

RENÉ REINHOLD SCHALLENGER

## **Only Human After All? The Surprising (and Avoidable) Failure of *Mass Effect: Andromeda***

---

### **Abstract**

*The Canadian developer BioWare is known for inclusive videogame designs, but Mass Effect: Andromeda (2017) has damaged the brand so considerably that the Mass Effect series was put on hiatus. While technical difficulties generated online ridicule, much more devastating was the alienation of BioWare's core audience: players favouring a diversity of representations and complex, critical discourses. After two already problematic trailers, the game represented privileged positions in an unreflected manner, attributing voice, agency, and power to hegemonic characters, and reducing marginal groups to undifferentiated images. Reports from inside the design team confirmed that questioning voices were silenced. BioWare failed to appropriately recognise the intersecting categories of gender, sexuality, race, and class in what could have been a postcolonial re-framing of an inherently colonialist narrative. Theories of gender and sexuality in the medium and of interrelationships between postcolonialism and videogames allow for a comprehensive understanding of why Mass Effect: Andromeda failed, refusing to acknowledge multiply-encoded identities.*

### **Résumé**

*Le studio Canadien BioWare est connu pour des jeux vidéo inclusifs, mais Mass Effect: Andromeda (2017) a tellement endommagé la marque que la série Mass Effect a été suspendue. Même si des difficultés techniques ont généré du ridicule, c'était l'aliénation du public cible de BioWare qui faisait des ravages: celles et ceux qui favorisent des représentations diverses et des discours complexes et critiques. Après deux bandes-annonces déjà problématiques, le jeu n'attribue voix, capacité d'action, et pouvoir qu'aux personnages hégémoniques en réduisant des groupes marginaux à des images peu différenciées. Des récits de l'intérieur de l'équipe ont confirmé que des voix critiques étaient réduites au silence. BioWare n'a pas reconnu de manière suffisante les catégories intersectionnelles de genre, sexualité, race, et classe dans un jeu qui aurait pu être un ren-câdrement postcolonial d'un narratif forcément colonial. Les théories sur le genre et la sexualité dans le médium et sur les inter-relations entre le postcolonialisme et les jeux vidéo permettent une compréhension globale des raisons pour lesquelles Mass Effect: Andromeda a échoué par son refus de reconnaître des identités multiples.*

---

### **BioWare from *Baldur's Gate to Andromeda***

The Canadian developer BioWare, headquartered in Edmonton/AB, is well known for their progressive and inclusive videogame designs, time and time again questioning received wisdoms and the established production logic of the industry. Over the years, they have managed to establish a very specific 'BioWare brand' of digital role-playing, creating a considerable niche audience for their games on the market, guaranteeing them if not stellar, then at least solid sales through their built-in audience both during the crucial phase immediately after release, as well as the long tail later that is so desirable to publishers (cf. D'Angelo 2012). Since the studio's takeover by the US publisher Electronic Arts in 2007, fans and critics have been worried they would give in to commercial pressure, and recent developments have substantiated these fears.

BioWare have a long and distinguished track record of inclusive designs. They did ground-breaking work with *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (2003), introducing the first ever same-sex romance option into the mainstream videogame market with the female Jedi Juhani. In *Dragon Age 2* (2011), non-player characters (NPCs) were given their own sexual agency, exerting it by actively pursuing romantic and sexual relations with the player avatar. This, however, kindled fears of 'ninja romancing,' i.e. unintended and/or unwanted relationships between the avatar and NPCs, in small but vocal sections of the player population. All NPCs were also still 'avatar-sexual,' lacking sexual preferences or a sexual identity of their own and therefore plastically conforming to player desire as expressed through avatar behaviour.

This situation was remedied in *Mass Effect 3* (2012) where players would encounter the first NPCs written and designed exclusively as gay and lesbian, Steve Cortez and Samantha Traynor respectively. Their sexual identities are additionally represented in a non-issue way, i.e. they are neither actively thematized, let alone problematized, in an inclusive fictitious setting that does not reduce people to their sexual behaviour and where characters show equally great respect and appreciation even for desires and feelings they cannot or do not want to reciprocate. Even non-minority NPCs in *Mass Effect 3* have and live very differentiated conceptions of sexuality and relationships, spanning a wide range of possibilities. The apex of this development in BioWare games was reached with *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014) where NPCs not only actively reject the player avatar's advances if they are not attracted to their gender or species, but the avatar can even be the submissive partner in a complex and mutually respectful BDSM<sup>1</sup> romance with the pansexual, sexually versatile, and hypermasculine mercenary Iron Bull.

---

1 This is a contracted combination of abbreviations for 'bondage/discipline', 'domination/submission', and 'sadism/masochism'.

Unfortunately, the most recent game under the BioWare umbrella, *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017), was a large step back from earlier achievements, and it damaged the franchise's reputation so considerably that the *Mass Effect* game series was put on hold for the time being by the publisher Electronic Arts (EA). Like earlier installments, this is an action role-playing game/third-person shooter hybrid, again published by EA. Whereas *Mass Effect 1* to *3* were created by BioWare Edmonton, the original studio, they had to abandon the series to work on a new game and franchise for EA, *Anthem* (2019), so BioWare Montréal took over. *Andromeda* was their first full game after only working on multiplayer components for other EA titles, and it would be their last, because they are now closed down.

