Intersectional Masculinities in Mass Effect

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ABSTRACT
While the bulk of the literature regarding character representation in videogames deal with the hypersexualized female bodies, hypersexual, racist, and stereotypical representations of male bodies are understudied. In this paper a character analysis of four human companions in the Mass Effect trilogy unveils the intersectional complexities of masculinities represented in the game. The data is supported by interviews with Mass Effect fans, comments on online forums, close reading of the author's gameplay and the official transmedia content of the franchise. The results show that the portrayal of subjugated masculinities relies on damaging stereotypes of race, gender and sexuality thus reinforcing whiteness and toxic masculinities as the norm. The research indicates that further male character analysis is paramount to a better understanding of the intricacies of identity in a supposedly male-dominated medium and add nuance to the masculinities portrayed in-game and perceived/performed off-game.

Keywords
masculinity, mass effect, intersectionality, queer, representation, race

INTRODUCTION

The *Mass Effect* (BioWare, 2007-2012) trilogy, despite recently celebrating its 10th anniversary, remains a key object of study by scholars, and has solidified its place in the history of gaming as one of its great works. Most of its greatness is tied to the combination of an intricate narrative, charming characters, interesting mechanics, and a diverse cast that was, for its time, a quite progressive move in the Triple A industry. In academia, the game has been thoroughly explored for its narrative and mechanics (Bizzochi et al. 2012) and in special gender and sexuality repercussions (Layne et al. 2013; Thériault 2017) but has produced studies ranging from the game's application in the teaching of philosophy (Aristidou et al. 2014) to how it perpetuates neoliberal thought (Voorhes, 2012). One aspect of the franchise that has further room for exploration is its portrayal of masculinity, be it within alien or human species. This paper focusses on the latter to avoid tracing conclusions based on masculine allegories in alien-coded bodies, opting instead to look at the characters whose bodies are problematized in and off-game as a political subject. The study of masculinities in

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games, while growing, seems to be still attached to either the portrayal of toxic masculinities that reinforce societal norms of male dominance; or the masculinities (toxic or otherwise) enacted by male players in diverse gaming environments (DiSalvo, 2016). In this paper a different perspective, that of oppressed masculinities, aims to shed light on the problems generated by the toxic, militarized and hegemonic masculinity that predominates in gaming culture and content. Through a character analysis supported by the meanings and experiences of my interviewees and the data collected in online forums – Reddit and the Unnoficial Bioware Social Network (USBN) – I argue that *Mass Effect* manages to bring nuanced masculinities that deviate from the gaming norm but do so using racial and queer stereotypes that position its male characters as subjugated to a normative White-Heterosexual framework of masculinity.

Intersectionality is key to understanding the presence and portrayal of masculine bodies that are oppressed and oppressive; that navigate boundaries of subjugation that ultimately positions them as *lesser than* the White-Heterosexual male. The term was coined and conceptualized in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw as a "continuity of the work of African-American women" investigating the interplay of oppressions (Guimarães Corrêa, 2020, p.825). Black Brazilian academic Laura Guimarães Corrêa argues that an intersectional approach offers opportunities to observe complex phenomena within the media economy and industry, reminding us that this paradigm "is not a simple sum of identities and categories, it is about the consequences of the interplay of different oppresions" (Guimarães Corrêa, 2020, p.829). In the games industry, for example, Bulut's work demonstrate how games production is oriented by a cultivated White Masculinity in the "racialized and gendered playgrounds of the game industry" (2020, p.5) one that is dominated by the White Male – and I add, heterosexual - in positions of power and decision making. Bulut's work reinforces and explains arguments of other scholars (Johnson, 2013; Anthropy 2012; Shaw 2009) that avoid equating diversity in the games working force to diversity in videogames content – it can and does happen, but it is not a solution in itself as there are issues on the realm of economics with the "fear of backlash" to the addition of queer content leading to profit loss and content censorship (Shaw 2009, pp.239-242). Nevertheless, when it comes to character analysis or game analysis of intersectional masculinities, research is still limited, although well-represented in the intersections of gender and race (Leonard, 2006; Everett and Wakins 2008), and the military identity (Blackburn, 2018). As MacCallum-Stewart reminds us, "gaming is a genre where dysmorphia is rife across all genders, and where vastly overinflated male bodies contend with offensive stereotypes of perceived Otherness,

including race, gender, ableism, mental ability and sexuality" (2015). Considering the intersectional nature of identities, the bodies of male characters in *Mass Effect* represent the complexities of a politics of identity that aims (and fails) to understand the layers of oppression that white, heterosexual, able-bodied hegemonic masculinity impose upon the non-normative male body. In the Mass Effect universe, the human male characters provide a spectre of diversity spanning race, sexuality and dis/ability that is fertile ground to analyse and comprehend the intersectional oppression the writing and design of these male bodies represent. While the analysis of the one dis/abled character, Joker, will not fit the scope and length of the current paper, the works of Joyal (2012) and Jerreat-Poole (2020) bring excellent discussions regarding the representations of disability in *Mass Effect*, including of other characters with mental and/or physical disabilities such as Kaidan Alenko and Tali.

