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Representations of Femininity in *Mass Effect 3*

A research report submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts by coursework in Digital Animation.



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Chapter One: Introduction

This research paper explores the notion of gender in videogames, specifically the ability of videogames to reinforce, reconstruct and enact ideas of gender which shape the experience of the player. Grounding its approach in the theory of Judith Butler (1988) it seeks to understand gender as a phenomenon which is constructed through both language and action. The notion of interactivity and its relationship to narrative in videogames is the field in which this research begins to explore the way in that the videogame can be considered a space where gender, with a particular focus on femininity can be experienced, reinforced and reconstructed through the narrative as well as the available options within the videogame which are based on the input of the individual. While the focus is the medium of videogames, and the ergodic actions of the player are central, this research approaches the object of study from a traditional narratological approach. It aims to achieve this through a close case study of the latest instalment in the *Mass Effect* series, the critically acclaimed and controversial videogame *Mass Effect 3,* developed by Bioware and published by Electronic Arts, released on 9th March 2012.

By adopting the viewpoint of Judith Butler (1988), who argues that gender is a culturally constructed phenomenon, this research attempts to unpack the way in which the 'interactive' and narrative elements of *Mass Effect 3* allow for the player to act out an alternative representation of femininity. In exploring the ways in which these elements of *Mass Effect 3* allow for the player to perform a differing construction of 'femininity' it attempts to explore, define and understand the experience of the narrative and gameplay affordances which are available to the gendered player through the game itself.

This research does not seek to establish a universal theory on the construction of gender in videogames in general, and the implications of this in society, but is rather conducted from a

specific vantage point with a specific object of analysis. The player experience of the acting out of femininity through narrative and interactive elements in *Mass Effect 3* will be understood from this author's gendered point of view. It looks at the way in which the cyber world of *Mass Effect 3* affords the opportunity to the player to act out an alternative possibility of the female gender, the differing ways in which this can be done, as well as the experience of these choices made by the player. While the primary focus will be the experience of femininity, masculinity is also looked at in order to contrast the differing representations of both genders as well as how these are involved in the construction of a different form of femininity.

Interactivity within *Mass Effect 3* is a key component to the experience of gender in the game. The research paper grounds its understanding of interactivity in the work of Espen Aarseth (1997) to determine how interactivity operates within this specific videogame to allow for the ability to act out a different construction of gender. It also seeks to unpack the ways in which this interactivity operates alongside the narrative and is used in order to drive the narrative forward and allow for the player to participate in the process of constructing an aspect of femininity, based on the specific input of the player's actions and decisions at key moments.

Gender and femininity are the focus of the research undertaken. This point of investigation is fuelled by the fact that players of *Mass Effect 3* are given the option to choose the sex of their protagonist which then allows them to determine the gender of their character, as well as their sexual orientation. Femininity in *Mass Effect 3* is an area which can be subjected to investigation as the game not only offers several different feminine representations but also allows for the player to engage in a different experience which is focalised through gender by allowing the option to choose between male and female protagonists. The research

acknowledges the differentiation between sex and gender but argues that the player assigns socially constructed understandings of gender to the specific sexes.

According to Judith Butler (1988) in her writings 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory', gender is an identity which is culturally constructed. It is only understood in language and action which takes place via social beings and it is manifested through the symbol of the body. While gender requires the individual to act it out, it is governed by historical contexts and norms which establish a status quo for genders to adhere to. Butler adds that straying from the established order of genders is rewarded in punishment. However, the videogame world is an environment which is not constrained by the laws and norms of society. This freedom of the videogame environment then enables it to become a space to contest, reimagine and experience gender in a different way. By offering this gendered author the possibility to play as a female avatar, it allows for him to participate in the construction of an alternative representation of femininity for their female avatar through the narrative and gameplay elements. This masculine author's experience of acting out a representation of femininity, and the way in which *Mass Effect 3* allows for the player to experience and participate in this construction of femininity, proves a fruitful area of investigation.

The decision of this research to look at this author's experience of femininity in particular, is attributed to the fact that *Mass Effect 3* allows for the experience of the opposite gender to the gendered position of this author, which cannot be experienced or acted out in any 'real' world scenario. The experience of femininity, which is the opposite gender to this author's is contrasted to that of masculinity to explore the way in which the experience of the two genders differs based on this author's socialised preconceptions about the expected performance of masculinity and femininity. This can be seen as important in exploring the ways in which the player understands the different femininities and masculinities in the game

as well as their perception of their avatar's femininity. This comparison is not used to assume that femininity requires masculinity to be understood but to rather highlight the differences between the two and how their representations in *Mass Effect 3* create the foundation of the construction and understanding of the game's alternative representation of femininity.

Gender as a concept is highly contested and explored in an array of different media as it remains prominent and relevant. Film and novels have an extremely large body of literature surrounding them regarding gender and representations of femininity within these mediums. In comparison, the literature which is based on representations of gender and femininity in videogames does not boast as extensive a research area for this type of investigation. This paper also serves as a way to contribute to research on the representation of femininity in videogames through its analysis of *Mass Effect 3*.

Mass Effect 3 relies on the concept that the player can be actively involved in their experience, understanding and unfolding of the narrative based on the actions and decisions which are made available throughout the course of the game. For example, players can choose to engage in relationships with other non-playable characters. Depending on the choices made, players can choose to pursue friendships with these characters or become romantically involved with them. They are also given the choice to pursue heterosexual as well as homosexual relationships. While the game affords the player a number of possible scenarios to act out, it must be noted that this paper acknowledges that the player can only act out what the videogame design allows. There is a limitation to what the player can do, seeing as the entire experience is a set of predefined and constructed scenarios which may appear to allow players freedom but they are merely acting out a set of scripted and coded possibilities. The focus is not the number of possibilities but rather the experience of these potential scenarios that the player can act out.

This study specifically looks to read *Mass Effect 3* as a finished cultural product and therefore accepts that as a finished cultural product, it carries meaning, whether it is intentional or not. Its analysis may be understood to include elements which were not intended by the creators of the game as a complete artwork. It bears analysis into its entire incarnation.

Chapter Two: Mass Effect

In order to establish a context for this study it is necessary to explore and describe the overarching narrative in the *Mass Effect* series. From this foundation, the paper explores the narrative and gameplay mechanisms of *Mass Effect 3* in depth.

Mass Effect is a three part videogame franchise developed by Bioware and published by Electronic Arts (EA). The first instalment of the series was released in November 2007 and it was exclusive to PC as well as Microsoft's Xbox 360 gaming console. The reception of *Mass Effect* was extremely positive from both critics and users. While it was criticised to an extent for some technical flaws, the game was highly commended for its story telling mechanisms as well as its gameplay mechanics. The universe of *Mass Effect* was brought to life through the clever narrative mechanics which allowed players to make different in-game choices that affect the outcome of certain scenarios as well as the ending. The game took this player agency further by offering players the choice between a female and male protagonist who at times were afforded different dialogue options. The gameplay and narrative also included the ability to engage in different relationships with non-playable characters (NPC's), which allowed for the unfolding of different side narratives alongside the main game narrative and further enhanced the appeal of the world of *Mass Effect.*

Following from the worldwide success of the first instalment of *Mass Effect*¸ Bioware released a sequel dubbed *Mass Effect 2*. The story of *Mass Effect 2* follows on from the first and while the core gameplay mechanic remains the same, Bioware managed to expand on many of the gameplay features; such as the class systems as well as squad commands. While *Mass Effect 2* initially launched as a title exclusively to Microsoft's Xbox 360 and PC in January 2010, it later became available for the Sony PlayStation 3 gaming console in January 2011.

With the inclusion of the Sony PlayStation 3, Bioware went on to release the third and supposedly final instalment of the *Mass Effect* series. The final instalment was meant to conclude the story of the main protagonist, Commander Shepard. *Mass Effect 3* was released in March 2012 and while it was well received by critics, the user opinions were mixed due to a controversy regarding the game's ending. This user opinion was taken into account by Bioware who then released a different ending for the game several months later that was available as a downloadable content add-on.

The story of the *Mass Effect* series takes place in 2183 in a galaxy where space travel allows for humans and alien races to travel with ease to different planets. This space travel is made possible with a technology referred to as the 'Mass Effect Relays' that allow for travel to occur at light speed. The protagonist and player controlled character of Commander Shepard is the 'hero' of the game's narrative. While travelling through space, Shepard comes across a cyborg alien race known as 'Reapers'. Shepard discovers that this alien race watches over the entire galaxy, waiting for all races to reach their maximum potential, after which they will then destroy all organic life forms. Ensuring the elimination of a single Reaper, Shepard is able to temporarily save the galaxy.

In the second instalment, Shepard is killed in a space attack, but the body is found and rebuilt by a powerful and notorious character known as the Illusive Man. Shepard is then required to investigate an alien race referred to as 'the Collectors' which is attacking and abducting human colonies in the galaxy. By gathering a team of skilled crew members, Shepard discovers that the Collectors are a product of the Reapers. It is learnt that the Collectors were once a race wiped out by the Reapers, but they were modified by the Reapers to serve them. Upon eliminating the threat of the Collectors by destroying their base, Shepard discovers that the Reapers are making their way to Earth to begin their process of eliminating all organic life in the galaxy.

Mass Effect 3 opens on Earth where the Reapers begin their attack on the planet. Commander Shepard manages to flee the planet and is tasked to bring help and find a way to eliminate the Reapers. On a mission to retrieve information from the archives, Shepard discovers a blueprint for a device which was designed by the previous race that the Reapers eliminated; the Protheans. While the Protheans were unable to complete the device, Shepard remains confident that they can build this device and save humanity and the entire galaxy from extinction. As Shepard waits for the device to be built, the story explores the travels to all corners of the galaxy seeking assistance from different alien races to help fight off the Reaper threat on Earth. The task to unite alien races to save Earth is complicated by rivalries between races. This forces Shepard to pursue other missions to win the faith and support of these differing races, while Earth's existence remains under threat. With a galactic army, Shepard returns to Earth to fight off the Reaper assault; however the Reapers still cannot be stopped. In an attempt to access the device to destroy the Reapers, Shepard comes into contact with a child, who appears to be in charge of the Reaper Army. The child informs Shepard that a decision will have to be made. Shepard will have to decide the fate of both the Reapers and humanity. The choices available to Shepard are: to take control of the reapers, to synthesise all organic life with machines or to destroy the reapers along with any inorganic life.

The progression of *Mass Effect 3* revolves around the outlying narrative mentioned above, however the game also offers side narratives, some of which are optional to pursue. These include travelling to distant galaxies and retrieving information, helping civilians as well as pursuing romantic relationships. These side quests and relationships in particular are very relevant to this research as they contribute to the understanding of the game's construction of femininity.

While the narrative of *Mass Effect 3* is central, another relevant aspect of this videogame that is subject to investigation is its gameplay. *Mass Effect 3* is categorised as a third-person,

action adventure, role-playing game. The game is driven by a strong narrative, but this narrative can at times be affected by player decisions and actions. The core gameplay mechanic of *Mass Effect 3* sees players navigating spaces and viewing their character from a third-person perspective. From this point of view, players are required to move through these constructed environments, complete mission specific objectives, use firearms, as well as a range of different powers which are determined through an extensive class system, to eliminate enemies. The class system of *Mass Effect 3* allows for the player to determine the core features of the characters which they will be able to develop throughout the game. Each class allows the player access to different unique abilities and specific weapons.

As players navigate the vast worlds and environments of *Mass Effect 3*, the narrative is driven forward through interactions and conversations with other characters in the game world.

The key feature of *Mass Effect 3*, from the point of view of this research, is that players are given the option to play either as a male or a female protagonist, choosing the sex and implicitly from the point of view of the game world; the gender. While the endings of the main story play out the same regardless of the player's choices, the experience of interactions and events with non-playable characters in the game world differ. The experience of the game then becomes focalised through the lens of gender, depending on the character that is selected. The task is to explore the way in which the interactive and narrative elements work in correspondence to allow for the player to not only view and experience *Mass Effect 3's* portrayal of gender but also to act it out through the gameplay mechanics of actions and decision making. In order to easily refer to both male and female versions of Commander Shepard, the terms Fem Shep and Male Shep will be used. These abbreviated versions arise from gaming community discussions, and have become the terms to refer to the different sexes of Shepard in the gaming community. Using the programmed environment of the game, an in depth analysis of the gender performances of its characters as well as its subversion of

symbols of gender it demonstrates how these factors allow for the creation and adoption of a reimagined videogame femininity. The study not only reveals the problematic notion of the representation of gender but it reveals the ability to enact this by allowing for the gendered individual to participate in the construction and adoption of this alternative femininity through the narrative and gameplay elements.

Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework

Chapter two of this study outlines and examines the key texts which are used to address the construction and performance of femininity in *Mass Effect 3.* By establishing the different themes of the study, unpacking the different texts used as well as their relevance, this serves as a framework to assess the elements of *Mass Effect 3* which are analysed in chapter four.

