Video games are in metamorphosis. As computer technology advances exponentially, the tools available to game developers grow in number and potency. Mass Effect, a science fiction series produced by Canadian developer Bioware, arrived in the thick of it. The medium has only just begun to gain respect as an art form. In a case study on Mass Effect 2 published in the Bulletin of Science Technology Society, Jim Bizzocchi and Joshua Tanenbaum argue that, “In spite of ongoing improvement in the technology of digital games, the poetics of videogame narratives remain in an early state, especially when compared with more mature and sophisticated narrative forms such as cinema and literature” (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum 1). Books and film have had time to spread their roots and impact society, while video games have just begun to bear fruit. Mass Effect in particular shows that games are now culturally significant. In its portrayal of gender and gender non-conformity with depth of narrative previously unseen in video games, this series advances the prominence of social issues and cultural influence in video games. With Mass Effect, Bioware has taken a medium formerly intended as a distraction or toy and delivered an 80+ hour journey full of character, diversity, and life that carries several progressive implications about gender equality in its design. The Mass Effect series isn’t flawless, falling victim to the limiting aspects of the relatively new medium such as processor power and the complexity of weaving a multi-faceted story into endless lines of code. In terms of gameplay, it has the same sort of dull moments (you hack security panels by playing tedious memory games), graphical problems (textures often “pop in” after a few seconds during scene changes), and frustrating aspects (enemies can be ruthless depending on the difficulty, so sometimes it takes several attempts to clear a level). Because of its format, though, the audience must take the good with the bad. Almost all games face these sorts of issues, but also offer something essential that books and movies can’t. Choice. The medium’s interactivity hands part of the authoring process over to the consumer, allowing them to have a say in how the story plays out. In a sense, the player is able to “plug” their brain in to their character, Commander Shepard. As long as the player is engaged, s/he is Shepard and Shepard is him/her. This bond allows for a type of cross-influence, having the player determine details of the story while the game subjects the player to not-quite brainwashing, a sort of educational experience. Games will often use this phenomenon to project a political message, and Mass Effect seizes the

Fan art depicting Miranda Lawson, one of the non-player characters in Mass Effect 2 and Mass Effect 3.
opportunity to influence its audience’s view on gender and sexuality.

The prominence of gender issues in video games didn’t start with *Mass Effect*, and it has changed quite a bit throughout their history. In November, 2012, TIME Magazine published a list of the top 100 video games of all time, categorized by decade of release (TIME). Starting in the 1970s, the list mentions seven games that feature player “characters” with no sex, gender, race, or any recognizable human attribute. They’re simply tools used to play an electronic sport – little shapes shooting asteroids and bouncing balls around the screen. The reign of testosterone in interactive media began in the 1980’s, when a definitive male-specific character shows up on this list for the first time: *Pac-Man*. Ironically, without the gendered title, players would have no idea whether Pac-Man was a man, woman, or neither. It wasn’t until *Ms. Pac-Man* came around that this gendered implication fully solidified. *Ms. Pac-Man* was one of the first distinctly female characters to show up in video games at the time, signified by lipstick and a little red bow. But, like in *Mass Effect*, the difference in gender has no effect on the gameplay. “Ms. Pac-Man was every bit as capable as Pac-Man,” says Jeremy Parish in his foreword to *1Up*’s weeklong series on gender and sexuality in video games, “unlike the female game characters who had come before (e.g., Donkey Kong’s Pauline)” (Parish). But this rebranded *Pac-Man* remained a minority. Among the few recognizably gendered characters appearing on TIME’s list, most appeared male: *Pac-Man*, Castle Wolfenstein’s unnamed Nazi-killer, and Jumpman (later rebranded as one of the most iconic video game characters of all time, Mario.) Whenever women did appear in a video game, they tended to fill the role of a damsel-in-distress, like in *Super Mario Bros.* and *The Legend of Zelda*.