Immediately after its release, *Andromeda* received mixed to negative reactions from players and press alike, with Metacritic scores ranging between 71 and 76 (out of 100) for reviews by critics and 4.9 to 5.0 (out of 10) for user reviews, depending on the platform (Metacritic 2017a, 2017b, 2017c). In comparison, *Mass Effect 3* (2012) holds scores between 89 and 93, as well as 5.7 and 5.9 respectively (Metacritic 2012a, 2012b, 2012c). These problems were the result of a troubled creative process with the project switching engines, drastic changes in creative vision, and crucial team-members leaving, which led to a situation where most of the game was put together in only 18 months (Schreier 2017). Of the originally projected 6 to 9mio copies EA expected, *Andromeda* only sold an estimated 2.5mio (Disruptor Ammo 2018), making back its budget but not being financially successful at all.

Reasons for this lacklustre reception varied from technical issues, such as dysfunctional facial and body animations, to poor graphics quality, and a multitude of bugs, that turned away the non-BioWare audience they tried to attract with their clear shift towards military shooter mechanics, to the bland and uninspired writing that was perceived to be very derivative of the main series and furthermore suffering from pacing issues and flat characters that affected their traditional target audience more interested in narrative interactions. In her review for *Kotaku*, Patricia Hernandez classifies the game as an "Alien dating sim," thus highlighting how "relationships have been the cornerstone of Bioware games," only to find *Andromeda's* writing "hollow" and tainted by a pervading lack of awareness: "I balked at the naivete and entitlement in thinking 100,000 people could just start a new life in a home that does not belong to them," she concludes (Hernandez 2017a). Addressing the importance of diversity in BioWare designs in a follow-up article, she expressly titles: "Underwhelming Gay Romance Options In *Mass Effect: Andromeda* Disappoint Many Fans" (Hernandez 2017b). Alex Avard appreciates how BioWare want to take their brand into a new direction, but at the same time he remarks upon how "the game's deviation from what we've come to expect from the franchise is largely characterized by a downgrade in quality almost across the entire board" (Avard 2017). Jim Sterling also acknowledges what he calls the "'soft reboot' approach popular in Hollywood to reuse a brand name without alienating potential new audiences," while he also makes a distinctly critical point about the risks of letting down the

specific BioWare audience with the shift: “*Andromeda* does shooting really quite decently. It is not, perhaps, what BioWare fans typically want first and foremost, however” (Sterling 2017). Similar issues are brought up in critical reviews across the spectrum, reaching from more understanding perspectives in mainstream outlets like *The Guardian* or *The Verge* (Webber 2017 and Webster 2017), to harshly voiced criticism in more games-related media, such as Keri Honea’s assertion that “*Andromeda* stumbles more than it sprints” (Honea 2017), or the fundamental questions Brad Shoemaker brings up: “For the start of a new chapter to be so bad at the things *Mass Effect* has traditionally been so good at raises serious questions about where the series, and perhaps even BioWare, go from here” (Shoemaker 2017). This sense of disappointment in the videogame community in general, and the BioWare fanbase specifically, is also reflected in several forum entries, with a special focus on interpersonal relationships in the game. The *BioWare Social Network* has its own forum dedicated to the romance options in *Andromeda*, and the official “Character Romance thread” alone is 2,088 pages long (SofaJockey 2017). Other, non-official threads show specific problems members of the BioWare community have with the game: “So ... After 4 ME games I still can’t romance an African-American woman?” (slw229 2017), “As a gay man, I have a big problem with the Make Jaal Bi campaign” (sageoflife 2017), or the more abstract “\*Romance distribution spoilers\* Make your voice heard about the lack of romance options, sex scenes, [sic]” (flog61 2017), for example. flog61’s thread has 743 replies and 48,064 views, and in their call for action, the author takes a clear stance as to why *Andromeda* is deemed insufficient as a continuation of the established BioWare brand:

You can make your concerns known, and the only way this will improve (clearly, as it has got \*worse\* since *Mass Effect 3*) is by speaking out. [...] We need to unite and make our voices heard, because they aren’t listening very hard for them. The next *Mass Effect* will include fairer treatment for gay men, but only if we make it clear that this is not acceptable. (flog61 2017)

Expressing the same frustration, Revan Reborn formulates a more neutral question in their thread: “How would you like to see romances improved?” (Revan Reborn 2017). Besides the official BioWare forums, *Andromeda* was also hotly debated on other platforms. On *NeoGAF*, Burbeting deplored “*Mass Effect Andromeda*’s poor handling of LGBT” in a discussion of 12 pages and 592 replies (Burbeting 2017), while on *reddit*, CrescentDusk’s aggressive attack on BioWare titled “ME:A, M/M romance, abysmal tokenism [MEA Spoilers]” resulted in 652 comments and was upvoted by 66% of the users:

Here’s a suggestion: If you don’t feel like writing out M/M options but feel some token obligation ... Don’t do it. I’d rather not have the option

than a shitty excuse for an option they made in a rush just for inclusivity's sake while actual care was paid to the other options.  
(CrescentDusk 2017)

The perception of a shift away from core markers of the BioWare brand, such as representational diversity, a focus on narrative, interpersonal relationships and romances, as well as complex politics, which for many, according to the reviews and player reactions online, constituted a destruction of this brand identity, is supported by the strong elements in an otherwise disappointing design that show the intended main focus of the game. The extensive open-world is the largest in the *Mass Effect* series yet (Wikipedia 2019), and the satisfying vehicle movement incentivises both traversal and exploration. The player avatar collects Viability Points for various worlds through missions, which at a certain threshold then allow colonisation of said worlds. The combat mechanics are also highly developed, especially when compared to those in the latest iteration of the sister-series, *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, which clearly puts the emphasis here on violent military, not social or political interaction.