In order for this study to embark on the search to explore how gender and specifically femininity can be acted out, constructed and experienced through the interactive and narrative elements of *Mass Effect 3*, an established definition of gender is required. The text *Sociology* by Antony Giddens (1989) helps to unpack the topic of gender in order to concretely understand it as a basic concept.

In his writings on 'Gender and Sexuality' in *Sociology*, Giddens looks extensively at the notion of biology, sex and gender. His investigation into this topic is fuelled by the idea that society is fixated with these terms and operates around these notions in order for people to understand themselves and others.

Giddens (1989) defines the difference between sex and gender and argues that sex can be defined as the "biological or anatomical difference between men and women." (Giddens 458) This means that sex is a term that is based on the different physical attributes between men and women which is understood within the sphere of biology that people assume to be 'natural'. Giddens then goes on to define gender as "the psychological, social and cultural differences between males and females." (458) He stipulates these differences to unpack the arguments surrounding these terms, where one claims that biology creates gender and the other claims that the behaviour of the sexes is determined by culture.

To demonstrate how behaviour of the sexes is not the result of biology, Giddens explains that the difference in behaviour between the 'two sexes' is not something which is passed on through genes, nor is it the result of different chromosome combinations that distinguish females from males. He notes that "gender roles are not biologically determined, they are culturally produced" (Giddens 460), however, he does not deny the "anatomical and physiological differences" (Giddens 486) between men and women but adds that this does not determine how they behave. Giddens points out how different cultures have differing roles for men and women that shows how behaviour is determined by culture and the context of societies.

To reaffirm his argument that behaviour of men and women is influenced by culture, he uses the example of 'congenital abnormalities', where he discusses people who are born with both male and female genitals but then raised either as male or female. According to Giddens, the result is that these people select which genders and by implication the gender roles they adopt, which shows how gender is something that is culturally constructed, learned through socialisation. In the view of Giddens, gender is not influenced by biology and therefore is not something which is innate or natural.

According to Giddens there are several ways in which gender can be learned via socialization, one of which is the way in which males and females are treated during their youth. Additionally he examines the way books and stories teach gender roles by portraying men as more active, independent and adventurous while women appear as passive, awaiting the return of the male. Television and film are also central for Giddens in that most leading figures are males and men dominate the active sphere. This then implies that the gender of females is something which is established as oppositional to males.

Using Giddens as a starting point to conduct an investigation into gender for this research, enables an understanding of what is defined as sex and gender and how these two concepts differ from each other. His definition of gender demonstrates that it is a socially constructed notion, which explains why it is interpreted differently in different contexts. This will be used to explain the way in which gender is constructed within the videogame *Mass Effect 3*. The socialised aspect of gender is also central to understanding the different ways in which the players of *Mass Effect 3* enact the story for the female character of Fem Shep.

While Giddens (1989) can be considered a somewhat dated interpretation of gender theory, his writings prove useful in establishing a basic understanding of the idea of gender and the way it is reliant on social constructions as well as individuals for it to be understood and reinforced. It is also used to understand how the authorial vantage point and the experience of *Mass Effect 3* is shaped by notions of gender that are culturally constructed, socialised understandings of what it means to be male and female.

Judith Butler (1988) and her writing on 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory' is also looked at in depth to contribute to the understanding of gender. Butler argues that the reality of the individual is something which is constructed through structures in society and is manifested through their actions, behaviour and language. She states that the "reproduction of gendered identity takes place through the various ways in which bodies are acted in relationship to the deeply entrenched or sedimented expectations of gender existence." (Butler 524) Gender is one phenomenon which is assumed to be natural and factual but Butler demonstrates how gender is an identity which is socially constructed and only exists through the acting out of gender by individuals. This process of acting out gender forms an important part of this research to understand how the performance of gender in *Mass Effect 3* becomes a way in which the player can engage in and re-experience gender.

Femininity as a concept is crucial to this research paper but this paper does not seek to look at the topic of femininity in any general sense of it but rather the active construction of femininity within *Mass Effect 3.* Therefore, in order to establish a theoretical framework on femininity in videogames this research paper looks to the work of Maja Mikula (2003) and her writing in *Gender and Videogames: The Political Valency of Lara Croft.* Mikula attempts to unpack the portrayal and construction of femininity in videogames. The focus of her paper is to specifically examine the popular female character: Lara Croft. Mikula (80) discuses that, "since Lara's groundbreaking entry into a traditionally male world, the number of female characters in action videogames has been on a steady increase." This reveals how Lara is seen as an important figure within videogame culture as she is considered to be atypical of her time.

As a starting point Mikula (2003) looks into the character of Lara Croft and defines her as the aesthetically 'perfect' woman with her slim figure and exaggerated curves. She adds that Lara Croft is defined by her physical abilities. While her appearance is that of the overly sexualised female, her actions and behaviour are not typical for her time as a videogame protagonist. Interpretations of Lara's character are plentiful, but an interesting one as outlined by Mikula (2) is the way that Lara can be seen as a "distorted, sexually ambiguous, male fantasy who also embodies a "dark side" (Mikula 83) of the female gender.

Mikula (2003) explains that the player's reception of Lara Croft's sexualized, assertive and independent character can occur in two differing ways. She looks at the relationship between character and player in terms of identification and objectification. Player identification is a useful concept to investigate as Mikula points to the way that through this process of identifying with the character, players are able to understand the role of the videogame and the specific idea of gender roles that it offers. Meanwhile, objectification of female characters

such as Lara Croft can reinforce masculine ideologies of being able to control a female and gaze upon her by moving the in-game camera (Mikula 2003)

Lara Croft represents a new perspective of the female within the videogame medium, seeing as females within videogames are often portrayed as "damsels in distress"(Mikula 80), in need of a masculine hero to come and rescue them (Mikula 2003). This depiction of women is something which is still very common in videogames today. Lara Croft reflects the traits which are commonly associated with forms of masculinity such as strength, independence and physical prowess. In this sense then, according to Mikula, Lara's character, despite being biologically female, can be understood to possess masculine traits and seen as a potential threat to masculinity considering that "she doesn't rely upon any male character to lead her around or to rescue her." (Mikula 79)

Mikula (2003) is particularly useful as her subject matter of representations of femininity within videogames is the key focus of this research. Her discussions surrounding Lara Croft and the way Lara's femininity has been constructed are used to compare and contrast the character of Fem Shep to Lara. Mikula is used to identify the ways in which Fem Shep can be considered an advancement in the representation of femininity in videogames. While Lara Croft is considered by Mikula to be a form of a masculine fantasy, the character of Fem Shep is presented in a somewhat different manner and Mikula's writing allows one to identify how this occurs. Using Lara Croft as a comparison to Fem Shep is fitting, seeing as Lara Croft is one of the most debated, well known and influential female characters of the videogame medium.

The notion of 'objectification and identification' which Mikula outlines, forms one of the ways in which the characterisation of the femininity of Lara Croft and Fem Shep can be understood. As it is shown further on in this research, the femininity of Fem Shep is not

experienced in terms of objectification of her game character but rather in terms of identification.

While Mikula's dissection into the femininity of Lara Croft is used as a way to contrast her to the femininity of Fem Shep, it is also useful to assess the other femininities on offer in the world of *Mass Effect 3* and can therefore be used as a benchmark to study the multiple femininities on offer in the game.

In order to obtain an even further understanding of the portrayal of femininity in videogames, this research draws from the work of Tracy Dietz (1998) and her paper entitled 'An Examination of Violence and Gender Role Portrayal in Videogames: Implications for Gender Socialisation and Behaviour' where she investigates the portrayal of women and violence. She proposes that videogames can influence the construction of identity of children through portrayals of gender and violence.

Individuals make sense of themselves and their environments based on understandings which are shared within a given society. These include the values, norms and ideas which are held regarding different topics; gender being one of them. (Dietz 1998) She argues that forms of media, including videogames are responsible for constructing understandings for terms such as gender through the ways they portray them. Dietz draws this idea from Gamson et al (374) who explains that "a wide variety of media messages can act as teachers of values, ideologies and beliefs and… can provide images of interpreting the world."

Dietz also brings into question the representation of females within videogames and states that as of the early 1990's games "present an overwhelmingly traditional and negative portrayal of women." (Dietz 426) This is then the understanding of gender which children can come to adopt. Gender portrayals are also manifested through specific symbols within videogames and these symbols become signifiers of genders (Dietz 1998). Symbols such as

firearms are traditionally associated with ideas of masculinity and violence, whereas the symbol of a flower is often associated with femininity.

The representations of gender in videogames and can be seen to create certain expectations for genders and these also play out within the videogames themselves (Dietz 1998). By looking at contemporary videogames one can 'expect' to see men playing the leading, dominant roles in the videogame narrative while women often occupy a less important role. By analysing different videogames, Dietz explains how this role for the masculine and feminine is in fact the case in a large percentage of videogames. She demonstrates this by discussing the findings of her study which "reveals that traditional gender roles and violence are central to many games in the sample. There were no female characters in 41% of the games with characters. In 28% of these, women were portrayed as sex objects." (Dietz 425) This study acknowledges how in the extremely fast moving world of games, Dietz's research is somewhat dated; however its importance to the field of videogame research and this study is central.

Dietz argues that a common representation of femininity in videogames environment is the typical, vulnerable woman who is in in need of saving, otherwise known as the 'waif'. Aside from this representation of femininity, videogames at times also make use of a 'femme fatal' who is defined as a dark force, designed to impede on the specific task at hand. She defines the femme fatal representation of femininity as "the evil seductress to lure the male away from his responsibilities" (Dietz 435). Regardless of the design of the female, Dietz adds that most often, this image is based on some form of a female stereotype: be it as a sex object or a weak character.

Taking the theories of Dietz (1998) into account provides a useful argument to link with the theory of Judith Butler and the way in which societal norms govern the societal behaviour of

gender. It is interesting to note how Dietz mentions that these socially promoted gender expectations also make their way into the videogame environment. This specific point is compared to *Mass Effect 3* to reveal that it uses these societal expectations of gender to reconstruct femininity in the game.

Dietz is used to reveal how *Mass Effect 3* is possibly reversing these traditional roles and trying to reconstruct a new femininity from its narrative, gameplay and characters. As it will be shown, *Mass Effect 3* still uses these traditional female representations, but only as a means toward reconstructing this new femininity which is manifested through the female protagonist. By drawing off Dietz (1998) and her discussions surrounding symbols as ways of understanding gender, this study is able to identify how *Mass Effect 3* alters these symbols to subvert the status quo of gender.

The second way Dietz (1998) is used in this research is toward the unpacking of the notion of multiple genders. Femininity is not simply one concept seeing as many representations of femininity exist. By highlighting the characteristics of at least two representations of femininities that are commonly found in videogame narratives, her writings on the characteristics of these femininities are used to explore and identify the available femininities which are on offer in *Mass Effect 3*. By assessing appearances and actions of female characters in the game, the research can identify how to characterise these femininities.

The main object of study within this research paper is the videogame *Mass Effect 3* and seeing as this medium is central to the research, one of the main themes that will be looked at in great detail is the notion of interactivity, something which has become commonly associated with videogames as a medium. The idea of interactivity and videogames is also a highly contested topic that has undergone much debate. Espen Aarseth, in his work *Cybertext* (1997) is particularly interested in digital media and their place within the field of study and

so his work will be useful to the understanding of this research. Aarseth's writing on the subject is considered an extremely early text in the field, which has developed much further; however, it remains a seminal text for anyone interested in this field.

Aarseth looks to establish a framework within which to understand digital media such as hypertexts as well as adventure games. In an attempt to try and propose a way in which to understand these literary phenomena, new at the time of his writing, he first interrogates the notion of what is defined as 'interactivity'. He makes use of the term "Cybertext" as a way to categorise these modern literary forms as well as a way to establish a framework to study them. Cybertext, according to Aarseth is defined as a literary work which contains a mechanism that allows for what he refers to as a "feedback loop." In claiming this feedback system which allows for information to be exchanged between the text and the user of the text, Aarseth claims this as a central feature to the Cybertext which sets it apart from "paper media" as the Cybertext is comprised of more than simply the words which appear on a page.

The idea of interactivity is something which Aarseth examines extensively in his writing as it is a central characteristic to the cybertext. He states that the term interactivity is a phrase which is widely used as an advertising language and it has been used so loosely that it does not offer a concrete definition to understanding what is meant by it. Seeing as it has been used to describe a range of unimportant trivial activities, Aarseth looks to establish a term which he uses to describe the interaction which takes place between a user and a cybertext. He uses the term "Ergodic" to describe the way in which users affect the events of a cybertext. It is explained as a movement or action which is consciously put out by the user on a physical level. According to Aarseth (1), "in ergodic literature, nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text." In order to differentiate what is considered ergodic literature, he adds that "if ergodic literature is to make sense as a concept, there must also be nonergodic literature, where the effort to traverse the text is trivial" (Aarseth 1) In accordance

with Aarseth, it can be argued that the conversation choices of a role-playing videogame can be seen as ergodic as they require an input which is not trivial, while the cut-scene aspects of a videogame could be understood as non-ergodic because the player is only required to observe them; this would seen by Aarseth as a trivial action. The distinction between ergodic and nonergodic literature is important to understand the ways in which users interact with adventure games and hypertext.

