From Embracing Eternity to Riding the Bull: Representations of Homosexuality and Gender in the Video Game Series Mass Effect and Dragon Age

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Abstract

Progressive and serious representations of homosexuality in Western mainstream video games are a recent phenomenon, and the Canadian developer BioWare has been instrumental in diversifying gender and sexuality representations in mainstream game culture. This thesis is an extensive study of the representational practices of BioWare's role-playing game series *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age*. The study views games as important cultural texts. I approach the games through critical textual analysis drawing on theories from media studies, gender studies, game studies and queer theory, and I discuss how these games can be seen as reflections of, negotiations with and challenges to representations of sexuality and gender in contemporary Western mainstream media and games culture. The thesis provides a comprehensive qualitative theoretical, methodological and analytical contribution to the study of representations of sexuality and gender in games.

The current dominant industrial strategy for representing homosexuality in mainstream games is optional content which the player must actively pursue. In the BioWare games, homosexuality is primarily offered and represented through 'romances': optional romantic relationships the player can enter into with non-player characters (NPCs). In the analysis I make a distinction between 'public' and 'private' gameworlds. The former is the overall gameworld the player traverses during main quests and sidequests, and the latter is the sphere of player-pursued romances. I investigate the different representational practices of each type of world and discuss the complex relationship between representations, player assumptions and player interactions.

The study finds that the public gameworlds generally have a foundational heteronormative premise that is very careful and contradictory in what it represents and communicates, and which is complicated by possible player interactions. This premise weakens over time with subsequent game releases. The private gameworlds, on the other hand, can be much more explicitly queer and experimental with their representational practices, and explore queer themes not readily found in other mainstream media. The study also shows that while both series become more progressive over time, they generally have a strained and anxious relationship with male homosexuality, which reflects overall mainstream media attitudes on representations of male and female homosexuality.
Acknowledgements

One of the main reasons why I like to play the healer class in online games is the distinct sense of team responsibility and team management it requires. The healer has to be aware of the entire field of battle and make sure that the tanks and damage dealers can do their things. The process of writing a doctoral thesis, an exciting and challenging quest, mainly requires a different class, because it is in many ways a quest in which you must lead the charge and always be ready to dive into the action and into the unknown, sometimes unprepared, sometimes without having a clue of what you are doing. But, you are never alone. So, what I am trying to say is that while I was more of a tank and a damage dealer when writing this thesis, I have enjoyed significant support from family, friends and colleagues. I could not have done this on my own, and I now wish to thank people who have been "healers" in their own special ways.

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Chapter I:
Introduction

Well, it's not as if I introduce myself that way. "Hello, my name is Dorian. I like men." Maybe I should start. Some days it seems that's all anyone cares about.

– Dorian Pavus, Dragon Age: Inquisition (2014)

What can mainstream video games do with homosexuality, gender and culture? The representational changes that have occurred in the last few years, particularly in this decade, have been astounding and exciting. If somebody had told me ten years ago that there would soon be not only one, but multiple large mainstream video games in which I could finally play a gay main character, I would most likely not have believed them. It would have seemed completely strange back then, because serious and progressive representations of homosexuality were not something the game industry was interested in. Games are usually produced with the intent of being consumer products primarily for entertainment purposes (which certainly does not preclude artistic aspirations and innovative potentials), and so their contents often operate in the belief that they cater to an already existing audience with certain preferences and already existing cultural factors. Games are not merely the mirrors of culture or the repository of all things cultural, however, but are equally responsible for cultural reproduction and creation as any other media. Granted, the release of the best-selling game The Sims in 2000 in which players can engage in same-gender relationships was groundbreaking, with Mia Consalvo calling it "perhaps the most progressive game yet released concerning sexuality" (2003: 181). A progressive and possibly empowering game indeed, but in terms of representation Sims are bots and not scripted characters, leaving the matter of representation completely in the hands and heads of the players. A. Brady Curlew argued that while The Sims represents a positive development, it should not "cloud over the fact that we are still a long way off from seeing openly gay heroes or romantic homosexual relationships portrayed in mainstream narrative video games […]" (2005: 4).

Here is the curious thing, though, and I do not know what I find more curious: that we as late as in 2005 were seemingly a long way off from seeing serious representations of

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1 The Sims is not the first Western video game to feature homosexuality. PC games Moonmist (1986), Circuit's Edge (1990), The Orion Conspiracy (1995) and Phantasmagoria: A Puzzle of Flesh (1996), for example, include representations of homosexuality, though not nearly as extensive as the possibilities offered by The Sims. See chapter II for more on these games and their representations.
homosexuality in mainstream games, or that it was happening. In fact, it had already
happened – though it was highly conditional. This is the time when Canadian developer
BioWare slowly made its entry into mainstream game culture. Its games, most notably the
role-playing game series *Mass Effect* (science fiction) and *Dragon Age* (fantasy), have been
instrumental in re-shaping and opening up new representational practices and possibilities in
an industry which for years has been restrictive and resistant to change. BioWare's games
signal a highly important and historical shift in the Western mainstream game industry and
culture. Simultaneously, as mainstream games their subversive strategy often relies on
optional content that the player can choose to pursue. This raises questions not only about the
 technique/structure of representation, but also of representation itself.

BioWare, originally founded in 1995, has become well-known for its role-playing games and
queer content, and some games "have been groundbreaking in their visual representation of
intimacy for LGBT characters" (Holmes 2016: 117). BioWare is notable for its romance
features which allow a player to optionally build deeper emotional, romantic and sexual
relationships with certain in-game characters, weaving in a love story alongside the games' main storyline.\(^2\) BioWare began experimenting with in-game romances in the *Baldur's Gate*
series, although romances were restricted to heterosexual couplings. BioWare's serious queer
adventure began in 2003 with the game *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (Holmes 2016:
125) with the lesbian character Juhani.\(^3\) The 2005 game *Jade Empire* saw the inclusion of two
more queer characters available for same-gender romances, a man named Sky and a woman
named Silk Fox. Steven Holmes argues that despite these notable additions, BioWare "remained skittish about the issue for years" (2016: 126). The queer relationships in *Jade Empire* were more difficult to access than the heterosexual relationships, and in the heterosexual relationships the characters would kiss whereas the camera would pan away and
avoid the same depiction in the homosexual relationships (Holmes 2016: 126). With its 2007
release *Mass Effect* and its 2009 release *Dragon Age: Origins*, BioWare was clearly
positioning itself as a developer interested in taking homosexuality in new directions in games.

BioWare's extensive narrative focus is remarkable and separates its games from other games
with similar themes. In these games the player meets and interacts with *characters* rather than

\(^2\) BioWare has not invented these types of game romances, but has made them a mainstay feature in its role-
playing games.

\(^3\) Juhani was not only BioWare's first serious queer character, but also the first lesbian character in the *Star Wars*
universe (Wookieepedia).
bots with simple traits and sexuality labels. Player companions are scripted with distinctive personalities, morals and issues, and sexuality and gender are incorporated into the game universes as social, cultural and political topics. To what extent they do so vary. BioWare structures its games around the notion of choice and agency, the latter being the type of agency enabled by the possibilities of electronic media, popularly defined by Janet Murray as "[…] the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices" (1997: 126). BioWare's games engender many different ways of playing the same game. Instead of the standard storylines where all scripted events remain the same each playthrough, a player may instead choose to do things in different orders, skip certain elements or choose different solutions to conflicts by siding with different factions and characters.

As the *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* games are mainstream games, the notion of choice plays an important part in the representations of homosexuality and this is precisely where the optional content becomes central. In games, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) representation is "highly controversial" (Shaw 2009: 233), which unfortunately should come as no surprise, and this has implications for if and how it finds manifestations. In the case of the *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* series, the game structure itself is crucial to how game content operates in a dual enabling/disabling dialectic: agency and choice give freedom to both developers and players alike, but simultaneously imply restrictions.

**Present Study and Research Questions**

In this study I am interested in investigating the representations of homosexuality and gender in BioWare's *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* games and their meanings in a cultural perspective. The study is comprised of analyses of six games in total: *Mass Effect* (2007), *Mass Effect 2* (2010), *Mass Effect 3* (2012), *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009), *Dragon Age: II* (2011) and *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014). Romances are the main venue for representations of homosexuality in these games, allowing the player to romance characters of the same gender as their created protagonist. This feature has attracted scholarly interest for its various

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4 All six games are designed toward a mature/adult audience. In the US ESRB system the series are rated "M" for mature (17+), while in the European PEGI system the series are rated as 18+. The US ratings take the games' sexual content into account, whereas the European ratings mostly emphasize the games' "extreme violence", though *Dragon Age: Origins* was marked for "sexual violence" (esrb.org, pegi.info).
approaches to performing and enabling non-normative sexuality and it has proven to be a popular, engaging and even controversial feature among players (Greer 2013, Waern 2015, Kelly 2015, Holmes 2016). The possibility of homosexual romances suggests that the gameworld is open and accepting, something which both Peter Kelly (2015) and Holmes (2016) emphasize. Kelly calls Thedas, the world of the Dragon Age series, "so devoid of homophobia" that amidst all of its problems homosexuality "hardly even registers as a potent issue" (2015: 48), while Holmes argues that Ferelden, the country Dragon Age: Origins takes place in, is a world "in which non-heteronormative sexuality and intimacy is banal" (2016: 117). These claims are true to the extent that the player will not be punished or persecuted for pursuing homosexual romances. But after this study I cannot possibly support the general claim that Thedas or the galaxy of Mass Effect is devoid of homophobia or treats homosexuality as banal. On the whole this paints an erroneous picture of the gameworlds and their norms and ideologies. Playing as a man romancing another man and then hearing "I guess I don't have to ask which one of you's the girl" from the protagonist's uncle or being able to tell certain queer characters more or less to shut up when they talk about their sexuality, among many other things, do not testify to a world where homosexuality is banal. It may perhaps seem like that in the sphere of romances, but once we move out into the rest of the games we meet a much more complicated world. We meet the rest of our world.

Prior to this study I had already played five of the six games analyzed here and initially the romances were the focus of my investigation. I thought to study how the romances were a key feature for enabling homosexuality in a mainstream game, allowing players to pursue certain types of content that could remain hidden or marginalized for other players. This focus remains, but the aim of the study has broadened significantly since I began in 2013. The player spends a significantly higher amount of time interacting with non-romance content and as such it makes sense to investigate the games as a whole. There is much more to these games regarding sexuality and gender than the romances, something which became very clear to me when I began to play more analytically and investigate the games on a much deeper level. These games represent large worlds brimming with cultural values, ideas and norms about sexuality and gender, much of which creates rather contradictory spaces in which homosexuality is free and unproblematic in certain contexts and anxious and precarious in others, and where queerness can be celebrated just as easily as heteronormativity is promoted.

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5 Dragon Age: Inquisition was released during the study.
and enforced. The question of representations of homosexuality is also not really a general question, but, rather, something that concerns the type of homosexuality represented. In these games, female homosexuality is clearly much less problematic than male homosexuality, and this is reflected both in the larger gameworlds and in the sphere of romances. This carries significant real-world cultural resonances. Understanding the romances is important, but they must be located in the games' overall representational practices. Some content might be optional, but it does not exist separately from the rest of the gameworld, neither in its structure nor in its culture. I attempt to create a better understanding of these two 'worlds' in my study. This study is on a broad scale about the reality of our lives through the fiction of games, and the fiction of games through the reality of our lives. Or, in another manner, it is about the reality and fiction of both our lives and games.

The following research questions form the basis for my overall investigation:

• How are homosexuality and gender represented in the Mass Effect and Dragon Age series, which representational practices are enabled in the public and the private gameworlds, and how do these practices change over time with subsequent titles?
• How can these representations be seen as reflections of, negotiations with and challenges to representations of sexuality and gender in contemporary Western mainstream media and games culture?

To answer these questions I will approach the games through critical textual analysis. I combine critical theories with hermeneutic principles of understanding and interpretation, and critically consider the interplay between gameplay and textual content. This study combines media studies, game studies and gender studies, but should first and foremost be understood as a humanities-based game study. I locate this study in the research area of game studies "that principally aims to study games and their structures", an area in which interpretations of games and their cultural significances are often rooted in humanities approaches (Mäyra 2008: 156). The analysis is based on extensive playing/interpretation of the three Mass Effect games and the three Dragon Age games combined with secondary material. I will disclose and discuss this approach and process in chapter III. Cultural contexts are partly introduced in this chapter, and will be expanded upon and contextualized further in chapter II.
In my analysis I make a general distinction between the 'public gameworld' and the 'private gameworld'. The public gameworld is the overall main game that all players progress through (such as main quests and obligatory locations and interactions), and the private gameworld consists of the romances and other flirtations. In this study I am interested in exploring these two main venues: what can be said and done in the public gameworld contra the private gameworld? One is the general sphere, the other is the specialized "optional" sphere. I use the public/private gameworld distinction similarly to an understanding of the public/private spheres in real life, where the public world is likely to be heteronormative (and male-centered), whereas homosexuality and other non-normative sexualities and identities are considered more private and as less visible/marginalized matters. Likewise, the public/private distinction can be appropriated to the difference between mainstream and niche media. In a mainstream game there are likely significant differences in what every player can expect to see and interact with during the main game and what they can do outside of this sphere. Simultaneously, the *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* games show significant developments toward more inclusive and progressive representations with new titles, meaning that the initial games of each series start out more or less as experiments that are further expanded upon in subsequent titles.6

The public/private division is a useful analytical concept for the purposes here, but I must stress that it is not a clear-cut and easily discernible distinction. The division does not exist as a clear boundary within the game. During gameplay, the public/private worlds blur into each other because they intertwine. Romance dialogues and scenes may be player-initiated, but they do not exist in a diegetic vacuum separated from the rest of the game. All optional content ultimately exists as part of the public gameworld. Optionality, however, suggests there is a certain type of hierarchy of representations and that the public gameworld is much "safer" than the private when it comes to non-normative content. I must emphasize that even obligatory content such as main quests contains some form of optional content, and optional content even has some aspects that are obligatory (romances require certain actions to be completed, for example). The way the public/private division is operationalized in the analysis is that one chapter for each series deals with the general public gameworld as encountered during main quests and sidequests, while another chapter focuses on romances. This allows for a clearer discussion on the different types of representations.

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6 The notable exception is a backlash in *Mass Effect 2*, where the main romances are heterosexual only.
Homosexuality, Gender and Queer

I would like to offer a brief account on "homosexuality and gender" and what I mean by it. Homosexuality is one of the primary "objects" of study, and while this term may seem univocal it can be quite ambiguous. As Annamaria Jagose argues: "Homosexuality is commonly and widely understood to describe sexual attraction for those of one's own sex", but that "a number of ambiguous circumstances cast doubt on the precise delimitations of homosexuality as a descriptive category" (1996: 7). People who have sexual or romantic feelings toward members of the same gender or who engage in sexual acts with members of the same gender may not think of themselves as homosexual, gay or bisexual. My aim here is not to impose any identifiers on individuals and how they might perceive their own sexuality. In this thesis I understand 'homosexuality' in a very general sense that refers to either the common understanding of sexual and/or romantic attraction to members of the same gender, or quite simply sexual relations with someone of the same gender without any particular types of feelings or attractions involved. I place emphasis on explicit same-gender relationships, liaisons and discourses as these are regularly marginalized or erased by mainstream media.

In fact, "exclusive" homosexuality is more difficult than bisexuality in the BioWare games, which is a complete reversal of their treatment in other mainstream venues where bisexuality is often vilified as promiscuity, voracity and instability. "Exclusively gay" characters do not appear until the third instalments of both series. Prior to that, characters available for same-gender romance were bisexual. This does not automatically mean that bisexuality finds its representational haven in games. While certainly a welcome change, it suggests that there are certain qualities about homosexuality that are difficult for mainstream games (or, at least for BioWare) which bisexuality as a game mechanic, rather than a specific sexuality, can help address. That said, other sexualities are not understood automatically as homosexuality and will be appropriately acknowledged and addressed.

Homosexuality will be discussed as part of a larger gender context in order to investigate how sexuality and gender inform and define each other. Sexuality is closely connected to gender and gender identities in our culture, though this should not be seen as any "natural" expression of a given gender. A gender perspective is also necessary to understand the construction of homosexuality in media and culture, because it comes with close ties to certain values, norms and beliefs. Female homosexuality and male homosexuality, while supposedly two "neutral
versions" of the same "phenomenon", are treated very differently in culture. Understanding these differences require an understanding of the general workings of gender in Western culture. I will introduce this issue in the next chapter.

I also use the terms 'queer' and 'queerness' broadly to designate anything that goes against heteronormative regulations of gender and sexuality. I find Judith Butler's ideas on queer useful for the current purpose:

> If the term 'queer' is to be a site of collective contestation, the point of departure for a set of historical reflections and futural imaginings, it will have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding purposes. ([1993] 2011: 173)

Queer refers to "non-normative, curious, and imaginatively ambiguous, objects and relations" (Erni 1998: 160) and does not automatically mean "gay" or "non-heterosexual". Heterosexuality can also be queer(ed). I give queer no fixed meaning here in order to preserve its critical and radical purposes.

**Singular 'they'

The protagonists in all the BioWare games analyzed here can be either female or male, and throughout this thesis I will use the singular 'they' when referring to these protagonists on a general level or in contexts and situations that apply to both genders. I will adopt gendered pronouns for situations that are gender specific. I also use the singular they when referring to 'the player'.

**Mass Effect and Dragon Age: Military Melodrama

The *Mass Effect* series (*Mass Effect*, *Mass Effect 2* and *Mass Effect 3*) is a science fiction/action series that takes place in our own future. The first three games, sometimes referred to as the "Shepard trilogy"\(^7\), take place in the years 2183–2186 in the Milky Way. Humanity has only recently discovered that it is not alone in the universe and is now trying to

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\(^7\) *Mass Effect 3* marks the official end of Commander Shepard's story.
find its place in the larger galactic community. The player assumes the role of Commander Shepard of the Alliance Navy. The series begins with Shepard being considered for the position of Spectre due to past heroic deeds. A Spectre is a special agent who only answers to the Galactic Council, and that a human is being considered for this position is a great honor. Yet, what begins as a simple shakedown mission turns out to be a massive conspiracy involving the ancient mythical machine creatures known as the Reapers, and ends in full-scale war. The Reapers arrive every 50,000 years to purge and harvest all advanced organic life. The fight against the Reapers to finally put an end to their reign of terror is the central conflict of the trilogy. Additionally, the galaxy has its fair share of cultural and political issues that must be negotiated and overcome along the way. Mass Effect details Shepard's rough journey into the ranks of Spectre agents and the discovery of the existence of the Reapers and their imminent return. In Mass Effect 2, Shepard must work with the paramilitary splinter group Cerberus in order to investigate the mysterious abductions of human colonies. In Mass Effect 3 the Reapers begin their full-scale invasion. The race begins to find a way to stop the Reapers for good, and ultimately Shepard must make a choice that will affect the galaxy forever.

*Dragon Age (Dragon Age: Origins, Dragon Age II and Dragon Age: Inquisition)* takes place in the fictional fantasy world of Thedas, which is just as riddled with ghosts of the past and cultural and political issues as the Milky Way future. Unlike the Mass Effect series, the Dragon Age games revolve around different protagonists and main conflicts, though they are all linked. In *Dragon Age: Origins*, the player assumes the role of a Grey Warden, a member of a mystical order devoted to destroying darkspawn. The vicious darkspawn are said to be the punishment for the avarice and sins of humans. In *Origins*, the darkspawn are gathering in large numbers led by an Archdemon, and the Warden is tasked with recruiting armies in the land of Ferelden to combat them. In *Dragon Age II*, the focus shifts to Hawke and their family. They were refugees during the Blight in *Origins* and the game revolves around Hawke's journey from rags to riches in the city of Kirkwall. Kirkwall is no ordinary city and Hawke is soon involved in all the corruption going on in the city and the far-reaching consequences it has. In *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, the player assumes the role of the Herald of Andraste, the sole survivor of a mysterious and disastrous event which opens a massive Breach to the spiritual realm, allowing demons to pour through. It is revealed that a powerful and enigmatic "Elder One" is responsible for the tragedy. The Herald, believed to be chosen by divine
intervention and left with the power to counter the Breach, must bring order to Thedas and stop the Elder One before his quest for godhood destroys the entire world.

The *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* games are primarily role-playing games (RPGs) with action elements. RPG is usually a story-heavy game genre with long and multiple plotlines, a plethora of quests, large worlds and ensemble casts. The player is often required to control and manage more than one character while exploring and battling. Characters must often be leveled up with experience points, and weapons and equipment must regularly be switched out and upgraded. Combat is usually tactical and strategic and involves the successful deployment and mastery of special skills and abilities. The computer RPG genre can be sharply divided into two distinct "philosophies", Western (WRPG) and Japanese (JRPG), a divide that developed in the mid-1980s and which has "only widened over time as Japanese developers increased their emphasis on story and team management while Americans and Europeans sought to free players from the constraints of pre-defined narratives" (Donovan 2010: 161). The *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* games belong to the WRPG tradition of offering narrative agency by allowing the player to directly influence the outcomes of many quests and storylines, but team management is also important. Team management in these games becomes more of a narrative and social involvement rather than a predominantly mechanical and functional management.

Both series have their share of storylines traditional for their genres, but what is remarkable and significant is their strong focus on interpersonal relationships and personal issues. The games offer players multiple companions, all with their distinct personalities, backgrounds, stories, and perhaps even quests to complete. This is typical for the role-playing genre, but BioWare focuses greatly on creating and giving life to characters. While a significant part of these games involves combat and fighting to save the world, an equally, if not more significant part can be spent interacting with and helping out various companions and characters. Some of these relationships can even evolve into romantic relationships. The journeys to save the world involve a lot of personal and local issues, and long conversations about life and love. Despite the more or less militarized premises of both series, there are distinct melodramatic sensibilities to be found here which make the games stand out from many other science fiction and fantasy games. Their "hardcore" gameplay comes with distinct emotional and interpersonal interactions that may make these games seem more like character dramas with some world-saving on the side. The social aspects are often optional, yet they
constitute such major parts of the games and contribute to their uniqueness in a video game history that is rather full of science fiction and fantasy games. These games invite the player into universes of people and cultures, and these are the aspects that will be the most investigated in this study.\(^8\)

This is first and foremost a game/text-centered study and it is the games themselves that guide and structure my discussions. The analysis is meant as a space for opening up critical questions of representations in mainstream games, their specifics and their relation to culture. The theories and contexts introduced here and in the next two chapters are important for how I conduct the analysis, but I do not aim to prove certain theorists or traditions "right". The theories I have chosen and applied in the analysis are meant to engage with the games on their own terms, and placing these representations in more general cultural contexts means discussing theory that is not necessarily designed with game content in mind, but it is a necessary move for understanding the larger issues at stake here. I follow the advice of Robert Alan Brookey and Robert Westerfelhaus who believe that "queer media scholars should become theory rustlers, stealing across disciplinary borders, taking the theory they want and using it for their own purposes" (2001: 154). This is what I done in this study (I have even "stolen" Brookey and Westerfelhaus' theories), though I should emphasize that this is not as unorderly or random as it may perhaps sound, and it allows for discussing these games as part of a greater culture.

### Games, Meaning and I

I would like to include a personal disclosure, seeing as how the researcher plays a major performative part in textual analysis. Video games intrigue me immensely. I have played and loved games for almost as long as I can remember: a Nintendo Entertainment System with *Super Mario Bros.* found its way to me when I attended day care, thus sparking the journey that culminates in, among other things, this thesis. I have spent most of my gaming life as a console gamer, that is, I mostly play games on home consoles and handheld consoles rather on than a PC. There are many things I love about games. Some aspects are more general toward games as an activity while others are more specifically related to certain titles and developers. The act of playing is an obvious starting point for why I find games so interesting.

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\(^8\) I will offer more in-depth information on the specific games and their mechanics in chapters IV and VII.
Games allow me to do things, I get to be in the middle of the action, and I can interact with content and express myself in ways that are not possible in other media. While central, gameplay alone is not the sole reason why I find games so interesting and engaging. Their aesthetics, worlds, characters and stories are also of great importance to me; the textual aspects of games are highly significant. Gameplay is not my only motivator for playing; I have abandoned games that I considered good games in terms of gameplay, but where the textual content was uninspiring, and I have struggled through games where playing was a predominantly frustrating activity, because I enjoyed the textual aspects. I am rarely interested in realistic-style sports games, for example, but redress the core mechanics and gameplay in the guise of Mario Kart, Mario Tennis and Mario Golf and suddenly my interest is there. It is never a simple either/or with video games. Playing and text are both important, and the interplay between these two aspects constitutes a major interest to me.

**Games as Culture and Ideology**

In this study I consider the BioWare games primarily as what Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman calls 'cultural rhetoric'. In this view games are treated as serious meaningful cultural and ideological products and practices and in which games can act as "social contexts for cultural learning":

This means that games are one place where the values of a society are embodied and passed on. Although games clearly do reflect cultural values and ideologies, they do not merely play a passive role. Games also help to instill or fortify a culture's value system. Seeing games as social contexts for cultural learning acknowledges how games replicate, reproduce, and sometimes transform cultural beliefs and principles. (2004: 516)

Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska point out that while games have their own distinctive features apart from other media, they are also

socio-cultural products, involved in the broad processes through which meanings are circulated in the societies in which they are produced and consumed. Games do not exist in a vacuum […]. They often draw upon or produce material that has social, cultural and ideological resonance, whether these are

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9 I do not by any means reject the possibility that these games can be played primarily for entertainment purposes without considering their more serious contents, but this is not the focus of this study.
explicit or implicit and whether they can be understood as reinforcing, negotiating or challenging meanings or assumptions generated elsewhere in society. (2006: 168)

Games are human creations, and "[c]reating games is also creating culture, and therefore beliefs, ideologies, and values present within culture will always be a part of a game, intended or not" (Salen and Zimmerman 2004: 517). The exhaustive repeats of straight male protagonists and hypersexualized and objectified female characters should exemplify this well enough. These beliefs, ideologies and values can manifest just as much in the aesthetics as in the game mechanics and how conflicts are solved and games are won: "[c]ore gameplay itself can also be freighted with a range of social-cultural-ideological meanings [...]" (King and Krzywinska 2006: 168). Mark Hayse argues that games

reflect the imaginative—and ideological—perspectives of their designers in terms of narrative, image, and procedure, much as myth, symbol and ritual convey culture. Some of this happens at an explicit level but much more likely occurs at an implicit level that designers and players alike may consciously overlook. (2014: 448)

This is an important point to bear in mind because my own analysis suggests that the BioWare games, while explicitly allowing queer representations, often reproduce seemingly mundane and problematic heteronormative assumptions and statements. Looking closer into how such attitudes manifest and are communicated within the games is important not only to understand the gameworld in a critical inquiry, but may also aid designers and scholars in discovering how these attitudes are reproduced and expressed in seemingly unimportant or secondary content. It may help designers avoid mythologizing problematic notions. Hayse points out that although the media critic is not neutral either, "the ideological interrogative for video games is not a question of 'whether or not,' but rather 'what kind,' 'what ways,' or 'how much'" (2014: 44). These three questions are crucial for investigating the representations of homosexuality in games in their current dominant paradigm: optionality.

**Optional Content, Mechanical Homosexuality and Gay Buttons**

The current dominant representational practice for homosexuality and other types of queer content is optional content, either through features such as romances or content that requires the player to actively seek it out rather than the content being part of main gameplay (or, less
euphemistically, "forced on the player"). In one sense it is an inclusive practice because it allows people to play the same game and experiment in many different ways that suit their playstyles and preferences, and perhaps challenge and expand them. In another sense it is problematic since diversity becomes an optional feature rather than its own goal, and queer content can be left out in the margins only for those that are interested in such content. This reproduces the tired notion that queer people are always on the outside of dominant culture and that queer content is mostly of interest to queer people.

*The Sims*, as argued above, is emblematic of this shift toward optional representation and equality, juggling both progression and status quo. Even in such optional content, however, certain norms and values manifest. While Consalvo called it perhaps the most progressive game yet, it was complex in how it "in some ways challenges norms of heterosexuality but in other ways reaffirms them" (2003: 181-182). Thus, while homosexuality is enabled, certain structures and limitations affect the possibilities for different sexualities. Sims of the same gender can move in together, but cannot get married. The manual codes heterosexuality as "sexy" whereas homosexuality is not, and while gay Sims may adopt children it is not something they can "plan on", unlike straight Sims (Consalvo 2003: 183). Even a game that revolves around bots incorporates certain normative restrictions on sexuality. There is a simultaneous admission and dismissal, as if it would be unrealistic for gay Sims to get married and plan on having children. Consalvo argues that the manual's language reflects "contemporary cultural unease over the issue of gay marriage" (2003: 183). If disabling marriage options is an attempt to not make a particular statement, it is at the same time precisely a statement because of its disabling. The game offers no ways of challenging or subverting these rules (besides hacking the game). *The Sims* allows the player to create, as Adrienne Shaw puts it, "a lesbian separatist community almost as readily as one may make a heteronormative, 2.5-offspring fantasy" (2014: 52), but the premises for these scenarios are not based on equal opportunities.10

Sexuality as game mechanics and traits continued as industry practice. Shaw discusses how this was used in the *Fable* series (2004-2010). In the first game, the player character's sexuality, once they enter into marriage, is marked in what Shaw calls "an oddly rigid way"

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10 *The Sims 4*, originally released in 2014, added in 2016 an update which allowed for greater customization of Sims regardless of their gender, such as masculine and feminine body frames, the ability to impregnate others or become pregnant, clothing preferences and how they would use the toilet (sitting or standing).
All characters are programmed to be able to fall in love with the player character. Player character sexuality starts out as "unknown", but if a male character marries a female NPC (non-player character) the character status changes to "heterosexual". If the male character marries another man the status becomes "gay", and if he is then married to another female NPC the status changes to "bisexual". Shaw is critical of this structural approach because it does not treat sexuality as flexible in any of the games. Similarly, the second game designates a "cross-dressing" label if the player wears clothing meant for the other gender, and this may impact relationship with NPCs. The third instalment is a strange backlash and offers "a closing down of options in gender and sexuality when it comes to the player character" (Shaw 2014: 31-32). These games thus demonstrate a different approach to sexuality which incorporates sexuality as traits, limitations and gameplay mechanics, and not necessarily as progressive representational practices. As a mainstream game strategy it may seem ideal because representations then rely mostly on the player's choices. Shaw points out that "optional homosexuality, bisexuality, and potentially transgender identity are discussed as the path of least resistance to including GLBT content" (2009: 247). The romance systems in the BioWare games, which invite players to partake in their representational practices or opt out, exemplify this approach to optional representations. This concerns directly both the positive and more problematic medium-specific features of game representations.

The "optional homosexuality" mechanic/phenomenon in games have led game designer Anna Anthropy to term it the "gay button" to designate, and criticize, how queer content is handled as optionality rather than being a fully-acknowledged part of the game. Shaw, referring to Anthropy's term, comments that "[i]f the player needs to push a 'gay button' […] to see same-sex relationship in games, then anyone who doesn't know or is unaware that the button exists can continue to consume the heteronormative-dominated texts" (2014: 34). The term is both an exaggeration and a rather accurate description. The gay button does not, at least not in the case of Mass Effect or Dragon Age (or most games featuring homosexuality, I would hope), appear as an actual button/in-game option or setting that says "Activate gay content" or similar; the approach is usually a bit more subtle, often manifesting as specific conversational paths which the player may pursue or avoid. A gay button mechanic may thus be viewed (industrially) as a central feature for how non-heterosexual content can find its place in mainstream games that do not wish to exclude its presumed predominant heterosexual audience (which also assumes that this audience generally cannot or will not accept or handle non-heterosexualities) while simultaneously recognizing diversity in their player base.
While I cannot speak for future practices, the "gay button strategy" is contemporarily the dominant mode of mainstream representations of homosexuality. It seems to suggest a greater desire for representing diversity in games, and while there may be challenges and "risks" to evaluate and overcome, this overly careful strategy is not really a call for diversity in the long run. It produces what Katherine Sender calls 'contained visibility', a visibility which "can only ever yield conditional acceptance" (2004: 240). I have to agree with Shaw that "[i]f we conceptualize representation as important because it provides us with a chance to imagine the world differently, why can't that difference ever include a more open acceptance of gender and sexual diversity?" (2014: 34). Why do players need the option to be "shielded" if the content is already there, intended as part of the game universe? Gay button-encoding may be seen as the current strategy or solution, but persisting this strategy may communicate the unfortunate implication that sexuality is mostly seen a choice, and as something that can be chosen away or kept outside the main heteronormative world.

What Shaw finds most interesting about optional representations in games "is that it places the burden of representation on players themselves" (2014: 35), and she insists that "this optional representation must be understood as part of the neoliberal logic that dominates much of late twentieth- and twenty-first-century social and political life. Good neoliberal subjects are responsible for themselves and, thus, are responsible for their own media representation" (2014: 35). I will discuss this logic more in relation to sexuality and gender in the next chapter. Here I wish to address that players are burdened with representational responsibility. This can be seen with other media in how queer reading practices have traditionally been utilized by readers and viewers even though the content itself might not be particularly or explicitly queer (Doty 1993, Jenkins [1992] 2013). In games, especially PC games, a popular and engaging practice involves players modifying and re-designing game content and sharing it with others players ("modding") (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 2013: 182-183, Holmes 2016), and some developers welcome such activities and even facilitate them by providing modding tools. No matter what the original content is, users may always re-imagine it in different ways and thus producers need not change or challenge their own textual practices. It is not that optional content in games as such is negative, but Shaw points out a rather important medium-specific distinction between pluralism and diversity:

[...] the way games structure how players get to alter representations, particularly when such optional content is the site of much of the potential diversity in games, indicates a particular type of
marginalization made available by this medium. The industry shifts the burden of representation onto players, and diversity in turn is reduced to aesthetic pluralism. (2014: 35-36)

Because games can enable choices and optional representations in ways not possible in other media, enabling diversity through gay button mechanics and similar strategies may defeat the purposes of representing diversity. Diversity becomes pluralism instead, which means that the player has rather many different options and can decide the degree of that diversity themselves. The player is tasked, or burdened, with seeking out a game's optional content (or content that other players have modified), and the game, though responsible for enabling the content, can rest assured that it has not disturbed any dominant positions.

Consalvo, in discussing *The Sims*, addresses sexuality as choice in games, and highlights how treating sexuality as an activity rather than innate has dual progressive and regressive aspects:

> For many gay rights activists, for example, the implication that sexuality is "merely" a choice gives credibility to arguments that if homosexuality is optional, then individuals can opt "out" of that activity. For this group, seeing difference as "innate" is politically necessary. By contrast, some might applaud the choice, as to suggest that any body is "innately" sexualized (or gendered) is essentialist and reductionist, and the products of social, cultural and historical conditioning, rather than biological structure. (2003: 186)

Sexuality as a choice in games is a complex phenomenon that carries significant real-world implications. Sexuality as an "activity" or mechanic is a game-specific representational characteristic not found in literature, film and television, and must thus be critically investigated as part of a medium-specific inquiry. One may not consider the choice mechanic particularly problematic in the bot world of *The Sims*, but it nevertheless suggests a difficult relationship between games and representation:

> All of these options and limitations regarding bodies, personality, behaviors, and actions suggest that diversity is an important aspect of the game, but that diversity must be limited. Even if diversity was limited only for financial or practical reasons, it is important to raise this issue, to better understand which options were ultimately considered necessary and which were expendable. (Consalvo 2003: 186)

Keeping the issue of diversity limitation in mind is especially important when homosexuality moves from the world of bots to the world of scripted characters and storylines, as in the *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* games. When characters are endowed with personalities, traits and
voices, they become much more alive and are more like humans than bots, and thus their significance is potentially vastly increased. It is then that someone has something specific to tell – if we let them. How can we engage?

**Queer(ing) Game Studies**

"Queer critique of gaming is a growing field" notes Holmes (2016: 119), and this thesis should be seen as a contribution to that emerging field. While the study of gender and games, especially female characters and female gamers, has already become a mainstay tradition, the study of sexuality in games has been more elusive. This elusiveness might be connected to how games themselves generally do not offer much variation from the heterosexual paradigm. Mia Consalvo's 2003 article "Hot Dates and Fairy-Tale Romances", which I referenced earlier, is among the first academic attempts to study sexuality in games. Consalvo formally asks: "How can we study sexuality in video games?" The question seemed novel at the time. Consalvo's essay is preliminary and exploratory and uses different theoretical approaches from outside game studies, seeing as there was no particular theory of "game sexuality" to draw from. She argues for how "studying both representations and gameplay are valuable" (2003: 172), as in the case of *The Sims* discussed earlier. The study of sexuality in games has gained more popularity in recent years and sexuality has been discussed in relation to industry, market logics, politics, game content, and players, such as in the various works of Curlew (2005), Shaw (2009, 2011, 2014), Krzywinska (2012), Greer (2013), Condis (2015) and Enevold & MacCallum-Stewart (2015).

I also contribute to a more general "queer media studies", and aim to bring video games into this discourse. Brookey and Westerfelhaus argue that "the mainstream media's greater inclusion of gays and lesbians, and their positive portrayals of them, calls for rigorous scrutiny" (2001: 142). They provide two main purposes for this: one which aims to "examine the impact, potential and realized, of such portrayals in redefining the intersection of gay and mainstream culture" and another which aims to "identify how such portrayals serve to challenge and/or reinforce the heterosexual bias of the American culture" (2001: 143). I fully support this research aim. Since such portrayals/representations are produced within a heteronormative media culture, it is imperative to investigate on which terms the representations exist and for what purpose. Brookey and Westerfelhaus argued in 2001 that
the "positive representation of queer experience in the mainstream media is a new phenomenon" (2001: 154), and while the media certainly continues to struggle with representation, positive and progressive representations are not a new phenomenon any longer. Positive representations of queer experiences in mainstream video games are new, however, and must also be critically discussed and situated in a broader context.

I was disappointed (but not really surprised) to discover a significant research gap between gender studies and media/game studies while conducting this project. Gender studies/gender and media studies are often not very interested in games. Games, if warranted attention here at all, are often dismissed as merely reproducing stereotypical heteronormative notions of gender without closer investigation or acknowledging that this is only part of the issue. Literature, film, television, and advertising, however, are generally widely investigated, critiqued, celebrated and canonized, as if these media are somehow "natural" carriers and producers of meaning in ways that games are not. Most of the works referenced in what follows are used throughout this thesis and the critique here is not a critique of the authors' general works, but rather to point out the problematic relationship academic literature has with games and gender.

For example, in Raewyn Connell and Rebecca Pearse's book *Gender* the authors refer to how social practices may "exaggerate the distinction of female from male", and it is in this context that they state that games "sometimes mythologize" this distinction (2015: 11). While this is not wrong, this is all they have to say on the matter. In a previous book, *Masculinities*, Connell briefly references "hyper-masculine computer games" as part of how men benefit from an unequal gender order (2005: 253). Once more, this is not wrong, but simultaneously that is not all there is to it. David Gauntlett, in his *Media, Gender and Identity*, investigates gender in many different media. Games, however, are only briefly mentioned inside a factual box which serves more as an intermission than evidence of any legitimate interest in addressing games. Here we learn that "[i]n video games, the representation of men and women is more stereotyped. By their nature, video games are typically about action rather than reflection [...]" (2008: 68). Gauntlett refers to tough and brutal male characters and female characters as sexy fighters and as prostitutes, and ends by referring to a study of US college students which found that they saw women in games as more sexualized and helpless than male characters (2008: 68). Again, this is not wrong, but it paints a very reductive picture of a complex field. Rosalind Gill offers the perhaps most problematic rejection here. In
Gender and the Media, games are hardly seen as media at all and altogether ignored as representational practices. Games are only referred to when Gill discusses "the emergence of a new generation raised on computer games and MTV" (the tone does not suggest that this is a good thing) as a reason for new advertising strategies (2007: 82-83). Gill clearly distances herself from viewing games in a serious light. Perhaps this reflects a generational aspect that will change as new scholars emerge on the field. I fully understand that one cannot grasp all phenomena in research and that some things are always prioritized over others. This general exclusion of video games from the gender and media field is problematic, however, and must be addressed.

Games are often an "extra phenomenon" in combined media and gender studies, much like how gender is often a special topic for its own chapter in media and cultural studies books rather than being fully integrated into the whole. In Routledge's 2012 The Gender and Media Reader, only two of the 50 essays deal exclusively with video games. They are also the final two essays to appear in the book. The 2015 The Routledge Companion to Media and Gender includes 59 essays. Once more only two essays are specifically devoted to games. By contrast, the 2014 The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies has 60 chapters devoted to games. This anthology, however, deals exclusively with gender in only two essays: one about femininity and one about masculinity. Sexuality is not an explicit or independent topic here. This suggests that games, gender and sexuality are not easily "officially sanctioned" in academic literature. It may also suggest that there are not many scholars who write specifically in this field. This study thus seeks to contribute to promoting the study of sexuality and gender in games in media, gender and game studies. And for that purpose, I believe, there are few games that are more appropriate for addressing this complexity than the Mass Effect and Dragon Age games.

BioWare's mission is, according to their website, "to create, deliver, and evolve the most emotionally engaging games in the world" (BioWare.com). Create. Deliver. Evolve. This is not only a mission to make games, it is a mission to evolve games, which implies challenging an entire industry. This ambitious mission is unlikely attainable by remaining within dominant industry discourses, yet it cannot take place outside them either. It also suggests that making games is not merely about supplying an existing demand, but to create new ones. Evolution suggests making what is already there much better. To evolve, one needs to become stronger. Evolution is change, yet evolution is slow. BioWare's mission, as I interpret it, is a
type of protest. It is not an explicit protest I ascribe to the company or any of its employees, but rather something implicit found in its mission and something very explicit found in its games. The "protest" I refer to here derives from the work *Reading the Romance* by Janice Radway, a classic study of romance novels and their readers. Radway views the act of romance reading as a protest against current everyday conditions. In this study I reverse that view and consider *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* as BioWare's (implicit) protests against a traditional and conservative industry. It is currently a small protest, but it is significant, and yearns for a chance to explore and show the diversity of video games. At the end of the book, Radway argues that

> I think it absolutely essential that we who are committed to social change learn not to overlook this minimal but nonetheless legitimate form of protest. We should seek out not only to understand its origins and its utopian longing but also to learn how best to encourage it and bring it to fruition. ([1984] 1991: 222)

Evolution is slow, but it happens. And when this type of evolution begins, in an industry that is not altogether currently preoccupied with homosexuality, it warrants our critical attention. As a scholar I will seek out how to best understand the origins and processes of this evolution, its utopian longing for a more diverse industry and discuss how we might encourage it and bring it to fruition. The game industry is slowly coming out of the closet, and this cannot be neglected.

**Thesis Structure**

The thesis is divided into two parts: the preliminaries and the analyses. The preliminary part consists of this introductory chapter as well as next two chapters. Chapter II concerns representation, homosexuality and the media and establishes the cultural contexts that serve as the basis for how I understand games as cultural rhetoric and their relation to sexuality and gender in culture, which in turn influences the analysis and how I will approach the games. Chapter III addresses textual analysis, the methodological approach applied in the analysis. In this chapter I discuss text, textual analysis, and the textuality of games, and offer a brief historical contextualization before I also disclose how the practical part of the analysis, the playing, was carried out.
Chapters IV–IX contain the analyses. I approach each series separately, with *Mass Effect* first and *Dragon Age* last. I have chosen this division to limit mixing the lore and details particular to each series and to provide a more focused discussion. Please note that the *Mass Effect* chapters will not refer to the *Dragon Age* games other than as general references, but the following *Dragon Age* chapters will refer back to the *Mass Effect* chapters for comparative purposes. There are three separate chapters for each series: one introductory chapter which introduces the central game mechanics, concepts and lore, one chapter which discusses the general public gameworld and one chapter which discusses the private gameworld of romances and related interactions and events. The analyses are structured slightly differently because they reflect the specifics of the games' representational practices rather than adopting a general scheme that is repeated in all chapters. The thesis presumes that the reader has read the prior chapters as it progresses; each chapter will build on and refer to previous chapters. Chapter X offers a summarizing discussion and concluding reflections.

The study that follows is a rather extensive undertaking. This is a deep analysis of six very large games, yet what is discussed in the analysis encompasses much more than the games themselves. It is a study that seeks to understand a current historical phenomenon, a genealogy of sorts. It seeks to discuss the complexities about representation in games and the evolution of a medium. It looks at the culture that surrounds and informs the games, and how the games reflect, negotiate and challenge that culture. This study is conducted in a time when the demand for diverse representation in games is increasing, a time when the game industry is no longer a closed and powerful cultural industry that can do whatever it wants without reactions from players, a time when a large queer gaming convention has become a yearly occurrence.\(^{11}\) I hope to add to the understanding of those who find representations in games important, and I hope to extend the same project to those who might not find it that important at all. The game industry is changing, and what follows is an investigation of significant reasons why and how that change is taking place—from embracing eternity to riding the Bull.

\(^{11}\) Here I refer to the crowd-funded GaymerX/GX conference, which is arranged for the fourth time in 2016.
Chapter II:
Representation, Homosexuality and Mainstream Media Culture

Representation is at the heart of this study and in this chapter I will introduce theories and cultural contexts central to this topic and which in turn shape the analysis. Homosexuality, gender and games are all complex issues, both separately and in combination, and I approach them from a diverse theoretical framework that allows for a critical examination of these complexities. In order for games to be understood fully, Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska argue that they "have to be situated within the cultures in which they are found, including the wider industrial/economic context" (2006: 219). Situating games within culture is important to understand how representational practices in games are informed by and reflect broader cultural sensibilities, as well as for understanding how games inform and might possibly challenge and further develop media culture. Such an understanding is also important for anyone who wishes to analyze cultural aspects in games. Here I will discuss how our contemporary mainstream media landscape is a contradictory space where recognitions and representations of sexual diversity exist alongside naturalized and essentialist views of gender and sexuality; where female homosexuality can represented as heterosexually appealing, erotic and sellable whereas male homosexuality provokes anxiety; where media culture is marked by a distinct sensibility called postfeminism which simultaneously signals progress and backlash; where questions of "good", "bad", "progressive" and "stereotyped" representations are increasingly difficult to critique; and, how games, despite being a major cultural industry, still have a long way to go in terms of representation and that the industry is dominated by traditional discourses that severely underestimate its player base. What is at stake in representation? Why is representation in games important? How does representation matter to players?

I begin with basic fundamental concepts and add more contexts as I progress. I start with the general topic of what representation is and its political and ideological dimensions through stereotyping and typical representational strategies concerning homosexuality. From there I proceed to a discussion of sexuality and gender in media culture and the game industry through the lenses of postfeminism and hegemonic masculinity, before ending with a discussion on the matter of representations in games. I will address these general issues and discuss how they intersect and affect each other. This will lay out the general cultural
framework for the analysis of the *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* series. The questions and topics raised here will be pursued and contextualized throughout the entire thesis.

**Representation**

This study is first and foremost a study of *representations* of homosexuality and gender in mainstream games, and this term and my use of it require clarification. Representation is a rather common term, but what exactly does it mean? Stuart Hall offers a useful general definition: "representation is the production of meaning through language" which "connects meaning and language to culture" and "is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture" (2013: 1-2). In this sense representation is a very broad and omnipresent phenomenon. These words, for example, are representations as they are a specific way of turning ideas into physical manifestation, and these very letters and words allow me to perform this action. In turn, these systems shape how I communicate and understand meaning as well as how others may understand it. These words may also carry certain cultural meanings and are not merely neutral translations of mental content into material content; neither the mental nor physical are neutral, but are in turn shaped by the representational practices of language and culture. Representation is broadly a way of understanding and referring to the world, while at the same time shaping and constructing that very world through the representational practices enabled by our use of language (and, subsequently, through our various media technologies). There is no representation without the human world, and there is no human world without representation.

Media representations come in many different forms, such as characters, settings, themes, aesthetics and storylines, as well as the discourses and genres these representations appear in. The medium plays a significant part in how representations are shaped and (re)presented: printed literature invites a different graphical representational mode than audiovisual media such as film, television and games. Games, furthermore, enable representations to be actively engaged with by a player, becoming what Jesper Juul (2005) calls "half-real": a combination of real rules and fictional content. According to Aristotle, representations can be differentiated in three ways: medium, object and mode. Medium refers to the channel used, object is what is represented, and mode refers to the discourse (Aristotle suggests that the same object can be represented for example through narrative or dramatization – two different modes) (17-19).
The combination of medium, object and mode, as well as their relationship, are crucial for both the inner and outer workings of representation, both as practice and experience. The concept of the "gay button", for example, is not possible in film and television. Games have thus a medium-specific representational technique/strategy which can have significant implications in the shaping of representations.

If representation is a human activity, and if representation is our way of understanding, explaining and exploring the world, then it follows that representation, like language, is not a neutral phenomenon or practice, but tied to cultural constructions and expectations. Culture has inherent political and ideological dimensions, which in turn suggest norms and values. W. J. T. Mitchell argues that the structure of representation can be seen as a triangular relationship: "representation is always of something or someone, by something or someone, to someone" (1995: 12). Representation is never "innocent" because it is cultural, but that does not suggest that representation must be devious or false. Richard Dyer, whose writings on the politics of representation have been very influential, stresses how representations "are presentations, always and necessarily entailing the use of codes and conventions of the available cultural forms of presentation" (2002: 2). Representations are also presentations because what goes into their creation is the very language and meanings we have at our disposal: "[Cultural forms] restrict and shape what can be said by and/or about any aspect of reality in a given place in a given society at a given time, but if that seems like a limitation on saying, it is also what makes saying possible at all" (Dyer 2002: 2). This is echoed in Adrienne Shaw's point that representation "provides evidence for what forms of existence are possible" (2014: 4). Representation promises visibility. Mitchell argues that because of all the social, cultural and political agreements involved in shaping representational practices, representation "can never be completely divorced from political and ideological questions [...]" (1995: 15).

If we see mainstream media as representations of life, and not only life in a general philosophical sense but the lives of the majority of people, then representations become crucial in how this majority is constructed: who are included, how are they addressed, what norms and values are communicated through the representational practices, what is valid, what is right, what is wrong? Representation does not merely reflect, as Kenneth MacKinnon argues: "[Representation] does not neutrally transmit a pre-existing meaning. It is more likely to provide a meaning that it has created" (2003: 24). Mainstream media are not merely
representing "life as we know it", but play a large part in constructing how we are supposed to
know it as well as what we are not supposed to know.

**Representation and Heteronormativity**

The ideology of heteronormativity has tremendous impact on mainstream media
representation in terms of sexuality and gender, and mainstream media play an important
contradictory part in constructing, upholding and challenging heteronormativity.
Heteronormativity, a critical term originating from queer theory and introduced and
popularized by Michael Warner (1991), refers to

the perceived reinforcements of certain beliefs about sexuality within social institutions and policies. These beliefs include things like the notion that sex equals penis-in-vagina intercourse, that 'family' constitutes a heterosexual couple and their children, and that marriage is a procreative institution and therefore should only be available to 'opposite-sex' couples. From this perspective, heterosexuality is viewed as the only natural manifestation of sexuality. (Clarke et al. 2010: 120)

Prior to the popularization of the term heteronormativity, Adrienne Rich ([1980] 1993), for example, called attention to what she termed 'compulsory heterosexuality' to criticize how cultural practices enforce heterosexuality on women. Rich argues that women are usually perceived as being innately sexually oriented only toward men (which can then be argued to work similarly in the opposite scenario: that men are supposedly innately sexually oriented toward women, otherwise obligatory heterosexuality would not exist). This works to undermine the notion that other possibilities (such as homosexuality) are available and legitimate. Rich's arguments concern not only how women are oppressed under a system of compulsory heterosexuality, but also how "both the naturalization of heterosexuality and the pathologisation of lesbianism work to privilege heterosexual masculinity" (Jagose 1996: 54).

The premise of heteronormativity depends on an essentialist view of gender. Its basic assumption is that gender is "natally ascribed, natural and immutable" and that "heterosexuality is thus deemed an essential aspect of human culture and intelligibility" (Cooper [2002] 2012: 356). Judith Butler argues that "[t]he institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished
through the practices of heterosexual desire" (Butler [1990] 2007: 31). Thus, if one is born male one becomes a man, if one is born female one becomes a woman, and this is assumed to be stable and separate gender identities. Furthermore, Brenda Cooper argues, heteronormativity is "a powerful principle of social and cultural order that absorbs and disciplines all forms of gender transgressiveness into its female-male binary gender system" ([2002] 2012: 356). Heteronormativity thus assumes that everyone is (or should be) heterosexual and that the male and female binary gender system represents the most, if not the only valid genders. Heterosexuality, however, is not inherently heteronormative (Clarke et al. 2010: 120). Heteronormativity constructs heterosexuality just as much as how it may construct other sexualities, and it becomes a restrictive and enforcing regulatory principle for heterosexuality as well.

The relentless institutionalization of heterosexuality as natural and given in fact only proves to emphasize that heterosexuality is no more natural than other sexualities. Butler argues that heterosexuality is dependent upon acts of repetition in order to assert its originality, and "[t]he more that 'act' is expropriated, the more the heterosexual claim to originality is exposed as illusory" ([1991] 1993: 314). Heterosexuality continually needs to claim and defend that it is original or natural, a continuous exhaustive effort that would not be necessary if it indeed was natural. Raewyn Connell and Rebecca Pearse provide an excellent example of heterosexuality's unstable claim to nature:

Belief that gender distinction is 'natural' makes it scandalous when people don't follow the pattern: for instance, when people of the same gender fall in love with each other. So homosexuality is frequently declared 'unnatural' and bad. But if having sex with a fellow-woman or a fellow-man is unnatural, why have a law against it? We don't provide penalties for violating the third law of thermodynamics. (2015: 5)

The crux of the issue of the natural/unnatural justification, which the thermodynamics joke highlights, is that if heterosexuality indeed is "natural" it would be governed by natural laws and thus be impossible to violate. All the (normative) practices and regulations of sexuality "only make sense because these matters are not fixed by nature" (Connell and Pearse 2015: 6). Since it is possible to not be heterosexual the exclusive claim to nature quickly evaporates and is instead a matter of the imperatives of ideology rather than a matter of the imperatives of the cosmos.
Criticizing heteronormativity is not an attack on heterosexuality itself, nor is the claim that gender is culturally constructed an attack on individual people and their gender identities. The aim is to point out and critique the mechanisms which attempt to naturalize notions of sexuality and gender, which thus marginalize and discriminate that which does not fit into the dominant idealized systems. Heterosexuality is privileged in heteronormative cultures, but that does not mean that it does not discriminate against straight people. Heteronormativity also postulates correct ways to be for its heterosexual constituents in order to separate them from that which it finds undesirable or less appealing. Heterosexuality is riddled with tiresome heteronormative media tropes of distinct notions of gender binaries, the ideal nuclear family and "vanilla" representations of its sexual practices where anything other than the missionary position might be considered too edgy or explicit for mainstream representation. Heterosexuality itself has never been a problem. The repeated efforts to naturalize it in order to maintain a power position, resulting in restricted diversity and expressions of gender, heterosexuality and other sexualities, however, are and remain a significant problem that has profound global, local and personal implications.

**Popular Representation and Life as We Are Supposed to Know It?**

Mainstream media generally want to reach the broadest audience possible, a strategy David Hesmondhalgh (2013) refers to as 'audience maximization', and in the pursuit of this audience it is quite a remarkable feat how mainstream media manage more often than not to represent the world so narrowly. MacKinnon argues that noticing "that there are many contradictions between life as shown in the media ('mediated') and the lives lived by the majority of citizens, not only of the socially marginalized" has become commonplace (2003: 24). The world of mainstream media is frequently white, heterosexual, and male-centric. Surely this is not an accurate or even close representation of the mainstream? Grand assumptions about audiences can reside in representation. The history of video games' representation of women (or lack thereof) provides a very good example. Historically, the game industry has been (and continues to be) dominated by men and playing games has been considered a predominantly male activity. One consequence of this targeting has been how women rarely appear in games "except as damsels requiring rescue, or rewards for successful completion of the mission" (Cassell and Jenkins 1998: 7). In order to target a male audience then, it has been commonly believed that men do not want to play as female characters, that men are, of course,
uncritically assumed to be heterosexual, and that women are secondary, objects, or quite simply absent. Damsels in distress, for example, become "synonymous with the end of the game, acting as the passive objects of desire, the carrot held out to entice the player to finish" (Salen and Zimmerman 2004: 524). Rather than being characters or actors in their own right, women are instead represented as rather concrete but invisible goals and may serve as an emotional stake for the player (saving another living being from the ultimate evil may be considered more rewarding than recovering treasure). I must add that while saving such damsels signifies victory, the women also signify "game over" and an end of the fun. Thus the trope also becomes a metaphor for real-life romantic relationships and marriage as "game overs" and that getting a girlfriend/wife means it is time to be serious and responsible.

The damsels example is perfect for illustrating the complex process of media representation and its cultural resonances. Damsels in distress or women as secondary and/or sexualized characters are not something games have invented, this is taken from traditions and tropes in other media, which again reflects a male-centric media culture. In doing so, however, games are not only "borrowing" representations from other media, but become an active part in constructing and perpetuating these representations as valid. This can also work to inform representations in other media. This process is akin to what Roland Barthes in his discussion of myths refers to as "the privation of History". Barthes argues that myths attempt to remove their historical construction and appear as if they came from nature: "It is a kind of ideal servant: it prepares all things, brings them, lays them out, the master arrives, it silently disappears: all that is left for one to do is to enjoy this beautiful object without wondering where it comes from. Or even better: it can only come from eternity […]" ([1957] 2009: 178-179). From this perspective games do not need to assume any responsibility for their representations since they are only doing what other media are doing and thus it is not their fault. The seemingly veritable bouquet of tradition offers many ideas and themes that can be uncritically reproduced because they have originated elsewhere and have become tautological: "this is just how it is and how it has always been done". It is with good cause that Barthes calls this privation of history "the irresponsibility of man" ([1957] 2009: 178-179). Tropes offer both easy uses and easy excuses, but they are by no means simple reflections of the current state of affairs or tradition.

Games do not merely passively represent content developers might deem "male" or a "natural" idea that games are a male activity, but are also responsible for constructing the
cultural notion of men in specific ways that imply primary identification with male characters, heterosexuality, heroism and superiority. Repeated use of such representations might work to further mythologize these constructed qualities as natural aspects of being male. Masculinity and male interests are assumed to be fairly limited, which is not only a grand underestimation of female players but also of its intended male audience, and games have continued to frame masculinity and maleness through constrained representational practices. It is important to bear in mind that representation is not merely the reflection of meaning or some idea, but also the active (re)production.

What does not fit with the dominant representational practices might become marginalized or symbolically annihilated. 'Symbolic annihilation' is a term coined by George Gerbner to refer to how marginalized groups are left out of the media and thus out of existence: "Representation in the fictional world signifies social existence; absence means symbolic annihilation" (Gerbner and Gross 1976: 182). Media's failure or reluctance to include diverse representations for whatever reasons turns mainstream media into someone's ideal or dream world rather than the broad and diverse world they actually want to target. Dominant attitudes, MacKinnon argues, "not only dominate, but 'normalize'. Thus, what dominant groups see is all that is allowed to be seen" (2003: 23). Symbolic annihilation can be both an unconscious and conscious practice: certain tropes and patterns are uncritically repeated because they are taken for granted as conventions (privation) whereas at other times someone wants to specifically target an ideal audience (such as the damsels in distress and objectified women) – and this ideal audience is assumed to like or tolerate certain things and not others. Whether consciously or unconsciously motivated, however, symbolic annihilation has consequences. As Shaw says: "In essence, lack of media representation is a way of saying: 'Your concerns/thoughts/lifestyle and so on are/is not important'" (2009: 231). Symbolic annihilation and minimal/regressive representation can thus be both an implicit and explicit statement; lack of representation can speak volumes by clearly showing who the world of mainstream media might be intended for and to whom visibility might be afforded. Homosexuality is very often symbolically annihilated.

Representations of marginalized groups in mainstream media can also speak volumes, and their status as "marginalized" implies that media representation will treat them differently than the dominant groups. Historically, homosexuality has usually been represented in service to heterosexuality, either as an alternative or as inferior, and rarely as a sexuality that has been
afforded the same status as heterosexuality. I will return to this below. Dyer argues that "how social groups are treated in cultural representation is part and parcel of how they are treated in life" (2002: 1), which suggests a close relationship between representation and socially agreed-upon codes and conventions, and refers to my earlier point about representation being a way of both understanding and constructing the world. Furthermore, Dyer argues,

[how a group is represented, presented over again in cultural forms, how an image of a member of a group is taken as a representative of that group, how that group is represented in the sense of spoken for and on behalf of (whether they represent, speak for themselves or not), these all have to do with how members of groups see themselves and others like themselves, how they see their place in society, their right to the rights a society claims to ensure its citizens. (2002: 1)]

Dyer addresses the political and ideological dimensions of representation and how they are connected tightly to social and cultural issues: "How we are seen determines in part how we are treated; how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation." (2002: 1). This is not to suggest a direct cause-and-effect relationship between individual and representation. In how I interpret him, Dyer does not say that viewing certain types of representations automatically makes people friendly, ambivalent or hostile toward groups. Such injection-based thinking about the media is best left abandoned. Rather, it is to suggest that (media) representation is a site for cultural struggle and negotiation for visibility and recognition, and that what is produced in culture is reproduced in representation and that culture and representation inform each other. Representations, in this view, have real consequences for people "in terms of the way representations delimit and enable what people can be in any given society" (Dyer 2002: 3). This representational operation of consequences is for example reflected in Michel Foucault's discourse theory, in which discourses are seen as "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" ([1972] 2002: 54). These practices do not merely speak of something, but in that very "speech" the thing is also created. Representations can be seen as discursive practices which not simply communicate its object (for example, homosexuality) through medium and mode, but in that communication the object is also created in certain ways and for certain purposes. Representation might explore and communicate what is possible, what is or what should be, and an important part of this process is representation as regulatory and ideological practices.
Stereotypes and Archetypes

Representation often involves or results in the creation of stereotypes and archetypes. A stereotype is a representational mode where that which is represented is comprised of a specific set of (exaggerated) traits that are supposedly meant to naturally communicate a specific theme, thereby hypostatizing it. Additionally, "[...] change or 'development' is kept to a minimum" (Dyer [1984] 2012: 276). The "effeminate gay man" and the "mannish butch lesbian" are examples of common stereotypes of homosexuality in the media, which may play on and attempt to establish a causal link between homosexuality and predominantly feminine traits in men and predominantly masculine behavior in women. The purpose and effect is often an "othering", that is, the creation of a certain distance between the stereotype and the norm/ideal it deviates from, usually in the attempt to promote the latter. Stereotypes can also be invoked for positive purposes, for example by emphasizing certain admirable and desirable versions of masculinity and femininity. In such cases we are dealing with archetypes, representations that are supposed to serve as aspirational models for that which they represent.

An archetype of homosexuality in mainstream media could for example be represented through an "average ordinary man" who is "just like everybody else"—consequently, a man who could "pass" as straight, so-called "straight-acting queers" (Clarke et al. 2010: 120). Both stereotyping and archetyping are problematic and complex. On one hand they represent normatively derogatory or idealized versions. The effeminate gay man stereotype could suggest that this is culturally undesirable, while the ordinary gay man archetype could suggest that in order to be "successfully" gay in culture one needs to stay within restricted heteronormative ideals. On the other hand, stereotypes and archetypes are not purely fictional. They are informed to some extent by real humans and real human practices. There is always the presence of some "real life" component. Stereotypes and archetypes are technically the same phenomenon, though they are invested with vastly different types of meanings circulated through respective modes of dismissal and aspiration.

Dyer opens his essay "Stereotyping" by asserting that gay people, "whether activists or not, have resented and attacked the images of homosexuality in films (and the other arts and media) for as long as we have managed to achieve any self-respect", and that this attack has primarily been against stereotyping ([1984] 2012: 275). Stereotypes are not only put out in media texts, they are also, as Dyer argues, "widely agreed upon and believed to be right". Dyer considers this damaging in two particular ways: one way concerns how many gay people actually
believe the stereotypes and thus leads to the self-oppression "so characteristic of gay people's lives", and that conforming to stereotypes only confirms their truth ([1984] 2012: 275). Furthermore,

[t]here can be no doubt that most stereotypes of gays in films are demeaning and offensive. Just think of the line-up – the butch dyke and the camp queen, the lesbian vampire and the sadistic queer, the predatory schoolmistress and the neurotic faggot, and all the rest. The amount of hatred, fear, ridicule and disgust packed into those images is unmistakable. ([1984] 2012: 275)

The negativity of such representations is, as Dyer points out, unmistakable since they often connect homosexuality with pathology or deviant behavior. Simultaneously, there can be no doubt that representations have progressed since Dyer's essay, though that does not preclude the continued existence and use of stereotypes. He argues that the question of stereotyping must proceed beyond viewing stereotypes as wrong and distorted:

Righteous dismissal does not make the stereotypes go away, and tends to prevent us from understanding just what stereotypes actually are, how they function, ideologically and aesthetically, and why they are so resilient in the face of our rejection of them. In addition, there is a real problem as to just what we would put in their place. It is often assumed that the aim of character construction should be the creation of "realistic individuals", but, as I will argue, this may have as many drawbacks as its apparent opposite, "unreal" stereotypes, and some form of typing may actually be preferable to it. ([1984] 2012: 275)

Turning stereotypes into archetypes is profoundly problematic, despite their often good intentions, and could result in new stereotypes which conform to different regulatory practices. This is especially troublesome, as Dyer argues, in the "realism" mode which suggests that certain things are realistic and certain things are not.

Dyer fruitfully combines the distinction between social types and stereotypes from Orrin E. Klapp and Antonio Gramsci's theories of cultural hegemony to explain how stereotyping can work. This will be important later in the chapter as well when I discuss 'hegemonic masculinity' and the "hegemony of play". A social type implies familiarity, whereas a stereotype is that which lies outside that familiarity, and social types are given much more flexibility as long as they stay within certain boundaries. Stereotypes are, by contrast, much more rigid: "a system of social- and stereotypes refers to what is, as it were, within and beyond the pale of normalcy" ([1984] 2012: 276). This is a hegemonic process in which what
constitutes "normal" is contrasted and negotiated with that which is "not normal". Hegemony is an active process, and Dyer stresses that it must be "ceaselessly built in the face of both implicit and explicit challenges to it" ([1984] 2012: 277). Stereotyping is thus an important representational practice in the service of normalcy and the current dominant ideas, but what constitutes normal and not normal is the result of clashes and negotiations between dominant and subordinate groups. Viewed as a hegemonic process, then, in stereotyping

the dominant groups apply their norms to subordinated groups, find the latter wanting, hence inadequate, inferior, sick or grotesque and hence reinforcing the dominant groups' own sense of the legitimacy of their domination. [...] What we should be attacking in stereotypes is the attempt of heterosexual society to define us for ourselves, in terms that inevitably fall short of the "ideal" of heterosexuality (that is, taken to be the norm of being human), and to pass this definition off as necessary and natural. Both these simply bolster heterosexual hegemony [...]. ([1984] 2012: 277-278)

The problem is not only the stereotypes themselves, but how they are created not simply as representations, but rather as something which aims to reinforce notions of normalcy. Critiquing stereotyping (and archetyping, for that matter) should consider the purposes of the representations in a larger context. Dyer's focus in "Stereotyping" mostly concerns representations of homosexuality, but it is not difficult to see how the same processes take place in other forms of stereotyping, for example with regards to gender and race/ethnicity.

Stereotyping might discourage the represented/affected groups from wanting media representation. Shaw, referring to interviewees from a previous study, points out that it could be argued that for the LGBT community it is more beneficial "to be left out of media than to be only referenced through stereotypes" (2009: 231). Shaw problematizes the benevolence of exclusion, however, by arguing that symbolic annihilation is just as problematic as being represented through stereotypes. The absence of homosexuality in media representation communicates a nearly exclusive and rigidly heterosexual world which does not correspond well with actual life. When homosexuality is not symbolically annihilated and is actually explicitly represented, it has frequently been used in service of strengthening and affirming heterosexuality, and more frequent progressive mainstream representations did not occur until the 1990s. Older representational modes have still not vanished today, however, and progressive representations exist alongside backlash tropes.
**Burying Gays, Comforting Straights and Hiding Homoeroticism**

If heterosexuality, as Butler claims, is dependent upon acts of repetition in order to assert its originality and its naturalness, and hence its superiority, then stereotypical, delimiting and demeaning representations of homosexuality in mainstream media can work in favor of that goal. A good starting point is the frequent deaths of gay characters. Homosexual narratives, Andrew M. Butler notes, "often end with funerals rather than weddings, with one or other of the lovers dying [...] and seem more dystopian than utopian" (2016: 55). While all sorts of characters die in fiction, the pervasive deaths and rejections of happy relationships and endings for gay characters suggest not only that heterosexuality is sacred, but also that homosexuality is punished for attempting to even exist on equal terms. Heterosexuality may retaliate with death when the naturalized construction of its "heteroanctity" is rendered vulnerable. The popular website TVTropes.com, a wiki database of a plethora of different tropes occurring in popular culture, includes an entry for a trope called "Bury Your Gays" (TV Tropes 2016). It is alternately referred to as the "Dead Lesbian Syndrome". The gist of this trope, according to the website, is how gay characters often "just aren't allowed happy endings" and must die. While views of sexuality nowadays have shifted "somewhat", the death of gay characters in fiction prevail. The contemporary strategy, we learn, is attempting to justify the gay character's death because the character is "too good for this sinful earth", or "[s]ometimes it's because the Magical Queer has died in a Heroic Sacrifice so that the straights may live." The article asserts that the problem "isn't merely that gay characters are killed off: the problem is the tendency that gay characters are killed off *far more often* than straight characters, or when they're killed off because they are gay." Gay characters seemingly have a higher survival rate if they are not in romantic or sexual relationships. These "survival tropes", however, are most common for female characters: "If you're a man, you're basically screwed" (TV Tropes 2016). And "screwed", here, does not refer to anything sexual.

The representation of homosexuality in service of bolstering heterosexuality has been pervasive. Robert Alan Brookey and Robert Westerfelhaus summarize research on three such (stereo)typical representational strategies. The strategies have no official names, so in this thesis I will refer to them as the "comfort strategy", the "discomfort strategy" and the "subtext strategy" to denote their contents and functions. All three are found to various extents in the

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12 "Too Good for This Sinful Earth", "Magical Queer" and "Heroic Sacrifice" are names of other tropes on the website.
Mass Effect and Dragon Age games. The comfort strategy is intended to comfort mainstream audiences and "depicts gays in ways that support rather than threaten the heterosexist order", a move which requires that homosexuality is tamed "by having gay characters serve as comedic foils to heterosexual leads, by portraying them as asexual and apolitical, and by depicting them as self-policing and impossibly perfect protectors of the heterosexist socio-sexual order" ([2002] 2012: 197). In this representational strategy, which is echoed in the "Bury Your Gays" trope, gay characters are usually minor characters, arguably no more than interruptions at worst and sidekicks at best. Their role is to support the straight protagonist's pursuits, whether it is through representing a short break from the norm or directly helping the main character to achieve a heterosexual romance (acting, for example, as a specialist in grooming and etiquette). Gay characters are likely to be singular and therefore they are denied any form of sexual activity save for some possible (hopeless) flirts with the unattainable heterosexual protagonist and stereotypical sexual innuendo. Their gayness is usually their most dominant, if not sole, quality and identity.

The discomfort strategy uses mostly overtly negative representations of homosexuality. Brookey and Westerfelhaus note that a "second strategy portrays gays in negative terms—as depressed and disturbed, as pathetic victims, or as dangerous predators—and thus reaffirms homophobic biases held by many mainstream audience members" ([2002] 2012: 197). This strategy pursues an outright rejection of homosexuality through an uneasy coupling with pathology and deviancy. In such representations homosexuality is usually the cause of the distress the character experiences or causes to others, and gayness is here not a benevolent benefactor to straights like the "adorable alternates" of the comfort strategy. The discomfort strategy might be one of the first or most prominent mainstream media strategies for representing homosexuality. Dyer argues that it was American film noir that provided "the first widely available images of homosexuality" in our time (2002: 50). The dark and dystopic worlds of the classic film noir of the 1940s and 1950s generally link sex with pathology, and while heterosexuality was also usually a "dirty deal", homosexuality was even worse and whenever it appeared it was almost always "branded as the narrative's noir element, the source of aberrant, criminal behavior" (Hirsch 1999: 9, 204). The discomfort strategy employs scare tactics to demonstrate that heterosexuality is generally the safest and most stable sexuality, the sexuality not prone to any misery except that which is imposed on it by an unstable sexuality.
The subtext strategy is, at least when compared to the other two, a rather curious one as it may attempt to represent homosexuality through heterosexuality. This strategy "hides the presence of gays—and any gay sexuality—through the inclusion of subtextual cues that are easily read by the gay audience but are virtually invisible to unsympathetic and unknowledgeable mainstream audiences […]. Such hiding rarely is complete, however, nor is it intended to be." (Brookey and Westerfelhaus [2002] 2012: 197). Brookey and Westerfelhaus relate this strategy to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's discussion of male homosocial bonds and desire. The homosocial, a word Sedgwick identifies as "obviously meant to be distinguished from 'homosexual'", describes "social bonds of people of the same sex" and is often applied to "such activities as 'male bonding,' which may, as in our society, be characterized by intense homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality" ([1985] 2016: 1). There can be no doubt that deep friendships between people of the same gender are important in our culture, but for men this is seemingly more problematic than for women. R. W. Connell calls homophobia the "classic barrier to friendship among heterosexual men", and that men's sexuality is "more sharply constrained by homophobia" (2005: 133, 247). Representations of explicit homosexuality between men can possibly be seen as anxious, then, because homosexuality transgresses the seemingly precarious limits of homosocial bonds.

While homosocial and homosexual are presented as a radically disrupted continuum to better separate the two qualitatively in service of heterosexuality, Sedgwick theorizes that they are in fact part of the same continuum and that men's relations to other men, regardless of whether they are explicitly sexual or not, are based on many of the same structures ([1985] 2016: 1-2). Sedgwick does not mean to claim that all men are gay, but to emphasize that homosocial and homosexual are much more similar than they are different. Subtext in media representation can thus be a useful strategy for exploring sexuality by playing on homoeroticism, simultaneously as its continued use may demonstrate the relevance of Sedgwick's claims of the similarity between the homosocial and the homosexual, and that the sharp divide is still being drawn. We can see this in the contemporary emergence of the "bromance" genre, for example. "Bromance" fuses the two words "brother" and "romance" together; "brother" is here not meant to be thought of as an actual blood relative but rather a very close friend, and denotes "an emotionally intense bond between presumably straight males who demonstrate an openness to intimacy that they neither regard, acknowledge, avow, nor express sexually" (DeAngelis 2014: 1). There is no doubt that the emergence of this phenomenon points to a more open representational development, yet it still lingers on
traditional values and anxieties: "bromance involves something that must happen (the demonstration of intimacy itself) on the condition that other things not happen (the avowal or expression of sexual desire between straight males)" (DeAngelis 2014: 1). Bromance plays more openly with deep emotional ties between men, yet generally frames this in the safe sphere of heterosexuality, making it a rather contradictory term.

**The Dawn of Liberal Conservatism**

Progressive and humanizing representations of homosexuality in mainstream media occur, but they are often affected by anxieties about what is representable and how it should be represented. Homosexuality has traditionally been represented in service of heterosexuality, so what does representing homosexuality for its own sake entail? Here it is important to briefly address American teen television in the 1990s and early 2000s because it has been notable for approaching homosexuality in a much more progressive manner. These teen melodramas were interested in approaching issues that were relevant to contemporary teenagers and young adults, and homosexuality was one of these topics (in addition to typical melodrama topics such as family, friends and romantic relationships). Glyn Davis applies the useful term 'liberal conservatism' in discussing how these programs address the topic of homosexuality through both a progressive and safe approach: "If the teen series has the potential to tell us things about queer teens, it will only tell us certain things, and not others" (2004: 130). Representing homosexuality and queerness is not an easy task since they have to exist alongside the heterosexual structure and system and continue to exist as "alternatives" in a heterosexual world: "That means that only certain types of queers get represented, and only certain issues are addressed by the programmes in which they appear. Queer sexual activity, for instance, is minimal, in contrast to extensive, occasionally graphic, heterosexual coupling" (Davis 2004: 130). The teen series Davis investigates mark a significant departure from previous typical representations of homosexuality: "Whereas, in previous decades, homosexuality per se was used by television series as a 'problem', the contemporary teen series (and other television series) now often depict coming out as the major problem for queer individuals to overcome" and this coming out "occupies a pivotal position in the teen series' narrativisation of queer adolescent subjectivity" (2004: 131). In these teen series, struggling to come to terms with one's queer identity and articulating it for oneself and others
become the focus instead of homosexuality being problematic. The focus shifts over to confronting societal and cultural pressures and finding one's place in the world.

Liberal conservatism, in the variants found in the shows Davis analyzes, is evident in how the programs "while recognising the 'difference' of these individuals' sexuality, attempt to make their queer characters ordinary, and their lives as everyday as those of their friends" (Davis 2004: 135). This can be seen as attempts at normalization and present queer characters in a "healthy" way by moving toward archetypes rather than stereotypes and to avoid the comfort and discomfort strategies, but simultaneously this normalization process can also work to eradicate more queer aspects in character representation. Additionally, liberal conservatism can also restrict these queer characters' partners or romantic affairs. Homosexuality and queerness then, become more of a topic for conversation rather than explicit acts, and such acts are either very minimal or happen off-screen. The "coming out" story can also be seen as a very safe plot device for representing homosexuality, because it offers a particularly universal and unique gay storyline. Heteronormativity's existence "means that there is no social imperative (or need) to identify or 'come out' as heterosexual" (Clarke et al. 2010: 121) since heterosexuality is already assumed. The "coming out" story might also be very realistic and necessary for both the characters and the audience, but its perpetuation can also suggest that while homosexuality is not aberrant or deviant, it nevertheless exists as an "other" in a predominantly heterosexual world, and that every queer person must create their own sphere both in and outside of this world. Liberal conservatism thus allows for more positive representations of homosexuality and queerness, but at the same time the types and expressions of queerness allowed are restricted. For example, in the mainstream television approach (as in the shows Davis discusses), coming out and talking about homosexuality take center stage while more physical and sexual content is minimal or absent. Optional homosexuality might be seen as the game industry's move toward a similar liberal conservatism specific to games – the content is there, but only by actively pursuing it.

Games saw no similar developments in the 1990s. Infocom's 1986 PC text-adventure game Moonmist is argued to be the first video game to feature a lesbian character (Cobbett 2011,
Holmes 2016), and the company's 1990 game *Circuit's Edge* included a gay man. Neither of these characters were playable (Cobbett 2011). Tristan Donovan argues that homosexuality remained largely taboo in video games throughout the 1980s beyond Japan's *yaoi*, or boys' love, titles. The few that did mention the subject usually did so in a negative way. It took until the 1995 adventure game *The Orion Conspiracy* for the subject to be tackled in a less prejudiced way. (2010: 231)

In the PC game *The Orion Conspiracy* the player assumes the role of a father who investigates the death of his son, and it is revealed that his son was gay. This had been unknown to the father and the game details how he comes to terms with this information. While perhaps less prejudiced, it was also a fairly safe inclusion because the player character is not gay himself, offering some distance to the topic. The following year went much further. The PC game *Phantasmagoria: A Puzzle of Flesh* (1996) "immediately courted controversy due to its graphic violence, sex scenes and a gay kiss involving the player's bisexual lead character" (Donovan 2010: 246). Here the controversy comes from an uneasy combination between violence, sex and queerness. If violence and sex were already problematic, the addition of the queer aspect did not perhaps do much to advance non-heterosexuality in games in a time where sex in games was already a highly anxious topic. Additionally, the game used live-action clips with real actors, making its depictions much more realistic. Despite the main character of the game being bisexual, however, "the in-game relationships were between him and his two competing girlfriends" (Cobbett 2011). Note that all of these games were for the PC and not for any of the (more conservative) mainstream home consoles.

Mainstream media have been sluggish, as David Gauntlett phrases it (2008: 88), in introducing homosexuality as a serious representational practice. While Rosemary Hennessy notes that in the 90s "gays and lesbians have been more visible than ever in arts and entertainment, despite the industry's still deeply entrenched investment in heteronormativity" (1994-1995: 60), the general sluggishness is evident as it took until May 2000 for the teen series *Dawson's Creek* to include "what is considered to be the first male-male romantic kiss on a prime-time [US] TV program" (Wilke in Gauntlett 2008: 88). This is the very same year that saw the release of *The Sims*, which was then, according to Mia Consalvo, "perhaps the most progressive game yet released concerning sexuality" (2003: 181). Gauntlett notes that

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13 The former lover of the game's lesbian character Vivien Pentreath has seemingly committed suicide (after leaving Vivien and marrying a man). Thus, gaming's first gay character is introduced through the failed homosexual romance trope.
lesbians became more visible as leading characters on television during the 1990s and not just as rare appearances as deviants, but that the same decade was not "especially kind to gay men on US TV", noting how gay men are seemingly subject to more controversy than gay women (Gauntlett 2008: 89-91). This has clear ties to how female homosexuality does not carry the same pathologization and anxiety in mainstream media as male homosexuality, and is seemingly much better suited to work in service of heteronormativity when represented "positively".

The 1990s is a significant decade for the move toward more progressive representations of homosexuality, but it is important to emphasize that the 1990s also saw an increase in essentialist views about sexuality and gender, creating a rather contradictory mainstream media space. The decade of liberal conservatism and more openness is also the decade where homosexuality could be incorporated as a commodity for heterosexual purposes, where Mars/Venus-discourses about men and women would flourish, and where feminism experienced heated debates and backlash. This emerging sensibility called 'postfeminism' is important for understanding the contemporary contradictory media landscape and what it might mean for the current politics of representation.

**The Complexities of Postfeminist Media Culture**

There can be no doubt that the battles fought by feminism and the decriminalization and de-pathologization of homosexuality and the emergence of queer movements, among other things, have led to a very different and more equalized cultural landscape in terms of gender and sexuality. Yet, there can also be no doubt that these battles are far from over and that the issues become ever more complex. Changes to traditional gender roles, for example, have led some to theorize a "men's crisis" where men are seen as less important to the reproduction of society and family because women become more independent. Gauntlett calls a masculinity crisis "a bit over-excitable": "Men may not be able to fit into their traditional role, but that's no reason to conclude that life is over for men" (2008: 9). Men and women have to find new places in the world, and Gauntlett emphasizes that the media and popular culture are critical for this process "because they offer important tools to help men - and women - adjust to contemporary life" (2008: 9). This adjustment sounds very orderly and helpful, but contemporary life in terms of gender and sexuality through mainstream media is a complex
mix of progression and backlash. Rosalind Gill points out the "extraordinary contradictoriness of constructions of gender in today's media":

confident expressions of 'girl power' sit alongside reports of 'epidemic' levels of anorexia and body dysmorphia; graphic tabloid reports of rape are placed cheek by jowl with adverts for lap-dancing clubs and telephone sex lines; lad magazines declare the 'sex war' over, while reinstating beauty contests and championing new, ironic modes of sexism; and there are regular moral panics about the impact on men of the new, idealized male body imagery, while the re-sexualization of women's bodies in public space goes virtually unremarked upon. Everywhere, it seems, feminist ideas have become a kind of common sense, yet feminism has never been more bitterly repudiated. (2007: 1)

If the media help us to adjust to contemporary life, it seems that we are adjusted to necessary contradictory disarray. Gill notes that, like the media, "gender relations and feminist ideas are themselves changing and in flux" (2007: 2) and that there is no single feminism, but multiple diverse feminisms. She suggests that the media exhibit a postfeminist sensibility in their representations and practices (2007: 249). This postfeminism and its (dis)contents provide important insight into how representations of gender and sexuality are shaped by and intersect in our current mainstream media landscape.

Postfeminism is both a theoretical academic field and a cultural condition (I will focus on the latter), and is, as Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon point out, "a concept fraught with contradictions" (2009: 1). Postfeminism can assume itself in the personal, social, and political spheres as well as in the media as attitudes and representations. The term refers to an aftermath and continuation of second-wave feminism, and, depending on perspective, a possible "end" to feminism as well. Angela McRobbie sees postfeminism as a type of symbolic power where feminism "is taken into account in order that it can be understood as having passed away" (2011: 179-180). Feminism is posited as outdated and uncool and not relevant for today's seemingly liberated women. McRobbie argues that a main strategy of postfeminism is to continuously point out "the seeming gains" of second-wave feminism, "implying that 'things have changed', so feminism is now irrelevant" (2011: 180). In this view, postfeminism is a type of victory declaration: equality has now been achieved and there is no more reason to fight. It can thus produce a defeatist attitude that does not resonate well with real cultural conditions. This "victory" can be derived from how postfeminism "emerges in the intersections and hybridisations of mainstream media, consumer culture, neo-liberal politics, postmodern theory and, significantly, feminism" (Genz and Brabon 2009: 5).
Neoliberalism dictates that good subjects take care of themselves and that media producers have no significant (ethical) responsibilities in terms of representation (Gill 2007, Shaw 2014).

There are three particular postfeminist cultural trends that are highly relevant for this thesis, and which will be found to different extents in the BioWare games: a resurgence of ideas of natural sexual difference, the commodification of difference, and a marked sexualization of culture (Gill 2007: 255). Postfeminist mainstream culture is a rather heterosexual and capitalist culture with ever-increasing sexualization of both women and men in media images, and it is paradoxically both liberal and traditional.

Homosexuality might become more increasingly acknowledged and visible in mainstream media, but contemporary media discourses also communicate a resurgence in heteronormative ideas of sexual difference: that men and women are fundamentally different and naturally compatible. One reason for this was promoted by backlashes to feminism and criticism of "political correctness" (Gill 2007: 265), which we have clearly seen another resurgence of in contemporary gaming culture and debates about representation in games and women in the game industry (Shaw 2014; Harvey and Fisher 2015, 2016). Another reason was motivated by the "growing interest in evolutionary psychology and developments in genetic science which held out the promise of locating a genetic basis for all human characteristics" (Gill 2007: 265). The search for the "gay gene" is part of this development. Additionally, the "explosion of self-help literature" promoted views that men and women are fundamentally different and that feminism had failed when it denied difference rather than acknowledging it (Gill 2007: 265). John Gray's *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* is symptomatic of this change. Gray views men and women as psychologically different, as if they came from two different planets, and that they must learn to communicate properly. Mars/Venus-discourse builds on ideas of compulsory heterosexuality.

Such views display a strong belief in what is called 'character dichotomy': "Women are supposed to have one set of traits, men another. Women are supposed to be nurturant, suggestible, talkative, emotional, intuitive and sexually loyal; men are supposed to be aggressive, tough-minded, taciturn, rational, analytic and promiscuous" (Connell and Pearse 2015: 42). These "gendered" traits are argued to derive from nature itself through natal sex, and in turn a failure to display and enact certain traits may be seen as "unmanly" and "unwomanly" and hence, wrong or deviant. The Mars/Venus-discourse avoids biological links
by focusing on differences in psychology, but it promotes a firm belief in character dichotomy nonetheless. Though character dichotomy between men and women has been "overwhelmingly, decisively, refuted" by research, Connell and Pearse argue that "[m]ost people still believe in character dichotomy. Pop psychology is utterly committed to this idea" (2015: 43). The over-representation of strong and active male characters and more passive and sexualized female characters in games is a clear example of sustained character dichotomy. Not only do such views reproduce outdated and restrictive gender norms and imply that homosexuality, among other things, is aberrant, but may also serve to keep heterosexuality and patriarchal notions in place. Sexual difference discourses, Gill argues, "serve to (re-)eroticize power relations between men and women. At one level this simply means that difference is constructed as sexy. At another […], discourses of natural gender difference can be used to freeze in place existing inequalities by representing them as inevitable and – if read correctly – as pleasurable" (2007: 266). These defeatist discourses might thus attempt to uphold gender and sexual status quo: surrendering to "nature" is all we need to do.

**Commodity Homosexuality and Queer Chic**

In addition to more progressive representations, mainstream media also found ways to use homosexuality as a commodity for heterosexual consumers. This development should be seen in connection with the establishment and rapid rise of the gay niche market in the early 90s (Sender 2004). The early 90s saw the appearance of "lesbian chic" and "luscious/lipstick lesbians": lesbianism was seemingly fashionable and lesbians looked just like conventionally attractive heterosexual women. Ann M. Ciasullo argues how mainstream media increasingly deployed the "femme body" in representations, most notably in advertising, which allows lesbians to appear attractive to heterosexual men and women; to the former as erotic objects and to the latter as consumers. Simultaneously, through the femme body the lesbian is de-homosexualized because of her conventionally attractive appearance, and also because she often appears alone ([2001] 2012: 329-330). The recognizable "lesbian" aspects here may play on what Elizabeth Ellsworth has termed 'lesbian verisimilitude': "the representation of body language, facial expression, and general appearance that can be claimed and coded as 'lesbian' according to the current standards of style within lesbian communities" (Clark [1991] 1993). The "butch" so commonly associated with lesbianism is erased and replaced by the
saleable femme (Ciasullo [2001] 2012: 329-330). Ciasullo acknowledges the positive aspects of depicting female homosexuality as something other than stereotypically masculine, but she remains skeptical: "the femme or feminine images presented to mainstream audiences have the potential to be interpreted in a variety of ways, many of them not subversive at all. The result, in fact, could well be a reinscription of mainstream norms and ideals" ([2001] 2012: 332). I can add to this that it is highly questionable that representations of homosexuality constructed primarily through heterosexual norms and for heterosexual pleasure signal progression for homosexuality. Here, lesbianism is represented in relation to consumption, which Danae Clark ([1991] 1993) refers to as "commodity lesbianism". This creates a new type of comfort strategy. As Hennessy argues, "the visibility of sexual identity is often a matter of commodification" (1994-1995: 31). Female homosexuality possesses this mainstream appeal which can be used to target both heterosexual men and women and thus it is enabled more widespread mainstream attention – though this is not necessarily particularly progressive. It is worth noting that commodification of male homosexuality for mainstream consumption to a similar extent as commodity lesbianism has not occurred. As Fred Fejes has pointed out: "Mainstream media gay masculinity is a curiously de-sexed, de-eroticized phenomenon" (2000: 116), which suggests a close link between mainstream culture and the anxieties of male homosexuality.

Contemporary media culture, particularly advertising, has intensified its treatment of female homosexuality as a commodity through what Gill refers to as "queer chic", a representational mode where queerness is "increasingly signified through a hyper-sexualized chic" (2007: 100). While lesbians of the 90s appeared mostly alone, the new figure known as the "hot lesbian" "never appears alone […] but is almost always depicted kissing, touching or locked in an embrace with another woman" (Gill 2009: 152). Such "hot lesbian" representation, Gill argues, "seems designed for male titillation" and plays on codes from heterosexual men's pornography (2009: 152, 2007: 100). Even games have used female homosexuality for male heterosexual appeal. Shaw notes that the game Fear Effect 2 is somewhat problematic because the game's "primary audience was straight men, although the main characters were lesbians" (2009: 239). This is not to suggest that games targeted toward men cannot include lesbian main characters, but to emphasize how representations of homosexuality are reduced and reworked in service of heterosexuality rather than serious representation that does not aim for male titillation. As a stark contrast, queer chic does not seem to apply much to gay men. Gay men, Gill argues, "are rarely portrayed kissing or even touching […] for the most part
gay men are signified through stylish and attractive appearance or through a series of negative stereotypes rather than intimate conduct" (2009: 152). There is a distinct discrepancy in how mainstream culture treats male and female homosexuality, and this is something that the BioWare games reflect well.

**Sexualization of Men**

Mainstream culture might generally be afraid of representing gay men explicitly, but nevertheless a notable point of postfeminist media culture is how men are increasingly sexualized. It is argued that the expanded commercialization of masculinity from the 1950s and onwards culminated in the commercial exploitation of "men-as-sex-object" in the 1980s (Beynon in Genz and Brabon 2009: 134). This commercial masculinity "transformed the male body into an 'objectified commodity' that saw the rise of retail clothing outlets for men, new visual representations of masculinity on television and in the media, and the growth of men's lifestyle magazines" (Genz and Brabon 2009: 134). Commercialized masculinity has favored "the young, 'good-looking' male body" and then has had it "(re-)inscribed as the site of opportunity and power, not because of physical prowess and economic value linked to labour, but as a signifying surface for commercialised masculinity" (Genz and Brabon 2009: 135). Gill et al. point out that gay media and gay culture have worked to dissociate the "natural" link between masculinity and heterosexuality, and that through showing men as objects of desire they also removed the premise of men as active sexual subjects only so that masculinity is no longer synonymous with activity. This went mainstream (Gill et al. 2000: 104). They argue that the reason gay images of men have gone mainstream is the realization that some heterosexual women found such representations very desirable, and the active role of women as gazers of men (Gill et al. 2000: 105). Furthermore, they refer to arguments that this mainstreaming of sexualized and objectified men in the public sphere have not taken the form of many different masculinities, but rather restricts itself to a very generic style: typically white, 30 years or under, muscular and slim, usually clean-shaven (though some designer stubble appears now and then) and particular facial features "which connote a combination of softness and strength – strong jaw, large lips and eyes, soft, clear skin [...]

Put simply, saleable and attractive masculinities are the ones that get promoted and idealized, and, like idealized femininities, mainstream media have a very narrow conception of what those masculinities are.
While men have been increasingly treated as sex objects in mainstream media, a role previously nearly exclusive to women, it would nevertheless be wrong to suggest that this is the same manifestation of sexualization as that of women, or a manifestation of "equality" for that matter. Sexualized and objectified mainstream imagery of men is most likely not aimed at heterosexual men in order to intentionally generate homosexual or homoerotic identification and attraction (not any more than what sexualized imagery of women does for heterosexual women), and has been understood as an attempt to encourage aspirational identification with men (Gill et al. 2000: 106). Kenneth MacKinnon argues that the male as erotic object is often represented through disavowal (2003: 29). Disavowal in this context means that male eroticization/objectification is "treated as if it were not happening—or treated with a different significance to that which it seems to have" (MacKinnon 2003: 29). Sexualization of men might occur in relation to some activity, such as sports, so that the sexualization does not seem like the primary reason and thus it is excused and easily explained away. Dyer argues that images of men "are often images of men doing something", which is considered important for representing masculinity as active even in seemingly eroticized and passive contexts (2002: 128).

That sexualization of men is not the same as the sexualization of women is due to the fact that men still represent the "dominant" and preferred gender in many mainstream arenas. While such imagery can produce body pressure that may be experienced by men as damaging, unrepresentative and unattainable (just like for women), matters which should be taken seriously, it is not the same as the objectification of women in that men often remain the active and controlling subjects. While advertisements may pose more or less the same objectification, narratives usually do not. In video games, this can be seen in how male protagonists are often portrayed in the same manner as idealized men in mainstream imagery, being reflections of commodified masculinities (for example, striking outfits, fashionable hairstyles, gym-toned bodies and conventionally attractive looks) but still remain heroes and the focus of the story. This may also serve to disavow any overt eroticization of the male. The appearances of sexualization of men and women might seem similar on the surface, but the mechanisms they operate through may be quite different.
The Mainstream Game Industry and Hegemonic Masculinity

Games are informed by culture and games inform culture, but when it comes to the topic of representation and diversity there are at least two major reasons for the mainstream game industry's rigid and restrictive practices: the lack of diversity in the workforce, and the belief that diversity in games, such as representations of homosexuality, lies in the consumer's responsibility to request/demand representation. Understanding the particular industry logics is thus important for discussing cultural representation in games. Ernest Adams in his *Fundamentals of Game Design* laments that "far too many game designers (and product designers in general) treat men and women as entirely different species with little in common", and he progressively encourages the budding game designer reader to ignore backlash from a minority of men who are threatened by the inclusion of female protagonists: "their assertions that men won't play games with female protagonists are simply not true, and in any case, it's not necessary to cater to men to make a popular game. If a game is good, they'll play it" (2014: 85). This much needed admirable attitude and encouragement is currently not reflected well in the mainstream industry, however. In a paper titled "The Hegemony of Play", Janine Fron, Tracy Fullerton, Jacquelyn Ford Morie and Celia Pearce attack in no uncertain terms what they consider the hegemonic elite in the game industry and how it has carefully constructed and controlled gender and diversity in specific ways:

The power elite of the game industry is a predominantly white, and secondarily Asian, male-dominated corporate and creative elite that represents a select group of large, global publishing companies in conjunction with a handful of massive chain retail distributors. This hegemonic elite determines which technologies will be deployed and which will not; which games will be made, and by which designers; which players are important to design for, and which play styles will be supported. The hegemony operates on both monetary and cultural levels. (2007: 1)

The hegemonic elite and their practices as discussed here are critical for understanding the mainstream game industry and its representational lack, though it is if course crucial to understand that this is not the situation for every actor in the mainstream game industry. These are nevertheless useful arguments that call attention to the power structures at play from a macro perspective and put them into context. Fron et al. do not believe that these power structures are inevitable, and urge those in game studies to "step up to the plate' and take a more pro-active stance in questioning and critiquing the status of the Hegemony of Play" (2007: 1). Furthermore:
[The hegemony] works in concert with game developers and self-selected hardcore "gamers," who have systematically developed a rhetoric of play that is exclusionary, if not entirely alienating to "minority" players (who, in numerical terms, actually constitute a majority) such as most women and girls, males of many ages, people of different racial and cultural backgrounds. It is aided and abetted by a publication and advertising infrastructure, characterized by game review magazines, television programming and advertising that valorizes certain types of games, while it marginalizes those that do not fit the "hardcore gamer" demographic. These attitudes prevail, in spite of the fact that inclusiveness has produced some of the best-selling games in history, such as Pac-Man, Myst, and The Sims. (Fron et al. 2007: 1)

The mainstream game industry is ruled by tradition and conservatism, both in the types of games it produces, the desired/designated audience, and its representational practices which in turn is often meant to reflect what the industry thinks the audience can or should identify with, as if diversity itself is not part of a greater cultural goal but rather a matter of commodification. Male dominance in the game industry has also, which Shira Chess, drawing on Consalvo and Fron et al., argues, resulted in that "only a handful of women are interested in being game designers, thereby limiting women's influence and maintaining the hegemony and dominant ideologies of gaming's status quo" (2015: 170). Barring women from entering the game industry, among other things, might be considered an important factor in the mainstream industry's lack of diversity in representation.

The structures and practices of the hegemony of play as Fron et al. describe it exemplify the gender order relationship that R. W. Connell has termed 'hegemonic masculinity', and this has important consequences for representation. Connell introduced the term hegemonic masculinity into research in the 1980s to discuss the construction of different types of masculinities and the power relations between them, as well as the relationship between men and women in the gender order. Connell emphasizes the importance of viewing systems and institutions as gendered spaces, and that there is a "world gender order" that can be defined as "the structure of relationships that interconnect regimes of institutions, and the gender orders of local societies, on a world scale" (2005: xxi). Connell argues that it "has become increasingly clear that different masculinities are produced in the same cultural or institutional setting" (2005: 36), meaning that dominant ideas about masculinity do not automatically guarantee their (re)production or dominance. Connell proposes to put masculinity into a system of power relations not only between different masculinities, but also between men and women:
Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women. (2005: 77)

Hegemonic masculinity is thus not gender politics that only affects men, but also implicates the position of women in society. The critique of the hegemony of play can be seen as a critique of the hegemonic masculinity that structures and dominates the mainstream game industry. It also emphasizes how hegemonic masculinity has far-reaching consequences. For example, Shaw argues that since "heterosexual masculinity is the presumed normative identity in both the audiences and industry, it is unsurprising that video game content follows similar norms" (2009: 239), an argument which exemplifies how hegemonic masculinity carries significant power in what gets included and represented as well as how that inclusion and representation is constructed.