This digital patriarchy continued for over two decades, with little dissonance. Of TIME’s top 100 games, 60 were released in the 1990s and 2000s. Only two games released since 2010 made the list, including the third installment *Mass Effect*. Of these 60 more recent games, most featured distinctly male main characters or, if multiple playable characters were available, didn’t offer many non-male options. Games like *Tomb Raider* stand out with strong female leads, but, “It’s debatable whether Lara Croft represents female empowerment or crass objectification in polygonal form” (TIME). For a while, the message from developers has been clear: the target audience is straight, white males, and therefore games should be about straight, white males. In order to achieve the depth and impact desired by storytellers and consumers hungry for something more meaningful than shallow, digital toys, writers would need to expand their scope to a much wider demographic.

When role-playing games (RPGs) like *Mass Effect* came along, it became clear that developers were now ready to tackle these challenges. Careful attention to player experience and desire for choice became one of the most powerful techniques for creating video game narratives, allowing players to tweak the experience to their liking. *Mass Effect* uses these techniques to their highest potential, and it tarts with the ability to play with gender identity.

The first menu in the first *Mass Effect* game presents you with an option: are you male or female? It doesn’t matter which the player identifies with in the real world – it’s an opportunity for him or her to step into the shoes of another “type” of person. When a male player selects a female avatar, or vice versa, they’ve already experienced part of the game’s gender-bending narrative. Next, you select a couple of backstory-related details and your character class. This class is a combination of conventional combat skills, technology prowess, and biotics – a telekinetic ability enabled by the talented use of a fictional element used as a plot device to explain the impossible technology in *Mass Effect*, Element Zero. Finally, you get the option to run with a preset character design or to customize everything from skin tone to nose shape. Despite this level of personalization, the gender binary offered in *Mass Effect*, and RPGs in general, has room for criticism. Perhaps I
want my “female” Shepard to have a penis? Seeing as genitals are never shown in the game, however, this aspect is up to the imagination of the player, so the “sex” vs. “gender” distinction isn’t much of a problem. That said, the stereotypical difference in body types between male and female characters can be seen as a shortcoming of an otherwise diverse and somewhat unrestricted game. Male Shepard always appears muscular, while Female Shepard is thin, almost dainty. It’s the only aspect that isn’t customizable, and in terms of gender narrative, it is a severe limitation. As stated, though, video games are still evolving, and this flaw can be explained partially by technical constraints. Animations, regardless of character model, play out the same way, so if players had been given the option to adjust body height/weight, the risk of having characters oddly clip through walls and other scenery appears. The choice to limit body type was likely made partially to avoid breaking immersion – anything that reminds a player that this is a video game and not real life damages the narrative impact of the game. Even so, this flaw, when seen alongside other gendered aspects of the game, contributes to that question and overall theme – Are you male or female?

After they design their character, the player takes control of Commander Shepard’s fate. A Council of alien races grants Shepard the rank of SPECTRE, above-the-law status, in order to hunt down a rogue agent. This gives the player the illusion of choice in a way that’s believable in-universe. *Mass Effect* then tracks every detail of player choices across all three games, saving massive amounts of data that shapes the narrative throughout the entire series. This results in a universe that ends up almost completely unique to each player. Non-player characters (NPCs) remember conversations you have with them years later. Deciding to land on one planet may result in the irreversible death of an ally on another. Rushing into a final confrontation without adequate preparation can even get your entire team killed. Of course, players are limited by the number of dialogue options available, part of this illusion of choice. The over-arching story essentially plays out with the same beginnings, middles, and ends for every player. In the words of TIME’s Matt Peckham, “*Mass Effect* is in that sense more a story-telling than a role-playing game” (Peckham). BioWare has a particular story to tell, but the limited amount of freedom they give the player creates a universe that feels slightly different with every playthrough. Through dialogue and action, the player tells the story of Shepard, *their* Shepard, and his or her fight against the biggest threat in the history of the galaxy.