Another important distinction which is made by Aarseth is that between the 'reader' and the 'user' and this is central to understanding the way in which a cybertext operates and is consumed. The term 'user' is used in order to better capture their role in the process of the consumption of a cybertext. In an attempt to establish his study of the 'cybertext' as something which exists outside of the field of literature studies Aarseth does not use the term reader which is commonly used in literary studies. The term reader does not allow for an accurate depiction of the role of the individual in the process. Aarseth states that the reader of a paper text is in fact "powerless" as they do not participate in the narrative as it unfolds and cannot interrupt the course of the narrative. There is no avenue in which the reader can act and change the outcome of the narrative. However, the term 'user' implies that the individual is capable of more than merely reading the narrative but that they have the ability to interact with it and influence the outcome of the narrative. The user has what Aarseth refers to as "the pleasure of influence." (Aarseth 4) This distinction between reader and user highlights the character of the cybertext and why it should be studied in a different manner.

The argument made by Aarseth (1997) will be particularly useful to this research as his definition of the Ergodic and the way in which Ergodic literature operates will give a better understanding to the way in which *Mass Effect 3* can be defined and studied. It allows for greater insight into how *Mass Effect 3* can be understood as 'Ergodic' and what the central features are which make it Ergodic. Aarseth's text will assist in establishing a distinction

between what can be considered truly interactive elements of *Mass Effect 3* to identify how these moments allow for the player to act out gender.

Through Aarseth's insight into the idea of the 'user', this research understands the player of the videogame as the user of *Mass Effect* 3 and looks at the different ways in which the user behaves within the videogame. It explores the way in which the different dialogue options as well as the range of actions can be chosen by the user to allow for them to act out different scenarios of gender.

While Aarseth (1997) is useful, particularly in his contribution toward understanding the idea of interactivity, his writings do not deal specifically with the theme of videogames and the way they are played and consumed. In order to bridge this gap and narrow the focus down to videogames specifically, Newman (2002) and his writings on *The Myth of The Ergodic Videogame* will prove a useful way to understand the 'interaction' involved specifically within videogames. The concept of videogame characters and their relationship to the player are also themes which are addressed by Newman.

In an attempt to try and discuss the complexity of videogames and videogame interaction, Newman (2002) expands on the idea of the Ergodic put forth by Aarseth; however, Newman questions the extent to which the videogame can be considered Ergodic by introducing new concepts of on-line and off-line play. While Aarseth is looking at cybertext in general, Newman focuses his study to specifically look at videogames and the player.

Newman questions the notion that the videogame can be seen as a medium which is defined as something which is purely interactive. He argues that defining it as something which is comprised solely of interactivity implies that it is only comprised of this one dimension. He states that while videogames "contain interactive or ergodic elements, it is a mistake to consider that they present only one type of experience and foster only one type of

engagement." (Newman Par.1) Adding onto this idea, he looks at the work of Aarseth (1997) on the topic of the Ergodic and argues that while he acknowledges that the videogame does contain elements of Ergodicity, one cannot simply see this as the only characteristic which is used to understand it. Newman points to the fact that the videogame offers two differing yet equally important aspects which can be understood as the 'watching' of a videogame as well as the 'playing' of it. It is these two elements in combination which make up the experience of the player and allow them to immerse themselves and relate to the videogame world.

The argument put forward by Newman is explained and justified by the fact that the videogame contains moments where the player is not required to give any input into the videogame. These moments can be described as the cut-scene sequences where the player is introduced to the narrative, characters as well as the unfolding of sections of the narrative. In a manner of speaking, these moments would be considered by Aarseth as something which is 'non-Ergodic' as they do not require the player to take any sort of conscious, non-trivial action. While they may not allow for any sort of interaction, their role is of equal importance as they allow for the narrative to unfold and to give the player information regarding their progress within the game. (Newman 2002)

In trying to explore these different experiences of the videogame, Newman creates categories which he defines as 'on-line' and 'off-line' elements to refer to moments within a videogame. He explains that these can be seen as the different "states of engagement with videogames." (Newman Par. 9) The on-line elements of the videogame can be described as the ones which are considered 'Ergodic'; they are the moments in the game where the player is actively involved in the game by playing it. In contrast to this the off-line elements of the videogame are the 'non-Ergodic' sections which do not require the input of the character, which exist in the form of cut-scenes or progress menus. (Newman 2002) He states that while these two elements are distinct from one another, their boundaries are blurred within the videogame

through transitional segments and different techniques that conceal where the one begins and the other ends. He illustrates this in an example of a racing game where the cut-scene incorporates a view of the racing track but then switches to a segment (this is considered as off-line) where the player is waiting for the light to go green before they can drive off. While the player cannot drive off, they are able to rev their engine (the transitional point between off-line and on-line) and this is followed by the light changing to green and the player assuming full control (the player is now engaging in on-line play) (Newman Par 10) This example illustrates the subtle transition from on-line and off-line elements of a game.

The last feature of the videogame which Newman explores is the relationship between character and player and the way in which this affects how the player is involved within the videogame. The concept of allowing the player to select multiple characters in a videogame is seen by Newman as a way to allow for the player to engage with the videogame and establish a link between the two. Players will consciously select a character based on their understanding of what will be required of them within the game. In this sense then, the character selection process and the player's immersion into the videogame is based on their perception of their character as a set of attributes necessary to complete the task at hand. This is seen by Newman as important considering the off-line elements create an understanding of the character but during the on-line segments, it is the player input which will be needed in order for that character to mean something. Without the player input, the character in on-line segments will not do anything (Newman 2002)

This idea of the character leads Newman to suggest that the process of engaging with the character at an on-line level serves as a way to allow players to consider themselves part of the game world because the character is understood as a combination of all the components of the videogame world. He argues that the experience of the player is tied to the environment, the action and engaging in activities which is all manifested through the

character. The character then becomes the link between the player and the world of the videogame "as the player utilises and embodies the game character" (Newman Par 21)

Newman's writings on videogames and his argument on videogames being more than a single sided experience is useful to this research in several ways. Seeing as *Mass Effect 3* is game which is reliant on lengthy cinematic cut-scenes as well as highly Ergodic gameplay elements, Newman's theory allows for the separation and identification of these two elements which make up the game. This highlights the necessity to look at the importance of narrative as well as gameplay elements to see how these two in combination provide several ways to act out genders and define the experience.

The discussion of character by Newman is also central to this research paper as its focus is to research the experiences of playing with a female protagonist. The link between character, game world and player through engagement with character is important to this research as the relationship will serve as a way to understand how the performance of the female and male is constructed and manifested in *Mass Effect 3* and how the player is implicated in this process through character engagement.

The study of narrative and gameplay in videogames and their relationship to one another is addressed by Henry Jenkins in 'Game Design as Narrative Architecture' (1999). It is important to note how authors such as Aarseth and Newman have given some insight into the approach for the analysis of the videogame and Jenkins's work provides insight into the way in which videogames differ from other forms of media and how they should be assessed using different methods.

The intersectionality between the videogame and story is where Jenkins (1999) grounds his theory. He presents what at the time of writing, were competing theories for videogame analysis: Ludological' and 'Narratological'. The former is preoccupied with the study of the

mechanics of the videogame which involves the elements of game play and argues that this forms the crucial area through which videogames must be studied. The latter of the two terms outlined by Jenkins involves the studying of videogames from a narrative perspective, arguing that the narrative forms the most important part of the videogame and that it should be the point from which to study videogames.

While the concepts Narratological and Ludological are central to understanding the elements of the videogame, Jenkins notes how one cannot merely focus on a single one of these aspects when trying to study videogames. He advocates for a middle ground by stating that videogames need to be analysed via a study of both of the concepts. He labels videogames as 'narrative architecture' in the sense that the story of videogames is only manifested through the world of the game. Jenkins (1999) then implies that the story is considered the narrative part of the videogame and the environment is part of the game play aspect of the videogame. This is reflected when he notes how 'Ludologists' are concerned with "the mechanics of gameplay" and 'Narratologists' see games equivalent to "other storytelling media." (Jenkins Par 1) His statement points out how the narrative of videogames cannot be understood without the gameplay elements and therefore, when looking to study this media, one is required to look at both of these elements as well as the relationship between the two. Jenkins demonstrates this understanding when he explains how the story is created only within the videogame environment and the environment is only created by the story. While this unified approach for the study of videogames has now become largely accepted, the work by Jenkins is still pivotal to this field.

Jenkins (1999) is particularly useful for the purposes of the research on *Mass Effect 3*. Seeing as the medium which is being investigated is the videogame, Jenkins's theories about looking both at gameplay as well as narrative help to serve as a guideline for what is worthy of investigation. Taking this into consideration, in order to concretely examine the gendered

experience of *Mass Effect 3*, the research will look at the videogame from both Narratological and Ludological perspectives to examine the different ways in which the game allows for the player to experience and act out an alternative representation of femininity. This involves an investigation into the plot, characters and the role of player input into the game. It explores how gender, and specifically femininity, is constructed through the narrative, and experienced via the interactive gameplay elements of *Mass Effect 3*.

In order to look at the way in which the interactive narrative of *Mass Effect 3* works and some of the characteristics which allow for the game to deliver an experience which is believable in its representation of femininity, this research looks to Janet Murray and her writing in *Hamlet on The Holodeck.* (1997) Murray looks to understand the 'cyber' narrative which at the time was a new form of storytelling. She discusses three key ways in which the 'cyber' narrative can allow for the individual to experience the narrative and to not only observe it but to act it out as well. For Murray (1997) the three key elements of the cyber narrative are immersion, agency and transformation.

Murray (1997) argues that immersion is a central feature to the cyber narrative as the narrative possesses the power to allow the individual to experience a constructed, virtual reality and to live out certain fantasies which they might have. The experience of engaging and feeling as though one exists within these worlds is referred to by Murray as "immersion." This experience involves a process whereby the individual (player) is required to learn the intricacies of the world and to learn how to operate within it. For Murray, it is important that the immersive story allows for players to experience something which is "outside ourselves" (Murray 100)

According to Murray (1997) structure and boundaries are inevitable and crucial in an interactive, cyber narrative. The videogame medium has its limitations which are the

programmed parameters of the world that determine what can and cannot be done. One of the ways in which the player can participate in the cyber narrative is through structuring their participation as a visit (Murray 1997) For Murray, this creates what she refers to as a "live action stage" where the player can be active in the experience through the visual representations on screen and corresponding player input, allowing for an immersive experience. The presence of other characters is what creates a world worthy of exploration and ensures that the player feels as though they are part of this world. It is the characters that surround the player which enhance the experience and give depth to the virtual world (Murray 1997)

Murray rejects the notion of the 'suspension of disbelief' when it comes to entering the virtual world and dismisses it on the basis that it is too inactive a way to describe the process of this medium. For her, belief is something which is actively created in this experience. Individuals enter these virtual worlds and use their own belief systems to enhance the reality as opposed to limiting it. When the player is in the virtual world, they incorporate their very own cultural, psychological, gendered viewpoint with them. This can be seen when she states that "we bring our own, cognitive, cultural and psychological templates to every story as we assess the characters and anticipate the way the story is likely to go." (Murray 110)

One of the many key aspects to immersion in the cyber narrative for Murray (1997) is the experience of behaving and acting in the virtual world as one would in the 'real' world. The player uses their "avatar" (Murray 1997) as a way to become part of this world and to project their own beliefs onto it. This avatar, unlike in the 'real' world, is not bound by the "social conventions of the performance" (Murray 1997) and so the consequence of their actions is not punishable.

The concept of immersion is something which is useful to this research in order to understand how *Mass Effect 3* is able to successfully create a world and reconstructed representations of femininity which feel authentic and believable. The process of learning about the virtual world can be applied to *Mass Effect 3* and the way that the player is required to learn to navigate and interact within the game's virtual world. In addition to this, the player also learns how to perform femininity through Fem Shep.

The argument made by Murray regarding the virtual world of videogames and their role in immersion, demonstrates how the virtual world can be considered a key element of the videogame experience. The richness of the virtual world can only be understood through the input of the player who navigates it and experiences it. Murray states that it is through the virtual world and the presence of characters which allow the player to experience immersion. This reveals to the need to examine the virtual world and characters of *Mass Effect 3,* to understand how these elements within the game allow for the player to effectively immerse himself in the game and buy into the alternative representation of femininity which it has to offer.

The characters of *Mass Effect 3* are not only looked at in terms of their contribution to player immersion, as this study reveals the way in which the different characters allow for the player to identify the differing representation of femininity which is constructed in the game. The existence of different femininities and masculinities which are manifested through the other characters in the game and their role in the adoption of an alternative femininity is examined extensively in the following chapter.

