

The Burden of Queer Love

Brianna Dym

University of Colorado Boulder

Abstract

Video games are a unique narrative and interactive experience that allow players to construct their own fantasies through play. The fantastical possibilities a video game could explore are nearly limitless. However, a game's design often precludes certain imaginative routes, shutting down one fantasy in favour of another. Games close out possibilities through actions as small as character design (gender, race, ability) and restrict imaginative interpretations to serve a narrow audience. Game developers design play that prioritizes hypermasculine narrative experiences, and players that do not align with this identity must condition themselves to play that excludes fantasies or alternate worlds that align with their experiences.

This essay explores attempts by game development studio BioWare to create video games that are inclusive of gay, lesbian, and bisexual players by writing queer romantic narrative subplots into their games. While BioWare's attempts are certainly not malicious, they fail time and time again, game after game, to break free of the hypermasculine and heterocentric culture dominant in the gaming industry. Instead, BioWare appropriates queer experiences and construes them as a burden to the player so as not to displace the fantasies of male, heterosexual gamers.

Keywords

LGBTQ identity; marginality; BioWare; queer game studies



Introduction

Within the realm of popular media, video games are a unique narrative and interactive experience that allow players to not only read about or witness fantastic worlds, but also construct their own fantasies through play. The fantastical possibilities a video game could explore are as limitless as its designer's and, to a lesser extent, player's imagination. However, a game's design often precludes certain imaginative routes, shutting down one fantasy in favour of another. Games close out possibilities through actions as small as character design (gender, race, ability) and are shaped by ruling hegemonic structures embedded within society that inform technological design (McArthur et al., 2015; Shaw, 2017). Overwhelmingly, major game developers design play that prioritizes hypermasculine narrative experiences for heterosexual, white men (Paul, 2018). Players that do not align with this identity must condition themselves to play that excludes fantasies or alternate worlds that align with their experiences. They must surrender their own desires and accept the hypermasculine, heterocentric gaming fantasy.

Within this essay, I explore and analyse historical attempts by game development studio BioWare to create video games that incorporate queer romantic narrative subplots into their games. While BioWare's attempts are certainly not malicious, they fail time and time again, game after game, to break free of the hypermasculine and heterocentric culture dominant in the gaming industry. This trend is evident in the earliest iterations of their games (*Baldur's Gate* and *Knights of the Old Republic*), and extends into their current, most successful series (*Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age*). Video games are a medium in which the possibilities available to the player could be endless. However, an unimaginative, singular interpretation emerges over and over within BioWare's games: the heterosexual male fantasy.

Making the Imaginative Masculine

In 1974, Ursula K. Le Guin published her essay, "Why are Americans Afraid of Dragons?" in which she detailed how many Americans are antifantasy and antifiction (p. 35, 1993). She argued that the American's deep-rooted fear comes from a perception of fantasy being too "childish" or "womanish" (p. 36, 1993). Over forty years have passed since the publication of her essay, and the modern media landscape has changed significantly, but the core element of Le Guin's argument holds true. When fantasy does not embody masculinity, it must be rejected as anything serious, and part of what is rejected in this process is "the human faculty of imagination" (p. 36, 1993).

By extending Le Guin's argument into the modern era, we can examine how video games, as well as other popular media about the speculative, make fantasy and the imaginative palatable through prioritizing hypermasculine, heterocentric narratives. Gilbert and Gubar (1979) reveal similar categorical enforcements of masculinity and femininity in

their analyses of 19th-century literary works. Overwhelmingly, male-dominated creative works defined any deviation from socially acceptable femininity as monstrous. Women were relegated to gendered roles, which excluded authorship. Women who authored their own works embodied a type of “Otherness” that existed outside of male fantasy (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979, p. 19). While BioWare’s modern depictions of queerness are not nearly as overtly sinister, I examine them with the understanding that BioWare’s queer characters model how dominant culture expects queerness to manifest—subservient and apologetic by its very nature. In faraway galaxies and fantastical universes, a heterocentric worldview must be the default because to conceive of something else is to engage the imagination, which, as defined by Le Guin, is “womanish.”

