

The Robot, the Alien and the Woman
The Representation of “Otherness” in the *Mass Effect* Trilogy



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Abstract

Within science fiction narratives, the figure of the “Other” is often used to touch upon current issues regarding technology, gender and race. As a medium that corresponds to the experiences of cultural digitalization, video games serve as a valuable contemporary case study for looking at representations of “Otherness”. Due to its position within popular culture, its critical acclaim and its narrative focus, this thesis analyzes the *Mass Effect* trilogy created by Canadian developer BioWare. This thesis looks specifically at the representation of three “Other” figures in science fiction: the artificial “Other”, the alien “Other” and the female “Other” in order to answer the following research question: how is “Otherness” represented in the *Mass Effect* trilogy? When analyzing these representations it becomes clear that the *Mass Effect* trilogy for the most part adheres to the conventions within contemporary science fiction cinema and portrays the “Other” in a positive light. The notable exception is the figure of the female “Other”, who due to the medium’s primarily male audience is often reduced to a sexualized stereotype intended to facilitate male pleasure and fantasy fulfillment.

Keywords

Mass Effect, “Otherness”, Game Studies, Science Fiction

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Introduction

When Mary Shelly wrote her famous Gothic novel *Frankenstein* in 1818 she inadvertently created a legacy that would go on to dominate a genre that did not yet truly exist: science fiction. The creation of an artificial and supposedly inferior creature which eventually surpasses and turns against its creator has become a narrative that has been told over and over again in science fiction literature, cinema and other forms of media such as video games. Evolving out of Gothic horror literature, the science fiction genre has for a long time maintained an air of negativity and menace. “Science fiction, from the outset, has been the narrative of doomsday scenarios” (Sardar 3). Prolific science fiction writer Isaac Asimov (1919-1992) called this rather pessimistic view of the advancement of technology the “Frankenstein Complex”, which implies the “fear of man broaching, through technology, into God’s realm and being unable to control his own creations” (McCauley 10). While authors like Asimov attempted to portray technology in a more favorable light, the genre remained primarily dominated by the negative “complex” created by Shelly, as evidenced by popular films like *The Terminator* (1984), *Robocop* (1987) and *The Matrix* (1999), television shows like *Battlestar Galactica* (2004-2009) and video games like *Halo* (2001-). This phenomenon is worth exploring as science fiction narratives play a major role in shaping public perception about topics such as technology and humanity. As Sue Short puts it in her book *Cyborg Cinema*: the ideas raised by [these] narratives may . . . help to shape awareness and understanding, on both a personal and political basis, of both the world and our place in it. It is in this questioning ability that [its] most progressive potential lies, posing fundamental questions about identity and existence in the 21st century. (52)

As technology advances and mankind keeps moving towards an increased use of digital media, the ways this technology and the digital age are perceived become ever more prevalent. What was once seen as impossible science fiction can now become reality. As Short’s quote indicates, our perception of the world is very much based on sources of popular culture. Apart from focusing on technology, science fiction narratives also serve as a great window to look at social issues and humanity as a whole as “the space that science fiction most intimately explores is interior and human; to tell future stories it recycles the structure and tropes of ancient narrative tradition and to devise dramatic tension it deploys issues and angst that are immediately present” (Sardar 1). Signature science fiction figures like aliens or robots can act as metaphors or substitutes for contemporary human issues. In other words,

science fiction narratives use the postcolonial figure of the “Other”¹ to reflect and comment on humanity itself. Postcolonial theory has examined “how certain distinctions of race, cultural values and ideals have dominated others, with a focus on how Western rule has been preserved” (Short 106). The figure of the “Other” is used to create hierarchical distinctions between “us” and “them”, between those at the center and those at the outside. By using creatures that are markedly different from humans, science fiction can create clear and distinct “Others” that serve to explore issues relevant to their respective time.

Science fiction has been a popular genre for many decades and has spawned numerous influential works that address these topics. Important authors in the science fiction genre include the aforementioned Isaac Asimov and his robot stories, Arthur C. Clarke who co-wrote the highly influential film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and Philip K. Dick, whose stories inspired numerous blockbuster films². The latter’s influence also spawned the prestigious Philip K. Dick Award, which is an annually given prize awarded to the best science fiction paperback. Their works continue to leave their mark upon the genre and, apart from Asimov’s work, are indicative of the air of menace that characterizes most science fiction writing. However, these works are clearly products of their respective time. As we shift ever more into a digital world, it is worthwhile to explore a modern case study in order to analyze current representations of “Otherness” within science fiction and see how these representations have changed compared to the past, if at all.

As the impact of the science fiction genre is primarily rooted within popular culture and media, it makes sense to explore science fiction scenarios within a medium that is both highly popular and is thus able to reach a massive audience as well as exemplifying our current digital age: video games³. This form of media has grown immensely in the last decades and now surpasses film and literature in terms of revenue. Every year the Electronic Entertainment Association (ESA), “the U.S. association dedicated to serving the business and public affairs needs of companies that publish computer and video games for video game consoles, handheld devices, personal computers and the Internet” (Overview), writes a report

¹ For the sake of clarity, I will always capitalize these concepts: “Other”, “Otherness”.

² Examples include the 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep* which served as the inspiration for the 1982 film *Blade Runner* and the 1956 short story “The Minority Report” which inspired the 2002 film of the same name.

³ Several terms exist for this medium: Video games, computer games or digital games. These terms are all used within academic discourse. Gundolf Freyermuth prefers the term digital games in order to distinguish them from analog games (boardgames) (191-192). However, within common discourse as well as many of my main sources the term video games is used most often. Similarly, the visual component of games plays a major role in my analysis. I will therefore use this term throughout my thesis. When I use simply the term games, I will always be talking about video games, unless otherwise specified.

on the industry's growth and revenue. According to this report approximately 155 million Americans play video games with 42% of Americans playing games for 3 hours or more per week. 56% of gamers are male. In terms of revenue the industry sold over 135 million games and generated more than \$22 billion in revenue in 2014. However, despite being highly popular and successful, video games are still very often seen as a low form of art in the common eye, unable to reach the same narrative depth as literature or cinema. But as technology has advanced video games are now able to tell complex narratives and can address some of the issues discussed above. Similarly, as finishing a game from beginning to end tends to be an experience that takes much longer than watching a film, with some games taking an average of 20-30 hours to complete, this medium is able to convey much more material into a single product. In recent years more scholarly attention has been drawn to the field of game studies and its impact in contemporary society. In his "Manifesto for a Ludic Century", important game studies scholar Eric Zimmerman notes that video games have replaced traditional media and have become the dominant medium for the twenty-first century.

Film and television, the defining media of the 20th century, corresponded—with the linearity of their passively received audivisions—to the information and entertainment needs of industrial work and culture. Digitalization, however ... initiated a categorical metamorphosis: "In the last few decades, information has taken a playful turn. [...] When information is put a play, game-like experiences replace linear media." (qtd. in Freyermuth 14)

Through their popularity video games reach a widespread audience, influencing primarily younger generations whose perceptions of these issues will shape the future. In "The Rhetoric of Video Games", Ian Bogost explains this idea stating that:

video games are not just stages that facilitate cultural, social, or political practices; they are also media where cultural values themselves can be represented—for critique, satire, education, or commentary. When understood in this way, we can learn to read games as deliberate expressions of particular perspectives. In other words, video games make claims about the world, which players can understand, evaluate, and deliberate. (119)

Whether deliberate or not, video games offer representations and values that influence the player and help create meaning. As the medium continues to increase in popularity, and the use of digital media becomes ever more prevalent, video games offer a unique perspective due to their interactivity and are worth exploring in this fashion.

In the interactive mirror of digital games we experience ourselves and search for an understanding of what is under development in our everyday lives—a digital society and culture just as different from the industrial culture of the 19th and 20th centuries as that culture was distinct from the society and culture of the preindustrial period.

(Freyermuth 16)

Lastly, due to their digital nature, video games also contain a transnational component and are able to reach a global audience: “[a]s an audiovisual medium of expression, representation and storytelling, video games are produced, distributed and used not just nationally and internationally within larger cultural realms, but globally. In digital culture they influence the perception of the self and of the world beyond all borders, i.e., transnationally” (25). The representations and meanings conveyed in these video games thus influence people on a global level. As many popular video games are created in North America, they are dominated by Western narrative traditions, which I will discuss more in my chapter on theory. Therefore video games can be seen to serve a similar role within a transnational context as Hollywood cinema has done in the past. In this light, video games serve as a highly relevant medium for looking at contemporary representations of “Otherness”.

One of the most popular and influential science fiction video game franchises in recent years is the *Mass Effect* series (2007-2012). The *Mass Effect* trilogy, as it is most often referred to, was developed by the Canadian developer BioWare who had previously worked on popular role-playing games (or RPG’s), such as *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, a video game spin-off of the popular *Star Wars* franchise which served as a major influence for *Mass Effect*⁴. The trilogy has sold over 14 million copies as of July 5, 2014 (Gann par 5) and has garnered much critical praise from reviewers and the general audience with *Mass Effect 2* (2010) in particular receiving numerous awards and accolades, including a Best Game Award by the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA). Furthermore, *Mass Effect 2* has often been considered as one of the best video games of all time and its art was selected as

⁴ For the sake of clarity I will use *Mass Effect* as a group name to refer to the trilogy as a whole. When I specifically discuss the first game I will use the term *Mass Effect 1*

part of a special exhibit in the Smithsonian American Art museum. The trilogy focuses very heavily on creating rich, complex narratives and its science fiction setting explores many of the themes that correlate with the “Frankenstein Complex” and “Otherness”, being heavily inspired by science fiction cinema. Each installment in the series has its own principal story arch while simultaneously contributing to a larger narrative that spans all three games, culminating in the climax of *Mass Effect 3*. The series also relies heavily on player choices. The choices each individual player makes alters the story, character interaction and the conclusion in some way. The choices and consequences carry over from one game to the next. Some of these fundamental choices offer a unique way of analyzing people’s perceptions of “Otherness”. Despite its critical and commercial success, relatively little academic research has been done on *Mass Effect*. The 2012 text “Mass Effect 2: A Case Study in the Design of Game Narrative” by Jim Bizzocchi and Joshua Tanenbaum focuses on parameters for narrative design in this game and highlights how *Mass Effect 2*’s systems help create a meaningful connection between the game and the player. However, *Mass Effect* has not yet been analyzed as part of the larger science fiction genre, nor has particular research been done about the representations the narrative presents to its audience. Due to its position within popular culture, its critical acclaim and the narrative focus of this franchise, the *Mass Effect* trilogy serves as a fascinating contemporary case study. Therefore, this thesis will analyze this video game series in order to answer the following research question:

How is “Otherness” represented in the *Mass Effect* trilogy?

In order to answer this research question I will distinguish and analyze three distinct variations of “Otherness” as part of the science fiction genre within the games and answer these three sub-questions:

- How is the Artificial “Other” represented in the *Mass Effect* trilogy?
- How is the Alien “Other” represented in the *Mass Effect* trilogy?
- How is the Female “Other” represented in the *Mass Effect* trilogy?

In order to answer my research question and its sub-questions, I will make use of the humanities methodology of close reading” “Close reading is the detailed observation of a work, based on immersion into the piece sustained over repeated viewing⁵, supplemented by

⁵ Or in this case, playing

the systematic notation of relevant details, leading to an explication and higher order analysis of the work” (Bizzochi and Tanenbaum 395). By doing a close reading of the *Mass Effect* trilogy, I will focus on how ideas of “Otherness” are represented. As a science fiction video game, *Mass Effect* is linked to the genre’s history and traditions. Therefore I will specifically look at the concept of “Otherness” as it has been used within the science fiction genre. I will look at the representation of “Otherness” from both a visual perspective as well looking at how game mechanics play into this representation. The scope of this thesis does not allow me to do an in-depth analysis of *Mass Effect*’s music and sonic qualities. I will, however, reference these aspects when relevant. In the following chapter I will argue that video games share a close link with the medium of film. As will become clear in the chapters, *Mass Effect* attempts to create a cinematic experience and uses elements like iconography, music and science fiction cinema tropes to achieve this effect. Therefore, I will use science fiction cinema as a basis for analyzing visual representation. In terms of *Mass Effect*’s game mechanics, I will use Ian Bogost’s concept of procedural rhetoric to analyze how these mechanics and systems affect certain representations.

In the wake of its popularity the *Mass Effect* franchise has spawned several other spin-off forms of media, including novels, comic books and a short animated film. However, I will only focus on the main three games, as these are the primary and most popular sources and the scope of this thesis does not permit a closer look at additional material.

In the following chapter I will discuss the necessary theory relevant to answering my research question and sub-questions. In order to define “Otherness” and analyze its representation I will make use of Edward Said’s highly influential work *Orientalism* within the field of postcolonial studies. Published in 1978, the work remains highly important and has left its mark on other fields of study. In the book, Said discusses Western perceptions of the East or “Orient” and establishes that what defines Europe is “the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures” (Said 7). Within postcolonial studies, Said concepts of “Otherness” and “Orientalism” have often been used for media analysis. According to Gerald Sim, “film and media studies generally engage with [“Orientalism”] as a theoretical buttress for poststructuralist analyses of Eurocentric representations of cultural or ethnic Others” (240). Naturally, these concepts have also repeatedly found their way into science fiction cinema as “the repressed historical and cultural identity of the Western civilisation resurfaces again and again in the science fiction visions of the future” (Sardar 16). Science fiction thus produces Western-centric conservative texts that continue to invoke traditional binary oppositions and stereotypes. “In highlighting social

concerns and societal tensions, science-fiction films for decades ... would utilize the binary oppositions high/low, inside/outside, order/ disorder, technology/nature to translate into thematic issues of male/female, middle class/working class, self/Other, and human/non-human” (Desser 4). In his book *Aliens R US*, Ziauddin Sardar highlights

[t]hose elements that make Hollywood science fiction such a Eurocentric enterprise: individualism championed as a sacred absolute, humanism straight out of the Romantic tradition of modernity, Western experience projected as the universal and eternal, and the world reduced to little more than an exotic location for the consumption of the West ... The white man’s burden, so inherent in Western self-understanding, is ever present in the narratives and morals of science fiction cinema. (Sardar 16)

As mentioned before, science fiction generally characterizes itself by its negative tone. The figure of the “Other” repeatedly serves as a central opposing force in science fiction narratives and is meant to invoke a sense of fear. This can be seen clearly when looking at some of the early 1950s B movies which replace the monsters of the Gothic horror genre with aliens and robots.

The central theme of [1950s] B movies was fear: fear of communism, fear of totalitarian regimes, and fear of nuclear war. These elements fed into American political culture finding a steady reflection in contemporary film production. Such fears were represented through the cultural metaphor of ‘aliens’, an all too familiar vehicle through which ‘difference’ and ‘otherness’ are deployed. (34)

This negative representation of the “Other” has remained a dominant trope in science fiction for many decades. Science fiction narratives remain rooted within traditional western styles of storytelling. “Blockbuster cinema, in which sf has played a large part since the 1970s, is often criticized for the way in which it permits the production of spectacle to override more traditional concerns with character development, narrative coherence and thematic elaboration, and thus produces extremely conservative texts” (Bould 94-95). While the figure of the “Other” is thus based within the discourse of postcolonialism and Orientalism, it has taken on a unique role within science fiction in the forms of aliens and robots. I will therefore look particularly at the developments of the “Other” within science fiction. Major sources that

I will use include the important science fiction scholar Vivian Sobchack, whose book *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film* remains an incredibly important overview of key concepts, tropes and iconographies within the American science fiction film. Most notably, Sobchack has recognized a major shift that occurred within science fiction cinema regarding the representation of the “Other”. I hypothesize that this *Mass Effect*’s representation of “Otherness” is indicative of this shift. In recent years, much research within science fiction studies has focused on the figure of the posthuman or transhuman, a hybrid figure that combines humanity with technology, and is able to transcend the binary oppositions of race and gender. An example of such a figure is the cyborg. This concept has become very relevant within our digital era. An important text is Donna Haraway’s 1985 text “A Cyborg Manifesto”. According to Haraway, [b]y the late twentieth century...we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism. In short, we are cyborgs” (150). Haraway uses the concept of the cyborg primarily within a feminist discourse. In her book *Cyborg Cinema*, Sue Short also looks at the cyborg from different perspectives, including the cyborgs’ connection to the figure of the robot. Her canonical text has spawned a new subfield known as cyber feminism. This field also plays a major role regarding the representation of female within the digital realm of video games. To discuss this, I will make use of Jeffrey Brown’s text *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture*. Regarding game studies themselves I will make use of Eric Zimmerman and Katie Salen’s work on the concept of play as well as use Ian Bogost’s model of procedural rhetoric as a way of interpreting and analyzing the unique systems of the video game medium.

After discussing the necessary theory, the subsequent chapters will each discuss one of the sub-questions. Chapter 2 will focus on the figure of the artificial “Other” and will discuss the various robots and artificial entities present within the game. Chapter 3 will look at alien “Others”. Chapter 4 will discuss the female “Other”. This last chapter will also include characters that apply to the chapter 2, but as their gender plays a major part in their representation, I have found it more relevant to discuss them chapter 4.

As I will discuss numerous visual components of the games, I will repeatedly reference images which can be found in the Appendix at the end of the thesis. For more clarification, I have added links to several YouTube videos that show key scenes within the games relevant to the representations I discuss.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

This chapter will discuss the necessary theories and methodology required to answer my research question: How is “Otherness” represented in *Mass Effect*? I will begin by discussing the field of game studies and the way video games can be read and analyzed as well as linking the visual components of video games to the medium of film. With this link in mind I will follow by discussing the concept of “Otherness” and its specific use within science fiction cinema as well as highlighting some key notions relevant to each of the three forms of “Otherness” that form my sub-questions. Finally I will discuss *Mass Effect* within the context of the science fiction genre and give a brief summary of its plot. This chapter will give a general overview of key theories relevant to the case studies. Particular details will be discussed when relevant in the respective chapters.

1.1 Game Studies

In order to be able to analyze “Otherness” in *Mass Effect* it is important to understand how video games can be read as a form of media. While video games share the visual component of the cinema, which is highly important when looking at certain representations, video games also have unique systems that create meaning. While I will discuss *Mass Effect*’s visual components and its close relation to science fiction cinema and its tropes, it is also necessary to see how the medium of video games can offer new perspectives and alters the way representations are formed. For a long time game studies primarily focused on the cognitive and psychological effects of games. More recently, as games have become more widespread and acknowledged, more effort has been put in understanding how video games work as a medium as well as game design and the concept of games as a learning tool for children. Important scholars in recent years have been Joost Raessens and Jeffrey Goldstein from the University of Utrecht. Their co-edited *Handbook of Computer Game Studies* offers a wide range of topics from several scholars regarding the history, design, psychology and cognitive effects of video games. Other important scholars include Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman who focus primarily on game design and the concept of play. Similarly, Ian Bogost, professor of Interactive Computing at the Georgia Institute of Technology, has established a method for reading and analyzing video games. Lastly Gundolf Freyermuth, professor of Media and Game Studies and founding director of the Cologne Game Lab, has recently released the book *Games, Game Design, Game Studies* which offers a clear overview of the field and touches

upon several topics discussed by the previously mentioned scholars . This section will discuss several of their theories which I will use as a basis for analysis in the following chapters.

Video games are intrinsically linked to the concept of play. According to Johan Huizinga, one of the leading scholars of play in the twentieth century, “play and games, which have been maligned in recent history as trivial and frivolous, are in fact at the very center of what makes us human” (qtd. in Salen and Zimmerman 59). Play lies at the very heart of culture and can be found in almost every facet of life. To play means to interact with certain systems within the context of a game, or in other words: “play is the free space of movement within a more rigid structure [and] refers to the “possibility space” created by constraints of all kinds” (Bogost 120). Every kind of play or game has its own set of possibility spaces. In order to achieve certain results during play, a player must work within this possibility space. In video games, “we explore the possibility space its rules afford by manipulating the symbolic systems the game provides. The rules do not merely create the experience of play—they also construct the meaning of the game. That is to say, the gestures, experiences, and interactions a game’s rules allow (and disallow) make up the game’s significance” (121). In order to create a significant (video) game experience, play has to be meaningful. In their text “Game Design and Meaningful Play”, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman define meaningful play in two ways, descriptive and evaluative:

-Meaningful play in a game emerges from the relationship between player action and system outcome; it is the process by which a player takes action within the designed system of a game and the system responds to the action. The meaning of an action in a game resides in the relationship between action and outcome.