Connell maintains that hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed character type, but that it is "the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable" (2005: 76). A focus on the gender relations among men offers a gain in realism, and that a relational approach "makes it easier to recognize the hard compulsions under which gender configurations are formed, the bitterness as well as the pleasure in gendered experience" (Connell 2005: 76). Those who are the most visible bearers of hegemonic masculinity (whatever it might be) are not necessarily the most powerful people. Connell argues that exemplars of hegemonic masculinity might be film actors or even fantasy figures, and that those who hold significant power or wealth may be very different from the hegemony in their personal lives. Nevertheless, Connell argues,

[h]egemony is likely to be established only if there is some correspondence between cultural ideal and institutional power, collective if not individual. So the top levels of business, the military and government provide a fairly convincing corporate display of masculinity, still very little shaken by feminist women or dissenting men. It is the successful claim to authority, more than direct violence, that is the mark of hegemony (though violence often underpins or supports authority). (2005: 77)

Connell stresses that hegemonic masculinity embodies a "currently accepted" strategy and that new groups (including women) may challenge and construct new hegemonies (2005: 77). The dominance of male protagonists in games is an example of hegemonic masculinity as representation. Many of these male characters are tough, masculine and heterosexual. This
can lead to female (main) characters repeatedly being marginalized, hypersexualized and used as damsels in distress for the male characters to save. There are several alternative masculinities to the hegemonic ones in games. Super Mario is an example of a character that does not embody the hypermasculinity found in many other game characters, but he is also made abstract by his cartoonish appearance (and enjoys success due to his long history and iconic status). Despite the cartoonish looks, Super Mario may actually resemble most male players more closely than the hypermasculine heroes of action and role-playing games who never have time for the gym, but manage to always look muscular and in shape anyway. Despite that, Super Mario is not the current hegemonic (commercial) ideal communicated through many different media texts, but works to show how hegemony can be fluid and accepting of certain forms of diversity.

Hegemonic masculinity is structured around three main practices of domination: subordination, complicity and marginalization. In relation to subordination, Connell uses homosexuality as the prime example, arguing that the most important case of subordination between groups of men in contemporary European/American society is "the dominance of heterosexual men and the subordination of homosexual men" (2005: 78). Connell calls this much more than cultural stigmatization of homosexuality, stressing that gay men "are subordinated to straight men by an array of quite material practices", arguing that this oppression places "homosexual masculinities at the bottom of a gender hierarchy among men" (2005: 78). Symbolic annihilation and comfort/discomfort strategies in media representations exemplify this attitude toward homosexuality. In relation to complicity, Connell argues that not many men actually meet the normative standards posited by hegemonic masculinity, but since they are men they are able to benefit from the "patriarchal dividend", the general benefits men gain from the subordination of women (2005: 79). In games, this patriarchal dividend is arguably reflected in the vast practices that specifically target or construct a white straight male demographic, which in a macro perspective prioritizes and "benefits" men as preferred subjects. Marginalization refers to how gender interplays with structures such as class and race, and how hegemonic masculinity authorizes certain aspects of this: "[...] in the United States, particular black athletes may be exemplars for hegemonic masculinity. But the fame and wealth of individual stars has no trickle-down-effect; it does not yield social authority to black men generally" (Connell 2005: 81). Hegemonic masculinity then, in this current case, is also privileged toward white, heterosexual men, a revelation which should come as no surprise. These three aspects are for Connell how hegemonic masculinity operates
and attempts to maintain its dominance. The mainstream game industry seen from a macro perspective has been surprisingly more devoted to a rigid hegemonic masculinity than other mainstream media. Once again it is important to stress that hegemonic masculinity is not fixed, and with challenges come inevitable (but slow) changes.

The recent years have seen a drastic increase in activism devoted to challenging the hegemony of play and promoting diversity in the game industry, most notably through various "women in games" initiatives that seek to make game production more inclusive for female employees (Harvey and Fisher 2015). In turn, diversity in the workforce is believed to create more diversity in game representations. There can be no doubt that an open and inclusive industry is healthy for game production and game culture. But diversity in employment does not necessarily entail diversity in representation. Women, when considered as having a subordinate status, are often thought to have a type of "double vision" granting them unique insights "to see the view from above and from below and thus produce fuller, fairer and more accurate representations" (Gill 2007: 125). Gill is skeptical of this view because it treats women as a homogenous group and that "the key division in society is between men and women" (2007: 125). Similarly, Shaw, quoting Charlotte Bunch, is critical of this "add women and stir" approach because it "assumes that there are no structural limitations within the industry that preclude this representation, that men in the industry are simply incapable of creating texts that are not representations of themselves or their fantasies, and that all women are feminists" (2014: 5). Likewise, it could be argued that the employment of more LGBT-persons in game development does not automatically result in more gay content in games, for example, because this problematically assumes that everyone who is not a heterosexual, white and cis-gendered male is an activist for their "cause" and that dominant industry discourses are easily thwarted by a simple reversal.

While diversity in texts is not guaranteed simply by diversifying the workforce, we must also acknowledge the fact that a diverse industry is an important step toward representational diversity. If a diverse workforce is believed to help create more diverse representation, then, as Gill points out, the key "will be diversity in terms of social class, 'race' and ethnicity (among other things) as well as gender" (2007: 126). Once again, however, Gill is skeptical about this approach leading to more diverse representations as it "ignores the significance of both ideology and the market" (2007: 126). This skepticism is warranted, but in terms of the game industry, at least, we should nevertheless realize the possibilities that workforce
diversity may bring, seeing as how the male-dominated industry is largely responsible for its restrictive representational practices. As Hennessy argues, the increased cultural visibility of homosexuality was "in great measure the effect of the relentless organizing efforts of lesbians and gay men" (1994-1995: 32), meaning that industry diversity is also an important aspect that cannot be ignored. But, as Gill points out, understanding the issue of diversity also requires looking at the market. In games the construction of the market is important in addition the internal gender logics of the industry (the two aspects are deeply connected, of course), because representation in games is strongly and restrictively tied to the commodification of consumer assumptions and expectations, perhaps even more so than in other mainstream media.

Game Representation and Market Logics

Male dominance in the game industry continues and has "overall […] been resistant to acknowledge the importance of gender" (Kafai et al. 2008: xx), which is reflected in how gaming has been historically constructed as a male activity and which, in turn, has always tied the question of representation to "expectations about audiences" (Shaw 2014: viii). Diversity in games, then, has not historically been primarily approached from the goal of social justice or a desire to represent culture more broadly and engender new ways of exploring stories and themes. A core tenet in this issue is identification. Regarding LGBT characters in games, for example, the major argument for their exclusion is that "the majority of gamers cannot identify with them" (Shaw 2009: 239). This argument presumes not only that the majority of gamers, which in this case is likely thought to be straight males, cannot identify with characters that are non-heterosexual, but also that identification in games works differently than in other media. Since games are often considered more interactive than other media due to the player's direct participation, identification with game content is also generally believed to be stronger. Interactivity and identification are thus often conflated, which in turn suggests that representation is also more personal to players and thus more care must somehow be exercised when creating game content.

In *Gaming at the Edge*, Shaw (2014) confronts the dominant discourse of identification and discusses how the players in her study do not necessarily identify with game content any more than with other media content, and that players are fully able to enjoy and engage with
representations that are not thought to be identifiable for them. Shaw uses these insights as a call for new industry logics. I will address this topic below. The game industry should really already be aware of players' ability to enjoy content which does not represent themselves, considering its penchant for producing shooter games and how the majority of players are unlikely to be soldiers in real life. Sexuality and gender, however, seem to be much more personal and precarious topics. Developers unproblematically assume that players generally can enjoy being relentless killing machines, but do not assume that male players want to play as strong female characters or, even more shockingly, a gay man, or think that female players want to play as something other than hypersexualized female characters primarily designed for the male gaze.

The industry might think that it "protects" players by avoiding content that could be deemed controversial, but at the same time this protection is a great underestimation of players. It does not only assume that players do not want diverse content because they cannot identify with it; it also assumes they cannot handle such content and preemptively precludes the possibility of even exploring what players can identify with. With regards to homosexuality, for example, this also assumes that gay people are predominantly nothing but their non-normative sexuality, and that this is posited as the reason why identification for heterosexual players is not possible. Gay characters, then, become a matter of alienation because they are not heterosexual, an aspect which seemingly overrides most other human aspects they have in common with heterosexuals. Gayness is not just difference in terms of sexuality, it is also deviance from humanity. Gay characters, it seems, are first and foremost gay before they are human, whereas heterosexuals are human precisely because they are heterosexual and thus they have universal identificatory appeal. In this way, the mainstream game industry does not only contribute to keeping homosexuality invisible or absent, it also works to dehumanize those who are not heterosexual.

Marginalization of homosexuality in games is further complicated by the fact that, as Shaw points out, "gaming is not a readily recognized part of gay culture" (2009: 242), and furthermore that "[g]amers are not gay, and gays do not play video games – or so the dominant discourses go" (2011: 36). The issue is not simply heterocentrism in that heterosexuality is considered the most important sexuality to represent, but also the belief that gay people do not generally play games. Once more, this idea connects sexuality to more than sexual attraction; attraction to people of the same gender is assumed to also come with other
dominant interests. This is likely closely connected to the construction of homosexuality through consumerism, where the stereotypical "gay market" is fashion and interior. These are interests typically connoted with women and femininity, and this assumes, among other things, that gay men are generally effeminate and have more in common with women than heterosexual men. And, if the game industry has had issues with recognizing women as players, then certainly gay men have been deemed a rather unlikely audience.

The recognition of the significance of the "pink economy" and the targeting of gay people as consumers particularly in niche media (Gill 2007, Sender 2004) has proven profitable, but a similar recognition of gay consumers has not been deemed viable for electronics and gaming. Thus, a dominant view is that there is no need to represent homosexuality in games at all, at least not for especially progressive or diverse reasons. This assumes that homosexuality has no place in the life of heterosexuality. Lack of representations of marginalized groups in games, then, "is often tied to the fact that the industry rarely recognizes members of these groups as gamers" (Shaw 2011: 28). This, in turn, adheres to the rather depressing and seemingly axiomatic market logic that "[g]roups are representable only insofar as they are marketable" (Shaw 2011: 33). This assumes that marginalized groups are not part of the mainstream demographic (or they become "lucky accidents" if they happen to buy the products), and implies that such groups seek out niche media instead. If games are supposed to represent homosexuality, then seemingly there has to be a notable gay market. Once again, this enters the precarious territory of assuming homosexuality to be gay people's definitional trait, that gay people are not in mainstream venues, and that straight players want nothing to do with homosexuality at all. The game industry, for good and bad, is an active partner in the construction of sexuality and gender beliefs and norms, not just their mirror.

**The Matter of Representation**

Representation seems to matter a great deal to the mainstream game industry considering its overall historically reactionary and restrictive practices, but does representation matter to players? It could easily be argued that representation is not as important in games as in other media since players are supposedly more engaged in activity rather than viewing and interpretation. The element of gameplay has also connoted games with ideas of triviality and as products mostly for entertainment, not for contemplation and cultural content. The early
years of game studies (late 1990s–early 2000s) saw a championing of views that preferred the importance of studying the more formal and structural features of games over their textual and representational features (see next chapter). A relevant example is Espen Aarseth's rejection of the appearance of Lara Croft of the Tomb Raider series, a character who has garnered a lot of critical attention over the years. Aarseth considers Lara Croft's body irrelevant to him as a player because another body would not have caused him to play differently: "When I play, I don't even see her body, but see through it and past it" (2004: 48). While this may certainly be true for Aarseth (and many other players, for that matter), posing gameplay as a reason to completely disregard representation is problematic. Stuart Moulthrop criticizes this perspective, arguing that Lara's appearance is important to sell well with the target audience (in Aarseth 2004: 48), which is clearly an important aspect of the game industry. Aarseth responds to Moulthrop's critique by stating that focusing on Lara's body does not tell us much about the gameplay (in Aarseth 2004: 49). This is a valid argument, but once more it seems to neglect the possibility that representation can significantly enhance how games and gameplay are experienced by players. Esther MacCallum-Stewart points out that despite Aarseth's claims, Lara does matter to many people and that she has been used to "encourage debates about gender and sexuality in gaming" in many game studies primers (2014). Helen Kennedy emphasizes how Lara Croft, a character who represented a striking break from the norm of the heroic male hero, "was a welcome novelty for experienced female game players" (2002). Game representations might not make players perform differently in structural and mechanical terms, but representation may invite more people to engage with games and broaden game experiences.

Representation is deeply reflective and constitutive of human cultures and practices, yet how and when representation matters is not clear-cut. This study approaches representation in games as important for cultural expression, inclusion and recognition as well as important for the cultural significance of the medium itself. This importance is not restricted to being of significance to non-heterosexual audiences only, but is located as part of the larger social goals of representation. If lived culture is multi-faceted, then the media practices it engenders can be argued to have to respect, reflect and recognize that. Shaw stresses that marginalized audiences "are often called upon to demand representation, but media producers are not pressed to see diversity as an integral part of their products rather than a feature included only if the case for such representation can be made", before presenting a direct call to arms (in the same vein as Fron et al.): "we need to stop letting media producers off the hook, including
game developers and game corporations" (2014: 218). There are two dominant approaches to this: one that focuses on how representation is important to players, and one where representation matters because it does not matter. I will begin with the latter position since it is the most unusual one in this context.

In *Gaming at the Edge*, Shaw interviews players "at the margins of gamer culture" and investigates how they identify with game representations of sexuality, gender and race. Her main goal is to find out how much representation matters to players as this is often the reason posited by research on why media representation is important, as I outlined above. Representation, it turns out, is not that important, at least not in terms of the supposed close identification assumed with representation, and her study is important for debunking the myth that players cannot identify with representations that are not of themselves. Shaw sums up the overall attitude as "nice when it happens". This attitude suggests that players are not used to and/or do not expect to be represented in games. Additionally, that "diverse representation is nice rather than imperative may entail a feeling that representation in video games is frivolous, a guilty pleasure" (Shaw 2014: 225). This statement should emphasize the fact that research on game representations is needed to combat cultural and social stigmatizations of games as mere entertainment. "Nice when it happens" may signal that Shaw's interviewees may not regard game representation as too important for them, which in turn could imply that there is no need for the game industry to be more diverse. Shaw, however, turns this phrase into a powerful argument that pushes back against the market logic of representation: "[…] 'nice when it happens' makes a personal argument into a social one. It admits the personal benefits of representation without accepting the responsibility for demanding representation. Rather, it insists that diversity is the social responsibility of cultural producers, not consumers" (2014: 224-225). If it is "nice when it happens", it means that the wish to be represented and acknowledged already exists and that the interviewees do not consider asking for it to be their responsibility. They view themselves as just as important as the ones representations cater to, and imply that they should also be acknowledged in media texts. Another important argument from Shaw's study is that representation is important for many players "because they want *other* people to see people like them", and not because players only want to see themselves in games (2014: 184). Cultural visibility is thus important for everyone.

Shaw uses the "nice when it happens" attitude to propose a rather unusual argument that representation is important because it does not matter: "Rather than argue that video games
should include more diversity because it matters, producers should include it precisely because representation does not matter to players in many games." (2014: 219). Since players seemingly do not identify as strongly with game representations as the industry believes, then there is simply no reason to uphold the strict representational practices. I can endorse and partly agree with this statement because if representation does not matter then game producers should consider themselves free to experiment with diversity and move outside their safe zones and established practices. Shaw also says that this argument "can contribute to the analysis and production of other media […]" (2014: 219), so the bonus is that not only the game industry can benefit from this position. Promoting the argument that representation does not matter in hopes of promoting diversity, however, is problematic. I do wish to exercise caution in using such an argument against a game industry which is already rather resistant to changes. Being told that representation does not matter is not necessarily any reason for the industry to begin thinking outside the box. Why change what they already are doing if it seemingly works, then? That representation does not matter could inspire a revolution just as well as it could inspire the maintaining of the status quo.

Representation also does matter for many players, a point which must be weighted alongside Shaw's arguments. Many players wish for more diverse game content that they can identify with in order to enjoy games even more. In 2014 The Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer rights (RFSL) conducted a study of 83 LGBT-players aged 15-35 and released a report called "... I do not exist in games" A report on young LGBT-persons' views on computer and video games and the culture surrounding them (all quotes from this report are my own translations from the Swedish original). The report is based on the experiences of the respondents rather than theories and research in an effort to awaken thoughts in the reader, and provides fascinating insights on representation that must be considered alongside Shaw's "nice when it happens" and "representation does not matter"—clearly there are very different opinions on this topic. A main finding of the study outright states that "playing for a majority of LGBT-persons entails largely negative experiences in relation to their sexual orientation and identity," and that a majority of the respondents were missing positive experiences in those regards (Wennlund 2014: 7). Generally, the experience of offline play was seen as more negative than online play. The offline criticism comes mainly from the restrictive options offered in games, such as "binary gender, heteronormative relations and stereotypical characters and events" (Wennlund 2014: 7). Online games are prone to harassment and hate speech from other players, but many respondents noted that
playing with other people online could be a positive experience, and that such games can allow the player to transcend limits on expression through own acts and interactions with other players. Many respondents think that game developers do not seem to care that much about equality and diversity, but many expressed appreciation of small improvements very much (which could be considered a variant of "nice when it happens"). Most agree that player culture is often very uncomfortably LGBT-phobic, but some think that these past years have resulted in a slightly better environment (Wennlund 2014: 9). One question in the study asked respondents if they had any tips on games that were good from an LGBT-perspective. *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* were the game series most commonly referred to. The *Mass Effect* series was the most frequent games referred to in this and other questions. Many respondents answered that they do not know of any games that are good from an LGBT-perspective (Wennlund 2014: 31), which should serve as a sobering comment on the overall state of the game industry.

**Representational Responsibilities**

In terms of games and representation, Shaw is adamant that "optional content does not address the socials goals of representation", and points to the seemingly easy targeting of the "LGBT market" through same-gender relationship options in games (2014: 206). I generally agree with her position that this is problematic and on the whole does not reflect diversity, but simultaneously I do not wish to easily condemn optional content and disregard its potential significance. Optional content and "gay buttons" are the current dominant strategies of the mainstream game industry when it comes to homosexuality and queer content, and, while problematic, this warrants closer investigations because of their medium significance and historical significance. Pluralism posed as diversity generally reflects diversity poorly because then it suggests that people can freely choose which other people to see and tolerate in the world:

Pluralism gives players the option of seeing marginalized groups represented only if a player so chooses, and therefore, it cannot fulfil the socially progressive goals of media representation. Diversity in video games necessitates that all audiences are confronted with different types of characters. Diversity is not the result of demand by audiences but the social responsibility of media producers. (Shaw 2014: 225)
Mainstream media producers can be argued to have a special social responsibility here, then, because mainstream media reach out to a vast amount of diverse people, and simply reiterating the same dominant white and heteronormative representations will not benefit anyone. In general, mainstream media can have strong potential for empowerment. Media representation is no immediate panacea for real-life troubles and social inequalities, but visibility can certainly help. Cultural visibility in mainstream media can accomplish the goals of social justice, a principle referring to the pursuit of equality, but not the pursuit of uniformity (Connell 2005: 229). For homosexuality, for example, Hennessy argues that cultural visibility "can prepare the ground for gay civil rights protection; affirmative images of lesbians and gays in the mainstream media, like the growing legitimation of lesbian and gay studies in the academy, can be empowering for those of us who have lived most of our lives with no validation at all from dominant culture" (1994-1995: 31). Gauntlett argues that it seems likely that tolerance should grow "as the media introduces the general audience to more everyday gay and lesbian (and bisexual and transgendered) characters" (2008: 15). Gauntlett notes that "[t]olerance of sexual diversity is slowly growing in society […], and by bringing into people's homes images of sexual identities which they might not be familiar with, the media can play a role in making the population more – or less – comfortable with these ways of living" (2008: 285-286). Indeed, as Shaw argues, LGBT content "does not have to exist just for those that identify with that acronym" (2009: 232). Emil Lundedal Hammar approaches representations from an ethical point of view, arguing that media producers are moral agents responsible for the representation of marginalized groups: "Through an act, attitude and reflexivity of including different groups and bringing about diversity, the different identities in question become legitimate not only for the marginalized groups in question, but for groups usually unfamiliar and unexposed to them" (2015: 9). Mainstream media can have a "sanctioning" function in that it recognizes and legitimates representations and identities, though I must point out there is always the risk of backlash and representations shot through heteronormative lenses that support rather than challenge dominant ideologies, in addition to possible audience resistance and the very difficult question of what "positive" and "legitimate" representations are. We can nevertheless argue that mainstream media have the power of increasing tolerance and promoting diversity, and that this is both a possibility and a responsibility mainstream media cannot neglect. Games are no exception.

Representation matters and it does not matter, though it seems that even when it does not matter it matters. The issue is complex. The studies cited here point to important different
aspects of the question of representation of marginalized groups in games. Some players may identify or interact strongly with game content, whereas others might have a more casual approach. These are, of course, all legit and important experiences, but we must take seriously those that also feel that representation in games is important. Shaw makes an excellent point about diversity in games through her research, but we cannot demand more diverse representations exclusively on the grounds that representation does not matter. It is surely one important point in the quest of not letting media producers off the hook, but simultaneously we must insist that representation also matters for many players and that this holds significant value. My study is not specifically on players and how they identify with or regard representations in games, but this important context should serve as a good indicator of the complexities of this field and the politics involved. I will discuss this more in the next chapter. What I wish to emphasize here is that the most fortunate part for the sake of diverse media and game representations in the "matters" and "does not matter" positions is that both positions nevertheless call for diversity as social and cultural goals. Representation remains important, though the ways representation is important differ. Arguments that representation in general does not matter are rather untenable, because why has the game industry repeated its dominant white heterosexual male character? The answer is that representation matters. The real question, then, should be rephrased because the issue is not really if representation matters as such, but, rather, which representations matter and why.

**Summary**

In this chapter I have introduced theories and cultural contexts that are central for understanding representations of homosexuality and gender in mainstream media. I have discussed the relationship between representation and ideology and how representation is never "innocent". I argued that heteronormativity greatly affects media representation and pointed out several central and persisting tropes and strategies typical for the representation of homosexuality in mainstream media. I also discussed the representational practices and logics specific to the game industry by connecting them to R. W. Connell's term 'hegemonic masculinity'. Finally, I discussed how and why representation in video games matter and how mainstream media producers can be argued to have a social responsibility to acknowledge and represent diversity.
Chapter III: Methodological Approaches and Contexts

This chapter is devoted to explaining and discussing textual analysis, the methodological approach I have chosen and applied for analyzing representations in the *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* series. The chapter is split into two main parts. In the first part I discuss the humanities and game studies, textual analysis as a central qualitative humanities approach, the relationship between text and game, and the specific use of textual analysis in game studies. The second part is more practical where I address how I conducted the deep playing analyses and collected material for the discussions in the following chapters. Games are not merely objects or pure texts, but also processes and interactions that are required in order to manifest the text. The act of playing is itself a major component of game analysis. I wish to provide a thorough methodological examination to be transparent about my choices and goals, as these will invariably structure and influence the analysis, discussions and findings. Mia Consalvo and Nathan Dutton argue that "more qualitative studies have been less forthcoming about how games were studied, other than the assumption that they were played and carefully thought about by the author" (2006), and this is something I wish to address. This chapter is intended to firmly ground my study in both theory and practice.

The Humanities and Game Studies

Game studies is a field which combines many different disciplines and approaches, and there are many ways to approach the critical study of games. Espen Aarseth declared in the inaugural issue of *Game Studies* that "[c]omputer games are perhaps the richest cultural genre we have yet seen [...]" (2001), and this richness is reflected in the variety of research which games have engendered. Game studies does not belong to any particular department or field (such as the humanities or social sciences), but constitutes its own area of studies devoted to games that incorporates other disciplines and approaches while also developing its own theoretical and analytical premises. Roughly put, there are, according to Frans Mäyrä, three main areas of game studies: one area which studies games and their structures, a second area which focuses on understanding players and play behavior, and a third area more centered on studying game design and game development. Mäyrä points out that there is "much overlap and interaction between and within research done in all these three main areas" (2008: 156).
This thesis is grounded in humanities media studies and belongs primarily to that first area which centers primarily on the games, but as seen in the previous chapter I draw on resources from the other main areas as well.

The humanities have contributed much to game studies. Mäyrä asserts that numerous humanities approaches have been applied to games, and highlights textual analysis and discourse analysis as notable general contributions: "Within such approaches, intertextual and intermedial comparisons are used to highlight hidden similarities and differences between games, or areas of media and culture, thereby extending the range of interpretation" (2008: 157). Generally, humanities approaches are beneficial for investigating games, their structures, content and their relationship to culture and other media. More specifically,

[l]iterary and media studies have contributed to this assemblage of humanistic game studies methodologies its own conceptual tools, ranging from discussions of character, narration, dramatic arc of theme, to point of view, cut scenes and camerawork familiar from film studies. Cultural studies style of analysis often also subject the text to ideological critique that is informed by Marxist, feminist or psychoanalytic thought. (Mäyrä 2008: 158)

It is important to acknowledge that the humanities provide valuable perspectives and insights to game studies, and as such the humanities are not only a contributor to game studies, but also a significant part of it. The relationship between the humanities and video games has not always been a happy one, however. In fact, it may have been a rather rocky start. Aarseth, in proposing an independent game studies, argues that games "are not a kind of cinema, or literature, but colonising attempts from both these fields have already happened, and no doubt will happen again. And again, until computer game studies emerges as a clearly self-sustained academic field" (2001). The fact that many games have aspects that are quite similar to other media such as literature and film has often led to games being studied primarily as static texts and gameplay itself has been considered more or less insignificant. Aarseth does not deny games' similarities to other media, but points out how applying seemingly medium-neutral theories that in reality are anything but neutral is "clearly a danger when looking at games as cinema or stories, but also when making general claims about games, as though they all belonged to the same media format and shared the same characteristics" (2001).
The perhaps most notable and notorious clash between humanities theories and game studies is the so-called "ludology versus narratology" debate, which exemplified the pains of establishing a new field of study, as well as why it is necessary. Aarseth (2014) views this debate partly as a methodological critique, a critique which is well worth taking into serious consideration when studying games from a humanities perspective. Ludology was "erroneously contrasted with narratology" and the cause of this misunderstanding, Aarseth argues, "is the ludological critique of naive and untheoretical applications of narratology to games (and certainly not narratology as such) that were prevalent in the early years of game studies" (2014: 185). This debate is no longer prominent (Aarseth 2012: 133), but it signifies an important starting point for how games should be respected in analyses and what the important aspects to take into considerations are.

**Textual Analysis: Origins**

Textual analysis, a qualitative approach primarily associated with the humanities (and originating from it), is a useful tool to employ in order to gain deep insights into processes of the creation and communication of meaning and (latent) ideologies and worldviews in different types of texts, practices and cultural expressions. 'Text' is seen as a broad category applied to anything that can be interpreted as meaningful. Textual analysis allows the researcher to deconstruct texts on structural and semantic levels and work along the entire chain of communication, focusing on for example authorial intention and meaning, discourse, style, aesthetics, representations, intended and constructed audience, and fan cultures (though not necessarily, and not typically, simultaneously). It opens up for approaching texts in a multitude of ways and from many different perspectives. A prime strength of textual analysis is that it allows the analyst to seriously consider texts and practices as important cultural phenomena that are inscribed with meanings, beliefs, norms, politics, ideals and desires. Its qualitative dimension may also treat texts as artistic expressions in their own right, as opposed to quantitative and more statistical methods such as content analyses that primarily considers texts valuable when they are actually consumed and in which the act of consumption takes primacy. Textual analysis can be very beneficial for taking (popular) texts and practices seriously and as worthy of critical examination, for example texts and practices that remain marginalized in academic research or are considered unproblematic, trivial and/or merely entertainment in culture, such as video games.
Textual analysis is well known and widely used in media and game studies, though the term 'textual analysis' and its principles are often vague and undefined. Many media studies textbooks, for example, acknowledge textual analysis as a qualitative approach or method that seeks to analyze meaning in texts through various theoretical frameworks such as semiotics, rhetoric, narratology and discourse analysis. It is usually seen as an umbrella term for various qualitative interpretative activities on media texts. Yet, textual analysis as a distinct approach, its contribution and its origins are rarely addressed. This may be because it was vague and undefined to begin with. In game studies, Consalvo and Dutton point out that while the interest in studying games is increasing, "there has been little or no effort to develop a method for the qualitative, critical analysis of games as 'texts' (broadly defined)" (2006). Similarly, Diane Carr argues that game research "proposing to define textual analysis, specify how it is done, or describe what it offers, remain rare" (2009: 1). It would certainly be in order, then, for a thesis on games based on textual analysis to offer some exposition on and contextualization of the textual analytical approach. I will attempt to bridge some of this research gap by discussing what textual analysis is, where it comes from and what distinguishes it from other types of interpretation and qualitative analysis, and by addressing how textual analysis has been used in game studies. This will create a clear link between academic traditions and my own positioning and contributions in this thesis, and should hopefully be beneficial to anyone who wishes to conduct textual analyses on games.

The term 'textual analysis' is a rather recent construct and it emerged as a result of the developments of structuralism and poststructuralism in the 1950s–1970s, connected to the evolution of 'text' as a broad category. The interpretation of meaning is not new, however, and dates back to ancient times. Hermeneutics, the theories and principles of interpretation and production of knowledge, was important for interpreting religious and juridical texts so that they could be applied and exercised in a practical manner. Similarly, literary studies/criticism analyzed meanings and structures of literary works long before there was any mention of 'textual analysis'. Why was there a need for a new term for interpretative activities that more or less already existed? A likely answer is found in the shift that occurred with the advent of poststructuralism. Structuralism, mainly influenced by the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure, became an influential approach in many different disciplines. It sought to investigate the underlying structures that made meaning possible. The meaning in a literary text or a cultural practice was for example thought to be secured in how the text/practice was structured. Structural analyses investigate the relationship between structure/rules ('langue')
and practice ('parole'), and the method is analytical, not evaluative (Eagleton 2008: 83-84). Structuralism, despite its perhaps narrow analytical focus, was nevertheless a very democratic approach and studied a broad range of texts and cultural practices on equal terms. The heyday of structuralism is over, but its legacy lives on today (in narratology and semiotics, among other things). Structural analysis, Carr argues, "makes sense in game studies" (2009: 2). Games consist of programmed and designed structures and rules that facilitate gameplay (Aarseth 2003, Juul 2005), and understanding how these structures operate is important in order to theorize and discuss the dynamic aspects of game textuality.

Poststructuralism rose primarily as a response to structuralism's narrow focus, heralding the advent of textual analysis. John Storey explains that in structuralism "[r]eaders are seen as locked into specific 'reading positions'. There is little space for reader activity or textual contradiction. Part of post-structuralism's critique of structuralism is the opening up of a critical space in which such questions can be addressed" (2015: 9). Poststructuralism's critique is also levelled at analyses and interpretations that only consider the author's intentions or authorial meanings as the most or only valid meanings in a text. This shift is signaled by Roland Barthes' "Death of the Author" ([1968] 1977), one of poststructuralism's foundational texts. Poststructuralism also focuses on 'deconstruction', an analytical technique introduced by Jacques Derrida ([1976] 1997, 1978), which seeks to discover and dismantle the (power) operations at work in seemingly "natural" significations and meanings. Julia Kristeva's theories on 'intertextuality' ([1974] 1984), in which a text never exists as a unique entity, but is the result of texts that precede and concur with it, have been highly influential as well.

Poststructuralism is where we begin to arrive at a common, broad understanding of text. In the 1971 essay "From Work to Text", Barthes argues that a "certain change has taken place (or is taking place) in our conception of language and, consequently, of the literary work which owes at least its phenomenal existence to this same language" ([1971] 1977: 155). Literature, the 'work', is no longer considered the sole province of the text, which has been demonstrated by the various disciplines devoted to finding meaning. Barthes argues that a new object is required to replace the focus on the work: the 'Text'. Barthes views the Text as a

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14 'Langue' and 'parole' are Saussure's original terms for language as both grammar/rules and individual practice.

15 Structuralism does not prioritize canonical classic works or "high art" over popular culture, for example, but this is not necessarily because it considers everything of equal value. As Terry Eagleton points out, structural analysis is (here, somewhat pessimistically) "quite indifferent to the cultural value of its object" (2008: 83).

16 Carr also emphasizes how structural narratology was useful to game theorists such as Espen Aarseth, Gonzalo Frasca and Jesper Juul in order to demonstrate "the differences between games and narrative" (2009: 2).
'methodological field' and argues that the Text "is experienced only in an activity of production" ([1971] 1977: 156-157). This new understanding of text originates with a new mode of analysis that Barthes refers to as 'textual analysis', which is supposed to be different from previous modes of textual interpretation. In "Theory of the Text", Barthes criticizes how the work of art is often constituted as "a closed object placed at a distance from an observer who inspects it from the outside. It is essentially this exteriority which textual analysis calls into question [...] on the grounds of an infinitude of languages" ([1973] 1981: 43). Textual analysis is not merely the search for meaning, it is also the active production of meaning. Barthes offers a comparison between (literary) criticism and this new textual analysis: "criticism seeks in general to discover the meaning of the work, a meaning which is more or less hidden and which is assigned to diverse levels, depending on the critic; textual analysis impugns the idea of a final signified" ([1973] 1981: 43). Barthes does not suggest that textual analysis cannot be critical, but that it rejects the notion of finding a stable or determinate meaning. Barthes seeks with textual analysis to shift the focus from the analysis of the author's intentions and the structure that makes the manifested text possible, and, as I interpret it, instead focus on the text's/work's relation to other texts, its surrounding history, culture and possibilities for meaning. A similar view is also promoted by the interpretation theories of Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics, where Ricoeur envisions texts as disclosing possible worlds that, while separated from the author's intentions, nevertheless remain an address to someone/something (1976). The combination with other theoretical frameworks, as indicated by Mäyrä above, has allowed textual analysis both broad application and broad purposes.

I would now like to move our focus over to how textuality in video games has been theorized. While the broad definition of text may seem to be all-encompassing, it was nevertheless conceived in a time where video games were not yet a significant part of culture. What challenges and changes do games offer to theories of textuality?

**Cybertext and Ergodicity – The Textuality of Games**

"Theorising game textuality is not straightforward", Carr argues in no uncertain terms, and points out that this theorizing matters because it might "usefully inform research into related issues such as representation or interpretation" (2009: 2). It is important, then, to address

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17 Barthes himself is often critical, especially in *Mythologies*. 68
textuality in games here in order to consider more closely how representation can work in games. It is not difficult, for example, to apply the broad definition of text to video games, considering that games often include elements such as characters, events, locations, verbal text, dialogue, and music – all of which can be considered meaningful. In this sense games can be very textual, just like other media. The evolution of text and textual analysis, however, took place primarily in a time before video games were common, and, especially, long before they were regarded as serious and worthy of academic study. As such, the broad definition of text was also originally devised without considering games and their textuality. Also, text as a broadly defined category does not necessarily take medium specificity into account. How does the medium itself affect the text and the communication of meaning? In a film we might analyze and interpret a specific scene as (intentionally) meaningful and look at formal and stylistic features including the use of camera techniques, perspectives, dialogues and temporal factors. This is no less valid for games, but what happens in a ‘text’ where the player merely walks around in the same spot for ten minutes without doing anything to progress? In a film we would likely interpret and ascribe a particular meaning to such an (in)action, but in a game this takes on a different set of meanings: it is not the character as an individual that is acting in this way because of some predetermined (narrative) reason. Rather, it is the player that generates this type of behavior for any number of reasons. The gameworld itself is also not just a narrative storyworld/diegesis, but is created as an interface and world first and foremost for gameplay and as such it may follow different sets of logics (Jørgensen 2013: 3). If reading is to Barthes the active production of meaning, then playing complicates this process: the production and performance of action for the production of meaning. We should not conclude from this that games are any less textual, that is, less able to signify and communicate meanings because of this, but it does affect the way we can and should talk about meaning in games. There are meanings in the designed content and the enabled actions, but there are also meanings to be found in the player's configurations and manipulations. This thesis is concerned with the former, but will not neglect the possible impacts of the latter.\textsuperscript{18}

Espen Aarseth addresses limiting models of textuality in his very influential book Cybertext (1997). Aarseth argues that previous models of textuality ignore the medium and the performative aspects of the textual communication (1997: 21), and he introduces a medium-

\textsuperscript{18} I must note that the player's actions might just as well denote meaninglessness. Running around in the same spot for several minutes might not hold any diegetic meaning or value other than the player merely wanting to do so for fun, but as such the actions may gain specific meanings even here. This is a player-centered approach to meaning, however, and is not the focus in this thesis.
specific textual approach to various kinds of literary/textual forms he calls 'cybertext'. The cybertext is "the mechanical organization of the text, by positing the intricacies of the medium as an integral part of the literary exchange", and which also "centers attention on the consumer, or user, of the text, as a more integrated figure than even reader-response theorists would claim" (1997: 1). This is thus a theory that considers textuality in forms where the medium itself must be interacted with rather than being only read or viewed. Aarseth does not consider cybertext to be a new or revolutionary textual form, nor is it a radical break with old-fashioned textuality: "Cybertext is a perspective on all forms of textuality, a way to expand the scope of literary studies to include phenomena that today are perceived as outside of, or marginalized by, the field of literature—or even in opposition to it, for […] extraneous reasons" (1997: 18). Thus, we do not need to throw away everything about textuality outlined above, but at the same time those previous theories and models are not by themselves sufficient to discuss the textual implications of the cybertextual process. Cybertext is "the wide range (or perspective) of possible textualities seen as a typology of machines, as various kinds of literary communication systems where the functional differences among the mechanical parts play a defining role in the aesthetic process" (Aarseth 1997: 22). Video games broadly represent one possible type of cybertext (individual games and genres may constitute different cybertextual processes), where the tripartite model of gameplay, game structure and gameworld (Aarseth 2003) is a crucial part for the textual exchange and interactions.

The mechanical textual exchange in a cybertext engenders another significant challenge to poststructuralism's broad textual venture. Media texts might indeed be polysemic and open to many different interpretations (van Zoonen 1994: 41), but games are additionally "polyludic": they can be played in different ways which might affect the textual content that appears/takes place. Adrienne Shaw offers a crucial remark that "[w]hat's different about games […] is not just that audiences are able to be active but that they have to be. The game text is not as stable as other media texts, as a great deal depends on how one plays the game" (2014: 25). The degree of stability of the game text may differ greatly depending on the game. More straightforward and linear games may offer more "stability" than games which offer open worlds and freedom in the order the player undertakes quests and explores. Agency-driven games such as *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* are affected by this possible textual instability.
These active and performative aspects of games are what Aarseth calls 'ergodic', a term he applies to denote the central participatory function of cybertexts, in which "nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text" (1997: 1). Ergodic literature, as Aarseth calls it, concerns the very type of participation the user/reader is engaged in, the centrality of the user-role and how this differs from traditional reading. The ergodic cybertexts create a distinction between the act of reading and the act of playing/interacting, and ergodic texts require successful configuration: "The cybertext puts its would-be reader at risk: the risk of rejection. The effort and energy demanded by the cybertext of its reader raise the stakes of interpretation to those of intervention. Trying to know a cybertext is a personal improvisation that can result in either intimacy or failure" (Aarseth 1997: 4). Reading is here considered a predominantly interpretative practice while playing is seen as a predominantly configurative practice: "[I]n art we might have to configure in order to be able to interpret whereas in games we have to interpret in order to be able to configure" (Eskelinen 2001). Interpretation and configuration are present in both ergodic and non-ergodic texts, but the core activity involved in the textual exchange changes depending on the medium. In games this can manifest through challenges that the player must complete, for example, and this "risk" involved could be the difficulty of the challenges. The player may lose the game, for various reasons, which might hinder textual content (such as storylines and characters) from progressing or being realized.

The ergodic aspect of games, the gameplay, has implications for textuality since games have mechanics. The player is not merely engaging with a fictional world, but also interacting with and through complex mechanical systems. Mechanics are crucial in that they document how the game world and everything in it behave. Mechanics state the relationship among entities, the events and processes that take place among the resources and entities of the game, and the conditions that trigger events and processes. The mechanics describe the overall rules of the game but also the behavior of particular entities, from something as simple as a light switch up to the AI of a very smart NPC. (Adams 2014: 362)

'Game objects', which Aarseth calls the parts of software packages that allow us to play, are "dual constructs of both semiotics and mechanics", and this is posited as "the key elements of which any virtual environment game consists" (2014: 488). For Aarseth there is here a clear division between the textual (semiotic) layer which conveys meaningful (and even
meaningless) information, and the mechanical layer which engenders player interaction through, for example, enabling actions as well as rules and conditions for winning. Games are not pure texts, then, in the now-conventional sense. Jesper Juul argues that the "interaction between game rules and game fiction is one of the most important features of video games" and refers to games as "half-real" because the content might be fictional, but the rules themselves (the mechanics) are real and generate conditions for winning and losing – winning or losing in a game is a real event (2005: 1). The game object is of another textual "order" than literature, film and television, and this is a crucial aspect to consider when using textual analysis for games. Special respects should be paid to the relationship between text and mechanics in analysis. Individual games will vary in how this relationship is played out. It is nevertheless important to acknowledge and critically consider the existence of this relationship, or the analysis will suffer from what Liv Hausken calls 'medium blindness' (2004: 392) which may provide no insight into how textuality may work in games (as both similarly to and differently from other media).

Mechanics might not be textual in a conventional sense, but that does not mean that they cannot hold cultural meanings or be analyzed as meaningful, both in their own regard and as part of the text. As Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman argue, and which I pointed out in the introductory chapter, "[c]reating games is also creating culture, and therefore beliefs, ideologies, and values present within culture will always be a part of a game, intended or not" (2004: 517). This does not apply only to the textual content/semiotic layer, but also to mechanics and rules. Miguel Sicart (2009) investigates how game mechanics may operate along with textual content to reflect or challenge ethical values and premises, and Ian Bogost argues that games can employ a 'procedural rhetoric' to persuade through "rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures" (2007: ix). Aarseth acknowledges that the mechanical layer of a game is "not completely devoid of any ideological meaning", but he emphasizes that this layer will, by being played, "create its own ideological discourse, through a re-interpretation of the game's semiotics, which de-emphasizes the ideological meanings and interpretations that non-players will produce upon seeing the game semiotics for the first time" (2014: 490). In Aarseth's view, engaging with mechanics as players creates a different relationship between the game, meaning and player than between game, meaning and non-players. Mechanics must thus be interacted with and experienced in order to understand the potential for meaning they might have other than facilitating gameplay. It is not my intent to conflate mechanics with text and
argue that mechanics are simply a different type of textual dimension. Mechanics might be considered a material condition that can both attain textual meaning and engender it. The most important point I want to make here is that mechanics are not the opponent to textuality and textual analysis, but rather something that should be critically considered in analysis to properly discuss textuality in games.

Textual instability and the relationship between text and mechanics are some of the things I am interested in analyzing, because this might be a strategy for non-normative content to find expression in mainstream games. Rather than seeing performativity and textual instability as game-specific textual and interpretative problems, I view these factors as challenges to be incorporated into analysis not only to acknowledge medium-specific features, but also to discuss what they can actually say about games as media for expressing and enabling/disabling textual content and meaning. Textual instability should not be seen as a hindrance or discouragement to textual analysis, but instead be precisely one of the aspects that textual analyses of games should be concerned with. If a great deal depends on how one plays the game and how the mechanics factor into the textual exchange, then special respect should be paid to what aspects of the game are realized and manifested in certain ways of playing and not others. This is critical in the Mass Effect and Dragon Age games, where the dialogue systems structure and engender many of the representations in the games as well as what the player is allowed to interact with and not.

**Two Levels of Performance**

A textual analysis is performative in the sense that it "gives much more space for, and even demands, disclosure of personal sensibility and judgement" (Fetveit 2000: 23, my translation). Constructing and interpreting meaning from textual content can thus be seen as a type of performance. This performance gains another level for a textual game analysis. The analyst is not only responsible for conducting the analysis, but also responsible for producing and manifesting the text which those meanings are derived from. This may in turn affect how text and meaning are discussed in games contra other media. In more "static" texts such as literature and film we encounter more or less the same material every reading or viewing. Our interpretations and understandings may change with each encounter, but the text itself remains materially unchanged. In games, on the other hand, different playthroughs may generate
different textual material. For example, the player may choose different paths, skip certain levels, or the game can even glitch and cause a number of unwanted and unintentional textual "intrusions". The player may even fail at the game, causing the remaining textual content to remain locked until the player performs better. The ergodic aspects separate games from other forms of non-dynamic material texts and impact how textual analysis is (or should be) conducted.

A predominantly configurative textual practice has at least two significant implications for a textual analysis: the text is not readily available from the beginning, requiring the analyst to produce and/or reveal it, and the analyst is subjectively involved in the game and in the production of the text for the analysis. Reading a novel or watching a film twice will take the reader through the same material text, though different interpretations and sensory perceptions may occur. Playing a game twice, however, does not constitute traversal of the same text since the performative aspect of games and player involvement virtually make any playthrough unique. At the same time, it is important not to overstate this argument or it may promote a belief that games are completely textually unique and fluid each time they are played, which they usually are not. The same type of narrative content, dialogues, actions and results may repeat each playthrough and more often than not can we say that a game's storyline remains the same regardless of what and how the player performs. The performance, however, will always vary and may affect how the textual aspects of the game are realized and perceived. The significance of this performance will vary with the type of game and purpose of analysis. In the Mass Effect and Dragon Age games, for example, combat is central to gameplay yet individual combat performances (such as player strategies and enemy AI behavior) rarely directly affects the storyline. Combat must be won to proceed, but, generally, how the combat is won does not matter. The player's choices in conversations, however, may greatly affect outcomes and so for these games and representation it is more fruitful to study narrative performance rather than combat performance.

Games challenge the notion of the textual whole of non-ergodic texts, a notion which, as Markku Eskelinen argues, entails that

[…] readers can easily read the whole text, as the only efforts and challenges associated with this conventional "goal" are of an interpretative nature; readers should read the whole text in order to be able to fully comprehend and interpret it; the point at which the whole text is read marks also the termination
point of reading; it is always possible to reread exactly the same text as its signifiers don't change between (or during) readings; and, finally, that the way the text is read doesn't affect its material string of signs. (2012: 70-71)

This has implications for a textual analysis. It would be wrong, however, to assume that issues with the textual whole are unique to games. Consalvo and Dutton point out that "the rising popularity of DVD editions of films and television shows/seasons with extra scenes, director's commentaries, and other 'bonus' material again questions where the text is considered complete and how broad an analysis should occur" (2006). For games the issue may be located in how certain choices and outcomes in one playthrough of a game may be completely different from another playthrough of that same game. The notion of the textual whole in the *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* games is tricky. It is possible to generate a whole, though, because once one of the games is completed a textual whole can be said to have been realized since the game has been won. This whole, however, will be different the next time and certain choices will exclude other choices during play, meaning that the game's "full text" is never present or possible to achieve. It is of course possible to see most of it by playing through the games several times with different playstyles, but contextually these playthroughs would be mutually exclusive. Textually, a *Mass Effect* playthrough as a female protagonist does not exist concurrently or simultaneously with a playthrough as a male protagonist. What these practices can do, however, is to establish textual aspects that are identical regardless of player interaction and aspects that are dynamic and changeable. There is thus the possibility to locate textually stable factors (certain dialogue and events will always occur, for example) for analysis and then discuss how the dynamics come into play for the manifestation of certain types of content. A textual analysis of a game must adopt a medium-specific textual discourse in order to not only treat the object of analysis respectfully in its own right, but also to improve our understanding of textuality in the media.

Since the analyst is involved in producing and realizing the texts for the analysis, a textual analysis of games is partly an analysis of the analyst's own playing. In my case the interpretation focuses on the expressions and representations in the game, but much of this will again be based on my own performances and choices. It is an interpretation of my own "text" created from the games' textual framework and that means that my own intentions are involved and important as well. This is important not just for technological media-specific reasons, but also because there is no right "narrative way" to play the *Mass Effect* and *Dragon
Age games (though the games regularly hint that some choices are better than others). There may be no "correct text". A textual game analysis should emphasize the possibility of various combinations and how they may produce different versions of the same main content (which is what Consalvo and Dutton (2006) call 'interaction mapping', see below), and how the analyst has personally taken part in this process. Whereas a non-ergodic text engenders multiple interpretations, a game can engender multiple texts that engender multiple interpretations. I will address my own practical approaches shortly, but I will once again call attention to not overestimating the complications of medium specificity here. That is, textual analysis is still possible in this case, and a playing analysis does not necessarily imply that one is only analyzing one's own playing and never the game itself. If so, then we could claim that every textual analysis is really only an analysis of someone's reading/viewing/playing of a text. We would end up with a logic dictating that we never analyze text, only our own experiences with the text. Certain considerations must of course be respected here (playing is a more direct and "intrusive" activity than reading and viewing), but there is no need to make these matters too obscure.

**Textual Analysis in Game Studies**

Text-centered discussions and criticisms of games are a common approach in game studies. I say "text-centered" because these discussions do not always take place as explicit or devoted textual analyses. Addressing topics such as meaning and text in games can occur without any explicit mention of the research being textual analyses. These discussions may be additions to other approaches (such as content analysis) or the analysis may be called a narrative, semiotic or ideological analysis. Research on game textuality nevertheless remains an important part of game studies. Consalvo and Dutton refer to research on text and games in relation to topics such as "levels of violence and aggression", "portrayals of minorities", "ideological assumptions operating in the game" and "most often, representations of women in games" (2006). From this we might gather that the most typical application of textual analysis in games is for critical purposes. If these areas represent typical areas of textual research in games, then this thesis contributes to the latter three areas. The use of textual analysis/text-centered approaches in game studies not only results in new ways of discussing medium-specific textuality in an academic context; it also critically and seriously considers how games themselves present new and exciting as well as problematic and controversial ways of
exploring and engaging with conventional topics of representation such as characters, events, stories and themes in dynamic and interactive ways. As this is a thesis concerned with the study of representations I will restrict this section to how textual analysis has been used for that purpose.

Helen Kennedy (2002) analyzes Lara Croft of the *Tomb Raider* series and challenges more traditional analyses of women as passive objects of the male gaze (Lara Croft has often been criticized as such). Kennedy argues that for male players Lara could enable a "transgendering" due to being both the object to be looked at as well as the hero of the game. The act of playing may significantly alter the possible identifications. Mia Consalvo (2003) discusses how certain heteronormative assumptions about sexuality and restrictions are reproduced in a seemingly liberal game such as *The Sims*. Hanli Geyser and Pippa Tshabalala (2011) use textual analysis to investigate the representation of Africa in *Resident Evil 5*. They problematize how using Africa as the setting of a horror game with a white protagonist (America symbolizing the West) and subaltern Africans as zombie enemies reflect and may confirm pre-existing derogatory views of Africa in the West. By critically considering and emphasizing the textual content over the fairly linear and restricting game structure, Johansen Quijano-Cruz (2009) conducts an analysis of the colorful and cartoonish Japanese RPG *Eternal Sonata* and how the game "makes powerful statements about the society in which we live in and challenges the player to do something do improve the world". Diane Carr's (2014) use of textual analysis on the horror game *Dead Space* shows how the game connects ideas about disability with horror elements, and how this in turn reflects cultural attitudes toward disabled bodies. Arne Schröder (2008) analyzes gender and sexuality in the role-playing game series *Gothic*, and finds that women are stereotypically represented and play a mostly insignificant role in a male-dominated gameworld (in one of the games the player is not even allowed to have conversations with them!). There are also vague references to homosexuality, which is then also connected to sexual relations with animals. Stephen Greer (2013) questions the affordances for sexuality in *Fable* and *Dragon Age* and discusses, among other things, the implications of a "sexuality blind" approach to game design which simultaneously allows for inclusivity as well as freeing developers from the burden of more carefully-considered and designed representations.

This brief overview shows both the continuing relevance of textual analysis in game studies as well as the variation of topics that can be discussed with it. Common for all the studies
listed here is that they do not analyze the games as if they were cinema or stories. Rather, in various ways, they discuss how game mechanics and gameplay might factor into the representations, such as when information and interaction is made available to the player as well as what the player can do (or cannot do) to interact, and what this might mean for the textual content. These analyses treat games as important cultural products that carry meaning, both explicitly and implicitly, and critically consider games as a serious representational medium.

The Benefits and Limitations of Textual Analysis

Textual analysis, I think, or hope, will become even more important in game studies as games continue to advance and develop their representational, textual and interactional aspects in a variety of new and interesting ways which we cannot find in other media. Games enable a lively engagement with textual content, and, for example, considering the game designers' "considerable ludo-narrative advances over the last decade" (Aarseth 2014: 189) as well as the increased focus on the representations of sexuality and gender, textuality is of important interest to both developers and players alike. We do not only engage with mechanics and structures, but also with meaningful textual content in cultural contexts. Academic game studies cannot afford to miss these crucial aspects of games, neither at the present time nor in the future.

As with any research approach or method, textual analysis has its limitations. Here I will focus on two main points. For games specifically, one apparent limitation is the variable nature of gameplay and that it is difficult in many games to have access to the entire text because of the various ways a game can be played. Consalvo and Dutton point out that some game researchers use that argument "in order to dismiss game-centered analysis, or any sort of ideological analysis of games", but the authors emphasize that "the same critique has been levelled against textual analysis of any sort, in that the possible 'range of meanings' may never be pinned down" (2006). While it is true that gameplay might complicate textuality, I argued above that this is precisely one of the aspects that a textual game analysis should critically consider and incorporate. Gameplay should not serve as a stunting obstacle or as a poor excuse for dismissing the relevance of textual analysis, but rather as an invigorating entry point into how textuality in games works similarly to and differently from other media.
The perhaps most obvious limitation of textual analysis is, since it primarily focuses on text, how it cannot account for audience reception and how meaning is produced by the consumers/users of media texts. It cannot say why people like or dislike certain texts and it cannot say what texts mean to an actual audience. When it comes to analyzing games, textual analysis grants certain types of knowledges while audience research grants other types. Adrienne Shaw exemplifies this in game research: "Analyzing texts tells us how the audience was constructed and about the inner workings of industry logics, but an audience study helps us make sense of where these meanings go after they are constructed" (2014: 63). I should point out that Shaw's conception of textual analysis in this context is rather short; textual analysis can investigate more than the construction of an audience and industry logics of representation. Nevertheless, this suggests a close link between the two positions and that we may need to understand texts in order to understand industry, culture and audience, and that audiences can grant insights into how texts are appropriated in other contexts – for example what matters to players in a game, how and when they play, what playing means in their personal and social lives, and so on.

These two different ways of studying games are not always considered equal but different approaches, however. Their different focus is sometimes used as a reason for dismissing the importance of investigating the media in favor of media usage. Since games must be played, and thus meaning may be engendered in the very act of playing, textual analysis might be considered inferior to the actual experiences and interpretations of players. Shaw (2014), for example, wants to advocate audience studies because text-centered critiques of representation have often assumed or argued how players identify with game content without actually studying players. Similarly, Kennedy's (2002) analysis of Lara Croft (mentioned above) is subtitled "On the Limits of Textual Analysis" and addresses how certain textual interpretations of the game might foreclose alternative readings and pleasantries derived from the game. The paper is not really a discussion on the limits of textual analysis as an approach, but rather on specific frameworks for interpretation. These are all legitimate and important concerns, but they should not be targeted at textual analysis itself. Rather, the critique should be aimed at the goal of the research. The central issue with the limitations of textual analysis discussed by Shaw and Kennedy is perhaps based on a misunderstanding, or, a misuse, of textual analysis in other studies. Textual analysis is not suitable for discussing or suggesting how actual players identify with characters and events or derive pleasures from a game (this should not be seen as the only goals of game research), and should not be used to enforce
interpretations as exclusive or suggest effects on players. It is fair to criticize individual textual analyses that attempt what they simply cannot succeed at analyzing. It would be completely unfair, however, to dismiss an entire approach because some analyses have been restrictive and reductionistic, or because there are some aspects textual analysis cannot address. No approach or method can address all aspects of a topic or an issue.

Shaw argues that the importance of representation does not live in texts alone (2014: 150). This is an important claim and it makes sense that the field of representation studies should not belong exclusively to the realm of textual analysis. I have no desire to promote the view that representation is only important from a textual perspective. Games are produced for an (often imagined or desired) audience, after all. That said, however, I see no reason why Shaw must "push back" against text-centered critiques of representation (2014: 151) (unless Shaw has specific reductive analyses in mind) instead of phrasing her study as a contribution to a discussion that likely requires different approaches. Shaw does state that textual properties "matter because they can shape how audiences interpret a given representation" (2014: 173). This resonates with Stuart Hall's arguments in his well-known paper "Encoding/Decoding" about how media texts, while being polysemic and open to a range of interpretations, usually have 'preferred readings', whose domains

have the whole social order embedded in them as a set of meanings, practices and beliefs: the everyday knowledge of social structures, of "how things work for all practical purposes in this culture", the rank order of power and interest and the structure of legitimations, limits and sanctions. ([1980] 2012: 141)

Hall makes it clear that preferred readings do not necessarily mean compliance or that the meanings will be understood or received at all. Liesbet van Zoonen, in discussing Hall, warns against treating the polysemic text as limitless: "In spite of its essential ambiguity, the range of meanings and subject positions a text offers is not infinite", and that most texts have a preferred reading "which, given the economic and ideological location of most media, will tend to reconstruct dominant values of a society—unless we are dealing with alternative media which should also be thought of as polysemic and encoded, within a rather different set of constraints" ([1991] 2012: 35). Similarly, Kenneth MacKinnon argues "it is surely over-optimistic to believe that [audiences] are 'free' to choose from a variety of potential meanings" (2003: 24). This should not be taken as arguments that audiences cannot interpret or incorporate texts in various ways (preferred, oppositional or otherwise), but rather emphasize
that these interpretations and incorporations will in some way be influenced by what the texts enable. If researchers wish to fully understand how players identify with game content and representation, then surely it makes sense that researchers should also understand games, their representations and structures. Without significant (textual) knowledge of games themselves, how meaningful can studies of players become? The complexity of games requires a multitude of approaches that can inform and inspire each other. Aarseth argues that the object of study in game studies is "not one, but legio: games as aesthetic objects/texts, games as social process/ritual, games as technological/designed systems, etc. All these require different methodologies from different disciplines that, when institutionally combined, can benefit from each other's insights" (2014: 186). This is important not only for the sake of varied research, but also if the aim is to promote change in industry practices. This requires not only studying the players, but also what the industry actually assumes and produces.

My intentions for using textual analysis can be usefully elucidated further by drawing on David Bordwell's defense of interpretation. Bordwell, in the context of film, argues that both innovative interpretations and "ordinary criticism" have useful purposes, and this is equally valid for games. Innovative interpretations, Bordwell argues, "have activated neglected cues, offered new categories, suggested fresh semantic fields, and widened our rhetorical resources. Innovative frames of reference have heightened our awareness of what can be noticed and appreciated in artworks" (1989: 256). I will not make any claims or have any pretentions about this study qualifying for this type of interpretations. Such innovations might be more of the Marxist or Freudian magnitude of innovative frames of reference, for example, in that they completely change the ways one might view the world. Ordinary criticism, the type of criticism that likely applies to most textual analyses, is the "application and extension of existing semantic fields, schemata and heuristics" (Bordwell 1989: 256). One strategy of this criticism is 'domestication', the "taming of the new". For Bordwell, this entails that the critic "subsumes the unfamiliar to the familiar" and makes the unknown known. The other strategy is 'differentiation', which is the "reshaping of the known": "By showing the applicability of existing conceptual schemes to a fresh case, the critic is often obliged to discriminate those schemes more exactly than heretofore. […] Both domestication and differentiation serve to reaffirm existing conventions, but they do so by demonstrating their range, power, and subtlety" (1989: 256-257). Innovation and "ordinariness" are thus important aspects of analyses and their usefulness.
This thesis should perhaps best be considered close to ordinary criticism. My analysis will revolve primarily around the strategies of domestication and differentiation. That is, I will approach serious representations of homosexuality as a relatively new (and generally "unknown") practice in mainstream games and discuss its cultural resonances, challenges and implications. This will be done by discussing it in relation to existing theories on representations of sexuality and gender, both in games and in other media, not only to emphasize the games' cultural relevance, but also how they might challenge other paradigms because games enable different types of interaction with the text. Innovation is not something I can or would like to attribute to my own work. What might be considered innovative here is up to others to decide, emphasize, and challenge. Yet, there are nevertheless some "innovative" aspirations in this study. For example, I attempt to fuse the often disparate gender studies and game studies in an analysis of what I argue to be innovative games in terms of representations of homosexuality in mainstream games. In turn this could to some extent activate "neglected cues", offer "new categories", suggest "fresh semantic fields" and widen "our rhetorical resources". My aspirations are in some sense innovative (though perhaps not in how Bordwell understands it) as I do not attempt to merely establish and reaffirm existing conventions. The success of this, however, can only established by others and my prior concern is to produce valuable knowledge of the BioWare games and their cultural and academic significance. What I do hope and believe I can do, is to introduce some frames of reference that can deepen our understanding and appreciation for representation in games, which is hopefully interesting and useful to players, scholars and designers alike, and demonstrate that homosexuality and gender in games are represented both similarly to and drastically different from other mainstream media.

**Practical Matters of Game Analysis**

In this section I will provide a discussion on how the game analysis in the following chapters was carried out and how I have combined direct and indirect playing experience (I will spare the reader the details of all the writing that has taken place). I have followed the simple, but very central and efficient methodological framework suggested by Aarseth in his 2003 article "Playing Research". Aarseth's article offers invaluable suggestions for conducting analyses on games and how this process differs from analytical practices that rely more on viewing and spectatorship, or other practices where the researcher is not ergodically involved. Games also
often involve viewing and spectatorship, but the fundamental "textual activity" is different. I will lay out my own approach through a consecutive review of his methodological framework. I also draw on Consalvo and Dutton's (2006) advice on 'interaction mapping'.

Aarseth argues that there are three main ways of acquiring knowledge about any type of game:

1: "[...] study the design, rules and mechanics of the game, insofar as these are available to us, e.g. by talking to the developers of the game."
2: "[...] observe others play, or read their reports and reviews, and hope that their knowledge is representative and their play competent."
3: "[...] play the game ourselves." (2003: 3)

Aarseth considers all three ways valid, but argues, as will I, that playing the game is "clearly the best" and recommends combining or reinforcing it with the other two ways:

If we have not experienced the game personally, we are liable to commit severe misunderstandings, even if we study the mechanics and try our best to guess at their workings. And unlike studies of films and literature, merely observing the action will not put us in the role of the audience. When others play, what takes place on the screen is only partly representative of what the player experiences. The other, perhaps more important part is the mental interpretation and exploration of the rules, which of course is invisible to the non-informed non-player. As non-players we don’t know how to distinguish between functional and decorative sign elements in the game. (2003: 3)

Aarseth argues that secondary sources/experiences can be quite effective for garnering insights that were not acquired during direct play, but he is adamant that any game analysis must require primary experience: "[...] informed game scholarship must involve play, just like scholars of film and literature experience the works first hand, as well as through secondary sources" (2003: 3). Primary playing experience is thus crucial, but secondary sources are also recommended to increase the understanding of elements that were not discovered or explored during primary playing due to factors such as lack of skill, different choices or the overall size of the game. My own playing analyses focused on recognizing central prevailing structures and repeated patterns, which helped me to understand the construction of the "ludotextual whole" and how various textual paradigms operate. Secondary material such as the comprehensive Mass Effect and Dragon Age wikis and YouTube videos uploaded by other players became central to address areas which my own playing did not cover or to confirm my own findings and experiences. In this type of study this approach has been invaluable, and
combining primary experience with secondary experience has provided me with a wealth of material for discussion. The extensive primary experience was necessary before approaching secondary material, because I would already have significant knowledge about how the games work and how detached and separate scenarios and instances in videos would fit into the overall playing/textual context. I will return to this.

The analytical centrality of playing should be clear, but playing is not a uniform activity and different games facilitate different ways of playing. This also affects playing for scholarly purposes, and an important question here is: how do we play scholarly? Aarseth asks if playing for research purposes differs from playing for pleasure (which does not imply that the two are mutually exclusive), and answers that it depends on the reason for the analysis: "A journalist assigned a game to review for a mass audience will probably spend less time than a serious game scholar carefully dissecting a potential masterpiece" (2003: 3). He also argues that the type of game constitutes another important factor: "A multiplayer game requires the participation of others in our play, while a complex strategy game may require hundreds of hours in quiet contemplation" (2003: 3). The Mass Effect and Dragon Age games are of the "dissection through many hours in quiet contemplation" type. Before I outline my approach further I wish to introduce one more analytical aspect: the researcher's positioning toward the game.

Aarseth asks a series of central methodological questions regarding how the playing analysis itself should be carried out:

As a player, we must assume one of a number of positions vis-à-vis the game. What type of player am I? Am I newbie, casual, hardcore? Do I know the genre? How much research should I do prior to playing? Do I take notes while playing? Keep a game-diary, perhaps? Or do I just go ahead and immerse myself, and worry about critical analysis later? Some games are fast, some are slow; should we approach them differently? Should we record ourselves while playing? How do we analyze a game we are not very good at? (2003: 3)

My aim is not to provide a general methodological discussion on these questions here, but rather discuss them in relation to my positions vis-à-vis the BioWare games.

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19 I exclude the optional multiplayer modes of Mass Effect 3 and Dragon Age: Inquisition in this study.
Playing and Knowing

My own playing/gaming background is extensive. I have played video games since my early years and I have had experiences with many types of games and genres throughout the years. Thus, I can generally be called a hardcore player, though my play style in each game is not always hardcore. Everyone is also technically a newbie when faced with a game one has never played before, but there is a difference between playing a game for the first with prior (general) playing background and with little to no playing background at all. What describes me as a hardcore player in this context is that I have an avid personal interest in games and games culture, and I spend, and have spent, a lot of time playing video games. Games are an active part of my life and are important to me as texts and processes, both separately and combined. That is, sometimes I think of games primarily as texts in terms of characters, storylines, settings, etc., without thinking too much about gameplay elements; sometimes I think of them primarily in terms of gameplay without thinking about the more textual elements, and sometimes these thoughts intersect because, as games, the one is usually dependent on the other to varying degrees.

I played five of the six games analyzed in this thesis "for pleasure" multiple times before beginning the project. In fact, as I said in the introductory chapter, the games themselves inspired me to research homosexuality and gender in mainstream games, and thus it is my prior playing experience that led me to my current purpose. I did not perform any scholarly work on the games prior to starting my PhD studies. Dragon Age: Inquisition, the final game analyzed, was released in November 2014. Though people around me humorously doubted me due to my current ongoing research, I was able to enjoy a personal playthrough before subjecting the game to analysis.\textsuperscript{20} It was mostly a personal playthrough, however, because I made sure to note down on my phone any elements that I thought could be relevant when the time for analysis would come, as well as capture various screenshots. While primarily for pleasure, the playthrough was also preliminary for research. I guess this was inevitable considering that I was already well on my way with the analyses.

For this study and for me, at least, playing for pleasure and playing for research constitute two very different ways of playing. Playing for research was, unsurprisingly, a much more meticulous activity and involved much greater testing of the games' systems, which granted

\textsuperscript{20} At the time I was in the middle of the Mass Effect 2 playing analysis.
me insights and understandings I had not acquired during personal play. In personal
playthroughs of games that offer multiple choices in conversations and actions, such as the
BioWare games, I usually tend toward choices that correspond to what I personally think is
the "best" solution (which typically corresponds to what the games code as "heroic" and
"altruistic"). I am generally terrible at "evil" playthroughs (I may feel guilty). I rarely test the
games' systems and structures analytically when I personally play. I might reload the game
now and then and pick different options if an outcome turns out to not be what I wanted, but
my own personal playthroughs are predominantly "seamless". In any case, this has provided
me with valuable firsthand knowledge about the games before subjecting them to academic
treatment (I do not consider primary experience with a game a necessary prerequisite to
scholarly activity, but it certainly helps).

It is no understatement to say that the analytical play and the subsequent analytical activities
proceeded according to the principles of the hermeneutic circle: examining the whole to
understand the parts and examining the parts to understand the whole. This has been carried
out on two primary levels:

The six games are analyzed both as individual games and parts of a larger, overarching series.
The analysis in the following chapters will split the discussion up thematically and then
address manifestations in each game to better present arguments and chronological
developments. The parts here are the particular elements belonging to a single whole game.
Thus, we have Mass Effect, Mass Effect 2 and Mass Effect 3, and Dragon Age: Origins,
Dragon Age II and Dragon Age: Inquisition.

Additionally, the two series are discussed separately in order to facilitate a clearer analysis on
the different representational modes and opportunities unique to each series, as well as to
avoid mixing too many different concepts and lore. Due to the structure of the analyses the
Dragon Age chapters will refer back to the Mass Effect chapters for comparative purposes. On
this level the parts are represented by each individual game belonging to a whole series. Thus,
we also have the Mass Effect series and the Dragon Age series, and there are important
differences between the games on this macro level as well.

These games can be very time-consuming and regular playthroughs which aim at completing
most sidequests and interactions may require around 30–50 hours depending on the title.
Dragon Age: Inquisition is a notable exception and my own full playthroughs would clock in close to or over 100 hours. Please note that these are estimates and may vary depending on how quickly a player completes quests, how much they explore and if they skip scenes and dialogues. These estimates should nevertheless serve as good indicators of the wealth of content both offered and required, and its implications for analytical play. All games are structured around a main questline, and sidequests, areas and scenes are activated (or disabled) as the player proceeds along it. The games facilitate a structure where the player must complete main quests in order to experience more content. If the player does not complete the main quests, the games will usually come to a halt and more or less force the player to continue in order to trigger more things to do. There is a distinct narrative logic that "linearizes" the games despite the fact that the player may at times choose which order to complete quests and interactions in. Romances are especially tied to the progression of the main quests. Thus, it was beneficial to focus on full playthroughs from the very beginning to the very end not only because this is the preferred/intended (or, basically, only) mode of playing, but also in order to investigate the relationship between the public and private gameworlds in the textual whole. This is especially important for discussing homosexuality, because it usually finds expression in optional content rather than obligatory content. This has important implications for how we should approach and discuss representation in agency-driven games.

The analytical playing involved both planned and spontaneous playing. I subjected each of the six games to two full playthroughs (PC versions), and each playthrough differed mainly in protagonist gender and romance, as well as various experimentations with the morality and personality systems.\textsuperscript{21} \textsuperscript{22} I took great care in exploring the same quests and scenes in both playthroughs of each game in order to see if there were any notable (gendered) differences as well as making sure I was thorough. This process involved what Consalvo and Dutton refer to as interaction mapping: "examining the choices that the player is offered in regards to interaction—not with objects, but with other player characters, and/or with Non-Player Characters (NPCs)" (2006). For my project, multiple playthroughs were required to experience as much of the textual content as possible, but also to follow Consalvo and

\textsuperscript{21} Chapters IV and VII introduce the specific mechanics of each series.

\textsuperscript{22} A notable exception is my first two playthroughs of Mass Effect, which were both done as the female character. At the time I had recently completed a playthrough as the male character in my spare time, and so instead I focused on testing out the two different moralities for the female character during scholarly play. I returned to the game and conducted an analytical playthrough with the male protagonist at a later date.
Dutton's advice on multiple playthroughs "so that the researcher can consider the game as a whole and can determine if earlier (unremarkable) dialogue/options/choices were actually important enough to include" (2006). For practical interaction mapping, they provide some suggestions for questions a researcher can ask: "Are interactions limited?", "Do interactions change over time?", "What is the range of interaction?", and "Are NPCs present, and what dialogue options are offered to them? Can they be interacted with? How? How variable are their interactions?" (2006). These types of questions constitute a significant part of my inquiry in these games. Interactions in the BioWare games take place primarily through the dialogue systems, which also required an interface study. The specifics of the dialogue interfaces are addressed in the mechanics chapters, and how interactions may work in these games is discussed in the analysis chapters.

Remember that I did not go blindly into the games in the scholarly process: I already possessed prior knowledge from earlier full personal playthroughs. In order to complement my existing experiences I focused on trying out new choices and interactions during analytical play. I frequently captured screenshots in order to both document my playthroughs and for use in the thesis itself.23 I proceeded in a chronological fashion game-wise, starting with the initial title of each series and then proceeding to the subsequent titles. I dedicated myself fully to playing one title at a time. I used another computer in each playing session to write down notable experiences and events for that particular playthrough. Once both playthroughs for a title were completed, I would collect my observations and write a general critical documentation/discussion of that title before approaching a new game. I focused on three distinct "play cycles" that would reflect and respect the temporal context of the games' release rather than their series affiliation. Play cycle 1 consisted of Mass Effect and Dragon Age: Origins, play cycle 2 consisted of Mass Effect 2 and Dragon Age II, and play cycle three consisted of Mass Effect 3 and Dragon Age: Inquisition. I additionally played through some of the games' downloadable content (DLC).24 To unburden the analytical work as much as possible, I set the combat difficulty to "casual"/"normal" to lessen time and energy spent in combat situations. These games involve a great deal of combat, and while an important part of the overall gameplay, combat systems and strategies are not the main focus in this thesis. Once all playthroughs were completed and discussed I began the work on the analysis

23 I took a total of 42,958 screenshots.
24 I focused on Lair of the Shadow Broker (Mass Effect 2), Citadel (Mass Effect 3) and Trespasser (Dragon Age: Inquisition) since they have much romance-related content.
chapters. The scholarly play process, including reading and writing, took approximately a full year.

While two full playthroughs with plenty of reloading and re-choosing in each game enabled me great insight into the overall structural, mechanical and textual dynamics of the games, they did not offer me a chance to see everything they offer. Therefore, it was important to combine my own experiences with secondary sources, and here I have primarily consulted the *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* wikis and YouTube. The wikis are not affiliated with BioWare; their community and contributors are players themselves. These wikis offer comprehensive encyclopedic information on virtually everything in the games, both large-scale and small-scale, and are especially useful resources for this type of analysis. Articles often detail various outcomes on macro and micro levels as well as offer detailed quest overviews and how certain scenes and interactions are triggered. The wikis are thus both encyclopedias and walkthroughs. I also consulted player-uploaded videos on YouTube to watch scenarios and outcomes I did not play myself and to verify my own outcomes. Several users have uploaded a staggering amount of gameplay videos that detail most scenarios and choices (especially romance scenarios), and were thus a very helpful resource. Video verification of the information found on the wikis was also important. I have thus experienced all game content discussed in the subsequent chapters. Aarseth's suggestion of combining primary and secondary experience in analysis and Consalvo and Dutton's recommendations for qualitative textual playing analysis have proven invaluable here.

**The Implied Player in Games and Analysis**

The final point I wish to address concerns the implied player both constructed by the game and in my analysis. This position affects how I discuss the contents of the games and how they are enabled/disabled through agency. Aarseth defines the implied player as "a role made for the player by the game, a set of expectations that the player must fulfil for the game to 'exercise its effect'" (2007: 132). As with the implied author, this is a term that has its origins in literary theory and narratology. The implied reader, a model proposed by Wolfgang Iser, is the counterpart of the implied author, "the audience presupposed by the narrative itself" (Chatman 1978: 150). Just like how we may get a sense of who the author may be when we experience a text, so too may we get a sense of whom the text is for. The implied reader is an
ideal reader, and an implied player may be an ideal player. Aarseth adapts this theory into a game-specific context which not only suggests that the same role process takes place in games, but that it also comes with functional implications. Aarseth argues that the implied player can be seen as "a boundary imposed on the player-subject by the game, a limitation to the playing person's freedom of movement and choice" (2007: 132). While the implied reader may be a text's hopeful address to an ideal audience, a game can enforce its ideal player position directly through structure, mechanics and actions. I am thus interested in how this implied player is activated and engaged in the Mass Effect and Dragon Age games through enabled actions and interactions. The implied player is not necessarily restricted to only one particular subject position in a game. An ideal player may be allowed to do a variety of things, but unlike implied authors and readers, games are much better at forcing players to adhere and respond to certain actions and events, though this should not be confused or conflated with player acceptance or support.

Consequently, the implied player is also a structuring principle in the analysis chapters. I have written the analysis from the point of view of an implied player both suggested and desired by the games and from my own playing practices. This facilitates a better discussion on how content is encountered and engaged with. This is only an ideal, considering that there are many ways to play the games, but the mode suggested here is the one I argue that the games also suggest. I will adopt the notion of a combined 'explorer-socializer' as the implied player. These terms are derived from Richard Bartle's typology of MUD players. Explorers "try to find out as much as they can about the virtual world" while socializers "use the game's communicative facilities, and apply the role-playing that these engender, as a context in which to converse (and otherwise interact) with their fellow players" (Bartle [1996] 2006: 757). The context for Bartle's typology is a bit different than my application of it since the BioWare games are single-player games and do not involve in-game interactions with other players. The terms remain useful, as the myriads of characters and conversational options facilitate the socializing aspects in these games. While the explorer-socializer unlikely represents all players of these games, it is evident that the games want these types of players considering their large amounts of extra content (and subsequently, rewards for participating in extra content) which add both depth and longevity to the games. In other words, while the games can be played mostly for their combat segments (though that will also inevitably require some socialization aspects with NPCs and exploration) they are nevertheless not intended or desired to be played mainly this way. The analysis is thus played and structured from the perspective
of an explorer-socializer, and the content discussed represents what this player type is likely to encounter in full playthroughs of these games.

The preliminary part of this study is hereby concluded and I will now take the reader on a journey through galactic and fantastical worlds to investigate what video games have to say about homosexuality and gender. We will begin with the Mass Effect universe and its futuristic version of our own world, and I will begin by introducing the games' mechanics that are central in how the games structure and enable their important representational practices. It is now high time to put theory into practice and practice into theory.

Summary

In this chapter I have introduced and discussed the methodological approach for this study. I have focused on explaining textual analysis, its origins and how it can contribute to game studies. I then discussed how text, understood broadly as meaningful content, may operate in games and what to critically consider when conducting textual analyses of games. I also disclosed how I performed the practical part of this study, the playing, and emphasized the importance of both firsthand experience and secondary sources for the analysis.
Chapter IV:
Gameworld and Interaction Mechanics of the *Mass Effect* Series

The *Mass Effect* games invite and require the player's direct participation in shaping the future of the galaxy and the developments of interpersonal relationships, and in this chapter I introduce the general world of the *Mass Effect* series and the central interaction mechanics. I will mostly focus on the dialogue and romance systems. Many manifestations of (homo)sexuality and gender will be explicitly tied to how these mechanics enable and perform interaction, as well as what can be enabled and performed. The player is both allowed and required to exercise agency through mechanics and systems governing and structuring dialogue choices, morality alignments, character interactions and romances. A central tenet of these games is what Ernest Adams refers to as self-defining play. This includes activities where the player can choose what to play as and look like, and how the player character behaves (2014: 167), allowing distinct personalization of the gaming experience. Self-defining play in video games is also a compromise structure because the player is both enabled and limited by the programming and design, meaning that whatever "self" that can be defined is offered through and within certain frameworks. Understanding how these frameworks operate is important in order to discuss the various textual possibilities the *Mass Effect* games offer and how they might be manifested. Most interactions take place through the dialogue wheel system, a dominant interface structuring interpersonal conversations, activities and decisions. The three *Mass Effect* games are very similar in terms of these mechanics, but each game has local variations. This chapter is mostly descriptive and introduces vocabulary and features discussed over the next two chapters.

"Our" Future: The *Mass Effect* Universe

The *Mass Effect* universe is designed to be a futuristic vision of our own universe, complete with Earth's entire (and thus our own contemporary) history. The name of the series, *Mass Effect*, refers to a specific type of advanced technology used for everything from generating artificial gravity to allowing faster-than-light (FTL) space travel. While the *Mass Effect*

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25 While combat equipment, playstyles and battle strategies are also aspects that can be categorized as self-defining play, they are not directly concerned with my area of research and as such they will not be accounted for here.

26 The general conversational mechanics and romance systems introduced here are also applicable for the *Dragon Age* series. Chapter VII offers an overview of the specifics of this series' interactional approach.
timeline implies and references a history spanning over a billion years, the three games take place during 2183–2186. The player can receive various outcomes when completing *Mass Effect 3*, which are governed by both past decisions and the decisive choice at the game's climax.

Humanity's real advance into space was marked with the foundation of the Armstrong Outpost as the first human settlement on the moon in 2069, 100 years after the first lunar landing. In 2148, humans found remnants of ancient advanced technology buried on Mars (later, this is revealed to have been created by an extinct species, the Protheans) which quickly lead humans to experiment with mass effect fields and develop FTL travel. One year later, humans discovered that one of Pluto's moons is a mass relay, which was believed to be a giant piece of advanced Prothean technology. Mass relays are transit devices that are connected in a vast network around the galaxy, and they can instantaneously transport starships between each other. This allows for journeys that would normally require years or centuries with FTL drives alone.

Up until 2157, humanity had not come across another species on their galactic expeditions. While attempting to activate a dormant mass relay, something which was forbidden by galactic law (which, of course, humans had no knowledge about), another spacefaring species, the turians (an avian-like race), discovered them and attacked. This resulted in a three-month conflict known to humanity as the First Contact War. The turians occupied a human world, but were later driven out by a surprise attack. When the turians planned a war against humanity, the Citadel Council noticed and took action. Peace was eventually made between humans and turians, and humans were introduced into the greater galactic community. Humanity's continued progress and galactic expansion were recognized by the Council when they awarded humanity a Citadel Embassy in 2165. Considering that *Mass Effect* takes place 26 years after First Contact, humanity is still a relatively new species to the galactic community and is often met with suspicion and disdain by other species.

The *Mass Effect* series adopts a more Darwinist worldview as opposed to the mysticism that permeates the *Dragon Age* games (though there is often a certain type of romanticism surrounding the Protheans, their highly advanced technology and their mysterious disappearance). Religion is not a common governing force. The Reaper mythos initially has some religious aspects surrounding it, and this is especially clear when Shepard speaks to the
Reaper Sovereign on Virmire in *Mass Effect*. Sovereign claims that the Reapers are beyond the comprehension of organics and that they have no beginning or end. When the truth is ultimately revealed, however, it turns out that it is all linked to science and technology and has a logical explanation. The departure from magical mysticism can also be seen in the *Mass Effect* universe's approach to "biotics", which is in many ways functionally similar to magic and spells from fantasy RPGs, but which originates from mass effect generation in body tissue. In a sense, even "magic" is scientific and technological here.

**World and Quest Structure**

The gameworld in the *Mass Effect* series is composed of multiple obligatory and optional locations which are all accessed from the spaceship Normandy, the games' central hub. From here the player navigates between locations through a Galaxy Map. The Normandy houses both the ship's crew and the player's companions and is also a location the player can regularly explore to engage in conversations and romances. The games are structured as what Espen Aarseth (2012) refers to as a "creamy middle quest game", which means that the player is afforded a certain agency in the order in which to undertake and complete quests after some obligatory introductory quests. A fixed final quest must be completed to finish the game. The choices and performances during the games' "creamy middle" may influence the final quest and its outcomes. The games have both obligatory main quests and optional sidequests (referred to as missions and assignments respectively in the games). Completing quests grants experience points to power up the characters, and items and upgrades. Quest progression is important not only for moving the game and storyline forward, but also for unlocking more conversations and content with companions. The social aspects of the games are thus closely connected to the progression of the storyline.

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27 The level design of actual quest/mission areas is typically structured as what Aarseth (2005) calls a "linear corridor". The player moves from a fixed starting point to a fixed ending point, and there may be a few branching paths here and there.
The Player Character

The player character in the *Mass Effect* games is always human Commander Shepard, but the player has the option to play as either female or male. This choice is made at the beginning of each new game and is irreversible. The games offer default appearances for both Shepards, but the player may customize. The default male Commander Shepard is well known from marketing and promotional material and has become an iconic character in his own right, rather than merely being a default shell for the player to manipulate. The default female Shepard has not enjoyed the same iconic status, and in *Mass Effect 3* BioWare introduced a completely new default appearance for her.28

The character creation in the *Mass Effect* games contains both of what Adams calls functional and cosmetic attributes: attributes that affect gameplay and attributes that do not (Adams 2014: 168). Shepard's physical appearance is always a cosmetic attribute. That does not mean that appearance is insignificant or will not have an impact on the player's experience, but it will not be registered or referred to by characters in the game, nor do different looks produce any in-game advantages or disadvantages. Adams argues that cosmetic attributes are important as the player can be apt to like a game more if customization is allowed (2014: 170). Customization options are significant in games where player choices are an integral part. Functional attributes include Shepard's combat class, which affects the type of abilities the player can use.

Shepard's gender, on the other hand, is both a cosmetic and functional attribute. Gender is cosmetic in the sense that it does not affect or alter combat abilities or the main storyline of the game, and the script is generally identical. The genders are equal in these instances, except for a few notable differences (see next chapter). Gender affects how Shepard talks and sounds, and some characters will react differently to Shepard depending on gender. The greatest functional attribute of gender is the types of romances that become available. Gender-specific romances will also open up for certain dialogues and scenes that are not available to a Shepard of a non-compatible gender. Unlike gender, sexuality is not an attribute or trait the

28 *Mass Effect 3* is also the first game of the series to possibly depict female Shepard on the front cover. Early editions of the game came with a reversible sleeve so that the player can choose which Shepard they want on the cover. Later editions, such as the Wii U release and the *Mass Effect* trilogy collection, however, only show male Shepard.
player chooses during character creation. Sexuality can be performed through romances and flirtatious interactions, but it never becomes a static or marked identity in the game.\(^ {29}\)

While the player may usually choose Shepard's responses in conversations, the responses, reactions and actions available will depend on the situation at hand and the characters in question. Shepard is not merely a tabula rasa in conversations. Everything is scripted and thus tailored to specific contexts. As Kristine Jørgensen notes, despite how the player may choose actions and responses, "Shepard's appearance and voice-acting suggests that the PC is a charismatic and energetic commander with an attitude" (2010: 320). Different companions invite the player to engage in different types of conversations, and Shepard's possible approaches, for example in the tone and address, can vary greatly between them.

**The Dialogue Wheel**

The *Mass Effect* games use interactive dialogues extensively as part of their approach to meaningful play, regularly calling upon the player to provide replies in conversations and make minor and major decisions. Interactive dialogues as a core mechanic enable interpersonal communications with companions and the possibilities of romances. Dialogues thus become a significant representational tool for identity expressions, as well as indicative of intended/enabled meanings, beliefs and values.

Conversation is a major activity and the player will spend much time talking to other denizens of the galaxy, both while out in the field on a mission and during downtime aboard the Normandy. The games use a mechanic called 'scripted conversation' (Adams 2014: 237) to create dynamic interaction between Shepard and other parties. When the player engages in a conversation the game will normally enter into a type of cinematic conversation mode where all other actions become unavailable. In such conversations, the player loses physical control of Shepard and instead chooses Shepard's responses and actions from a menu. Time will normally freeze around the characters in these conversations and will not resume until the exchange is over. The player has infinite time in choosing responses while in this mode, even

\(^ {29}\) The games often assume Shepard to be heterosexual, however. See the section on "default heterosexuality" in the next chapter.
in situations where there is obvious immediate danger. These conversations typically use the cinematic shot/reverse-shot technique.

![Figure 1: The dialogue wheel in conversation.](image1)

The *Mass Effect* games use a variant of the dialogue tree system that is commonly referred to as the "dialogue wheel". The dialogue wheel is, as the name implies, a circle containing various responses and actions directly related to the current situation. It appears at the bottom of the screen and is a dominant, recurring user interface. The lines in the wheel are paraphrases representing what Shepard will actually speak out loud if a particular option is chosen. Here is close-up of a typical conversation involving the dialogue wheel:

![Figure 2: A close-up image of the dialogue wheel.](image2)
The dialogue wheel is in essence the same as a dialogue tree, but it performs differently than a regular list of conversational responses. Responses located on the right side of the wheel generally progress the conversation toward its end. Responses located on the left side usually allow the player to ask for more information regarding the current situation or character. The "Investigate" tab here opens further options the player may ask about before ultimately moving on. Investigation options may yield fruitful information and open up other options in a conversation. The dialogue wheel is not only used for interpersonal conversation, it is also a tool for interacting with things such as computers, and for performing particular actions such as entering or leaving. The dialogue wheel is a performative interface, allowing the player to interact in various ways and express certain attitudes and behaviors. It is thus one of the most significant role-playing features in the games. While the player must regularly travel and fight enemies on missions, the dialogue wheel is typically the ultimate and decisive decision-making tool involved in all spheres of the games. The dialogue wheel is both enabling and restricting: it is enabling in that the wheel offers multiple possibilities, and restricting because those possibilities are always limited to the written and programmed content.

**Paragon and Renegade Morality**

The dialogue wheel is not an arbitrary construction or a mere cosmetic variation of a dialogue tree; it is closely structured around the Paragon and Renegade morality system. This morality dichotomy is a recurring feature in the *Mass Effect* games, measuring and indicating what type of character Commander Shepard is. The responses located on the right in the wheel are usually placed according to their designated morality parameter. Upper-right options belong to Paragon while the lower-right options correspond with Renegade. Choosing these options may award morality points. Accumulating morality points will unlock special responses and interactions. The middle option is usually considered a neutral response which will not award morality points. This structure offers predictability and comfort, enabling the player to easily act out the preferred attitude. A Paragon Shepard will appear as understanding, helpful and diplomatic, while a Renegade Shepard is more impatient, pragmatic and prone to making threats or easily resort to physical violence. The Paragon/Renegade structure is often not applicable when talking to companions or during romance dialogues.
This morality system reflects what Miguel Sicart calls a "mirror ethical design". In this design the game "is aware of its own value system and builds gameplay around this awareness, without players being able to do anything but play these external ethics" (2009: 217). This stands in contrast to what Sicart terms "subtracting ethics", which "creates a moral experience, but leaves the ethical reasoning to the players" (2009: 215). For Sicart then, the Paragon/Renegade system would reflect a constrained way of representing ethics and morality in games, where morality is decided by developers and which reduces morality to an accumulation of points and attributes rather than inviting deeper reflection. Mirror ethical design thus perhaps invites more into a reflection on the developer's ethics rather than the player's own sense of ethics. At the same time, I would not downplay that mirror ethical design can invite the same types of ethical reflections as subtracting ethics can do, though this would likely require good textual representations in terms of responses to the player's actions and (long-term) consequences. BioWare manages a little of both in both series. Many choices have long-lasting consequences, though often characters suffer from what I term "agency amnesia". The player often receives immediate reactions to their choices and actions, but they are also regularly soon forgotten by the other characters.

**Conversational Restrictions**

The dialogue wheel enables freedom in choosing responses, but it regularly imposes restrictions on the player as to what is allowed to be expressed:

![Dialogue options in the conversation with Ashley about Liara's sex life.](image)

Here, Ashley Williams makes a joking remark about asking the asari squad member Liara T'Soni about her sex life. As the image shows, the player is presented with the usual three Paragon/Neutral/Renegade responses. What is interesting here is that Shepard is never

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30 The reason why Ashley specifically brings up Liara's sex life is related to the many rumors about asari sexuality, which I will discuss in the next chapter.
allowed to agree with Ashley or be in on the joke. All of the options reprimand Ashley in some way for suggesting it. The Paragon option will yield "I don't think she's used to teasing, good-natured or otherwise" while Renegade triggers "[i]s that the best way to spend your time, Chief?" The primary difference here is that Renegade is more confrontational toward Ashley, not some confirmation from Shepard or a follow-up joke of a similar kind. This situation sends a message that it is not appropriate to joke about Liara's/asari sexuality and that Liara should not be criticized regardless of Shepard's personality. Shepard, on the other hand, can criticize Liara in private conversations. A similar situation occurs when Ashley speaks about one of her sisters and how she beat up her boyfriend who wanted to have sex with her when she was not ready. Shepard is only allowed to agree with how Ashley's sister handled the situation, and the Renegade option in this case will have Shepard criticize the nature of teenage boys. While Paragon and Renegade are usually equally valid options so that the game does not prioritize or moralize too much on behalf of the player, situations like the two described here indicate that the game takes specific stands on certain matters. As we shall see in the coming chapters, this creates implications for (and discrepancies between) the representation of topics such as gender and sexuality and how the player's agency is enabled and restricted. The dialogue wheel offers the player power to do and say various and certain things, but that power is always limited to the script. This is thus closer to a mirror ethical design.

In *Mass Effect*, Shepard will not speak unless the player uses the dialogue wheel. In *Mass Effect 2*, Shepard is able to speak without the player's input. Shepard usually adds a few independent lines during conversations (auto-dialogue). This lessens the frequency of instances where the dialogue wheel must be used and can be argued to remove some of the player's control, turning Shepard into a character that is sometimes controlled by the player and sometimes acts on their own. The positive result is that it creates a more natural flow in conversations, allowing Shepard to add a few comments here and there instead of standing idly by, waiting for the next opportunity to respond. It may also serve to make Shepard a more developer-controlled character than previously, limiting player choices. This approach carries over into *Mass Effect 3*. 
Companion Interactions

A considerable part of the *Mass Effect* games' role-playing experience involves interacting with and building relationships with Shepard's companions and crew aboard the Normandy. Companions often have interesting stories to tell or opinions and advice to give. Typically, companions can talk about their background and motivations prior to joining Shepard's mission. Alien companions may also function as ambassadors on behalf of their species, teaching the player about their history, culture and other unique features. The player can befriend the companions, opt for more tense relationships, or ignore them. It is imperative to the dialogue mechanics of the *Mass Effect* games that main characters are round and open-ended so that they can excite and engage the player in the many possible conversations. In these games, however, it is not merely the anticipation of what the characters are like or how they unfold. The dialogue mechanics also allow the player to choose different responses and interact personally with the characters, and much of the surprise and excitement will here stem from the suspense of finding out how the player may interact and how the character may develop because of the player. It is not merely a fictional, literary suspense, it is also the suspense produced by the possibility of direct involvement.

Companions are mostly supplementary in narrative terms in *Mass Effect* and *Mass Effect 3*, but they become very central to the progression in *Mass Effect 2*. The plot of this game centers on gathering a team for a suicide mission. The game's main quests focus extensively on recruiting companions. The plot makes it clear that each team member needs to be fully focused for the mission ahead, so additionally each companion has a specific quest known as a Loyalty Mission. These quests typically deal with personal issues. Successful completion makes the companion loyal to Commander Shepard, which means they have a higher chance of surviving the game's final mission. The Suicide Mission is, as Jørgensen points out, "a highly emotional part of the game" and ties in with the fact that "the player has spent the majority of the game getting to know the companions and thus develop a bond with them" (2010: 326). The plot of *Mass Effect 3* revolves around full-scale galactic war and thus moves away from this extensive companion focus.

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31 Everybody can survive the Suicide Mission if they are loyal and the player assigns appropriate roles to each member. It is also in fact possible to successfully complete the Suicide Mission with everyone dying, including Shepard.
The companions, including romance companions, are not merely literary characters or static representations. They are what Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman call 'procedural characters'. This refers to the interaction the player can have with the characters, as well their more formal game characteristics. This is closely tied to the view of games as simulation: "Combining narrative and simulation is a powerful way of thinking about games as a representational medium, because it forces a truly existential approach to participating with a story" (Salen and Zimmerman 2004: 435). They discuss various types of procedural characters in their book and while there is no stable definition, their own discussion emphasizes that "[s]ome of the examples are characters under the direct control of the player, whereas others remain outside of player control. In all cases, rules and interaction are used to procedurally construct a character, while also weaving the character into the larger fabric of the game representation" (Salen and Zimmerman 2004: 435). Let me use Kaidan Alenko as a brief example to illustrate this. Kaidan has developed biotic powers due to being exposed to element zero while in the womb, something he may talk about to the player if they engage in conversation. These powers also exist for the player to upgrade and utilize in combat if they take Kaidan along, allowing Kaidan's more representational aspects to become functional aspects as well. Likewise, the dialogue wheel functions as a procedural tool (in addition to being a discursive tool) for interacting with the characters, enabling the player to explore characters and reactions in different ways. Romances can thus be viewed as procedural because they are wholly dependent on the player's choices and interactions in accordance with the romance "rules", and allow a companion to, for example, change from friend to significant other (changing both their formal and textual/representational status).

List of Companions

**Mass Effect**: Kaidan Alenko (human), Ashley Williams (human), Liara T'Soni (asari), Garrus Vakarian (turian), Urdnot Wrex (krogan), and Tali'Zorah nar Rayya (quarian).

**Mass Effect 2**: Miranda Lawson (human), Jacob Taylor (human), Mordin Solus (salarian) Garrus Vakarian (turian), Jack (human), Grunt (krogan), Tali'Zorah nar Rayya (quarian),
Thane Krios (drell), Samara/Morinth (asari),\(^{32}\) Legion (geth), Zaeed Massani (human), and Kasumi Goto (human).

*Mass Effect 3*: Kaidan Alenko/Ashley Williams (human),\(^{33}\) James Vega (human), Liara T'Soni (asari), Garrus Vakarian (turian), Tali'Zorah vas Normandy (quarian), EDI (AI), and Javik (Prothean).

**Romances**

Romances are special types of relationships that the player can enter into with companions. Romances can be gender specific or available to both genders, and represent a core aspect of the games' representations of homosexuality. They require that the player interacts with the preferred and available companion regularly and favorably, as well as choose dialogue options to make Shepard flirt. Unfriendliness, disinterest and hostile attitudes will exclude the possibilities of a romance. Shepard's morality scores do not affect the ability to enter and build a romance with a companion, so both Paragon and Renegade players have the same possibilities.\(^{34}\) A Renegade player cannot be particularly mean or distant toward the desired companion as this will communicate disinterest and rejection. Romances are wholly optional and add extra scenes and dialogues. They do not affect combat gameplay or the outcome of the games' missions. Romances should not be considered arbitrary or unimportant because of this. They can contribute to significant textual variations and allow for explicit acts and expressions of gender and sexuality. This adds depth to the role-playing experience and allows the player to add stories of love and/or heartbreak of their own to the overall storyline—a feature that does not exist in literature, film or television.

Romance in the *Mass Effect* games follows the main quest structure and evolves over the course of the game, just like a regular companion friendship. Generally, romance progression takes place outside of the games' main storyline missions. The romance culminates in a special scene once the point-of-no-return mission at the game's climax is started. The romanced companion will approach Shepard, typically in Shepard's quarters, and they can

\(^{32}\) Samara is initially recruited, though the player can help her daughter Morinth kill her and assume her place on the squad. Morinth takes on Samara's appearance to fool the others.

\(^{33}\) Which character appears depends on who survives Virmire in *Mass Effect*.

\(^{34}\) The only exception to this is Samara in *Mass Effect 2* who cannot be successfully flirted with unless Shepard is Paragon, due to Samara's own convictions. Samara is not a romance option, however.
share an intimate moment before embarking on the game's last set of missions. The intimate moment is usually a sex scene that fades to black at various points depending on the companion. With most alien companions the screen fades to black more quickly than with certain human companions. The intimate scene will unlock a trophy/achievement, signalizing that the romance is successfully completed.\footnote{\emph{Mass Effect} and \emph{Mass Effect 2} offer the possibility to turn down sex during this scene. In \emph{Mass Effect 3}, however, curiously only some companions can be turned down.}

As romances are tied to the chronological progression of the games' storyline and specific dialogues/scenes, the player must be careful or certain romance opportunities might be permanently lost for that playthrough. The structure of a romance is similar in all three games. There is no penalty for flirting with multiple companions, but at one point the player must decide to lock the romance with one of them. Romance progression with other characters becomes unavailable once a locking point has been reached. If a companion is rejected during the lock-in dialogue, all romance possibilities for that character will permanently end.