Speculative spaces of media have a long history of embodying the masculine. In the same essay, Le Guin identified that “Male elitism has run rampant in [science fiction]” (p. 93, 1993) similarly to how Gilbert and Gubar argue that the feminine is historically relegated to certain roles in literature, mainly to be an object for the masculine to act upon. Science fiction becomes a place to pit men against the Other, or Alien: the sexual Alien, social Alien, cultural Alien, and racial Alien (p. 93, 1993). Much like science fiction, fantasy currently inhabits a space where men are contrasted to an Other.

In this analysis, I explore how some of BioWare’s most popular video games demonstrate this “man versus Other” dichotomy in their romantic subplots, preserving the hypermasculine, heterocentric narrative. To do otherwise would be to ask the heterosexual male player to imagine a world unlike their own, to burden them with queerness. Queer love is conceptualized as a burden in BioWare’s romantic subplots, and is something to protect the player from, only exposing queerness to the player when it is in service to the heterosexual man. The queerness that BioWare offers players is not a queer identity owned by any queer players. It is a co-opted, constructed identity that defies any true exploration of what it means to be queer, instead brutalizing the queer player by forcing them to acknowledge the burden that their love is upon everyone.

The Gaming Industry as a Hegemonic Force

Understanding BioWare’s failures and the ways their games enforce heterosexuality is critical for understanding related problems systemic to the gaming industry and gamer culture. These problems are evident in the persecution of Anita Sarkeesian for her YouTube series “Tropes VS Women in Video Games” (Sarkeesian, 2013) and the panic of the #GamerGate movement that focused young men’s fears of a feminist takeover of games into a violent cyberbullying campaign (Chess and Shaw, 2015; Massanari, 2017). Sexist norms of how male and female identities should be portrayed are enforced in many games, including

World of Warcraft's character design (Brett, 2018). In general, video games are heteronormative and ask the player to assume male heterosexuality as default (Krobová, 2015). The gaming industry suffers from the effort to maintain its own hypermasculine framework, leading to higher rates of sexual harassment directed at women and the LGBTQ community in online games (Ballard and Welch, 2017) and some people's reluctance to claim a "gamer" identity with the same ease as their heterosexual male counterparts (Shaw, 2012).

Yet despite these massive barriers to entry, women, people of colour, and the LGBTQ community still want to play. Games scholar Christopher Paul observes that "video games are now part of everyday life, serving as both touchstones for how we construct who we are as people and as an economic engine that generates billions of dollars (more than the music or movie industries)" (p. 2, 2018). Because video games are such a rapidly growing part of everyday life, it is important to understand how this intensely interactive medium is structuring its play, stories, and the people in games, from the white, heterosexual man at the centre of many major games to the Other that developers misrepresent.

Paul points to the demographics of the game industry's workforce as one of the many systems in place that perpetuate the problem. The author describes the typical game industry employee as a 32-year-old straight, white male (p. 4, 2018). With this demographic so prominent among game developers, it is even more crucial that we turn a critical eye to the ways in which marginalized and minority characters are constructed and presented within games. Furthermore, the interactive nature of games lends a unique element in that they construct ways in which the player must interact with cultural artefacts such as race, sexuality, and prejudice within their own character as well as the virtual world they inhabit (Shaw, 2015). While these game interactions might not have been purposefully constructed to discipline the player to accept hypermasculine heteronormativity as default, the overwhelming unease of the heterosexual gaming community toward any encroachment of the Other (Cross, 2017) on their space points to the underlying power dynamics inherent in games.

For BioWare's games, this emphasis takes the form of shielding the player from queerness at all possible costs. Games researcher Megan Condis argues that "gamers have been taught to desire (and to expect) a bodiless, apolitical experience within virtual worlds" (p. 204, 2015). This expectation that many gamers have is a social conditioning to mask that: 1) games are political in favour of hypermasculine heteronormativity and 2) that they embody experiences with a white, male, and heterosexual player in mind.