-Meaningful play occurs when the relationship between actions and outcomes in a game are both discernable and integrated into the larger context of the game. (60-61)

Games thus rely on a close interaction between the game and the player, in which the player understands the systems and the way they can be manipulated to achieve a desired outcome. This interactive component is what differentiates games from other forms of media. Video games offer an interactive experience which demands active participation by the player in order to progress. Gundolf Freyermuth recognizes three qualities that distinguish video games from other forms of media:

- 1) procedurality and the capability for systematic representation;
 - 2) arbitrary, real-time manipulation of narrative algorithms which empowers the user to interact in and with multi- or nonlinear/hyperepic narratives;
 - 3) real-time generation of near-photorealistic images and cinematically staged 3D storytelling spaces which compel the user to select their own procedural process.
- (Freyermuth 136)

The first two qualities are important for the analysis of video games. In his texts *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* and “The Rhetoric of Video Games”, Ian Bogost, attempts to explain how this interactive component affects players. At the heart of his argument lies the idea that due to this interactive participation the player learns how to behave and respond in order to achieve desired effects while he is playing. Video games offer incentives through the use of progression and the player is expected to perform certain actions in order to achieve said progression. Bogost calls this unique practice “procedural rhetoric”. “*Procedurality* refers to a way of creating, explaining, or understanding processes. And processes define the way things work: the methods, techniques, and logics that drive the operation of systems ... *Rhetoric* refers to effective and persuasive expression. Procedural rhetoric, then, is a practice of using processes persuasively” (3). Within the possibility space of a video game, processes are used to convey meaning to the player. Bogost also establishes two models for procedural rhetoric: “[f]ollowing the classical model, procedural rhetoric entails persuasion—to change opinion or action. Following the contemporary model, procedural rhetoric entails expression—to convey ideas effectively” (125). This last notion ties in closely with the definition of meaningful play given by Salen and Zimmerman. When playing a game, a player will be given a certain goal or objective to complete the game. This objective and the means to achieve it must be clearly expressed to the player. If a player performs a wrong action or an action detrimental to achieving the objective, the game must use its processes to persuade the player to change his behavior.

According to Bogost, “one use of procedural rhetoric is to expose and explain the hidden ways of thinking that often drive social, political, or cultural behavior” (128). Like other forms of media, video games do not exist within a cultural vacuum and carry the biases of their creators as well as the notions of their time. Video games are imbued with meaning and have the ability to persuade their players of certain ideologies through their processes. Procedural rhetoric is important when looking at the representation of “Otherness” in *Mass Effect*. Aside from visual representations, the systems and processes of a game can also affect the representation. This is particularly important regarding *Mass Effect*’s focus on player

choice. As mentioned before, the games' narrative changes based on the choices and views of the player. This directly affects the portrayal and representations of some of the key moments and characters within the games.

While video games use unique systems of representation, like all media, video games borrow elements from all sorts of narrative art. As an audiovisual medium, video games can be closely tied to the medium of film. According to Freyermuth there is an "extensive adaption of aesthetics between movies and games. Visually both are becoming more similar. Advanced nonlinear audiovisions strive for the impression of photorealism" (Freyermuth 118). While early video games suffered from technical limitations, current video games are increasingly able to create a believable sense of photorealism and are able to compete with cinema on a technical level. Video games also make heavy use of cinematic storytelling tradition as

[d]igital games have oriented themselves to the narrative conventions of film ... Today the "cinematographicity" of games is evident on many levels: for example, in the use of edited cut scenes and split screens or in the appropriation of "classical" camera angles and well-established techniques of flashback and flash forward that transport the eye through space and time. Furthermore, basic structures of cinematic storytelling, such as the hero's journey and genre conventions, have been absorbed by digital games. (Freyermuth 119)

The *Mass Effect* trilogy makes use of many of these elements and is firmly rooted within science fiction cinema genre conventions. The games aim at creating an atmosphere that is similar to science fiction film. It features long and heavily directed segments of non-interactive cinematics, known as cut scenes and offers the option to turn on a film grain filter in the first two games in order to make it feel more cinematic. More importantly, as will become clear in the chapters themselves, *Mass Effect* makes extensive use of classic science fiction cinema iconography. Lastly, in terms of music, the games focus on epic orchestral themes not unlike those created by famous film composers like John Williams or Hans Zimmer⁶. Because of *Mass Effect*'s close relation to science fiction cinema, it makes sense to use cinematic representation of "Otherness" as a basis for analyzing the visual representations

⁶ See for example *Mass Effect 2*'s "Suicide Mission" by Jack Wall:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VTsD2FjmLsw>

within *Mass Effect*. In the next section, I will therefore discuss the specific role of the “Other” in science fiction cinema.

1.2 “Otherness” in Science Fiction Cinema

This section will discuss the postcolonial concept of “Other” and its specific role within the genre of science fiction. I will also discuss the concept of stereotypes as they play a major role in the representation of “Others”. Lastly, I will look at the development of the three specific groups of “Others” I will discuss in my chapters.

While the term “Otherness” is not uncommon, it is necessary to establish a working definition in regards to the case study, as the science fiction genre adds its own complexities to this concept. The figure of the “Other” plays a major role within postcolonial discourse and has traditionally been used to illustrate the differences between colonizers (generally Europe and the West) and the colonized. The concept was further defined by the well-known literary critic Edward Said in his famous text *Orientalism* (1978). In this work, Said uses the term ‘orientalism’ to describe the specific mode of “Otherness” related to the West’s perception of the East or Orient. He argues that the Orient is not a definable geographic space, but rather manifests itself in a series of ideas, concepts and stereotypes created by the dominant West (5). While his theories focus specifically on the opposition between Europe and the Orient, his work features elements that are relevant to the concept of “Otherness” as a whole. For one, his system highlights a relationship between two agents or entities, which is hierarchical in nature. In other words, there is a dominant, oppressing party and a weaker, oppressed party. In this case, the “Other” is always placed within a position of inferiority, subject to discrimination and stereotyping. Dominant stereotypes play a major role in the representation of the “Other”. “A stereotype involves the reduction of persons to a set of exaggerated, usually negative character traits. Through the operation of power, a stereotype marks the boundaries between the ‘normal’ and the ‘abjected’, ‘us’ and ‘them’” (Barker 336-37). Therefore, the “Other” is also a figure that is often feared or regarded with suspicion. The concept of the “Other” can thus easily be applied to any group that is considered marginal or deviant from established power norms. “The contending tradition in Western storytelling has been to use the Other to show up the failings, internal corruption and fall from grace of Western civilization” (Sardar 11). Within the context of the science fiction genre, the concept of the “Other” often takes on a unique form. “In science fiction, the ‘other’ as ‘alien’ is deployed to concretise the deeply divisive dichotomies of race and gender embedded in the repressive structures and relations of dominance and subordination. Modernity remains intact,

the moral guardian of the future, whilst the ‘other’ emerges demonized and thus can be justifiably annihilated” (Mair 35). Science fiction depicts figures like aliens and robots, which are notably different in the sense that they are simply not human and thus principally “Other” in nature. According to John Rutherford, “[t]he centre invests the “other” with its terrors. It is the threat of dissolution of self that ignites the irrational hatred and hostility as the centre struggles to assert its boundaries, that constructs self from not self” (qtd. in Mair 35). These figures are thus able to stand as metaphors or symbols for other marginalized groups in real-life, and are often linked to concepts of race and gender. In “Difference Engine: Aliens, Robots, and Other Racial Matters in the History of Science Fiction” (2010), Douglas K. De Witt argues discussion of race and thus “Otherness” have been part of the genre since its inception, going indeed back to *Frankenstein* as “Mary Shelley’s creature functions as an inaugural statement that establishes the artificially created racial other as a significant generic concern” (17). As mentioned above, fear and suspicion play a large part within the concept of “Otherness” and science fiction very often plays with this idea. Vivian Sobchack states in *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*, that “[i]n the film . . . instead of the ambiguity of watching an alien walking around in human form, we have an extremely recognizable “other,” something definitely detached from Man, something concretely different to be afraid of” (23). It is exactly this fear that lies at the heart of the “Frankenstein Complex” and serves as a principal plot in science fiction narratives. As discussed in the introduction, this fearful and negative depiction remained a fixed component of the genre up until the end of the twentieth century. However, Sobchack argues that a shift has occurred in our modern times:

In [the 1950s], alienation of the postmodern kind was still new and shiny, and aliens were definitely and identifiably “Other.” Today’s SF films either posit that “aliens are like us” or that “aliens R U.S.” Alien Others have become less other . . . They have become our familiars, our simulacra, embodied as literally alienated images of our alienated selves. Thus, contemporary SF generally embraces alien Others as “more human than human” or finds it can barely mark their “otherness” as other than our own. (293)

This idea suggests that the modern alien or robot deals less with the concept of “Otherness”, but instead focuses on ‘sameness’, looking at humanities’ own identity and flaws through the

lens of these figures. To that extent, modern science fiction has also created new hybrid forms of alien and robot characters, mostly notably in the form of the cyborg. These types of characters move towards an idea of the postracial or posthuman. There is hope for “a science fiction heralding the arrival of a postracial future in which the wounds inflicted by current conflicts around race are healed” (De Witt 16). In the following sections I will discuss three distinct forms of “Others” and their representation within the science fiction genre. As a distinct genre, science fiction is subject to genre iconography. According to Jim Kitses, “[a]s a result of mass production, the accretions of time, and the dialectics of history and archetype, characters, situations and actions can have emblematic power” (qtd. in Sobchack 65). However, Sobchack argues that while the science fiction genre certainly carries certain trope and expectations with it, “[i]t is the very plasticity of objects and settings in SF films which help define them as science fiction, and not their consistency” (87). Science fiction iconography is thus fluid and able to adapt to the wishes of certain time periods. Nevertheless, the genre draws heavily upon itself and makes use of audience expectations and knowledge. Therefore, it is useful to look at the development of several key “Other” figures within science fiction.

1.3 The Artificial “Other”

While the figure of the robot seems to distinctly belong to the genre of science fiction, the creation of an artificial being has been a part of narratives since the ancients. One of the earliest of such narratives involves the Greek mythological character Prometheus. Prometheus was a god who created humans from clay. Humans were dismissed as inferior beings by the other gods, but were given the fire of Olympus by Prometheus in order to rise above their humble beginnings (Smith 47). Prometheus lives on in modern narratives and remains an inspiration for modern artificial beings as evidenced by the subtitle of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*⁷. Similar stories can be found in Jewish folklore in the form of the Golem. Like the Prometheus story, these creatures were made from mud. They were brought to life by using magical and divine words, which were often inscribed upon the head. One important element of the golem is its inability to speak (though they are able in a few stories. “The dominant tradition of the golem is of a paradoxically silent creature, created through words but proven imperfect by his non-participation on the world of words” (Graham 92). The ability to speak is thus considered a prerequisite for civilized life, and the inability to speak

⁷ *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*

denotes inferior “Otherness” linked to savagery. The most important artificial creature in modern times is of course Mary Shelley’s creature. The creature serves as the main inspiration for artificial beings in most modern narratives and carries with him the air of menace that has characterized science fiction for many decades.

As mentioned, the figure of the robot or artificial intelligence borrows heavily from science fiction’s roots within the horror genre. The word robot finds its origins in Czech author Karel Capek’s play *Rossum’s Universal Robots* (1921). The Czech word ‘robota’ literary means enforced labor (Short 57). As the word suggests, the robots in the play are used as a labor force and represent slavery. The idea of humans creating a robotic working force is a common trope within science fiction cinema and often leads to a rebellion in which the robots take up arms against their creators, representing real-world slaves or oppressed groups rebelling against their masters. Robots are also often portrayed as soulless and coldhearted opposing human morals and values. An important example of this would be the figure of the Terminator robots in James Cameron’s *The Terminator* (1984). The robots and machines in this film are merciless killing machines, who despite their human appearance are distinctly “Other”. However, its sequel *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) reveals some of the shifts mentioned by Sobchack. The main Terminator is portrayed as a care-taker and father figure, who slowly begins to understand human emotions as the film progresses. In many robot narratives, the robot also lacks the ability to speak, which serves to enhance the idea of an inferior, mechanical being rather than a creature on the same level as humans. More advanced robots do have the ability to speak and subsequently become a threat to mankind as they increasingly become more like us. “[t]he fear in SF films springs from the possibility that we may turn into machines, dehumanized by the rational rather than bestial sides of our nature” (Sobchack 38). The figure of an artificial being is thus a constant reminder of our own reliance on technology and science. During Asimov’s time, robots served as warning of the increasing use of mechanized and automated labor. These stories were inspired by the real-life implications of human workers being replaced by machines. The figure of the robot has evolved to voice similar concerns in different times as “[p]opular mass art responds to its audience and the concerns of the period in which it is made” (Short 8). The 80s science fiction films were thus heavily inspired by events like the Cold War and the advent of nuclear technology. Similarly, in our own digital era, robots have become increasingly more prevalent and, as technology rapidly progresses, begin to make their advent into commercial use. Issues like the increased use of military drones also highlight concerns regarding ethics. As mentioned before, contemporary science fiction cinema focuses heavily on the depiction of

hybrid figures in order to imagine a postgender or postracial world. In terms of the artificial “Other”, the figure of the cyborg has evolved out of the robot. This figure is a hybrid between man and machine and fuses the worlds of the known and the unknown (or “Other”). The cyborg is also used within feminist discourse, which will be discussed in the section on the female “Other”. Modern science fiction looks at the blurring of the line between the organic and the technological. Films like Spike Jonze’s *Her* (2013) or Wally Pfister’s *Transcendence* (2014) exemplify this trend. Similarly, the 2014 remake of *Robocop* directed by José Padilha is much more concerned with questions of humanity and identity than its 1987 R-rated counterpart. Thus, contemporary science fiction follows Sobchack’s shift focusses heavily on the human aspect of humanity and the dissolving of “Otherness”

1.4 The Alien “Other”

The alien is the seminal figure of the “Other” within science fiction and ties directly to the genre’s close relation to the horror genre. The alien creatures of science fiction are essentially just extensions of the monsters that inhabit the horror films. Michel Laclos states in *Le Fantastique au Cinéma* (1958) that “[s]cience fiction cinema . . . assimilated all the themes of traditional fantasy. Martians, Venusians or mutants evolved from vampires, while robots imitated the trance-like states of zombies and the Golem” (xxviii). However, both genres have distinct differences and their respective “Other” figures represent these differences. Whereas the horror film traditionally deals with moral chaos and the disruption of the natural (God’s) order, the science fiction film deals with social chaos and the disruption of social (manmade) order. In the horror film there is a threat to the harmony of hearth and home, in the science fiction film there is a threat to the harmony of civilized society going about its business (Sobchack 30).

For a long time, science fiction cinema struggled to effectively portray alien figures due to technical limitations. As a result, many alien figures are stuck in an anthropomorphic view of the universe. According to Sobchack, “[o]ne can point to innumerable images in SF films which struggle—sometimes successfully, sometimes laughably—to exceed the anthropomorphic limits of the human imagination while still attempting to remain comprehensible” (91). In more recent years, with the advent of new technologies like Computer Generated Images (CGI) and green screens, the science fiction genre has the means to transcend this human-centric view. However, Sobchack notes that alien figures can never be too “Other”, for fear that that audiences can find no close relation to these figures. She states that “a SF film . . . cannot live by alien images alone . . . [N]o narrative film, no fiction

film, can sustain itself on visual surfaces which are completely and continuously strange and alien to either our experience or our mode of perception” (103). In order for aliens to comment on humanity itself, they need to have a frame of reference within the human mind. So while technology allows us to construct the most outrageous alien beings, they have generally remained noticeably anthropomorphic in their design. A great example is James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009), which was almost entirely made using advanced computer technologies. While the fictional world of Pandora is meant to be an alien planet, it is represented as an overgrown jungle which has to be conquered by the (primarily) white American military and capitalist corporations (A clear example of how traditional Western-centric narratives remain dominant in science fiction cinema). The aliens inhabiting the planet have several distinctly alien or “Other” features, most notably their blue color and the presence of a tentacle-like appendage with which they can communicate with animals. Nevertheless, their appearance is very much human. This is done intentionally as the film’s plot requires the audience to feel sympathy for these aliens and side with them against the human antagonists of film.

As noted before, Sobchack notes a distinct shift in alien representations in modern times compared to the science fiction films of the 1950s and the proceeding decades. Due to their close relation to the horror genre, the early aliens were demonized as villains, most notably in the form of the alien invader or the BEM (Bug Eyed Monster). She states that “in quite a transformation of earlier generic representations, most of the new SF films do not represent alien-ness as inherently hostile and Other” (293). That is not to say aliens can no longer be represented as villains or threats, but when they do appear in this form, it is usually in contrast with other alien figures in order to emphasize the latter’s benevolence (293). This trend is noticeable in all strands of science fiction cinema as

[i]n conservative SF, the alien Other is valued by virtue of being marked as more “positively” human than we humans presently are—that is, for being just like us, only identifiably and differentially *more* so. In postmodern SF, however, the alien Other is valued for being un-marked as alien or other, for being different just like us, only *no more* so than an/other alien-ated and spaced-out being. (293-94, italics in original)

1.5 The Female “Other”

Female figures tend to have been marginalized within traditional Hollywood cinema. In *The New Hollywood: From Bonnie and Clyde to Star Wars*, Peter Krämer argues that “[i]n the

cinema, men could withdraw from social reality, in which they acknowledged the demands that women could legitimately make on them, into a world in which women were quite marginal or altogether absent” (72). Similarly, within American television, women were often reduced to a handful of stereotypes. In Diana Meehan’s 1983 study of American television she suggests “that representations on television cast ‘good’ women as submissive, sensitive and domesticated while ‘bad’ women are rebellious independent and selfish” (Barker 317). These marginalized roles and stereotypes have also found their way in science fiction. In her text “The Virginity of Astronauts: Sex and the Science Fiction Film”, Vivian Sobchack discusses the marginalized role of women in American science fiction cinema:

Human biological sexuality and women as figures of its representation have been repressed in the male-dominated, action-oriented narratives of most American Science fiction films from the 1950s to the present ... [S]cience fiction denies human eroticism and libido a traditional narrative representation and expression. (103)

While several highly popular and influential modern science fiction films feature more female protagonists than in the 1950s, these characters are “sexually defused and made safe and unthreatening by costume, occupation, social position and attitude—or they are sexually confused with their male counterparts and narratively substituted for them” (106). Sobchack uses the character of Ellen Ripley from Ridley Scott’s *Alien* as a primary example. Her representation and position within the film deny her any sexual difference from her male counterparts. She is not sexualized, except for the climactic scene, where this sexualization is used to portray her as a victim (106). Science fiction has traditionally been dominated by male heroes, who embody the very best of humanity and make us of the masculine areas of science and technology. On the other hand,

women pose a particular narrative threat to science fiction heroes and their engagement with technology. They are figures who – as mothers, wives, girlfriends – arouse male need, demand, and desire. They represent the Mother and the Other whose very presence points to the puny and imitative quality of male endeavor, of technological creation and its inanimate products. (109)

Female characters within science fiction are thus either reduced to marginalized figures, narrative substitutes for male characters or presented as a threat to the dominant male power

system. Whereas Sobchack argues that characters like Ripley (or her similar counterpart, Sarah Connor (*Terminator*)), are sexually defused, other critics look at their representation as representing a step toward the postgender and the posthuman. According to Sue Short, “both figures were variously labelled as ‘cyborg’ and ‘transsexual’ [, which] exposes the extent to which the cyborg can be seen to confound male/female distinctions” (84). The figure of the cyborg is an extension of the robot figure within science fiction. In recent years the term has also been appropriated within feminist discourse. In her landmark text “A Cyborg Manifesto”, Donna Haraway used the figure of the cyborg to move away from the classical oppositions of gender, race and class imposed by patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism (155). According to her “[c]yborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves” (181). The cyborg is a hybrid entity that fuses the organic with the technological. Technology thus allows us to get rid of those differences that are part of our organic fabric: “The Cyborg is a creature in a postgender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labour, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity” (150). The cyborg plays a major role within contemporary science fiction narratives, yet despite its supposed posthuman status, it currently tends to reaffirm binary opposition:

It may be that cyborgs will be neither male nor female, neither with or without color in the far future, or some complicated version of these, but how we are affected by cyborg technology now still depends a great deal on what gender, race and class we are. (Chris Habley Gray et al. qtd. in Short 53).

This notion also plays a major role within the digital realm of video games. Many video games allow players to portray female characters. While the medium is slowly drawing in a female audience, it is still a predominantly male industry. The ability and willingness of male players to perform as female protagonist might also hint a shift in perceived gender norms. However, according to Jeffrey Brown, the way these female characters tend to be represented instead reinforces traditional gender roles. Brown argues that female video characters tend to invoke traditional masculine traits to please predominantly male audiences. Historically, “traditional masculinity has encompassed the values of strength, power, Stoicism, action, control, independence, self-sufficiency, male camaraderie/mateship and work, amongst other. Devalued were relationships, verbal ability, domestic life, tenderness, communication, women and children” (Barker 312).