The concept of the "active creation of belief" (Murray 110) is useful to understand the experience when first playing as the female character and upon entering the world of *Mass*

Effect 3. It gives insight into the way the alternative representation of femininity, which is manifested through Fem Shep appears to be complete and believable to the player.

The second feature of cyber narrative which is outlined by Murray (1997) is the concept of 'agency'. Agency is defined as the ability to "take meaningful action and see the results of these choices" (Murray 1997). These cyber narratives attempt to include the player by allowing them agency within the environment as the ability to navigate virtual worlds is on its own, a form of agency. Murray notes how the cyber narrative is a form of storytelling which is based on the shared experiences of individuals, and that they can be viewed as platforms where the individual can express their own longings.

Agency is something which can be applied to the research of *Mass Effect 3* to assess the extent to which the player's actions can affect the game world and construction of femininity. Looking at *Mass Effect 3* as a narrative created out of shared experiences allows insight into the way this futuristic world deals with situations which occur in the real world, and this allows for it to become immersive and genuine in its representation of femininity.

The last characteristic of the cyber narrative which Murray (1997) unpacks is that of 'transformation'. This idea of transformation firstly occurs in the sense that the computer environment transforms the player into becoming a specific character in the narrative (Murray 1997). Transformation can also occur at a personal level of the player by allowing them to partake in the narrative as opposed to simply witnessing as they would within a novel or film.

Murray explains a concept referred to as "mosaic information". It is described as patterns which are created and presented to the player who then takes these and processes them into information. In newer forms of media such as the cyber narrative, these fragments of

information are arranged in varied form which allows for the information to then become more versatile and possess more complexity (Murray 1997)

Transformation as a concept in this research is extremely useful to understand how the Narratological and Ludological elements of *Mass Effect 3* transform the gendered player into the role of the feminine character of Fem Shep. Not only does it allow understanding of this, but it also allows for an understanding of the way that *Mass Effect 3* can transform the initial personal perspective into the formulation of a reconstructed idea of femininity.

The world of *Mass Effect 3* is responsible for supplying the "mosaics of information" which is outlined by Murray (1997). Using these fragmented mosaics which are provided to the player, the player is able to develop and participate in the construction of femininity. Murray is therefore useful to unpack the way in which the Narratological and Ludological elements allow for this personal transformation to occur within *Mass Effect 3.*

Mankayi Nyameka brings the topic of masculinity into question in his paper entitled 'Masculinity, Sexuality and the Body of Male Soldiers.' Seeking to examine masculinity and sexuality in the context of the military, Mankayi explores the performance of masculinity in the military. The outcome of his study finds that the body and symbols associated with the military are a key area to the performance of masculinity.

The relevance of Mankayi to this study is found in the discussion of symbols and the way in which *Mass Effect 3* subverts symbols that represent gender. As the military is one of these very symbols, it will help to establish how the military is dominated by a hegemonic masculinity.

This study has outlined the key theories and texts that are central to understanding the performance and construction of femininity within *Mass Effect 3*. It consolidates these theories and ideas with aspects of the game to demonstrate the way in which femininity is performed, reconstructed, and experienced. The following chapter is dedicated toward demonstrating this with this theoretical framework as a basis.

Chapter Four: Case Study and Analysis

Up until this point, this research has introduced its goals and outcomes and has justified this subject as worthy of examination. It has also provided an overview of the case study. Lastly, it has outlined and explained the way in which the different literature that has been used form a theoretical framework toward the understanding of the object of study (*Mass Effect 3).* It is at this point where this research begins to examine key elements of *Mass Effect 3* in relation to the theories that have been examined. This process covers four major themes, all of which are involved in the way that Fem Shep can be represented in such a way that she demonstrates a new, reconstructed form of femininity. These four themes are; the navigable world of *Mass Effect 3,* the central characters¸ the experience of Fem Shep's femininity and the subversion of symbols in the game. Each one of these elements will be explored independently in the sections to follow.

The Navigable Space of *Mass Effect 3*

The existence of multiple locations worthy of exploration is a feature of *Mass Effect 3* which allows the player to truly feel as though they are part of the universe of the narrative. Unlike some videogames, *Mass Effect 3* is created as an open world, which allows for the player to have freedom to select where they would like to go and which order they would like to complete their missions. This incentive to navigate the world of *Mass Effect 3* is not always motivated by the primary player goal, which is to complete the game. As the player can discover, the navigable world of *Mass Effect 3* can also be about the journey, to learn more about the world and the events which are taking place in it. The scale of the world of *Mass Effect 3* and the ability to navigate it from the players input allows for the creation of a world which is incredibly rich in terms of emergent narrative content. It also allows for the player to

not only actively participate in, but to invest belief in, the narrative, characters and by extension the reconstructed femininity as manifested through Fem Shep.

The framing navigable environment in the world of *Mass Effect 3* is the realm of space. The navigation of the space environment in the game is reliant on the player through input of a keyboard or controller. *Mass Effect 3* has an abstraction of the navigational space in the form of a galaxy map view which allows the player to travel between different solar systems and planets. In order to visit a specific system, the player first selects it from the map and is then transported to it. Once inside the system, the player is able to control the space ship 'The Normandy'. Within this Ludological element of the game the player is able to visit specific planets and land on some of them. Another Ludological feature available to the player is the ability to use a scanner to try and find war assets to use against the Reapers or additional fuel for their ship. If the player attempts to scan more than three times, Reapers will appear in that system and try to attack the ship. The only way to survive this is to leave that specific system and return to explore it at a later stage.

The ability to navigate the space environment of *Mass Effect 3* creates a lived environment in which the player can begin to immerse themselves as Murray argued was made possible through engagement with navigable space (1997). Immersion into this environment is ludologically highlighted by having the imminent chance of Reaper attack on the ship. This presence of a Reaper threat in the space environment ties into the overarching narrative of *Mass Effect 3*, however, now the immediate threat is to the player and their ability to continue the mission in that specific moment. Whereas the overarching narrative's Reaper threat has no immediate effect on the player, this threat does, as it is the ludological framework which makes the player fearful of the Reaper attack in the space environment. This reflects the ideas of Jenkins (1999) who advocates "a middle ground position between the Ludologists and Narratologists." (Jenkins Par 6) which demonstrates the importance of assessing both the

narratological as well as the ludological elements of videogames in search of meaning. As this shows, it is the combination of these two elements which result in the way the videogame is experienced.

In addition to the experience of immersion into the virtual world of *Mass Effect 3*, the player is also able to experience a sense of agency within these moments. The decision to use the scanner to locate objects that will assist in the final mission comes with a potential danger that could end their game. The player's action then, in terms of Murray (1997), is "meaningful" as they are able to view the result of their action in the game system.

The second, yet important navigable environment in *Mass Effect 3* is the Citadel. The Citadel is a city in space which is home to many different races. It is also the political heart of the *Mass Effect 3* universe as it is home to the galaxy council and its councillors. The Citadel may be a much smaller environment than the amorphous mass of space, however, the level of exploration possible, and detail presented, is far deeper, and it proves to be a location rich in information on the world of the game. Within the Citadel, there are six different navigable spaces, these spaces include: a hospital, a nightclub known as Purgatory, a commons area, the embassies, a space port and a landing deck. It is important to note that all of these environments are densely populated with an array of different characters engaging in different activities.

The Citadel can be considered a perfect example of Murray's term "mosaic information" (p156). The city is far from static and as the player navigates through the different spaces of the Citadel, they can overhear conversations between civilians, buy items from the market, interact with the members of Fem Shep's crew as well as assist civilians in need of help.

The civilian conversations taking place in the Citadel can provide the player with information regarding the Reaper invasion. This information may not be important to understanding the

narrative in its entirety but it enhances the appeal of the narrative by supplying additional information to it. This additional information is focused on the personal experience of the individuals who are caught up within this galactic war. For example, in the docking area players can overhear a conversation between a soldier and his wife. The soldier is about to depart on a mission and his wife is upset. Both characters, in both animation and voice acting, strongly convey their emotions and the conversation carries a very mournful tone. In another example, a Human female who is in a relationship with an Asari female, is trying to get her daughter off of the Citadel in order for her to go to her partner's family. The Human female exclaims to the person assisting her at the help desk that she has filled in all the relevant papers only to find out that she cannot be assisted. This is a continuing event throughout the game and if the player passes by this on-going debate several times in the narrative, it is discovered that the child is eventually secured passage off world. A final example of this sort of civilian dialogue in the Citadel is when a woman is looking to track down her missing brother. She claims that the last time she had spoken with him was just before the invasion of the Reapers and since then she has been unable to get in touch with him.

All of these examples of the types of dialogue which can be overheard in the Citadel help to give richness and a sense of life to the city and the narrative as a whole. Not only are these dialogues related to the war itself but they also involve the individuals at a personal level. The concerns which are raised are humanising as they are problems which individuals in the real world have to deal with in a war situation. They give the player a sense of purpose in taking part in the war to stop the Reapers, and provide another reason, besides completing the game, to actually see the mission to its end. These dialogues can be viewed as "mosaic information", or environmental storytelling, in the sense that they occur at different moments and different places within the Citadel and it is the player who has to piece all of these snippets of information into the bigger picture of the narrative. The fact that these vignettes

are always present in the Citadel and changing, reveals how the organisation of their information about the richness of the world is kaleidoscopic, allowing for the player to "rearrange the fragments over and over again…to shift back and forth between alternate patterns of mosaic organisation" (Murray, 157). This then results in the player experiencing a world which is not only immersive but also believable through these fragments of information it provides to them.

To demonstrate the effect of the densely populated Citadel on player immersion, one can examine the moment in the game where the Citadel is under attack. On this mission the city is empty of any civilian presence. If one does come across a civilian, it is one who has been killed and left on the floor. As players progress through the different parts of the Citadel that they could usually visit, it feels empty and baron. Seeing as the Citadel is an important environment in *Mass Effect 3* this experience enhances the player's emotional investment in the game.

By having invested in the richness and sincerity of the Citadel, through the vignettes of its environment, the player is more likely to feel compelled to complete the mission and restore the city. Therefore, if the player did not have the ability to navigate the Citadel and experience it before this mission, they would not be as emotionally invested. Once the mission is completed and the Citadel is rescued, the player experiences a feeling of actual achievement. The agency to explore and investigate the rich environment of the Citadel creates the platform for an experience which is authentic and believable. As it will be shown further on, this notion of a believable world and environment are central toward the establishment of the reconstructed femininity of Fem Shep.

The final navigable environment in *Mass Effect 3* which plays a crucial role in ensuring player agency and immersion is Fem Shep's space ship, the Normandy. Like the Citadel,

there are also different sections of the Normandy which can be explored by the player, should they choose to do so. While the Normandy is also populated by different characters that are part of the alliance fighting the Reaper invasion, the primary focus of the navigation in the Normandy is to interact with the central crew members who can accompany Fem Shep on her missions.

The navigable Normandy proves to be a very effective environment to contribute toward the player's immersion in *Mass Effect 3.* Fem Shep's crew members can be found in different sections of the ship and the player can choose to engage in dialogue with them at different moments. This ability to interact with the crew allows for the players to learn about them on a personal, narrative, level, outside of the player action of the battlefield. The crew members share different information at different times, but they all provide information about their backgrounds, their emotions and their experiences of the war. The role that this interaction and information serves is that it allows the player to become more knowledgeable about the crew which humanises them. This results in the player caring for them as characters, rather than only viewing them as assets to assist in Ludological segments. These dialogues occur from both a narratological as well as a Ludological perspective. The 'on-line' elements are comprised of the player selecting what question or response they would like to give to a crew member, while the responses from the crew members occur in an 'off-line' manner. This gives the illusion of actually participating in the conversation. The Ergodic action of selecting the dialogue in the conversation and listening to the responses allows for the player to immerse themselves within the world and invest belief in the characters themselves. This symbiotic relationship between the environment of the videogame and the narrative is summarised by Jenkins. He states that "what games do best will almost certainly center around their ability to give concrete shape to our memories and imaginings of the storyworld,

creating an immersive environment we can wander through and interact with." (Jenkins Par 19)

By looking the Citadel and the Normandy as important navigable spaces, this research has explored how these environments are structured in such a way that they allow for the player to experience a sense of agency within them. Their structure and ability to almost seamlessly combine the Narratological and Ludological elements allow for them to create a virtual world in which the player is immersed. This immersion allows for the player to emotionally invest themselves into the narrative as well as the characters. By doing so it creates the platform from which it can not only introduce the player to a reimagined form of femininity through Fem Shep, but it can also allow them to believe and understand this femininity. Before looking specifically at the femininity of Fem Shep, this research will first examine the characters of *Mass Effect 3* along with the performances of their femininities and masculinities.