What BioWare does when it includes queer romantic narratives is construct a parody of queerness in which the queer gamer must recognize a contorted image of themselves and accept that distortion as

the only reality possible within the game. In BioWare's games, queerness is a burden that the player and other characters must continually apologize for so as not to displace the hypermasculine, heterocentric norm of video games (Condis, 2015). The distress surrounding queerness in BioWare's games upholds a ruling hegemonic structure that must oppress those who are not white, heterosexual men. This hegemony demands a retreat from the human faculty of imagination, presenting players with the illusion of choice and creativity while defining these fictional worlds in particularly unimaginative terms.

“Ha, ye'er a queer fellow.”

BioWare has long developed games that offer intricately branching narratives and character dialogue that change based on the player character's presentation—their gender, race, and other attributes affect story elements to varying degrees of significance. Founded in 1995 (Electronic Arts, Inc., n.d.), the studio gained notoriety in 1998 when they released *Baldur's Gate*, a *Dungeons & Dragons* influenced role playing game (RPG) that introduced character customizability that went beyond picking out a physical appearance. Players selected their gender, fantasy race (human, elf, halfling), appearance, and profession all before playing the game. The game used dialogue trees as a core mechanic, allowing the player to choose conversation and story-based choices from a list of branching options. This design offered the player a veritable blank slate to build their character from the ground up, recruit a cast of supporting characters, and begin a story-driven journey where player choices determined whether conflict would be resolved through violence, negotiation, stealth, or a myriad of other options.

Giving the player a robust character creation system and multiple dialogues to choose from does not circumnavigate problems of bias built into the game. Despite its design, the original *Baldur's Gate* is guilty of subtle disruptions when the player is not the imagined core audience. One such disruption appears within an hour of the game's start, when a supporting character addresses the player character, “Ha, ye're a queer fellow.” The language is most likely meant to invoke Early Modern English, utilizing the word “queer” instead of “strange” and substituting the archaic “ye” for “you.” And though “fellow” could be construed to be gender neutral, it still implies a male identity. In the case of female and LGBTQ gamers, they might be neither “fellow” nor “queer” in the sense that the game alludes to. The modern sense of queerness is thus erased for the aesthetic of invoking a historical period that is construed entirely inaccurately. Dragons, goblins, and magic exist in the world of *Baldur's Gate*, but the Other in the form of racial diversity, feminist ideology, and queer identity is not permitted in the game's fantasy setting, a trend carried through many modern fantasy narratives (Stone et al., 2013).

BioWare released a sequel in 2000, *Baldur's Gate II*, and introduced the element of romance to their player-driven narratives. The game includes three female characters for a male player character to romance and one

male character for a female player character to romance. Image 1 displays the in-game portraits of these characters and their requirements for their romance to be available to the player.




Romancable companions in Baldur's Gate II					
Companion ↕	Alignment ↕	Race ↕	Class ↕	Requirements ↕	
 Aerie	Lawful Good	Elf	Cleric / Mage	Male; Human, Elf, Half-elf, Halfling, Gnome	
 Anomen Deilyn	Lawful Neutral	Human	Fighter / Cleric	Female; Human, Elf, Half-elf, Halfling	
 Jaheira	True Neutral	Half-elf	Fighter / Druid	Male; Human, Elf, Half-elf, Halfling	
 Viconia DeVir	Neutral Evil	Drow	Cleric	Male; Human, Half-elf, Half-orc, Halfling	

Image 1. Romance options for Baldur's Gate II.

The game's code is set to recognize specific categories in the player. If the requirements are not satisfied in the player character, then the romance narrative will remain locked in the dialogue trees, inaccessible to the player except through modifying the game code. This trend of locking and altering romantic arcs to specific settings based on the player character's presentation continues in almost every other BioWare game.

"I'm am sorry if this upsets you."