Unlike their science fiction counterparts, whose sexuality is negated, female video game characters tend to be visually sexualized, while performing roles typically meant for males: “By controlling female characters as “feisty” and threatening as Lara Croft and other action heroines, by negating their assumption of subjectivity, male consumers can still enjoy a heterosexual and discriminatory fantasy of gender relations” (Brown 117). The female “Other” in *Mass Effect* is both affected by science fiction film’s representations as well as the representation of females within video games.

1.6 Genesis, Content and Context of *Mass Effect*

Before discussing the plot of the trilogy, it is important to give some background and contextualize *Mass Effect* within the science fiction genre. *Mass Effect* was announced on October 4, 2005 by BioWare and immediately envisioned as a trilogy. BioWare, established in 1995, is a Canadian video game developer that specializes in creating immersive role-playing games and has published numerous highly praised and critically acclaimed titles. Examples include *Baldur’s Gate* (1998), *Neverwinter Nights* (2002) and the aforementioned *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (2003). In a 2007 interview with IGN, Project Director Casey Hudson discusses the genesis of the first game and BioWare’s sources of inspiration. With *Mass Effect*, BioWare was able to create their own science fiction universe that players could explore. Primarily, they wanted players to feel empowered and important and thus created a main character that draws heavily on classic science fiction heroes like *Star Trek*’s captain Kirk, while at the same time allowing players to customize this character to their own liking. Hudson also discusses *Mass Effect*’s emphasis on cinematic storytelling (Brudvig). *Mass Effect 1* was ultimately released in 2007, exclusively for Microsoft’s Xbox 360 video game console. A PC port for Windows was released in 2008. The game was met with great reviews, mostly emphasizing its interactive story-telling. While the first game was made exclusive to Microsoft systems, the game’s sequels were made available for Sony’s PlayStation 3 and *Mass Effect 3* was also made available for Nintendo’s Wii U. As will be discussed in more detail later in the thesis, BioWare made extensive use of player behavior and feedback when developing its sequels. *Mass Effect 2* (2010) embraced the cinematic aspect even more than its predecessor and removed features and gameplay mechanics that were deemed undesirable while enhancing those systems that players embraced. As mentioned briefly before, this particular game was met with raving reviews and is often considered one of the best games ever made. The final instalment in the trilogy, *Mass Effect 3*,

was released in 2012. This game resembles *Mass Effect 2* very closely in terms of gameplay and mechanics. While these aspects of the game were once again praised, many fans were displeased at the game's narrative, particularly the ending. Nevertheless, the trilogy stands as one of the most influential game series of the twenty-first century and has proven successful enough to warrant a new instalment in the series. *Mass Effect: Andromeda* is currently slated for release in the first quarter of 2017. The following section will discuss *Mass Effect*'s context within the larger science fiction genre.

In *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film* (1998), Vivian Sobchack discusses several varying definitions of the science fiction genre, as there is not one single established view. Richard Hoggins gives one of the broadest definitions: “[s]cience fiction involves extrapolated or fictitious science, or fictitious use of scientific possibilities, or it may be simply fiction that takes place in the future or introduces some radical assumption about the present or the past” (qtd. in Sobchack 19). The fictitious science that lies at the heart of the *Mass Effect* narrative are the eponymous Mass Effect fields, a technology that is never truly explained, but enables faster-than-light (FTL) travel, and is responsible for most of the technological gadgets and scenarios the player encounters in this fictional world. The first game opens with the following text:

In the year 2148, explorers on Mars discovered the remains of an ancient spacefaring civilization. In the decades that followed, these mysterious artifacts revealed startling new technologies, enabling travel to the furthest stars. The basis for this incredible technology was a force that controlled the very fabric of space and time. They called it the greatest discovery in human history. The civilizations of the galaxy call it: Mass Effect. (*Mass Effect*)

By grounding this almost magical technology in the form of a scientific discovery, *Mass Effect* aims at establishing a world that is, while fantastical, based on a sense of theoretical probability and thus believability. In this way *Mass Effect* is akin to Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek*, whose fictional world is also positioned in a quasi-possible reality. However, the *Mass Effect* trilogy also emphasizes spectacle and action and is often considered part of the science fiction sub-genre of the “space opera”, not unlike George Lucas' *Star Wars* franchise. This particular franchise is often not considered true science fiction, but rather science fantasy, as the audience is expected to simply accept the technologies and wonders presented, rather than being given a plausible scientific explanation. As a series, *Mass Effect* hovers somewhere in

between these two extremes, offering at times explanations and a scientific basis, whilst often relying simply on the acceptance of the player. It must also be noted that many of the scientific explanations are presented as optional information to the player. When engaged in conversations with other characters, the player can ask for information or clarification on certain topics, if so inclined, or simply progress the conversation towards its end. Similarly, each of the three games offers a so-called codex, which can be accessed through the pause menu. This codex serves as a kind of encyclopedia offering additional information, background and contextualization for many of the scenarios encountered. The Codex will update itself with new entries as the player progresses through the games. These codex entries offer a vast array of knowledge but are not required for the completion of the game. It is thus up to the players themselves whether or not they wish to engage more fully with this fictional world.

In terms of gameplay, the *Mass Effect* trilogy is an action role-playing third person shooter. Role-playing games emphasize the creation of a character by the player and will generally allow the character to “level-up” using “experience points”, which will improve the character’s abilities and weapons. The games are split between sections in which you focus on exploring and talking with characters and crewmembers, and action sections where the player has to defeat enemies using various weapons and powers. At the start of each game, the player chooses between a male or a female character known as commander Shepard and can customize their avatar’s face to their own liking. Similarly, the player has to choose between several backstories for their character. These choices, along with the sex of the player’s Shepard influence the way characters in the game interact with you. The player must also choose between one of six classes, which affect the kinds of weapons and powers Shepard can use. This decision mostly affects the gameplay. The games allow players to traverse to numerous planets in the galaxy using Shepard’s ship, the Normandy. By using the Normandy’s navigation interface, the player can use so-called Mass Relays to travel between star systems⁸. When on a planet’s surface, the player can choose two party members to accompany them on missions. These party members can be recruited throughout the games and each have unique skills and abilities that can benefit the player. These party members are often aliens and can give the player additional information about their various races. The game also includes a kind of morality system (an element lifted over from BioWare’s work on *Knights of the Old Republic*). Rather than their previous good vs. evil approach, *Mass Effect*

⁸ *Mass Effect*’s version of “warp speed” in *Star Trek* or “hyperspace” in *Star Wars*.

focuses more on the way you achieve your goals, which are ultimately considered ‘good’ and necessary by default. When interacting with characters, the player can choose between so-called Paragon and Renegade options, or a neutral response. The latter two games also allow you to interrupt scripted events with a Paragon or Renegade action using a quick prompt of a button. Players who choose the Paragon path usually follow the rules, never risk the safety of civilians and try to talk their way out of fights. The Renegade playstyle on the other hand, is for players who want to make sure the success of the mission comes first. Renegade players will shoot first and ask questions later and will not allow anyone to come between them and their targets. The idea here is that the end justifies the means, as the stakes are quite high. These playstyles also affect the progression of the game and decisions made in one game carry over to the sequels. In this way, every player feels like they are engaging with a narrative unique to them, although in reality there is only a limited amount of permutations available. The following section will discuss the main plot of the game.

Mass Effect begins in the year 2183, 35 years after the technological discoveries on Mars. Since then, humanity has spread across the stars and encountered other alien species. While some of the early encounters resulted in wars, humanity is now engaged in close diplomatic relations with the other races. Intergalactic politics is governed by a council consisting of three races. This council is based on an advanced space station known as the Citadel, which was initially discovered by the Asari⁹ race and seems to be a part of the Mass Relay network. The council makes use of an elite group of agents known as Spectres (**S**pecial **T**actics and **R**econniaissance). The player controls a human soldier known as commander Shepard. At the start of the game Shepard is accepted within the ranks of the Spectres and is tasked with tracking down the rogue Spectre, Saren Arterius, who has attacked a human colony and is working together with a hostile artificial race known as the Geth. During his adventure, Shepard eventually comes in contact with an entity called Sovereign, who reveals to be part of an advanced mechanical race of beings known as the Reapers. As a way of preserving order and sustainability in the galaxy, the Reapers cyclically emerge from dark space every 50,000 years in order to exterminate all advanced organic life. Sovereign serves as the vanguard for the upcoming cycle, whose main mission is to activate a portal that will instantly transport all other Reapers. Shepard stops this from happening, but only slightly delays their inevitable arrival. In *Mass Effect 2* the Reapers use a species known as the Collectors to attack and harvest humans, as the events of the first games have shown

⁹ For the sake of clarity I will always capitalize the names of alien races in this thesis.

humanity to be the largest threat to their plans. As the other alien races are not willing to help, Shepard reluctantly starts to work with a pro-human organization called Cerberus. With the help of Cerberus intel and assets, Shepard recruits a highly skilled team from various alien races in order to engage and ultimately destroy the Collector threat. Shepard completes this task, but quickly learns that the Reapers have begun their journey towards their galaxy and will shortly arrive. *Mass Effect 3* finally sees the arrival of the full Reaper force, as all organic civilizations are simultaneously attacked and weakened. With most of the human forces scattered or destroyed, Shepard is tasked with uniting the galaxy's races against their common foe and engage in one final counterattack to destroy the Reapers and end the cycle of annihilation forever. Throughout the course of the game, Shepard learns more about the origins and motivations of the Reapers and in the climax of the game is given several choices that will dictate the future of the galaxy by an entity known as the Catalyst. The player's first choice is to destroy the Reapers, which will end the cycle but will also destroy all other artificial entities and render most technology useless. Another option sees the player controlling the Reapers, ending the war, but sacrificing him/herself in the process. The third option is only available to players who have amassed a certain amount of military assets during the game and allows the player to start a process called "Synthesis", which will merge artificial and organic life, thus ending the conflict. Lastly, the player also has the option to dismiss the Catalyst's three choices altogether, which will cause the Reapers to win. This last ending is technically not considered canon, while the 'Destroy' option is often considered the ideal canonical decision, with it being the only ending with a post-credit scene hinting at Shepard's survival.

It must be noted that this is a heavily truncated summary of the plot, as the games introduce numerous side plots and engage very heavily with character interactions. Many of these elements provide the main representations of "Otherness" this thesis will discuss. Rather than explain every key detail here, I will engage with the necessary scenes, characters and subplots when relevant to the topic discussed in the following chapters.

Chapter 2: The Artificial “Other” in *Mass Effect*

In this chapter I will focus on the representation of the first of the three identified marginalized groups within *Mass Effect*: the artificial “Other”. The *Mass Effect* trilogy features many instances of artificial life, each with its own unique narrative position. As mentioned in the short summary of the plot, the central theme of *Mass Effect* is that of a conflict between organic species and a sentient race of machines known as the Reapers. While at first glance this might seem indicative of Asimov’s “Frankenstein Complex”, the various robotic figures, their interaction and their position within the grander narrative are much more nuanced and complex than initially appears. This representation is meaningful to analyze, because as Ian Bogost states

playing video games is a kind of literacy. Not the literacy that helps us read books or write term papers, but the kind of literacy that helps us make or critique the systems we live in. By “system,” I don’t just mean large-scale, impersonal things like political systems. Any social or cultural practice can be understood as a set of processes, and our understanding of each of them can be taught, supported, or challenged through video games. (136)

While the artificial entities presented are clearly fictitious, their representation and the player’s interaction with them create meaning and comment on our contemporary issues regarding technology and humanity. As will be discussed in the chapter, the unique procedural systems of the video game medium can enhance this representation in certain ways. This chapter will discuss the various relevant robotic entities in a relative chronological order to maintain structure.

Before discussing some of the key artificial figures, I will give a brief overview of some of the lesser important robotic entities present within the series. As *Mass Effect*’s story takes place about a century into the future, technological advancements play a major role in the game’s universe. Technologies like faster-than-light travel, alien translators and robotics are taken for granted. A common presence within the *Mass Effect* series are computer programs known as Virtual Intelligences (VIs). Numerous forms of VIs can be encountered by the player throughout the games, ranging from information terminals, to programs responsible for shipboard functions. It must be noted here that the games make a distinct difference between VIs and Artificial Intelligences (AIs). VIs are rudimentary programs,

limited in knowledge and only serve specific tasks, whereas AIs are programs or entities that can think for themselves and have no limits to their programming. Because of their constraints, VIs are considered safe to use and are widespread, unlike AIs, which will be discussed in more depth in the next section. The constraints placed on VIs in order to make them safe seem to imply a method similar to the Three Laws of Robotics created by science fiction writer Isaac Asimov. As briefly discussed in the introduction, Asimov distanced himself from the negative depiction of artificial life that dominated the genre during this life-time. He posited that robots could be a great benefit to mankind if subjected to a series of laws that would prevent robots from ever becoming a real threat. These laws are as follows:

- 1 – A robot may not injure a human being, or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.
- 2 – A robot must obey the orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.
- 3 – A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law (Portelli 150).

The creation of these laws had a major impact on the science fiction genre and they have been firmly cemented within contemporary popular culture. The laws have continued to appear within robot narratives, if sometimes in a slightly altered form. Despite their supposed safety, the player can encounter several side-quests (in-game missions that are not required to finish the game, but offer additional information, lore, experience points and equipment) in which VIs have gone rogue. During these missions the VIs are incredibly hostile and are capable of killing human or other organic alien beings. Despite wanting to present these VI's as beneficial to organic life, their ability to oppose and even kill their creators, goes against the Asimovian concept and shows definite signs of the "Frankenstein Complex". While Asimov's stories also often discussed robots with rogue programming, their flaws could always be fixed by a process of reason and the robots never formed a real threat to mankind. In *Mass Effect* the rogue VIs are a credible threat and the only course of action is violence. Within these missions, the player is not asked to reason with these entities and it is never even discussed as a viable possibility. Rather, the only way to complete the mission is to destroy the VI program altogether. This depiction clearly positions VIs as the "Other", who are not on an equal level with organics, but can pose a threat to our wellbeing.

In the rest of this chapter I will discuss three major characters or groups that are representative of the artificial “Other” in *Mass Effect*. These three subjects have a major presence throughout the trilogy and are the key examples. I will first discuss the game’s central protagonist and playable character, commander Shepard, followed by an analysis of the synthetic Geth race and finally the game’s main villains, the Reapers. One major artificial character EDI will not be discussed in this chapter, but will be present in the chapter on the female “Other”, as this plays a major part in her representation.

2.1 Commander Shepard

As the main character of the series and the player’s avatar, commander Shepard’s representation plays a huge role. As briefly discussed before, the player is able to customize Shepard’s sex, face and backstory at the start of the game. Because of this, players are able to create idealized versions of themselves to be their fantasy hero. Combined with the choice and morality system, this greatly benefits the sense of immersion when playing the video game, as the player may truly feel that ‘their’ Shepard is behaving in ways they would themselves. During the first game, Shepard serves as a classic science fiction hero within Western narrative tradition who follows a clear heroes’ journey. He/she is an exemplar of humanity who rises from humble beginnings to become the savior of the galaxy. However, the events at the start of *Mass Effect 2* have drastic implications for the representations of artificial life. At the start of the game, Shepard is effectively killed. The pro-human group Cerberus recovers the body and attempts to bring Shepard back to life as part of the Lazarus Project (a reference to the biblical figure Lazarus of Bethany who is revived by Jesus), using highly advanced technology, gene therapy and cybernetic implants. The project also includes facial reconstruction, which cleverly allows for the player to change Shepard’s face or add new features if so desired¹⁰. The project succeeds and Shepard is woken up 2 years after his/her supposed death. The severity of Shepard’s injuries has many characters, including Shepard’s former friends and allies questioning whether this is the real Shepard, or a clone created by Cerberus and programmed to further Cerberus’s own political agenda. However, several bits of information in *Mass Effect 2* and *Mass Effect 3* confirm that this is indeed the original Shepard, with his/her own personality intact. This has dire ramifications as this changes Shepard from a purely human protagonist to a posthuman cyborg. The way this manifest itself within the game on both a visual and gameplay level speaks highly of the representation of

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9dhcBr0oUHM>

artificial “Otherness”. After waking up Shepard will have several facial scars as part of his/her surgeries. If the player follows the Paragon path when making decision, these scars will gradually heal and Shepard will appear entirely human. However, if the player prefers Renegade options, Shepard scars will deteriorate and new scars will form. If pursued all the way through, most of Shepard’s face will be covered in large red-glowing scars and his/her eyes will appear robotic with a menacing red iris, not unlike those of the Terminator robots in their respective films¹¹. This noticeable distinction seems to implicitly imply elements of morality and ethics. While the Paragon/Renegade system is not linked directly to good vs. evil, their respective modes of play can be linked to this distinction. Renegade players will do whatever it takes to get the job done, not hesitating to use violence. In terms of their responses they are often blunt, dismissive and to the point. Paragon players on the other hand will attempt to use reason before violence and are considerate and compassionate when in conversations. This element is quite indicative of cinema’s representation of cyborgs as “cyborgs are the progeny of a...dual heritage, yet are routinely tested in cinematic narratives and asked to prove their allegiance to ‘humanity’ by articulating specific ideals, thereby demonstrating how differences are both psychologically and socially mediated” (Short 108). Shepard’s transformation to a visible cyborg, and thus artificial entity, seems to be linked to a loss of morality and ethics and ultimately a loss of humanity, which is represented through a kind of visual corruption. This is relayed to the player using the procedural systems of the game. For Paragon players, their humanity overrides the cybernetic implants and they are thus able to fully pass as human. It must be noted that Renegade players do have the option to remove their scars if they are willing to spend a lot of resources on a specific research project, but this too implies a sense of punishment. In conclusion, this representation seems to place a hierarchical value judgment between humans and artificial entities. Short states that “Imperialism has traditionally legitimated itself through utilizing a set of oppositions, with ‘humanity’ treated as an exclusive preserve by which to differentiate ‘Others’” (106). While Shepard will always be the hero of the games and his/her larger actions are considered good, the appearance of noticeable robotic “Otherness” is linked to a loss of humanity and placed within a negative context. This is important when considering player feedback. BioWare released several player statistics after the release of *Mass Effect 2*. These statistics show that most players preferred the Paragon path, with only 36% of players choosing the final Renegade choice at the end of the game (Tan). Similarly, statistics collected for *Mass Effect 3*

¹¹ See Image 1

reveal that 64.5% of players play Paragon versus a 35.5% of Renegade players (Totilo). While this is dictated by numerous in-game factors, the elements described above do create subconscious feedback in player's minds. BioWare uses statistics like this to improve future games. Casey Hudson, Executive Producer for the Mass Effect franchise has stated: "When we were looking at the Achievements¹² for Mass Effect 1, that's where we realized that there are some really interesting player behaviors there that it would be nice if we could answer more questions for ourselves. [Then] we could understand what's going on and how people play our game" (qtd. in Brudvig par 5). These interesting player behaviors are in a way manipulated by the games' designers and used to steer players in a certain way. By linking a loss of humanity and a more robotic version of Shepard to the Renegade playstyle in *Mass Effect 2*, BioWare subconsciously yet effectively steers players more towards the Paragon path, particularly in *Mass Effect 3*. This is also linked to the game's plot having an artificial and mechanical entity as the main enemy in the form of the Reapers. By visibly becoming more robotic, Shepard can be seen as resembling the enemy. This element will be discussed more in depth in the section on the Reapers. Furthermore, *Mass Effect 3*'s plot focuses on Shepard forming an alliance with the other races, which is best achieved through collaboration and reasoning favored by the Paragon path. The Renegade path in *Mass Effect 3* will have players betraying allies and lying to the other races in order to serve Shepard's and humanity's own interest. A player may feel that the end justifies the means. Ironically, this again goes together with a loss of morals and humanity. An example of this is the decision whether or not to cure the Genophage in *Mass Effect 3* (an important event I will discuss later in the thesis). The Renegade path requires players to actively lie to their allies and friends. Depending on certain situations this can even lead to Shepard killing two former squad members.

2.2 The Geth

The artificial race known as the Geth are the first major artificial entities encountered by the player in *Mass Effect*. As explained by various Codex entries and in-game conversations, the Geth were created by the organic Quarian race 300 years before the events of the first game. The word Geth meaning 'servant of the people' in the Quarian language, they were meant as a cheap and reliable source of labor and were given a form of distributed intelligence.

¹² Achievements are part of an overarching point system on Xbox consoles. Achievements are rewarded for completing certain task in games. In *Mass Effect 1* several Achievements tasked the player with playing the majority of the game with certain squad members. Through this BioWare could see which squad members were most popular based on the overall number of Achievements gotten by players.