Characters

One of the central factors to the success of *Mass Effect 3* producing a rich and immersive universe is a strong cast of characters. As Murray (1997) points out, the characters in the cyber narrative are responsible for allowing the player to feel they are part of the virtual world in which they are playing. The *Mass Effect* series and *Mass Effect 3* in particular, is renowned for producing characters that are believable, likeable and interesting. The characters of *Mass Effect 3* serve a purpose even beyond that of merely allowing the individual to immerse themselves in the *Mass Effect 3* universe, the differing characteristics of the femininities and masculinities of the supporting characters plays a crucial part in the construction of the femininity of Fem Shep. The examination into the characters will include

their physical appearance, their mannerisms, as well as key moments in the game which give insight into the way in which they perform their genders. The goal of this examination of the genders of the characters is to assess the differing femininities and masculinities visible in *Mass Effect 3* and to examine the role they play toward the creation and understanding of the femininity of Fem Shep.

The first character that will be looked at is that of Liara T'Soni. Liara is a female character who belongs to the Asari race. The Asari race is comprised of only females. The complexities and implications of this are examined at a later stage. In terms of her physical appearance Liara wears a blue and white uniform which is tightly fitted to her body and accentuates her figure, drawing focus to her breasts. By simply looking at Liara's outfit, one can link her appearance to Dietz' (1998) theory regarding the negative portrayal of women in videogames. Visually the character of Liara is presented in the traditional, sexualised portrayal of women in videogames. This argument can be augmented by examining the mannerisms, behaviour and skills of her character.

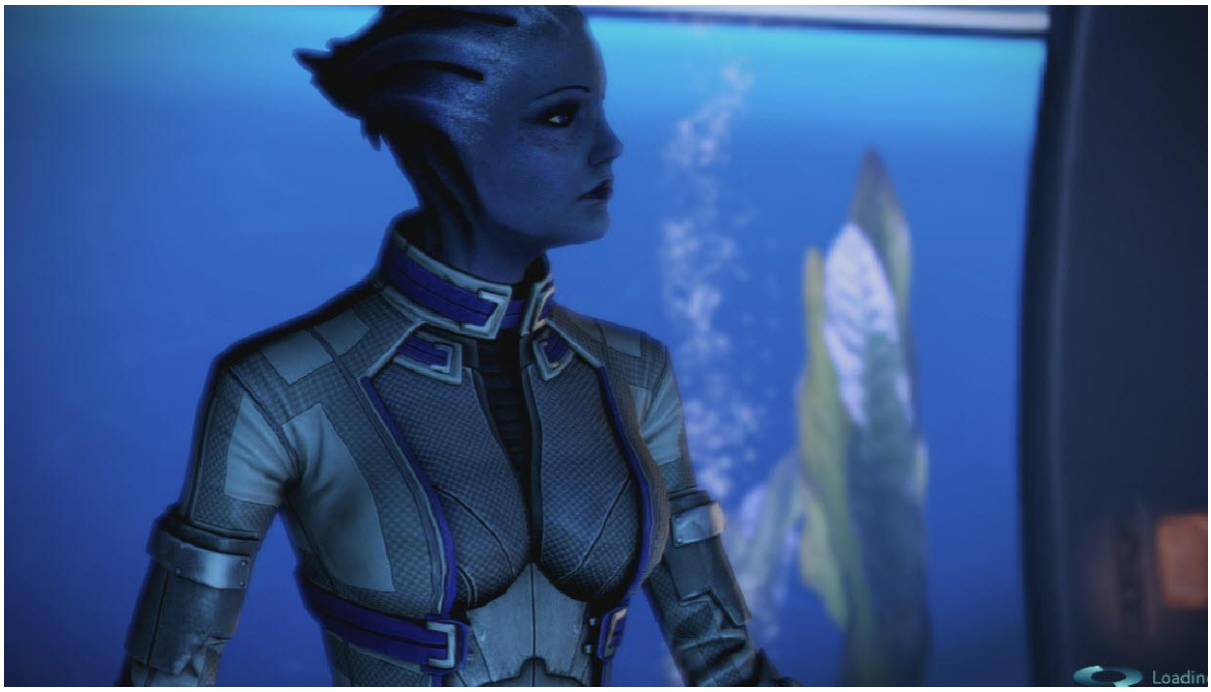


Figure 1-Liara T'Soni

An investigation into the mannerisms of Liara can be understood as an assessment of the performance of her gender. As Butler (1988) discusses, it is this performance of gender which allows for the idea of gender to exist. If society informs how femininity is to be performed, the individual is able to use these codified performances to understand the femininity of an individual. Therefore, , the experience of Liara's performance would be compared to the formulaic performance of femininity imbued in most popular cultural discourse.. The performance of femininity by Liara falls within societal guidelines. This is communicated in many ways, for example, the animation of Liara's movements. Liara walks in a way that has societally been constructed as graceful and feminine. In a scene where Liara is sitting with Fem Shep, Liara is seated with her legs crossed and her hands folded on her knee. This familiar pose has been reinforced through socialisation and cultural production something which is typically feminine. However, the ability to understand Liara's femininity goes further than only the ideas of her graphic representation and spills into her narrative and ludological construction as well.

One of the defining characteristics of Liara is that she is never an overtly violent character. Violence is a performance which is not historically associated with femininity. Liara is presented as more suited to being an academic as opposed to being a fighter in the true sense. Her specific field is that of a researcher and scientist, also a non-traditional role for a woman, but removed from combat and violence. While her femininity is not necessarily a traditional one the more passive position she occupies is in stark contrast to that presented by Fem Shep. This less violent nature of her character can be seen in several different 'on-line' and 'off-line' moments within the game. Liara's behaviour tends to be more diplomatic than aggressive. An example of 'on-line' scene where Liara's non-aggressive performance of femininity points to the fact that she can be viewed as a familiar, traditional and stereotypical female character is during a discussion in the Citadel. The player discovers a character at the

Bar who claims to be Liara's father and who states that he is watching over her. The player has the choice of whether or not to convince Liara to go and speak with her father. While her initial decision was to not make contact Liara can easily be convinced to do this through emotional manipulation, which indicates how easily she can be swayed and influenced by the player character. This paints Liara in a submissive light, a stereotypical manner within the acceptable understanding of femininity within most popular media. In several 'on-line' moments in the Citadel, Liara is standing on the balcony admiring the view when the player engages her in conversation. At these points she often remarks on the beauty of the citadel, and of the natural world This preoccupation with the landscape could also be interpreted as traditionally feminine as wistfully admiring beauty and lamenting its possible loss, especially during a time of crisis, is culturally associated with the more passive, 'natural' role attributed to women. In all of these cases the player is actively involved in eliciting this performance from Liara, as they are given the option to approach her and engage in conversation with her in several 'on-line' segments.

As Newman (2002) notes, it is both the 'on-line' and 'off-line' which are important to the videogame experience and so the 'off-line' or cut-scenes, of Liara's performance must also be looked at. An ideal example of an 'off-line' scene with Liara that takes place right before Fem Shep goes into final battle with the Reapers. In this scene, Liara tells Fem Shep that she would like to give her a gift. The player then watches a cut-scene where Liara uses her powers to take Fem Shep's mind into a dream-like world where they both stand in the middle of a collection of stars. While both Fem Shep and Liara are looking at the stars, Liara rests her head upon Fem Shep's shoulder. This scene can be interpreted as romantic, but at the same time it remains important to understanding the performance of Liara's femininity. It reveals her sensitivity, as well as her tendency to be preoccupied with something like the stars just before battle, echoing her preoccupation with the landscape of the Citadel. This is

something which one would normally associate with historical representations of femininity as this performance reveals a soft, sensitive demeanour.

A second, very different, femininity on offer in *Mass Effect 3* is that of the Krogan female, Eve. The work of Dietz (1998) on different representations of femininity in videogames, allows for one to pick up on the existence of multiple femininities on offer in *Mass Effect 3* that stretch far beyond the two types which she has outlined; the waif and the femme fatale. Dietz' paper reveals the necessity of the existence of these femininities to establish the reconstructed femininity of Fem Shep. Eve is the only hope for the Krogan race to be able to reproduce, as in the narrative the Krogan were exposed to a toxin that prohibited them from procreating, an event known as the 'Genophage'. With the help of scientists from the Salarian race, the Krogan have the opportunity to extract a cure from Eve's DNA.

The femininity of Eve is unique within *Mass Effect 3.* Her performance of femininity can be looked at as along the lines of the suffragettes. Through her role in the narrative Eve is tasked to represent the struggle for equality, right to political voice, and right over the body of all Krogan women. Power relations for the Krogan are encapsulated in ultra-violent displays of masculinity. As the ability to procreate is so greatly restricted, Krogan men via for breeding rights, and Krogan women are set up as invisible, silent, brood mares. Eve's character presents a powerful challenge to this status-quo and offers the player an opportunity to encounter complex real world gender issues in a science fiction hyperbolic form.

In terms of the physical appearance, Eve wears an outfit which covers her whole body. It also has a cloak attached to it which is also used to cover most of her face. The colouring is rich blues purples, reds and golds, and there is detailed patterning visible in some areas and heavy gold chains across the face. From the reference to the Islamic Niqab (half face veil) to the Japanese Obi (traditional sash) visible on her back the overall aesthetic is a re-enactment of

orientalist fantasies. The outfit can be seen as the performance of a femininity which believes in the covering and controlling of the female body. From a western perspective this is projected onto the oriental other and is understood as a form of femininity which is repressed and not allowed to reveal itself. This is offset by the performance of a violent, oppressive masculinity in the Krogan males. The actions, behaviour and dialogue of Eve can be linked to this repressed femininity which is performed, and struggled against, by Eve.



Figure 2-Eve

Eve is under pressure from a male Krogan leader named Urdnot Wreave, to ensure that the Krogan race is able to reproduce and seek revenge on those responsible for the creation of the Genophage. While this political struggle takes place between two individual characters, it is constantly referenced by the characters themselves in terms of gender conflict. Bothe Eve and Urdnot Wreave recurrently speak of the role of the females, the burden of reproduction and the conflict of the males. The femininity of Eve, is cast in light of conflict, caught in a struggle to resist the violent Krogan masculinity's ideals of revenge and instead to focus efforts on restoring pride to their race. In the way that the suffragettes fought for women's

equality and to earn the right to vote, Eve's femininity is performed in conflict, fighting for her opinion and vision to be heard. The essence of the performance of Eve's femininity is reinforced when she tells Fem Shep that "females will help save the future."

The player is given the option to visit Eve in the med-bay when aboard the Normandy where the player can allow for Fem Shep to engage in conversation with her to discover more about the Krogan female and male dichotomy. It is discovered that the dichotomy between females and males can be understood in terms of a violent, dominance of the male Krogan over the females. Eve explicitly contrasts the behaviour of Krogan masculinity to that of femininity. She depicts Krogan masculinity as unnecessarily violent, patriarchal and illogical when she notes how Krogan males have "evolved to become selfish", that they are "killers, seeking targets to justify their existence. Excuses to earn them 'honor'." In contrast to this, she depicts Krogan femininity as peaceful, nurturing and empowered. This is established when she says the "violence must end if Krogan are ever to have a voice in galactic politics" and that "females will help save the future, before, we were just pawns of power hungry males." The conversations between Eve and Fem Shep not only reveal the dichotomy between male and female Krogan, but also how this stems from differences in their gendered behaviour.

The existence of Eve's struggle not only allows for the player to experience another performance of femininity, different to that of Liara's, but also demonstrates how femininity can oppose and threaten masculinity, and is therefore subject to oppression and control. This is an important theme and it lends itself towards the establishment of Fem Shep's femininity. Eve's diplomatic dialogue, coupled with her soft spoken voice problematizes the masculinity of the Krogan male. It demonstrates the violent nature of that incarnation of masculinity and its inability to resolve conflict. This impression if masculinity can be seen when Eve says that "rivalries are an invention of the males."

The ultimate triumph of Eve's femininity has its limitations in the game, depending on player decisions and success. In one play experience Eve dies just before cure is manufactured, which does not allow for her character to actively ensure that her ultimate goal for the Krogan race is achieved. In another she is not only instrumental in formulating the cure, but also uses it to challenge the traditional role of females in Krogan society, demanding a place for females amongst the Krogan leaders. Another limitation to the femininity of Eve is that while her femininity appears to move toward some form of political strength, it is contained and constructed by conflict over her reproductive ability. The right of women to have control over their bodies in terms of reproduction is a struggle that continues to this day. Eve therefore enacts many of the historic feminist battles; the right to political agency, and the right to control of the body, its presentation and reproductive system. Her presence very actively raises these questions for the player through both 'on-line' and 'off-line' elements.

Mass Effect 3 offers another performance of femininity which is manifested through the character EDI. EDI is an artificial intelligence on board the Normandy and is also an embodiment of the ship itself, controlling and monitoring its function. At a stage within the narrative, EDI manages to place her intelligence within a robot which is designed to look like a human female character. However, EDI establishes herself as female early in *Mass Effect 2,* where EDI informs Commander Shepard that she has opted to be understood as female in order to make the crew feel more "comfortable." In *Mass Effect 3* she argues that the robotic body is a further attempt on her part to 'comfort the crew.' The notion of the feminine being something which is 'comforting' indicates the perception of the feminine as disarming. It implies that femininity is enchanting or captivating, and these characteristics are viewed as important to understanding the active, sexualised femininity of EDI.