There are also other types of brief romantic and sexual pursuits available, and I refer to these as "flirtations" to separate them from the romances. These do not award an achievement or result in a relationship. Typically, flirtations only consist of some flirting and/or sex. While a flirtation may not be as extensive as a romance, it is not necessarily trivial in nature either. Flirtations generally do not interfere with progress in the official romances, but entering romances may interrupt the possibilities of engaging in flirtations. For example, in \emph{Mass Effect} the player may have sex with the asari consort Sha'ira after helping her out in a quest. In \emph{Mass Effect 2} the player can repeatedly flirt with Yeoman Kelly Chambers without any of the other companions taking notice, and it will not interrupt progress in a romance. Entering a relationship prevents the player from accessing the later scenes with Kelly, however.

The games also include what I call "romantic snares": flirts and romance possibilities that never culminate in anything or which may break off romance progression. I derive this term from Roland Barthes' \emph{S/Z}: "Narratively, an enigma leads from a question to an answer, through a certain number of delays. Of these delays, the main one is unquestionably the feint, the misleading answer, the lie, what we will call the \emph{snare}" ([1973] 1990: 32). In Barthes' analysis, snares occur as part of the hermeneutic code, as false answers to the mysteries of the story which will suspend the resolution of the enigmas. In romantic snares the player is led to
believe there is a genuine possibility of romance (like flirting with James Vega as a female Shepard in *Mass Effect 3*) only to be inevitably turned down at some point. Similarly, during the romance path with Jack in *Mass Effect 2* she will offer to have sex with Shepard; this is a snare and if the offer is taken the romance cannot continue as Jack wants to have nothing more to do with Shepard afterwards.

**List of Romances and Flirtations**

The following is a list of the romances and flirtations offered in each *Mass Effect* game.\(^{36}\) Information in brackets refers to which gender the character is available to.

*Mass Effect*

Romance: Kaidan Alenko (F), Ashley Williams (M), Liara T'Soni (both).

Flirtation: Sha'ira (both).

*Mass Effect 2*

Romance: Miranda Lawson (M), Jacob Taylor (F), Garrus Vakarian (F), Jack (M), Tali'Zorah (M), Thane Krios (F), Liara T'Soni (both).\(^ {37}\)

Flirtation: Kelly Chambers (both), Samara (both), Morinth (both).

*Mass Effect 3*

Romance: Kaidan Alenko (both), Ashley Williams (M), Liara T'Soni (both), Steve Cortez (M), Samantha Traynor (F), Miranda Lawson (M), Garrus Vakarian (F), Jack (M), Tali'Zorah (M), Thane Krios (F), Kelly Chambers (both).

Flirtation: Diana Allers (both), Samara (both), James Vega (F), Javik (F).\(^ {39}\)

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\(^{36}\) Miranda, Garrus, Tali and Thane must be romanced in *Mass Effect 2* in order to continue a romance with them in *Mass Effect 3*.

\(^{37}\) Liara is not a part of the official romance lineup in *Mass Effect 2*. In the DLC *The Lair of the Shadow Broker* the player is able to continue a romance with Liara (if one existed in *Mass Effect*), though the game will not officially recognize it as a romance (no achievement is awarded) and it will not hinder progress with another romance.

\(^{38}\) Thane inevitably dies mid-game and the romance grants no achievement.

\(^{39}\) Flirtations with Samara, James and Javik require the *Citadel* DLC and that Shepard is not involved in another romance. Additionally, Samara requires that the player flirts with her in *Mass Effect 2*. 
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male same-gender</th>
<th>Male opposite-gender</th>
<th>Female same-gender</th>
<th>Female opposite-gender</th>
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<tr>
<td>Romances</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Flirtations</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
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Table 1: The number of romances and flirtations available for each protagonist gender.

From this list we can gather some preliminary thoughts on what to possibly expect from the gameworld. The series offers the most options for male heterosexuality, and has very few options for male same-gender romances and flirtations. The numbers of options for female same-gender and opposite-gender relations are fairly similar, overall suggesting that the gameworld is not as accommodating toward male homosexuality. What the gameworld actually represents and how is the topic for the next two chapters.

**Summary**

This chapter has introduced the general gameworld and interaction mechanics in the *Mass Effect* games. The dialogue wheel functions as the player's primary tool for interaction, allowing the player to make decisions and conversational responses. The player character Shepard's morality is measured in a Paragon/Renegade system which allows for different personality styles for Shepard. Companion interactions are an important (though mostly optional) feature enabling the player to get closer to other characters and possibly affect their personal development, resulting in a deep, interpersonal role-playing experience. The player can also enter into romantic relationships with certain companions. Romances typically act as the player's own love story through the course of the game and follow the progression of the main quests. Flirtations refer to minor romantic and sexual interactions the player may engage in.
Chapter V: Sexuality and Gender in the Public Galaxy

The futuristic Milky Way of the first three *Mass Effect* games invites players on an interstellar journey to explore different planets and cultures in the quest to stop the mysterious Reapers from destroying the galaxy. Galactic society flourishes with many different species in a variety of locales, and there is a lot of history and culture to discover, explore and interact with. The player is regularly required to aid and intervene in many local and personal conflicts. In this chapter I will analyze and discuss how sexuality and gender are constructed, represented and interacted with in the public gameworld of *Mass Effect* (either through acts or dialogues). My specific aim is to discuss what type of world this is in terms of sexuality and gender, and how (and in many cases, if) homosexuality finds both place and expression. Locating the overall sexuality and gender frames is important in order to understand how the games portray both tradition and diversity in a public gameworld, as well as understanding which types of diversity are allowed and which are not. Homosexuality is not a solitary or isolated phenomenon, and will not be investigated here as such. Here I will focus on the overall public gameworld the player meets and interacts with during main missions and sidequests, and I also include companion interactions that are not part of the romances. I limit the analysis to aspects of the games where topics of sexuality and gender are addressed in some way or another.

I have structured the analytic inquiry into five main categories based on my observations and experiences from the playing analysis: protagonist gender specificity; default heterosexuality; gazing, eroticization and irony; queerness through the asari and xenophilia; and implicit and explicit homosexuality. These aspects are present in all three games, more or less, but they will not be treated equally since they depend on what the individual games actually offer. These five aspects are what I have found to be the most central points to investigate in order to gain comprehensive knowledge of how (homo)sexuality and gender are constructed in the *Mass Effect* series. I will discuss each aspect separately and in a game-wise chronological manner where it is applicable. This is the common structure for all five analytic aspects.

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40 I have included some minor romance-specific content here either to supplement a current discussion (Liara and asari sexuality) or when it seemingly takes place as regular companion interaction (Kaidan in the hospital). I offer a brief statement and reason for inclusion when these instances occur.
I wish to emphasize that overt and explicit homosexuality, particularly male homosexuality, is not represented much of outside companion interactions and romances. *Mass Effect 2* is almost exclusively heterosexual in its romance possibilities and player-enabled male homosexuality is not possible until *Mass Effect 3*, which may serve as an indicator of what to expect in the public gameworld. The analysis in this chapter may not have many particular explicit examples of homosexuality to draw on, but this is a point in itself to investigate in order to see how homosexuality finds its (uneasy) place in the galactic sphere of gender and sexuality through both symbolic annihilation and silence before its eventual uneasy emergence. There can be no doubt that queerness is prominent in all three games, but mainstream conventions regulate representations. The sexual future as suggested by the *Mass Effect* series offers both new hopes and anxieties of the past, a somewhat contradictory relationship between sexual and gendered freedoms and constraints as evident in Western cultures today.

Let us consider the first *Mass Effect* a beginning of what would become an extensive mainstream exploration of sexuality and gender, and that this beginning is slow and careful. There are plenty of reasons to believe *Mass Effect* was developed primarily for a (straight) male audience: the realms of science fiction and action games are typically "men's genres". There is also a focus on sexualized and objectified female characters and there is no male homosexuality to be found. It is also important that we understand how this "straight male" is constructed and interpellated, as well as how that construction is destabilized over time with subsequent titles. The public gameworld of *Mass Effect* is a generally heteronormative world, yet, as I will show through this chapter, it comes to represent a starting point for more inclusive and diverse spheres. Where it begins is certainly not where it (currently) ends.

**Science Fiction: The Gender Genre?**

As science fiction the *Mass Effect* series places itself not only in a genre that focuses heavily on futuristic technology, space travel and alien species, but also in a genre known for exploring gender and sexuality. Science fiction is, Brian Atteberry argues, a "form of storytelling that invites us to challenge standard notions of nature and culture", and while traditionally constructed as a male genre, the increasing developments in gender and sexuality awareness in the genre over the years have made it so that it is "virtually impossible for an SF
writer to take gender for granted anymore" (2002: 4, 6). Atteberry argues that if a science fiction writer wants to "portray unchanged gender roles in the future or in alien societies, that fact has to be explained somehow. It's the result of biological imperatives, for instance, or reactionary social pressures" (2002: 6). Mainstream media do not necessarily require their science fiction texts to challenge gender and sexuality norms or explain unchanged gender roles, however: "[science fiction's] role as a commercial product has always tended to push it toward safe predictability and a reinforcement of existing social roles, but its own internal dynamics invite more daring variations in story, characters, setting, and social implications" (Atteberry 2002: 5). Also, science fiction texts "aimed at the broadest possible audience—novels that break out of category to become best sellers, for instance, or nearly all SF movies—tend to reinforce sexual status quo" (Atteberry 2002: 5). This is no less true for games, science fiction or not. Brian Stableford, in discussing science fiction's entry into the mainstream, laments that a popular genre "must, by definition, move with the pattern of public demand and it cannot escape the imperatives imposed upon it by whatever medium provides its economic anchorage" (1996: 329). Veronica Hollinger argues that science fiction on the whole is "an overwhelmingly straight discourse, not least because of the covert yet almost completely totalizing ideological hold heterosexuality has on our culture's ability to imagine itself otherwise" (1999: 24). While science fiction seems to be ideally suited "as a narrative mode" to challenge "the smoothly oiled technologies of heteronormativity" (Hollinger 1999: 24), the heteronormative mainstream sphere has significant impact on what science fiction (and other genres) can do, or dares to do. This, as I will discuss throughout this chapter, is highly relevant for the Mass Effect series and how it communicates homosexuality and queerness through predominantly straight discourses.

Atteberry makes a qualitative distinction between science fiction (SF) and "sci-fi", where the latter "is what comes out of Hollywood: both the popular entertainments and the non-SF-reading public's impression of what the field is all about" (2002: 172). Whether the Mass Effect series qualifies as "real" science fiction or not is not within the scope of this thesis. I address the series generally as science fiction. The important point here is that while the mainstream/Hollywood does produce alternatives now and then, they remain exceptions rather than rules. It is possible to claim that exceptions of sci-fi are conventions of science fiction. The Milky Way which we are now going to visit is a complex mix of both the commercial and the non-commercial.
Protagonist Gender Specificity

What kind of world does the Mass Effect series disclose? As a mainstream game series seemingly targeted toward a primarily (straight) male audience, Mass Effect is likely to communicate a world which is generally in accordance with that imagined demographic. Yet, this is complicated by the fact that the player can choose to play as a male or a female protagonist. What kind of perspective does the gameworld take? Does it change depending on the gender of the protagonist? Consider texts written from feminist or queer perspectives. In such texts the world is likely to be represented in a way that makes issues pertaining to these perspectives apparent in manners that are not so immediately visible in more mainstream texts. They may often be focused "from the margins", so to speak, and the same world may look very different depending on the chosen perspective. Such texts are not necessarily challenging or subversive, but may have this potential because "those who are denied power or autonomy within a social system are more likely to be aware of its workings than are people who benefit from them" (Atteberry 2002: 7). What is the perspective of the world of Mass Effect, then? Does it change significantly depending on protagonist gender? My analysis suggests that, while the implications are not too severe, the galaxy presumes a default male protagonist whereas the female protagonist is considered "difference". In both cases the world remains more or less the same, but a female Shepard is more explicitly "gendered" than a male Shepard. This is sometimes coupled with default heterosexuality which automatically assumes that Shepard is straight.

With "gender specificity" I refer to situations where Commander Shepard's gender is specifically addressed in conversations (excluding general references like nouns and pronouns), or where situations differ because of Shepard's gender. This occurs mostly with a female Shepard, whereas male Shepard avoids any significant gender addresses. This contributes to the view that this world positions the male as default. This is made apparent already before Mass Effect officially begins. When a player chooses to begin a new game, the player is asked to create their Commander Shepard. There are options to either use the default appearance or to customize. At the first screen, there is only a quick option for the default male Shepard. There are options to either use the default appearance or to customize. At the first screen, there is only a quick option for the default male Shepard. In order to find the option to play as female, the player must instead choose "Enter New ID". This screen provides both custom and quick-start options for male and female Shepard. The character customization screen thus prefers/promotes male Shepard while relegating the female version into another set of subscreens, as if to give the intended
male players an option to dive right into the action while not thinking that a similar scenario is plausible for female players who want to play as female Shepard (or male players who want to play as female Shepard). This presumed male player is also evident in how the face for the default male Shepard is fashioned in the likeness of a real-life model, whereas the face of female Shepard is not.

41 "New Game" in Mass Effect 2 and Mass Effect 3 shows both gender options immediately when creating a new character.

42 The face of default male Shepard is based on Dutch model Mark Vanderloo. The default face of female Shepard was kept in the first two games, but for Mass Effect 3 BioWare changed the default design and allowed players to vote on which model to be implemented as the new official default female Shepard (Mass Effect Wiki). The faces of certain other characters, such as Kaidan and Samara, are also based on real people.

Female Shepard as Difference

Adventuring through the galaxy in Mass Effect is generally a gender-neutral affair, but there are two particular instances where a female Shepard elicits reactions to her being a woman, suggesting that the world is slightly male-centric. They are rather small, but deal with the same topic: sexism. One situation occurs early on after the game's first mission on Eden Prime. The player is tasked with interrogating Harkin on the Citadel. This is not an obligatory encounter. Harkin is a suspended Citadel Security Officer and Shepard needs to procure...
information from him. Harkin, who hangs out in the "gentlemen's club" Chora's Den, will make direct passes at a female Shepard: "Hey there, sweetheart. You looking for some fun? 'Cause I gotta say that soldier getup looks real good on that bod of yours. Why don't you sit your sweet little ass down beside old Harkin? Have a drink and we'll see where this goes."
The player can only decline his vulgar offer and, while the Paragon replies attempt to ignore his comments, the Renegade replies provide a direct confrontational response to his chauvinistic and sexist attitudes as Shepard threatens him: "I'd rather drink a cup of acid after chewing on a razor blade" and "[c]all me a princess again and you'll be picking your teeth up off the floor." Renegade Shepard will ultimately threaten Harkin at gunpoint because he keeps ignoring her, but he ultimately yields. Harkin will not make passes at a male Shepard. While he is still a vulgar character, male Shepard does not arouse his sexual interests.

The other confrontation with protagonist-centered sexism occurs late in the game as part of a special Renegade quest called "The Negotiation". Shepard is sent to negotiate a deal between the Systems Alliance and a "Lord" Darius. Darius is not pleased to see Shepard, believing that the Alliance would send someone of greater import: "Instead, they send me a woman. Were you supposed to use your assets to win concessions from me?" He stresses the first syllable in "assets" to make a sexual reference. Shepard ignores Darius' comments, so the player does not have the opportunity to reply to that specific inquiry/accusation. Darius has an obnoxious attitude regardless of Shepard's gender, but only offers a gendered comment to a female Shepard. While it cannot be responded to per se, the player may always resolve the quest in a violent manner by killing Darius and his crew (for a number of particular reasons). Note that neither of these cases is caused by anything Shepard initially says, but rather reactions that initiate and set the tone for the encounters.

The gender-specific discourse here is only used to express sexism and additional chauvinism in the two characters encountered, as if to further degenerate their already unsympathetic personas (Harkin is disgruntled and a "disgrace to the species" while Darius is arrogant and deranged). Unsurprisingly, perhaps, both of these characters are also men. Female Shepard's gender is only called on specifically to show that there are some (personal) prejudices toward it, but sexism is not presented here as an issue that can be directly addressed. The game does not communicate that there is anything wrong or inappropriate about being/playing female Shepard, but it introduces the notion that despite being over 150 years into "our own" future, sexism still prevails in some forms. It is only encountered if Shepard is female, however.
Male Shepard does not receive similar gendered addresses. Perhaps it is considered logical here since there are many issues dealing with speciesism and xenophobia in the *Mass Effect* games. Sexism cannot be actively engaged with, only ignored or violently responded to as if to suggest that Harkin and Darius are lost causes anyway. It proposes a world that still expects or believes men to be default. I would of course not overstate the importance of these two incidents which, in a 20–30+-hour game, are both optional and brief. I would also not downplay their significance, because they provide notable breaks in the otherwise gender neutral script and they do so for very specific purposes. This, among the points discussed below, contributes to the game's diegetic world building.

Shepard's gender is not arbitrary to the gaming experience, but it is mainly irrelevant or secondary/implicit to the main script. The games are not explicitly games about gender. The particular gendered experience is located mostly at the level of the player. In the game, characters react primarily to Shepard as a military commander, human, or an individual rather than as a gender. It is possible to argue that since Shepard must have a gender, all responses will in some way or another be responses to Shepard as a *gendered* commander, human or individual, and that there is no "neutral" zone. In terms of agency, this is plausible since male and female Shepard are mutually exclusive: they cannot exist simultaneously in a single playthrough. Thus, all responses can in some way respond to Shepard as a gendered being since there is no possibility in a single playthrough that Shepard could be another gender. Additionally, since gender-specific pronouns and nouns are often used there are at least some acknowledgments of Shepard's (current) gender throughout the game, repeatedly marking Shepard as gendered. This argument can be countered by looking at how responses stay the same regardless of Shepard being male or female, so if discourses are always gendered in some way, they are not necessarily coded as specifically male or female. And if they are specifically gendered, the gender-neutral script shows that specificity is strangely unspecific. Perceived contexts of certain situations may change depending on Shepard's gender, but this is left up to the player's own considerations and interpretations since the games rarely incorporate this explicitly. If anything, the gender-neutral script at least exposes the contingency and performativity of traditional military masculinity: it is not something inherently male. R. W. Connell argues that "no arena has been more important for the definition of hegemonic masculinity in European/American culture" than the military (2005:

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43 Due to the mission structure it is very likely that the player will at least meet Harkin.
44 A similar "woman in a man's world" approach is found in *Dragon Age: Origins*. See Chapter VIII.
213), and here comes possibly a female Commander (or a gay male Commander) to challenge that traditional notion.

*Mass Effect 2* keeps general gender specificity to a minimum, but sexism returns. In the quest to recruit Garrus the player must enter the nightclub Afterlife and register for a mercenary operation. Upon seeing female Shepard, the batarian man in charge says: "Well, aren't you sweet? You're in the wrong place honey. Strippers' quarters are that way." Even though Shepard enters the area wearing full armor she is automatically assumed to be one of the strippers. A Renegade option allows Shepard to pull out her gun and say: "Show me yours, tough guy. I bet mine's bigger," invoking a common phallic metaphor to ascertain that she is no "ordinary" woman. Another notable example may occur during Garrus' loyalty mission. It requires special choices to be made rather than Shepard merely being female and encountering an NPC. The player will meet Harkin again, who has now turned to a life of crime. An angered Garrus threatens to shoot him in the leg. If the player allows Garrus to do so, a follow-up Renegade dialogue choice causes a female Shepard to say: "You're lucky. I wouldn't have shot you in the leg." This implied castration is likely a response to Harkin's previous vulgar treatment of her.45 This response is indicative of what Rosalind Gill (2007) refers to as postfeminist revenge themes: the "battle of the sexes" in which women enact gendered revenge upon men. These themes typically see men humiliated by women for their "failure" as men.46 Shepard's proposed intention of shooting Harkin in the groin can be seen as a type of gender revenge, though in this case it is not a simple "Harkin is incapable as a man" reference, but rather a likely confrontation with his previous sexism. Whether that should be combated with castration threats, however, is more problematic.

Male Shepard also gets a special "gendered" opportunity, though this takes place through action and not discourse. If the player helps out Gianna Parasini on Noveria in *Mass Effect* they can meet her again on Illium in *Mass Effect 2* where she once more requests Shepard's aid. Upon completing the quest she will reward male Shepard with a kiss if Paragon options are chosen. A female Shepard cannot receive a kiss from her, and a similar situation with a different NPC does not exist for female Shepard. I interpret this scenario as part of a

45 Male Shepard says "[y]ou're getting off easy, Harkin" instead since there was no previous sexual context.
46 Gill is critical of these revenge themes and calls them a perversion of real feminist aims (2007: 107). I return to this topic more fully in the discussion of *Dragon Age: Origins*, which has more involved revenge rhetoric than *Mass Effect*. 

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significant (backlash) heterosexualization that occurs in *Mass Effect 2*, a point I will return to below.

Gender specificity in *Mass Effect 3* remains scarce, but this game has more obvious feminist recognition and abandons the previous confrontations with male chauvinism/sexism, as well as including more light-hearted references. 47 A central plot early in the game involves saving a fertile female krogan 48 named Eve from terrorist group Cerberus. The krogan are a reptilian species who were once a culturally rich civilization, but technological advancements have reduced the krogan to clans who fight over the precious resources on their home planet Tuchanka. After Eve is rescued, krogan ally Wrex 49, who is to become the father of Eve's offspring, bemoans the fact that (krogan) women like to think and talk about things excessively. Krogan males, by comparison, have a knack for brutality. Male Shepard will advise Wrex to take women seriously as they have good ideas and are worth listening to. Wrex modifies his complaints if Shepard is female. After complaining he will apologize to her, and she will advise Wrex to listen to "us" and that "we" have good ideas. Here we can see how "women" as a category is seemingly transspecies, at least in the context of human and krogan culture. Female Shepard allies herself with Eve and the rest of the krogan women that Wrex refers to. In either scenario, Wrex says he knows women have good ideas, but that "[women] have so many of them. So, sometimes, I pretend to listen and, well, let's just say krogan females have tempers too." There is a parody in this exchange. It plays on the construction that the krogan species is largely based on character dichotomy: the belief that men have a certain set of traits and women have another set of traits (Connell and Pearse 2015: 42). In this case, krogan males are largely brutal and violent creatures of action, while krogan females are wise and nurturing. Also, krogan females seemingly talk a lot, at least compared to krogan males. It is interesting that this is posited as part of krogan culture, because it does not take much to realize that this is in fact very indicative of human culture. Here the game plays on, for example, certain "classic" gender tropes of the inattentive and unfocused man/husband and the overly communicative and often "nagging" woman/wife. Character

47 In the *Citadel* DLC, the scene with Miranda and female Shepard in the casino sees the two joking about being "troubleshooting space divas" and not girly girls despite the dresses they have donned for the evening.

48 The krogan species has been afflicted with a genetic mutation from the "genophage", a biological weapon deployed by the salarians to reduce the exceedingly high reproduction rate of the krogans. The questline mentioned here involves curing the genophage or sabotaging the cure.

49 Wrex is a companion in *Mass Effect*, and his presence here depends of course on if he survived that game.
dichotomy is supposed to justify the heteronormative "natural" compatibility of men and women, but it also produces resistance. While opposites seemingly attract, they also clash.\textsuperscript{50}

Alien species have frequently been used as metaphors for humanity and human cultures in science fiction (Benford 1980, Malmgren 1993),\textsuperscript{51} and Shepard's advice to Wrex about taking women seriously is likely an outward reference as well: since the krogan situation closely resembles human gender tropes (and female Shepard even allies herself with krogan women), it is also an address to a male-centric culture, perhaps to both players and industry, to actually listen to women and afford them an equal space. It makes sense with the game's release in 2012, a year where questions and debates about gender and games began to escalate significantly (Harvey and Fisher 2015: 577). The gender-specific reference here is then refocused to address gender issues in new ways other than simply serving sexist remarks about Shepard being a woman. Wrex already knows that women have good ideas and he is well aware that there will be consequences if he does not respect them. The krogan now seemingly have to find a new place in society and likely depart from their traditional masculinist culture, much like how David Gauntlett emphasizes how both men and women have to find new places for themselves in contemporary culture (2008: 9). The krogan's possible return to a fertile and reproductive society means great changes for all parties involved, and as such it may be seen as a type of metaphor for the changing gender relations in our own culture.

Talking with the krogan female Eve as a female Shepard yields more gender-specific insights about the general male dominance/default in the galaxy. Eve will tell her that she is glad to see humanity treating their women with respect and that a lot of responsibility has been put on Shepard. Eve then says that they should show the men how things are supposed to be done, and Shepard replies: "Deal." This brief exchange is likely an extension of the topic raised in the previous example, and is perhaps also a (slight) recognition and empowerment of female gamers in a male-centered game culture. In this context the gender problematic is rerouted through the krogan species so that humanity seems to be more or less equalized and that this is the hope for the krogan as well. It recognizes the empowered female Commander Shepard (and the seemingly non-sexist human species), but at the same time these examples make it

\textsuperscript{50} This is often referred to as Mars/Venus discourse: the heteronormative view that men and women are psychologically different and must negotiate their inherent differences. I return to this point later.

\textsuperscript{51} Using aliens as metaphors has also been critiqued for rendering the truly "alien" too human and familiar.
clear that males are considered default both in this gameworld and culture. These brief examples are by no means currently overwhelming evidence, but the slight script differences for male and female Shepard in these scenes suggest that female Shepard is gendered in a way that male Shepard is not. What is reproduced here is the notion that men are generally not considered gendered, only women are. Gender issues here are mostly women's issues. Explicit questioning of male dominance is hidden from male Shepard. Female Shepard takes both center stage and resides at the margins. She is allowed general presence as well as a special "sensibility" due to her gender. The implications of these possible feminist interventions are not taken up by the game to any explicit extent because the gameworld remains more or less the same regardless of gender. There is a slight will to recognize a gender order, but it does not go too far—as if not to become too overtly political in the game's themes. This is precisely what happens, however, in the games' overall staging of public sexuality and heterosexualization of player interactions.

**Default Heterosexuality and Heterosexualizing Campaigns**

What is assumed about the protagonist/player's sexuality in the *Mass Effect* games? The player chooses a gender for Shepard prior to starting the game, but sexuality is not a functional attribute or a set statistic to be chosen. Rather, sexuality is enacted through whatever romance options the player opts to pursue (or not pursue). Despite this, the games usually presuppose default heterosexuality for the protagonist/player. The games will not assume, for example, that Shepard is gay, but they will generally assume that Shepard is straight whenever sexuality becomes a topic. This is problematic when the games enable non-heterosexual relations. Default heterosexuality, as a manifestation of heteronormativity, is emblematic of what Mia Consalvo terms the "gay window" of video games. She derives this feature from "gay window advertising", a term used in "identifying advertising that is designed somewhat ambiguously to appeal to both 'straight' and 'gay' readers" (Consalvo 2003: 187). These designs play on coding texts in a way so that non-heterosexual people feel they are included as well, but that the design is never so overt as to reveal its dual interpellations. This is quite similar to the mainstream strategy of coding gayness as subtext (Brooke and Westerfelhaus [2002] 2012).
The "gay window" in games is thus how the player can choose to be non-heterosexual, but only through conscious and active choices: "Options not explored will not surface, at least in the game as it is currently constructed. Game designers make choices, and these choices have consequences" (Consalvo 2003: 188). This can be interpreted as a significant part/effect of the gay button mechanic: the player may be allowed to be non-heterosexual (the extent of this depends on the game), but this is only through active and personal pursuits. The dialogue wheel may alert the player to actions and paths in advance so that certain content is not "accidentally" chosen. This also reflects the larger heteronormative structure and closet rhetoric: everyone, more or less, is assumed to be straight until proven or declared otherwise. It is generally not considered controversial or problematic to assume that someone is heterosexual. It is culture's default. Similarly, in games, it is not likely seen as controversial to "force" gay players to play a most straight character, but the opposite scenario, requiring straight players to play gay characters, seems to be a much riskier venture. This can partly explain the current "optional as optimal" strategy in games. I will now discuss the assumptions of default heterosexuality in the public gameworld of Mass Effect and how it reflects this safe initial heterosexual state. This takes place through both subtle and mundane references and a distinct structuralization of gender specificity.

I would like to discuss default heterosexuality as part of a "heterosexualizing campaign", an expression I borrow from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. She mentions it briefly in one of her discussions of male homosocial desire and the explicit use of women as dispellers of homosexuality in homosocial relations between men ([1985] 2016: 34). This expression is not a recurring term, but it suitably captures the various processes of using heterosexuality to domesticate uncertain elements and to make them appear safe and non-threatening, as well as any repeated efforts to promote heteronormativity. Default heterosexuality is one such process. Other aspects, such as the alien species the asari and the games' gaze practices, are also subjected to specific heterosexualizing campaigns. Additionally, the word "campaign" is often used in game culture and by games to refer to the main content/main storyline of a game (for example, the "single-player campaign"). Thus, the expression gains a dual meaning in the context of games where it can refer to processes in a specific game as well as the game as a whole.

It is helpful to briefly revisit which romance options are available in order to understand this default heterosexuality and what to expect in the games. In Mass Effect there are no
exclusively-gay options and only one romance option available for both genders (Liara), meaning that it is only possible to have a female same-gender relationship. In _Mass Effect 2_, all the romance options are heterosexual. From a macro perspective it makes little sense to expect that these two games will assume that a male Shepard is gay, seeing as there is no way to actually express or perform male homosexuality (other than to reject the available options). In this context it would be highly problematic if they did assume that Shepard is gay, because the available options would then suggest that Shepard should move away from homosexuality and into heterosexuality. Assuming that female Shepard is gay might have worked for the first title, but it would have been problematic in the sequel where the realm of romance is exclusively heterosexual.\footnote{Mass Effect 2 offers some same-gender flirtations for a female Shepard, and Liara is available in a DLC if a romance is imported. Otherwise, the main romances are only heterosexual. See next chapter.} Unsurprisingly, assuming heterosexuality is the path of least/no resistance, and here we can see how it might work together with the available romance options to legitimize its assumptions. This should not be taken as a totalizing gesture, however. Rejecting the heterosexual romances offered can be a form of protest against the system. It is important to highlight and discuss the mechanisms which the games use to unproblematically assume default heterosexuality for its protagonist. It may reflect the more mundane expectations about people in everyday life, but it is also a specific strategy intended not to alienate (pun intended) its main straight demographic.

**Straight Starts with Kaidan and Ashley**

_Mass Effect_ communicates default heterosexuality as early as at the end of its first main quest on Eden Prime, and companions Kaidan and Ashley are wellsprings for default heterosexuality. Upon arriving at the mysterious Prothean beacon, one of Shepard's companions will be drawn to it. This is either Kaidan if Shepard is female or Ashley if Shepard is male. Kaidan and Ashley are also the two heterosexual romance options. In this scene Shepard will push the companion out of the way, only to become struck by the beacon's powers and pass out. When Shepard wakes up back on the Normandy, the involved companion will be by Shepard's side. Kaidan/Ashley will worry about Shepard's condition and apologize for their carelessness. This structuralization emphasizes default player/protagonist heterosexuality, and attempts to explicitly initiate a special bond between Shepard and the opposite-gender romance companion. Liara, who might possibly represent
the "other" to this set-up, joins the team later in the game. We can think of this as an example of what Judith Roof (1996) calls "narrative's heteroideology": how heterosexual ideology in culture and media is maintained through various combinations of sexuality and narrative. Damsels in distress, the proliferation of male heroes, sexualized female characters, and the relationship/marriage as resolution/reward can be examples of this heteroideology.

In *Mass Effect* we can see how heteroideology is implied in the player's choice of protagonist gender: choosing to play as a man means here that the game will assume that this man will desire a woman. The fact that Kaidan/Ashley is present by Shepard's side afterwards can be narratively justified. They are concerned because their inattentiveness put the Commander in danger. This structure is fixed and unchangeable, however, and is heteronormatively structured from the outset. Games can thus posit dynamic heteroideology: the default or dominant assumption is heterosexuality, but the player is given tools to personally reject it. The player is not required to romance the companion in question and they may even be ignored for most of the game. Likewise, because of the dialogue and morality systems, in the post-Eden Prime scene the player is not even required to act politely toward the concerned companion and may choose to chastise them instead. The game may posit an assumption, but the player is not required to go along with it here. The heteroideology/heterostructure suggested here is in fact closer to real life than its static narrative manifestations in other media. In *Mass Effect*, heterosexuality is proposed/assumed, much like in real life, but the player can ultimately reject and abandon it. What it can be rejected in favor of, however, depends heavily on the available alternatives (if any).

Conversations with Kaidan and Ashley aboard the Normandy also reveal heterosexual assumptions. When Kaidan talks about Rahna, a past love interest, he mentions that she was beautiful but not "stuck up about it". He then tells a male Shepard that Shepard would have liked her, implying that Rahna is his type of woman. This is different for a female Shepard. Here Kaidan says that Shepard is just like Rahna, which is part of his flirt dialogue. Similarly, the player will come across a conversation with Ashley which begins with her talking to her sisters without noticing Shepard's presence. If Shepard is male, the sisters will talk about how good-looking Shepard is and Ashley is obviously embarrassed when she discovers he has overheard it. This is part of Ashley's flirt dialogue. If Shepard is female, however, the sisters

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53 The player must recruit Liara, but if she is recruited very late in the game she may become unavailable for romance as the game will force itself into the final stages of the main quest.
will instead talk about how cute Kaidan is. The heterosexual structure is carefully planned and exercised, and may serve as a build-up to when Liara appears to cause gender trouble.

The game has a specific situation in which the player is enabled a voluntary expression of essentialism and heteronormativity, and this varies with Shepard's gender. This occurs in a conversation with companion Ashley, which revolves around one of Ashley's sisters who beat up her insistent boyfriend who wanted to have sex with her before she was ready. The Renegade-positioned options provide a generalized gender comment. Female Shepard gets a "Boys… no control" option which causes Shepard to say: "You ask me, boys need a cold shower that lasts from age 12 to 25." This statement problematically assumes that all adolescent boys are slaves to their hormones and sexual drives, whereas female sexuality is more passive and controlled by contrast. Male Shepard gets an even more troubling "Boys will be boys" option: "The male pursues the female. That's their nature. In the genes." Here, boys are not only slaves to their biology, but they are also exclusively heterosexual. Heterosexuality is coded into nature and genes, making no other alternative possible (unless the game thus suggests that homosexuality is a natural disorder or genetic failure). It also implies that women are (imperative) conquests for men. Note how female Shepard criticizes boys while male Shepard unapologetically celebrates their "natural" desires. The complication here is that both these options are part of the Renegade persona in which Shepard often comes across as brash and callous (and sometimes xenophobic), and is not tied to any particular constant condition of the gameworld here. Yet, as I will discuss throughout this chapter, the essentialist and normative notions expressed in these two replies are often unproblematically assumed and expressed in all three games.

**Galactic Heterosexuality**

*Mass Effect* has certain rejectable and optional heteronormative assumptions, but an uncontestable and rather mundane default galactic heterosexuality is proposed after Eden Prime. This situation is conditional and occurs if the player triggers the "Scenic View" conversation while exploring the Citadel. Shepard, Kaidan and Ashley will discuss the massive size of the Citadel and its various inhabitants of many different species. Kaidan comments that it must be hard to get all these different cultures to work together and Ashley throws in a "[o]r maybe they just don't like humans" comment. There is a Paragon option
titled "What's not to like?" where Shepard, regardless of gender, replies: "Why not? We've got oceans, beautiful women, this emotion called love. According to the old vids, we have everything they want." Humanity has beautiful women who "they", as in the galaxy, here presumably to be understood as heterosexual male aliens, apparently want. The assumption here is that men are not a universal sexual fantasy considering it is likely men who are mostly in charge of the galaxy (or believed to be in charge). The universal "they", because they desire women, creates a connection between "the galaxy" and "men", and suggesting that the different alien cultures want humanity's beautiful men conjures up the specter of homosexuality that this game cannot address. This is a basic heteronormative/everyday assumption in which women can be freely sexualized as a universal fantasy, but not men.

The default galactic heterosexuality exemplifies aspects of the gender order proposed by Connell's term 'hegemonic masculinity' (discussed in chapter II), most notably in its dominant public cathexis. 'Cathexis' is a psychoanalytic concept introduced by Sigmund Freud to describe an interest (libidinally) "charged with psychical energy" ([1900] 2001: 177). Allocated into more popular discourses, cathexis refers to an (often sexually) intense interest invested into someone and/or something. Connell uses the term to discuss how hegemonic masculinity privileges male heterosexuality: "Heterosexuality is socially organized to prioritize men's pleasure, in personal relationships as well as sexualized mass media" (2005: 247). This is posited as its advantages for men, but simultaneously it comes with serious disadvantages: "Men's sexuality is more alienated, and more sharply constrained by homophobia" (Connell 2005: 247). This sexual prioritization can thus assume itself in seemingly mundane and uncritical statements such as "humanity has beautiful women everyone wants", which is in many ways another way of saying that, regardless of time and place, "male heterosexuality is the public default". Even female Shepard complies with it here. This may not be a particular intentional statement about sexuality, but it does reflect the more commonly accepted notion of women as publicly desirable. While men are increasingly eroticized and sexualized in the media (though rarely in the Mass Effect series), this sexualization is often accompanied by a strategy which Kenneth Mackinnon (1997) calls "disavowal" to displace the erotic focus. This is thought to help avoid, among other things, what Katherine Sender in a mainstream advertising context refers to as the "horror" of male homosexuality (2004: 192). I return to this discussion later. From the perspective of

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54 'Cathexis' is a neologism created by Freud's English translators. Freud originally called it 'Besetzung' (Rycroft [1968] 1995: 19).
heteronormative hegemonic masculinity, then, heterosexuality is not only the most legitimate public sexuality, it is frequently coded as a distinct (and restrictive) male heterosexuality. There is no shortage of evidence of this belief in the *Mass Effect* series.

There is merit to the belief that the Milky Way galaxy consists mostly of men, at least initially in *Mass Effect*. Most alien species are represented only by their male members.\(^5\) Humanity is currently the only species where both women and men are generally represented. Tali is a female quarian, but in the first game she is the only quarian present. Female turians and krogan first appear in subsequent titles.\(^6\) This male dominance is supposedly mitigated by the asari, an all-female/feminine species who serves as the galaxy's current apex species. As the asari seemingly have no special sexual preferences they can just as well be included in the "aliens want beautiful human women" comment. While the asari possess radical queer potential they are subjected to hefty heterosexualizing campaigns in all three games which complicate this matter. I return to this in much more detail in a separate section.

It is worth mentioning that for a game which enables a tough and non-sexualized female protagonist, *Mass Effect* sure likes using the "damsel in distress" trope for its supporting characters, regardless of how tough and capable they are. All female companions must be rescued upon their initial recruitment. Ashley, while being the last survivor of her squad, ultimately survives because Shepard is there to intervene. Tali must be rescued from assassins on the Citadel (though she states that she knows how to look after herself after she has been rescued), while Liara must be freed from a force field she accidentally triggered and then rescued from Saren's henchmen. By comparison, Wrex is recruited simply by talking to him on the Citadel, while Garrus is recruited on the Citadel after he has saved another damsel in distress, Dr. Chloe Michel. *Mass Effect* thus begins somewhat traditionally in several manners.

*Mass Effect* 2 does not posit default heterosexuality in the same way as its predecessor, but since the game only offers heterosexual official romance options one can argue that heterosexuality here is not just default, it is exclusive. There is one particular example of explicit assumed protagonist heterosexuality, however. Aria T'Loak, the asari crime boss encountered early in the game, provides an explicit communication of default heterosexuality.

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5. Certain species such as hanar, volus and elcor are more uniform in appearance and males and females may look and sound alike, but their voices are all distinctly male.

6. Not in any staggering amounts, however. The two female turians only appear in DLC content in *Mass Effect* 3, while the only prominent female krogan, Eve, is part of a main quest in the same game.
After conversing with her she will recommend that female Shepard finds herself a man or that male Shepard finds himself a woman in the nightclub, as Aria thinks Shepard needs to loosen up. Loosening up is a heterosexual venture as far as the player is concerned. No other assumptions can be made, suggesting a neutral "someone" is out of the question and there is only heterosexuality, which works in concert with how the game has disabled player-selected homosexuality in romances.

**Structuring Sexuality through Protagonist Gender**

*Mass Effect 3*, which enables both male and female homosexuality, moves away from any particular assumptions about the protagonist/player, but it does include two notable examples of general gender specificity through game structure rather than direct textual address: the implied/presumed heterosexuality of other characters can significantly shape the possible interactions in favor of their sexuality. The first situation takes place in the nightclub on the Citadel. Joker, the Normandy's pilot, will ask what Shepard thinks of EDI and him together in a romantic context. EDI is an artificial intelligence inhabiting a female gynoid (see below). This conversation is initially the same for both genders. A female Shepard may ask Joker if he has ever considered the two of them romantically together. Joker reacts awkwardly to her question and politely turns her down: "Chain of command, Shepard. In an alternate dimension without military ranks, I would rock your world." A male Shepard cannot pursue this route at all. Joker's heterosexuality (which is never explicitly stated/articulated in any of the games, though it is heavily implied) works as a barrier against a possible homosexual advance. It is likely that if male Shepard had been able to ask Joker about the two of them romantically together, the entire discourse would have to change. There would no longer primarily be the issue of chain of command or rocking Shepard's world in an alternate dimension: because Joker is heterosexual he cannot dismiss male Shepard on the same grounds as female Shepard and the situation would thus conjure up a gay discourse which this game cannot or will not do.

This "heterostructuring" of gender is also found in friendly interactions with companion James Vega. The burly lieutenant treats Shepard very differently based on gender. He will flirt with a female Shepard multiple times during interactions with him, for example saying that she fills out a uniform like "nobody's business" and asking her if she is just there to talk or look. He nicknames her "Lola" (if he is allowed to be informal) because she reminds him
of his friend's older sister who was "hot and tough". The player can even flirt back, though no romance is possible with the character. This is in fact a rather peculiar choice, considering that James is the only character that will flirt so explicitly with Shepard. The friendly replies are positioned in the Paragon alignment, so a friendship between James and female Shepard automatically becomes a flirt exchange. It will culminate in a confrontation where Shepard will ask James if he ever plans to make good on all his flirting. James, taken by surprise, becomes hesitant and says that this is just who he is and means nothing by it. Shepard's reply is: "Knew it." This shows a clear discursive discrepancy between player agency and character performance. Is the game tricking the player with flirting here? This exemplifies what I in the previous chapter called a "romantic snare", where the game seemingly sets up possible romantic encounters only for them to never happen. When it is revealed that it does not lead anywhere Shepard even announces that she knew so all along, providing closure for James and simultaneously one-upping an unsuspecting player who may have seen this as a serious venture.\(^57\) By contrast, male Shepard and James will not share any flirting between them and the friendly relationship becomes much more brotherly. He nicknames male Shepard "Loco" as a reference to how crazy he is (no "hot and tough" here).\(^58\) The core content in all interactions with James is the same regardless of Shepard's gender, but a female Shepard has the flirty interactions added to some of these scenes. This exemplifies how sexuality can be communicated through game structure and how norms can be found by looking at the structure. James does not declare his heterosexuality as such, but since he begins to flirt with female Shepard the player is able to flirt back. James does not flirt with male Shepard and thus there is no way to enter into any flirtatious territory here. The dialogue and discourse in the Joker and James examples show how the heterosexuality of other characters may become determinant in what the player may actually attempt with them. The available dialogue choices here avoid any conflicts of confrontation between sexually incompatible characters, and structures homosexuality away.\(^59\)

Heterosexuality is thus generally the default state both in terms of the protagonist and the overall galaxy. These assumptions take place through rather mundane and easily overlooked references (such as positing that beautiful women are what everyone wants), much like how

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\(^{57}\) It is possible to flirt with James during the party in the *Citadel* DLC. A single female Shepard may then wake up next to him after an off-screen one-night stand. This is likely partly a response to player feedback on James' unavailability and the game baiting/tricking the player with flirt dialogue.

\(^{58}\) There is actually a possible (subtextual) flirt in one scene between male Shepard and James, though it is quickly dispelled. See below.

\(^{59}\) Romances, however, may confront incompatible genders/sexualities in some capacity. Please see next chapter.
they are unproblematically and uncritically reproduced in real life. Heterosexuality is the safest assumption because it does not really call attention to anything special, challenging or jarring from a heteronormative perspective. Even the game structure may favor heterosexuality by giving certain options to certain genders. Sexuality may be structured through the available dialogue choices and avoid overt discourse in cases of incompatibility. These are not the only heterosexualizing campaigns, however. There are other significant factors which give clear indications of what is preferable in the public gameworld of the *Mass Effect* galaxy, such as the games' gaze practices. These are also more problematic than heteronormative "slips" in casual dialogue because they are incorporated through ironic, knowing and often critique-dismissive registers.

**The Galactic Gaze**

The public sexualizing/eroticizing gaze in the *Mass Effect* series, at least when such a gaze explicitly assumes itself, is predominantly male and heterosexual. This constructs a very contradictory gameworld. On one hand it seems to support and encourage mostly heteronormative male ways of gazing by sexualizing and objectifying women and (mostly) avoiding doing the same to men. If the (male-centered) galaxy desires beautiful women there is no better place to look than into the galaxy's gaze. On the other hand the games enable a private sphere where the player may be non-heterosexual, so the restrictions promoted by the public part of the game may be rejected in the private sphere. This contradictory relationship becomes especially conflicting with the arrival of *Mass Effect* 3, which finally lets male players be gay. Who is this galaxy mostly for, then?

Sexualization and objectification of women have for a long time been mainstay practices/tropes in mainstream media, much like the mundane heteronormative assumptions discussed above. The *Mass Effect* series joins this venture. Two of the earliest examples involve the powerful and respected asari Matriarch Benezia and Consort Sha'ira. Following the first mission on Eden Prime is a cutscene where the mysterious Matriarch delivers the news of Shepard's intervention to antagonist Saren Arterius. Benezia wears a tight-fit black dress which significantly exposes her bosom and cleavage. She walks toward Saren with her back facing the camera, and when the camera switches to face her it immediately focuses on her breasts before moving up to reveal Benezia's face. On the Citadel following Eden Prime,
the player is likely to encounter rumors about a "Consort". Pursuing this path leads to a sidequest which enables the game's only sexual encounter outside a romance. Upon progressing through the dialogue with the attendant of the Consort Chambers, the Consort, Sha'ira, will ultimately call the attendant and request that Shepard joins her in her private chambers. As Sha'ira calls her attendant the camera focuses only on Sha'ira's body as she oversees Shepard from a distance. Sha'ira walks suggestively back into her chambers, inviting the player to follow her for some currently unknown reason.

![Figure 5: The Consort watches Shepard from a distance.](image)

These scenes are textbook examples of the male gaze with its focus on representing only specific parts of the female body to emphasize the woman as (sexy) mystery. Theories on the male gaze were popularized by Laura Mulvey in her highly influential 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", which has been both widely celebrated and heavily criticized. Some of Mulvey's ideas are useful in an examination of the gaze practices of the Mass Effect series (the practices reoccur notoriously in Mass Effect 2, for example). Mulvey uses psychoanalytical theory as a political weapon and argues that the classic Hollywood cinema promotes both (narcissistic) 'scopophilia', the sexual pleasure of looking, and 'voyeurism', the sexual pleasure of looking at something "forbidden". These mechanisms are argued to be constructed from and through a male gaze which sees woman as the image and man as the bearer of the look:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (Mulvey [1975] 2012: 62)
Furthermore, Mulvey argues that this male gaze is not only an effect within the movie itself, but also something that has "disciplinary" functions on its audience: men are supposed to identify with the man on the screen as the active part while women are supposed to identify with women on the screen as the passive, objectified part. For Mulvey there is only the male gaze at work here, and in her theories even women are invited/required to position themselves through this particular mode of looking. Mulvey's essay and theories have been both celebrated and criticized. For example, her arguments point to a pervasive pattern in the media where women are frequently eroticized, objectified and disembodied. In postfeminist media culture, however, women are no longer the only objectified representations on offer and this complicates the issue. This does not mean that the male gaze simply evaporates because men are also sexualized and objectified, but it challenges the absolutism of Mulvey's arguments. Liesbet van Zoonen, for example, calls Mulvey's analysis of patriarchal cinema "dark and suffocating" and it negates the possibilities of female spectatorship (1994: 97).

It is important to acknowledge the context of viewing/playing in relation to Mulvey's arguments. Mulvey's account concerns the cinema. MacKinnon argues that "there must be considerable caution about transporting the analysis of gendered spectatorship in Mulvey's terms beyond that [cinematic] apparatus", highlighting that the context "alters the experience of the viewing" (2003: 32). The gaming context is generally very different from that of watching a film on the silver screen in the darkness of the cinema. The visual power may for example lose its effectiveness if a player is impatiently waiting for a cutscene to end so that playing can resume. Helen Kennedy, in an analysis of Lara Croft, the protagonist of the Tomb Raider series, argues that there are limits to applying Mulvey's theories to "a games character who is simultaneously the hero (active) and the heroine (to be looked at)" (2002). Lara Croft complicates Mulvey's theories because she must also be controlled by the player. Kennedy argues this might "transgender" a male player, as "the distinctions between the player and the game character are blurred" (2002). Thus, the gaming context might invite entirely different modes of gazing and identification. I must point out that my appropriation of Mulvey here is to point out a representational practice that repeatedly objectifies women. I use it as part of the discussion on the reflection of cultural tropes. The women that are objectified here are not controllable by the player in the same way as Shepard (companions on missions are controlled by the game), and objectification usually happens during cutscenes which use cinematic conventions. I have no intention of suggesting particular effects this might have on players,
but rather use it to emphasize the construction of sexuality and gender in the public gameworld.

Regarding the objectification of men, Mulvey argues that "the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like" ([1975] 2012: 62). This argument was untenable already 20 years ago. MacKinnon points out that it may have been very possible to claim that there could not be a male object of the gaze when Mulvey wrote her essay, but that it was extremely difficult in the mid–late 1990s "to deny the evidence for the male as object of the erotic gaze" (1997: 14).60 The increasing sexualization and objectification of men in postfeminist media culture is, however, not unproblematically "emancipatory" or proof that Mulvey's theories are no longer valid. Gill argues that "the objectification of male bodies has not led to a decrease in the objectification of women's. Feminist anger about being objectified in advertisements has not brought about an end to this practice, but merely its extension to men – we are all objectified now" (2007: 104). This sexualization and objectification does not take place through the same mechanisms, however. I will return to male sexualization later and continue the current discussion of the male gaze on female bodies.

The theory of the male gaze may be considered out of date or irrelevant by many, particularly with postfeminist media turning an objectifying lens on the male body as well. I argue that it still has relevance because the practice of targeting women still prevails (and occurs in the Mass Effect games). Women's bodies are frequently fragmented, "visually dissected so that the viewer sees only the lips, or the eyes, or the breasts, or whatever" (Gill 2007: 80).61 Gill argues that this has a specific effect, which is to "deny women's humanity, to present them not as whole people but as fetishized, dismembered 'bits'" (2007: 80). Benezia's and Sha'ira's complete images are ultimately revealed, but these are classic examples in which the woman's body becomes the center of attention. In Benezia's case it does not seem to serve any other function than to merely show off her bosom in the various scenes she appears in. The Sha'ira case is a bit more complicated since she may offer a sexual reward. This gaze is thus seemingly more appropriate or "functional" because eroticization here is not merely cutscene spectacle, it is part of the character. This invites a different set of questions which I will deal

60 MacKinnon's book Uneasy Pleasures. The Male as Erotic Object is a response to Mulvey's essay.
61 Gill uses advertising as typical examples of these practices, but they apply just as well to other visual media.
with later on. Such an eroticized gaze aimed at Benezia and Sha'ira is nevertheless not extended to men in this game. Only women are objectified in this particular manner.

"Ass Effect"

There is perhaps no better example of the cutscene male gaze than Miranda Lawson in *Mass Effect 2*, a companion and possible romance who firmly puts the "ass" in *Mass Effect*. The visual dissection of Miranda is so blatantly obvious and pervasive that it spills over into the parodic—yet it is not a parody at all. Multiple cutscenes and conversations place the focus on specific parts of Miranda's body—most notably her butt—and her head is completely out of frame in several instances. Miranda is the primary target for the lustful camera treatment in this game. This is coupled with Miranda's skin-tight uniform which leaves very little to the imagination.

![Figure 6: Scenes in which the camera focuses on Miranda's body parts (Mass Effect 2).](image)

The Miranda gaze is coupled with a narrative theme for her character, and Miranda as body is actually a topic in her character arc. Miranda is the product of her father's egomaniacal goals of creating a dynasty. Henry Lawson created Miranda out of his own genetic tissue and designed her to be perfect. Miranda explains her perfection: "It's just a fact. My reflexes, my strength, even my looks – they're all designed to give me an edge. No point in hiding from it." When asked bout her genetic modification she replies: "It's very thorough. Physically, I'm superior in many ways. I heal quickly and I'll likely live half again as long as the average human. My biotic abilities are also very advanced… for a human. Add to that some of the best training and education money can buy and, well, it's pretty impressive, really." Here, the game

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62 Miranda is often referred to as "ass effect" in game culture and fan discourses due to her outfit and how the game camera treats her.
flirts with a biological basis for culture, particularly with how her looks have been designed to give her an edge, as if Miranda is the culmination of "natural" (heterosexual) desire. This edge is firmly heterosexually oriented, though the game never says it directly. Miranda is very confident and possesses an outward ice-queen attitude. She attempts to mitigate her sense of superiority if asked if she was designed to be perfect, and she somberly reflects: "Maybe, but I'm not. I'm still human, Shepard. I make mistakes like everyone else. And when I do, the consequences are severe. Everyone expects a lot from someone with my… abilities." Miranda's story is fairly similar to that of many superhero tales. She is powerful and "created", but this power comes with great responsibility and expectations. Stakes are high should she fail. This is explored further through Miranda's loyalty mission where she requires Shepard's help to protect her twin sister Oriana from falling into their father's clutches, but the serious themes of this particular arc are often downplayed when the camera cannot decide whether the player is supposed to listen to her or look at parts of her. Miranda's possible return in Mass Effect 3 is accompanied by an even more insistent objectifying gaze.

Figure 7: The camera continues to focus on Miranda's body parts in Mass Effect 3.

Mass Effect 2 also extends this gaze to a lesser extent to other female companions, most notably asari justicar Samara and the "psychotic biotic" Jack. This proceeds through two different modes. The gaze on Samara is similar to the one on Miranda. In Samara's introductory cutscene the camera focuses on her breasts as she charges up a biotic blast; the effect is seemingly supposed to be erotic as the blue energy swirls around Samara's body. Jack, on the other hand, is a bit more complicated. Her character and appearance are a strong contrast to the more conventional attractive looks of Miranda and the asari. She is even posited as a "gender surprise": in her recruitment quest, it quickly becomes obvious that the

63 A justicar is a "mystical warrior" who follows an extremely strict moral code and travels around the galaxy fighting injustice.
player (and the characters) is not supposed to initially know that Jack is female. Other prisoners and guards carefully avoid using any words that may disclose her gender, so that coupled with name "Jack", typically a male name, it is taken for granted that she is a man. When she is revealed, however, the characters react in surprise when they see who Jack really is, indicating that they were expecting something completely different. Jack is actually much more exposed than Miranda or Samara. She wears only a pair of trousers (it is actually her prison uniform pulled down) and some thin leather straps to cover her nipples. Her entire upper body, however, is covered in tattoos and works almost as a substitute for clothing. Her head is shaved.

Figure 8: Jack in Mass Effect 2 (left) and Mass Effect 3 (right).

Despite Jack's body obviously being much more exposed than Miranda's and Samara's, some other gazing mechanism is at work here. Jack's very appearance is a clear rejection of traditional/stereotypical markers of femininity. She wears makeup, but it is used to emphasize her punk style rather than her "girly" side. The myriad of tattoos on Jack's body "cover her scars in a deliberate attempt to write her own story, erasing the pain of her past" (Hudson et al. 2012: 78). Each tattoo has a significant meaning, such as gangs she has belonged to and people she has killed. Jack, while heterosexual, embodies qualities of the butch body and has instead veered strongly toward traditionally masculine domains and expressions. Jack is an important contribution to the representation of femininity in these games. Jack's appearance is an expression of her rebellion against almost everything in the world, and if she is seen in connection with other female characters she is certainly representative of a very extreme alternative femininity in this universe. This is coupled, however, with Jack as an extremely violent and traumatized character, suggesting that this version of femininity has some anxious connections to deviancy.
The mode of gazing is different with Jack. The camera does not "desire" Jack in the same sense as it does with Miranda or Samara. In one early scene aboard the Normandy, the camera will give a slow close-up of her body in order to show her tattoos to the player, but it is not posited as sexualization in the same manner as other female characters. Jack's bosom is also noticeably smaller than, for example, Miranda's and Samara's, which I believe lends "credibility" to her exposed appearance. Also, the amount of tattoos and their erratic patterns do not attempt to fix the player's gaze on one particular area. This is also evident from the production process: "We also sought ways to best show off her tattoos while covering her chest to some degree. Concerns about how exposed she was led to some of these changes" (Hudson et al 2012: 79). Interestingly, it is only with Jack that they were concerned about exposure. Nevertheless, Jack challenges heteronormative and stereotypical tropes about femininity, particularly in this game universe. This is also enhanced by the fact that she is a potential romance option for the player, showing that her outcast status does not ensure that she irredeemable. In a game that only offers heterosexual romances, Jack is possibly the queerest heterosexual thus far. Jack wears more clothes in Mass Effect 3 to signalize her maturation. The design was made before it was known she would be a teacher, but is defended on grounds that Jack would never "wear a regulation uniform" (Hudson et al. 2012: 137), suggesting an uneasy coupling between the character as designed and the character as a person with a life of her own.

The newest addition to the female roster in Mass Effect 3 is EDI, short for Enhanced Defense Intelligence, and she is quickly sexualized. EDI was introduced in Mass Effect 2 as the Normandy's artificial intelligence represented by a holographic orb. EDI, as an AI, does not have a specific gender, although its voice is distinctly female. Joker, the Normandy's pilot, comes to refer to EDI as a woman after they begin to cooperate efficiently and form a type of friendship. In Mass Effect 3, Shepard captures a Cerberus gynoid during the game's introductory mission in order to extract vital data from it. EDI hijacks the body to circumvent a failsafe and manages to gain control of it. EDI explains that the body can provide ground support and wishes to test it out in the field, which makes her available as a companion. EDI's appearance is inspired by Maria in Fritz Lang's science fiction classic Metropolis (Hudson et al. 2012: 138). EDI becomes crucial to the series' exploration of sexuality discourse, particularly for female homosexuality, which I will come back to. Here I would like to point out that the embodied/gendered EDI is quickly cast into an eroticized female robot body. Whereas Dr. Eva Coré, the gynoid's former identity, had an artificial epidermis and looked
distinctly human (it was an infiltration unit, after all), EDI wears the body "naked" after its exterior applications were burned off. This is of course not viewed as naked in the same sense it would be for an organic being, seeing as it is a robot body and EDI is an AI. The body even has "tasteful"/strategic patterns to indicate clothing of some kind. The metal becomes a safe nudity here.

Figure 9: EDI's new body.

The sexualization and objectification of female characters through a predominantly male gaze here are complicated by the characters' subjectivity, a central theme in postfeminist media culture. For example, Miranda, Samara and Jack are all powerful and capable fighters. They are not simple damsels who are unable to do anything on their own. Thus, they are not simply objects. Gill, in discussing advertising, highlights that there has been a major shift from "the portrayal of women as sex objects to the portrayal of women as active and desiring sexual subjects" (2007: 89). While on one hand this may promote a welcome change from earlier modes of representation, it is on the other hand often a problematic change that can be rooted in neoliberalist ideology where everything is seen as an act of independence devoid of any cultural and social influences. Referring to Robert Goldman, Gill argues that "sexual objectification can be presented not as something done to women by some men, but as the freely chosen wish of active (confident, assertive) female subjects" (2007: 90). Sexualization today, then, "works somewhat differently in many domains" and Gill points to how women are not straightforwardly objectified, but may choose to present themselves in an objectified manner (2007: 258). This is often exemplified by the constructed figure of "the sexually autonomous heterosexual young woman who plays with her sexual power and is forever 'up for it'", a figure Gill identifies as a backlash response to feminist critiques (2007: 258). The combination of sexualization and subjectivity may signal independence, but may equally well also be used to further excuse an objectified heteronormative portrayal of women in
contemporary media. A particular case in point here is reporter Diana Allers in *Mass Effect 3*. She is a possible flirtation for both genders and wears a skin-tight short white dress that suggests nightclub ventures more than journalistic field work. This is excused by having Allers comment that people are more attentive when the reporter is feminine,\(^6^4\) which reaffirms heteronormative assumptions and makes it "dismissible" on grounds that she is just doing her job really well. While real-life journalistic practices often use women in the belief that "a woman's presence in a conflict zone will add to the frisson and drama of war reports" (Gill 2007: 122), Allers is more likely chosen to *divert* viewers from the issues by appearing as mere spectacle in a war where ancient machine creatures are wiping out the galaxy.

The repeated and almost-exclusive\(^6^5\) sexualized gaze on women suggests a highly heterocentric gameworld where the public mode of gazing is straight male. While heterosexuality can be rejected by choosing a same-gender romance or opting out of romances altogether, the player is nevertheless put into the position of a predominantly heterosexual male spectator in the public gameworld. This is of course not to suggest that for example all straight male players find this erotic or that gay women cannot find this erotic or appealing to them, but there is a repeated and restrictive pattern of gazing here that strongly suggests that the public is the domain of the straight male. The games copy a problematic pattern from mainstream cinema which, while

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\text{in its assumption of a male norm, perspective and look, can constantly take women and the female image as its object of investigation, it has rarely investigated men and the male image in the same kind of way: women are a problem, a source of anxiety, of obsessive inquiry; men are not. Where women are investigated, men are tested. Masculinity, as an ideal, at least, is implicitly known. Femininity is, by contrast, a mystery. (Neale 1983: 16)}
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The obsessive inquiry Steven Neale points out here is reflected in how the *Mass Effect* series cinematographically treats many of its women. Not only is public gazing at women "expected", pervasive as it is in mainstream media, it also avoids confronting the "horror" of male homosexuality or acknowledging male homosexuality at all. Simultaneously the women that are gazed at are never simple objects without any agency, and they have also all chosen to dress in certain ways out of their own free will (at least on a diegetic level—they are designed characters, after all, so the question of choice is problematic).

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\(^6^4\) This can be overheard in a dialogue between Allers and Traynor aboard the Normandy.

\(^6^5\) The few cases of eroticized men are discussed in a separate section.
Perhaps game conventions may offer a convenient escape? Miranda, Samara and Jack, for example, can use biotic powers. Biotic powers are generated from the body. This is akin to magic in fantasy universes, at least functionally. It is common that mages/magic-wielding characters in games cannot wield heavy armor due to their lack of melee combat skills, and thus they wear lighter gear such as robes and tunics. As such, biotics in Mass Effect generally do not wear heavy armor. That is, female biotics do not. Perhaps biotic powers, because they are generated from the body, are seen as more effective when there is less interference (for example, without heavy armor), and light and tight-fitted clothing may thus be seen as the most appropriate or as more or less required. Jacob Taylor and Thane Krios, two male biotic companions in Mass Effect 2, also wear light and tight-fitted suits, though they are nowhere nearly as sexualized as Miranda or Samara. It may make sense to think of the characters' outfits in terms of their game class/diegetic status, but this is not universal. Male companions Wrex and Kaidan, for example, are fully able to wield biotic powers while donning heavy armor, and there is really no rescue to be found in claiming that biotics need skimpy outfits.

In Mulvey's psychoanalytic account of the male gaze, the gaze is often reproduced unconsciously and remains as such when it goes unchallenged. We may think of the examples discussed thus far as possible expressions of this (unconscious) reproduction of female sexualization because it occurs everywhere. Many things are likely unconsciously reproduced, such as small remarks about the galaxy preferring beautiful women or that Shepard is encouraged to find an opposite-gender partner in the nightclub. For Mulvey the gaze is not only the various camera techniques that leer at women while avoiding the same look at men. The narrative itself, in her account, "supports the man's role as the active one of forwarding the story, making things happen" ([1975] 2012: 62-63). This notion is complicated if Shepard is female. Yet, this narrative theme supporting the straight male mode of gazing is present, and it is complicated by another mechanism at work here: the games are often very conscious of what they are doing. The games know, and they talk about it. The gaze also becomes a spoken discourse.
Oh the Irony: Boys Will Be Boys

The public straight male gaze in the *Mass Effect* series is accompanied or reinforced by a rhetoric of irony and knowingness that seeks to simultaneously address and excuse female objectification and sexism. This works to promote and mythologize gender essentialism and heteronormativity in the public gameworld. All three games include this rhetoric. Irony is a common form of humor and is "everywhere in postmodern consumer culture" (Gill 2007: 111). The use of irony allows media to defend against critique by self-consciously drawing attention to their ironic status (Gill 2007: 111), meaning that media are often very aware of their representational practices and goals. Irony allows a dual mode of presenting "titillating and sexist images of women while suggesting that it was all a deliberate and knowing postmodern joke" (Gill 2007: 110). Any critique or accusations of sexism, then, can be reflected back onto the accuser for failing to understand the joke and not getting the point. The joke may thus be at the receiver's expense, not the producer's. Irony can be a safeguard which may allow the player to dismiss critical thoughts because they are already addressed and dismissed, and no longer a problem one needs to actively engage with.

Chora's Den, the self-proclaimed "gentlemen's club" in *Mass Effect*, provides a good starting point for the discussion on the series' use of irony. The player is required to visit Chora's Den as part of an early main quest and in some sidequests. This club features asari and female human dancers in tight leather clothing spread out across the circular locale with atmospheric colored lighting. The galaxy's universal beauty standard is the human(oid). Ashley may provide a comment if she is triggered by the player: "A million light years from where humanity began and we walk into a bar filled with men drooling over half-naked women shaking their asses on a stage. I can't decide if that is funny or sad." Kaidan jokingly replies: "What? You don't think they're here because of the food?" While Ashley may not know if she finds the venture funny or sad, a likely function of the comment itself is to highlight the fact that what they are currently witnessing is both funny and sad, playing on a contradictory double ideological sense. This is the irony. With Ashley as the player's guide, one can ponder the fact that it is supposedly sad that, to the players, over 150 years into future strip clubs/exotic dance establishments are as popular as ever. In the diegetic context, Ashley refers to being far away from Earth and seeing the same contemporary patterns repeated elsewhere,

66 Gill specifically discusses advertising in this context, but irony is not exclusive to this sphere.
67 By contrast, if Kaidan is the first character triggered he will say: "I see why this place is so popular. It's got quite the, uh, view." Ashley replies: "Hey, Lieutenant, put your tongue back in your mouth before you trip on it."
hinting at their inevitability. The entire venture is likely also meant to be funny, invoking the tautological myth of "[straight] boys will be [straight] boys" and that no matter when and where, men will want to gaze at half-naked women dancing in a semi-public sphere. This is a pervasive heteronormative trope. The "boys will be boys" myth operates on a notion that this is how it has always been and always will be, playing on ideas of character dichotomy and essentialism. Chora's Den, in all its defeatist irony, may want to elicit both a sigh and a smile from the player.

In Chora's Den the politics of looking is reserved for men, as Ashley's comment suggests. Her comment may offer sanction. If the game offers one (randomly triggered) critical comment, it shows that some critical reflection was given on the creation of such an establishment and by acknowledging and (sort of) condemning this venture the inclusion of Chora's Den can be excused, dismissing the matter as "quirkiness". Men are suggested, after all, to simply behave like men, which is a highly suspect and problematic assumption. On the other hand, the comment can also serve to provide a cultural critique by displaying the more vulgar sides of heteronormative masculinity. It is likely not a particularly intended critique, however, considering how heteronormative masculinity is the preferred public mode. This is not a matter that can be actively engaged with. Chora's Den might in reality be there just as much for the player to watch half-naked women as for any of the other drooling men that occupy its establishment. This is clear from how the player may choose to have a private dance show with one of the asari dancers.

Figure 10: The private dance show in Chora's Den.

In this show mode the dialogue wheel becomes a camera tool for gazing. The player has an option to "relax"; this has Shepard sitting back in the chair while the camera positions itself behind Shepard's shoulder in order to view the asari from the front. The "sit forward" option is
the default position where Shepard sits up straight while the camera positions itself in order to give a full view of the asari from the back. The dancer cannot be interacted with and the scene serves no other purpose than merely watching the asari perform a quick-looping dance. The asari will continue to dance even without Shepard sitting in the chair (the chair is always unoccupied until the player uses it), making her an asari reserved for the player. Additionally, the dancer is oblivious to Shepard's presence, indicating the emptiness of the entire venture.

*Mass Effect 2* includes Afterlife on Omega, a club similar to Chora's Den which also appears very early in the game. Irony is not invoked in the same manner here, but it is found in its diegetic context. Omega is a grittier version of the Citadel. Afterlife is "the ultimate in illicit entertainment" and the concept was based on high-end bars similar to those in Las Vegas (Hudson et al. 2012: 95). The player is required to visit the club to gather information. Upon entering the club the player is greeted by atmospheric and pulsating electronica music, several pole-dancing asari and a giant projector featuring even more asari. The player may even happen upon some asari prostitutes. The player is also allowed a private dance show here, and this time Shepard's companions can be seen in the background while their Commander ogles an asari. Omega, referred to as a "pisshole" by Miranda, is a criminal haven. The club is perhaps expected in a sordid location such as Omega. Afterlife contributes to the station's grittiness and supposed realism: if it is a (predominantly heterosexual) criminal haven, it certainly must include the overt sexualization and exploitation of certain types of women. One could argue that the seriousness of Afterlife is downplayed because Omega's ruler, Aria T'Loak, is an asari herself. Thus, the venture is not organized by a shady group of men, but by one of their own. It is not considered exploitation, then, because if it were, why would Aria condone it? While an interesting point, it is also problematic because using species as a reason and excuse ("but the owner is an asari!") only serves to excuse exploitation for another species ("but the owner is human/female!").

*Mass Effect 3* sees the return of a nightclub with female dancers, Purgatory, but unlike the previous games the player is not thrown into the establishment in the beginning of the game. The nightclub is also not a required location this time around, although multiple sidequests and companion interactions take place here and the player may find themselves making

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68 If minor character Fist from Chora's Den survives *Mass Effect*, he can be found talking to a couple of asari prostitutes by the bar: "So I get friendly with the whores in my off hours. So what? That's all I got left of the old days, thanks".

69 The brothels in *Dragon Age: Origins* and *Dragon Age II* are run by women. See chapter VIII.
regular visits. The asari dancers are not so prominent anymore and have been placed in the back of the locale. There are five dancers all wearing the same signature stripper outfit from the previous games. They are dancing on platforms that move up and down (much like a typical sexual act), and one of the dancers is human. It is no longer possible to get a private show. The player can also engage in a brief dance on the dancefloor (unsurprisingly) with an asari dancing up against the wall. The dancer composition and placement in this club reflects a rather sad notion. Up in the corner, no one is really watching them as they wriggle around on the moving platforms. It is especially sad for the one asari tucked away in the corner, who seems to be dancing for absolutely no one. The prospect's hollowness is emphasized here.  

While Chora's Den and Afterlife add to the seedier parts of the galactic community (because seedy is seemingly connoted with scantily-clad women), Purgatory is instated as a safe haven from the war, a place to relax. It is more of a multi-purpose club for everyone, with an all-female dancing staff. The public galactic cathexis, it seems, continues to be heterosexually male.

Figure 11: Dancers on the moving platforms next to the dancefloor in Purgatory.

The more sexualized female characters of the games are also acknowledged and talked about, as if to present some critique or awareness of the issues at hand. In *Mass Effect* this begins mostly as a way of further promoting a "boys will be boys" attitude by using Benezia's appearance as a promotion of naturalized heterosexuality. This occurs during a main quest on icy planet Noveria. The player can ask around about Benezia's location and a turian NPC will mention that "Lady Benezia was dressed for her role. An asari in a pinstriped suit set tongues wagging among the younger male employees. So to speak." If Liara is present she will add: "Young males have an unhealthy obsession with my species." This promotes the asari fantasy

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70 The dancers on the platforms may actually be used to invoke player heterosexuality during Steve Cortez' romance path, making them somewhat "functional". See next chapter.
in a diegetic perspective, affirming the repeated notion/myth that the asari are desirable (to everyone/every man). I return to this below. It is served as a general rule, a truism, as something normal. While Liara may view it as unhealthy, the fact still remains that young males are seemingly especially attracted to asari in this universe. The entire idea builds upon a heteronormative and heterosexist stereotype that all young men are or should be obsessed with women in general. While an obsession may be deemed as unhealthy, this obsession is still presented here as something that occurs normally, as if no one has any control once it manifests and it can therefore be dismissed as "charming", "innocent" or "excusable" and shrugged off. It escapes scrutiny as long as it exists in service of promoting heterosexuality. The entire premise here, just as Chora's Den and Ashley's comment, is based upon a discriminating and erroneous assumption of obligatory and default heterosexuality in the disguise of innocent humor, and there is no way to interact with it or confront it. Boys will be boys, after all.

Irony can take the form of what Roland Barthes refers to as the inoculation process of a myth, where the troublesome aspects of some idea are presented beforehand, already acknowledged (and thus it is redundant to criticize it, because it has already done so itself), and "then, at the last moment, save it in spite of, or rather by the heavy curse of its blemishes" ([1957] 2009: 39). Miranda's attire is a very good example of this. Her appearance does not go unnoticed by other characters. The following banter may be overheard when passing by engineers Kenneth Donnelly and Gabriella Daniels on the Normandy:

Daniels: I've got green across the board. The forward tanks are buoyant and elevated.
Donnelly: Are you talking about the Normandy, or Miranda?
Daniels: I'm talking about the one that's covered and protected, not bouncing in the breeze.
Donnelly: I don't know. Officer Lawson's uniform is very official. It always makes me stand at attention.
Daniels: You're such a dog.

The in-game characters know that Miranda is not appropriately dressed for her occupation. During Miranda's loyalty mission, Captain Enyala, one of the enemies, will taunt Miranda if certain dialogue choices are selected: "I was just waiting for you to finish getting dressed. Or does Cerberus really let you whore around in that outfit?" Miranda does not respond. Here it is as if Miranda's (or, perhaps better, the designers') choice of outfit is completely legitimate as long as the game recognizes its possible flaws: it is not "covered and protected" and it is
prone to be thought of as whorish. The game responds by providing comments on Miranda both as allure and as an object of criticism. There is seemingly no point in commenting on this because the game is already aware, as if the game has armed itself against criticism and instead promotes "endearing" jokes about the outfit. The game shares the joke on equal terms with the player. If the gameworld knows, then it can supposedly become a narrative theme and part of that world rather than seen as outright objectification for the pleasure of players.

This straight male gaze as discourse takes on an aspect of postfeminist media culture known as "laddism". This derives from a postfeminist ideal character known as the "new lad", typically promoted through the discourses of men's magazines and similarly targeted media. The new lad has been constructed as a response to the new man; the new man "has been described conflictingly as pro-feminist, narcissistic, anti-sexist, self-absorbed and sexually ambivalent" (Genz and Brabon 2009: 137). This "new man" was a result of feminist endeavors to emphasize the social construction of gender and attempts to expel notions of natural gender roles and behaviors. With postfeminist's media culture's return to re-traditionalization and expressions of feminist backlash, however, the "new lad" seemingly appeared as a construct to combat what various editors and producers viewed as an inauthentic male character. The new lad "was depicted as honest, open and authentic" and, more specifically, represents "a defensive assertion of masculinity, male power and men's rights against feminist challenges" (Gill 2007: 211). This is exemplified in the discourse of sexualization of men and women, where laddism typically casts (heterosexual) men as "hedonists just wanting a 'shag'" (Gill 2007: 257). This is coupled with a rhetoric of natural gender differences and a "boys will be boys" discourse. This laddish persona has much in common with the straight male gamer persona constructed by the industry. Tracy Fullerton refers to this gamer persona as "the third gender" constructed around notions of "highly stylized graphical violence, male fantasies of power and domination, hyper-sexualized, objectified depictions of women, and rampant racial stereotyping and discrimination" (Fron et al. 2007: 7). In addition to the examples above, Mass Effect 3 continues this rhetoric through Scottish "lad" Kenneth Donnelly, which serves to acknowledge the sexiness of the game's female characters:

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71 The player is likely not supposed to have any sympathy for the villainous Enyala, however, who is killed shortly after.
72 Laddism is typically seen as a British phenomenon, yet its general heterosexualizing male discourse has a more widespread approach.
Donnelly: So, Gabby, have you seen EDI's new body?
Daniels: Oh, I knew this was coming.
Daniels: Uh-huh.
Donnelly: And if she ever walks into a wall, there's just so much padding.
Daniels: I knew it.
Donnelly: Wish I were a wall.
Daniels: You pretty much are, Kenneth.

Donnelly: Gabby, have you ever seen recordings of Liara's mother, Matriarch Benezia?
Daniels: Yes, what about her?
Donnelly: And remember Samara, the asari justicar?
Daniels: Where are you going with this, Kenneth?
Donnelly: Have you noticed that older asari women seem to be a bit more ample? Do you think they just keep growing?
Daniels: Kenneth!
Donnelly: I think I'll spend my sunset days in an asari retirement home.
Daniels: If I don't kill you first.

There is a duality here: the characters' sexualized appearance is addressed in discourse, signalizing that the game is aware of its practices, and they in turn enable Donnelly's character and commentary. They supplement each other. Additionally, Donnelly's unabashed laddism is kept under control by having Daniels act as the "voice of reason" so that their possible love story requires the sexualized women. The Donnelly and Daniels banters are meant to be humorous; they are sparring matches between the hopeless guy who cannot see that the woman next to him is interested in him, and Donnelly can be a parodic character just as much as he can be a celebratory character. Like I discussed above, however, these dialogues can have a mythological function: they point out many things that can be criticized as problematic, such as EDI's body and Benezia's and Samara's bosom exposure, as if the game is already self-aware and criticizing itself. Thus, the dialogue can also work to excuse these types of representations on the grounds that the game already knows and deals with possible issues while simultaneously illustrating the joy of the representations (EDI's body being sexy and the two asari having large breasts). It is worth noting the one-sided dynamic here. Daniels is never given the opportunity to talk about men she likes in the same way as Donnelly. That would most likely not work well with Donnelly's extreme heterosexuality (which Daniels is of
course expected to tolerate, albeit dejectedly so). Daniels is not necessarily the type to talk about men in the same way Donnelly talks about women. It contributes, however, to the notion that the public fantasies on offer in the galaxy of the *Mass Effect* series are primarily those that are cast or can be cast through the desires of a (specific type of) heterosexual man.

This combination of irony and gaze (both as look and discourse) here can be a powerful regulator for what is deemed publicly acceptable and what is to be more private in the gameworld. The games are often aware of what they are doing and address sexualization practices by turning them into jokes and preemptive strikes against possible critique. This is clearly evident with EDI in *Mass Effect 3*. When EDI is visiting the Citadel she may ask Shepard if it is time to leave yet, as she is getting propositioned "with increasing frequency". Sexualization of women is given a narrative dressing so that it appears that it belongs thematically to the universe of the games. This is problematic, however, because these addresses merely seem to endorse the sexualization rather than acknowledge it as a potential issue and something the player can interact with. This pattern reflects the mirror ethical design Miguel Sicart (2009) discusses, in which some values reflect the developer's own views rather than challenge the player's own ethics through mechanics and interactions. I must point out that I ally myself with Gill in that being critical of sexualization is not to be "anti-sex", though "in postfeminist media culture this position (the prude) is the only alternate discursively allowed (itself a part of the problem, and eradicating a space for critique)" (2007: 259). The critique of sexualization here is to point out the restrictive practices which have implications for which types of desires that are communicated and sanctioned by the games, as well as the notions of objectification of women that are perpetuated. If the games aspire to be inclusive spaces for at least male-identifying and female-identifying players of diverse sexualities, it is highly suspect and problematic that the public gameworld continually endorses a primarily straight male cathexis while relegating everything else to the private spheres of romances. The knowing play on irony and self-awareness may serve as humor on one end, but at the same time the rhetoric of irony "means never having to say you're sorry" (Gill 2007: 212).

The *Mass Effect* series nevertheless remains a series that attempts to challenge its own dominant practices in the face of a heteronormative industry and culture, and as titles progress the gameworld invites more openness. This openness often exists in an uneasy relation to the overall public straight cathexis, and it is these challenges and queer aspects that I will now turn the attention to.
Looking at Men

Male characters generally avoid any overt sexualization through exposed apparel or highly subjective camera techniques outside of the romances, though some notable examples do occur. The first example I will use, Jacob Taylor from *Mass Effect 2*, is meant to serve as an illustration of how the gaze practices toward men belong to another mode of sexualization. Jacob wears a tight-fitted suit similar to that of Miranda, although his suit is darker and his features are not as emphasized as Miranda's. The camera treats Jacob fairly objectively, though there is the possibility of having a similar subjective camera here as well. This, however, requires that Shepard is female and flirts with Jacob. This is in stark contrast to the general default subjective camera that activates without the player's intervention. On the Shadow Broker ship, the player can watch a short surveillance clip of Jacob doing shirtless push-ups on the Normandy. This is a notable change, but it is rather hidden and obscure DLC content than a particular part of the public gameworld.

![Figure 12: The camera focuses on Jacob's body parts in a conversation available only to female Shepard.](image)

*Mass Effect 3* challenges earlier practices by introducing a (subordinate) eroticized gaze on men, yet it may take place through a different mode: disavowal of erotic context/purpose. In Mulvey's theories on the male gaze the male cannot bear the burden of objectification, but this statement is suspect today (though the principle may apply fairly well to the *Mass Effect* series). Mulvey's theories have rightly been criticized for their heterocentrism. Ellis Hanson points out that queer theorists have discovered that "the heterocentric and exceedingly rigid structure of the look in Mulvey's analysis—patriarchal masculinity leering at objectified femininity—writes homosexuality out of existence" and goes on to ask: "How do women

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73 This requires the *Lair of the Shadow Broker* DLC.
74 The game's only almost-depiction of male homosexuality is also through these clips. See below.
desire women in and through film? How do men desire men? Is a lesbian a male gaze in drag?" (1999: 13). The gaze may invite different subject positions for different viewers, though what I have attempted to show here is the pervasiveness of certain modes. The male as "spectacle" has been around for a long time, but MacKinnon points to the "cultural habit of massive disavowal" for ignoring it (1997: 21). Disavowal in this context means that male eroticization/objectification is "treated as if it were not happening—or treated with a different significance to that which it seems to have" (MacKinnon 2003: 29). The sexualized context is disavowed through placing a focus on activity rather than the male as an object of the gaze:

By means of [disavowal], "magnificent" male bodies may be exhibited for scrutiny in art galleries without raising inadmissible questions about erotic gazing that inevitably touch on the taboo of homosexuality. By means of it, photographed, filmed and videoed male bodies may masquerade as deserving of the spectator's close attention only when they encounter threat or endure torture in something as "male" as the action genre, for example. Sportsmen's bodies, likewise, are objects of the gaze only because men love sport, and those who play sport must be in top physical condition. Any erotic gazing can legitimately, as it were, be only from female eyes. (MacKinnon 1997: 20-21)

Men in erotic and sexualized contexts may be safely explained away in terms of functionality and activity. This is not to suggest that they cannot be desired by viewers, but that disavowal posits that objectification and sexualization are not for explicit and conscious erotic purposes. I will discuss this topic through how Mass Effect 3 gazes at two of its male companions, James Vega and Kaidan Alenko.75

James Vega represents the most sexualized/eroticized male in public thus far and is a clear break with previous gaze modes. James is much bulkier than the average muscular male of the game, and his second-skin T-shirt does a fair job in emphasizing his overly defined muscles. The game also shows his body in action, for example when Shepard talks to James while he is performing pull-up exercises and their following sparring match, or when he is getting a new tattoo at the Citadel. He embodies certain hard masculine body ideals, a type of "spectacular body" (MacKinnon 2003: 29),76 and the game does not attempt to hide it. For the first time, a male character is explicitly positioned as a target of a general desiring gaze. Yet, there is a sense of disavowal here. The context is always "functional": the sparring match, James

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75 Kaidan's appearance is highly conditional and requires that he survives Virmire in the first game.
76 MacKinnon refers to how the male as erotic object became quite common in the cinema of the 1980s through the hypermasculine "spectacular bodies" of actors such as Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone and Jean-Claude Van Damme (2003: 29).
working out, and the tattooing which requires the removal of his shirt. The situations do not invite the gaze in the same way as in the seemingly random Miranda dismemberments.

Figure 13: Scenes in which James is working out (left) and getting a new tattoo (right).

A similar practical gaze mode occurs when Kaidan is hospitalized and the player visits him. Kaidan's bruised face and overly muscular "hard" torso are fully exposed in regular conversation. As with the women who are gazed at, here a certain type of masculine body ideal is offered as a spectacle to any desiring players (though Kaidan is allowed to have his head in the frame).

Figure 14: Hospital scenes featuring Kaidan's exposed upper body.

Some disavowal may occur here too: Kaidan is hospitalized and the context is not particularly erotic. The male torso also does not carry the same sexualized meanings in our culture. Unlike women's torsos, for example, the naked male torso is frequently considered an unremarkable spectacle in public spaces and entertainment. This example is particularly interesting if we compare it the corresponding scenario if Ashley survives Virmire instead.

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77 Some flirt dialogue may occur here, however. See below.
When Ashley is hospitalized she wears a top that covers most of her upper body, making Kaidan's eroticized display actually a seemingly much more conscious and deliberate effort.

While disavowal may be present here (both due to the public status of the male body and the practical contexts), the orchestrations and the cinematography involved in these interactions possibly carry some notable homoerotic undertones if Shepard is male (James showing off for a male Shepard, for example, though this is likely an explicit example of homosocial bonding in the context of the game). Only Kaidan may lead to explicit homosexuality. These cases are notable examples of how the games wish to challenge their gazing practices, although sexualized men are put into safe and practical contexts rather than outright and "out of place" sexualization. These are also additions to the general gaze: a subordinate gaze, and not replacements.

**Queerness in the Galaxy**

The galaxy is on one hand rather rigidly heteronormatively structured, but on another hand it is also (contradictorily) notably queer. The project and prospect of queerness and explicit homosexuality in the *Mass Effect* series initially begin with the asari, an all-female/feminine species which occupies a crucial position for understanding how these games construct sexuality and queerness. Originally a "homosexual" species, the asari possess radical queer potential, yet this queerness is significantly tamed, mainstreamed and articulated mostly in the service of male heterosexuality. This makes the asari one of the most comprehensive heterosexualizing campaigns in the entire series, and I have already pointed out various examples where the asari are used as dancers in nightclubs and to exemplify and excuse "boys will be boys" notions. With the asari the games explore and complicate issues of biology and culture, which is very well within the spirit of science fiction, but the games simultaneously seem to suggest a sexual status quo and a domestication of alien aspects. Additionally, the asari are continuously talked about in terms of gender and sexuality in repeated attempts to mythologize their status as fantasy in the public gameworld. This simultaneously recognizes that queerness is an important aspect of the world and that this very queerness should be heterosexually appealing, or, perhaps better, heterosexual.
Asari as Dual Representations of Queerness and Heteronormativity

The asari are a monogendered\textsuperscript{78}, all-female blue-skinned humanoid species and currently the galaxy's apex species.\textsuperscript{79} Liara states that the asari are not women, but the in-game codex (a database of information the player can access from the pause menu) in \textit{Mass Effect} claims that they are all-female. The asari are both masters of diplomacy and combat and are natural biotics. They are also able to procreate with most other advanced species through a special process called "melding" or "joining". Asari have an average lifespan of around a thousand years. The asari are evolutionary and cultural winners, as well as cultural fantasies. Asari are always referred to as "she" or "her". Unless the player reads the codex, the more technical details about the asari as species are not revealed until the player recruits Liara T'Soni in one of the main missions. The asari, as an all-feminine/all-female species, also provide a sharp contrast to the other alien species in the game that are mostly represented by their male members as if to supplement or, perhaps, excuse the lack of diversity in species representations.

The initial purpose of the asari was to serve as love interests for players:

To add a familiar element of science-fiction fantasy, we decided that one of the main species in \textit{Mass Effect} would be a race of beautiful, blue alien girls. An extensive exploration of the idea led to the asari appearing exotic and alien while still having some human qualities, which allowed them to be desirable as potential love interests. The original inspiration of the scalp tentacles was to evoke the image of a woman emerging from the water with her hair swept back. Asari clothing was to be alluring and sexy but with a sense of class and style—more of a Hollywood red-carpet feel than that of a stripper (except for the asari who were, in fact, strippers). (Hudson et.al. 2012: 17)

This quote makes the idea behind the asari and their purpose clear. They are inspired by science fiction conventions, and likely inspirations here include the blue-skinned Andorian females and the green-skinned Orion slave girls, the latter of which supposedly no human man can resist, both from the \textit{Star Trek} universe. There may also be some inspiration from

\textsuperscript{78} The games have no consistent vocabulary here. For example, the \textit{Mass Effect 2} codex calls them "unisexual" instead of monogendered.

\textsuperscript{79} In \textit{Mass Effect 3} it is revealed that the asari have kept a Prothean beacon hidden on their homeplanet Thessia. The knowledge and technology housed in the beacon help to explain how the asari were able to become so quickly advanced. This revelation comes as a shock to Liara, and is presented as one of the species' deepest secrets. The penalties of withholding Prothean technology are, as EDI tells us, "among the harshest in Council space" and the asari may have "cheated" their way through evolution.
Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* series, which I will come back to. If a species consisting completely of women is one such convention, then the notion of the genre's intended/assumed male audience is also prevalent. The choice to include a female species is also "excused" by these earlier conventions, and "to add a familiar element" signifies that the asari are created primarily for the (male) player to feel at home. The asari are notably also the most human of all the alien species, even when compared to the other fairly humanoid aliens in the games. Asari are quite distinct from the amphibian salarians, the avian turians, the elephantine elcor and the jellyfish-like hanar. "Exotic" and "alien" are combined with "some human qualities" to create attraction, where the "alien" aspect is softened by the other two qualities. Essentially, asari are blue human women and are thus considered "safe" as a sexual fantasy without transgressing too much from conventional sexuality and preferences.

At this point the asari may appear as nothing more than primarily a type of male heterosexual fantasy, and locating queerness is difficult. While asari in many instances appear to fulfil that fantasy function, it is also important to remember that the intention of creation does not necessarily mean that the asari are always forced to represent a sexual fantasy. Asari and their sexuality are much more focused upon in *Mass Effect*, whereas in *Mass Effect 2* and, particularly, *Mass Effect 3* they tone down the sometimes excessive treatment of the asari that colors the first game. Before I discuss the asari more generally, I wish to provide a discussion on how they are introduced into the game and how the player might possibly/likely come to meet them.

The asari are immediately a sexualized phenomenon, as the first depiction of the asari in *Mass Effect* comes in the shape of Matriarch Benezia's breasts during the post-Eden Prime cutscene. Immediately after meeting with the Citadel Council in the beginning of the game the player may overhear some talk about an asari consort, which may lead into an investigation about what this is all about.\(^80\) Sha'ira, the Consort, provides the game's first and only possible sexual encounter outside a romance, and can possibly be the first example of homosexuality if Shepard is female. The game does not communicate explicitly that Sha'ira may provide sexual services. This communication is served through circumlocutory hints that are fairly obvious. For example, an obviously embarrassed Private Fredricks in the lounge will reveal that "I, ah,

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\(^80\) In fact, talks about the Consort can be the first thing the player hears when re-gaining control after the first scene on the Citadel. The office next to where the player begins houses an elcor named Xeltan, who is involved in the quest.
well, she's an asari who works here as... that is, she helps people with... things." Sha'ira's attendant Nelyna is also fairly evasive when she tries to explain the Consort to the player: "It is difficult to explain. She is many things to many people, and something different for each. Some seek her for advice, some for entertainment, others still for pleasure. Most of the time, our clients won't realize what they were seeking until after she has provided it for them." If the player asks if the Consort is mystical, Nelyna replies that she is "not in the usual sense. She is merely a woman. A woman with remarkable compassion and a generous spirit." There is a great deal of investment in mystifying this Consort, and the mystery turns out to mask that this is an opportunity for a sexual encounter. Strangely, the game can never say it. This triggers the scene where Sha'ira watches the scene from a distance, which was discussed above.

The Consort requires Shepard assistance in stopping a turian general from spreading vicious rumors about her, and if the player accepts her request, she then moves toward Shepard and embraces them as she says: "If you can convince him to stop spreading lies about me, I would be very grateful." Her embrace hints at a reward of a physical nature, although interestingly that is not what the actual initial reward is. The quest itself is fairly simple. Upon returning successfully to Sha'ira she will reward Shepard with a "gift of words", which she tells Shepard to remember when doubt descends. A Renegade option also causes Sha'ira to pay Shepard money for their services. The player can express dissatisfaction with the reward by choosing the subsequent Renegade option "That's it?", in which Shepard says: "Uh... thanks?" and Sha'ira will then immediately say: "Close your eyes and relax, Commander." The two will suddenly have sex in a very brief and non-graphic scene. A short clip featuring close-ups of their faces in dimmed lighting is shown, and Sha'ira's arm is seen going up against the headboard of the bed, presumably during the climax. Sha'ira will have sex with Shepard regardless of gender, making it the first possible encounter with homosexuality. After sex their business is concluded.

The quest reward situation shows where the text and the mechanics create a peculiar situation. Only the Renegade-positioned reply initiates the sexual encounter, whereas the Paragon and neutral options end without sex. The strangeness here is not that sex is possible, but how it is enabled. Shepard, expressing discontent with the reward, does not explicitly suggest sex. The paraphrase of the dialogue wheel might suggest it, with "That's it?" indicating an expectation for more. But, in the game this is articulated as "Uh... thanks?" which does not necessarily
carry the same meaning as the paraphrase. Instead, it is expressed like Shepard is confused
with the nature of Sha'ira's gift. Sha'ira nevertheless takes this as a cue to jump onto Shepard
and initiate an unannounced and, at this particular point, forced sexual encounter. Shepard
does not seem like an unwilling participant, however. Its "true" context may be evident if the
player only chooses the Renegade options throughout this last dialogue with Sha'ira, since
Shepard is rewarded with credits from the first option. Then, after the gift words, the
dissatisfaction expressed will not be a yearning for money, but for the hyped services of the
Consort. Sha'ira somehow intuitively knows that sex is what Shepard is after. Regardless of
morality responses prior to initiating sex with Sha'ira, it is fairly obvious that sex is a possible
award both from all the previous hints and information about her and how she embraces
Shepard at the beginning of the quest. Thus begins the asari.

Queerness in the asari might seem distant or absent at this point, with the possible exception
of Sha'ira, though they are an inherently queer species. The asari monogenderism might in
one way function as a straight male fantasy: a species with only beautiful women and no
horrors of male homosexuality. In another way, however, monogenderism provides a
significant challenge to heteronormativity (which is dependent upon a highly-regulated binary
gender system). Monogenderism can simultaneously also work as a straight male "nightmare"
because the asari, as monogendered, do not need men at all. This radically queer aspect,
however, is heavily toned down and mitigated through established cultural norms in the
diegetic universe. The codex entry is a first indicator of this:

Although asari have one gender, they are not asexual. An asari provides two copies of her own genes to
her offspring. The second set is altered in a unique process called melding. During melding, an asari
consciously attunes her nervous system to her partner's, sending and receiving electrical impulses
directly through the skin. The partner can be another asari, or an alien of either gender. Effectively, the
asari and her partner briefly become one unified nervous system. This unique means of reproduction is
the reason asari are talented biotics. Their evolved ability to consciously control nerve impulses is very

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81 Sha'ira must have switched diegetic levels and is looking at the dialogue wheel rather than listening to what
Shepard says.

82 Sha'ira's legacy continues in subsequent titles. In Mass Effect 2, the player can overhear two male crew
members on the Normandy speaking about her: "I've got an appointment with Sha'ira in three months. I can't
wait." "We're flying into the eye of the storm, and you're thinking about some asari prostitute?" "Hey, watch it!
It's not like that at all. She's so... she's... ah, you won't understand unless you meet her." This is the only time
someone explicitly calls the Consort a prostitute. On the Citadel, a krogan believes that eating a fish from the
Presidium (the most high-class area of the Citadel) would be like "screwing Sha'ira". Sha'ira makes a brief
reappearance in the Citadel DLC in Mass Effect 3.
similar to biotic training. Asari believe their offspring acquire the best qualities of the "father" from the melded genes, but evidence is anecdotal.

Here we are introduced to the queerness of asari physiology and how they reproduce as a monogendered species. They can not only have "functional" sexual relations with other asari or other aliens of either gender, they can also reproduce with them (the offspring is always an asari). Then, a heterosexualizing campaign introduces a cultural value to explain that the asari believe that their offspring get the best qualities from the "father" and which enables/encourages their interspecies sexual relations (and hence, their availability to the player). The asari are the only species that can reproduce this way and they are also made available to every species this way, activating their status as interspecies sexual fantasy. The Consort and Chora's Den serve as early examples of this notion.

Liara T'Soni acts as the player's ambassador on asari culture and provides further insight into their species, as well as how the game attempts to soften the queerness. She paints a much more sympathetic and genuine picture of the asari as more than sex objects, though she also contributes to the recognition of that notion. In one of her expositions she explains that the asari were the first species to discover the Citadel and that they were instrumental in forming the Council. The asari also have a penchant for diplomacy, always striving "to be the voice of peaceful cooperation in galactic disputes". The asari strive to understand other species, but few species seek to understand them; subsequently the galaxy "is filled with rumors and misinformation about my people." Liara reveals that "[m]ost of the inaccuracies are centered around our mating rituals. My species is mono-gendered. 'Male' and 'female' have no real meaning for us. We still require a partner to reproduce. The second parent, however, may be of any species and any gender." Here the player can reply in a Paragon way with an inquisitive "How is that possible?" or the more condemnatory Renegade "That's disgusting!" option. The Paragon option has Shepard asking how they are able to mate with other species. The Renegade option is much more demeaning: "So, you'll have sex with anything?" Liara somehow does not take this negatively and instead replies: "Now you see how rumors get started" while smiling. She is perhaps used to the asari prejudice, or perhaps the player is allowed "a way out" once unconventional queer content emerges.83 Either reply nevertheless leads to Liara explaining that physical contact may or may not be involved in the asari union:

83 Such condemnatory replies in relation to sexuality are much more prominent in the Dragon Age series. See chapters VIII and IX.
The true connection is mental. Our physiology allows us to meld with other beings. We can touch the very depths of their minds. We explore the genetic memory of their species. We share the most basic elements of their individual and racial identities. We then pass these traits on to our daughters. It is how we learn to grow as a species, and how we develop a greater understanding of other races.

