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AN END, ONCE AND FOR ALL: *MASS EFFECT 3*, VIDEO GAME CONTROVERSIES,
AND THE FIGHT FOR PLAYER AGENCY

by

CAREN PAGEL

Under the Direction of Dr. Gregory Smith, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

Since the success of the player-led *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy, player-led video game controversies have become mainstream sites of industrial and ideological contention between developers, players, and the culture itself. This dissertation focuses on the history of the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy, the game's specific textual qualities that encouraged player protest, and the negotiations between players and developers in online spaces that persuaded developers to alter the game's ending based on player demands. Using the *Mass Effect 3* as its primary object, this dissertation argues this controversy—as well as subsequent player-led video game controversies—was not simply the result of dissatisfaction with a single plot point or representation in the text or video game community, but the complex negotiation of creative

differences between players and developers over the production and control of video game texts and culture. Video games and their controversies are rooted in the medium's intrinsic qualities of interactivity, choice, labor and the need for shared production between developers and players to progress and produce a video game text, which encourages the development of a sense of agency and ownership over the text for both groups. This dissertation argues that video games are not just texts that developers create and that players play, but rather texts produced through the co-creative production practice that Axel Bruns has defined as “produsage”—texts where producers act in dual roles as users while users to also act as producers—that allow players a creative stake in the outcome of a video game text, encourages a sense of agency and ownership, and collapses traditional boundaries between developers and players. Video game controversies naturally arise when players perceive a loss of agency and control over the video game text and attempt to reclaim control over ownership of the text through controversy.

INDEX WORDS: Video games, Controversies, Produsage, Mass Effect 3, Agency, BioWare, Video game industry, Social media, Interactivity, Collaboration

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CAREN PAGEL

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the College of the Arts

Georgia State University

2023

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2023

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May 2023

DEDICATION

I would first and foremost like to dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Douglas and Joanne. This dissertation would not have been possible without their support and encouragement through the degree and the writing process. I would also like to dedicate this to my aunt and uncle, Linda and Tony, and my writing partners Batou, Kit, and Hunter. Additionally, I would like to dedicate this to everyone at BioWare who created the world of *Mass Effect* and all of the *Mass Effect* players who changed the game.

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1 INTRODUCTION: LEAVING EARTH

After hundreds of hours of gameplay and choices, *Mass Effect 3* players expected a conclusion more satisfying than a simple, seemingly meaningless choice between control, synthesize, or destroy and almost no one expected that *Mass Effect 3* would go down as having one of the worst video game endings in history. Additionally, almost no one could have predicted the massive player-led controversy that erupted in response to player dissatisfaction or that the controversy would persuade the developers to change the ending of the game.¹ As the first major video game controversy driven by the video game community, the now historic *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy represents a significant opportunity to understand how and why video game controversies develop, what distinctive factors in video game texts and cultures contributed to these conflicts, and why they continue and flourish years later. Over the past ten years, video game culture and its controversies have become mainstream sites of industrial and ideological contention and negotiation between players and developers. While video games have been the subject of controversy since the 1970s, most of these controversies prior to 2012 originated from outside the community and focused on moral objections to sexual or political content in games. This includes conservative objections to the possibility of lesbian content in first *Mass Effect* game (2007),² missions that include terrorist acts in *Modern Warfare 2* (2009),³ and depictions of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea *Homefront* (2011).⁴ However,

¹ Kyle Orland, "'Extended Cut' provides much-needed epilogue for *Mass Effect 3*," *Ars Technica*, June 26, 2012, <http://arstechnica.com/gaming/2012/06/extended-cut-provides-much-needed-epilogue-for-mass-effect-3/>.

² Seth Schiessel, "Author Faults a Game, and Gamers Flame Back," *The New York Times*, January 6 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/26/arts/television/26mass.html>.

³ Gas Mastrapa, "'Modern Warfare 2' Terrorism Hits Close to Home," *CNN*, November 11, 2009, <http://www.cnn.com/2009/TECH/11/11/wired.modern.warfare.xbox.360/>.

⁴ John Gaudiosi, "North Korea Invades America in Controversial 'Homefront' Game," *The Hollywood Reporter*, March 16, 2011, <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/north-korea-invades-america-controversial-168534>.

major controversies originating in the gaming community and focused on power negotiations within the community represent a more recent phenomenon. The catalyst for the shift from outsider to insider controversy emerged in 2012 with the highly contentious *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy and the resulting struggle between players and developers over who should control the ending and ultimately the text of *Mass Effect 3* itself.

The *Mass Effect* series remains one of the most successful and popular series of the modern video game era. Developed by Canadian studio BioWare and published by American multinational Electronic Arts Inc., the main trilogy—*Mass Effect*, *Mass Effect 2*, and *Mass Effect 3*—has sold more than 14 million copies⁵ and garnered hundreds of gaming award nominations. As with any shooter, the combat experience drives much of the gameplay in the *Mass Effect* series. However, the narrative complexity, personalization, and opportunity for control over the narrative and interpersonal relationships played critical roles in making the series seductively engaging to players. This combination of player influence over gameplay, personalization and narrative helped create an unusually strong experience of player agency, investment, and ownership in the series. The capacity for agency and investment drew players into the game from the first choice of creating the player-character's identity to the final choice to defeat the Reapers and epitomizes what made the series so incredibly successful. However, this agency and investment also appears to be the root cause of why players ultimately rejected *Mass Effect 3*'s ending and felt compelled to demand a new one more to their liking.

As the final entry in a beloved series, some degree of dissatisfaction is to be expected, but the pushback to *Mass Effect 3* exploded and united players and critics against its perceived failings. Much of the outrage was aimed at a very limited portion of the game that occurred

⁵ Leo Sun, "What EA Must Do to Make 'Mass Effect 4' a Blockbuster," *The Motley Fool*, July 4, 2014, <https://www.fool.com/investing/general/2014/07/05/what-ea-must-do-to-make-mass-effect-4-a-blockbuste.aspx>.

during the ending choices and cutscenes. Throughout the series, the games routinely offered players choices in the dialogue system that seemed to alter the player-character's personality, relationships, and the narrative and placed control of the development of the text in the player's hands. The final sequence—which gave the player a choice between three similar, color-coded endings—seemed to offer players no choice at all. Players felt this lack of choice disrespected player influence over the text and disregarded the narrative seemingly created by player choice.⁶ While some players focused their displeasure on the seeming pointlessness of the ending choice, many other players and critics identified the lack of choice but the game's treatment of player agency as the primary failure of the game's ending.⁷ In essence, a series that had been built as a space for player agency and influence had abruptly revoked said player agency and the resulting control over the game's text in its final act. In response, players rebelled against their loss of power and against the developers of the game responsible for the ending by engaging in an online pushback campaign through official and unofficial forums, Facebook and other social media, and through a petition to change the ending through the creation of new downloadable content, which the developers granted, for better or for worse.⁸

This dissertation argues that the *Mass Effect 3* controversy—and to some degree every subsequent player-led controversy—arose not simply because of the dissatisfaction with a single plot point or representation in the text, but because of a complex negotiation of creative differences between players and developers over the production and control of the text and

⁶ Sparky Clarkson, “*Mass Effect 3*'s Ending Disrespects Its Most Invested Players,” *Kotaku*, April 12, 2013, <https://kotaku.com/5898743/mass-effect-3s-ending-disrespects-its-most-invested-players>.

⁷ Becky Chambers, “Everything You Need to Know About the *Mass Effect 3* Ending Controversy, As Spoiler-Free As Possible,” *The Mary Sue*, March 20, 2012, <https://www.themarysue.com/everything-you-need-to-know-about-the-mass-effect-3-ending-controversy-as-spoiler-free-as-possible/>.

⁸ Kate Cox, “Here are the New *Mass Effect 3* Endings You Requested,” *Kotaku*, June 26, 2012, <https://kotaku.com/5921361/here-are-the-new-mass-effect-3-endings-you-requested/>.

culture. At their core, video game controversies initiated by the gaming community are fundamentally a struggle for agency between players and industry. The source of this agency and what makes video game controversies unique is that video game texts require both developers and players to produce the text through individual interaction and choice. This dissertation argues that this creative process should be seen as acts of collaborative produsage where both developers and players must produce parts of the text in order to consume them. Furthermore, video game production through produsage and the shared collaboration of developers and players fosters agency, a sense of entitlement and ownership over the text, and collapses the boundary demarcating production and participatory culture. Although most role-playing games offer personalization and a sense of agency, the *Mass Effect* trilogy built a strong experience of agency—primed for explosion when seemingly revoked—through a complex combination of narrative, personal and moral, and gameplay customization that fostered complex player production. However, this alone would not be enough to spark and propel the controversy. The complex agency fostered player engagement and encouraged players to spread production from the *Mass Effect* texts to other convergent spaces and coordinate online, activist pushback to force changes in the text.

1.1 Produsage, Agency, and Revolt

If the struggle for player agency lies at the core of the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy and other recent controversies, then this project must establish how agency is understood in the context of video games and its place within this project. Interactivity represents the first step to creating the opportunity for agency in video games and its design creates spaces for player participation, influence, and control. The concept of interactivity itself is still often a contested

matter with differing definitions based on different perspectives,⁹ and so Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman’s approach to interactivity as a multifaceted concept is useful for understanding because it shows how different types of interactivity work together to create player experience. Salen and Zimmerman choose several definitions of interactivity that highlight varying aspects as part of a system of engagement that includes cognitive participation between players and systems, structural interactions with the interface and material components of the system, explicit participation, and the experience of participation with the culture of the object such as in fan culture.¹⁰ This approach is useful to understanding interactivity, but it is also useful as a foundational model for understanding how the systems within video games—cognitive, material, explicit and cultural—interact with players to produce the experience of agency. Furthermore, this definition of interactivity leads us to Salen and Zimmerman’s concept of ‘meaningful play’ whereby a player acts within the system of a game, the system responds, and meaning is produced in the relationship between the two.¹¹ The concept of meaningful play does not explicitly speak to player agency in their explanation, but it does serve as the bridge between interactivity and agency and provides insight into why a player may revolt because of dissatisfaction.

While interactivity leads to a meaningful relationship between the player and the text, agency allows for players to assign meaning to their actions and their results. Much like interactivity, agency in video games is a concept without a universal definition and without a

⁹ Lori Landay, “Interactivity,” in *The Routledge Companion to Video Games Studies*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York: Routledge, 2014), 173.

¹⁰ Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 59-60.

¹¹ Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 156-157.

large body of scholarship on the subject. The most authoritative discussion of agency in relation to video games remains Janet Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. According to Murray, agency is "the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices."¹² While some definitions may more simply define agency as the ability to carry out actions and produce an effect, Murray's definition is more suited to this discussion because of its focus on agency as a form of power over the text that is driven by a desire for satisfaction. Players and critics alike identified agency and its loss as a significant factor in the *Mass Effect 3* controversy and this loss produced a deep dissatisfaction that compelled players to take meaningful action in the form of protest in order to take back control over the text.

Murray and to some degree Salen and Zimmerman's discussions regarding interactivity and agency serve as a foundation to understanding these processes, but this dissertation argues that the separation of actions into director and interactor should be reframed in terms of production and creative labor performed by both developers and players to produce the text, and that agency comes from producing the text rather than simply making choices. Without a developer *and* a player manipulating the text, a video game would only exist as potential narrative and gameplay, and therefore video games inherently require production from both positions. While it may seem that collaboration would be the way to describe this arrangement, collaboration implies authors willfully working together and sharing authorship,¹³ while video game developers and players create the text as separate, isolated acts of production—a separation

¹² Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 126.

¹³ Krystina Madej, *Interactivity, Collaboration, and Authoring in Social Media*, (New York: Springer, 2016), 11.

that potentially encourages a strong sense of agency because of a lack of feedback and oversight from other producers.

These separated acts of user-led, non-hierarchical production in video game texts resembles the produsage production inherent in many other interactive new media texts such as Wikipedia and blogs as described by Axel Bruns in *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond*. According to Bruns, the producer-user, or produser, actively produces texts while consuming them¹⁴ and becomes critically involved in creating media from the work of others by altering the text as part of a collective production process.¹⁵ In this mode of production, the production process itself becomes inherently networked and decentralized with many users—some of whom may be traditional producers but many who are not—connected in a process that both requires and allows for open participation and problem solving, fluid and heterarchical labor organization, unfinished texts that are continuously being revised, and a common text that offers individual user rewards. Although they are not often discussed in this context, video games and video game play share many of these characteristics including the necessity for players to alter the developer's text in a decentralized process of engagement and revision.

While produsage has often been a positive arrangement for users in the examples that Bruns highlights such as blogs, Wikipedia, and open-source software, Joshua Green and Henry Jenkins argued that in many of these arrangements a new moral economy has developed and created new tensions between traditional producers and users where rights, labor and ownership are no longer clear. This dissertation argues that these tensions likely contributed to the recent video game controversies. The video game industry, however, is not new to blurring the lines

¹⁴ Axel Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Produsage*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 1.

¹⁵ Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life*, 15.

between producers and players and the potential tensions associated with these arrangements and have often relied on the immaterial labor of both developers and players to create and maintain the text. Players have long been willing to volunteer free labor to modify and distribute single players games and MMOs that the industry as a source of labor and ideas¹⁶ with the industry often encouraging mod development and machinima only to buyout or assimilate player labor and texts only to cause potential conflict or tension.¹⁷ Although it is not necessarily recognized as such, the player's intervention and building of the text through play is also a form of immaterial labor and industry efforts to limit or control player labor in the form of gameplay or experience have led to many of the recent controversies.

Prodsusage and its resulting sense of player agency encourages player creation, revolt, and controversy. Therefore, the question must be asked regarding just how the *Mass Effect* trilogy was able to construct such a persuasive experience of agency and how this agency led to the unprecedented controversy? The answer lies in the series' commitment to a multifaceted toolkit for players to produce the text in a complex process that involves participatory, procedural, spatial, encyclopedic structures with personal, moral and often romantic elements attached to choices. Through active intervention in the text, players construct individual versions of the narrative and the player-character's morality through dialogue choices, gameplay as part of combat, and character development through personalization, moral and romantic decisions. Unsurprisingly, these are also the elements that players and critics identified when voicing their displeasure with the *Mass Effect 3* ending and its sudden lack of choice, lack of closure, and plot

¹⁶ Mark Dyer-Withford and Grieg de Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 24.

¹⁷ Dyer-Withford, *Games of Empire*, 27.

holes¹⁸ that was compounded by many players' sense of entitlement cultivated from labor and investment.¹⁹ The complex structure of *Mass Effect* allowed for complex produsage that required a significant investment of immaterial labor that created a strong sense of investment and ownership, but also resentment when player agency was revoked and labor discarded, which directly led to the controversy.

The struggle between the player and the text—and also critically between the player and the traditional developer—serves to influence the organization and relationships in video game communities and conflict between players and producers. As T.L. Taylor described, the relationship between these groups is often imagined as a shared creation community and struggles typically arise because of this collective feeling of ownership over the text. To this end, video game communities constantly engage in debates over ownership because of the mix of collective and individual production, the lack of clear boundaries between producers, and developer's effort to produce in collaboration with players in the form of such practices as beta testing and feedback.²⁰ While video game communities share many features and impulses with older media fandoms such as the television fandoms studied by Henry Jenkins, video game communities are likely better understood as examples of what Paul Booth has described as “digital fandoms.” According to Booth, digital fandoms and their works should be understood as the productions of a collective community rather than fans as individuals in the community.²¹ In addition, these online fan communities tend to operate on a “philosophy of playfulness” where

¹⁸ Chambers, “Everything you Need to Know.”

¹⁹ Arthur Gies, “Reviewer’s Talk: Mass Effect 3, the Ending, the Narrative, the Controversy,” *Polygon*, March 26, 2012, <https://www.polygon.com/2012/10/5/3461080/reviewers-talk-mass-effect-3-the-ending-the-narrative-the-controversy>.

²⁰ T.L.Taylor, *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 126.

²¹ Paul Booth, *Digital Fandom 2.0: New Media Studies*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2017), 25.

collaborators playfully produce and reproduce the text²² and inherently rely on community and socialization to maintain.²³

Although the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy began with tensions between the text, developers and players, the rise and spread of the controversy required another factor outside of the text that allowed players to extend their acts of produsage to other media. The grassroots *Mass Effect 3* campaign utilized what Henry Jenkins has called convergence culture and spreadability as tools for organizing efforts and interacting with developers. According to Jenkins, convergence culture depends on the relationship between the flow of content across media platforms, consumer's active participation in and circulation of content, and the collective production and consumption of meaning.²⁴ Jenkins argued that in convergence culture consumers are "encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content"²⁵—which participants in the *Mass Effect 3* controversy were quickly able to do because they had been engaged in this process all along in official BioWare message boards, YouTube and social media sharing information and participatory fan works. In convergence culture and much like produsage, the boundary between producer and consumer often remains unclear with traditional producers and consumers better understood as interactors rather than separate groups.²⁶ Much of this time the interaction between developers and players occurred through social media.

²² Booth, *Digital Fandom*, 29.

²³ Booth, *Digital Fandom*, 85.

²⁴ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 2-4.

²⁵ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 3.

²⁶ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 3.

Social media were critical for the development of the *Mass Effect 3* controversy and played a major role in allowing it to flourish and spread through convergence, but also allowed for the players to take on developers and challenge their power. Much like in the major social media movements in the year prior to the *Mass Effect 3* controversy—in particular, the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street—social media allowed for organization and interaction that may not have been possible even a few years earlier. In general, social media allows people to communicate directly with what would be prohibitively large groups in real life blurring the line between both personal and interpersonal and online and offline.²⁷ According to Clay Shirky, this has resulted in dramatic changes in how groups assemble and cooperate by increasing their ability to share information and take collective action outside of traditional organizations and frameworks.²⁸ Much of the reason the *Mass Effect 3* controversy was the catalyst for subsequent controversies likely lies in a combination of established social media like walkthroughs and message boards together with formal and informal communication with players and developers on Facebook, Twitter, and the official BioWare forums—all of which allowed players to organize and extend creative production beyond the confines of the text.

1.2 A Brief Tour of the Galaxy

Numerous characters, alien races, and political alliances populate the *Mass Effect* universe and bring the world to vivid life. This dissertation references specific characters, species and events from the series as part of the discussion, but taking the time to introduce these characters and events and explaining the pertinent background would prove disruptive to the discussion in each chapter. This section serves as a brief guide to the most critical characters and

²⁷ Nancy K. Baym, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*, (Malden: Polity Press, 2010), 4.

²⁸ Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*, (New York: Penguin, 2008), 21.

races of the *Mass Effect* series as well as a brief overview of the narrative of the three games. Players experience the world of *Mass Effect* as Commander Shepard who is a human Systems Alliance navy marine thrust into a race against time to stop multiple attempts to destroy all organic life in the Milky Way galaxy. In *Mass Effect* (2007), Shepard must stop a renegade Turian Spectre, Saren, from destroying the galaxy and its central government at the behest of the series' big bad, the Reapers. In *Mass Effect 2* (2010), a humanity-first organization, Cerberus, coerces Shepard into hunting down a mysterious race called the Collectors because they are abducting millions of humans from planetary colonies. Shepard eventually embarks on a suicide mission to the Collector homebase, and prevents their masters, the Reapers, from invading the galaxy. In *Mass Effect 3* (2012), the Reapers have finally invaded Earth and other inhabited planets in their final attempt to destroy all life in the galaxy. With the war raging, Shepard must find a way to stop the Reapers by uniting the galaxy's races and ultimately by making a final choice with three definitive options at the game's end. Throughout the trilogy, Commander Shepard is joined aboard the Alliance frigate Normandy in each game by squad members from varying races, medic Dr. Karin Chakwas, and pilot Flight Lt. Jeff "Joker" Moreau.