The first aspect of EDI's performance is that the body she now maintains control over is designed as a shapely overtly sexualised and attractive female body. While EDI's body seems

to be made out of metal, the model is not clothed, giving her the appearance of being nude. Clothing is rather insinuated through the use of different coloured metal plates. This places focus on the sexualised features of her body, her breasts and her buttocks grounding her character's femininity in the sexualised, male fantasy. The relationship of the player to EDI conforms to the notion of objectification as outlined by Mikula (1997). The sexualised, objectified femininity as displayed by EDI is reinforced through the seductive and husky voice acting. This is made even more prominent with her 'experimental' relationship with the pilot of the spaceship, Joker.



Figure 3-EDI

EDI's character progression of is presented in such a way that she is perceived as embodying both the waif and the 'femme fatale' representations of femininity commonly found in videogames (Dietz, 1998). These stereotypical feminine videogame performances can be seen in the way that EDI becomes fixated on trying to establish an 'experimental' relationship Joker. In a segment of the game where EDI is in conversation with Fem Shep, she asks about the best way to try and get Joker to open up to her and discuss how he feels. The player is

given to option to either encourage or discourage the potential relationship and both of these options reveal an interesting observation about her character.

Should the player opt to encourage her to pursue a relationship with Joker, EDI performs the role of a lovesick romantic female who is desperate for the affection of a male. In this segment EDI is self-conscious and unsure and a sense of experimentation with, and expectation of, her relationship with Joker is displayed in the way she thinks she should act. The tentative nature she shows in seeking advice from Fem Shep is underlined by constant references she makes to how she 'should' feel or behave. At times her femininity appears rehearsed, a mechanical acting out of what she perceives to be a feminine performance. This depiction implies that EDI believes she should require the presence of masculinity in order to complete her femininity. In comparison to Lara Croft's independence discussed by Mikula (1997), one form of EDI's femininity appears at the opposite side of the spectrum. The most crucial aspect of the performance of her femininity is that she has only recently become a 'woman' and she chooses to pursue love interests as her primary objective.

While EDI performs a waif-like femininity in some instances, at times she also performs the femininity of the 'femme fatale' which Dietz defines as a "seductress who might lure the male away from his responsibilities." (435) Dietz notes how this representation of femininity can occur in the form of a sexualised female character. Unlike the other female characters, EDI is far more overtly sexualised and her approach toward the relationship with Joker can be understood as an active one, as she is the one who is chasing after him. Her active pursuit of Joker not only results in the performance of an overly sexualised femininity, but it also reverses the traditional social understanding of the preferred gender roles within a relationship, emphasising the taboo of the femme fatale. Joker discusses his feelings for EDI and his apprehensions of pursuing her with Fem Shep on several occasions, this preoccupation results in him losing focus on the mission. This reaction forms part of the

effect of the femme fatal aspect to EDI's performance as she is luring Joker away from his responsibilities.

Another character whose performance of femininity falls into Dietz's classification of traditional representations of a woman as weak and in need of rescue is Tali'Zorah. Tali is part of the Quarian race, which is cast as extremely vulnerable to the environment and therefore have to wear masks and outfits which protect their bodies from infection. If the necessary conditions from earlier *Mass Effect* games are fulfilled Fem Shep encounters Tali when she seeks the assistance of the Quarians to join her alliance in fighting the Reapers. As a precondition to gaining the support of the Quarian fleet, Shepard must first help the Quarians take back their home world from a robotic race known as the Geth.

Interestingly, when it comes to identifying which Quarians are male and female; one can easily do so through the difference in attire, regardless of the fact that their faces are concealed. Like the Asari female Quarians wear a suit which is tightly fitted to their body and highlights their breasts, thighs and buttocks, allowing the player to identify them easily. This demonstrates how the player is allowed to understand the gender performance of each Quarian in terms of the conflation with their sex and physical body. In most cases in the game gender is collapsed into physical sex with no space for more complex distinctions. Tali can instantly be understood as feminine through her body, her style of dress, her speaking voice as well as her mannerisms. The first clue to Tali's performance of her femininity is that she has a purple, patterned design on her hood as well as other areas on her armour. Societal understandings, as outlined by Butler, relates the colour and pattern to some form of femininity through conventions of dress.



Figure 4-Tali'Zorah

The second aspect which gives one the ability to identify the specificities of her performance is that of her speaking voice. Tali's tone of voice is always very soft and soothing. In addition to this, when her character speaks, she often seems to be shy and hesitant in her speech. This then plays into the 'waif' like representation of femininity as discussed by Dietz seeing as it paints Tali's femininity as something which is weak and fragile. This representation of her femininity extends further than her tone of voice but also into the scripted words of her character. In a scene where Tali and Fem Shep first land in her home world, Tali stops for a second to comment on its beauty. She speaks about how she admires the sky and the rocks and the way she would once write poems about them. The speech made by Tali in this segment reveals a sensitive and sentimental side to her, like that of Liara in the Citadel, which is culturally interpreted as specifically passive and feminine, in contrast to an imagined active masculinity which would rather focus its efforts to the task at hand. Unlike EDI, Tali does not

display any form of an overly sexualised role to break the ‘waif’ like performance of her own femininity, which reinforces her traditional feminine representation.

In a Ludological instant aboard the space ship, the player has the option to go visit Tali and engage in conversation with her in the engineering deck. However, if this is after a mission where the character of Miranda dies, Tali is found in the lounge area of the ship, sitting at the bar. If the player attempts to initiate conversation with her, it is discovered that Tali has been drinking and is not in a sober state of mind. She begins to discuss Miranda and the way in which she could never match up to her as “genetically, perfectly engineered”. While her dialogue is envious of Miranda, Tali also notes that “she (Miranda) was a bitch, but I respected her.” Tali explains that her respect for Miranda stems from Miranda’s ability to stand up to her father as opposed to changing who she was to please him. The behaviour of Tali in this scene and the previous player knowledge of Tali’s relationship with her father points out to how Tali was unable to go against her late father and how her actions and behaviour changed in order to keep him satisfied.

The entire scene provides a very useful window within which to view the character of Tali as well as her femininity. The way in which she criticizes Miranda for being ‘perfect’ shows how Tali is self-conscious, fragile and lacking in confidence. This scene also reflects how Tali is conscious of her inability to uphold a strong individuality and how the masculinity of her late father subjected control over her reflects her femininity’s surrender to patriarchy. By looking at this through the literature of Dietz, Tali’s representation of femininity can be considered almost text book to the traditional and negative portrayal of femininity in videogames where women are often “portrayed as victims” (Dietz 438). In the case of Tali with this scene, she is a victim of her father and of her own inability to act.

Thus far the depiction of Tali as a traditional and negative femininity in accordance with Dietz (1998) has only reflected this in terms of her appearance and her psychological attributes. However, when looking at Tali's physical abilities in the game, the same can be said for her as a supporting character in Ludological battles. Each character in *Mass Effect 3* possesses a set of skills which can be used in the battle segments of the game. Tali's skills in the game are; combat drone, defense drone, and energy drain. None of these actually involve Tali dealing the damage to enemies as they are not physical attacks. Tali does not possess any physical strength which can be used in combat, but rather uses intellect and mental alacrity. The implication of the lack of physical prowess reflects the way in which Tali's femininity is represented; with no true form of battle strength, she is not viewed as a solider. By combining the physical performance of Tali together with her emotional performance, it solidifies the traditional representation of her femininity. If according to Mikula (1997), Lara Croft is distinguished as a strong femininity because she is "physically strong, can fight and shoot" and "has incredible gymnastic abilities" (2), then Tali is also distinguished, but in a weak sense from her lack of these abilities.

A femininity which is similarly displayed to that of Tali's is that of Ashley Williams. Unlike Tali, Ashley is a Human. In terms of her physical appearance, Ashley is modelled as attractive, with long, dark, fashionably styled hair as well as having a traditionally beautiful facial structure. Her armour is also tightly fitted to her body which accentuates her breasts, thighs and buttocks. It can be noted then that in terms of the performance of her femininity her physical appearance echoes that of the sexualised and objectified femininity which Mikula (1997) explains and how the player could be "invited to take sexual pleasure from *looking* at her." (80)



Figure 5-Ashley Williams

An aspect of Ashley's character which allows for her to initially be viewed as having a stronger and more capable femininity is the fact that Ashley is the only female, aside from Fem Shep, who falls under the character ability class of soldier. Of course the player does not necessarily have to choose this class for their Fem Shep character, but it is a possible avenue. While Ashley's femininity may show the initial potential to be something more than the other femininities in the game have to offer, she fails to live up to this expectation and instead her performance reveals yet another unimaginative, recognisable and traditional feminine representation in videogames. The inability of her femininity to evolve into anything more can first be experienced when Ashley is injured during one of the missions. Subsequently she spends quite a large portion of the narrative in the hospital on the Citadel, where players can visit her and choose to engage in conversation with her.

The fact that Ashley is injured and cannot participate in the adventure for quite some time shows the weak side to her femininity as well as her failure to uphold the abilities and strength of the soldier. Her vulnerability becomes particularly apparent when the player visits Ashley at the hospital. Ashley tells Fem Shep, "I don't know how you manage to keep it all together. It's hard to put it all aside." This statement reveals Ashley's inability to cope with the pressures of what is occurring in the galaxy and the fact that she is lying in the hospital bed accentuates this. It is important to mention that if the player's Ashley dies in the original *Mass Effect* the player will have the male character of Kaidan in her place. His story arch, responses and behaviour in hospital is exactly that of Ashley. Due only in part to his hospitalisation and vulnerability Kaidan is constructed as a weaker masculinity in contrast to the other masculinities on offer. However If the player is not importing any previous *Mass Effect* save data, Ashley is used by default.

The final femininity which will briefly be looked at is that of Samantha Traynor, who is otherwise known in the game as Specialist Traynor. Samantha's performance of femininity falls along the lines of a traditional and negatively portrayed femininity that Dietz (1998) identifies with videogames at the time. In comparison to the other characters, it can be argued that Samantha has one of the weakest femininities in the game.



Figure 6-Samantha Traynor

Unlike the other female characters that have been outlined, Samantha does not leave the Normandy to go and fight against the Reapers nor participate in any mission. Her job is to collect intelligence and look after the crew's needs. While she often comments on how she wishes she could inflict pain on the Reapers, the reality is that she does not participate in any way. This performance then can be understood to fall into the traditional stay-at-home role. It also reinforces how her character possesses no physical strength to assist in battle. By looking at this performance, it is clear that Samantha is portrayed to have an extremely stereotypical and instantly recognisable femininity.

The presence of Samantha within the *Mass Effect 3* story, as a means of comparison to Fem Shep, is of utmost importance to the understanding of Fem Shep's femininity. This is explored further when examining Fem Shep. Lastly, it can be said that the decision to romance Traynor as Fem Shep allows for the player to gain much greater insight into the femininity of Fem Shep, which this study returns to further on.

In the same way that an examination into the different femininities on offer in *Mass Effect 3* is significant, an investigation in the different masculinities is of equal importance to the understanding of the reconstructed femininity of Fem Shep. In order to fully understand Fem

Shep's femininity, it requires the presence of masculinities to compare the way in which it measures up to them. This brings the performance of masculinities into focus and calls for an unpacking of the way in which these masculinities can be categorised and understood.

One of the first and most important masculinities of non-playable characters in the game is that of Lieutenant James Vega. In most ways, James can be argued to perform the most stereotypical and traditionally understood form of masculinity in the game. The characterisation of James results in him being the stereotypical masculine character that Giddens (1989) and Dietz (1998) would consider the archetypal protagonist in a traditional videogame story. This argument stems from the fact that both Giddens and Dietz note how storytelling mediums traditionally favour masculinities which are strong, bold and heroic, casting them as the leading role. While James does possess these qualities, he is not the hero in this narrative. This is returned to further on when looking at the interaction between James's masculinity and Fem Shep's femininity.

In an attempt to explore the performance of James's masculinity, his physical appearance proves to be a useful starting point. A feature that is instantly noticeable with James is that his body type is very large and muscular. In terms of his masculinity, this gives the impression that he possesses a great amount of physical strength and competency in the battlefield. He is often found exercising and takes explicit pride in his appearance. In addition to his body type, James also has a very short hair style which is shaved very closely on the sides, recognisable as a symbol that he is a soldier. His body is also covered with different tattoos that act as a cultural signifier for a battle hardened individual, established through Hollywood traditions of representation. Another important way in which this reinforced is through the attire worn by James outside of battle; a plain white shirt, with dog tags and cargo pants traditionally associated with the military.



