

Renegade Sex: Compulsory Sexuality and Charmed Magic Circles in the *Mass Effect* series

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Abstract

This article examines portrayals of sexuality in video games, particularly in terms of the increasing inclusion of queer and non-normative sexuality. This increasing diversity of representations remains rife with problems, however, ranging from the privileging of female queer identity over male queer identity in much of the *Mass Effect* series, to the “gay button” issue of having queer content only accessible through player effort to locate it. In order to examine both this progress and its problems, this article primarily uses close readings of game texts including the *Mass Effect* series, supplemented by key existing critical work on in-game sexuality (Consalvo, 2003; Shaw, 2009; Greer, 2013). The article begins with an application of Adrienne Rich’s concept of “compulsory heterosexuality” to game worlds and examines the privileging of certain sexual activities and identities in games using Gayle S. Rubin’s concept of the “charmed circle”. Both of these concepts are applied to games more generally, and then to the work of game development studio BioWare particularly with a focus on their *Mass Effect* series. This article concludes with a consideration of some work by independent developers that both expand and critique the hierarchies of sex and what the mainstream game development community could learn from these projects.

Author Keywords

Sexuality; video games; Bioware; charmed circle; compulsory heterosexuality

Introduction

This analysis aims to raise questions about the mandatory performance and privileging of particular sexual identities in video games, first through examining the explicitly heterosexual narratives of classic game series like *Super Mario*, and then the more narratively and performatively diverse romantic side-quests in modern Role Playing Games (RPG) like *Mass Effect*. In BioWare’s *Mass Effect* series in particular, the romantic side-quest has progressed, with some difficulty, beyond the compulsive heterosexuality of the classic video game. Specifically, this compulsive heterosexuality is a particular iteration of Adrienne Rich’s (1980) “compulsory heterosexuality”; the key difference between the two is that while “compulsory heterosexuality” is a privileged societal norm than can be refused, the compulsive heterosexuality of the classic video game demands that the player perform a heterosexual player-character or cease playing the game altogether.

The scope of choice in a video game literalizes and ultimately closes Gayle S. Rubin's "charmed circle" of sexuality (1984, p. 153), rendering what falls outside the circle impossible for the player to enact. Normally, Rubin's "charmed circle" contains types of sexuality sanctioned by societies as acceptable, such as heterosexual, monogamous sex. Unacceptable but still practicable forms of sexuality are relegated to the "outer limits" of the "sex hierarchy." Rubin's scope of acceptable and unacceptable sexual practices is much wider than the enforced heterosexuality described by Rich, but both critics describe privileged acts in comparison to acts that are heavily marginalized and even punished, but these acts are still possible. I use Rich's model first because its focus on "compulsory heterosexuality" and the social (and sometimes legal) fallout of non-compliance contrasts with the impossibility of such resistance in the game. Additionally, Rich's model works best with the history of sexuality in video games, while Rubin's is more appropriate to the increasing diversity of sexual identities and practices found in some forward-thinking games that have appeared more recently. I follow with Rubin's model specifically because it addresses a wider scope of sexual practices and purposes than Rich does. In video games, the "outer limits" are beyond the limits of the game entirely; only the acceptable practices of the game's "charmed circle" are possible in the world of the game. If we see the game-world as an example of Johan Huizinga's (1938) famous "magic circle" that defines the limits of the space of play, these two circles overlap: Rubin's "charmed circle" and Huizinga's "magic circle" become indistinguishable in scripted video games (p. 20).¹

This article follows in the tradition of close analytical readings of video game texts in order to investigate the depiction of sexuality with regards to representation at both the level of narrative and game-play. Broadly, this analysis is heavily indebted to studies on gender in games, from Cassell and Jenkins' 1998 essay collection *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games* to the more recent work of Jenson and de Castell (2013) and Anita Sarkeesian's *Tropes Vs Women in Video Games* video series (2013 – 2015). Looking at the study of sexuality and gaming more particularly, this article draws heavily on the work of Mia Consalvo (2003; 2005), Alexander, McCoy and Velez (2007), Adrienne Shaw (2009; 2013; 2015), and Stephen Greer (2013). While these key critics employ a variety of analyses, this article uses a similar tactic to the textual analysis of *The Sims* by Consalvo (2005) and the *Fable* and *Dragon Age* series by Greer (2013) in particular. Rather than focusing on a phenomenological study of player experience, this article considers depictions of, references to and important absences regarding in-game sexuality at a (primarily) narrative and (to a lesser extent) ludological level.