ON REPRESENTATION

Videogames studies on representation encompass both quantitative and qualitative methods and analysis, ultimately working towards common goals: 1) assess and discuss the dominant demographic group in the discourses about videogames (the white, male, adolescent/young adult, heterosexual) and their role in configuring, shaping most of the industry production and who is "allowed" to play and make videogames (Anthropy 2012; Shaw 2014; Kocurek 2015); 2) critically assess this imbalance, tracing its origins and proposing solutions towards a more diverse scenario (Anthropy 2012; Shaw 2009, Thompson 2013; Nooney 2013); 3) uncover and understand the extent of representation of the non-technomasculine audience (Kocurek 2015) in games (Williams et al 2009; Leonard 2006); and 4) uncover how non-normative bodies are written and designed in games (Joyal, 2012; Krobova et al 2015).

Related to the approaches of this paper are studies from cultural, feminist, and queer scholars. These studies uncover the quality of these representations, what they tell us about the societies we live in, and what to do to increase (appropriate) representability in gaming. Indeed, their concern is with the politics of representation, in 'how particular topics, perspectives and images become prominent, how their depictions are formed and interpreted, and the social relations and inequalities reproduced through representational practices, including their institutional settings' (Kratz 2002, p. 220). Important studies include for instance the in-depth analysis of Lara Croft, a character that carries in her a duality of being a strong female character in a medium dominated by males, but also a highly sexualised body, not just in-game, but also in the marketing

campaigns related to the game (Kennedy 2002; MacCallum Stewart 2011). Recently, *Mass Effect* characters such as the alien race of the Asari and the main character Female Shepard have also been thoroughly analysed from the standpoint of representation (Adams 2015; Layne et al. 2013; Østby 2016). This indicates a tendency for research to use character analysis as a route to understand representation of marginalised groups beyond their quantifiable presence/absence. That said, this is not solely restricted to gender, with studies about the portrayals of race (Everett and Watkins 2008; Poor 2012; Brock 2011; Kafai et al 2009) and sexuality (Burgess et al 2007; Condis 2014; Martins et al 2009) comprising a significant part of studies about representation.

HEGEMONIC MASCULINITIES AND INTERSECTIONALITY

The definition of hegemonic masculinity by Connell (1987) is valuable for understanding the establishment of videogames as a gendered medium skewed towards a male demographic. Hegemonic masculinity is the belief that society is subordinated to powerful models of masculinity. This ideal is embodied by few men, 'fantasy figures', from films for instance. Its power lies in the constant reinforcement of its symbolic power, achieved 'in a play of social forces that extend beyond contests of brute power into the organization of private life and cultural processes' (Connell 1987 p.184). Societal structures such as media, religious doctrine and the organization of labour operate in creating a divide between hegemonic men and those subordinate to this structure, such as gay men and, especially, women. The maintenance of hegemonic masculinity is ideological and often surreptitious, offering some freedom to its subordinate groups, while ultimately denying them the right to speak, and keeping the consensus by avoiding the construction of scenes of dissent capable of challenging the hegemony.

Within the context of videogames, several studies demonstrate how hegemonic masculinity is influential to the representation of both hegemonic and subordinate groups. Fox et al (2014) argue that online gamers often demonstrate conformity to hegemonic masculine ideals, such as the need of dominance over women and the heteronormativity of their self-presentation online. For instance, Fisher (2015) claims that the portrayal (or absence) of female characters in video game magazines reinforce the imagery of women in games as sex objects and irrelevant sidekicks whose names, function and background description are absent, deemed unimportant. Indeed, *Mass Effect* suffers from the same fate, with its lead female character being forgotten during the marketing campaigns of the first and second games (Lima, 2019), indicating that

gaming magazines and marketing are still catering to an archaic stereotype "of the gamer as a young white man with a penchant for technology" (Kocurek 2015, ch.7, p.28). The public face of "the gamer" can therefore be understood as an expected consequence of the hegemonic masculinity discourse that overvalues heterosexual and white masculinities (hooks 2004). Kocurek contends that the gendering of videogames industry is the sum of several factors that we can correlate with hegemonic masculinity:

> (…) the greater relative freedom of young boys to move through and participate in public culture; the alignment of computer and video game technologies with both military interests and competitive male-dominated sports; the subsequent affiliation of video gaming with violent thematic content; and the ongoing association of technological skill with masculinity (Kocurek 2015, Introduction, p. 10)

Another system of oppression that feeds into hegemonic masculinities in gaming is heternormativity, a system of beliefs regarding male and female behaviour, sexuality, and relationships – erasing any non-binary, non-heterosexual manifestations of sexuality (Clarke et al 2010, p.120). It is a further symptom of hegemonic masculinity where queer men are representatives of subordinate masculinities (Connell, 1987, p. 186).