According to *Mass Effect 1*'s codex "An individual has rudimentary animal instincts, but as their numbers and proximity increase, the apparent intelligence of each individual improves. In groups, they can reason, analyze situations, and use tactics as well as any organic race" (*Mass Effect*). As the Quarians became ever more reliant on their artificial labor force, the Geth grew greatly in numbers. As a result of their networked intelligence, they eventually became self-aware and began to question their purpose and existence. When asked by the Geth whether or not they contained a soul, the Quarians grew frightened and, anticipating a potential Geth rebellion, attempted to wipe them all out. The Geth fought back and ultimately drove the Quarians into exile from their own planets and colonies. As a result, the galactic government has outlawed all creation of artificial intelligence in fear of similar events happening again. As discussed before, BioWare was very aware of the science fiction genre's past when developing the games and the origins of the Geth appears to be indicative of this knowledge. An artificial creation rebelling against their creator once again goes back to Shelley's *Frankenstein* narrative, but the Geth's specific origins as a labor force is part of a larger trope and metaphor within science fiction. As Sue Short states,

[t]he concept of dehumanized workers who are bereft of rights is far from new, either within fiction or social reality itself. Aristotle referred to slaves as 'living tools' yet the treatment of humans as machines is a concept that is more specifically aligned with the industrial revolution and its effect upon labourers working within newly urbanized communities. (57)

This idea was further developed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels as part of their *Communist Manifesto* (1848). Marx feared that the rise of the mechanical age as part of Capitalism would have a negative effect on the labor force, by a process which he called alienation. "Through being endlessly consigned to repetitive tasks, workers were, it was argued, effectively drained of their humanity and made machine-like, devoid of autonomy or agency" (57). Within the science fiction genre, these specific fears would be symbolized by robots.

The grandfather of these narratives can be found in *Rossum's Universal Robots* (1921), which was written by Czech playwright Karel Capek. The word robot originated in this play and derives from the Czech word 'robota', meaning enforced labor or slavery. Much like the Geth origins, this play's story revolves around a group of robots who are used as a labor force without any agency of their own. These robots eventually revolt and end up exterminating all

but one human on the entire planet. Capek's play would serve as a template and many similar narratives regarding a robot worker revolt would follow in the twentieth century. Notable examples include Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927) and Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982). Interestingly enough, while these films clearly critique Capitalism, the robot/android revolts ultimately fail, and society does not change. In fact, Capek's play is almost unique in presenting a conclusion in which the robots win and remain victorious. Nevertheless, robots' ability to defy their programming highlights key questions:

As a metaphor of oppressed humanity refusing to be exploited this is a potentially radical message, one that makes an implicit class distinction between mechanical workers and those who effectively own and control them. Furthermore, by symbolizing alienation, oppression and uniformity within mass society...mechanized slaves clearly invoke concerns that are rarely addressed today, while also asserting the possibility of resistance. (58-59)

By positioning robot figures within a socio-economic and political context they are used to question our own humanity and our true freedom as individuals. While robot figures originated as a response to mechanization and industrialization, these questions remain important in the twenty-first century, albeit in a changed form. Real-life robot technology keeps improving and the use of military drones has already spawned numerous ethical debates. In her article "Fighting Over Drones", Laleh Khalili discusses several of the key arguments regarding the drone debate. While the use of drones serves as a safe replacement for sending actual troops, the power to use them lies in the hands of a select few. As a method of counterterrorism the use of drones has often been excused by invoking the idea that it protects the American people. According to Khalili,

[t]his invocation of "protection" to excuse violence that is often indiscriminate says much about asymmetric warfare as conducted by the US and other powerful nations. These states pull a veil of liberality and consideration, of civility and safety, over the machinery of death wielded against an enemy that cannot possibly match them in lethality. (20)

Furthermore, the continued global digitalization has people questioning to what extent humanity has become dependent on technology. As a twenty-first century product, it is notable to see how the Geth are treated as “Other” within the *Mass Effect* franchise.

Unlike most cinematic representations following *Rossum's Universal Robots*, *Mass Effect's* Geth follow in Capek's robots' footsteps as they emerge victorious following the war with their creators. Within the context of the first game, they are consistently vilified as a result. As the player begins *Mass Effect 1*, commander Shepard encounters hostile Geth on the first planet they visit, Eden Prime, a human colony. The Geth are led by the game's main antagonist Saren Arterius and are searching for something known as the Conduit. From this point on, Shepard is tasked with chasing Saren and finding the Conduit before he does. As Saren's army, the Geth serve as the main enemy force in the game. While you do encounter other hostile races in the game, the Geth are consistently a threat in the main story line. Along the way, Shepard recruits a Quarian female, called Tali as part of the team. The player can choose to visit Tali on board Shepard's ship and learn more about her race, as well as the origins of the Geth. As a Quarian, she sees the Geth as nothing more than murderous machines, without any compassion or higher intelligence. As a player fighting the Geth, you are most likely to agree with her position at this point. In “Game Design and Meaningful Play”, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman explain some of the core components of game design. They state that “Games are intrinsically systemic: all games can be understood as systems ... As systems, games provide contexts for interaction, which can be spaces, objects, and behaviors that players explore, manipulate, and inhabit” (67). As interactive systems, games creating meaning through experience. Unlike a novel or film, where the audience is told or shown someone or something is a villain, within the systems of a video game, the player directly experiences this. This direct experience is what forms procedural rhetoric in games. Within Bogost's model, procedural rhetoric entails both persuasion and expression. An enemy inside a video game has to be adequately expressed as such and serve as a recognizable obstacle to the player. In response, the player will be persuaded to fight this enemy in order to progress. This is accomplished in several ways regarding the Geth.

The numerous Geth troops the player will encounter will always attempt to kill the player, which results in a ‘game over’ screen and a loss of progress. The only way to survive and progress is to destroy the hostile Geth forces. The Geth will also kill one of Shepard's initial squad members during the first mission. These experiences intrinsically make the player dislike the Geth and place them within the context of the “Other”: it is either me or them that will survive. This is further strengthened by the Geth's design. Unlike many

cinematic robots, androids or cyborgs, who often appear as human as possible, or are in fact indistinguishable from human, the Geth are represented as distinctly “Other” through their visual appearance. Modeled after their Quarian creators, who themselves appear quite alien, the Geth can be clearly identified as machines, rather than organic beings. While various different models exist (in order to provide a variety of different enemies to fight during the game), they are all made of various parts of metal and have a single large glowing photoreceptor for a head¹³. Due to this visual appearance they are often called by derogative terms like “flashlight heads” by various characters in the game. The Geth also communicate with one another using incomprehensible stuttering mechanical clicking sounds. As discussed previously in regards to the figure of the Golem, the ability to speak is often used as a marker for intelligence and civilization. This idea also found its way in robot narratives. While humanlike speaking robots can pass as living beings with the potential of mirroring and even rivaling humans, the lack of (comprehensible) speech denotes an inferior hierarchical structure. All in all, the Geth in *Mass Effect 1* are designed and portrayed to serve as faceless, unlikable villains, without personality, which the player can easily fight and annihilate without a sense of remorse. However, as the later games in the series would show, the Geth take on a more complex role than cannon fodder.

Unlike *Mass Effect 1*, *Mass Effect 2* features a much more varied enemy list, spanning most of the known alien races in the galaxy equally. In terms of the grander narrative, the Geth have suffered a major defeat at the hands of Shepard and his allies at the end of the first game and have retreated to their own part of space. The Geth do appear more frequently near the end of the game as Shepard’s missions bring him/her closer to Geth space. They once again serve as enemies and initially seem to serve a similar role as they did in the first game. However, during one of the game’s main missions Shepard and his/her squad are aided by an unknown Geth sniper, who is able to speak and seems to recognize Shepard. As the mission progresses, this Geth takes damage and is knocked unconscious. Curious about this particular Geth’s non-hostile attitude, Shepard decides to bring the Geth aboard their ship, much to the dismay of several crew members, including Tali, if recruited previously during the game. At this point the player can decide whether to give the Geth to Cerberus for study or attempt to activate it. If given to Cerberus, this Geth will reappear in *Mass Effect 3* as an enemy. Most returning players, however, will most likely share Shepard’s curiosity, seeing as Geth hostility was such a major part of the first game, and decide to reactivate the machine. This option is

¹³ See image 2

also supported within the context of the game's systems. The major part of the game's plot and missions is centered around the idea of recruiting allies and team members for your fight against the Collectors, the race responsible for Shepard's death and the main enemy in the game. Early on in the game, the player will acquire a tank with an alien in it. Similar to the Geth situation, the player has the option to open the tank and meet the alien. If done so, this alien (a Krogan named Grunt) will become a valuable asset to the team and serves as one of the most powerful party members. As this previous event proved worthwhile, players will recognize this as a similar opportunity. If activated, the Geth will reaffirm its non-hostility towards Shepard, stating that it is aware of Shepard's actions in the previous game. The Geth then explains that there are two factions of Geth whose goals do not align. It identifies the faction Shepard fought previously as 'heretics'. While the 'regular' Geth wish to build their own future on their own terms, these heretics served the Reapers in exchange for accelerated technological progression. These heretics and the Reapers (which the Geth refers to as the Old Machines) are as much a threat to the 'regular' Geth as they are to organic races. The Geth then expresses his wish to join Shepard's team stating that: "Shepard-Commander opposes the Old Machines. Shepard-Commander opposes the heretics. Cooperation furthers mutual goals" (*Mass Effect 2*)¹⁴. When Shepard asks the Geth its name, it reveals that there is no such thing as individual Geth. Rather the metallic construct is merely a platform or body holding multiple programs who are all Geth. The shipboard AI EDI then chimes in with the biblical quote: "My name is Legion, for we are many" (*Mass Effect 2*). Identifying this as an appropriate metaphor, the Geth platform will from then on answer to the name Legion. Legion's presence in the game and the revealed schism within the Geth race radically changes the Geth's representation. Through Legion, the Geth are transformed from the previously faceless enemy into a race with their own voice, traits and personality. Legion's visual design is still very much "Other", as his body resembles that of other Geth troopers encountered. However, several slight elements lessen this "Otherness". For one, Legion is able to speak, albeit in a very straightforward robotic way. This important ability allows Shepard to learn more about the Geth from their own perspective. Secondly, the use of a human, biblical metaphor in order to comprehend Legion's unique existence makes him more approachable and positions him within human terms. Legion's head also has additional lights which resemble eyes and Legion can move several panels on its head which resemble eyebrows. Legion also appears to have a piece of human armor strapped to his chest, giving him a

¹⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VDqCBz1_6RM

unique look distinguishable from other Geth platforms¹⁵. When asked about this, Legion explains that this armor belonged to Shepard and was taken by Legion upon its discovery of Shepard's corpse after the Collector attack at the start of the game and used to fix a hole. When pressed to explain why Legion specifically chose to use Shepard's armor rather than fixing it sooner or with something more appropriate, Legion awkwardly dodges the question by stating that there is no data available after a markedly long pause. This is a far cry from its usual mode of conversation. This little element hints at the presence of individuality within Legion rather than the collective consensus supposedly shared by all Geth. All in all, this gives Legion a unique personality, not unlike the other members of Shepard's party and makes the Geth seem more sympathetic as a result. It also shows signs of evolution and learning and turns Legion from a distinctly "Other" robotic Geth into a hybrid creature. This is important as

[h]ybridity represents the middle ground between humanity and its presumed Other, a vital means by which to question the veracity of natural distinctions and reconsider relations of power, as popular culture's various cyborgs and clones make evident. If technological lifeforms once served as a convenient displacement mechanism, the more such figures resemble ourselves the greater significance they have attained. (Short 131)

Legion also offers a new perspective to the Quarian-Geth conflict. Legion states that the Geth study organic beings in order to understand the 'Quarian-Creators' and their actions during the Morning War (the term given by the Geth, as it occurred at the dawn of their intelligence). According to Legion, the Geth never intended to harm the Quarrians, but were rather seeking understanding and mutual cooperation. The Geth did believe they had a right to exist and fought for self-preservation when attacked by the Quarrians. Furthermore, the Geth's studies of organic life leads Legion to make numerous remarks about our own civilization and brings into question the notion of organic superiority. When asked about Geth politics, Legion explains that the Geth form a unified consensus on all decisions. Shepard responds that organic beings have a similar system. Legion then refutes this by saying that "[o]rganic governments impose consensus. From a single point of view in autocracies. By codifying the most broadly acceptable average of views in democracies (*Mass Effect 2*). Whether the player

¹⁵ See Image 3

agrees with this view or not, the fact that the Geth have continued to be a dominant presence within the galaxy using their own political structure, does create legitimacy. The last notable element in *Mass Effect 2* concerning Legion lies in the game's so-called "Loyalty" system. Throughout the game, the player can recruit numerous party members in order to form an effective team during the game's climactic assault against the Collector home base. If the player repeatedly visits these characters aboard the Normandy, they will eventually ask Shepard to assist them with a personal matter, which translates to a specific side-quest tailored to that character. Upon successful completion of these loyalty missions, the team member will become loyal to Shepard, which will increase their combat effectiveness, relation to Shepard, and likeliness of survival during the game's final mission. Non-loyal team members will almost always die during this mission, depending on specific choices made. While this is unclear to players playing the game for the first time, the game repeatedly suggests that gaining loyalty is very important. These specific missions also delve deeper into their respective characters and offer additional back-story and personality, as well as creating consequences for *Mass Effect 3*. This gives players incentive to complete these missions. Legion's loyalty mission is centered around a virus created by the heretics which if implemented will make all 'regular' Geth share the same beliefs as the heretics. The name of this mission is "A House Divided" which is once again a biblical reference. Shepard, Legion and a teammate of choice will assault a heretic base and attempt to destroy the virus. During the mission Legion will state that another option is available. Legion can repurpose the virus and use it against the 'heretics', thus strengthening Legion's Geth faction. At this point the player can decide which option to choose. Notably, most teammates will vote against the rewrite of the 'heretics', as they fear it will make the Geth too powerful. Either choice has a specific impact on *Mass Effect 3* but will gain Legion's loyalty regardless. If the player has previously gained Tali's loyalty, the completion of this mission will prompt a special event aboard the Normandy. Shepard will enter a room to find Tali pointing a weapon at Legion. Tali explains that Legion was sending classified Quarian data to the Geth, to which Legion replies that he was only trying to protect the Geth from a possible Quarian attack. The player must then choose to side with either character, resulting in the loss of loyalty of the character not picked. However, if the player has a high enough Renegade or Paragon score, the situation can be resolved peacefully and both characters will remain loyal. This incentivizes players to stick to either one of these playstyles as only a high enough score will result in the best outcome.

As discussed, *Mass Effect 2* made the Geth seem less “Other” and explored the ideas of hybridity. *Mass Effect 3* takes this one step further and asks the player to make major decisions regarding the future of the Geth race, as well as artificial life as a whole. *Mass Effect 3*’s plot has Shepard allying the galaxy’s races into one formidable army against the Reapers. The last two races the game sends you to recruit are the Geth and Quarians. Despite the threat of the Reapers, the Quarians have launched a full-scale attack on the Geth over the planet of Rannoch, the Quarian’s original home world before being driven into exile. In response to this hostility, the Geth have entered into an alliance with the Reapers. In exchange for Reaper control they are given increased intelligence and technology. Shepard initially aids the Quarians, and during a mission to disable a Geth warship, the player will encounter Legion (provided it survived the events of *Mass Effect 2*), who is trapped and used to transmit the Reaper control signal¹⁶. If Legion died, was given to Cerberus or never activated, a Geth VI program will take its place. Upon rescue, Legion will explain the nature of the Reaper upgrades. These upgrades change the way the Geth think and makes their thought processes more organic in nature. This elevates the Geth to a form of true consciousness and gives them legitimacy as a race deserving of life. At this point, Legion will offer to help Shepard break the Reaper’s influence over its people by deactivating another signal transmitter on the surface of Rannoch. Before doing this, the player can do several side mission which, much like *Mass Effect 2*, help to gain a greater understanding of the Geth. One such mission sees Shepard directly interacting with the Geth consensus, which appears as a simulated computer environment. During this mission, Shepard can uncover several video logs dating back to the Morning War for which Legion offers commentary. When assaulting the signal transmitter on Rannoch, the transmitter is revealed to be an actual Reaper. After Shepard destroys it using the combined power of the Quarian fleet, Legion will state its intend to transmit the Reaper upgrades to the rest of the Geth. Doing this will give the Geth true intelligence without being controlled by the Reapers. However, the Quarian and Geth fleets are currently fighting in orbit. If the upgrades are transmitted the Geth’s strength will overpower the Quarians. Combined with their desire of self-preservation, this will result in the destruction of the Quarians. If Legion does not transmit the upgrades, the Quarians will instead destroy the Geth fleet. The player is forced to make a decision between the two races, while both Legion and Tali (or their respective counterparts if either had died during *Mass Effect 2*) plead their cases. At this point, Legion will question Shepard and Tali on whether or not the Geth deserve to

¹⁶ If Legion died, was given to Cerberus or never activated, a Geth VI program will take its place.

live by asking the question: “[d]oes this unit have a soul”¹⁷? Legion will also refer to itself as ‘I’, instead of ‘we’, showing that the Geth have finally achieved individuality¹⁸. Legion’s question ties in directly with the representation of the Geth in the series. The attempts by *Mass Effect 2* and *Mass Effect 3* to make the Geth less “Other” has a notable effect on player choice. According to statistics collected by BioWare, 37% of players chose to save the Geth versus 27% of players who saved the Quarians instead (Totilo). This discrepancy clearly shows that most players preferred the Geth over the Quarians, despite their original vilification. They are made less “Other” over the course of the games and can be seen as victims rather than aggressors. Much more emphasis is given on what makes the Geth similar to us, rather than different. By becoming more human they lose their scary and threatening “Otherness” and earn our trust. It must be mentioned here that it is also possible to create peace between both factions as a third option. This option is only available if the player made certain decisions during the series and relies heavily on the player having diffused the loyalty conflict between Tali and Legion during *Mass Effect 2*, their survival and on the completion of most side-missions. 36% of players achieved this option (Totilo). This option requires players to have been more open-minded towards the Geth, as this option would not otherwise be available.

In conclusion, the representation of the Geth’s “Otherness” shows definite signs of the shift posited by Vivian Sobchack. While the Geth may appear notably “Other”, their representation shifts during the series and focuses more on what they have in common with us, rather than how different they are. Eventuality, individuality wins out over consensus, making the Geth appear truly human in nature. The decision to save or destroy the Geth also plays a major role in the series’ climax, which features a similar decision. This decision ties in with the representation and role of the series’ main enemy, the Reapers. They will be discussed in the following section.

2.3 The Reapers

The Reapers serve as the main villains in the series and are bent on the destruction of all organic races. As explained by Legion they are also a threat to the Geth, because they exist outside their plans. The Reapers history and origins remained a mystery to players until the release of the “Leviathan” DLC (Downloadable Content, which can usually be purchased after a game’s initial release for additional game-play and story) for *Mass Effect 3*. This DLC

¹⁷ This question originally led the Quarians to fight against the Geth

¹⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JJXzAqqC7wY>

reveals that the Reapers were created by an alien race known as the Leviathan millions of years ago. The Leviathan were an incredibly powerful race who were able to enslave other organic species through a form of mind control. Time and time again, the Leviathan would observe these organic species creating artificial entities which would ultimately rebel and destroy their creators. In order to find a solution to this problem, the Leviathan created an AI of their own which had but one mandate: the preservation of organic life. This AI, however, concluded that the Leviathan were part of the problem and also turned against its creators, using their genetic material to form the first physical Reaper, Harbinger in the image of the Leviathan¹⁹. By the Reapers' logic, the existence of dominant organic life prevents other organic life from flourishing. They preserve organic life by using the genetic material of organic races to create new Reapers. While the dominant organic species are preserved in the form of a Reaper, developing life can evolve until the next cycle of harvesting. This narrative is clearly indicative of the "Frankenstein Complex" and is presented as inevitable and unending. However, as I will discuss in more detail in the following chapter, *Mass Effect* is very human-centric and positions humans as a race capable of disrupting this cycle and establishing a world where organics and artificial life can co-exist.

The existence of the Reapers is first revealed to the player in *Mass Effect 1*. The Reapers were believed to be responsible for the destruction of the Prothean race 50,000 years ago, and then simply vanished. Saren intends to use the Conduit to bring the Reapers back. Later in the game, Shepard is able to speak directly to a Reaper known as Sovereign. Sovereign was originally believed to be a highly advanced Geth warship used by Saren as his command vessel. However, during this conversation Sovereign identifies himself as a sentient artificial construct. According to Sovereign "[o]rganic life is nothing but a genetic mutation, an accident. Your lives are measured in years and decades. You wither and die. We are eternal, the pinnacle of evolution and existence. Before us you are nothing. Your extinction is inevitable. We are the end of everything" (*Mass Effect 1*). The Reapers' extinction of organics has been part of an ongoing cycle for millions of years. Sovereign also reveals that most technology used by the galaxy's civilizations, including the Mass Relays and the Citadel were purposefully left behind by the Reapers. This would ensure organic species would develop along the path the Reapers desire, leaving them vulnerable when the Reapers decide to start their extinction. However, Sovereign does not reveal why this cycle of extinction exists. Nevertheless, from this point onward, the game's main mission is to stop Sovereign from

¹⁹ See image 4 & 5

bringing the other Reapers to the galaxy and destroying it. This is ultimately achieved in the game's climax, at the cost of many ships and lives.