One of the features of the *Mass Effect* series that makes it so engrossing for players from a narrative standpoint lies in its rich and detailed history, culture and physical traits that BioWare developers created in the game. Unfortunately, it would be impossible to even begin to explore this here in a brief summary, but there are a few basic facts that should be kept in mind. The center of galactic civilization, culture and politics resides on the Citadel—a massive space station presumably left behind by an ancient, extinct species known as the Protheans—and is overseen by the Citadel Council, which is comprised of representatives from the long-lived female cuttlefish-inspired Asari, the featherless birdlike Turians, and the short-lived amphibian

Salarians. The council also oversees the special forces group known as the Spectres. They are considered the best of the best soldiers among each species and answer only to the council. Significantly, Shepard becomes the first human Spectre in *Mass Effect*, which paves the way for the humans to become part of the council itself. The history of the races of *Mass Effect* is fascinating and extensive. However, for the purposes of this discussion, there are only a few pieces of background necessary going forward and should be kept in mind while reading. The Reapers are an ancient race of synthetic beings that wipe out all developed life in the Milky Way galaxy every 50,000 years, enslave and repurpose their victims through mind control known as “indoctrination,” and resemble immense crustacean-like ships that house an incredibly advanced artificial intelligence. Approximately a thousand years before the events of the *Mass Effect* trilogy, the hulking, belligerent tortoise-like Krogan rebelled against the other races in the galaxy and waged war until the Salarians and Turians deployed a sterility plague known as the genophage against the Krogan. The genophage subsequently decimated the Krogan population, and encouraged further resentment of the other races by the Krogan. Finally, three hundred years prior to the events of the *Mass Effect* trilogy, the Quarians—a race only seen wearing environmental suits because of their poor immune systems—created a slave race of hominoid machines who rebelled against their masters in self defense, drove the Quarians off of their home planet, and effectively forced them to wander the galaxy as refugees in a flotilla of ships. These are the primary issues facing Commander Shepard during the trilogy that the player must ultimately resolve.

1.3 Chapter Overview: Controversy, Text, and Agency

The *Mass Effect 3* controversy represents a sprawling and complicated cultural watershed in video games where production and agency spread from the text to networked cultures and

controversy became another form of production. While the *Mass Effect 3* controversy is compelling because of the complex negotiations between producers and players over production and agency in the game and in the culture, it is also significant because it is the first major successful player-led video game controversy and precursor to other more recent, contentious video game controversies. The proposed chapters and analysis aim to explore the *Mass Effect 3* controversy, the textual factors that encouraged the development of the controversy, how produsage and agency factored into this controversy, and the player motivations behind player actions during the controversy. At the same time, these chapters also provide a model for understanding subsequent controversies—such as Gamergate and the multiple controversies surrounding microtransactions—as conflicts between the agency and control of producers and players by tracing the flow of agency from text to controversy. In order to understand the *Mass Effect 3* controversy and its commonalities with other player-led controversies, this project proposes four main chapters that examine the reasons behind the development and events of the *Mass Effect 3* controversy, the structures of interactivity and choice inherent in video games that allow for produsage and agency, the nature of video games as collaborative produsage texts, and the development of a sense of agency and ownership over the games that drove players to rebel in the form of controversy when agency and ownership were disrupted.

Chapter One sets the stage for the remaining chapters by presenting a history of video game controversies before *Mass Effect 3*, the build up to the player-led revolt, and a history of the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy itself. Additionally, this chapter proposes a definition of player-led video game controversies and identifies their primary features as disagreements between groups that are initiated by the group with less power, extends into a large group of participants, and concludes with some form of appeasement to controversy demands. From there,

this chapter then traces the history of video game controversies from the first controversy surrounding *Death Race* in 1976, to the major moral outrage controversies of the 2000s involving such games as the *Grand Theft Auto* series, and the most significant government and institutional attempts to regulate video games. The primary focus of this chapter is the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy itself and examines the course of the controversy and its eventual conclusion and provides a history of the controversy through the game's release and initial reviews, the forming of player-led protest groups on Facebook and the official BioWare forums, and the development of the game's new ending.

Chapter Two provides a foundation for understanding video games as produsage texts that encourage a sense of agency by examining the inherent features of video games that both set them apart from other narrative media and allow player choice and influence. The main argument of this chapter is that video games and their experiences are created through a series of choices by both developers and players made possible because of video games' inherent interactivity, technological and rules-based limitations of the text, and the need for the player's contribution to advance the text. This chapter looks at the primary ways that players experience and are influenced by developer choices and initially focuses specifically on how these choices affect the player's experience of the *Mass Effect* games through developer and player choices related to genre and gameplay, video graphics and aesthetics, interface, and narrative as the core experience of gameplay. Along with establishing how players experience these games and how these experiences open the door to player agency, this chapter expands its focus to examine how the disruption of player experience and choice in other video games has led to other video game controversies, each with their own specific issues, pushbacks, and resolutions. Additionally, this chapter also explores the financial, cultural, and technological limitations such as crunch time,

game engines, and player feedback in the real world that influence developer choices in the game and ultimately affect the player experience.

Chapter Three builds on the previous chapter by arguing that the core features of video games necessitate the collaborative production of video game texts by both developers and players and that this collaboration is the foundation for video games as produsage. Drawing heavily from Axel Bruns' discussion of produsage, this chapter examines the depth of interactivity's influence on the collaborative production of video game texts and argues that this interactivity is critical for video games as texts but more importantly as produsage texts that contribute to the development of player agency. Through play and interactivity, the player as simultaneous producer and user can take many forms outside the text in the form of game mods, walkthroughs, and videos. However, this chapter argues that the production of the narrative and gameplay in the game text itself is also a form of produsage because it requires the incremental labor of many participants without a clear hierarchy working toward personal rewards. With its hundreds of choices tied to meaningful outcomes, the *Mass Effect* series represents one of the most successful examples of produsage in video games, and this chapter also argues that the failure of the game's ending choices represents one of the most prominent examples of the tension between collaborators when agency and a sense of ownership over one's contributions becomes disrupted.

Chapter Four examines the connection between produsage and the development of a player's sense of agency and ownership over the text and how the disruption of agency led to a player revolt over the ending of the *Mass Effect 3* ending. This chapter explores agency in both psychological and video game contexts and argues that development of player agency is inherently tied to the primary features of the text and the player's ability to alter the text through

collaborative produsage. Furthermore, controversies such as the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy form when disrupted individual agency transfers to the larger community and becomes collective agency with a common purpose. This chapter describes the elements of the *Mass Effect* games such as gameplay, narrative, morality, and player choice that heavily influenced the development of player agency and psychological ownership and how the game's ending motivated players to collaborate online to "Retake *Mass Effect 3*" from developers through social media and in particular through interactions on the official BioWare social forums. Previous fan campaigns in other media and Henry Jenkins' participatory fan culture provide some perspective and historical insight into this type of phenomenon in this discussion and help to provide context for player actions. Finally, this chapter presents the most critical part of the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy—the players' action to successfully change the game—and describes how players were able to organize and collaborate with each other and developers online in order not just to force a new ending but to participate in its creation.

2 CHAPTER ONE: A VERY DANGEROUS PLACE

Henry Jenkins was in over his head. The famed scholar had agreed to appear on the *Donahue* talk show to discuss the effects of video games on culture because of expertise on the medium and history testifying before a hostile Senate committee on video games and their effects. During this period of video game history, ignorance and moral outrage fueled video game controversies and no game needed a sympathetic defender more than the perpetually derided *Grand Theft Auto* series. Jenkins believed he could act as a rational voice on video game violence and the lack of concrete evidence linking virtual violence to violence in the real world.²⁹

²⁹ Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 199-200.

Controversies, of course, don't need facts. By the end of the segment, the zealous, emotionally-manipulative outrage and false accusations from the Donahue-instigated mob overwhelmed Jenkins and his rational argument. The audience insisted that *Grand Theft Auto* teaches children how to kill. It didn't matter to them that the game is made for adults and boasts graphics so full of ugly polygons and abstraction a cubist would be proud.³⁰ According to the desires of the audience, *Grand Theft Auto* needed to be controlled. This brief controversy illustrated the truth that video game controversy participants and onlookers frame these debates in terms of opposing sides that Jenkins retrospectively argued "allows no space to defend popular culture from any position other than self-interest."³¹ In gaming's past and present, video game controversies from *Grand Theft Auto* to Gamergate to the Electronic Arts loot box scandals, video game controversies ultimately erupt because of a group's desire for control over video game texts and culture.

As video games expanded their share of popular culture, video game controversies expanded alongside the growth of the industry, and the motivations for these controversies have also evolved with the culture. As Jenkins suggested, video game controversies are defined by the fight for self-interest between two warring groups vying for control over video games and their production. However, these controversies are no longer limited to the moral outrage of those in power against a developing medium. For the first thirty years of video games, video game controversies nearly always originated outside the gaming community and were initiated by moral crusaders who had seemingly never played the game and who tended to be obsessed with violence or suggestive sexual content. The *Death Race* controversy of 1976 marked the starting

³⁰ Jenkins, 200-203.

³¹ Jenkins, 205.

line of outrage campaigns when the moral crusaders singled out the rudimentary, coin-operated driving and driving over simulator for its extreme violence and potential corrupting influence on youth. As one contemporary psychologist argued, video game players are not just passive observers but active participants in the violence.³² For similar but moderately more graphically sophisticated reasons, the *Grand Theft Auto* series has drawn moral fire for too many reasons to list, but includes everything from lawsuits claiming the game caused several teenagers to go on murderous shooting rampages,³³ accusations of hate crimes against Haitians,³⁴ and the notorious “Hot Coffee” PC modification that allowed the player-character to enact something awkwardly resembling sex within the game. Even some not so obviously offensive games like the first *Mass Effect*—a science fiction shooter and for many an ostensible relationship simulator—was targeted on the Fox News channel in 2008 for including a graphic lesbian sex scene that did not exist and, at the time, was not technologically possible as described.³⁵ While there were several failed attempts to regulate violent video games including *Brown v. the Entertainment Merchants Association*,³⁶ there were few significant changes in the video game industry because of these controversies and ultimately served only to reinforce the moral outsider’s self-interest and imagined power to regulate video games with little say from the players themselves.

³² Carly A. Kocurek, *Coin-Operated Americans: Rebooting Boyhood at the Video Game Arcade* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 2015), 83-84.

³³ Kocurek, 89.

³⁴ “Outrage Over Game Urging Haitian, Cuban Killing,” *CNN*, December 3, 2003, <http://www.cnn.com/2003/TECH/fun.games/12/03/caribbean.outrage.reut/index.html>.

³⁵ Nathan Dutton, Mia Consalvo, and Todd Harper, “Digital Pitchforks and Virtual Torches: Fan Responses to the *Mass Effect* news Debacle,” *Convergence: The Journal Of Research Into New Media Technologies* 17, no. 3 (August 2011): 290.

³⁶ *Brown et al. v. Entertainment Merchants Association et al.*, 08-1448 U.S. 564 (2011).

But in 2012 everything changed with the emergence of a new mode of video game controversy driven not by moral outsiders agitating for the restriction of content, but by players motivated by player self-interest as consumers and creators. Where the outsider controversies employed old media in attempts to coerce legal or industrial remedies to sex and violence, these new player controversies organized through social media to demand the industry and its developers grant greater influence and control to the players. The result has been the proliferation of a controversy culture in video games that does not simply reject games as in older controversies but instead demands negotiation and revision by players who see themselves as part of the development process as contributing producers. On average, at least seven major controversies develop in any given year, but several controversies have emerged as more long-lasting in the culture. These include the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy where players campaigned developers to revise the game's ending to the player community's liking,³⁷ the *No Man's Sky* controversy where players believed that developers had not delivered on gameplay promises and players demanded changes to fit their vision along with a few demands for developers' lives—a process that is ongoing several years after initial release³⁸—and the cultural dumpster fire that was Gamergate where players battled each other and the industry over minority representation in games often to the point of violent exclusion.³⁹ While each of these controversies held different aims, ideologies, and attitudes towards the focus of their demands,

³⁷ Becky Chambers, "Everything You Need to Know About the *Mass Effects 3* Ending Controversy, As Spoiler-Free as Possible," *The Mary Sue*, March 20th, 2012, <https://www.themarysue.com/everything-you-need-to-know-about-the-mass-effect-3-ending-controversy-as-spoiler-free-as-possible/>.

³⁸ Keza MacDonald, "*No Man's Sky* Developer Sean Murray: 'It was as Bad as Things Can Get,'" *The Guardian*, July 20, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/games/2018/jul/20/no-mans-sky-next-hello-games-sean-murray-harassment-interview>.

³⁹ Caitlin Dewey, "The Only Guide to Gamergate You Will Ever Need to Read," *The Washington Post*, October 14, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2014/10/14/the-only-guide-to-gamergate-you-will-ever-need-to-read/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.12f921c057de.

all of these controversies were highly contentious with the primary goal of changing video games according to their desires. From one controversy to the next, the foundation of these controversies shifted to player-led controversies where participants were not motivated by morals but by a sense of ownership over the text that players asserted control by demanding influence over its production both during and after a game's initial release.

The demarcation line between outsider attacks driven by morality and player-led attacks driven by control appears to run through three significant video game controversies originating within several months of each other in 2012. The *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy emerged as the first controversy in March followed closely by the backlash to the founding of Anita Sarkeesian's Feminist Frequency project in June and the ethics-in-game-journalism controversy known as Doritosgate bringing up the rear in October. Both of these controversies developed in 2012 as separate complaints regarding the perceived state of video gaming would later explosively and remarkably merge into their final form in Gamergate a year-and-a-half after both had first emerged. While the Sarkeesian and Doritosgate controversies remain significant because of the culture-shifting movement they became, the *Mass Effect 3* controversy represents the most critical catalyst and turning point in video game culture, controversy tactics, and as a model for subsequent player-led controversies. However, the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy also represents a true revolution in player-led controversies because it is the first major player-led movement to successfully persuade developers to revise the text after its release. It is the first time that players unequivocally won.

The problem with *Mass Effect 3* began at the end. The *Mass Effect* series at its core sells players on the idea that they can customize everything from the player character to relationships to the narrative itself and subsequently hooks the player with the promise that every choice

matters. Or it did until the last fifteen minutes of the series and the final player choice of the game. After hundreds of choices throughout the games, the game offered players three color-coded choices of either red, green, or blue that resulted in nearly the same universally abrupt and inconclusive ending. Essentially, the ending offered players the choice of no choice at all and players felt dissatisfied with the conclusion of their beloved series because of what they perceived as a denial of their agency, control, and their realization that player actions had been essentially meaningless to the narrative. In response, players took to the virtual highways to protest and demand changes in the game and eventually persuaded developers to create a new ending coda, for better or for worse.⁴⁰ This is where the true historical significance lies in this controversy. The *Mass Effect 3* controversy did not just shift power in gaming controversies to players but also shifted how players understand their personal agency in the text and the production process and influenced how they interact with the industry itself. In short, the *Mass Effect 3* controversy changed how players contribute to video games and influenced their perceived entitlement and conviction to do so, their expectations of their own personal intervention in a text, and what they expect the industry to do for them and their contributions.

But why do video games invite this sort of player controversy and why was this game in particular the one to break the whole thing open? In order to understand why this and other video game controversies happen within this culture, it is necessary to take a step back from more theoretical discussions and examine the specific event of the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy. This accounting of the history of video game controversies that led to the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversies provides some degree of context for video game controversies as a whole and the *Mass Effect 3* controversy in particular. Subsequently, the primary intent of this chapter is to

⁴⁰ Christopher McManus, "With Pressure On, BioWare Enhances *Mass Effect 3* Ending," *CNET*, April 5, 2012, <https://www.cnet.com/culture/with-pressure-on-bioware-enhances-mass-effect-3-ending/>.

trace the course of events in this controversy during its most intense period in 2012 in order to construct a map of the controversy, its unfolding, and to provide an historical and foundational springboard for analysis in subsequent chapters. The discussion of the *Mass Effect 3* controversy presents background on both the *Mass Effect 3* controversy and the wave of controversies that have arisen in the years since, but will also serve this chapter's secondary aim of demonstrating a demarcated shift between older-style, outsider controversies dependent on news media and government and the newer player-led controversy campaigns reliant on social media and the internet to wage their battles. Additionally, mapping this controversy helps to illustrate the significance of player response in the initiation and resolution of controversies, the muddying of the boundaries between player-producers and official developers, and the evolution of player agency in the production process as represented by the interaction of *Mass Effect 3* players and BioWare developers that produced the revised game ending.

The roadmap for this chapter follows the chronological events of the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy and its preceding and succeeding controversies as much as possible. In order to maintain the sense of forward progression and the march toward change, the rest of the chapter begins with a survey of pre-2012 video game controversies beginning with the *Death Race* controversy in 1976. It then moves onto more contemporary controversies from the 2000s initiated by concerned citizens bemoaning the sex and violence supposedly rampant and corrupting of the youth supposedly inherent in video games. The historical reconstruction and the culture reporting then shifts to the primary object of the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy and examines pre-release discussions, reviews, and player responses on major gaming news sites such as *Kotaku*, *Forbes*, *Polygon* and others before traversing through the bulk of the player campaign to "Retake back *Mass Effect 3*" during its most active period of March 2012 to July

2012. While the online pushback to the ending was widespread and often dispersed, the most concentrated and successful arena for the controversy resided in the now-deleted official BioWare *Mass Effect* forums, which represents the most critical space where players and developers interacted with each other in order to revise the game.

2.1 What is a Controversy, Anyway?

Before proceeding any further, this chapter must ask one seemingly simple question: “What is a controversy?” You know it when you see it, right? One person who then becomes one group expresses outrage over something someone else did or said and then an opposing force backs the one being attacked. While we seem to be surrounded by controversies in popular culture today, the question of what constitutes a controversy—which may appear obvious on the surface—often seems to be drowned out by the explosiveness of the controversies themselves. In fact, defining controversy and its main components has been mostly overlooked despite cultural interest and the scholarly value in controversies in general. At its most basic, Merriam-Webster defines the phenomenon as “a discussion marked especially by the expression of opposing views.”⁴¹ The dictionary is not very helpful here and is, frankly, a bit silly but is one of the few places where a definition resides. Somewhat more helpful but also not quite a definition or explanation comes from Henry Jenkins in his analysis of fan responses to changes in the 1980s television series *Beauty and the Beast* when fans organized to protest alienating changes to the text. Here Jenkins saw the protest as a reaction to fan beliefs of a rupturing of expectations and fan recognition and that their interests did not necessarily align with the interests of producers. This created a personal, economic, and political conflict between the two groups. Ultimately,

⁴¹ “Controversy,” *Merriam-Webster*, last updated June 17, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/controversy>.

Jenkins suggested that “fan reading practices can be mobilized into active opposition to producer efforts,”⁴² which was true in the case of *Beauty and the Beast* and remains true in recent video game controversies today.

As these controversies have become more common in video game culture in recent years, they have provided far more opportunity to identify commonalities. In the case of Jenkins’ *Beauty and the Beast* and nearly every controversy, protest is initially provoked by a disagreement between two groups who are then mobilized into action to achieve a group goal and may address specific concerns. This could be something highly focused like the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy or more generalized as in the Gamergate controversy where the player’s objection was not tied to a specific game but to the culture itself. Disagreement ignites a controversy but is not the sole force at work and play. For a disagreement to rise to the level of controversy, there exist four necessary and common features of the phenomenon in video game culture. First, these disagreements are not simply disagreements between two groups but conflicts between two separate parties unequal in power and typically involving player consumers versus the industry. Second, video game controversies and other media controversies are usually initiated by the party at a power disadvantage in response to a perceived threat to self-interest. Third, for a disagreement to become a controversy, the pushback must extend beyond a small number of protesters to a much larger campaign that extends beyond the original protest community, forces attention from members outside the community, and provokes a response from the targeted party. Finally, resolution to video game controversies requires some act of appeasement to the interests of the initiating protesters from the targeted party that allows protesters to regain some real or imagined control. Additionally, lack of appeasement runs the

⁴² Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 122.

risk of encouraging the controversy to evolve into a larger ideological and uncontrollable movement.