Compulsory Heterosexuality and Compulsive Heterosexuality

The classic video game's limited field of choices regarding the performance of sexual identity provides a variation on Adrienne Rich's "compulsory heterosexuality" defined in her 1980 essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." Several game studies theorists have used Rich's essay and applied the term "compulsory heterosexuality" to game texts, but often in passing rather than focusing on the gap between Rich's real-world definition and how it must be rethought in order to apply it to game texts (Consalvo, 2003; Schröder, 2008; Voorhees, 2014).² Rich defines compulsory heterosexuality as a privileged norm from which homosexuality is a punishable, but possible, deviation. In the average video game narrative, however, heterosexuality is not merely a prescribed standard that should be followed. Instead, the privileged standard becomes the only available option: a player is often literally unable to perform queerness or self-identify as anything other than heterosexual in a particular game. Here a differentiation between the compulsory and

the compulsive act becomes useful. While the compulsory is a requirement that can be resisted, the compulsive heterosexuality of the game is impossible to avoid without exiting the game entirely, making games unique spaces in which player actions can be not merely privileged to varying degrees but literally unavailable as an option altogether. This classic game-play experience differs so radically from everyday experience because, unlike the everyday, the space of the game is completely designed; there is nothing extraneous, save in the case of errors. Every potential choice the player can make is limited by what the game designers see fit to include in the game. It is this submission to the game in order to play it that makes the proscribed heterosexuality of the classic game compulsive rather than compulsory.

As noted by Consalvo (2003), many famous and enduring game franchises heavily rely on heterosexual narratives. The vast majority of the game narratives of the *Super Mario* series are fuelled by the temporarily interrupted heterosexual union of Mario and Princess Peach Toadstool. This narrative arc reaches back to earlier versions of Mario and Peach (Jumpman and Pauline, originally named Lady) performing a similar rescue arc in the original *Donkey Kong* arcade game in 1981. To play Mario is to perform a heterosexual role. While one doesn't think of Mario as a sexual creature, his character is nonetheless functionally heterosexual, based on the trappings of a heterosexual, monogamous, patriarchal relationship, to the point that Mario must repeatedly rescue Peach from the prospect of a forced marriage to the series' villain King Bowser. Mario is just one example out of many classic games that enact a compulsive heterosexuality, namely heterosexual performance through the princess rescue arc as a necessary part of game-play (see Sherman, 1997; Consalvo, 2003; Kirkland, 2007). While there are other classic games such as *Pong* (1972), *Pac-Man* (1980), and *Tetris* (1984) that do not exhibit this compulsive heterosexuality, they are able to do so because of their lack of romantic content. Consistently, classic games that have shaped video game history and featured romantic content have also required players-characters perform heterosexuality across genres and platforms including: *The Dragon's Lair* (1983), *The Legend of Zelda* (1986), *Double Dragon* (1987), and *Leisure Suit Larry in the Land of the Lounge Lizards* (1987). Even the sequel to *Pac-Man*, *Ms. Pac-Man* (1981) explicitly featured the titular characters' courtship and child-bearing in intermission scenes played between mazes. Even though Ms. Pac-Man's sexuality has no direct bearing on the game-play of eating dots and avoiding ghosts, to play Ms. Pac-Man is to perform a heterosexual role.

The princess rescue plot remains a key trope within the medium's history of compulsive heterosexuality. Created in 1986, *The Legend of Zelda* series relies on the relationship between hero Link and Princess Zelda to fuel many of the series' narratives. Within the game's lore, Zelda's distress and rescue plays out over various re-incarnations of the characters across time, markedly unlike the seemingly ageless Mario and Peach who have performed their rescue narrative in their modern iterations from 1985 to the present day. Notably, both franchises are the creations of the famous game designer Shigeru Miyamoto, providing what may seem like a small sample of gaming history, but the centrality and influence of both these series and their maker must not be understated. The proliferation of other influential games and series with similarly enforced heterosexuality (a small sample of which is listed above) further reinforces the ubiquity of the trope in games that feature explicit or implied romance.

Critic Ewan Kirkland (2007) notes the long life of the rescue-the-princess arc, claiming, "From *Donkey Kong* (Nintendo, 1981) to *Shadow of the Colossus* (Team Ico/Sony, 2005), the male-hero-rescuing-helpless-female trope endures, structuring all three of the male-centered *Silent Hill*

games” (p. 174). This endurance has resulted in variations of the arc, often largely for the sake of novelty. Rather than critiquing the legitimacy of heterosexuality itself, these variations often invoke the failure of the arc for the sake of pathos (*Shadow of the Colossus*, 2005) or parody the princess rescue arc for the sake of humor (*Fat Princess*, 2009). These variations may play with the enacted rescue or the mechanics of the relationships involved but almost never criticize or deviate from the heterosexual relationship base itself, thus maintaining the trope’s association with compulsive heterosexuality.