Here we can identify strong similarities between the asari and the oooloi from science fiction writer Octavia Butler's *Xenogenesis* trilogy. The oooloi are an experiment in androgyny. Their appearance is quite different than the Hollywood-inspired asari:

They have two hearts, four arms, seven fingers on each hand, an internal reproductive organ called the 'yashi', and wriggling sensory tentacles in various places. They do not have genitals but their sexual equipment includes both the womb-like yashi and the phallic sensory arms. They are attractive to members of both other sexes and can temporarily develop breasts and other secondary characteristics of either human sex. (Atteberry 2002: 144)

The oooloi differ greatly from the asari in physical appearance, being rendered into a much more prominent otherness that challenges gender borders. Additionally, an oooloi is the active part in a relationship, and it "uses its sensory arms to enter both the male and female bodies. It receives from each of the gametes out of which it constructs a new individual. It differs from men and women in being immensely powerful, able to kill with a touch but also to heal, and capable of stimulating (and receiving) unearthly pleasure" and they "confers the gift of psychic as well as physical closeness to their sexual partners" (Atteberry 2002: 144-145). The oooloi undo "the privileging of genital over other erogenous zones", making alien sex polymorphously perverse (White 1993: 404). 'Polymorphous perversion' is a Freudian term that refers to how humans may find sexual pleasure in things that are not driven toward genital intercourse and reproduction. This is usually "conditioned away" through "shame, disgust and morality" directed toward sexual excesses as humans grow up (Freud [1901-1905] 2001: 191). Science fiction, particularly through alien sex, may thus offer an exploration beyond the constructed heteronormative regulations on reproductive genital sexuality as "normal" sexuality, a significant queer aspect when compared to the "vanilla" restrictions of heteronormativity.

There are striking similarities between the oooloi and the asari here (the oooloi were perhaps an inspiration), such as the mode of reproduction, the active part in the sexual relationship (one asari must always be the active part in the joining), their attractiveness to seemingly all other
species, the immense power and the unearthly "polymorphously perverse" pleasure they can yield. The asari, however, are fashioned in the likeness of human women (always with breasts and, presumably, female genitals) and markers of androgyny are generally dispelled. All asari have a slender femme body. Any anxieties of tentacles penetrating another party, male or female, are removed by having the joining focusing on biotics and mental processes instead. While the asari do have tentacles, they instead function as their hair rather than as phallic tools for sexual conduct, providing a mainstream variant of gender and sexual experimentation that is heteronormatively safe. The queer aspects of the melding, however, are nevertheless an opposition to conservative notions of sex.

Asari and asari sexuality are initially presented as a mystery served through various 'hermeneutic codes'. These are narrative codes that generate suspense and mystery (Barthes [1973] 1990: 17). For the asari the game sets up a set of sexual hermeneutic codes: what is asari sex truly like? This may build on the previous mysteries of the Consort if the player pursed that path, which also progressed through an enigmatic path. The Consort only offered conventional sex, but the "true" wonder of the asari is found through deeper commitment. Additionally, Shepard must join their mind and "embrace eternity" with two other asari (Shiala and Liara) up to two times during the main quest in order to decipher the beacon, although this is non-sexual. The game invests much time in asari sexuality and offers Liara as a promise of fulfilment. Asari joining is much better than "ordinary sex", and the heavy foregrounding of asari sexuality is likely an attempt to bait the player. Asari sex and its discourse are explored further in the romance chapter.

If contemporary postfeminist media culture sees femininity as a bodily property as opposed to a social structural or psychological one and has an "obsessional preoccupation with the body" as Gill argues (2007: 255), then Mass Effect reflects that with its obsessional preoccupation with the asari (body). This is not just a general focus of displaying bodies, but to connect them with certain ideas about nature and culture: "The body is presented simultaneously as women's source of power and as always already unruly and requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodeling (and consumer spending) in order to conform to ever narrower judgements of female attractiveness (Gill 2007: 255). Whereas Mass Effect and the

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84 The horned Qunari race of the Dragon Age series, mostly represented by their male constituency, provides an interesting contrast to the asari. See chapters VIII and IX.

85 These instances, while seemingly being built up as potentially sexual as the asari partner closes in on Shepard to initiate the joining, consist mostly of the jarring and gruesome images from the beacon.
asari do not reflect much of the explicit consumption pressures, the asari represent a fairly narrow judgment/representation of female attractiveness. They are supposed to be the attractive species, after all. Other species are not treated nearly in the same manner as the asari. There is extensive discourse focusing on displaying and explaining both asari body and sexuality contra other species. In *Mass Effect* neither Wrex (krogan), Garrus (turian) nor Tali (quarian) speak about the biological and cultural features of their species' reproductive and recreational sexual acts, and the player will not find these species "half-naked, shaking their asses on a stage". All four companions speak about species features in some way or another, but the more general cultural aspects talked about by the krogan, turian and quarian companions are replaced by an almost exclusive focus on gender and sex with the asari. Liara speaks mostly about other things than asari sexuality, but these are more personal character-specific topics rather than general "educational" exposition. This sexual discourse is framed by the need to explain misconception and rumors already present in the game universe (and the dialogue focus thus diverts possible accusations of being sexual exposition directly aimed at titillation, another example of irony/knowingness), but the rumors about asari promiscuity were written into the game as a cultural "quirk" and are not something that has occurred naturally, and should not be taken as a given state of affairs. This is where queerness and heteronormativity, both inside the gameworld and in our culture, severely clash.

The asari have radical queerness potential since as a monogendered species they defy heteronormativity and a binary division of gender, yet the queering is tamed. I repeat Judith Butler's argument that for queer to be a site for collective contestation it will "have to remain that which is, in the present, never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes" ([1993] 2011: 173). This queering suggested by Butler may apply well to the asari as an example of queerness. If there is no biological and cultural (hierarchical) division between "men" and "women", terms like "sex" and "gender" seem to lose their relevance for the asari, though they do acknowledge gender in the sense that they view their species as "monogendered", a label which was probably introduced to them after discovering other species. By our definition this could certainly be considered queer because it breaks so clearly with our own gendered and sexual realities. For the asari this is simply considered natural, because to them there is no meaningful distinction between genders or sexualities, and as such "heteronormativity" and "queer" have no relevance to them.
Heteronormativity, both in-game and out-of-game, however, casts long, narrowing and incorporating shadows. The issue here is not the asari or the idea of the asari as such, but how they are often represented, existing unevenly forever between queerness and heteronormativity. Even without the knowledge that they were intended as desirable love interests there are several signs which point to how their queerness is (hetero)normalized and made safe. Besides their feminine looks and voices and despite Liara's claim that they are not women, asari are always referred to with feminine pronouns and nouns such as "she", "her", "mother", "daughter" and so on. In the *Mass Effect* universe, all species speak in their own language. Most have microcomputers or sub-dermal implants which include an application that translates foreign speech into native speech in real time. To the player, this will be English.\(^{86}\) Asari language, then, is translated into the closest English equivalents so that while they may not really say "she" and "her" in reference to themselves, this is what it sounds like in English (though when they actually refer to women, the feminine pronouns apparently operate exactly as references to other asari do). The entire culture is structured around gendered notions, such as the goddesses of their religion and the three life stages an asari goes through: maiden, matron and matriarch. It is clear that asari appearance and culture are firmly grounded in (human) femininity. If the player pursues flirtatious dialogue with Liara she may reveal to a female Shepard that while male and female have no real meaning to the asari, they do have maternal instincts and can fill such a role in a relationship. This is not coincidental. This is seemingly required in order for them to remain desirable for the presumed male audience. While they are monogendered, they are firmly anchored as women and this is reflected in the language used about and by them. The matter would have been different if they had constantly been referred to in more neutral words, for example as "it" or "zer", and if their culture were less grounded on heavily gendered markers. This, however, could have pushed them outside of mainstream safety and fantasy. The particular female/feminine gendering helps to keep the asari safe in the realm of femininity so that their innate queerness and challenges to gender and sexuality norms are tamed and domesticated.

Furthermore, consider how asari culture has introduced an actual stigma on intraspecies "homosexual" relations, which have been their entire mode of survival pre-space travel. This has been fueled by a belief that asari offspring inherit traits from the "father" species and thus asari-asari unions are no longer encouraged or common. Liara speaks about how it became a

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\(^{86}\) That the lip synchronization remarkably also adjusts to English is a technical game quirk one must overlook for this to make sense.
norm for the asari to mate with other species after they mastered space flight: "Union with our kind is no longer common. Not for the purposes of reproduction. Most asari believe it weakens our species. Asari daughters inherit racial traits from the father species. If both parents are asari, then nothing has been gained. Or so conventional wisdom would hold." Liara reveals that she is a "pureblood" asari, a child of two asari. Pureblood is here used as a stigma, not as a sign of superiority. When the asari meet other cultures, they strangely apply a type of homophobia to their own culture. This stigma raises questions. Before coming into contact with other species (which happened a long time before the current timeline), the asari thrived on their own. After discovering that they were not alone in the galaxy, they seemingly found out that they were able to procreate with other species, which eventually led to the belief that such liaisons would benefit their own species. The child of an asari will always be an asari, regardless of the species of the "father", so the asari species nevertheless benefits from these prospects. Other species are seemingly incompatible in terms of reproduction, so non-asari interspecies liaisons are not common. The asari thus possess a very strong evolutionary benefit. Mass Effect 2 provides another possible reasoning for this: a dangerous genetic disorder that occurs only in offspring of asari-asari parents. Initially, the asari do not need men at all and they can very well continue their species without them. This is part of their "straight male nightmare" aspects, but this cultural "homophobic" stigma enables them to actively seek out other species, making them available to, among others, men. Thus, they become consorts, exotic dancers and prostitutes in clubs, and men are no longer in danger of being viewed as superfluous to the asari. Asari queerness becomes a rather heteronormative queerness and not really an explicit challenge to any establishments.

It is useful to discuss the evolution of asari "homosexuality" as an example of "hommo-sexuality". This term, originally used by Luce Irigaray ([1974] 1985), plays on 'homo' ('same') and the French word 'homme' ('man') to denote how female homosexuality in Freudian psychoanalytic discourse was frequently understood through the discourse of male homosexuality and male desire. Teresa de Lauretis borrows "hommo-sexuality" in the essay "Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation" to analyze how female homosexuality is frequently understood and represented as sexual indifference rather than sexual difference: "women are, or want, the same as men" ([1988] 1993: 142). Katherine Sender uses de Lauretis' discussion of "hommo-sexuality", "in which women's desire for each other is reworked in the service of male desire", to understand how lesbian representations in mainstream marketing "function less to appeal to a lesbian market than for the pleasure of
heterosexual men and women" (2004: 195). The asari represent a very curious case of this "hommo-sexuality". They were originally a "homosexual" species, perhaps in the truest sense since there was no male desire it could be understood through. Coming into contact with a larger galactic culture, however, turns them into a "hommo-sexual" species in which they become available to men and not so much to their own species anymore. The crucial part of this operation is that this is not done to them by men; rather, the asari stigmatize their own intraspecies homosexuality. The asari may perfectly illustrate de Lauretis' argument that "[t]he construction and appropriation of femininity in Western erotic ethos has also had the effect of securing the heterosexual social contract by which all sexualities, all bodies, and all 'others' are bonded to an ideal/ideological hierarchy of males" ([1988] 1993: 144). When the player meets the asari they are already "hommo-sexual": an originally radical female homosexuality that does not threaten or estrange male heterosexuality, but rather invites, encourages and entertains it. It works in the service of heterosexuality now.

The asari nevertheless still retain some critical aspects that are somewhat downplayed as actual topics. These are biological aspects. The first is their long lifespan (averaging a thousand years) and their natural biotic abilities, which means that an asari will likely outlive her non-asari partner and that they are physically strong (without ruining their feminine physique, of course). The second is procreation. Regardless of the other partner's species and gender, the resulting child will always be an asari. Thus, asari will always have control over the system of reproduction, a system typically associated with patriarchy. A straight male player/partner, for example, can outright forget any stereotypical notions/needs of passing on their genes as a service to family/nature, because the asari will always give birth to an asari. That is not to say that the resulting child is not the child of both parents; as previously mentioned, a partner is required to procreate, but the discourse of the importance of having own children in the sense that the child is a biological link to its parents (father) is dispelled in these relations.

Whereas asari biology is emancipatory in the above regards, it is rather constricting and suspect in others. There are three concerns I would like to discuss. The first concern is their maternal instincts, which supposedly all asari come with according to how Liara presents it (though by no means do all of the asari encountered during the game seem like fitting mothers and caretakers). This idea builds on a stereotype/fantasy rather than reality, because while "maternal instincts" are regularly used in everyday (media) discourse for various rhetorical
purposes, it is not an "all women" phenomenon or a shared gene or female "anima" that ensures that all women behave "motherly". A likely function of this fact is to further ensure that the asari can be locked into a specific gender, and to remind the player that they are effectively human women who offer fantastic sex and are simultaneously good, caring mothers, all while still claiming that they are not "this" or "that". In all their (Liara's) insistence on being monogendered, they do a remarkable job of presenting this monogender as (fantasy) female.

The second concern is how each life stage of the asari is, according to the codex, "marked by strong biological tendencies". For example, the Maiden stage "is marked by the drive to explore and experience", while the Matron stage "is marked by a desire to settle in one area and raise children". Matriarchs "become active in their community as sages and councilors". The codex does mention that there are some individuals who make "unexpected life choices" that break with these biological drives, and thus they are not entirely reduced to their biological make-up. The asari flirt with the notions of biologically determined aspects of life and that deviation from this is "unexpected". Biology is apparently one's destiny, a theme that has been common in science fiction (Benford 1980: 54), but sometimes "culture" intervenes and certain asari stray from that path which their entire society is built upon and which is taken as a natural state of affairs.

The third concern is their ability to mate with everyone. Exactly why they can mate with other species is not known. It can be argued that it is some kind of evolutionary trait, but it also does not make much sense considering they have always had the ability to mate and reproduce amongst themselves. The stigma introduced on intraspecies relations adds to a wish-fulfilment scenario. This is connected to the anxious link between biology and sexuality. It is never made clear if an asari can have specific species/gendered sexual preferences or if they are always pansexual. Nothing is stated in either direction. All the asari romantically and/or sexually available to the player in some way or another in all three games are available to both Shepards, for example. This definitional gap could certainly be interpreted as queer, seeing as there is never any clear answer. Much discourse about asari gender/sexuality is closely related to their bodies and systems of reproduction. These aspects are cast primarily in a biological realm and thus view the asari as something given by nature, inevitable and absolute, suggesting that sexuality stems from their biology. In a sense, this can be considered a "smart" first move of incorporating homosexuality in a mainstream video game, because if it
can be explained away through binary and heteronormative assumptions, homosexuality is not really homosexuality after all. For a straight male player playing female Shepard and romancing Liara, for example, the insistence on asari being female and maternal avoids any overt confrontations with gender transgressions.

The asari of *Mass Effect* are in many ways examples of contemporary mainstream re-eroticization of gender differences, a strategy which draws upon the Mars/Venus discourse that not only "asserts that there are natural sex differences (a highly contested claim in itself, refuted by considerable research evidence), but also that these alleged differences are profoundly pleasurable, if only we could recognize their existence instead of resisting" (Gill 2007: 109). This does not transfer automatically to the asari as they are not heterosexual, but as intended love interests that exist in a game aimed primarily at a male audience, they become the epitome of "the ultimate woman" with all their natural femininity. Their queerness is mitigated by, among other things, placing them as dancers in male-dominated establishments. The asari work as *Mass Effect's* "queer/lesbian chic": homosexuality is enabled (it is not shown unless the player pursues it, however) through specific codes (here: female homosexuality) that flirt with the idea of queerness but nevertheless feel the need to constantly make it safe, desirable and, not least, usable for heterosexual contexts. This is safer for mainstream contexts, seeing as "girl-girl couples are less likely to alienate heterosexual men" (Sender 2004: 192). Through asari, homosexuality/"hommo-sexuality" is simultaneously enabled and disabled, heteronormativity is implicitly significantly challenged and explicitly firmly instated, yet there is never stability. It is perhaps both what queer should be and should not be.

**Mythologizing the Asari**

The sequels expand and sometimes even problematize the "love interest" approach from the first game, though what takes place is mostly a mythologization of the asari as the galaxy's ultimate fantasy. The asari almost become the epitome of Barthes' definition of myth as a tautology: an eternal and uncontested/uncontestable "truth". For Barthes tautology is one of the forms a myth may take in its transformation from history to eternity: ":[…] one takes refuge in tautology as one does in fear, or anger, or sadness, when one is at loss for an explanation […] In tautology, there is a double murder: one kills rationality because it resists
one; one kills language because it betrays one" (Barthes [1957] 2009: 180). Tautology is perhaps one of the "worst" forms a myth may take, because rhetorical forms such as "this is how it has always been done" and "that is just the way it is" suggest that one is at a loss of explanation for why something is the way it is, and thus it only gets promoted further. There is no challenge in tautology, only defeat. Tautology is frequently invoked when speaking about gender and sexuality, treating each topic as if it has emerged directly from nature and outside of history and society itself. The "fate" of the asari as exotic dancers is presented in this form. In Mass Effect 2, the raunchy Matriarch Aethyta, Liara's "father", laments the development of asari culture: "We can't go a single asari lifetime without some big war breaking out. We need to get our daughters working earlier, not spending their wild maiden years stripping or in merc bands." Asari culture seemingly promotes two outcomes for its young members: stripping or mercenary work. This is also expressed when speaking to the asari Ereba, who used to date a sensitive krogan named Charr: "It's fun to join a mercenary guild or dance at bars for a few centuries, but eventually you hit the matron stage, you know?" Even Aethyta herself spent some time "shaking [her] ass in some sleazy bar" in the past. The game includes this as a cultural problem in the diegetic context, yet complicates and contradicts it by positing these dancers as spectacles to be enjoyed by the player.

Consider the following brief example from Mass Effect 2. At the Citadel the player may, while perusing the various shops, speak with an asari shop clerk working for the human company Sirta Foundation and ask why she is required to be physically present when all sales are handled through an electronic kiosk. The clerk explains that her employers believe that a real-life attendant helps to improve sales and customer trust, adding: "Though I'm not sure why a human company exclusively hires asari to work their stores." The clerk may have no idea (which is strange, considering asari usually seem well aware of their popularity), but it is fairly obvious that it has much to do with the idea that asari are supposedly desired by a majority of people. Thus, their "innate" and automatic sex appeal, which apparently is tautological, makes them more efficient salespeople. Once more, the game knows. It should also be argued that this example is not necessarily only indicative of asari allure, but also of the exploitative practices of humanity (it is their business strategy, after all). While this is also a valid point, the topic here is mostly focused on the asari. In the grand scheme of the galaxy, it is not the questionable motives of human business practices that take center stage. That stage is reserved first and foremost for the asari.
There is also a direct confrontation with the "humanoid as universal fantasy" notion, seemingly in an attempt to explain their universal appeal on grounds other than that the game is for human players. On Illium, an asari colony, the player may overhear a conversation between a group simply called "Bachelor Party", consisting of a human, a salarian and a krogan with an asari dancer on the table between them. They discuss why asari are so attractive to every species:

Salarian: I can understand why I might find asari attractive. But how can they be attractive to humans too? They look just like salarians!

Human: What? They look exactly like us! I'm... I'm not seeing the salarian thing at all. At all.

Turian: You're both wrong. Asari look just like blue turians. Look at the head-fringe!

Human: Wait. You don't think they're like, mind-controlling us to see them as attractive, do you?

Turian: Please be quiet. You're going to ruin asari for me. And there aren't many turian women on Illium.

This is an interesting snippet of a discussion of how one might appropriate otherness into sameness, but it may also attempt to downplay any intentional fantasy the asari are supposed to represent. Instead of taking the female human model as the default universal attraction, here it is argued that each species sees itself in the asari and this is what makes them (heterosexually) desirable. The discussion, however, quickly moves over into humor. This exchange implies that each species attempts to find itself in the asari, perhaps to mitigate any anxieties about crossing boundaries. By declaring that the asari are similar to one's own species, they are not really strange and made safe and acceptable. This rhetoric is quite similar to the one that was used to design the asari as desirable love interest for human players. Once more, it can also reflect that the game is aware of its own practices and has now introduced a joke to guard itself against possible critique.

*Mass Effect 3* continues the mythologization of the asari as the universal allure. Late in the game the player is required to go to the asari homeworld Thessia in order to find a relic. The Galaxy Map has information about Thessia, saying that the planet has been called "the crown jewel of the galaxy", "the apex of democracy" and the "beating heart of galactic love". Additionally, there are subtle pieces of dialogue that emphasize the superiority of the asari.

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87 Mordin Solus discusses another possible explanation. He comments that despite the low sexual drive of salarians, he has found past sexual offers from asari intriguing: "Wonder why. Transspecies pheromones unlikely to work. Must be neurochemical." The topic is not explored further.
After the mission on Thessia, the player can overhear a conversation between Samantha Traynor and reporter Diana Allers. Traynor wants to know if Allers is doing a piece on the situation on Thessia, saying that "I'd think that story would be perfect for you. The hidden dark side of the most beautiful race in the galaxy?" James Vega also has something to add after this mission: "Sure would've liked to visit Thessia before the war. Imagine a whole world of those blue beauties. One of the wonders of the galaxy if you ask me." The Banshee is a Reaper-type enemy made from corrupted asari with latent or manifest Ardat-Yakshi potential (the dangerous genetic disorder which likely put a stigma on asari-asari relations).

After Thessia, Tali will lament the fate of the asari turned into banshees, saying that it was horrible to see such "beautiful people" turned into these creatures. The focus is once again on appearances. It is not primarily tragic that the asari are transformed into Reaper creatures as such, it is primarily tragic because they are so beautiful. The Reapers transform humans, turians, rachni, krogan and batarians into twisted creatures as well, but this is apparently not worth feeling sad about in light of these despoiled blue beauties.

Matriarch Aethyta's appearance is the only instance in which asari gender is a topic in Mass Effect 3. The player can ask about Liara's "paternity" when Aethyta reveals she is Liara's "father". Shepard asks/insinuates: "You mean you were her other mother, right?" to which Aethyta responds: "No, I didn't pop her out. Hell, she's never even met me." Shepard then goes: "Sorry. If you were human, you'd both be called mother, regardless of which one gave birth." Aethyta reprimands Shepard: "Well, I'm not human, am I? Anthropocentric bag of dicks." This dialogue path is strange considering it ignores what the universe has previously established about asari parthenogenesis—Shepard is supposed to know this. This is likely meant as a lesson for new players and at the same time a "slap on the wrist" reminder that contrary to what the game attempts to communicate, the asari are not human. Perhaps it is equally well a reminder to the game itself, considering how often it forgets the more radical queerness of the asari.

The asari mythos combines the rhetorical figures of myth Barthes refers to as "the privation of History", tautology and "the statement of fact" ([1957] 2009: 178-183). The privation is a process where something is stripped of its history, as if to appear eternal and/or natural. Tautology, as discussed earlier, creates a logic where the idea is posited as a universal truth that cannot be easily challenged ("that is how it has always been"). The statement of fact consists of articulating these myths as particular forms of "common sense". The asari are
often talked about in relation to them being female and thus the object of desire for the majority of the heterosexual galaxy. This is presented as an almost absolute truth, and while the player may not personally go along with it, the mythological discourses remain static and unchallengeable. This is the state of the world, a constant fact. There is perhaps no better example of this than what last-surviving Prothean companion Javik may reveal during the Citadel DLC: "Protheans did not 'date' primitives. We conquered them, enslaved them... We sometimes ate them, but we did not 'date' them. Unless they were asari. The things Liara does not know..." Even in ancient times where they were considered a food source the asari were the galaxy's sexual favorites. The asari are perhaps the series' true cathexis—but mostly as women for a supposedly straight galaxy.

**Mainstream Xenophilia**

Xenophilia, here understood as interspecies attraction and sexuality, is a recurring theme in science fiction (especially in non-mainstream literature), and the *Mass Effect* series contributes to this tradition. The asari begin as, among other things, an experiment in (safe) homosexuality and xenophilia. What is striking is how xenophilia is apparently much more mainstream and appealing than homosexuality in this series. In *Mass Effect*, Liara is the only alien available for romance, and since *Mass Effect 2* expands these options galactic culture itself also expands so that the asari are no longer the only xenophile fantasy (only the most dominant). *Mass Effect 2* attempts to broaden the range (and acceptance) of xenophilia, though it remains mostly in reference only. On Omega the player can purchase "Fornax", which is described as a "titillating alien magazine". Its front cover depicts a hanar in a suggestive pose, strategically utilizing its bioluminescence:

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88 Brian Stableford calls science fiction's flirtation with xenophilia "brief" and that it "never made the least dent in the xenophobia of the real world" (1996: 329). Mainstream science fiction has overall tended toward more predictable and safe themes, and xenophilia often involves rather humanoid aliens. More experimental and "alien" xenophilia, such as the ooloi, is mostly reserved for non-mainstream texts.
The magazine itself cannot be read or used; buying it only unlocks a codex entry which describes what Fornax is:

Launched in 2167, Fornax magazine described itself as "the galaxy's finest xenophilia." By its fifth year, Fornax became the first human magazine to offer full five-sensory stimulation, a previously-unaffordable magazine technology made profitable by the economy of scale. With a monthly publishing run of 127 million available in both in hard-copy and direct download, Fornax offers a range of alien models with a particular emphasis on the unisexual asari, although both genders of quarians, drell, batarians, and volus are regularly depicted. Specialty editions such as Genit-elcor and Krogasm service devoted but smaller markets.

Fornax is likely meant to be a mostly lighthearted and humorous reference, but it should not be thought of only as that. The codex text provides some points worthy of a closer inspection of how it stages xenophilia. Unsurprisingly, the magazine has a particular focus on the asari. The text specifically mentions "both genders of quarians, drell, batarians, and volus [...]", indicating that these species have specified differences between genders. More quarians (both male and female) are introduced in this game so this matter is clear. Perhaps here we have a solution to the mystery of why females of certain species do not appear in the games: they are preoccupied posing as models for Fornax. Fornax is remarkable in that it features both genders in a single publication, but whether this is to primarily perform heterosexual sex or if it allows for same-gender relations is not known. As a final note on this magazine: while the suggestive hanar on the front cover may be intended to spark grins and raise eyebrows among
players, the hanar are perhaps much closer to "true" science fiction gender and sexual experimentation, for example as seen with the ooloi of *Xenogenesis*, than the asari.

Xenophilia involving humans and species other than asari is not a recurring feature. Outside the possible romances for Shepard, references to such relationships and attractions are scarce. One notable example is found in the Eternity Bar on Illium, where a female quarian complains about her human ex-boyfriend to a turian male. The turian attempts to hit on the quarian. He makes a reference to a popular film called "Fleet and Flotilla", which is supposedly praised for its depiction of a quarian-turian relationship. After helping krogan companion Grunt in his loyalty mission, EDI alerts the party to the fact that Grunt has received several breeding requests from female krogan, and that there is also one breeding request for Shepard. Grunt laughs. It is unclear if female Shepard's breeding request comes from a female krogan. This is not pursued further and seems mostly to be a joke on Shepard's behalf, seeing as how humans and krogan cannot procreate with each other.89 Besides Fornax, which boasts a large but mostly invisible customer base, in *Mass Effect 2* the Normandy's yeoman Kelly Chambers is the only human that seems interested in aliens other than asari. Whenever Shepard has recruited a new alien companion, Kelly may provide various comments, such as wanting to hug Garrus, wondering what the skin of quarians feels like and whether she finds Thane scary or sexy. For other types of xenophilia there are asari-hanar porn games (plural!) sold in a human commercial zone unavailable to the player. A salarian games merchant calls the games "really nasty". Note how these porn games and Fornax are human creations. Xenophilia in general, however, revolves predominantly around the asari, and is surprisingly a very open topic compared to (explicit) homosexuality.90

EDI's embodiment in *Mass Effect 3* is an important point to discuss here, though it exists unevenly between xenophilia and heterosexualizing campaigns/myths. I have nevertheless chosen to discuss EDI as part of queerness and xenophilia. EDI, in addition to being conformed to existing patterns of heteronormativity, challenges another paradigm: the given-ness of romance and sexuality as an intrinsically organic venue. EDI and Joker's (possible)

89 Mordin may tell Shepard that a "subset of krogan sexual deviants enjoy salarian flexibility", suggesting that krogan (non-asari) interspecies relations is considered deviant (this occurs in the conversation where Mordin confronts Shepard about talking to him a lot, thinking Shepard is attracted to him. See below). In *Citadel* in *Mass Effect 3*, Wrex will tease Shepard about not wanting him as their "date" if he is not taken along on the casino mission, playing further on the notion that a krogan-human romantic/sexual relationship is not a serious consideration or plausible.

90 Xenophilia and interspecies dialogue feature more prominently in the romances. Please see next chapter.
relationship provides an exploration of a new type of xenophilia. This is apparently nothing revolutionary, however, considering how EDI is propositioned with increasing frequency on the Citadel. It is interesting to note the gendering of EDI. EDI becomes a "she" to Joker through working with him. The gendering works both to personalize EDI and to make her safe. Then she occupies a physical body which luckily for Joker is a highly feminized one that will further work to make her safe and desirable. A hypermasculine or androgynous body might have conjured up anxiety. While EDI opens up for visible "robosexuality" (though no sexual acts are shown), her character becomes pivotal to the game's discourse on female homosexuality. I will discuss this more closely in the next section.

**Toward Explicit Homosexuality**

The *Mass Effect* series has a rather strained relationship with homosexuality, at least up until *Mass Effect 3* and its openly-gay characters Samantha Traynor and Steve Cortez. Homosexuality is always present and implied by the existence of the asari, yet this is also tempered by the stigma the gameworld has introduced on asari-asari relations as well as the overall heterosexualizing campaigns. In *Mass Effect* homosexuality is only possibly explored through the asari and there is really no such thing as male homosexuality. *Mass Effect 2* effectively restricts representational possibilities by only offering heterosexual romance options. Yet, *Mass Effect 2* also signals the move to actually represent homosexuality in various minor settings, though this takes place through an almost exclusively dismissive register. One may only wonder how a game that allows humans to become romantically involved with other alien species has such a difficult time with homosexuality. *Mass Effect 3* moves beyond the dismissive register and attempts more open discourse and acceptance. Homosexuality, as we shall see, is perhaps one of the most alien aspects in the entire *Mass Effect* trilogy.

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91 Geth companion Legion is subjected to a similar gendering process. At the climax of the main mission "Priority: Rannoch", Legion will attempt to upload a specific code that will turn all geth into true AIs. If the player allows this, Legion will in its final moments refer to itself as an "I" instead of "we" ("we" as an avatar of the geth consensus). Back on the Normandy, EDI contemplates this phenomenon and says that Legion was a person in its last moments. Commenting on this, Joker says that: "Well, when the geth fleet helps to retake Earth, I guess we'll owe that to... him." Humanization means gendering. Notably, Joker is the one who genders, without opposition, the two main AIs of the series. Because Legion has a male voice and no emphasized feminine features like EDI, it is automatically a man.
Discomfort and Dismissal

The dismissive register introduced in *Mass Effect 2* consists of acknowledging the existence of (mostly implicit) homosexuality as something that can be used to underscore the severity or pathology of something, as if the prospect of homosexuality is something that adds more gravity to any situation. These are not really progressive explorations of homosexuality since it becomes a type of "spice" to flavor something. Such dismissive modes are already well known and well used in mainstream media. *Mass Effect 2* utilizes a varied combination of the discomfort and comfort strategies for its representations of homosexuality in the public gameworld, making homosexuality either implicitly part of some problem or merely a quirky reference.

The most easily accessed example occurs during Samara's loyalty mission, which involves tracking down and confronting her daughter Morinth. This quest combines a brief exploration of female homosexuality combined with the pathology of asari suffering from the dangerous genetic disease that discourages asari-asari reproduction. At the beginning of the quest, Shepard and Samara must investigate the apartment of Morinth's latest victim, a girl named Nef. Nef's video log reveals that she finally managed to get into Afterlife's VIP area, a success which ultimately becomes Nef's downfall: "Then the most beautiful asari starts dancing near me. She moves like water, form and volume, but shifting, changing. I'm in a trance. Then I'm dancing with her. Later, we went for skewers, and I'm supposed to see her again tomorrow." The next entry reads: "Am I a freak? Morinth is a girl like me, and she's definitely not human. Just… when we dance, and the Hallex is flowing through me… The way she looks at me – with a hunger, a longing… No one's ever looked at me like that. We kissed tonight." The final entry goes: "She's going to take me to her apartment tonight. Whatever happens, I want to be with her forever. She can sell my pieces. We can live somewhere glamorous, like the women in Vaenia, that vid Morinth likes. How did this happen to me? I'm just dumb trash from Omega." Nef seems surprised of her attraction to women, seeing as she not only emphasizes that Morinth is not a human, but also a girl like herself (a nod to the strange, but familiar qualities the asari simultaneously embody). The very thought of that seems surprising to Nef. It may not be that Nef is really attracted to women (or asari, for that matter), however, because Samara reveals that Morinth controls her victims through sheer will. It may be that Morinth is so powerful that she is able to entrance Nef and "create" desires in her. Samara may later reveal how Morinth once enthralled an entire village and made them bring her
young asari sacrifices. Then again, when Shepard attempts to seduce Morinth she does not attempt to control Shepard's mind until the very end, so this is not a clear matter. This is one of the few instances in which issues regarding homosexuality are (possibly) an explicit topic, although briefly and from a tragic point of view.

Morinth is a (sexual) predator, and if we think of this as an example of the discomfort strategy we have a reverse stereotype: pathologic homosexuality is usually represented through men, but here a woman assumes this role instead. This should not be considered only in the context of homosexuality, however, considering the asari have no specific or defined preferences. Morinth can be interpreted as an extreme version of the femme fatale of film noir, whose sexuality "remains threatening, fearsome, indeed potentially annihilating", a character type who is "marked by her monstrous threat to a 'civilized environment'" (Hirsch 1999: 188). The classic femme fatale represents fear about free and unrestrained female sexuality, and she is usually an explicit threat to the male hero. Morinth may represent a different fear. Morinth's genetic disorder grants her actual powers and while she may represent the darker sides of asari sexuality, she also embodies the possible dangers of asari-asari sexual relations. She thus represents the horrors of intraspecies homosexuality, at least to the asari. The Ardat-Yakshi\(^\text{92}\), as these asari are called, either become slaves to their faulty instincts or must spend their entire lives secluded in monasteries, isolated from the rest of galactic society. Additionally, Ardat-Yakshi are sterile and might thus symbolize the horror of homosexuality as denying reproduction. While this genetic disorder is extremely rare, it seems to forever haunt the asari as a reminder of what might happen if they would dare to mate with their own species—it could technically lead to the end of their own species, as well as the end of others.\(^\text{93}\)

More direct and outright dismissals of homosexuality occur with companion Jack. In conversation, Jack can make a small reference to having been intimate with both men and women. She thought that some former friends of her, Manara and her boyfriend, would help her out, but they only helped her into their bed. Jack, however, can only be romanced by a male Shepard. If female Shepard is friendly with her throughout the entire game Jack will ultimately say: "Been thinking. We've seen a lot of shit together now. And you're always coming to talk to me. It's just, I'm not really a girl's club kind of person. I like you, all right?"

\(^{92}\) Ardat-Yakshi means, according to Samara, "demon of the night winds" in an old asari dialect. 

\(^ {93}\) If the player assists Morinth instead of Samara, which leads to Samara's death and Morinth assuming her identity as a companion, the player can persuade Morinth after the game's final mission to join with Shepard. This kills Shepard and causes a "Critical Mission Failure" (game over).
That's a good place to stop." If the player attempts to speak to her again she will say that Shepard is just "pissing around". The player is not even allowed to express that they had or did not have any romantic interest in her; Jack simply assumes that they do and any further discussion on the topic is closed. While the assumption is an interesting break from default heterosexuality, it seems to serve mostly as a form of dismissal. This is perhaps connected to how Jack is often irrational and difficult to approach, though the lack of further dialogue on the matter signals that this is not something to be talked about.

Male homosexuality is also introduced anxiously, and the very first hint of it is through implied prison rape, which makes for anything but a progressive representation. During Jack's recruitment mission on the prison ship Purgatory, the player may interrogate a few prisoners in cells about life in the compound. A male "Prisoner 780" anxiously discloses that other denizens of the prison take "[y]our smokes, your clothes, your… pride. I haven't taken a shower in three months." This prisoner implies that he has been raped in the showers by other male prisoners. This is a real-life practice, a recurring media representation of examples of reality and pathologic homosexuality, and which has disturbingly been transferred into everyday consciousness in the "don't drop the soap" joke. Here it is used to emphasize the gritty nature of prison culture and the indifference of the mercenary caretakers, a problem which the player cannot do anything about. It is likely also used as an expected feature of prison culture. Male homosexuality is here used as something pathologic and this is a clear, yet subtle, example of the discomfort strategy.

A more complicated representation of male homosexuality requires the completion of the DLC Lair of the Shadow Broker, and is found by watching the various surveillance videos aboard the Shadow Broker ship. One clip shows Preitor Gavorn, a turian male tasked with keeping vorcha away from Afterlife on Omega, sitting on large bed and a human man walking in toward him. The clip abruptly ends there. The situation most likely indicates a secret sexual liaison. This is not only implied by the set-up in the video clip, but also by the secret surveillance context of it. The reason why this encounter is secret is not known. Is it because male homosexuality is being stigmatized? Is it because of the interspecies aspect? Is it because the humans and turians already have a strained relationship? Is it perhaps because the human works for a different faction than Gavorn? There may be multiple factors involved here. This affair is unlikely publicly known or open, otherwise there would have been little point in showing this scene as part of the Shadow Broker's hidden surveillance. Considering
that the player is allowed to romance multiple species and since there do not seem to be any overt cultural stigmas involved in interspecies relations, the focus here is likely on same-gender relationships. One likely interpretation is to take into account the gritty environments of Omega and its "flagship" Afterlife enterprise. The criminal haven does not come across as a sanctuary for male gay people or gay male expression. Additionally, Gavorn is required to maintain an aggressive and threatening masculine display in his work to keep the vorcha away (Gavorn only speaks a few lines about his work and Omega when talked to, so not much personal information is given). In the criminal Omega, Gavorn's solution might be to resort to cruising and secret random sexual encounters. So while gay men do exist in the gameworld, neither Omega nor the game caters to them.

Whereas queer sexuality is celebrated and promoted galaxy-wide in its female manifestations, male homosexuality is slapped with a notable stigma that all too well resonates with real-life imbalance between public and mainstream ideas about female versus male homosexuality. It seems that interspecies romantic and sexual relations are completely fine as long as they do not occur between two men. This example rests uneasily between a type of dismissal of male homosexuality and a genuine exploration of it. The former is possible because it occurs in a short video clip in a DLC, and is likely meant as a shock factor. The latter is possible because it fits into the context of Omega and its harsh heteronormative environment. This is further complicated by the fact that the game does not enable male homosexuality for the player, which suggests that this is a topic the game does not wish to deal with. A three-second clip of a prelude to sexual relations is as close as it gets. This clip is in striking contrast to another clip which shows female reporter Khalisah al-Jilani and an asari kissing deeply, which is something to secretly ogle.

**Quirky Sexuality**

There is a final possible reference to male homosexuality which carries a much more humorous and light-hearted tone than the previous examples. Salarian companion Mordin Solus may ask to have a small chat with Shepard late in the game if the player has not romanced anybody else: "Aware you have come by a great deal. Have had other species become attracted to me before. Awkward. Not interested." The player has a few replies available, ranging from stating that Shepard is not interested in Mordin, expressing surprise
that Mordin gets hit on, or thanking him for the heads up. Shepard will make a joking comment if the latter is chosen: "I appreciate you letting me down easy." Mordin says that he means no offense because salarians have very little sex drive, and that if he ever "intended to try human, would try you." This scene is identical for male and female Shepard. I find it difficult to assess the male Shepard scenario as an example of homosexuality since the entire scene is likely meant as a joke about Mordin's inability to read social cues. Shepard's various reactions also indicate this. Shepard can never communicate any explicit romantic interest in Mordin anyway, neither in the past nor in the present situation. Mordin's discourse is nevertheless interesting because his focus is on Shepard as a human, not as a man or a woman. I place it in this section because it is one of the very few examples in which same-gender sexual discourse between men may occur. After this conversation, however, the topic is not raised again.

*Mass Effect 2*'s more or less overt dealings with homosexuality can fall into the following representational modes: pathologic/problematic/traumatic (Morinth/Nef/Purgatory), erotic/gazing (Khalisah al-Jilani) restricted/repressed (Gavorn), dismissed (Jack) and humorous (Mordin). Homosexuality is not a happy story in any of these examples and serves more as "gritty" backdrops, deviances and jokes instead of as something that can also tell positive stories or be a functional, regular and visible part of the galaxy. Homosexuality's existence (or, certain representations of it) is acknowledged, but only briefly and extraordinarily. Perhaps it is to be expected in a game that only allows heterosexual romances, but it promotes conservatism instead of actively challenging tropes and pursuing change in this area. Instead, the game recycles stereotypes about homosexuality as traumatic, sexually violent, stigmatized, trivial and, possibly, quirky. This is highly contradictory in a rich and diverse universe with a penchant for a monogendered queer (but tamed) species that can mate with anyone. It is of course legitimate to explore darker sides of sexuality, but when this course steers sharply in one particular direction it may resemble more of a critique and dismissal of certain sexualities instead of genuine explorations and inquiries. And here the player is only given tools to go along with it or ignore it, never address or change it.
New Paradigms for Homosexuality

Each title in the Mass Effect trilogy seems to domesticate and familiarize that which was alien and other in its predecessor. In Mass Effect the asari were strange and required explanation. In Mass Effect 2 the asari were more or less average and ordinary whereas interspecies is a new hot and fun topic, and homosexuality is restricted to regressive representations. In Mass Effect 3 interspecies is also more or less "normal", and the reactionary/backlash representational modes for homosexuality are gone. Homosexuality is no longer prison rape references or quirks of character, and the representations on offer allow for much more progressive diversity than merely using homosexuality as gritty backdrop or perversion. With that said, the discourses on homosexuality made available in this game, both during general gameplay and the romances (see next chapter), reveal a contradictory relationship between treating (female) homosexuality as a sexuality in its own right and as a desirable or at least objectionable approach for the straight player base. Female homosexuality is made the subject of conversational topics, fantasies and fetishes. Male homosexuality, by comparison, is marked by a strange discursive silence. Female homosexuality becomes the privileged object of otherness, the one that exists "out there" for public enjoyment.

Exclusively Gay

Mass Effect 3 introduces the two first "exclusively gay" characters, Samantha Traynor and Steve Cortez, and this marks a significant change. Traynor, the communications specialist, and Steve, the shuttle pilot, are crew members, meaning that they serve aboard the Normandy and cannot be taken along as squad members on missions, yet they qualify as full-fledged romances. Traynor and Steve are involved to a lesser degree in the game's storyline than companions, but this interestingly also gives them a much more stable presence than companions the player can choose to take along. Aboard the Normandy, Traynor is located right next to Shepard's personal terminal and will often alert the player about new e-mails and sidequests. Steve, although located in the shuttle bay, is often present in scenes between missions where he transports Shepard and squad to their destination and provides information on the mission at hand. Thus, Traynor and Steve can be considered much less conditional than many companions. While this is an interesting way of offering gay characters a distinct
presence and visibility that may push against gay button logics, it is rather how their sexuality is communicated to the player that is the most interesting feature here.

Both Traynor and Steve reveal their sexuality in their introductory scenes/conversations, but it takes place through two different modes. Upon first meeting Traynor in an obligatory scene she will explain her role in retrofitting the Normandy and her current function as a data analyst aboard the ship. EDI (currently without a body) says over the intercom that Traynor is very capable, and EDI prefers that she remains on board. Traynor thanks EDI for the compliment, but is surprised that a virtual intelligence is capable of making requests. Shepard reveals that EDI is an AI and Traynor exclaims: "I knew it!" Then she apologizes to EDI "for all those times I talked about how… attractive you voice was…" Then she proceeds immediately to explain the ship's functions to Shepard. To clarify, Traynor feels it is necessary to apologize to EDI because virtual intelligences are simple functional programs whereas AIs have the ability to think and act on their own. Traynor realizes that EDI is not an "object", but a "subject". This is not, however, a mere recognition of the subjective dispositions of artificial intelligences. This dialogue (obviously) works as a way to tell the player that Traynor is interested in other women.

The revelation of Steve's sexuality proceeds in a different and more tragic manner. Unlike Traynor, Steve has no such obligatory introduction scene. During the first meeting, Steve explains his role as the Normandy's shuttle pilot and his dedication to his work. James Vega is exercising in the background and Steve makes a joke about this. James replies: "You know you love the show, Esteban", suggesting that Steve actually likes watching his friend exercise (and that James likes showing off). The player can ask for more information about Steve. Steve reveals that he is an only child and that he used to have a husband, but he was killed when the Collectors attacked their colony.94 Steve does not wish to speak more about it. The fact that Steve was married is a notable progressive recognition of gay marriage. Unlike Traynor, the information to learn about Steve being gay is optional. After completing missions, however, Traynor will eventually alert the player to check on Steve in the armory. He can be found crying while listening to a recording of his husband Robert urging him to flee and get to safety during the Collector attack. The recording is very emotional, and is a notable expression of male-male love discourse: "I love you, but I know you. Don't make me

94 The Collector attacks are part of the plot of Mass Effect 2.
an anchor. Promise me, Steve." He will mention losing his husband (in case the information was not obtained during the previous meeting) and explain how he died. Steve believes he has put Robert's death behind him, but he questions that notion. The player can support Steve empathically or more crudely. Steve's character arc is mostly focused on helping him overcome his grief over his late husband.

The sexuality of gay characters in media is often revealed at the outset, as if to clearly communicate that these characters represent something else. Is that the case with Traynor and Steve? In "Stereotyping", Richard Dyer asks the question: "Why, after all, is it felt so necessary to establish from the word go that a character is gay?" ([1984] 2012: 278) in response to this stereotypical practice and answers that it comes from one of the "prime mechanisms of gay stereotyping": the synecdoche, that of taking a part for the whole:

> It is felt necessary to establish a character's gayness, because that one aspect of her or his personality is held to give you, and explain, the rest of the personality. By signaling gayness from the character's first appearance, all the character's subsequent actions and words can be understood, explained, and explained away, as those of a gay person. ([1984] 2012: 278)\(^95\)

Dyer discusses this mechanism in relation to revealing sexuality through iconography, though what takes place with Traynor and Steve is through dialogue and not visual cues. Regardless of the revelatory code deployed, it is worth discussing this point because these gay characters are almost immediately revealed as gay. This does not apply to straight characters; straight characters do not announce their sexuality the moment they appear, though heterosexuality is usually taken for granted as default.

I recognize the problems that Dyer raises about stereotyping gay sexuality this way, but I will not argue here that this seems done in an attempt to make the sexuality of Traynor and Steve their only trait or something which is used to understand the entire character.\(^96\) Steve is allowed to speak of his former husband Robert, which ventures into hitherto uncharted territories for the series, and it also avoids treating homosexuality as an issue or as something that can be gay-buttoned away. Steve feels no shame about his sexuality. It could be argued, of course, that Steve does represent some stereotypical notions about depressed gay men (the

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\(^95\) I return to this topic in relation to Dorian Pavus in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. See chapter VIII.

\(^96\) In the romances, however, Traynor's sexuality seemingly becomes most of her character. See next chapter.
discomfort strategy). This depression comes from losing the man he loved, however, and not
from troubles with his sexuality. Thematizing this grief process may for example work against
negative ideas about same-gender relationships being frivolous or purely sexual. Gay men are
stereotypically represented with an "excessive sexuality" (Halberstam 1998: 114) and as being
hypersexual (Sender 2004: 200), and here is a representation that goes against this trope. traynor's reveal is trickier considering it plays on an erotic register, a register not really made
available to male homosexuality in these games. Whereas Steve's sexuality is revealed
through the familial and the established, Traynor proceeds directly to the erotic by
commenting on the attractiveness of EDI's voice, a comment she seemingly had to make in
front of Shepard/the player upon introducing herself. It risks venturing into treating female
homosexuality as "queer chic", which I will return to shortly. Revealing the sexuality of
Traynor and Steve early on might work to emphasize that these are characters that are
confident in their sexuality, and that this is nothing to be ashamed of or to be hidden away.
Such expressions can be welcome in a public gameworld which repeatedly posits male
heterosexual desire as the universal default desire. Traynor and Steve are technically
minorities in this universe, though Traynor is less of a minority than Steve since female
homosexuality/"hommo-sexuality" is already always "guaranteed" through the asari.

Female Homosexuality as Public Venture

It becomes increasingly clear that Mass Effect 3 has very discrepant representations of female
homosexuality and male homosexuality in the public gameworld, which also extend into the
romances. Homosexuality is generally coded as female in the galaxy, and it rarely occurs
without involving an asari. Two instances can be found on the Citadel. The player can
overhear a conversation between a human woman ("Wife") and her asari mistress. The wife
has cheated on her husband with this mistress and wants to leave him to begin a relationship
with her. The mistress clearly does not want a relationship, and the conversation ends on an
awkward note. Another conversation involves a female human marine who cannot get in
touch with her asari wife Neeota, who has likely been killed, and she is trying to secure their
daughter and send her away from the war. The asari clerk tells the marine: "We keep identity information on all permanent Citadel residents engaged in
formal relationships with asari. That way, should anyone require diplomatic aid, we can ensure prompt

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97 It is curious though that Steve will die in the game's final mission if the player does not help him with his grief,
suggesting that Steve succumbs to grief on his own and cannot possibly recover without the player's aid.
98 The asari clerk tells the marine: "We keep identity information on all permanent Citadel residents engaged in
formal relationships with asari. That way, should anyone require diplomatic aid, we can ensure prompt
marine's own family has disowned her for marrying Necota. It is unclear if marrying an asari or a woman was the issue, the game (once more) only implies rather than explicates. The Omega DLC, which focuses on helping asari crime boss Aria T'Loak retake Omega from Cerberus, introduces the series' first female turian, Nyreen Kandros, and it is revealed that she had a relationship with Aria in the past. Nyreen ultimately sacrifices herself, which sends Aria into a fit of rage on the enemies. These three examples are notable for representing/implying homosexuality in different ways, but all of them curiously have one thing in common (except asari): none of these situations end happily, which reproduces the tired mainstream trope where homosexuality seems more dystopic than utopian (Butler 2016: 55).

When female homosexuality is not doomed it is hypersexualized. Traynor's sexuality becomes the focus of a conversation during the party in the Citadel DLC. EDI asks Traynor about how she finds her voice attractive, much to Traynor's extreme chagrin. Here is an excerpt from their conversation:

EDI: On one occasion, you said that you wanted to, quote, pin my voice against the wall and run your tongue along its collarbone.
Traynor: Well, there's a context there that... you were talking about quantum entanglement, and... I didn't know you were an AI! Anyway, I was just looking. You know, stress of the retrofits, and...
EDI: Really? My diagnostics suggested you were genuinely aroused.
Traynor: You have diagnostics? Cerberus programmed you to check body language?
EDI: I get more reliable results measuring pupil dilation and readings of erogenous zones.
Traynor: Oh, good lord.

Shepard cuts in and says that EDI has a right to ask about what Traynor said:

EDI: I was very interested in Traynor's ability to develop feelings for what was, at the time, a bodiless voice.
Traynor: You are all terrible. EDI, I apologize for saying that I wanted to roll naked with your voice in satin sheets.
EDI: Oh, I was not offended. In fact, it was flattering.
Traynor: Even the part where I wanted to grab your voice by the hair and nibble my way down its back?
EDI: I do not in fact remember you saying that, Samantha.

The existence of such an official support system once more suggests that the asari are the galaxy's favorite species, and that other types of interspecies relationships are not as prioritized or officially sanctioned.

99 Lines where Tali attempts to derail the conversation have been removed.
EDI tells Traynor that she does not need to be embarrassed as sexual attraction is natural for organics, before continuing into another avenue: "And given your orientation and interest in synthetics…" Traynor wants to stop talking about it. EDI says that if Traynor is interested, she has a list of extranet sites involving romantic relationships between organics and synthetics. Traynor heavily protests, but ultimately asks EDI to send them her way. Tali ends the conversation with: "Ew."

EDI attempts a philosophical debate regarding Traynor's ability to develop sexual feelings for a "bodiless voice", although finding voices sexually attractive is neither a new nor especially strange phenomenon. Voices are often part of gendered and sexual identities and experiences. It is likely Traynor's explicit desire to do something physical to a voice that is the real essence here, and while that could have been interesting to explore, Traynor is so humiliated and the conversation becomes banter about Traynor's sexual fantasies. The scene is humorous as Traynor squirms while EDI acts in a calm and collected manner. Using EDI may be a strategic move for exploring this topic. As an AI, EDI is excused from understanding/following the norms and conventions of organics, and her inquiries can thus be viewed as an attempt to understand organic behavior and thought instead of raising sexual topics in inappropriate settings. The openness regarding sexuality displayed here shows the game's inclination to move beyond its own borders and to acknowledge active female sexuality, which is often ignored when the gaze/discourse is predominantly straight male.

It is important to investigate this phenomenon as a variation of mainstream media's "queer chic", which I introduced in chapter II. Queer chic refers to signifying (mostly female) queerness through a hypersexualized chic rather than as a separate or different sexuality, primarily for heterosexual purposes. Gill points to the repeated use of the "lipstick lesbian" theme, "in which two extraordinarily attractive, conventionally feminine, young women are shown kissing or touching or in a mutual embrace" (Gill 2007: 100). This is also referred to as the "hot lesbian", who "seems designed for male titillation" (Gill 2009: 152). This plays on "hommo-sexuality": female homosexuality for men. Sender points out that this does not mean that lesbians cannot enjoy such imagery, but that lesbians are often used in a mainstream

100 Mass Effect 2 attempts a similar strategy with Mordin Solus in relation to the interspecies romances. See next chapter.
context to appeal to heterosexual audiences (2004: 195), thus not making the representations for the sake of lesbian acknowledgement. By comparison, queer chic does not apply to men in the same manner (Gill 2009: 152). This is important to consider in the context of the Mass Effect universe since the series' male heterosexual bias is not only apparent through the heavy domestication and "hommo-sexualization" of the asari, but also in the ways female homosexuality is made the center of references and humorous banter while male homosexuality is forced to live mostly implicitly and in silence. The series has no corresponding gay male EDI/Traynor-type discussion or cathexis, for example.

Consider another example of female queer chic, also from the Citadel party: Miranda and Jack, who had an extremely tense relationship in Mass Effect 2, can be found insulting each other at one point. Shepard can join in with a joke: "Honestly, I think it might help if you two just kissed and got it over with." Miranda: "What?" Shepard: "I mean, this is all just sexual tension, right? Two powerful biotics, forceful personalities, confident in their sexuality…" Jack: "You are shitting me." Kasumi, if present, appears and says she is ready to record them: "I'm pretty sure there's a market for this." Afterwards, Jack and Miranda "make up". Jack says: "I still really hate you, but you have fantastic tits." Miranda replies: "All right, I can live with that." The banter here turns into jokes about girl-on-girl fantasies, an eroticized motif which enjoys dominance in heterosexual men's pornography (Sender 2004: 181). A significant premise of these girl-on-girl pornography setups is that the girls are not really lesbians, or, at least, they are not performing for a lesbian audience. This is a prime example of "hommo-sexuality" and here the game jokes and flirts with it.

I must raise a very important point about Mass Effect 3's public queer chic: it is not the same queer chic as the way it occurs in other media. In fact, this is more of a "queer tease" than anything since no physical actions occur. There is only (hyper)sexualized discourse, jokes and the fantasy of women sexually together, but it is actually never depicted in public. The game flirts with female homosexuality/"hommo-sexuality", yet it stays very conservative in what it actually depicts. Its public female homosexuality is closer to the liberal conservatism of mainstream television (Davis 2004): acknowledgement mostly through discourse rather than sexual actions. "Wife" and "Mistress" holding hands is actually as close as it gets outside of romances and flirtations.
When "Hommo-sexuality" Attacks

Female homosexuality and queerness may often be constructed to be heterosexually appealing and publicly acceptable, but they can easily become the source of male weirdness and anxiety if certain boundaries are transgressed. The nightclub Purgatory is the site for a conversation on some very interesting and very real, but not surprising, views on the combination of traditional/stereotypical masculinity and female queerness. The conversation is easy to miss and only available for a limited time. It takes place on the left after entering Purgatory and is between a female Alliance marine named Mel and her male colleague. Mel is very hyped about having shore leave and wants to know where the dancers are: "Not dancers, dumbass. 'Dancers'. I'm here for shore leave, not the Viennese Waltz. Oh come on, if there's an ass shaking somewhere on this station, you guys know where it is." Her male colleague seems hesitant, but Mel persists: "Why are the guys weirded out? Do they think I'm gonna want guys dancing? Cause I'm fine with asari. This one act I caught on Illium? She starts dressed out as a commando, but by the end… well, I never looked at a shotgun the same way again." The colleague says the rest of the guys are weirded out because Mel is a woman. Sarcastically, she replies: "What the hell? I'm a woman? Holy crap. I'm a woman! Where did these tits come from? Were they cloaked? Are they infiltrator tits? Could there be more of them hiding?" The colleague asks her to listen and says: "The guys came here to, you know, be guys. And they don't think they can do that with you here." Mel continues: "Why not? Wait, are you guys gonna get bare-assed? Do you need me to get bare-assed?" The colleague protests: "What? No! God, no." Mel: "Wait, is this 'cause you all secretly want to nail me? Well, secretly except for Richards. He wrote poetry." Colleague: "No, nobody wants to… poetry?" Mel: "Well, it didn't rhyme, but I think it was a prose poem. Or else he was hammered and messed up his punctuation." Colleague: "No, listen, it's not like that." Mel asks: "So am I one of the guys or not?" and the colleague answers that she is "totally one of the guys". Mel then finishes the exchange: "So buy me a damn drink, dumbass. And let's find some dancers. Perky ones."

The Mel situation illustrates the rather common notion of "guys' night out" where a group of men go out together for drinks and activities usually involving (aspirations of) hooking up with women. There are similar "girls' night out" concepts. Guys' night out is a site for "(heterosexual) men to be (heterosexual) men" and to establish and perform male homosocial

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101 The player cannot engage directly in this conversation, and it is episodic. The player must leave their vicinity and return to trigger the additional segments.
bonding. Mel invades the guys' night code because she is a woman—but Mel is not only a woman, she is one of the "guys" and thus not the type of woman they (except for Richards) would like to see in a romantic/sexual context. This is even apparent in the masculine form of her name, "Mel", which is likely an abbreviation of "Melanie" or something similar. This causes gender confusion among her colleagues. The problem is only apparent once they are off work. Mel shows an eagerness to join them in their traditional activities and she is very persistent. It is clear that Mel does not identify herself with the women these guys are romantically/sexually interested in, and she exhibits the same attitudes and desires as them, also directed toward the same things as them. She even temporarily denies a possible desire for men in order to fit in with the group. Despite this, Mel is still cast into a stereotypical "woman" category by her colleagues and seen as a block to their enjoyment. They cannot simply be "guys" around her, meaning that they also lock themselves into a fairly restricted category. When Mel calls out the male exclusivity by suggesting that they are planning to get "bare-assed", her male colleague heavily protests as if to immediately deny anything remotely homosexual or homoerotic about their "ritualistic" homosocial gathering, echoing Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's ([1985] 2016) discussions of the striking similarities between male homosocial and homosexual desire, which in heteronormative culture are constructed to appear as or reflect completely different phenomena. Mel's male colleagues are perhaps not threatened by her specifically, but in horror witness their own behavior replicated in the very pleasurable "object" it is directed toward, and that Mel as a woman is just as active and a desiring subject as them, and not for them, revealing to them the fleeting boundaries of gender roles. Mel manages to end the discussion seemingly in her favor, although any outcomes of this night out are never revealed. The possible changes in krogan society in *Mass Effect 3* might be interpreted as a metaphor for contemporary changes in gender roles in human societies, but the Mel situation is a rather direct confrontation with human culture, although in a very minor and easily-missed way.

**Male Homosocial/Homosexual Desire from Subtext to Text**

Male homosexuality outside romances occurs as a few minor references, so it is not completely erased from the public sphere. They all occur, however, in interactions with companions. One example of this is the above mention of James calling out "[y]ou know you love the show, Esteban" to Steve Cortez, referring to his own constant workout routine in
Steve's proximity. During *Citadel*, the player can invite James and Steve to Shepard's apartment. James and Steve want to watch a "biotiball" match between the Seattle Sorcerers and the asari team Usaru Maestros. James is an avid supporter of the Maestros and Steve calls him out on being more interested in their looks than their athletic prowess. James concedes, but he also reflects this back to Steve, asking "you telling me you don't got the hots for some of the Sorcerers?" Steve admits he is "guilty as charged". The heterosexual fancy is, unsurprisingly, asari. Male homosexuality is represented through a queer chic pattern of looking (at James and the human biotiball players), though it is commendable that it is straight James who encourages the expression of male homosexual desire here.

In another example, James discourages what may possibly be an expression of male homosexual desire since it involves him. There is one very interesting instance in which male Shepard seemingly flirts with James without the player's direct involvement, though it is vague. If the player maintains a friendly relationship with James, he can eventually be invited up to Shepard's cabin because he wants to discuss some private matters. At the end of the conversation he will mention that he needs to get back to the shuttle bay because things are too soft around Shepard's cabin for him. Shepard, regardless of gender, will then say: "The bed's a lot harder than it looks." If Shepard is male, James simply puts up his hands (as if to symbolically push him away) and says he will take Shepard's word for it. When a female Shepard says it, however, James will instead ask if she is flirting with him. Comparing these two incidents (including James' reactions) lends credibility to male Shepard attempting to flirt with James. This male gay flirting is by itself unique for the series, but also because it occurs without the player choosing it. It is unclear if Shepard intends it as a flirt or as a joke to embarrass James, though, seeing as how male Shepard and James develop a more brotherly relationship and female Shepard seemingly always knows that James will not pursue anything serious with his flirting. Still, it deserves to be included as male Shepard and James' relationship has a slight homoerotic subtext. The entire issue with the bed is dropped almost as soon as it is brought up, however, and never mentioned again. This subtext cannot become text.
In a final and rather curious example, the subtext actually becomes text. It concerns Kaidan and technically belongs to his romance path, but it is notable because it occurs without explicitly notifying the player through the dialogue wheel (similarly to the conversation with James). It is a conditional scenario and requires that the player purchases the Peruvian Whiskey gift item at the hospital shop, which Shepard will give to Kaidan when they meet. Catching up with Kaidan in the hospital enables the player to ask about his biotic implants, and here a male Shepard may vaguely flirt with Kaidan. The dialogue wheel does not indicate that this is a flirt. Kaidan says that his biotics are stronger than ever, thinking that some things may get better with age. Shepard replies that maybe it is Kaidan that has gotten better with age, not his powers, which prompts a surprised reaction from Kaidan: "Are you flirting with me, Commander? Wait, wait! Don't tell me. Let me live in the illusion." There is no follow-up dialogue available here, so the game shuts off any possible further explorations of this topic at this point. Without buying the gift item, Shepard actually also tells Kaidan that he has gotten better with age. In this scenario Kaidan simply tells Shepard that he has gotten more experience and is a better soldier now, so Shepard's comment is only interpreted as a flirt if the gift is bought. Buying Kaidan a gift is not a commitment to anything, but it is a prelude to a territory hitherto unexplored by the series.

Kaidan makes a pass at the player in a later scene. In the crew lounge he greets Shepard rather longingly with a "Hey. There you are." and Shepard replies: "Are you flirting with me?" Kaidan smiles and responds: "If you have to ask, I'm clearly out of practice. When we've got time, you'll have to let me practice…" This occurs for both male and female Shepard, but that it actually occurs for a male Shepard is notable. The exchange happens automatically so that
the player is notified that this friendship might head a certain way if they press on. This scene is not as vague as the "let me live in the illusion" flirt at the hospital or the "the bed is harder than it looks" with James, and here it is clear that the game sets up that male Shepard can indicate an explicit interest in men as well, or, at least, not freak out when the context may be more than homosocial. The conversation once more quickly derails from the current topic before becoming serious, though. While the game sets up incentives for a possible romance on its own, and likely attempts to push the boundaries of previous representational practices, it makes the player character's involvement simultaneously both direct and vague. The "boys will be boys" Shepard is nevertheless a thing of the past, and with *Mass Effect 3* the series has clearly begun stepping into the future. Now it is time to leave the public gameworld behind and travel into the private gameworld of romances. There are many more exciting developments in store.

**Summary**

In this chapter I have analyzed and discussed the representational practices of the public gameworld of the *Mass Effect* series. I have looked closely at assumptions made about the player, initially beginning as a "default heterosexuality", and how the public gameworld generally caters to a straight male cathexis through various heterosexualizing campaigns such as sexualized and objectified women, the heterosexuality of the asari and the often knowing and ironic discourses the series adopts about its own practices. The series continually expands its queer representations, for example by acknowledging and enabling xenophilia. Homosexuality is off to a rather rocky start, especially with the dismissive representational modes in *Mass Effect 2*, but *Mass Effect 3* moves significantly toward more progressive representations of homosexuality that avoid the anxiety of its predecessor.

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102 When the actual romance locking scene occurs, however, it is as though these flirts have never happened. See next chapter.
Chapter VI: Romances Among the Stars

Romance in the *Mass Effect* series is a central optional feature where the player can build deeper emotional and sexual relationships with certain companions. Romances thus serve as more specialized spheres for exploring and representing homosexuality and gender, and here I will investigate the representational strategies of the more private and personal gameworld. Romances can add personal depth and customization to the gameplay experience. They usually follow the structure of the main quests by weaving in a love story, or possibly a heartbreak story, amidst all the grand galactic conflicts. Homosexuality is represented much more explicitly and seriously both through dialogue and action in these scenarios than during general gameplay. Unlike much of the public gameworld discussed in the previous chapter, however, romances are wholly conditional and the manifested contents and representations can be highly dependent upon player choices and activations. Protagonist gender will in some cases considerably change the available representations of homosexuality. The player may befriend all companions, but romances usually provide additional character developments and interactions unavailable to platonic friendships. Romances, since they are conditional, may also provide an arena to represent homosexuality in terms that are not so readily articulated in mainstream media. Because romances can be highly personal choices which the player must actively pursue, they may offer a separate arena to challenge the mainstream tropes and player assumptions expressed in the overall gameworlds. It does not, however, mean that they do so. Representations of homosexuality predominantly through romances are also at the crux of the gay button problematic, though this should not mean that the romance feature in itself (both here and in other games that include it) is something negative or regressive. On the contrary, romances can be a rather engaging game-specific feature.

My discussion here is primarily restricted to the same-gender romances, but I will draw on some of the opposite-gender romances of particular relevance to the current investigation. The structure in this chapter follows the representational developments of the series, focused around three main areas. I begin with discussing Liara T'Soni in *Mass Effect* as an initial exploration of homosexuality and queerness. I will then continue with *Mass Effect 2*'s exclusively heterosexual romances and discuss the new focus on interspecies relationships as a form of (safe) heterosexual queerness and as possible metaphors and subtextual acknowledgements of non-normative sexual practices. In the final area I will investigate *Mass
*Effect 3*'s return to explicit homosexuality. This game introduces male homosexuality in romance for the first time in the series. I will look specifically at the enabled conversational topics and physical acts and connect them with the discussions in the previous chapter.

In the previous chapter I discussed the public gameworld as particularly inclined toward heterosexuality, heteronormativity and a predominant (hyper)sexualization of female characters. Homosexuality is rarely represented, and it is mostly female homosexuality that receives discursive and sexual exposure. I argued that the game series is mostly targeted to a heterosexual male player while acknowledging some "other" possibilities now and then, and this pattern can be found again in the available romances and flirtations. A male Shepard has a total of eleven available opposite-gender romances and flirtations. By comparison, a female Shepard has six. The issue becomes much more critical if we look at same-gender options. A male Shepard only gets two, while a female Shepard can choose between eight different romances and flirtations (though there are more brief flirtations than romances). This reflects several of the issues I discussed in the previous chapter about the discrepancy between female and male homosexuality, where the former is seen as much more representable, acceptable and "likely"/"likeable" than the latter. Curiously, these games clearly have a much easier time representing interspecies romances than homosexual (human) romances, which is something I will examine more closely in this chapter. While the amount of available same-gender romances is low compared to opposite-gender romances, they nevertheless contribute to valuable gender and sexual diversity which simultaneously complicates and confirms many of the same ideas found in the public gameworlds.

"You're female!/an alien!": Queerness and Sameness

Dr. Liara T'Soni, Shepard's asari companion, is the first queer romance option of the *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* series, and the only queer romance option in *Mass Effect*. As I pointed out in the previous chapter, the asari are not technically women, and Steven Holmes argues that the Liara-Shepard relationship thus "pushes the boundaries of coherent sexuality" (2016: 126). In one sense it does since the asari always have an inherent queer aspect, but nevertheless the game invests much effort in stabilizing the asari as female and making the incoherent rather coherent. I will regard this relationship as an example of heterosexuality/homosexuality depending on the context (while remaining aware of the
perpetual definitional difficulty). Both male and female Shepard can flirt with and romance Liara, and while the romance dialogues and scenes are mostly the same in both instances, the possible discourses about homosexuality/queerness differ significantly depending on Shepard's gender. It will even engender discourses that attempt to heteronormize not only Liara in different ways, but also Shepard (and, implicitly, the player). Liara can initially be considered an embodiment of the intention of "asari as love interests for the player". In the first game she can be the player's direct fulfilment of all the investment put into the discourse about asari sexuality, much of which comes from Liara herself. Liara is the first alien encountered for serious romantic and sexual relations. The alien encounter in science fiction, Carl D. Malmgren argues, "inevitably broaches the question of the Self and Other" and generally "the reader recuperates this type of fiction by comparing human and alien entities, trying to understand what it means to be human" (1993: 15). What then may it mean to enter into a relationship with an asari, a member of a species that is considerably straightened out despite its possible radical queerness? In this context, as we shall see, homosexuality and queerness are mostly contained in safe harbors, and the domestication of otherness proceeds differently for women and men.

Liara is quite a different asari from the ones the player has likely already encountered prior to her recruitment, such as the dancers of Chora's Den, the Consort, and the scenes with Benezia's bosom. Liara, an archaeologist and an expert on the Protheans, is rather shy and unused to dealing with humans, and she is embarrassed to admit she is only 106 years old (the average asari lifespan is around 1000 years). Her asari physiology becomes a plot-specific feature as she is required to join minds and "embrace eternity" with Shepard in order to interpret the Prothean vision to deduce where they need to go to stop Saren. Liara is also a sharp contrast to the "ordinariness" of the human romance options Kaidan and Ashley, and she is distinctly more conventionally feminine than the self-proclaimed military tomboy Ashley. It is important to note that Liara is a privileged character in all three games. She is the only companion a player can have a romance with throughout all three games. Liara performs vital narrative functions both on-screen and off-screen, and she is the only original companion that cannot die until possibly the last moments of Mass Effect 3. She even features as a point of discussion in the other romances in Mass Effect, and she gets her very own DLC in Mass Effect.

103 The player must join consciousness with Liara up to two times depending on the order the main quests are completed in. Coupled with Shiala's obligatory joining at the conclusion of the Feros main quest, the player may "embrace eternity" three times during a regular playthrough. Samara in Mass Effect 2 may also call out "embrace eternity!" when she uses one of her biotic abilities on an enemy.
**Effect 2.** Liara can be considered a, if not the, "canon" romance option (insofar as it is possible to speak of such a thing here) due to her significant involvement and that this romance has the most scenes and dialogues of them all when all three games are considered.

Liara is initially a possible "interactive" manifestation of the vast cathexis invested in the asari. The world speaks of their inherent mystery and with Liara the player gets to partake directly in the fantasy.\(^{104}\) As mentioned previously, Liara acts as an asari ambassador to the player and provides much insight into their culture, gender and sexuality. Liara is quite shy and easily embarrassed when speaking with Shepard, as shown here when she finds Shepard very fascinating for being touched by Prothean technology:

Shepard: Sounds like you want to dissect me in a lab somewhere.
Liara: What? No! I did not mean to insinuate—Ah, I never meant to offend you, Shepard. I only meant you would be an interesting specimen for in-depth study. No—that's even worse!
Shepard: ["Relax"-option] Calm down Liara, I was only joking.
Liara: Joking? Oh, by the Goddess! How could I be so dense? You must think I am a complete and utter fool. Now you know why I prefer to spend my time in the field with data disks and computers. I always seem to say something embarrassing around other people. Please… just pretend this conversation never happened.

Liara also represents a reversal of the asari fascination: she is deeply interested in humanity and finds it very romantic and exciting. Early on, she tells Shepard: "You humans are creatures of action. You pursue your goals with an almost indomitable determination. It is an admirable trait, but also an intimidating one." She quickly becomes flirty with Shepard if the player remains friendly toward her, stating that there is something compelling about Shepard. She reveals that she was initially interested in Shepard because of the Prothean beacon, but that her interest has grown beyond that: "You intrigue me, Shepard. But I was not sure if it was appropriate to act on my feelings." Liara's romance dialogues are much more open and direct than the ones involving Kaidan and Ashley. Kaidan and Ashley are more reserved toward Shepard because of military regulations against fraternization. Liara is unconstrained by these regulations and thus she is also more intense and upfront in her dialogue, though she is regularly embarrassed, as if to not come on too strong. This is likely a conscious effort to

\(^{104}\) Sex with the Consort Sha'ira, which is available prior to meeting Liara, is seemingly just sexual intercourse and not the fabled asari joining/melding.
emphasize Liara's appeal over the two other "modest" romances. Pursuing Liara will ultimately trigger a conversation in which her difference becomes a possible point of concern.

"Difference" is ambivalent, and it can be "both positive and negative", argues Stuart Hall (2013: 228). Liara is a distinct queer and alien presence, and thus "different", and this enables gender-specific issues both in her own romance path and in conversations with Kaidan and Ashley. Romancing Liara, since she is an alien, can be considered queer regardless of Shepard's gender considering how this relationship breaks from a human-human norm. If we consider the Liara romance as a way to play queer regardless of protagonist gender, then it is helpful to consider Stephen Greer's argument in his analysis of Fable and Dragon Age that "the possibilities of 'playing queer' are also predicated on a logic of sameness: that the potential for non-heterosexual identification or role play is primarily constructed and validated on the same terms as playing straight" (2013: 5). For the current purpose I would like to use this point to argue how "playing queer" with Liara is not only validated on the same terms as playing straight, but in fact is a way of playing straight, at least when considering the enabled discourses. The difference/otherness manifested in romantic and sexual possibilities with Liara posits unique challenges to male and female Shepard. When Liara eventually indicates her romantic feelings for Shepard, the player may address her "difference" directly through the replies "You're female!" (female Shepard) or "You're an alien!" (male Shepard), signifying that difference is something that must be engaged with in conversation through a concerned mode. These are wildly different ways of handling (and dismissing) both the same-gender and interspecies aspects of romance. Here we can already see that a male Shepard is focused on Liara being an alien, while female Shepard seems to ignore or not care about that and proceeds directly to the gender aspect. In a way, both topics are nevertheless handled in each instance, and they speak a lot about the gendered assumptions about Shepard/the player through prime examples of player-pursuable heterosexualizing campaigns.

Female Shepard's "You're female!" discourse is the more bizarre of the two in this particular context. In this option Shepard says: "You want a relationship with me? Even though we're both women?" Over 150 years into the future and the concept of a relationship between two women seems surprising or rather unthinkable, as though the entire human species has been

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105 I argue that this also applies to the interspecies romances in Mass Effect 2, despite their exclusively heterosexual premise. See below.
exclusively heterosexual before Shepard meets Liara. This point is made even more ludicrous if the player had sex with the Consort before this exchange, where this topic was of no concern at all. The notion of homosexuality is quickly dispelled (or, attempted to be dispelled) when Liara responds that asari are monogendered (which the player may already know from previous conversations) and that "male" and "female" have no meaning to them. They do, however, "have maternal instincts. So perhaps we would fill what you consider a female role. I'm sorry if this is awkward for you, Shepard. I'm only trying to be honest. I feel as if we share some type of... connection." While this serves to reinforce the female gendering of the monogendered asari, it takes on another possible function here. It is as though Liara's speech, while being delivered to a female Shepard, is directed at a male player. Liara specifically positions herself as the "female role" in the relationship, thus reserving the "male"/"active" role for the player. It negates the possibility that female Shepard can assume this "female role" and that there can only be one such role. It implies that the game is addressing a male player playing as female Shepard or that because female Shepard is a military commander she is automatically the butch or masculine part. This entire (brief) exchange also builds upon the stereotypical heteronormative view that each relationship has a man and a woman, and that these two have special roles and functions in that relationship. Effectively, character dichotomy, the oft-believed "natural" trait differences in men and women (Connell and Pearse 2015: 42), is proposed here. Liara thus poses no threat to any established norms, despite the overhanging queerness of the asari. Liara effectively heteronormalizes herself.

By contrast, male Shepard's "You're an alien!" option creates a different and more overt sexual discourse. Shepard says: "How can you and I have a relationship? We're not even the same species." Liara calmly reassures Shepard that "[a]sari and human are physiologically compatible in most ways, Commander. Of course a relationship must involve more than mere... physical contact. There must also be an emotional and spiritual connection between us. Our species may be different, but there are many things we could share." In this scenario Liara jumps right to the "physiologically compatible in most ways" aspect, which the player has likely already realized considering how much Liara looks like a human woman. This is a euphemistic way of telling Shepard/the player that they can enjoy "normal" penetrative intercourse. The phallus is not threatened by redundancy or the asari's non-male origins. The explicit gender aspect is gone and there is no need to dispel (anxieties about) homosexuality and reassure Shepard about heteronormative relationship roles since homosexuality is not a "threat" in this context. It is basically taken for granted that Liara is a woman, which is in
accordance with how the series generally treats the asari. Liara is also quick to emphasize that she wants an emotional relationship, but strangely she assures Shepard/the player that their sexual premises are valid first. Liara's speech to male Shepard also refers more to notions of romantic love ("emotional" and "spiritual"), while with a female Shepard it is more tentative (there is "some type of… connection"), as if Liara herself is unsure about a woman-woman relationship, whereas she has no second thoughts about a man-woman relationship. Perhaps Liara is unsure about human homosexuality. If not, her doubts might raise rather interesting implications about the assumed asari pansexuality. After these possible brief interventions, however, any such topic is never addressed in romance dialogue again and the script is mainly gender neutral for the rest of this game and the two subsequent titles.

Note that the player does not need to choose these options, so these dialogues may never be realized (though constant facts seem to be expressed in them). Nevertheless, their existence speaks a lot about the gendered and sexual assumptions of this game, much like the heterocentric public gameworld. Liara is clearly this game's spectacle, one which represents both a radical otherness and sameness, and such representations must seemingly come with safety measures. Addressing Liara's difference in conversation is not necessarily problematic, but the purpose of its invocation is. Greer, discussing bisexuality in Dragon Age II, argues that the sexuality of the romance characters is "a response relative to the player's active choices. Sexuality, then, appears primarily as a reflection of the player character's own performed desire" (2013: 14). Liara's difference is here presented as a possible obstacle, one which may need to be adjusted to normalcy. Liara reassures the player that nothing outside the norm is really taking place; the player assumption here seems to prioritize the need to assimilate rather than differentiate. Difference must disappear. Instead of being genuine explorations into what it may mean to be attracted to another species/another woman and/or diegetic challenges to that (if any), the discourse serves more to reassure players that they are romancing an average, ordinary woman. I must emphasize the foundation of these supposed reassurances which takes the form of "compatible physiology" and "maternal instincts": biology. Biology is invoked in both instances to reassure the player that they are not moving out of any safe zone, and that Liara is a woman like any other. In both cases, the player is seemingly assumed to be male or the "masculine" part, reinforcing both a default male player and heteronormative relationship roles.

106 I discuss this topic in its original context in chapter IX.
These gender-specific addresses are constructed and supported in a similar manner when Kaidan and Ashley ask about Shepard and Liara. With Kaidan the same-gender aspect is emphasized while with Ashley the alien aspect takes precedence. It is very easy to trigger "jealousy dialogues" in this game; simply being polite to the companion may easily lead them into thinking Shepard is interested in them. Thus, the companions may use Liara as a way of defining their own relationship with Shepard. For example, in an early conversation with Kaidan the player can "claim" Liara, telling him "[j]ust remember Lieutenant. I saw her first." Kaidan then replies: "They do say asari are open to that sort of thing. Ma'am." "That sort of thing" is most likely homosexuality in a vaguely articulated sense rather than a reference to interspecies relations. If Shepard is male and tells Kaidan that he saw Liara first Kaidan merely adds "[o]nly by two seconds", indicating that the heterosexual pairing is completely ordinary. Comparing these two scenarios reveals the grand assumption that homosexuality is an asari "sort of thing" in this game, which implies that other alien species, and possibly even humanity, are not generally open to homosexuality.

If we compare this situation (Shepard claiming Liara as an object of desire) with the actual flirting with Liara (realization of desire) we find a strange incoherency. In this situation the player can explicitly announce that they plan to pursue Liara romantically/sexually, but in the particular flirting they can bring up the species/gender issue depending on Shepard's gender, as if the first conversation with Kaidan about this issue never takes place. Played out in this particular scenario, Shepard can go from "I'm pursuing Liara!" to "What? Liara wants a relationship with me? But she's…!" In another conversation, Kaidan may apologize for addressing female Shepard informally and direct the topic to Shepard and Liara: "Maybe I got a bad signal. I mean if you're a—Maybe there's someone else you'd rather confide in. Ma'am." The neutral reply enables a similar reaction: "I, uh, I don't want to step on anyone else's toes, especially if you're a—uh, if I have misread your interests." Kaidan likely attempts to say "lesbian" or something similar here, but homosexuality cannot be named. Homosexuality is never named as such in any of these games, and Kaidan's "if you're a—" is actually the closest acknowledgement of the fact that a word such as "lesbian" exists. Kaidan adds that Liara is "a very interesting lady. Not to my, uh, tastes. But I never claimed to be big on alien culture." The discourse plays back on the interspecies aspect, though once more the topic is laid to rest almost as soon as it appears.

107 The *Dragon Age* series uses "that" and "such things" to refer to homosexuality. See chapter VIII and IX.
Ashley, on the other hand, pursues the alien aspect with male Shepard. She reveals that rumors say Shepard has a thing for Liara: "I could understand why. The crew's off-limits with the regs against fraternization, and at least she looks like a woman." Ashley invokes the grand assumption that Shepard is heterosexual (and in this game there is no other romantic option for him anyway). Ashley is the only one who seems to not take for granted that Liara is a woman, though it is used here in a demeaning manner. This also harmonizes with the "You're an alien!" discourse male Shepard can trigger with Liara. Despite the somewhat negative tone here, Ashley's comment also works to excuse the alien aspects of Liara by once more positing her in the "woman" category. "At least she looks like a woman" is also another way of saying "you are (still) straight", so if it is somewhat queer it is nevertheless within safe boundaries.

Pursuing flirts with both available companions will trigger a love triangle scene where Liara's female and alien aspects are addressed and domesticized once more. The love triangle scene between Kaidan, Liara and Shepard is particularly interesting. Kaidan is confused about where he stands and Liara, while not familiar with human relationships, says she understands the concept of jealousy. Kaidan says that he is not jealous but that he is confused: "I thought we had something, ma'am. I, I didn't realize that you were a... well, that you prefer other women." The unnamable quality of homosexuality appears once more, but this time Kaidan is allowed to be unusually direct toward Shepard by outright stating that she prefers other women. The direct reference to homosexuality is quickly downplayed as Liara reacts with "I'm not technically a woman, Lieutenant. My species only has one gender." Biology attempts to save the day and Kaidan replies: "Yeah, but you look...", trapped in the very same discourse about the asari that the rest of the galaxy, including the asari themselves, perpetuates.

The Liara and Ashley love triangle scene also follows the logic of otherness that surrounds Liara in the Ashley and Kaidan romances. When Liara says she understands the concept of jealousy, Ashley exclaims: "Jealous? Of you? You're not even our species!" Here Liara is allowed to take a different, more offensive stance than the "asari are monogendered" argument: "Perhaps that is why you feel threatened. I am a rival unlike anyone you've faced before. Hostility is a common reaction to the unfamiliar." Ashley gets upset and threatens...
Liara with physical violence. In both love triangle scenes the player must choose between the two. If the player opts for keeping both, only Liara accepts to remain Shepard's romance—perhaps because she ultimately senses the "fated" epic love of their romantic discourse, and she does not give up that easily.

Liara is presented as an antithesis to the rumored asari promiscuity, ultimately revealing she is a virgin, at least in terms of true asari melding. When Liara reveals that asari do no enter lightly into a union and that it can be a truly life-changing event, the player can signal their interest in a union with Liara. Once more, Liara becomes nervous and flustered:

No! Oh, no! Uh, I am not very good at this, am I? I'm sorry, Shepard. I am trying to explain why I have been so... reserved. The union is more than just sex. It is the life-blood of my species, the way we asari evolve and grow as a society. That is why I have never... uh, I mean, that is why we must choose our partners with great care.

This sets up the possibility of the player/Shepard being Liara's "first". Being someone's first sexual experience is often considered an achievement. This could be considered a double jackpot in terms of sexual fantasy insofar that Liara has not only never experienced sex, but she has not experienced true asari sexual joining either. Liara is twice as pure and the player might become Liara's first in a dual sense, then, emphasizing a significant investment of cathexis in the Liara romance/fantasy.

**Embracing Eternity**

Triggering *Mass Effect*'s final mission leads to the climax of the romance: the sex scene. This scene is similar for all three companions, but the Liara romance has a slightly different sex scene due to the fabled asari union. Truly embracing eternity is something other than sex, and here the mystery is finally solved. Shepard sits in their private quarters while on their way to the final mission. Liara walks in and asks to speak with Shepard. Shepard says they have been thinking about Liara, and Liara has been thinking about Shepard as well, in addition to what they are currently going to face. Liara is concerned and says she must tell Shepard

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108 There is a Renegade option here called "Catfight!" causing Shepard to grin and chauvinistically say "I love it when women fight over me." This is likely meant to be humorous, but it also harmonizes with the overall male-centric universe of the game. Ashley denies the possibility of that fantasy happening.

109 The player is able to turn down sex with all companions.
something in case they fail: "These could be our last moments together. Our last chance to show each other how we feel. I want this to be special." If the player accepts to let their "bodies and minds unite", Liara grabs and kisses Shepard, and the sex scene/union will start. The scene mostly features shots of Liara's body, mixing between blurry images, close-ups and an overall red/pink aura to signify the asari union.\footnote{The Liara sex scene in Mass Effect 3 is also notably different from the sex scenes with the human companions. The camera uses strategic angles and shots to avoid showing Liara's breasts and behind. Blue energy emanates from Liara as she crawls on top of Shepard. They kiss and the camera uses close-up shots. The room around them then seems to "disappear" and they are seen floating through the ether/space itself while making love, inviting the player into the asari joining. Blue energy embraces them as they journey through "eternity".}

Tanya Krzywinska calls the presentation of the sexual encounter between male Shepard and Liara a "touching expression of intimacy and intensity. In many ways, this pair conforms to the cinema equivalent of the 'proper couple', except of course this is cross-species sex", and notes that the female Shepard and Liara sex scene is also intimate and passionate "even if a classic pornographic trope designed mainly for male consumption" (2012: 148). We may thus regard this scene as another possible example of "hommo-sexuality": female homosexuality primarily for heterosexual men. This is already supported by the possible dialogue choices and assumptions leading up to this scene. Krzywinska contrasts this with the sex scene between Ashley and male Shepard, which to Krzywinska is presented "in terms of fun and}
playfulness (with a hint of S-M style power play), a pastime framed as affectionate but not seemingly an expression of deep romantic love or passion" (2012: 148).\footnote{This "hint of S-M style power play" is likely from Ashley teasing Shepard about making her come over to him and then pulling him toward her to kiss him. Liara is the "kiss initiator" in both instances. Kaidan is more careful, and Shepard is the one who initiates kissing here.} The Liara flirt/romantic discourse is completely different due to her not being military personnel and as such it can avoid the ranks-and-regulations discourse and the promises of "once this is over" with Ashley and Kaidan. That said, I will not argue that the Kaidan and Ashley romances are frivolous or that sex is merely a pastime with/for them. There is also the sense of love and affection in these romances, yet with Liara it is made much more explicit throughout the game.

The three different but fairly similar sex scenes are also notable in that they, regardless of the romance companion, center the focus on the female body and limit exposure of the male body, suggesting male gaze logic even in the private realm. In all three versions a female partner is seen climbing on top of and over to her partner as the camera glides alongside her naked body. The torso and face of the male partner are briefly seen before the scene fades. In the Ashley and Liara scenarios the romance companion's body is emphasized, but in the female Shepard and Kaidan scenario, however, Shepard's body becomes the center of attention. The male body cannot be shown in an especially erotic context here, and instead of seeing the romance option the player is instead served their own character as the erotic focus. Perhaps this is not surprising considering that this game is the precursor to Miranda's "ass effect", but this is clearly an attempt to avoid any sexualization of men, even in private erotic contexts. A female player, for example, is in this scenario still playing in a world structured from the vantage point of an assumed straight male and the heteroideology sneaks itself into private spheres and restricts even the heterosexual scenario.

The continuation of the Liara romance added in the Mass Effect 2 DLC Lair of the Shadow Broker sheds more light on the series' approach to sexuality and otherness, both in how it manages to promote female homosexuality as a straight erotic venture ("hommo-sexuality") and in its queering of heterosexual relationships. Liara originally appears during the main game as an information broker on Illium, and if the player has imported a previous romance there is the possibility of continuing it in the DLC. Thus, some possibility for same-gender romance in the game was added later. Liara has grown as a character and is not as shy and
apologizing as before. Throughout the DLC the player can reaffirm their feelings for Liara and share some emotional moments, and invite her onboard the Normandy afterwards.\textsuperscript{112}

Liara's visit to the Normandy triggers more romance interactions and discourses that might have been unheard of in the previous game, such as the possibility of two women (or a (hu)man and an alien) getting married and having children. The scene also plays immediately on the general fascination with the asari. Liara walks into Shepard's cabin wearing a cocktail dress. She is happy to be back (temporarily) on the Normandy and mentions speaking with Joker again. Joker, as discussed previously, is the Normandy's very heterosexual pilot. In all three versions of the scene Joker will provide an asari-specific sexual reference. If Shepard is female and in a romance with Liara, Liara will add that "[Joker] did ask if you and I would be acting out scenes from some vid called "Vaenia", to which Shepard replies "[o]f course he did" and scratches her head. "Vaenia" is a film featuring "glamorous women", referenced during Samara's loyalty mission.\textsuperscript{113} Vaenia is, at least for Joker, a girl-on-girl film which gets him excited when thinking about female Shepard and Liara/asari. The specific reference here becomes a reminder to the player that while they may enjoy a same-gender romance with Liara, they must also not forget that such relations also serve as performances catering to heterosexual male fantasies.\textsuperscript{114} Here it is merely dismissed as one of Joker's whims, but, as I have discussed, this is a pervasive pattern and discourse, not a single instance. Joker will not make a fantasizing remark about the two of them if Shepard is male. Liara will instead add that Joker asked her to "record any parts of our conversation where my eyes do that freaky black eternity thing." This is a reference to how the asari's eyes turn dark as she initiates the joining. Joker is not interested in imagining their sexual conduct since Shepard is male. If Liara is not romanced, Joker will instead ask if Liara has "embraced eternity lately", which is another way of basically asking if Liara has had sex.

The scene following Joker's remarks is the same for male and female Shepard, but the version featuring female Shepard in a romance with Liara has dialogue about marriage and children which should be discussed as a first in this universe. Shepard and Liara will discuss the future

\textsuperscript{112} Reaffirming a romance with Liara is not hindered by a romance already established in the main game, nor will it have any effect on an already established romance or be recognized as a romance (it grants no achievement/trophy).

\textsuperscript{113} The Shadow Broker files on the companions reveal that Grunt has downloaded Vaenia and that Garrus listens to a track from its soundtrack during firefights. An audio log found in the Ardat-Yakshi monastery in \textit{Mass Effect 3} reveals that some of the asari denizens have snuck in a copy of Vaenia which they plan to view at night.

\textsuperscript{114} This notion is repeated more excessively in \textit{Dragon Age: Origins}. See chapter VIII.
and the dialogue will proceed into either a discussion about their relationship (romance) or what Shepard is fighting for (no romance). There is a slight variation in dialogue depending on whether this scene occurs before or after the Suicide Mission. I will base the following on the romance version. Liara will happily state that she has everything she wants now that Shepard is back and asks what would happen to them if everything ends tomorrow. The player can reassure her with the "Happily ever after" response where Shepard replies: "I don't know. Marriage, old age, and a lot of little blue children?" Liara teasingly pushes Shepard and says: "You just say these things." I consider this a significant change. In just two years, both in-game and out-of-game, female Shepard goes from having the possibility of questioning the entire enterprise of two women in a romantic relationship (as if it is unheard of) to contemplating both marriage and having children with another woman. An off-screen sex scene eventually triggers (initiated as Liara does her "freaky black eternity thing") and afterwards they hug before Liara leaves.

**Exposing Contingency**

A remarkable aspect of the Liara romance is how human(e) it becomes after its initial "You're an alien!"/"You're female!" days, which is evident in how the romance in *Mass Effect 3* bears no semblance of being a spectacle or someone else's girl-on-girl fantasy. While the asari may still remain a spectacle in the public world, Liara is now treated like a person in her own right rather than as an object of fascination and/or desire. The player is no longer "baited" with temptations about virginity and life-altering sexual experiences, and the player can get close to her and interested in her on her own terms rather than outright sexual ones. The "humanity" of it all may also belong to the domestication of the asari and thus they are not "remarkable" in romantic aspects in *Mass Effect 3*. As I pointed out in the previous chapter, most queer relationships in the public gameworld involve asari. The asari are physiologically compatible with humans (almost as if they are designed for humans—curious, that one), and essentially they are humans, but the most notable aspect here is that female Shepard and Liara have gone from being the initial edgy "girl-on-girl" possibility to being the longest and most serious actual "epic" relationship between two adult people in the series. It no longer gives off the impression that it is a performance primarily for the player's assumed/intended fantasies. Liara as a character and as a romance is a solid example of my argument that the initial ideal

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115 There is also a less romantic "Death, most likely" option.
of the asari (as love interests for men) does not mean that the asari are forever condemned to represent this ideal. Initial intentions can be broken and altered (though in the larger picture this is not the current case with the asari as species).

Figure 18: Romance scenes featuring Liara and female Shepard in *Mass Effect 3*.

The female Shepard and Liara romance is a clear example of Judith Butler's argument that the "replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original" ([1990] 2007: 43). "Epic romantic love" is a construct and not something inherently heterosexual, though it is often posited as such, supported by countless media narratives. Butler's argument is equally viable for any of the other same-gender relationships, but I emphasize this particular point here because the Liara romance is the only romance that so overtly adopts the epic love discourse in all the games analyzed in this thesis. It is also the longest romance of them all. Representing queer relationships as monogamous and based on romantic love can be critiqued as being conservative representations (Prater 2016: 21), and this is indeed an important argument. Mainstream homosexuality may easily become normalized and tamed according to heteronormative principles, mitigating any possible queer "threats". I remain firmly critical, however, of arguing that representing queer relationships through monogamy and romantic love should generally be considered a conservative move. This may suggest that queer people do not want, or should not want, these types of relationships, and that romantic love belongs to heterosexuality. Historically, romantic love may have been extensively institutionalized as heterosexual, and representing queer relationships through this mode can help to expose its contingency. It can also help combat stereotypes of gay people as unstable in terms of relationships and commitment. If anything, it might be queerer and more liberal if representations of *heterosexuality* move outside monogamy and romantic love. What the female Shepard and Liara romance clearly achieves is to show that epic romantic love—
constructed, real, or whatever it may be—has no natural or logical links to heterosexuality and that two women are equally capable of representing and living this romantic fantasy/ideal. The asari aspect is important here, however, because the asari seemingly have no distinct or defined gender/sexual preferences and thus there might not be any meaningful difference for them. There may be no subversion in the gameworld, but there may be in the world outside the game. This romance is an important and notable example of subverting a cultural heterosexual notion and showing how that notion is utterly constructed in the first place, enabling a mainstream science fiction trilogy with a gay female military protagonist and her alien girlfriend—possibly.

**Heterosexual Queerness through Interspecies Romance**

Despite its heterosexist romance bias, *Mass Effect 2* exposes contingency and challenges heteronormative constructions through its queer explorations of interspecies romances. Here we are introduced to a rather open discursive mode that shows that the game is willing to talk about some things and not others when it comes to sexuality. An intriguing thing about this game is that the player can romance alien species that are not as safely humanized (and hyperfeminized) as the asari. In this respect the game is very progressive. A less intriguing matter is the exclusive heterosexuality of these alien companions. This does not only work to exclude certain players and communicate an assumption that the majority of the audience is straight, but it also helps to reinforce the notion that heterosexuality is the norm in this universe and that only the asari (and humanity) can cross normative sexual boundaries. Aliens other than asari are strictly for the heterosexual romances. Homosexuality might be expelled, but queerness seeps into and through the heterosexual.

Why can interspecies romance be easier to represent than homosexual romance, at least in the context of this particular game? Heterosexuality is an important first argument. Heterosexuality as a given seems to warrant no discussion about sexuality itself. Heterosexual attraction, even across species, is just "natural". Men are men and women are women, and men desire women and women desire men. This is supposedly the timeless and interstellar tautology, but heterosexuality alone is not enough to explain the interspecies phenomenon. The greatest representational hurdle here is not fantasy, but, perhaps, reality. Interspecies alien romance is perhaps easier to represent because it cannot happen in real life—thus it may
be argued to not represent reality. Homosexuality, on the other hand, is very real and thus representing it can cause much more anxiety and seriousness than any imaginary phenomenon precisely because it also represents reality. Interspecies relations can be much easier to experiment with and dismiss as fantasy and imaginary simply because the player does not run any particular risk of facing these implications in reality. Homosexuality does not guarantee this imaginary haven and is prone to be seen as more connected with a person's actual (possible) preferences in a real-life context. I consider understanding *Mass Effect 2*'s take on interspecies relations crucial in order to understand the games' strained relationship with homosexuality.\(^{116}\)

I argue that romancing alien companions can be very queer, heterosexually or otherwise. Romancing alien companions is queer by the very fact that it defies our reality of exclusive human-human romantic and sexual relations. Granted, the aliens made available for romances have fairly humanoid features, but Garrus and Thane are particularly notable because of their respective avian and reptilian aspects. Tali's appearance is obscured by her mask and suit, but when her appearance is finally revealed to the player in the form of a photograph she looks like a human woman with some added alien features.\(^{117}\) These species represent what Gregory Benford calls "anthropocentric aliens" who consist of "exaggerations of human traits" (Benford 1980: 53). These aliens represent a safe queer. Compared to other alien species such as the elephantine elcor and the jellyfish hanar, which in Benford's terms would be closer to "unknowable aliens" who possess an "essential strangeness" (1980: 56), we can clearly see that the aliens available for romance are fairly human/superhuman. As such, they are perhaps easier to identify and empathize with. They do not represent something so uncanny that the prospect of sexual attraction and romantic involvement is considered perversion and/or fetishism. This is helped by locking them into safe gender binaries and heterosexuality. There is nevertheless an inherent queer aspect of interspecies romances because they move out from the assumed sphere of human-human relations, which I consider a progressive (but safe) development.

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\(^{116}\) Unused in-game audio suggests that both Thane and Tali were originally meant to be available to both genders (Mass Effect Wiki), though this never made it into the final game. Whatever the reason might have been for this exclusion, it nevertheless communicates that homosexuality was not important enough.