Each of these key characteristics consistently appears in video game controversies. Since the *Mass Effect 3* shift in 2012, the initial conflict and the collective protest are often most conspicuous during the most active period of a protest, but how these controversies manifest depends on the community and the specific reason players perceive a loss of control. For the *Mass Effect 3* controversy, players assumed the ending would conform to player expectations and previous game experiences. The unexpected loss of agency and unfulfilled player expectations motivated players to initiate a campaign to take back *Mass Effect* from developers through the use of social media. In a similar incident, players invested in first-person shooter *Aliens: Colonial Marines* (2013) initiated a class action lawsuit against the game's publishers Gearbox and Sega alleging the companies had employed false advertising by releasing video of levels and graphics unseen in the game, which created expectations for a game that did not deliver what players believed they had been promised. Furthermore, the suit alleged that players had been intentionally lied to by developers.⁴³ While these examples feature players targeting powerful developers and the industry, the reality of video game controversies is that sometimes merely being perceived as having a position of power means that an individual may find themselves in the crosshairs. This was certainly the case in Gamergate and the earlier attacks against Anita Sarkeesian. In these controversies, male gamers blamed independent female developers for changes in the industry and more specifically for more inclusive changes in representation, which some gamers perceived as a threat to their dominance in the culture.

⁴³ Griffin McElroy, "Gearbox and Sega Falsely Advertised *Aliens: Colonial Marines* with Press Demos, According to Lawsuit (Update)," *Polygon*, April 30, 2013, https://www.polygon.com/2013/4/30/4287382/aliens-colonial-marines-lawsuit-class-action-sega-gearbox?utm_source=feedly.

Whether it was the extended ending in the *Mass Effect 3* controversy, Blizzard's removal of a popular female's sexualized pose in *Overwatch* (2016) after players objected to it for being out-of-character,⁴⁴ or the Warner Brothers removal of microtransactions in *Middle Earth: Shadow of War* (2017) after months of player pushback,⁴⁵ most video game controversies end the same with some form of capitulation from the industry to the interests of players.

Defining the parameters of what makes a video game controversy a controversy is critical to understanding these campaigns for several key reasons. For one, the lack of a clear definition of controversy in this context makes it difficult to separate these player actions from benign group actions within the community such as online requests for new game options or the expression of player wishes for a game from the targeted controversy campaigns waged with a specific goal. While these requests illustrate cases where players expressed their desires to developers, controversies require a conflict over a game between groups of unequal power and are typically initiated by the group at a disadvantage because of a perceived transgression against their control. However, the outrage itself is not enough to qualify as a controversy. In order for player anger to rise to the level of controversy, the campaign must extend beyond the boundaries of the initial community that demands the attention of outsiders and forces the target to respond, typically in the form of some type of appeasement that cedes control back to the outraged group. The construction of a definition of video game controversies is also critical because it offers a framework for identifying similarities and differences in the course and resolution of these controversies, understanding how and specific controversies develop, why one controversy may

⁴⁴ Paul Tassi, "'Overwatch' Stumbles Into Controversy by Cutting 'Sexualized' Tracer Victory Pose," *Forbes*, March 29, 2016, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/insertcoin/2016/03/29/overwatch-stumbles-into-controversy-by-cutting-sexualized-tracer-victory-pose/#7692e636f62b>.

⁴⁵ Luke Plunkett, "Six Months After Release, *Shadow of War* Will Remove Microtransactions," *Kotaku*, April 2, 2018, <https://kotaku.com/six-months-after-release-shadow-of-war-removes-microtr-1824270848>.

falter while another succeeds. Additionally, this definition should be utilized in order to help distance observers from the often emotional and contentious video game controversies that arise in the community.

2.2 Outsider Outrage and Government Threats

But what about controversies before *Mass Effect 3* and 2012? Did they display the same tendencies of the new controversies? At first glance, there may appear to be similarities between the old controversies and the new, but the pre-2012 controversies appear lacking in one critical regard. The earlier controversies—and this is arguably what distinguishes them from the current culture of controversies—were rarely motivated by a personal sense of agency and ownership because these controversies were typically initiated by outsiders with no interest in video games other than a means to an end of acquiring political capital, exerting power over a culture that could not fight back, and providing an open door for potential government regulation over the medium. In other words, these controversies tended to be more cynical than selfish. In general, pre-2012 controversies followed a different pattern than later controversies and were motivated by moral outrage at a text rather than opposition to a specific person or group. These early controversies typically cited objectionable content—whether the content actually existed or not—as the obligation for censoring offending games on the grounds of sex or violence but often both. Newer controversies typically seek revision of unsatisfactory elements in the gameplay or narrative tied to the experience of the text. In these outsider controversies, there is no disagreement between groups and no substantial power disparity. The interest for participants in these older controversies skew to the blatantly ideological, typically limited to an individual or small group that exploits the targeted game for personal benefit, and nearly always fades away

after several news cycles without a resolution because there was no conflict between parties to be resolved in the first place.

The early outsider controversies nearly always fell into three different categories of objectionable content that participants felt needed to be policed. Unsurprisingly, sex and violence represented evergreen targets because of their perceived corrupting influence on youth but also because outrage over these topics represents an effective method for drawing attention to one's moral superiority. Not only were video games attacked again and again for depictions of sex and violence, but the same video game publishers and studios often found themselves in the crosshairs. In turn, many of these publishers then exploited this predicament by selling the games with the promise of outrageous sex and violence as part of the experience. Surprisingly, far more of this outrage has been directed toward violence rather than sex, but not all of it with games such as *RapeLay* (2006), a literal rape simulator,⁴⁶ and the previously mentioned "Hot Coffee" mod in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004) riling up the crusaders. Controversies driven by moral outrage over violent content arose in response to several games in Activision's first person shooter and war simulator series *Call of Duty*. The controversies began with the uproar over the notorious so-called "No Russian" level of *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2* (2009) that required players to participate in a terrorist operation to kill civilians in an airport,⁴⁷ then upped the ante in *Call of Duty: Black Ops* (2010) by assassinating Fidel Castro and angering the entire Cuban government because of its perception as American propaganda,⁴⁸ before finally going all in by

⁴⁶ Kyung Lah, "'RapeLay' Video Game Goes Viral Amid Outrage," *CNN*, March 31, 2010, <http://www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/asiapcf/03/30/japan.video.game.rape/index.html>.

⁴⁷ Gus Mastrapa, "'Modern Warfare 2' Terrorism Hits Close to Home," *CNN*, November 11, 2009, <http://www.cnn.com/2009/TECH/11/11/wired.modern.warfare.xbox.360/>.

⁴⁸ Michael McWhertor, "Cuba Slams Call of Duty: Black Ops As 'Perverse' Propaganda For Sociopaths," *Kotaku*, November 10, 2010, <https://kotaku.com/cuba-slams-call-of-duty-black-ops-as-perverse-propagan-5686777>.

hiring convicted felon and disgraced Marine Lt. Col. Oliver North as the official spokesman for *Call of Duty: Black Ops 2* (2012).⁴⁹ Unsurprisingly, all of this did succeed in bringing attention to the games if nothing else. The appearance of Oliver North also brings attention to the third and seemingly most prevalent category of moral outrage controversy—that, frankly, warrants a comprehensive study of its own—which is controversies dealing with the depiction or exploitation of the United States military apparatus. These controversies target ideology offensive to American interests including objections to games accused of trivializing combat such as *Six Days in Fallujah* (delayed from 2010 to 2023),⁵⁰ games accused of operating as propaganda such as *Rendition: Guantanamo* (canceled in 2009),⁵¹ and games that allow players to play as enemy Taliban in *Medal of Honor* (2010)⁵² just to name a few that occurred during the span of just one year.

Before diving into the shift in video game controversies from 2012 onwards, it is helpful to wade into several significant older controversies in order to construct a brief history of video game controversies and clarify the demarcation line between old and new. There is no better place to start than the first documented video game controversy in response to *Death Race* in 1976. Based on the *Death Race 2000* film from the previous year, the coin-operated arcade driving *Death Race* game allowed players to operate a vehicle and gruesomely run over creatures the game referred to as gremlins. Many who heard about the game interpreted these gremlins

⁴⁹ Owen Good, “*Black Ops II* Chooses Someone Who Failed the Call of Duty,” *Kotaku*, May 4, 2012, <https://kotaku.com/black-ops-ii-chooses-someone-who-failed-the-call-of-dut-5907854>.

⁵⁰ Newsweek Staff, “Controversial Videogame on the Battle of Fallujah,” *Newsweek*, June 5, 2009, <https://www.newsweek.com/controversial-videogame-battle-fallujah-80591>.

⁵¹ Ki Mae Huessner, “9 Video Games That Went Too Far,” *ABC News*, June 3, 2009, <https://abcnews.go.com/Technology/GameOn/story?id=7750809&page=1>.

⁵² Matt Peckham, “Medal of Honor ‘Play as Taliban’ Angle Controversial, Except Not Really,” *PC World*, August 17, 2010, https://www.pcworld.com/article/203446/medal_of_honor_taliban_controversy.html.

instead as human beings who violently and graphically succumb to gory vehicular homicide, which some perceived as disgusting and offensive. The controversy drew media and public attention with much of it wrapped up in contemporary concerns of youth culture and also marked the beginning of the neverending debate on the effects of video game violence on the individual and society.⁵³ It may be difficult to imagine now that anyone could find the crude, blocky graphics of 1970s video games violent, but this apparent lack of specificity encouraged the controversy because it allowed viewers of the game to fill in the blanks in their reading of the text itself, but also intertextually in relation to the violence of the film it was based on. Just as the *Death Race* controversy emerged as the first moral outrage controversy, it also emerged as the one of the first instances of the video game industry capitalizing on the notoriety of the controversy to increase sales through the game's naughty reputation. This was further exacerbated by the game's publisher marketing for the game that took advantage of the controversy and the outrageous violence in the game,⁵⁴ which ultimately served as a model for future developers whose violent or controversial games might exploit a moral panic for publicity and sales.⁵⁵

While the driving game *Death Race* may have been the first controversy, the outrage surrounding the *Grand Theft Auto* series certainly holds the crown for most notorious. The basic premise of each game is simple. Players drive, shoot, and rob their way up through the ranks of a criminal organization fulfilling the American Dream in capitalism's purest form while also occasionally finding time to run over a prostitute or two, fight crime, or even go bowling with

⁵³ Mark J.P. Wolf, *The Video Game Explosion: A History from PONG to PlayStation and Beyond* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2008), 39.

⁵⁴ Korucek, *Coin-Operated Americans*, 83-84.

⁵⁵ Korucek, 88.

their needy cousin. Ostensibly, the recurrent controversies surrounding each and every game release—which publisher Rockstar Games has both encouraged and exploited up to a point—represent attacks on the games’ depiction of sex and accusations that the violence in the game inspires violence in real life.⁵⁶ While the attacks on the games’ content is noteworthy, the most significant aspect of the campaigns against *Grand Theft Auto* remains the consistent incursions of state intervention and attempted regulation that has become a normal part of the *Grand Theft Auto* release and controversy cycle and a constant tension between the industry and state power. In this regard, the *Grand Theft Auto* controversies share some resemblance to their post-2012 counterparts—albeit with the power of the controversy originators inverted and backed by the legal apparatus—where the driving force of the complainants attempts to coerce industry into revising the text while ceding greater control to the people’s demands through appeasement.

With each new iteration of the series came more opportunity for players but also more opportunity for the morally indignant to take offense. Much of the controversy surrounding the series began with *Grand Theft Auto III* and its release for the then new PlayStation 2 in 2001. Unsurprisingly, some took issue with the player’s ability to solicit prostitutes—who would then proceed to sit in the passenger’s seat next to the player-character while the vehicle mysteriously bounced up and down—and the game was inevitably banned in Australia because of the sexual content⁵⁷ and blamed for real world violence and death including the murder of a man by a nineteen-year-old in the United States who claimed *Grand Theft Auto* inspired his crime.⁵⁸ For *Grand Theft Auto* this would become normal. What would also become normal in these

⁵⁶ Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers*, 198-199.

⁵⁷ IGN Staff, “Grand Theft Auto III Refused Classification in Australia,” *IGN*, December 13, 2001, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2001/12/14/grand-theft-auto-3-refused-classification-in-australia>.

⁵⁸ David Kushner, *Jacked: The Outlaw Story of Grand Theft Auto* (Hokoken: Wiley & Sons, 2012), 142-146.

controversies was a kind of bullet ballet between outside regulation of the industry and Rockstar Games' own sense of self preservation. The release of *Grand Theft Auto III* in the United States prompted lawsuits and criticism from politicians that terrified retail behemoth Walmart enough to institute a new policy to request ID from customers attempting to purchase the game. For its part, Rockstar blew off the controversy as misguided.⁵⁹

However, Rockstar could not ignore the controversy around the next game in the series, *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* (2002). In this case, the usual claims against sex and violence turned into lawsuits and protests accusing the game of perpetuating racial violence through a minigame that ordered players to “Kill the Haitians” or “Kill the Cubans”—or even commands to “Kill the Bikers” whose ranks were entirely white—and eventually capitulated to protestors after New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg threatened legal action against Rockstar and distributor Take-Two Interactive. The move by Rockstar attempted to avoid government regulation or testing the then presumably shaky limits of First Amendment protections for video games.⁶⁰ This, of course, would not be the last legal attempt against the series with literally everyone and their grandmother suing Rockstar and Take-Two over the hidden sex mod in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* prompting an FTC investigation,⁶¹ a series of suits and countersuits attempting to effectively ban *Grand Theft Auto IV* (2008) through nuisance and RICO suits before the parties

⁵⁹ Harold Goldberg, *All Your Base Are Belong to Us: How Fifty Years of Videogames Conquered Pop Culture* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2011), 234.

⁶⁰ Tor Thorsen, “Take-Two Self-Censoring Vice City,” *Gamespot*, December 10, 2003, <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/take-two-self-censoring-vice-city/1100-6085346/>.

⁶¹ David Adams, “Grandmother Sues Take-Two for AO Content,” *IGN*, last updated June 16, 2012, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2005/07/27/grandmother-sues-take-two-for-ao-content>.

settled out of court,⁶² and the removal of *Grand Theft Auto V* from Australian Target shelves after outrage over the game's depiction of women and violence against them.⁶³

The culmination of these controversies and the fight to control video games and their content reached its high water mark and subsequent downfall when the state of California not satisfied with exploiting video game controversies simply for moral capital, passed legislation making it illegal to sell violent video games to minors and gave the state the power to regulate the sale and marketing of games. The bill introduced by State Representative Leland Yee prohibited the sale of video games to minors, but also required merchants to display a special symbol marking certain games as violent and fined merchants up to \$1,000 for infractions of the law.⁶⁴ The law represented a direct attack not only on supposedly immoral content but also on the industry's ability to control its own product and regulate itself. The poorly-defined nature of both the limits of what constituted violent along with the understood but nonexistent reasonable person who may find the violence offensive meant that video games were now controlled by arbitrary forces and not developers or even the market. In this controversy, the industry found itself the underdog and fought back when the Entertainment Merchants Association sued the State of California for an injunction to prevent implementation of the law. The courts struck down the law twice in the United States District Appeals Court on First Amendment grounds.⁶⁵

⁶² Brendan Sinclair, "Take-Two Settles with Thompson," *Gamspot*, April 19, 2007, <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/take-two-settles-with-thompson/1100-6169360/>.

⁶³ Mike Fahey, "Target Australia Pulls *GTA* Due to Depictions of Violence Against Women," *Kotaku*, December 3, 2014, <https://kotaku.com/target-australia-pulls-gta-v-due-to-depictions-of-sexua-1666096131>.

⁶⁴ Jessica Fischer, "Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association: 'Modern Warfare' on First Amendment Protection of Violent Video Games," *Journal of Business and Technology Law*, 8:2 526-527.

⁶⁵ Lindsay E. Wuller, "Losing the Game: An Analysis of the Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association Decision and Its Ramifications in the Area of 'Interactive' Video Games," *Saint Louis University Law Journal*, 57:457, 460-461.

Undeterred by previous court losses and the inherent threat to the First Amendment, then Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger appealed directly to the Supreme Court in 2011 in an attempt to uphold the law, but the justices ultimately ruled the law unconstitutional in a 7-2 verdict and affirmed that video games deserve the same First Amendment protections as other media and argued the state had not proven a need to regulate video games beyond the industry's already established guidelines.⁶⁶ The ruling, for now, solidified the industry's standing alongside other creative industries and for the time being shut down legal attempts at moral regulation and moral controversy movements.

The history of video game controversies before 2012 is a history of video game outsiders and their attempts to exert control over the medium and its culture. From the earliest attempts to censor violence in *Death Race* to the many objections and suits against *Grand Theft Auto* to the state of California's legal prohibitions, outsider-led video game controversies were driven by the desire to control video games despite the fact that no real ownership claim or stake in these texts. Few of these controversies could be described as successful and—with the exception of the adoption of the ratings system—it is arguable whether these controversies had a lasting effect on outrage targets or the industry as a whole. In fact, the legal restrictions enacted in California and the resulting Supreme Court decision in 2011 striking down these restrictions had the unintended consequence of enshrining the medium's First Amendment protection into law, effectively making any further outsider controversies moot. Nonetheless, these proto-controversies established controversy as a normal and even expected part of the culture and may have also unintentionally served as the first models for what the culture would become.

⁶⁶ *Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association et al.*, 564, U.S. 786 (U.S. 2011).

2.3 The *Mass Effect* Game Trilogy

The year 2012 may not have been the end of the world, but it was the end of major video game controversies started by outrage groups outside the community. After several decades dominated by moral attacks against games and the industry, the established pattern of controversies motivated by a desire to exert power over content in search of regulatory control abruptly receded in favor of a new type of controversy driven by player-led protests. The 2012 controversies were by no means the very first player-led controversies as 2009 also saw a surge in pushback from players against the industry and perceived anti-consumer business practices limiting player access. Most fans might celebrate the greenlighting of a sequel to their favorite game, but fans of Valve's *Left 4 Dead* (2008) revolted at the news of sequel and went so far as to call for a boycott because they believed Valve failed to deliver enough content for the first game before moving on to a sequel.⁶⁷ Later in the year, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (2007) fans staged a minor mutiny when publisher Infinity Ward dropped dedicated servers from PC multiplayer and removed the player ability to control matchmaking and the rules of their own games, which players responded to with a petition including more than 150,000 signatures to ask Infinity Ward to reverse its decision.⁶⁸ And on the more metatextual front, 2009 also saw controversies aimed at review scores with fans of *Killzone 2* (2009) attacking reviewers because the scores in their positive reviews were not deemed high enough and included one that gave the game a 5 out of 5 star review⁶⁹ as well as the proposed boycott of gaming blog *Destructoid* after

⁶⁷ Martin Robinson, "Fans Boycott Left 4 Dead 2" *IGN*, last updated May 11, 2012, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2009/06/08/fans-boycott-left-4-dead-2>.

