation:

> Shepard: "It's been a couple years since I passed through here. Security seems to have tightened a bit."
> C-Sec Custom: "After the geth attack, there was a review in the security protocol. A few minor changes were made to reduce the risk of geth infiltration. We apologize for the inconvenience."
> Jacob: "You'd think a geth would stand out."
> C-Sec Custom: "Assumptions are dangerous. 'Be alert, Be safe.'"

Players can also witness a revealing conversation like the following:

> C-Sec custom: "I'm sorry sir, but I'll need you to remove any biotic amp you might be wearing."
> Commuter: "What! Why?"
> C-Sec Custom: "Unfortunately sir, biotics can be used as a weapon. The rules require me to confiscate all amps. Could you please hand over yours?"

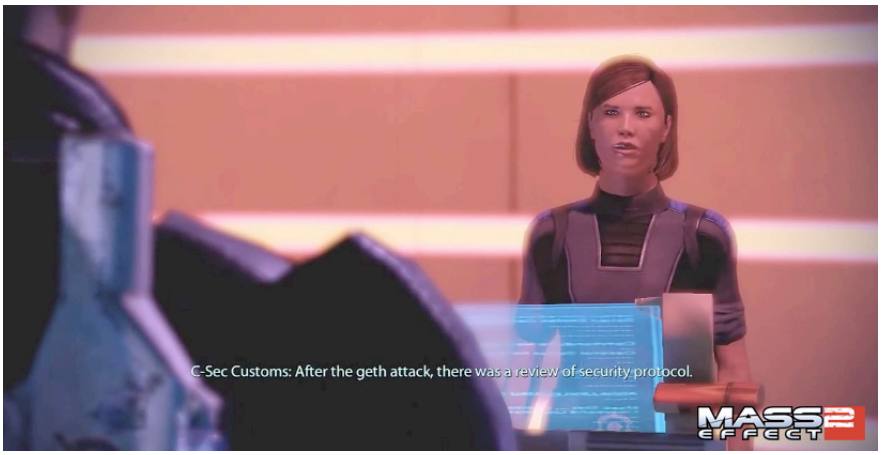

Figure 4.11: Citadel's new security protocol. Image captured from Tetra Ninja's Youtube channel. (*Mass Effect2*, 2010)

Every time players come to visit the Citadel, they can experience different dialogues going in a similar direction. Another correspondence to the policy change after the events of 9/11 involves the heavy investment of the US government in the defence industry, as well as campaigns against terrorism. In the game, this situation can be seen when Captain Bailey's says, "Yeah, the council can get anything. Best thing about working C-Sec is that any equipment, information, or money you need, you get."

These close references used by the game serve as a normalizing for strict policies that encourage the abdication of individual freedom for security, as well as the reallocation of public investments towards militarist campaigns. Furthermore, as with every war-based game, *Mass Effect* also operates as a tool to celebrate the power of the western military force over its enemies, which is depicted through the division between the Citadel races and non-Citadel races, which was already discussed in section 1.1.

The general military imagery depicted in *Mass Effect* reinforces colonial endeavours via what Leonard (2004) calls 'historical myopia', which ignores the failure of US military campaigns, such as in the Vietnam war, and excessively acclaims their military success in conjunction with the game choice constraints. According to him, the majority of war games fall into the easily stereotyped portrayal of ethnical groups that also constrain a player's choice to only join the US

or British military and contain a weird absence of civilians in the 'occupied' cities used as the game's battlefields. In the case of *Mass Effect*, players can only join the Alliance/Citadel forces, and, curiously, only the enemies promote civil casualties. Ultimately, as Leonard (2004) argues, "selective [historical] memory of this kind reinforces hegemonic ideas about western dominance" (p. 6).