\(^{117}\) Her face is revealed in *Mass Effect 3* by continuing the romance. She gives Shepard a picture of her, and the photo shows an edited version of Hammasa Kohistani, the 2005 Miss England (Mass Effect Wiki).
There is a certain duality in how *Mass Effect 2* approaches interspecies relationships, as we saw in the previous chapter. There is Fornax, for example, the "titillating alien magazine" created by humans that enjoys mainstream circulation, a small reference that can work as quirky disavowing humor and simultaneously signal a general acceptance of xenophilia. We also have Kelly Chambers, the Normandy's yeoman, who expresses her fascination with several of Shepard's alien companions upon their recruitment. The conversational option "Are you into aliens?" will appear here, and it will appear on multiple occasions until the player activates it once or completes all dialogue with Kelly. Clearly, the game wants the player to hear Kelly's thoughts on the matter. Shepard asks Kelly if she is attracted to other species, to which she answers: "Well, part of my job is predicting the motives and feelings of humans and aliens. Intimacy brings understanding. And passion is nice wherever you find it. Character matters, not race or gender." This line is served almost as an excuse or defense for Kelly's preferences, hinting that they are unusual. Her preference for aliens is also presented as somewhat practical, in the sense that it is required in her job and that "passion is nice wherever you find it"—almost as if Kelly cannot afford to be "picky". This open attitude is perhaps not so open after all? The irony here is that in the world of romance in *Mass Effect 2*, race and gender are precisely that which seem to matter. Whereas the peculiarities of interspecies (sexual) relations exist in the public gameworld, in the private sphere of interspecies romances it is not really the alien aspects that are peculiar—the human aspects are.

**Conditional Xenophilia and Discourse**

Steven Holmes calls the approach to the queer romance characters in BioWare's *Jade Empire* "conditional bisexuality", which according to him means that a "character may be latently bi-curious, but only express meaningful sexuality in regard to the PC; that is, the character's sexuality is tailored in response to the player" (2016: 126). I will borrow this notion and apply it to *Mass Effect 2*’s alien companions and their "conditional xenophilia".¹¹⁸ Both Garrus and Thane seem to discover their attraction to humans in response to how the player acts, and this causes them to rethink their sexuality to some extent. Tali is an exception: she is seemingly automatically interested in male Shepard prior to the player flirting with her (as revealed by

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¹¹⁸ I will return to this term in its original context in the discussion on Kaidan later in this chapter.
Kelly Chambers upon recruiting Tali), yet even here the human-alien relation requires some special reconfigurations.

Unlike the treatment of homosexuality, interspecies relations are catalysts for discourses about sexuality, perhaps because they are first and foremost imaginary and not as "close to home". These relations can be thus be especially entertaining to talk about and reflect on. How does one have sex with a lizard-like man or a woman who must wear a suit which obscures her appearance? Being someone's "first human" or "first alien" is perhaps less anxious than someone's first homosexual experience. With Tali, for example, the romance discourse revolves around her enviro-suit and how she would need to protect against infections from being physically intimate with Shepard. Quarians have extremely weak immune systems, causing Tali to have doubts about wanting to be intimate with Shepard: "[...] quarians are different. We can't just… We have to think of other people. Always. You deserve to… be happy with someone. I can't do that. No matter how much I… I could get sick. Jeopardize the mission." The player can ask if Tali would die if they were to have sex: "It's always a risk. Maybe the reaction would be minor. Maybe it would put me down for a few weeks. Or maybe it would kill me. But… that's not what I'm concerned about, Shepard. I don't want you distracted. I don't want what I want to hurt this mission. It's too important." Initially presented as a hurdle, quarian weakness becomes a clear romantic notion as Tali prepares for the sexual encounter by taking antibiotics and herbal supplements—a sign of her true affection for Shepard, a will to face even the possible threat of death. Tali does not require the human Shepard to prepare in any special way, however, emphasizing that she is mostly there for the player.

Figure 19: The romance climax scene with Tali.
Garrus is surprised if Shepard flirts with him, and the interspecies aspect, initially deflected, becomes a central "issue" to be overcome. Once more it is not the player that needs to do anything: "Oh! I didn't… Huh. Never knew you had a weakness for men with scars. Well, why the hell not. There's nobody in this galaxy I respect more than you. And if we can figure out a way to make it work, then… yeah. Definitely." Later on he comments: "I've never considered cross-species intercourse. And damn, saying it that way doesn't help. Now I feel dirty and clinical. Are we crazy to even be thinking about this? I'm not… Look, Shepard, I know you can find something a little closer to home." Garrus' realization is similar to that of Jade Empire's Sky, another BioWare character, who "seems to be discovering queer identity for the first time through the game" (Holmes 2016: 130n7). If the player presses on, Garrus will admit that he does not have a "fetish for humans", but that Shepard means more to him. The interspecies aspect becomes a joke, which is in accordance with Garrus' general buddy-like attitude: "[…] It'll either be a night to treasure, or a horrible interspecies-awkwardness thing. In which case, fighting the Collectors will be a welcome distraction. So, you know, a win either way." Garrus wants to save their rendezvous until the "calm before the storm":" You know me. I always like to savor the last shot before popping the heat sink. Wait. That metaphor just went somewhere horrible." Garrus may think that the metaphor went somewhere horrible, but it also went somewhere functional: this is perhaps a much more subtle way of telling the player that turians and humans are physiologically compatible. At least, the same understandings of (heterosexual) sex seem to apply. Garrus' awkward approach to humans is also reflected in the climax scene where he attempts to compliment Shepard: "If you were a turian, I'd be complimenting your waist or your fringe. So… your, uh, hair looks good. And your waist is… very supportive." For Garrus, romantic and sexual relations with a human are unexplored territories that both scare and fascinate him. The turian aspects, however, are not presented as something challenging to Shepard. Like with Tali, the player's involvement here is mainly to provide encouragement as the alien partner adjusts themselves to be sexually involved with a human.
Thane Krios, by contrast, only offers a minor reference to the interspecies aspect. The player has to work through the memories of his lost wife, his life as an assassin and his attempts to find atonement before he dies. Thane reacts with mild surprise if the player admits to have more than friendly feelings for him: "I've never felt attraction for another species. I'm not sure what to do now." Shepard then replies that they just have to figure it out and Thane says he will look forward to the memories. This is the only time the interspecies aspect will be a topic in conversation with him.

I would like to extend the gist of Greer's (2013) argument about the sexuality of characters in *Dragon Age II* being directed toward the player to this context: the characters' alien status adjusts to humanity/the player. There is no questioning of the player's/Shepard's sexuality when it comes to romancing aliens, but the aliens are required to rethink not only themselves and their prior attractions and preferences, but also their own physical capabilities. Interspecies relations are explored primarily through the concerns and adjustments of the alien companions, rendering the player character somewhat superior and without need to adjust anything. Shepard does not discover anything new about Shepard. The game wants to discuss
or at least address that there are certain implications in interspecies relations, yet it does so without implying anything about the player. In *Mass Effect* the player can be concerned about Liara's alien status, causing a quick affirmation that she is not too alien, burdening her with adjusting herself to the player. The topic is already weaved into the main romance discourse and made the responsibility of the alien partner, who has to figure out how to make a relationship and sex work. Shepard's possible xenosexuality is unremarkable or taken for granted, yet Tali's, Garrus' and Thane's newly discovered attraction to another species (because, it is of course Shepard that makes them realize this) warrants introspection. The player's own performed desire to romance an alien companion allows the topic of interspecies attraction to be explored, yet it does so carefully without asking the player the same direct "are you into aliens?" question that the player might confront Kelly with.

"Don't Swallow!" Queer(ing) Straight Sex(uality) with Aliens

The main interspecies romance dialogues in *Mass Effect 2* avoid overtly thematizing Shepard's/the player's own attractions or possible responsibilities during sex, but the game does attempt to speak about alien sex and challenges associated with each species. This is presented through medical discourse from the quirky salarian scientist and medical doctor Mordin Solus. Mordin, as discussed in the previous chapter, would try Shepard if he ever intended to "try human". He will provide input on several of Shepard's romances. The medical discourse is important here because it enables the sexual topics to be framed in a serious and clinical manner instead of being out-of-place sexual banter, and it is coupled with the eccentric Mordin who is rather direct and confrontational. These dialogues are important because they add to the open and oftentimes humorous discourse the games can enable with interspecies sex, sexuality and relationships, and which they do not enable with homosexuality (and, which *Mass Effect 2* does not need to since it has effectively erased it).

If we consider the argument/critique that alien-encounter science fiction often represents aliens as more human than alien (Malmgren 1993), then it is possible to interpret these interspecies romances as subtextual queerness in relation to non-normative sexual practices—at least non-normative by going against the taken-for-granted orderly "lovemaking". As I discussed in the previous chapter, alien physiology and sex in science fiction may open up for an exploration of "polymorphous perversity" in the sense that sexual pleasure is not
heteronormatively) restricted to the genital zone. Aliens can represent ways of tackling human matters in other contexts, often acting as a mirror or foil (Benford 1980: 54).\textsuperscript{119} Entering into romantic and sexual relations with aliens with vastly different physiologies likely requires some adjustments, and the game acknowledges and addresses this. Though the address is served through a humorous and inconsequential register, the game nevertheless approaches rather ordinary sexual discourses and sexuality through alien physiology. This creates a safe and "normal" space to acknowledge and raise the topic of what people actually do when they have sex, though even here there are certain normative assumptions.

When the player has progressed far enough with a romance, talking to Mordin may yield his input on having sex with the romanced companion and warn about any potential dangers to Shepard (who is a "normal" human). The player may ask Mordin for medical advice, which usually nets humorous suggestions about sex. For example, Mordin suggests caution with Jack because "[e]motionally unstable biotics dangerous during intercourse." With Miranda he recommends caution due to her involvement with Cerberus: "Watch for bugs. Could be planted anywhere. Can perform exam later if necessary. Will need probes." This is a particularly problematic example because it plays on the idea of anal probes stereotypically associated/represented with alien abductions. "Planted anywhere" and "probes" connote the anal orifice and indicate that the examination will be unpleasant, because in the mainstream the anal zone is regularly regarded with sexual anxiety (or the cause of it), and often viewed as the sole province/activity of gay male sexual intercourse: "Anal sex is a key symbol of Western male homosexuality, though AIDS research shows it is done less often than its symbolic importance might suggest" (Connell 2005: 62). Connell also argues that in popular homophobia "[a]nal sexuality is a focus of disgust, and receptive anal sex is a mark of feminization" (2005: 219). The probing is not intended as a source of pleasure here and continues the game's bias toward male homosexuality as a source of anxiety/pain.\textsuperscript{120}

The physiologies of other species create certain sexual obstacles for interspecies intercourse, (except for and with the asari who for some reason have evolved to be compatible with everyone). This is indicated both in dialogues with the companions above and through Mordin's advice. I argued that in interspecies relations the player/Shepard is not made

\textsuperscript{119} For example, in the previous chapter I discussed the krogan as a possible metaphor for our own culture's changing gender relations.

\textsuperscript{120} As seen in the secret liaison between Gavorn and a human man and in the prison rape reference.
responsible for taking any particular precautions during sex. The following dialogues may suggest otherwise, but I must point out that this is not something the player can do anything about, nor is it addressed in the actual romance. Regarding Tali, Mordin simply repeats many of the same concerns that Tali herself has, but he recommends that Shepard "self-sterilize as well. Oral contact with tissue dangerous. Take precautions." He will then forward an advice booklet containing "[v]aluable diagrams, positions comfortable for both species, erogenous zone overviews." Mordin recommends caution with Garrus and warns Shepard about "chafing". He also provides the following technical-sexual advice: "Turians based on dextro-amino acids. Human ingestion of tissue could provoke allergic reactions. Anaphylactic shock possible. So don't, ah, ingest", essentially telling her that she should not swallow any of his bodily fluids. Mordin recommends caution with Thane because drell-human liaisons are complex. He considers Thane complex as well. He asks Shepard to come to him "when rash develops" because "[p]rolonged human to drell skin contact can cause small rash, itching. Oral contact may cause mild hallucinations."

Alien physiology becomes a vehicle for acknowledging diverse yet completely ordinary sexual practices in a rather subtle manner. Mordin's various dialogues acknowledge that sexual activities are varied and not simply "in and out" intercourse. While Mordin may warn Shepard against performing certain actions due to the partner's physiology, it nevertheless implies that certain acts are completely normal and are likely to occur if Shepard has sex with their partner. Mordin warns Shepard from the point of view of human sexuality. Mordin's dialogues paint a more diverse picture of what may actually be involved in sex, something which the player is likely already aware of, and create a space where "swallowing" and alternative sexual positions can be talked about—except for anal sex and implications thereof, which must be dismissed. The medical discourse and alien context/subtext emphasize and enable these topics without turning the discourse into mere out-of-place sexual exposition for the sake of sexual exposition.

The various things Mordin warns about never actually happen and are not something the player must be actively mindful of.121 Shepard does not develop rashes, experience hallucinations or suffer anaphylactic shocks from "ingesting" turian tissue. While the player may not need to do anything explicitly, the dialogues can serve to make Shepard a responsible

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121 Tali does in fact get sick for a brief time, as revealed in *Mass Effect 3*, but she says it was worth it and that she has become adjusted to Shepard's physiology.
party in these liaisons as well. If we consider the Tali and Garrus romances, the burden of working out how they can have sex is placed solely on them, as if Shepard/the player is a goal they have to work hard to get. The Mordin dialogues, however quirky and humorous they may be, remind the player that sex is the responsibility of all parties involved and not merely an expected service to the privileged Commander Shepard. While it is not said directly, interspecies relations other than with asari come with so many possible obstacles and repercussions that they support the notion of the asari being universally preferred, simply because asari physiology is so perfect for everyone. Asari only give ecstasy, not rashes and shock.

The fantasy aspects of interspecies romances create discursive explorations that do not, at least in the context of the *Mass Effect* series, have corresponding explorations of the very real homosexuality (except possibly in the Traynor-EDI party exchange). The different physiologies of alien companions open up for explicit sexual dialogue presented through factual medical discourse. This demonstrates a will to cross certain boundaries. Here we see actual (though brief) discussions of xenophilia in various forms, which means that explicit matters of sexuality are something the developers want to represent in their games—despite the mostly humorous and deflective tone adopted here. The game is remarkably humanizing in this manner by never questioning sexuality itself. Rather, it points out some physical differences and things to avoid, which may add to the realism of the universe. One would expect something to work somewhat differently with avian and reptilian humanoid companions, but this is also the same game that believes that an all-female species is primarily for male spectators and that male homosexuality is quirky, repressed and pathological. There is an obvious discrepancy between what the game considers alright and what it does not like to talk about. The game is quite happy with discussing interspecies sexual relationships. It is fine to basically tell a female Shepard "don't swallow" because it is disguised as a medical concern which simultaneously enables it as a (heterosexual) conversational topic. If the alien companions had been available for homosexual romances then Mordin would not only have addressed interspecies sex, he would also have addressed gay sex. That is not something this game can do. There is a will to engage with sexual matters, but it is currently shepherded through relatively safe spheres. If science fiction often encourages the audience to compare aliens and humans in order to understand what it is to be human (Malmgren 1993: 15), then the interspecies romances may be seen as a space for challenging mainstream conceptions of what is deemed heterosexually attractive and viable,
perhaps encouraging the player to contemplate that human heterosexuality is also a queer affair.

Homosexuality on the Side

*Mass Effect 2* does enable two female characters for same-gender flirtation: asari justicar Samara and Kelly Chambers. Samara is a snare: the player can attempt to flirt with her and nearly kiss her, but she will ultimately resist and reject Shepard because she cannot risk losing her self-control. Kelly, on the other hand, is easily flirted with and immediately available for flirting. Flirting with Kelly, regardless of romantic intent, seems to be recommended as she will eventually offer to feed Shepard's fish, making her a functional flirtation. Pursuing the flirtation to its conclusion enables the player to invite Kelly up to Shepard's cabin where she will wear an asari stripper outfit and dance suggestively for Shepard. Considering the game's heterosexual bias, it is likely that this flirtation feature is primarily aimed at a straight male audience, and that she is intended for a male player playing female Shepard to enable some romantic/sexual content without forcing the player to pursue another man. Kelly essentially becomes the player's own Chora's Den/Afterlife dancer.

Man as Active/Sexual, Woman as Passive/Emotional

Fascinating yet restrictive queer advances with interspecies romances aside, *Mass Effect 2* manages to enable rather heteronormative assumptions about male and female Shepard in romances: male Shepard as active and sexual, and female Shepard as passive and emotional. While male and female Shepard stay fully clothed during the (implied) sex scenes, the scenes for male Shepard are more graphic. In the Miranda scenes, for example, Shepard appears behind Miranda and then lifts her up and presses her against the wall. Then they lie down on the floor with Miranda on top unzipping her suit (she exposes her shoulders, abdomen, and breasts in a brassiere) before they kiss and the scene ends. Jack comes crying into Shepard's

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122 In the Citadel DLC of *Mass Effect 3* the player may finally kiss Samara if they flirted with her in *Mass Effect 2* and if Shepard is not involved in another romance. They will not enter into a relationship, however.
123 The player may purchase various fish for the fish tank in Shepard's cabin. They will die if the player does not feed them regularly. The fish are an aesthetic feature, and it is not crucial to gameplay in any way.
124 Kelly does in fact become an official romance option in *Mass Effect 3*, which requires completing the flirt arc and dance scene in *Mass Effect 2*. This romance is severely limited, however, compared to other romances. Shepard and Kelly have off-screen sex mid-game and Kelly then gives Shepard a portrait of herself. She does not feature in any of the regular romance content.
cabin (she has finally broken down and realized she needs him, similarly to Ashley) and they embrace before Shepard pushes her onto the bed, climbing on top of her and kissing her. Jack does not take her clothes off, but then again she barely has any clothes to begin with. Male Shepard also gets to lie down on the bed with Tali, and her undressing comes in the form of her taking her mask off. By contrast, female Shepard only gets one romance climax that is similar to these three. Jacob undresses his upper body and in a move that completely turns the tables on the previous game, both Shepard and the camera gaze at his muscular body. Shepard takes the lead and pushes him onto the bed and climbs on top of him. With Garrus there is only forehead-hugging and with Thane there is a kiss. Male Shepard always gets to lie down with the companion, something which female Shepard only gets to do in 1/3 cases. While there is an emotional aspect in all cases (between the characters it is never sex for the sake of sex), for male Shepard the scenes depict a much more active and explicit sexual approach than for female Shepard.

The "male as active/female as passive" structure can also be seen in the post-romance climax scenes. After the Suicide Mission the player can call the romanced companion up to Shepard's cabin. Then they can spend time on the sofa and on the bed with said companion. Male and female Shepard are treated differently here. Male Shepard will always be the "active" part, with the romanced companion sitting on his lap or lying next to him in his embrace on the bed. Female Shepard is considered the "passive" participant, being the one who sits on the lap or lies next to the companion in their embrace on the bed (the only exception here is Kelly Chambers, though this flirtation seems primarily intended for men). This is one of the more obvious stereotypical representations of gender. Perhaps it is thought to be "logical" because male Shepard is always bulkier than the female companions and female Shepard is always lither than the male companions, but that is also to suggest that physical size automatically and naturally decides one's roles and needs in physical interaction. The lack of variety in positional approaches in these scenes suggests stereotypical gender assumptions of men as active and women as passive. Mass Effect 2 has in that respect managed to create a fairly consistent stereotypical heteronormative worldview even when aliens can be the love of one's life.

125 It would have been interesting to see how this game would have approached this scene if male homosexuality were possible.
Interspecies relations become rather normal and unproblematic in romance discourses in *Mass Effect 3*, and interspecies aspects no longer feature as particular topics for conversation or medical issues. Some slight references remain, for example as Garrus tells Shepard that it will take more than Reapers to get between "this cross-species liaison", and a drunken Tali will admit that her father would have hated her human boyfriend. Instead of interspecies fascination, *Mass Effect 3* moves closer to home and turns its attention explicitly to homosexuality.

**Human Homosexuality**

*Mass Effect 3* is notable for introducing the first exclusively gay characters and romance options of the two series, and also for taking male homosexuality seriously. The overall changes made to the game's representational practices demonstrate that significant developments have happened in the years between 2009 and 2012. I have already discussed some aspects of the representations of homosexuality in *Mass Effect 3* in the previous chapter, for example that both Samantha Traynor and Steve Cortez implicitly reveal their sexuality.
early on, and that female homosexuality is publicly visible and valued whereas male homosexuality is silent and kept to a discursive minimum. The romances allow the picture to simultaneously become slightly more nuanced and indicative/supportive of that general argument. Traynor is generally hypersexualized and Steve, by comparison, is generally desexualized, making the two gay characters almost complete reversals of stereotypes of desexualized lesbians and hypersexual gay men. Such a reversal is not more progressive or less problematic, especially not when mainstream media gladly represents lesbians as heterosexualized and "hot" and gay men as asexual. What happens in the private gameworld?

In addition to introducing gay characters, Mass Effect 3 is also notable for "changing" the sexuality/availability of a character. Kaidan Alenko, previously only available to a female Shepard, is now also available to male Shepard. This is not, however, merely retroactive continuity or a mere change in the character's programming. Kaidan has been provided with a special arc in the form of a "coming out" scene to reflect his possible new discoveries, resulting in a case that not only (perhaps unknowingly) generates a set of difficult and interesting questions about (bi)sexuality, but also highlights how the conditionality of gameplay can be significant (and troublesome) in the exploration of the more ontological aspects of sexuality.

Samantha's Shower Chic and Luscious Homosexuality

Communications Specialist Samantha Traynor from the United Kingdom is the series' (and BioWare's) first gay female character. Traynor assumes many of the same functions as Kelly in Mass Effect 2 in that she alerts the player of any new messages and sidequests, and is located next to Shepard's terminal in the Combat Information Center. Pre-Citadel DLC her appearances are restricted to scenes on the Normandy only and there is not much romance-specific content. I discussed some of Traynor's appearances and interactions in the previous chapter. She subtly "reveals" her sexuality in the very first scene she appears in by commenting on EDI's attractive voice, and during the party in Citadel her sexuality becomes a topic of great explicit conversational interest. Interactions with Traynor remain the same for both male and female Shepard up until the locking point, which is signaled in-game as the e-mail invitation for a "Game Night". Traynor, a fun-loving and zesty character, notably contributes to a more lighthearted and human atmosphere aboard the Normandy during the
bleakness of war. In romance she is notable for her hypersexualized mode of representation as well as acting as a snare for "unsuspecting" male players, raising questions of both queer chic (Gill 2007) and the more "casual" understandings of lesbianism (Diamond 2005, Jenkins 2005) in mainstream media. The "luscious"/"hot" lesbian representations of mainstream consumer culture (Ciasullo [2001] 2012, Gill 2009, Jackson 2009) are of particular importance here. If Krzywinska argued that the brief female Shepard-Liara sex scene in Mass Effect was a "classic pornographic trope designed mainly for male consumption" (2012: 148), then the Traynor romance takes this trope a lot further.

First of all, for a game series rather determined to direct the player's gaze at certain preferred female representations, the Traynor romance interestingly, at least on one particular occasion, shifts the gaze toward the player character. This is exclusive to female Shepard. After one of the early main missions, Traynor will approach a female Shepard and ask her to get some rest as she has been working nonstop since evacuating Earth. Shepard notes that it sounds like an order (Traynor is under Shepard's command, after all), but Traynor calls it a "polite suggestion from someone with a vested interest in your success… Commander." The camera proceeds to focus on Shepard's buttocks, hinting at Traynor's "vested" interest in her and suggesting that Traynor might be available for romance (in case her immediately implied sexual interest in EDI's voice did not already establish that). Shepard becomes the object of the gaze here, similar to how Shepard is presented in the Kaidan sex scene in Mass Effect. Here the objectification is performed through a reverse act where the companion is the first to indicate their interest in Shepard, though this is not registered by Shepard, but communicated to the player through Traynor's gaze.

The game sets up scenarios that complicate the representation of female homosexuality in two different but linked ways, and these depend heavily on Shepard's gender. Traynor will eventually talk about how she loves strategy games and that chess is her favorite. She thinks most of the other games are too flashy. She mentions that she has a special chess set at home, adding that "I like the feel of something solid in my hands." This could be regarded as typical sexual innuendo and might actually serve as a snare for male Shepard players. I will return to this. Traynor will send Shepard an e-mail about a game night which enables the player to invite her up to Shepard's cabin for a scene that serves as either the romance locking scene or a friendly (and possibly awkward) social night. Male Shepard can attempt to make a move on her which results in a light-hearted rejection, but this rejection also carries implications and
thoughts about the "casualness" of female homosexuality. I will discuss the exceptionally erotic (at least for these games) female Shepard game night scenario first.

Game Night, Female Shepard: Traynor enters Shepard's cabin and compliments Shepard on how gorgeous it is. She then walks into Shepard's shower and is surprised to see an "actual shower", commenting that the faucets in the women's bathroom are "crap". She walks back out into the room and asks if Shepard wants to play chess. The player can suggest that Traynor may use the shower instead. Traynor is excited and accepts. Shepard retreats to the sitting area while Traynor enters the shower (dressed down into her brassiere and underwear). She is very excited: "Ooh... hot water and room to stretch. I could get lost in here. Mmm... Oh, it's like a week's worth of stress is washing off." The water pours over her and the scene is staged to be titillating. Shepard is shown smiling in her chair. Traynor will then hint at Shepard: "And the timing is perfect. I was hoping to look nice for somebody." Shepard asks if she has a hot date lined up and Traynor replies: "Hopefully more than just that. I play for keeps." The camera moves slowly up her wet and glistening body, as if to make it perfectly clear (if it is not clear enough already) that this "somebody" is Shepard. Shepard says that it sounds serious and Traynor says, with a hopeful look on her face: "That depends on whether she's interested." Traynor articulates her sexuality much more explicitly than before. The player is then presented with a choice to join her or stay out. This is the locking moment, the one and only chance to romance her.
If the player chooses to join her Shepard resolutely says "[s]he's interested" and walks right into the shower fully clothed and embraces Traynor. The camera uses close-up shots as the two women touch each other while drenched in water from the running shower. Shepard moves Traynor to the wall and lifts up Traynor's thigh as the camera moves out and the shower door closes. The scene, while rather soft, plays on "porno chic", which "involves depictions of pornography in non-pornographic contexts" (Genz and Brabon 2009: 101). This is emphasized by Shepard's sudden "intrusion" into the shower, mirroring simple porn movie plots which move from casual/preliminary interaction to sex fairly quickly and without much context. After the shower they both lie down in their underwear on Shepard's bed and Traynor expresses how much she needed that. Shepard asks: "Are you only using me for my shower?" and Traynor teasingly replies: "I certainly hope so." Shepard ends the scene with: "Well, in that case, it's yours whenever you like." There will not be any chess-playing in this scenario. If the player chooses to not join Traynor, Shepard says: "Well, good luck. Holler if you need anything." An obviously surprised and disappointed Traynor thanks Shepard and the scene will progress to the aftermath of the chess game. The shower is the only way to indicate and lock a romantic interest in Traynor.\textsuperscript{126}

The shower scene is the most overtly erotic and graphic locking scene yet, and the only one which offers implied off-screen sex before the romance climax. The romance progression here is also notable because it proceeds from no explicit or obvious flirting to a full-on erotic encounter. It is one of the very few romances that begin with a climax. The scene is also interestingly rather easy to get. While the romance sex scenes usually occur at the end of the game and require committing to a companion, this scene is acquired rather early and merely requires some friendly non-committing conversations before the shower scene. It is even

\textsuperscript{126} Traynor will not mention the shower at all if the player has locked another romance and the scene will progress directly to the chess aftermath.
possible to send Traynor into the shower and watch the prelude without romancing her, thereby emphasizing Traynor's to-be-looked-at-ness. It is questionable that this is the only romance treated this way. The scene can be applauded for breaking norms of typical liberal conservative representations of homosexuality as mostly dialogue with minimal physical contact, and for representing both women as sexually active subjects in their own right.

The issue at stake here is mainstream queer chic, which aims at queer representation but usually only through (hyper)sexualized codes for heterosexual marketing purposes, and which aestheticizes and fetishizes queerness instead of treating it as "merely a different sexual identity" (Gill 2007: 100). As I pointed out in chapter II, the femme body is frequently used to "normalize" lesbian representation and make female homosexuality appealing to heterosexual viewers/consumers (Ciasullo [2001] 2012: 329-330).\footnote{127} Gill discusses queer chic primarily in advertising, but its strategy can be seen in the general mainstream. The "hot lesbian", as Gill calls this hypersexualized representation, is presented in a manner that "seems designed for male titillation. The figure never appears alone [...] but is almost always depicted kissing, touching or locked in an embrace with another woman" (2009: 152). As Sue Jackson points out, the "hot lesbian" may "counter heteronormativity and diversify representations of femininity", but her "problematic constitution within heterosexuality" has been pointed out by feminist critiques (2005: 199-200). In Traynor's case, neither the shower scene nor the acts in and of themselves are particularly problematic in isolation, but there are certain questions that must be addressed when they are situated in the larger mainstream context and the Mass Effect games' preference for female homosexuality over other non-heterosexual sexualities.

The first lesbian character is also the one whose romance path proceeds directly from general dialogue to explicit erotic action in the shower, an adventurous spur of the moment where Shepard does not even bother to get undressed, as if performing for some outside spectator, as if the game could not wait long enough to eroticize female homosexuality (in a game universe which has a history of doing so). This is a particular relevant example for Gill's claim that in queer chic "the sexualization of 'lesbian' bodies [...] seems to be constructed in relation to heterosexuality not as an autonomous or independent sexual identity" (2009: 153). The shower scene adds to the games' notion of female homosexuality as "fun", "exciting" and "public", seemingly constructed primarily through codes that also work as a performance for straight male players, a stereotypical example of "hommo-sexuality".

\footnote{127} This is also what Danae Clark (1993) refers to as "commodity lesbianism".
It does not end with the shower scene. The rest of Traynor's romance path, particularly in the content in *Citadel*, never forgets that the shower has a central place in the relationship. As such, the romance continues to aestheticize, fetishize and objectify female homosexuality, but mostly through discourse rather than acts. I will discuss how shortly, but first I would like to address the game night scene for a male Shepard as it concerns another problematic stereotype about female homosexuality in mainstream culture: the idea that lesbians are not really (exclusively) gay.

Game Night, Male Shepard: The game night proceeds a bit differently for male Shepard since he cannot romance Traynor, but the player may try. Traynor makes no mention of the shower in this scenario. Instead she immediately asks if Shepard is ready to play, and Shepard asks: "Play?" in slight surprise. This is a very strange reaction considering that game night was the premise for her visit to the cabin. It is as though the game is setting up Shepard to expect her to be there for sex and that he believes "game night" is only a cover up or code for something else. Traynor mentions picking up a chess board and that Shepard "delivered something that closely resembled a challenge". The player has two replies available: "I have a bad feeling…" (Paragon position) and "That's it?" (Renegade position). "That's it?" delivers the same type of disappointed attitude Shepard could express after receiving the initial reward from the asari consort Sha'ira in *Mass Effect*: "The most exciting thing you can think of is playing chess?" Traynor attempts a "[w]ell, if you're not up to the challenge…" and Shepard agrees to play. Both responses lead to them playing chess and Traynor will beat him and make a joke on his behalf. The player now gets two replies: one to go along with the joke (Paragon position) and one that reads "What about playing in bed?" (Renegade position). The game sets up a snare in that romance interactions are usually reserved for the Paragon position, while here the request for sex is placed in the Renegade position. This is likely an indication that the attempt will either fail or at least that it will not result in a locked romance/relationship. If the player inquires about playing in bed Shepard says that he is interested in playing another game. Traynor replies: "Ha. Such as...? Oh." She quickly picks up on what type of game Shepard is suggesting. Shepard then immediately attempts to excuse himself: "Hey, I'm sorry. You seemed interested..." Traynor stands up and begins apologizing: "Oh, no, I apologize. I try to be friendly, but you're not really my type. Remember how I liked EDI's voice?" Shepard replies: "Oh. Sorry. I didn't realize..." Traynor sits down again and returns to a cheerful mood, saying how she cannot wait to tell her friends that she broke Commander Shepard's heart and
crushed him at chess. Then they decide to have a rematch and the scene ends. Shepard does not indicate any romantic interest in Traynor if the player chooses the Paragon-aligned option.

Whether asking Traynor about sex is meant to serve as a cultural commentary, stereotypical representation or backlash is not clear. The scene contains all of these possibilities. The player has likely watched Traynor's introductory scene where she comments on EDI's voice being attractive, which should serve as an indication that she is not at least exclusively heterosexual. The purpose is to establish Traynor's sexuality without explicitly stating it, much in the same way as Steve Cortez mentions his late husband. While the player may register the EDI comment, it seemingly goes unnoticed by Shepard as a reference to her sexuality. Also, it is another case where homosexuality cannot be expressed directly. It has to be routed through something else. Homosexuality remains that which cannot be named, though "cross-species" and "interspecies" are labeled and unproblematically used in conversation. Traynor has to hint at an earlier occurrence hoping that Shepard understands what she means. Shepard also tells Traynor that she seemed interested in having sex with him. There is no previous dialogue that suggests this. Perhaps it refers to Traynor mentioning how she likes having something solid in her hands when talking about chess pieces, which Shepard might have taken to be a penis reference—perhaps this is also part of the set-up enabled in this scene. Otherwise, there is nothing that indicates anything flirty in Traynor's relationship with Shepard. She has only been acting like a friend. A woman interested in and on friendly terms with a man is here interpreted as automatically indicating romantic or sexual interest. For some reason Traynor has to apologize to Shepard as if she is to blame for leading him on by acting friendly. This plays on a dangerous notion that women are responsible for inciting certain behaviors and beliefs in men (seen particularly in domestic violence and rape cases): "Women's behavior is pathologized, while the view of men as 'testosterone timebombs' just waiting to explode is treated as unproblematic" (Gill 2007: 139). The Traynor scenario is by no means as serious, but it plays on some of the same rhetoric: Traynor invites Shepard's sexual interest because she acts friendly and thus she must apologize for any transgressions.

The male game night scene (and Traynor's arc) also plays on what Ann M. Ciasullo terms the "'I know, but...' equation": "I know this character's a lesbian, but—but she's so attractive, she can't be a lesbian" and that "in mainstream cultural representations of lesbianism, there is

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128 Ciasullo names this equation after a line spoken in the 1997 film Chasing Amy.
always a *but*, always the possibility—or is it the promise?—that she who is lesbian […] can 'unbecome' lesbian […]" ([2001] 2012: 335). This applies to the proliferation of the femme bodies in mainstream media, a body/representational type which certainly applies to Traynor. It is not that Traynor can "unbecome" lesbian, but the agency structured here points to playing on the "I know, but..." equation: Traynor may have indicated her attraction to women, but there is always the chance that the interest is not exclusive. This is the form the discourse takes once the dialogue wheel opens for these options. This claim is further strengthened by the fact that female Shepard cannot make any romantic moves on Steve Cortez (which I will discuss later). Male Shepard's assumption that Traynor was hinting at sex might also be connected with the more recent media phenomenon called "heteroflexibility", in which heterosexual women experiment with homosexuality but nevertheless remain available to men (Diamond 2005), promoting a view of lesbianism as "casual". The fact that Traynor is gay works to counter such notions simultaneously as their existence is confirmed.

As I said, it is difficult to ascertain if this is a cultural commentary meant to possibly "educate" the player or if it plays on and confirms heterosexist beliefs about women and homosexuality. The problem is that it does both. The dialogue wheel may indicate that suggesting sex is not the right way to approach Traynor since the option is positioned as Renegade, but this has not been a consistent logic. The Renegade option with Consort Sha'ira in *Mass Effect* actually leads to sex without any consequences. A Renegade option in *Mass Effect 2* also allows a male Shepard to have sex with Jack, although this forecloses the possibility of successfully romancing her and getting the "real" sex scene later on. The dialogue mechanics offer no stable indicators here.

### Private Public Hypersexuality

The curious and troublesome aspect of the Traynor romance is how it takes the common stereotype of gay men as hypersexual (Sender 2004: 200) and applies it to women instead, which results in a string of pervasive sexual references for public and heterosexual enjoyment. The shower chic of the romance with Traynor is so pervasive and really the only thing the romance is about. At one point, Traynor teasingly tells Shepard: "If you die, whoever replaces you might not let me use your shower." The *Citadel* DLC adds several extra scenes to the Traynor romance. Simultaneously, these scenes also add more to the idea of female
homosexuality as public and sexualized. During the main mission of *Citadel* Shepard and the squad will meet Traynor as they attempt to retake the Normandy from Shepard's evil clone. When she sees Shepard she is angry because she was just fired by Shepard's clone with no time to get her things. In a romance the player can choose to interrupt Traynor's reprimands by suddenly kissing her deeply. Shepard's squad attempts to open the door to the Normandy while the two of them have at it, and comments awkwardly that they need to move on. Shepard and Traynor's relationship is made into an awkward but seemingly enjoyable public affair, and it does not end there.

Most of Traynor's romance scenes involve sexual references. During *Citadel* the player can root for Traynor in a game duel: "I'm only gonna say this once, Traynor. My shower is for winners" and afterwards Shepard can tell her "[n]ice job, Specialist. Now hit the showers." The shower reference is truly a favorite in this relationship. For the second scene the player can invite Traynor to Shepard's apartment. Traynor will once again comment on how gorgeous the place is and she will quickly discover the hot tub. In the romance version Shepard says that "[w]e could go out, maybe catch a live performance? We don't absolutely have to use the..." and then the scene cuts and they are both in the hot tub in their underwear. Shepard opens with saying "[y]ou're very persuasive" and Traynor replies that she at least let Shepard take off her clothes this time. This is once again a shower reference. Traynor then slides over toward Shepard as the camera moves away. Shepard giggles and shouts "[o]h, you are dead" as the screen goes dark and the scene ends.

The friendship version of the scene (regardless of Shepard's gender) also revolves around the hot tub and flirty/sexual humor. The game wants all players to experience some of the wonders of the aqueous Traynor. Once Traynor notices the hot tub Shepard will simply tell her to go ahead. Traynor sits in the hot tub alone with Shepard standing outside the room with their back against wall, looking away. Traynor comments on how the hot tub is very good for her allergies and that she has asthma. She asks Shepard to grab some scented bath oil for her. As Shepard hands her the oil she thanks them and teasingly adds: "Eyes are over here." The reference is humorous, but it plays on a common stereotype of men typically looking at women's breasts more than their faces. Acknowledging an "eyes are over here" is also very contradictory for a game that is adamant in having its all-female species regularly serve as

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129 The friendship version would technically count as an example of the public gameworld, but I have chosen to include it here instead to focus the discussion on the current topic.
strippers and the reduction of Miranda to "ass effects". Perhaps "eyes are over here" is meant to be ironic or defeatist so that the player is reminded that they are trapped in a world of the dominant male gaze. This becomes clear when Traynor asks if Shepard, now walking back out of the room, has a loofah. Shepard is not sure and as they turn around Shepard sees Traynor standing up looking through an overnight bag. Traynor does not notice that Shepard sees her. Shepard, somewhat embarrassed, turns around again quickly. The scene is problematic because it sets up the assumption that Shepard/the player gazes at her regardless of their personal interest, though it is presented as an accident. The hot tub scene is a type of snare, but it is dismissed as a joke. Even the series' first gay woman has to be available for the straight male player (and everyone else) somehow and she cannot escape the "ass effect-gaze". She might possess sexual agency, but she must relinquish some control. As the scene comes to an end, Traynor comments on the contents of the overnight bag. She asks if Shepard knows who the owner of the bag is, as she thinks "K. Sanders" (who can be encountered in an earlier mission) has great taste in "adjustable massage wands", and the scene ends. Traynor's sexuality is seemingly what the game thinks is the most important/interesting thing about her.

Figure 26: Shepard turns around and sees Traynor looking through the overnight bag.

The Traynor romance also engenders explicit public sexual discourse. In the previous chapter I discussed how Traynor's sexuality and sexual interests become a conversational topic
between EDI and Traynor during the Citadel party, and a romance with Traynor will add even more to the notion of female homosexuality as public fascination. Garrus, for example, will refer to Shepard's apartment as the "Traynor-Shepard love nest". During the awkward conversation between EDI and Traynor, Shepard says "[l]et's remember that one for later, actually" when Traynor mentions wanting to grab EDI's voice by the hair and nibble her way down its back. In the "Relaxed" version of the party, Traynor and Joker will instead talk about Traynor's attraction to EDI. Traynor asks Joker to treat EDI right, to which he says: "You're awfullyissy about this considering you're sleeping with Shepard now." Traynor will also, unsurprisingly, recall running into Shepard "once or twice" in the shower, the only real thing they have in common. Its casual reference here might suggest that the shower story is also a public affair now. Joker, since Shepard has cybernetic implants from the resurrection in the Lazarus Project, "warns" Shepard that Traynor is attracted to robots. Traynor seems turned on by the idea the Shepard is thirty percent cybernetic, although she presents it like a joke. Once more the game attempts to venture into an exploration of sexuality, but it is deflected by humor. Joker offers Shepard sound advice: "Just bear in mind, she's probably going to check whether your back lights up during sex, so... if there's reach-around action, it's... you know, because she's looking for your cyborg parts." Traynor joins in on the joke and, seemingly disappointed, says that Shepard's back does not light up. It is perhaps no surprise that Joker is the one to talk about the sexual escapades of Traynor and Shepard considering his very exclusive interest in women and penchant for girl-on-girl action. This openness about homosexuality is remarkable and should be encouraged, but here it is so repeatedly hypersexualized. Traynor's homosexuality does not represent a different sexuality as much as a sexuality that can easily fit in and be incorporated into heterosexuality—not as a challenge, but part of its repertoire. Looking closer at the representations of male homosexuality should make this picture much clearer.

**Steve and Subversion**

Steve Cortez is the first gay male character, which means that he is the first genuine attempt to seriously represent male homosexuality in this series. Like Traynor, Steve is given direct involvement in many parts of the game. As the Normandy's shuttle pilot Steve is often responsible for transporting Shepard and the squad to the ground. Like Traynor, Steve's sexuality is "revealed" early on, but his sexuality is not revealed through sexual references.
Rather, it is revealed through the mention of his late husband Robert. Unlike Traynor, Steve is not subjected to steaming shower scenes and endless references thereof. His character arc sees him mourn the loss of his husband. Most of Steve's arc involves supporting him through his grief, and this is a requirement for romance. The Steve arc/romance, in addition to being the series' first serious representation of male homosexuality, is notable for allowing a male Shepard to indicate an explicit general romantic/sexual interest in men (without necessarily romancing him). Both genders have almost the same dialogue with him up until the romance locking point. Throughout his grieving, Steve gives some hints that he appreciates male Shepard's support a bit more ("[y]ou give me strength" as opposed to "I'm glad you came", for example), but there is no overt flirting. The Steve romance seemingly attempts to avoid many of the stereotypes about hypersexual gay men and instead presents a more "normalized" representation of male homosexuality that focuses more on the emotional than the sexual.

Steve can be considered as what is referred to in R. W. Connell's research as a "very straight gay" (2005: 156) or a "straight-acting queer" (Clarke et al. 2010: 120). These terms are used to describe gay people with a rather normative or "ordinary" gender identity, and that the only thing "gay" about them is their sexual and romantic interest in members of the same gender. This categorization is of course problematic in that it communicates that "normality" is synonymous with heterosexuality and that heterosexuality sets the bar for appropriate behavior. Yet, it is not an imaginary identity either since heteronormative culture often assumes that gay men lack masculinity and are often defined as effeminate (Connell 2005: 143, 161), or otherwise queer or deviant, often reflected in stereotypical media representations of gay men as "limp-wristed sissies or confused and unhappy protagonists […]" (Feasey 2008: 28). The "very straight gay" is a useful concept to consider here since it has become more commonplace to represent more "normalized" gay men in mainstream media. This, however, may often come with a price. Katherine Sender points out that "representing an acceptable version of same-sex relationships as 'normal' has often led to the decision to present very desexualized images of gay people, to 'take their sexuality out of it'" (2004: 126). This has particularly affected televised representations of gay men, reflected in the "long-standing criticism of representation of gay men on television as asexual – that is, only allowed to exist on network TV on condition that they never actually engage in the practices that define their sexual identity" (Gill 2007: 101). I must stress that being gay should not be considered as

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130 One of Connell's interviewees used this term to describe himself.
something that requires physical practices in order to be legitimate or defined, but I understand the general concern of normalization through desexualization. Considering how unevenly the series treats its representations of homosexuality, what happens when *Mass Effect 3* tackles homosexuality seriously through a "very straight gay"?

Steve being almost immediately cast into the role of grieving husband might raise some concerns regarding stereotyping gay men as unhappy. These are legitimate concerns, but I must point out that Steve is not grieving because he is gay. The loss of his spouse plays on general emotional issues and is not a sexuality issue per se. We must also acknowledge the fact that Steve actually got to be married (at some point in the past) and that the player is not given the option to ask how two men can be married. Helping Steve through his grief might signal the beginning of a type of "educational" representational approach in which non-heterosexuality/queerness is encountered as a regular part of the gameworld. At the same time, it might considered questionable that Steve, once he is helped through his deep grief and depression, is immediately ready to jump into another relationship, as if his late husband is now completely a thing of the past. It links anxiously to stereotypical beliefs about gay relationships as unstable, though Steve (and Traynor, for that matter) is represented as devoted and dedicated.

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131 This educational aspect is also found particularly in regards to homosexuality and transgender topics in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, released after *Mass Effect 3* (see chapter VIII).
Steve's romance path is particularly interesting in how it allows for player expressions of male homosexual desire without necessarily romancing him, and for how the game sets up both progressive possibilities and default heterosexuality. Steve invites Shepard for a few drinks in the nightclub Purgatory after being assisted through his grief. The male Shepard version is the more extensive of the two versions. Shepard comments that Steve looks happy, to which Steve replies that he is no longer living in the past. Shepard says he did not think a club would be to Steve's tastes, but Steve then says: "You don't have to be all hot and bothered to appreciate graceful dancing. There's an energy here. There's life." Purgatory works to symbolize the reversal of his previous "lifeless"/"drained" existence. If Shepard is male and currently not in a romance, Steve will also look at a man on the dancefloor and add: "And some of the eye candy in the crowd isn't too shabby either." The game shifts from Steve's grief and over to the prospect of explicit homosexuality, and the player is presented with a choice: "I'm eye candy, too" and "I'll be watching the ladies." There is one option to flirt with Steve and another to grasp for heterosexuality as a way out of this situation; one semi-gay button and one straight button.
The remarkable aspect in the "eye candy" version is that a player can signify that Shepard is gay without also being locked into a romance with Steve (though this does not put any actual restrictions or commitments on the player), and that a straight Shepard may also enjoy some romantic attention from another man without panicking. This brief scene thus holds important possibilities for self-expression that have not been previously available. If the player chooses the "eye candy" option Shepard says: "I'm hurt. Why aren't you looking over here?" Steve flirts back with: "Who says I'm not? I hear a few ladies have shown interest, but you haven't bitten yet…?" Shepard is still safely assumed to be heterosexual and supposedly only women (that we get to hear of) have voiced their interest in him, but it is also as though Steve's comment acknowledges that only women have been romantically and sexually available to male Shepard in the past. Perhaps it thus actually comments on the games' representational practices up to this point, presented in the moment when they can possibly change. The player is once again presented a choice which (surprisingly) allows the player to express that Shepard is gay, but without requiring an actual romance to manifest it: "Waiting for the right man" and "Waiting for the right woman". As with the earlier "I'll be watching the ladies" option, "Waiting for the right woman" brings the scene to an early end. If the player picks "Waiting for the right man" Shepard says "I haven't had the right moment with the right man yet" and Steve is immediately intrigued: "Oh, really? Dance with me." Not only has Shepard
never had the right moment with another man, he has not been able to get near any such moments until this game. Like Steve's heterosexuality assumption, Shepard's comment may address earlier practices. If the player declines, Steve will attempt to ask him again, hinting to the player that they should not let Steve slip away. If the second opportunity is declined, the two of them will proceed to have a toast before the scene ends.

The game sets up the possibility of a romantic or friendly dance with Steve. The two of them casually dance facing each other, and there is no touching. The dancing is primarily directed toward the romantic scenario, which is indicated in the emotional tone of Steve's dialogue on the dancefloor. Steve says it is nice to see Shepard relaxed, as he is used to seeing Shepard "step off my shuttle and into hell. And then I wait. And worry about whether you'll make it back." Shepard says he did not know Steve cared and Steve adds: "You're our Commander, but... you've been there for me. You're a good friend, Shepard." The player must choose to lock the romance or remain friends. In the former scenario, Shepard outright tells Steve that he wants to be more than friends, and Steve replies that "I thought I felt something between us, but I was afraid it was just hope..." They ultimately kiss. Steve says "[t]oday is a good day" and Shepard continues with "[t]onight could be better." Then they head back to the bar for a toast and the scene ends.132 In terms of romance structure, this scene is the gay male equivalent to Traynor's shower scene and is remarkably less sexual and "cleaner" by comparison, though the discourses it enables are remarkable for the series.

Heterosexuality is enabled as a savior against impending homosexuality. The initial "I'll be watching the ladies" option causes Shepard to say "[t]he eye candy on the stage is fine by me" and the camera zooms in on the dancers on the elevating platforms to contrast their exaggerated heteronormative deployment with the less spectacular eye candy that Steve had in mind. If anything, at least the dancers serve a practical function in this game. Steve replies he is glad as he does not need Shepard as competition and they have a toast. Steve can rest easily because the game does not enable any such competition at all. If the player is "Waiting for the right woman", Steve simply says that Shepard should not wait too long.

The female Shepard version of this scene skips right to the toast and she cannot flirt or dance with him at all. There is simply no way for a female Shepard to be interested in Steve, unlike

132 If the player wants to stay friends, Shepard says that he trusts Steve with his life and the lives of his squad. Steve says that he will always be there for him and they head back to have a toast.
Traynor and male Shepard. The "I know, but" equation for lesbian representations does not have a male counterpart in mainstream culture and men cannot be "de-homosexualized" in the same manner. Neither Traynor nor Steve ever discloses that their sexual attractions are exclusive, but we are likely meant to interpret that Traynor could be available to men (bisexuality, homosexuality as an experiment, "phase" or an example of "heteroflexibility") while Steve, having been married, is more "seriously" gay and thus not an object of desire for women. Initial subtle dialogue differences aside, Steve shows just as much interest in female Shepard as Traynor shows in male Shepard, but the former is not interpreted as romantic whereas in the latter friendliness is taken to possibly mean romantic interest. Male homosexuality seemingly becomes too abject here.

Most of the sexual interactions between Steve and Shepard are implied rather than explicit. The romance is similar to the Traynor romance in this sense, but it takes a rather "domestic" and toned-down approach to sex and sexuality when compared to its "corresponding" female equivalent and its pervasive shower references and hot tub scene. The Citadel DLC adds scenes such as a moment where Steve asserts to James that Shepard has good taste in men when they are discussing the biotiball tournament, and Shepard and Steve will enjoy a short moment sitting next to each other on the sofa. Steve will also invite the player on a shuttle ride, and in a romance he and Shepard will hold hands and eventually go into the back to get "cozy" (off-screen). During the party, Steve will make a sexual reference if the player joins the rest of the companions on the dancefloor. They mock Shepard's dancing and Steve says to everyone that he knows Shepard has rhythm "where it counts". As with most romance options, Steve also wakes up with Shepard after the party and they share a brief moment in the docking bay. Steve's romance has no explicit sex scene, only the same fade-to-black off-screen sex all non-original romance options get.133

There is something very curious here: if male homosexuality is seemingly precarious and heavily limited in the public gameworld, why is it so tamed in a romance which the player actively pursues? Granted, Steve is a different character than Traynor, but nothing overly erotic is ever shown between the two men. Unlike Traynor and Shepard, there is no "performance" for the player. Rather contradictorily, even here the game seems to want to protect or limit the player from seeing sexual intimacy between two men, which makes no

133 Liara, Kaidan and Ashley are the only companions who have "full" sex scenes.
sense in a romance scenario. Male homosexuality continues to elicit a certain representational anxiety in the private sphere as well. Kaidan's romance is notably more sexual and challenges the series further, but even here there are certain anxieties and restrictions.

**Kaidan and the Conundrums of Conditional Bisexuality**

Kaidan Alenko is perhaps the most curious case of conditional bisexuality in the *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* series.\(^{134}\) Kaidan is only available to female Shepard in *Mass Effect*, originally written as a heterosexual character who likes "adventurous women"\(^ {135} \). In *Mass Effect 3* he is available to both genders. The player can continue a romance with him as female Shepard if he was romanced previously, or both female and male Shepard can start a new romance with him here. Superficially, this might easily be regarded as retroactive continuity and reflect a "cheap" move to ensure that there are also two male options for same-gender romance without creating a completely new character, considering Liara already existed for female Shepard. It might possibly have been the rationale during development. Regardless of reason, what actually happens here is more than a simple programming change in Kaidan's availability. This is not really retroactive continuity, this is possible development. It opens up a possible exploration of the complexities of sexuality as Kaidan realizes his attraction to men, and shows the significant possibilities and issues that game mechanics and conditionality pose for this exploration. In *Mass Effect 3* Kaidan might officially be regarded as a bisexual character, yet how and if bisexuality is represented and manifested depends greatly on the player. Only a male Shepard can possibly explore this topic. A female Shepard, on the other hand, will hear nothing of it.

Bisexuality is generally more stigmatized than homosexuality. Bisexuality occupies a rather anomalous and often invisible place in the cultural imagination, seeing as it does not fit into the hetero/homo-binary which is often so important for conceptualizing "legitimate" and exclusive sexuality. Bisexuality often becomes shrouded in "suspicion and myth", resulting in what is referred to as 'monosexism' or 'mononormativity' (Clarke et al. 2010: 105). Connell argues that it "seems broadly true of contemporary European/American society that sexual

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\(^{134}\) As introduced above, conditional bisexuality is Steven Holmes' term for when a video game character "may be latently bi-curious, but only express meaningful sexuality in regard to the PC; that is, the character's sexuality is tailored in response to the player" (2016: 126).

\(^{135}\) He says this as part of the flirt dialogue with a female Shepard if the player asks him if he likes Liara.
preference is dichotomized and bisexuality is unstable" (2005: 154). This is reflected in common prejudices against bisexual people such as claims that they are "greedy", "indecisive" and need to "make up their minds". Bisexual people face accusations "that their sexual relationships or practices are inherently promiscuous and unstable" (Clarke et al. 2010: 87), reflected in media stereotyping of bisexuals as "duplicitous cheaters" (Gill 2007: 103). *Mass Effect* already ventured into this territory with its construction of the rumors of asari promiscuity, which are tied to their bi-/pansexuality. This was simultaneously used in service of heteronormativity and "hommo-sexuality". Here we are dealing with male bisexuality, and considering the series' overall strained history with male homosexuality, how does it fare?

Kaidan, like Liara, Traynor and Steve, can under no circumstances be accused of being promiscuous or unstable. Prior to *Mass Effect*, his romantic past mainly involves a failed budding romance with a girl named Rahna, and he spends most of the game possibly being interested in female Shepard. If the player romances him, he will reveal in an e-mail in *Mass Effect 2* that he had begun dating a doctor after grieving and recovering for two years, but everything changed when he saw Shepard alive again. In *Mass Effect 3*, he hopes to either get back together with Shepard if they were together previously, or get the chance to explore his romantic feelings for Shepard that have built up over the games' three-year span. The romance path can be started once Kaidan wakes up at the hospital. I discussed this scene at the end of the previous chapter as an interesting example where male Shepard may flirt with Kaidan in auto-dialogue. The actual topic of romance is never explored until the locking scene, however, and this scene does not explicitly acknowledge any previous flirting.

The romance locking scene has the same beginning for both male and female Shepard, but will ultimately differ greatly depending on gender.\(^\text{136}\) It is, among other things, notable in how Kaidan explicitly takes charge in proposing a romance, not the player. The male Shepard romance scenario also contains a "coming out" dialogue, a remarkable first for the series.\(^\text{137}\) I will begin with this version of the scene. Shepard meets Kaidan at the Apollo Café on the Citadel. Emotional piano music plays during the scene. Kaidan says he is glad they are taking the time to do this and that he could use a sanity check. Eventually, he mentions that he has

\(^{136}\) If the player has already locked another romance or acted unfavorably toward Kaidan or ignored him, the scene is instead replaced with a "friendship" version which contains mostly the same dialogue except any indications of romance. The emotional romance-like piano music still plays during the scene, though.

\(^{137}\) In a sense, both Garrus and Thane also possibly "come out" as attracted to humans, but this is not presented in the same contemplative manner as Kaidan's realization that he is attracted to men.
trouble sleeping at night: "It's just—you plan a career, you focus, then suddenly the world's ending and it's too late to… find someone," triggering Kaidan to reveal where he is going with the conversation: "We've been friends 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?" Kaidan carefully comes out of the closet without saying or determining too much. From his dialogue it seems he has given much thought to why he has not been with anyone, not at least since Rahna long ago, and that he has questioned his sexuality. It seems he has postponed this questioning, however, focusing primarily on his career, but the impending destruction of the galaxy has caused him to prioritize differently. His careful approach may perhaps reflect that he has been thrown into admitting his attraction to Shepard before he was ready.

The player is then presented with two options: "I think I want that, too" and "Let's just keep it friendly." "I think I want that, too" causes Shepard to ask "[y]ou and me? Is that what you're saying, Kaidan?" to which Kaidan asks "[i]t feels right, doesn't it?" The player is once more presented with a choice: "Okay, I'd like that" and "I misunderstood. Sorry." These dialogue options are strange. "I think I want that, too" seems to imply that the player wants something similar to what Kaidan wants (finding someone) and not necessarily Kaidan, though Kaidan is not exactly too subtle in his approach and "Let's just it friendly" should indicate that the conversation is proceeding into a romantic context. Shepard seemingly ignores the dialogue paraphrase and asks Kaidan outright. Note that the player gets a second choice to really confirm that they want to be with Kaidan, in case they "misunderstood". The same occurs with Steve Cortez. This is not typical for romances in this game. The Liara and Traynor romances, for example, contain no such second considerations. Male homosexuality
apparently a much larger concern and the game makes sure that the player is not "unknowingly" thrown into it. The "misunderstood" option will lead to the same situation above. Answering "Okay, I'd like that" (a hopelessly casual paraphrase for what Kaidan is proposing) leads to locking the romance. Shepard realizes that "[a]fter all this time… You and me. I like that. A lot." Shepard's reply might indicate that he realizes something about his own sexuality, or at least that he harbors romantic feelings for Kaidan. "After all this time" may not merely be a comment on Shepard and Kaidan's relationship, but also on the fact that male Shepard may now finally be gay. There is not, however, any more discussion on this matter. Kaidan is happy and says there are benefits to that happiness, and gives Shepard a rather roguish and suggestive look. Then the scene fades as they continue their meeting at the café.

In Steve's club scene, heterosexuality can be invoked as a defense against the gay context, and with Kaidan the player can call upon familial bonds to remove any lingering sexual tensions. Shepard will simply apologize to Kaidan if the player rejects him. Kaidan says he understands and that it is not a problem. Then he goes on to say that he considers Shepard a really good friend and that this was way less awkward in his mind. Shepard will then call Kaidan his brother. While this may indicate that they share a deep friendship, this "brothering" can be considered a way of effectively removing any chance of sexual attraction/homosexuality by introducing (the stigma of) familial bonds, and anchoring the relationship with homosocial bonds. The "threat" of homosexuality can thus be safely negated and no unresolved sexual tension remains between them. On the other hand, this can also be a respectful way of treating Kaidan, who is in an obviously vulnerable situation, by preventing immature and panicked homophobic responses from Shepard.  

In order to better understand the conundrums of Kaidan's sexuality, it is important to contrast this scene with the female Shepard version because things are very different here. If the player had a relationship with Kaidan in Mass Effect, he will profess his love for Shepard. He says he wants to better understand the thing they have between them. The player can accept and continue the romance (which will lock the romance immediately; the player is not presented with an "I misunderstood" choice here). Shepard says that she cannot bury what she feels for him anymore and that she does not want to. Kaidan will then take her hand and put it against his cheek while giving the "benefits to happiness" speech. He kisses her hand and says there

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138 This has not been a particular issue before (except in the Liara early days), but in the Dragon Age games the player is enabled a variety of ways of responding negatively to male homosexuality. See chapters VIII and IX.
will be more on that topic later. Shepard says: "Later? We need to get back to the Normandy ASAP," but their drinks arrive and Kaidan says he wants to take his time. If female Shepard has not had a previous romance with him, he will say that he has feelings for her and that he wants more. Answering favorably to this launches the same dialogue Shepard would deliver as if they had previously been together. If he is rejected, he becomes more visibly upset and says that it was not the answer he was hoping for. Kaidan and Shepard will only touch each other in the heterosexual version of this scene.

The male Shepard-Kaidan scene integrates the "epic romantic love" format (which is already there in the female Shepard and Kaidan romance) of the Liara romance to create an "after all this time" romantic discourse. Both Kaidan and Shepard come to realize that they are attracted to each other (and, seemingly, to men), something which has previously been unthinkable. In all its subtlety and carefulness, this scene is remarkably sensible to the aspect of not only revealing romantic interest but also one's sexuality in one move. It also manages to integrate the entire aspect of the heteronormative game universe (intentionally or not) where both Kaidan and male Shepard previously were straight and reflects this implicitly in the romance dialogue. Simultaneously, it may also incorporate that heteronormativity, seeing as how the scene is devoid of any physical interaction between them. While they may just realize their romantic/sexual interest in each other and want to be careful, it also falls into the trap of representing male homosexuality mostly as implication and minimal physical contact. Also, consider the rejection responses. If Kaidan is rejected by a female Shepard he will be much more upset, saying it was not the answer he expected. With male Shepard, on the other hand, he is extremely quick to explain that it is no problem and that he respects Shepard much, as if the prospect of having a chance with him was unlikely.

Kaidan is thus a prime example of conditional bisexuality—bisexuality/homosexual desire does not surface unless certain conditions are met—but this is where the gay button mechanic becomes (unintentionally/unknowingly) deep rather than outright problematic. On one hand, this conditionality may be interpreted as a somewhat regressive move considering how female Shepard will hear nothing of bisexuality and Kaidan can remain straight for the heterosexual romantic love context. On the other and more interesting hand, the two mutually exclusive male/female versions of the Kaidan locking scene raise interesting queer implications about constancy/conditionality and sexuality, and the game may thus explore the fluidity of male sexuality. Kaidan is attracted to female Shepard across all three games and makes this fact
very clear, but what happens to Kaidan when the player is male Shepard? Then he never has female Shepard, and while he still has his past with Rahna, there is no obvious possible romantic future for him. His relationship to Shepard makes him reconsider and discover certain aspects of himself. For example, while this topic is never raised in dialogue, Kaidan may have thought that Shepard saving him on Virmire over Ashley must have signified something special. Whatever has happened over the years and whatever actually happens currently (possibly through Shepard flirting with him at the hospital and Kaidan flirting back in the lounge), Kaidan realizes that he wants to be with Shepard. His careful approach to a male Shepard makes it clear that this is something that he has struggled with. Kaidan is likely also careful since Shepard is a man and probably assumes he might be straight. This is evident if compared to the female Shepard scenarios where Kaidan is much more confident and explicit in voicing his feelings. Assuming that female Shepard is straight is unproblematic. There is a complex mix of Kaidan's own anxieties and assumptions about Shepard at work here. Nevertheless, this particular male romance path should be emphasized for how the game (perhaps unconsciously or unintentionally) moves away from essentialist notions of sexuality as fixed and moves toward a queer project by exploring sexual fluidity in adult men, and for thematizing what might potentially trigger such new realizations (though mostly implicitly). There is much more here than just another romance option.

The romance past the locking scene is generally the same for both male and female Shepard, but the male Shepard version, even though it enables a gay male sex scene, is marked by an odd restriction on affectionate display. In Citadel (which was released a year after the main game), Shepard calls seeing Kaidan in action on a mission "pretty hot", which is a rather outstanding remark for this series to enable between two men. The progress here, however, is curiously marked by backlash in Citadel's casino mission. If Kaidan is brought along, he will walk down the red carpet alongside Shepard. Shepard wonders why he has not seen Kaidan in formal wear before and Kaidan replies that he has got to have some secrets. The curious aspect is that they are not allowed to physically touch while walking down the red carpet. Shepard and all other romance companions available for this mission (Traynor and Steve are unavailable as they are not companions) will walk arm in arm down the carpet. Male Shepard and Kaidan will not walk arm in arm, as if any public display of a male-male relationship is considered inappropriate, or that the game's idea of masculinity is constructed around avoiding public displays of gay affection. Male homosexuality becomes, once again, a private phenomenon.
Kaidan engenders the series' first gay male sex scene, diversifying the representational practices further. Launching the endgame missions prompts a visit from Kaidan in Shepard's cabin. Kaidan tells Shepard to take five minutes for a quick drink and provides Shepard with some encouraging words. The player can either have Shepard tell Kaidan that he is exactly what he needs right now or ask how this kind of distraction is meant to help him win the war. In both cases they kiss and Kaidan admits he did not visit Shepard for a quick drink. This starts the sex scene. Shepard and Kaidan have dressed down into their underwear when the scene begins (male Shepard and Kaidan, due to the overall "male human" design, eerily have almost identical bodies) and they kiss. Kaidan then pushes Shepard onto the bed and crawls over him. They kiss some more and roll around back and forth on the bed until the screen fades. The scene is notably emotional with frequent eye contact between them, and the series clearly demonstrates that it has come far since 2007.
Summary

In this chapter I have discussed the queer romances of the private gameworld. I began with discussing Liara and how her romance evolves from being a fantasy to possibly providing a queering of epic romantic love. For *Mass Effect 2* I discussed the interspecies romances as a possible type of heterosexual queerness which resists heteronormative assumptions about attraction and sexual intercourse. In *Mass Effect 3* I looked at the differences between the representations of female and male homosexuality. Traynor's romance is a complex representational mix between homosexuality and public "hommo-sexuality", and may even play on ideas of female homosexuality as casual if the protagonist is male. Steve is notable for being the series' first gay male character and same-gender romance option, and for giving male homosexuality a stable presence in the gameworld. Kaidan's same-gender romance verges implicitly into very queer territory by thematizing the fluidity of sexuality and coming out of the closet in adult life.
Chapter VII: 
Gameworld and Interaction Mechanics of the Dragon Age Series

It is time to move over to the Dragon Age series. In this chapter, I wish to introduce the general gameworld and interaction mechanics in the same vein as I did in chapter IV. I presume that the reader is familiar with the Mass Effect interaction mechanics such as dialogues and romances, as these are generally applicable for the Dragon Age games and will not be explained in general here. Instead I discuss the notable system differences in the Dragon Age games; dialogues and romances remain the same phenomena as in the Mass Effect games, but are tweaked differently depending on the title. The most notable difference is how the Dragon Age games rely much heavier on the measuring and successful maintenance of companion relationships than scoring the player character's morality.

Central Thedosian Lore and Culture

Thedas, the world of the Dragon Age games, is a rather classic medievalesque "sword and sorcery" fantasy world. There are four main races that frequent the world of Thedas: humans, elves, dwarves and Qunari. Unlike in the Mass Effect series, in Thedas humanity is the most dominant and numerous race. The Dragon Age universe is exceptionally vast and is covered both through in-game interactions and codex entries, as well as in novels, graphic novels and two large companion volumes entitled The World of Thedas. Thedas has a rich history, most of which is not actually explicitly experienced in the three games themselves, but the player will often hear stories of and references to past events and historical characters. The name of the series refers to the current age in Thedas. Prior to the Dragon Age there have been nine other distinct time periods. Local diegetic cultural and political aspects will be discussed in relevant sections of the analysis. Here I wish to introduce some of the overarching concepts that will influence and govern many of the others: the Fade, religion, and mages/magic. The lore is quite vast, and what I present here is a general and limited introduction.

Main Religion and Beliefs

Andrastianism constitutes the major (human) religion in Thedas, institutionalized through the Chantry. It is based on the Chant of Light, the teachings of Andraste, the Maker's Bride. The
Chantry dictates that the Maker has left the world because of the hubris of humanity, but that He will return if the Chant of Light is sung from all four corners of the world, that is, if all of Thedas is subjected to the Chantry's teachings. Only women are allowed to serve in higher clerical and leadership roles in the Chantry. Men can only attain the lowest rank of "brother", or are encouraged to enlist for Templar training and service. Templars are the Chantry's holy knights, trained to resist and dispel magic and charged with overseeing mages.

The Fade

Thedas exists alongside a metaphysical realm known as the Fade where demons, spirits and similar beings reside. The Fade, while mystical, is not mythological and is very real. Mages draw magic from the Fade when they cast spells. The Fade is also known as the realm of dreams, a world people visit mentally during sleep. The Fade is separated from the rest of Thedas by a barrier known as the Veil. Demons are often eager to break through the Veil and physically enter Thedas, either by possessing people or being summoned by mages. The Veil may be or become weaker in certain locations, which causes an increase in supernatural occurrences. The Fade also houses benevolent spirits, but unlike demons they seem to have very little interest in people and are far less known. Demons and spirits often appear as types representing their strongest vice/attribute. The demon hierarchy consists of creatures such as rage demons, desire demons and pride demons, while the spirits may take on forms such as spirits of compassion, spirits of justice and spirits of wisdom. The Fade is usually visited mentally; physical traversal of the Fade is extremely difficult and dangerous, and is believed to have been the cause for why the Maker originally abandoned Thedas and its children.

Magic, Mages and Maleficarum

In Thedas, possessing the ability to use magic may be a source of great power, but in many ways it is also an inescapable curse. Magic cannot be learned by everyone, one needs to be born with a sensibility to magic and the Fade. While mages possess innate deep sensibility to the Fade and can draw magical power from it, they are also rendered much more open to corruption and demonic possession. Demonic spirits are drawn to mages and their power. Children who begin to exhibit signs of being mages are often feared and become disappointments to their family; they are seen as broken because the Chantry teaches that
magic is perverted and dangerous. It is commonly believed that mages must receive training in order to control their abilities, otherwise disasters will surely occur. The Chantry laws demand that all mages are required to submit to a Circle of Magi for a life of training and mentorship.

Mages that do not belong to the Circle or who have escaped are branded as apostates. Templars are tasked with hunting down and returning apostates to the Circle. Many apostates are also branded as maleficarum because they practice magic that is not officially sanctioned by the Chantry. Being branded as maleficarum is usually, but not exclusively, related to the practice of blood magic: the most forbidden of all magic. Blood mages use the power of their own blood to control the mind and body of others, often with malicious intentions and disastrous consequences. Blood magic is so powerful that it can tear open the Veil and allow demons to physically pass through into Thedas. Templars are ordered to slay maleficarum on sight. The Circle offers no refuge or forgiveness for those who practice blood magic.

**World and Quest Structure**

All three *Dragon Age* games also follow an overall "creamy middle" structure which grants the player a certain agency in which quests to complete and the order to complete them in after an obligatory prologue. As in the *Mass Effect* games, the player is granted a hub area that houses companions and which connects to other areas via a world map. Selecting a location on the world map allows for immediate travel to the chosen location. The hub areas are the party camp (*Origins*), Kirkwall (*II*) and the village of Haven/fortress of Skyhold (*Inquisition*). The games offer several main quests and sidequests, and quests typically reward the player with experience points, items and money. The social aspects of interacting with companions and engaging in romances here are also tied to the progression of the main storyline and certain sidequests. The player is encouraged to regularly seek out companions after completing quests to check if new interactions and content have been unlocked. In these games, however, storyline progression is not enough by itself to unlock certain companion

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139 In *Origins*, travels on the map may be interrupted by short combat segments or other scenarios the player must complete before being allowed to travel on.

140 The large city of Kirkwall also functions as a location where many quests take place.

141 Haven serves as the hub area in the beginning of the game, and is replaced by Skyhold later on.
content. The player must also make sure to keep their relationship with the companions at favorable levels (see below for an explanation).

**The Player Character**

Each of the three *Dragon Age* games puts the player into a specific character/role: in *Origins* the player assumes the role of a Grey Warden, in *II* the player becomes the Champion Hawke, and in *Inquisition* the player takes on the responsibilities as Inquisitor. The player can choose between different races for the Warden (human, elf or dwarf) and the Inquisitor (human, elf, dwarf or Qunari), but Hawke is always human. All three characters can be either female or male. Like with Commander Shepard, the player is free to customize the player character's appearance or choose from preset/default designs. Appearance remains an exclusively cosmetic attribute, but gender and race provide both cosmetic and functional aspects. Gender also regulates which types of romances that are available as well as certain interactions and reactions. Race functions in a similar manner in that the player might receive different abilities, interaction options and conversational opportunities depending on which race the protagonist is. In *Inquisition*, the Inquisitor's race will also determine a latent bonus. For example, a human Inquisitor receives a bonus attribute point to spend on skills and upgrades at the beginning of the game while a Qunari Inquisitor receives a permanent 10% physical resistance bonus. Despite local alterations and different scenarios, both gender and race are equal in the sense that they offer the player the same possibilities for game completion. *Inquisition* is notable for introducing racial restrictions on two romance companions. This applies to female Inquisitors only.

All three *Dragon Age* games require the player to choose from three different combat classes: warrior, rogue and mage. This will heavily impact combat gameplay, but I raise this topic because the mage class is of particular diegetic interest. While the mage class as a functional combat class is very similar to magic-wielding classes in other RPGs, mages in the *Dragon Age* universe come with a special type of stigma that is related to the history and lore of the gameworld. A mage player may thus be met with extra reactions or have conversational options that are otherwise unavailable to "ordinary" warriors and rogues. This does not

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142 Male Hawke is the only player character who has an "iconic" appearance akin to male Commander Shepard, used for promotional and marketing purposes. He even appears on the game's box art.
amount to any particular unfair narrative advantages over warrior and rogue characters, but reflects how the lore of the game may mix with the initial choices of the player. This is also seen in how dwarves in the game universe cannot use magic and thus a player choosing a dwarf character cannot choose the mage class. The conflict of how mages are viewed and treated is a main focus in all three games. Granted, the narrative effects of a mage player should not be overstated. In II, for example, a mage player may unproblematically romance Fenris, who has a strong hate for mages and who will disapprove of the player's defense of mages. The crucial mage aspect is suddenly rendered unimportant and mostly ignored in the romance.

**Dialogue Systems**

*Origins* uses a traditional dialogue tree whereas *II* and *Inquisition* use the dialogue wheel. The Warden in *Origins* is unvoiced in dialogues and thus the dialogue tree contains a list of fully-phrased responses that are delivered immediately upon activation. Some responses contain a tag denoting that the response will trigger a particular action, such as "lie", "persuade" and "attack". Unlike the dialogue wheel, the dialogue tree is less systematic since it is not structured around a particular aesthetic design or tied to morality paths. Friendly options are not always placed at the top and rude and aggressive responses are not always presented at the bottom. This makes it especially important to pay attention to the phrasing of dialogue choices. The responses may often appear ambiguous in tone, and the player may need to select certain options and see the response to them in order to discover their intended tone/meaning. Kristine Jørgensen argues that this system, unlike the one employed in the *Mass Effect* series, enables players to be "free to make their own interpretations of the Grey Warden's personality, how the PC sounds with respect to intonation and vocal tone, and of how the PC reacts emotionally in different situations" (2010: 320). This is overall true, but many dialogue responses carry specific intentions and meanings that become obvious when other characters react to them. The game remains tightly scripted in most areas, although the game might feel less so when the protagonist delivers lines silently.

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143 The Warden can express certain short phrases and sounds during combat and when executing certain commands.
II and Inquisition use a fully-voiced Shepard-like protagonist and introduce the Dragon Age version of the dialogue wheel. The wheel retains most of its basic functions from the Mass Effect series, but has some added tweaks to accommodate the specifics of these games. The most notable feature is how the wheel includes an icon in the center to describe what the option does. An investigation option, for example, is usually marked by a question mark, while a flirt option is indicated by a heart. The wheel in Inquisition even offers special help text that appears with certain important choices. Help text such as "Begin relationship with Iron Bull" and "Offer the rebel mages full alliance", appears above the wheel when the appropriate option is highlighted.\textsuperscript{144} On one hand, this makes it easier to discern between the various options to plan gameplay more carefully, while on the other hand it might also make the experience more predictable and less spontaneous.

The dialogue wheel in II and Inquisition is structured after moods/tones rather than morality (since these games do not measure the player character's morality). In II, upper-right options correspond to diplomatic/helpful responses, the middle options are charming/humor responses, and the lower-right options are reserved for the aggressive/direct responses. Consistently pursuing a response path will crystallize Hawke's dominant personality accordingly, which changes some of Hawke's auto-dialogue. The "regular three" options in Inquisition focus much less on such a sharp divide between responses and dominant personalities.

\textsuperscript{144} At other times the help text feature does not take itself too seriously: during a quest the player may have sex with a Minister Bellise in order to gain her favor and the flirt option has the corresponding help text "Carpe diem!"
Companion Interactions and Relationship Systems

The *Dragon Age* games have a much more extensive focus on companion interactions and build entire systems around companion relations. In-depth companion interactions normally take place in the hub areas such as the party camp, Kirkwall and Haven/Skyhold. I said above that these games do not directly measure the player character's morality in a Paragon/Renegade-like system, but reflect this in the player's relationship with companions. That said, the relationship system is not a direct equivalent to the morality system of the *Mass Effect* series, but they both focus on different aspects of character building. Points will now be attributed to different companions rather than to the player character when choosing certain actions and responses. The three games have different ways of handling this system, although *Origins* and *Inquisition* are fairly similar. Notably, *II* limits most of its companion-specific interactions and scenes to explicit quests.

*Origins* and *Inquisition* use an approval system. In *Origins*, each companion comes with their own approval gauge. The approval scores can be increased or decreased during conversations with companions or as a result of choosing certain actions and responses during quests. Approval can also be raised by giving companions special gift items that can be found or bought around the world. A message will briefly appear on the screen if a companion approves or disapproves of something, accompanied by the number of plus or minus points the player earned. Treating companions favorably is important in order to keep their approval high. Maintaining a high approval with companions unlocks benefits such as more conversational options, personal quests, combat bonuses and romance possibilities. Companions have individual personalities and thus maintaining high approval with all of them requires different strategies. For example, Alistair approves if the player is caring and sympathizing, whereas Morrigan approves of more direct attitudes and disapproves of...
sentimentality and apologetic responses. Companions may have various approval preferences, but what they all have in common is that none of them likes being ridiculed, overly criticized or insulted. The player may choose whatever playstyle they want, for example being heroic and kind or ruthless and brutal, and still enjoy strong relationships and romances with companions. As long as things are maintained in the private sphere the player's actions in the public sphere are generally of little consequence. *Inquisition* also uses the approval system, but takes a more "human" approach to it: approvals are no longer gathered in overt numerical terms, but phrased as "Cassandra (slightly/greatly) approves/disapproves" and are no longer measured in a gauge the player can check. Instead, the player must check how the companions greet and react to the Inquisitor to determine approval. High approval does not enable special combat bonuses or abilities.

*II* moves away from the friendly/unfriendly modes of the approval system and introduces another way of maintaining companion relationships: Friendship and Rivalry. The player's responses and decisions throughout the game will shape how companions view Hawke, and they will gravitate toward being Hawke's friend or Hawke's rival. This is somewhat similar to the approval system, but the crucial difference is that Friend and Rival are considered equally valid relationship aspects in terms of gameplay. Friendship/Rivalry affects how the specific companions react to and address Hawke, but a rivalry-aligned companion does not equal an unfriendly companion. Whereas approval/disapproval has more to do with liking and disliking, Friendship/Rivalry is more about different types of respect. A companion can be loyal to and respect Hawke regardless of whether they are 100% friends or rivals. The player is free to focus on being friends or rivals with all companions or to mix it up at their own leisure. The player is nevertheless encouraged to max each companion in either end of the scale. Doing so unlocks bonus skills, personal quests and romances. Some romance scenes and dialogues will also differ slightly depending on relationship alignment. Once a companion reaches 100% Friendship or Rivalry the relationship crystallizes and no further points can be accumulated for that companion. The companion might still object to certain replies and actions, but the relationship is fixed. The Friendship/Rivalry system is also structured to encourage the player to vary between companions while traveling. Maximizing relationships with everyone is difficult if the player only uses a static party throughout the game.

The rivalry aspects are basically free from serious consequences. No matter how badly the player may treat the companion they will still enjoy their loyalty and respect without fearing
any consequences beside the occasional snide remark. For some reason, the companions become painfully dependent on the fairly ordinary Hawke (fairly ordinary compared to Commander Shepard and the Warden) for everything, and in many instances rival companions will be more or less forced to admit that Hawke was right all along and that Hawke was really looking after their best interests after all. A rivalry-romanced Anders sums up rivalry in a good manner: "You represent everything I hate, but I cannot stop thinking about you!" Companions become more like puppets in the player's powerful grasp than autonomous individuals. This may be an overstatement considering how manipulable companions in the other games are, but it becomes much more apparent once any crucial consequences are removed.145

List of Companions

*Dragon Age: Origins:* Alistair (human), Morrigan (human), Leliana (human), Zevran (elf), Wynne (human), Sten (Qunari), Oghren (dwarf), Shale (golem), Dog (war hound), Loghain (human).146

*Dragon Age II:* Bethany Hawke/Carver Hawke (human), Aveline Vallen (human), Varric Tethras (dwarf), Anders (human), Fenris (elf), Merrill (elf), Isabela (human), Sebastian Vael (human).

*Dragon Age: Inquisition:* Cassandra Pentaghast (human), Varric Tethras (dwarf), Solas (elf), Vivienne (human), Blackwall (human), Iron Bull (Qunari), Dorian Pavus (human), Sera (elf), Cole (spirit/human).

Party Banter

While traveling around Thedas, companions may suddenly begin to talk to each other and briefly discuss various topics and make jokes. This feature is known as party banter.148 Party

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145 Friendship/Stockholm Syndrome would be a much more fitting description.
146 Loghain replaces Alistair if Alistair leaves the player's party after the "Landsmeet" main quest.
147 Both Hawke siblings are initially available, but one will die during the Prologue. This depends on Hawke's class. Bethany dies if Hawke is a mage, and Carver dies if Hawke is a warrior or a rogue.
banter, while scripted, is dynamic in that it occurs outside dialogues and cutscenes; party banter occurs in "the wild" when the player is exploring. Depending on the game, banter occurs either by triggering invisible cues in the landscape or from the passage of time. The type of party banter the player hears is determined by several factors: current progression in the game's storyline, companions present in the party, decisions made by the player, and romances. Some banter is episodic. A topic might be partially discussed in one banter segment and then picked up and discussed further in the next. Party banter can easily be interrupted/skipped/missed, for example if the player enters combat, engages in a conversation or changes areas while the banter is running.

Party banter helps to create more life when traveling around in the games, and it further deepens the personality of the companions and reveals what they think of each other. The banter is often humorous and is many times a source for more information about characters and culture that is not obtained in regular conversations. Companions are especially inclined toward prying into embarrassing and private aspects of others, particularly if the player is currently romancing a companion. Party banter is also a source for sexual information and discussion, which makes the feature a key point of investigation in this thesis.

Most of the games' explicit discourses about sex and sexuality can be found in party banter, which makes the topics more of a concern for the private rather than the public sphere in these games. As the "banter" part implies, leaving topics about sex and sexuality mostly to these exchanges allows them to take on humorous and spontaneous characteristics rather than directly interfering with main dialogues as a sort of "sex for sex's sake" purpose. Party banter reveals the desire to talk about sexuality in various contexts, but that it is toned down into optional emergent content. It builds on a sort of proairectic logic that such discourse and behavior occur normally between people. Party banter nevertheless contains a whole lot of sexual discourse and innuendos that have no equal in Mass Effect.

Companions in the Mass Effect games may also provide such banter, but the feature is nowhere as extensive and involved as in the Dragon Age series.
Romances

The *Dragon Age* romances are mechanically similar to the *Mass Effect* romances in that they are initiated and performed through the dialogue interface by choosing appropriate options in specific conversations/scenes, and in that the player is largely responsible for approaching a companion romantically. In the dialogue tree of *Origins*, the player must identify and choose relevant replies, whereas in the dialogue wheel of *II* and *Inquisition* the player needs to choose the flirt options indicated by the heart icon. The player is free to flirt with multiple companions at once, but must ultimately choose one companion to lock the romance with. In the *Dragon Age* series, the player is not simply required to progress correctly along pre-written conversations triggered by earlier conversations and events. The player must also make sure to actually engage frequently with the companions in order to raise the approval levels or Friendship/Rivalry alignments. Romances in *Dragon Age* thus require the player to exert more time and effort than in the *Mass Effect* series, and depending on the companion and title there may even be romance-specific quests. There is overall more gameplay investment involved in the *Dragon Age* romances. All three *Dragon Age* games also include casual flirtations, brief sexual encounters and romantic snares, just like the *Mass Effect* games.

Romances in the *Dragon Age* series might hold extra gameplay incentives. As the games often reward the player with increased companion approval scores when flirting, the player might be inclined to flirt with most available companions regardless of romantic intent in order to gain favor with them. This is perhaps most pertinent for *Origins*, in which higher approval unlocks significant combat bonuses for the companions. *II* enables some bonus skills for raising Friendship/Rivalry. Steven Holmes argues that this setup might attract the attention of players who are not normally interested in romances (2016: 126). This mechanical approach may complicate matters as the game characters might see interactions as romantic/sexual interest from the player, who might in reality be interested in points. This is a striking difference from the more straightforward romances of the *Mass Effect* series. With that said, it is fully possible to maximize approval scores without flirting. *Inquisition* does not offer combat bonuses for raising approval: here the focus is exclusively on narrative character

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149 In the case of *Dragon Age II*, Peter Kelly argues that it is "often not as simple as always selecting the romantic dialogue option to successfully woo a companion [...] Attention must be paid to each companion's backstory and personality quirks to effectively navigate their romantic wheels" (2015: 53). In terms of game mechanics, this is not true. An explicit flirt option may not always yield an enthusiastic or flirty reply, but there is no penalty for choosing flirt options when they appear. Choosing all the available flirt options with a companion will enable the player to successfully romance them.
development whereas the ludic developments require fighting and collecting experience points, emphasizing that character interactions are important in their own right as well.

Romances are also differently structured in the narrative sense. In the *Mass Effect* series, the romance builds up gradually during the game and reaches a conclusion with a sex scene after launching the game's point-of-no-return mission. In the *Dragon Age* games, the sex scene happens much earlier, usually mid-game, and marks the beginning/locking of a romance rather than its ultimate reward. The romance conclusion is instead usually a farewell/reunion scene. *Inquisition* is the first game to introduce full romances that have no explicit sex scenes as part of their progression.\(^{150}\) Finally, whereas interspecies (sexual) relations were explicit topics in the *Mass Effect* series, interracial relations are rarely seen as peculiar or noteworthy in *Dragon Age*. There is some discourse, but it is nowhere near as extensive as the ones employed in *Mass Effect 2*. This is likely due to the fact that there are much more obvious biological and physical differences between the alien species of the Milky Way than between the mostly human-like races of Thedas.

**List of Romances and Flirtations**

The following is a list of the romances and flirtations offered in each *Dragon Age* game. Information in brackets refers to which gender the character is available to.

*Dragon Age: Origins*

Romance: Alistair (F), Morrigan (M), Zevran (both), Leliana (both).
Flirtation: Darren (both), Iona (both),\(^{151}\) Tely (M), Mardy (M), Gorim (F),\(^{152}\) Isabela (both), desire demon (both),\(^{153}\) Cammen (F), Gheyna (M), Kaitlyn (M), Bella (M), Bann Teagan (F), prostitutes (both).

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\(^{150}\) Technically, romances with non-Liara aliens in the *Mass Effect* series have no such scenes either, but sex is implied.

\(^{151}\) Darren and Iona are only available in the Human Noble Origin story.

\(^{152}\) Tely, Mardy and Gorim are only available in the Dwarf Noble Origin story.

\(^{153}\) The desire demon is only available to a mage Warden.
**Dragon Age II**

Romance: Fenris (both), Isabela (both), Merrill (both), Anders (both).
Flirtation: Sebastian (F), Aveline (both), Jethann (both), Zevran (both), Orlanna (both), Tallis (both),\(^{154}\) prostitutes (both).

**Dragon Age: Inquisition**

Romance: Cassandra (M), Dorian (M), Cullen (F),\(^{155}\) Blackwall (F), Iron Bull (both), Sera (F), Josephine (both), Solas (M).\(^{156}\)
Flirtation: Vivienne (both), Lace Harding (both), Minister Bellise (both).

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Male same-gender</th>
<th>Male opposite-gender</th>
<th>Female same-gender</th>
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<td>Romances</td>
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<td>Flirtations</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
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Table 2: The number of romances and flirtations available for each protagonist gender.

The numbers\(^{157}\) presented here paint a much more progressive picture than the available romances and flirtations in the *Mass Effect* series. There are still more options for heterosexual relations than homosexual relations, but the numbers are not as uneven. Interestingly, there are more heterosexual romance options for female protagonists than male protagonists this time around, although male characters get more options "on the side". Another notable point is how many total options there are, especially in terms of flirtations. Please note that the flirtation numbers must not be overstated in terms of significance. Many of the flirtations are extremely brief and almost insignificant. Nevertheless, they do represent the variety of choices the player is offered. There is a trend toward more straight male flirtations and more opportunities for female homosexual relations than male homosexual relations, and there is a gradual decrease in flirtations. At the same time, this is complicated by the total number of options available for female protagonists, which might indicate that the *Dragon Age* series is not as targeted toward the straight male demographic as the *Mass Effect* games. Numbers are far from everything, and the next two chapters will dive much deeper

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\(^{154}\) Tallis is encountered in the *Mark of the Assassin* DLC.
\(^{155}\) Additionally, the Inquisitor must be human or elven.
\(^{156}\) The Inquisitor must also be elven.
\(^{157}\) I have listed "prostitutes" as a single entry in the applicable categories in this tally.
into the series' representations of homosexuality and gender. We will begin with the public gameworld.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I have introduced the overall gameworld and the central interaction mechanics for the *Dragon Age* series. The mechanics and quest/world structure are fairly similar to the *Mass Effect* series, but there is much more focus on maintaining favorable relationship levels with companions rather than measuring the player's morality. This takes place either through the approval system (*Origins* and *Inquisition*) or the Friendship/Rivalry system (*II*). Romances generally require that the player maintains these systems in addition to flirting with companions. The narrative romance structure of the *Dragon Age* series is different: the sex scene (if any) typically occurs in the middle of the game rather than at the end, and the romance concludes either with a farewell scene or a reunion scene.
Chapter VIII:
Sexuality and Gender in Public Thedas

The fantasy realm of Thedas invites players of the Dragon Age series to a world where the magical and mythical clash with the social and political, and my aim in this chapter is to explore the representations and constructions of sexuality and gender in the public gameworld. Like the Milky Way galaxy in the Mass Effect series, Thedas is a world where the player must not only battle the forces of evil to save the world, but also regularly confront and solve many small and large cultural, social, racial and political issues. The Dragon Age games take a much more explicit approach to topics of sexuality and gender and the series can generally be considered more daring and more experimental than the Mass Effect series. The Dragon Age series included same-gender romance options for both genders already in the first instalment, something which the Mass Effect series did not enable until the third game. There is no equivalent to the asari and their exhaustive mythologization in the Dragon Age series, enabling the series to explore sexuality and gender primarily through other types of characters and settings. With that said, the series often has a more strained relationship with non-normative content, seemingly because it makes it so visible and available. It is important to acknowledge that the Dragon Age series also evolves over time, and like Mass Effect, the first game begins as a sort of testing ground that slowly develops with more diverse and progressive representational approaches.

How does homosexuality fare in a public gameworld that evolves to openly confront gender myths and politics, discuss transgender topics, and talk about sex toys and "unconventional" sexual practices—a world that increasingly wants to move away from the restraints of heteronormativity? Homosexuality is (possibly) much more visible in these games, though here the topic can actually become more unstable and more subjected to the rather harsh dominion of the gay button. There are no "exclusively gay" characters prior to the release of Dragon Age: Inquisition, and the first two games rely heavily on conditional bisexuality. Dragon Age: Inquisition, however, demonstrates that great changes have taken place over time, and the game, with all its progress and lingering problems, ultimately heralds a new dawn for homosexuality and queerness in mainstream games.
I will discuss the representations of sexuality and gender in public Thedas by focusing on the available representations and possible interactions, similar to the analysis in chapter V. This chapter is structured a bit differently than chapter V because the public gameworld of the Dragon Age series has different practices. The discussion is structured around the following four main areas: protagonist gender specificity; default heterosexuality, essentialism and queering; queering the established; and implicit and explicit homosexuality. Investigating these areas provides a thorough understanding of the complex relationship between homosexuality, heterosexuality and other queer and non-normative content. For this and the following chapter, I presume that the reader has read the Mass Effect chapters, as I will regularly make references to this series for comparison.

**The Fantastic (and the) Mainstream**

Fantasy, like science fiction, is a space for imagining and exploring other worlds that can be quite similar to and vastly unlike our own, and in fantasy we are often invited to grand adventures in realms of magic, monsters and legends. Modern fantasy, Rosemary Jackson argues, is "rooted in ancient myth, mysticism, folklore, fairy tale and romance" (1981: 34), and it "often takes place in an artificially sanitized medieval world" (Balay 2012: 924). These elements have lent themselves well to video games since their early beginnings. Fantasy may regularly be connoted with escapism, childishness and frivolity, and considered to be of lesser importance than more "realistic" and "serious" fiction. Jackson resists such devaluing views and calls fantasy "the literature of subversion" because, among other things, the genre can challenge constructed notions of "reality" and comment on/critique the limitations and lacks of culture (1981: 48). Likewise, Daniel Baker argues that fantasy has a progressive potential that can "direct the subject (reader) towards a new, radical, (perhaps) emancipated subjectivity" (2012: 437). Fantasy's fundamental premise in Jackson's views is how the genre "offers unique possibilities for the subversion of social and cultural norms [...]" (Roberts and McCallum-Stewart 2016: 3). Concerning the topic of popular fantasy, however, Jude Roberts and Esther McCallum-Stewart argue that Jackson's position is "rather more strongly stated" than their own position, and remain cautious about making definitive claims about the subversive potential of fantasy "to offer a space for critical reflection on social norms of gender and sexuality" (2016: 3). Jackson argues that many best-selling fantasies, such as those written by C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien, move away from the "unsettling implications
which are found at the centre of the purely 'fantastic', and in the process are "expelling their desire and frequently displacing it into religious longing and nostalgia" (1981: 9). To Jackson, such romanticizing popular fantasy texts "defuse potentially disturbing, anti-social drives and retreat from any profound confrontation with existential dis-ease" (1981: 9). Fantasy, then, like science fiction, is a genre that harbors subversive potential, but may easily be used in order to affirm and uphold existing cultural norms and beliefs.

The nostalgia of much popular fantasy, since it often relies on myths and folklore, can long for a time when things were different and supposedly "better", and this may quickly serve to (re-)eroticize heterosexuality and eliminate queerness. Brian Atteberry calls fantasy's reliance on traditional storytelling forms and motifs both a strength and a weakness: fantasy can "reimagine both character and story", but "a willingness to return to narrative structures of the past can entail as well an unquestioning acceptance of its social structures" (1992: 87). The retrospection and nostalgia of fantasy can also be ironic, however, which Anne Balay argues in relation to queerness in adolescent fantasy fiction. Fantasy's narrative logic and medieval worlds are nostalgic because they "deliberatively recall and recreate the past", but Balay contends that such nostalgia is ironic and self-aware "since fantasy both draws from these rules and constantly challenges and explodes them to avoid repeating previous texts" (2012: 924). One purpose of fantasy, Balay argues, is "to try out new realities and expand the limits of possibility, though always referencing the world as we know it" (2012: 925). The world as we know it can easily furnish the stage for challenges as well as resist challenges.

Stephen Kenneally argues that fantasy has a tendency to maintain a normative framework. Despite its subversive potential for exploring queer themes, the actual engagement and exploration of such themes within fantasy has historically been "noticeably limited" (2016: 8). Baker argues that in the West, "the vast majority of fantasy, those multi-volume mega-series, have been reflections, if not products of conservative politics" (2012: 438). A fantasy text, like any other text, is "produced within, and determined by its social context" (Jackson 1981: 3), so it figures that explorations of themes such as homosexuality and queerness, at least in mainstream texts, only start to appear once culture becomes more progressive. According to Kenneally, there were few texts with LGBT elements in science fiction and fantasy up to 1983, and the late 1980s and the 1990s saw an "overwhelming increase" in LGBT depictions and characters in fantasy (2016: 11). In the mainstream context, this is undoubtedly connected to the increased visibility and more progressive acknowledgements of homosexuality in the
media. The world of Thedas, as we shall see, is a perfect example of a re-imagining of a mythical past which attempts to push at the boundaries of sexuality and gender conventions in a constant struggle with our own dominant norms. Dragon Age re-presents a much queerer medieval world than many popular fantasy texts, though conditionality is an important factor for much of its queering.

**Prelude: Sexuality in Thedas**

The Dragon Age universe has, unlike the Mass Effect universe, an official "decree" regarding sexuality which, contradictorily, progressively states that all sexualities are considered natural and simultaneously manages to promote heterosexuality as the norm. This heterosexual norm is to some extent explicitly recognized as troublesome rather than taking heterosexuality for granted as the only valid sexuality. Prior to Inquisition, views on sexuality had to be gathered from various character interactions and observations. The first volume of The World of Thedas, a (currently) two-volume companion book to the games, includes a note seemingly written by in-game scholar character Brother Genitivi called "The Sex Lives of Everyday Thedosians", based on reflections of his research. This note eventually found its way into Inquisition as a codex entry where it is now named "Sexuality in Thedas", and I reproduce this short note in its entirety:

What I find most interesting is that, despite the lack of open discussion on matters of human sexuality, there is a commonality to be found on the subject in all Andrastian lands. Typically, one's sexual habits are considered natural and separate from matters of procreation, and only among the nobility, where procreation involves issues of inheritance and the union of powerful families, is it considered of vital importance. Yet, even there, a noble who has done their duty to the family might be allowed to pursue their own sexual interests without raising eyebrows. The view on indulging lusts with a member of the same gender varies from land to land. In Orlais, it is considered a quirk of character and nothing more. In Ferelden, it is a matter of scandal if done indiscreetly but otherwise nothing noteworthy. In Tevinter, it is considered selfish and deviant behavior among nobles, but actively encouraged with favored slaves.

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158 Adolescent fantasy fiction has been an important contributor. The late 1990s and early 2000s show an increase in young adult fantasy fiction with gay characters, and "exploration of sexual identity, including queerness in all its forms, is increasingly common in [young adult fiction]", though most of the young adult genre is in the realist mode rather than the fantastic (Balay 2012: 926).

159 Genitivi's writings can be found in all three games. Genitivi appears in Origins and must be rescued from a cult. The player may choose to murder the esteemed scholar at the end of the quest.

160 The player can find the note hidden away in an abandoned mansion in the forests of the Emerald Graves.
Nowhere is it forbidden, and sex of any kind is only considered worthy of judgment when taken to awful excess or performed in the public eye. (Gaider 2013: 72)

We can identify some general points that will be useful and brought along for the investigation ahead. First of all, the "lack of open discussion on matters of human sexuality" is interesting because it indicates that sexuality is not something Thedosians discuss and thus is not something the player should expect to hear about either. Surprisingly, then, the games actually do have much discourse on sexuality and the player will hear even more of it than in any of the Mass Effect games (though it is rarely "open discussion"). Genitivi's observations seem to exclusively concern human sexuality (Ferelden, Orlais and Tevinter are human-governed nations), and we are not taught anything about the elves, dwarves or Qunari. Human homosexuality is not seen as unnatural. Sexuality, or "sexual habits" as it is called here, "is what it is". Homosexuality is not particularly troublesome, only if sex is "taken to awful excess" or displayed in public, which also goes for any other kinds of sexuality and sexual acts. Only the nobility seems to have particular issues with homosexuality, but this concerns first and foremost the continuation of lineages and alliances between families and is not derived from any belief that homosexuality is wrong. Orlais views homosexuality as a "quirk of character", whereas in Ferelden it is seemingly a scandalous manner if done "indiscreetly", whatever that means. In Ferelden, then, homosexuality is nothing noteworthy as long as it stays behind closed doors, indicating that silence is the best treatment for "successful" homosexual practice. These views do not really testify to the assumption that one's sexual habits are typically considered "natural", unless they are heterosexual. These habits would not have needed to be viewed as quirks or catalysts for scandals otherwise.