Interesting work has been done regarding heteronormativity and games, especially stemming from the works of Adrienne Rich (1980) and her definition of 'compulsory heterosexuality'[1] (Consalvo 2003; Krobova et al 2015, Østby 2016) and Gayle S. Rubin's (2007) charmed circle[2] (Adams 2016; Shaw 2015). According to Adams, games are not compulsory but compulsive regarding heterosexuality, where the former can be resisted while the latter is unavoidable (2016, pp. 41-42). In most games there is no other option but to play as a heterosexual character who is "often literally unable to perform queerness or self-identity as anything other than heterosexual" (ibid, p.41). To escape the confines of heteronormative gaming, Krobova et al's (2015) study indicates that queer gamers, whom are not "a homogeneous group that jubilantly accepts LGBT content in role-playing games" (Krobova et al. 2015, p.8) use three different strategies of play: imaginative play, stylized performance and role-playing.

Krobova et al identify imaginative play as 'an "oppositional" queer reading of a game' (2015, p.6). Interviewee Robin engaged in queer imaginative play, highlighting how he defied gender binaries through his experience playing as an agender Commander Shepard: "I wanted to play something in my world (of *Mass Effect*), where I am

interpreting the game, even though the game does not always help, I wanted to do something different. Then I created a character and I read it as agender". Robin's experience is part of the "outer limits" of a charmed circle, taking "advantage of polysemy in order to adjust character's sexualities in his or her own imagination" (Krobova et al., 2015, p.6) as he uses some cues from the canonical text – such as possible meanings being lost in translation when communicating with other races – as rationale for this asexual performance. This also fits the idea of stylized performance, when "the player deliberately performs as a queer character by marking the character with stereotypical signs of his or her sexuality" (2015, p.6)., which in this case occurred by not engaging with the romance mechanics available to create a narrative more fitting to his character.

Lastly, role-playing is associated by Krobova et al with BioWare titles in general and "involves a degree of identification with a queer character within a game's pre-designed narrative" (2015, p.7). With the games romance mechanics allowing for queer performances in the three games, players can play a role that mimics their own self or enact a other whose identity markers are distinct from the player. These performances are configured by the game itself: there is a code behind it that limits what the gamer can do, even though there are countless possibilities (but not limitless). Even though BioWare "has grown to consistently reject the traditional compulsive heterosexuality of video games" (Adams 2016, p. 45), there are still queer performances beyond even the openness of imaginative play. Nonetheless, the game also fails to portray transgender characters and has limited and controversial approaches to queerness as discussed later in the paper.

Lastly, hegemonic masculinities also subjugate male identities based on racial/ethnic markers, with whiteness being in the lead of ideal masculinity that oppresses black, latino, Asian, indigenous, and any non-white bodies. An intersectional analysis of masculinities must also account for the role of class and race as other aspects that fit certain men into a subordinate category. Unlike white males, representations of men of colour in videogames are restricted to the repetition of certain tropes, mostly being terrorists, criminals, and the enemy, rather than the heroes (Leonard 2006 pp. 84-85; Everett and Watkins 2008, pp. 147-149)[3]. Games with a man of colour protagonist, such as *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar North, 2004), show just one possibility of black masculinity existence (Leonard 2006, p.85), related to a life of crime. The game also emphasizes black male hypersexuality of "compulsive obsessive fucking" (hooks, 2004, p.68) through the presence of sex workers the player can

interact with[4]. Rather than an affirmation of masculine power, however, hooks argues that it is an indication of "extreme powerlessness" (ibid. p.68) whereby the black male body is reduced to its primal sexual nature. Black sexuality, argues hooks, is subsumed to white hegemony, to a form of seeing and doing sexuality that is western and white in nature. It is a subjugated masculinity, "feminized and tamed by a process of commodification that denies its agency and makes it serve the desires of others, especially white sexual lust" (ibid, p.74).

METHODOLOGY

The aim of this paper is to discuss the interplay of masculinities through the analysis of four human characters of the *Mass Effect* trilogy: Jacob Taylor, James Vega, Kaidan Alenko and Steven Cortez. The research adopted a qualitative case study approach utilizing diverse datasets collected between August 2015 and December 2017 conducted for the purpose of a larger research regarding the political discussions within the franchise (Lima, 2019). First, the author conducted and recorded two playthroughs of the trilogy, with a Female and a Male Shepard. Each playthrough generated files named in accordance with the Main Quest or SubQuest(s) being played to facilitate finding the correct spots during analysis in combination with notes of noteworthy events and dialogues. Secondly, 15 interviews were conducted with *Mass Effect* players from Brazil and the United Kingdom. They were sampled via an online questionnaire (N= 225) sent to mailing lists, posted on the ME Reddit forum and spread via Twitter and Facebook by several participants. From the initial sample, twenty-five subjects (25) were selected that fitted my basic criteria: that they had played and completed all three games at least once. The selection aimed for a diverse set of interviewees who self-identified their gender, ethnicity, and sexuality[5]. From the initial twenty-five selected, fifteen replied positively to being interviewed. All the interviewees are identified here using pseudonyms and agreed to the Consent Form in accordance with the University ethics and policies of data management. Thirdly, data was gathered from online forums Reddit (N=4 threads; N=1.664) and USBN (N=25 threads; N=3,971). Both interviews and online data were analysed narratively (Somers, 1994) to extract stories and experiences from players, forming their ontological and public narratives, relating it to socio-political metanarratives, configuring a *conceptual narrativity* that advances the meta-narrativity through 'concepts and explanations that we construct as social researchers' (Somers, 1994, p. 20).