Looking more closely at the function of failure and parody in retreading the princess rescue arc, it appears that the deviation from the norm is invested in the insufficiency of the princess or rescuer rather than a critique of the narrative itself. More specifically, the pathos of the failed rescue lies in the character of the rescuer, while the humor of the rescue parody tends to depend on the undesirability of the princess. In games like the 2008 puzzle-platformer *Braid*, the princess the player-character seeks is ultimately unattainable and the later stages of the game reveal the player-character as the monster chasing her, in stark comparison to the knight that actually rescues her. The princess rescue narrative itself is not shown to be insufficient: instead it is the player-character who fails to uphold the standards of the trope. Similarly, *Shadow of the Colossus* (2005) depicts the hero Wander’s successful attempt to revive the girl Mono using increasingly heart-rending means that ultimately result in his possession by a mysterious entity. Parodies of the princess rescue, however, often mock the object of the rescue effort. In 2009’s *Fat Princess*, players feed a princess (who physically resembles *Peach* from the *Super Mario* series) pieces of cake to make her too heavy for opposing players to carry back to their base. This subverts the figure of the princess without changing the fact of the rescue arc narrative, namely that the princess is an object that exists to be rescued, in this case despite her ‘comical’ weight. Critic Sharon R. Sherman (1997) describes the princess as “that which the hero lacks in all of the games” (p. 253). If we consider the princess figure to be the elusive proof of the player-character’s heterosexuality, which must be pursued to eliminate the spectre of other sexualities, the traditionally heterosexist narratives of video games reflects the same anxieties about difference that define Rich’s concept of “compulsory heterosexuality.” This anxiety results in narrow definitions of sexuality in most video games even today, reifying heterosexuality as the norm and marginalizing the efforts by some game designers to use more diverse depictions of sexuality in games to address heterosexism and homophobia.

Pressing Buttons in the Charmed Magic Circle

Game studies theorists have both championed and critiqued the possible use of games to engage social and political issues. Even among proponents, optimism ranges from the intense (Frasca, 2004) to the more guarded (Voorhees, 2009). Similarly, in terms of using games to fruitfully expand conversations about sexuality, critics’ levels of optimism differ. Consalvo (2003) writes that after the compromised but “radical potential” of sexuality in *The Sims* “the potential for more diversity in sexuality is arriving” (p. 191). However Alexander, McCoy and Valez (2007) critique Consalvo’s position, writing “while Consalvo usefully explores some of the parameters and possibilities of exploring sexuality within games themselves, such as *The Sims*, she does not explore the specific literacy experiences, strategies, and reflections of *gay gamers*” (p.174). The reflections of queer-identified gamers and scholars have certainly yielded unique perspectives on sexuality in gaming, such as the idea of “the gay button” first brought up by game designer Anna Anthropy (and critically discussed by Adrienne Shaw). Anthropy describes “the gay button” as the

option to see queer content in a game (and the option to avoid it) that depends on the corporate control over “images that represent our lives” (qtd. in Fitzgerald, 2013). This perspective critiques games that require players to make choices and effort to be aware of queer-related content, rather than presenting queer content or even the acknowledgement of queerness at all as an unavoidable part of the game. Shaw (2013) develops the concept of “the gay button,” describing how the approaches of series like *Fable* put “responsibility for diversity onto audiences” (para. 18). More specifically, the requirement to push “the gay button” makes it so “anyone who doesn’t or is unaware that button exists continues to consume the heteronormative dominated texts” (Ibid.).³

“The gay button” problem, while significant, presupposes the inclusion of queer content, which is relatively recent in the history of video games. If we (briefly) consider that history, a particularly useful model to use in order to unpack the unique limitations on game sexuality is Rubin’s “charmed circle” (1984). While the “magic circle” often used as a shorthand for the delineated space, time and conditions in which games occur is a commonly discussed topic in play and game studies (Huizinga, 1938; Salen and Zimmerman, 2003; Jarvinen, 2004) Rubin’s “charmed circle” is also useful to our consideration of the designed context of the game as a world apart from everyday experience. In her 1984 essay, Rubin uses 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 (p. 153). The video game can seal itself around its particular “charmed circle” and off from the outer limits entirely, removing even the possibility of performing unacceptable activities. This makes the ‘unacceptable’ activities that we could still choose to practice in our everyday lives not a part of the game narrative at all, hence the compulsive heterosexuality of most games. While Rubin’s societal model can never entirely erase the unacceptable, but only push it to the circle’s periphery, the designed nature of the game can make an unacceptable act specifically impossible. This is why it has never been possible outside of fan-creations and parody for Mario to date and rescue Toad, or his brother Luigi, rather than Princess Peach⁴. Rubin tells us that “consent is a privilege enjoyed only by those who engage in the highest-status sexual behavior” (p. 168). Gaming goes even further: game designers decide player capacity to do things at all, completely prior to being able to consent or not. The privilege of consent is not the player’s to exercise, but the game designer’s to give in carefully selected instances. The more recent “gay button” problem exists when the sealed circle of the game allows queer content to exist, but in doing so constructs an in-game “outer limits” that still excludes other kinds of content. In comparison to the sealed “charmed circle” of the typically compulsively heterosexual game in which content is either privileged or non-existent, this model allows for marginalized content that can remain relegated to the in-game “outer limits” unless summoned by “the gay button” that indicates the player is receptive to such content. The player’s ability to consent to certain types of content (for example, to push the non-monogamous or kinky button) still does not exist, largely. As Shaw (2009) notes, it is not sufficient to idly wait for further improvement in this area. Instead, players and critics must critically engage with the politics of what sexualities, practices and purposes are privileged, marginalized or erased entirely by a game.