If homosexuality in Thedas is typically seen as "non-unnatural" (since it is clearly not viewed as natural in the way it is presented in the note), one would perhaps expect to find a lot of homosexuality in the games. While there certainly is more representation of homosexuality than in the Mass Effect games, the "Sexuality in Thedas" note may serve as an example of a type of closet rhetoric that dictates that homosexuality is perfectly fine in private, but it is generally not to be expected in public because somebody has stated this. This is specifically articulated here (though subtly through companion books and easily-missed codex entries)

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161 Qunari sexual culture is drastically different from mainstream Thedas. See below for a discussion.

162 Tevinter views on sexuality are among the most explicitly pronounced ones in the games, and find particular expression through companions Fenris and Dorian Pavus in II and Inquisition respectively. I will discuss these characters below and in the next chapter.
and must be seen as an explicit condition in the game universe. Therefore, since homosexuality is publicly eschewed, it is also implied that the public gameworld will not contain much of it. This could be seen as an attempt to excuse the (lack of) representation of homosexuality on the grounds that "it is natural, but not public", but simultaneously these are issues that are sometimes actively incorporated into and explored more or less successfully in the games. There is a certain will to engage with these topics. This is rather different from the Mass Effect games where homosexuality is largely the domain of the asari and can be safely explained away and heteronormalized. The absence of a heteronormalized all-female species calls for different representational strategies, and the Dragon Age games attempt to do this more explicitly. Introducing explicit cultural views on sexuality is interesting and exciting, but I do think it is important to be mindful of the fact that this approach can easily work as representational dismissal, or be focused in particularly stereotypical ways. Homosexuality as a mostly hidden and private venture is an example of this, and with "Sexuality in Thedas", public homosexuality is more or less explicitly discouraged, both as in-game occurrences and as design choices.

**Gender Specificity**

Playing as a male or a female protagonist is overall a gender-neutral affair concerning how the character is addressed and reacted to, and in what the player can say and do. Playing as a female protagonist enables various gender-specific interactions and reactions and, like in the Mass Effect games, this is reflected most strongly in the first game and becomes rather minor in the next two games. Investigating gender specificity is important because it allows us to better understand what types of gender views the games implicitly assume, and how playing a woman is often distinctly different from playing a man. This also reveals assumptions about sexuality. Once more sexuality is not a "trait" the player can choose for their protagonist, but rather something that must be performed through interaction. Male gender is taken for granted, while female gender is explicitly marked and gendered as such. Mass Effect has two instances where gender specificity is used to invoke sexism from unsympathetic male characters and Mass Effect 3 has some notable recognition of gender, but besides that, gender-specific dialogue is mostly found in companion interactions and romances. Dragon Age follows that model. The dialogic gender specificity in Origins is specifically female: the player can "call upon" being a woman, but cannot call upon being a man in the same sense. Male protagonists
are default. Male protagonists in Origins also have the exclusive opportunity to claim physical rewards such as kisses from women for completing certain quests. The gender specificity in Origins is far more complex than in Mass Effect, which is likely reflecting a type of gendered world-building BioWare is attempting in this series contra in the other.

**Adventuring With Patriarchy**

Thedas has a more distinctly gendered official institutional structure than the Milky Way, and this is particularly interesting considering the gameworld has a rather open view on sexuality, yet gender is initially viewed more traditionally. The Maker, the father and origin of all creation, is central to the dominant human religion Andrastianism. Andraste is a Jesus/Joan of Arc hybrid who, according to belief, ascended to become the Maker's bride. Andraste's centrality in the human world narrative has served to make women in charge of the clerical duties of the Chantry. Men can only achieve the lowest rank of "brother" in the Chantry hierarchy, and the higher echelons are reserved for women. This is, as Mother Giselle reveals in Inquisition, because the Chant of Light dictates that men are more vulnerable to anger or passion. Mother Giselle contends that this is really a political matter. Men are instead encouraged to serve the faith as templars. Women may also enlist for templar training, but female templars are far less common. The matriarchal structure of the Chantry is an interesting reversal of the patriarchal structure of many real-world religions and offers insight into how religion might be organized outside of its traditional trajectories. Simultaneously, the Chantry does reproduce some gendered stereotypes such as men primarily being suited as active fighters and enforcers while women are more passive, caring and secretarial. This is also noticeable in the structure of the Grey Wardens, the organization the player joins in Origins, which for unknown reasons has had very few female members. Dwarven society is ruled by a rigid caste system which seems to override any structural significance of gender, yet also here warriors are mostly male. The Qunari have the most rigid system of them all, but I will return to this peculiarity later. Thedas, especially in the Ferelden of Origins, is rather traditionally structured.

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163 The Chantry is notorious for its brutal treatment of mages and its goal to submit the entire world to Andrastianism (which is believed to bring the Maker back), so the game perhaps suggests that it is religion in itself and not gender that is determinant for its operations.
Jane Tolmie argues that heroines in many contemporary fantasy novels "remain at their best when rising above external conditions that are against them in gender-based ways" (2006: 148). Female-fronted fantasy often uses gender structures to highlight and explore the disenfranchisement of women in culture. A typical premise for a fantasy heroine according to Tolmie is "to have patriarchy itself as her adventure" (2006: 157), which is often considered that which makes such fantasy texts notably or typically "female". Such perspectives may often, as Atteberry (2002) reminds us, render the familiar and the taken-for-granted, such as societal structures and relations, different and problematic. As with the Mass Effect series, the Dragon Age gameworlds retain mostly the same overall perspective regardless of protagonist because the focus is not primarily on gender issues and the game needs to accommodate the possibility of female and male protagonists for the exact same adventure. Nevertheless, the Dragon Age gameworlds also reveal themselves to be rather male-centered and that "female-ing" consists of explicitly encountering this male-centrism.

In Origins, female protagonists of any race will encounter patriarchal structures and assumptions early on. The player is recruited into the Grey Wardens, a warrior order dedicated to eliminating darkspawn. Like in Mass Effect, a central military-type setting is established, a typically male-dominated field in both reality and fiction. The Grey Wardens are known for recruiting all types of allies due to their extremely dangerous line of work and any volunteer is a good volunteer (that is, as long as they survive the initial joining ritual). If the player character is a woman, however, companion Alistair will be surprised and state that there have never been many women in the Grey Wardens, wondering why that is. The player is enabled a snarky\textsuperscript{164} response: "Probably because we're too smart for you." Alistair humorously turns this joke back on the player: "True. But if you're here, what does that make you?" There are two other gender-specific options available as well: "You want more women in the Wardens, do you?" and "How about you stop thinking of me as a woman?" The player can also move away from the gender discourse by selecting "I can handle myself better than most", which, while deflecting explicit engagement with the gender issue, nevertheless seems to imply that women are generally not considered warriors. All options confront the player with the fact that women are not a common sight among the Grey Wardens and that the female Warden is clearly "different", regardless of race.

\textsuperscript{164} I assume this is meant to be snarky due to the context, phrasing and Alistair's response to it. The difficulty with the dialogue tree in this game, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, is the uncertainty of the meaning of certain options until they are chosen.
What is striking about the female gender specificity in *Origins* is that it is more involved than in *Mass Effect*, but it takes on the characteristics of a special trait like race and combat class. Mages, elves, dwarves and women meet different types of prejudice aimed at their being, but human men are considered default and are not confronted on gendered terms. Choosing to be a female Warden is in many ways thus the same as marking the Warden specifically as "other" in the male-human-centered sphere of Ferelden. Male prejudice against women warriors occurs again in the main quest in Redcliffe. This quest involves protecting a village against the undead (or dooming it by not helping).\(^1\) Mayor Murdock is skeptical toward a female Warden: "So you're the Grey Warden, are you? I didn't think they made women Grey Wardens." The player may ask why Murdock thinks this way: "For more reasons than you'd care to hear, I bet. Still, there's no reason to think Bann Teagan's lost his mind." Murdock obviously does not believe that women are capable fighters, which is well reflected in the male-populated Redcliffe village defense force. The issue of sexism is briefly recognized here before it is immediately dismissed, and the player cannot actively engage with it other than actually being successful as a female Warden and hopefully "prove" her worth to the world implicitly. A notable exception is the Qunari companion Sten. Qunari philosophy, the Qun, dictates that women are not suitable as warriors, and Sten confronts a female Warden and expresses disbelief that she is a woman and in charge. By raising approval with him, however, the player will see him come to accept the Warden as a powerful and respected leader. While this may not change Sten's view on female warriors in general, it nevertheless serves as a more explicit opportunity to more actively engage with gender issues.

The player will meet and interact with plenty of women in all sorts of different societal positions, but there is a notion that leading women are unusual in Ferelden. Upon meeting Morrigan for the first time, the player's male companions will be scared since Morrigan is a witch, and she will direct her attention to the seemingly unfazed Warden and emphasize gender: "You there. Women do not frighten like little boys. Tell me your name and I shall tell you mine." Morrigan's gender views are the opposite of the dominant views: women are tough and rational whereas men are scared "little boys". If the player gains high approval with her, she will reveal in a personal conversation how she was intrigued to encounter such a formidable woman in the forest, a woman "obviously more potent than the men she traveled

\(^1\) This is one of the four main quests and can be completed at any point from early on to very late in the game.
with". Pirate captain Isabela\textsuperscript{166} is similarly impressed after the player helps her fight off some thugs, finding it "refreshing to see another woman who answers to none". These tidbits testify to a specific gendered world-building where women are often seen as the underdog—Ferelden is a man's world, quite essentially. At the same time, this is complicated by the fact that the protagonist being female is not a recurring topic and only something that is hinted at here and there. Such gender-specific options and gender recognitions can be interesting. They may be empowering for female players because they allow them to actively confront a dominant culture that neither expects them to be fighters nor gamers. The more troublesome aspect is how this gender specificity is so briefly acknowledged because the game cannot deviate too much from its default script. Gender visibility may helpfully confront gender norms, but gender specificity seems more like a small feature here rather than an actual topic for thorough engagement. It is a "feminist button" feature that acknowledges structural gender inequalities, yet quickly retreats from that exploration before it becomes too overtly political, as if the game reminds itself that it is not about gender per se even though it sporadically wants to be. It is also problematic that male protagonists do not face such issues and that gender inequality remains mostly invisible or implicit here. This may serve to support the notion that men are default and women are "gendered", and that gender issues are women's issues that men should not be confronted or "bothered" with.\textsuperscript{167}

**Gender Revenge**

A more problematic aspect of gender specificity is the type of gender revenge rhetoric that appears in the early "Joining" quest in *Origins*. Revenge themes, "the notion of gender war and revenge" as discussed by Gill (2007), are an emergent postfeminist phenomenon (especially in advertising): "Rather than playfully reversing gender roles, revenge adverts put the supposed love-hate relationship between men and women – 'battle of the sexes' – centre stage" (Gill 2007: 106). Typical revenge rhetoric is having women exact revenge upon men and their gender, for example by humorously humiliating them and their "male incapacities". *Mass Effect 2* may briefly engage with themes of gender revenge when a female Shepard may indicate she would have shot Harkin in the groin, a typical gender revenge theme. In *Origins*,

\textsuperscript{166} Isabela becomes a companion in *Dragon Age II*, and is an important character regarding representations of homosexuality both in the public and private gameworlds. See below and next chapter.

\textsuperscript{167} *Origins* enables one very notable exception to this, although it is fairly implicit and wholly conditional. I will address it in the next main section.
gender revenge is evident in how a female Warden is enabled to respond to the other recruits during the Joining main quest. A recruit will freak out at the sight of darkspawn and the player has the option to reply "It appears that I am the only man here." This works to simultaneously emphasize the toughness of the female Warden and belittle women at the expense of humiliating men. Bravery is coded as male and something men are expected to possess while fear is implicitly coded as female. Women (i.e., the Warden) can also possess this, but it is still considered a male trait. It is thus also unmanly and unbecoming for men to be fearful. This reply is not responded directly to. A similar situation occurs during the Joining ritual itself when the other recruits express (unmanly) fear once more, enabling a special option: "I swear I'm the bravest one here, and I'm a woman", which once again criticizes others on gendered grounds and assumed gendered expectations, while simultaneously indicating that the woman in question is clearly acting in an unexpected manner for women. These options play on distinct revenge themes, though the responses are relegated to mere commentary, as if to enable the player to at least express it but not get reactions to it. This gender-specific rhetoric plays mostly on humiliating and belittling men instead of making a case for empowering women in a landscape that clearly does not expect women to be warriors.  

Gender revenge rhetoric frequently finds its place in everyday discourse, which may partly explain why it shows up in video games and other media. Character dichotomy beliefs are popular and traits and abilities are often viewed as gendered. They become sources for social stigma such as not being "manly enough" for men or not "womanly enough" for women, and are generally found in seemingly innocent and unproblematic statements such as "do not act like a little girl" and "start behaving like a man". Such attitudes exemplify what Elisabeth Peel calls "mundane heterosexism" because such ideas are "either unnoticed or unnoticeable because they are socially normative" (Clarke et al 2010: 119), and they work to enforce heteronormative gender and sexuality roles. Revenge themes and rhetoric may offer a way to turn the tables on the oppressor, but Gill views the trend of representing women taking revenge against men and getting away with it as problematic in the larger schemes of gender culture: "This is a perversion of real feminist aims, which, in none of their myriad formulations, have been about simply turning the tables on men and engaging in tit-for-tat-aggression" (Gill 2007: 107). If empowerment and equality are considered to simply be about

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168 The icing on the revenge cake is that neither of the two recruits survives the Joining, presumably because they are not manly enough.
having the oppressor and oppressed switch roles, then progress is unlikely. In the *Origins* examples, womanhood is not even used as aspiration, and manhood retains its privileged hegemonic position and is not challenged.

The revenge rhetoric employed in *Origins* is different from the ones Gill refers to since revenge themes typically play on humor. In *Origins*, the revenge responses seem wholly spiteful or jaded, though it is difficult to pinpoint their exact intentions since the Warden is not voiced and the statements elicit no reactions. I must point out that the spiteful tone allowed here is not different from the other spiteful and sarcastic replies the player can make. The crucial difference is the gendered tone which superficially appears to emphasize female empowerment over "emasculated" men and turn the gender tables, but instead works to glorify hegemonic tough masculinity as the ideal for both. Such rhetoric is highly symptomatic of what Butler ([1990] 2007) terms the 'heterosexual matrix', in which gender is strictly defined as a binary relation with set assumed/expected qualities and works to organize heterosexuality and other sexualities in specific ways that privilege heteronormativity. This will affect the games' representations of sexuality, particularly if there are (sometimes) essentialist beliefs about gender. Following these early examples, however, the gender specificity mostly disappears and is replaced by a focus on racial and cultural issues, both in the rest of *Origins* and in subsequent titles.

**Toward Generality and "Two Women Dancing?"**

*II* and *Inquisition* move toward a much more gender-neutral approach for the protagonist and structural and prejudiced gender issues are no longer made particularly explicit, though some assumptions nevertheless make themselves visible. The gender of male and female Hawke in *II* is still recognized by other characters, but this concerns the referential level only. Affectionate and unfriendly terms differ depending on gender and appear as traditional normative descriptors. A female Hawke is "beautiful" and a "bitch" while male Hawke is "handsome" and a "bastard". In *Inquisition*, a few notable exceptions to generality occur if the Inquisitor is female. Companion Cassandra may in a later conversation express admiration for the Inquisitor and state that like in the times of Andraste, Thedas is once again saved by a

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169 In an Act 3 main quest in *II*, the player is tasked with locating three apostate mages. One of them, Emile de Launcet, will attempt to (unsuccessfully) flirt with a female Hawke. The player cannot, however, call on and/or "use" gender here.
woman. A "Just because I'm a woman?" option is available here to ask Cassandra why the Inquisitor's gender is relevant to this context and for Cassandra's admiration. While Cassandra may come to admire both female and male Inquisitors, she responds that gender is relevant because it means that the Inquisitor is joining a small and formidable group and thus it is of historical significance.¹⁷⁰

Then, during the main quest "Wicked Eyes and Wicked Hearts" in Inquisition, there is a situation that sends sexuality and gender reeling back into the days of 2007 when female Commander Shepard had no idea that two women could have a relationship. The Inquisitor is invited (and required) to dance with Duchess Florianne de Chalons at the ball in the Winter Palace. There is an option to address the "issue" of two women dancing together in public if the Inquisitor is female. Florianne replies that they are the two most talked-about people in the room and that it would be scandalous if they did not dance. The logic of this "Two women dancing?" question is questionable. A similar question is not made available in romantic and flirtatious pursuits, so it cannot be that the Inquisitor is oblivious to the existence of homosexuality. The question may be even more jarring if the player is already in a romance with a female character. Perhaps the question addresses concerns about the "public nature" of intimate same-gender conduct, but it begs the question: if they were not supposed to dance together because both of them are women, why did Florianne ask? Additionally, the ball is hosted by Orlais' Empress, who is gay. Perhaps the option is here to stave off any possible anxieties about homosexuality; dancing with Florianne is obligatory and this is a way to desexualize any undertones that may be present. It nevertheless appears to be an exit strategy to possibly sanitize the series' first obligatory same-gender intimate interaction, even though the entire venture is all business. Understanding this contradictory treatment of sexuality and gender requires an investigation into the larger gameworld and the assumptions made about the player. The series has much in common with the Mass Effect gameworlds in this area.

**Default Heterosexuality, Essentialism and Queering**

In the previous chapters I discussed examples of what I termed default heterosexuality: a game's assumption that the player is heterosexual unless proven otherwise (and even then it

¹⁷⁰ This approach to gender specificity is similar to that in Mass Effect 3, in which krogan Eve comments she is glad to see humanity treating their women with respect.
might continue to assume it). As the gay button concept dictates, it is the player's responsibility to break from this, which clearly communicates that heterosexuality is default. The problem is not that there can be an assumption that the player might be straight, the problem is that heterosexuality is mainly the only assumption available since sexuality is not a static "trait" the player can choose for the protagonist. Default heterosexuality occurs most notably in *Origins* and *II*, and is identifiable in certain options made available to the player in certain scenarios and in what other characters may say to or believe about the player. The public gameworlds of the *Dragon Age* games are an even more contradictory space than the Milky Way, and essentialist notions of sexuality and gender exist alongside ripe opportunities for queering and thwarting narrative heteroideology.

**Queer Origins?**

Default heterosexuality, as argued in chapter V, assumes the player/player character to be heterosexual and problematically implies that heterosexuality is a default state to either remain in place or to be "replaced" once homosexuality is discovered and enabled. Default heterosexuality in *Origins* manifests differently depending on the Origin story the player chooses. A quick glance at the different Origin scenarios for each type of protagonist reveals some overarching trends. A female mage may encounter templar Cullen in the Circle Tower, who might reveal he has a crush on her. A female mage can also indicate a sexual interest in fellow mage Jowan, although nothing will happen between them. Male mages do not get these or similar interactions, and thus homosexuality is not possible here. A male dwarven noble can sleep with two different women during the Origin story, while a female dwarven noble can sleep with another man. Such setups do not only create specific sexualities for the characters in question, but also assume that the player is straight. It is of course possible to ignore these options and to go for same-gender romances later, just like in the *Mass Effect* series, but nevertheless the main assumption is heterosexuality.

The Human Noble Origin complicates matters a bit, both progressively and contradictorily, and it plays on the theme of the familial responsibilities of nobles and homosexuality. Initially, the scenario assumes default heterosexuality by almost immediately suggesting an opposite-gender pairing for the player: in the opening meeting with the Warden's father and Arl Howe, Howe mentions that either his daughter Delilah or his son Thomas was asking for the Warden,
and that he should perhaps bring her or him along next time. The player can quickly break free from this suggestion, however, for example by asking why Howe would bring them or to say the Warden has no interest in an arranged marriage. The player may also answer affirmatively, though regardless of intention here neither Delilah nor Thomas is ever encountered since Arl Howe betrays and slaughters the entire household the following night. Before all that fighting and escaping, however, the player may encounter and possibly break yet another assumption of default heterosexuality. The player will happen upon the Warden's mother Eleanor in the courtyard. She is in the company of Lady Landra, currently present with her son Dairren and her elven lady-in-waiting Iona. If the Warden is male, Landra may reveal that she spent half of last year's spring salon "shamelessly flirting" with the Warden. Landra briefly introduces Dairren before she introduces Iona and tells the Warden's mother that Iona might have a crush on the Warden. The player can direct the conversation back onto more serious matters or tell Iona that they want to speak in private later.

The situation is not only reversed if the Warden is female, the coupling tone of the conversation is also more serious. Landra will not have spent the spring salon flirting with a female Warden, instead she will have spent half of it trying to convince her to marry her son Dairren. Dairren laments the unsuccessful effort. Iona comments that the Warden is pretty and this causes Eleanor to launch into a brief rant about how her beauty makes it much harder to find a suitable match for her. Dairren defends the Warden, suggesting that she has a mind of her own and that Eleanor should be proud. "Proud doesn't get me any more grandchildren," Eleanor responds, as if conceiving children is the sole purpose of a woman. The player can turn the conversation over to more serious matters or ask to speak privately with Dairren later. One could certainly expect noble families to be particularly interested in continuing their lineage and heritage (which is even explicitly stated in the "Sexuality in Thedas" note), but it is also easy to see how this pressure is applied only to the female Warden. Combine this with Dairren's comments that she has a mind of her own, which is seemingly uncommon (for a noblewoman, at least), and the other miscellaneous surprised reactions to the Warden being a woman and one may easily deduce that Ferelden is quite the man's world.

Following this conversation and its stereotypical setup, things may become much more interesting by allowing explicit homosexuality. Though the game sets up an opposite-gender pairing with male Warden-Iona and female Warden-Dairren, the player may flirt and have off-screen sex with either of them regardless of gender. This is optional and easy to miss.
After the courtyard scene the player may speak to both of them in private, flirt with them and invite one of them to join the Warden in their chambers later that night.\textsuperscript{171} The flirt dialogue is brief and not gender specific. Both Dairren and Iona seem gender blind in these scenes, which contradicts the earlier setup and creates a rather empty exchange considering the rules of all the nobles. This echoes at least two conflicting but simultaneously possible reasons, one diegetic and one design-related. The first concerns the responsibilities of noble families to reproduce and secure their alliances and power, which "Sexuality in Thedas" makes clear. Coupled with the Fereldan custom of keeping homosexuality out the public eye, it may thus make sense that the nobles do not publicly encourage non-reproductive sexual liaisons. Therefore, any acts of transgression must happen in private. The design-related reason is the gay button design. Since the courtyard scene is obligatory but speaking with Dairren and Iona afterwards is not, more care has apparently gone into how the player is assumed and addressed.

It is striking that this default heterosexuality is not only the current assumption about the player character, but also constructed as part of the character's past. Howe's children and Landra's flirting and matchmaking preemptively provide grounds for believing that the player character might be straight. It is then the player's responsibility to be something else, if and when allowed to. Also, since the courtyard scene occurs very early in the game, it was likely not deemed proper to believe anything but heterosexuality about the player in the obligatory storyline scene. Heteronormativity is itself built upon a default heterosexuality dictating "straight until proven otherwise". Assuming that the player is heterosexual and addressing them as such is not seen as particularly discriminatory, but rather reflective of everyday mundanity. It is seemingly perfectly acceptable to assume heterosexuality; this is not considered "pushing" someone into a specific role, because heterosexuality is default and/or "natural". It is the player who must initiate the flirting with Darren and Iona, they will not pursue anything on their own. Whoever is the lucky candidate will wake up in their underwear in the Warden's bed at night and will be quickly killed by an archer as Howe's treachery begins.

Remarkably, at least compared to \textit{Mass Effect} (and a whole slew of other games), homosexuality, particularly the possibility of male homosexuality, is enabled so early on. The

\textsuperscript{171} Strangely, these sexual encounters are represented as quests, titled "Sweet Dairren" or "Sweet Iona" depending on the character chosen.
options are not especially overt, however, and rely on the player's interest in exploring character interactions and breaking assumptions on their own. It is also a "fine" display of how diegetic reasoning can work to excuse representation and assumptions: the rules of nobility dictate no (public) homosexuality, therefore there is no need to design or imply it either. Then again, homosexuality is enabled, but only carefully so as if to not "brutally" appear for unsuspecting players. The way homosexuality is introduced here is also extremely vague compared to the much more explicit hints about the Consort Sha'ira early on in Mass Effect. I must also stress that the possible brief homosexuality options offered in the Human Noble Origin is only available as one of the six possible Origin stories. Perhaps the assumptions about heterosexuality here work in concert with the overall belief that women-as-warriors are surprise elements in a world that expects neither them nor non-heterosexuals, and that it is up to the player to break any chains if they want to and if given the opportunity.

Default heterosexuality in II possibly also constructs Hawke's sexuality as a given and with ties to an implied past. A particularly noteworthy example occurs if Hawke is male and a mage (the mage class causes Carver to be the surviving sibling in the Prologue). Carver will eventually receive a letter from someone named Peaches back in Ferelden. Peaches wants to know if Hawke has found a girl in Kirkwall, which she does not hope that he has, and writes that she always thought he liked her, ending with: "I think I've filled out just a little more since you left. I think your brother would appreciate it. I look so much better in dresses now and even more amazing out of them." The letter implies a heterosexual past. The contents of the letter might of course speak more about Peaches' own character than assumptions of default heterosexuality. Compare this to her discourse if Hawke is female, where Peaches will be interested in Carver instead: "Why haven't you been writing, Carver? Did you find another girl in the Free Marches? Remember: no girl will ever do what I did for you behind Barlin's shed that time. You just think about that!" There is an interesting implication in these contrasting scenarios: the game only establishes Peaches' interest in a male Hawke. She actually performs sexual actions with Carver if Hawke is female, which, at the same time as it assumes heterosexuality for both Hawkes, takes care not to assume too much about Hawke's own personal (sexual) history.

A more universal example is provided by Hawke's mother Leandra. In Act 2 she will mention that she should start looking for a suitable bride for male Hawke or a husband for female Hawke. She suggests to a male Hawke that "[t]he Reinhards' second daughter is very
interested in meeting you" and tells a female Hawke that "I hear the seneschal has a son about your age." The player has no means of interacting with her statements. Leandra may mention the player's love interest, if any, in conversation: "I have seen the way you and <companion> look at each other", which is a very general comment that does not recognize any possible rejection of the heterosexual assumptions she has about Hawke. Leandra may even provide the "finding a spouse" comment after recognizing that Hawke is romantically involved with someone, which, besides being a possible design error, posits heterosexuality above all.

Default heterosexuality might offer a space for subversion in all its safe player assumptions. For example, the gameworld mimics beliefs persistent in the world: people are straight until proven otherwise. Hawke, for example, has clearly has not given anyone any reasons to believe they are not straight prior to events of the game. The player is able to meet the same expectations in-game and possibly go against them. Heteronormativity can set the stage for "fighting the power" (though, in the case of Origins and II, without the power recognizing that it is being challenged or rejected). A certain type of queering is enabled in that the player is given the means to reject the heteronormative assumptions in the text. As Mia Consalvo argues:

> How a player's input alters or reinforces what is presented in the game—how static representations become dynamic—becomes much more complicated, especially as more queer readings arise, and the heterosexuality implied in the games either fails to materialize, or can be subverted in interesting ways. (2003: 173)

One might argue then that pursuing certain romances (or opting out of it) can postulate a direct rejection of the heteronormativity already assumed in the game text (this also applies to the Mass Effect series). It allows/excuses a dual structure where heterosexuality can be uncritically assumed simply because there are explicit alternatives to it. There is no need for queer readings of subtextual cues or vague scenarios; queer is already supplied. It is always the matter of acting against the norm, however, a responsibility put on the player. Good neoliberal subjects, as Adrienne Shaw argues in relation to optional content in games, are "responsible for themselves and, thus, are responsible for their own media representation" (2014: 35). Within that logic, it would seem that it is pointless to criticize the game text for assuming the player's heterosexuality as there is always the choice to be something else. Such logic reveals the heterosexist bias of mainstream neoliberal ideology. The issue would not be
so pertinent if the games actually managed to assume something else about the player, but it is usually considered controversial to assume anything other than heterosexuality. It would likely be much more acceptable to suggest that Hawke went behind Barlin's shed with Peaches in the past than to receive a letter from a same-gender former love interest. Stereotypical male-centered straightness is an (unconscious) ideal that others can stray from with the tools provided by the game. This logic is assisted by the games' diegetic safeguard through providing a heterosexual framework for its culture (the codex entry "Sexuality in Thedas"), much in the same way as Mass Effect uses the asari as the universal and tautological allure. Non-heterosexual people, much like the fantasy heroines Tolmie (2006) discusses, may then seem to have patriarchal heterosexuality as part of their gaming adventure, but unlike the fantasy heroines, any form of subversion takes place mostly in the personal and private sphere, leaving the dominant structures and views intact.

Anxious Allure and Public Desire

Ideas about what is generally and publicly desirable are closely connected to default heterosexuality and certain essentialist and character dichotomist views about gender. I will begin this section by discussing one the most obvious stereotypical sexuality and gender constructions in Origins and II and its grand heterosexual assumptions: the desire demons. The Mass Effect series insists on the asari as the universal and idealized desire of the galaxy, but in Thedas the cathexis invested in women as public fantasy is closely connected to anxiety and ruin simultaneously as public desire is reasserted as heterosexually male. In Thedas, spirits from the Fade become avatars of specific traits. Demons embody and play on mortal vices and weaknesses. They take on set physical forms in the games and the player must often confront and fight demon enemies. Demons do not technically have genders, but the desire demon is notably the only female and most human demon of the hierarchy, as well as one of the most devious and dangerous. It takes the form of a hypersexualized scantily clad woman with horns and bluish-purplish skin, and is another textbook example of a stereotypical representation for male gaze enjoyment:
There is a notable discrepancy between the desire demon's function and its in-game appearance. Desire demons target and affect both men and women as they manipulate desire directly and make their victims see and imagine whatever it is they truly desire. Victims of desire demons are thus not likely to see the horned naked woman, at least not after they fall under their compulsion, though this the default/true form the player always gets to see. It makes sense to think that this woman form is their true form considering how the other demons also have default appearances. That this is the chosen embodiment of desire speaks a lot about the gendered assumptions that inspired this design. Since they are demons they can seemingly wear as little as possible, as if to better to emphasize their demonic contrast to other women. The public cathexis is seemingly once more that of a straight man.

Desire demons are rather similar to the Ardat-Yakshi of the Mass Effect series: the asari suffering from a genetic disorder which causes them to kill their partners during joining/intercourse. They offer excitement and pleasure, but ultimately lead to doom. This siren/femme fatale trope, which I discussed with the Ardat-Yakshi, has a long history of using female sexuality specifically as a source of (male) demise and is very stereotypical. The desire demons play on well-known and rather outdated views on the male fear/desire dialectic of

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172 In the quest "The Golem of Honnleath", for example, a desire demon has possessed/assumed the form of a speaking cat named "Kitty" in order to manipulate a young girl named Amalia into freeing it from a trap.
liberated female sexuality. The games avoid making this a too overt point, however, seeing as how the desire demons are a rather minor and alternate female representation in the grander scale of these games. Another troublesome aspect is how this is the only mode of desire on offer. Male sexuality is not seen as a source of combined desire and anxiety in the same sense (for male players) and is not a public fantasy, implying its default stability and superiority. By contrast, the other demons such as pride demons and rage demons are bestial, asexualized and masculinized. Male sexuality and masculinity expressed through the demon hierarchy is translated into the physical brutality and "crush, kill, destroy" approach of the pride and rage demons instead, another pervasive stereotype of (violent) masculinity.

Any anxiety and unconscious drama the desire demons may threaten with is perhaps not so threatening after all, considering how a mage Warden (of any gender) at the resolution of a main quest in Origins can persuade one to show them pleasure, which triggers a kissing scene between the Warden and the demon.\textsuperscript{173} It is unknown if sex is also involved. In II, Anders may ask Aveline in party banter if her former templar husband was "as dirty as they seem": "Did he ever ask you to play 'the naughty mage and the helpless recruit'? Maybe the 'secret desire demon and the upstanding knight'?" Anders says he hears that this roleplaying scenario is quite popular. "Upstanding" is likely a dual reference, referring both to the knight's moral status and his erect penis, playing on such pornography myths as men who are "perpetually ready to perform sexually, just as women are perpetually available and eager for that performance" (MacKinnon 2003: 48). Desire demons and all the anxiety and ruin they represent, then, may function as tantalizing sexual roleplay where the evil and corrupted woman seduces the righteous knight and leads him astray—or, perhaps the upstanding knight manages to turn her into an upstanding woman, which is usually the "best" solution the femme fatale figure can hope for (though for desire demons there is no hope for domestic salvation).

The roleplay scenarios Anders mentions have two interesting implications: first, as templars and knights in Thedas are typically male (prior to Inquisition, at least), the roleplay suggests that the desire demons are also generally seen in and understood through their default "devil asari" form, lending credibility to the argument above. The second and much more interesting point is how these roleplays may imply men's desire to be sexually submissive. This notion is

\textsuperscript{173} This can occur at the end of the main quest "The Arl of Redcliffè", and requires that the Warden enters the Fade to bargain with the demon.
not readily acknowledged and explored in mainstream culture, seeing as how sexual submission contradicts patriarchal and popular notions of masculinity as inherently active, whereas femininity is required to be "weaker, to need masculine support, to give masculinity its meaning" (MacKinnon 2003: 50). Male sexual submission is also anxiously connoted with homosexuality and sexual receptiveness, which is also often connoted with femininity and passivity. How these seemingly popular roleplays typically play out, however, is not talked about further. Party banter is rarely the venue for deep discussion and elaboration, and any implications seem instead intended to leave the player puzzled.

The all-female desire demons are nowhere to be seen in Inquisition, which clearly demonstrates a shift toward more critical representational practices. The player encounters only one desire demon in this game, Imshael, and it takes the guise of an ordinary human man. If it is provoked into battle, it will assume numerous bestial demonic forms. If Dorian is brought to the Fade in the main quest "Here Lies the Abyss", he will mention that he met a desire demon once who tried to seduce him. The demon is referred to as a "he": it tried to appeal specifically to Dorian, who is gay. It is obvious that the removal of the female demons altogether and replacing them with male versions is a direct confrontation with earlier practices, especially since the same rage and pride demons still make regular appearances. It opens up for thinking about desire in other contexts than "naked woman". Confronting and challenging such gendered myths and representations is important in order to move away from the "dead, […] motionless world" (Barthes [1957] 2009: 181) of tautology and uncritical tradition, and to acknowledge that while desire might be a universal phenomenon, it is not uniform.

**Mars and Venus in Fantasy**

Default heterosexuality and the overall heteronormativity that creates it make no sense unless there are strong essentialist beliefs about gender and what constitutes men and women. Indeed, in our current cultural landscape, a "whole industry of pop psychology tells us that women and men are naturally opposites in their thinking, emotions and capacities" (Connell and Pearse 2015: 33). In the Mass Effect series, this manifests for example as instances of ironic and defeatist "boys will be boys" rhetoric and that (all) men love the asari. Similar views exist in Thedas as well, most notably in Origins and Inquisition, and their existence in the latter is
surprising considering the game's overall progressive advances over its predecessors. In (post)feminist theory, such essentialist views are often symptomatic of a Mars/Venus discourse, promoted and popularized by John Gray's massively successful self-help book *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (1992), which claims that men and women are essentially from different planets. Essentialist views about gender existed long before this book, but it serves as a modern attempt to return to a traditionalist and essentialist view about gender in a time of supposed gender chaos. Gray uses psychology rather than biology to argue for inevitable gender difference, and both Gill (2007) and Gauntlett (2008) cite it as a problematic example. Gauntlett argues that "the book proposes a return to 1950s-style gender roles within relationships" and that "[i]f a Mars-Venus couple were to procreate, for example, they would seem to be destined to bring up children whose ridiculously outdated views of gender would cripple them in the modern world" (2008: 246-247). Gill argues that the Mars/Venus discourse (found not only in this book, but in other media texts as well, particularly in advertising) works to emphasize that there are supposed natural differences between genders, and that "these alleged differences are profoundly pleasurable, if only we could recognize their existence instead of resisting" (2007: 109). Gill suggests that this discourse aims to make patriarchy pleasurable as it is all about acknowledging and living pleasurably with these inevitable differences instead of promoting active change. Mars/Venus discourse obviously favors heterosexuality, so how homosexuality might exist in that worldview is complicated. I argue that the *Dragon Age* series does not particularly promote the "patriarchy as pleasurable" view, despite the several seemingly mundane patriarchal assumptions that exist in the games. The Mars/Venus discourse here manifests more as seemingly automatic repeats of essentialist gender views that originated elsewhere (manifested as mundane (hetero)sexism), and as explicit challenges to established diegetic gender views.

*Origins* moves away from the more overt essentialist views expressed in *Mass Effect*, and the game's approach to such views is more subtle. Leliana, one of the player's possible companions (and one of the advisors in *Inquisition*), has a background as a bard and spy in Orlais, and the player may ask her about her past if they have favorable approval levels. When discussing her work as a spy, Leliana confidently claims that women are better at that particular job because "[e]veryone can be seduced by the right woman. The trick is predicting who she is, and becoming her. Master the game, and no one can resist you." She also claims she was quite good at her work: "Sometimes all I had to do was toss a glance and smile. Men..."
read promises into such things, and will go to great lengths to see that promise fulfilled." This comment suggests that the "everyone" of her first statement is most likely heterosexual men. Leliana adds that this game is "a game everyone plays, even if they do it unconsciously. Women are just better at it." Women are here master manipulators with a mystical hold over men (much like the desire demons), men who seemingly can be seduced by a woman regardless of their own sexuality and other factors (for example, marriage) as long as she is the right woman. Leliana's own experiences may certainly be (fictionally) true, but this essentialist assumption is reductive and tiring, conflating "everyone" with heterosexual men who lose their wits in the presence of a woman, and is overall so generally unremarkable because it is commonly believed to be true in a heteronormative worldview. The player has no way of engaging with the gender aspects of Leliana's claims and they are presented as truisms, not matters up for debate.

Simultaneously as Origins assumes essentialism, however, it also sets it up as a possible arena for subversion, and, notably, this requires a male Warden. I argued above that gender issues are mostly hidden from male protagonists, but there exists one example where a male Warden might possibly thwart essentialist gender assumptions. This is not an explicit issue or "quest" for the player, however, but rather develops from the player's friendly interactions. Morrigan holds some generalized gender views, but the player may actually challenge her views to some extent. I have already noted how a female Warden fascinates her for being a strong woman, but a male Warden may also surprise her. The player can inquire about Morrigan's past and learn how she and her mother were able to live safely as apostate mages. Morrigan explains that "[m]en are always willing to believe two things about a woman: one, that she is weak, and two, that she finds him attractive", which resembles Leliana's assumptions. Morrigan derives this belief from a life of constantly being on the run from officials. She recounts some of her early adventures in which she would use her womanhood to escape difficult situations, as it was seemingly easy to believe the innocence of a young woman. Her mother Flemeth would often seduce men and then kill them in order to keep their existence and location a secret, and Morrigan was raised in the belief that this would also be her mission one day. Morrigan has thus developed a cynical outlook on men. The friendship scenario with Morrigan is particularly interesting here because it reveals a change in her attitude. If a male Warden only pursues a friendship with her, she will eventually express surprise that it is possible to have a non-sexual relationship with a man and a friendship where a man does not ask for anything in return. This route may nevertheless prompt Morrigan to ask the male
Warden if there could be anything romantic between them, so this friendship path and newfound perception may trigger a new interest from Morrigan. This is a rather interesting route to develop a romance through instead of the player actively pursuing explicit flirt options, but it does also suggest that a friendship between a man and a woman might possibly have romantic undertones regardless. Here, at least, the player is allowed to engage somewhat actively in a gender topic and positively affect someone's opinion. Or, the player may also call Morrigan a selfish bitch and send her packing.

_Inquisition_ abandons obvious default heterosexuality and shows a more open interest in confronting gender myths, such as questioning the gender politics of the female-lead Chantry, though some mundane and generalized heteronormative views sneak their way into the game. A mage in the Hinterlands, for example, speaks about her relationship with a templar, noting that it is not possible to place so many healthy men and women together in a Circle without anyone getting "ideas". The specific division between "men" and "women" in her statement suggests a very heterosexual premise behind these "ideas". The player can ask companion Solas to talk about his past experiences in the Fade, and one of these memories involves a "matchmaker" spirit: "I met a friendly spirit who observed the dreams of village girls as love first blossomed in their adolescence. With subtlety, she steered them all to village boys with gentle hearts who would return their love with gentle kindness. The matchmaker, so I called her. That small village never knew its luck." That village was indeed "lucky", then, to only have straight adolescents. A slightly different variation on this essentialist heteronormative theme is expressed in possible humorous party banter between Vivienne and Iron Bull:

Vivienne: You cannot go shirtless in front of the preeminent nobles of Orlais. Let us see…
Iron Bull: Hey… I had a shirt in Halamshiral!
Vivienne: In Halamshiral, you were a blade of cheap iron. When I am done, you will shine like a gleaming dawnstone saber. A purple coat, tight at the waist, slashed with silver, emerald accents. Open at the collar to accentuate your chest. Every woman will want you. Every man will want to be you.
Iron Bull: Well… alright. Tell me more about the coat.

Here we have the type of common belief that men (should) want women and women (should) want men. In Vivienne's scenario, Iron Bull in his coat would make every woman want him and make every man want to be him. Women are meant to take him as a sexual object while men are supposed to identify with him so that every woman would want them as well. Even
the pansexual\textsuperscript{174} Iron Bull is caught up in these heteronormative structures. These examples are all variants of the "boys will be boys" attitude in \textit{Mass Effect}, though the rhetoric here is perhaps more subtle and not presented as dejected inevitable irony.

The remarkable aspect of these attitudes is how unremarkable they are. Essentialist heteronormative gender assumptions are so pervasively common in mainstream culture and media texts (Mars/Venus discourse, for example). It is not the "men" and "women" categories themselves that are the issue, it is the universal heterosexual expectations tied to them. The subtlety of this rhetoric is that it enables the supremacy/idealization of one type of sexuality without explicitly acknowledging or mentioning others. By saying "women would want you and men would want to be you", for example, one plays on an already long-established notion of heterosexuality which is seemingly unproblematic to use in this regard, whereas the other version ("men would want you and women would want to be you") would imply too much. Simultaneously, then, one sets forth heterosexuality as the unproblematic ideal and as if nothing else existed. One can only imagine the anguish of the matchmaker spirit if one of the girls turned out to be gay. In this way, heterosexuality also offers a very "cheap" and easy way to talk about gender by playing on the assumed sexual majority and as if there is always a clear binary division. While these myths certainly do not say anything explicitly negative about homosexuality or other sexualities (part of the rhetoric, I assume, is to not acknowledge them at all), they nevertheless contribute to a worldview in which one "legitimate" sexuality is the ideal and that everything else simply has to find its own place outside the general sphere. The heteromythology manifested in the above examples is not, however, overly dominant. They are clear indications of essentialist heteronormative views, but they occur in minor contexts and do not, for example, carry the same persuasion attempts as the \textit{Mass Effect} series' asari rhetoric. Minor contexts do not mean they should be disregarded, however, because this is where problematic assumptions can easily find their survival and become mythologized, and it is important to see what the player can expect the game to engage in and allow them to question.

\textsuperscript{174} His sexuality never stated in the game, but was revealed in a tweet by one of the writers, Patrick Weekes. See next chapter for a discussion on this.
**Queering the Established**

*Dragon Age* attempts to challenge established sexuality and gender norms much more explicitly than the *Mass Effect* series, and is not so intent on providing a safe heterosexualizing retreat from queerness, such as with the asari and their genderqueerness. The repeated performativity of heterosexuality which, according to Judith Butler ([1990] 2007), seeks to naturalize heterosexuality and simultaneously exposes its contingency in the process, creates a space where it can be subverted and challenged. In this section, I will discuss four significant exceptions to both mainstream and Thedosian sexuality and gender representations: gender parody through a golem character, a drag queen, a transgender warrior, and Qunari sexual practices. If the term "genderquake" is used to describe the profound changes in gender relations in Western democracies (Gill 2007: 2), then it is certainly an appropriate term for explaining the gender challenges in the *Dragon Age* series.

**Genderquake and Parody**

Shale,[^175] a sentient stone golem companion in *Origins*, is a literal genderquake and is a character that posits interesting questions and implications about the construction and performativity of gender and gender identity. Judith Butler is well known for her theory of gender as performative acts rather than simply a state of being, and Shale is a perfect example of the contingency of gender. According to Butler, gender is not something we are, gender is something we do: "Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being", and that gender "ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" ([1990] 2007: 45, 191). Gender is seen as something constituted by a myriad of different acts which will ultimately result in the sensation of a naturalized gender for the individual, meaning that whatever has been constructed through whatever acts has been determinant for how gender feels to the person concerned. Butler theorizes her views of gender through the practices of drag and its imitations of gender, in which drag "reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency" ([1990] 2007: 187). Gender itself is a type of drag, "a kind

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[^175]: Recruiting Shale requires the DLC *The Stone Prisoner.*
of imitation for which there is no original" ([1991] 1993: 313). In Butler's view, all gender practices are imitations, but there are no originals to imitate, an argument which emphasizes the cultural force of human practices rather than any natural states.

Figure 36: The Warden meets Shale in Honnleath.

Shale, being a golem, does not have a gender and is an "it", which is also what Shale will refer to the Warden as. It eventually becomes very clear that Shale is intended as gender commentary and represents a much more explicit statement than the monogendered asari. Shale has been deactivated for decades, but remained conscious of its surroundings while deactivated. This has caused Shale to develop a particular aversion to pigeons (which would sit on Shale and cover it in excrement) in addition to Shale's already misanthropic and somewhat jaded attitude. Shale has no memory of its life prior to becoming a golem and does not know much about its history at all. Shale is obviously meant to give off the impression that it is, or used to be, a man. Its appearance has typical rough male features and an overly muscular physique, and the female voice actor's voice has been altered to sound more masculine to capture the ambiguity (Dragon Age Wiki). This serves to set up the surprising revelation that comes later in the game. Initially, the player is able to react surprised that Shale is not very golem-like, to which Shale immediately begins its dismantling and ridicule of expectations that it will pursue later as well: "Should I talk in a monotone? 'Yes, master. I
exist to serve the master. I shall kill for the master and only for the master!' Perhaps it expected me to have a booming voice? Recite limericks? I can recite limericks, if it likes."

Shale's often clinical and brutish attitude occasionally reveals some queer aspects. Early on, Shale will explain the nature of augmentation crystals to the player. Shale cannot be equipped with conventional weapons and armor. Instead, it uses various crystals to augment its abilities and this is worked into the diegesis. Shale prefers to think of the crystals as "accessories" and worries about how they might make it look: "So? What does it think? They don't make me look any wider, do they? I find I am already too wide as it is." Shale also encourages the Warden to find more crystals, because it wants to "glitter from ear to ear… so to speak!" The queering is set up as a type of contradiction: this is a large and brutal stone creature/man with an appetite for destruction, yet it also seems very fixed on its looks and worries that its accessories give it an unflattering appearance. This plays on a very familiar media joke in which a woman asks a man if some garment makes her look fat. Shale parodies mainstream culture's gender expectations, but diegetically, at least to Shale, it is not considered particularly parodic—thus, Shale is both a gender parody and not at the same time. This emerging "vanity discourse" is also part of the hermeneutic code of Shale's background story, a soft setup to the revelation that Shale used to be a woman.

Investing time in Shale will eventually lead to the revelation of its past as a dwarven woman, and this triggers gender reflections between the player and Shale. Shale used to be Shayle of House Cadash. Shayle was the first woman to volunteer for Paragon Caridin's experiments with golem conversion in order to protect her people. If Shale is brought along to meet Caridin, Caridin will explain that Shale used to be a strong woman and that he is glad to see Shale remained as such, though Shale does not assume a female gender identity following this revelation. Back in the party camp following the revelation, the player may ask Shale why it did not reveal that it was a woman. Shale quickly counters this by saying that it did not find that fact relevant. This is an interesting comment because Shale had no explicit memories of its past, yet seemingly it knew that it was or used to be a woman. While complicating the construction of gender, it seemingly also assumes something inherent or transcendent about gender identity—memory disappears, but gender remains in place. Shale also confronts the Warden about not having told it what gender they are, which may serve as a lash against

\[176\] If the player asks if the limericks are dirty, Shale replies that "[m]ostly they involve slaughtering pigeons in creative and invasive manners."
humanity's incessant focus on knowing each other's gender and the view that gender is matter-of-factly and automatically communicated. Shale ultimately considers its past gender irrelevant now that it is a golem.

Shale asks the Warden if its gender rejection will become an issue, which unlocks two unique responses depending on the Warden's gender. Both options play on stereotype humor, and one option may assume default heterosexuality. A male Warden has the option to humorously ask Shale if he now has to open doors for it, as in being a gentleman for a lady. Shale sarcastically replies: "Oh, ho, ho. I can tell this is going to be a whole pile of laughs. Oh yes. Comedy gold mine." A female Warden has a different gender-specific reply: "Are we going to fight over the same men?" Shale is not more enthusiastic about this question, replying: "Ah, yes. Female bonding and all that. Rah." This option also jokes with stereotypes, but it has more ramifications. First of all, the script possibly assumes that the Warden and Shale are both straight or, at least, attracted to men, and that this is supposedly the only humorous option available here. It may even be chosen if the player is in a romance with Leliana, ignoring the fact that the player and Warden may have no romantic or sexual interest in men. One may of course joke about these things regardless of actual sexuality, but in this universe, this approach is likely seen as the less offensive path. An alternative like "Are we now going to fight over the same women?" loses the stereotypical notion the reply is supposed to make fun of. It may also make a whole slew of assumptions about Shale's past and/or present preferences that is not implied in the same sense when assuming heterosexuality. It is also possible that this option parodies the stereotype of women fighting over men without assuming anything about the Warden or Shale, though considering the gameworld's overall assumptions it is not unlikely that it does.

While gender parody might poke fun at dominant culture and stereotypes, Butler calls attention to both the problematic and subversive potentials of such parodic displays: "Although the gender meanings taken up in these parodic styles are clearly part of hegemonic, misogynist culture, they are nevertheless denaturalized and mobilized through their parodic recontextualization" ([1990] 2007: 188). The gender humor invoked with Shale requires acknowledging dominant essentialist gender beliefs, signaling that they are not a thing of the past, and beliefs which become parodic in this particular exchange might remain unchallenged outside the conversational sphere. The gender conversation ends in both cases with a funny and gritty remark from Shale: "Now, let us crush something soft and watch it fountain blood.
That is a girlish thing to want to do, yes?" The question is of course rhetorical, and both the player and Shale know that this is precisely not considered a girlish thing to do. But, in one sense, now it is, and Shale is allowed to remain itself.

**Putting the "Drag" in Drag Queen?**

*II* attempts to push experimentations with gender ambiguity a bit further from the more "unreal" golem scenario, though in a very minor and problematic way. Kirkwall has a brothel\(^{177}\) called The Blooming Rose which houses a drag queen character. Serendipity is a male elf who dresses up as a woman. She is not referred to as a drag queen in the game, nor is her gender called into question, but former lead writer David Gaider (2015) has confirmed that she is a drag queen and not transgender. Drag may often connote excess: male drag artists, for example, are often known for using excessive clothes, hair and makeup as part of their performances. Serendipity is much more toned down and looks like any other female elf from a distance. Her face is slightly sharper than the average female elf and she has a distinctly male voice. She is drag more "in attitude if not appearance", to quote Gaider (2015). Butler, as mentioned above, cites drag as a prime example of how the social construction of gender is revealed and, subsequently, parodied: "In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency" ([1990] 2007: 187). Butler further argues that drag itself is not the parody of some original, but rather that drag is the parody of the very notion of an original. Drag as gender parody thus "reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without origin" (Butler [1990] 2007: 188). It is not that all drag performances or acts have the inherent and explicit aim of parodying or revealing such notions, but for Butler they become both metaphor and evidence for the social construction of gender. Drag often emphasizes explicit gender ambiguity, an ambiguity which Connell and Pearse argue "can be an object of fascination and desire, as well as disgust", and they refer to how gender impersonations are familiar in both popular and high culture such as Shakespeare's plays and modern films (2015: 7). Serendipity might not be intended as anything particularly subversive or challenging, however, and demonstrates how drag may be easily used in stereotyping and humor.

\(^{177}\) I will address the brothels of *Origins* and *II* more directly below.
Serendipity plays a dual role in representing both fascination and stereotyping. She is clearly appreciated in Kirkwall society: she is one of the brothel's expensive premium services, and on the streets of Hightown the player may (surprisingly) hear a random male NPC saying "I hope Serendipity's working tonight" when passing by. As a service to the player, however, she is reduced to the same innuendo one-liners as the other prostitutes. Serendipity's unremarkable appearance (at least from a distance) may also give her a type of shock factor function: the player will not know that she is a drag queen until they approach her for sex, in which the camera closes up on her elven male face and her male-sounding voice delivers the one-liner. Serendipity is certainly more serendipitous than the other prostitutes because she gets to make an appearance in the DLC *The Mark of the Assassin*. Here, she is encountered as Seneschal Bran's date to a party. She will recognize Hawke if the player has previously used her services, if not she will insist on getting to know Hawke better. In both cases, the temporary companion Tallis will comment that the situation is awkward before they move on.

It is easy to see that Serendipity is mostly comic relief, and Gaider is aware of this: "[D]ue to a bad line link and the fact we’d only ever included transgender characters as sex workers and

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178 "This encounter will have a high challenge rating, big boy" (male Hawke) and "[l]et's get you some experience, sweetie" (female Hawke).
comedic relief, it really seemed like she was there to be gawked at and laughed at" (2015). The issue here, I will argue, does not stem from Serendipity's comic drag queen attitude. This "sassiness" is a common drag practice and could actually be a useful way of not (hetero)normalizing Serendipity. The issue lies in the fact that it is the only mode that Serendipity is allowed. Serendipity is not really a character, she is a type who can only express sexual innuendo. She may thus not necessarily be a parody of gender; she may in a sense function as a parody of drag and that it is drag we are supposed to laugh at, not the gender construction itself that drag may represent. There is also no cheerful message in the fact that the only future drag queens and crossdressers may have (in Thedas) is sex work and that they cannot be a part of functional society—unless as public escorts for nobility, surprisingly. Serendipity does not appear again to move beyond the apparent problematic frames even the developers recognize. *Inquisition* attempts another more gender-challenging approach instead.

**Transgenderquake**

*Inquisition* introduces the game series' first ever transgender character, Cremisius Aclassi, more commonly known as Krem. It is truly noteworthy that a transgender character appears in a mainstream game in a non-stereotypical, non-comic relief fashion, and Krem's inclusion likely reflects the emerging cultural visibility of transgender people and the fight for transgender rights. Transgenderism is a marginalized topic and avoided even more by mainstream media than homosexuality since it significantly challenges the conflated sex/gender beliefs and may disturb notions of inherent and "natural" gender identities. Butler emphasizes that "[t]he harassment suffered by those who are 'read' as trans or discovered to be trans cannot be underestimated" (2004: 6). Gill notes that "[t]he representation of transgender people and bisexuals is, in many ways, even worse [than the representation of homosexuality], with the former frequently portrayed as predators, Queens, paedophiles or pornographers, and the latter often depicted as duplicitous cheaters" (2007: 103). Indeed, marginalized groups "are traditionally either cast in clearly demarcating 'other' roles, exemplifying their threat to the mainstream, or made to be 'model minorities,' just like the mainstream, nonthreatening, and never challenging the status quo. Their difference may be displayed in a positive

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179 The *Dragon Age* graphic novels introduced a transgender character, Tevinter magister Maevaris Tilani, before *Inquisition*. Maevaris is referenced in *Inquisition* through War Table Operations, and she appears in Dorian's epilogue slide in *Trespasser*. She does not make a physical appearance in the game.
(assimilated) or negative (deviant) light" (Shaw 2014: 19). Mainstream media are thus actually "kinder" to homosexuality than transgender people because homosexuality can seemingly be safely locked into a set gendered relation, still existing in the man/woman hetero/homo binaries. Krem is clearly cast in an assimilating and "normalizing" light, but the game makes no attempt to hide his gender identity in discourse (when the topic ultimately comes up). Besides being a transgender character with a rather distinct presence in the game, Krem is also interesting because of the educational aspects of his character's discourse and enabled interactions. His story is framed around growing up with the norms and beliefs of the Tevinter Imperium, the mage-ruled nation which favors slavery and is reviled by the rest of Thedas.

Krem is part of Iron Bull's mercenary company Bull's Chargers and is first encountered in Haven acting as a messenger on behalf of the company, which triggers Iron Bull's recruitment quest. Recruiting Iron Bull also activates Krem as a representative for the mercenary company in Haven/Skyhold. Functionally, Krem is akin to the introduction of exclusively gay characters Traynor and Steve in Mass Effect 3, who are also given a distinct presence in the hub area. Krem looks like a fairly ordinary young male Dragon Age character, and the
perhaps most distinctive "trait" is that he has a female voice actor. There are no exaggerated features. That Krem is transgender is not something that is explicitly revealed by Krem himself or any other character; revealing this is almost entirely up to the player. I say almost, because the game will suddenly attempt to "bait" the player. There is a scene in Skyhold where Iron Bull will introduce the Inquisitor to his Chargers. Early in the scene, Krem will tease Iron Bull and afterwards the dialogue wheel appears with four choices: "Are you a woman?", "When did you know?", "Why pass as a man?" and "And the rest of your crew?" The game spoils the "truth" about Krem before he even has a chance to tell it himself, if he even wanted to, and by positing choices in this way the game assumes that the player recognized that Krem is "different". Selecting "Are you a woman?" causes a surprised Inquisitor to ask: "Wait, are you… I didn't realize…" and Krem replies, somewhat annoyed: "You didn't? Well, great. Now we can all talk about it." Krem will be even more annoyed if the player asks why he is "passing" as a man, stating that he is not passing as anything. The "When did you know" option seems to be the most "sympathetic" option since Krem does not get upset when choosing this: "Yes. It's not the most fortunate thing to know about yourself, growing up in Tevinter one rung above slavery." After any of these three options, Iron Bull nevertheless asserts that Krem is a real man, at least according to the principles of the Qunari: "In Qunandar, Krem'd be an Aqun-Athlok. That's what we call someone born one gender but living like another." The fourth option simply moves the scene along.

It is fairly obvious that the three confrontational replies represent common (more polite) reactions and assumptions that transgender people may regularly meet in everyday life, and the game sets up a meeting between the player and a character who represents something not often represented or shown/known in media. The prospect of games as social contexts for cultural learning, as emphasized by Salen and Zimmerman (2004), is rather direct here. The social context and educational aspect may lie in Krem's reactions to the responses, which the player might take as a cue not to replicate such assumptions in real life. The topic is explored further in personal conversation, which provides even more educational exposition. The educational aspects are also emphasized in how the player is not allowed to be outright prejudiced or bigoted toward Krem on these issues, which I do not consider to be problematic.

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180 Krem is voiced by Jennifer Hale, who also voices female Commander Shepard.
181 This concept is introduced for the first time in *Inquisition* and is likely not common among the Qunari, considering Sten's extreme disbelief upon experiencing female characters such as the Warden, Wynne and Morrigan as warriors.
but, as we will see below and in the next chapter, this "protection" is not afforded to homosexuality.

Following this scene, the player can inquire more about Krem and Krem's past from both Iron Bull and Krem, and it is very clear that the game wishes to discuss/teach the player about transgender topics. The gender aspect features in interactions with both characters. A "Him being a her isn't an issue?" option is available with Iron Bull, causing him to quickly state that Krem is not a woman. He says that since he has horns and the Inquisitor has some other deviant trait depending on race or class, they are not the best people "to go around deciding what's normal. Krem's a good man. I don't give a nug's ass that it's a little harder for him to piss standing up." Krem reveals more about his background as transgender in the Tevinter army. He was a soldier, but women join ranks under a different program. When they found out that Krem was passing (Krem's words), it "got ugly" and he escaped:

I was up for promotion, but the healer I'd bribed to sign off on my physical had to tend a sick magister. When the replacement healer saw what was, or wasn't, in my pants, he made threats. It was slavery or death, so I knocked him out and ran. [...] It's a crime to lie on an Imperial application for service. Would've been a heavy fine or slavery. For ten silvers, the healer said he'd tell the tribune I was sick in the head. Some pity for the mad little girl. That was when I hit him. I'd served for a few years. I was good at hitting.

Krem can also talk about growing up and how his parents wanted him to marry up: "They tried to find me a nice merchant's son. Every day, I'd put on a dress, look into my father's shaving mirror, and just... hate myself." The player actually has an option to ask if Krem wants to change "all the way" by using magic (if such magic exists), but Krem is pleased with his current life: "What? No. I don't want any magic like that within ten yards of my body. When I was younger... I don't know. Everyone has silly dreams. In Tevinter, dreams like that get you killed. Bull helped me make a good life. Nice armor and a well-placed sock, and I'm happy." This exchange alludes to the topic of modern day gender reassignment surgery and the belief that gender is decided by sex/genitals. Many transgender people want to "adopt fully the bodily identity associated with their gender identity", and many want to adopt a normative sexual identity after transitioning (Clarke et al. 2010: 88-89). To Krem, at least, being a man has nothing to do with what is or is not in his pants, although he does prefer some signifier/sensation of male genitalia (the "well-placed sock"). To Krem it does not matter if it
is biological or not (in Thedas, no such medical interventions seem to be available), which
confronts the belief that chromosomal sex/reproductive organs equal gender and vice versa.\textsuperscript{182}


\textbf{Fatalist Philosophies and Sexual Systems}

The systematic gender and sexual practices of the Qunari are vastly different from mainstream
Thedas (and Western culture). Qunari society and beliefs provide a rather drastic and feared
alternative to the rest of Thedas with its extremely rigid gendered societal structure and
fatalist philosophy seeking to submit the entire world to its principles. Qunari are most
frequently encountered as enemies, and significant portions of the plot in both \textit{II} and
\textit{Inquisition's Trespasser} DLC involve fighting off a Qunari invasion. Qunari are almost
exclusively represented in the gameworld by their male constituency, and they are usually
large and muscular with horns that are notably more phallic than the "swept back" tentacles of
the asari. The Qun (Qunari philosophy) dictates that women are not usually warriors. Let me
offer \textit{Inquisition's} Qunari companion Iron Bull's explanation of their society as a starting point:
"It's pretty simple. We've got the matriarchy, the priesthood, and the military. The priesthood
figures out how the Qunari should live in theory. The matriarchy makes it work in practice…
And the military keeps the Qunari safe from outside threats." In this tripartite system, we find
the Tamassrans who control the upbringing of children, education, breeding, role assignment,
and who provide sexual relief. Tamassran is a female gender role. Qunari do not marry, and
the player can ask Iron Bull about this. He replies that Qunari "love our friends like anyone
does, but we don't have sex with them." This is likely a result of the strict breeding regime
enforced by the Tamassrans and, as such, it is likely that heterosexual intercourse is the norm
among Qunari because sex is first and foremost a means for reproduction.

In \textit{Origins}, the player can recruit Qunari companion Sten,\textsuperscript{183} and this is the first instance in
which we might learn about their sexual culture. The Qunari have harsh views on magic and
Sten views Morrigan with suspicion. In party banter, Morrigan might tease Sten for staring at
her and ask him if he would be interested in having sex with her. Sten is not interested, but

\textsuperscript{182} Krem being transgender is implied again in \textit{Trespasser}. One possible scenario involves Krem becoming
romantically involved with Maryden, a bard NPC. An option allows the player to ask Cole if the two of them
will be alright when Krem tells Maryden about himself, and Cole, in his cryptic way of communicating, assures
the Inquisitor that they will be fine. Iron Bull even offers Krem to talk to Maryden about "things", but an
obviously embarrassed Krem protests and says the two of them are fine.

\textsuperscript{183} The current design of the Qunari with horns was introduced and became default in \textit{II}.  

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contends that she would not want to, as the Qunari sexual act "is... unpleasant" and supposedly "deadly". Morrigan continues to push the topic, and he eventually humors her:

Sten: You will need armor, I think. And a helmet. And something to bite down on. How strong are human teeth?
Morrigan: How strong are my teeth?
Sten: Qunari teeth can bite through leather, wood, even metal given time. Which reminds me, I may try to nuzzle.
Morrigan: Nuzzle?
Sten: If that happens, you'll need an iron pry bar. Heat it in a fire, first, or it may not get my attention.
Morrigan: Perhaps it would be better if we did not proceed.
Sten: Are you certain? If it will satisfy your curiosity...
Morrigan: Yes. Yes, I think it is best.

If asari joining is *Mass Effect's* dominant "different" sexual practice, then Qunari sexual practices and sexual culture provide a stark contrast to that with their implied inherent roughness and brutality. Sten is likely exaggerating in order to stop Morrigan from bothering him, seeing as how he couples the brutality of the sexual act with the softness of nuzzling (which is also posited as rather intense since he recommends a heated iron pry bar to stop him).

Sten may joke and exaggerate, but it nevertheless has grounds in Qunari culture. Iron Bull provides details in *Inquisition* upon asking if the Qunari never have sex since they do not marry: "Oh, we *definitely* have sex. There are Tamassrans who pop your cork whenever you need it." This orgasm-on-demand service surprises the Inquisitor, who asks "[s]eriously?" indicating its difference from general Thedosian sexual culture. Iron Bull provides a cultural comparison: "Yeah, it's not a big deal like it is here. It's like... I don't know, going to see a healer? Sometimes it's this long involved thing. It takes all day, leaves you walking funny. Other times, you're in and out in five minutes. *(clicks tongue)* Thank you, see you next week!*" Qunari society, with its strict breeding control and absence of "romantic love", has developed a sexual system to keep its subjects happy and sublimated. This is a rather mechanical treatment of sex, at least when compared to Thedosian (and Western) views on love and sex. A flirt option will yield a bit more insight into these practices, and I have included it here for its general context. The Inquisitor asks Iron Bull if he has thus never really "made love" (a favorite term in American film and television) and connected with
someone in "both body and soul". Iron Bull replies: "I don't know. One time they used this thing called the Saartoh Nehrappan. It's a leather-wrapped rod on a harness… That wasn't really my soul, though. Also, there were more than two people."¹⁸⁴

There are perhaps more open attitudes toward sexual practices and sexuality among the Qunari than among the majority of Thedas, and here the game engages in forms other than "making love" (and absurd brothel scenarios—see below—or desire demon whims) by implying group sex and possibly anal penetration (at least for males). This openness, however, exists in a system devoted to a fatalist philosophy which desires to conquer the world under its rule, a philosophy which assigns people into specific roles and functions in a highly rigid gender system. It is clearly marked as difference. The Qunari might have a less prudish attitude toward sex, but this is coupled with a philosophy the player is regularly reminded they should not support. There is perhaps no better example of this than Iron Bull himself. If the player does not sever Iron Bull's ties to the Qunari in his personal quest, he will ultimately betray the Inquisition in favor of the Qunari in the Trespasser DLC and must be killed, regardless of friendship levels and romance. There is thus an anxious connection between unconventional sexual practices and extreme philosophical/cultural beliefs, alluding to sexual subcultures and communities outside the mainstream.

I find it interesting to compare the difference of the Qunari sexual culture with the mainstream xenophilia of the Mass Effect series. Qunari sexual practices and attitudes are clearly marked as different from everyday Thedas, but in the Milky Way, humans have effectively turned the strangeness of alien sex into mainstream fantasy. Mass Effect 2 can sell magazines with a jellyfish-like alien in a suggestive pose on the front cover and humorously engage in conversations about the peculiarities of sex with alien companions. I argued that this open treatment is safely grounded not only in its heterosexual basis, but also in the more absurd and implied aspects of having sex with non-asari aliens. Compared to turian, quarian and drell sex, at least when considering the implied precautions both the alien and Shepard must take, Qunari sex is rather ordinary. Perhaps it is the reality of Qunari sex that makes it so different. Alien sex is imaginary, but Qunari sexual culture refers to practices that are fairly human, such as the use of sex toys/tools, engaging in group sex and the more casual attitude toward sex. If the romances with aliens in the Mass Effect series can be interpreted as metaphors for

¹⁸⁴ Iron Bull prefers BDSM-sex where he assumes the role of the dominant partner, which creates a rather unique romance dynamic. See next chapter.
non-normative human sexuality, then the Qunari can actually function as metaphors for more ordinary human sexuality. Qunari sexual culture is contrasted with the mainstream Thedosian view which posits "making love" as the sexual ideal, a notion that stands in opposition to casualness and sees sex as something with a deeper emotional aim and meaning. The difference of Qunari sexual culture might be different from that of mainstream Thedas, but it is in fact quite similar to ordinary human sexual practices and is perhaps not really difference at all. To the mainstream of lovemaking, however, such ordinariness might pose a threat to its sexual sacrosanctity.

**Thedosian Homosexuality through Fantasy, Anxiety and Reality**

There is no doubt that the *Dragon Age* series wants to engage with sexuality and gender and make such topics central in the gameworlds, both reaffirming and challenging existing cultural tropes and beliefs, and the thematic exploration is more diverse than in the *Mass Effect* series. Heterosexuality is both established as the norm and regularly pushed back through implications of homosexuality and non-heteronormative sexual practices and attitudes. The games' relationship with explicit public homosexuality, however, remains strained. The games follow the *Mass Effect* games' general approach in treating female homosexuality as a public fantasy (in fact, even more so than the *Mass Effect* games' direct "hommo-sexuality") and as mundane/casual, whereas male homosexuality means more causes for alarm and trouble. There is less symbolic annihilation of male homosexuality in the *Dragon Age* series, but not being silent also triggers more backlash and regressive/problematic representations. *Origins* and *II* have the most strained and discrepant relationship with homosexuality, while *Inquisition* attempts to put representations "back on track" toward progressiveness.

**Brothels and Absurdity**

Both *Origins* and *II* include brothels the player may visit in order to enlist the services of prostitutes, and if homosexuality is discouraged in public then these venues seemingly provide the most "public" gathering of queers. *Origins* features a brothel called The Pearl, supposedly one of the finer (and the only one available in-game) brothels in Denerim, the capital of Ferelden. In The Pearl, the player has the option to have sex with a variety of male and female human, elven and dwarven prostitutes for a fee. All prostitutes are available to
both genders, and, as Steven Holmes points out, the player can choose whichever regardless of "previous actions in the game or any sense of their character's sexuality – so long as they have the money to pay" (2016: 127). The selection of prostitutes is conducted in a rather crude manner. Sanga, the proprietor, asks the player nicely what they would like to see. Options here are "The men", "The women", "Some of both", and "Surprise me." The first three options trigger a line-up of six fully-clothed prostitutes of the gender(s) the player asked for, emphasizing their status as mere merchandise. Once a choice has been made, the player and the prostitute will enter a room, now dressed in their underwear. The prostitute makes a suggestive remark (like "[n]o, honey, the collar is not for me") and the screen goes black. Various groans and expressions can be heard and afterwards the Warden is alone in the room. The brothel in II, The Blooming Rose, is fairly similar and the player must choose between "ranks" of prostitutes depending on the fee. These prostitutes also serve one-liner innuendos before engaging in the off-screen sexual act. The brothels are fairly empty ventures in terms of content, but they are one of the earliest situations in which homosexuality is possible.

The "surprise me" option in Origins is the most notable function of the brothel, as it triggers various obscure humorous and often queer and non-heteronormative events. All scenes are aftermath scenes and no sexual acts are actually shown. One scenario sees the Warden in their underwear standing next to a male "Husky Dwarf" wearing women's clothing and makeup, who somewhat unenthusiastically states: "Yes, that was amazing. The world moved for everyone." Another one sees the Warden alone in their underwear with their hands tied to their back. On the bed, the player may investigate an "Insertion Tool" and an "Extraction Tool", suggesting a parodic form of BDSM. In a third version, the Warden finds themselves in a room with two nugs (rabbit-pig-like creatures) who fall to the floor, presumably in exhaustion from whatever activity they were involved in. These are all good examples of how Dragon Age does sexuality differently from the Mass Effect series, though their significance and seriousness are unclear. The events are obviously meant as humorous and absurd moments for the player, who is then left to ponder what really transpired the night after the brothel.

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185 The companions will come running once the player exits. Apparently, they have been waiting patiently for the Warden, much in the same sense as the companions patiently waiting for Shepard to finish glaring at the asari dancers.

186 The special services in the Blooming Rose in II provide the same type of obscure and humorous scenes, including ending up in a room filled with traps or listening to a Chantry sister preach about repentance. These scenes are notably nonsexual compared to the corresponding bizarre scenarios in Origins.

187 Inquisition attempts to approach BDSM more seriously with Iron Bull's romance. See next chapter.
before. The likely intention in all scenarios is parody, and they have no particular effects on anything in the gameworld.\textsuperscript{188} Nevertheless, sex with a dwarf in drag, speculative tools and, presumably, pet creatures, is actually fully possible.

The brothels, despite their potentially absurd and humorous scenarios, carry problematic implications about non-heterosexuality and sex work. Shaw, discussing the RPG series \textit{Fable}, remarks that coding all sex workers as bisexual "reproduces a tired and oppressive stereotype about sex workers and bisexuals as those who will screw anything that moves. Further, it assumes that sex work is \textit{sex}, not work, and that it in turn defines one's sexual identity" (2014: 30). This sex work philosophy is seen in both \textit{Origins} and \textit{II}, as all prostitutes are available to both genders and that they are nothing more than a sexual-encounter-in-waiting. Perhaps the brothels are the Thedosian way of showing off sexual grittiness, much like how so many asari maidens become strippers in dance clubs constructed primarily through a heteronormative male gaze. Brothels are not a topic to engage with. Even the \textit{Mass Effect} series manages to slightly problematize that many asari choose to become strippers rather than help out galactic cultural advancement, but the brothels are establishments taken for granted. Unlike the asari strippers, the brothels are not constructed to cater to a specific public male and heteronormalizing gaze, and by contrast they significantly "queer things up". I remain critical of using brothels as the primary possible stories about queerness outside romances and as a way of enabling gay options and characters in a fairly easy and empty manner, which presumes that this is the natural domicile of queerness. After all, the brothels contain more non-heterosexual characters than the player's inner circle of companions. This would have been gay-button mechanics at their worst if this had this been the only mode of homosexuality. \textit{Inquisition} abandons the brothel feature altogether, another move which signals a more progressive approach toward representation.

For the rest of the chapter, I will split the discussion into two separate categories: one focusing on female homosexuality and one for male homosexuality. They are treated very differently, just like in the \textit{Mass Effect} games. Female homosexuality is readily used for straight male fantasies and evolves to become a rather mundane thing in Thedas, but male homosexuality is mostly represented as quirks, jokes and deviancy until \textit{Inquisition}.

\textsuperscript{188} The nug incident might become a catalyst for rumors about the Warden in the \textit{Witch Hunt} DLC.
"Hommo-sexuality" Extreme

In the *Mass Effect* chapters, I discussed the phenomenon "hommo-sexuality", a term originally used by Luce Irigaray ([1974] 1985) in her arguments about how Freud discussed and understood female homosexuality primarily through the discourse of male homosexuality and male desire; female homosexuality was seemingly not its own thing in classical psychoanalytic discourse and was very much centered on the penis/phallus discourse. Both de Lauretis ([1988] 1993) and Sender (2004) discuss "hommo-sexuality" in relation to lesbian representation. Sender points especially to the use of lesbians in marketing targeted at straight men in which lesbian desire is used for male titillation instead of representing female homosexuality for the sake of inclusion and diversity. Such hypersexualized representations are pervasive in female "queer chic" strategies (Gill 2007). This topic must be revisited here because *Origins* approaches such "hommo-sexual" representations in a much more direct and sexually explicit manner than what the *Mass Effect* games do. In *Origins*, female homosexuality is not only constructed as public and appealing for a straight male player, but also for the characters in the game. If "hommo-sexuality" and queer chic play on codes from heterosexual male pornography and the *Mass Effect* games flirt with such representations through implication, then *Origins* makes "hommo-sexuality" perfectly explicit. It is particularly a female Warden that may hear most of the girl-on-girl fascinations because most of them involve the Warden herself.

I will begin with the Oghren and Branka scenario since it is a good catalyst for the discussion of female homosexuality as queer chic/male heterosexual fantasies. Oghren, the player's dwarven companion, absolutely loves alcohol and women. He acts inappropriately and often serves as comic relief. The comic relief function is important for much of the "hommo-sexuality" in this game because it can be dismissed on the grounds of Oghren's whims rather than the game outright representing female homosexuality for/as straight male pleasure. It is revealed during the main quest "A Paragon of her Kind" that Oghren's wife Branka had a female lover, Hespith, who meets a tragic end during the quest. If the player speaks with Oghren once they exit Orzammar following the quest and asks him if he thinks it is strange to be on the surface, he replies: "Strange? No, strange is your wife turning out to prefer the ladies." This topic is not pursued further in conversation, but Oghren will deal with it on his

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189 Hespith has become a ghoul from ingesting darkspawn flesh, and commits suicide by jumping off a cliff. If Branka is temporarily brought to her senses and persuaded to destroy the Anvil, she will lament Hespith's fate before committing suicide herself.
own. He is often drunk when he is in the party camp. If the Warden is female, he will believe that she is Hespith during one of his drunken banter and wonder what she had that he did not. Oghren's contemplation echoes men who believe that they can "turn" women gay because of their own lack of male prowess. These people are likely also apt to believe that they can turn gay women straight by an impressive and overwhelming display of said male prowess. While such beliefs place an enormous, albeit wrongful, confidence in some magical power of masculinity, it is also a demeaning view of female sexuality as something unserious and as phases that can be controlled by men. Such views can easily dictate that female homosexuality is the result of the failure of male heterosexuality, and affords little to no autonomy to women. This is emblematic of the obligatory heterosexuality expected of women (Rich [1980] 1993). Oghren, however, quickly finds an exit strategy and instead begins to imagine Branka and Hespith together. He hastily claims that he has to retreat to his tent, a euphemism for his need to privately fantasize about them and masturbate. Whatever his anxieties were before can now become sexual fantasies. Hespith and Branka are heterosexually appropriated instead of them remaining threats to him and his manhood. Since he will never get the answer to his question, he finds another coping mechanism that avoids it altogether.

Pirate captain Isabela can be found visiting the brothel, offering both functional and sexual rewards. She can teach the Duelist specialization to the player if they beat her at a card game or have sex with her ("get to know her better"). The sex option requires upgrades in the coercion skill, and Isabela is available to both genders. The unique possibility here is that companions may actually join in on the fun. It is actually possible to engage in a foursome, depending on how the player has interacted with companions previously and the combination of companions present when speaking with Isabela. There is no scene for this activity, there is only a quick fade-to-black scene and the game immediately resumes with some banter and Isabela teaching the specialization to the player. This is the only scenario in all of the games in which it is possible to engage in group sex with multiple companions.

The Pearl is a crucial site for "hommo-sexuality". If a female Warden has sex with a female prostitute and Oghren is in the active party upon selection, Oghren may barge into the room

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190 Possible combinations are Warden/Isabela, Warden/Isabela/Leliana, Warden/Isabela/Zevran, Warden/Isabela/Leliana/Zevran and Female Warden/Isabela/Alistair. Convincing Alistair or Leliana to participate in group sex requires that the player "hardens" them during their personal quests. That is, the player must steer the characters' personality in certain directions.
during the black screen. The prostitute will shriek and Oghren unconvincingly excuses himself with "[h]eh, sorry. Wrong room." If Oghren is in the active party when the player chooses to have a threesome with a female Warden, Isabela and Leliana, Oghren will grunt and claim that it is too much to handle before fainting and falling to the floor. Oghren's repeated display of exaggerated heterosexual masculinity, in which he pines for seeing two women having sex so much that the fainty upon the realization of the prospect, is perhaps meant to be parodic while simultaneously affirming its appeal. Oghren is not the only straight man to be amazed at the wonders of two women having sex, for example. Alistair may also express his interest in the prospect if the player propositions Isabela with him in the party: "Are you suggesting... with her? I mean... wow. And here I am, awake and everything." Female homosexuality continues to be a venture that is also for heterosexual men, and while the player may choose to engage in these sexual activities for many different reasons, the game attempts to make sure that one does not forget that it is also pleasurable to those it may not concern—or, perhaps, that it is precisely their concern.

Such repeated "hommo-sexual" representations communicate that male heterosexuality has a distinct sense of ownership of female homosexuality. This is strikingly absent with male homosexuality, which tends to get expelled and ignored instead. Michael Segell argues in "Two Girls for Every Boy" that "All men—straight ones, anyway—are aroused by the idea of two women having sex with one another... Male fascination with female coupling is so universal, in fact, that some researchers consider the erotic response to it a reliable indicator of heterosexuality" (Segell in Ciasullo [2001] 2012: 341-342). While I understand the polemical nature of the claim, I do not in any way believe that all straight men find girl-on-girl fascinating or arousing, nor do I consider erotic responses to it (or lack thereof) a supposed valid test of "true" heterosexuality for men. The argument traps itself in gender essentialism and character dichotomy rhetoric. There is a curiously culturally relevant theme here, however, especially in how it is manifested in the BioWare games and in the general queer chic phenomenon. Female homosexuality is a fantasy, male homosexuality is not. It is certainly progressive that female homosexuality is offered exposure and representation both in terms of discourse and actions, but why must it first and foremost be cycled through the dominant mode of straight male fantasy? It does not matter, then, if we are in the mythic medievalesque past or almost two centuries into our own future: contemporary mainstream sexual culture consumes both. Furthermore, female homosexuality thus far involves bisexual women, so there is not even the need to "wish/imagine away" their homosexuality like
Ciasullo ([2001] 2012) argues about the "luscious lesbian" mode of representation. These women are always ready for men, and are not hesitant to let other women come along for the ride. Andrew M. Butler asks: "Being homosexual might be defined by (sexual) actions, by appearance, by lifestyle or by community – or by a readerly identification imposed on a text or recognized as being represented in the text. At what point is the representation of a character a representation of a gay character?" (2016: 57). In this context it is quite plausible to argue that such "hommo-sexual" representations are not really representations of female homosexuality at all. Instead, Origins moves much closer to female homosexuality as heterosexual male pornography.

**From Spectacle to Ordinariness**

*Origins'* hypersexualized female homosexuality is toned down in the sequels and moves from initial (male pleasure) spectacle to a more ordinary sexuality. The process is quite reminiscent of the treatment of the asari, in which *Mass Effect* spends much time establishing and discoursing about the peculiarities of their sexuality and gender, whereas the sequels attempt to push them into more normalized representations. *II* continues with a comedic register, though instead of routing female homosexuality through "hommo-sexuality", the humor is instead played off from the naivety of other companions. Isabela, now a companion, provides most of the discourse on female homosexuality through party banter. Isabela's vast sexual experience makes her a symbol of both fascination and revulsion among other characters. Aveline finds nothing admirable about her sexual pursuits. Merrill and Bethany, however, where the former is naive and the latter is inexperienced, find Isabela intriguing and may ask her various sexual questions in party banter. Bethany, for example, cautiously asks her "[s]o you've… been with women. In bed?" and Isabela replies "I know. Shocking, isn't it? You see, sweetness, men are only good for one thing. Women are good for six." Hawke reprimands Isabela, who then laughs, before the exchange goes any further. It is clear from this exchange that homosexuality is not considered usual, at least not to Ferelden-born Bethany, but it seems to be a fascinating concept. In another banter session, Bethany turns her attention to the fact that Isabela has been with lots of men. Isabela replies: "Men. Women. Elves. A dwarf in drag once, but I don't recommend that." Here, we can also see that "men" is automatically

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191 The presence of Bethany is wholly conditional and requires that Hawke is not a mage. Otherwise, she will die in the Prologue.

192 This is likely a reference to the "Husky Dwarf", one of the surprise options at The Pearl in *Origins*. 

193 Here, we can also see that "men" is automatically
coded to mean human males, since elves are a particularly separate entity in Isabela's account. Female homosexuality for male fascination seems absent in these examples and the humor is instead generated by the curious and naive inquiries of other characters.

Besides the curious "Two women dancing?" question, in Inquisition female homosexuality has become fairly ordinary and seemingly unremarkable. During the minor quest "Strange Bedfellows" in the Hinterlands, for example, the player is asked to locate a missing scout named Ritts. She can be found fighting off some rogue templars. After the fight, the player can investigate the surrounding area and find the body of a dead female apostate mage lying on what looks like a picnic blanket. Ritts offers some vague clues about the dead mage until it is ultimately revealed that Ritts and the mage were having a picnic: "So, the truth… I may have been, um, passing time with Eldredda […] At first she was just a mage who saw me and didn't attack, but later, we…" The rogue templars interrupted their picnic and killed Eldredda. Ritts asks if the Inquisitor is going to report her. The issue is not that Ritts had an affair with another woman, but that an Inquisition scout had a liaison with a rogue mage. The player can defer to Varric if he is in the party to recruit Ritts as an agent for the Inquisition, prompting Varric to praise Ritts' talents: "Look, kid, if you can talk an apostate out of her pants in the middle of a war, you've got a gift. Use it." Minor quests aside, in Inquisition female homosexuality is incorporated into one of the game's larger plots.

**Lesbian Rulership**

The Inquisition main quest "Wicked Eyes and Wicked Hearts", which involves the Orlesian Empress Celene Valmont I, provides an interesting addition to the representation of female homosexuality since it indirectly thematizes homosexuality in the public context of royalty and national rulership. The mission is initially about protecting Celene from an attempted assassination at a masquerade ball. The advisors explain that Celene will be meeting for peace talks with the usurper Grand Duke Gaspard and Ambassador Briala in order to end the civil war plaguing Orlais. Briala is an ambassador in name only, and has organized the elves of Halamshiral into an underground army. Leliana explains that Celene invited Briala in order to

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193 If Isabela is taken to meet Leliana during a quest in the DLC The Exiled Prince, they will recognize each other if they had sex together in Origins as part of a threesome or foursome. Isabela reminds Leliana of their past venture, saying that "it didn't take much to get you to sing." Leliana blushes.

194 Gaspard is Celene's cousin and was originally the first in line to inherit the throne, but Celene outsmarted him and won over the Council of Heralds, which holds authority over title disputes.
gain the elves' alliance, and adds that "[t]hat would be scandal enough, without the rumor that Brial is a jilted lover of Celene's." The player is allowed to inquire more about this. The dialogue choice reads "Celene had an elven lover?" which places the focus on the racial aspect rather than the gender aspect. Homosexuality is not a particular issue in Orlais; it is considered a "quirk of character and nothing more". The issue here is the Orlesian Empress' liaison with a rebel. Leliana says that if the rumors are true and were to get out, the scandal (the Empress and an elf) could destroy Celene's court. Celene herself has never married and has yet to name an heir. During the ball, the player is tasked with investigating various clues from all involved parties (Celene, Gaspard and Brial) and it becomes clear that all of them are involved in schemes and wish to manipulate the Inquisitor for their own purposes. Different outcomes on who ultimately rules Orlais are available depending on player actions. If proper steps are taken, the player can support Brial and state she was instrumental in discovering Gaspard's betrayal, and the former lovers can be reconciled. Their reunion is emotional and Celene will publicly announce Brial as a new member of the court, thus officially recognizing their romantic relationship, both past and present.

![Figure 39: Celene is reunited with Brial.](image)

The player can allow Gaspard to rule alone or have Brial rule with Gaspard as her mask. Both of these outcomes require that Celene is assassinated. Celene may also rule alone. Alternatively, the player can blackmail all three parties into a public truce.

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The Celene-Briala constellation sets up a fun subversion of the heteronormative structure of royalty, while it simultaneously plays on familiar romantic themes of seemingly impossible romances between people of completely different social standings/classes. It also puts homosexuality visibly into one of the most public arenas there are. Celene and Briala display no physical affection besides warm looks and smiles, however, but this is likely out of general respect for the ballroom situation. A note found in *Trespasser*, however, reveals that they regularly cavort "like lovers half their age". The reconciliation is wholly conditional; the player may freely choose other options as they see fit. As a representation of homosexuality, the scenario is put into a rather rickety situation. In one version, the quest functions as a scenario for reconciling two former lovers. Whether the reconciliation itself is a good thing (say, for the sake of having two women rule Orlais) is debatable. Both Celene and Briala have committed questionable deeds that have affected them negatively. The player must judge what they think is best (or go with whatever solution they manage to reach depending on quest performance). It is complicated further by the game's reward mechanism. The reunion of Celene and Briala is the only scenario which rewards the player with an Amulet of Power for the Inquisitor.196 This amulet grants the Inquisitor an extra combat ability or upgrade. This may suggest that the reunion is the real or best route to take, at least in terms of gameplay rather than story. Granted, the Amulets of Power are not exceptionally powerful, but they come in limited quantities and as such they are valuable items. As a final note, the initial focus of the Celene-Briala relationship is that Briala is an elf. The epilogue, however, mentions Briala as Celene's "lady love" instead, suddenly shifting the focus back onto her gender for some reason. While it is likely so due to inconsistency in the writing process, the phrasing "lady love" seems to imply that their relationship is different from the supposedly heterosexual "love".

### The Horrors and Humors of Male Homosexuality

The *Mass Effect* series avoids male homosexuality except as stereotypical references until *Mass Effect 3*, but the *Dragon Age* series includes it already from the first instalment. There is much more possible open discourse and acknowledgement of its existence, but prior to *Inquisition*, this is mostly communicated through comfort and discomfort strategies which aim at mostly emphasizing the prejudices and biases against male homosexuality and its

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196 It becomes available from a War Table operation following the resolution of the quest.
"threat" to established orders. Male homosexuality, it seems, is almost always possibly the problem, and does not go through the same "normalization" process as female homosexuality in these games, nor is it ever anyone's open and public fantasy. The "Sexuality in Thedas" note may state that everyone's sexuality is considered natural, but that does not stop prejudice and stereotypes from manifesting. Homosexual desire disrupts hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005: 58), and, as Sedgwick ([1985] 2016) argues, the sharp distinction constructed between homosexual desire and homosocial relations is rather fragile and the two are structured quite similarly. Homosocial relations are important, but in a predominantly heteronormative society, men's sexuality is more sharply constrained by homophobia (Connell 2005: 247). Connell argues that hegemonic masculinity has social authority and is difficult to challenge openly. Hegemonic masculinity has the power to shape the perceptions of gayness (2005: 156). Most of the public representations of male homosexuality in Origins and II are constructed from such perspectives, and reflect the more patriarchal biases of Thedas perhaps even better than the biases when playing as a female protagonist.

**The Uses of Male Homosexuality**

This section concerns the functional "use" of implied male homosexuality by the player or other characters for creating discomfort. I will start with Oghren since his exaggerated male heterosexuality engenders discourses on male homosexuality as well, although in the completely opposite manner than his girl-on-girl fantasies. A male Warden can make Oghren extremely uncomfortable when he gathers up the courage to ask the Warden for help with his personal quest. He attempts to flatter the Warden first, but he obviously has trouble doing so. The player can cut in with an "I love you too" option, which is not a declaration of (romantic) love, but a joke about his rambling compliments. It is meant to freak him out, and it does. Oghren is thrown off guard, replying "I-what? Keep your hands where I can see 'em! Sheesh, can't a man address a friend without getting all… weird? I was just asking a favor. You had to go all… that on me." Oghren expresses a similar reaction in party banter with Zevran when Oghren wants to talk about Antiva. Zevran makes a joke: "Oghren. If you want to bed me, you have only to ask." Oghren panics once more: "What!? Draw your weapon and say that again!" Zevran laughs and reveals the joke, before asserting "[y]ou are only slightly more attractive to me than a slime-filled pool of swamp water." Male sexual/romantic interest is thus not something that hyperstraight Oghren favors or handles especially well. He has no
prejudice toward Branka being gay/bisexual, but if a male Warden romances Zevran, Oghren may tell Zevran in banter "yeah… well… good luck with that" and that the two of them "might wanna… you know… keep it down though." Oghren turns his ex-wife and her female lover into masturbation fantasies, faints at the prospect of two women having sex with each other and runs in on the female Warden having sex with a prostitute, but two men should be silent. Oghren exemplifies the "I'm fine with gay men as long as I do no have to see it" attitude. The "I love you too" reply here uses implications of male homosexuality as a tool for freaking someone out. Once more, it is important to be mindful of Oghren's character and his role as comic relief. Both the player and Zevran may imply male homosexuality to scare Oghren, which could be seen as a means to poke fun at the frailty of his exaggerated heterosexuality/masculinity, but it only goes so far and the player only hears of his disgust rather than any changes in or challenges to his attitudes.

Interestingly, the brief male Warden-Oghren exchange brings out one of the two scenes in the game (the other is in a romance) where homosexuality is vaguely articulated: as "that". This is comparable to Kaidan's trouble of naming female homosexuality in Mass Effect, though here it has added prejudice. It is clear by now that the BioWare games do not want to place any particular labels on sexuality. This strategy avoids rigid markers and too overt assumptions about the player, but it also results in the games' difficulty with talking sensibly about sexuality and instead makes the topic seem embarrassing or taboo.

Homosexuality can also be used as a "manipulation tool" in a possible main quest called "Captured!" This is a very amusing quest in which the player must attempt to escape Fort Drakon, either on their own or by relying on companions coming to the Warden's, and possibly Alistair's, rescue. I will detail the independent escape featuring Alistair. The Warden and Alistair, both stripped down to their underwear, are located in a cell. There is an option to lure one of the guards into their cell by asking him to keep them company. The purpose is to attack him, get his key and escape (other means of escape are also possible). Both male and female Wardens can seduce the guard. The dialogue remains the same for both genders. The player can choose to attack the guard immediately or persuade him even further and have him remove his clothing. This causes the guard to strip down to his underwear and, for some reason, his helmet. From here the player can only attack him, so whatever the guard was

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197 This quest requires that the player surrenders to authority during the "Rescue the Queen" main quest.
hoping for will never happen. One may question multiple things here, for example the guard's work ethic or why the player has the ability to have the guard dress down once he is lured into the cell if there is no chance that sex will happen (it nevertheless cannot happen because Alistair is straight). The guard is manipulated and humiliated, and (homo)sexuality is once more a tool.

![Figure 40: The Warden tricks the guard into removing his armor.](image)

**The Silent Treatment**

Male homosexuality can also be rendered silent in public and deferred to the player's own interactions. The recruitment of potential companion Zevran Aranai is rather cautious and seems to imply a default straight player by hiding possible homosexuality. Zevran is bisexual and the first full romance option for male same-gender romance in these two series. Zevran is an elven assassin of the notorious Antivan Crows and is hired to kill the Warden. He is an obligatory encounter and once he has been bested in battle he surrenders himself to the Warden. The player can either recruit him or kill him. The way Zevran's sexuality/availability is revealed differs greatly depending on the Warden's gender. During the recruitment scene, he will almost aggressively flirt with a female Warden, saying that she is lovely, utterly gorgeous, an "aggressive little minx" and call her a "deadly sex goddess". He employs this flattery discourse in order to sway the Warden's mind, but in the male Warden scenario, no such discourse occurs and he does not flirt with him at all. Zevran acts more in a purely business-like manner toward the male Warden. His bisexuality is slightly hinted at in both scenarios if the player asks about why he remains with the Crows. He will mention that the Crows supply their assassins with "wine, women, men. Whatever you happen to fancy." Zevran instantly makes himself available to a female Warden, but is extremely reserved toward a male Warden. A likely reason for his modesty toward a male Warden may be that he

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198 I will discuss Zevran more closely in the next chapter.
believes Ferelden to be a much more "straight" country than Antiva and thus acts more carefully around men here. If a male Warden flirts with Zevran in the party camp, he will say that he did not expect to hear such things in Ferelden. He may also reveal that while he likes both men and women, he prefers women. This might also explain why he is flirty with a female Warden and not a male Warden: it is both safer and more preferable to flirt with her.

At the same time, considering the overall context, it is not really surprising that this careful approach was chosen. Here, there is a complicated relationship between diegetic reasoning and design which grants the representation a narrative justification which also works to "shield" (male) players from presumed unwanted content. Women, on the other hand, seem to be expected to deal with such comments from men.

In II, the player must help companion Anders rescue a former friend and lover, Karl, from templars, and this is where the gay button concept reaches peak levels of absurdity. Karl is revealed to have been turned Tranquil, a process which "castrates" mages by shutting off their emotions so that they cannot use magic, and thus they pose no threat to society. Anders is able to temporarily restore Karl's emotions. Karl begs Anders to kill him before he reverts to his former state, stating that he will never be "whole again", and Anders ultimately obliges. The quest itself presents Karl as Anders' dear friend and former associate, and Karl's ultimate fate clearly distresses Anders. In the follow-up conversation back at his clinic, Anders may reveal that his relationship with Karl was romantic (Karl was his "first"), but only if Hawke is male. If Hawke is female, he will not mention any romantic or sexual ties to Karl at all. Anders' relationship with Karl is not conditional, but the revelation of its nature is. This is a strange way to hide homosexuality. For a female Hawke, then, this is supposedly not a tragic love story. See next chapter for a more thorough discussion on this.

**Stereotyping, Heterosexism and Anxiety**

When male homosexuality in II is allowed to exist outside the silent treatment, it is mostly represented through stereotypes ranging from comic relief to the darker topic of rape. The Act 1 sidequest called "The First Sacrifice" involves finding Ninette, the disappeared wife of the rather unsympathetic nobleman Ghyslain de Carrac. Ninette is rumored to have been spending time at the Blooming Rose and the player is directed to speak to Jethann, one of the male

199 "Such things" is one of the ways this series articulates "homosexuality".
elven prostitutes there. Jethann mistakes Hawke for a client and is disappointed upon learning that Hawke is not there for sex. He then offers Hawke information and adds a frustrated remark that the templar who visited him earlier, Ser Emeric, would not sleep with him either. The player may have sex with Jethann after the conversation. This leads to the same fade-to-black scene as the other non-romance sexual encounters and afterwards Jethann is permanently gone, erasing any trace of the encounter and the character. Jethann, like Serendipity, is an exaggerated stereotype whose only existence is based on sex, just like all the other brothel workers.