*Andromeda* is, strictly speaking, a spin-off of the main series. Set between *Mass Effect 2* and *3*, the invasion of the Milky Way by the Reapers, synthetic aliens coming to 'harvest' all highly developed biological life, is imminent. In reaction, the private Andromeda Initiative sets out from Earth to colonise our neighbouring galaxy Andromeda as a last-ditch effort to preserve at least a pocket of human (and other allied biological alien) life. The journey there with sleeper ships, the so-called arks, takes 634 years, but on arrival, the arks are hit by a mysterious astrophysical phenomenon, the Scourge, are heavily damaged and separated from each other. The player avatar, either Scott or Sara Ryder, takes over as Pathfinder from their father to scout out and develop the newly discovered worlds in order to be able to wake more and more colonists from cryo-sleep and to build permanent colonies in their new home.

This fictitious Andromeda is, however, not a *terra nullius*: it is inhabited by the an-gara,<sup>2</sup> an aboriginal population waging a desperate defensive war against earlier colonisers, the kett, a militaristic society that reproduces only through the forced genetic mutation of subjugated alien species. The kett, as 'evil colonisers,' serve as a foil for the supposedly more 'benevolent' colonisation systematically implemented by Initiative forces. The difference is that the kett are 'biopower' taken literally, i.e. Foucault's "regimes that administer and discipline 'life itself'" (Dyer-Witford and de Peuter 2009, 124), whereas the Initiative is more of a cultural and economic empire. Adding another layer to the complex history of colonisation in *Andromeda*, the

---

2 In the *Mass Effect* universe, species only use lower-case names in order to signify that they are just another aspect of who individuals are, thus reducing them from identity-creating proper names to descriptors.

planets the avatar can visit and interact with are strewn with the ruins of a long-lost alien civilisation, called the remnant. They are much later in the narrative revealed to be the remains of a vast, interstellar terraforming network created by the jardaán, a species who came from the darkness of space, created the angara through a mass production process of genetic engineering and then seeded them across the newly terraformed systems. The Scourge that almost destroyed the Initiative fleet of arks is the after-effect of a civil war among the jardaán triggered by the ethical disputes and conflicts brought about by the hubris of creating life and terraforming worlds. The surviving jardaán, whose name might echo the French *jardin*, as gardeners of planets and species, left the cluster of shaped worlds and vanished into the void of interstellar space.

The intricate layers of colonisation and victimisation – between the jardaán, angara, kett, humans, and other Milky Way species – are very much reminiscent of Canadian history and culture, not surprisingly, given the distinct Canadianness of BioWare's creative output (cf. Schallegger 2016a, Schallegger 2016b). However, *Andromeda* refuses to acknowledge the complex, dynamic identities of the potential players behind the avatars, creating two major problems with BioWare's traditional core audience: (1) a perpetuation of the videogames of empire that have so far dominated the industry, and (2) a disconnect with their players' awareness of intersectional experiences and identities.

### **Videogames of Empire**

The visibility of minorities in *Andromeda* is developed to the highest degree among all BioWare games in terms of quantity, but decidedly lacking in quality. First hints for a problematic (lack of) understanding of colonialism can already be found in the 2015 E3 announcement trailer for the game, with its obvious visual Wild West aesthetics, the gun-toting main character exploring frontier worlds, and Johnny Cash's "Ghost-Riders in the Sky" (1979) as a less-than-subtle soundtrack (Mass Effect 2015). The launch trailer, then, established the official tagline "Fight for a new home," blatantly ignoring North America's troubled colonial past (Mass Effect 2017). Manveer Heir, at the time of production designer at BioWare Montréal, heavily criticizes the macho-militaristic colonialism that pervades the game: depicting the aboriginal population as noble savages, favouring mechanics that motivate players towards expansionist land-grabs and resource exploitation without negotiation or compensation (Henry 2017). These issues, he claims, were already brought up as problematic during the production process, also by white staff members, but they were ignored due to what Heir calls "homogenous leadership" in the studio (Riendeau 2017).

The main cast of *Andromeda* is another manifestation of these problems. The Ryders are a white, highly educated, upper middle-class family, and both canon Pathfinders are cast with male, white actors: Clancy Brown as father Alec and Tom Taylorson as his son and successor (and player avatar) Scott. Scott's sister Sara, an optional

avatar but intended as a damsel-in-distress in the canon plot according to the release trailer (cf. *Mass Effect* 2017), was cast with the Mexican-American actress Fryda Wolff. Aliens are also frequently played by minority actors and actresses. The angaran squad mate Jaal Ama Darav was voiced by the African-American actor Nyasha Hatendi; the angaran leader Moshae Sjefa by the British-Indian actress Indira Varma; and Jarun Tann, a socially awkward salarian bureaucrat described as a 'Space Frog' in an official video (*BioWare* 2017), was voiced by the Pakistani-American actor Kumail Nanjiani.