HYPERMASCULINE BODIES: RACIAL STEREOTYPES AND QUEER DESIRE IN JAMES VEGA AND JACOB TAYLOR

Figure 1: Jacob and FemShep during their love-making scene in Mass Effect 2 (Anonymous Source. Available at: http://cdn.ddanzi.com/201306-images/1252075.jpg)1

The character of Jacob Taylor (Fig. 1), a possible love interest for a Female Shepard in *Mass Effect 2* (ME2) is a black male soldier from the criminal organization Cerberus[6]. He deviates from a performance of black masculinity in games of "talking trash and crushing bodies with sheer force" as he is an eloquent, studied character (Leonard 2005, n.p). Jacob is, however, one of the two male characters objectified by female characters in the game for his perfectly shaped body.

Teammate Kasumi Goto, the only playable character of Asian descent, shows an interest in Jacob and, in conversation with a Female Shepard that is romancing him, often highlights his sexual nature and body features. For instance, she says to Commander Shepard that what Jacob wants is to use "his biotics to get you out of that uniform"; wonders which clothes to wear to seduce him if he "is back on the market", admittedly spies on him while he is working out, shirtless, and describes the scene as "mesmerizing". In the Shadow Broker DLC, the player can see a series of videos of several characters, secretly recorded by Liara (the current Shadow Broker, a galactic information trader). One of these videos has Jacob doing push-ups while shirtless.

The problematic representation of Jacob is not limited to his objectified design that is also the target of "body shots" like Miranda's (Østby, 2016, p.132), but also his actions. Towards the end of their romance, before he and FemShep engage sexually, he appears by her door and says that he is walking a dangerous path, but that the prize – FemShep – is worth it: "Sneaking into the Captain's quarters? Heavy risk. But the *prize*... (Jacob Taylor, Mass Effect 2)". In the third game, if Jacob is still alive after the *ME2* suicide mission, the player learns that in the six months that he and Shepard have been separated while she was held captive by the Alliance, he started a relationship with another woman and is soon to be a father. It is the only male romance that openly objectifies FemShep as a "prize", and the only romance in the game that allows for the romanced to cheat on Female Shepard while MaleShep has no similar plot. Interviewees and other subjects in my data often express disliking of Jacob's character due to his actions from a feminist standpoint – i.e. that only women are subject to infidelity in the game - but do not note the correlation with race and the perception of non-white men as hypersexual and promiscuous (Everett and Watkins, 2008, p.149). That the one controversial and openly sexist romance plot builds on this stereotype of blackness adds insult to injury in the representation of the only playable black character in the game[7].

James Vega appears just in the third game as the first male and human companion to join the team. Vega is an extremely muscular character, wearing a tight shirt that emphasizes his big arms and six-pack. He also appears shirtless in several scenes, in often gratuitous situations in a clear objectification of his body as eye-candy. Following the stereotype of the Latin lover, "he possessor of a primal sexuality" (Berg, 2002, p.76) James is flirtatious, something that he admits to being second nature, part of who he is. As a USBN commenter summarizes

> I mean, he flirts all the time because he thinks it's fun, but then he gets all coy when Shepard starts to ask him where this is all leading? I think that his writer Mac Walters stated something similar, that they scrapped the romance with James in the end because he was a military guy through and through. (/Fraggle on USBN)

Being apparently an "all muscle no brains" sort of character, Vega is present in one of the most amusing moments of the game. When asked to fix a communication antenna, Vega is unable to comprehend why he was chosen to do so as he does not carry the knowledge necessary to fix it. Ultimately, he decides to kick it until it works again.

According to Charles Ramirez Berg classification of Latino stereotypes in Hollywood Cinema, James Vega could fit both the "Latin lover" and "the male buffoon" impersonations: a sensual, charming man and a comedic, simple-minded character (Berg, 2002, pp. 71-76). While both are traits of his character, James Vega is also related to the "militarized masculinity" ideal (Blackburn, 2018), being an authentic soldier, following to his best the military codes of conduct and respecting hierarchy .