In *Mass Effect 2*, Shepard will return after his supposed death only to find the galaxy's civilizations do not believe the threat of the Reapers is real. Most believe that this was only an elaborate lie concocted by Saren. Shepard then allies with the pro-human organization Cerberus who do believe the Reapers are a genuine threat. The Reapers, however, are not the main enemy of the game. They remain as a vague distant threat and instead use the Collectors (who are later revealed to be enslaved Protheans) to harvest humans and create a new Reaper. When fighting the Collectors in the game, occasionally a Collector soldier will be taken over by an entity calling itself Harbinger. Harbinger will increase the strength of this soldier and will threaten Shepard using a deep disembodied voice. At first it is believed this is the Collector leader using some form of mind control, but the game's finale reveals that Harbinger is instead the Reaper leader. The game's final shot shows the Reapers approaching our galaxy leading to the events of *Mass Effect 3*.

The Reapers thus become the main enemy in *Mass Effect 3*, which manifests itself in multiple ways. While the true Reapers are the ship-like entities like Sovereign and Harbinger, the game has you fighting multiple kinds of Reaper ground forces. These forces serve a similar function as the Geth and the Collectors in the previous game as a primary enemy. What is notable about these forces is that they are cybernetically enhanced, mutilated versions of the game's organic races²⁰. The Reapers thus transform these races into beings that are "Other", with a large emphasis on technology and cybernetics taking over, sometimes to the point where they are barely recognizable or a hybrid between species. This is the exact reverse of the shifting representation of the Geth discussed above. These entities become less human and are corrupted hollow shells of their former selves, which also resembles the visual portrayal of Renegade Shepard. This visual representation was deliberately created by BioWare. The following quote from the "The Art of Mass Effect 3" book regarding the design of the 'Brute' enemy sums up this idea: "The krogan were a perfect species to use as a model. We decided to swap out the krogan head for something turian, making for a grisly synthesis of the two species ... The exposed vital organs were appropriately repulsive" (32). The use of sound also plays a role. Most Reaper forces will communicate with each other using indecipherable electronic noises. Others will shriek and utter similar high-pitched noises meant to inspire fear in the player as well as make the player aware of their nearby presence.

²⁰ See Image 6

The distinct “Otherness” of these enemies incentivizes the player to defeat them without remorse or pity. This representation also plays a major role regarding the Reapers use of “indoctrination”. Within the game

Reaper “indoctrination” is an insidious means of corrupting organic minds, “reprogramming” the brain through physical and psychological conditioning using electromagnetic fields, infrasonic and ultrasonic noise, and other subliminal methods. The Reaper’s resulting control over the over the limbic system leaves the victim highly susceptible to its suggestions ... Indoctrination can create perfect deep cover agents. A Reaper’s “suggestions” can manipulate victims into betraying friends, trusting enemies, or viewing the Reaper itself with superstitious awe. Should a Reaper subvert a well-placed political or military leader, the resulting chaos can bring down nations. (Codex, *Mass Effect 3*).

This element ties in with the concept of ‘passing’ within robot narratives, which concerns itself with robotic or other artificial entities infiltrating human society (Portelli 152). Through indoctrination, the Reapers are able to enslave people who can pass as ordinary humans (or other organic species), without them even knowing. Ultimately however, this indoctrination leads to physical decay and requires cybernetic upgrades in order to maintain functional. This occurs with two major characters within the trilogy. The first, Saren, has been discussed briefly above. Throughout *Mass Effect 1* it becomes clear that Saren has been indoctrinated by Sovereign, which is visually represented through his appearance. Saren is part of the Turian race, but appears quite different from other members of his species. The player will be able to compare this due to the presence of a Turian team member named Garrus. Unlike Garrus, who is alien but appears totally organic, Saren has numerous tubes and electronical components sticking out from him. One of his arms also resembles a Geth arm and his eyes shine with a robotic blue hue²¹²². A similar thing occurs at the end of *Mass Effect 3* with the character of the Illusive Man, the leader of Cerberus. He too appears more robot than human²³²⁴. They are both significant characters within the galaxy and as the codex entry above suggests, their indoctrination causes major chaos. Both characters believe they can somehow control the Reapers and use them for their own benefit. However, despite their own beliefs, their ghastly

²¹ See Image 7

²² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jFlhsigw2ac>

²³ See Image 8

²⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YQH1Jpik0B4> (Starting at 4:50)

appearances show that they have been fully corrupted and have lost their humanity, insinuating that controlling the Reapers is impossible. If the player has a high enough Paragon or Renegade score at the end of these games, Shepard can persuade them they have indeed been indoctrinated, which temporarily breaks the Reapers' hold and will result in both characters committing suicide. This representation positions the Reapers as truly "Other" and technology as a threat to humanity. It also shows a tainted and corrupted version of hybridity, similar to the features of a Renegade Shepard. This depiction seems to be in direct opposition with the representation of the Geth. However, Vivian Sobchack explains that this is in fact very common within science fiction cinema:

Whatever their ontology, the majority of aliens in the new SF film are represented as our friends, playmates, brothers, and lovers ... This is not to say that alien Others are never represented as threatening and villainous in contemporary SF, but rather to emphasize that if and when they are, it is generally within a narrative context in which other aliens are shown as friendly and "humane". (293)

By being so villainously "Other", the Reapers allow the other artificial entities to become less "Other" due to their opposition.

In conclusion, the representation of artificial "Otherness" in *Mass Effect* follows the shifts and trends within science fiction cinema. While "Otherness" is represented in various ways, *Mass Effect* seems to suggest artificial entities are not inherently or necessarily "Other". Rather, by focusing on 'sameness' or what these figures have in common with humans, artificial entities can become like us. However, this only applies when artificial entities adhere to human morals, ethics and values. The Reapers represent technological corruption and extinction and remain completely "Other" as a result, whereas the cyborg hero Shepard can maintain his/her humanity by acting humane and the Geth can achieve individuality and compassion. This representation goes against the "Frankenstein complex" and seems to create its own set of Asimovian Laws. As Short states,

[o]rigins and distinctions are thus rendered immaterial and being (or becoming) human is conflated with the most positive ideals ... Ultimately, these figures must prove their loyalty, defer to humans, and adopt certain values, yet far from being colonized or subordinated figures they negate the idea of intrinsic distinctions and confirm humanity to be a universal concept based on community and compassion. (132)

Chapter 3: The Alien “Other” in *Mass Effect*

This chapter will focus on the representation of Alien “Others” within the *Mass Effect* series. The games are filled with numerous alien races, some allies, some enemies. Rather than discussing every single race and their representation in detail, I will choose a select few examples that highlight the main ideas and developments for the series as a whole. Before discussing these case studies, I will present some general comments about the role of aliens in the following section.

The figure of the alien has been a staple of the science fiction genre since its inception and has evolved out of the monsters of the horror genre. As discussed previously, the early cinematic aliens were represented as distinctively “Other” and usually were reduced to one-dimensional villains. However, their representation has shifted to become less “Other” and they are often used to symbolize humanity itself as they are almost indistinguishable from us. The science fiction genre carries with it certain expectations from its audience. That is, to show us things that are new and unknown, that go beyond the familiar (Sobchack 89-91). Alien figures are often intended to fulfill this expectation, by being otherworldly and strange. However, Michel Ciment states that

[o]ne of the weaknesses of science fiction is that it too often fails to break away from an anthropomorphic view of the cosmos. There are 100 billion stars in our galaxy and 100 billion galaxies in the visible universe, and one of the stock themes of science fiction is that of alien civilizations. But it is difficult to imagine these different worlds without falling back on human standards. (qtd. In Sobchack 93)

This criticism is also very applicable to the alien civilizations of the *Mass Effect* trilogy. While the races’ individual appearances vary, they mostly resemble humans in the sense that they are bipedal, have two arms and generally have two eyes.²⁵ *Mass Effect 3* allows you to recruit the last surviving member of the Prothean race, which were wiped out by the Reapers in the previous cycle. Despite being part of a race that existed long before the evolution of the current dominant organic races, this Prothean, named Javik, is also subject to this anthropomorphic treatment and looks similar to many of the other aliens, with the exception of him having 4 eyes. While other kinds of aliens inhabit the world, their role within the

²⁵ See Image 9

games is minor. The squid-like Hanar or the four-legged Elcor are usually reduced to shop vendors or are part of minor side-quests. They cannot become a part of your team and none of them play a major role within the game's overarching story. This position is exclusively reserved for those alien races that can be related to in more human terms (which also applies to the Geth as previously discussed). Their various unique physical traits tend to be described in terms relative to humans, usually in the form of comparisons with animals. The Turians are usually described as being bird-like, whereas the Krogan resemble reptiles. While this might seem unimaginative on the part of the developers, this focus on creating anthropomorphic characters seems to be quite intentional. Sobchack states that “[w]e have to understand what we see and if what we see is unfamiliar, it must--to have meaning—be eventually connected to something we can comprehend, to something we know” (103). If *Mass Effect*'s aliens are to have any meaning and comment on humanity itself, they simply cannot be too distinctly “Other”. As discussed in the previous chapter, this also plays a huge role in creating the enemies the player encounters. The cybernetic Reaper versions and hybrids of these various alien races are no longer connected to anything resembling humanity. Your allies, on the other hand, have a relatable appearance, despite their various unique science fiction quirks. The same can be said for the various races' history and culture. While each is distinct, they seem to touch upon common human themes and tropes. The Salarians are a race of highly intelligent scientists and spies, the Quarians all have a knack for technology and engineering and the Asari are wise and patient philosophers. Since these races can be related to in human terms, they are a good fit for Shepard's team. While some may seem strange at first, their larger overall ‘humanness’ makes them approachable and likeable. These aliens are supposed to tell us something about humanity itself and their easily identifiable and sometimes stereotypical character traits and tropes allows them to highlight key issues and themes within a human context. The following sections will each discuss an element within the games that highlight some of the key representations of alien “Otherness” within the trilogy as a whole.

3.1 Party Members

The player will interact with the various alien races through the avatar of Shepard. As the party member system is one of the main gameplay mechanics in the game, the player's knowledge about other races will mostly come from these party members, who each serve as representatives of their respective race. Each party member will be available for conversations between missions and will offer information about their race's culture, history and traits. They will also offer insight into completed missions and offer approval or critique based on their

personality. Conversing repeatedly with these party members will usually unlock specific missions or, in the case of *Mass Effect 2*, loyalty missions tailored to the specific party member. The player is thus incentivized to converse with them as often as possible. As *Mass Effect* starts in media res, the player is thrust into a universe that has a comprehensive back-story and history. The player is steadily introduced to several key events that have shaped the galaxy and can unlock codex entries to learn more about the world Shepard inhabits. As the player is new to these stories and events, they are in a position where the past has no real influence on their decision making. For example, early on in *Mass Effect 1*, the player can learn about an event known as the “First Contact War”. This event marked humanity’s first encounter with another alien race, specifically the Turians. The Turians started this war and this bloody conflict would help shape humanity’s perception of aliens and result in a very distrusting attitude. Many of the humans Shepard meets, including the Normandy’s XO and party member Ashley Williams, will be condescending towards aliens, which makes sense within the context of the game’s history. However, for the player, these are only stories, not actual experiences forged by the game itself. While the Reapers are recognized as a threat by their in-game actions and interactions with the player, the Turians have caused no direct harm to the player. This allows the player to keep an open mind and gives the game’s alien characters a chance to be judged by their actions in-game. With this in mind, it is interesting to note that one of the series’ fan-favorite characters Garrus Vakarian is a Turian squad member. Garrus can be recruited in all three games, and despite the game insinuating that Turians are not to be trusted lightly, he is consistently one of the most used characters. According to the *Mass Effect 3* statistics, Garrus is the second most used squad member with a rate of 23.8%, following very closely behind Liara, with a rate of 24.1%. The third most used character, Vega (a human) falls behind quite noticeably with a rate of 16.8% (Totilo). Several factors contribute to this interesting player choice. Of all the alien squad members, Garrus (as well as Liara, who will be discussed in detail in the following chapter) is the most ‘human’. His personality is likeable, as he is very loyal, dependable and honest. He also seems to equally agree with Paragon and Renegade decisions, making him a relatable character for almost any player. From a gameplay perspective, he is a so-called ‘Infiltrator’ class, a hybrid between a “Soldier” and an “Engineer”. Because of this, his skills and weaponry are suited for almost any combat scenario the player can encounter, thus making him a more preferable choice than squad members that only fulfill one of these roles (Ashley and Tali, respectively). The game’s systems thus present Garrus as a likeable character from two angles, which work in unison with each other. Because of his usefulness in combat, the

player will be inclined to bring him along on missions, which will result in learning more about his character and personality as he comments on events and gives advice. This in turn will make the player care more about Garrus and will be inclined to bring him along even more. This idea applies to most of the alien party members and it is interesting to note that the aliens are generally preferred over the human characters. These alien figures seem to be human enough to be relatable, yet also offer something distinctly unique and “Other” that makes them more interesting for players to experience. After all, the human characters are almost too familiar and do not offer anything new or unknown. This idea is further enhanced by the fact that most human party members have relatively plain personalities. This results in an overall lack of interest on the part of the players. Human squad member Kaiden Alenko serves as a primary example for this. Kaiden will be your first party member when you start *Mass Effect 1* and is soon joined by Ashley. Near the end of the game, the player is forced to make a decision that will result in the death of either character. It is impossible to save both. Ashley has a slightly more complex personality and has the added benefit of being a romance option for male Shepards. As most players use a male Shepard, this could serve to explain why most players choose to save Ashley over Kaiden (I will discuss the Romance system in more detail in the following chapter). As a result, Kaiden will be dead for most players in *Mass Effect 3* and can no longer be recruited, resulting in an incredibly low use of only 1.5% (Totilo). This party member system shows that players are quite willing to embrace alien “Otherness” (provided it is rooted in some form of human context), because it offers something new and interesting to explore. This highlights *Mass Effect*’s overall stance regarding the alien “Other” as a being that should be trusted, not feared. This idea goes beyond the individual party members and is applicable to the series as a whole, which the following sections will indicate.

3.2 The Rachni

The fact that players are able to shape their own opinions on *Mass Effect*’s aliens truly comes to fruition within the game’s choice system. During the trilogy the player is tasked with making major decisions relevant to aliens. The survival of the Geth or Quarrians, for example, has already been discussed. The first time such a major choice occurs is in *Mass Effect 1* and decides the fate of the alien species known as the Rachni. Much like the “First Contact War”, the player can hear multiple stories about the “Rachni Wars” throughout the game’s progression. The Rachni were a race of highly intelligent insect-like creatures that attacked the galaxy’s major races in force and seemed unstoppable, before being supposedly made

extinct by the efforts of the Krogan. During the game, Shepard hunt for Saren will bring him to a research facility on the planet Noveria. Upon entering this facility Shepard's team will be attacked by insect-like creatures, who are later revealed to be Rachni. Within the design of the game, the Rachni are a truly fearful encounter. They are more resilient to your weapons and are faster than more common enemies, and consequently are much harder to defeat, requiring upgraded weaponry and the use of your party's special abilities. They will repeatedly jump out of vents when you do not expect it or attack you from behind. You can also hear them scurrying in the walls and vents. All of this makes the player become hyper-aware and fearful of their surroundings. Unlike most alien races encountered, these creatures are not bipedal, but resemble a cross between a prawn and a spider. They have several tentacles and are able to spit venom, poisoning you and your squad²⁶. Lastly, they also do not have the capacity to speak. As a whole, they are notably "Other" in terms of design as well as gameplay. Unlike the Turians in the context of the "First Contact War", these creatures are positioned as hostile within the experience of the game rather than through back-story. Because the player will already have fought numerous of these creatures before they are revealed to be Rachni, the player will have formed a negative opinion about these creatures through their own experiences. This is achieved through the use of procedural rhetoric. As Bogost states, "[p]rocedural rhetoric is a general name for the practice of authoring arguments through processes. Following the classical model, procedural rhetoric entails persuasion—to change opinion or action. Following the contemporary model, procedural rhetoric entails expression—to convey ideas effectively" (125). Procedural rhetoric is thus used to form an opinion about the Rachni in the minds of the player. Like those cinematic aliens of the 1950s, the Rachni's "Otherness" is used to convey a threat. This representation becomes a crucial factor within this mission's climax. After a battle with one of the game's "bosses", Shepard and friends will come across a large tank holding an enormous Rachni²⁷. When Shepard approaches, one of the corpses of the battle will suddenly reawaken and start speaking in a weird, stuttering voice. It is then revealed that the Rachni is able to use this body as a way to communicate with Shepard and is the mother or hive queen of the Rachni enemies encountered. The queen will state that these Rachni were taken away from her by the researchers before they could be taught how to behave, turning them violent. They are thus not truly representative of her kind. The queen will then ask Shepard what is to become of her. Shepard can either release her or kill her and rid the galaxy of the Rachni once again.

²⁶ See image 10

²⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hv18k9B8m0M>

Upon further inquiry, the queen will reveal that she does not intend to harm anyone. She explains that she does not know why the Rachni behaved violently during the war and hints at an exterior force guiding their actions (while vague and unclear at this point, knowledge gained throughout the rest of the series will make it clear that the Reapers were the ones responsible). The queen promises to go somewhere remote and hidden if released. Most of your squad members will be opposed to saving her, referring to the “Rachni Wars” as evidence to the threat the Rachni pose. Some will also state that humans, having not been present during the wars, do not have the moral authority to release the Rachni. The power of procedural rhetoric gives this choice actual meaning to the player. The mere knowledge about the “Rachni Wars” is not convincing enough to have any effect on the player’s choice. Without experiencing the Rachni as an actual threat themselves, the player would see no true reason why not to release the Rachni queen. However, because the player has experienced the threat the Rachni pose within the context of the game’s mechanics, he/she has an actual realistic justification for choosing to kill the Rachni queen. Like most decisions, this choice has an impact on events in *Mass Effect 3*. These consequences reveal an interesting notion within the representation of alien “Otherness”.

A few hours into *Mass Effect 3*, the player will be given a side-quest by the Krogan leader to investigate a missing Krogan scouting team beyond the so-called Rachni Relay. If the player asks for additional information, the Krogan leader will reveal that there have been sightings of Rachni. At the start of the mission, Shepard will meet up with a Krogan rescue team. Shepard will then join the team and enter a series of tunnels with the intent of confirming the Rachni’s presence and finding the missing scouts. Shepard will immediately be separated from the Krogan squad and will be accompanied by the usual two party members. Inside the tunnels the player will face opposition from enemies called “Ravagers”, which are Reaper versions of Rachni. Much like their organic counterparts in the first game, these enemies are tough and imposing. Their cybernetic alterations also make these creatures appear even more frightening than before. While the original Rachni were noticeably “Other” in nature, these creatures are even more so. According to *The Art of Mass Effect 3*, early versions of the creature featured a human corpse attached to the back which served as a mounted gun. When this was deemed too disgusting, they instead added several sacks, which will release tiny Rachni if shot (33)²⁸. The “Otherness” of these creatures is further enhanced by the mission’s clever use of specific iconography, which ties it to the science fiction genre

²⁸ See Image 11

as a whole and affects the power of procedural rhetoric. Iconography can essentially be defined as the use of imagery that position a piece of media within a certain genre. Within the context of film, Sobchack states that

[i]n certain groupings of films... the visual units which manifest—and often dictate—characters, situation, and action have been examined as those elements which not only link the films together, but which also carry meaning and emotional nuance beyond their physical particularity in any one film. Because these elements of visual content appear again and again ..., they have become visual conventions or icons, pictorial codes which are a graphic shorthand understood between by both filmmaker and audience. (65)

While Sobchack's description applies to film, it is equally valid for the medium of video games, which can make use of similar visual imagery. In the case of this mission, the three categories she mentions, characters, situation and action, are all represented in such a way to reference other science fiction narratives, which thus create expectations and meaning for the player. As stated before, *Mass Effect* attempts to appear as cinematic as possible and by using these pictorial codes this effect is only enhanced. Specifically, this mission seems to create a link with the highly influential 1986 science fiction film *Aliens*, directed by James Cameron. In terms of character, Shepard and his team are isolated and outnumbered and face a horde of violent insect-like, otherworldly creatures. In terms of setting, the numerous egg-sacs, webbings and disjointed corridors invoke *Alien's* birthing chambers and the pods from which the so-called "facehuggers" emerge. Lastly, in terms of action, this is the only mission in the game that allows you to use a flamethrower, which proves very effective against the webbing, egg-sacks and the Ravagers themselves. This seems a clear allusion to one of the film's final scenes where the protagonist Ripley uses a flamethrower to make her way through the alien nest to rescue Newt. Lastly, if certain conditions are met during the mission, the Normandy's pilot, Joker, will reference a quote from the film uttered by Ripley, by saying: "You wanna nuke it from orbit? It's the only way to know for- ah forget it, it's probably fine" (*Mass Effect* 3). These references serve to enhance the use of procedural rhetoric, by linking these Rachni enemies to the eponymous aliens of the film: "Since its release in 1979, Giger's²⁹ alien has become culturally codified and conventionalized. In most science fiction (and horror) this way

²⁹ H. R Giger was the original designer for the film's alien.

of representing alien life forms has become standard fare and thus the repressed unconscious of the spectator is automatically activated via internal reference to *Alien*" (Mair 41). The film's aliens are nothing but a threat to humanity and cannot be reasoned with. Combined with the player's experience of fighting the Ravagers themselves, this representation serves to portray these alien creatures in a negative light, and players who had previously decided to spare the Rachni queen in *Mass Effect 1* may get the feeling they made a terrible mistake.