BioWare and the Romantic Side-Quest

In light of Shaw’s contention, this article uses the tactic of looking more specifically at the closed circle of sexuality in the *Mass Effect* series to encourage change and critical responses to the deficiencies of inclusive representations of sexuality in games. To do so, we should consider its

parent company's use of romantic side-quests. BioWare is known for producing complex game narratives with prominent romantic side-quests. Their games have historically been queer-inclusive to varying degrees, so that the player-character can pursue a same-sex romantic relationship with a non-player-character within the game's main plot. These side-quests include unique dialogue and voice-acting, and can subtly or significantly affect the main plot. Quoted in a 2009 New York Times article, the lead designer of *Dragon Age: Origins*, Mike Laidlaw, describes the BioWare title as "designed to celebrate player choice and create a story that is reactive to the way you choose to play it" (C1). Laidlaw adds "Among the tools that we have as storytellers, I see romance as being one of the principal ones." Laidlaw's description is typical of BioWare's focus on engaging players through narratives in which the limitations on player choices are obfuscated, in order to increase player investment. The romantic side-quest is a substantial deviation from the proscribed heterosexuality of Miyamoto's *Legend of Zelda* franchise. Rather than being a singular relationship that defines the game's story arc, the romantic side-quest in BioWare is consistently one of several choices, always optional, and serves to enrich rather than define the player's in-game experience. If a player so chooses, there is no need to begin any of these side-quests, effectively allowing the player to perform in-game asexuality. Compared to most triple-A studios, BioWare is traditionally fairly inclusive in terms of the romantic options it allows players.

It is because of BioWare's famous gestures toward inclusivity as well as its critical and commercial successes that I look at this company in particular. I do so not to dismiss the successes or importance of BioWare's depictions of queer relationships, but to look closely at a company that has grown to consistently reject the traditional compulsive heterosexuality of video games. Because of its focus on offering players romantic choices in its game, BioWare is doubly useful as an example to consider through the lens of Rubin's "sex hierarchy." As the company continues to widen the scope of possible romantic options in its products, each game's "charmed circle," "outer limits" and practices entirely excluded from the game differ. These differences offer insight into what the company and its franchises value as game content and assume what players will value.

Mass Effect

BioWare's *Mass Effect* franchise is perhaps its most critically and commercially successful: Leo Sun reports that as of July 2014, the series had sold over fourteen million units (2014, para. 4).⁵ However, the series has also been much more in line with traditional heterosexist gaming than BioWare's earlier *Jade Empire* or the *Dragon Age* series. In 2007's *Mass Effect*, when playing a male or female Commander Shepard, players can pursue heterosexual romances with human crewmembers, but only pursue a debatably queer romance as a female Shepard with an alien named Liara. Both human heterosexual relationships are typical "charmed circle" fare – they are characterized by monogamous, romantic love between partners in a similar age-range, which Rubin (1980) notes is the gold standard of what falls within the "charmed circle" (p. 253).⁶ These relationships are quite typical of videogame compulsive heterosexuality. The game's set-up simply sidesteps any queer option for a male Shepard, rendering that particular queer performance beyond even the outer limits of Rubin's circle, excluding it from the game entirely.

The original *Mass Effect*'s sole queer romance is heavily annotated. Both female and male Shepards can have a romance with the scientist Liara T'Soni. She is explicitly stated to be from a 'monogendered' race, the Asari, but as noted by Davis (2014) she is clearly intended to be ultimately perceived as a blue woman (para. 2). Liara has a female voice actor and model, and is consistently referred to by female pronouns. Additionally, the majority of Asari-partnered aliens

we meet throughout the series are male, re-inscribing heterosexuality as the in-game standard. A lesbian relationship with Liara is literally othered by the fact that she is an alien, but the game verifies the romance's place within the "charmed circle" by focusing on romance and child-bearing.⁷ The Asari are specifically discouraged from mating with each other, placing such activity within the in-game "outer limits" of the "sex hierarchy"; as we find out later, this is because children with two Asari parents have a higher likelihood of being an "Ardat-Yakshi", a kind of Asari succubus that murders its partners through sex. At the same time, because all Asari look stereotypically female, this produces what looks like a taboo against lesbianism; if a player performs a male Shepard and romances Liara, the taboo remains in place, effectively making the compulsively heterosexual male Shepard rescue Liara from her lesbian heritage as the child of two Asari herself.