⁶⁸ Michael Thompson, "Modern Warfare 2: The Case for the Dedicated Server," *Ars Technica*, October 29, 2009, <https://arstechnica.com/gaming/2009/10/modern-warfare-2-the-case-for-the-dedicated-server/>.

⁶⁹ Ben Kuchera, "Killzone 2 Reviews: Fanboy Food with a Side Order of Nastiness" *Ars Technica*, February 5, 2009, <https://arstechnica.com/gaming/2009/02/killzone-2-reviews-fanboy-food-with-a-side-order-of-nastiness/>.

a low-scored review of *Assassin's Creed 2* (2009).⁷⁰ While 2009 represents a growth spurt of sorts for player-led controversies, players primarily geared their complaints toward technical rather than textual dissatisfaction and offered only a preview of the confrontations between players and developers to come.

In 2012, *Mass Effect 3* emerged as the catalyst of change. Published by the aforementioned American-based Electronic Arts, the trilogy of games was produced and developed by Canadian studio BioWare. Over the years, the studio developed a reputation for their games' narrative depth and the allowance of player influence in sci-fi and fantasy role-playing series *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, *Dragon Age*, and *Mass Effect*, which arguably represented the most fully-realized example of BioWare's trademark. The premise of the *Mass Effect* series is fairly straightforward. As space marine Commander Shepard—who is either male or female, black or white or Asian, straight or queer depending on the player's choosing—the player traverses the Milky Way galaxy with Shepard's human and alien comrades in order to save everyone from a devastating threat to civilization. Ostensibly, the series falls into the category of semi-open RPG, sci-fi shooter and is thematically informed—like many other military-type shooters of the 2000s—by the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks with subtle and not-so-subtle references to the sprawling security state and endless wars abroad that proliferated during the War on Terror. From this description, one might assume that the *Mass Effect* series falls into the same category as jingoistic, outrageous military shooters along with *Call of Duty*. One would be very wrong. At the heart of the *Mass Effect* series resides a complex, colorfully-woven role-playing and relationship simulator that ensnares and engages the player with the promise of control over the narrative, the player character's experiences and morals, and Shepard's

⁷⁰ Nick Henderson, "I Don't Usually Do this But..." *4 Player Network*, November 26, 2009, <https://4playernetwork.com/blog/2009/11/i-dont-usually-do-this-but/>.

seemingly deep and meaningful relationships with the game's NPCs. All of this effectively persuades players that every choice they make *matters*, which, in turn, encourages a strong sense of player agency within the text. Arguably, player agency represents the cornerstone of the *Mass Effect* series and while this agency is experienced and created by the player through choice, it is initially born from the developer's willingness to design gameplay that entrusts the player with a certain measure of game development outside of developer control.

Nearly all aspects of the player experience of *Mass Effect* that allow for player choice—and this is, of course, true to some degree regarding any game—encourage the development of player agency, but it can be argued that *Mass Effect's* effectiveness in encouraging agency lies in the game's insistence on handing the controls over to players on multiple, branching fronts with greatest importance placed in character building, gameplay and narrative. What sets the *Mass Effect* series apart and arguably what makes it so persuasive in terms of cultivating agency is that it is deftly effective at blurring the lines between gameplay, character building, and narrative while infusing the player's moral and personal choices into the progression of all three. A significant portion of the game and the player's ability to progress in it is not in combat but in conversation with various NPCs and performed almost exclusively in the game's dialogue wheel. Through dialogue choices the player creates what kind of person Shepard is, what kind soldier Shepard is, what friends and enemies and romance partners Shepard makes, what kind of narrative Shepard is the hero of, and ultimately the individual fates of many NPCs along with Shepard's fate in the game. Additionally, in order for the player to create their portion of the text, the average player will likely spend upwards of one hundred hours over the course of the trilogy—or several hundred for those especially invested—spending time with beloved NPCs, traversing the well-realized *Mass Effect* universe, romancing their space boyfriend or girlfriend,

and creating and revising their personal vision of the narrative and in the process cultivating a sense of ownership of the text through labor and familiarity.

Thus, the story so far in the *Mass Effect* trilogy leading into the release of the third game also varies in some way from person to person—including some player's whose Shepard even died permanently at the end of the second game—but there are commonalities when describing the big picture leading up to the controversy surrounding player disappointment in its resolution. With each game, the threat to the galaxy becomes more dire as Shepard and the player discover the true nature of the Reaper enemy while fighting individual battles and rallying allies to the cause. In the first game, *Mass Effect* (2007), Commander Shepard begins as an elite marine on an Earth Systems Alliance space frigate and is the first human promoted to council Spectre—a special operations officer who reports directly to the interspecies, interplanetary galactic Citadel Council—in order to hunt down a rogue Spectre, Saren, who is threatening the council and galactic order. During the course of the game, Shepard and their crew discover that Saren is not the big bad but instead is being mind-controlled through technological indoctrination by the true big bad of the series: the Reapers, an ancient race of machines preparing to wipe out all organic life. The first *Mass Effect* ends the same for everyone—barring some relatively minor differences—with a dreadnought-sized Reaper crashing into council headquarters, Shepard killing Saren, and the looming threat of the Reapers unresolved. Most of the player's significant choices from the first game transfer to the second game in the series, *Mass Effect 2* (2009), which begins with Shepard dying after an attack from a new enemy, the Collectors, and then being rebuilt bionic woman-style by independent, human-first organization, Cerberus. Once rebuilt, Cerberus' leader, the Illusive Man, tasks Shepard to assemble a crew to stage a suicide mission against the collector homebase—only to discover that they, of course, were also pawns

of the Reapers. While the ending for the first game is fairly static, the suicide mission has the potential to permanently kill off one, some, or all of Shepard's twelve squad companions or even for the player fail the suicide mission and see Shepard also permanently killed. This is where the story leaves off leading into *Mass Effect 3* (2012).

2.4 *Mass Effect 3*: Initial Reactions

No matter how BioWare had ended the series, someone would have hated it. Ending a beloved narrative-driven series of any medium with high expectations from the fanbase risks alienating the audience through missteps or dissatisfaction—fans of *Lost* or *Game of Thrones* can attest to that—but producers also run the risk of alienating fans through their own interactions with fans or through responses to audience feedback. For BioWare and *Mass Effect 3*, several pre-release changes to BioWare's approach to marketing and delivering the game may have been a sign of problems to come, but also a sign that BioWare would be receptive to engaging player responses. This occurred specifically in BioWare's solicitation of player feedback determining part of their new marketing approach for the final game. Despite the *Mass Effect* trilogy's catering to many different players and playstyles, the default female version of Shepard—called FemShep by some fans and simply Shepard by others—had never been featured as part of the marketing or box art for the games with the grizzled default male dominating Shepard's public image. However, for *Mass Effect 3*, BioWare announced that female Shepard would finally have her own trailer and be featured in the internal side of the cover insert in identical art to her male counterpart,⁷¹ which could be flipped to the outside by the owner of the disc but would be hidden on store shelves. Additionally, rather than simply use the default model as had been done with

⁷¹ Winda Benedetti, "You Get to Pick the Female Face of 'Mass Effect 3'," *NBC News*, July 25, 2011, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/you-get-pick-female-face-mass-effect-3-flna121845>.

male Shepard, BioWare held an online Facebook contest asking players to choose their preferred hair color for Shepard, which—while clearly being a bit problematic—showed that BioWare was willing to ask for and accept input from players, which some players perceived as mirroring the democratic process of having each player choose his or her own Shepard in the game.⁷²

While this change provided some goodwill between producers and players, the other major change to how BioWare and Electronic Arts handled the release likely did not and may instead have contributed to player anger at BioWare and the game's ending. Publishers releasing paid, day-one downloadable content that is often already contained on the game disc has become a hated but entirely common industry practice, but in 2012 this was still a relatively novel distribution method. In what may be a case of what one might speculate as the influence of Electronic Art's greed, BioWare announced that the DLC "From Ashes" would add an additional mission, an additional squad mate, and would be available the day of the game's release as a \$10 download. This alone angered players who believed that they shouldn't be forced to pay extra for content completed before release and felt they were entitled to it as part of the base game.⁷³ To make matters worse, intrepid players discovered code and some elements of the DLC were not downloadable content at all but included as part of the base game's files on the physical disc.⁷⁴ BioWare and Electronic Arts' responded to player anger by explaining that the DLC was not included in the base game because they had been developed and certified separately and was

⁷² Kirk Hamilton, "Fans Picked the Blonde in Controversial Video Game Beauty Contest, But That's Not a Bad Thing," *Kotaku*, August 1, 2011, <https://kotaku.com/fans-picked-the-blonde-in-a-controversial-video-game-be-5826702>.

⁷³ Jason Schreier, "Mass Effect 3 DLC Triggers Fan Outrage, BioWare Response," *Kotaku*, February 23, 2012, <https://kotaku.com/mass-effect-3-dlc-triggers-fan-outrage-bioware-respons-5887626>.

⁷⁴ Tom Senior, "Mass Effect 3 Day One DLC Files Spotted on Disc, BioWare Response," *PC Gamer*, March 13, 2012, <https://www.pcgamer.com/mass-effect-3-day-one-dlc-files-spotted-on-disk-bioware-respond/>.

simply completed sooner than they expected.⁷⁵ Most players begrudgingly accepted this change to the game's distribution but some players persisted in their calls to boycott the game because of these business practices.⁷⁶ While most fans still anticipated greatness going into the game's release, the reception had already been tainted for some and it was only about to get worse.

Mass Effect 3 was released on PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, and PC on March 6, 2012 to overwhelmingly positive reviews in the gaming press. Although many reviews and game writers eventually expressed solidarity with outraged players, the discontent over the game's ending did not originate from any official, institutional source online or from within the major industry reviews first published on the day of the game's release. A survey of the reviews from that day from prominent gaming sites *Destructoid*, *Kotaku*, *IGN*, *Polygon*, and *Ars Technica*, in fact, reveal that game writers were not that bothered at all. Only one of the reviews by *Kotaku's* Kate Cox even hinted that the reviewer or the players may have reservations about how BioWare ultimately ended the series. Although she did not include the game's ending in her list of her least favorite things about the game—and presumably felt the ending was at the very least serviceable—Cox makes a point that the game is not perfect and concludes her list of imperfections with a prediction that she is “sure that fans will be talking and arguing amongst themselves at length about the entire final act and the ultimate conclusion for months, if not years, to come.”⁷⁷ Whether or not it was simply a throwaway line to tie up the review or an honest concern for the game's ending is unclear because the review provides no further context,

⁷⁵ Erik Kain, “BioWare and EA Respond to DLC Controversy,” *Forbes*, March 12, 2012, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/erikkain/2012/03/12/bioware-and-ea-respond-to-dlc-controversy/#228e55fe672f>.

⁷⁶ Skye Nathaniel Schiefer, “Controversial Day-1 Mass Effect 3 DLC Prompts Calls to Boycott,” *PC World*, February 23, 2012, https://www.pcworld.com/article/250546/controversial_day_1_mass_effect_3_dlc_prompts_calls_to_boycott.html.

⁷⁷ Kate Cox, “*Mass Effect 3*: The *Kotaku* Review,” *Kotaku*, March 6, 2012, <https://kotaku.com/mass-effect-3-the-kotaku-review-5890467>.

but Cox’s observations about the potential of the game’s ending was one of the only early insights of what was about to become a major player-led backlash against the game.

Overall, release day reviewers concluded that *Mass Effect 3*—though not without its imperfections—was an excellent game that lived up to high expectations with reviewers recommending the game across the board. In what surely would have looked great in advertisements, *Polygon*’s Arthur Gies declared that “*Mass Effect 3* is a triumph,” and summarized his experience of the game as the satisfying conclusion to the game’s often experimental game narrative for which he expressed gratitude for having the opportunity to play.⁷⁸ This is obviously not a position that many of the most vocal players would share and there are other key differences between Gies’ initial positive review and later player consensus, particularly in his perception that choices did in fact matter in this game. In what would go against the grain of controversy logic, Gies proclaimed that:

Mass Effect 3’s biggest achievement is how much it felt like my experience. Events, consequences, repercussions—they all seemed wrapped neatly, believably around my decisions over the course of the entire *Mass Effect* trilogy.⁷⁹

But Gies’ assessment was not unusual among initial reviews. *Destructoid*’s Conrad Zimmerman stated that the third game “still does an excellent job of making the player feel like the decisions have impact,”⁸⁰ and even Kate Cox singled out the element of choice as one of the defining features of the game.⁸¹ While the player’s disgust over a perceived lack of choice drove the

⁷⁸ Arthur Gies, “Mass Effect 3 Review: The Sharp Edge of Hope,” *Polygon*, October 2, 2012, <https://www.polygon.com/2012/10/2/3443570/mass-effect-3-review-the-sharp-edge-of-hope>.

⁷⁹ Gies, “Mass Effect 3 Review.”

⁸⁰ Conrad Zimmerman, “Review: Mass Effect 3,” *Destructoid*, March 6, 2012, <https://www.destructoid.com/reviews/review-mass-effect-3/>.

controversy, it didn't seem to register as an issue for reviewers who played the game before release day. That's not to say that reviewers didn't have issues with the game. Nearly all of the major reviews expressed grievances with a number of common gameplay mechanics and perceived attempts to make the game more mainstream.⁸² It's just that they did not seem to have the same issues players would later rally around.

Online reviews are meant to give players an idea on whether or not a game is worth the player's time and money, but they also often provide players with a space to respond not only to the reviews but also to their initial—and often third-hand—impressions of the game. For the most part, the review comments followed either one of two paths neither of which can be construed as positive. The first trend showed that, at the time, the hate for the game was not so cut and dry with many players expressing simple, typically ineloquent hate for the game that they may not have completed or even played. However, these responses ran in direct competition with many players defending the game. A perusal of Zimmerman's *Destructoid* review reveals that for every player comment insisting that, "The endings are the most horribly written trash that bioware could have possibly churned out. They're a big fuck you to the players,"⁸³ there are several more comments declaring, "I luv this game! Right when I got it I beat it in 2 days. Honestly Me3 had one of the best campaigns I had ever played in my whole life!"⁸⁴ Similarly, it's not difficult to find prime hater comments on Colin Morairty's review for *IGN* asserting,

⁸¹ Cox, "Mass Effect Review."

⁸² Kyle Orland, "Mass Effect 3 Review: A Proper Ending—But Not a Perfect One," *Ars Technica*, March 6, 2012, <https://arstechnica.com/gaming/2012/03/mass-effect-3-reviewed/2/>.

⁸³ DasPooch, "Comment on," Conrad Zimmerman, "Review: Mass Effect 3," *Destructoid*, March 6, 2012, <https://www.destructoid.com/reviews/review-mass-effect-3/>.

⁸⁴ DaBigSlayer, Conrad Zimmerman, "Review: Mass Effect 3," *Destructoid*, March 6, 2012, <https://www.destructoid.com/reviews/review-mass-effect-3/>.

“The endings are terrible. BioWare should go to game developer jail for it.”⁸⁵ But often more eloquently and with more argument than insult, are comments like user “antithesis13” who summed up their over seven hundred word defense of the the game stating in part:

I’m happy with the series. For me, it was more about the journey than the destination. The characters were like old friends to me.... Much love to the devs, at least from me anyway. What an incredible ride!⁸⁶

While there was discontent at this point in time, there were still many players and reviewers willing to defend the game and its ending.

The other prominent early trend in commenting directed anger not at the game or the developers but at the reviewers themselves. Many players were not content with simply expressing their displeasure with the game and turned to attacking the quality of the reviews themselves within the review comments. In some cases players even accused the authors of shilling for the developers. On just a sample of comments left on Moriarty’s single *IGN* review, one can find comments asserting, “Honestly, this is a really sub-par review, and show just how inarticulate and unprofessional *IGN* has become.”⁸⁷ Or, “This review is a bunch of bullshit.”⁸⁸ Or even, “This thing is crap. The reviewer must have been bought. Shame on him.”⁸⁹ While these

⁸⁵ xsoporanos, “Comment on,” Colin Moriarty, “Mass Effect 3 Review,” *IGN*, last updated March 6, 2012, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2012/03/06/mass-effect-3-review?commentId=358060813>.

⁸⁶ antithesis13, “Comment on,” Colin Moriarty, “Mass Effect 3 Review,” *IGN*, last updated March 6, 2012, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2012/03/06/mass-effect-3-review?commentId=358060813>.

⁸⁷ emonious-tk, “Comment on,” Colin Moriarty, “Mass Effect 3 Review,” *IGN*, last updated March 6, 2012, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2012/03/06/mass-effect-3-review?commentId=358060813>.

⁸⁸ Rhino132_688521, “Comment on,” Colin Moriarty, “Mass Effect 3 Review,” *IGN*, last updated March 6, 2012, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2012/03/06/mass-effect-3-review?commentId=358060813>.

⁸⁹ nalik, “Comment on,” Colin Moriarty, “Mass Effect 3 Review,” *IGN*, last updated March 6, 2012, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2012/03/06/mass-effect-3-review?commentId=358060813>.

sorts of responses appeared common on reviews for the game, players accused *Kotaku's* Kate Cox—perhaps because of gendered gatekeeping in the culture that would become more insidious in the years following—of not only writing a bad review and being on the BioWare payroll, but also not worthy of critiquing or commenting on games. One of the highest voted comments belittles her and her review with:

This didn't really seem like a review to me. Hell I'm already 3 hours in almost and I can make a better review and bring up better points in the article. Does this author work for EA/Bioware? It felt like an advertisement and not a review of the game to me.⁹⁰

If this wasn't enough, several commenters were quick to assure the thread originator that Cox was “new blood” to the site in order to discount her review that had, in fact, warned players of the game's ending.⁹¹ For any of the reviewers and review sites, on the readied barrel of their readers ire is likely not where they wanted to be.

Not long after the players began to turn on the game and reviewers the reviewers began to come over to the side of the discontents. Think pieces about what went wrong with the ending began to drown out the original positive reviews and gave coherent voices to player concerns that the authors now shared. Six days after publishing Kate Cox's positive review, *Kotaku* posted what was essentially a review of the *Mass Effect 3* ending itself by Luke Plunkett that echoed and reinforced what players had been expressing in an article simply entitled, “Why *Mass Effect 3's* Ending Was So Damn Terrible.” For Plunkett, it wasn't what happened that he felt was the problem for himself and for players—even if they weren't able to articulate it initially—but how

⁹⁰ HurricanDJ, “Comment On,” Kate Cox, “*Mass Effect 3: The Kotaku Review*,” *Kotaku*, March 6, 2012, <https://kotaku.com/mass-effect-3-the-kotaku-review-5890467>.

⁹¹ FuktLogic, “Comment On,” Kate Cox, “*Mass Effect 3: The Kotaku Review*,” *Kotaku*, March 6, 2012, <https://kotaku.com/mass-effect-3-the-kotaku-review-5890467>.

the ending happened. According to Plunkett's argument, the problem with the game was that up until the ending, the game operated on the assumption that every player choice, and every moral decision contributed to the progression of the story through clear mechanics and rules and that:

The way the game's endings were presented didn't just undermine this, it threw it out the window. What had been the point of making all your decisions across three titles based on good or "evil" (well, "rude") if the final payoff did not represent these?⁹²

Plunkett's professional opinion was not unique among game journalists. *The Mary Sue's* Becky Chambers laid out a similar critique a week-and-a-half after the game's release in her explanatory essay that detailed the backlash to the ending. Chambers points to the game's customization and choice as key reasons that she personally became emotionally invested in the series more than any other work of fiction and identified the lack of choice, lack of closure, and several plot holes as the core grievances of the players.⁹³ While the gaming press didn't initiate the controversy and at first seemed to be on a different page than the players, their articles did effectively give a more coherent voice to player issues and legitimized some of their concerns.