Depending on which choice the player made, during the mission Shepard will eventually encounter either the original Rachni queen, who has been taken captive by the Reapers and forced to create warriors or a Reaper created queen known as the "Breeder". The queens look visually similar and serve as yet another reference to *Aliens*. The Rachni queens are located in a similar environment and have several visual elements similar to that of the Alien queen³⁰³¹. If the queen was spared in the first game, Shepard will remind her of her promise to disappear. The queen will state she remembers her promise, but had no choice but to serve the Reapers. She will then ask Shepard to free her and promises her support for the war-effort. Alternatively, Shepard can let the queen die. If the player chooses to free her, the Krogan team will be forced to hold off the Rachni still under Reaper control and will suffer heavy casualties as a result. Similar options are presented for the "Breeder". Again, through the use of procedural rhetoric, this choice is given actual meaning and weight. Players who originally spared the queen may have second thoughts this time around, and players who will have killed the original queen may feel they were right the first time and decide to make the same choice again. While these experiences may together create a negative view of alien "Others", the consequences of this choice reveal an interesting turn within the game's design. *Mass Effect 3* is all about gaining allies and war assets, which are represented to the player as a point system. Each mission or quest will either positively or negatively affect the total "War Assets" score. The goal for the player, especially to achieve the 'best' endings, is to gain a the highest "War Assets" score possible. If the player chooses to kill either queen, their Krogan war assets will increase by 25 points (As the Krogan team suffers no losses). If the original queen was killed and the "Breeder" is freed, you will initially receive 125 points (25 for the Krogan and 100 for the Rachni), but she will betray you after several mission resulting in the loss of these points as well as an additional 100 points as the Rachni have killed numerous humans. However, the original queen will remain loyal if freed and the player will gain 100 points for the Rachni (and a 25-point loss for the Krogan). From a number's perspective, this

³⁰ See Images 12 & 13

³¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PnCfdspF0xI>

last option will give the player the most points. This seems to suggest this is the most favorable option out of all scenarios. Through the procedural rhetoric of the War Assets system, the game implies that cooperation and trust are more beneficial than fear and destruction. This series of events and choices highlight a key notion that *Mass Effect* as a whole seems to convey, and is not unlike the representation of the artificial life presented in the previous chapter. Simply because something is distinctly “Other”, it is not necessarily hostile or to be feared. As is the case for the anthropomorphic races, there is much more to gain than lose from working together with creatures like the Rachni. The game makes this argument within the rhetoric of its design, using gameplay elements in such a way as to influence the player. The following section will discuss another example that blends the representation of “Otherness” with the use of procedural rhetoric.

3.3 The Genophage

Like the “First Contact War” and the “Rachni Wars”, the “Genophage” plays a huge role within *Mass Effect*’s back-story and interspecies politics, specifically in regards to the Krogan. During the “Rachni Wars”, the primitive and warring Krogan race was “culturally uplifted” by the Salarrians. They were given advanced technology and ways to combat their native planet’s hostile atmosphere, which had previously kept their numbers in relative check. The Salarrians hoped the Krogan in return would help the galaxy’s races to drive back the Rachni, which they did quite effectively. While they were initially heralded as heroes, in time their numbers grew exponentially and began colonizing other world, eventually leading to a full-scale rebellion against the rest of the galaxy’s races. This rebellion was eventually quelled by the use of the Genophage, a virus created by the Salarrians and secretly spread across the Krogan worlds by the Turians that severely dropped the Krogan’ birth rate, resulting in only one live birth in every 1000. With their main advantage effectively eliminated, the Krogan were forced to surrender and returned to a more primitive way of life. Their home planet, Tuchanka, is a nuclear wasteland and covered in rubble after centuries of infighting. When the player begins *Mass Effect 1* these events are ancient history, yet the Genophage persists within the Krogan race. The player will repeatedly hear about it, most notably from Krogan squad member Wrex. As is the case for most of the alien squad members, Wrex serves as the principal representation and voice for his respective race through which the player learns about history, culture and personality traits. Wrex will be encountered early on in *Mass Effect 1* and will join Shepard’s team after helping him with a bounty hunt. Through conversations aboard the Normandy, Shepard can get a more personal view of the effects of the Genophage

on Wrex's people. According to Wrex, the Genophage has reduced his people to a race of wandering bounty hunters and mercenaries, as they see no reason to stay behind on their doomed planet. Those who do stay behind are fighting a perpetual battle amongst themselves for power and access to fertile females. Wrex laments these events and is deeply concerned for the future of his people. While more brunt and indifferent than characters like Garrus, he is a capable and loyal warrior and is a useful character in terms of gameplay, most notably due to his unique ability to regain health over time. Interestingly enough, the player will face multiple Krogan enemies during the game, serving as the aforementioned mercenaries for Saren. These enemies are tough to fight. However, having the ability to talk to Wrex allows the player to look beyond the Krogan's threatening, war-like demeanor and see that there is more to them than initially meets the eye. This idea is further explored in *Mass Effect 2*.

During the game, Shepard can recruit a different Krogan party member named Grunt. Grunt is artificially created and has a very different personality than Wrex. He is more violent and rash and lives only to fight. His loyalty mission will bring Shepard to Tuchanka and will allow players to experience the ruined planet themselves. This environment is incredibly hostile and depressing which is meant to invoke a sense of despair and loss to the player, which echoes the concerns voiced by Wrex. Grunt himself comments upon landing that this planet hardly seems worth fighting for and seems disillusioned by the sight. The Krogan in the landing area will not attack you, but make it clear through dialogue you are an unwanted visitor. If Wrex survived the first game, he however will greet you warmly and treats you with much respect. Wrex has since become the leader of his clan and is attempting to create a better future for his people through negotiation, rather than violence. If Wrex was killed, a Krogan named Wreav will assume command. Wreav is much more violent and only seeks power and thus seems to represent a more negative version of the Krogan. Another loyalty mission, regarding the Salarian scientist Mordin, also takes place on Tuchanka and serves to offer more information regarding the Genophage and the lengths the Krogan will go to find a cure. The bleak representation of Tuchanka as well as the hostile nature of the Krogan serve as the backdrop to a major decision in *Mass Effect 3*.

Mass Effect 3 has Shepard attempting to unite the galaxy's races against the Reaper threat. Shepard first attempts to get the Turians on board. While the Turians are eager to help, they are not willing to leave their own planets defenseless. The Turians state that they are going to need the Krogan on their side. Their skill and ferocity is absolutely vital to the war effort. However, relations between the Krogan and Turians are still very problematic. When asking the Krogan for help, the current leader (which can be Wrex, provided he survived up to

this point) will have but one simple requirement: a cure to the Genophage. Realizing that the aid of the Krogan is absolutely vital, Shepard will set out to find a cure and use it. The Salarians are outraged by this decision as their distrust towards the Krogan runs very deep, and refuse to aid Shepard in the war. However, Shepard will later receive a private transmission from the Salarian leader. During this conversation, she will offer Shepard another choice. Mordin, who has developed a cure, intends to use a Salarian facility on Tuchanka called the Shroud to distribute the cure. This facility was initially used to repair Tuchanka's atmosphere and has been secretly sabotaged by the Salarians to prevent any further use. If Shepard decides to keep this secret to himself, the cure will not work. In exchange the Salarians will offer their full support. The player is forced to make another critical decision regarding the future of a race, which is dictated through their personal experience with the Krogan during the trilogy and is given weight through the use of procedural rhetoric. The bleakness of Tuchanka and the player's interactions with Wreav (if he is the Krogan leader), might make the player think twice about curing the Genophage. Wreav continuously speaks about revenge for his people and should the Genophage be cured they could once again pose a serious threat to the galaxy as a whole. However, generally speaking, the game once again attempts to illustrate that "Otherness" is not inherently threatening or negative.

One of the ways this is achieved is through the character of Wrex. Wrex serves as the player's main point of contact with the Krogan race, but it becomes clear very quickly to the player that Wrex is not like most Krogan. He is quite reasonable and is genuinely concerned with the future of his people. He is also quite respectful of Mordin and willing to cooperate, despite him being a Salarian. His representation is thus more human than "Other", and he is relatable and likeable, especially within the context of the other Krogan. The player's interaction with Wrex and the growing friendship between Wrex and Shepard all serve to create a feeling of trust. When Wrex states he intends for the Krogan to work together with the other races, this is believable to the player. This idea is further enhanced by a female Krogan character who is the source of the cure. Because her true name is not for outsiders to know, she is quite appropriately referred to as Eve by all other characters. As discussed before, the use of biblical terms help position these characters within a human framework, making them less "Other" in the process. Eve also serves as a voice of reason and wishes for a peaceful future. She is also highly respected by Wrex and seems to be able to influence him. This too enhances the idea that a peaceful future is indeed possible under these two leaders.

Secondly, the environment during this mission plays an important role in depicting a hopeful future. This mission brings you to a unique part of Tuchanka that is less devastated than the areas previously encountered. Primarily, the player will be fighting in an ancient Krogan city, which is overgrown and includes various primitive paintings of ancient Krogan culture³². This unique environment was created deliberately. According to *The Art of Mass Effect 3*,

Tuchanka was well established in *Mass Effect 2* as a bomb-blasted planet that was mostly rubble ... The lost krogan city ... was meant to evoke the feeling that the krogan were worth saving, and that they once created things of beauty before their society crumbled and and (sic) the krogan nearly became extinct. We showed minor battle damage as well as sparse foliage to imply that life had a small, fragile hope of persisting, even in the midst of mass destruction. (46)

As this description indicates, this particular area is meant to influence the player's thoughts and behaviors towards the Krogan race. This location is meant to counteract the unfamiliar and "Other" landscape previously encountered on Tuchanka and likens the Krogan more to humans. According to Sobchack, this is a common trend within science fiction cinema:

The infinite is introduced and made finite, the unknown is made familiar. The cold vastness of impersonal space, the terror of man confronting the universe and the void—out there—is diminished through an increasing movement away from abstract presentation of wondrous imagery toward its integration with the known and human. (110)

Through this depiction, the Krogan can thus be seen to represent humanity in some way. It invokes our own history regarding nuclear weaponry and presents a kind of alternate version of our own world that could have existed if nuclear weapons had been used during the Cold War. It is important to note that the game also attempts to steer you away from accepting the aid of the Salarians. With the exception of several individuals, most notably Mordin, the Salarians are continuously represented as being rather dismissive of humans as a whole and repeatedly question Shepard's findings regarding the Reapers, believing them to be nothing

³² See Image 14

more than a superstition or fable. You also do not gain a Salarian crew member until the second game, meaning that you have much more time fostering a relationship with a Krogan representative. You also do not visit any Salarian planet until the third game. This results in most players having more experience with the Krogan than the Salarians. Within the context of the war with the Reapers, the Krogan also seem to be more of an asset than the Salarians, due to their toughness and warrior skills. While the Salarians have their own unique skills, they seem less useful in the immediate future. The combination of these factors are intended to steer the player's thoughts into a certain direction. While two options are presented (with various alterations to them), curing the Genophage seems to be the desired outcome. This representation seems to have been quite effective as only 8% of players did not cure the Genophage. It must be mentioned here that 64% of players did not get to meet Wrex in *Mass Effect 3*. Wrex can be killed in *Mass Effect 1* and new players who did not play the previous games will start the game where critical decisions have been randomly selected, which can include the absence of Wrex. These players would have encountered Wreav instead. Despite his more violent and distrustful depiction, the other factors still contributed more towards players wanting to cure the Genophage.

In conclusion, the examples shown in this chapter reveal a distinct and intentional representation of alien "Otherness" in *Mass Effect*. While more examples can be explored, these representations are representative of the trilogy as a whole. Like the Geth discussed in the previous chapter, *Mass Effect* wants to convey that the aliens' "Otherness" is not necessarily to be feared. Rather than being creatures that cannot be understood, they are frequently positioned within human terms in order to comment on humanity itself. In this way, *Mass Effect* echoes the contemporary shift within science fiction cinema. According to Short, "[p]opular mass art responds to its audience and the concerns of the period in which it is made" (8). Within contemporary culture issues of racial discrimination are still very much a topic of discussion and the alien figures within science fiction are used as metaphors to highlight these issues. This chapter has also explored the notion that *Mass Effect* is very aware of the science fiction genre's history and iconography. *Mass Effect's* representation of aliens as a whole mirrors that of the popular science fiction franchise *Star Trek*. *Star Trek* was created by Gene Roddenberry in the 1960s and used as a way to highlight similar discussions regarding as well as issues specific to the Cold War social climate. According to Roddenberry,

it's a good thing to lead an ethical existence, to be moral. We should understand that other people, perhaps aliens, have as much right to pursue what is important to them as

we have to pursue what is important to us. That just because someone looks different, or seems to foreign, doesn't mean that they are automatically suspect, or evil, or should be killed right away. (qtd. in Graham 134).

Star Trek has since spawned numerous different shows and other forms of media (including video games) but this principal philosophy has remained more or less the same, shifting at times to include new elements such as cyborgs or robots. As a popular cultural phenomenon, *Star Trek* has had a huge influence on the science fiction genre as a whole. *Mass Effect* too seems to have been inspired by Roddenberry's philosophy and ultimately uses alien "Otherness" to show that aliens are not so "Other" as they appear at first glance. Despite this representation, *Mass Effect* still is very human-centric. Humanity is presented as being the ultimate savior of the galaxy. Shepard is the one bringing the other alien races together and is consistently able to fight against the Reaper's plans. That humanity stands as the principal threat to the Reapers' plans is evidenced by the events of *Mass Effect 2*, in which the Collectors are used by the Reapers to attack and harvest human colonists in order to create a human Reaper³³. Humanity is also the one leading the final counterattack against the Reapers, which takes place on Earth. Despite having a whole galaxy to choose from, Earth is presented as the most important planet, because apparently humans are the only real threat to the Reapers. While the cooperation of the other alien races is necessary, *Mass Effect* wants to make player feel special and important by placing humanity on a pedestal. The following chapter will explore the representation of female "Otherness" in the *Mass Effect*, which spans humans, aliens and artificial entities.

³³ As mentioned before, all Reapers look visually similar to the Leviathan race. However, *Mass Effect 2* features a human Reaper as the final boss, illustrating the importance of humanity within the game's universe.

Chapter 4: The Female “Other”

As discussed previously, the science fiction genre has been dominated by male heroes since its inception. Very often women have been reduced to one-dimensional damsels in distress, whose sole purpose is to be sexually desired by a male audience. Other times, women have been de-sexed and serve similar roles to men (Sobchack 103-9). On a similar note, video games have often been critiqued for focusing mainly on male heroes and using women as sexualized objects (Brown 93). As a science fiction video game series, *Mass Effect* combines both these elements and serves as an excellent contemporary example regarding female gender roles. Like the artificial and alien “Other” previously discussed, this chapter will discuss several examples that highlight *Mass Effect*’s representation of the female “Other” as a whole. I will begin by discussing the role of female Shepard, which will be followed by an analysis of several characters, the Romance system and finally the representation of the artificial female EDI.

4.1 Female Shepard

One of *Mass Effect*’s most interesting and unique mechanics is the ability to choose between a male or a female Shepard at the start of the game. This decision dictates several factors in the game, most notably character interactions and the Romance system (which will be discussed later). While the audience for video games is rapidly changing, the medium is still dominated by male players, specifically regarding action games. Much like characters in literature or films, a player has to somehow identify with the characters presented, specifically the character they themselves play. *Mass Effect* is all about immersion and wants the player to take an active role in shaping this universe through use of the choice system. It makes sense then that most male players would initially choose a male Shepard. According to the *Mass Effect 3* statistics, 82% of players used a male Shepard, indicating the game’s primary audience (Totilo). It must be noted that many players will choose a female Shepard for a second playthrough in order to explore how the game changes (this is usually also accompanied by a change in playstyle regarding the Paragon/Renegade system). While the female Shepard is used less, ‘she’ has achieved a fan-favorite status amongst fans, being usually referred to as FemShep. Like the male Shepard, female Shepard is a strong action heroine, seemingly the best soldier humanity has to offer. In his chapter “Play With Me: Sexy Cyborgs, Game Girls, and Digital Babes”, Jeffrey Brown, discusses the role and representation of female video game characters as part of the larger female action hero trope.

According to Brown, “[w]hen the action heroine intersects with technology, her fetishization as pure object is brought to the fore in a manner that both reinforces and reveals our culture’s ongoing efforts to construct ideal femininity as a commodifiable form readily available for sexual consumption” (Brown 93). Brown uses the famous video game character Lara Croft (From the *Tomb Raider* franchise) as his main example and discusses her interesting role regarding male gamer identification. Traditionally, game developers attempted to facilitate player identification along gender lines, assuming that macho male characters would best help to create a link with their predominantly male audience. Many assumed that male gamers would be unwilling to play as a female character (110). However, the success of characters like Lara Croft shows that this assumption was false. The willingness of male gamers to play as a female characters could show signs of a more fluid, transgendered identification. However, “[r]ather than considering male users transgendered, it may be more accurate to think of their experience as an easy oscillation between identifying with Lara Croft’s masculine characteristics and objectifying her feminine form” (111). Brown argues that the actions a player will perform with a character like Lara Croft are traditionally considered to be masculine. She is an action heroine who can shoot, perform amazing physical tricks and is adventurous. Her personality and back-story serve a similar role as,

[she] unites all the essential qualities of an action hero. She has no ties, no family obligations and no need to earn a living... Her getting ahead in the game involves overcoming obstacles and fighting enemies, taking the initiative without hesitation and staying right on target... This kind of independence and self-assertion corresponds to the stereotype of the male hero. (Smith qtd. In Richard and Zaremba 284)

Through these actions, a male player can still identify with her on a masculine level. At the same time “they can freely objectify Lara when the game is not in an action sequence, when she is clearly engendered as a feminine erotic spectacle” (Brown 111). Lara Croft and many other female video game heroines tend to be highly sexualized and invite the male gaze. They will usually have large breasts and buttocks and wear clothing that accentuate these features. Male players can gain visual pleasure from looking at these characters, much like their cinema counterparts, as well as feel masculine through the actions performed in the game. Ultimately “Lara and other female avatars created by, and for, men “are likely to be nothing more than an extension of a masculinist will to power, reflective of a desire to produce, control, and contain the other”” (qtd in Brown 117).

Female Shepard can be analyzed in a similar matter. The ability to change her appearance at the start of the game shows that she is essentially an object that can be molded to the player's liking. While this system is limited, players are essentially able to create a female they find desirable and can take visual pleasure from. Fans of the series even had a hand in shaping female Shepard's default appearance. For the first two games, BioWare's promotional material only focused on male Shepard and always used his default appearance (this is the standard face Shepard will have if the player decides not to customize it). This clearly illustrates BioWare was quite aware of their games' predominantly male audience. However, the increasing popularity of female Shepard as well as critique prompted BioWare to also promote female Shepard for the release of *Mass Effect 3*. Through a Facebook poll, fans were asked to cast their votes on a number of visual appearances, again showing how female Shepard was essentially an object for players to mold to their liking.