Furthermore, Liara's race is problematic in itself. The Asari, a race of what consistently appear to be beautiful blue women, are frequently sexualized throughout the *Mass Effect* series. They appear as exotic dancers and appear to be universally sexually attractive to other races. Additionally, as DuVoix (2014) writes, Asari "promiscuity is the stuff of in-universe legend" (para. 7) Not only are the Asari universally desired, they are widely assumed to be universally desiring and to have little to no selectiveness in sexual partners (that this may partially be wishful thinking on the part of the rest of the galaxy is not discussed in detail). Similarly, Davis (2014) notes that this sexualization is a potential source of shame for some Asari: "Asari are viewed by other aliens as sexual beings, even hypersexual: if Shep talks to Liara about her species, Liara stammers to defend herself against assumptions about Asari promiscuity" (para. 2). Technically, Liara says "The galaxy is filled with rumours and misinformation about my people" (*Mass Effect* 2007). Liara is correct in that the Asari sexuality is misunderstood and as Davis (2014) notes "the assumptions about Asari sexuality echo real-world stereotypes about bisexuality" (para. 2). However, the game re-inscribes rather than criticizes the sexualization of the Asari in its depiction of their bodies and their status as what Davis (2014) calls "the sex class" universally desired in the *Mass Effect* series (para. 4). Despite calling out this treatment in player-character conversation, the game does not substantially challenge these assumptions through the representation of the Asari.

The sex scene that marks the fruition of the romantic side-quest in *Mass Effect* is similarly reductive. The scene is really very similar regardless of the characters involved with the female body prominently featured. Specifically, the same panning shot of a woman's buttocks and back is used no matter if the woman's back in the sex scene belongs to the human love interest Ashley, Liara, or Commander Shepard herself. The male figure, if the scene has one, is much less prominent, anticipating the gaze of a heterosexual male gamer who would be uncomfortable seeing a male body, in a toned down though similar way to how mainstream heterosexual pornography frequently minimizes the appearance of male actors and focuses on women on-screen.⁸ Clearly, the sex scene in *Mass Effect* is in no way pornographic, despite ill-informed assertions to the contrary (see "Se'Xbox?" 2008). But the scene does anticipate the male viewer, performing an extra and intra-game "compulsory heterosexuality" of the kind Rich describes. Though this is certainly a step forward from the compulsive heterosexuality of traditional video game narratives, it is a step back for BioWare within the arc of its progress up to 2007.

Contemporary media responses to this scene, however, provide a lesson regarding how in-game sex, while within the "charmed circle" of the game itself, is staunchly in the outer limits of the "charmed circle" as imagined by some morality watchdogs. Fox News took up the outcry over the

Mass Effect sex scene in 2008, well after the game had been released. In an televised discussion between video game journalist Geoff Keighley and self-help author Cooper Lawrence, the game is introduced as depicting frontal nudity (which it does not) and allowing players to determine which specific sex acts were to be performed (which it does not) (“‘Se’Xbox’?”). After the discussion, a four-person panel focuses on the effect of young boys accessing their father’s video games, specifically gendering the player as male in both cases. In this discussion, the lesbian content falls so far in the game’s “outer limits” that it goes unmentioned, showcasing that the real stakes are the effects on young boys seeing heterosexual sex in a video game. This serves as a useful reminder that at any given time, Rubin’s “sex hierarchy” is not singular, but each circle – be it the individual video game or the Fox News standard – is in dialogue with many others and may accordingly grow or shrink depending on the context of that dialogue.

Mass Effect 2

The franchise follow-up, *Mass Effect 2*, features a reworking of the “charmed circle”, its outer limits, and the total exclusion of certain possibilities unique to the structure of the game. The sequel took not so much a step backward, but a kind of step sideways, offering a higher number of possible romantic options both resulting and not resulting in Paramour achievements, but still no queer options at all for a male Shepard and no Paramour achievement for a female Shepard unless the player pays for downloadable content that features a quest in which the player can win back Liara if she was previously romanced. A male Shepard remains compulsively heterosexual, if any romantic options are to be pursued. A female Shepard can romance bisexual Yeoman Kelly Chambers, but doing so does not yield a Paramour achievement or an implied sex scene the way that romancing ‘official’ interests does. Similarly, the player can attempt to romance the Asari Samara or her Ardat-Yakshi daughter Morinth, but the former will refuse and sex with the latter will kill Shepard. All official romance options in the original release are solely heterosexual and romance quests pursuing human characters tend to feature the partially-clothed bodies of the romantic interests much more prominently than the alien love interests. Presumably as a response to the “charmed circle” of the buying public and the likelihood that human rather than alien nudity is closer to that circle’s center, both heterosexual human love interests Miranda and Jacob, are seen in states of undress, while the alien love interests are clothed even in scenes of intimacy, usually limited to a kiss or touch and a fade to black.