This situation calls to mind Souvik Mukherjee's analysis of the intricate interrelationships between postcolonialism and videogames: "There is a wish to become the Other while at the same time there is one to spurn it," he explains (2017, 59). Mukherjee is especially interested in three main aspects: "The Playing Fields of Empire," i.e. the construction of imperialist spatialities in videogames; "Playing the Hybrid Subject," where the subaltern acts as player and/or avatar; and finally "Playing Alternative Histories," or the (re-)writing of authoritative histories (2017, vii). He borrows the concept of the 'subaltern' from Antonio Gramsci and Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, explaining how the cultures of former colonies are "portrayed in videogames through lenses that privilege Eurocentric accounts of history and progress" (2017, 103). Mukherjee's suggested reaction to this regime of gaze and agency is "a playing back that refuses to engage with the colonial system" (ibid.). However, he also warns that "[t]he other playing back is, of course, that which has empire as its subject – the games that implicitly are based on the logic of imperialism" (ibid.). Nevertheless, Mukherjee identifies a considerable potential in the medium to represent a diversity of perspectives, most importantly when the identification with the colonial Other as player avatar actively and successfully raises "questions of identity and [...] agency from the position of the colonial subject" (2017, 108). On a macro-level, the unprecedented possibility the medium provides to perform and experience alternative histories makes it possible for players to critically engage with the logic of empire, as "[m]eaning, instead of being the preserve of imperial 'centres,' is in play, as it were" (2017, 111).

In her research, Mary Flanagan exposes an inherent connection between videogames and wargames as "ways of modelling and mediating conflict" (2016, 703). The first tentative videogames, she reminds us, were developed "right on the very machines used to calculate secret war codes and bombing trajectories" (ibid.). Wargames like *Andromeda*, with its clearly designed focus on martial conflict not political negotiation, inherently are what she calls "powerful fictions" because they are necessarily "tied to highly imagined scenarios and speculative events" (2016, 704). The scenarios that are presented to the players and the solutions suggested or withheld in their simulational systems are not innocent toys, rather they "show us the ways in which we are capable of thinking" (2016, 704). Flanagan therefore suggests the creation of new and alternate wargames, "incorporating different modes of problem solving, aesthetics, and nonviolent conflict resolution" (2016, 705), an

opportunity that was clearly missed by the creative leadership at BioWare Montréal. Unlike such an alternate wargame that “isn’t so much about war as it is about critical thinking and critique from an outsider status” (2016, 706), *Andromeda* still perpetuates both the well established and pernicious white saviour myth on the one hand and dangerous techno-martial power fantasies of conflict resolution on the other. The player is only given the option to ‘fight for a new home; they cannot ‘negotiate for a new home;’ not with the angara, and certainly not with the kett. The jardaán, finally, are silent and absent gods whose power the avatar eventually assumes when he (i.e. Scott) discovers that his technicity (cf. Dovey and Kennedy 2006) is compatible with theirs and he learns how to wield their technological remnants to create and shape life and whole worlds. This failure of *Andromeda* is especially galling, since Flanagan clearly identifies “an opportunity, even a responsibility, to evolve with [the medium] and push ourselves to model the world we wish to create” (2016, 706).

Already in 2009, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter identified the militaristic aspect as “primal and originary for digital play” (99), since “in Empire, war is waged not to resolve disputes between states but to maintain order within a global territory” (ibid.). In their reading, videogames become “machines of ‘subjectivation’ to temporarily simulate, adopt, or try out certain identities” (2009, 192), but they can never be separated from “the actual social formations in which the games are set” (ibid.). So, while the medium of videogames inherently tends to reinforce notions of Empire through the understanding and use of agency that is traditionally in evidence in products of the industry, it is nevertheless still possible to “counterplay against Empire,” the authors remind us, by “resist[ing] the dominant messages encoded in games of Empire [and] produc[ing] alternative expressions” (2009, 193). Even though up until now it has mostly been used to stabilise the status quo, player agency also potentially “disrupts the manufacture of consensus” (2009, 212), but this effect entirely depends on the algorithmic choices made and provided by commercial developers. Economic and social pressure are frequently cited as preventing any drastic shifts in the prevalent design philosophy and practices in the industry, and yet the existence of more critical perspectives and experiences in commercial videogames proves that designers “do sometimes enjoy a degree of creative autonomy” (ibid.). Mainstream videogames might currently *choose* to convey reactionary imperial content, “as militarized, marketized, entertainment commodities,” but they can also inherently provide a multitudinous form, “as collaborative, constructive, experimental digital productions” (2016, 228). In one of the classics of game design literature, Jesse Schell already made it very clear to aspiring designers that, as ethical beings who work with a medium driven by the experience of agency, they *cannot* transfer responsibility for their choices to systemic constraints: “Your obligation begins today – this minute” (Schell 2008, 457).



### Disconnected Intersectionalities

Not only does *Andromeda* show an utter lack of awareness for postcolonial perspectives, stereotypical gender roles also pervade the game. Already in the launch trailer, only Scott is featured as having agency, asserting both martial and sexual dominance, while Sara is relegated to the role of victim to be rescued. The covers of physical copies also show a gender-neutral, helmeted Ryder, a clear step back from the official variant covers for *Mass Effect 3* that represented both the male and female avatar as equally important.

The potential romantic and sexual relationships in *Andromeda*, and the male/male options specifically, highlight additional problems. There were no m/m-options immediately after release *within* the squad of important NPCs the player spends most of their time with. After player backlash, a later patch ‘made’ the angara squad mate Jaal retroactively bisexual by opening up romantic content originally intended and written for female avatars to male avatars, thus unthinkingly, or for the sake of an easy and cheap technical implementation, equating gay male and straight female desire. Queering the alien Jaal and not the human male squad mate, the black Brit Liam Kosta, also establishes and implicitly naturalises an unfortunate connection between the alien and the queer. The most extensive potential m/m-relationship in the game is with Gil Brodie, the ship engineer, but the code dedicated to it is drastically reduced in comparison to what heterosexual squad mates have (Hernandez 2017b). The Gil romance furthermore culminates in a cutscene that fades to black before any sexual interaction between him and Scott (Schalleger 2017), whereas the very explicit, soft-porn sex scene between Scott and his female squad mate Cora (gi justice 2017) is obviously designed to satisfy the straight male gaze and thus confirm the authority of heteronormative masculinity and desire.