BioWare's next release, *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic (KOTOR)*, came out in 2003—a similarly styled role-playing game where the player builds their character and recruits a team of supporting characters, playing through a story-driven experience culminating in (if the player chooses) a classic tale of the hero rising up to vanquish evil and fall in love. With an emphasis on personalization and choice, featuring hundreds of different dialogue trees and alternative story routes, the game spoke to more than just the stereotypical white male player. In this universe, anyone could be invited into the *Star Wars* mythos as the main character.

The game received serious acclaim for its efforts, winning several awards and being placed on several lists for top video games of all time (Wikipedia, 2018). While BioWare's previous games were successful,

KOTOR attracted attention like none before. Furthermore, the romantic subplots in *KOTOR* brought major changes to BioWare games in two significant ways: it brought romantic narratives into video games in a far more visible way than any of its predecessors; and it allowed the player character to be queer in the modern sense of the word. In its major titles moving forward, BioWare maintained the core elements of what made *KOTOR* such a success: a personalized main character, story, and romance.

There are three supporting characters that the player character can have a romantic relationship with: 1) Carth Onasi, a human male and a possible romance for female player characters; 2) Bastila Shan, a human female and a possible romance for male player characters; and, 3) Juhani, a female alien in the *Star Wars* universe and the first "lesbian" romance BioWare brought to its games (Wikia, n.d.). Juhani is a minor character compared to Carth and Bastila. She is encountered somewhat later in the story and can be immediately killed rather than recruited to the team, meaning her role to the game's narrative is optional, if not superficial. If Juhani is recruited, she will travel with the player character along their journey. If a female player character chooses the appropriate dialogue along the way, Juhani confesses her feelings for the player character in the penultimate moment of the game, declaring, "I care for you...I am sorry if this upsets you. I am so sorry if I am wrong, but I cannot deny what it is that I feel."

In this moment, BioWare sets the tone for queer love in its subsequent video games, and quite possibly for other major developers in the gaming industry. In her confession, Juhani cannot even name her emotions. Those specific words are reserved for the characters Carth and Bastila, who confess their feelings using the word "love." Juhani, however, is queer, and was intended to be queer from the game's release. As such, she is written to carry the guilt of her feelings and apologize to the player character for feeling them. Juhani's queerness is portrayed as a burden, something that will likely be unwanted by the player character, and so her dialogue is written with that assumption in mind.

Here, the dominating heteronormative structure in video games claims queerness for itself as something secretive, something shameful, and something not to be celebrated. If the player character returns these feelings (by stating, "I feel the same way"), then Juhani goes on to say, "Now that I have put myself in this position, I know not what to say," to which the player character can respond, "You do not have to say anything", "Er...Thank you'?", or "We have gone past words." No matter what the player picks, Juhani responds, "Yes. I thank you," and the player must return to the main plot of the game. The exchange enforces a vagueness in the emotional connection the characters are allowed to share. They cannot talk about their feelings. Instead, the queer

character is reduced to thanking the player for accepting the burden of her love.

“If this makes you uncomfortable...”

The 2005 BioWare title *Jade Empire* slightly changes their formula for romance, but the message of queerness as a burden remains. Set in a fantasy universe inspired by imperial China, *Jade Empire* borrows its setting and game mechanics liberally from different non-Western histories. Just like its previous titles, *Jade Empire* asks the player to design their character and embark on a story-driven journey, utilizing the same dialogue tree system to offer branching choices in the game’s narrative. The player character assembles another team of supporting characters, with three of these characters containing romantic subplots. Dawn Star, a female character, is a possible romance for male player characters; Silk Fox, a female character, is a possible romance for both male and female player characters; and Sky, a male character, is a possible romance for both male and female player characters.