It is interesting to notice that the rhetoric of *Mass Effect* is used to question and argue about many complex topics, but also to avoid others. There is no place to inquire about the specific historical context of these terrorist threats. The game, for instance, does not even provide a clear motivation for the Reapers' invasion: the general idea behind them is expressed that they are "beyond organic comprehension" and that they are "the solution for chaos." As Leonard (2004) notes, war games engage players in fictional conflicts based on supposed terrorist threats and never encourage questions about it. In a general manner, by using popular culture's power to shape representation and meanings, the US government is using video games to "teach soldiers to kill and citizens to support murder without remorse" (Leonard, 2004, p. 6) in order to preserve American hegemony.

Even though *Mass Effect* is a war-based game, it drives players to manage both military and political issues, since the game's quests are divided into combat and diplomatic (or political) missions. However, the way that *Mass Effect* privileges imperialist militarist discourse over the political action is explicit. The game depicts every political action as a vicious and corrupt practice, while the military approach is associated with honour and loyalty. This pro-militarist propaganda can be perceived through many of the NPC's positions. For instance, after observing a conversation between Shepard, Udina, and Anderson in *Mass Effect 1*, Ashley affirms, "And that's why I hate politicians." In *Mass Effect 2*, while testing Shepard's memory, Miranda declares, "Yes, Captain Anderson is now Councillor Anderson, though from what I hear, he preferred life in the military," and Jacob adds, "Still, good to know that the human council member isn't going to put politics ahead of defense." (Fig. 4.12).

Figure 4.12: Jacob discussing the benefits of have a military officer who is also a leader in politics. Image captured from Tetra Ninja's Youtube channel. (*Mass Effect2*, 2010)

The militarist preferences in *Mass Effect* are also easy to perceive, for instance, by doing a quick comparative analysis of how the game portrays Captain Anderson and Ambassador Udina. The former is the good guy: a loyal and ethical hero, whose only has interest in helping to save the galaxy no matter what; while the latter is the bad guy: a corrupt and perverse politician, who only wants to pursue his own personal ambitions.

The game's persuasive pro-militarist oratory disseminates a strong campaign against the capacity of politics to manage and solve a range of common situations. In making such a distinction, *Mass Effect* creators disregard the fact that both political and military approaches present systematic problems in similar proportions, in which either politics or militarism might have vicious and bureaucratic problems. Furthermore, this generalized attitude that suggests there is discredit and dishonour in political acts might not only discourage people from being involved in political activism, preventing them from fighting for their social and civil rights, but also stimulates a distorted perception about the military: an institution highly connected to conservative and regressive policies.

2. The intentionality of the *Mass Effect* discourse

As I have been arguing, many scholars hold the view that video games are not just an entertainment instrument, rather they are a cultural medium that absorbs and transmits ideological significances, where the interactivity between game and play carries meaning (Bogost; 2007; Dymek & Lennerfors, 2005; Mayra, 2008, Newman, 2013; Warnes, 2005). Cultural products disseminate and reflect the dominant cultural norms, creating ideological consent (Williams, 1981) through a spectrum of white/western supremacy projects. As with any other cultural object, video games offer dominant ideologies, spreading their perspectives over race, gender, sexuality, and national meaning. For Leonard (2003), the medium functions as a "sophisticated commodity that plays on the desire of individuals to experience the other, breaking down real boundaries between 'communities' through virtual play, while simultaneously 'teaching' its player about stereotypes, United States foreign policy, and legitimization of the status quo" (p. 2). Thus, the dominant ideology has been holding a place in a common social imagination according to the western perspective of representations of race identities and gendered social perspectives, including the role these groups must play in this symbolic space.

Mass Effect, as a cultural instrument, uses its message to reinforce and subvert the established status quo. In dealing with race and gender, for instance, it is possible to say that the game keeps its representation throughout within the range between reinforcement and subversion. In managing its imperialist ideology, the game clearly reinforces dominant western imperialism. At the same time, however, in dealing with sexual orientation, the game seems to subvert the idea that every non-heteronormative attitude is considered deviant or abnormal (table 4.1).