> "Being a soldier is the only thing I've ever been really good at. And not 'cause I try. Hell, I'd've kicked my ass out years ago. Last time I had a command, I lost almost everyone. And they promoted me for it. I guess I'm just not sure if I'm ready to lead again. I don't know if I want that responsibility" (James Vega, Mass Effect 3)

This part of his identity and personality is challenged during the Citadel DLC. In it FemShep can approach Vega, insisting on having a one-night stand with him in a series of dialogues that *ME* fans tend to dislike due to the predator-like approach of FemShep. Commentators on the USBN forum consider the situation as moral and sexual harassment based on the power imbalance of that relationship: she is a Commander while he is a soldier in her chain of command. The dialogue feels out of character with any but a Renegade FemShep and only happens if no other person has been romanced until that moment. In order to engage with FemShep, Vega admits it has to be a once-in-a-lifetime situation, where he is mostly drunk and unable to judge what is going on in order to forget that she is his Commander and he should respect the military hierarchy.

His flirtatious nature as a Latin lover, explored throughout the game, seems at this moment to have been nothing but a shield, a manifestation of male power not unlike the one highlighted by bell hooks (2004) regarding black masculinity. The extended transmedia universe of *Mass Effect* adds evidence to this: the animation movie Paragon Lost, set before ME*3*, shows the backstory of Vega, the difficulties he and his squad faced and the loss of the woman he loved. The chronology of events reinforces the possibility that, during the period the player can engage with James Vega, he uses flirting as an emotional shield that is forcibly disrupted by FemShep in the Citadel DLC. This aspect of Vega's story that reveals a hard past and some emotional frailty is what made interviewee Ron attracted to him, wishing that he could also be an available gay romance. Ron highlights that James Vega fits a body type that is very attractive to many gay men, bulky and strong (see Fig. 2). Ron's boyfriend jokes about him "falling in the trap of heteronormative gay men stereotypes", being attracted to a non-gay character that is designed to be attractive for this demographic. However, Ron argues that his attraction really derives only from his backstory as he is not into the strong body type and believes that Vega is also a victim of hypersexualization, with his shirtless scenes being unnecessary.

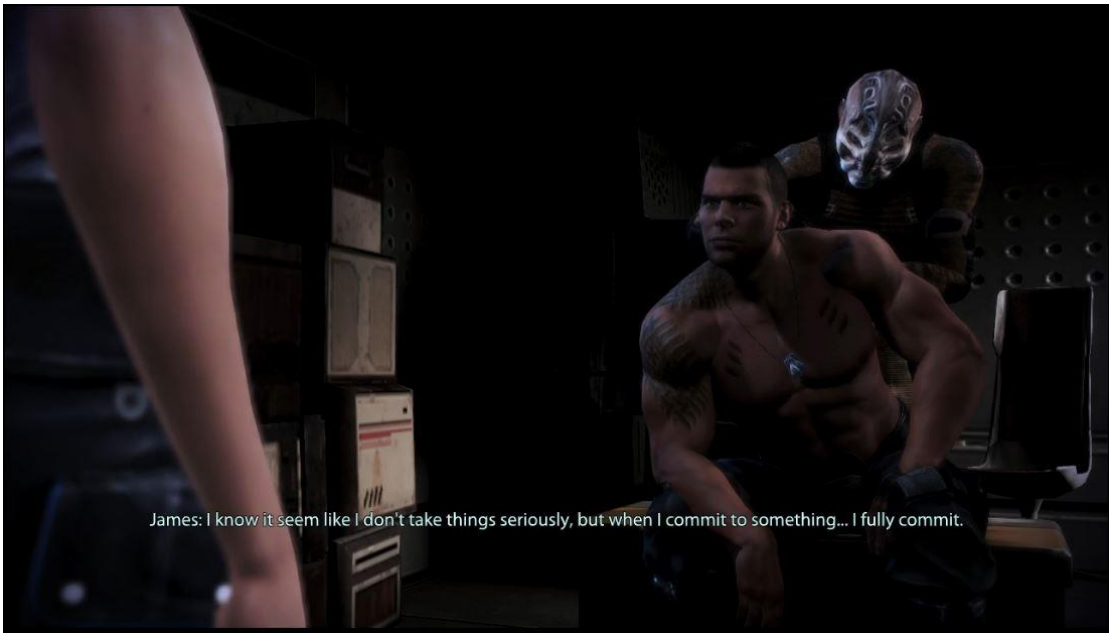

Figure 2: James Vega getting a new tattoo during Mass Effect 3. The tattoo celebrates his acceptance in the N7 program, the elite soldiers from humankind. Source: author's own gameplay

QUEER MASCULINITIES: KAIDAN ALENKO AND STEVE CORTEZ

As innovative as the romance mechanics implemented by BioWare in their games are, they are yet insufficient as tools of engendering diversity. Two seemingly contradictory reasons help us to shed light on that. The first is that the "side quest" nature of romance in general and non-heterosexual romances in specific reduces the visibility of these character's sexuality for the players. Rather than being introduced as natural parts of the plot, the romances are quests the player must pursue. Often, as interviewees Mary and Gibbs said, players can be accidentally dragged into it when pressing the right buttons during dialogue. Being optional rather than integral to the game diminishes its impact as an example of diversity in games. According to Adrienne Shaw (2014), this puts the burden of representation into the player rather than something that comes naturally from the creators. Moreover, it impedes others who are outside the LGBTQA+ publics be in touch with this kind of content that can potentially challenge their perceptions about sexualities. The second reason is the mandatory nature of sex once these romances are in motion, impeding certain performances of (a)sexuality. The romance must be stopped before sex or the player and character must proceed to the scene that indicates the start of sexual intercourse.