Notably, the human female Jack can be romanced by a male Shepard, but sleeping with her prior to establishing a romantic relationship effectively fails the romantic side-quest and causes Jack to shout obscenities at you if you approach her again. In order to successfully romance Jack, Shepard must get the severely psychologically damaged Jack to open up emotionally, to the point that she cries before, during and after their romantic interlude. As Rubin (1980) notes, “Virtually all erotic behaviour is considered bad unless a specific reason to exempt it has been established. The most acceptable excuses are marriage, reproduction, and love” (p. 150). This reading of what type of erotic behavior is commonly privileged and why provides a useful method of reading *Mass Effect 2*’s romances. While the possibility of reproduction and marriage remains largely unsaid in *Mass Effect 2*, save with Liara in the DLC, romantic, emotionally intimate and specifically monogamous love is the apex of the appropriately named romantic side-quest in *Mass Effect 2*. Regardless of how serious each relationship is, getting the interest to bare their emotions is key to successfully completing their respective side-quest. Additionally, as is typical of BioWare, consensual polyamory is excluded as a possible act in the game, though not excluded as a concept: unlike male homosexuality, attempts at romantic non-monogamy are possible in-game, but characters

will confront you and insist you choose between them if you attempt to pursue multiple official relationships. Monogamy in the game is thereby compulsory, rather than compulsive, while male heterosexuality remains compulsive in the series' first two installments.⁹

The game's stance regarding compulsory monogamy is complex, assuming that the player has imported a save in which Shepard romanced Ashley, Kaidan, or Liara in the first game. If such an import is used, a picture of Shepard's previous lover appears in their headquarters, but Shepard can make little contact with their previous lover, except in the case of meeting a previously-romanced Liara in the *Lair of the Shadow Broker* DLC. If Shepard initiates another romance, the picture is turned over, but not removed. The gesture seems to indicate the possibility of Shepard's guilt for starting a new relationship when their former lover believes them to be dead. In the case of a player importing a save with a romance, Shepard can only "cheat" on their original interest or remain celibate: this seems to reinforce non-monogamy's place in the "outer limits" of the game's "sex hierarchy" even as the plot excludes consensual non-monogamy from the hierarchy entirely.

The game design mediates between the societal placement of sex with aliens in the "outer limits" of the game and the game designer's choice to include it as a player option by validating alien romantic interests in specific ways. Like Liara in the original *Mass Effect*, the alien Tali is heavily implied to be sexually inexperienced. Tali and Liara are initially introduced as female-glossed romantic options with a focus on their youth, innocence and relatively untouched bodies. This seems to be intended to counteract the extra-game societal taboo against interspecies sex, balancing an outer limit-aligned characteristic with one from the heart of Rubin's "charmed circle". Similarly, Thane and Garrus, both male alien heterosexual love interests who recount their heterosexual history to a female Shepard in the course of the completion of their respective romantic side-quests, are specified to be emotionally vulnerable. However, where Tali and Liara's alien natures are downplayed by the appeal of their seeming virginity, the same effect comes about for Thane and Garrus as a result of their established heterosexual history. Thane describes how he met his late wife; Garrus describes a casual sexual encounter with a female crew-member on a previous assignment. In both cases, a female Shepard is described in terms similar to the alien love interest's previous heterosexual partner. While open to interpretation, this does seem to indicate sharp gender differences regarding what game designers felt players operating a male Shepard or female Shepard would presumably want from alien partners. Their particular sex hierarchies are assumed to differ and the game adjusts its romantic offerings accordingly. Hwang (2014, para. 8) notes also that male alien love interests in the series tend to have more widely differing physiology, while female alien love interests are much more human-like. Garrus has an avian appearance, coupled with a set of mandibles. He is also grey-skinned with prominent blue facial tattoos and scars. Thane has a reptilian appearance, as well as two sets of eye-lids. Comparatively, Liara is very human-like, except for her colouration and the smooth tendrils that mimic the appearance of hair. In *Mass Effect 3*, a romanced Tali is also confirmed to be quite human-like with perhaps the biggest difference being, again, skin colour and the sharper incline of her calves relative to her thighs.