Casey Hart (2015) talks about a “dynamic of false-choice” in regard to the romance options in the *Mass Effect* series, since here “sexual availability [...] reveals a predominantly heterocentric agenda” (153). Male avatars can altogether pursue nine heterosexual or two homosexual relationships in the games, while female avatars have four heterosexual and seven homosexual options to choose from. In 20 of the 22 romance arcs women are clearly represented as sexually available, and 90 percent of the sexual cutscenes were created to satisfy the straight male gaze. Additionally increasing the problematic impression of the representational regime, the attribution of predominantly homosexual interest to a strong female avatar “endorses a troubling schema in which powerful women are either lesbians or fetishized sex objects” (2015, 153). Hart therefore concludes that “motivating players to pursue sex and then offering them intrinsically biased and heterosexual, male-centric options creates scenarios in which females are commodified and reduced to objects” (2015, 153-154).

*Andromeda* is to a large extent a shooter game, and Soraya Murray (2016) identifies a “troubled mythic construction of the normative (i.e., white, heterosexual, male)

American soldier" (319) that dominates videogames of this genre. She goes on to observe a containment of all potentially homoerotic male desire in what she terms "hackneyed homosocial relations in terms of the mythmaking of soldiering as an unconditional, loving bond between men" (2016, 325). What happens here could thus be interpreted as an inversion of unwanted, denied, and shunned desire and behaviour: *eros* is transmuted into *thanatos*, as it is acceptable for men to kill together, fulfilling the stereotypical male role of the warrior, but not to have sex together, which would immediately raise delicate questions of sexual agency and power relations. For Murray, this inversion is related to a "deep-seated longing for the stability of that normative male role" (2016, 326) and "idealized notions of militarized masculinity" (2016, 327). Contrary to what we see in *Andromeda*, it would actually be desirable for contemporary videogames, including shooters, to undermine both the "heteronormative male shooter trope," dominated by bromance but avoiding romance, and, in Murray's strong terms, the "'masculine' satisfaction [...] of dominating one's environment using violence and aggression" (2016, 325).

Raewyn Connell (2016) would call the masculinity so blatantly on display in *Andromeda* and in most mainstream videogames "hegemonic masculinity" (77). Yet she also reminds us that masculinity is not a monolithic concept but that there are rather "relations of alliance, dominance and subordination" between different expressions and performances of masculinity (2016, 37), constructed through practices of inclusion and exclusion among self-identifying men. Under the social and cultural regime of "obligatory heterosexuality" (2016, 123), heterosexual desire of female bodies is perceived as natural and inherent to maleness. This is also why any positive or even neutral representation of homosexual men inherently undermines hegemonic masculinity, as "their object-choice subverts the masculinity of their character and social presence" (2016, 162). *Andromeda's* unequal (i.e. significantly reduced) inclusion of romantic arcs between men that at the same time shows a dishonest denial or even refusal of male/male desire, clearly exposes that, in Connell's words, "sexual relations are where it takes a potentially radical turn" (2016, 162). Friendship, even romantic attachment is – at least borderline – acceptable, but sexual desire must not be represented as equally valid or aesthetically pleasing in order not to endanger hegemonic masculinity.

Echoing this defensive turn away from sexuality and maturity, Derek A. Burrill (2008) argues that it is a reactivation of boyhood that helps men achieve the perceived requirements of masculinity, "while offering the male a safe haven from the social contract." (29) Most men in contemporary western societies therefore continually "skate the edge of boyhood and maturity" (2008, 29), he claims, and videogames "serve as a similar safe playspace for the excess of masculinity" (ibid.). The infantilization of male avatars and their behaviour in what one could call the Peter-Panisation of virtual masculinities becomes a safeguard against potentially troubling desires on the one hand (associating the male with the supposedly innocent times of pre-pubescence), while it also becomes an apologetic strategy for excessive

behaviour in the virtual but also the actual world (following the adage: 'boys will be boys'). Boyhood has also been deeply involved in the production and consumption of digital imagery since the very beginning of videogames as a medium, and according to Burrill it is frequently used in "performances of anxieties and desires marked by gendered notions of the body and the status of subjectivity" (2008, 137). Even within the *Mass Effect* series, it is noticeable that Scott Ryder, the male avatar of the more recent *Andromeda*, is decidedly more boyish than his older, gruffer, more masculine predecessor, Shepard, in the previous titles *Mass Effect 1* (2007) to 3 (2012).