Indeed, *Mass Effect* allows players to customize Shepard as raced/ethnic, and even to add on top of it non-heteronormative sexual behaviour. However, by default, the game offers Shepard as a Caucasian heterosexual male character for players. Observing the symbolism around this attitude, I started to wonder how many players actually choose to customize Shepard, since, according to Newman (2013), the more expert the players are, the less they will be concerned

	REINFORCEMENT	SUBVERSION
RACE		
GENDER		
SEXUALITY		
POWER		

Table 4.1: How *Mass Effect* reinforces and subverts hegemonic ideology.

about character features other than those that influence in-game capacity and capability. Yet, as stated by Leonard (2003), "there is a need to go beyond stereotypes to situate this project within larger structures of domination and the longstanding practices of whites generating pleasure through the exploitation and consumption of the racialized other" (p. 6). On the surface, *Mass Effect* might be acknowledged for its progressive representation of gender and race, due to the well-designed appearance features combined with the straight moral and ethical attitudes of Jacob, as well as through the game's powerful set of strong female NPCs. However, there are some aspects of the game's general set of images and text that might contribute to stereotypical points of view on issues of race and gender in order to legitimate, normalize, and sanction state violence, inequality, and despair.

Similarly, *Mass Effect* also implies imperialist principles through the militarist discourses present in its storyline. Although *Mass Effect* is a war-based game driving players to manage military and political issues, it is explicit in the way that it privileges the imperial militarist discourse over political actions. The game depicts every political action as a vicious and corrupt practice, while the military approach is associated with honour and loyalty. By using such a discourse, *Mass Effect* serves as an ideological instrument that not only exposes the technological superiority of western

dominance, but also discourages people from being involved in political activism, which might be considered a potential threat for democratic involvement in the future.

Cultural products might also serve as instruments to stimulate a discussion around established everyday practices. For instance, Roach (1997) uses criticism of the cultural imperialism approach from scholars like Armand Martellart, Herbert Schiller, and Dallas Smythe, among others, to discuss the notion of a passive audience. She states that some cultural manifestations might be understood as a resistance and a subversion of the established system. From that perspective, *Mass Effect* might be considered a tool for criticizing the concepts of heteronormative and performatively established social relations, since non-heterosexual relations are treated as a natural pattern for affectionate relationships. However, Roach also argues that even though there is the idea of an active audience who has the power to interpret these messages and construct their own meaning through a polysemy effect, the actions of a dominant ideology from these messages cannot be completely ignored. As Roach (1997) observes,

> 'active audience' theory and the 'resistance' of audiences were in opposition to some of the basic tenets of cultural imperialism. It argued that individuals and individuals as members of different sub-groups can and do construct their own meanings from media messages and cultural products, thus refuting the central idea of domination through Western culture. (p. 52)

These results demonstrate that as with any cultural object, video games are also able to embody complex social contradictions in their discourse, going far beyond the binary and over-simplistic perspectives to actually simulate a version of reality. According to Cassar (2013), video games manifest their expressiveness across different levels and instances, in which their ideology might manifest itself through the games' cinematic and textual expression, as well as via the games' rules and gameplay mechanics. As an RPG, the procedural arguments of *Mass Effect* contribute to players' reflecting on their choices in dealing with such morally and ethically complex game situations.

As mentioned before, unlike the majority of war-based games that promote a good vs. evil perspective, *Mass Effect* does not allow players to engage with just black and white points of view; rather, players need to exercise their judgement through the many grey issues within the game. The challenges players might face to solve each complex situation in the game is also mirrored by it. Right after Garrus' loyalty mission, Shepard says, "the lines between good and evil blur when we're looking at people we know," to which Garrus replies, "It's so much each easier to see the world in black and white. Grey... I don't know what to do with grey."