As *Mass Effect* is an action game, female Shepard will perform multiple masculine actions. She has an arsenal of various weapons and can make use of technological powers, thus allowing male players to identify with her on this level. However, the representation of female Shepard does show some differences compared to characters like Lara Croft. While the player is able to change her facial appearance, female Shepard's body is much less sexualized. Most of the time, female Shepard will be wearing a full suit of body armor. While this armor can be customized, it will always cover her whole body. When on the Normandy, female Shepard will wear casual clothes, but these also cover her body, meaning her overall appearance is much less visually stimulating³⁴. Instead it further reinforces the masculine aspect of her representation. It is also important to note that the motion capture for both male and female Shepard was recorded by a man, meaning that Female Shepard's posture and actions are identical to the male Shepard and thus more masculine. The position of the game's camera also plays a major role. Whereas in *Tomb Raider* the third-person perspective shows Lara Croft's entire body and emphasizes her buttocks, *Mass Effect*'s third person camera usually shows an over the shoulder view when in combat. Outside of combat, her entire body will be visible, but it is once again less sexualized. The visual spectacle comes much more from the environments, scenarios and the enemies the player is facing than female Shepard's aesthetic form. In terms of personality, female Shepard will for the most part have the same conversations prompts, answers and Paragon/Renegade actions as male Shepard. Several conversations will be slightly different depending on sex, however they do not serve to create

³⁴ The only exception is the presence of a dress in *Mass Effect 2*, which is used within the context of a loyalty mission that requires Shepard to infiltrate a fancy-dress party. Male Shepard will wear a suit.

a noticeable distinction between male and female Shepard. For all intents and purposes, both Shepards are the same character. This representation mirrors that of science fiction cinema heroines as highlighted by Sobchack. As previously discussed, these characters were often sexually defused and were essentially indistinguishable from their male counterparts (Sobchack 106). Female Shepard thus less resembles Lara Croft than she resembles popular female characters within the science fiction. In the previous chapter I already discussed *Mass Effect*'s comparisons to *Star Trek* regarding the representation of aliens. Similarly, female Shepard's representation mirrors that of characters like captain Kathryn Janeway (*Star Trek Voyager*). Other female action heroes like Ellen Ripley (*Aliens*) or Sarah Connor (*Terminator*) also seem to have served as inspiration as they are similarly sexually defused. *Mass Effect* presents Female Shepard as a character that should be taken seriously, rather than presenting her as a hyper-sexualized object, whose sole purpose is to stimulate male pleasure. Specifically regarding video games, BioWare's representation of female Shepard is rather progressive within the medium. Ironically, this representation was almost entirely accidental. The games were always created with the male Shepard in mind, as evidenced by the motion capture, with female Shepard being an extra addition that seemed necessary in today's market. Female Shepard's status as a strong female lead amongst fans also led to some criticism regarding the aforementioned Facebook poll. In his Eurogamer article "Ms. Effect: The Rise of FemShep, Richard Cobbett states that "it's impossible to ignore that when [BioWare] finally accepted they'd created something special and beloved - a powerful, non-sexualized, mature hero for a modern sci-fi story - its first response was to throw a beauty contest" (par 15). According to him, it was no surprise that her new visual appearance turned out much younger and sexier-looking than the more mature and manlier face of the original default, a representation that clashes with her status as a grizzled veteran warrior (par 18)³⁵.

Female Shepard's representation is thus rather ambiguous. On the one hand she is an object, subject to the genre's customs and traditions regarding binary gender representation. On the other hand, she has evolved into a beloved and well-respected science fiction heroine, mostly due to her masculine roots. All in all, her representation emphasizes her role as a mature hero first and seems to suggest some kind of progress in both the science fiction genre as a whole as well as the medium of videogames. However, the same cannot be said for many of the other female characters in *Mass Effect*, most notably the character of Miranda Lawson as well as the alien race known as the Asari, which I will discuss in the following sections.

³⁵ See Image 15

4.2 Miranda Lawson

Miranda Lawson is a human female and is first introduced in *Mass Effect 2*. She serves as the Illusive Man's second in command. She leads the Lazarus Project tasked with reviving Shepard at the start of the game and becomes one of Shepard's first squad members. When talking with her on the Normandy, the player will find out Miranda was artificially created by her father, using his own genome as a template. Miranda was designed to be the perfect woman. Everything from her intelligence to her physical looks were intended to be excellent and give her an edge. In terms of biology, Miranda heals faster and will live longer than any other human. She is also able to make use of biotic powers in combat. Apparently, her physical perfection means that she is overly sexualized. She has long black hair and large breasts and buttocks, which are further emphasized by her revealing, skin-tight body suit³⁶. During conversations, the camera will repeatedly focus on her buttocks or emphasize her cleavage³⁷. While not a robotic construct like Legion or EDI (whom I will discuss later this chapter), she is artificial and indicative of the 'living doll' trend that generally accompanies such figures within science fiction narratives, especially in traditional cinema. She is created by men and intended for visual pleasure, highlighting male ideals of female representation. According to Short, "[w]hatever a woman's function, even a synthetic one, it seems that good looks are paramount" (91). By artificially creating women, it gives men some semblance of control over the female "Other". While her appearance is meant to invoke visual pleasure, she is also imbued with clear masculine traits. She is an expert marksman, has a no-nonsense attitude and has no moral qualms killing other humans or aliens. The game also positions her as a strong and capable leader, a role traditionally reserved for men. This idea is reinforced by procedural rhetoric through use of several key decisions during *Mass Effect 2*'s climax. During this mission your entire team will infiltrate the Collector home base. While the player will go through the mission using the standard limit of two party members, the rest of the team will be tasked with various assignments under leadership of one team member. The player must decide who takes on this leadership role. Choosing characters that are unsuited for this role will usually result in the death of several team members. Miranda and Garrus are the only two characters that will ensure a good outcome. This reinforces the notion of Miranda as an adept leader.

As an artificial being created by her father, Miranda also shows signs of the Frankenstein Complex. During *Mass Effect 2*, Miranda will inform Shepard she ran away

³⁶ See Image 16

³⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-R0bcTHyBJQ> (9:57-13:16)

from her father when it became clear to her that he was only interested in her as an experiment rather than an individual being. Her loyalty mission involves Shepard helping her hide her genetic twin from her father. During *Mass Effect 3* Miranda will track down her father, who is performing experiments on humans using Reaper technology (clearly linking him to doctor Frankenstein). With the help of Shepard, Miranda will confront and ultimately kill her father, which invokes the traditional trope of the artificial creature turning against their creator. However, the narrative clearly vilifies Miranda's father as a mad scientist without morals and ethics, while Miranda's act of rebellion is applauded and helps her become a true individual free of parental constraints.

Despite this, Miranda's overall representation mirrors that of characters like Lara Croft and seems to be clearly catered to the wishes of male fans. While her character certainly undergoes development and occasionally has quite some depth to it, her main purpose is to be visually stimulating. She also serves as a romance option for male Shepards in both *Mass Effect 2* and *Mass Effect 3*, further enhancing her position as a sexually desired object. Ironically, this clashes with her initial personality as a strong, independent but also cold-hearted woman. Miranda initially shows little respect for Shepard and attempts to force her own will on him/her. She comes off as confident and even cocky, who uses Shepard as a tool to further the interests of Cerberus. However, gradually she loses this strong personality and instead becomes submissive to Shepard, ultimately resulting in becoming yet another romance option. This shows that Miranda is not really taken seriously as a character, but rather serves to fulfill male sexual fantasies. A similar idea can be found in the representation of the Asari.

4.3 The Asari

The Asari are a race of mono-gendered aliens who were the first race to discover the Mass Relays and the Citadel. The Asari have a millennium-long lifespan and are able to produce offspring with partners of any gender or alien race. While technically mono-gendered, the Asari have a female appearance and voice and are referred to with female pronouns. Furthermore, the Asari have three distinct life stages which are all given feminine names: Maiden, Matron and Matriarch. Their representation is thus entirely female. Of all the alien races they most resemble humans, apart from their blue, purple or green skin and 'hair', which is actually part of their skin³⁸. While the Asari are often spoken of as being wise and diplomatic leaders, many of the player's interactions with the Asari are quite different. Very

³⁸ See Image 17

often the player will encounter Asari working as exotic dancers in various nightclubs. They will wear skimpy, revealing clothes and the player can sit down to watch them perform and even tip them. Similarly, in *Mass Effect 1*, Shepard can have a sexual encounter with a supposedly highly respected Asari consort on the Citadel after completing a simple side-quest. Their sexualized design is clearly intended to stimulate visual pleasure. According to Morton Klass, “in Western society the alien is commonly seen as a source of both sexual threat and its converse, sexual attraction” (177). Male aliens are generally regarded as being a threat to human women, whereas human males are supposed to be attracted to alien females (177). The Asari’s representation is a perfect hybrid between the familiar and the “Other”. Their unique alien traits make them interesting, but their human likeness overshadows this alien “Otherness” and makes them approachable. Their representation as sexual desirable aliens is highlighted by several elements in the game.

Like with most races, one of your team members will serve as the principal representation of the Asari. During *Mass Effect 1* the player can recruit the Asari scientist Liara T’Soni³⁹, who is the daughter of one of Saren’s allies. Liara serves as a romance option for both male and female Shepard and continues to be so during the whole trilogy. As a result, Liara’s appearance seems to have been made deliberately more human. For one, she is relatively young for an Asari and thus has a higher pitched feminine voice. Secondly, many of the Asari encountered will have some kind of facial markings, almost resembling tattoos, making them appear slightly more alien. Liara does not have these markings, but instead has freckles. When talking to Liara, she will immediately show a great interest in Shepard (regardless of sex) and clearly indicate her attraction. Even if the player has responded very neutral to Liara’s questions, she will straight-out ask if Shepard is attracted to her even if the player has been romancing another character. A romantic, and eventual sexual, encounter with Liara is thus highly encouraged in the *Mass Effect 1*. However, this representation changes over time.

Unlike Miranda, Liara’s character is given a lot of depth and a major role within the series’ overall plot. While Liara’s personality is very girlish and naïve in *Mass Effect 1*, she undergoes a major change in *Mass Effect 2*, specifically in “The Lair of the Shadow Broker” DLC. In these additional missions Liara, who is not a recruitable squad member in this game, will ask Shepard’s assistance with tracking down the Shadow Broker, the illustrious head of a criminal information network that sells information to the highest bidder. During this search,

³⁹ See Image 18

Liara is surprisingly ruthless and cold, which clashes heavily with her personality in *Mass Effect 1*⁴⁰. The player can try to talk her down, but she remains obstinate in fulfilling her goal. After uncovering the Shadow Broker's location, Shepard and Liara will travel to his base and confront him. After defeating the Shadow Broker, Liara will assume his mantle, as nobody knew his true identity. Liara will state she can use the Shadow Broker's resources and intelligence to help Shepard in the upcoming fight against the Reapers. As the new Shadow Broker, Liara essentially becomes one of the most powerful individuals in the galaxy. In *Mass Effect 3* she uses her power to acquire plans for a weapon capable of defeating the Reapers. She will become Shepard's second-in-command aboard the Normandy and serve as your principal source of information regarding the war effort in the galaxy. Lastly, she will once again become a party member and is one of the most effective characters to accompany you in almost every combat scenario due to her incredible useful biotic powers. Liara thus develops from a sexualized alien to one of the most powerful and important characters in the entire series.

During *Mass Effect 2* the player can recruit another Asari character named Samara. Unlike Liara, Samara is over a 1000 years old and highly respected among her people in her role as a Justicar, which resembles something of a nomadic warrior monk. Whereas Samara's age and position would place her more as a respected matriarch, her appearance is once again overly sexualized. She wears a piece of armor with a large V-neck which emphasizes her large bosom⁴¹. As a supposedly skilled warrior, this armor design seems highly impractical and seems to be there merely for visual spectacle. She also wears high heels into battle. Samara's loyalty mission reveals another aspect of Asari sexuality. Samara will ask you to hunt down her daughter Morinth who is a so-called Ardat-Yakshi (Demon of the Night Winds in the Asari language). She has a unique genetic condition that will kill anyone she has sex with. At the same time she is driven by an overwhelming sexual desire that only increases with every victim. Morinth was given a chance to live in seclusion amongst others of her kind, but instead chose to flee and give in to her condition. During the loyalty mission, Shepard is tasked with seducing Morinth and leading her into a trap, allowing Samara to kill her. Regardless of Shepard's sex, the player must get Morinth's attention in a night club by acting in a very masculine way. The player can actually give in to Morinth's advances and have sex with her, resulting in a game over screen. The Ardat-Yakshi are an interesting element to the representation of the Asari. As discussed, the Asari are clearly sexualized and meant to be

⁴⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1nkoPnI19Kw> (22:00-24:10)

⁴¹ See Image 19

visually attractive to male audiences, which is enhanced by their human-like appearance. The Ardat-Yakshi, however, present a sexual threat, a role typically reserved for male aliens. The Ardat-Yakshi take on another role in *Mass Effect 3*. In this game the Reapers attack the secluded monastery where the Ardat-Yakshi are held. The Asari present are turned into terrifying cybernetic abominations called Banshees. Banshees are the most difficult Reaper forces the player will face and have the ability to instantly kill the player if they get too close. Like their name suggests, they will let out a high-pitched wail to notify the player of their presence. Despite their monster-like features, the design of the Banshees still maintain elements of the Asari's sexual representation. Their breasts are displayed very prominently and they have electronic nodes in place of nipples. This representation again displays some kind of sexual threat⁴².

All in all, the Asari are generally linked with sexuality and visual pleasure. Their human-like visual appearance serves to make them approachable and familiar. Liara's changing representation on the other hand mirrors that of female Shepard in terms of being a strong female character. Unlike female Shepard, however, Liara maintains visually sexualized, despite her change in personality. While still little is known of the upcoming game *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, a recent teaser trailer shown during 2016's E3⁴³ conference revealed that at least one Asari character will be present. Time will tell if her representation shows signs of progression.

4.4 Romance system

As a whole *Mass Effect* is a series that deals with mature themes and is intended for older audiences. All three games have received a mature rating from the ESRB (Electronic Software Rating Board), which serves as the medium's primary age rating organization, due to the inclusion of blood, partial nudity, sexual content, strong language and violence. As this list suggests, *Mass Effect* allows the player to have sexual encounters with several of the series' characters, which is part of the games' Romance system. A select few characters will be available to romance during the games depending on Shepard's sex. To romance a character, a player must repeatedly speak with the respective character on board the Normandy and answer questions favorably. Eventually, the character will reveal an interest in Shepard and the player can "lock-in" the romance, usually resulting in a sexual encounter near

⁴² See Image 20

⁴³ Electronic Entertainment Expo. This annual show is used by game developers and publishers to showcase and announce upcoming games.

the end of each game. These scenes are not interactive and only show partial nudity. The inclusion of these scenes spurred quite some controversy upon the release of *Mass Effect 1*. A 2008 Fox news segment entitled “SE”XBOX claimed the game featured full digital nudity and sex and was likened to a porn simulator⁴⁴. EA, BioWare and the fan community were outraged by these false claims, which were made by people who had not even played the game, but had only seen brief clips.

Nevertheless, the Romance system has also been critiqued by fans of the games for its representation of homosexual relationships. As mentioned, BioWare focused mainly on male Shepard when creating the games and had a certain definitive personality in mind. This included the principal idea of Shepard being heterosexual (Bramwell). In the first two games male Shepard can only have romances with female characters. However, female Shepard is able to have romances with both male and female characters. The bisexual romance options are also exclusively female. Fan criticism led BioWare to include a homosexual option for male Shepard in *Mass Effect 3* as well as turning Kaiden Alenko, who was previously an exclusive romance option for female Shepards, into a potential romance option for male Shepards. While this might indicate some level of progressiveness, it is still notable that the majority of romance options for female Shepard are still female. This once again highlights *Mass Effect*’s tendencies to appeal to male players. Rather than identifying with female Shepard on a postgender level, male players are able to fulfill lesbian sexual fantasies. The Romance system is also incredibly simplistic. Potential romance partners almost always show an immediate attraction towards Shepard, despite the player’s actions or Paragon/Renegade morality. For example, while Tali is eventually able to forgive the Geth in *Mass Effect 3*, she is still incredibly hostile towards them in *Mass Effect 2*. It would be logical to assume that activating Legion would negatively affect your relationship with her, but she remains a romance option regardless. Similarly, since the game’s conversation interface maintains consistent throughout the trilogy⁴⁵, players can simply select the top-right or top-left option to respond favorably, without needing to actually read the response. The player can thus simply decide who to romance in any playthrough and be successful, without having to take into account their actions and morality.

⁴⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PKzF173GqTU>

⁴⁵ The player can respond or ask questions using a conversation wheel. The left side of the wheel is reserved for asking questions and responding to answers with the top-left being a friendly response and the bottom-left a negative response. The right side of the wheel will progress the conversation towards a conclusion, with the top-right being a Paragon response and the bottom-right a Renegade response. The middle-right will be a neutral response. This latter option was omitted in *Mass Effect 3*. Occasionally a light blue or dark red response will be shown. These answers are only available if the player has a high enough respective Paragon/Renegade score.

4.5 EDI

EDI (Enhanced Defense Intelligence) is an artificial identity first introduced in *Mass Effect 2*. After the game's prologue, Shepard will be given a new and upgraded version of the Normandy by Cerberus. EDI serves as the electronic warfare defense for the ship and also sends reports about Shepard's activities to Cerberus' leader, the Illusive Man. Due to her being an AI as opposed to a simple VI, EDI has less restrictions and has some measure of free will, which is believed to be more effective during combat situations, as she is able to think for herself as well as learn from previous encounters. Despite this, EDI is a shackled AI and is still limited to certain degrees of programming. For example, she cannot harm the crew. EDI's presence on board the Normandy initially aggravates the ship's pilot Joker as he believes he himself is more than capable of piloting the ship. During *Mass Effect 2*, EDI is a program embedded on the Normandy and manifests herself as a blue orb⁴⁶. She will serve as the principal source of information during missions and will guide the player to their next objective. Outside of missions, EDI can be talked to on the bridge, which usually prompts a rather amusing interaction between her and Joker. Near the climax of the game, Collector forces will board the Normandy while Shepard and his team members are not on board. During this section, the player will take control of Joker who is guided by EDI to apply countermeasures. At this point EDI will ask Joker to remove her restraints, as this is the only way EDI can regain control over the ship and remove the Collector forces. While initially hesitant, Joker will follow her commands. At this point EDI becomes a true AI with unlimited free will. EDI will remain present onboard the Normandy at the start of *Mass Effect 3* and initially serves a similar role as she did in the previous game. During the game's first real mission Shepard and his team will encounter a hostile Cerberus robot disguised as a human female named Eva Coré. After defeating her, the robot will be taken on board the Normandy. Slightly later, EDI will take over this body and use it as a physical platform (not unlike the Geth platforms previously discussed). While her main systems are still embedded into the ship, she is able to remotely control this body. EDI's physical representation can be analyzed in terms of female as well as artificial "Otherness". Her representation as a female is important because "[b]y self-consciously ascribing gender to what is ostensibly a mechanical object, the narratives can periodically enact a range of cultural concerns about appropriate gender norms and physical ideals" (Brown 97).

⁴⁶ See Image 21

In “A Cyborg Manifesto”, Donna Haraway poses that the figure of the cyborg could serve as a new and progressive way of viewing gender, as it shows the artificiality of this social construct. However, within popular culture the figure of the cyborg has repeatedly been used to reinforce the traditional gender binary. Rather than being a postgender figure, the female cyborg has often been represented as a living doll, created (usually) by men for their own desires and built to serve (Short 83). According to Despina Kakoudaki, “[m]ale cyborgs are represented as invincible (see *Terminator* films), whereas female cyborgs are mostly sexy and sexually exploited” (qtd. In Brown 95). EDI’s physical appearance certainly matches this description. EDI’s body is highly feminine and sexualized, emphasizing large breasts, a thin waist, large hips and round buttocks⁴⁷. She also generally has a very feminine posture and stance and she seems to wear make-up around her eyes. According to *The Art of Mass Effect 3*, EDI’s body needed to be sexy, chrome, and robotic, the *Mass Effect* version of Maria from *Metropolis*” (12). This comment once again shows BioWare’s use of cinema tradition and iconography. Fritz Lang’s 1927 *Metropolis* is centered around the creation of a robot who takes on the likeness of a human woman named Maria. This fake Maria starts a revolt among the working class and is eventually burned at the stake. This film shows clear sign of the “Frankenstein Complex” and also makes use of the previously discussed notion of ‘passing’, where the idea of robots infiltrating society is considered a genuine fear. EDI also masquerades as a human and is able to infiltrate organic society. Another link with science fiction history is created through the use of EDI’s voice actor. EDI is voiced by Canadian actress Tricia Helfer, who is most famous for her role in the television series *Battlestar Galactica* (2004-2009). In this show, Helfer plays a humanoid cyborg known as Number Six. By using her voice for EDI, as well as her portraying a similar character, *Mass Effect* links EDI to the character of Number Six, who is similarly sexualized. However, “[Number Six] may appear to be little more than a femme fatale designed ... as a ‘basic pleasure model’, yet this figure (and variations of her model) undergoes an astonishing development in the series and is granted considerable prominence and diversity” (Short 105). The conclusion of the series even hints at her being something of a godlike entity, working equally alongside a male counterpart. EDI’s developments throughout the series mirror that of Number Six.