The initial reviews from journalists and their eventual shift toward the larger consensus is critical to understanding the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversies and reveals something crucial about how controversies develop. Most of the early reviews for the game were positive and made little to no criticism of the ending or how it played out. In effect, there was no controversy or consensus when only a handful of players had access to the game. But as more and more players experienced the ending of the game and connected with each other online to vent their outrage, the consensus in the general community changed and the opinions of the game journalists began

⁹² Luke Plunkett, "Why *Mass Effect 3's* Ending Was So Damn Terrible," *Kotaku*, March 12, 2012, <https://kotaku.com/why-mass-effect-3s-ending-was-so-damn-terrible-5892676>.

⁹³ Chambers, "Everything You Need to Know."

to change as well in reaction to the messages from the players. The player's ability to influence the reviewers clearly represents a point where the discontent with the ending spread beyond the player community into the journalist community, forced the attention of individuals outside the immediate *Mass Effect* community, and provoked a response from the journalists that would amplify the campaign's demands. Without this amplification, the player pressure on BioWare to change the ending would likely not have been so persuasive. Additionally, this was the first clear indication that player controversy could move power in their favor, which would prove critical as the controversy shifted its focus to BioWare.

2.5 The Catalyst's Solution

Very quickly and organically player discontent with the ending turned to action. What started as disagreement initiated by dispersed players became a full-blown controversy when players began to collaborate and form several different protest campaigns, each with the aim of appealing directly to BioWare for a new ending to the game. For one group of players who met on the official BioWare forums, this meant appealing directly to the developers' stomachs in a more traditional approach when they sent four hundred vanilla cupcakes—because, apparently, no matter what you choose they all taste the same and this supposedly communicated this idea—to BioWare's Edmonton offices in an attempt to convince the studio to change the ending and “add a some more ‘sweet’ to their bittersweet ending.”⁹⁴ While the cupcake campaign took a more tangible but inscrutable approach, most of the major protest campaigns remained online in more direct and specific communication with BioWare and relied on the use of newer methods of social media for organization, protest, and communication. Of the online campaigns, two

⁹⁴ Jim Reilly, “Someone Sent BioWare 400 Cupcakes,” *Game Informer*, March 27, 2012, <https://www.gameinformer.com/b/news/archive/2012/03/27/someone-sent-bioware-400-cupcakes.aspx>.

gained the most momentum and attention from players, the press, and most importantly BioWare. The first and probably most famous of these campaigns known as “Retake *Mass Effect 3*” employed a multi-pronged approach utilizing Facebook, Twitter, and crowdfunding in its assault with the goal of forcing BioWare to change the ending of *Mass Effect 3*. The other campaign primarily rallied around the idea of forcing BioWare not to change the ending but to confirm the group’s obsession with the so-called “Indoctrination Theory” that posited the ending had essentially been a dream and this represented the true interpretation of the ending. Both groups employed a direct approach to getting what they wanted and brought the controversy directly to BioWare in the studio’s official forums and in direct communication with some of the game’s developers.

The “Retake *Mass Effect 3*” campaign seemed to appear faster-than-light and by far burned the brightest of all the protest groups. Unlike many of the gaming controversies that had preceded it and even the other *Mass Effect 3* protesters, “Retake *Mass Effect 3*” was highly organized into a recognizable group and offered flexibly accessibility to participants, but was still able to direct to players and focus them on its stated aim of persuading BioWare to deliver alternate endings for the game. As an organized, networked group, the “Retake *Mass Effect 3*” campaign operated in ways that a disorganized campaign could not and was able to guide its concentrated members to execute their campaign through from multiple approaches that utilized the social networking platforms of Facebook⁹⁵ and Twitter⁹⁶ along with the petition platform of Change.org⁹⁷ to plead for a new ending. However, the “Retake *Mass Effect 3*” group took it a

⁹⁵ Demand a Better Ending to Mass Effect 3 Community, “Demand a Better Ending to Mass Effect 3,” *Facebook*, March 8, 2012, <https://www.facebook.com/DemandABetterEndingToMassEffect3/>.

⁹⁶ New Ending for ME3 (@RetakeME3), “New Ending for ME3,” *Twitter*, <https://twitter.com/retakeme3?lang=en>.

⁹⁷ Krista Hauser, “Retake Mass Effect,” *Change.org*, March 16, 2012, <https://www.change.org/p/retake-mass-effect>.

step further when they replicated the game's insistence on moral choices and actions into the real world by turning their fight into a battle not simply for their own behalf, but as a moral action by incorporating a charity drive as a central tactic of the campaign.⁹⁸

The "Retake *Mass Effect 3*" campaign initially formed on Facebook on March 8, 2012 only two days after the release of the game itself. By 2012, social media and Facebook in particular had already become prominent organizing tools and center of operations for several high-profile, high-stakes protest movements such as Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring. By this point, social media were already seen as an effective means for protestors outside of traditional power structures to organize and assert control over their perceived to be desperate situations. Occupy Wall Street often utilized both Twitter and Facebook in concert with each other to share news, livestream the protests, and post activities and would typically spread to several social media sites at once in order to spread information as widely as possible. As a result, these online protests created a synergy between platforms to reach the most people.⁹⁹ For participants in the Arab Spring protests in Egypt and Tunisia, the use of social media and Facebook specifically served two critical purposes in establishing and maintaining the movements. Much like the Occupy Wall Street movement, Facebook was essential for disseminating information but also crucially allowed for organization of participants in one of the few venues available outside of state and political control and served as an initial step to independence, and drove victory for protestor interests.¹⁰⁰ Additionally, and not as much like

⁹⁸ Retake Mass Effect 3 Crowdfunding Campaign, "Retake Mass Effect Childs Play – Crowdfunding Campaign," *ChipIn*, March 2012, <https://www.chipin.com/retake-mass-effect-childs-play-campaign/>.

⁹⁹ Victoria Carty, "How to Interpret the Occupy Wall Street Social Movement in the Context of the Digital Revolution," in *From Tahrir Square to Ferguson: Social Networks as Facilitators of Social Movements*, ed. Juliet Dee (New York: Peter Lang, 2016), 169.

¹⁰⁰ Philip N. Howard and Muzammil M. Hussain, *Democracy's Fourth Wave?: Digital Media and the Arab Spring* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 47.

Occupy Wall Street, the use of Facebook during the Arab Spring allowed participants to help shape the conversation regarding the protests and their goals and spread their democratic ideals throughout the region and globally.¹⁰¹

The “Retake *Mass Effect 3*” campaign would employ similar tactics as its high-profile predecessor movements to influence its targeted power structure, but unlike Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring that fought to affect participants’ direct material reality, the *Mass Effect 3* campaign would rarely leave the virtual space of social media for the real world—possibly because the world protestors sought to influence was itself entirely digital. Although “Retake *Mass Effect 3*” operated on multiple social media fronts, Facebook clearly represented the most robust and active heart of the campaign and served as the main base of operations coordinating with its other fronts. Formally titled “Demand a Better Ending to Mass Effect 3” the Facebook group’s following was fairly substantial boasting 40,000 members by March 18, 2012, at least 60,000 members in 2014 according to cached versions—the page still nearly 50,000 likes and followers years later in 2022—and led by a user who simply went by the handle “Eric” along with several temporary admins.¹⁰² Like any typical Facebook page, the basic setup of the site was simple but geared toward the facilitation and spreading of information about the cause. It boasted a news feed dedicated to providing members with updates on the game and campaign itself, a photo gallery full of sharable banners, and among other things banners directing members to the group’s other social media accounts.

As with any change-driven protest movement, the “Retake *Mass Effect 3*” campaign was not without a list of demands—though whether it rises to the level of manifesto is debatable—

¹⁰¹ Howard and Hussain, 65.

¹⁰² Demand a Better Ending to Mass Effect 3.

that were not simply delivered through the anger and entitled trolling that has become common in video game controversies. Instead, the group took what seemed to be a more savvy approach that tried to appeal to BioWare's business sense and goodwill while at the same time remaining positive and presented an almost grateful front when speaking directly about the studio. The group's "About" page serves as its statement of purpose, as a centralized address book for its sites and the sites of like-minded sites, and as a code of conduct for its members and informs the visitor upfront and succinctly—but without punctuation—of their goals and philosophy:

BioWare is a business if we can make them understand that by using the current endings they alienate (no pun) their customers, and destroy the replay ability of the trilogy they are hurting their profits and we CAN bring about change for the better.¹⁰³

From the onset, the "Retake *Mass Effect 3*" protestors recognized that they did in fact hold a certain amount of power not just as players but as consumers who could hurt BioWare if their demands were not taken seriously. The controversy itself was itself evidence of this reality. Further down in their statement they follow this up with a summary of the series that reiterates the players' shocked feelings of anger and unfulfillment. According to the group, this anger stemmed from the failure of the ending and they reiterated their understanding of the capital at stake for BioWare and fans that they felt justified the protests. Ultimately the "Retake *Mass Effect 3*" group believed that players invested too much time and too much money—and by implication deserve what they desire—to "be abandoned with such a fate" as an unsatisfactory ending.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Demand a Better Ending to Mass Effect 3, "About," *Facebook*, https://www.facebook.com/pg/DemandABetterEndingToMassEffect3/about/?ref=page_internal.

¹⁰⁴ Demand a Better Ending, "About."

The group's statement read as part demand and part request for well-produced *Mass Effect 3* fan fiction, but it did echo what many players were asking for at the time. Specifically, the group demanded a lengthy DLC ending or possibly a full-length expansion to serve as an epilogue,¹⁰⁵ which was likely impossible at such a late state of development even if BioWare had wanted to produce it. But the group was not satisfied simply demanding new content. They also felt the need—or perhaps even the right—to suggest desired content that furthered Shepard's romance as well as various possible post-game storylines that should be considered. There was one demand and plea the group expressed that would be repeated throughout the controversy by the "Retake *Mass Effect 3*" group, individual writers, and many others that seemed to eat at fans more than anything else. Players desperately wanted a sense of closure not just for the game, but for the characters, species and members of Shepard's crew that they had grown to love over the course of the three games and harbored a desire to know that their actions had clear consequences for these characters. The group ended their request with the gracious plea to BioWare to "please take the opinions of the fans into account, and provide us with [a] more fulfilling ending to the trilogy."¹⁰⁶

The "Retake *Mass Effect 3*" campaign's success appears to have come in large part from the interaction and organization afforded by the platform's centralized post and commenting system, which allowed the group to help direct the focus of the protest while also reinforcing the agency of players who felt disaffected by the ending. For Facebook and protesting, this was nothing new and likely part of why the "Retake *Mass Effect 3*" protestors were drawn to the site and its ease of use much like the previous successes of protest movements like the Arab Spring

¹⁰⁵ Demand a Better Ending, "About."

¹⁰⁶ Demand a Better Ending, "About."

and the Spanish 15-M. Earlier protests had utilized the platform's interactive features to give people the impression they could directly participate in change through commenting and action and that it could be a useful tool.¹⁰⁷ Few of the official "Retake *Mass Effect 3*" posts were about the game itself. Most posts focused on recruitment to the cause and directed activities towards the group's stated goal of a new ending. Early posts were relatively simple in their efforts to recruit members and did so primarily by simply asking people to spread the word regarding the protests¹⁰⁸ or asking players to celebrate another milestone achieved in membership numbers to the page.¹⁰⁹ By the third day of its existence, the group began to take on a more community feel when it started posting news about the controversy, soliciting feedback and assistance with building the site, and gathering information related to the game and its protests—including news about the group itself.¹¹⁰ In fact, most of the official posts weren't about the game or the controversy but rather about the group and served to reinforce a sense of group membership through the posts.

As the controversy grinded on, the "Retake *Mass Effect 3*" admins announced the second phase of their campaign on March 12, 2012 that would help them propel them towards realizing their goal of a new ending for the game. The intent of this campaign was to shift the energy of the members away from their self-referencing bubble and instead direct it at BioWare as a

¹⁰⁷ Paolo Gerbaudo, *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism* (London: Pluto Press, 2012), 87-88.

¹⁰⁸ Demand a Better Ending to Mass Effect 3, "Comment On," *Facebook*, <https://www.facebook.com/DemandABetterEndingToMassEffect3/posts/350642668313115>.

¹⁰⁹ Demand a Better Ending to Mass Effect 3, "Comment On," *Facebook*, <https://www.facebook.com/DemandABetterEndingToMassEffect3/posts/351099304934118>.

¹¹⁰ Demand a Better Ending to Mass Effect 3, "Comment On," *Facebook*, <https://www.facebook.com/DemandABetterEndingToMassEffect3/posts/351646538212728>.

cooperative group. The call to arms—much like many of the group’s posts—was fairly simple and succinct in its direction to its members, stating:

Phase two will be the beginning of our effort to directly contact Bioware, EA, and everyone/anyone who will listen to our voices. We need a combined effort to make this happen. Instead of hundreds of individuals to whoever we will be an organized force. Yay us! #RetakeMassEffect.¹¹¹

During this phase, the group expanded to include non-English sites as part of its overall campaign¹¹² and shifted its primary tactic to fundraising for charity to draw attention to their campaign for a new ending. Initiating a charity drive to force a developer to revise a video game may not seem like a logical course of action for a movement. But for a game series that offers player choice and morality as one of its cornerstones—and one where reportedly ninety-two percent of players made morally paragon exemplar choices at any given moment¹¹³—the shift from moral gameplay to moral protest may have seemed like a natural progression for many players even if the morality of the game and the protest had different stakes. As part of its paragon charity drive, the group surprised nearly everyone by raising \$80,000 for Child’s Play¹¹⁴—a Washington state-based charity that provides toys and games to children in hospitals—drawing significant industry and media attention to the protest campaign, and before

¹¹¹ Demand a Better Ending to Mass Effect 3, “Comment On,” *Facebook*, <https://www.facebook.com/DemandABetterEndingToMassEffect3/posts/352553491455366>.

¹¹² Demand a Better Ending to Mass Effect 3, “Comment On,” *Facebook*, <https://www.facebook.com/DemandABetterEndingToMassEffect3/posts/113778572086548>.

¹¹³ Paul Tassi, “You’ll Be Surprised What Percent of ‘Mass Effect’ Players Choose Paragon,” *Forbes*, February 22, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/paultassi/2020/02/22/youll-be-surprised-what-percent-of-mass-effect-players-chose-paragon/#3d866c836cf5>.

¹¹⁴ Mike Fahey, “Child’s Play Doesn’t Appreciate Being Used to ‘Retake Mass Effect,’” *Kotaku*, March 23, 2012, <https://kotaku.com/childs-play-doesnt-appreciate-being-used-to-retake-mas-5895898>.

too long created a whole new controversy when Child's Play shut down the drive because they objected to their own cause being exploited by a third party.¹¹⁵

Despite the large number of users involved on the Demand a Better Ending for *Mass Effect 3* Facebook campaign, the Facebook group remained relatively insular and would not likely have been enough to influence BioWare on their own. Had they not also branched outside of the echo chamber of the initial page by engaging relatively passively on Twitter and more actively on Change.org the movement may have withered on that single Facebook page. The group's tweets almost all duplicate individual Facebook postings and subsequently added little to the conversation, but allowed the group digital proximity to and potential notice from several key BioWare personnel including writers and producers who worked directly on the game. The Change.org petition created by "Retake *Mass Effect 3*" supporter Krista Hauser—which was actually one of many, but by far the most successful—not only garnered attention to the cause but also elevated Hauser to one of its unofficial spokespeople.¹¹⁶ The petition's demands reflected what many in the protest had issued as the primary complaint regarding the game's failure to live up to the promise of its choices, lack of closure, unsatisfactory ending, and requests the fates of the characters and races be better spelled out in the text as well as providing "a heroic ending which provides a better sense on accomplishment."¹¹⁷ When the petition closed, it had nearly 1,500 supporters and had drawn enough attention that Hauser and

¹¹⁵ Tycho, "Child's Play and 'Retake Mass Effect,'" *Penny Arcade*, March 23, 2012, <https://www.penny-arcade.com/news/post/2012/03/23/childs-play-and-retake-mass-effect>.

¹¹⁶ Paul Tassi, "What *Do* the Fans Want? Talking with Retake Mass Effect." *Forbes*, April 9, 2012, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/insertcoin/2012/04/09/what-do-the-fans-want-talking-with-retake-mass-effect/#33e552734d9d>.

¹¹⁷ Krista Hauser, "Retake Mass Effect."

her petition were taken seriously by some in the gaming press, which likely contributed to earning a new ending.

While it is difficult to know whether the “Retake *Mass Effect 3*” campaign had a significant influence on BioWare and its producers or what they may have actually encountered of the campaign, the same cannot be said for the protests that took place directly on the BioWare forums. The now deleted forums were housed within BioWare’s domain and organized into major subforums for the studio’s most popular series, *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age*. In addition, the site housed a major subforum for off topic discussions, social networking and discussions of BioWare and its digital and non-digital products with each subforum further divided into smaller subforums according to specific game or topic. Unlike the quickly-made, ad hoc “Retake *Mass Effect 3*” Facebook page created for a singular purpose and abandoned after only several months of activity, the BioWare forum had been heavily active for years before and after the controversy—the *Mass Effect* forum alone had over eleven million replies when it was shut down¹¹⁸—and had built an active community with the expectation of some degree of access to BioWare itself. The forums were not just a space for players to gather and converse with each other, but a small sanctioned space within industry infrastructure critical to changing the way players and developers interact and where players shared their feedback with each other and the larger BioWare community. While the “Retake *Mass Effect 3*” campaign was organized around the idea of demanding a new ending for the game and creating a brand new movement and community, the BioWare protests most significantly organized around BioWare and its pre-established fan community on the official forums. While other campaigns came together briefly

¹¹⁸ BioWare, “The BioWare Forum,” *BioWare*, <https://forum.bioware.com>.

for the protest, the players on the BioWare forums attempted to influence the game through their normal community activities.

When the BioWare forums were deleted in 2016, most of the community's writings simply vanished. However, prior to the forum's deletion, thousands of pages specific to the controversy were downloaded for this project and represent a massive snapshot of the community and the controversy. However, this ultimately represents an eternally incomplete archive of the protests on the forums. Under the umbrella of the main *Mass Effect 3* subforum, the most significant protests concentrated into multiple sustained, highly active, topic-specific reaction threads focused on player interpretation of the *Mass Effect 3* text and demands for revision—or in the case of the so-called “Indoctrination Theory” threads, attempted to fill in the plothole gaps—rather than on the controversy itself. While the “Retake *Mass Effect 3*” protest approached the controversy as a community building movement, the BioWare forum participants approached the controversy primarily as an opportunity to negotiate for their preferred vision of the game and its ending alongside other community participants in conversations that proceed for hundreds and sometimes thousands of pages within the forums. Because of their proximity to BioWare through the sanctioned forums, many players may have assumed that this negotiation included the developers themselves and that their comments would be seen by writers and producers. During the controversy, protests emerged dealing with specific aspects of the ending and invariably with a significant overlap of the opinions and desires expressed in this space.