Even though the game offers many options for players to handle conflicts, not all matters are presented as alternatives in the wheel of dialog for players engage with. Many of other complex issues are put aside not only because of the natural constraints of the game, but also because of the developers' (conscious or unconscious) choices and also because part of the game's messages comes from the game's set of images, text, and other production decisions over which players have no control at all.

Conclusion

As I have been arguing throughout this thesis, recent digital games are using their affordances to structure intricate narratives that are able to involve and compel players within the game world. Such complexity is grounded and perceived through not only the mechanical elements of the game, but also through the game's storyline. Accordingly, the conflict between ludologists and narrative theorists is losing strength. Stories and gameplay complement each other, serving the overall work of create a video game. Among the variety of genres of digital games, there are some that are more story-based, others that are more inclined towards problem-solving, and others that might blend both characteristics quite well. Thus, as suggested by Zimmerman (2004), game scholars must move on and address other relevant questions, such as how games can represent meaning, or even how games can or should build their arguments and simulations. The importance of Zimmerman's suggestion lies in the fact that such simulation can replace the sensation of reality in many ways. As observed by Mayra (2008),

> Baudrillard makes keen observations on the power of the media in shaping our consciousness and on the process in which a large segment of 'cultural industry' is increasingly blurring the boundaries between facts and information, information and entertainment, and between entertainment and politics. Games are entangled in this larger social and cultural development, and one can contrast current virtual game worlds with Baudrillard's description of Disneyland as 'hyperreality', or simulation that is offered to consumers as 'better than real thing'. It is easy to pass over such critique as exaggerated concern about something that is essentially just fun and games, meaning toys. However, following cultural critics like Poblocki (2002), one might also claim that toys are all the more 'dangerous' in their seemingly neutral and simplistic manner of presenting their microworlds. (p.100-101)

By presenting an involving and complex narrative, video games have become persuasive and have expanded their influential spectrum. Narrative is connected to our most common form of expression, serving as a guide to human thoughts (Ryan, 2004), and video games are using it as a palatable way to deliver their messages to players. More than just clues to interpret game rules

(Juul, 2005), stories allow games to make strong arguments about our society, influencing social and cultural behaviour (Bogost, 2007; Leonard, 2003). The expansion of the game industry demonstrates that games are no longer just an entertainment product; rather, they have become a highly expressive medium able to embody ideological and cultural meaning. Consequently, we must understand video games as a cultural product, since they not only embody meaning and intentions that are able to shape social thought, but they also reflect the ideological forces that generate them (Warnes, 2005).

No doubt, a video game is an instrument that benefits a specific group in society by disseminating its specific ideology, though such influence often occurs in a subtle and almost invisible way (Leonard, 2003; Williams, 1981). Ideology operates in conscious and unconscious manners, influencing people's everyday life also in "the form of unquestioned common sense that in most cases take the shape of images, concepts, and structures that are imposed on men without them realizing it" (Cassar, 2013, p. 337). Therefore, it is important to look carefully when examining video games, the same way we do with any other cultural media (*e.g.*, books, movies, music, plays, television shows), in order to understand how they create their narrative and how they convey meaning.

One way to analyze games as complex platforms that use their variety of affordances to deliver meaning to players is to combine Bogost's (2006; 2007) procedural rhetoric approach with cultural and social theoretical tools to analyze such complexity. On the one hand, game engines are instruments capable of generating expressivity through their conventions of procedural signs, which not only regulate the artistic, cultural, and narrative expression of games, but also control the gameplay behaviour, facilitating the interaction between the game and the player. On the other hand, game elements such as cut-scenes, cinematics, images, texts, and visual aesthetics provide the symbolism in which the ideological tissue of society is constructed. Thus, to understand how much of the game rhetoric reinforces or criticizes the way society works, it is crucial to bring to the surface a discussion about the social, cultural, and historical context involved in such in-game situations (Warnes, 2005).