Another difference emerges if we compare the advice given by ship's doctor Mordin Solus in *Mass Effect 2*: when advising Shepard about sex with Thane or Garrus, Shepard's safety is humourously emphasized, but when advising Shepard about sex with Tali, Tali's vulnerability is seriously emphasized. Mordin explains that contact with Thane's skin will produce a rash and "Oral contact can cause mild hallucinations." If Shepard romances Garrus, Mordin advises that "Human

ingestion of tissue could provoke allergic reactions. Anaphylactic shock possible. So, ah, don't ingest." Both descriptions refer to potential dangers to Shepard rather than her lover, but do so humourously. His advice regarding Tali is oriented very differently: Mordin says, "Quarian immune system weak. Could kill her." While the descriptions given regarding Thane and Garrus are humorous references to oral sex, the conversation about Tali is a reminder that sexual contact is a significant and potentially fatal danger for her. Again, the game designers seem to anticipate differing standards of what affirms a character's attractiveness to a player performing as a male or female Shepard and observing their romantic interactions: those playing a male Shepard are presumed to prefer vulnerable, human-like alien romantic interests and those playing a female Shepard are presumed to be more open-minded. This anticipation of player preference determines the content and limits of a game's "charmed circles" and reveal assumptions about gender underlying the game's development.

Mass Effect 3

The series' most recent installment and its DLC have expanded the "charmed circle" considerably, though again there are key differences between the circles of activities available for a female or male Shepard. Like *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2015), 2012's *Mass Effect 3* includes exclusively heterosexual, homosexual or queer love interests for both male and female Shepards. Notably, two interests are exclusively homosexual: pilot Steve Cortez can only be romanced by a male Shepard while Comm Specialist Samantha Traynor can only be romanced by a female Shepard. Character sexuality is neither implicitly or explicitly dependent on the desire of the player-character, but rather depicted as an innate part of the character's identity. Perhaps in a nod to the fact that wider romance options were planned and even partially produced but ultimately not present in the final versions of the two previous *Mass Effect* titles (DuVoix 2014), human character Kaidan Alenko's romantic potential is expanded from a solely heterosexual option in the original *Mass Effect* to a romantic option for either Shepard in *Mass Effect 3*. Kaidan is also the only male-presenting character attracted to either Shepard in the series and is only available this way in the final game; the other three romantic interests available to either Shepard are all women (Kelly Chambers, Diana Allers) or strongly feminized (Liara T'Soni), two of which have been available in previous titles. While the scarcity of a sexuality or practice does not necessarily indicate it is being devalued by the game's design, it does invite comparison regarding scarcity and plenty. Discounting the romantic interludes in the citadel DLC, there are five romantic interests available exclusively to a male Shepard, three available exclusively for a female Shepard, and four available to both. Eight of these are women (who easily make up the bulk of the options available to a male Shepard or to Shepard regardless of gender) and four are men. There are double the number of female romantic objects in the game compared to male ones. If we consider that the sharp numerical contrast makes a game-world in which romanceable women are relatively abundant and romanceable men are relatively scarce, the game orients romance interest on the player-character's part to be more central to the game's "charmed circle" than romantic interest aimed at men.

However, the "charmed circle" still differs from one gendered Shepard to another. A Female Shepard remains the only one able to engage in sex or relationships with alien characters that do not closely resemble humans. In the *Mass Effect 3: Citadel* DLC, a romantically unattached female Shepard can engage in casual sex with the alien Javik or the human James Vega, both male. A male Shepard simply cannot have similarly casual encounters in this DLC, which seems like a glaring difference in the "charmed circles" presented to players depending on their choice of Shepard's gender. Similarly, in the game proper, two interests exclusively reserved for a female

Shepard (Samantha Traynor and Garrus Vakarian) express a desire to have children with Shepard. Though the vast majority of Shepard's potential romantic interests are deeply committed (with a casual fling with reporter Diana Allers being the sole exception), only these two characters address another aspect of sex typically found in the "charmed circle": procreative sex. While a male Shepard has a larger number of potential partners, a female Shepard has a more diverse range of potential kinds of relationships. Her "charmed circle" is comparatively larger. This is not to say that difference is automatically a bad thing, particularly in light of Greer's (2013) critique of the "logic of sameness" that effaces character sexual identity in *Dragon Age II* as a result of making character sexuality dependent on player-character interest (p. 3). However, that the *Mass Effect* series consistently differentiates between the sexual practices available to male and female Shepards and avoids any engagement with the question of Shepard's gender beyond a dualistic choice remains a point of critique.

Additionally, as DuVoix (2014) notes, the game's official human queer romantic interests (a series' first) are "drawn from lower ranks" (much like Yeoman Chambers, Shepard's secretary in *Mass Effect 2*) and cannot actually follow Shepard into combat (para. 17). Work like that of DuVoix acts as a reminder that progress in in-game representation must not be used as a reason to stop critiquing that representation. As Shaw (2009) notes, simply being content to uncritically wait for improvement is unfeasible (p. 229). Levering criticism at relatively progressive series like *Mass Effect* does not constitute a rejection of the developers' work, but rather is intended to show that in both these games – and game culture more broadly – the confines of the charmed magic circle are not impassable boundaries. Instead, the outermost lines of the circle are a horizon, beyond which lie identities and practices yet kept unvoiced in triple-A game development. Developers, critics and enthusiasts must be aware of the limits of these horizons and be aware that they can be surpassed.