The first major *Mass Effect 3* threads on the BioWare forums questioning the game and its ending were started mere hours into its North American release on March 6, 2012. The first thread of many was simply titled “Mass Effect 3 - Endings” and began with a brief and simple post expressing disappointment with the ending that many posters would repeat in some manner

on the forums and throughout social media as part of the campaign for a new ending. The initiating message on the boards and first shot fired at the ending was by user Ravanofdarkness who started simply by stating:

So i've got done playing through Mass Effect 3 and checkt out all three different Endings and i gotta say, i hope there's a secret Ending because those Endings were just terrible.¹¹⁹

Players eventually created many threads on the forums dedicated to the campaign, but this thread and this user's initial comment would encourage thousands of similar responses from other players, set the tone for the controversy campaign, and focus players around two primary activities in these threads that served to strengthen the community's bonds and utilize their common self-interests to work toward the production of a new ending. The forums provided players with a space to vent their frustrations with the ending within the framework of a community of like-minded individuals. A significant number of posts on the forum and elsewhere focused on lodging player complaints. However, many of these posts revealed players who persisted beyond their concerns and imagined the possibility of a new ending and who had the audacity to suggest specific changes to BioWare in order to improve the ending. This is, in fact, the precedent that original poster Ravanofdarkness set when they first complained about the ending and then proceeded to provide suggestions for how the ending could be changed for the better and listed specific ways they would have changed the ending.¹²⁰ Although this initial thread only went on for fifty-three pages before being abandoned in favor of newer threads and ideas, the players who posted here encompassed the overall sentiment of the protests from

¹¹⁹ Ravanofdarkness, "Mass Effect 3 Endings," *BioWare Forums*, March 6, 2012, <https://forum.bioware.com/topic/267421-mass-effect-3-endings/#entry8013269>.

¹²⁰ Ravanofdarkness.

disappointment¹²¹ to despair from the dark ending and calls for a rewrite¹²² or even the complete and total rejection of the ending.¹²³ Players may have all had personal responses to the ending, but most if not all players to a certain degree felt that the three endings to *Mass Effect 3* “felt like a betrayal” of the fans by BioWare and its developers.¹²⁴

While players were free to respond positively or negatively to the ending on the boards with little-to-no interference from BioWare or its forum moderators, players assumed and were later proved correct that BioWare representatives oversaw the activities on the forum and communication with players and their posts—although developers typically only communicated through proxies. This not only was true of relatively benign, passive interactions moderated through community managers, but also of several directed pleas from developers for feedback delivered to the players through the forum. Monitored interaction between BioWare and players began overtly only several hours after the first complaint thread when one of BioWare forum’s community managers identified as Chris Priestly started a thread entitled “Mass Effect 3 Fan Reviews (May Contain Spoiler).” The manager posted a link to collected reviews and asked players to post what they thought of the game and to post their own thoughtful reviews.¹²⁵ On the surface, this official post from BioWare may appear to have been at best a fun way to bring the forum together in conversation and at worst an attempt to direct the conversation or even simply

¹²¹ Diegoprugmetal, “Mass Effect 3 Endings,” *BioWare Forums*, March 6, 2012, <https://forum.bioware.com/topic/267421-mass-effect-3-endings/#entry8013845>.

¹²² schenellgaming, “Mass Effect 3 Endings,” *BioWare Forums*, March 8, 2012, <https://forum.bioware.com/topic/267421-mass-effect-3-endings/page-7#entry8040669>.

¹²³ militarized, “Mass Effect 3 Endings,” *BioWare Forums*, March 8, 2012, <https://forum.bioware.com/topic/267421-mass-effect-3-endings/page-7#entry8041760>.

¹²⁴ corvisrex, “Mass Effect 3 Endings,” *BioWare Forums*, March 8, 2012, <https://forum.bioware.com/topic/267421-mass-effect-3-endings/page-15#entry8056577>.

¹²⁵ Chris Priestly, “On the Mass Effect 3 endings. Yes, we are listening,” *BioWare Forums*, March 15, 2012, <https://forum.bioware.com/topic/283224-on-the-mass-effect-3-endings-yes-we-are-listening/#entry8344974>.

a way for the community managers to monitor reactions more easily. However, the prompt from Priestly ultimately encouraged players to post not just complaints that had overwhelmed much of the internet at the time, but also encouraged players to provide long, detailed, well-argued reviews that clearly described the issues with the ending and ways that players felt it could be improved. While always a presence on the forums, Priestly merely acted as an observer who provided players with the space to contribute their feedback without challenging player opinion. Nevertheless, Priestly's continued presence in the thread suggests that what players were posting was officially being monitored for BioWare.

However, the BioWare community managers did not stop with this simple thread asking for reviews—which may itself have served as an attempt to test the waters of collaborative engagement—but instead continued to post threads asking for more specific feedback from players. In one thread, also started by Priestly and entitled “On the Mass Effect 3 Endings. Yes, We Are Listening,” Priestly shifted the relationship between players and developers and blurred the line between the two groups in the process when Priestly posted that BioWare and its developers “appreciate feedback and want to know that we are listening” to player suggestions and feedback. Priestly then requested that players post their favorite moments while also continuing to encourage debate in the community.¹²⁶ While the first thread from the community manager had initially been designed to encourage critical thought on the game and its ending by the players, this thread and its manager's requests crossed the threshold from writing prompt or player appreciation to an official solicitation for feedback and input from players and confirmed that BioWare was earnestly listening to what players were desperately saying. The implication, of course, was not only were they listening, but that these forum interactions suggested real

¹²⁶ Priestly, “On the Mass Effect 3 Endings.”

access to the developers and the process and therefore the potential to influence changes to the ending that BioWare may be producing. Whatever the implication and the reality, the post was persuasive enough that players engaged with it for 939 pages before being locked by moderators but not before it helped shape a general consensus that the ending was terrible but could, in fact, be improved.

While the previous threads primed the community to the idea of constructive feedback and its value to BioWare, one specific thread tipped the balance for the community and seems to have been the point when BioWare officially set in motion a revised ending for *Mass Effect 3* and the end of the controversy. This thread entitled “ME3 Suggested Changes Feedback Thread” was prompted by the message of another BioWare community manager, Jessica Merizan. Instead of asking for vague creative exercises, the thread specifically asked players for their feedback on the ending, offered encouragement, clearly stated that there would be a collaboration between developers and fans, and made it seem as if Merizan would be serving as a direct mediator between the two groups. If players were fighting for a new ending to the game, this thread ostensibly announced that BioWare had ceded victory to the players’ campaign. Merizan’s official announcement was interpreted as a direct request of the community.”¹²⁷ In this thread, Merizan was not simply asking for player feedback, but confirming that BioWare developers considered players collaborative partners in *Mass Effect 3* and were actively using players ideas in the creation of a new ending. However, her involvement in the discussion also meant that she was able to help steer the conversation, direct players to the “Retake *Mass Effect 3*” campaign and away from other campaigns, keep the feedback constructive, and presumably help streamline

¹²⁷ Jessica Merizan, “ME3 Suggested Changes Feedback Thread - Spoilers Allowed,” *BioWare Forums*, quoted by RaenImrahl, March 17, 2012, <https://forum.bioware.com/topic/286442-me3-suggested-changes-feedback-thread-spoilers-allowed/>.

the process for developers as they considered the feedback they were receiving. Because of the promise of collaboration and consideration, this thread became the central focus of the players involved in the controversy and drew thousands of replies that represented player investment in *Mass Effect 3* and this new form of player and developer collaboration that would create a new ending for the game, restore the players' agency, and control over the game and its meaning.

Like many of the replies in other BioWare initiated threads, player responses to Merizan's prompt were typically detailed, thoughtful and lengthy with specific critiques of the game's ending and how players would like to see it revised. Many of the responses posted by players were also specifically addressed to Merizan, Hudson, or BioWare itself as if they were operating within an established relationship, which suggests that players believed they were, in fact, collaborating with developers on a new ending. Because of the appearance of collaboration, players held the expectation of being heard by developers and that their suggestions would be considered and respected. Players who had been operating in opposition to the developers at BioWare throughout the controversy now seemed to be directly speaking to developers as part of a team of creators. This was no longer a protest but a collaboration and the majority of player interactions on the board began to reflect this turn. For the most part, players offered suggestions and feedback rather than demands or complaints that pointed to problems with the ending common to most players. These suggestions included adding an epilogue showing the fates of the characters,¹²⁸ softening the abruptness of the original ending,¹²⁹ and changing the

¹²⁸ ultraproud, "ME3 Suggested Changes Feedback Thread - Spoilers Allowed," *BioWare Forums*, March 17, 2012, <https://forum.bioware.com/topic/286442-me3-suggested-changes-feedback-thread-spoilers-allowed/>.

¹²⁹ mildhole, "ME3 Suggested Changes Feedback Thread - Spoilers Allowed," *BioWare Forums*, March 17, 2012, <https://forum.bioware.com/topic/286442-me3-suggested-changes-feedback-thread-spoilers-allowed/>.

disappointing cinematic where the Normandy flees the end of the battle.¹³⁰ Most importantly, players suggested that the new ending should offer at least one more additional choice when faced with the ending decision that would allow players to reject the ending choices completely.¹³¹ In this collaboration, players became part of the production process and not simply consumers of it.

The *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy represents one of the most significant player-led video game controversies because it was the first of its kind to utilize social media tactics that allowed it to grow significantly enough to garner the attention of developers. It is also the first to convince developers to engage directly with players in an openly collaborative—although not necessarily transparent—arrangement with players to produce a new text. However, what made the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy truly significant was that it worked. On April 5, 2012 almost a month after the release of the game and the beginning of the controversy, BioWare announced that they would officially release a new downloadable ending to *Mass Effect 3* in response to the controversy and player feedback on the forums and making it available as a free add-on for players to download and install if they desired.¹³² In the official announcement released on the Electronic Arts' website and reposted throughout the video game press and community, BioWare co-founder and general manager Dr. Ray Muzyka announced the production of a new *Mass Effect 3: Extended Cut* add-on for the game, stated that he was proud

¹³⁰ kilshrek, "ME3 Suggested Changes Feedback Thread - Spoilers Allowed," *BioWare Forums*, March 17, <https://forum.bioware.com/topic/286442-me3-suggested-changes-feedback-thread-spoilers-allowed/page-8#entry8450665>.

¹³¹ darthhowie, "ME3 Suggested Changes Feedback Thread - Spoilers Allowed," *BioWare Forums*, March 17, <https://forum.bioware.com/topic/286442-me3-suggested-changes-feedback-thread-spoilers-allowed/page-6#entry8450318>.

¹³² T.C. Sotteck, "'Mass Effect 3: Extended Cut' Free DLC to Expand on Trilogy Ending this Summer, not Change It," *The Verge*, April 5, 2012, <https://www.theverge.com/2012/4/5/2927531/mass-effect-3-extended-cut-announced>.

of the work that the BioWare team had done on the game, and reassured players that developers had listened to their suggestions and produced an ending that should address concerns.¹³³ Not only did the announcement and promise of a new ending make it seem that the controversy had been a success, but Muzyka specifically noted that developers turned to player input in order to develop the new ending when he said that:

Since launch, we have had time to listen to the feedback from our most passionate fans and we are responding. With the *Mass Effect 3: Extended Cut* we think we have struck a good balance in delivering the answers players are looking for while maintaining the team's artistic vision for the end of this story arc in the *Mass Effect* universe.¹³⁴

In this controversy and its eventual conclusion, BioWare's capitulation to player demands and Muzyka's acknowledgment of the value of player input effectively broke open the floodgates that would persuade future controversies that protest could persuade developers to change video games and forced them to conform to player ideas about their games and even the culture itself.

BioWare officially released the *Mass Effect 3: Extended Cut* as a free download to players on June 26, 2012 only four months after the release of the original game and assumedly with a development and production time shorter than those four months. For BioWare to develop new content presumably from scratch in such a short turnaround meant that a complete overhaul of the ending would have been nearly impossible to complete. Despite the accelerated production of the new content, BioWare produced an ending that added an entirely new epilogue. This new content mostly consisted of stills with voiceover narration by one of the characters, several cutscenes near the ending of the game that attempted to fill several plot holes that players had

¹³³ Electronic Arts, "BioWare Announces *Mass Effect 3: Extended Cut*," *Electronic Arts*, April 5, 2012, <https://www.ea.com/en-ca/news/bioware-announces-mass-effect-3-extended-cut>.

¹³⁴ Electronic Arts, "BioWare Announces."

noted in their feedback, and a lowering of one of the cumulative game scores that determined whether Commander Shepard ultimately survived the final battle, which made it far more possible for players to be able to save Shepard from certain death at the conclusion of the game.¹³⁵ With this new extended ending, BioWare did attempt to address many player concerns—but, obviously, not every concern or suggested feedback could be taken into account—and the new ending appears primarily drawn from player interactions on the BioWare forums. The epilogue was clearly meant to provide some of the closure that players had called for in their responses, while the additional cutscenes helped to fill in some unintentional blanks that players found during their playthroughs, and the player-requested option to reject the three choices entirely during the ending conversation returned greater control to players. In this new ending, the player-led controversy led to a new collaboration between players and developers and provided a lesson to the video game community that players who act have the power and agency to change the games that they play.

By the time that the new extended ending was released in the summer of 2012, the majority of the most intense fires of the campaign had already died down and been reduced to embers holding out for the promised ending. The response to the *Mass Effect 3: Extended Cut* generally ran from positive to begrudgingly neutral when it came to the changes that BioWare introduced and whether this new ending delivered what players had wanted. As reported on *Kotaku* after the wide release of the extended ending, most of the player responses were, in fact, positive and many declared the new ending left them feeling anywhere from “content” to “very pleased” to “satisfied” all the way to “so freaking happy” with some players indicating that the new ending effectively saved the series for them and made them want to return to playing the

¹³⁵ M. Suzek, “Documenting the Changes in Mass Effect 3’s Extended Cut DLC,” *engadget*, July 5, 2012, <https://www.engadget.com/2012-07-05-cataloguing-the-changes-in-mass-effect-3s-extended-cut-dlc.html>.

game they had rejected.¹³⁶ However, many players expected more than the brief add-on that BioWare could reasonably provide in such a short amount of both development and play time and expressed their continued rage over the perceived failure of the perceived original ending, the unsatisfactory revisions of the *Mass Effect 3: Extended Cut*, and their feelings of being let down by BioWare who, as they saw it, had disregarded their demands. The players who rejected the old and new endings declared that they could “finally trade in my ME3 copy,” that they “hated it then, hate it now,” and still believed BioWare to be “liars.” Additionally, some players appraised the new ending as “a pile of implied insults, more plot holes, useless scenes and a slideshow.” Without fail there were some players who simply stated that they felt “extremely disappointed the ec sucks balls.”¹³⁷ Whatever the individual player was regarding how well they believed BioWare had addressed their concerns, the *Mass Effect 3: Extended Cut* and BioWare’s capitulation to player protests was effective enough to appease player outrage and marked the end of the active period of the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy.

2.6 Conclusion

The *Mass Effect 3* controversy and BioWare’s decisions to respond to player demands through collaboration rather than rejection represents a shift in the way that developers and players interact and how players imagine themselves as part of the collaborative and creative process. The *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy has become the catalyst and inspiration for other player-led controversies that have become a common part of video game culture in the decade since. For years, video game controversies were dominated by moral outrage events initiated by outsiders to the video game community and industry who waged their own campaigns against

¹³⁶ Mike Fahey, “The Verdict is In: Fans Love / Hate the Mass Effect 3 Extended Cut,” *Kotaku*, June 26, 2012, <https://kotaku.com/the-verdict-is-in-fans-love-hate-the-mass-effect-3-e-5921394>.

¹³⁷ Fahey, “Verdict is In.”

video games everywhere from Fox News to Congress. These controversies against such games as the bloody *Death Race* and obscene *Grand Theft Auto* games revolved around attempts to force developers or the government to censor the content of video games in outsider attempts to exert power over a burgeoning industry and by extension its players and community. These attempts, of course, nearly always ended in failure to regulate the industry by any official means—although the implementation of the voluntary rating system may not have happened without this pressure—and these types of outsider outrage controversies have gradually become a thing of the video game past and difficult to imagine taking hold today with the exception of the occasional, feeble attempt to blame certain mass shootings on the perpetrator's playing of *Call of Duty*. However, even these attacks on video games are now typically ignored and written off as an inconsequential factor in the crime where once they would have been the primary focus.

As video games and the video game industry have developed and matured during the 2000s, video game controversies have also developed away from moral outrage to player outrage over control of the medium, the culture, the industry, and the ownership of each video game text. The attacks against *Grand Theft Auto*, sex, violence and other perceived moral perversions that dominated the culture for so many years have been replaced with a seemingly daily eruption of player-led video game controversies fueled by player outrage ignited by the player perception that these video games—in one fashion or another—belong to the players and are being taken away from player control by the industry in the vast majority of instances. Unlike the moral outrage controversies that seemed only intent on censoring content they didn't like, the rise of the player-led controversies has seen a far more diverse set of objects and goals that seem to develop based on the specific video game, community, and developer involved in the protest.

3 CHAPTER TWO: BATTLE WITHIN, BATTLE WITHOUT

In the world of *Mass Effect*, every choice matters. Every choice the player makes inside the game to craft Shepard's unique identity, every choice the player makes to romance Garrus or Liara or Tali, and every choice the player makes to spare the life of a nonplayer character or condemn an entire race matters to the narrative. Every choice matters because every choice is the player's to make. Unfortunately, the limitations of the *Mass Effect 3* ending shattered most players' faith in this core promise. While players believed their choices would ultimately decide the ending of the series and the fate of the galaxy, BioWare developers had made their own choice to construct a predetermined ending that allowed for little player influence and took the game out of players hands. The decision to take the fate of the game away from players ultimately forced the *Mass Effect* community to choose controversy in order to get the ending they wanted and reclaim their control over the games. For players and developers, the experience of interacting with a video game is first and foremost the experience of making a choice and expecting a reasonable and satisfying response from the system in return. An individual player's choices produce an experience that furthers the text for the individual player. However, the developer's choices during and after production—and sometimes in response to player feedback to the game—also function as a critical step to player experience because video games are essentially a series of choices made by individuals before, during, and after gameplay that cultivate a player's sense of agency. Developers influence player interaction and decisions by providing the space for players to make choices within a video game. If choice is taken away from players, then players will often respond with revolt.

The *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy and other player-led controversies all represent critical events where the specific qualities of video games and, more importantly, the experience

of playing video games encourage players to engage in collaborative production in the real world in order to produce a satisfying conclusion unavailable in the text. This collaborative production between developers and players through the text and through the mechanism of controversy resides at the core of video games as texts and controversies as movements. Play and controversy should be understood as acts of produsage—acts where the choices of developers merge with the choices of players—that allow for the development of agency and ownership through individual production as part of an evolving community production of meaning. With video games, the text is never complete when released from developers into the hands of players. Players incrementally interact with, alter, and revise the game text according to their needs and without oversight from developers. Developers often patch or revise aspects of a game based on player feedback regarding how well the game functions. Both scenarios allow players a sense of being co-producers of the text through their choices and persuades players of their agency and ownership over the text that they invest their time and energy to produce. By extension, this sense of agency and ownership allows players a sense of having a personal stake in the development and outcome of the game.

At their very core from development to play, video games are texts that encourage agency and controversy because video games are fundamentally a series of choices made by participants based on their personal experiences and expectations of the text. Every choice a player makes affects every aspect of the game and the production of experience. These choices are rarely contained within the bounds of the text itself. Before a video game reaches player hands, developers collaborate on choices that affect the gameplay, narrative, environment, graphics, and scores of other elements of the game that create the text while also creating the possibility for player experience through their own individual and sometimes collective choices.