If a male player character chooses a certain order of dialogue options, he can have both Dawn Star and Silk Fox agree to enter a polyamorous relationship with him by the end of the game. This option is only available to the male player character. The female player character does not have the option to pursue a polyamorous relationship, or even a romantic story arc with Dawn Star. For the male player character, Dawn Star’s sexuality is made malleable to serve a male power fantasy, but is then restricted to heterosexuality when interacting with the female player character. Dawn Star is an integral character to the storyline, being the first supporting character that the player character meets and forming the crux of several plot-essential points of the game. While Silk Fox and Sky have subplots and characteristics that enhance the story, they do not play the same integral role that Dawn Star does throughout the game.

Despite favoring heterosexual men, *Jade Empire* is the first game from BioWare that allows a male player character to pursue a same-sex romance. It carries with it, however, the same tone of burden that Juhani’s romantic story arc did in *KOTOR*. A male player character can enter a romance with Sky only if he continually dismisses and shuts down advances from both Silk Fox and Dawn Star. If the player character chooses any dialogue options when interacting with the female characters that are flirtatious, or perhaps even friendly, then the romantic story arc for Sky is closed off to the player. The game is designed to lock away this arc unless the player makes deliberate choices to prompt it. The game’s design, then, actively enforces a default heterosexuality in the player character.

If the player has followed the correct sequence of dialogue choices throughout the game, Sky will eventually interrupt the player character to confront him about his apparent lack of interest in women. Even at

this point in the game, however, the dialogue is written so that Sky overtly represses his own desire to talk about his feelings, "There is one thing that's been puzzling me. Is... No, it's nothing. We have things we should do instead of wasting time talking."



Image 2. The player character (face shown) speaks with Sky (back turned to camera).

As Image 2 shows, the game's dialogue tree provides four ways for the player to respond, including two that shut down the conversation from going any further. When the player character says, "What's on your mind?" Sky responds, "This could be a delicate subject, so if... Well, stop me if I say anything out of line." Yet again, the game frames queerness as a burden, something that the player must be appropriately cautioned for before the characters continue along this romantic arc. Sky explains to the player character that he has noticed his disinterest in both Dawn Star and Silk Fox, despite both of them being in love with the player character. He asks, "Is there some... I don't know, some reason?"¹

The player character is given five options to respond with, and only one of them continues the romantic arc with Sky: "There's a very good reason. You." Sky responds with disbelief, and the player character is presented with three more dialogue options. In the one that furthers the romantic arc, the player character says, "If this makes you uncomfortable, we can pretend this conversation never happened." The player character, in this case, embodies the burden of their queerness, driving the male player character to work through a complex series of dialogue interactions, selecting choices that specifically rebuke flirtations from the female characters so that there is no option left but to be gay. In this instance, the male player character is denied any other identity than that of a gay man. Furthermore, the player is disciplined away from interacting with two other significant characters in the game. Queer love

¹ All ellipses in Sky's dialogue are as written in the game, denoting a pause or hesitation of speech.

becomes a limitation in how the player is allowed to explore the game. The messiness surrounding Sky's romance is carried over into other iterations of gay male romances in BioWare games, demonstrating a "strained and anxious relationship" with male homosexuality (Østby, 2017, p. i).

"I'm sorry if this is awkward for you."

In 2007, BioWare moved on to create one of their biggest blockbuster game titles, *Mass Effect*. With the same lead writer from *KOTOR*, *Mass Effect* struck a familiar note in its gameplay and setting, taking place in humanity's distant future among the stars in the style of a space opera. Like *KOTOR* and *Jade Empire*, the player character is joined by a supporting cast of characters on their quest to save the galaxy. Also like *KOTOR* and *Jade Empire*, three of these characters have a romantic subplot attached to them. Kaiden Alenko is a human male and a possible romance for female player characters. Ashley Williams is a human female and a possible romance for male player characters. Liara T'Soni is an alien created for the world of *Mass Effect*, and is a romantic arc available for both male and female player characters. This character is also the first BioWare character that is essential to the game's narrative and is available to both player character types for a romantic arc. Furthermore, Liara is a recurring character across all games in the *Mass Effect* series.