Rather than games becoming "a progressive sexuality learning space" (Ware, 2015), these videogames' 'gay button' representations of non-heterosexuality seem to re-enact social practices disguised under the "diversity" policy while hiding the possibility of experiencing it. The issue is further highlighted in controversies surrounding the bisexual character, Kaidan Alenko, who despite being portrayed as solely heterosexual during the first two games, suddenly becomes a romance option for MShep in the 3rd game. In one of many Reddit threads discussing the issue, a redditor comments "because bi women are fiiiiine, only queer boys are icky??" in response to both the late inclusion of male queerness by BioWare and the homo/biphobic reception by parts of the fan community. The redditor is likely alluding to the male fixation and acceptance toward lesbians (as a sexual desire) that led to their presence being widespread in gaming, while the same is not true for gay males.

BioWare choices of representation are not disconnected from the prejudice suffered by LGBTQIA+ people as their game-making are configured by the current discourses about it. Gay males are often absent, invisible, or portrayed only from a stereotypical perspective of the feminized gay man – a trope which is very common in videogames, with a range of "feminine" male characters read as gay by players, such as Kuja from *Final Fantasy IX* (Squaresoft, 2000). The issue escalates when bisexuality is considered. In TV series, bisexual women are twice more common than male

(Deerwater, 2016), and while both representations suffer from bisexuality tropes and controversies, male bisexuality, due to its invisibility, needs further attention:

> Several of these characters – male and female – fall into outdated patterns and dangerous tropes of villainy and duplicity that are far too often associated with bisexual, but as bi males remain nearly invisible, the missteps really stand out. In shows such as *The Royals* and *Mr. Robot*, men seduce other men for power or information. Their sexual fluidity is associated with immorality rather than indicative of real interest, and reinforces harmful stereotypes of bisexuality being a strategic means of manipulation, rather than a unique identity (Raina Deerwater, 2016[8])

Returning to Connell's (1987) studies, a bisexual man seems to be a non-existent separate category for hegemonic masculinity, absorbed by a larger umbrella of homosexuality that falls under a subordinated masculinity definition. Interviewee Mary – a bisexual woman - believes that there is a general acceptance of women as bi, but that this identity is occluded in men, adding that she has "no idea why that is, but people don't really think of it, they think it's like man have to be gay or straight". In Mass Effect, the bisexual character, Kaidan Alenko, was received with a mixture of praise and backlash that can be partially linked to the difficulty of accepting men as bisexual or acknowledging that "you can discover your sexuality later on!" as interviewee Gibbs reminds in our conversation. Being a part of the previous games as a love interest exclusive for Female Shepard, his "sudden" bisexuality left a bitter taste as it was not, according to several players, done in a narratively convincing way, nor seemed to be added to the game as a meaningful part of it:

> There's absolutely no problem with Kaidan as a character himself nor his appeal to both gender but my major issue with MShep/Kaidan was mainly how ME3 romance was simply created by swapping bodies inside FemShep/Kaidan narrative. This lackadaisical treatment is very unfair to MShep/Kaidan fans themselves who deserve their own narrative without being treated as an alternate (/aoibhealfae on USBN)

> He wasn't bisexual to start off with. That is my problem. I'm glad it didn't happen to Ashley because it would remind me of DA2 where

> everyone was bisexual just to please everyone. It makes the characters feel unique if everyone was different. It would also feel like it came out of nowhere just like it did for Kaidan. If Kaidan/Ashley were bisexual from the start, I'd have no issue with it. (/obbie1984 on USBN)

However, his inclusion as a romance for Male Shepard is important to gay interviewee Ron. After having Kaidan's bisexual and romanceable future in ME3 revealed to him by his boyfriend, Ron decided that this would be his goal in every playthrough. At first, Ron expressed concern about male gay representation: "I was afraid, how was it going to be approached? Could it be cliché? Videogames are generally very stereotyped, sometimes like a mockery, making fun of it". His concerns come from experience. As a gamer since childhood, he does not expect games to have gay characters because that is not what he is used to. Akin to the findings of Shaw (2014) representation is not paramount for Ron to play a game or he "would play almost nothing right?" (Ron, interviewee). However, he is pleased when the possibility is available in newer games where storytelling can be more complex.