In addition to the relationship structures in *Andromeda* thus confirming the worldview of the 'eternal digital boy,' male/male romance and sexual options show a distinct lack of understanding for the dynamics of intersectionality. There is Reyes Vidal, the dangerous Latino gang boss and underworld kingpin whose Latino masculinity is immediately associated with gang culture and crime. No committed relationship is possible with him, only an intense and, as it is aggressively communicated, dangerous sexual fling. Reyes is represented as unable to restrain his carnal desires, and if the avatar/player gives in to his advances, he goes on to berate Scott for his "poor taste in men" (BioWare Montréal 2017), hinting at the damaging patterns of a co-dependent relationship and reinforcing unfortunate stereotypes about unbridled, overpowering male Latino sexuality. Jaal Ama Darav is the previously mentioned aboriginal Andromedan squad mate 'turned' queer. The intensely stereotypical and clichéd romance with him is entirely vectored on exploring the Exotic Other, and the metaphorical as well as literal climax happens in an idyllic pond, under a waterfall, surrounded by lush Andromedan flora. This perpetuates, even relishes an antiquated and regressive imagery of the noble savage that is very much reminiscent of a 'queered Pocahontas' narrative, with all its deeply problematic political implications. The last option is the ship engineer Gil Brodie, who transforms from a 'player,' in sexual terms, to a 'DILF'<sup>3</sup> in just one dialogue. Gil is strongly defined by homonormativity, constantly flaunting his sexual exploits and embodying a stereotypical visual image of gay masculinity with his perfectly tanned skin, hipster haircut, well-groomed beard, and tight leather outfit. Ironically, he is at the same time defined by heteronormativity, such as when the colonialist imperative of the plot eventually overrides Gil's alternative lifestyle and sexual identity: He expresses how he feels the duty to procreate in spite of being gay and in a committed male/male relationship (Schalleger 2019). It is also interesting to note here that for a Scott performed as gay by the player, founding a family is per design only ever an issue and a possibility with the white, human partner, excluding both the man of colour (Reyes) and the alien (Jaal) as theoretically viable options, even though biological compatibility with the latter is absolutely irrelevant.

---

3 This is a slang acronym for 'dad I'd like to f\*\*k' used to refer to men whose fatherhood makes them more sexually attractive to the speaker.

Adrienne Shaw argues that all cultural production is aimed at imagined and constructed audiences (2014, 224-227; 2012, 232), and that the videogame market is specifically defined by a pervasive industry perception of players as “immature and prejudiced” (2012, 233), while masculinity is “the presumed normative identity.” (2012, 235) This coincides strongly with Burrill’s perspective of a designed return to boyhood through what I would call Peter-Panisation. Hegemonic masculinity “remains the unmarked normative category,” Shaw adds, “and for all other identities to be represented their existence must be defended.” (2012, 239) Still, simple demands for representation, i.e. quantifiable visibility, can rarely do justice to what she perceives as “the complexity and intersectionality of identities” (2014, 7), which makes it absolutely necessary to take into account “the fluidity, performativity, and contextuality of identity categories” (2014, 15) in any attempts to realise qualitative visibility. Unlike myself, Shaw is also strictly against the optionality of same-sex content in videogames, since for her “sexuality is present and relevant in every single video game made, regardless of the sexual identities or relationships [...] of the characters” (2014, 205). This is why she demands that designers become “cognizant of their own default choices (i.e. male, white, heterosexual) and task themselves to think outside these norms” (ibid.), a process that unfortunately did not happen, or at least did not happen sufficiently, during the creation of the ill-fated *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, as it seems.

### **From Mosaic to Kaleidoscope**

As this theoretically contextualised analysis of the game has shown, with *Andromeda* BioWare Montréal unfortunately failed to appropriately recognise the specific community that has grown around the BioWare brand and the expectations of its built-in audience. Rather than representing intersecting categories of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, and class in a differentiated and meaningful manner, *Andromeda* fails to deliver what could, and indeed should have been an inclusive post-colonial re-framing of an inherently divisive colonialist narrative of victimisation and exploitation. Central issues of BioWare’s failure are notions of power, voice, and agency that are almost exclusively attributed to hegemonic white male characters, an unreflected reproduction of structures and systems of marginalisation and privilege, as well as a disappointing lack in the quality (not quantity) of visibility for marginalised identities. So, the studio decided not to respect the complex, multiply-encoded, and intersectional identities of their brand-loyal player- and fan base, looking to attract new customers by shifting the franchise towards the mainstream military shooter. While a diversification of the target audience is a sound strategy in a media landscape driven by market forces, it is, however, financially risky. Eventually, BioWare ended up alienating both their core audience, by dismantling their established brand identity, as well as their new target audience, by leaving too much of its progressive politics and narrative focus intact. This is then what ironically led

to potential buyers on both ends of the spectrum turning their collective backs on *Andromeda*.

One possible way forward that could prevent a similar catastrophe for a rumoured sequel would be to take the by now somewhat dated idea of the Canadian mosaic and develop it further to include the more complex, shifting, and at times ephemeral contemporary realities of life. The kaleidoscope seems to function better as a metaphor here than the mosaic because of its dynamic, every-changing patterns that are constantly created, uncreated, and recreated from moment to moment, so unlike the static mosaic that is only assembled once in diversity and then never changed again. Maybe the kaleidoscope thus expresses best what it means to be 'only human' today.