The methodology I offered in this thesis is an approach to study video games as cultural products that attempts to keep in within view their mechanical affordances. Inspired by previous analytical methods from different scholars (Aarseth, 2003; Bizzocchi & Tanembaum, 2012; Consalvo & Dutton, 2006; Newman, 2013), the template I proposed has eight aspects of a game, including mechanics (object inventory, core mechanics, objectives, game interface, interaction map) and narrative (characters, narrative space, narrative arc). This methodology might be useful to other scholars who are interested in investigating any other story-based games.

Using this methodology to examining the collections of *Mass Effect's* affordances (imagery, textual expressions, and gameplay mechanics), it is clear that they are important not only for the structure of a complex narrative, but also to create the social and cultural arguments in which such a narrative is expressed. Through the game's affordances, *Mass Effect* builds an immersive and epic story. This engaging narrative, structured by the game system, allows players to step back into the boots of Commander Shepard and fully experience an intricate adventure, including dealing with the consequences of their choices and decisions from all three games. Such a possibility provides a coherent and consistent narrative to the game.

According to the player's performance, especially in the loyalty missions of the second game, the game system provides different situations for players to face in the subsequent releases of the game. As a consequence of players' choices, the mechanism of succeeding and failing missions where they can win characters' loyalty or see them die in the battlefield opens different narrative paths in which the game unfold its storyline, impacting the way in which each player experiences the game. Such an influence can even alter the ending of the game plot, reducing the player's options to decide the destiny of the galaxy.

Even though *Mass Effect's* system provides a variety of approaches for players to solve puzzles and conflicts, it also establishes cultural constraints that expose a deliberate curation of specific topics by game developers. By mandating, for instance, that Commander Shepard join the Citadel forces, and not offering a clear reason behind the Reapers' desire to vanish all the advanced

organic races of the galaxy, *Mass Effect* is arguing in favour of extreme war actions without even questioning such motivations—it uses the overly simplistic idea that 'if they are the enemies, they deserve to be eliminated'. It is interesting to note that, although the game requires players to play with a political and diplomatic approach in specific circumstances, there is no diplomatic solution as an alternative to solve the war with the Reapers. As Leonard (2004) argues, such a discourse is didactically used to preserve and legitimize the American hegemonic agenda.

Nevertheless, the game offers different ways to handle racist situations. As an RPG game, *Mass Effect* situates players within a space where multiple conflicting interests are in play which involve most of the races that inhabit its universe. The game presents the reasons for the divergences between races from different perspectives in order to provide enough background information for players to reflect on them and make their own decisions to solve the situation. Likewise, in dealing with affectionate relationships, *Mass Effect* lets players decide whether or not to follow the usual authoritative heteronormative structure of social relations. Players are able to decide if the main characters gets involved in a same-sex relationship, and such a relationship is presented in a very natural way. Therefore, *Mass Effect* builds strong arguments that are able to both subvert and reinforce the established status quo.

The set of images and dialogues in *Mass Effect* also makes strong arguments about gender, race, and sexuality. For instance, in dealing with gender representation, even though the system provides strong and powerful females character, the man-like animation of female Shepard and the sexualized and stereotypical manner in which female characters are visually represented, play against any endeavour to promote equality of gender. By objectifying women's bodies, the game makes use of the "three on-going processes: excluding, marginalizing, and trivializing women and their accounts of social and political life" (Beasley, 1999, p. 4), since it reproduces the common depiction of the female gender that is widespread in entertainment media, which, furthermore, is generally used to reinforce the established patriarchal culture.