Figure 7-James Vega

His use of language as well as his tone of voice can also be used as queues to understanding his masculinity. His language is very succinct and his speaking voice is deep and abrupt. The performed masculinity of James can also be understood in terms of male privilege and superiority because at first his character does not hold much respect for the character of Fem Shep. One of the words he uses in order to refer to her is the name "Lola". "Lola" once again draws from a Hollywood tradition of an over-sexualised female figure. Seeing as this is not her name nor does it have any significance to the understanding of Shepard, it is understood as an insult used by James to undermine her authority. By referring to her as "Lola", he demonstrates that he views her as a sexualised woman and not his commanding officer. This behaviour on the part of James falls in line with his specific performance of masculinity and demonstrates how his stereotypical masculinity views itself as far superior to any femininity. As it is shown further on in this paper when looking specifically at Fem Shep, this extreme performance of heteronormative masculinity as manifested through James is central toward the construction of Fem Shep's femininity.

James and his performance of masculinity can be argued to fall on the one extreme of the spectrum of masculinity. The character of Steve Cortez can be viewed as occupying the opposite side to that spectrum. Steve is a pilot for the alliance but he is aboard the Normandy assist with the mission to stop the Reaper invasion. In terms of his physical appearance, Steve can be described as average looking male, with no distinct features. Unlike James, Steve does not exude confidence, which leaves him a far quieter and less hyperbolically masculine character.



Figure 8-Steve Cortez

One of the key moments which assist in the understanding of the performance of Steve's masculinity is when the player can first go visit him and engage in conversation with him. Steve explains how he feels guilty for not helping save his husband during the first attack by the Reapers. This statement comes as a shock because Steve is the only male character in the game to openly be homosexual, and is one of the first male homosexual characters in videogame history. As Murray (1997) notes, when the player enters a virtual world, they bring their cultural understandings and societal expectations of events with and so these

associations affect the player's perception of Steve's character from this point forward. The player views Steve with what Butler (1989) would argue as a socially constructed understanding of what the performance of masculinity should be. In some cases this could result in an understanding Steve's masculinity as lacking, and problematic. However, the enactment of Steve's masculinity is particularly powerful as a subversion of traditional representations of overtly effeminate homosexuality. There is a matter-of-factness in Steve, and in the way in which Shep responds, that offers a strong, alternative reading of homosexuality. Male homosexuality is something that has been steered well clear of in games, which are often constructed as the domain of the male heterosexual. The inclusion of Steve presenting an alternative masculinity is therefore quite daring in the context of a game.

Despite the positive element in the depiction of Steve's homosexual masculinity several drawbacks and stereotypical constructs still occur. Steve's masculinity can be considered weak and aligned to the traditional feminine when examined in the light of his responsibilities in the game as well as his conversations with Fem Shep. With regard to his duties, Steve is in charge of piloting the shuttle of the ship which transports Fem Shep and her crew down to the different planets to begin their mission. In no way is Steve ever directly a part of the battle as he does not get off the ship to fight alongside Fem Shep on the ground. This duty in the game does not allow for his performance to demonstrate any sort of physical strength. His absence in battle suggests that his masculinity lacks the socially constructed characteristics of the historical masculine performance. In addition to this, Steve is only piloting the shuttle of the ship and not the main ship itself. This task can be considered to be less prestigious than that of piloting the main ship, which is built up to emphasise Joker's extreme skill levels. It can be suggested then that his masculinity does not command the constructed cues of the masculine performance to do this. By comparison, the pilot of the main ship, Joker, while displayed as uncannily skilful, is also constructed as passive as he has a disease which affects his bones

and limits his mobility. His role in his 'experimental' relationship with EDI reinforces this as he occupies a more passive position.

The Reconstructed Femininity of Fem Shep

Up until this point, this research has looked at the virtual world of *Mass Effect 3* and the way in which this world of the videogame allows for *Mass Effect 3* to create a story and environment for the player that feels immersive and believable. It has also examined the different characters which are central to the story of *Mass Effect 3* and who play a large role in the journey of the protagonist, Fem Shep. The exploration into these characters has allowed for this research to explore their specific gender performances and to understand the different femininities and masculinities which the game has on offer. This next segment will focus specifically at the female protagonist, Fem Shep and look at the way in which these competing femininities and masculinities allow for the femininity of Fem Shep to be brought to the foreground.

The player of *Mass Effect 3* is able to choose if they want to play the game with a female or male protagonist. The main narrative and gameplay element remains the same regardless of which sex the player chooses to play. However, the differences between these two choices are found in character interactions, as well as dialogue options. The key element which this research examines is the implications of the representation of the femininity on offer, even though the main narrative segments remain unchanged from that of the male character. It argues that this very fact results in the creation of a femininity which is reconstructed or alternative from the traditional representations of femininity in videogames.

The crux of the arguments surrounding Fem Shep performance of femininity is that it possesses two distinct aspects allowing for a construction of a femininity that is holistic rather

than fragmented. This idea then places Fem Shep's gender in the game as unique as she is the only one who has the potential to reflect a femininity which is rounded. The one side of Fem Shep's femininity occurs through the embedded narrative of the game itself, whereas the other aspect to the performance of her femininity is reliant on the meaningful action taken by the player in order to reveal it.

In examining the first aspect to Fem Shep's performance of femininity, this discussion begins with an examination of her physical appearance. While the appearance of Fem Shep can be customised by the player, this research looks specifically at the standard configuration of the character. The standard appearance of Fem Shep is a female with short, red hair, pale skin and freckles on her face. Her appearance is introduced to the player immediately in character creation. This type of appearance for a female protagonist is not common within the videogame medium and so players are automatically aware that there is something different about the character. After the popularity of Fem Shep in *Mass Effect* and *Mass Effect 2* she was controversially redesigned in the third instalment to make her appear more traditionally 'pretty' and younger, yet she still does not appear as a standard female in videogames. The design of the character does not comply with the specific traits of female videogame characters that Mikula (1997) and Dietz (1998) discuss in their papers, which include traditionally beautiful facial structures and accentuated female features such as breasts and buttocks.

The second way in which the character of Fem Shep is different from traditional female game characters is in terms of her combat attire. Most of the armour which is worn by Fem Shep during the game can in no way be considered to make her appear as Mikula's sexualised and objectified Lara Croft. Fem Shep's armour is not tightly fitted and it does not overly accentuate any part of her body. While she retains some curves and breasts, they are under-emphasised and can in a sense then be viewed as something which is not an overt signifier of

her gender in any way. This is where the presence of other femininities in the game comes into play. This understanding of Fem Shep's armour is most noticeable by its contrast to the armour, or lack of armour, on other female characters. All the battle outfits of the other female characters in some way point out to the fact that they are sexualised females, whereas the armour of Fem Shep does not. The result of this then is that when looking at Fem Shep in both the Narratological and Ludological segments, the player's focus does not lie in the objectification of her body but instead on her abilities as a soldier, the mission and the narrative.



Figure 9-Fem Shep in Armour

The examination of the multiple femininities also allows for a comparison to be drawn between them and Fem Shep's speaking voice and mannerisms. Fem Shep's voice, unlike that of the other females, has a far deeper, harsher sound to it. The presence of the other femininities provides a way of bringing this difference to the foreground. Fem Shep is voiced by Jennifer Hale who has received critical acclaim for her performance in the *Mass Effect* trilogy. This role has resulted in a boost to her fame as she is highly regarded for her role, demonstrating the effectiveness of the performance as a whole.

The distinction of Fem Shep's femininity can also be seen when analysing the different mannerisms and animations for her. One of the most debated aspects to Fem Shep's performance of her femininity is her animated walk cycle. The walk cycle for Fem Shep is exactly the same as that of Male Shep. The general player reaction to seeing Fem Shep walk in this way is that she is very masculine. Based on the socially constructed cues for a feminine walk, the walk cycle of Fem Shep is very far from being traditionally feminine, as for example Liara's is. In line with the argument of Butler (1989) this walk cycle would appear to be un-feminine as the individual is trained to adopt the societal views of how each performance of gender should appear. The player enters the game with these pre-constructed understandings of the performance of gender which become a lens through which they interpret every character's performance.

The inability to instantly recognise Fem Shep's performance as feminine continues as the player is exposed to her other animations such as running and sitting. When Fem Shep is seated, she does not cross her legs like the other female characters but instead keeps her legs apart in the same way that Male Shep does. In a scene where Fem Shep is in her cabin having a conversation with Liara, she is seated with her legs apart, but at the same time, in direct contrast to this, Liara is seated with her legs crossed in a 'lady like' manner.

The ability to distinguish the femininity of Fem Shep through the femininities and masculinities of other characters is not limited to these aspects of the performance, nor does it only demonstrate how Fem Shep's femininity is not traditional. These distinctions also allow for the *Mass Effect 3* to construct a new form of femininity which requires the presence of the other characters in order to create it. By comparing the femininity of Fem Shep to other genders in the game it is demonstrated how *Mass Effect 3* creates a rounded femininity, one which is neither a purely sexualised nor objectified femininity but rather something that the player can identify with.

The first way in which the player is able to begin the identification of a military femininity of Fem Shep through a comparison to other femininities, takes place during the attack on the Citadel. In this scene, Fem Shep and Liara are in a shuttle chasing after an enemy known as Kei Leng. While Fem Shep is piloting the shuttle, Kei Leng appears and begins to attack it. At that moment, Fem Shep allows Liara to pilot the shuttle and she exits the shuttle to fight him. During this process, the camera cuts to Liara piloting the shuttle revealing her in a state of terror because of the events. Meanwhile the camera cuts of Fem Shep show a determined, calm look on her face. This contrast between the reactions to the event between Fem Shep and Liara reveal a side to Fem Shep's femininity which Liara does not possess. They depict Fem Shep as a female who does not fear anything and who possesses the physical capability to overcome any challenge.

Fem Shep does not only demonstrate the strength of her femininity through the comparison to other femininities but also does so through other masculinities. As it has been mentioned earlier in this paper, James can be viewed as a hyper masculine character as he performs the societal understanding of a dominant heteronormative masculinity. However, the femininity of Fem Shep is constantly able to undercut the masculinity of James, allowing for her femininity to appear more capable and superior to his the hyper masculinity.

An example of the ability of Fem Shep to undercut the masculinity of James occurs aboard the Normandy when Fem Shep can first approach James to engage in conversation with him. At this point in the game, James lacks respect for Fem Shep and her authority. His attitude toward her is negative and disrespectful. After conversing with James, players are given the option to challenge him to a fist fight. This fight occurs as a Ludological event, which then places the player in control of fighting James using Fem Shep. By beating James in the fist fight, Fem Shep can begin to earn his respect. The fact that James prides himself on being a

soldier further enhances the understanding of Fem Shep's capable femininity which is based on her abilities in combat.

The player can also encounter another scenario with James which also allows for Fem Shep to undercut his masculinity. In the space port area of the Citadel, players can find James getting a tattoo on his back. He is seated with his top off, revealing his very muscular body as well as his existing tattoos. This allows James to display a strong masculinity as he is displaying his strength and sexuality by showing off his body and the fact that he is getting an N7 tattoo, which is a military division which only the most proficient military soldiers are part of. Fem Shep has already been inducted into N7 in an earlier episode of the series. In this scene, James asks Fem Shep if she would also like a get an N7 tattoo and when she refuses, he suggests that she could perhaps get a different tattoo "somewhere special." In making this statement, James attempts to poke fun at the femininity of Fem Shep by reducing her to a woman who will without thinking, tattoo a name on her body in a display of fealty, suggesting a dominance of his masculinity over her femininity.

Fem Shep's response to the comment made by James is to challenge him to act on all of his flirtatious comments. James reacts by stuttering and becoming unsure of himself. The confidence he had at the start of the interaction has now been lost because of Fem Shep's challenge. This action therefore presents her as dominant. The scene allows for the player to view the way in which even though James possesses a strong masculinity, it can be undercut by Fem Shep. This reveals how *Mass Effect 3* is reconstructing the representation of femininity in the game.

Fem Shep's ability to display dominance and strength over masculinity also occurs with Steve Cortez. Even though it has been established that Steve's performance of masculinity is an untraditional one due to his sexuality, his interactions and direct comparisons to Fem

Shep's femininity pushes this understanding even further. This can be seen in the way that Steve is reliant on Fem Shep's assistance in order to overcome the pain of his late husband's loss. In several different instances in the game, Steve discusses the loss of his husband with Fem Shep. She is able to offer him advice and to help him try and deal with his emotions. This dynamic between Fem Shep and Steve can almost be seen as the reversal of the traditional understanding of both genders. The socially constructed understanding of a masculine performance would dictate that masculinity should not be overly emotional and that it would not require any sort of assistance. On the other hand it would assume that femininity would be unable to cope with events and it would require a strong masculinity to console it. Through Fem Shep and Steve, *Mass Effect 3* reverses this dynamic and paints the femininity of Fem Shep as the stronger of the genders, by making Steve require the strength of Fem Shep to overcome the pain of his loss. While the male Shepard also consoles Steve in that situation it is possible to move from a paternalistic care to a romantic involvement. This space of possibility opens many interesting readings of male Shepard's performance of masculinity in relation of that of Steve's, but this is out of scope for this paper.