II even attempts expressing outright heterosexist attitudes toward male homosexuality, and this is enabled by Hawke's uncle Gamlen. Like Oghren, Gamlen's character is important for this particular discourse. Gamlen is presented as rather disgruntled and unsympathetic, a man "whose meager hospitality is overshadowed only by his shadiness" (Kelly 2015: 51) and who lost the family fortune to drinking and gambling. Gamlen provides various demeaning remarks about Hawke's romances. He will provide one default comment and then follow up with a gender-specific comment. To a male Hawke romancing Fenris, he will say: "So, you're into elves, huh? I guess I don't have to ask which one of you's the girl." This comment is based on the rather stereotypical view that all sexual relationships involve an active and a passive partner; a giver and a taker, or, more specifically in essentialist views, a man and a woman. The active and passive designations themselves are not problematic; they may be used to simply indicate someone's preferences, but these designations are often conflated with gender in heteronormative discourses. The problem is assigning these roles to essentialist beliefs: that the taker is a woman and that the giver is a man, and that these roles do not signal equal status. For male gay relationships, the stereotypical view is that the receptive partner is the "woman", a notion which builds extensively upon the belief that sex is originally the domain of heterosexuality and that receptiveness/femininity indicates subordination. Gamlen's slur in this instance is likely intended to refer to Fenris' lithe elven physique, but to a female Hawke he will instead simply add "[i]t takes all kinds", indicating the inherent homophobic motivation in his address to male Hawke. Gamlen also says "I guess I don't have to ask which one of you's the girl" to a male Hawke romancing Anders, because to Gamlen male homosexuality is apparently nothing more than trying to copy man-and-woman-stuff and it is the only story available. It is more ambiguous who the "girl" might be in this instance, but it is

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200 Jethann is voiced by Mark Meer, who also provides the voice of male Commander Shepard.
likely Anders because he is a very emotional and passionate man, qualities I assume Gamlen would view as womanly. The discourse is likely also structured this way so as to not assume that the player is the passive/submissive sexual partner. The player is meant to remain active and in control, even when/as their in-game uncle rebukes them.

Gamlen does not possess the same negative attitude toward female homosexuality (of course). Homosexuality is not a problem for Gamlen as long as it is the right homosexuality. If a female Hawke romances Isabela, he will say: "I hear you've been slipping it to that pirate slut from the Hanged Man. What's that like? Two women? I've always wondered…" Homosexuality is now suddenly, and unsurprisingly, appealing, fantastic and out of reach, something which Gamlen has "always" thought about. A male Hawke will instead get "[t]he bitch turned me down flat", revealing that Gamlen has approached Isabela at some point. Gamlen might be represented as a stereotypical and bigoted old man, but there is a pattern now in which the games enjoy talking about female homosexuality in positive and alluring ways while either hiding or critiquing male homosexuality in various other ways. At some point, something stops being a cultural critique/representation of "reality" and instead begins to reflect more the cultural views of the developer and the audience assumptions about the player. The player has no way to object to Gamlen's assumptions. Instead, the player is supposed to dismiss his comments on the grounds of his disgruntled character, similar to Oghren and his comic presence.

The darker aspects of representations of homosexuality emerge during companion Fenris' storyline. It uses Tevinter norms and beliefs to problematize the treatment of homosexuality, much like in the cases of Krem (as argued above) and Dorian (discussed below). The "Sexuality in Thedas" codex entry mentions that same-gender sexual relations in Tevinter are "considered selfish and deviant behavior among nobles, but actively encouraged with favored slaves." While heterosexual slave relations are also likely to occur, the codex entry deals specifically with homosexual relations. The slave aspect is briefly visited in II. Fenris, a former Tevinter slave, is on the run and wants revenge on his former master, magister Danarius. Danarius eventually appears in Kirkwall in Fenris' Act 3 personal quest. His small remarks imply that he had an "actively encouraged" sexual relationship with Fenris: "my little Fenris", "my pet", and (to Hawke) "[d]o I detect a note of jealousy? It's not surprising. The lad is rather skilled, isn't he?" The player may either confront Danarius in battle or turn Fenris
over to him. The former leads to Fenris killing Danarius, while the latter surprisingly sees Fenris relinquish all hopes of freedom and simply return to Tevinter with him.

Homosexuality in Tevinter is only considered deviant in the context of noble-noble relations, whereas it is *actively encouraged* with favored slaves. Is homosexuality only deviant in one situation, but not the other? There are implications of a type of rape culture here. Homosexuality is really only "normal" if it is conducted with slaves. Sexual relations between a slave and a slave master are not necessarily automatically rape per se. Their diametrically opposed relationship, however, causes complications. While such relationships might be seemingly consensual or even romantic, it is also feasible to think that the slave does not have much of a choice in these matters because the master has much more power, owning the slave/object in question. Sanctions and punishments are likely enacted on slaves who are unwilling to offer up themselves to their masters' sexual lusts. In Tevinter, then, homosexuality is acknowledged as real, but it is expelled from the public sphere and instead encouraged to find expression in the private sphere by taking advantage of those that are already robbed of their freedom and confined to lives in servitude. We can view this as an attempt to make Tevinter even more unsympathetic to the player. Tevinter is rarely portrayed as a nation the player should support. At the same time, familiar and depressing tropes of homosexuality as perverse and abusive are used for this gritty purpose and are thus perhaps only a more domestic version of the prison rape trope.

**Repressed Homosexual Desire**

*II* includes a very brief, easily missed and obscure scene which implicitly thematizes homosexuality as repressed desire. The scene is also notable for enabling a more functional use of the all-female desire demons. It occurs during Sebastian's companion quest "Repentance" in the DLC *The Exiled Prince*. The quest takes place in a mansion where all the inhabitants have gone crazy in various ways because of a desire demon. The player may stray from the main path and encounter an optional scene in a bedroom where Ruxton Harimann, one of the nobles owning the estate, can be seen engaging in sexual activities with a female elven prostitute. Both are completely oblivious to Hawke and the companions. Upon entering the room, Ruxton will order the elf to go "[o]h… lower… lower…", and she performs (off-screen) fellatio on him. Sebastian apologizes for exposing Hawke to this scene, and remarks
that he has known Ruxton his whole life and that Ruxton is a complete prude. The cutscene ends when Ruxton asks the elf: "Where's your brother? Let's ask him to join us…" The elf does not say anything at all. Her brother never makes an appearance and may only serve as a final comment on how much the madness is escalating.

The brief scene may hold a deeper meaning if it is viewed in the light of the source of the madness. When confronted, the desire demon at the root of the problem reveals that while it does have the ability to create desires in people, it is "far easier to nurture those that already exist." This may be case for most, if not all, of the strange occurrences in the mansion where the demon has appealed to and activated all types of (strange) desires. For Ruxton, then, his sublimated/repressed desire to actively engage in sexual conduct with another man is brought forth by the demon's spell. As a nobleman, Ruxton is expected to perform his familial duties first and here we might actually see an engagement with the topic of sexual repression. It can also be a mere whim or quirk, but it does make sense in the context the game is attempting to establish with desire demon functionality and sexuality in nobility. It may not necessarily be a social critique, however, because after the demon is dealt with, the issues raised here are never taken up again and might be intended as a quirky "bonus scene" for diligent explorers.

**Heralding a New Dawn for Male Homosexuality**

*Inquisition* marks progression for male homosexuality in the public gameworld and does away with most of the earlier anxious representational practices. The ball in Halamshiral is an excellent point of departure for a discussion on these new approaches. The first instance, occurring during the ball, plays on a familiar stereotypical humorous "man hits on another man, making said man awkwardly uncomfortable" trope. If homosexuality is seen as a "quirk of character" in Orlais, then this quirkiness finds expression here. Advisor Cullen is the lucky subject. Cullen is easily embarrassed when it comes to flirts and sexual matters. For example, he finds it difficult to talk about his investigations in the Blooming Rose in *II*. At the ball, Cullen has attracted a following: two women and a man. Cullen is clearly uncomfortable, saying that he does not know who they are and that they will not leave him alone. The player can hang around listening to the nobles interacting with him. One of the women asks if he is married. When Cullen says he is not, the nobleman is suddenly very intrigued. At one point, Cullen may suddenly say "[d]id you just… grab my bottom?" and the nobleman affirmatively
and coyly replies that he is a weak man. A noblewoman may also say "[s]mile, Commander! You're so handsome when you smile" and the nobleman flirtingly adds: "He's just as handsome when he doesn't." He also compliments Cullen's hair and requests a dance with him, but Cullen turns him and the other candidates down. It might be sobering to note that this very minor unnamed character has now already managed to express much more explicit male homosexual desire (outside romances) than many other characters in these games.

The "male homosexuality as comedy" comfort strategy is fairly well known. It is often used as a taming device to "support rather than threaten the heterosexist order" (Brookey and Westerfelhaus [2002] 2012: 197). I do not view this as the case with Cullen and the nobleman. A stereotype, the somewhat effeminate, quirky and promiscuous man who cannot take a hint, is invoked, but here we are not likely invited to find him appalling or out of line. This is a comic relief situation, but it is constructed to poke fun at Cullen's inability to handle being flirted with by another man. The joke is on Cullen and his social paralysis. He is not comfortable with the noblewomen either, so it is not technically a gender issue. The nobleman is, however, the more aggressive flirtier here. This can be a way of using stereotypes in a way that is not primarily there to dismiss them or to make jokes about them. Heterosexuality can just as easily become a target. In Orlais, Cullen is out of his element and the encounter with another dominant culture and its values exposes cultural contingency.

Dorian's Breakout

The most significant representation of male homosexuality in the public gameworld of Inquisition is Dorian Pavus, the series' first exclusively gay male character. Popular gaming site IGN referred to him as "gaming's breakout gay character" (2015), and this is with good reason. With Dorian's character arc/personal quest, the game approaches male homosexuality in a much more careful and serious manner than before, and frames it rather sensibly and critically in the context of the gameworld's cultural and sexual politics. It manages to emphasize that male homosexuality remains potentially problematic, but here the emphasis is placed on the familial duties of nobility rather than a pathological and prejudiced approach to homosexuality as sexuality, and pathology is instead placed in the pursuit of heteronormativity. Dorian's personal quest, notable for including a type of "coming out" scene, which is rather uncommon for video games, also manages to demonstrate that when male
homosexuality is afforded this much involvement the game mechanics must seemingly provide defensive maneuvers for the player.201

Dorian is a confident and stylish mage from Tevinter, and the player can encounter him early in the game if they pursue meeting with the rebel mages in Redcliffe.202 Dorian is notably queerer than the "very straight gay" types such as Steve and Kaidan in the Mass Effect series. His eloquent manner of speech, overly self-confident and mocking attitude, gesturing and meticulously groomed appearance connote several aspects of what is often considered gay masculinities or the more modern construction known as "metrosexual". Dorian never says anything explicit about his sexuality early on, and both male and female Inquisitors can initially attempt to flirt with him.203 The player may decode some hints about his sexuality (besides what his overall demeanor may connote) in the way he talks about his family and why he has run away from Tevinter. Dorian explains that he is estranged from his family because they did not approve of his "choices". Dorian's family wanted him to marry a noblewoman and maintain the power and influence of the Pavus family, as Tevinter nobility structure dictates, but Dorian had no desire of living in "luxurious despair" and left home. Dorian remains adamant about not revealing the true cause of the trouble with his family, but his discourse is not too ambiguous either. Eventually, in Skyhold, Dorian's personal quest will be triggered, which involves meeting and confronting Dorian's father. As the player progresses in the quest, they will come to learn that the issue is not only that Dorian rejected his family's idyllic heterosexual plan for him, it also concerns that his father attempted to "cure" his homosexuality, which resonates with many real-life issues and attitudes toward (male) homosexuality.

The meeting, which Dorian suspects is a trap, turns out to not be a trap at all: Dorian's father, magister Halward Pavus, is the only one there and the player needs to act as a mediator between father and son. Dorian is furious and demands to know his father's intentions. Dorian eventually explains the true reason behind their conflict: "I prefer the company of men. My father disapproves." Here, the player gets one of those somewhat rare and silly dialogue choices where the Inquisitor asks Dorian what he means by "the company of men". This is

201 The "defense against homosexuality" rhetoric is, strangely, mostly found in the romances. See next chapter.
202 If the player sides with the templars instead of the mages, they will encounter Dorian during the siege of Haven, and he can be officially recruited upon reaching Skyhold.
203 A female Inquisitor who repeatedly flirts with him may confront Dorian about him possibly "deceiving" her after it is revealed that he is gay. See next chapter.
perhaps enabled for those who might be in disbelief about the prospect of two women dancing in public. Dorian has a snarky reply: "Did I stutter? Men, and the company thereof. As in sex. Surely you've heard of it." The player can also ask if that is a big concern in Tevinter, which it really is: "Every Tevinter family is intermarrying to distill the perfect mage, perfect body, perfect mind. The perfect leader. It means every perceived flaw—every aberration—is deviant and shameful. It must be hidden." The Tevinter Imperium strictly controls breeding, much in the same sense as their sworn enemies, the Qunari, in order to preserve their powerful magocracy. Tevinter does not forbid homosexuality, however, and Dorian being gay is not the issue per se. The issue is that he did not want to suppress it for the sake of family and society, and this is where the player gets to partake in the exchange.

Figure 41: Dorian confronts his father.

The player is allowed to respond to Dorian in a variety of ways, and it is a veritable plate of interesting and problematic discourses. The dialogue wheel pops up with "I had a suspicion", "Spare me the details", "No women at all?", "I had no idea", and, if the Inquisitor is male, "I've done it" (flirt option). Only one of these options can be chosen before the conversation proceeds. The player can ask Dorian about not having been with women at all, posited as if exclusive homosexuality is a mystery greater than the Fade. Dorian replies that women are wonderful, but that they are not for him. The flirt option for male Inquisitors is interesting because it enables the player to express homosexuality outside the romances. It triggers a sarcastic remark from Dorian: "No! The Herald of Andraste? I am shocked and scandalized." "Spare me the details" is an aggressive option in which the Inquisitor says: "That's what I thought. No need to elaborate." Dorian sarcastically replies: "Good. I'd hate to resort to drawing pictures." I call this the "touchy button" which, in the context of homosexuality, is only afforded to male homosexuality. It is a way for the player to say "stop it!" and criticize male homosexuality. I find this discourse very problematic because it enables the silencing of
male homosexuality and its possible condemnation, whereas female homosexuality is not treated this way at all. Dorian might reply sarcastically, but the player retains the power to ultimately silence him on the matter.

The "I had no idea" and "I had a suspicion" options lead into similar territory that warrants discussion on explicit homosexuality. The former option triggers Dorian saying: "Well, it's not as if I introduce myself that way. 'Hello, my name is Dorian. I like men.' Maybe I should start. Some days it seems that's all anyone cares about." The latter, where the Inquisitor says "[t]hat's not exactly news, Dorian", triggers: "And why should it be? Why should anyone care? I have no idea." This is likely meant as an explicit critique of gay stereotypes in media. Dorian's wry "[h]ello, my name is Dorian. I like men" echoes a long-standing practice of gay representation, and it is helpful to revisit Dyer's argument ([1984] 2012) about the ideological function of representation through synecdoche, that of taking the part (the "gayness") to be the entire character. Dorian is a direct confrontation with stereotyping practices, but without censoring his queerness. Dorian as Dragon Age's first gay male companion was announced on several online sites long before Inquisition's release, and both Dorian's character and the enabled player discourse play on knowing or suspecting that he is gay. That he is not reduced to his sexuality is a progressive move for a gay character. Regarding his "why should anyone care?" comment, I argue that being able to express sexuality/gayness is important. There is a difference between gayness being the entire character and a gay character being allowed to express his or her desire. We should care because homosexuality is forced into silence in the mainstream and stereotyping practices are still prevalent in games (if homosexuality is lucky enough to be represented at all). A direct confrontation with the synecdoche stereotype can easily lead into heteronormalized and silent characters: they are gay, but do not do anything "gay". This is an easy pitfall into the "asexualized gay men" stereotype of mainstream media. Why anyone in Thedas should care about Dorian liking men is one matter. Why anyone in our world should care is more important: homosexuality remains marginalized in video games and lacks serious and open discourse. Eve Sedgwick argued in Epistemology of the Closet that "the closet is the defining structure for gay oppression in this century" ([1990] 2008: 70). It remains so and only explicit discourse and visibility can change that. Dorian represents a significant break and change. It is important to recognize the dual aspect here. While Dorian himself does not consider homosexuality a big deal, his arc and quest are constructed to emphasize exactly that it is a big deal, and they do so without being "preachy". It is not that homosexuality always has to be talked about to exhaustion, but it needs to be talked about. It
needs to be visible in a mainstream media culture that idealizes gender essentialism and heteronormativity, ideals that are found both in our world and Thedas alike, and which may attempt to use homosexuality in service of heterosexuality's pleasures and fears.

The crux of the matter surfaces when Dorian confronts his father about attempting to change him by using blood magic: "He taught me to hate blood magic. 'The resort of the weak mind.' Those are his words. But what was the first thing you did when your precious heir refused to play pretend for the rest of his life? You tried to change me!" Halward's dangerous attempt to change Dorian's sexuality/manipulate his mind echoes the depressing and possibly dangerous belief that homosexuality is only a phase or a disease, and that it will pass or can be "cured". Blood magic is used in this context as a metaphor for the real-life psychological practices known as "conversion therapy" (Clarke et al. 2010: 12), which views homosexuality as pathologic and as something that can be "repaired". Historically, such therapy has been associated with violent and intrusive methods, such as "associating electric shocks or nausea-inducing substances with homosexual stimuli" and more extreme methods involving the use of hormones or surgery (Clarke et al. 2010: 12). Blood magic is vilified and dangerous. Halward says he only wanted what was best for Dorian (a typical parental concern/excuse), but Dorian interrupts him and points out the selfishness of Halward's actions. The outcome of the quest is left up to the player, who can either leave with Dorian or persuade him to talk to his father. This choice affects some of the dialogue in the following scene back at Skyhold. If the player urges Dorian to speak with his father, it is revealed that Halward deeply regrets his actions and seeks his son's forgiveness. Dorian, surprised, goes off to speak with his father in private.

Back at Skyhold, the player is given an opportunity to ask why and how Halward tried to change him: "Out of desperation. I wouldn't put on a show, marry the girl, keep everything unsavory private and locked away. Selfish, I suppose, not to want to spend my entire life screaming on the inside. He was going to do a blood ritual. Alter my mind. Make me… acceptable. I found out. I left." If he is asked if blood magic can actually do such a thing, he replies: "Maybe. It could also have left me a drooling vegetable. It crushed me to think he found that absurd risk preferable to scandal. Part of me has always hoped he didn't really want to go through with it. If he had… I can't even imagine the person I would be now. I wouldn't like that Dorian."
Dorian's personal quest is powerful and meaningful, and its thematic importance is emphasized by the fact that the quest only involves cutscenes, not collecting items or fighting enemies (which most companion quests involve). This places much more focus on the interpersonal drama, a drama which I believe can hit close to home for many players and is perhaps the most directly real-world relevant companion quest. The character arc and quest show how homosexuality as a topic can be meaningfully and explicitly integrated and explored in the storyline, instead of always having it in romances or as minor humorous or absurd references here and there. In a video game, especially a mainstream game, this arc and quest are groundbreaking. Not so because it deals with real-life instances (I have shown a variety of different ways these games do that throughout the thesis), but groundbreaking because it is in a video game and made into a prominent part of it (although every companion quest is optional). It is interesting to reflect on the fact that while Dorian and his arc can be considered groundbreaking in a mainstream game, the same type of storyline can be considered completely mundane in other mainstream media, particularly in television. Coming out/confrontations and issues with friends and family are popular storylines (especially in teen and young adult series), and homosexuality as an "issue" is often the only story mainstream media can tell (Davis 2004). With Dorian, the game shows that it can thematize homosexuality directly while not making it the only important aspect of the character or conflating the character with his sexuality. Dorian is confident and resolute, and his desire to change things can work as a metaphor; what Dorian is to Tevinter is what BioWare may be to the mainstream game industry: a renegade and a paragon.

"Adoribull" Homosexuality

My final point in this chapter concerns the explicit public expression of male homosexual desire that Inquisition enables, something which is lacking in the five other games. This discourse is enabled by traveling with Dorian and Iron Bull and triggering special party banters. It is thus highly conditional and easy to miss or skip, but its inclusion nevertheless signals a much more progressive approach to openness about male homosexuality and desire, moving it out of its silent corners and slowly into the public:

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204 This word, a portmanteau of "adorable", "Dorian" and "Iron Bull", is taken from various internet memes and discourses which celebrate the possible romantic pairing of Dorian and Iron Bull in the game. I find the word appropriate for closing the current discussion.
Iron Bull: That staff's in pretty good shape, Dorian. Do you spend a lot of time polishing it?

Dorian: (Groans.)

Dorian: Watch where you're pointing that thing!
Iron Bull: Dirty.
Dorian: Vishante kaffas! ["You shit on my tongue"] I meant your weapon!

Both of these examples revolve (rather unsurprisingly) around penis jokes, but they are a few of the rare instances where this type of sexual banter happens between and toward men. It is quite unlike the joke where Zevran implies that Oghren wants to have sex with him in order to vex him. Interestingly, Dorian is the only man whom Iron Bull will have this type of direct sexual banter with. As they are the only two queer male companions, the heterosexual men are seemingly left alone. Iron Bull is pansexual and available to both genders, but his dialogue and banter about sexual interests (except about Dorian and possibly the Inquisitor) are directed at women. I will return to this in the next chapter. The penis jokes may of course be easily dismissed as mere jokes, but they can also be considered Iron Bull's way of flirting, especially since no "I was just joking" defense immediately follows. Iron Bull will also sympathize with Dorian after Dorian meets his father.

Party banter has always been static in that while its contents may depend on certain factors, banter itself does not change anything about characters or gameplay, but *Inquisition* makes one possible exception to this rule. There is a chance that Iron Bull and Dorian will become romantically involved (off-screen) if the player does not romance either of them, and they may enter an official relationship. This is progressed and revealed entirely through party banter, so there is a chance the coupling might not happen even if the initial conditions are met. The player is thus responsible for allowing this relationship to happen, either directly or indirectly. The tone of the flirty/sexual banter between them as the relationship escalates is remarkably direct:

Iron Bull: I'm just saying, Dorian, you carry around this picture of the Qunari in your mind. Like you see us as this forbidden, terrible thing, and you're inclined to do the forbidden…
Dorian: I have no idea what you're talking about.
Iron Bull: All I'm saying is, you ever want to explore that, my door's always open.

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205 I do not count the possible Fenris-Isabela off-screen physical relationship in Act 3 in *II* here. This relationship is revealed through party banter, but not caused by triggering a series of banters.
Dorian: You are impossible. This is… (growls)

Iron Bull: Quite the stink-eye you've got going, Dorian.
Dorian: You stand there, flexing your muscles, huffing like some beast of burden with no thought save conquest.
Iron Bull: That's right. These big muscled hands could tear those robes off while you struggled, helpless in my grip. I'd pin you down, and as you gripped my horns; I. Would. Conquer. You.
Dorian: Uh. What?
Iron Bull: Oh. Is that not where we're going?
Dorian: No. It was very much not.

This is a distinct change in the cathexis allowed for public discourse. Such explicit sexual dialogue between two men, particularly in the latter example, is not common in the heteronormative mainstream. Connell argues that gayness "in patriarchal ideology, is the repository of whatever is symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity […]", noting that oppressive practices place "homosexual masculinities at the bottom of a gender hierarchy among men" (2005: 78). This can easily lead male homosexuality into silence in mainstream media on the account of it not being desirable or aspiring as "male" qualities. Furthermore:

In the established gender order, relations of cathexis are organized mainly through the heterosexual couple. This is the taken for granted meaning of 'love' in popular culture and it has massive institutional support. Masculinity is necessarily in question in the lives of men whose sexual interest is in other men. (Connell 2005: 90)

Masculinity is so often fused together with heterosexuality that homosexuality is frequently viewed as unmanly. Hawke's uncle Gamlen's views on male homosexuality represent that fairly well ("I don't have to guess which one of you's the girl"). If masculinity remains a (heterosexual) cultural ideal, there is no wonder that media producers have trouble representing gay masculinities. Consider the rather "very straight gays" Kaidan and Steve of the Mass Effect series and their rather silent/private expressions of desire (couch snuggling, and no hand-holding on the red carpet). Inquisition attempts to shatter that practice by simply going against the (main)stream of silent male homosexual desire. It is important to acknowledge that these banters rely on certain player actions and decisions and are thus highly conditional and still "hidden" in a sense, but they nevertheless mark a significant shift in the cathexes allowed.
While Iron Bull's advances seem unsuccessful, there is a chance that Dorian will find his offers appealing, as indicated in a later banter:

Iron Bull: So, Dorian, about last night…
Dorian: (Sighs) Discretion isn't your thing, is it?
Iron Bull: Three times! Also, do you want those silky underthings back, or did you leave those like a token? Or… wait, did you "forget" them so you'd have an excuse to come back? You sly dog!
Dorian: If you choose to leave your door unlocked like a savage, I may or may not come.
Iron Bull: Speak for yourself.

Now ejaculation becomes the punchline between two men, and it is clear we are not in the *Mass Effect* series anymore. If Dorian and Iron Bull enter a relationship, the player can actually ask them about their status in Skyhold. Iron Bull will say that Dorian is a sweet guy and he hopes they are good for each other. He also adds that Dorian once got so excited (presumably during sex) that he lit the curtains on fire. Dorian says that the relationship began as an ill-considered act after much drinking one night, but that he kept returning to Iron Bull. These banters and dialogues are remarkably sexually explicit for male-male interaction in mainstream games/media, and are very good indicators of the liberal attitude that BioWare is pursuing. This is a long and significant jump from a previously almost complete silence to public expression and discourse. One may be critical of the overly sexual/physical tone of the banters, because they might play on stereotypes of homosexuality as only about sex and lust. Then again, this gay male sexual discourse is precisely the one which mainstream games and media are too anxious to include and express. It is important to break with these traditions—otherwise, homosexuality will remain tamed, silent and heteronormalized.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I have analyzed and discussed central points about the representational practices in the public gameworlds of the *Dragon Age* series. Generally, these gameworlds are not as inclined toward heteronormativity as the *Mass Effect* worlds and are more openly queer. They remain complicated world and mundane heteronormative assumptions are repeated here as well, but not in an overly ironic and knowing/defeatist discourse. While the *Dragon Age* series offers both male and female same-gender romance options and discourses in all three games, there are still discrepancies in how the two are treated. Male homosexuality assumes
roles as jokes, discomfort and issues, whereas female homosexuality remains either desirable and appealing or completely mundane and unremarkable. *Inquisition* marks overall significant representational progress and female homosexuality is instead treated as a sexuality in its own right, not as a construct primarily for others to enjoy. Male homosexuality is taken much more seriously than ever before, notably with Dorian, his character arc and his possible interactions with Iron Bull, signaling more openness and great changes in the public cathexis.
Chapter IX:
Romances in Fantasy

This chapter is devoted to the romances of the *Dragon Age* series, and I will analyze and discuss how homosexuality is represented through discourses, actions and interactions. Romances in this series are quite similar to romances in the *Mass Effect* games in terms of structure and mechanics, but they are also very different. Whereas the Milky Way is quantitatively a straight romance paradise, Thedas provides a much more balanced world of sexualities. In fact, exclusively heterosexual romance options are slightly outnumbered by queer romance options, enabling more diversity in availability and representations. Both male and female protagonists have same-gender options in all three games. Thedosian romances offer a much more open queer space which challenges the views and representations in the public gameworlds, and they can tell many different and interesting stories about sexuality and gender through both direct and subtle dialogue and actions. At the same time, the romances often reproduce many of the same overarching symptoms regarding female and male homosexuality found in the public gameworlds. Female homosexuality is often the more mundane, unremarkable or invisible sexuality, but male homosexuality is possibly anxious and problematic in all three games. The *Dragon Age* series explores sexuality and gender more explicitly than the *Mass Effect* series, and the romances are no exception—they contribute greatly to diverse explorations of sexuality. Simultaneously, the player is granted more power in regulating sexuality discourses.

Prior to the release of *Inquisition*, bisexuality was the queer romance strategy of the series. *II* is notable in how all original romance options are available to both genders, which is a complete reversal of the exclusive heterosexual approach in *Mass Effect 2*.\(^{206}\) This suggests that exclusive homosexuality is difficult, whereas bisexuality is not. This is a very striking contrast to mainstream culture and media, where bisexuality is often stigmatized as (sexual) voracity, indecisiveness, or more pathologic than "pure" homosexuality since it does not rest firmly on one side of a preferred binary opposition. The game industry, however, is not necessarily more benign toward bisexuality than rest of culture; it might have more to do with what bisexuality may offer in terms of structure, agency and economic convenience. Steven

\(^{206}\) Sebastian Vael from the DLC *The Exiled Prince* was added later and is only available to female Hawke. The continuation of the Liara romance was added to *Mass Effect 2* in a later DLC as well, making these two games polar opposites in their main romance offerings.
Holmes argues that bisexuality is appealing from a developer's standpoint since "instead of needing to animate, hire a voice actor, and code for an exclusively queer companion, they can appeal to all sexual demographics with bisexual characters while, for the most part, reusing the same graphic, voice, and code assets" (2016: 127). In the *Mass Effect* series, this is handled by making the asari monogendered. While bisexuality may be offered more presence and representation, it might simultaneously work or be used to hide itself. Bisexuality may become more than a sexuality: it can become a game mechanic for specific purposes rather than reflecting a genuine interest in representation. Bisexuality and "exclusively queer" do not seem to be compatible in Holmes' argument, however, which is unfortunate; perhaps he meant to say "exclusively gay". Regardless, using bisexuality for economical reasons is problematic in terms of representation and we should be critical of this practice, but that does not automatically mean that the representations engendered from this approach cannot be meaningful or that bisexuality is arbitrary. I intend to discuss this throughout the chapter.

I have structured this chapter more closely around each separate title and alternate between discussing female homosexuality and male homosexuality, which offers a helpful way of examining the varying practices of queer female and male characters. Since these games enable same-gender romances for both genders in all titles, adopting a more chronologically-centered approach is beneficial for discussing the developments over time. This structure also avoids mixing too many romance and interaction systems and concepts since *Origins*, *II* and *Inquisition* all use different approaches. I will devote the discussion to the main romance options.

**Dragon Age: Origins** *(2009)*

*Origins* offers four different romance options, two heterosexual and two bisexual characters, and the heterosexual options are the most important ones in the game's main narrative context. The player has romantic access to three of them in any given playthrough. Alistair and Morrigan are recruited in the game's prologue, whereas Leliana can be recruited shortly after in Lothering, and Zevran is a forced encounter after the completion of one main quest. Leliana and Zevran can be considered secondary characters compared to Alistair and Morrigan, who both have plot-specific roles to play. Thus, the same-gender romances here are more like side-plots (Waern 2015: 34). Alistair is the king's bastard son and possible heir to the throne. The
player will be able to determine his fate fairly late in the game, and until that point he cannot be sent away. Morrigan is also automatically recruited, though she can be sent away from the party early on. She will always reappear near the end of the game to offer the player a dark ritual, which consists of her conceiving a child with either the male Warden or Alistair/Loghain in order to prevent the death of the Grey Warden upon slaying the Archdemon. The narrative structure of the game gives Alistair and Morrigan "heterosexual purposes": Alistair is the potential new king which consequently enables a female Human Noble Warden to potentially become queen, and Morrigan needs another man to conceive a child which will harbor the soul of the Old God extracted from the Archdemon. While this certainly does not require that Morrigan is straight, it is included in a possible setup where a player who is romancing her may conceive the child with her, thereby making it a part of the romance scenario. Both of these heterosexual romance paths head toward typical straight institutions: marriage and parenthood. Leliana and Zevran are not considered important in this sense, but that does not mean that they are insignificant companions or that they do not contribute to anything. It does mean that the bisexual companions are outside the "main loop", but so are also the other companions. Heterosexuality furnishes solutions to the larger plot problems here, though this can be rejected with various consequences.

The two bisexual companions, Leliana and Zevran, are introduced in very different ways and are romanced differently, and they represent contrasting ways of approaching the topic of homosexuality. Leliana is encountered early on in the village of Lothering. Leliana appears as a Chantry sister in a tavern and helps the Warden and companions out when they are attacked by soldiers. Afterwards, she explains that she has received a vision from the Maker Himself and that she is destined to follow the Warden in fighting the Blight. The player may reject her and leave her behind. It is possible to skip meeting Leliana. Zevran is an obligatory encounter after a main quest has been completed. As noted in the previous chapter, assassin Zevran is hired to intercept and kill the Grey Wardens. Once he is defeated, the player may choose to kill him while he is unconscious or interrogate him. Zevran says that the contract was only professional and not personal, and that since he has failed his mission he will become a target to his own assassin's guild. He pledges his services and loyalty to the Warden

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207 If the ritual is performed, Morrigan will conceive a son, Kieran, who appears alongside her in Inquisition.
208 In Morrigan's case, rejecting her offer will lead to the death of either the Warden or Alistair/Loghain. Alistair may become king, he may be executed, he may leave the game or he may remain with the Grey Wardens.
209 Even if the player skips meeting/recruiting her or kills her during the "Urn of the Sacred Ashes" main quest she will nevertheless appear in the DLC The Exiled Prince in II and as one of the advisors in Inquisition.
instead. The player may accept or reject/kill him. Additionally, if the Warden is female, Zevran will excessively flirt with her during his plea, calling her an "aggressive little minx", "lovely", "utterly gorgeous" and a "deadly sex goddess". Male Wardens get no similar approaches here. Both Leliana and Zevran can be flirted with almost immediately upon recruitment, but Leliana will not have sex with the Warden unless she falls in love first, while Zevran may be quite happy to demonstrate his reputation as an "Easy Lover", which the "tongue-in-cheek" (Greer 2013: 14) achievement/trophy for romancing him is called. They are also notably the two most "exotic" romance options: Leliana, while originally Fereldan, has spent most of her life in Orlais and thus speaks with a slight French accent (not as accentuated as native Orlesians), and Zevran, being from Antiva, speaks with a hybrid Italian/Spanish accent, and may even speak some Spanish words. Homosexuality is not particularly Fereldan here. Holmes argues that while there are some dialogue options unique to the same-gender pairings, they are rare and "queer and heterosexual relationships with both characters are not particularly different" (2016: 127). From a more general perspective, this is true in that most scenes and conversations are the same, but a closer investigation of the enabled interactions and responses reveals that there are wildly different (possible) attitudes toward sexuality expressed in them.

Both Leliana and Zevran can be very suggestive and flirty. In fact, all four romances play on suggestiveness and innuendo of sorts, like Alistair joking about licking lampposts in winter and the female Warden's possible subsequent response that she has licked many lampposts in winter, implying fellatio, and Morrigan coyly stating that it is cold in her tent or that her intentions may be "painfully perverse". This reflects the more explicit sexual topics and representations in the overall gameworld compared to the first Mass Effect. The romances in Mass Effect are fairly platonic and chaste by comparison, with Liara being the one who mostly delivers sexual suggestiveness hidden under a blanket of shyness and innocence; she did not "mean" to say that. The Origins romances all have their moments when they take a very direct approach in flirting with the player. Leliana's romantic past with Marjolaine is implicitly revealed through Leliana's personal quest and surrounding discourse, while Zevran's explicit sexual history with men is mostly reserved for personal inquiry and possible scrutiny.

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210 The Alistair achievement is called "First Knight", which plays on Alistair having sex for the first time. The Leliana achievement is "Wine, Woman and Song", alluding to hedonism and Leliana being a bard. The Morrigan achievement, "Witch Gone Wild", plays on Morrigan as the Witch of the Wilds and the "Girls Gone Wild" pornography franchise.
Leliana, the first female companion offered for same-gender romance in *Dragon Age*, is the only female companion in the series with whom the prospect of homosexuality is potentially disturbing to the player/protagonist, and this is even more anxious than the "You're female!" scenario with Liara.\(^{211}\) In this sense, Leliana is rather unique. She exemplifies an aspect of what Holmes calls conditional bisexuality: "that character may be latently bi-curious, but only express meaningful sexuality in regard to the PC; that is, the character's sexuality is tailored in response to the player" (2016: 126). I discussed this previously in the exploration of Kaidan's sexuality in *Mass Effect 3*. Conditional bisexuality as Holmes defines it here does not apply to Leliana and Zevran since both are bisexual, not latently bi-curious, and they have had past same-gender relationships/sexual encounters. The conditionality here lies in the dialogue system in which the player may control and reveal/disable sexuality discourses—player-activated homosexualizing/heterosexualizing campaigns.

Leliana can be flirted with almost immediately after her recruitment, and her attitude will differ slightly depending on the Warden's gender. The player can ask what someone like her was doing in a cloister, which prompts Leliana to ask: "What is meant by 'someone like me'?" An obvious flirt is made available: "You know, a beautiful charming woman like yourself". Leliana does not take this explicitly as a flirt, and instead she attempts to deflect the topic while adding some sexual undertones:

> And there are no beautiful, charming women in the cloisters, you think? Oh, you would be wrong. There were many lovely young initiates in the Lothering cloister – all of them chaste and virtuous. Ah, it added to their mystique. Because then… then they were forbidden, and forbidden fruit is the sweeter, no?

Leliana delivers this account rather dreamingly, emphasizing the fantasy surrounding this forbidden fruit of chaste young women. Leliana implies her interest in women here, though nothing concrete has been revealed at this point. The "forbidden fruit" alludes to the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis, so this real-world concept has found its way into the fictional universe of Thedas along with limericks. The forbidden fruit connotes not only temptations, but also the dangers of succumbing to temptation. The fruit functions as bait which the player

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\(^{211}\) Male homosexuality, however, remains a potentially troubling affair in all three *Dragon Age* games.
may pursue. A rather direct option, "What about your fruit? Is it forbidden?", forces Leliana back onto the path she seemingly attempted to divert the player from. To a female Warden, she replies: "My… fruit? I… uh… I can't believe I am having this conversation. Ahem. But no, I did not take vows." A male Warden, however, gets a different and more interested reply: "My… fruit? Well… it is not technically forbidden… b-but it's not freely given either! Not everyone gets a bite. I can't believe I'm having this conversation. Ahem. But no, I did not take vows." The female Warden reply is missing parts of the reply she offers a male Warden, as if she is suddenly trying to hide her interest or to reject the player in some fashion. Perhaps diegetic reasoning could explain it: Leliana's past has rendered her vulnerable and possibly it is harder for her to trust a woman than a man, though this is never explicitly discussed and does not harmonize well with her jaded "men are easily seduced by women" attitude either. Perhaps she would not like to disclose her bisexuality and thus it is safer to be more direct with a man because heterosexuality is always unproblematically assumed. Another indication of this is evident from triggering a jealousy scenario with her and Alistair; Leliana is quite happy to admit that she herself would have pursued him. Her bisexuality is hidden at the outset, though it is implied since the female Warden is allowed to flirt with her.\footnote{Prior to \textit{Inquisition} these games, including the \textit{Mass Effect} games, structure flirting rather rigidly based on gender compatibility.}

A female Warden will find that, after raising approval, Leliana will compliment her on the way she wears her hair, which possibly moves the relationship into gay territory. The hair compliment quickly turns into stories about Orlesian nobility. She will apologize for rambling and say that she feels so comfortable around the Warden, believing that she could say anything and the Warden would not judge her. This may trigger an emotional Leliana saying "I haven't felt this close to anyone in a long time. I really enjoy your company", enabling a possible discussion about homosexuality and romance through the gay button:

1. You are a treasured friend, Leliana.
2. And do you often enjoy the company of other women?
3. I... I think you're getting the wrong idea.
4. Right, enough of that. Let's talk about my hair some more.

Figure 42: The Warden's possible responses to Leliana's compliments.

Option 2 continues the romance dialogue, and it allows the player to outright ask Leliana about her interest in women. This is different from the options afforded to the player in
Zevran's scenario, as I will discuss shortly. Option 2 triggers a hopeful question from Leliana: "And what would you do if I said I do? Very much so, in fact?" The player is offered new replies that are either friendly or romantically inclined or that reprimand Leliana:

1. I think I might giggle, maybe look coy?
2. I think I might tell you not to get the wrong idea about me?
3. I'm flattered that you like my company then.

Figure 43: The Warden's possible responses after asking if Leliana enjoys the company of other women.

It is the rejection I find most interesting here. The discourse in this context is structured around asking Leliana about her romantic/sexual interest in women, not Leliana's general romantic interest in the Warden. Therefore, not getting the "wrong idea" refers to the Warden's sexuality, since the dialogue has already progressed past the mere friendship mode. This is more than a mere general disinterest: it is a way of claiming and using heterosexuality as an escape. It also implies that it is the business of straight people to ask non-straight people about their preferences and then use heterosexuality to say "I am not like that". This path does not actually preclude the chance of romancing Leliana later in the game. The matter is complicated, however, as Leliana's response completely deflects what the dialogue tree is aiming at: "Wrong idea? I'm not sure what you're talking about. I enjoy spending time with my friends. Is there something wrong?" Leliana knows exactly what the Warden is hinting at, and the subsequent exchange departs from any implications of homosexuality:

1. No, nothing. You are a good friend.
2. No, let's talk about my hair again.
3. Never mind, I must have misunderstood.

Figure 44: The available responses after Leliana deflects the topic of homosexuality.

All three options return the conversation back to a safe friendzone, but there is no more discourse about homosexuality. The "misunderstood" option ends the conversation prematurely, as Leliana skips the type of additional comments she provides for the first two options. This indicates that there were indeed some undertones here, and that it was apparently awkward for both Leliana and the Warden. The "wrong idea" discourse is also abandoned and the player cannot pursue the topic further. It was nothing at all, a

213 The resolution of Leliana's personal quest offers another chance to enter a romance with her if not initiated previously. Telling Leliana not to get the "wrong idea" is not an "end romance" option.
misunderstanding, or a spur-of-the-moment digression from discussing hairstyles and "girly" things. What happens here is a type of fake-out: the player is presented with an option to ask evasively about Leliana's interest in women and then call upon some sort of heterosexual defense. In turn, Leliana activates her own defenses (perhaps rightfully so), and the subsequent dialogue forces the player to end the current line of questioning. Here, it is the player who seemingly goes too far: Leliana only intended to be friendly (except she is, or, at least may become, romantically interested in the Warden). Therefore, the player must desist and admit "defeat". Homosexuality can be silenced in the same moment it appears, though this possible exchange is fairly trivial compared to Zevran's dialogues. This exchange ends the explicit gender-specific portions of the Leliana romance. A male Warden cannot inquire about Leliana enjoying the "company of other women", but her past with Marjolaine is revealed through her personal quest, and her being bisexual, while implied, is not completely hidden.

"Such Things" and Defense Against the Male Other: Saying "It" Pt. 2

BioWarian male homosexuality is always the more difficult and anxious sexuality, and the discourses enabled with Zevran Aranai make this very clear. Gender specificity is much more extensive here than with Leliana. Annika Waern considers Zevran to be possibly the more interesting romance option over Leliana since she "falls in love easily and equally easily maintains her feelings for the player-character throughout the game. Zevran is a more complex character that first looks only for sex, and will confess deeper feelings only at a high level of approval […]" (2015: 34). Zevran is quite different from Leliana, being characterized as "libidinous and largely amoral, a 'master of seduction' who will use his sexual wiles for his own pleasure and to achieve any ends he sees fit" (Greer 2013: 13). Zevran is interestingly allowed what Greer calls an "independent expression of sexual interest" (2013: 14), which makes him rather different from many other characters whose sexuality seems to surface mostly when the player asks for it. Greer argues that this independent expression "disrupts any easy presumption of heteronormativity, going beyond a polysemous representation which might be understood as gay to force a confrontation with a queer other" (2013: 14). Zevran is

214 It is worth noting that in the final conversation with Leliana after the Archdemon is dead (and the Warden survives, obviously), there is an option to ask her "But does the heroine get her girl?", which is a fun play on the stereotypical "male hero gets the girl at the end" trope (which is exactly what a male Warden can ask Leliana about). The game can be rather glitchy here, though. I was able to ask Leliana this question as a male Warden even though I had romanced Zevran.
obviously a character that can possibly disrupt heteronormative stability. His character is also notable for providing the most extensive discourse on bisexuality in these games. I will add that he is also interesting because of how the gay button mechanics target him and the possible "homosexual panic" that can arise from interacting with him. His independent expression of sexuality is not as independent as it may sound and remains heavily dependent on the player's choices, and the confrontation with the queer other can be met with pejorative remarks and silencing techniques from the straight self.

Zevran has a very troubled past which is revealed piece by piece by interacting with him. His mother was forced into prostitution after his father died of a disease (elves have no privileged status in human cities), and she died shortly after giving birth to him. Zevran was raised along with other elven orphans in a brothel and was sold to the assassin's guild The Antivan Crows at the age of seven for a significant amount of money. In more recent times, he fell in love with an elven girl on his team, Rinna. She touched something deep within him, which frightened him. Rinna was later murdered by Zevran's associate Taliesen when she was exposed as an informant, but everything was orchestrated by the Crows to show Zevran that he and Rinna were expendable to them. Zevran then took the difficult Warden assassination job in Ferelden because he wished to die and hoped that the Wardens would kill him.

Zevran's interest in a female Warden is blatantly obvious from the very beginning, as shown earlier, and he is much more careful with a male Warden. He has an initial attraction to the male Warden as well since the actual romance progression is fairly similar for both genders. It is very easy to gain high approval with Zevran early (part of his "Easy Lover" persona). In one of the early conversations, the player can ask Zevran various questions about the Crows, and Zevran will subtly move into romance territory: "In Antiva, being a Crow gets you respect. It gets you wealth. It gets you women… and men, or whatever it is you might fancy." This is a repeat of the statement possibly made in his recruitment scene. While it is stylized to be a general reference (delivered to Wardens of both genders), it is likely a comment on Zevran being bisexual without saying it directly. This is observable in the phrasing "women and men" rather than "women or men", implying a desire for both in Zevran's case. The player can ask Zevran what he fancies: "I fancy many things. I fancy things that are beautiful and things that are strong. I fancy things that are dangerous and exciting. Would you be offended if I said I fancied you?" "Things that are beautiful" and "Things that are strong" may once again be a reference to him liking both women and men, in the stereotypical way of
dichotomizing the two. Both Wardens get almost the same type of responses, but a male Warden gets an extra option:

Figure 45: A male Warden gets an extra "But I'm a man" option when Zevran flirts.

Option 3, "But I'm a man", reverses female Shepard's jarring "You're female!" reply to Liara in Mass Effect, playing on a notion that homosexuality must/should be introduced to the player somehow. While Liara quickly explains the gender aspect away, Zevran proceeds along a different and less heterosexualizing/normalizing path: "(chuckle) Oh, you are speaking seriously, aren't you? I do forget that this is not Antiva City. We are… a little more open-minded about such things, where I hail from. Is this something I should beg pardon for?" This is the second instance in Origins where homosexuality is recognized and vaguely named: "such things" (Oghren provides us with "that"). The player is not simply equipped with heterosexuality as a possible escape; homosexuality is a type of foreign "intrusion" and as such, the player can tell Zevran to apologize for proposing such a thing. This is not extremely evident homophobia, however, since Zevran's discourse focuses on nationality. "Such things" are not common in Ferelden, he believes, and a Fereldan Warden might thus ask him to apologize for being inappropriate in another nation. It is not homosexuality per se that is the problem, national norms are. Homosexuality, however, is specifically the context in which the game enables the player to tell Zevran to apologize for, and nationality is a weak excuse for possible homophobia. After all, the player cannot force him to apologize for all the people he has assassinated.

While the game furnishes such an escape for whomever wishes to use it, it simultaneously does not render Zevran a victim to the player's responses either, further complicating the issue. He will apologize if he is told to, but also add: "Though I'll remind you… you did ask." The game also provides an explicit reminder that the player did indeed press the gay button, thus signifying that the player is not rightly justified in asking Zevran to apologize. The game uses its own enabling/hiding mechanic as a means to critique the fear of male homosexuality, a

215 Male homosexuality is also referred to as "such things" in II.
staging the game was responsible for to begin with. The difference in tone between Zevran and Leliana is also notable. The player cannot make Leliana apologize for talking about liking other women. This is apparently a rather mundane and unproblematic matter and it is "misunderstood" away. "Such things", as in "male homosexuality", on the other hand, seemingly require a special type of defense, just in case some unwitting player hits the obvious gay button. Defense against male homosexuality does not stop here, however, and the matter becomes ever more complex.

If the player is merely friendly with Zevran, there will be an option in conversation called "Do you stare at everyone like that?" which can engender a discussion on bisexuality. This proceeds very differently depending on gender. Zevran replies to a male Warden: "Not everyone. But a handsome man like yourself? Why not? I am sure you are a man who draws many stares, from women and other men alike. Does this bother you?" A female Warden gets a similar variant: "Not everyone. But a beautiful woman like yourself? Why not? I am sure you draw many stares, from men and even other women. Does this bother you?" This scene triggers a special reaction for a male Warden titled "Oh, I had no idea you were…", once more an elliptical and simultaneously fairly obvious inquiry. Zevran laughs and replies: "I was raised in a brothel and trained to seduce whomever is required. Open-mindedness is a survival trait, and I learned long ago to not make such judgments. But if you would rather I desisted, I shall do so. I've no wish to make you… uncomfortable." A female Warden can also tell Zevran to stop staring, but she cannot do so on the grounds that he makes her uncomfortable by being sexually attracted to men. This scene highlights that the game desires to talk about Zevran's bisexuality, at least if the Warden is male, but in doing so it also provides ways out by allowing criticism of male homosexual desire. Once more, this takes place in the gay-button context where the player has already pursued the path of asking specifically about homosexuality, here articulated as "…", a mere gap which the player is required to fill in because the game cannot say such things.

The defense mode does not stop there, either. A male Warden on a romance path may eventually unlock a conversational option called "Have you always been…?", which once more uses a gap to imply homosexuality. Zevran jokingly responds "… intrigued by tight leather clothing"; he most likely knows what the Warden is hinting at. The player gets three

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216 This is implied as there is no actual scene in which Zevran can be seen staring especially at the Warden and thus triggering this particular question.
"Among other things", "Attracted to men" and "Forget I said anything". The game explicitly spells it out, and talking about Zevran's attraction to men triggers an explanation on his background and preferences:

I grew up amongst Antivan whores, men and women both. My introduction to the subject of sex was, shall we say, rather practical. My only rule regarding sex is that it be done well. (Chuckles) It's a certain open-mindedness that the Crows seek in their recruits, for very good reasons. I have been with both men and women in my time. Many, in fact. Often for business but not always. Given my druthers I would say I prefer a soft and shapely woman, but I know what I am. I will not discount anyone solely because of what someone else tells us is right or wrong. I cannot change my past, obviously. You are a most intriguing man, but if what I represent makes you uncomfortable… well, it would be better for both of us to know that now, yes?

The matter is more complicated here. The player is enabled yet another tiring defense against homosexuality. Curiously, this exchange occurs as a part of a romantic path, so the player is suddenly enabled to be uncomfortable with Zevran's attraction to men even though the player will have flirted with him. A female Warden is also afforded this exchange, but the premise is discussing his prior sexual history with many women, causing Zevran to reveal that his past also includes other sexual partners: "It has not been restricted to women. Does… that offend you?" Zevran does not say "men" explicitly, this responsibility is left to the player to explicitly manifest by choosing "You enjoy other men?" (as if this is something completely alien). In this version, Zevran says: "Do I prefer women? Yes… yes, I believe I do [...]" before remarking that the Crows require that "open-mindedness". The player is allowed to express their discomfort with his sexual past or support him in both versions.

What is most notable about Zevran's discourse here is that it represents the most explicit discourse on bisexuality in all six games, and that Zevran is allowed such an extensive "independent expression of sexual interest", as Greer (2013) notes. Zevran states outright that he actually prefers women over men, emphasizing that bisexuality, as discussed with Kaidan in Mass Effect 3, is not an easily measurable 50/50 attraction division, though it is often believed to be so. Certainly, Zevran is afforded a sexual agency unlike many other characters, yet I must also point out that this independent expression nevertheless requires the player's interest to become fully manifested. Simultaneously, Zevran's independence comes with regulatory dialogue options which enable the player to control the extent of his sexual agency and, problematically, force him to stop, possibly prematurely ending this confrontation with a
queer other, emphasizing that male homosexuality/bisexuality is a highly anxious and precarious topic.

The attraction discourse, however, is strange. Zevran says he would prefer to be with a woman, but since he knows what he "is", he is not going to solely discount the male Warden based on what someone else says is right or wrong. What happened to Zevran's own desires/attractions? Does this mean that Zevran would prefer a woman because this is supposedly the "right" thing to do? Suddenly it is not Zevran's preference for women that presents an obstacle, but, rather, societal ideas, for some reason. While it exemplifies the complexity of bisexual attraction (as in not being 50/50), it also a type of heterosexualizing campaign which might render the representation of bisexuality as something arbitrary. Even Leliana might indicate that she would have pursued Alistair, indicating that same-gender sexual relations and relationships are not the ideal. Here, the gay button mechanic is not simply an activation of gay relationships or discourse, it also encompasses the activation of the same-gender desire of the bisexual companions. If the player does not romance them, they will stay "mostly straight" in terms of sexual preferences. Any ties to homosexuality, then, remain rooted in (tragic) backstories. The most notable thing here is that Zevran does not hide his sexual past with men from a female Warden, and thus he is not "sanitized" for heterosexual scenarios.217

The bisexuality discourse is further complicated by Zevran's stereotypical aspects. Initially, "Easy Lover" Zevran with his pragmatic attitude toward sex may play significantly on the stereotype that bisexual people will "screw anything that moves" (Shaw 2014: 30). Players have criticized Zevran as a "stereotypically promiscuous image of bisexuality or as the framing of homosexual desire as a fluid bisexuality in order to make homosexuality more palatable to a mainstream audience [...]" (Greer 2013: 14). The discourse may also play on views of sexuality as a result of trauma: Zevran has adopted "unconventional" practices because he grew up in a whorehouse and in an assassin's guild. His life and career have required that he has a pragmatic approach to sex. This is further reflected in various humorous remarks he may make during the game, such as indicating desires to be tied up in ropes or chains, or that he does not "appreciate foreign objects invading [his] personal space", quickly

217 This is the case in Anders' romance, in which he will never reveal his sexual interest in men if Hawke is female. See below.
adding a "[w]ell, usually". These desires are not in themselves problematic, and add to Zevran's independent sexual expression. It is not surprising, however, that Zevran is the character with these explicit desires.

Greer argues, as will I, that despite Zevran's stereotypical aspects "it is hard to dismiss him as two-dimensional" (2013: 14). Indeed, Zevran's romance develops according to his character: his upbringing and experiences have deeply affected him (and not merely turned him into a "walking quirk") and, while it is difficult for him, he will ultimately develop a strong and loving bond to a Warden of either gender. Zevran's feelings for the Warden become so strong and confusing to him that he at some point will refuse the Warden's sexual advances unless the Warden can promise that the two of them have a future together. He will even offer an earring as a token of affection which may be regarded as a proposal if the Warden wants it to be.

**Contemplating Male Homosexual Desire**

Interactions with Zevran may also engender two other discourses on male homosexuality in which it seems to be a strange or fascinating subject. These instances are very short and highly conditional. They require that the player flirts with both Zevran and Morrigan or Zevran and Leliana, and triggers the jealousy/confrontation scenes. Morrigan is initially not surprised if the male Warden has been with Zevran: "The elf is attractive enough, in his way. I can see why you would find another man such as him desirable." If the player rejects Morrigan in favor of Zevran, however, she comes to a new realization: "No need to say that you have chosen a man over me. I must say this is new for me, but let us give credit where it is due, yes? The assassin certainly has his charms." This scenario further challenges Morrigan's heterocentric worldview, considering how she has been taught the "truth about men" from her mother and that all men believe that a woman wants them (not quite unlike Leliana's beliefs about her spy work).

The more involved example occurs in the Leliana-Zevran love triangle, and male homosexuality becomes both a topic of fascination and shame here. If the player has sex with Zevran and is currently in a romance with Leliana, she will say: "I didn't know you were…

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218 This particular line occurs in relation to Shale's control rod if Zevran is taken to the reactivation of Shale.
fond of other men. Not that… not that there's anything wrong with it, but I had no idea" (to a female Warden she says that she did not realize that the Warden was attracted to him). One response allows the player to use their persuasion skill to lie about it, the other three options afford conversations about homosexuality: "Dear Maker, please don't tell anyone else", "To tell the truth, I didn't either, until he came along" and "Well, there is something to be said for trying new things". The options allowed imply that Zevran is the first man the Warden has ever had sex with (which can be outright wrong if the player had sex with Dairren in the Human Noble Origin), so an assumed heterosexuality/heterosexual past is inscribed on the player character. Any hopes the player might have for Leliana not telling the world that the Warden likes other men is dispelled when she informs that Zevran is already doing that by boasting to everyone. In one version of this scene, Leliana tells the player: "I suppose I can't fault you for being desirous of new experiences. And what is it they say? Oh, yes. You should try everything once, except for incest and Qunari cuisine?" Apart from Qunari cuisine being as bad as incest, we have yet another unfortunate connection between male homosexuality and stigma (aside from introducing incest in a conversation about homosexuality): sex with men is considered "trying" something. It certainly can be, but in this context it assumes that the Warden has been straight prior to this point. Zevran from queer-Antiva disrupts hetero-Ferelden. The player is actually allowed to tell Leliana "[y]es. This is who I am" when she asks if being with Zevran is their decision, placing emphasis on the Warden's sexuality rather than their romantic interest in Zevran.

The issue is more complicated if the player indicates that they are not sure if they prefer men. Leliana answers: "You don't have to deny it. I always thought there was something missing between us. Now I know what it is." Leliana explicitly inscribes the Warden as gay and breaks off the romance; being unsure about one's sexuality apparently means that one is truly gay and Leliana knows best. Leliana has felt that something was "missing" between them, and this "missing" was that the Warden wanted to be with another man. The mystery is solved: the Warden is gay! I say gay, because if she were to believe that the Warden is bisexual this "missing" would thus be highly problematic, suggesting that bisexuality is something that is never whole and that there will always be a yearning for the other gender than the gender one is currently with. That would have certainly been a hypocritical statement from Leliana. She also ends this with a joke: "And you tell [Zevran], if he ever hurts you, he'll have to face me! Men can be bastards sometimes, you know…" That final line might be an implicit lash at the Warden. The joke plays on the idea that girlfriends stick up for each other versus boys, and
signifies that the Warden is now a "girl" included in this club. One may freely pursue another man without explicit judgement, but one must not forget that it is outside official sanction. The Warden is not only gay, but now also one of the girls.

It is not possible to reject either Alistair or Morrigan on explicit grounds of being gay, so sexuality is only available as a direct excuse when faced with same-gender interactions. Heterosexuality operates "automagically" and does not require any proof for its assumed default state. Homosexuality, on the other hand, is only there and proven once it has been conducted and performed; it is retroactive and seemingly has no privileged origin.

The game enables the explicit expression of homophobia served through the "I'm uncomfortable" mode. One could object to my criticism and say that one should be allowed to do so considering the game allows the player to act carelessly, condescendingly and callously to most other characters and situations. Then consider this: why is this mode only afforded to male homosexuality? Why this incessant belief that the player should be equipped with some sort of defense against male same-gender desire, while simultaneously assuming that female homosexuality is automatically tolerable and non-threatening? If the silence/absence in *Mass Effect* is a clear indication of its attitude toward male homosexuality, then the discourse/presence in *Origins* is an indication of an anxious introduction and a continuation of those prior beliefs. BioWare obviously wants to tread new ground here, but simultaneously it is seemingly safeguarding itself against criticism by providing players measures against its very own advances. Somewhat paradoxically, these options are sometimes offered even when the player has obviously ventured into these "unknown" territories.

**Same Sex?**

The sex scenes in *Mass Effect* are mostly constructed through a male gaze by mainly depicting the female participant's body, but *Origins* is notably egalitarian/uniform by having fairly similar sex scenes for all romances, both in content and duration.\(^{219}\) Regardless of how sex is initiated, either at the player's request or the companion's, a brief scene shows the characters in their underwear sharing an intimate moment. The camera keeps mostly above the belt and varies between close-ups and more distant/blurred shots, accompanied by a

\(^{219}\) This uniform approach is abandoned in favor of different types of sex scenes in subsequent titles.
somewhat awkward female soprano soundtrack; sex in Ferelden is very epic/romantic/melodramatic.\textsuperscript{220}

Gender plays an important part in how these scenes are choreographed. In the sex scene with Zevran and a male Warden, the Warden is depicted as assuming the active/dominant role. The Warden directs Zevran, lays him down on the ground and serves as the top/penetrator. This is completely reversed with Zevran and a female Warden; here a more traditional active/passive dichotomy is enacted with Zevran assuming the active and dominant role. The Leliana and female Warden scenario differs in role division. This sex scene alternates between them assuming "active" and "passive" positions: in one moment Leliana is on top, in the next the Warden is. The scene is choreographed identically for a male Warden, though now the Warden assumes more of the traditional active penetrative role. The Alistair and Morrigan scenes are only available to the opposite gender, and these scenes also see the male participants as the more dominant, controlling part in the intercourse. The heterosexual constellations thus assume a fairly stereotypical sexual exchange: man as the "giver" and woman as the "taker". The Zevran and male Warden scene hands over all control to the player

\textsuperscript{220} The perhaps strangest and most ridiculous feature of these scenes is how the characters claim beforehand to retreat to a tent in the party camp, yet when the scene starts they are clearly outdoors with the party camp in the background. This "public" sex is perhaps what should be regarded as the queerest aspect of the \textit{Origins} sex, regardless of the genders of the parties involved.
and is thus also very stereotypical: one is the giver and the other is a taker. This design suggests that the player is still the "man" in the relationship. Considering how many chances a player gets to criticize male homosexuality, it is not surprising that this scene "favors" the player as the dominant agent. It is here more permissible to assume diversity in sexual intercourse between two women, either because in this scenario the stereotypical active/passive division evaporates because no penetration is assumed or because sex between two women is seen as more open and "experimental". Granted, many of these scenes feature identical scenes/positions: the sex scene is a rather general design which two characters are slotted into and utilized for more than one romance. As these examples show, however, which character assumes which position is not a random choice. Men retain their agency as active sexual partners (except Zevran; the male player must not become passive), and the scene between two women is a notable queer break from an assumed active/masculine and passive/feminine division of sexual intercourse. Sex between two men, regardless of what the game assumes about its participants, is also notable and important, quite simply because its availability represents a clear break from the more heteronormative world of the *Mass Effect* series which would not enable male same-gender romance and sex until its third instalment.

**Dragon Age II (2011)**

All original romance options in *II* are bisexual, making the game a notable departure from the *Mass Effect* series, particularly from the heterocentrism of the romance system in *Mass Effect 2*. *II* is the mirror world of *Mass Effect 2* in this regard. Clearly, different representational strategies and player assumptions are in play. The bisexuality approach triggered a complaint from a fan who, on the BioWare forums, accused BioWare of "neglecting" their main demographic, the "Straight Male Gamer", and called for a "No Homosexuality Option" (Greer 2013, Kelly 2015). Besides the overall obvious homophobic attitude, the implication of such a statement is that bisexual people are not suitable for being romantically involved with straight people. This complaint is notable because it got the attention of (then) lead writer David Gaider (Greer 2013: 16). Gaider outright rejected the complaints on the grounds that "the majority has no inherent 'right' to get more options than anyone else" and, adding a personal note, "the person who says that the only way to please them is to restrict options for others is, if you ask me, the one who deserves it least. And that's my opinion, expressed as politely as
possible" (Destructoid 2011). Gaider also emphasized that the bisexuality approach in II was due to a desire to provide something for everyone:

> Romances are never one-size-fits-all, and even for those who don't mind the sexuality issue there's no guarantee they'll find a character they even want to romance. That's why romances are optional content. It's such a personal issue that we'll never be able to please everyone. The very best we can do is give everyone a little bit of choice, and that's what we tried here. (Destructoid 2011)

As argued above, bisexuality in games can also be a result of economic factors, however, and thus representations are not exclusively generated from desires to offer something to everyone.

Here is Gaider again on this topic:

> The truth is that making a romance available for both genders is far less costly than creating an entirely new one. Does it create some issues of implementation? Sure -- but anything you try on this front is going to have its issues, and inevitably you'll always leave someone out in the cold. In this case, are all straight males left out in the cold? Not at all. There are romances available for them just the same as anyone else. Not all straight males require that their content be exclusive... (Destructoid 2011)

Clearly, bisexuality in video games can be fundamentally different as representations of sexuality from bisexuality in literature, film and television. It opens for more options for the players while simultaneously providing cheaper solutions. The objective here, then, becomes not merely to criticize choosing bisexuality over hetero- or homosexuality because it is less costly, but to examine how bisexuality is represented when this cost reduction is the premise: what stories about sexuality and gender does this premise enable? Paradoxically, bisexuality in video games can thus become a complete reversal of its representations (or lack thereof) in other mainstream media. If bisexuality is vilified in media and culture as duplicitous, voracious and unstable, bisexuality may instead be preferred in video games for romantic content because it is cheaper to produce. Recognition and representation of bisexuality as such may not be the goal. With this approach, bisexuality may or may not become just that: a cheap design solution. Favoring bisexuality in games because it is *cheaper* does hold some rather unfortunate ties to cultural beliefs about bisexuality. It is thus important to investigate what this design approach means for bisexuality. One thing is clear, whether it is due to cost reductions and/or shifts in representational attitudes: the vast sexuality discourses of romances in *Origins* are not found in *II*, and BioWare has opted for a more neutral approach with very slight gender specificity.
Greer argues that the romance companions in II "appear to orient themselves towards the player, regardless of gender: the appearance of a given sexuality is a response relative to the player's active choices. Sexuality, then, appears as a reflection of the player character's own performed desire" (2013: 14). I must add that if the sexuality of characters in this game is oriented toward the player, then this also affects the sexuality that the player orients toward the characters. The following analysis will clearly show this. Certain sexualities may fail to materialize due to the player character's gender and companions' seemingly exclusive romantic interest in Hawke. Greer, in reference to gaming journalist John Walker, is hesitant to call the characters essentially bisexual, but rather considers them to be potentially bisexual. This is, he argues, due to the fact that while the game text's "range of paths and possibilities might contain plural versions of a given character, as individual players we only encounter the version that is turned to face our own in any single play through" (2013: 15). This is a valid point insofar as bisexuality might be designed as a conditional bisexuality that can be tailored to the player's choices, and that in heterosexual playthroughs the discourse on homosexuality/bisexuality might become severely limited or non-existent. As a generalized claim, however, I argue that this provides a somewhat erroneous and simplified understanding of the bisexuality approach in II since it pays no particular heed to the characters themselves. Isabela, for example, reveals that she has had sexual relations with both women and men. Surely Isabela being bisexual is not potential, even though the revelation of this fact might be conditional? Merrill, on the other hand, might qualify as potentially bisexual since she gives no impression of any of prior relationships or attractions, and a romance might trigger her exploration of her own sexuality. This does not apply to all four characters. Greer only reports on Anders in II, but this character alone is not enough to generalize bisexuality in this game as potential rather than essential.

Greer argues that in spite of potentiality, bisexuality in these games, since it challenges the dichotomized view of sexuality as hetero/homo, "may allow us to further understand the role of the player character beyond the performance of 'truly gay' or 'truly straight' personae – or, rather, to think more carefully about what identification as bisexual may involve" (2013: 15). In Greer's view, the question of bisexuality is muddled because playthroughs cannot exist concurrently, though he recognizes that the existence of these parallel alternatives "may open up a queering discourse" (2013: 15). Investigating these romances with differently gendered protagonists reveals not only discourses about bisexuality and its essentiality/potentiality, but also how the public gameworld and cultural beliefs about male homosexuality and female
homosexuality are incorporated and reflected. The question is not only carefully considering what it might mean to identify as bisexual, but also confronting the gendered imbalance that exists within these bisexual representations and how the player may come to control it. Conditional/potential bisexuality may be "cheap" to include, but its implications are not.

**Marked Men**

*Marked Men II* increases its male same-gender romance repertoire by one, and offers two companions that approach the topic of homosexuality in different manners. The two most notable aspects here are that there is less explicit discourse than in *Origins* and that male homosexuality still retains some haunting, othering qualities. Anders, a Grey Warden mage and host for a Fade spirit, was introduced as a companion in the *Origins* DLC *Awakening*, where all he wanted was "a pretty girl, a decent meal, and the right to shoot lightning at fools". This, coupled with his former lover Karl (mentioned in the previous chapter), suggests that his bisexuality is not potential. Anders has defected from the Wardens and now spends his time working as a healer in Kirkwall simultaneously as he functions as a mage rights activist speaking up against the increased injustice against mages. Fenris, a former slave infused with mysterious powerful lyrium markings on his body, hates mages and will do everything to get his revenge against his former Tevinter master, with whom he also had a sexual relationship. Anders and Fenris are almost polar opposites: one is a mage and a fervent supporter of mage rights, while the other detests mages and believes them to be a public menace that must be controlled. They also have some common features, as both are distinctly marked: Anders, in addition to being a mage, is playing host to a Fade spirit that emerges from time to time, and Fenris is infused with lyrium markings that grant him special powers. Both "marks" give rise to pain and anxiety: Anders fears that he is slipping and that he is becoming one with the spirit, while the lyrium markings remain a painful and constant reminder to Fenris about his past. Anders and Fenris are also similar in that they both have had difficult past experiences with other men: Karl and his subsequent Tranquil state in the case of Anders, and the intimate relationship between master and slave in Fenris' case. Homosexuality itself is not a direct cause for any present misery, but the game adopts familiar themes of male homosexuality as something difficult, traumatic, and possibly pathologic. The Anders and Fenris romances approach homosexuality differently, with the former being the much more expressive than the latter,
and indicate that while the series seems to want to progress further, it still roots male homosexuality in modes of negation and trauma that the player may eventually purify.

**Anders' Antagonism?**

Anders offers not only the most explicit discourse on male homosexuality in *II*, his character has also been met with heavy criticism from (male) players due to his direct openness on the matter (Kelly 2015, Holmes 2016). The discourse on homosexuality is highly dependent on Hawke's gender, much like the scenarios with Zevran, but Anders drives this mode further: Hawke *must* be male for the information to be revealed and responded to. Kelly notes that one critique of Anders particularly targeted his "flagrant" sexuality which does a disservice to the homosexual community, while other male players "found themselves disturbed or threatened by the unsolicited advances by another male character, particularly since a rejection of Anders' come-ons yields negative measurable consequences on the avatar-NPC relationship" (2015: 48-49).\(^{221}\) The "fiery discourse" was mostly American (Kelly 2015: 55), echoing conservative mainstream American sexuality and gender values. It is particularly interesting that these male players considered the unsolicited advances disturbing or threatening, echoing the fear of being solicited by gay men in real life, as though gay men are a completely different species that should not be allowed to do so, and also signaling that the player should always remain in control of such scenarios. Gaider is unsure about repeating this particular approach (he doubts he would have had Anders make the first move again), but remains determined that having the player in total control in all flirt/romance situations is unrealistic (Destructoid 2011). The critique against Anders implies that whatever Anders is doing is possibly more upsetting and controversial than Zevran, who is in fact rather open about his sexuality and his various desires. The conflicting aspects lie perhaps not in that Anders is open about being attracted to men, but in how this exchange is structured. It forces an encounter with the queer other in a completely different way from Zevran.

Following Anders' recruitment quest involving his friend Karl, which I discussed in the previous chapter, the player can return to Anders' clinic and speak about the Fade spirit in him. There is a flirt option made available in this conversation, "I like men with dark pasts", which enables different discourses depending on Hawke's gender. The flirt is articulated as: "So, that

\(^{221}\) This refers to an increase in Rivalry for choosing certain options while interacting with him.
explains your whole sexy tortured look" and Anders provides different reactions. To a male Hawke, he says: "I've rarely met a man who says such things so obviously. But you're obviously a rare man." Here we have "such things" again. The male Hawke situation is a reversal of the male Warden-Zevran scenario: it is the player who is the "open" part now. This proactive approach is not taken into account by the game, however, which I will discuss shortly. Anders' reply here should be contrasted with his reply to a female Hawke: "I had not thought to ever find a woman who would look past what I just said." In the heterosexual version the comment is not considered a transgression/remarkable at all. The discourse shifts to Anders seemingly finding acceptance from Hawke for him being a spirit host. A man who says "such things" to another man, however, is apparently so rare that that merging with a spirit pales in comparison. There is actually merit to this argument, considering how many times the player will meet and fight abominations (corrupted mage/demon creatures) contra meeting gay men. It is also clear that the series attempts to posit male homosexuality as non-normative in the grand Thedosian sphere. While flirting with Anders here nets the "such things" comment, it is the next scene that leads into the true nature of Anders and Karl's relationship, and how "such things" may suddenly be unheard of to the player.

Figure 47: Anders reveals that Karl was his "first" to a male Hawke.
If *Mass Effect 2* shies away from non-asari homosexuality altogether, *II* takes a few leaps in the opposite direction while exemplifying the limits of gay-button discourse. In a follow-up conversation, Anders will apologize to Hawke for telling them about Justice, fearing that he might have sounded selfish. This conversation will then proceed into Anders' relationship with Karl, but only on the conditions that Hawke is male and the player flirts or is friendly. The discourse revolves around a central theme, but it is presented differently depending on the player's initial choice of either flirt or friendly interaction. The flirt option triggers Anders speaking about growing up in the confines of the Circle of Magi and how the mage apprentices found ways to make it bearable. Anders reveals that Karl was "the first". There is an option to ask "Together?" which triggers a rather surprised "[y]ou… and Karl?" from Hawke. This reply is stylized not as bewilderment over Anders and Karl's *liaison*, but rather as surprise at two men being romantically/sexually involved. Anders confirms this in his reply, in which he goes automatically into a type of defensive mode while triggering a confrontation with the player: "I've always believed that people fall in love with a whole person, not just a body. Why would you shy away from loving someone just because they're like you? Does it bother you that I've… been with men?" This reply is similar to the various scenarios with Zevran in which the player can express their interest in or discomfort with male same-gender attraction, but it also proceeds past Zevran's "practical" attitude toward men. Anders already assumes that the player/Hawke might find male homosexuality strange and problematic—in a world where everyone's sexual habits are supposedly considered "natural".

Anders' reasoning provides both an interesting and somewhat tame approach to the theme of homosexuality (when considered in the overall context). The reply attempts to shift the focus away from *bodies* and over to *person*, a move which might be interpreted as an attempt to combat beliefs about male homosexuality being purely physical/sexual and an inability to love "properly". This belief can be traced back to classical Freudian psychoanalysis, for example, which theorized a division between (heterosexual) anaclitic object choice and (homosexual) narcissistic object choice: "Narcissistic objects represent transformations or derivatives of the ego, while anaclitic objects represent transformations or derivatives of external figures" (Lewes 2009: 62). My aim here is not to discuss these psychoanalytic claims, problematic as they might be, but rather to show that this belief in homosexuality as somewhat selfish or "untrue" has a distinct place in history and carries cultural weight: homosexuality is "selfishly" loving oneself whereas heterosexuality is "properly" loving the "other". Anaclitic love, object choice or whatever one wishes to call it, in classical
psychoanalytic discourse, "follows a path laid down by the self-preservative instinct" (Rycroft [1968] 1995: 7). Such views, which are present to a large degree today, posit reproduction as the de facto sexual goal, and homosexuality is frequently seen as selfish and deviant because it seemingly cannot do so "naturally". We do not need to look further than the "rules" of sexuality of Thedosian nobility to find evidence of the prevalence of these views in-game. Anders is of course not explicitly confronting psychoanalytic theories, but his reply suggests that there are beliefs about same-gender attraction being mostly about lust and he confronts that by assuming that this is already commonly believed about homosexuality/"such things". It is interesting that the conversation proceeds directly to this defensive statement; Hawke, while surprised, had not explicitly indicated anything negative. This would in turn have been completely strange, considering that the player must flirt with Anders to trigger this path. Anders' explanation focuses attraction on person and not body, which might take on certain "educational" traits. Anders attempts to place homosexuality in the "proper"/anaclitic domain, but the rhetoric employed also works to diminish the fact that sexuality is often very closely connected to bodies. Certainly, this explanation may perfectly communicate how Anders truly feels about these matters, but its general address also works to downplay any special aspects of same-gender attraction/relations. Here there are none: there are only persons and not bodies. One can interpret this strategy as dual: in this scenario the game wants to talk about male homosexuality, but it cannot be too explicit. It is further complicated by Anders' remark that "[w]hy would you shy away from loving someone just because they're like you?" Anders seems to assume that sexuality is nothing at all, and while it paints a sympathetic surface picture of attraction and desire, it completely ignores that love and sexuality are not always merely about "shying" away or overcoming that "shyness". This dialogue path clearly wants to talk about male homosexuality, but the dialogue itself suddenly shies away from any explicit discourse about it and instead reverts to generality.

Male homosexuality is once more possibly the problem. "Does it bother you that I've... been with men?" is Anders' direct address to the player (the player is not allowed to comment on his "shy away" statement), which posits the discourse back onto him having been sexually active with other men and the player's subsequent approval or disapproval of this. It also echoes Zevran's repeated addresses to the player's concerns. The paradox here is that this entire situation is triggered by the player flirting with him, which creates a very dissonant situation where Anders has to ask the player if it is alright with them that he has been with other men. The player can reply that they are bothered (ends the romance and conversation),
that they are not bothered (flirt) or that "I've never thought about it" (tentative). The "bothered" option has Hawke saying "[l]et's not speak of this again", to which Anders dejectedly replies: "Fine. I hear you, strictly professional." It is somewhat challenging to discuss these options seriously considering the context they appear in; after all, the player engaged him. Neither the heart icon nor the "At least he got a nice body" flirt text indicates that this is a general platonic option. The situation is also very dissonant considering that the player may have previously flirted with Anders (and even called him sexy), and here there is a sudden non-recognition of previous actions. It also, perhaps unsurprisingly, summons default heterosexuality into the conversation: if Anders had not believed that Hawke/the player was likely straight, this conversation would not have happened this way. While the dialogue itself attempts to bring homosexuality into conversation and explicit discourse, just as it did with Zevran, it still manages to place (male) homosexuality as something the player can possibly condemn as something disgusting or something they have explicit trouble with, and that homosexuality is something one should apologize for. Perhaps the intensity of these defensive strategies is meant to harmonize with the intensity of Anders' dialogue so that the game cannot be accused of being too political or moralistic/"preachy". Yet, enabling the player to call upon the sort of rhetoric that reproduces the homophobia and silencing techniques associated with patriarchal hegemonic masculinity (Connell 2005) is not progressive at all.

Non-flirty friendly interactions with Anders will also trigger dialogue about his past with Karl, but the focus shifts in this interaction—Anders will be the one initiating flirting instead. The condemnatory mode from above applies in this scenario as well. The friendly option, "You did the right thing" (which appears simultaneously with the flirt discussed in the previous paragraph) causes Anders to reply: "Well. Under that scruffy exterior, I think you've got a bit of a soft heart yourself. I'm sorry, I shouldn't presume… It's just… we've hardly met and I feel like I know you. Am I making you uncomfortable?" The options "Yes" (end romance), "No" (flirt) and "It's unexpected" (flirt) are available. The game "snares" the player into a situation where they can either outwardly reject him on the grounds of him making them uncomfortable, or flirt with him. Rejecting him leads to a slight increase in Rivalry (this is the scenario which Kelly (2015) notes concerned some players). Note that this situation occurs for both male and female Hawke, but where it goes from there varies greatly. If male Hawke flirts, Anders will recite his story about Karl, and the player gets the same choices as above except the "Together?" option. An aggressive "Too much information!" option is enabled in which Hawke says, in rather homophobic disgust, "[o]h! There's an image I didn't need."
Anders' only form of defense is "[w]ell, pardon me!" It currently seems that whenever male homosexuality is an explicit topic, the player must be equipped with some homophobic or otherwise aggressive remark about it. There are clear indications that tensions around men and male homosexuality in culture find their way into these games. Sexuality becomes the specific target for possible criticism. When male homosexuality is not symbolically annihilated by silence and absence (which it notably is in the Mass Effect series), it must come equipped with a safeguard, some way of possibly denouncing it. Male homosexuality receives better treatment if it is not talked about (I will discuss this shortly with Fenris), but once it is the dialogue system stands ready for anyone who does not want to hear it. Waern argues that a very likely reason that many players engage in Dragon Age romances is that it "feels safe to do so" (2015: 37), but some topics are seen as more "threatening" and may disrupt this safe sphere.

BioWare may be not designing for the straight male gamer in Dragon Age, but the discourse and choices suggest that they are taking discomfort with male homosexuality into serious consideration. It is as though there is a hegemonic negotiation with the mainstream sphere here: if BioWare wants to do X, which is considered controversial, then the players must at least be allowed to do Y, as if there is some sort of compromise required. It is of course quite possible that the script is designed to adhere to possible norms or ideals in Thedas, but it is eerily similar to our own mainstream culture. Why enable such obvious homophobia toward men if the goal is to increase diversity and enable encounters with queer others? If sexuality is supposedly free and natural in Thedas (which it seemingly is not), why enable these possible reactions? It is not as if the possible homophobia is addressed either. It points to homophobia being an enabled defense mechanism rather than a role-playing mechanic or a subject for further inquiry and discussion. The only real repercussions to reproducing real hate are disapprovals and Rivalry points, repercussions that may easily be remedied by other means and which are forgotten in the next conversation. Homosexuality can be criticized, but homophobia cannot—clearly, the implications of this attitude are highly problematic.

A brief examination of the female Hawke-Anders scenario reveals further insights: male homosexuality is best kept hidden. Anders never mentions Karl being his first to a female Hawke and here the conflict is exclusively on Anders' changed circumstances. There is seemingly no point for him to lament the loss of Karl, who clearly was very dear to him, as revealed in the male Hawke scenario. Any explicit indication that Anders has been intimate
with men is omitted. Anders has an explicit sexual past with men and does not/is not allowed to talk about it. Bisexual men in heterosexual contexts are clearly a difficult terrain in these games (I will discuss this in *Inquisition* as well), and it has its cultural roots. Bisexuality is not seen as particularly noteworthy, interesting or desirable in heterosexual contexts—at least not as open discourse. Anders remains completely silent, although clearly his past with Karl should not matter less simply because Hawke is female. There is a heterosexualization of bisexual men in heterosexual contexts: the men might be bisexual, but it is best not to talk about it. They are allowed to be heterosexually appealing by staying silent. In the case of Anders there is not even the need to push a gay button if Hawke is female; the game has already decided that "gay" does not exist. Men can be bothered by it and women can live without knowing about it. To top it all off, Anders ultimately blows up the Chantry and kills several innocent people near the end of the game, echoing the all too familiar discomfort strategies of representations of homosexuality.  

**Fenris' Fears**

The second male romance companion, Fenris, offers an interesting contrast to Anders. He is not only a contrast in terms of being distant and reserved as opposed to the somewhat bombastic romantic love of the Anders romance, he is also notable for providing a fairly gender neutral romance with some slight differences. Fenris does not flirt with the player like Anders does; the flirting is left completely up to the player and thus homosexuality is not posed as a possible problem. Fenris, as discussed in the previous chapter, had an intimate relationship with his master, magister Danarius. As Thedosian sexual culture goes, in Tevinter same-gender relations are considered selfish behavior for nobles, but are encouraged with favored slaves. Fenris might be a victim of sexual abuse, then, which is understandably not something one is apt to divulge. The romance path with Fenris deals with helping him fight both the symbolic and very real ghosts of his past, reclaim his lost memories and overcome his fear of being physically intimate. He is "difficult" to romance in the semantic sense in that he is more focused on getting his revenge and will at times lash out at Hawke and resist. In the structural sense he works like any other romance.

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Anders’ sexuality is not the problem here, however, but the ever-increasing injustice toward mages and Anders merging more and more with the Fade spirit.
The Fenris romance also approaches gender specific recognition, but it is addressed differently than with Anders. Initially the romance consists of various flirts that swap out adjectives based on typical gender address: "handsome" for male Hawke and "beautiful" for female Hawke. Fenris' concerns are more directed toward himself than any possible same-gender relationship: "I'm an escaped slave, and an elf, living in a borrowed mansion. None of those things bother you?" Unlike with Anders, in a same-gender situation the player cannot be uncomfortable with Fenris being a man; for such a negation to trigger it seems that the game itself must ask this question directly to the player. In Act 2, Fenris will tell Hawke the story about his escape. If the player flirts and says they enjoy listening to Fenris talk, he will reply "[a]nd I enjoy a man willing to speak his mind" or "[t]here are few pleasures greater than speaking with a beautiful woman" depending on Hawke's gender. Notice the different tone in the statements. Fenris flirts back explicitly to female Hawke by calling her beautiful, but no such sentiments are found in the male Hawke version. His reply there seems rather general: an appreciation for someone who says what they want. I can interpret this in the larger diegetic context, much like how Anders comments on the rarity of men who say "such things" so openly: male homosexuality is rare and not expected, and Hawke receives recognition for being one who dares to go against the norms. The game thus hints at wanting to recognize the same-gender aspect and put it into its own larger context, but without doing it as expressively as with Anders or Zevran. Simultaneously, the statement is somewhat dissonant considering that he might have called male Hawke handsome earlier and does not do so here, whereas female Hawke receives a rather direct flirty remark.

The game attempts a final gender specific interaction which implies wanting to talk about homosexuality in some manner, but hides it and dispels it almost as quickly as it is brought up. It occurs in the post-sex scene conversation. Fenris is standing by the fireplace as Hawke wakes up. Hawke asks "[w]as it that bad?" and Fenris apologizes, saying it was beyond anything he could ever dream of. A friendly option, "Is something wrong", appears. Choosing this option provides a rare gender/sexuality comment: "Was it too strange to be with another man?" This rather specific question is not indicated by the general paraphrase. Fenris quickly replies "[i]t's not that" to Hawke's question and explains that he received flashes from his past life. Here we are presented with an interesting reversal: Hawke is suddenly the "expert" on homosexuality. Recall that in the Anders scenario the replies were set up so that

223 If there is anything stable we can say about the dialogue wheel, it is that the paraphrases are often very different from what the character actually says.
homosexuality was a thing previously thought unbelievable, which was also the case with Zevran and a male Warden. Imagine the contradictions in a playthrough in which a player chooses homophobic remarks to Anders and then proceeds to romance Fenris and ask him if it was strange to be with another man. We can clearly see here that the sexuality that the player can orient toward the character depends on the character. Regardless, the sexual focus shifts, but the diegetic/cultural assumptions remain: two men having sex is not considered ordinary, at least not in terms of frequency. The topic is not pursued further.

Figure 48: After having sex with Hawke, Fenris receives flashes from his past life.

If the player chooses the option as a female Hawke, she will instead ask if his lyrium markings hurt; it would be considered ridiculous to assume or ask if it was strange to be with a woman since heterosexuality is seen as default. Fenris also replies "[i]'s not that" to this. There is a clear attempt to acknowledge same-gender specificity in this romance, but without resorting to the more problematic discourses of the Anders scenario. Perhaps these changes were made to add some gender specificity to a romance that is nearly identical for both genders, but they cause a peculiar gap between what the game seems to want to talk about and what it can actually say.
"Girly fun" and Subtlety

Homosexuality is an entirely different subject once we move into the female sphere: it is hardly a subject at all and free from anxiety. There are certain differences in discourse between female and male Hawke in these romances, and while some same-gender aspects are acknowledged they remain remarkably unproblematic or mundane compared to male homosexuality. This is an extension of the view popularized by the public gameworld. These romances offer a different perspective on homosexuality and romance in which homosexuality can be something other than that slippery word or concept, while simultaneously reaffirming that male homosexuality belongs to a spectrum of possible anxiety and is always that slipperiness in comparison.

The two female companions available for romance are Isabela and Merrill, and like the male romance companions they are very different from each other. Pirate captain Isabela from Rivain, who is "raunchy, exotic, and debauched [...]" (Kelly 2015: 49) and a Thedosian Aethyta, was discussed in the previous chapter. She initially appears as a minor character in the brothel in *Origins* where she could teach the player a specialization as well as possibly enable a threesome or foursome. She can be considered the Zevran of *II* as she is very explicit in her humor and sexually promiscuous. There is rarely a conversation or banter with her that does not include some type of innuendo. Isabela's reputation as a "whore" and a "slut" is often acknowledged by companions in party banter, and Isabela seems to be comfortable with these identities (or, she at least seems to ignore what other people think about her). Isabela has chosen to live a rather carefree life due to difficult experiences in the past. She was once married and some man's "plaything": "He saw me with my mother in the market in Llomerryn and decided he had to have me. My mother gave me away for a goat and a handful of gold coins. She didn't even haggle over the price. Bitch." Isabela was freed from the marriage when someone ordered an assassin (Zevran) to kill her husband. Merrill is a Dalish elf the player encounters during a main quest on Sundermount. She is sweet and caring, rather naïve and at times socially awkward. Merrill is sent away from her clan due to her practicing blood magic she learned from a pride demon. She believed that restoring an ancient, magical elven mirror with blood magic would help her people. Both blood magic and the mirror are considered highly dangerous. Merrill is a stark contrast to most other blood mages in the game, who are

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224 Aethyta, Liara's "father", is the most sexually explicit character in the *Mass Effect* trilogy. See chapter V.
225 When Aveline asks Isabela in party banter if the things men say to her bother her, she replies: "Why should it? They don't know me. I know me."
usually depicted as unsympathetic enemies that must be killed and which serve to reinforce the belief that blood magic is destructive and evil.\textsuperscript{226} \textsuperscript{227} Merrill also originally appeared in \textit{Origins} as a temporary companion in the Dalish Elf Origin. In \textit{II} she is almost a polar opposite to Isabela, and she quite resembles the "shy/inexperienced girl" previously seen with Liara in \textit{Mass Effect} and Tali in \textit{Mass Effect 2}. Merrill is the game's only "virginized" romance companion and seems to come with no particular prior sexual history, much like Liara and Tali. The grand differences between Isabela and Merrill are exemplified perfectly in the following party banter:

Isabela: It's not always fun and games on the sea, though. There are storms and hostile pirates. And it's trying being cooped up with men who haven't seen a woman in months.
Merrill: You're a woman.
Isabela: Exactly. And I don't usually let them touch me, so they get... frustrated. I insist all of them get alone time. Helps with the crankiness.
Merrill: But they're already lonely! Why would you insist that they be alone some more?
Isabela: Merrill.
Merrill: What? Did I miss something?
Isabela: Go think about it. Maybe it'll come to you.

\textbf{Easy Isabela?}

The Thedosian version of popular culture's phrase "that's what she said", primarily used as a reply to make a non-sexual statement sound sexual, would most likely have been "that's what Isabela said". Isabela is both stereotypical and not: the lusty and loose pirate, traditionally a man, now recast as a woman. While this role reversal might seem like a simple shift, it can actually be a bit more complicated than that. We can view Isabela as a gender parody in the Butlerian sense, seeing as how the stereotypical male pirate captain role is appropriated in a female context and thus its contingency is exposed. Piracy is a type of drag here, then, which might be subversive "to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality" (Butler [1993] 2011: 85). Not only does Isabela re-contextualize the gender roles commonly connoted with piracy and the role of pirate captain, but the character also "copies"

\textsuperscript{226} Strangely, though, Merrill does not have the blood mage specialization as her gameplay class.
\textsuperscript{227} This point is also emphasized in Dorian's personal quest where it is revealed that his father tried to use blood magic to change his sexuality/control his mind, echoing the violence of "conversion therapy". See previous chapter.
the excessive sexuality that is assumed to belong to such a "male" role and emphasizes that female sexuality is not passive and that such open sexual desire is not the exclusive realm of men. Isabela's character also resonates with "raunch culture" or "do-me feminism". Genz and Brabon consider this a "highly sexualized version of power feminism [...] that sees sexual freedom as the key to female independence and emancipation" (2009: 91). This "do-me feminism" has both been applauded as empowerment and heavily critiqued as disempowerment and objectification, and is arguably one of the better examples to illustrate the complexities of the postfeminist media culture of backlash and progression: "Raunch culture and do-me feminism blend the sometimes conflicting ideologies of women's liberation and the sexual revolution by heralding sexually provocative appearance and behavior (including exhibitionist stripping) as acts of female empowerment" (Genz and Brabon 2009: 91). "Do-me feminism" generally "focuses on sexuality as a means to attain freedom and power", and, more particularly, the "do-me feminist" "expresses her individual agency [...] primarily through the re-articulation of her feminine/sexual identity" (Genz and Brabon 2009: 92). One can see how Isabela captures many of these overall ideas, particularly in how she escaped a horrible marriage to man and found herself as a pirate and a duelist and with an "open" sexuality which becomes one of her primary means. She is also unapologetic about her behavior and attitude and uses sexual discourse often, all of which is established early on.

Parody and drag are not necessarily subversive though, Butler warns, because they "may well be used in the service of both the denaturalization and reidealization of hyperbolic heterosexual norms" ([1993] 2011: 85). While Isabela may be an empowered pirate captain in all its romanticized fantasy essence, the structural difference between genders is striking. Whereas a male pirate captain is more likely to incite fear and/or respect, this mode is seemingly not available to Isabela because she is a woman. Her sexual promiscuity and the uneasy subject/object dialectic offer her no such respect or fear at all: the people of Kirkwall mostly consider her a slut and a whore, communicating that since she is a woman who frequently submits sexually to men she is worthy of no respect. Isabela's sexuality is vilified in Kirkwall, and her occupation as a pirate is hardly worthy of any attention at all. The Isabela-Merrill banter above even emphasizes that Isabela's men expect her to provide sexual services for them and that she sometimes obliges, underscoring that Isabela's subversion is simultaneously a re-affirmation of norms regarding (the limits of) female sexuality.

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228 Serependity, the drag queen prostitute, is an example of this. See previous chapter.
In her recruitment quest, Isabela is seen easily handling a group of men attempting to attack her over some money issue, and her sexual character is immediately established. Upon meeting a male Hawke, she says "[m]y, and here I thought the only men in this place were besotted fools who couldn't hoist the mainsail", which is obviously meant as innuendo. Hoisting the mainsail is only for men though, because Isabela will instead tell a female Hawke to watch herself: "You're nothing but tits and ass to the men of this place, and they won't hesitate to grab at both." Her initial flirt then is only directed at a male Hawke, though after agreeing to help her out she mentions to both Hawkes that she has a room at the tavern "if you're looking for… company later." This path cannot be pursued or responded to. Besides being the most sexually explicit companion introduction, note the absence of any rejection options here. Hawke cannot express that Isabela is making them uncomfortable, nor can Isabela be rejected for propositioning Hawke about sex. Compared to the Anders scenario, the possible same-gender aspect here is regarded as unproblematic, and once the instigator is a woman it is excused and it is not possible to be uncomfortable with it. Another interesting point in this situation is how it allows Isabela to presume that a female Hawke would like to have sex with her. This suggestion does not come equipped with options to turn her down or shout "oh! The images!" to her. Part of it can be explained by the nature of Isabela's character: this is just who she is and the comment is not to be taken too seriously. Another part is explainable by the general attitude toward female homosexuality in these games: it is not really problematic at all.

Flirting with Isabela generally revolves around sexual references back and forth between Hawke and her, and is less about directly building an actual relationship than it is about sexual discourse. The dialogue exchanges are tailored to her character. She will eventually show up at Hawke's estate in Act 2 and say that she preferred it when Hawke was living in Lowtown (in Act 1): "Dirty, chaotic, glorious Lowtown. The smell of tar and the sea, and the sound of some whore playing her trade in a back alley—don't you miss that?" This scene is a prelude to the sex scene and is the only other scene which is notably different in gender address. The sex scene is triggered either by the player propositioning Isabela or by having Isabela soliciting Hawke (this happens if the first flirt option here is not chosen). The gender specificity is only revealed in the latter scenario. If Hawke is female Isabela asks if they should "go off and have a bit of… girly fun?" Hawke asks: "You think I'm girly?" Isabela replies: "No, silly. Us, together. Telling secrets, exploring each other's hidden… depths." This is a dual reference because, while it has an obvious sexual address, it actually refers to traditional "girly fun" of
talking and telling secrets to each other. It thus creates links between innocent "girl things" and sexual revelations. To a male Hawke, Isabela says instead that she would like to duel him. There is a notably different approach to sex here, then. Dueling implies focused and likely intense physical action/interaction, a sparring back and forth, while "girly fun" suggests that sex between women is more sensitive and "explorative". This is only what is suggested by the dialogue, though, because the sex scene itself is identical for both Hawkes.

Figure 49: Female Hawke and Isabela engage in some "girly fun".

Isabela's bisexuality is not potential, but she is frequently heterosexualized. She freely expresses her sexual experiences with both genders in party banter, but notably it is sex with men that is most explicitly talked about. For example, she may recommend a rather dirty and blasphemous book to Bethany called "Hessarian's Spear" (a penis reference, as Hessarian did not wield a spear in the legends), to Aveline she refers to sex as "[b]e flipped ass over tits and hammered like a bent nail", whereas Aveline in a possible scenario tells Isabela that "I realize that you are always prepared for a sudden random phallus [...]". At the same time, she is allowed to express having been with women, though this is less graphic, such as "[c]oming here of my own free will feels wrong... Like diddling a [Chantry] sister" and a reference to a girl called "The Lay Warden" that she "liked" back at the brothel in Denerim. If the player romances neither Isabela nor Fenris, the two of them will take up an off-screen physical
relationship in Act 3. Similarly, when encountering Zevran as part of a sidequest she will ask to have sex with him at the conclusion of the quest, even if the player is in a romance with her. The player can tell her to stop, let her have her fun or join them. While it is never said explicitly, Isabela seems to prefer men.

The line between a celebration and empowerment of feminine sexuality and stereotypical voracious homo-/bisexuality can be thin in Isabela's case. Isabela is a good example of Gill's argument of the postfeminist objectification-to-subjectification, in which women are represented as active and desiring sexual subjects who choose to be objectified "because this 'suits' their liberated interests" (2007: 90). Isabela assures everyone that she is only an object to others because she chooses to, and she knows the real truth about herself. Her pirate life is an active choice and no one has forced this upon her. Sexually promiscuous men like Zevran, on the other hand, are not considered sluts or whores: here, sexual experience is seen as valuable and as an expression of "natural" masculinity. Zevran also escapes the overt "slut" mode because he has professional reasons for his conduct (it is "required") and he had no "choice" since he grew up this way. Isabela is afforded more expression due to her being a woman, but simultaneously she must take even more criticism and scrutiny simply because she is a woman. The game also reminds us that such sexual promiscuity belongs to the realm of bisexuality. Not all bisexual companions are like this, of course, but it pays to remember that this promiscuity is not afforded to heterosexual companions here.

**Merrill's Meandering**

Merrill is the least remarkable romance when it comes to homosexuality and explicit discourse, yet what the romance possibly reveals about homosexuality is found in its subtle gender-specific flirts and gender modes. Sexuality and gender are not specific topics here; Merrill has no troubled romantic or sexual past (at least, nothing is revealed or implied). Merrill is the complete opposite of the worldly and experienced Isabela. Like Liara and Tali before her, Merrill is shy and can become flustered if she is flirted with. What this romance does differently is to posit different roles for male and female Hawke in the relationship, as well as revealing how the heterosexual version of the romance is more overt while the homosexual version plays more on the discovery of homosexuality. Merrill is the most appropriate romance companion for discussing potential bisexuality in this game.
Act 2 offers flirt situations which show the differences in the straight and gay versions of the romance. Merrill shows Hawke the Eluvian mirror and comments on its beauty, while the available flirt has Hawke telling Merrill "[y]ou're much prettier." She becomes visibly embarrassed if Hawke is male: "Oh, you're too kind! Is... it warm in here? Stop babbling, Merrill..." Now consider her reply if Hawke is female: "I'm sure you say that to Varric at least once a day." Here she is more dismissive, or, at least, does not seem to recognize that Hawke is flirting with her. If Hawke is male, however, she not only recognizes the flirt, she also reacts visibly and audibly to it and indicates that she is also interested in him. A similar situation occurs later if the player helps Merrill procure the Arulin'Holm, a tool she needs to repair the mirror. In the post-quest scene the player is given an "I'm a great guy/girl" flirt. The male Hawke-Merrill exchange proceeds as follows: "I'm sensitive, handsome and supportive. What else could you possibly want?" Hawke delivers a rather self-confident statement (articulated with a dash of humor so he does not sound too conceited) and once again Merrill is sent into the same flustered Liara state as before: "Nothing. Oh, not that I'm saying I want you... I'll just stop talking now." There is once more a distinct contrast with a female Hawke: "What can I say? I'd do anything to help someone as sweet as you." This dialogue shifts from Hawke focusing on herself to emphasizing Merrill's qualities ("sweetness") as the trigger for her extended efforts, which is clearly different than the self-confident male Hawke. Traditional notions of masculinity and femininity are incorporated here: the man as active, admirable and self-assertive, and the woman as self-sacrificing and nurturing. Male Hawke is seemingly after something while female Hawke just helps Merrill because she is so sweet. Merrill's reaction to female Hawke is also notably different: "You're too good to me. I don't deserve you." Again, there is no recognition of Hawke's flirting: it is as though Merrill does not think that female Hawke is flirting, or perhaps that being attracted to another woman is not something she has experienced before (in the same sense as with Kaidan in Mass Effect 3, this discovery depends thus entirely on the player). It is nevertheless quite subtle since there is no explicit discourse.