Liara is an "asari," one of the many alien species written into the game. Though Liara explains to the player character that the asari are a "mono-gendered" species and as such do not have concepts of male or female in their society, she consistently uses female pronouns and is presented to the player character as a female-coded body based on the same human female model used for other women in the game, and represents what prior scholarship has described as a stereotypical depiction of female and feminine traits (Lima, 2017). She is also given a female voice actor to dictate her lines. Throughout the game, asari characters are consistently positioned as the galaxy's stand-in for sensuality. Asari most commonly appear as strippers (the game series has multiple strip clubs) or cool-headed diplomats.



Image 3. Liara T'Soni, a supporting character in Mass Effect.

When Liara confesses her feelings to the player character, female avatars have an extra dialogue option to select "You're female!" in response, which translates to the player character saying, "You want a relationship with me? Even though we're both women?" Again, Liara reminds the player character that asari are "mono-gendered" despite everything in the game's design enforcing the trope of the asari being an all-female, exotic alien race with a fluid sexuality and penchant for promiscuity. The status of the asari as a mono-gendered species granted the developers of *Mass Effect* a unique opportunity to explore non-binary identities or concepts of gender outside of a heteronormative framework. Instead, the game actively enforces in its design a specific gender binary as the default.

Despite correcting the player character's assumption, Liara then goes on to say, "We do, however, have maternal instincts. So perhaps we would fill what you consider a female role." The game immediately gives the player permission to assign the gender binary it visually enforces throughout its design. Liara is a queer character, but her queerness is not designed to make male player characters uncomfortable. While a male player character may protest her interest by saying, "You're an alien!" his alarm is framed by fear of the Other, much like Le Guin framed themes in science fiction in the 1970s (1993). Even though the male player character reacts to a fear of the unknown, the game's design ensures that there should be no discomfort for a male player character because, as she reminds both players, she can still be assigned a female role. A female player character, however, is assumed to have some level of discomfort with this queerness, so much so that game designers build in a dialogue tree specifically for the female player character to address that assumed discomfort.

Then, following the same beat of Juhani from *KOTOR*, Liara goes on to apologize for her queerness, "I'm sorry if this is awkward for you...I'm only trying to be honest. I feel as if we share some type of...connection." Her queerness is once again framed as a burden, and

must be apologized for to the player. The burden of queer love has thus become a steady trend in BioWare's video games, one that they have yet to break free of now that they have established this particular discourse.

Constructing the Queer Subordinate

The *Mass Effect* franchise now includes four full games and several spin-off books and comics. The trends highlighted so far in BioWare's games have been perpetuated throughout this franchise and BioWare's accompanying fantasy series *Dragon Age*. With three full games and just as much spin-off media, the *Dragon Age* series follows the same beats that *Mass Effect* does with the presentation of romantic story arcs to the player, with many of its queer romances rendered with a "sameness and likeness" (Greer, 2013, p.17) that erases queer experiences.

Even the prominent character Leliana, who appears across every game and carries significant roles in the series, is never given the opportunity to speak to her queerness and how it is framed in the universe's lore. Despite her availability as a romance option for both male and female players and her backstory including reference to a sexual relationship with a woman, Leliana's sexuality is left on the table. This contrasts to the way Liara's "otherness" is specifically highlighted in *Mass Effect*. As Greer (2013) indicates, neither of these strategies are the most effective way to engage with queerness in games.

Most notable across these seven video games is the trend of who does and does not get to be a romantic story arc for queer players. Excluding the characters Liara and Leliana, queer characters (such as Zevran, Fenris, Anders, Merrill, or Isabela from the *Dragon Age* series, or Kelly Chambers from *Mass Effect 2*) play less essential roles than their heterosexual counterparts (such as Morrigan and Alistair from *Dragon Age: Origins*, Cassandra and Solas from *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, Miranda, Jack, and Garrus from *Mass Effect 2 & 3*, and Cora Harper from *Mass Effect: Andromeda*).