Embedded in an epic tale of misfits banding together to stop an ancient race of machines bent on destroying all organic life in the galaxy is a story of trust, loyalty, love, and sexuality. Player choice not only affects the outcome of firefights and politics, but also opens up a world of romance. Through dialogue and various choices across all three games, Commander Shepard can pursue romantic interests, each of which eventually leads to a love scene. The depiction of sex in the first game ended up causing quite a stir at Fox News, which ran a segment entitled, “‘SE’Xbox?” Among other poorly researched claims slamming the game, one correspondent reported:

“[*Mass Effect*] . . . features full digital nudity. Imagine! And the ability for players to engage in graphic sex – the person who’s playing gets to decide what’s going to happen between the two people, if you know what I mean.” (FOX NEWS)

Had the reporter played the game, she would have noted that the sex scenes throughout the series, while steamy, are actually pretty tame. They show nothing that wouldn’t pass censors on network television (no nipples, genitalia, etc.) and involve no direct player interaction during the scene itself. (The “role playing” aspect of romance stops after conversation and seduction.) The controversy stirred up by Fox News exemplifies a deep-seated fear that video games are a bad influence.
ence. The network focused on the idea that sex in media is pornographic by nature, but does not acknowledge the important role of sex in fiction. Sex scenes have been depicted in movies for decades. Love and sex are extremely common aspects of storytelling, playing minor to key roles in countless films. They drive humans on a fundamental level, as Hilary Goldstein, a video game critic and columnist, notes that, “Sex is very much a part of our culture and should not be ignored by anyone hoping to tell a complex narrative.” Tracing sex scenes in Mass Effect reveals how the series became more complex as it progressed. Mass Effect capitalizes on the human (and, apparently, alien) need for companionship and support. Goldstein argues that, “For most characters, sex is the final barrier of trust. In a galaxy at war, there’s little room for vulnerability.” This vulnerability, woven between the bits and bytes of Mass Effect, is a very real, very human element that reflects one of the most basic building blocks of our culture.

One character illustrates this vulnerability in an unorthodox way. Jack, first introduced in Mass Effect 2, defies female gender norms in every way. Bioware designed her shaved head, tattoos, and belt-buckle bikini to give her a visual gruffness that reflects her temper and extreme biotic capabilities. Entering Jack’s romance subplot requires different tactics than other characters, too. Dialogue options that assert Shepard’s dominance, arguably to the point of verbal abuse, earn Jack’s respect. Keeping this up results in one of the more rough sex scenes in the series. But there’s another route available. As Goldstein observes, getting to know Jack by showing patience and an interest in her captive upbringing by Cerberus, a human supremacist group, brings about a surprising result:

Those who show Jack kindness and patience, who earn her trust and her love, get something far more potent leading into the crew’s suicide run against the Collectors. Instead of sex, you curl up on the bed with Jack and spoon. It’s a surprising, soft touch that showcases the purpose behind all of Mass Effect’s romantic scenes.

Lo and behold, the most “grungy” character in the series turns out to have one of the most surprisingly tender backgrounds. Jack describes sex as a meaningless, primal activity more than anyone in the series. Her initial demeanor suggests that she is interested in rough, emotionless sex. The existence of such wildly different possibilities suggests that even “shocking” appearances and behaviors are not only acceptable, but to be celebrated. But it’s not just her romantic interaction with Shepard that makes Jack interesting. Her complex story is further complicated by her interaction with other non-player characters.

Jack’s antithesis comes in the form of Miranda Lawson, a Cerberus agent also introduced in the second game as a possible romantic interest for (male) Shepard. She’s designed in every way to be the perfect woman. Her character model is based on her voice actress, Australian actress Yvonne Strahovski, who is known for her role as the sexy and unlikely romantic interest of the titular character of the TV series Chuck. Bioware clearly knew what they were going for in selecting Strahovski as the model for Miranda – a beautiful woman and nerd icon many fans would kill to have a shot with. Jack is the dramatic opposite of Miranda in a yin-yang, almost symbiotic relationship, and the game plays on this directly. Due to her traumatic history with Cerberus, Jack immediately displays hostility toward Miranda. It’s up to the player, through Shepard, to intervene and keep the peace, consequently uncovering both characters’ innermost insecurities and demons. Despite their huge difference in outward appearance, the two characters eventually reveal a stark inner similarity. Miranda harbors an intense resentment toward her father, and even though she’s fully aware of her “perfection”, she doesn’t see her value as a person. Similarly, Jack’s childhood abuse left her feeling worthless and furious. Both Jack and Miranda have attributes that make them more physically
capable than most men (and aliens) in the galaxy. Over time, as these women grow closer to the other cast of characters and go through various experiences with the player, gameplay makes them independent and diverse. Model-esque girls with heavy makeup and hourglass figures exist in the real world. So do tatted-up biker chicks. By including these polar opposites alongside dozens of other distinct female characters, Bioware recognizes the diversity of women without necessarily portraying them as sex objects.