The pre-sex scene at Hawke's estate sheds some more light on how this romance stages its subtle hetero/homo differences and what it can tell about discovering same-gender desire. Merrill will arrive at Hawke's estate and say she believes it might have been a mistake to leave the Dalish, but that it ultimately led her to Hawke. Her attraction to male Hawke is clear

229 I only detail the Friendship version of the scene. The Rivalry scenario focuses mostly on Merrill's self-destructive path and does not have the same notable gender discourses as the Friendship version.
in this scene, because she is concerned that he is a human and she is supposed to preserve the elven lineage. She says that the Keeper and her clan would object to their union, but that they could not possibly hate her even more anyway. This exchange builds on the previous flirts in which Merrill is obviously interested in Hawke, and she approaches him presuming that there is something special between them and she is ready to go against her entire culture. This is once again very different in the female Hawke scenario. Merrill instead says that she wishes she could be more like Hawke: "You're beautiful and you're clever, and you never make any mistakes. And I… I don't deserve you." She adds that it is foolish of her to dream that she has a chance with Hawke. There is a distinct difference in assumptions here. Regardless of Hawke's gender, Merrill arrives at the estate in order to see if they share something deeper. She already assumes that a romantic relationship is possible with a male Hawke (and she knows the risks involved), but this is not the case with female Hawke. Rather, a relationship with another woman seems somewhat illusory, something one can only dream about. She does not bring up her clan and her expected preservation of the elven lineage here. This is probably only "worth" mentioning if procreation is possible in the actual union, so the topic is dropped. The discourse revolves around Merrill possibly coming to terms with romantically loving and desiring another woman, though that does not seem like a real option to her. This illusory aspect might be a direct result from the expectations among the Dalish: the lineage must be preserved and thus heterosexuality is the dominant mode, much like with Thedosian nobility. Hawke, if the player accepts her, tells Merrill that she does not have to dream about it. The fantasy becomes real.
Whether intentional or not, the Merrill (Friendship) romance shows a very different approach to telling stories about (possible) homosexuality than other romances. This romance has the game's most "invisible" homosexuality of them all, yet it manages to represent a rather meaningful approach to portraying same-gender desire that does not rely on explicit discourse or a particular issue to overcome. This meaningfulness is mostly identifiable if the male and female scenarios are compared to show the differences in flirts and responses. The bisexuality approach might be criticized for being a cheap way to introduce romance options for all players with less effort, yet all romances show there are variations. The Merrill romance in particular is a very good candidate for highlighting how representations of same-gender and opposite-gender relationships with the same character can be meaningfully explored in a structure that aims to be fairly equal, and that uniform and economical design solutions do not necessarily indicate weak representational practices.

With that said, homosexuality in the private gameworld is mostly "enabled" by the player. Revisiting Greer's (2013) arguments about the characters being potentially bisexual, I would rather argue that it is mostly the revelation/expression of bisexuality that is potential/conditional, not bisexuality itself (except in the Merrill romance). Bisexuality is easily heterosexualized here and this heterosexualizing campaign is another good reason for
why "exclusively gay" characters are also needed (besides being able to tell different stories about sexuality): to circumvent a logic which, at least here, dictates that expressions of sexuality lie almost exclusively in the hands of the player and that bisexuality can be unproblematically "straightened out" by game mechanics. It may render representations of bisexuality not only conditional or potential, but also marginal. Nonetheless, I must also emphasize that regardless of romance chosen, the player is always romancing a non-normative companion in this game. That is perhaps one of the game's queerest statements.

Sex at the Hawke Estate: Explicit Women, Tame Men

In this short section, I would like to discuss the sex scenes of the romances to point out what they say about the game's construction of sexuality, how they have developed from Origins, and to set the stage for the vast changes in Inquisition. The sex scenes in II follow the same developments as the first two Mass Effect titles: from more graphic scenes containing partial nudity and "strategic" shots to more general scenes with little nudity that mostly show the prelude to sex and fade to black as the action begins. In II the sex scenes are very clean in the sense that they only show a fully-clothed prelude and an aftermath. In Origins, the sex scenes are fairly similar, though their constellations imply that a male Warden is the active partner and a female Warden is the more passive partner. Since II does not show the sex itself it is more difficult to assert anything here. Yet, there are still indications of the game's view of gender and sexuality in what is actually offered: sex scenes involving female companions are notably more "graphic" (as graphic as it gets in these games) than sex involving male companions. Hawke's gender does not structure these scenes differently.

The Merrill sex scene begins with her and Hawke kissing before the scene cuts to the bedroom where Hawke is on top of Merrill on the bed, kissing her some more. The camera is zoomed in during this part. The scene fades, and once the camera returns, Hawke is lying on the bed with Merrill and they talk. Male Hawke has his upper body exposed and is wearing pants, while female Hawke is wearing a brasserie and underwear. Merrill is wearing a corset (strangely, the same corset worn by prostitutes at the Blooming Rose). Isabela has a notably different scene altogether, which is perhaps to be expected considering how much the game invests in her sex life. She jumps up on and kisses Hawke as Hawke carries her backwards onto the bed. Isabela removes the daggers equipped on her back and they lie down on the bed.
The camera zooms in, and Isabela sits up to remove yet another dagger before they kiss some more and the camera moves away before the scene fades. This scene also plays a rather energetic "pirate theme" with drums. Both are fully clothed afterwards. The male companion scenes are fairly different. Anders delivers a passionate speech to Hawke in Hawke's bedroom before they start to kiss. Hawke pulls Anders down onto the bed and they will kiss some more. The camera moves out before the scene fades, but it does not zoom in like in the Merrill and Isabela versions. Afterwards, Anders and Hawke are standing fully clothed by the fireplace. The sex scene with Fenris begins as Hawke touches Fenris' arm and his lyrium markings temporarily glow blue. Reacting to being touched (which he does not like), he pushes Hawke up against the wall and they stare at each other for a little while before they kiss (his markings may or may not glow here depending on the order of quests completed). Afterwards, a half-naked Hawke wakes up on the bed (pants and bare torso for male Hawke and brasserie and underwear for female Hawke) while Fenris is fully clothed by the fireplace. All post-sex conversations revolve around the future of the relationship. Companions that move into the estate (Anders and Merrill) share one more kiss with Hawke before the scene ends, and companions that do not move in (Fenris and Isabela) leave without any physical interactions.

The structural and semantic differences here are not that great, yet it is clear that scenes involving the female companions use more zooming techniques and depict physical actions to a greater extent than the scenes involving the male companions. This suggests that women here have a certain to-be-looking-at-ness, to use Laura Mulvey's ([1975] 2012) term, that men do not have; we are not supposed to be interested in close-ups of the male companions. The sexualization of Hawke is also different. Male Hawke, in the two possible scenes where he dresses down, only has his torso exposed while female Hawke is dressed in her bare minimums. Male Hawke is more covered up so that the male player character is not too sexualized, for some reason. We can view this as an extension of the sex-scene practices adopted in Mass Effect 2, which also moved away from sexualizing Commander Shepard through clothing (or lack thereof). It might testify to a strategy which attempts to avoid sexualizing/objectifying the player, unless, of course, Hawke is female, in which it is considered perfectly fine to dress her down. Male Hawke, on the other hand, gets to keep his pants, possibly not to objectify him too much; male Hawke is not meant to be gazed at. We may be in the presence of disavowal (MacKinnon 1997, 2003) here, then, in that Hawke's eroticization is toned down and displaced. The same-gender scenarios carry implications that strangely show up even when players have actively pursued these routes and pressed many
gay buttons: women having sex is more interesting/less anxiety-inducing than men having sex. Compared to its precursor Mass Effect 2, this is nevertheless more daring considering how that game is "straightened out", but compared to Origins it is perhaps a step back, even with the rather traditional active/passive assumptions about sex in that game.

**Dragon Age: Inquisition (2014)**

Considering mainstream games in general and the analysis in this thesis thus far, I will allow myself a pun and say that no one expects the Dragon Age: Inquisition. It is an overstatement, yet it is also justifiable. Inquisition is, at the time of writing, the culmination of BioWare's sexuality and romance practices. Mass Effect 3 departs from its predecessor's heterosexual focus and introduces exclusive gay characters; Inquisition abandons its predecessor's (almost) exclusive bisexual approach and introduces a more diverse romance system while additionally making its gay characters companions rather than supporting crew. The various romances in Inquisition are also notably less structurally and semantically uniform than in previous titles, and the romances even dare to show partial explicit nudity in this title and involve some rather mainstream-challenging unconventional sexual practices. The game is a rather clear testament to what mainstream games can do with diversity. Yet, it is important to remember that we are still in the realm of agency and gay buttons—which representations enter the public and private gameworlds might be wholly dependent on the player. The game frees itself from earlier restrictive and stereotypical practices (from both series) and enables new and different stories about sexuality, but some "effects" still linger: female homosexuality and male homosexuality, while being more or less equated here, are still treated fundamentally differently as a topic—it is only the latter that is a topic per se. There are new nuances and fewer anxieties, however, and these shall be explored here.

The bisexuality approach in II was partly a result of economic restrictions, and the diversity approach in Inquisition must be considered partly a result of economic possibilities. First of all, the game has eight main romance options, which is double the amount of the previous game, and the budget for this game is much larger than for its predecessor. Gaider said in an interview that “[i]n Inquisition we got the go ahead to include a lot more total romances, so the decision was made that we don’t need to compromise” (Gamespot 2014). This should serve as an obvious indicator of how economic factors shape sexuality in these games, and
how romances might be prioritized during game development. What I find interesting here, however, is what Gaider said about the importance of diverse sexualities in *Inquisition* romances: "I thought that was pretty important because those are different stories to tell" (Gamespot 2014). I agree with this; different sexualities can tell very different stories. It would be easy to apply Gaider's statement retroactively and say that the bisexual approaches in previous titles are unable to tell these different stories, but my analysis has suggested otherwise. These romances, however, while able to tell different stories, run a greater risk of heterosexualization and a silence about homosexuality in heterosexual scenarios.

The great benefit of more diverse sexualities in romance is that the gay button mechanic may lose some of its "efficiency" and certain characters need no longer be heterosexualized simply because they are not heterosexual. There is more progressively queer potential in this approach, then, and a non-heterosexual character does not have to assure the player that they generally like the opposite gender and will not speak of "such things" unless the player wants to. Granted, just that some characters are gay does not mean that the game cannot restrict their expressions or shape them in certain "publicly beneficial" ways (Steve and Traynor in *Mass Effect 3* are good examples), but it does mean that the potential for avoiding such practices is enabled. The characters are gay whether the player likes it or not.

**Snares and Incompatibility: Expanding the Exploration of Sexuality**

Before addressing the main romance options, I wish to discuss how *Inquisition* experiments with its romance system by allowing players to flirt with romance companions that their Inquisitors are not compatible with, enabling further explorations of sexuality (and rejection). This incompatibility flirting is not a general rule, however, and special restrictions apply. For example, a male Inquisitor may attempt to flirt with Cullen and Sera (female romance only), but never Blackwall or Solas (female romance and female elf romance respectively). A female Inquisitor may attempt to flirt with Cassandra and Dorian (male romance only), and she has fewer restrictions than a male Inquisitor. An elven female Inquisitor can flirt with everyone. If the pairing is "totally incompatible", then flirt options will not appear at all. It is never clearly stated why some are completely unflirtable by incompatible Inquisitors, but the game has at least some suggestions. First of all, it adds a

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230 This is also possible to a much lesser extent in *Mass Effect 3*. 

realism effect to flirting: it is possible to flirt with people in real life that are not sexually "compatible". This approach also softens the game structure's hold on communicating characters' sexualities through available/unavailable flirt options. The player is able to explore other stories about sexuality when flirts are added to incompatible romances. They will ultimately lead to different types of rejection, but also they do not cast (certain) characters automatically as straight or gay. It also eliminates a practice where a (male) gay character is not seen as desirable for straight people and thus they cannot flirt with them. The restrictions are a different matter. Solas is clearly a special case: an ancient elven mage with a strong desire to restore the elven glory days of old. That he thus desires another (female) elf is perhaps not so surprising considering his traditionalist origins, though it does not explain why others cannot flirt with him. Blackwall is "very straight" and would perhaps not take too kindly to a male Inquisitor making a move on him. In any case, male Inquisitors are the most restricted here.

Incompatibility flirting and rejection are interesting because they enable new ways to articulate sexuality. They might be small additions, but this tiny change in structure can lead to new significant semantic changes. Previously, articulation of a character's preferences in situations of incompatibility was restricted to Traynor in Mass Effect 3, where she might reject a male Shepard by referring to how she liked EDI's voice, which is meant to serve as a clear indication of her sexuality—the big "oh"-moment for both Shepard and player alike. There was not a direct articulation there. What happens in Inquisition? This game is both more direct and subtle, depending on the companion. It is important to keep in mind the flirt discourses here: different companions enable different types of flirting. The flirts with Cassandra often take on a more friendly tone in which the Inquisitor compliments her on her abilities and decisions. A female Inquisitor is able to flirt with Cassandra up until the point where she would initiate the romance dialogue with a male Inquisitor. A scene triggers in which Cassandra explains she has noticed the flirting and that she is unable to return the Inquisitor's affection. She explains this inability because the Inquisitor is "[t]he Herald of Andraste… the Inquisitor… and a woman." She adds that she is flattered and hopes they can remain friends. Cassandra takes a direct approach and does not circumvent the topic. Sera provides an even more direct approach to a male Inquisitor. If the player flirts with her after her personal quest, in which the Inquisitor says that he likes having her around and wants her to stay, she goes into a rejection mode: "Ohhh. No, we have… too much in common, yeah? Because we both like women? So… right. Not letting you take back the 'staying' part,
though." Another instance is also available if the player chooses the "I'm interested in you flirt" during normal Skyhold conversation. This flirt is delivered like a rather regular friendly comment in which the Inquisitor says that he and Sera should get to know each other. She also goes into the rejection mode here: "Aww, that's... not going to work. I mean, it's too bad, we've got a lot in common. We both like women. You get it, yeah? It's not you, it's... you?"

Unlike Dorian, Sera does not have a "sexuality revelation" scenario and does not articulate her exclusive interest in women unless this path is chosen. Sera is nevertheless very direct and has no trouble stating that she likes women. Note that while Cassandra takes some time to notice a pattern before she confronts the Inquisitor, Sera rejects the Inquisitor fairly quickly even when the flirts themselves are rather neutral ("I like having you around" and "We should get to know each other better").

The two male characters, Dorian and Cullen, also follow this structure of cumulative response and early rejection. A female Inquisitor can flirt with Dorian throughout the entire game (Dorian loves compliments almost regardless of who provides him with them—himself included), though there is no direct rejection situation. His personal quest, in which he reveals that he is gay ("prefers the company of men"), takes care of that for him. Considering that his sexuality is a narrative theme and built into such a "revelatory" moment, it would not make sense for the narrative logic to have him reject a female Inquisitor prior to this. In the post-conversation to this quest the player may accuse him of leading them on, to which Dorian apologizes and says that he never meant to do so. The player can indicate that they liked flirting and that they can continue on a friendly basis, or demand that he stops. Cullen, on the other hand, is like Sera and halts flirting early on, though in a much more subtle manner. Cullen is less blunt than the others since he is fairly shy. The player can tell Cullen that he might enjoy their company (considering he has no one special in his life), and if the Inquisitor is male he will say that he would value his friendship and cannot offer anything more than that. Cullen also has a racial restriction: he can only be romanced by female human or elven Inquisitors. His particular preference is not talked about. If a female dwarven or Qunari Inquisitor attempts to flirt, he will nervously state "I... If I've made you think otherwise... (sighs) I have so many responsibilities, and..." before continuing with the same friendship reply he offers a male Inquisitor. The interesting difference between male and incompatible female Inquisitors is that Cullen believes that he might have acted in some way that might be seen as suggestive to a female Inquisitor, while interactions up to this point are the same for both genders. He does not, however, believe that he has done anything to encourage the male
Inquisitor's approaches, meaning that whatever he "normally" does is not considered something that men should find inviting in that sense, although women might somehow consider it like that.

I will now analyze and discuss the queer romances. There are four characters available to Inquisitors of the same gender (and any race): Josephine, Sera, Dorian and Iron Bull. Josephine and Iron Bull are available to both genders. Flirts and romance dialogue for these two characters are the same regardless of whether the Inquisitor is male or female, save for a few differences in pronouns and nouns. While gender is not an explicit topic in these two romances, it becomes so in Dorian's and Sera's romances, although it manifests quite differently. In Dorian's case it becomes an explicit cultural/political issue, while in Sera's case it becomes more of a topic for sexual references. This is no longer shocking, considering the previous games' take on female-female relationships, but significant changes to overall representational practices nevertheless occur here.

**Courtly Love and Roguish Fun**

The female characters available for same-gender romance are once again vastly different. Josephine Montilyet, hailing from a noble Antivan lineage, possesses much poise and grace and is a very "ladylike" and "proper" character. Fereldan rogue Sera, on the other hand, is an impetuous and rather tomboyish elf who often speaks before she thinks and swears a lot. Josephine's character is reminiscent of early Liara and Merrill in that she is shy and reserved in initial flirting stages, not believing that the Inquisitor is really romantically interested in her. Sera has no trouble being suggestive toward a female Inquisitor and is the one who takes charge in propositioning the Inquisitor about "more". Both romances build on previous notions of female homosexuality in the BioWare games, especially female homosexuality as "normal"/unproblematic, but they also add new and interesting developments. One notable point here is the toned-down sexual aspects of the Josephine romance (there is no sex scene for this romance) compared to very discursive and rather graphic features of the Sera romance. Josephine and Sera are also notable for moving away from mere girl-on-girl discourse/fantasies, and for not being representatives of the "luscious/lipstick lesbians" trope.
Jousting for Josephine

Josephine is the Inquisition's ambassador, diplomatic advisor and emissary. She was recruited by her old friend Leliana. Josephine, being from a noble lineage, has worked for many years in courts across Thedas and understands Orlesian politics especially well. Josephine is originally from Antiva, but received her education in Orlais. She was a bard in her youth, attracted to the romanticism surrounding that occupation. During a mission, she encountered a rival bard and killed him by accident. When she discovered that this rival was a former friend, she left this life behind. Josephine is a very courteous, composed and polite woman. She dresses in an exquisite manner and her clothing style has earned her the nickname "Ruffles" from Varric. Josephine is sweet, caring, responsible and generally unassuming. She takes her work very seriously and shrugs off early flirt attempts, reacting either by dismissing them as jokes or becoming embarrassed. Josephine is an advisor and not a companion, and thus she cannot be taken along as a party member in combat. The approval system does not apply to her.

Josephine is bisexual, but unlike other bisexual romance options she does not speak of particular attractions or "reveal" her sexuality; sexuality is not a topic at all. It is interesting to contrast Josephine's situation with Dorian's as both are nobles and experience vastly different attitudes toward their sexuality. In the rigid magocracy of Tevinter, (male) homosexuality is clearly undesirable (unless with slaves on the side), whereas in Antiva it seems to not be an issue at all. In Antiva, as Zevran tells us in Origins, people are more accepting of "such things", though considering what "Sexuality in Thedas" proclaims, nobility nevertheless posits a duty first and foremost to preserve lineage. Josephine's case may testify that some families may not be as strict on enforcing this (particularly, perhaps, since Josephine has siblings). Another connection can be made to the fact that female homosexuality is not seen as threatening or even noteworthy, even when it appears in noble settings. Empress Celene and Ambassador Briala exemplify that in this game. Yet, Josephine's character arc may also imply a heterosexualizing campaign. If the player romances neither her nor Blackwall, party banter may suggest that Blackwall and Josephine are flirting off-screen, yet no relationship ever begins due to their different stations. As part of her romance arc, Josephine also discovers that her family has engaged her to a nobleman. This is perhaps the "safest" way of not assuming anything about her character. As I have argued previously, implying and enforcing heterosexuality (the "default") is not viewed as particularly problematic (it is part of the
ideology of compulsory heterosexuality), whereas explicitly suggesting and enforcing homosexuality is much more controversial. The game keeps itself within certain limits still and Josephine is also heterosexualized unless the player intervenes. This is not to suggest that heterosexuality means meeting with a terrible fate, but it is fairly common for bisexual BioWare characters to mostly "become" heterosexual without the player's intervention.

The romance with Josephine carries interesting subversive potential in the same-gender scenario. I suggest viewing Josephine's romance arc as a type of courtly love scenario in which typically a chivalrous and brave (male) hero pursues relations with a noble lady. Intrigues are of course involved. This is a traditional medieval European literary trope, and is also part of a gendered structure in which the hero is male and the object of desire is female. Viewed in this context, Josephine's romance may either be rather traditional/stereotypical if the Inquisitor is male (this is not criticism) or be a fairly subversive play on stereotypical gendered assumptions and narrative structures and provide an interesting gender parody. In the Merrill romance, the difference in gender and sexuality between Hawkes is observable in the different flirts and responses. With Josephine the dialogue is mostly the same for male and female Inquisitors, though here its different "stories" are observable through its conventional structure (syntagm) and what type of gender (paradigm) is inserted into it, like in the epic love format of the Liara romance. A uniform romance (whether merely cheap to produce and/or genuinely intended as diversity) can engender different and mainstream-challenging versions/interpretations, and this is certainly one of them.

The player is called into possible gender-parodic courtly intrigue shortly after officially beginning the romance. Josephine delivers terrible news in true soap opera style: she is engaged to another man! A clearly frustrated Josephine explains that for the past year her parents have searched Antiva for a suitable match for her, and that they had no idea she had grown so close to the Inquisitor. Now she has received a letter declaring that her parents have betrothed her to a Lord Adorno Ciel Otranto of Antiva. Josephine assures the Inquisitor that she will deal with this situation, but until then the two of them cannot be seen in a compromising situation. The quest ultimately requires that the player duels Lord Otranto for Josephine's favor behind her back. Men fighting each other for the favor of another woman is a common narrative trope. Recall the joke between Shale and a female Warden in Origins about "fighting over the same men". It is, in addition to perhaps being viewed as a true "test" of hegemonic heterosexual masculinity, a recurring feature of the damsel-in-distress trope in
which the male hero typically fights the male villain to rescue a woman. The duel is not exactly that type of scenario. It happens without Josephine knowing it and she is not reduced to an object to be won. Josephine retains her agency and is able to dissolve the engagement on her own (yet this is not the outcome the game allows). Simultaneously, Josephine is part of a patriarchal system that allows her to be betrothed without her having a say in the matter, though she is at least allowed to have a say after the fact. The duel and its following bravado is a necessary component of the romance. It adds to the courtly intrigue. It is also enabled as a way for the player to show their devotion to Josephine; it would hardly have been particularly romantic if the matter was resolved by off-screen bureaucratic paperwork.

The duel itself is not a gameplay fight; the entire fight takes place during a cutscene at the Summer Bazaar in Orlais. Otranto does not react differently if the Inquisitor is female. It is perhaps not particularly surprising to him because Antiva apparently has much more relaxed attitudes toward homosexuality. Otranto and the Inquisitor spar not only with swords but also with words, throwing slurs back and forth until Josephine arrives and breaks off the fight. She is angry that the Inquisitor got involved when she specifically told them not to. She demands to know why the Inquisitor would do this and risk their life; here the player can officially commit to the relationship and declare to everyone that the Inquisitor loves Josephine. A surprised, but pleased Josephine asks "[y]ou... you do?" while a shocked Otranto follows with "s/he does?" Josephine declares her love for the Inquisitor and runs into their arms. The Inquisitor picks up Josephine and spins her around before they hug. Otranto yields, saying he is not "fool enough to stand in the way of true affection" and regretfully withdraws the terms of their betrothal. When Josephine and the Inquisitor kiss at the end of the scene, Josephine pops up her foot in a "true" ladylike manner. The quest resolves with Josephine and the Inquisitor talking and snuggling on the sofa in the Inquisitor's quarters in the evening.

Figure 51: Josephine arrives to break off the duel between the (female) Inquisitor and Lord Otranto.
It is not difficult to see that Josephine's character and romance arc are based on rather traditional ideas about femininity and heterosexual narrative structures, and that the same-gender version can provide a dismantling and "parody" of the essentiality of that tradition. The heterosexual scenario might be typical of Judith Roof's (1996) term narrative's heteroideology\footnote{I have previously discussed this term in relation to how the player may break from default heterosexuality.} in how gendered tradition is invoked. We can identify this here in a return to traditional masculinist ideas of taking action and fighting for a woman's favor. Even though Josephine could have resolved it on her own and expresses her dissatisfaction with the player's decisions (though no other courses of action except inaction are available), she ultimately reveals in the sofa scene that she did find it exciting and romantic after all: "Running into the middle of the crowd, the noise, the swords flashing... I was so worried for you, but at the same time... well, it was the most exciting thing I've seen in ages." It would nevertheless have been more problematic if Josephine were merely a prize to be won, which she certainly is not. It would be easy to criticize the romance's contents for being traditional, but this is further complicated by a gameworld that takes place in times where one would possibly expect such scenarios to be more regular—thus it adds to diegetic realism, and we must not forget that both genders can play this scenario. While the romance can be criticized for simply being a series of generic scenes in which the player character is uncritically inserted, there is subversive and possible parodic potential in the homosexual scenario. I say "parodic" in the sense that it plays on stereotypical conventions in non-stereotypical contexts; it is something unexpected.

Butler's theories on drag and gender parody are also useful in this examination. The duel scene involving a female Inquisitor may easily demonstrate what Butler considers the
"imitative structure of gender itself" and its contingency ([1990] 2007: 187). The scenario is completely different when a woman enters the stage and duels a man for another woman's favor, not because women cannot do so but because they are not expected to. This is commonly considered male territory, and having a woman take the lead role and courageously face the self-secure lord to show her love for another woman is a demonstration of how easily it does not belong to that territory. It might lose some force due to the fact that the Inquisitor is repeatedly out in the field fighting and performing various heroics, but here we are faced with a rather explicit type of challenge to patriarchal and traditional heteronormative constructions. It is not a direct or obvious parody like Shale or Serendipity, but I argue the same points apply: "parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim of naturalized or essentialist gender identities" (Butler [1990] 2007: 188). Whatever constitutes heterosexual love and the bravado in displaying such love is naturalized, not natural, and may easily be rearticulated for other contexts and purposes. We can extend this argument to the duel for Josephine and say that it may indeed copy a tired notion of physically fighting for the love of a woman (which could treat her as a type of object to be won regardless of her agency in the matter), but it also extends the meaning of that scene when recontextualized with a female protagonist. One can further consider the parodic/progressive potential it may have depending on if the Inquisitor is a human, elf, dwarf or Qunari; while not mentioned to any notable degree, the "spinning-Josephine-around" scene post-duel looks rather different depending on race. Parody aside, this may not necessarily make the scene less stereotypical in structure (someone is still fighting to win a woman, more or less) or more "feminist", but it allows for new considerations about how these gendered patterns are constructed and how fragile they actually are.

**Serious Fun with Sera**

Sera is an elven rogue archer and a member of the Friends of Red Jenny, a secret society of rogues who perform revenge schemes on those who would misuse and prey on the less fortunate in society. Sera grew up in Denerim during the events of Origins and while she can remember the elven alienage, she denies hailing from there. A sick woman named Lady Emmald took her in and became her patron. Being raised by humans, in addition to the psychological abuse she suffered during the time under Lady Emmald's care, has led to Sera having a strong disregard for elven culture and anything "elfy". Sera inherited Lady Emmald's
estate when she died, but rejected both the estate and the fortune that came with it. Sera is very impulsive and commonly uses words and language that other characters often find offensive, vulgar or childish, like "soggy biscuit", "tits", "shite", and "arse". Sera also loves pranks. She is one of the most sexually explicit characters in the game (rivaled only by Iron Bull) and will explicitly flirt with a female character.

Sera is the only romance option in which the Inquisitor's race is a particular topic throughout (and not just a passing reference), but a female Inquisitor of any race can successfully romance her. She has a preference for Qunari women and she is highly skeptical and reserved if the Inquisitor is an elf. She will comment on the Inquisitor's race the first time they meet. If the Inquisitor is a Qunari, she will be amazed and say that she is "well fit". Sera's preferences play on a well-known dynamic (and stereotype) of lesbian relationships: the butch and the femme. She calls a human "plain", finds a dwarven Inquisitor sweet and adorable because she is so tiny, and she is somewhat disappointed if the Inquisitor is an elf, saying that she hopes she is not too elfy. Regardless of race and class (she is also skeptical toward mages and magic), she will love the Inquisitor regardless and all races have the same romance scenes and dialogue with her. The Inquisitor's race results in slight variations in dialogue, so there is actually the potential for multiple stories other than female homosexuality (as with any romance, really), though the latter is what I must restrict myself to here.

Sera's unconventionality makes her a fascinating contrast to other female companions available for same-gender romance and other representations of female homosexuality. Sera is certainly not a "luscious lesbian"; in fact, she challenges the entire dominant representational practice of conventionally attractive women. Sera is notably rough and oftentimes direct and vulgar. She is not a completely new character type, but rather a combination of the unconventionality represented by Jack in the Mass Effect series and the more sexually explicit Isabela mode. She is clearly different from her "luscious" Mass Effect 3 counterpart Samantha Traynor. Sera exhibits many of the qualities associated with tomboyism, which in our culture, Judith Halberstam argues, "tends to be associated with a 'natural' desire for the greater freedoms and mobilities enjoyed by boys" (1998: 6). Tomboyism is considered to be both beneficial and anxious. In early years it might be seen as a sign of independence assuming it

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232 She will enter the ball in Halamshiral under the name "Her Ladyship Mai Bhalsych of Korse" and snicker at its public announcement.

233 If the player is not a female Qunari, Sera will ask Iron Bull about them in party banter, inquiring if female Qunari are as "big" and "phwoar" as he is.
remains linked to a stable girl identity, and may be punished if male identification becomes too extreme (Halberstam 1998: 6).

Sera's character and situation are a reflection-rejection of these notions. Sera may be unconventionally feminine, but there are no signs of extreme male identification. Sera is still a girl/woman and recognizes herself as such, and she makes no claim to be particularly different. She has rejected a particular gender conformity that would have sought to turn her into a "real" woman. As a member of Friends of Red Jenny, she is an opponent of those systems that would likely enforce certain types of gender conformity. She not only rejects established ideas, but this rejection is also used to enhance the credibility of her character. She is "outside" in more ways than one, and represents a different type of femininity that is not often seen in these games. Sera does what she wants and feels unrestrained by society, and she employs a rather stereotypically masculine register of sexual banter and profanities (imagine Josephine saying what Sera says). Sera, as a gay character, also cannot be safely heterosexualized, so she always represents an unstable queer female element. Of course, as earlier discussions have revealed, female homosexuality is not seen a notably threatening in these games, but here it is connected to an "unstable" unconventional femininity, one that is perhaps more loud and visible than others. What Sera also demonstrates is that a character can employ sexual and vulgar language without necessarily being sexually promiscuous themselves, so a free expression of sexuality is allowed here without rendering the character "slutty" (although Sera is often considered immature by other characters).

As with Merrill possibly discovering her attraction to a female Hawke, so too can the player challenge or affirm Sera's desires. She eventually pulls the Inquisitor aside for a chat in Skyhold and tells her she has noticed the flirting and asks if she maybe wants more. She comments on the Inquisitor's race, and the comment can range from high approval to skepticism, as seen in her Qunari and elf comments: "So, uh, yes? Because phwoar, you… you have height" or "I mean, I don't usually go for elves. Feel like a bag of chicken necks. But yes, I like you. You're… it's good." Here we can see the extent to which bodily properties and preferences are worked into the discourse, which are fairly absent in other romances. Sera clearly has ideals and specific attractions, and the Inquisitor romance may cater to them or

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234 In fact, even the game possibly sees Sera as threatening (to the player) considering she is the only companion the player can permanently send away after initial recruitment (and without triggering low-approval scenes). The player can also be notably harsh to her compared to options available with other companions, and the player is given multiple opportunities to end the romance.
challenge and reconstruct them; Sera might, for example, discover other body types she is attracted to. Her comment that elves feel "like a bag of chicken necks" is likely connected to her overall disdain for elves more than their physiques. She is attracted to a Qunari because they are so large, but she is also attracted to a dwarf because they are so "twee". A human is unremarkable; here it is the Inquisitor's noble lineage that is the issue.

Sera's romance is the most "sexual" with frequent references to sex and implied sex between her and the Inquisitor. During a rooftop scene (where they eat cookies), Sera blurts out "[p]issballs! I could have made a whole dirty thing about your biscuit! Or muffins! Muffins on the… on the roof. Because tits?" and the player may suggest that they should have sex right there on the roof. Sera is clearly raunchy, but in a different way than her raunchy predecessor Isabela. Both characters are rather loose cannons, but whereas Isabela has adopted a lifestyle of piracy and no-strings-attached sex and thus may be read as a stereotypical example, Sera enables the raunchy mode to not automatically signify jaded or carefree attitudes toward sex. This is a significant move in our cultural environment. As Halberstam discusses, within present-day cultural stereotyping "gay men tend to be associated with excessive sexuality, and white lesbians are still linked to frigidity and spectrality, and white lesbian desire becomes entwined with suffusive eroticism rather than overwhelming sex drives" (1998: 114). Sera is not only allowed to abandon the stereotypical frigid and spectral modes, but by specifically enabling a rather outspoken sexual register not commonly associated with or expected from women, she also avoids the queer chic/"hommo-sexual" mainstream representations chiefly aimed at heterosexual audiences. This can be considered a progressive move that counters both stereotyping and mainstreaming, yet strangely even here there is a potential for backlash seen in how aggressive and patronizing the player may be toward Sera compared to other romances (though not on the grounds of her sexuality).

With Sera, sex is queered in the sense that it is tailored to her zany character and the player must prepare for hitherto unseen hilarious hijinks. In Sera's romance quest, where the goal is to find Sera a proper gift and which requires asking the other companions, Vivienne suggests that the Inquisitor should just "shave something rude into your privates, dear. She won't get the redundancy." This is no requirement, but accepting the suggestion triggers an extra scene at the end of the quest. Back in the Inquisitor's quarters, Sera is overjoyed that the Inquisitor told everyone that she is her lover, calling it the "best gift ever". She pushes the Inquisitor onto the bed and climbs atop her. If Vivienne's suggestion was accepted, an extra scene will
now play. Both of them are naked in bed and Sera is giggling and laughing excessively, surprised that the Inquisitor "shaved that in your…" Sera laughs so hard that she falls off the bed and after some slight dialogue, she pulls the Inquisitor down onto the floor with her. This scene is notable not only for being more graphic than previous sex scenes (the breasts of both women are uncovered and clearly visible, not obscured by strategic, suggestive shots), but also for its zany tone. Sex is here depicted as a fun (but serious) venture with intermittent banter. This is not the stereotypical "lovemaking" scene of mainstream culture and the previous games, though in the latter case it is difficult to make certain claims about this considering there are no intermediate-sex scenes, only scenes pre-sex and post-sex. The Sera sex scene is thus one of the more realistic representations of sex in how it does not represent it as a merely one (implied) continuous act of intercourse, and in how it shows that women also actually undress their torso for sex. The scene is of course likely tailored to Sera's character; hence the possibility to shave the Inquisitor's pubic hair.

Figure 53: Sera discovers the Inquisitor's gift.
Sera can also be considered pivotal for not only diversifying representations of female homosexuality, but also because she enables the games' first (and currently only) gay marriage. In the *Trespasser* DLC, Sera will propose to the Inquisitor during the Exalted Council and if the player accepts, a post-ceremony scene will be shown where they celebrate their status as wives. Inspiringly, Thedas does not seem to have any restrictions on gay marriages, though it must be said that the wedding takes place in Orlais where homosexuality is considered a quirk of character. Interestingly, Sera is the one who wears the wedding dress while the Inquisitor wears regular formal attire. This may engender a gender-parodic display in the Butlerian sense as Sera, not usually the dress-wearing type, proclaims to everyone: "That's our bells, nobbers! We friggin' win!" The representation of marriage here can be helpfully contrasted with the straight wedding involving Cullen, the only other wedding available in the DLC. The Inquisitor is the one who wears the dress here because this is the traditional heterosexual wedding. The dress seems to be a required component of the weddings. In this wedding, however, the ceremony itself is shown. The Inquisitor and Cullen exchange vows in front of Mother Giselle. While the establishment of marriage is offered to both gays (women only) and straights, only the straight version shows the ceremony whereas the gay version proceeds directly to the aftermath. This may emphasize the sanctity of the romantic heterosexual union itself, pledging love and trust to each other in the eyes of the almighty Maker. The homosexual union is not applicable for this, at least not visibly. This is
likely an attempt to avoid creating the same scene twice, and the marriage itself is a progressive inclusion and statement in our times where same-gender marriage is increasingly acknowledged, legalized and fiercely debated. Another issue is the fact that no male gay weddings and marriages are enabled, only implied.235

The Company of Men, Power Games and Submission

Dorian and Iron Bull, the two male companions for same-gender romance, progress representations away from stereotypical usages and make audible and visible much of what was silent or even unthinkable before. Dorian may possess several stereotypical qualities, but he can be viewed as an explicit confrontation with and a reconfiguration of gay male stereotypes while simultaneously allowing male homosexuality to gain a louder voice in these games. Iron Bull can be considered a stereotypical hypermasculine character who may publicly appear to be very straight, but privately his character challenges beliefs about certain types of masculinities being inherently heterosexual, and his romance incorporates BDSM (an acronym for "bondage, domination, sadism, masochism" (Clarke et al. 2010: 257)) practices. Such practices remain pathologized, obscure and vilified in mainstream culture. In addition to the character arcs and stories these romances represent, the characters are also cultural statements in which homophobia is confronted and non-mainstream sexual practices move out of the shadows. This is remarkable progression, indeed, yet there still remain certain types of representational anxieties in what the characters may talk about and how the player can respond. Dorian is very restricted in what he can say about his own desires, while Iron Bull is frequently heterosexualized in public gameworld discourse.

Dorian and Discourse

Dorian is the son of esteemed Tevinter magister Halward Pavus. He calls himself a "product of generations of careful breeding, and the repository of its hopes and dreams." Dorian is a powerful mage and a well educated and eloquent man, obviously affected by being raised as an upper-class citizen in Tevinter (he believes "the south" has a rustic charm). Varric nicknames him "Sparkler" because of his style and attitude. Dorian has no trouble

235 It is possible to ask if Iron Bull wants to get married, and he says he will do whatever the Inquisitor pleases after their mission is done. No marriage is ever shown or mentioned.
complimenting himself on how he looks or criticizing the appearance of others. Dorian may come across as mocking and self-occupied, but if he is befriended (and, especially, romanced) he shows a deeper and more caring side of himself, without losing his overall self-secure flair. Since he is from Tevinter he is viewed with extreme suspicion by many other companions and characters. He approaches the Inquisition for help when he discovers that his former mentor is dealing with dangerous magic at the behest of Corypheus.

I have already discussed Dorian at some length in the previous chapter, in relation to his companion quest where he confronts his father who does not approve of him being gay and also because of how he might possibly end up in a relationship with Iron Bull. Dorian's romance arc speaks more about homosexuality than his personal quest and offers insight into how the repressive Tevinter culture has affected his life and his expectations for the future. His "coming out" scene is not the only thing he offers on the subject of male homosexuality: the rest is in the romance, both in practice and discourse. Dorian's personal quest is a requirement for a romance to start. Prior to this there are only flirts in which Dorian generally acknowledges the Inquisitor's flirts by emphasizing his own qualities ("Distracted? By my wit and charm? I have plenty of both").

The "defense against male homosexuality" discourse returns with Dorian. He will compliment a male Inquisitor early on after reaching Skyhold, saying that he finds him "rather strapping". A man initiating flirting with another man is considered to be very rare and very precarious territory in these games. *Inquisition* is no exception. The player may immediately respond with a "Don't flirt with me" option, in which the Inquisitor calmly says "I'd prefer if you didn't.... make comments like that." Dorian replies: "Touchy, I see. As you wish." Representational practices may evolve and expand, but old habits and anxieties die hard. In *Dragon Age*, it seems, the trend is that once male homosexuality dares to preempt the player's gay button it must come with its own self-destruct mechanism. This is apparently the responsible thing for male homosexuality to do, according to these games, so that the player is not automatically forced into or assumed to be accepting it. When Sera flirts or is suggestive to a female Inquisitor, no equivalent option to express discomfort is offered at all. This continues to reproduce and maintain a tired notion that male homosexuality is considered anxiety-inducing and scary, even in the contexts where the game attempts to change its earlier
practices. While the player may be told off for choosing these options (called "touchy", for example), the player is nevertheless given the control to practically annihilate explicit male homosexuality. There is hardly anything progressive or subversive about that.

The relationship with Dorian takes a different turn than other romances because while the game counts the romance as officially started after his personal quest, it does not become a relationship after "the talk" following the romance quest. The romance fluctuates between the issue of him being from Tevinter and being in a relationship with another man. Dorian's experiences in restrictive and repressive environments have clearly made him believe that a romantic relationship is unlikely for him, echoing real-world situations where romantic relationships are frequently represented as the core privilege of heterosexuality. As Dorian reveals in a later conversation, he has been "a port in a storm before", hinting that for gay men in Tevinter, at least, the best thing to hope for is some temporary reprieve before culture and responsibilities come calling. The romance quest involves helping Dorian retrieve his amulet; the amulet is in fact his birthright and he does not want the Inquisitor's help getting it back. The merchant who possesses the amulet wants to use it as leverage to get the Inquisitor's aid and he tells Dorian that he should accept his "friend's help". This sparks Dorian's anger: "Kaffas! I know what you think, and he's not my friend. He's...." Dorian hesitates and the Inquisitor looks inquisitively at him before he finishes: "Never mind what he is." Dorian is paralyzed here; he cannot explicitly acknowledge the relationship because it is yet undefined, though he seemingly begins to find himself in a different situation than what he is used to. Back at Skyhold, Dorian receives the amulet from the Inquisitor and reveals his concerns: he is afraid of being "the magister who's using you" and worried about damaging the Inquisitor's reputation. One "dirty" option is enabled here where the Inquisitor tells him "[i]s that all? Go ahead and use me, Dorian. Or are you all talk?" Dorian ultimately apologizes for being bad at accepting gifts and promises to repay him. Following that, Dorian tells the Inquisitor to check his room. Doing so will trigger the possible sex scene which continues the dual homosexuality/Tevinter culture theme.

Dorian's possible sex scene, provided it is played in order to continue the romance, engenders two possible relationship paths, both of which ultimately shock Dorian. Dorian arrives in the

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236 A similar option is also afforded during Dorian's personal quest where the player can outright tell him they do not want to hear about him being gay at all. See previous chapter.

237 This is possibly a reference to a man named Rilienus, who seems to have been important to Dorian in the past. Rilienus is only mentioned in party banter between Cole and Dorian.
Inquisitor's chambers and proclaims that "[s]o! It's all very nice, this flirting business. I am, however, not a nice man" before suggesting they move on to something more "primal". His proposal can be accepted, rejected completely, or he can be asked to slow things down. In the latter option, the Inquisitor says it is all very sudden to him, much to Dorian's surprise (by his standards, he says, they have been "positively chaste"). The Inquisitor says he wants a relationship and Dorian is shocked. He is rendered speechless and says that it does not happen like that where he is from. The following dialogue is very similar to the one after the sex scene, so I will discuss it there. Dorian accepts the Inquisitor's wishes, but nevertheless steals a kiss before he leaves. "It is a matter of pride," he says.

If his "primal" proposal is accepted, they kiss and the scene proceeds to the post-sex conversation which offers much more context. This scene offers a remarkably unique representation of male nudity as the scene opens with Dorian completely naked, the backside of his body toward the camera. This is the most naked male character these games have dared to depict thus far. After some banter, he sits down on the bed with the Inquisitor and asks where they are going. It is also clear here that Dorian has not come to expect stability and that "fun" is the most he can expect. Dorian admits to like the Inquisitor "more than I should".

Dorian is rendered speechless for some time before he replies if the player signals interest in wanting more than fun: "I was… expecting something different. Where I come from, anything between two men… It's about pleasure. It's accepted, but taken no further. You learn not to hope for more. You'd be foolish to." The significance here is how Dorian reflects on growing up and living in a highly restrictive culture in which heterosexuality is not only normative, it is more or less required by law. This can be compared to Krem's situation and the Tevinter military's harsh gender restrictions. Both Dorian and Krem represent extreme cases in which the only option was to escape the country altogether in order for them to be themselves and not pose as happy puppets for society. Homosexuality in Tevinter, then, is primarily considered a sex issue and is possibly allowed as physical acts on the side as long as the (noble) citizens perform their primary familial and societal heterosexual duties and responsibilities. Dorian says it well at the end of his personal quest: "My father never understood. Living a lie… it festers inside of you, like poison. You have to fight for what's in your heart." Homosexuality is viewed as a condition in Tevinter, then, and not a legitimate sexuality. This is clearly indicated by Halward's belief that he could use blood magic to "cure" his son—issues that have all too real cultural resonances. Homosexuality itself was never the problem as long as it could be safely hidden away on the side, but Dorian resisted society's
rules and was subsequently punished. Empress Celene's words, "culture doesn't change over night", echo here. Entering into a relationship with Dorian may not change Tevinter, but it changes the Tevinter in him.

Dorian's plotline and romance are a complex mix of homosexuality and restrictions thereof and Tevinter culture. Dorian is hit with a double stigma. Homosexuality is only the direct issue in his dealings with his family and in some parts of the romance. In all other contexts, Dorian uses his Tevinter nationality as grounds for why any liaison between them is shocking. His reserved attitude toward relationships nevertheless continues throughout the rest of the romance; going into a relationship does not automatically dispel all his previous thoughts and experiences. Dorian's story, then, is not only a story about homosexuality, but also about the anxieties involved in finally attaining that which was thought unattainable.
"Taarsidath-an Halsaam," a drunk Iron Bull tells the Inquisitor after killing a dragon, and the closest translation he can offer is "I will bring myself sexual pleasure later, while thinking about this with great respect." This should properly set the stage. The Iron Bull is a Qunari mercenary and a Ben-Hassrath spy (the Qunari "secret police"). He leads the mercenary company Bull's Chargers, a company he founded on order from the Ben-Hassrath when he was reassigned to Orlais. Iron Bull is not a typical Qunari, and represents one of the very few Qunari that have been the player's ally. Iron Bull remains loyal to the fatalist philosophy of the Qun (the player may change this), but his time in Orlais has changed him and he regularly drinks alcohol and sleeps around, behavior that violates the Qun. Iron Bull is a complex and curious character and I argue that he is one of the more subversive BioWare characters because he can be a great surprise element, yet some challenges remain.

There are at least five primary reasons (for the purposes here) for his complexity and curiosity, which will serve as the basis for the discussion: (1) he overtly represents a stereotypical hegemonic heterosexual hypermasculinity due to his tall stature, overly muscular physique
and his lust for fighting and sleeping around. In other words, he is designed not only as a "very straight gay", but also as an "extremely straight gay" (Iron Bull is not gay, however—I am using these categories to designate common cultural identities). (2) He is not a stereotypical representation of hegemonic masculinity because he is pansexual, which means that he can be attracted to anyone regardless of gender and sexuality and that these markers/identities are not determinant for his attraction. (3) His pansexuality is complicated and diminished by vague discourse and by him being subjected to a heterosexualizing campaign. (4) He enjoys BDSM practices where he takes the dominant role and the player/Inquisitor assumes the submissive role. (5) Finally, Iron Bull's romance differs from the others in that it begins purely as a sexual/physical relationship and evolves into a romantic one over time. If the player does not engage much with him he will more or less only be the type of character described in (1) and (3). There are several complex issues at work here, and how his character is realized depends greatly on the player, which is why I saved him for last. Romancing him nevertheless leads the player into queer/unconventional territory, regardless of gender.

The first topic I would like to discuss here is the representation of pansexuality, or, rather, the vagueness of it. Pansexuality provides a welcome addition to game's diversity. Yet, this diversity can seemingly only go so far because there is no way to know in-game that Iron Bull is pansexual. His sexuality was in fact revealed on Twitter by BioWare writer Patrick Weekes following a panel discussion. It is perhaps not surprising at this point that the game does not talk about pansexuality. If we revisit Shaw's argument that "optional content does not address the social goals of representation" (2014: 206) (an argument that I do not wholly agree with), then I will take this one step further and argue that diversity certainly does not gain anything from silence or indifference either. There is of course a difference between having Iron Bull express his pansexuality and the stereotypical manner of having him announce it as soon as possible; the way this would have appeared here, then, is not necessarily a legitimate recognition of pansexuality. Compare Iron Bull to Josephine, who is bisexual (which, similarly, is not talked about either). Both characters can be romanced by an Inquisitor of any race and gender. Why is Iron Bull considered pansexual and not Josephine? What are the differences? There are none that the game is willing to speak of, apparently.

238 "Minor clarification for those versed in LGBT terminology: we say bi for simplicity, but yes, the Iron Bull is pan. :) #ridethebull" (Patrick Weekes 13/7-2014): https://twitter.com/PatrickWeekes/status/488379341718298624
which at least offers pansexuality and bisexuality something in common here: ambivalence. Diversity is then conditional based on what the player wants. Josephine, for example, can remain fairly straight and so can Iron Bull. The issue does not stem from a lack of conversations in which the characters exhaustively explain every detail and facet of their sexuality to the player in an educational or preachy manner. The issue is the fact that pansexuality and bisexuality have different names for a reason, and when the game wishes to include them in order to tell different stories, the game should attempt to at least express why they differ, what they might mean and why they matter.

Iron Bull himself is a rather complex mix of dominance and submission, which is in opposition to how his own preference for BDSM sexual practices is structured into clearly defined roles. Iron Bull is primarily a fighter and not a "thinker" and takes pride in being in control of himself and his actions, which is well demonstrated in how he explains his choice of name upon inquiry: "This may surprise you, but I really like hitting things. Also, it's 'The Iron Bull,' technically. I like having an article at the front. It makes it sound like I'm not even a person, just a mindless weapon, an implement of destruction… that really works for me." Simultaneously, he remains loyal to the Qun, a system which demands complete obedience and submission from its subjects. Likewise, he fully submits to the command of the Inquisitor, recognizing the authority of his "boss", and even having very low approval with him does not trigger particularly hostile responses from him or threats about leaving. Unlike Dorian and Tevinter, for example, Iron Bull has no desire to abandon the Qun. In his personal quest, he begins expressing doubts about the Qunari possibly intervening more actively in the Inquisition, and the player must ultimately make the choice of aiding the Qunari, which causes the deaths of Bull's Chargers, or aid the Chargers, a choice which sacrifices the Qunari alliance. Iron Bull is excommunicated from the Qunari in the latter scenario. Separating Iron Bull from the Qun is the only outcome which ensures that he does not betray the Inquisition in Trespasser, making this a clear example of how the Qun is not to be supported by the player.

The Iron Bull romance is structured to be a meeting between two very different worlds: the Inquisitor encounters "new" desires and practices, while Iron Bull ultimately finds himself in the realm of romantic love. He is initially very resistant to flirts. He picks up the various hints the player throws at him (as he later reveals), but before he approaches the Inquisitor in their private chambers he generally derails any direct flirts. For example, in Haven, the player can flirt and say they will protect Iron Bull from magic/demons and Iron Bull replies: "My blade
pretty much protects me." The Inquisitor does not stop, however: "Perhaps I can do things your blade can't." This is a fairly sexually suggestive remark, but Iron Bull manages to deflect the topic even here: "I don't know. It has blood grooves. Well, technically it's the fuller, but 'blood grooves' sounds so much more violent." Iron Bull is very evasive with the Inquisitor, which is in direct contrast to how he flirts and openly banters with other characters (for example, fantasizing about Cassandra in and out of her armor and the penis jokes with Dorian). He never offers a direct reason for why he differs in attitude, but it is likely out of respect for the Inquisitor as his boss ("boss" is the frequent term he uses for the Inquisitor). As a Qunari, he has likely adopted strict views on rank and status. He remains reserved perhaps for another reason as well: he wants to make sure that the Inquisitor seriously wants to get involved with him because such a liaison entails more than "regular" sex, and he has his own specific terms and conditions.

Iron Bull will be waiting in the Inquisitor's chambers once the player has "hinted" enough. This is where the player encounters BDSM for the very first time in these games.239 BDSM, broadly defined, is a

sub-cultural term used by people (of varying sexual identities including heterosexual) who engage in consensual sexual practices which include wearing leather, latex and uniforms, using sex toys and creating sexual "scenes" usually involving sexually "sadistic"/dominant and "masochistic"/submissive partners. (Clarke et al. 2010: 257)

I use BDSM as a general term in this analysis because the game does not call BDSM anything at all (like homosexuality, it is unnamed or unnamable), and while the game offers some indications of the sexual activities involved, they remain rather vague. Thus, I speak of this romance as a representation of BDSM in a broad sense, and remain aware that some aspects implied by the term may not be applicable for the Iron Bull romance.

A key concept here is "consensual sexual practices", and consent is clearly something that has received a great deal of consideration in this scenario. Iron Bull, sitting on the Inquisitor's bed, tells the Inquisitor: "So, listen. I've caught the hints. I get what you're saying. You want to ride the Bull. Can't say I blame you. But I'm not sure you know what you're asking. Not sure if

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239 The brothel in Origins has a parodic reference to BDSM in one its surprise scenarios, but since the function is humorous implication I do not consider this a particularly serious or notable representation of it.
you're ready for it." Iron Bull does not immediately state what he means by the Inquisitor not being ready, though "ride the Bull" is a clear sexual reference that conjures up images of the rowdiness of bulls and the riders' struggle to hang on. It is of course also a direct reference to riding Iron Bull, and, while riding may mean different things as a sexual activity, riding likely refers to being penetrated while sitting on top of him, probably also grappling his horns.240 "Riding the Bull" becomes indicative of how the sexual intercourse is structured around the dominant and submissive parts. If the player indicates their "readiness", Iron Bull will once more offer an explanation: "See, you say that, but… you really don't know what that means." The scene builds up suspense by indicating that there really is something special going on here other than the fact that he is a large Qunari (which the player might also be, incidentally). Another indication of interest causes Iron Bull to walk resolutely over to the Inquisitor. He takes the Inquisitor's arms and raises them up while cornering the Inquisitor, who then gasps. Iron Bull issues a final "warning": "Last chance…" Accepting begins the relationship, and Iron Bull takes the Inquisitor in his arms as the scene fades. Afterwards, Iron Bull tells Leliana to let the Inquisitor rest. Note that the player has accept three times before sex is initiated; consent is very important here. Yet, at the same time it is never stated what type of relationship this is. This scene mostly indicates that he is a dominant sexual partner. Whereas the Inquisitor will experience it firsthand off-screen, it remains something the player must inquire more into and piece together from hints.

BDSM is not mainstream at all, although the past few years have given some mainstream attention to it, particularly seen with the success of E. L. James' Fifty Shades book series and subsequent film adaptations. In fact, and this may not be particularly surprising, "BDSM is pathologised in the [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders] and some

240 Iron Bull makes it clear in party banter with Dorian that grappling his horns is considered part of the activity.
aspects of BDSM are illegal in many countries" (Clarke et al. 2010: 257). Representing BDSM activities in a mainstream game, both represented at all and as something "normal", is a very bold move, then, and the line between stereotyping and pathologization on one side and acceptance and understanding on the other is thin. One may run the risk of connecting BDSM "naturally" to sexual promiscuity or voracity, in the same vein as stereotypes of bisexuality. The *Fifty Shades* series, for example, has been critiqued for "framing some BDSM and all non-heterosexual practices as the result of childhood trauma and thus as signs and results of a pathological condition" (Harrison and Holm 2013: 560).

*Inquisition* attempts to avoid pathologizing BDSM by employing conversations about it, yet it also keeps a certain distance by not being overly specific in showing or telling. This may of course be a part of the fantasy fulfilment of the romance, but vagueness may also create understanding about these types of sexual practices rather than focusing on the sex itself. Consider the follow-up conversation where the Inquisitor and Iron Bull discuss what happened between them, which is never really said out loud. The Inquisitor may say "I'm still unsure how to react to the things we did" to which Iron Bull suggests he can show them a few stretches that will take care of the "limping". Both Iron Bull and the Inquisitor may point out the novelty of the experience: Iron Bull recognizes that the Inquisitor found "a part of yourself you didn't know was there before", while the Inquisitor may state that "[n]obody has ever done that to me before. I… enjoyed it." The Inquisitor's self-discovery is the player's enigma; the nature of these activities is not disclosed, which may add a certain allure to the romance. It becomes evident that the focus is not on the sex itself, but rather the institution of sex and sexual relationships. If we think back to the first *Mass Effect*, this is a distinctly different attitude from the exhaustive explanations of asari sex and sexuality as alluring and fantastic, where perhaps understanding was not so much in focus as the fact that the sex was great. What is revealed about Iron Bull and the Inquisitor's sexual activities is that they involve rope work. This is indicated by Iron Bull's romance tarot card (on the companion selection screen) in which he is depicted as kissing the hand of the Inquisitor and green rope is strung around him and the Inquisitor's hand. In a later romance scene he thinks of Sera as not the kind "who lets you tie her down". In the *Trespasser* DLC, brief romance banter on sex toys reveals that Iron Bull prefers rope work because "knots are easier to adjust—and more intimate." The "bondage" part of BDSM is at least present here, and it is likely that the D, S and M are present in some form as well, as following dialogues and scenes suggest.
Understanding and consent take center stage as Iron Bull introduces his system while emphasizing the "purpose" of what he is doing: "Outside this room, nothing changes. You're the Inquisitor. You're the boss. I will never hurt you without your permission. You will always be safe. If you're ever uncomfortable, if you ever want me to stop, you say 'katoh', and it's over." Iron Bull introduces a safeword, an important feature of BDSM. The safeword is not only a representation of real-life practices, but also a "tool" which the player can end the romance with. The dominance/submission binary, which is an important structure in this relationship, is never explicitly established, but it can be inferred from the various replies offered in this scene: "no one has ever done that to me", "I'm not going to be your slave", "take me". What I find especially interesting here, in addition to the fact that these types of sexual practices are enabled, is the gender context. Iron Bull's dialogue and sexual structure remain the same regardless of the Inquisitor's gender. A male Inquisitor is required to be the submissive partner, which by no means indicates that the partner is passive, and this is a rather new role for a male protagonist to assume. The player character in general is required to be active and in control, and of course men are frequently taken for granted as automatically being the dominant or active partners in sexual intercourse. As Dyer argues, "[m]ale sexuality is repeatedly equated with the penis; men's sexual feelings are rendered somehow as being 'in' their penises" (2002: 90). Having a penis, thus being a penetrative part in intercourse, assumes that one is or automatically grants one the role of active or dominant (the giver/taker dichotomy, as discussed in previous chapters).

In a game that is so focused upon the player's control of actions and events, it is fascinating that such a submissive sexual role is offered, especially to men, who in heteronormative contexts are not supposed to be submissive or be penetrated; this is frequently associated with shame, disgust and unmanliness. It is of course not always a matter of a clear binary: "Research on anal sex between gay men [...] suggests that the meanings attached to the role of the insertive or receptive partner in anal intercourse are not always tied to particular identities (i.e., insertive partners are dominant and receptive partners are passive)" (Clarke et al. 2010: 185). Heteronormative culture's views (the "outside") on such matters may remain simplified and restrictive, but that is also because heteronormativity itself is so regularly based upon that same restrictive dichotomy for its subjects. It is what allows heteronormativity to state what "right" sex is and then transfer that model on to everything else to measure how it fits or deviates. The male version of the Iron Bull romance thus provides ways to thwart simplified and generalized views on sex between men. A
complication may be the fact that there is a seemingly clear sexual role division here which might work to support binary assumptions, but it must be said that there is nothing that indicates that the Inquisitor is merely the passive receiving end. A post-main quest scene emphasizes this when the Inquisitor is asked by Iron Bull to repeatedly hit him with a stick to help him handle his fear of demons (supposedly a Qunari exercise to master fear). A flirt is available at the end where the Inquisitor says they did not know that Iron Bull liked it "that rough", and he answers: "Only from you, boss, only from you." Also, as the research Clarke et al. point to suggests, partner roles during sex are often "adopted by individual men because they are experienced as pleasurable" (2010: 185), and not automatically because of inherency and "natural" inclinations. I will take the lack of explicit discourse on somewhat good faith, and emphasize the progressive potential of enabling such an unusual role to (male) player characters.

While Iron Bull may be the dominant sexual partner, the player is required to be the dominant romantic partner. Iron Bull remains clear about his functions, the Inquisitor's needs and his subsequent role in satisfying those needs, and it is the player who must pursue more. Almost as an extension of the Qunari society he was brought up in, he has more or less accepted that he is there to perform a function and reveals little about actually harboring romantic feelings for the Inquisitor. If the player asks him what he needs, he brushes it off by stating that "[0]l' Iron Bull is fine" and that the Inquisitor should not worry about him. The player can also ask him if the two of them are serious, to which he says: "That's up to you, boss. If you want it light and casual, that's fine with me." His romance quest can be triggered after the Inquisitor asks him how Qunari show that they are serious about a relationship, which prompts a direct reply: "They don't. We don't have sex for love." He reveals a Qunari tradition, however, where they break a dragon's tooth in half and each wears a piece to show their affection: "Then, no matter how far apart life takes you, you're always together." The quest is appropriately called "Tough Love", which refers to their sexual practices, the fact that the romance does not necessarily begin with romantic intentions and that the player must kill a dragon, which is considered one of the more dangerous enemies. The romance can be tough on many levels.

Procuring the dragon tooth necklace triggers a rather hilarious scene in which the entire affair becomes public and sex ceases to be Iron Bull's only function. The scene opens with Iron Bull and the Inquisitor post-sex. The Inquisitor is dressed, but Iron Bull lies naked on the bed.
Suddenly, Commander Cullen comes barging in and is shocked at the sight of the naked Iron Bull. Iron Bull casually asks him how things are going, and an embarrassed Cullen tries to look away. Then Josephine enters and her eyes immediately fixate on Iron Bull's off-screen and presumably large penis, apologizing and stating "I cannot move my legs." As if that was not enough, Cassandra appears and is equally shocked. She attempts to comment on the matter, "[s]o, I take it—", but Iron Bull interrupts her by smugly stating: "Actually, he's/she's the one who's been taking it." Cullen snorts. This is a remarkably direct sexual comment that signifies different meanings depending on the Inquisitor's gender. For a female Inquisitor, "taking it" likely means "regular" vaginal sex, but the focus is perhaps on the size of Iron Bull's Josephine-entrancing penis. This focus also applies for a male Inquisitor, but here "taking it" connotes anal sex and becomes a rather direct expression and acknowledgement of it.  

Cassandra attempts to be the responsible one of the three, apologizing "for interrupting what I assume was a… momentary diversion?" Cullen smiles and says there is nothing wrong with having a little fun, and a still-hypnotized Josephine states: "Who wouldn't be a little curious?" This scene is on the whole notable for its explicit and public content, and for showing that even straight Cullen is fascinated and has trouble looking away from the scene.

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241 A similar difference is found in the drinking scene with Iron Bull following the killing of a dragon, in which he tells a romanced female Inquisitor that she has "fantastic tits", while a romanced male Inquisitor has a "fantastic ass".
The player must either commit to the relationship or break it off ("This was just a fling"). In the affirmative scenario, the Inquisitor declares that this is not a momentary diversion, and the advisors and Cassandra leave. The Inquisitor then presents Iron Bull with the necklace and tells him that no matter where they are, they will always be together. A clearly emotional Iron Bull states: "Not often people surprise me, kadan." The Inquisitor asks "[k]adan?" and Iron Bull moves closer: "Kadan. My heart." He then embraces the Inquisitor, who also calls him kadan, and they lie down. This might be a far jump from his previous "if you want it light and casual, fine" attitude, as Iron Bull is now suddenly overwhelmed by romantic commitment. He has clearly begun harboring feelings for the Inquisitor, which can be revealed if the player breaks off the romance in this scene instead. The Inquisitor says "Iron Bull and I were just blowing off some steam", which obviously disappoints him. If the player suggests that they can continue doing this, Iron Bull says they have to stop: "I was trying to relieve your stress, not add to it. If you're ashamed of this, I'm doing a crappy job." Like with Sera, the point is not only acknowledging and reciprocating romantic feelings, but also showing them to the world: to make something private public (which these games often have trouble doing). Iron Bull realizes something new in himself at this point. Now he even has sex for love. A final romance scene (which unlocks the achievement) sees the two of them after sex once more, and Iron Bull compliments the Inquisitor for lasting "that long" and never using the safeword.
This rhetoric is a way to offer the player some control back and suggests that the Inquisitor is not a dominated slave, but represents an equally tough partner in love. Iron Bull states he is a better man for having met the Inquisitor, and, depending on choices, the two declare their love for each other either directly or implicitly, or joke about marriage.\textsuperscript{242}

The Iron Bull romance should also receive attention for its queering of romance. BDSM, for example, could easily have been (mis)represented as a natural result of trauma or some other deviation which the player can purge through the institution of romantic love, a notion which so often is linked unproblematically to presumed heterosexual love and restricted practices. Iron Bull does indeed realize his deep and romantic commitment to the Inquisitor, but this does not result in the "purification" of his sexual practices as a result from progressing into the established order. Rather, a BDSM relationship is not tied to sexual aberration here (though its "exotic" links to the Qunari, Qunari culture and non-heterosexuality should not be overlooked), but is indeed a regular practice in a normal relationship. Regardless of the Inquisitor's gender, Iron Bull provides a significant queering of romantic love and demonstrates that this type of relationship is just as committed and devoted as any other, and that these types of sexual practices are not merely something waiting for the magic of romance to replace them. They have their place in romance as well.

Pansexuality, BDSM and queering of romantic love—there are certainly many progressive representational aspects to embrace here, but still, the specter of mainstream media continues to haunt. While Iron Bull is one of the queerest additions, he is, in a similar vein as the asari, subjected to a heterosexualizing campaign to keep him more or less sanitized in public. He remains fairly straight in conversations if he is not romanced. In Haven, two women can be overheard talking about him. One of them is clearly fascinated by him and wants to have sex with him. In Skyhold, Iron Bull remarks the following before a conversation: "Hey, that elven redhead who makes the buns in the kitchen? Is she available? Because I'm getting signals." Similarly, in the beginning of the romance, the player can ask him about who else has needed his "services", which the dialogue wheel translates directly into "[t]hose times you talked about 'passing time' with the serving girls… is this what you do to them?" Iron Bull replies: "The serving girls spend most of their day following orders and feeling unimportant. They

\textsuperscript{242} Marriage, as I discussed earlier, is only afforded to Sera's and Cullen's romances, and two male characters cannot get married at all. In \emph{Trespasser}, however, the player can actually ask Iron Bull about marrying him and while he himself states that it is not necessary for him to show his commitment that way, he says they can get married once the Exalted Council business is concluded.
need someone who makes them feel special, lets 'em cut loose with no repercussions. I let 'em bounce on top and tell 'em their tits look nice. Everybody wins." In party banter, he talks to Sera about women and he flirts with Cassandra. The issue here is of course not that he expresses a desire for women, but that this is the only mode of desire available to him. With the possible exception of Dorian, he never gets to comment on men or flirt with them. Dorian does not get to do this either, though perhaps he is not the type to go around flirting so publicly. This is precisely part of Iron Bull's character, however, and he is fairly restricted in what he is allowed to publicly express. This is part of the established practice in these games in which male homosexual desire is not for public expression and should be as quiet as possible outside of romances. This heterosexualization may work in favor of dispelling stereotypical assumptions if Iron Bull enters a romance with either the player or Dorian, yet this mode is not incidental either because these games clearly have trouble with expressing male homosexual desire. Iron Bull's subversive potential is great, but it is so reliant upon highly conditional factors. The grasp of the gay button still exerts its representational control, and one of the most diverse and norm-challenging companions can be reduced to appear merely as a stereotypical hypermasculine straight guy.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I have analyzed and discussed the queer romances of the *Dragon Age* series. I began with discussing the differences between male and female homosexuality in *Origins*, where the former is a site for possible controversy, unease and novelty. In *II*, I focused on how the seemingly uniform bisexuality romance system (which may be considered an "efficient" and "cheap" strategy by the industry), can take on different meanings and embark on different explorations of sexuality depending on protagonist gender. It can also be a problematic system, as seen in the curious case of Anders where he hides any implications of his bisexuality if Hawke is female. As with Zevran, Anders may also confront a male protagonist with gay discourse, and the player is enabled problematic ways of reacting very negatively toward it, granting the player the power to silence it. *Inquisition*'s progress with the public gameworld is reflected in the private gameworld and the game pushes against its past practices and mainstream boundaries by, for example, including a lesbian character that is not of the "luscious/hot lesbian"-type, and a pansexual hypermuscular Qunari man who invites the player to engage in BDSM practices with a strong focus on safety and consent. *Dragon Age*
asserts itself as a series that continues to challenge mainstream culture in new and interesting ways, and seems more and more confident with each release.
Chapter X:
Concluding the Embrace, the Ride, and Everything in Between

The progressive acknowledgement and serious representations of homosexuality in Western mainstream games are a recent phenomenon. I conducted this study out of the conviction that video games can be instrumental in creating, challenging and subverting cultural values as well as reflecting, upholding and reinforcing them, and that we as players and scholars should concern ourselves with how they might do this. The mainstream game industry as a whole seems to lag significantly behind the practices of the rest of popular culture (which is not to suggest that there are no issues of representation elsewhere) and has maintained a conservative attitude that privileges certain (imagined) audiences and which does not match overall cultural developments. Yet, while the mainstream industry in general has been cautious and conservative, the years 2007–2014, with the release of BioWare's Mass Effect and Dragon Age games, have marked a significant change in diverse representational practices in such a short time that we may finally hope that the industry is beginning to take notice and challenge itself.

This thesis sheds light on and discusses the complex processes involved in representing homosexuality and gender within the current dominant industrial paradigm of optional content. Unlike representational practices in literature, television and film, games can include representations through optional content that must be actively sought out by the player. Mainstream television approached more progressive representations of homosexuality through 'liberal conservatism', consisting mostly of discourse and little physical action (Davis 2004), and now the mainstream game industry has approached a new type of liberal conservatism particular to games: the content is there, but mostly by actively pursuing it. This means that representations of diversity may be overlooked, missed or outright skipped—possibly symbolically, or "ludically", annihilated despite the fact that they exist in the text. Adrienne Shaw recognizes that this is a "particular type of marginalization made available by this medium", causing the industry to shift the burden of representation onto players, "and diversity in turn is reduced to aesthetic pluralism" (2014: 36). BioWare's representational practices rely significantly on optional/player-pursued content (simultaneously as much content is obligatory) but this is not a strategy that only targets potentially controversial representations and content. BioWare's games are on the whole structured around choice and
agency. Optional content may represent a particular game-specific marginalization of diversity, but simultaneously it is also a potential site for exploration and engagement not readily available in other media. Games may thus also represent sexuality and gender in progressively new and interactive ways, and the BioWare games represent a clear shift toward diversity and progressive representations. Mainstream games are a complex venue, however, and while subversion can happen, it does not happen easily.

I was interested in studying how the construction and representation of homosexuality and gender in BioWare's games operate between the two main gameworlds: the 'public gameworld' which consists of the main quests, sidequests and regular companion interactions, and the 'private gameworld' of romances, which the player must optionally pursue. Granted, there is much optional content in the public gameworlds as well, but romances generally require a much more conscious and persistent pursuit. I wanted to look closer at how the games control their representational practices in these two gameworlds and how they might both influence and contradict each other. The notion of a public mainstream gameworld suggests a more heteronormative and "safe" world, while the private sphere of player-pursuable romances may provide breaks from the dominant norms. In the introduction I asked the following research questions:

- How are homosexuality and gender represented in the *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* series, which representational practices are enabled in the public and the private gameworlds, and how do these practices change over time with subsequent titles?
- How can these representations be seen as reflections of, negotiations with and challenges to representations of sexuality and gender in contemporary Western mainstream media and games culture?

I conducted a critical textual analysis to discuss these questions, an approach which combined theories of representation, sexuality, gender and mainstream culture and which focused on the interplay between game mechanics and textual/meaningful content (detailed in chapters II and III). I followed Mia Consalvo and Nathan Dutton's (2006) useful advice on 'interaction mapping' to investigate how the player is able to interact with representations and how representations may change depending on protagonist gender or choices made during the game. I collected the material for the analysis from both extensive firsthand playing and secondary material such as wikis and YouTube videos. I divided the analyses into the
public/private distinction for each series, which proved to be a helpful way to structure the analyses and to compare which types of representations occur in which worlds. As I stated in the introduction, the public/private division is an analytical distinction and not a clear-cut actual division between worlds in the games. The two "worlds" may easily blur into each other when playing.

BioWare's romance options have attracted previous scholarly attention, but romances, although being highly significant for representation, do not take up nearly as much time as the main quests and sidequests. The player spends most of their time playing non-romance content, and studying only the romances results in a limited understanding of the games' contradictory representational strategies and practices. Homosexuality does not exist in a vacuum and is part of a larger gender and sexuality order. Therefore, I found it important to investigate the overall gender and sexuality orders in these games, and how homosexuality is constructed and finds its place in and around these orders.

I will now proceed to summarize the main findings of the analysis chapters to provide overall answers to my research questions. One of the points of qualitative textual analysis is to engage with texts and investigate their potential for meaning. My analyses are meant to show how these games are highly complex and contradictory in their representational practices, and they do not lend themselves well to hard facts or clear and easy answers, nor were they ever meant to. The question of representation cannot (or should not) be easily summed up into categories such as "good" or "bad". It is clear to me that the representational practices of these games often result in "yes, but..." arguments because there is rarely any stability. Is it possible to claim that the Mass Effect series is homophobic toward male homosexuality since it generally treats it regressively and anxiously in the public gameworld, but (ultimately) allows gay discourse and gay sex in romances? I think it is imperative that we regard the initial title in each series as testing grounds, and that more experimental and diverse representations are included as the series progress. Significant changes take place over time. That said, what is nevertheless clear is that the representational practices of the public and private gameworlds are often very different and discrepant, and there are some general points, patterns and concerns I would like to address here. I will focus on the public/private distinction of the analysis chapters.
Public Representational Practices

Overall, we can conclude that the public gameworlds of the *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* series have a foundational heteronormative premise that is very careful and contradictory in what they represent and communicate. The *Mass Effect* gameworlds are more explicitly heteronormative than the *Dragon Age* gameworlds. Homosexuality and queerness are, to varying degrees and for various purposes, present in all games. This presence, however, is not always for a particularly queer purpose. We would do well to heed Wendy Pearson's (1999) argument that the inclusion of queer characters and queer themes does not necessarily make a text (or an overall gameworld, for that matter) queer. Queer representations can easily be used in service of heteronormativity (Dyer [1984] 2012, Brookey and Westerfelhaus [2002] 2012). Both series contain some of Western game culture's most progressively queer characters, but their overall worlds do not match that queerness too well. The public gameworlds clearly have wildly different attitudes toward female homosexuality and male homosexuality.

That the public gameworlds in both series are largely heteronormatively structured is by itself no surprising discovery or shocking claim, though it should not be downplayed either considering that the games (increasingly) want to be inclusive and progressive. I was more interested in how heteronormativity is constructed and supported, as well as finding any possibilities to explicitly challenge or break with it. The most striking general observation is how contradictory these public gameworlds can be in how they construct sexuality and gender. At times they seem to verge strongly toward idealized heterosexuality and unconsciously reproduced heteronormative notions, only to suddenly attempt to debunk and challenge them, often in minor and optional content. In that sense the gameworlds are structured similarly to the real world in which heterosexuality remains the norm, but is frequently criticized and challenged.

None of the public gameworlds actually seem too generally pleased with overall heteronormativity, but a significant impediment to how these gameworlds want to challenge mainstream notions is the games' penchant for implication rather than explication. The games often want to address and discuss sexuality and gender topics/issues, but they mostly only imply that such matters are important or notable in some sense, only to quickly end any explicit explorations as if to not become too political or "preachy". In these cases, the games
seem to negotiate unevenly between wanting to be "games for fun" and "games for cultural contemplation".

A significant representational strategy in the public gameworlds, and an overall hurdle for queer representation, is what I referred to as "heterosexualizing campaigns", inspired by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick ([1985] 2016). With this term, I refer to the various strategies and processes of using heterosexuality to domesticate uncertain elements and to make them appear safe and non-threatening, and any repeated efforts to promote heteronormativity. One such campaign is "default heterosexuality". I use this term about the assumptions made about the player's/protagonist's sexuality and the overall state of the gameworld. This manifests both directly and indirectly. The games will not automatically assume that the player/protagonist is gay or anything non-straight (even some of the same-gender romances imply that the protagonist may initially be straight), but they can imply/assume they are straight. This follows notions of obligatory/compulsory heterosexuality which produce the effect that everyone is assumed straight unless proven otherwise, and that it is generally not considered problematic to assume someone is heterosexual. Such explicit assumptions fade in the third instalments of both series, indicating the progressive move to opt for more neutral attitudes toward the player/protagonist.

Player default heterosexuality is complicated by ludic aspects. The games may reproduce mundane or undisputable notions of obligatory/compulsory heterosexuality, but the games, being games, allow the player to break from these notions and thus make the games' heteroideology possibly dynamic. The games may (unproblematically) assume, but the player may reject the assumptions by choosing a same-gender romantic partner (or avoiding the romances altogether). In one sense, then, default heterosexuality can engender liberation and resistance through player choice. The possibilities to explicitly break from these assumptions depend on the alternatives the games offer, however, and do not challenge the overall heteronormative fundament of the gameworld. In another sense, default heterosexuality is emblematic of the optional content strategy, allowing the games to unproblematically reproduce heteronormativity and avoid particular scrutiny since they simultaneously offer same-gender romances.

Both series reproduce default world heterosexuality through rather mundane generalized heteronormative assumptions and statements about the world, such as indicating that the
entire galaxy desires beautiful women and that everyone can be seduced by the right woman. Beliefs in character dichotomy and various generalized Mars/Venus assumptions about men and women occur, and heterosexuality is repeatedly mythologized and taken for granted. These ideas are mostly presented as constant facts that the player cannot openly challenge or change.

The *Mass Effect* series has the most persistent and problematic heterosexualizing campaigns, and the trilogy as a whole shows several signs of being constructed mostly for an assumed straight male audience. The male bias is evident in, among other things, how all three games contain nightclubs with only female dancers, and how in several cutscenes and dialogues the male gaze fixates on the body parts of several female characters and emphasizes their to-be-looked-at-ness. This is often complicated by the characters' subjectivity, and thus they are not "completely" objectified. *Mass Effect 3* attempts to challenge itself and enables public male eroticization, but here the gaze context is more functional and thus disavows and displaces any explicit erotic focus. The *Mass Effect* series' heterosexualizing campaigns also proceed through ironic and knowing discourses (very common in postfeminist/postmodern media culture) where the games offer seemingly critical comments on problematic issues (such as the objectification and hypersexualized appearances of female characters or the "heterosexual nature" of men), only to quickly dismiss them as any serious concern and instead make them into humorous references that reinforce heteronormative ideas about gender and sexuality. This series is (problematically) often very aware of what it is doing.

The heteronormative bias of the *Mass Effect* series is perfectly demonstrated in its treatment of the asari. The asari are potentially a radically queer all-female/feminine species, but their radically queer aspects, such as being bi-/pansexual, monogendered, and not needing men to procreate, are briefly acknowledged, but significantly downplayed in favor of promoting them as conventionally attractive and heterosexually available/appealing (and as dancers/stripers for public enjoyment). The asari were first introduced as a close-up shot of Matriarch Benezia's breasts. Instead of significantly challenging any establishments, they end up being the prioritized cathexis and sexual fantasy of the public gameworld. The asari are mythologized as the default tautological state of affairs and end up working in the service of heterosexuality rather than challenging it.
The public gameworlds have an overall strained relationship with homosexuality, and initially they cannot be argued to be particularly progressive. This applies particularly to male homosexuality. Homosexuality in the *Mass Effect* series begins with the asari, but in the first title, homosexuality is only player-activated. *Mass Effect 2* moves toward a more open and celebratory attitude toward xenophilia (but even here there are regulations on acceptable xenophilia) while it significantly lashes out at homosexuality. In the public gameworld, homosexuality is represented as quirky, pathologic, and anxious, using the mainstream comfort and discomfort strategies/tropes to paint a dismissive picture of homosexuality as comic, dangerous, tragic or gritty. This dismissive attitude may be understood (but by no means excused) in the context of the game's exclusively heterosexual romance repertoire. *Mass Effect 3* attempts to correct this dismissal by, among other things, introducing gay characters. Homosexuality becomes a much less anxious issue than in its predecessor, but the game represents female homosexuality as publicly and heterosexually appealing, visible and as a topic for conversations while male homosexuality is generally quiet and absent from the public gameworld. The game does notably challenge itself in the latter area by allowing male same-gender romances and some possible male-male (subtextual) flirting, but the series is overall very anxious toward public male homosexual desire.

The *Dragon Age* series has more explicit representations of homosexuality and notably incorporates more queer and norm-challenging public content than the *Mass Effect* series (such as the golem Shale and the transgender warrior Krem), though many of the same trends can be found here. An important point is how the series has an official "decree" on the views on sexuality in Thedas, which establishes that sexuality ("sexual habits") is considered natural simultaneously as it communicates that homosexuality can be considered quirky and not for particular public display. The first two games offer brothels where the all-queer workers are reduced to one-liner innuendo remarks and are nothing but their sex work. In *Origins*, female homosexuality is fetishized while implications of male homosexuality may be used as jokes to freak out another companion. Female homosexuality becomes rather mundane (though still slightly unusual and somewhat fascinating) in *II*, but male homosexuality is connected to hypersexuality and sex work, heterosexist slurs, and anxious references to a type of master/slave rape culture. *Inquisition* makes significant attempts to be more inclusive and progressive by, for example, removing the all-female desire demon enemies and the brothels. The game makes male homosexuality a topic in Dorian's character arc, allowing the game to meaningfully thematize real-life issues such as stigma on being gay and conversion therapy.
The game also possibly allows some public discourse on male homosexual desire, thus opening up areas where the *Mass Effect* series has been particularly restrictive.

**Private Representational Practices**

Representation is generally a completely different and more progressive matter in the private gameworld of romances, and here we enter a much more open and experimental world. It is in the romances that the representations of homosexuality really flourish. Romances do not exist separately from public representational practices and some romances also often tie into the overall heteronormative premise of the public gameworlds. Overall, there is less regulation here. One obvious reason why romances may be more progressive is that they must be pursued by the player and built up during the game. Another likely reason may also reside in the fact that interactions with companions are much more involved and deeper affairs than the overall NPCs that populate the public gameworlds of quests and missions. As E.M. Forster argues in the classic *Aspects of the Novel*, it is "only round people who are fit to perform tragically for any length of time and can move us to any feelings except humour and appropriateness" (1927: 77). Perhaps, then, it is mostly/only companions who are able to provide more thorough and progressive representations of homosexuality here, not only because they are player-pursuable and optional, but because they are also more carefully written.

The *Mass Effect* series' heteronormative focus is reflected in many of the available romances, but the games dare to do more than in their public gameworlds. In *Mass Effect*, homosexuality begins with Liara T'Soni. This is not technically homosexuality considering that she is an asari, but due to the game's strong gendering of the asari I have discussed it as such for this purpose. Initially, Liara seems included mostly to serve as a realization of the game's fascination with the asari, and her otherness is presented as a potential problem for the player. The female Shepard scenario invokes the strange notion that the protagonist may not even know that homosexuality is possible at all. I discussed how this romance may possibly become a deconstruction and re-appropriation of the notion of heterosexual epic romantic love. In *Mass Effect 2*, which lacks official same-gender romances, I focused on the heterosexual interspecies romances and discussed how they may explore and represent queerer aspects of heterosexuality. These romances move the discourse away from the
heteronormative focus on genital intercourse and over to more "polymorphously perverse" pleasures that may in fact acknowledge the ordinariness of human sexual relations rather than the more mainstreamed notion of "lovemaking". Mass Effect 3 enables both male and female same-gender romances. The Samantha Traynor romance is complicated in how it reflects the series' preference for female homosexuality as (heterosexually) erotic and appealing, while also hinting at problematic assumptions of female homosexuality as "casual" if the player is male Shepard. The romance with Steve is significant for introducing male homosexuality into the series, and for offering an interesting way for a male Shepard to declare that he is gay without manifesting it through romance. The Kaidan romance is especially interesting, considering that it may (implicitly) move into very queer territory by thematizing the fluidity of adult male sexuality and coming out of the closet in adult life. This romance also enables the series' first male gay sex scene, clearly showing that the series loosens its grip.

The Dragon Age series has enabled same-gender romances for both genders from its very beginning. Prior to Inquisition, bisexuality was the series' exclusive strategy for same-gender romance. Bisexuality can actually be economically beneficial in games because developers can avoid creating much extra content or characters, and most of the same assets can be reused for male and female versions of the romance (Holmes 2016: 127). While this "reuse" strategy does occur in these games and only offers minor script differences for the two different genders, my analysis suggests that the representation of gender and sexuality can change significantly depending on protagonist gender. Consider, for example, Merrill, who seems more overtly interested in a male Hawke and is more reserved with a female Hawke, as if female Hawke triggers something in Merrill that she has not thought about before. Similarly, Josephine's romance path can subvert notions of traditional courtly love through gender parody if the Inquisitor is female. The bisexuality approach may be preferred for economic reasons and thus seem somewhat simple from a general perspective, but it can also become complex and meaningful in different ways depending on protagonist gender.

The two first Dragon Age titles attempt a "risky" strategy in that they may openly confront a male character with male homosexual desire/discourse, as seen with Zevran and Anders. Simultaneously as the games make such a "preemptive strike" in a game series that is rather centered around the player's control of events, the player is also enabled different dismissive and homophobic responses to easily silence them—seemingly a compromise the game must make to be able to attempt subversion. This "defense against male homosexuality" button is
present in all three games, emphasizing the notion that male homosexuality remains a threatening venture.

*Inquisition* offers significant challenges to earlier practices. Sera, for example, is a zany and tomboyish character who goes against the grain of other more conventionally attractive and feminine "lushious"/"hot" lesbian representations. Dorian's romance thematizes the effects of having lived under oppressive conditions and allows the player to welcome him into a more open and accepting culture. With the pansexual Qunari Iron Bull and his romance, the game approaches BDSM, a very precarious mainstream theme. The game progressively represents BDSM as healthy activities that focus on consent and safety. The romance path is notable for requiring the player to become the sexually submissive partner, and also for not representing BDSM as the result of trauma and as something that must be "romanced" away. As I stated at the end of the previous chapter, *Dragon Age* asserts itself as a series that continues to challenge mainstream culture in new and interesting ways, and seems more and more confident with each release. The overall developments in the public and private gameworlds of both series hold very good promises for future instalments. They clearly begin to show that diversity is a goal in itself, and not something that must be tailored to restrictive assumptions about audiences.

**BioWare and the Violent Hierarchy of Male/Female Homosexuality**

There is one main issue I must single out and address in its own section before concluding. The BioWare games are rich, engaging, fun, and complex, but the two series have one significant general issue in common: their strained relationship with male homosexuality contra female homosexuality. I have pointed this out frequently throughout the thesis, and this has not been without merit or purpose. Western (media) culture remains firmly structured around the heterosexuality/homosexuality binary (which excludes other sexualities), but in a heteronormative culture these are not merely two different "versions" of sexuality. Poststructuralist philosopher Jacques Derrida uses the term 'violent hierarchy' to denote how binary oppositions are not "the peaceful coexistence of a *vis-à-vis* […] One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand" ([1972] 2002: 41). What makes heterosexuality different from homosexuality in such a binary, then, are not only seemingly neutral descriptors ("opposite-gender sexual desire" and "same-gender sexual
desire"), but also the ways heterosexuality is defined and mythologized as something superior based on whatever homosexuality lacks by comparison. This is the "violence" that allows heterosexuality the upper hand in the binary pair. As I pointed out in the introduction and have argued throughout the thesis, it is not simply a question of homosexuality as such, but which homosexuality. If we look at the male homosexuality/female homosexuality binary, we have another violent hierarchy. Female homosexuality is more acceptable in mainstream media since it is seemingly easier to incorporate in service of heterosexuality, as seen in strategies such as "commodity lesbianism" (Clark [1991] 1993), "luscious"/"hot" lesbians and "queer chic" (Ciasullo [2001] 2012), Gill 2007), and "male-created pseudo-lesbian pornography" for heterosexual men (Morrison and Tallack 2005). Male homosexuality poses a much greater threat to hegemonic masculinity and the rigid construction of heterosexuality it attempts to uphold (Connell 2005). In turn, this may lead to frequent representations of male homosexuality as hypersexual, asexual, pathologic or feminized (Brookey and Westerfelhaus [2002] 2012, MacKinnon 2003, Sender 2004, Gill 2007, Feasey 2008). Male homosexuality is overall much more precarious and threatening to the mainstream, clearly revealing/creating a violent hierarchy that goes beyond the overarching heterosexuality/homosexuality binary.

Overall, the BioWare games make significant and historical progress with their representations of homosexuality, but at the same time they contribute to upholding this male homosexuality/female homosexuality violent hierarchy. The public gameworlds generally treat female homosexuality either as heterosexually fascinating and desirable ("homosexuality"), as something to fantasize and talk about, or as completely mundane. By comparison, male homosexuality rarely makes appearances in the public gameworld other than through tropes and strategies that seem regressive and dismissive, or as a silent or de-sexualized phenomenon. Male homosexuality is also the only homosexuality that is possibly a problem, especially in the Dragon Age series where the player is enabled different ways of reacting negatively toward it, rendering it an easy victim of the notorious gay button. Inquisition makes notable progress through Dorian's character arc, but even here the player can tell him that they want to hear no more of his preference for the "company of men". The romance offerings of the games, particularly the Dragon Age series, enable an inclusive private sphere, but a lack of public exposure communicates that "such things" are not welcome in public. As Steven Holmes has pointed out, BioWare was skittish about homosexuality for years prior to these series (2016: 126). Skittishness toward public male homosexuality persists, though it seems to wane slowly.
The "types" of homosexuality that are the most heteronormatively appropriable might be offered more mainstream representation and exposure, but mainstream visibility by virtue of hetero-appropriation is no overall boon. As I pointed out in the introduction, this produces what Katherine Sender calls "contained visibility", a visibility which "can only ever yield conditional acceptance" (2004: 240). The goal in this case, if we follow Derrida, is to overturn these violent hierarchies and their assumptions ([1972] 2002: 41). Games (and other media) that want to represent homosexuality must recognize the existence of this violent hierarchy and overthrow it in order to change these discrepant attitudes. Scholarly analysis can deconstruct how these assumptions are produced and upheld, but overthrowing such a violent hierarchy is no work for scholars alone. We also need media producers to do interventional work by representing in ways that thwart this violence. In doing so, we may instead move toward visibility, which in turn would, in the long run, yield acceptance. BioWare is already well on its way, but the rest of the mainstream industry needs to catch up to it.

**Optionality, Diversity and Subversion**

In this section, I would to revisit and offer some thoughts on the topic of optional content as a representational strategy for diversity. Optional content can be both exciting and problematic. It can be exciting in that it encourages exploration and engenders different ways to play a game. It can be problematic, especially when it comes to the representation of diversity, in how certain content may never surface depending on player choices and performance. The *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* games may be played more or less as purely stereotypical heterosexual male hero fantasies, or as groundbreaking queer revolutions where gay characters rise up as heroes and save the world (a notion which mainstream media are not too keen on entertaining). It is surely interesting that the very same products can be played in such radically different ways, which adds to the complexity of the game medium, but it also raises the question: what are the transformative, subversive and diverse aspects here? For these reasons, Shaw argues that this pluralism enabled by much optional content "cannot fulfil the socially progressive goals of media representation. Diversity in video games necessitates that all audiences are confronted with different types of characters" (2014: 225). I generally agree with this argument, but I would also not downplay the significant diversity offered in optional content. Clearly, much of what the BioWare games offer cannot simply be reduced to being aesthetic pluralism without subversive and diverse potential. Optional content might enable a
medium-specific marginalization, but dismissing this medium-specific feature overall as regressive also dismisses the medium itself. Western role-playing games are often built around choice and player-activated content, but this should not automatically imply that WRPG is a reactionary genre. Shaw advocates a study of the seriousness of representation in games that is not dismissive of play (2014: 150), which I have hopefully respected in this study. In a similar manner, I will advocate a study of the seriousness of representations in games that is not dismissive of medium-specific optional content.

The central issue with optional content, in the Western RPG genre at least, lies not in the optionality as such, but in the public/private distinction and how games regulate and police their representational practices around it. Games that attempt to be inclusive and diverse, seeking cultural visibility pursuing the goals of social justice (equality, not uniformity (Connell 2005: 229)), should not offer this diversity only in optional content that the player must actively seek out and unproblematically assume and reproduce dominant norms and representations in obligatory content. The diversity that the BioWare romances open up for is exciting, engaging and significant. It provides challenges and stable alternatives to an overall heteronormative gaming landscape. The strategy of optional content such as romances is by itself not problematic, but it would be overall beneficial if the progressive, diverse and humanizing private worlds of optional content could be reflected equally well in the public worlds. Because, in a sense, these are metaphors for our own public and private lives, and while certainly there are some things that might be more appropriate and exciting in private, we should all be welcomed, acknowledged and visible in public.

**Contemporaneity and Future**

In this study, I have attempted to open up a discussion on a contemporarily recent and important phenomenon. As argued previously, the contemporary dominant mainstream strategy for representations of homosexuality in games is optional content such as romances. Jude Roberts and Esther McCallum-Stewart point out that the "moment of the contemporary" is of course a moving target: "Any claim or attempt to engage with the contemporary must necessarily suffer both from instability of the term and from the certainty that it will swiftly become dated" (2016: 2). While I think it is (unfortunately) unlikely that the overall mainstream game industry becomes comfortable with creating games with gay main
characters in any near future, and that it is very likely that the optional content strategy will continue to prevail for a while, the seven years of the current BioWare games nevertheless demonstrate how quickly things can develop once they are allowed to. One day, though it is likely far, far away, what I have analyzed and discussed here might not be relevant for understanding the new contemporary issues and topics that have arisen in a new contemporaneity. What I do know is that it should be relevant now, and in the case it one day gets dated and history does not repeat itself, the thesis nevertheless provides one of the stories of how the Western mainstream game industry finally began to seriously and extensively represent homosexuality.

**Thesis Contribution**

The critical textual analysis I have conducted in this study can be seen as a contribution to several goals emphasized by research. It contributes theoretically and methodologically to media studies, game studies and gender and sexuality studies. It is also a direct contribution to the growing field of queer gaming critique (Holmes 2016). The thesis offers a comprehensive analysis of the representations of homosexuality and gender in mainstream video games in a broad cultural context, drawing on theories and perspectives from different fields, and is hopefully a useful inspiration and reference point for anyone who wishes to conduct similar research in the future. Also, consider my reference to Janice Radway and 'protest' in the introduction, where she argues that researchers should be supportive of both producers and audiences when it comes to negotiating new ways to represent gender and sexuality. My analysis can support game design by taking developers' efforts to create more diversity in representation seriously and as worthy of critical investigation, and may hopefully aid developers in critically assessing how the representational practices of games can reproduce and challenge culture. Similarly, the analysis might also support audiences who believe that representations matter and that games are important cultural products. The thesis can serve to aid Shaw's call for the "need to stop letting media producers off the hook, including game developers and game corporations" when it comes to diversity and representation (2014: 218), and contribute to Fron et al.'s request that those in game studies "step up to the plate' and take a more pro-active stance in questioning and critiquing the status of the Hegemony of Play" (2007: 1). Espen Aarseth's original vision for game studies, should it prove to be a success (which it has been), is the possibility to "actually contribute both constructively and critically,
and make a difference outside the academy" (2001). While Aarseth remains skeptical about game studies influencing a multibillion game industry, there is nevertheless a glimmer of hope: "But in the long run, who knows?" (2001). The game industry is changing, though there is no easy way to explain why. I do believe that the critical study of games is a contributive factor. Theory is usually informed by practice, so I should hope that practice is also informed by theory.

**Suggestions for Further Research**

In this section, I will offer some suggestions for future research. The phrase "more research on this is needed" has become an academic trope/cliché, but mostly it is true. One study can rarely, if ever, address a topic in such a way that further research is not needed. There is another issue I must raise, however, before I address some other interesting and important areas of study: not only is further research on homosexuality in games needed, we also need many more games to research. Homosexuality and other types of queer content remain scarce in Western mainstream games, though this is (hopefully) likely to change more and more over the coming years as the industry is slowly changing. This is an important overall concern, but there is no need for academic despair. There is still much we can do now, and here are my suggestions.

One obvious approach would be to study the players of the BioWare games and investigate how they play the games, what choices they make and what the romance options might mean to them. How do players reflect on the game content? Is it common for players to do multiple playthroughs and try out different genders and sexualities? Do the games provide a safe and serious sphere for players to experiment with and contemplate their sexuality? Do players play to experience "otherness" from a more direct and personal perspective? Do LGBT players feel more recognized and acknowledged by mainstream media through these and similarly-themed games? Audience studies can helpfully supplement textual studies and together bring forth even more comprehensive analyses of these games and their significance. It would also be very interesting and relevant to conduct producer/industry-focused studies.

There is plenty of room for textual studies. This study has focused mostly on mainstream industry and culture, and it would be interesting to conduct analyses on games with queer
content produced by independent (indie) developers and compare them to mainstream practices. Niche/alternative media are produced "within a rather different set of constraints" than mainstream media (van Zoonen [1991] 2012: 35). These past few years have seen the emergence of queer-themed indie titles such as My Ex-Boyfriend the Space Tyrant (2013), Gone Home (2013) and Read Only Memories (2015), and it would very interesting to investigate the representational practices of indie games and their relation to mainstream culture. This study has also been exclusively focused on Western mainstream games. Investigating the representational practices of Japanese mainstream games through comparative perspectives could yield further interesting insights into the construction and representation of homosexuality and queerness in these two major video game markets.

**Final Words**

This study was not conducted out of my convictions alone, but also, of course, out of my love for video games, and it is this love I hope shines throughout this thesis. Yes, the analysis may be critical, but I do not think such an extensive critical activity could have been done without love. Games are a tremendous part of my life and they will continue to be. They have offered me so many exciting adventures and explorations that other types of media have not, and they continue to advance and evolve in a myriad of different ways. And now, games are beginning to discover what they have forgotten or neglected in their past ventures, for the benefits of both players and culture. I think it is fair to say that the obligatory heterosexuality of Western mainstream games is finally ending. Embrace the ride!
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