Conclusions

Ultimately, this article's application of Adrienne Rich's model of "compulsory heterosexuality" and Gayle S. Rubin's "charmed circle" and "outer limits" of the "sex hierarchy" to the *Mass Effect* series and video games more generally is intended to draw attention to the limits of representation in even the most progressive triple-A games. In contrast, independent game creators like Anna Anthropy, Christine Love and Merritt Kopas have fought against compulsive heterosexuality in game culture and not merely broadened the "charmed circles" of video games, but critiqued the existence of these hierarchies altogether. Some independent games like anthropy's *Encyclopedia Fuckme and the Case of the Vanishing Entrée* (2011) only depict queer and/or kinky sexuality and thus enforce a non-normative version of the compulsive heterosexuality of most games. I would argue that the queer subversion of compulsive heterosexuality is not merely an appropriation of the trope, but an intervention in the huge historical presence of heterosexism in gaming. Other games like Love's *Digital: A Love Story* (2010) and Kopas' *Consensual Torture Simulator* (2013) have had gender-neutral protagonists in relationships with women, but these relationships are heavily inflected with queerness. As Love has said, "I get bothered when people play *Analogue, Hate Plus*, and don't realize what's queer about them" (2014). The criticism of romantic content in games implicit in Love's recent work such *Analogue: A Hate Story* (2012), *Hate Plus* (2013) and the forthcoming *Ladykiller in a Bind* is explicit in Arden Ripley's *Kindness Coins* (2013), a game in which the player controls a character being pursued by the protagonist of a dating sim. While *Kindness Coins*' clearest subject is the critique of how games model the development of

relationships based on protagonists choosing dialogue options that please romanceable characters, the game also implicitly critiques the typical heteronormative parameters of many dating sims: in the course of the game, protagonist Florence comes out and despite not making particular ‘correct’ dialogue choices, gets a date with her crush Daisy. The game puts the emphasis on Daisy’s desire independent of Florence’s dialogue – even *Mass Effect 3* still retains the logic that key dialogue choices confirm romances. As triple-A games that feature romantic content like *The Witcher* series succeed critically and commercially, developers at all levels can benefit from better understanding how their scripted romantic content presents, values and excludes different aspects of sexual and romantic behaviour.

While independent developers continue to critique gaming’s narrow visions of sexuality, identity and practice, triple-A developers lag behind, held back by factors ranging from potential impacts on sales to the technological limitations in the game’s programming. It remains important that we critically engage both with game content and, crucially, what games exclude. Game consumers and critics must continue agitating for a widening of gaming’s charmed magic circles and critiquing those boundaries even as they expand.

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¹ This pairing of Rubin's work with Huizinga's has precedent in the work of both Emma Vossen (2015) and Adrienne Shaw (2015). Notably, both Vossen and Shaw used these converging circles to discuss player behavior more broadly, rather than applying it solely to in-game content like romantic subquests.

² I should note there that Consalvo (2003) focuses on the "compulsory heterosexuality" of the presumed male player, whereas Schröder (2008) uses the phrase "compulsory heterosexuality" in the context of gaming but does not cite Rich specifically. Voorhees (2014) directly references the "lesbian continuum" from Rich's 1980 article in the context of gaming, but focuses on the continuum of desire as a potential model for player desire toward the avatar.

³ Shaw (2013) notes that over-simplified confrontations with queerness divorced from real-world prejudice and violence like those presented in the *Fable* series are also insufficient solutions. Similarly, Greer (2013) observes that "a predominant logic of sameness – grounded in an even-handed 'blindness' to sexual difference – may also restrict the possibilities for queer identification" in games (p. 3).

⁴ For one example, see Scott Ramsomair's web comic "NSFW" in which upon being told by Toad that the princess is in another castle, Mario salaciously responds "Who said anything about her? Come 'ere you."

⁵ I should note that official sales figures for the *Dragon Age* series, Bioware's most comparable series to *Mass Effect*, have not been released, though they did announce that *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2015) had their most successful game-launch, in terms of units sold, in the company's history (Savage 2015, para. 3).

⁶ That the heterosexual human relationship options are possibly ethically troubled by the relationship being between a military superior and subordinate are discussed in-game, but present little problem.

⁷ For a detailed look at the "gay-lien" trope of queer female characters othered by being non-human in a context where heterosexual characters are human, see DuVoix's 2014 article *Queer Lovin' Blues Part 2: "Character Matters, Not Race of Gender."*

⁸ Schröder (2008) links similar representation in the Gothic series to the male gaze and scopophilic pleasure critiqued by Laura Mulvey in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975).

⁹ Waern (2011) notes that the game's approval system incentivizes the pursuit of multiple romances to gain party member approval from a gameplay perspective (n.pag). This might initially appear to privilege polyamory, but I assert that the game's narrative firmly trumps this.