When BioWare began including more gay and lesbian exclusive stories, these characters were relegated to less significant parts of the game. Whereas romantic arcs were previously written only for characters that accompanied the player character into combat, newer iterations of *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* wrote in side characters that the player would interact with in specific spaces, but would not be able to bring them with on all parts of their journey.

Meanwhile, male and female characters more fully integrated into the story were consistently marked as heterosexual. BioWare delivered elaborately crafted romantic sex scenes for the male player characters and their primary female romances, while other characters received a fade-to-black scene for the culmination of their romance. Where supposedly queer characters are animated in a sex scene, developers

swapped out the male player character model for the female equivalent and changed nothing else (Hernandez, 2017). The most comically poor animation thus far appears in *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, where swapping models leaves the female player character lying on her back while the female love interest straddles her hips and rocks against anatomy that in all likelihood would not be there for the player who is choosing to present their character as female. The result is that same distortion of queerness. In this moment, the queer player is asked to embody heterosexuality to continue being part of the game. Their queerness is no longer a burden, but an afterthought.

Queer love becomes secondary to the experiences of the heterosexual male gamer, with the sexuality of women more malleable solely for the purpose of titillating the straight male player, and the queerness of men all but erased from the games. However, there are still opportunities in games for queer players to push back against those hegemonic forces

Conclusion

In the last ten years, the video game industry has seen a surge of queer representation within the characters and narratives offered to players (Cole et al, 2017). Much of that surge is in no small part thanks to the efforts of independent publishing platforms where single authors or programmers are able to work with a small team to put together a simple video game on their own and publish it for others to play. The independent gaming scene has allowed queer game developers to author their own games, but none of these works attain the success, recognition, or reach that BioWare's video games do, which are currently both critical and commercial successes in addition to being lauded for their work in making games more diverse. Despite this recognition, BioWare is continually tone-deaf to how queerness is structured in games and the social issues surrounding diversity in games. While scholars may provide subversive and critical readings of BioWare's games as queer experiences (Harper, 2015; Thai, 2018), those readings do not account for BioWare's appropriation and subordination of queer experiences.

The privileged narrative of heteronormativity is, by design, in the very code of BioWare's video games. Set in both fantasy-like and futuristic lands, these games have no obligation to enforce a default masculine, hyper-violent narrative. If the imaginative threatens the masculine norm, then what BioWare's games (and the gaming industry at large) have done is systematically leached out imagination for the player. BioWare's games build dialogues and fictional worlds that force the player to uphold heteronormativity through their actions in the game.

Protests and the independent game developing scene are two of many paths available for queer gamers to improve representations of queer identity in games. Gaming communities are so diverse and numerous, with fans not only developing their own content independently but also

modding existing content (Layne & Blackmon, 2013), constructing playthroughs, creating guides, and digitally archiving game-related content (Swalwell et al., 2017) in addition to recrafting queer narratives in fan fiction (Dym et al., 2018). These activities and more are an opportunity to correct the false assumption that queerness is a burden on gamers. As queer gamers continue to go forth and expand queer experience in games, whether through designing their own games or writing fan fiction, BioWare and the gaming industry at large must reckon with the unimaginative worlds they have built to conserve heteronormativity. To do otherwise would be to insulate themselves from the vibrancy of ingenuity and imagination that is rising up.

The gaming industry is relatively new and young, and will eventually shed the skin of these old hegemonic structures as gamers continue to push back. Until that moment comes, and even after it arrives, queer gamers must recognize that their identity has been taken without their permission and broken down to serve heteronormativity. To that end, queer gamers must reclaim their narratives, build new interpretations of characters and worlds, break down misinterpretations, and expand the discourse of queerness in games beyond the industry's restrictive standards.

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Image 2: A screenshot of a scene during the romantic narrative arc between Sky and a male player character in *Jade Empire*. Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jOs_AxGfWsU

Image 3: Liara T'Soni, a supporting character from the *Mass Effect* series, as she appears in *Mass Effect 2*. Retrieved from: http://masseffect.wikia.com/wiki/Liara_T%27Soni

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