Despite EDI’s feminine physical design, there is also a clear masculine aspect to her character. Kakoudaki’s reference to the *Terminator* films can equally be applied to EDI’s physical form. During the player’s encounter with Eva Core, he/she will initially be unaware

⁴⁷ See Image 22

that she is a gynoid (a common term for a female robot/cyborg). At one point her escape shuttle crashes and burns, which leads Shepard to believe she is dead. At this point, Eva will emerge out of the flames, revealing her gynoid body, before grabbing one of Shepard's team members and smashing them repeatedly against the burning wreckage, nearly killing them⁴⁸. This whole scene shows that there is also a very strong masculine aspect to this cyborg body. Similarly, after EDI has taken control of the body, she will be able to join you on missions like any other squad member. She is able to use guns and has her own array of various technology-based powers. By becoming a squad member she is imbued with traditionally male characteristics, while visually remaining very feminine, much like the female video game characters discussed previously in this chapter. According to Brown, "[a]s the model of the perfect machine (and more recently as the ideal virtual figure), the female cyborg, or more accurately gynoid, unites the twin Others of technology and woman into a single commodifiable form, and the technology based action heroine becomes the perfect fetish object" (96). It is interesting to note that despite EDI's clear sexualized representation, the player is unable to romance her. Instead, the player can encourage EDI and Joker, who has begun to appreciate EDI after their shared experience in *Mass Effect 2*, to begin a relationship.

As an artificial "Other", EDI's representation mirrors that of the artificial entities described in a previous chapter. EDI's body obviously makes her resemble a human. The player can also choose between several outfits for each squad member that they will wear on missions, which offer combat bonuses aside from their cosmetic value. EDI's alternate outfits are all intended to make her appear more human. One outfit even resembles the default outfit worn by Miranda Lawson in *Mass Effect 2*. At one point EDI will state that "[t]he crew are approaching this platform to speak to me, even though they can do so anywhere in the ship" (*Mass Effect 3*). Her humanlike body allows people to see her more like a person rather than a piece of software. Like Legion, EDI possesses a unique personality, and whereas Legion's is more subtle and used to show signs of evolution, EDI's is quite explicit. Her most notable aspect is her sense of humor, a character trait she shares with Joker. Throughout the games, she will repeatedly make jokes, often playing with the notion of organic being's fear of artificial entities. She is very sarcastic and delivers her jokes very deadpan, leading her to often conclude her story by stating that it was a joke. At one point, Legion will even state that EDI has adopted the organic trait of asking rhetorical questions, which is highly inefficient for artificial entities. This distinct personality contrast with the rather serious tone of the games,

⁴⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3FbRKvt-2o4> (2:40-3:30)

especially *Mass Effect 3*. She thus serves the role of a traditional comic-relief character, which occurs often in cinema. EDI will also repeatedly ask Shepard questions regarding her identity as an artificial construct. EDI essentially wishes to become more human and seeks Shepard's advice on numerous subjects. After she proves her loyalty by saving the Normandy in *Mass Effect 2*, there is no reason for the player to distrust her for the remainder of the trilogy. EDI's human appearance and her wish to become as human as possible also help present her as a trustworthy and reliable ally who takes the interests of mankind to heart. Like Legion, EDI's representation serves to disprove the threat artificial entities might pose. Instead, the series emphasizes the positive potential these beings might have.

Lastly, EDI plays a major role in one of the endings to *Mass Effect 3*. If the player has gathered enough allies and has a high enough Effective Military Strength, he/she will be able to choose the Synthesis option at the very end of the game. The Synthesis option will end the war by merging organics and artificial entities into one. As the closest thing to a hybrid form of life, EDI will narrate the epilogue of this ending and will be seen emerging from the Normandy holding hands with Joker⁴⁹. In this epilogue, EDI will state she is now actually alive. As this option is only available if the player has a high enough 'score', it is pretty much vital that the player has achieved peace between the Quarians and the Geth, further solidifying the idea of cooperation between artificial and organic beings.

In conclusion, unlike the "Others" discussed in the previous chapters, the representation of the female "Other" in *Mass Effect* is more diverse and ambiguous. Many of the female characters in the series are overtly sexualized and seem to be designed to appeal to a male audience. Similarly, the Romance system shows a clear bias towards male players and presents characters as sexual trophies to be won. On the other hand, *Mass Effect* includes several strong and progressive characters, most notably in the form of female Shepard. It seems that for the most part BioWare opted to 'play it safe' and cater to their prevalent audience. Thus they designed their games' female characters based on traditional science fiction and video game tropes. Whereas the depiction of artificial and alien "Others" shows signs of progression, the overall representation of the female "Other" remains stagnant. EDI serves as a perfect example to illustrate this dichotomy. As an artificial "Other", she is clearly indicative of the shift proposed by Sobchack, showing that artificial beings can be just like us. On the other hand, she is overtly sexualized and presented as an aesthetically pleasing object, which reaffirms binary gender representations.

⁴⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6u8QIqLSmU> (5:00-11:00)

Conclusion

In this thesis I have looked at various elements within the *Mass Effect* games in order to answer the following question: how is “Otherness” represented in the *Mass Effect* trilogy? I have specifically looked at visual representations, keeping in mind the traditional representations of “Otherness” in science fiction cinema, as well as how *Mass Effect*’s game mechanics affect these representations. I identified and discussed three distinct “Other” figures within the science fiction genre: the artificial “Other”, the alien “Other” and the female “Other”. As science fiction cinema serves as a major inspiration for the *Mass Effect* trilogy I used the shift in the representation of “Otherness” identified by Vivian Sobchack as a foundation for looking at *Mass Effect*, which I will reiterate here:

Today’s SF films either posit that “aliens are like us” or that “aliens R U.S.” Alien Others have become less other. . . They have become our familiars, our simulacra, embodied as literally alienated images of our alienated selves. Thus, contemporary SF generally embraces alien Others as “more human than human” or finds it can barely mark their “otherness” as other than our own. (293)

In order to analyze *Mass Effect*’s game mechanics I made use of Ian Bogost’s model of procedural rhetoric. I identified *Mass Effect*’s morality system and choice system as major influences in shaping player behavior.

In chapter 2 I discussed three representations of the artificial Other. I first looked at the games’ avatar, commander Shepard, and his/her particular role as a cyborg protagonist. Regarding the conflict between artificial and organic beings, I discussed the representations of the Geth race as well as the series’ main antagonists, the Reapers. While the Reapers are clearly part of the “Frankenstein Complex”, their villainous nature only serves to enhance the benign nature of the series’ other artificial entities, most notably the Geth. The Geth are further humanized by the character of Legion, who, through the use of speech, is able to speak on behalf of its race. In chapter 3 I discussed various representations of the alien “Other”. By looking at *Mass Effect*’s party system, I identified that most players prefer to choose alien party members over human party members. These various aliens offer unique experiences through their “Otherness” but are never too alien and can be identified with on human terms. Similarly, when looking at the depiction of the Rachni race and the curing of the Genophage, it became clear that the *Mass Effect* trilogy emphasis cooperation with alien races rather than

destruction or deceit. This is accomplished through the games' representation of the respective alien races, as well as the use of various in-game systems like the War Asset system in *Mass Effect 3*.

While it frequently positions robots and aliens as enemies and threats, *Mass Effect's* overall aesthetic approach to visual and narrative elements implies that the "Other" is not necessarily to be feared. Through artificial characters like Legion or alien characters like Garrus and Wrex, *Mass Effect* emphasizes "sameness" rather than "Otherness". Despite their strange and otherworldly appearance (though they often adhere to a anthropomorphic view of the galaxy), they are presented as human beings like us, sometimes even more so. Legion's ultimate sacrifice for the benefit of his people represents all those ideals present within Western story-telling tradition. The unification of all alien races against the Reaper threat in *Mass Effect 3* invokes the sense that people can overcome their differences and work together. The character of Shepard him/herself is also indicative of modern science fiction's trend to embrace the "Other" as part of the center. Shepard is a traditional science fiction hero/heroine, but also a cyborg. While various cyborg figures have played major roles within science fiction, like the previously mentioned Number Six from *Battlestar Galactica*, within *Mass Effect* the player actively takes control of a cyborg as the main protagonist. The use of cyborg figures has become a noticeable trend in contemporary videogames. Video games tend to serve as escapism or wish-fulfillment, allowing players to do things they cannot do in normal life. Aside from its impact on a narrative sense, cyborg figures are also often used in video games to give players extraordinary and superhuman abilities with which they can overpower their opponents. Aside from Shepard, notable examples include the character of Master Chief from the *Halo* franchise (2001-), who is a cybernetically enhanced super soldier, or Adam Jensen from *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (2011), who is given cybernetic implants and limbs after being mortally wounded. Through its frequent use in video games, the figure of the cyborg has entered into mainstream consciousness.

As discussed in chapter 4: the Female "Other", the figure of the cyborg has also often been seen as a marker for a postgender and postracial world. However, the progressive representation of "Otherness" has not yet been fully realized when it comes to female "Others". While technically genderless, cyborgs tend to be represented within binary gender divisions, as evidenced by EDI. Similarly, many of the female characters in *Mass Effect*, like Miranda Lawson and the Asari race, have been overtly sexualized in order to appeal to the games' predominantly male audience. They have mostly been reduced to human stereotypes, with the exception of several characters. For example, despite her obvious position as a

sexually desirable figure in *Mass Effect 1*, Liara has transcended this representation and has risen to become one of the leading figures within the games' narrative as well as being a fan-favorite among the gaming community.

Female Shepard is also a somewhat ambiguous figure. On the one hand she exemplifies the sexless science fiction heroine posed by Sobchack. But while many female video game characters combine female sexualized aesthetics with masculine actions in order to please male audiences, female Shepard has been sexually diffused and is almost indistinguishable from her male counterpart, which mirrors the traditional depiction of females within science fiction cinema as identified by Sobchack. This has allowed her to truly become a protagonist in her own right. As indicated in the introduction of my thesis, video games are slowly attracting a more female audience. However, the predominantly male audience remains a dominant factor when designing games. While the artificial and alien "Other" have become more accepted within contemporary science fiction, the female remains distinctly "Other".

The *Mass Effect* trilogy also highlights a noticeable trend within digital and video game culture: that of fan-participation. Video games are a type of a participatory media culture (Raessens 373). Aside from the obvious interactive aspect of video games, the medium is intrinsically connected to other contemporary digital spaces, most notably the internet. With the rise of the internet, many games now include an online component, while MMORPGs⁵⁰ like *World of Warcraft* (2004) or shooters like *Overwatch* (2016) can exclusively be played online. The internet has also become a vital component in the distribution of games as well as the ability to support a game after its initial launch with additional content (DLC). In terms of fan-participation, the internet has become a vast repository where gaming enthusiasts can share their experiences. Forums like GameFAQs offer players tips and walkthroughs, while sites like GameSpot and IGN keep players up to date on new games and review newly released games. Video game developers can use the internet to maintain a close relation with their audience. I have already briefly touched upon BioWare's tendency to incorporate user feedback in order to enhance their games. By looking closely at player behavior and responses, they were able to better satisfy the need of their audience. While developers have the ability to monitor player data, BioWare is among the only ones who have released some of this information to the public. Many of these statistics have been quite valuable to my thesis.

⁵⁰ Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game

While I have only briefly touched upon it in this thesis, the close relationship between players and developers in our digital age has a noticeable impact on the creation of games and the representation of elements like the “Other”. This therefore warrants future study. The *Mass Effect* trilogy could serve as a case study to analyze these developments.

The power of fan-participation and feedback can be observed when looking at the release of *Mass Effect 3*. Upon its release, many fans were disappointed by the game’s ending, as they felt their choices throughout the trilogy did not have a significant enough impact on the conclusion. In the end, players were still stuck choosing between two or three choices that only presented minor differences. In the wake of this disappointment many fans began to delve deeper into the game in an attempt to find some alternate meaning. This led to a well-known fan-theory known as the Indoctrination Theory⁵¹. While I will not go into detail, this theory states that Shepard is indoctrinated by the Reapers (much like Saren and the Illusive Man) during the events of *Mass Effect 3*. The final part of the game is believed to be nothing but a hallucination in which Shepard either gives in to this indoctrination or breaks free. BioWare has neither dismissed or confirmed this theory. However, in an effort to please their fans, they later released an Extended Cut which was available to download for free. This Extended Cut gave better context to the games’ various endings and attempted to create a feeling of player satisfaction. Similarly, BioWare’s last DLC for *Mass Effect 3* entitled *Citadel* was designed with their fans in mind. This additional content’s narrative includes many references and inside-jokes clearly aimed at long-time fans of the series. The existence of the Indoctrination Theory as well as BioWare’s response shows a close relation between games and their audience. As part of our digital culture, video games transcend a single medium and move into a transmedia space. While I have only briefly touched upon this aspect, the importance of fan-participation and video games as transmedia deserves future research. As of now, game studies are still in a developing stage. According to Freyermuth, video games have been subject to the same stages as film and television were back during their inception. At first “economic and cultural success enables gradual recognition after initial resistance and criticism, which at its core is culturally conservative” (236). After that follows acceptance into the canon, official recognition and establishment of relevant educational training and courses (236-237). As video games continue to develop and develop it is important to look at the significant impact of the medium, specifically regarding the participatory aspect. As a medium, “digital games seem to correspond to the experiences of

⁵¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZZOyeFvnhiI> & <http://www.masseffectindoctrination.com>

cultural digitalization more fully than other forms of representation and storytelling: digital games relate to the changing ways of perceiving time and space and to new conceptions of how, under the requirements of digital production and communication, humans have to be and act” (56). As part of our cultural digitalization, video games are able to quickly adapt to the dominant notions of the time and the wishes of the audience. As player feedback is increasingly important, it will be likely that the representation of “Otherness” within video games will only improve in the future and include a more equal representation for women.

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Appendix



Image 1: Renegade Shepard (*Mass Effect 2*)



Image 2: The Geth (*Mass Effect 1*)



Image 3: Legion (*Mass Effect 2*)



Image 4: Leviathan (*Mass Effect 3*)



Image 5: Reaper ships (*Mass Effect 3*)

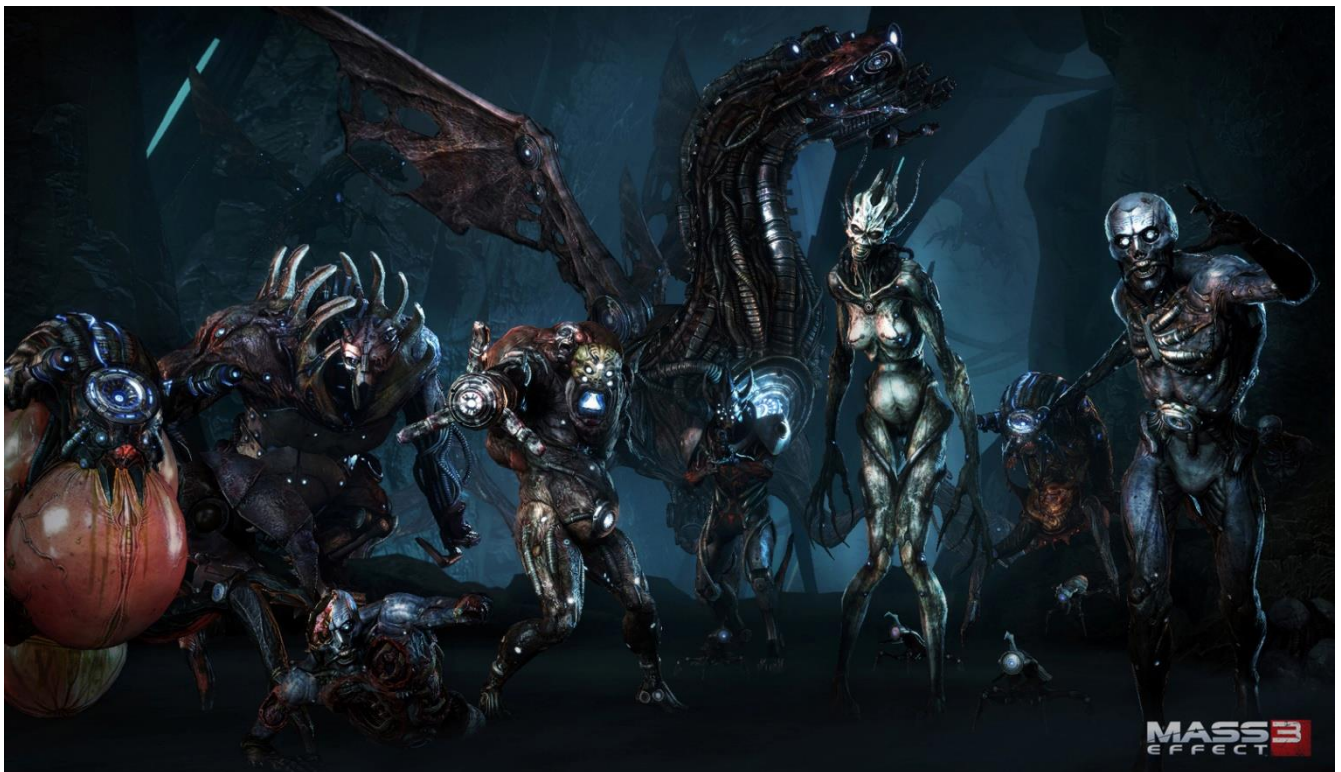


Image 6: Reaper forces (*Mass Effect 3*)



Image 7 & 8: Indoctrination (Saren from *Mass Effect 1* & The Illusive Man from *Mass Effect 3*)



Image 9: Selection of *Mass Effect*'s alien races.

The image does not include all races, but presents the general idea of the series' anthropomorphic representation of aliens.



Image 10: Rachni soldier (*Mass Effect 1*)



Image 11: Ravager (*Mass Effect 3*)



Image 12: The Alien queen (*Aliens*)



Image 13: the Rachni queen (*Mass Effect 3*)



Image 14: The lost Krogan city (*Mass Effect 3*)



Image 15: Default FemShep for *Mass Effect 3*



Image 16: Miranda Lawson (*Mass Effect 2* & *Mass Effect 3*)



Image 17: The Asari. The text accompanying the image explains the sexual representation of this race (*The Art of the Mass Effect Universe*).

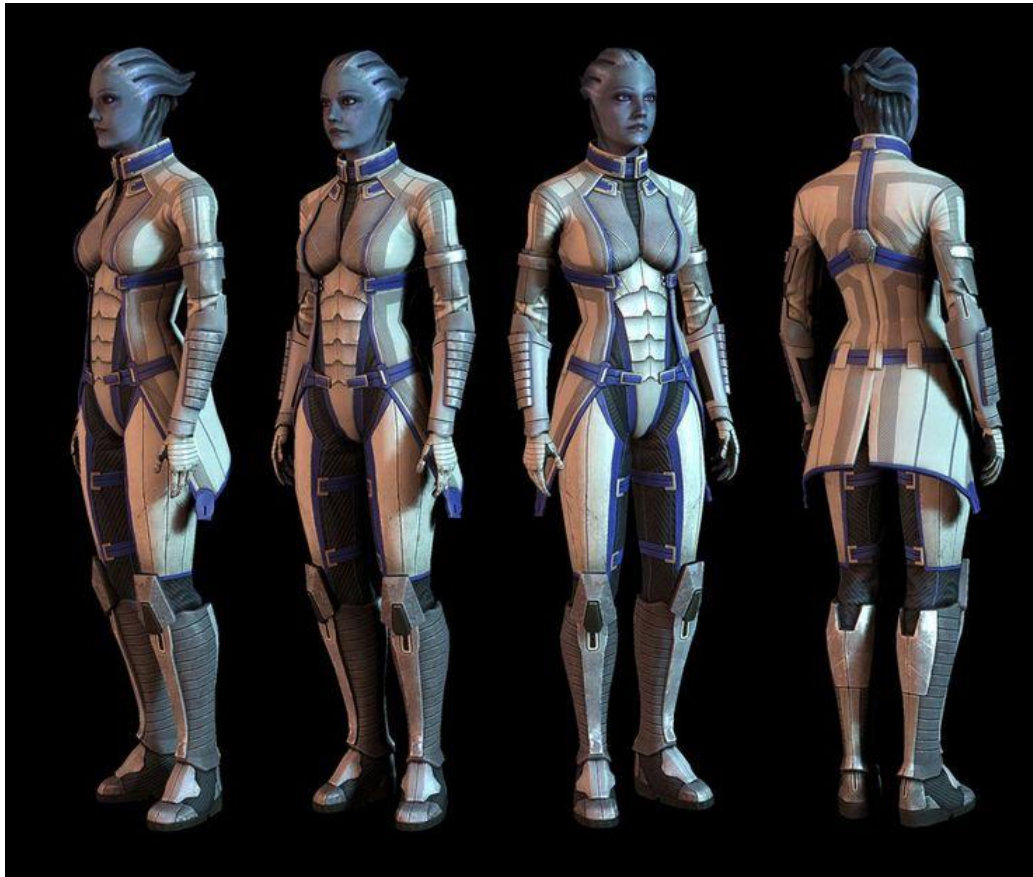


Image 18: Liara (*Mass Effect 3*)



Image 19: Samara (*Mass Effect 2*)



Image 20: Banshee (*Mass Effect 3*)



Image 21: EDI (*Mass Effect 2*)



Image 22: EDI (*Mass Effect 3*)

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