*Mass Effect* takes its gender representation further than, "Women can be unique," of course. The games feature a large variety of alien species – from the birdlike Turians to the reptilian, war-mongering Krogans. One race stands out, however, in the discussion of sexuality in video games – the Asari. This blue-skinned, humanoid race of powerful biotics have only one sex, with every member resembling a human woman. They reproduce through "melding," a telepathic linking of the minds that, according to game lore, creates what amounts to a scramble of DNA, resulting in pregnancy. This allows Asari to mate with members of any species, including humans. Romance subplots come into play here, but with a twist. In the first game, a naïve young Asari scientist, Liara T’Soni, finds herself aboard the *Normandy*, Shepard’s spaceship. Unlike the other romance subplots in the first game, which require a Shepard to be a specific gender in order to create a heterosexual match, players can woo Liara regardless of the gender they chose for Shepard. Unfortunately, the opportunity for a female Shepard to romance a female-appearing Liara is the only representation of same-sex love in the first game, leaving homosexual males by the wayside for the time being. But Liara’s bisexuality did spark an interesting idea that laid a framework for Bioware to expand upon homosexuality in the sequels. Human players, as sexual producers, see a human female romantically pursuing an alien that looks like a human woman and call the attraction “lesbian.” This label never comes up in the games, though. Any homophobic argument of, “It’s not natural; they’re making a choice,” can’t be made regarding these aliens – their attraction is undeniably biological. When a player is plugged into this world, the developers can play on the cognitive dissonance created by this situation, having the narrative effect of advocating for homosexuality in the real world.

Of course, the inclusion of an entirely bisexual race of alien women can be argued to appeal primarily to male players’ horniness. The first game can give that impression, but by the end of the series, *Mass Effect 3* continues every possible romantic subplot from the first two games and adds several more, finally including both male-male and female-female options involving two humans. Furthermore, all of these romantic subplots involve fairly deep emotional narratives. While in the first *Mass Effect*, all sex scenes are identical, aside from substituted character models, the sequels feature a unique scene for every character pairing. Bioware simply needed to warm up a bit with their romantic writing. After offering only one human-human same-sex option...
in *Mass Effect 2*, *Mass Effect 3* finally offers several choices for a homosexual Commander Shepard. Cognitive dissonance becomes an even stronger asset at this point. When various characters drop hints at their sexuality, most notably Steve Cortez, the Normandy’s shuttle pilot, Shepard’s pre-scribed reaction gives the player no choice but to be accepting. Apparently, in the future, homosexuality has become as ordinary as sexuality itself – an implication that Bioware makes based on current sociological trends. Whatever the player’s own beliefs may be regarding same-sex love, as long as they’re plugged into the mind of Commander Shepard, they open themselves to that influence and thus discover some small amount of acceptance for difference.

Jack, Miranda, and Liara join an entire cast of characters in the *Mass Effect* canon with prominent gender implications. The societal issues brought up in this space opera go far beyond the romantic path any particular Shepard takes. Every character and every race comes with an incredibly complex backstory and intense narratives at every turn. *Mass Effect* is a paragon of what video games as literature can do to not only entertain, but educate. The way this game shows acceptance and normality of gender diversity will be absorbed by a player immersed in the story. Alongside the thrill of hunting down rogue agents, blowing up killer robots, and saving all sentient life from annihilation, a seed of acceptance is planted in the gamer’s mind – something video games don’t often attempt. *Mass Effect* embodies the cultural influence of video games and has and will continue to have a massive effect on the medium. As other games follow suit, this increasingly popular, extra-immersive form of entertainment will open more minds and do more justice to real-world minorities who deserve better and more honest representation.

**Works Cited**