## References

- Avard, Alex, 2017, "Mass Effect: Andromeda Review – Shepherding New Beginnings", in: APPTriigger, <https://apptrigger.com/2017/03/27/mass-effect-andromeda-review-shepherding-new-beginnings/> (accessed October 24, 2019).
- BioWare, 1998, *Baldur's Gate*, Interplay Entertainment.
- , 2003, *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, LukasArts.
- , 2007, *Mass Effect*, Electronic Arts.
- , 2010, *Mass Effect 2*, Electronic Arts.
- , 2011, *Dragon Age 2*, Electronic Arts.
- , 2012, *Mass Effect 3*, Electronic Arts.
- , 2014, *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, Electronic Arts.
- , 2017, "Kumail Nanjiani: Space Frog", in: Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8-57qulMCE> (accessed May 15, 2019).
- , 2019, *Anthem*, Electronic Arts.
- BioWare Austin, 2011, *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, Electronic Arts.
- BioWare Montréal, 2017, *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, Electronic Arts.
- Burbeting, 2017, "Mass Effect Andromeda's poor handling of LGBT", in: NeoGAF, <https://www.neogaf.com/threads/mass-effect-andromedas-poor-handling-of-lgbt.1354052/> (accessed October 24, 2019).
- Burrill, Derek A., 2008, *Die Tryin': Videogames, Masculinity, Culture*, New York/NY, Washington/DC, et al.: Peter Lang.
- Connell, Raewyn, 2016, *Masculinities*, Cambridge/Engl.: Polity Press.
- CrescentDusk, 2017, "ME:A, M/M romance, abysmal tokenism [MEA Spoilers]", in: reddit, [https://www.reddit.com/r/masseffect/comments/60jdz1/mea\\_mm\\_romance\\_abysmal\\_tokenism\\_m\\_mea\\_spoilers/](https://www.reddit.com/r/masseffect/comments/60jdz1/mea_mm_romance_abysmal_tokenism_m_mea_spoilers/) (accessed October 24, 2019).
- D'Angelo, William, 2012, "Mass Effect: A Sales History – News", in: VGChartz, <http://www.vgchartz.com/article/250066/mass-effect-a-sales-history/> (accessed October 24, 2019).
- Disruptor Ammo, 2018, "[No Spoilers] How many copies did Andromeda sell?", in: Reddit, [https://www.reddit.com/r/masseffect/comments/7xjqt1/no\\_spoilers\\_how\\_many\\_copies\\_did\\_andromeda\\_sell/](https://www.reddit.com/r/masseffect/comments/7xjqt1/no_spoilers_how_many_copies_did_andromeda_sell/) (accessed May 15, 2019).
- Dovey, Jon, and Helen W. Kennedy, 2006, *Game Cultures: Computer Games as New Media*, Maidenhead/Engl.: Open University Press.