The representation of race in *Mass Effect* has similar problems: people of color are under represented, or suffer from lack of empowerment, as in the case of the NPC Jacob. Although he

presents a well-designed visual appearance and morality, Jacob has an insignificant role in the overall story. In addition, in discussing otherness by using a variety of races in the *Mass Effect* universe, the game distinguishes the Citadel races and non-Citadel races in a very stereotypical manner, following certain preconceptions in dealing with the definitions for developed and civilized people. According to Poor (2012), such a strategy is used because race relies heavily on cultural traits; thus, race is used to "describe differences in appearance, culture, and geographical origin for characters. This use is consistent with how race is used in real world, although in fantasy it is used more broadly" (p. 377). Hence, the Citadel races might be interpreted as the western dominant nations, represented by the US and their political allies, at same time that the non-Citadel races are exposed as the enemy to be fought, eliminated, or subdued, reflecting the manner in which some nations (such as middle-east countries) are depicted through the American 'war on terror' discourse.

Nonetheless, in dealing with sexual orientation, the narrativized simulation of *Mass Effect* provides a chance for player to decide which path they are more comfortable following, or even to inquire about how open they are to virtually experiment with the Other. By treating queer identities and relationships in a natural manner, the game also contributes to legitimizing the existence of such identities and relationships as a non-deviant behaviour.

Mass Effect uses its affordances to structure a compelling storyline and to create its cultural, social, and ideological arguments, making it clear that to understand how a game works rhetorically, or how much such a rhetoric reinforces or criticizes the way society works, it is also crucial to consider the social, cultural, and historical context involved in such in-game situations. Thus, the analytical approach suggested in this thesis might be useful to analyze a variety of other games, especially recent—and future—games with a strong narrative component. *The Last of Us Remastered* (Naughty Dog, 2014), for instance, offers a very well structured narrative that is also

surprising[9]. Although there are many battles with zombies and humans alike, it is the heavy emotional tone in the game that makes it stand out. *The Last of Us* exploits its system in a way that makes us able to explore that emotional environment, which reveals itself to be devastatingly sad more than anything else. Such a narrative construction and emotional appeal demonstrates once more that Juul's (2005) argument about the inability of algorithms to transpose complex emotions or a specific narrative genre to the game environment has definitely been overcome. In addition, the game presents interesting arguments involving the representation of gender and sexual orientation.

Grand Theft Auto V (Rockstar North, 2013) is another game that may be investigated using a similar framework. The game certainly raises many questions involving issues of capitalism, politics, violence, conflict between classes, and gender and racial representation. Widely recognize as a polemical game, *GTA V* offers a complex storyline, a fairly open world, and a set of robust mechanics to build many different controversies for players to deal with while playing it. For example, through the stereotypical portrayal of African American characters and their neighbourhoods, the game exposes many arguments concerning racism and the racist attitudes players must deal with.

As technological advancement is constant in video games, the medium's capacity to influence players' perspectives within the world is still booming. Games like *Mass Effect,* which provides a quite complex set of options for players to solve the game situations, are becoming even more difficult to write. The more agency developers want to provide to players, the more complex the game's algorithm becomes. Yet, one way to resolve these problems is by developing a more robust artificial intelligence to generate the narrative content by integrating players' modeling and decision-making. That is, it is possible that in the near future the game system will be able to

[9] The game received many game awards, including BAFTA awards for best game and story, and the Writes Guild of America Award for achievement in video games writing.

automatically generate its narrative events based on the previous decisions players have made[10] (Bulitko, n.d). Even though this possibility is still in its research phase, such a scenario already stimulates many questions, especially those involving the machine learning process. For instance, how much can a machine learn from players' inputs before it starts to generate its own options without the players help?

Nonetheless, it is important to keep in mind that such a robust artificial intelligence process is still a human creation and its progression will be made possible by using human inputs; therefore, this system is still able to carry ideological perspectives. No doubt a video game is a technological medium, but it is also a product of our society, as so, it reflects and refracts social and cultural structures and interests, revealing relationships between cultural producers and dominant groups (Bogost, 2007; Williams, 1981). Such connections expose how these relationships attach, influence, and shape cultural practices and consequently model human behaviours and social relations.

[10] see more in http://webdocs.cs.ualberta.ca/~bulitko/research/is/index.html

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