By allowing players to interact with and change the text, developers also choose to cede some of their power over the text to the players who choose to engage with the developer's text. The player's experience of a video game is then influenced by the developer's choices, which then influences player choices in the text and sometimes outside of it in the form of controversy. These choices and experiences form the foundation of player agency and the development of player controversy. And, in some cases, the player's choice to protest such as in the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy persuades developers to make the choice to revise the text and create a new experience.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a foundation for the discussion of video games and their controversies as produsage in the following chapters and to illustrate how the fundamental aspects of player experience open the door to player agency, ownership, and by extension player controversy. In order to present this argument, this chapter examines the inherent features of video games that produce player experiences and encourage choice, agency, produsage and the resulting tensions that occur when player interactions and expectations of these elements become disrupted. The specific features of video games provide the opportunity for players to develop a sense of agency and ownership in relation to a video game. They also provide the opportunity for players to revolt when agency is disrupted. As a medium, video games have long been recognized as differing from many other narrative media because of their intrinsic need for interactivity and player input.¹³⁸ This chapter examines the specific qualities of video games that define the video game experience in terms of how they produce meaning for players through interactivity, their technological aspects, rules, and limitations and fundamental need for player choice and action. Video game rules and characteristics ultimately produce

¹³⁸ Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 71.

player experiences and expectations as a result. Player experiences ultimately represent the critical link between a video game and a video game controversy. In order to understand how the disruption of player experience leads to controversy, it is necessary to understand how players make their choices within the developer's framework of genre, graphics and user interfaces, and narrative. Each of these key characteristics embedded in a video game by developers' choices enable the production of player experience, expectations, and open the door for player agency. In addition to examining the video game text itself, the chapter provides examples of how developer choices and actions affect the production of a video game and therefore the production of the experience for the player, which can often directly lead to controversy. With potentially hundreds of individuals working on a specific video game, there are typically thousands of choices made in the production of a video game that can be influenced by a personal or collective creative desire that can influence the player experience. However, production and experience are also influenced by financial, technical, and cultural limitations that affect the text, and sometimes influence developers to alter the text based on negative player feedback regarding the text's limitations.

3.1 When Developer and Player Choices Collide

In most cases, controversy erupts when the best intentions of developers collide with the expectations and experiences of players in the real world. When the core experiences of games become disrupted such as in the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy, it forces developers and players to grapple with the reality of their expectations versus the results—and often do so through choices made outside of play. All of the rules that developers program into video games create the foundation for player experience and the foundation of both developer production and player experience in a video game. These rules and characteristics allow for choices to be made

by anyone—player or developer—who interacts with the video game because choice is what happens between rules and outcomes and sets the stage for agency. Players make choices in direct response to the expectations, logic, and limitations of the video game text and player choices affect the player’s personal experience of the game—even the choice to alter the text through modification or force changes in the text through controversy. The choices that developers make in order to initially produce the text tend to have more of a universal effect on player experience—one developer choice during production will affect the experiences of all who play the game—but are also limited by the reality of technology and the real life decisions sometimes made outside of developer control. The development process for any video game plays out based on a series of choices intended to produce an experience for players. These choices include design, graphical, music, and narrative choices among hundreds of other decisions during production. However, every developer choice represents part of a larger matrix of financial and cultural choices that shape development, player experience and often the player response—and potential influential action—both before and after the game has been released. The *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy stands apart as one of the most significant examples of the disruption between developer intent and player experience. However, it represents only one example that led to controversy as part of a cultural and industrial overall trend.

Every game has its own rules and elements that must be assembled according to the game’s overall logic and aesthetics before a player can interact with the game and produce an experience. This means that every game starts with the actions, interactions, and choices of members of one or several development studios that are then typically broken down into smaller teams with specific design goals who then choose how to utilize the system’s elements and rules. While most games have hundreds or even thousands of players who interact with the game and

create personal experiences for themselves, development studios may be very small like the three-person team behind award-winning indie game *Depression Quest* (2012)¹³⁹ or may have an extensive global production staff like major mainstream hit *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, which reportedly had around 1,500 workers who participated in some aspect of the final product.¹⁴⁰ Additionally, each developer will have different goals and motivations that determine how and why each game creates potential for player interactions and experiences. The developer's goal for the freely-distributed *Depression Quest*, for instance, was to raise awareness for mental illness¹⁴¹ while the focus for the developers of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) was to create an immersive gameplay and narrative experience for players while also producing a video game that would bring in a high amount of revenue for the studio.¹⁴²

While many controversies explode because of the disruption of player expectations and choices, video game controversies germinate in the developer's experience and the limitations of production. For video games and their developers, rules and expectations are rarely solely under the control of developers and are influenced by financial, cultural, and technological limitations that help determine the limitations and ruling logic of each game and translate into the player experience. Some or all of these limitations may clash with developer goals and player expectations. In general, most video game studios want to create a game that produces a meaningful experience for players while also satisfying creative goals, but these goals and what

¹³⁹ Zoe Quinn, Patrick Lindsey and Isaac Schankler, *Depression Quest*, February 14, 2013, <http://www.depressionquest.com/>.

¹⁴⁰ CD Projekt Red, "Paszporty Polityki 2015 - CD PROJEKT RED || Podziękowania dla studia," YouTube video, 1:30, January 13, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PKgTg3kpPdQ&t=41s>.

¹⁴¹ Zoe Quinn, "Depression Quest," *Games for Change*, February 14, 2013, <http://www.gamesforchange.org/game/depression-quest/>.

¹⁴² Haley Williams, "CD Projekt Red Explains Why Witcher 3's Open World Worked," *Gamespot*, May 28, 2020, <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/cd-projekt-red-explains-why-witcher-3s-open-world-/1100-6477549/>.

any given studio sees as meaningful varies and is often hampered by studio resources and backing, which ultimately affects the player experience of the game. One of the most immediate and far-reaching choices and determiners of game development depends upon the financial situation of the studio and pervades every aspect of the development process. A studio with strong financial resources will have greater access—and a greater desire to produce large, mainstream games—to more powerful technological tools and diverse development resources. These resources and tools may allow the production of a technologically sophisticated, graphically detailed, immersive gaming experience, but it will also allow the studio greater access to the labor power required to produce the game and the distribution channels necessary to reach consumers. On the other hand, a small, independent studio lacking these resources may therefore desire to produce a smaller, more personal gaming experience influenced by the resources available. The reality is that both come with their advantages and disadvantages when developing a game for people to ultimately play and both influence the player experience of the finished product.

As video game journalist and critic Jason Schreier points out at the beginning of his book *Blood, Sweat, and Pixels: The Triumphant, Turbulent Stories Behind How Video Games are Made*, the first important question of game development is always “How are we going to pay for this thing?” because it’s directly tied to how and if the developer can achieve their vision for the game. The development process for *Mass Effect*’s sister BioWare property *Dragon Age* illustrates how this both helps and hinders the development process at a well-funded studio producing major mainstream games and how it affects the player experience. In his case study of the production of the third game on the series, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014), Schreier details the development team’s issues replacing their outdated game engine—the coding programs the

developers utilize to construct everything in the game from rules to graphics to gameplay—with a new engine called Frostbite that was adopted, in part, because BioWare’s parent company Electronic Arts already owned the engine. Unfortunately, Electronic Arts pushed this adoption without consideration for the fact that BioWare did not have the resources to manage the engine or the fact that the engine was ill-suited to the developer’s vision.¹⁴³ While the Frostbite engine was sophisticated and powerful enough to allow the developers to create detailed, immersive fantasy environments, the engine—which had been designed for first person shooters—lacked the functions to create models for player characters, third-person combat systems or even automatic save points. This meant that the development team had to spend substantial resources to build these functions into the game and the engine became a constant source of bugs, frustration, and delays.¹⁴⁴ Ultimately, this technological mismatch resulted in added labor and forced developers to utilize the power of suggestion of greater scope and gameplay mechanics to cover the game’s limitations,¹⁴⁵ an overabundance of trivial sidequests early in the game that psychologically trapped many players in the beginning area of the game, disruptive bugs in early versions of the game, and what some players felt was a disjointed main storyline because of its lack of a clear narrative throughline.¹⁴⁶ While the developers at BioWare had the resources to create a massive fantasy game because of their backing from Electronic Arts, the financial decisions of Electronic Arts filtered into the game experience because of the use of its cumbersome, incompatible game engine.

¹⁴³ Jason Schreier, *Blood, Sweat, and Pixels: The Triumphant, Turbulent Stories Behind How Video Games are Made* (New York: Harper Collins, 2017), 147-149.

¹⁴⁴ Schreier, *Blood, Sweat, and Pixels*, 150-151.

¹⁴⁵ Schreier, *Blood, Sweat, and Pixels*, 162.

¹⁴⁶ Vince Ingentino, “Dragon Age: Inquisition Review,” *IGN*, November 11, 2014, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2014/11/11/dragon-age-inquisition-review>.

This example illustrates that the real rules that govern these imaginary spaces are not merely the result of developer choices translated into the game. Instead, video games are the result of real-world choices that influence development. The finished playable games typically come from a combination of the influence of technological resources, industrial culture, and cultural expectations from within the developer, player and greater cultural communities. Beyond the very direct and often immediate effect of the game engine, code, and technological assets, games are nonetheless bound by the motivations and cohesiveness of groups of humans—sometimes hundreds of participants who may never directly communicate with one another—collaborating on development and feedback on the project. Typically, these collaborations are composed of many developers working with each other and then eventually with players who influence production first as an imagined audience and then as a source of critical feedback. The mandate of the publisher may require developers to include profit-oriented elements in the game that directly affects player agency and experience like microtransactions, but the circumstances and cultural backgrounds of the development labor force may also have a significant effect on the playability of the game or the ideological choices available to players. Of course, none of this production occurs in a vacuum and cultural norms and standards invariably influence what topics and images developers will address during production and in the text while player feedback and game sales influence production, game updates and potentially changes to future projects.

One of the more recent examples of publisher choices affecting player engagement and satisfaction and the development of player-led controversy is the disastrous 2017 release of *Star Wars: Battlefront II* (2017) developed primarily by EA DICE and published by Electronic Arts—which also not so coincidentally utilizes EA’s Frostbite engine.¹⁴⁷ Despite the title, the

¹⁴⁷ Electronic Arts, “Frostbite,” *Electronic Arts*, <https://www.ea.com/frostbite>.

game is the fourth main iteration of Electronic Arts' shooter series based in the greater *Star Wars* universe and was highly anticipated by players and *Star Wars* fanatics. While players expected a satisfying shooter in the vein of previous games in the series, what they encountered instead when they played the game was a complicated and oppressive pay-to-win system employing loot boxes—a form of microtransactions that allow players to purchase in-game items and bypass possibly hundreds of hours of play time—that required players who wanted to progress to pay rather than play their way through the game.¹⁴⁸ After already spending more than \$60 on the base game, the game encouraged players to spend additional cash on loot boxes containing randomized “Star Cards” that were critical for leveling up the player-character and progressing through the ranks in the game. These loot boxes could provide significant boosts to character stats or relatively useless items such as dance emotes. The luck of the draw encouraged players to spend more for the possibility of something useful in a manageable amount of play time, but each one required real world player funds with the intention of becoming real world profits for Electronic Arts.¹⁴⁹

Electronic Arts' decision to include microtransactions that limited players' ability to successfully play the game was not without consequence for players, the developers, or the game itself. For players, the immediate effect of the inclusion of the loot box mechanic meant that players could buy what they needed to advance—and quickly buy and buy again—or play for thousands of hours in order to acquire the playable characters necessary to progress in the game. The loot box mechanic effectively diminished player agency to the point of insignificance. With

¹⁴⁸ Matt Fernandez, “‘Star Wars’ Video Game Microtransactions Ignite Controversy,” *Variety*, November 23, 2017, <https://variety.com/2017/digital/news/star-wars-video-game-controversy-microtransaction-loot-box-1202621913/>.

¹⁴⁹ GameSpot Staff, “Star Wars Battlefront 2's Loot Box Controversy Explained,” *GameSpot*, November 22, 2017, <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/star-wars-battlefront-2s-loot-box-controversy-expl/1100-6455155/>.

either option, the mechanic grossly mocked player effort and expectations, diminished *Star Wars: Battlefront II*'s ability to produce negotiable consequences, and rendered the player experience more akin to gambling than playing a game. In fact, players reportedly estimated that in order to actually progress through play rather than payment, one would have to grind for around forty hours¹⁵⁰—or around the same amount of hours as a complete middle length game—to see rewards for effort and a valorized outcome. Because player effort was essentially ineffective in the game itself, many players responded by redirecting their efforts into a controversy demanding that Electronic Arts modify the loot box system to make the game more competitive and playable without the necessity of microtransactions. The player revolt against the game's loot boxes and Electronic Arts spread online before eventually provoking a response from Electronic Arts after a post by the company attempting to defend itself on Reddit became the most downvoted post in the history of the site with nearly 700,000 downvotes.¹⁵¹ Electronic Arts promptly announced changes to the loot box system the next day.¹⁵²

For developer EA DICE and publisher Electronic Arts, the effects of the choice to include prohibitive microtransactions in the game reached beyond the game and the players who purchased *Star Wars: Battlefront II*. While EA DICE did not incur as much hatred or blame for the problems with the game as Electronic Arts, the controversy and resulting low sales of the game made it difficult for EA DICE to meet Electronic Arts' financial expectations, caused the

¹⁵⁰ Ethan Gach, "Unlocking Heroes in Star Wars Battlefront II Could Take A Long Time [Update]," *Kotaku*, November 12, 2017, <https://kotaku.com/players-are-trying-to-calculate-how-long-it-takes-to-un-1820373111>.

¹⁵¹ Gene Park, "How a Star Wars Video Game Faced Charges That It Was Promoting Gambling," *The Washington Post*, November 18, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/comic-riffs/wp/2017/11/18/how-a-star-wars-video-game-faced-charges-that-it-was-promoting-gambling/>.

¹⁵² Oskar Gabrielson, "An Update on Star Wars Battlefront II," *Electronic Arts*, November 16, 2017, https://www.ea.com/games/starwars/battlefront/star-wars-battlefront-2/news/pre-launch-update?utm_campaign=swbf2_hd_na_ic_soco_twt_swbfii-prelaunchblog-tw&utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social&cid=42029&ts=1623350992099.

studio to lose considerable reputation with players, and forced developers to reassess their approach to production and player sentiment.¹⁵³ Having once been voted worst company in America ahead of the likes of Comcast and Bank of America,¹⁵⁴ the cumulative effect of the predatory loot box system on Electronic Arts' reputation was likely negligible, but the controversy and resulting negative attention—primarily in the form of an investigation into whether or not loot boxes constitute a form of gambling by the Belgian Gaming Commission¹⁵⁵—did persuade Electronic Arts to attempt to fix them in the short term by modifying the loot box system and apologizing for the mistakes made in the implementation of the loot boxes with promises to do better for players in the future.¹⁵⁶ The end result of Electronic Arts' decision to include essentially game breaking microtransactions and the ensuing controversy ends much more positively for players than it began. In the years after the release of *Star Wars: Battlefront II* and the player revolt, EA DICE has updated and modified the once broken game into a well-balanced experience that allows player effort to dictate progress rather than player pocketbooks.¹⁵⁷

Along with the influence of publishers on the development of games, the influence of management and publishers on labor practices represents a well-known detriment to developer

¹⁵³ James Batchelor, "Restoring Trust in Star Wars Battlefront II," *Games Industry*, August 23, 2019, <https://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2019-08-22-restoring-trust-in-star-wars-battlefront-ii>.

¹⁵⁴ Schreier, *Blood, Sweat and Pixels*, 141.

¹⁵⁵ M. Moon, "'Battlefront II' Under Investigation in Belgium Over Loot Crates," *Engadget*, November 16, 2017, <https://www.engadget.com/2017-11-16-battlefront-ii-belgium-gambling-investigation.html>.

¹⁵⁶ Andrew Webster, "EA Says It's Learned from Star Wars Battlefront Controversy, Vows to 'Be Better,'" *The Verge*, April 13, 2018, <https://www.theverge.com/2018/4/13/17230874/ea-star-wars-battlefront-2-loot-box-patrick-soderlund-interview>.

¹⁵⁷ Chris Chenard, "Why Star Wars Battlefront 2 is Worth Playing in 2021," *Screenrant*, January 22, 2021, <https://screenrant.com/star-wars-battlefront-2-good-worth-playing-2021/>.

choices and by extension a detriment to games and players. The most notorious and often far-reaching of these practices remains the demand for crunch time—the ever-expanding period when developers are required to work extended hours and days in order to complete the game often to the detriment of health and production¹⁵⁸—from developers in order to meet deadlines and budget constraints and often produce games with technological issues and poor player experiences. Unsurprisingly, this is another facet of game development that Electronic Arts became famous for embracing after several lawsuits over labor conditions from employees exposed how widespread the practice is in video game development.¹⁵⁹ In *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter describe this period of game development as a “period of crisis” for labor often with 80-hour work weeks that more and more has become normalized over the entire production process that builds a culture of overwork into development.¹⁶⁰ The effects of labor practices such as crunch on developers represent clear attempts by management and publishers to control development costs and milestones, but also effectively control labor by forcing overwhelming working conditions that include lack of proper compensation, overexhaustion, health issues and burnout, and the constant threat of replacement hanging over each employee’s heads.¹⁶¹ While the effects of crunch time directly affect developers, the pressure from this labor practice inevitably affects the final product shipped to players’ hands and their experience of the game.

¹⁵⁸ Randy Nichols, *The Video Game Business* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 149.

¹⁵⁹ Nichols, *The Video Game Business*, 155-156.

¹⁶⁰ Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter, *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 59-60.

¹⁶¹ Dyer-Witheford, *Games of Empire*, 61-62.

The use of crunch time during production often results in effectively unfinished games and represents one of the driving forces behind the player rebellions that turn into controversies. One of the more recent and disastrous examples of the effects of crunch time on a game and the player's ability to play comes from the release of CD Projekt Red's open-world action role-playing game *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020). As the follow-up to CD Projekt Red's blockbuster release of their popular *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* and after years of delays in development, player and developer expectations for the game were astoundingly high. During production, CD Projekt Red promised developers and players that there would be no mandatory crunch time and more humane working conditions for labor.¹⁶² However, CD Projekt Red's ultimate failure to uphold this promise and its resulting expectations complicated both the production process and player confidence in development—both of which would affect the game itself. With the game's final release date set for the fall of 2020 after multiple delays, CD Projekt Red's commitment to no mandatory crunch time crumbled as early as January 2020 when CD Projekt Red's chief executive Adam Kicinski conceded to investors that crunch time and what would become several more delays would be required in order to complete the game because of what he described as “technical bug-fixing and polishing” during the final stages of development on what he assured those in the meeting was a completely playable game.¹⁶³ Despite Kicinski's assurances, the apparent reality of the game's production was that developers had actually been required to work mandatory crunch time of long-hour, six-day work weeks for more than a year before the release

¹⁶² Jason Schreier, “CD Projekt Red Boss Again Promises That Cyberpunk Devs Won't Have To Crunch,” *Kotaku*, June 14, 2019, <https://kotaku.com/cd-projekt-red-boss-again-promises-that-cyberpunk-devs-1835518344>.

¹⁶³ Owen S. Good, *Cyberpunk 2077 Still Needs Crunch Time to Complete, CEO says*, *Polygon*, January 18, 2020, <https://www.polygon.com/2020/1/18/21071895/cyberpunk-2077-delay-crunch-cd-projekt-red>.

of the game.¹⁶⁴ While Kacinski insisted to press and investors that developers were happy about the delays and extra work required to complete the game,¹⁶⁵ the delays meant that not only were developers being required to work more hours but also that they had no idea when or if it would end, felt betrayed by management,¹⁶⁶ and left publicly “frustrated and angry” with the management and the process.¹⁶⁷

When *Cyberpunk 2077* was finally released on December 10, 2020 for PC and consoles, the game was, to put it kindly, an unplayable mess for the majority of players but especially for those trying to play the game on Sony’s console-leading PlayStation 4 or Microsoft’s Xbox One. The console version of the game suffered from severe and far-ranging glitches. Most players encountered significant frame rate drops that led to choppy graphics, game freezes and crashes, and NPCs reduced to polygons rather than anything resembling a human¹⁶⁸—all things that are unusual in current generation video games. Beyond these immediately apparent issues with the game, players also had to contend with the game’s poor artificial intelligence and glitches that, among many other things, inexplicably caused vehicles to fall from the sky, rendered trees in

¹⁶⁴ Charlie Hall, “Cyberpunk 2077 Has Involved Months of Crunch, Despite Past Promises,” *Polygon*, December 4, 2020, <https://www.polygon.com/2020/12/4/21575914/cyberpunk-2077-release-crunch-labor-delays-cd-projekt-red>.