- Dyer-Witheford, Nick/Greig de Peuter, 2009, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*, Minneapolis/MN and London/Engl.: University of Minnesota Press.
- Flanagan, Mary, 2016, "Practicing a New Wargame", in: Pat Harrigan and Matthew G. Kirschenbaum (eds.), *Zones of Control: Perspectives on Wargaming*, Cambridge/MA and London/Engl.: MIT Press, 703-707.
- flog61, 2017, "Romance distribution spoilers\* Make your voice heard about the lack of romance options, sex scenes," in: BioWare Social Network, <http://bsn.boards.net/thread/5648/romance-distribution-spoilers-options-achievement> (accessed October 24, 2019).
- gi justice, 2017, "Cora Romance/Sex (Explicit Nudity) Mass Effect Andromeda", in: Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bNsflSNkkpk> (accessed May 15, 2019).
- Hardt, Michael/Antonio Negri, 2001, *Empire*, Cambridge/MA: Harvard University Press.
- Harrigan, Pat/ Matthew G. Kirschenbaum (eds.), 2016, *Zones of Control: Perspectives on Wargaming*, Cambridge/MA and London/Engl.: MIT Press.
- Hart, Casey, 2015, "Sexual Favors: Using Casual Sex as Currency within Video Games", in: Matthew Wysocki and Evan W. Luteria (eds.), *Rated M for Mature: Sex and Sexuality in Video Games*, New York/NY, London/Engl. et al.: Bloomsbury, 147-160.
- Henry, Jasmine, 2017, "Mass Effect: Andromeda Development 'Worse' Than Anyone Realizes, Says Ex-Designer", in: Gamerant, <https://gamerant.com/mass-effect-andromeda-development-worse-ex-designer/> (accessed May 15, 2019).
- Hernandez, Patricia, 2017a, "Mass Effect: Andromeda: The Kotaku Review", in: Kotaku, <https://kotaku.com/mass-effect-andromeda-the-kotaku-review-1793496930> (accessed October 24, 2019).
- , 2017b, "Underwhelming Gay Romance Options in Mass Effect: Andromeda Disappoint Many Fans", in: Kotaku, <https://www.kotaku.com.au/2017/03/underwhelming-gay-romance-options-in-mass-effect-andromeda-disappoints-many-fans/> (accessed May 15, 2019).
- Hocking, Clint, 2007, "Ludonarrative Dissonance in Bioshock: The Problem of What the Game is About", in: Click Nothing, [https://clicknothing.typepad.com/click\\_nothing/2007/10/ludonarrative-d.html](https://clicknothing.typepad.com/click_nothing/2007/10/ludonarrative-d.html) (accessed May 15, 2019).
- Honea, Keri, 2017, "Mass Effect Andromeda Review – Finding Paths (PS4)", in: Playstation Lifestyle, <https://www.playstationlifestyle.net/2017/03/20/mass-effect-andromeda-review-finding-paths-ps4/> (accessed October 24, 2019).
- Mass Effect, 2015, "MASS EFFECT™: ANDROMEDA Official E3 2015 Announce Trailer", in: Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uG8V9dRqSsw> (accessed May 15, 2019).
- , 2017, "MASS EFFECT™: ANDROMEDA – Official Launch Trailer", in: Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X6PJEmEHlaY> (accessed May 15, 2019).
- Metacritic, 2012a, "Mass Effect 3 Playstation 3", in: Metacritic, <https://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-3/mass-effect-3> (accessed October 24, 2019).
- , 2012b, "Mass Effect 3 PC", in: Metacritic, <https://www.metacritic.com/game/pc/mass-effect-3> (accessed October 24, 2019).
- , 2012c, "Mass Effect 3 Xbox 360", in: Metacritic, <https://www.metacritic.com/game/xbox-360/mass-effect-3> (accessed October 24, 2019).
- , 2017a, "Mass Effect: Andromeda PlayStation 4", in: Metacritic, <https://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-4/mass-effect-andromeda> (accessed May 15, 2019).
- , 2017b, "Mass Effect: Andromeda PC", in: Metacritic, <https://www.metacritic.com/game/pc/mass-effect-andromeda> (accessed May 15, 2019).
- , 2017c, "Mass Effect: Andromeda Xbox One", in: Metacritic, <https://www.metacritic.com/game/xbox-one/mass-effect-andromeda> (accessed May 15, 2019).
- Mukherjee, Souvik, 2017, *Videogames and Postcolonialism: Empire Plays Back*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Murray, Soraya, 2016, "Upending Militarized Masculinity in *Spec Ops: The Line*", in: Pat Harrigan and Matthew G. Kirschenbaum (eds.), *Zones of Control: Perspectives on Wargaming*, Cambridge/MA and London/Engl.: MIT Press, 319-328.
- Revan Reborn, 2017, "How would you like to see romances improved?", in: BioWare Social Network, <http://bsn.boards.net/thread/8117/romances-improved> (accessed October 24, 2019).
- Riendeau, Danielle, 2017, "We Talk EA Woes, Mass Effect: Andromeda, Race, and Sexism with Manveer Heir", in: Vice, [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/evbdzm/race-in-games-ea-woes-with-former-mass-effect-manveer-heir](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/evbdzm/race-in-games-ea-woes-with-former-mass-effect-manveer-heir) (accessed May 15, 2019).
- sgeoflife, 2017, "As a gay man, I have a big problem with the Make Jaal Bi campaign", in: BioWare Social Network, <http://bsn.boards.net/thread/8984/gay-problem-make-jaal-campaign> (accessed October 24, 2019).
- Schalleger, René, 2016a, "Designing the Peaceable Kingdom: The Canadian-Ness of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*", in: Brittany Kuhn/Alexia Bhéreur-Lagounaris (eds.), *Levelling Up: The Cultural Impact of Videogames*, Oxford/Engl.: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 73-85.
- , 2016b, "Game Changers: Representations of Queerness in Canadian Videogame Design", in: *Zeitschrift für Kanadastudien* 65, Augsburg: Wißner, 42-62.
- , 2017, "Mass Effect™: Andromeda - Using the L-Word", in: Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w9Cf44wyLg> (accessed May 15, 2019).
- , 2019, "Mass Effect™: Andromeda - Talking Babies", in: Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HwlvfmDnTp0> (accessed May 15, 2019).
- Schell, Jesse, 2008, *The Art of Game Design: A Book of Lenses*, Burlington/MA: Elsevier.
- Schreier, Jason, 2017, "The Story Behind Mass Effect: Andromeda's Troubled Five-Year Development", in: Kotaku, <https://kotaku.com/the-story-behind-mass-effect-andromedas-troubled-five-1795886428> (accessed May 15, 2019).
- Shaw, Adrienne, 2012, "Putting the Gay in Games: Cultural Production and GLBT Content in Videogames", in: José P. Zagal (ed.), *The Videogame Ethics Reader*, San Diego/CA: Cognella, 225-248.
- , 2014, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture*, Minneapolis/MN and London/Engl.: University of Minnesota Press.
- Shoemaker, Brad, 2017, "Mass Effect: Andromeda Review", in: GiantBomb, <https://www.giantbomb.com/reviews/mass-effect-andromeda-review/1900-762/> (accessed October 24, 2019).
- slw229, 2017, "So ... After 4 ME games I still can't romance an African-American woman?", in: BioWare Social Network, <http://bsn.boards.net/thread/9126/after-games-romance-african-american> (accessed October 24, 2019).
- SofaJockey, 2017, "The Character Romance thread (Official)", in: BioWare Social Network, <http://bsn.boards.net/thread/3634/character-romance-thread-official> (accessed October 24, 2019).
- Sterling, Jim, 2017, "Mass Effect: Andromeda Review – Uncanny Galaxy", in: Jimquisition, <https://www.thejimquisition.com/post/mass-effect-andromeda-review-uncanny-galaxy> (accessed October 24, 2019).
- Webber, Jordan Erica, 2017, "Mass Effect: Andromeda review – this galaxy has promise", in: Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/mar/23/mass-effect-andromeda-game-review-galaxy-problems> (accessed October 24, 2019).
- Webster, Andrew, 2017, "Mass Effect: Andromeda is a thrilling sci-fi drama stuck to a boring game", in: The Verge, <https://www.theverge.com/2017/3/20/14961928/mass-effect-andromeda-review-xbox-ps4-pc> (accessed October 24, 2019).
- Wikipedia, 2019, "Mass Effect: Andromeda", in: Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mass\\_Effect%3A\\_Andromeda](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mass_Effect%3A_Andromeda) (accessed May 15, 2019).
- Wysocki, Matthew/Evan W. Lauteria (eds.), 2015, *Rated M for Mature: Sex and Sexuality in Video Games*, New York/NY, London/Engl. et al.: Bloomsbury.