An important characteristic to the performance of Fem Shep's femininity is that even though she can be understood to have a strong femininity which is able to challenge masculinity, she never appears androgynous and remains very much feminine.

The relationships, as well as the comparisons, between Fem Shep and the supporting characters allow for the player to identify the way in which Fem Shep's femininity is distinctly different. By using traditional representations of femininities as well as both traditional and unconventional masculinities, *Mass Effect 3* allows for the player to engage with alternative representation of gender.

The vast majority of this engagement is based on Narratological or 'off-line' elements of the game. However, the Ludological or 'on-line' elements help to reinforce the construction of femininity for Fem Shep. The Narratological elements inform the player that the femininity of Fem Shep can be understood as an unconventional one which is defined by her strength, physical abilities, competency as a leader and skill on the battlefield. The Ludological elements of *Mass Effect 3* allow the player to experience the femininity of Fem Shep from their own perspective. They involve the player having to complete missions on different planets while fighting off enemies as well as controlling Fem Shep's interactions with and reactions to other characters. By taking control of Fem Shep, they are able to use a number of different skills and abilities. They have access to a large range of weapons to customise and they must also command their squad. All of these different activities that the player can engage in allow them to control their own experience of Fem Shep's character. Using the fragments of information which are provided by the Narratological and the Ludological frameworks, they are able to create a structured understanding of the narrative, of Fem Shep, and therefore of her femininity. One of the ways in which this is illustrated anacdotally is that the male player is able to identify with Fem Shep's character, as opposed to the reaction to Lara Croft who, Mikula argues, is objectified by male players. As evidenced by her massive popularity online Fem Shep is discussed and approached by players as a character, rather than a fighting doll. *Mass Effect 3* is able to produce a reconstructed femininity which is believable.

As it was noted earlier, the femininity of Fem Shep is not a one sided one and this is another way in which its performance remains unique. Up until this point, this research has established that the one aspect to this femininity is that it is able to display dominance over other genders within the game and establish itself as powerful largely based on its leadership and skill on the battlefield. This on its own sets the femininity of Fem Shep apart, as she does

not perform femininity such as that of Lara Croft who possesses the same physical dexterity but lacks the ability to command authority. Also, unlike Lara Croft, Fem Shep does not perform the femininity of the sexualised, objectified symbol of desire.

The other side to Fem Shep's femininity is something which requires the input of the player in order to discover. If the player opts to pursue prospective romances with Fem Shep, they open up the potential to discover that Fem Shep also possesses a femininity which is more aligned to traditional understandings. By deciding to romance another character in the game, this action reveals Fem Shep to display the primary human need to seek love and companionship. A way in which this aspect of Fem Shep's femininity can be uncovered is if the player allows Fem Shep to enter a romance with the male character of Garrus. This romance option leads to a conversation between the two who discuss how they would go about having a child. This scene adds another dimension to Fem Shep's femininity in the sense that it opens up the question of motherhood, something which up until this point has not been associated with her. The notion of motherhood is a female experience and so this scene also prevents Fem Shep from appearing androgynous. It shows how she can possess the ability to be both a solider and a potential mother, a role far removed from the traditional videogame representation of female characters.

While the interactions with Fem Shep and Steve can be considered a way in which to understand how Fem Shep's strong femininity is represented as dominant to that of Steve's, unconventional, subverted masculinity, these scenes also serve to reveal the traditionally feminine side. In the discussions between them, Fem Shep comforts and soothes Steve's pain of his loss in a maternal way. She is also very gentle in her tone of voice in order to comfort him. These elements of her performance are contrasted to her military femininity but are central in ensuring that Fem Shep is always understood as feminine and not masculine or

androgynous. In this way, her display of understanding and maternal behaviour, reinforce a traditional representation.

Another way in which in to discover an additional aspect to the femininity of Fem Shep is by romancing the character of Samantha Traynor. Should the player decide to spend time with Samantha before the last mission, they are taken to a scene where Fem Shep is lying in her lacy underwear on the bed beside Samantha. This scene, and ones like it with other romance options, is important in understanding the additional, more traditionally represented aspect of her femininity as it allows the player to view her body in a way that was not seen before this point. The Samantha Traynor scene perfectly summarises the experience of this moment as she states "I never thought I would see a woman under all that armour." This reveals the femininity of Fem Shep to the player and demonstrates how her femininity is not only constructed as her skill as a soldier, but also as a sexual, and vulnerable woman in a more traditional sense.

By having a femininity which is comprised of a combination of traditional representations of femininity as well as the untraditional role of leader and soldier, Fem Shep can be viewed to possess a holistic, rounded, and more realistic gender identity which no other characters in the game are able to demonstrate. Shepard's ability to occupy both of these femininities simultaneously is demonstrated through the cocktail dress that players can wear aboard the Normandy. The cocktail dress can be viewed as a historically feminine choice of outfit, as the short dress is considered a stereotyped form of femininity which implies a seductive role through its length and revealing neckline. Ironically, Fem Shep's walk cycle still remains the same while in the dress. Her walk cycle, when viewed in the dress with heels jars the viewer in a way that it does not when she is wearing her armour. Players in the gaming community have noted how her walk in the dress is annoying and a result of lazy animation, however this study looks at the game as a finished, cultural product which carries meaning, whether it is

intentional or not. If the dress can be argued to represent a traditional, sexualised, femininity, then the walk cycle can be interpreted as the symbol for her military femininity. Therefore the combination of the two reflects the holistic femininity of Fem Shep as constructed through *Mass Effect 3.* Another way in which this can be seen is by the juxtaposition of the bedroom scene with Samantha which is followed by a scene with Fem Shep in the War Room planning the approach for the final attack on the Reapers. Fem Shep's ability to easily move between two juxtaposing contexts allows for her to reveal the way in which she can embody both multiple aspects of femininity.



Figure 10- Fem Shep Cocktail Dress

The final way in which this can be seen is in a conversation with Samantha aboard the Normandy before Fem Shep departs to battle the Reapers. Very similarly to Garrus, and other romance options, Traynor proclaims her love for Fem Shep and begins to tell her how she would like to have a house with a white picket fence, a dog as well as children. This statement brings to light the more traditional aspects of Fem Shep's femininity, however this

statement is undercut by Samantha's following words, "now go and save the world…again." Once more the player becomes exposed to the duality of Fem Shep's femininity.

The reconstructed femininity of *Mass Effect 3,* manifested through Fem Shep, rejects the traditional cues of the performance of femininity. Through a comparison of Fem Shep's femininity to other femininities and masculinities it can be seen how *Mass Effect 3* creates a new femininity which is based on an amalgamation of a strong, military leader, a traditional sensitive woman, and a sexual being. This reveals how the femininity of Fem Shep is holistic which allows her to embrace multiple sides of the performance

The Subversion of Symbols

Dietz (1999) discusses the way in which symbols used within videogames become avenues through which gender portrayals can manifest seeing as individuals "associate gender identity with gender symbols." (427) In this sense specific symbols can be used within videogames in order to reflect different genders. A stereotypical example of this would be the symbol of a gun. In many ways a gun can be a symbol which is associated with masculinity as it is tied into ideas of violence and its design could be interpreted to represent a phallus.

Mass Effect 3 also makes use of a number of different symbols which are used to portray gender. However, one of the main themes about this use of gender in *Mass Effect 3* is that these symbols are instead subverted in order to form a new portrayal of gender through them. The effect of these different subversions of symbols assists in the creation of a believable form of femininity as manifested through Fem Shep. The two different subversions of symbols which are looked at in this research are the military as a symbol of masculinity and clothing as a signifier of femininity.

According to Mankayi (2008) the field of the military is an environment which is dominated by hegemonic masculinities that rely on performances of physical strength to demonstrate their capability and to adhere to the masculine code which is part of the military. Through the use of the character of Fem Shep, *Mass Effect 3* is able to therefore subvert the symbol of the military as something which is masculine, and allow the symbol to instead associate to something which is feminine. This outcome is achieved by allowing Fem Shep to perform her femininity in such a way that it adheres to all of the required cues of the masculine performance of the military in combination with a more traditional femininity. Fem Shep displays leadership skills; she displays physical strength as well as proficiency on the battlefield. The one difference with her performance is that it is also a truly feminine one. The other aspect of Fem Shep's femininity allows the player to also view that despite her soldier-like femininity she is female and can also display the traditional characteristics in addition to performing the cues required to be considered adept from a military perspective. The use of Fem Shep then allows *Mass Effect 3* to subvert the idea of the military which is a symbol commonly associated with masculinity and reengineers it to incorporate femininity.

The second symbol which is subverted in *Mass Effect 3* is the symbol of clothing. While clothing may carry different portrayals of genders in different cultures, this research is only looking at specific items of clothing in *Mass Effect 3.* The only items of clothing which will be the particular focus of this segment of this research is that of the cocktail dress which players can make Fem Shep wear aboard the Normandy as well as the lacy underwear worn by her in the bedroom scene with Samantha or another character romance option.

From a socially constructed point of view of the cocktail dress that Fem Shep is able wear aboard the Normandy can be interpreted to stand as a symbol of a specific performance of femininity. Based on an understanding of Mikula (1997) the dressing of a female videogame character in an outfit such as this would confirm that she is represented as a sexualised, male

fantasy. In using this idea in order to assess the perception of Fem Shep wearing the cocktail dress aboard the Normandy, one is not given the impression that Fem Shep is particularly feminine in the traditional sense as outlined by Dietz (1998). The reason this assumed feminine symbol of the cocktail dress does not reveal the femininity of a sexualised female is that the game manages to undercut that symbol and subvert it through the use of Fem Shep's mannerisms and animated movements. By subverting the symbol of the dress through the use of Fem Shep's untraditional feminine walk cycle, *Mass Effect 3*, manages to remove the connotations of the cocktail dress. The effect of this subversion makes the player question what the definition of femininity is and helps allow room for the representation of Fem Shep's reconstructed femininity.



Figure 11-Fem Shep and Samantha Traynor Romance

The lingerie worn by Fem Shep in the romantic scenes aboard the Normandy before the final mission can be understood as being another subverted symbol of gender identification. Based on a social interpretation, it is ordinarily associated with a sensuous and sexualised femininity. The subversion of this occurs as it is known that while Fem Shep does possess traditional, sexualised videogame femininity, she also performs the strong, military

femininity. This unconventional femininity of Fem Shep subverts the symbol of the lacy underwear so that it is not understood to only symbolise a single form of femininity. The bedroom scene is contrasted with a scene where Fem Shep is in the War Room preparing for battle and this juxtaposition of scenes assists in the subversion the symbol of the traditional understandings of lingerie.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

This research has explored the way in which femininity is represented, constructed and experienced through conducting an investigation into the interactive videogame *Mass Effect 3.* Taking the standpoint that a large majority of videogames historically tend to represent females in a traditional and often negative manner, it has demonstrated how, in contrast to this, *Mass Effect 3* allows for the construction of an unconventional videogame representation of femininity. In comparison to other representations of femininity in videogames, this reimagined femininity is more holistic, powerful and believable. The ability of *Mass Effect 3* to achieve this construction is attributed to several narrative and gameplay factors which include: the navigable environment of the game, its characters as well as the subversion of symbols associated with gender. It is the combination of these elements which provide the basis upon which to construct and experience the reimagined femininity of *Mass Effect 3* manifested through its protagonist.

The case study and analysis have shown that the player is not only a central figure in the process of the construction of this femininity, but also in its adoption. By being placed in a position where the player enacts the elements of this femininity, it changes the reception from a passive viewing of an alternate feminine to a complicit construction. This results in the creation of a far deeper identification with the female protagonist and the performance of her femininity. The ability of the player to actively participate in this representation naturalises the performance for the player as it becomes in a sense, their own. The impact of this, although in many cases unconscious, is far more real than a simple viewing experience which remains detached from the viewer.

While a valid critique of this study questions the intentionality of the specific choices made in the creation of *Mass Effect 3* the research is founded on an explicit premise that the analysis

has read the game as a finished cultural product. The study may examine elements which were not intended by the creators, but it has approached its analysis on the game's final incarnation as a cultural product. Even elements that may have been unintentional need to be analysed within in the final product as they still have an impact on the player experience.

The examination of femininity as represented in games reflects the need for the medium to move into a space where these forms of gender subversion become a more common place. It reveals the need to present plural femininities, and masculinities, which are distinctive, important and memorable. However, the caveat is that in order to prevent these femininities from being understood as androgynous, they must also ensure that a true feminine essence is maintained. The challenge is therefore not to create female characters that act as a stand in, or just an alternate 'skin', for male characters, but to represent holistic and realistic feminine experience.

While narrative plays a pivotal role in the communication of the message of a videogame, the other factor which contributes to the success of the videogame in creating an alternate representation of women is its interactive component and therefore the complicity which it elicits. This interactive characteristic makes games ideal spaces for reinvestigations of gender and gender roles, as this study of femininity in *Mass Effect 3* demonstrates.

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