Regarding Kaidan "coming out" in the third game, Ron believes that he is unable to qualify it as neither a natural nor forced narrative but highlights the importance of having this theme brought to light in a game: "(...)defending Kaidan, I think that it is how real life can be. I don't know if they thought about it when they made the game, I believe they didn't, but there are a lot of guys in the closet". Even in the futuristic utopia of ME, where prejudice appears considerably diminished, being a bisexual man seems to be a taboo: not one that comes from the game's lore, but from the developers and the circuits of social and political configuration that affects what they add or not to the game. Moreover, as interviewee Gibbs highlights: "the future is supposed to be more accepting but you can't read into it, people who are bisexual, probably act straight as a sort of preservation" tracing a direct link with "real world" issues faced by those pertaining to LGBTQA+ identifiers. Kaidan coming out in the third game is not by any means unrealistic if acknowledged the real-life examples of closeted men and women.

The problem is not just the poor representation of male bisexuality, but its invisibility in comparison to the extremely normalized female bisexuality[9] in BioWare games and *ME* in particular. Bisexual females are present from the first game, with FemShep and Liara (and, by extension, every Asari in the game), and the options multiply in the following games: Morinth, Samara, Kelly Chambers and Diana Allers. Female characters are open about their bisexuality, whereas Kaidan seems to be what

commentators at USBN name a “Shepardsexual”, interested only in Male (and Female) Shepard, not expressing attraction for any other men in the game. A USBN user argues that the insistence, by Bi-Kaidan critics, in the argument that in the first game he only shows attraction to women is a reflex of heteronormativity, adding that “BioWare bi men never show an interest in men”, being always hidden behind constant affirmations of preference towards women, reinforcing a “trope that sadly we have to endure” (/nickclark89 on USBN). The issues with male bisexuality in ME are, then, both qualitative in how they are presented, and quantitative, as it is restricted to one character despite a clear interest of players in romancing other male characters, like Garrus and Thane. The latter had, it seems, been originally thought as a possible bisexual, as fans found the voice overs for this romance hidden in ME 2 files[10].

Despite bisexuality being (controversially) present since the first game, it is only in the third game that players are presented to a lesbian and a gay character: Samantha Traynor and Steve Cortez, respectively. Both are NPC's that cannot be a part of the player’s squad. Cortez participates in some missions as the pilot of the transportation vehicle, while Samantha is rarely seen outside of the Normandy. Furthermore, while Samantha Traynor sexuality has to be discovered by the player – I only found out after frustratingly trying to romance her as a heterosexual MShep – Steve’s character is presented from the start as a gay man (with a tragic backstory). He lost his husband during a Collectors[11] attack, and this is brought up in conversations with him with both Shepard's, with and without romancing him. His sexual identity plays a bigger role in how the character is presented; it is a conflict that a Male Shepard must help him overcome to make the romance a possibility. Interviewee Ron thinks that Steve Cortez was not very convincing but appreciates the casualness in how his relationship with the deceased husband is portrayed. As a character late introduced into the franchise, Cortez still managed to gather fans. A USBN commentator, for example, says that “the "dead husband" thing can seem daunting at first, but I feel that Cortez is very much an individual and not just personifying his tragedy” (/spiritvanguard on USBN), a point of view shared by many in a thread dedicated to the character. Interviewee Robin says that in a play-through where she intended to romance Kaidan with a Male Shepard, she felt deeply emotional with Cortez's back story and dropped Kaidan with no regrets – she argues the character is very realistic and not a clichéd gay character. Interviewees Mary and Gibbs, however, tend to disagree with it as they are both bothered by the trope of the “sad gay/transgender story” very common in books, movies and games. Commenting on how he finds the movie Boys Don’t Cry “horribly depressing”, Gibbs, a transgender gay man, wishes that LGBTQA+ stories could be less about the struggles

faced by them and instead show “how fun it is to be LGBT”. His friend Mary, who identifies as bisexual, agrees with Gibbs, and wants stories that show that LGBTQA+ can (and are) happy too.

Although a fleshed-out character, Steve Cortez being an NPC limits his political potential. Unlike Samantha Traynor, who is positioned in a central location in the Normandy - besides the Galaxy Map that the player must constantly utilize, facilitating interaction with Samantha as well – Steve Cortez is hidden in Normandy's shuttle bay, where squadmate James Vega is also present and tends to draw the attention of the player. Steve Cortez only ‘forcefully’ appears to the player when he shows up in cutscenes driving the shuttle car, but in these situations, his backstory is unimportant and not brought to light. Further adding to this invisibility, Cortez ethnicity seems to be of mixed Black and Latino parents – although there is no textual evidence to it, just assumptions based on phenotypes and his surname -, positioning him in intersectional subaltern positions as a gay person-of-colour whose character story needs additional ergodic effort to engage with. For example, a USBN commenter admits she did not know nor remember meeting Cortez until later in the game:

> I'm ashamed to say that I ignored him in the first part of the game and didn't make it down to the shuttle bay until almost halfway through the game. When I started noticing just how nice he was, I thought I'd better pay him a visit, and realised that there were two crew members hanging out in the shuttle bay (yeah, James got really mouthy with me) (/roselavellan on USBN)

CONCLUSION

If Samantha's sexuality seems to be indiscernible for the player if not romancing her, she is at least a more likely member to interact with during the game while Cortez can be completely ignored – romancing the character requires more effort than for others, keeping at (shuttle) bay its only exclusive male-to-male romance. The mere presence of non-heterosexual characters does not equal to diversity, but as Shaw says, to plurality, as it only appears when minorities are “targeted as a market” (Shaw 2014, p.218). There are many non-heterosexual characters in Mass Effect, but their significance is questionable. The “gay button” is present here again, with these representations being entirely optional rather than integral to the story being told

regarding male characters who have fewer opportunities to present themselves queerly. Moreover, the treatment of bisexuality as a token for diversity is problematic. It ignores unique traits of bisexual identity by making it ubiquitous (for female characters) or invisible and unimportant for male characters. Indeed, most of the 'romanceable' queer characters can be considered "shepardsexual", willing to date the player's avatar but no one else, while some heterosexual romances – Garrus, Tali, Jacob, James Vega and Ashley Williams – all can form heterosexual couples without Shepard. Steve Cortez had a husband but does not have any other romantic interest aside Shepard; Jack, who is canonically bisexual, remains single if not romanced by Male Shep – and cannot be romanced by FemShep; all the Asari have the same fate, and so does Samantha Traynor, Kelly Chambers and Diana Allers, all non-heterosexual characters that are denied a relationship if not with Shepard. Racially, Cortez is further positioned as subaltern to White Hetero-Masculinity both narratively and spatially, left in the corner of a room and the players' view. Furthermore, both James Vega and Jacob Taylor being "objectified", despite being in the dominant male category, do fall under subjugated categories regarding their race Even though they have more complexity in their narrative, both have as starting points damaging racial stereotypes, extensively propagated in popular culture. Both serve as male eye-candy for female and gay male publics, and although male hypersexualization is not as widespread and damaging as female hypersexualization, it shares some of its roots such as the predominance of a white-male normativity over their bodies and sexuality. Moreover, beyond the stereotypes of non-white characters common in videogames that David Leonard highlights – criminals, terrorists, muscular and uneducated (Leonard 2006, p.85), these sexual stereotypes also add to the problem, reflecting "dominant ideas of race, thereby contributing to our common-sense ideas about race, acting as a compass for both daily and institutional relations" (hooks, p.85).

Rather than a coincidence, these examples reinforce the heteronormative and white dominance of *ME* masculinities, where queer and racial representations are present only through its normalization through a heterosexual, masculine, patriarchal and racialized lens. Such cases emphasize the need for an intersectional approach that also accounts for marginalized and stereotyped masculinities as an interplay of oppressions – or as hooks (2008) claims, provides new alternatives to masculinity that are not subsumed to white and patriarchal expectations.

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ENDNOTES

[1] According to Adams : “Rich defines compulsory heterosexuality as a privileged norm from which homosexuality is a punishable, but possible, deviation”(2016 p.41).

[2] Rubin’s charmed circle is a “model for the sex hierarchy with an inner ‘charmed circle’ of acceptable practices such as monogamy and heterosexuality and, surrounding the ‘charmed circle’, the ‘outer limits’ of another circle containing unacceptable practices such as intergenerational sex or BDSM” Adams, 2016, p.44)

[3] Another common representation of non-white bodies is related to physical prowess, a natural-born ability that enables black men to excel at sports and Asian (or to be specific, Japanese, Chinese and Korean men and women) to be martial arts experts, contrasting the “hard work” that white men must endure in order to be on par with them (Leonard, 2004).

[4] GTA: San Andreas also has an infamous sex mod derived from a hidden piece of code in the game that allows the player to control the avatar action during sex. The mod is known as “Hot Coffee” (Wysocki 2015, p.200).

[5] Geographical limitations were an issue due to budgetary constraints. Therefore, despite the questionnaire being open to anyone, the selected interviewees were mainly from two Brazilian cities – Belo Horizonte and Rio de Janeiro – and London.

[6] Perceived in game by many as a terrorist organization fighting for human supremacy in the galaxy, therefore putting Jacob in a similar role of a criminal.
[7] Other black characters include Commander Anderson, Shepard's guide and one of the lead characters in the first three books of *Mass Effect* and Steve Cortez, who seems to be a Latino/Black mixed character.
[8] Source: https://www.glaad.org/blog/male-bisexual-representation-slowly-changing-better-tv
[9] The treatment of female bisexuality has an important exception: character Jack was openly referred as liking both men and women but is only available as a love interest for Male Shepard despite being canonically bisexual.
[10]Dialogue available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mhfzyGbnAYA
[11] Collectors were the main enemy species in the 2nd instalment of the game.