¹⁶⁵ Surej Singh, “‘Cyberpunk 2077’ Crunch was ‘Not That Bad’, Says CD Projekt RED Head,” *NME*, October 29, 2020, <https://www.nme.com/news/gaming-news/cyberpunk-2077-crunch-was-not-that-bad-says-cd-projekt-red-head-2802972>.

¹⁶⁶ Lauren Rouse, “Former Cyberpunk 2077 Dev Talks About Their Experience With Crunch,” *Kotaku AU*, October 15, 2020, <https://www.kotaku.com.au/2020/10/cyberpunk-2077-ps5-xbox-crunch-culture-former-dev/>.

¹⁶⁷ Jason Schreier, “Cyberpunk Game Maker Faces Hostile Staff After Failed Launch,” *Bloomberg*, December 18, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-12-18/cyberpunk-game-maker-faces-hostile-staff-after-failed-launch>.

¹⁶⁸ Patricia Hernandez, “Cyberpunk 2077 on PS4 and Xbox One Seems to Have Major Problems,” *Polygon*, December 9, 2020, <https://www.polygon.com/2020/12/9/22166912/cyberpunk-2077-base-ps4-xbox-one-bugs-issues-glitches-performance-trees-bushes>.

actively moving and independently elastic state,¹⁶⁹ assaulted players with seizure inducing graphics with no warning,¹⁷⁰ and game camera issues of becoming unplayably stuck in the third-person.¹⁷¹ Additionally, the game was plagued by a notorious glitch where the player-character's customized penis would unexpectedly pop out of their pants.¹⁷² Most players had preordered the game years earlier and purchased the game for a minimum of \$60. The combination of player expectations of experience, financial commitments, and technological issues, and state of the console version of the game outraged players and drove them to protest the game online. In light of these game issues, players were quick to turn on CD Projekt Red and the game with many players making demands of developers sometimes to the point of harassment.¹⁷³

Player controversies over disappointing games are not new, but the *Cyberpunk 2077* controversy signals an intriguing shift because many players directly blamed the problems with the game on CD Projekt Red's use of crunch time and the lack of developer choice during game production. As a result, many blamed the problems on management for overworking

¹⁶⁹ Mike Isaac and Kellen Browning, "Cyberpunk 2077 Was Supposed to Be the Biggest Video Game of the Year. What Happened?," *New York Times*, December 19, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/19/style/cyberpunk-2077-video-game-disaster.html>.

¹⁷⁰ Ethan Gach, "Report: Cyberpunk 2077 Causes Seizure, Doesn't Contain Prominent Warning [Update]," *Kotaku*, December 8, 2020, <https://kotaku.com/cyberpunk-2077-causes-seizure-doesn-t-contain-warning-1845834693>.

¹⁷¹ Christopher Livingston, "Cyberpunk 2077 Third-Person Camera Glitch Shows a Disturbingly Elastic Headless V," *PC Gamer*, December 18, 2020, <https://www.pcgamer.com/cyberpunk-2077-third-person-camera-glitch-shows-a-disturbingly-elastic-headless-v/>.

¹⁷² Nicole Carpenter, "Cyberpunk 2077 Characters Can't Get Their Penises to Stop Poking Through Their Pants," *Polygon*, December 10, 2020, <https://www.polygon.com/2020/12/10/22167349/cyberpunk-2077-penis-glitch-breasts>.

¹⁷³ Philip Martinez, "Cyberpunk 2077' Developer Temporarily Leaves Twitter Amid Intense Fan Backlash," *Newsweek*, December 15, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.com/cyberpunk-2077-developer-leaves-twitter-death-threats-cd-projekt-red-1554925>.

developers.¹⁷⁴ In effect, players recognized that the choices and agency of developers had also been compromised by the development process and directed the controversy at the studio practices that robbed players and developers of expectations and choice. As for CD Projekt Red, their response to the release of the game and the resulting controversy adopted a mix of blaming the players for even expecting a finished and well-performing game while also blaming the hardware for not being able to keep up with the game specifically developed for it. However, Adam Kacinski did concede to investors that CD Projekt Red may have “underestimated the scale and complexity of the issues” plaguing production and “ignored the signals about the need for additional time to refine the game on the base last-gen consoles.”¹⁷⁵ In other words, the state of the game and its problems could not be blamed on player expectations, but rather CD Projekt Red’s choice to focus on crunch time to publish the game on its release date instead of focusing on actually finishing the game. Six days after the launch of the obviously unfinished game, Sony made the unprecedented move to pull the game from its storefront and offered players who purchased the game from the PlayStation store full refunds for the game¹⁷⁶ while Microsoft similarly opted to refund players but still make the game available for purchase.¹⁷⁷ However, since the initial disastrous release of the game, CD Projekt Red has not abandoned the game. Instead they have offered a series of patches in an attempt to make the game playable for anyone

¹⁷⁴ Patricia Hernandez, “The Cyberpunk 2077 Crunch Backlash,” *Polygon*, October 7, 2020, <https://www.polygon.com/2020/10/7/21505804/cyberpunk-2077-cd-projekt-red-crunch-youtube-jason-schreier-labor-the-witcher-3>.

¹⁷⁵ Michael Kan, “CD Projekt Red Tries to Explain Why Cyberpunk 2077 Sucks on Consoles,” *PC Magazine*, December 15, 2020, <https://www.pcmag.com/news/cd-projekt-red-tries-to-explain-why-cyberpunk-2077-sucks-on-consoles>.

¹⁷⁶ Sony Interactive Entertainment, “Cyberpunk 2077 Refunds,” *Playstation.com*, December 17, 2020, <https://www.playstation.com/en-us/cyberpunk-2077-refunds/>.

¹⁷⁷ Derrick Bryson Taylor, “Sony Removes Cyberpunk 2077 From PlayStation Store After Complaints,” *New York Times*, December 18, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/18/technology/cyberpunk-2077-refund.html>.

using a console to play the game with a re-release of the patched console game on June 21, 2021.¹⁷⁸

The effects on player experience and exploration from the choices of others are almost always compounded when they converge with the influences of the general culture and what players and the industry expect and will tolerate. The choice of a developer to include or exclude a certain topic, action, or identity represents a choice to allow for players to engage and experience the game in a specific way. These choices often limit the player experience based on cultural pressures and indeed the financial effects of their choices. The use of the game ratings systems represents one of the most ubiquitous limitations of developer and player choice from outside the culture. In the United States, the Entertainment Software Ratings Board—generally known as the ESRB—voluntarily regulates video games through review and assigns a rating based on its evaluation of the game broken down into Everyone (E), Everyone 10+ (E10+), Teen (T), Mature (M), Adults Only (AO).¹⁷⁹ On the surface, each of these ratings acts as a guide for consumers as to what type of content one can expect in the game, but like all ratings systems these ratings serve to dictate what type of content can be included in the game experience particularly when it comes to content that deals with sex and sexuality, drug use, and certain types of violence. Developers are free to include whatever they want in terms of sex, drugs, and violence—and players often develop expectations accordingly—but also then risk an Adults

¹⁷⁸ Joe Skrebels, “Cyberpunk 2077’s Latest Patch Continues to Try and Make the Game Run Better on Console,” *IGN*, June 17, 2021, <https://www.ign.com/articles/cyberpunk-patch-1-23-console-cpu-improved>.

¹⁷⁹ Entertainment Software Ratings Board, “Ratings Guide,” *ESRB*, December 17, 2021, <https://www.esrb.org/ratings-guide/>.

Only rating that will essentially ban the game from major retailers who will not sell a game with that rating.¹⁸⁰

However, there are times when player culture rather than the general culture influences player expectations of games and content that affect experience for all. What the community will or will not accept can have an effect on anything from player character choices to gameplay mechanics and can often shift rapidly over the course of even a few years and often cannot be separated from the gamer identities. For decades, player characters were limited to strictly white, heterosexual males in part because this archetype reflected the average developer but also because players had difficulty accepting any deviation from this standard. Recent incidents illustrate this unwillingness in the community in the extreme backlashes over the inclusion of a playable female character in *Battlefield V* (2018),¹⁸¹ the recent controversy by some gamers over the starring and supporting lesbian and trans male characters in critically-acclaimed *The Last of Us Part II* (2020),¹⁸² and the notorious misogynistic Gamergate campaign. These controversies illustrate the limits of the community's willingness to accept inclusive changes and upset players have often discouraged developers to push boundaries in past video game productions. The player tolerance for problematic aspects of games and in particular problematic gameplay aspects of games even has the potential to persuade developers to alter games after release in order to satisfy player conditions. Video games like *Cyberpunk 2071* and *No Man's Sky* (2016) represent

¹⁸⁰ Chris Morris, "Wal-Mart, Target Pull 'Grand Theft Auto,'" *CNN*, July 20, 2005, <https://money.cnn.com/2005/07/20/technology/personaltech/gta/>.

¹⁸¹ Megan Farokhmanesh, "EA on the Backlash Against Women in *Battlefield V*: 'Accept it or don't buy the game,'" *The Verge*, June 12, 2018, <https://www.theverge.com/2018/6/12/17453728/ea-women-in-battlefield-v-backlash-response>.

¹⁸² Jen Glennon, Dail Johnston and Eric Francisco, "The Rest of Us: The Last of Us Part II Trans Controversy, Explained," *Inverse*, May 14, 2020, <https://www.inverse.com/gaming/last-of-us-2-trans-controversy-explained-abby-tlou>.

games altered by developers for issues tied to gameplay and technical problems but this is also true for games like *Mass Effect 3* where developers created additional content to supplement the game's problematic ending.

The *Mass Effect* series itself is a prime example of the limits of what the general public and the gaming community will choose to accept and how quickly these attitudes can change, specifically concerning BioWare's handling of queer romances over the course of the trilogy. Each of the games in the series allows the player-character to enter into a romantic relationship with a variety of different species and genders, but the first game limited the male version of the player-character, Commander Shepard, to heterosexual partners, which BioWare did not change until *Mass Effect 3* when human squadmate Kaidan Alenko became a choice for both male and female Shepard. The reason it took BioWare so long to include more queer male options was not that the politically progressive studio was uninterested in allowing these relationships, but that they were concerned about backlash regarding the inclusion of homosexuality in the game from both players and outsiders. After Fox News pushed a controversy over a nonexistent lesbian sex scene in *Mass Effect*, BioWare became more conservative in how it depicted romances for fear of controversy, and these fears directly affected the production on the games and player experiences. Developers admitted that internal concerns over conservative backlash persuaded them to change the intended sexuality of one of the female squadmates, Jack, from pansexual to straight during the production of *Mass Effect 2* in order to eliminate the external threat.¹⁸³ Considering how successfully Fox News ran with the false story regarding outrageous lesbian sex scenes, BioWare may not have been incorrect that there would have been pushback from the

¹⁸³ Cian Maher, "Mass Effect 2's Jack Was Originally Pansexual, But Non-Straight Romances Were Cut Because Of Fox News," *The Gamer*, January 22, 2021, <https://www.thegamer.com/mass-effect-2-jack-gay-pansexual-fox-news/>.

inclusion of a new gay romance option. However, despite conservative pressures, players themselves were not as particularly bothered by this possibility in the game. In fact, by the time that the third game in the series went into development, players had begun to demand the inclusion of more gay romance options for both the female and male Shepard—a demand that BioWare embraced wholeheartedly and without reservation in the final game.¹⁸⁴

Developer choices encourage player choices and interactivity that create the player experience and the potential for agency. However, the choices and limitations of video games and their production extend beyond the boundaries of a game to any point where the system can be influenced. These rules, limitations, and outside influences suggest that the developer of a video game should not be considered the sole producer of a video game but rather one of many interactors who influence and produce the game through their personal choices. Developer choices create the initial video game and its system and are often complex and influenced by the choices of others that often alter the outcome of the text and player experience. A developer may have specific plans for a game, but outside forces such as financial costs, technical limitations, publisher interference, labor issues, and player pushback all play roles in producing the final product. Every game and every developer choice eventually collides with the expectations of players and their desire to control their experience. Each of these influences, in turn, collaborators and the text and have a direct effect on the player experience, which may trigger a controversy that demands changes to the game. Ultimately, video games are not made by developers. They are made by the choices and interactions between everyone who interacts with a video game system that produces a player experience.

¹⁸⁴ J. Condit, “‘Mass Effect Legendary Edition’ Doesn’t Add Same-Sex Romance to the Originals,” *Engadget*, February 2, 2021, <https://www.engadget.com/mass-effect-legendary-gay-characters-160055997.html>.

3.2 Genre: Player Expectations and Experiences

Every choice and rule a developer makes for a game and its production leads to a potential experience for any player of the game. These choices also create the possibility for players to make their own individual choices within the text and influence their expectations for control. For players, the ability to make individual choices within a video game and have them result in reasonable outcomes represents the key characteristic of player experience intrinsically tied to player controversy. Developers often focus on the building blocks of player experience such as code, mechanics, and the individual parts of the game during production. Players, on the other hand, utilize these building blocks to experience games as habitable spaces that allow for player choice and intervention within a world. A development team may only experience one facet of the game over the course of years as they work to complete the game. However, players experience the game and its characteristics as a complete—admittedly, not always as completed as developers and players would like—textual whole as they interact with the world and control the player character and game’s point-of-view in the space. These elements of player control privilege the player’s choices by giving them definitive say over the action and outcomes in the game and the power to remake the experience whenever they desire. For players, playing represents more than just winning, collecting points, or the limitations of choice imposed by the game’s rules. Playing video games means being able to make choices that lead to satisfactory game outcomes and depends on a sense of agency over the text. These choices could be tied to combat, the accumulation of points, character development, or a combination of activities that progress the narrative. Every game choice a player makes contributes to the player experience beyond the bounds of developer choices and ensures player control over experience.

Most contemporary video games utilize a truly multimedia array of content and technical elements that comprise the medium of the video game that influences player experience and choice. This includes such diverse features as music, 2D and 3D art models, voice acting, minigames within the larger game, weapon and item collection, sound effects, game area maps, player character and sometimes nonplayer character control, save and autosave functions, gameworld encyclopedias, cutscenes, and even loading screens with each element comprising a fraction of what players interact with and experience. Each of these elements tends to make up smaller pieces and parts of the primary elements tied to the player experience but almost all games are composed of major developer choices that utilize genre and gameplay, video graphics and aesthetic, interface, and the narrative as the core of the experience—an experience that may begin before even playing the game and has no reason to end once the game concludes.

While most of a player's game choices occur during gameplay, player choices always begin in the real world before ever playing a game. A player may choose to play *Mass Effect 3* based on a combat trailer or the outer space setting presented in reviews and promotional materials. Or a player may choose to play *Mass Effect 3* because of their personal investment in the narrative from their experiences of the two previous games. Because player choice begins in the real world rather than the game itself, player video game choices always exist with one foot in the real world and one step away from asserting player choice and agency back in that real world. For most players, the first game choice they make depends on the answer to the question, "What kind of game is it?" For video games, the answer to this question lies in the game's genre because it typically determines the thematic experience of the game and also the type of interactivity and player expectations in terms of gameplay, mechanics, and narrative. While genres in film, television, and literature may primarily indicate similar themes or techniques of a

genre, video game genres indicate similar themes and techniques but also the style of gameplay involved in order to progress the game. This means that all video games necessarily represent hybrid genres that merge thematic genre properties along with the functional genre properties of gameplay, which in itself may include more than one type of gameplay genre.

One game may be described thematically as a horror game and functionally as an action game like the *Silent Hill* series, another as a military stealth shooter like the *Metal Gear Solid* series, another as a fantasy or sci-fi role-playing game like Bethesda's *Elder Scrolls* and *Fallout* series respectively. Or a game may even be described as a combination of genres such as a military sci-fi space shooter role-playing game like the *Mass Effect* series. Each of these generic descriptors sets expectations for what the game will offer players in terms of themes, world building, and player interactions with the game. They also set expectations for what players want out of a game and what they assume the game will allow them to do within the confines of the gamespace. Perhaps more critically, they create expectations for the kinds of choices players should be able to make and what degree of agency they should have over the game. Additionally, the generic elements a player feels defines one game or another will depend on the combination of how developers choose to construct and present a game's genre along with the generic aspects that a player sees as most important to their own experience.

Video games, player expectation, and player experience can be influenced by specific elements of production that require the player to influence the outcome of the game and its narrative. This means that video game genres represent one of the most critical aspects of the video game experience because developer choices in a game's genre define video game parameters and possible experiences available through interactivity and the direct audience production of the text. The player's ability to interact with a game and influence the progression

of the game through interactive choices depends on what type of game it is—in other words, what a game’s genre is—and what expectations for experience and choice developers and players imagine for a game. For developers, genre choices serve as the foundation for development and starting point for production of the text but also as a way to frame production toward a specific audience, generic conventions, and regulations with additional considerations made for expectations for platforms.¹⁸⁵ Games developed for the family-friendly, portable Nintendo Switch like *Animal Crossing: New Horizon* (2020) reside in the simulation genre with pleasant graphics and its interactivity geared toward collecting items, interacting with other players and characters, and playing in manageable short bursts assumed to appeal to younger and casual gamer demographics. Alternatively, games developed for the PlayStation and Xbox consoles often cater to the assumed young, male, hardcore gamer demographic. Games in this genre include the first-person shooter *Call of Duty* series that attempt greater immersion, in part, through the use of the first-person view with interactivity nearly exclusive to quickly lining up weapons against enemies, collecting needed objects, and extensive time and energy devoted to leveling up the player character.

For players, expectations of genres influence player choices are tied to play a game, the experience of interactivity, and the satisfaction. If a player is uninterested in sports games, a game series such as the many *Madden NFL* or *FIFA* games may be passed over for a game in a genre that aligns with the player interests based on expectations and interests in terms of theme, setting, interactivity, and gameplay and is often tied to the first choice a player makes about a video game—that is whether to play or not to play the game at all. Based on the presented genre, the player who chooses to play the aforementioned *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* likely

¹⁸⁵ Nichols, *The Video Game Business*, 70-72.

expects the game and its settings thematically to be colorful and populated by cute characters and environments. From a generic gameplay perspective, players likely expect a game full of opportunities to collect items and customize the player-character and the environment while also offering easygoing interactions that can be completed at the player's leisure. On the other hand, based on the presented genre, the player who chooses to play a game in the *Call of Duty* series likely expects the game to be set in realistic urban or jungle warzones and populated by third-world bad guys to be killed in service of saving the world. In terms of gameplay, players likely expect constant combat immersion and progression through first-person gunplay, a high rate of failure and trial and error, and the dedication to many sustained hours of play in order to level up, collect better weapons, and cultivate the bragging rights associated with gameplay success. In both instances, genre in both its thematic and functional aspects set the entire stage for the player experience and determine what types of choices a player may make within the game and therefore what type of text the player may create and experience.

Deciding to play a video game based on genre represents one of the first and most critical steps in a game experience because they often fuel player expectations of theme and control. In fact, when it comes to video game genres, there is often very little difference between expectation of genre and expectation of control. As an example of how genre informs themes and control, the complex hybrid genre of *Mass Effect 3* presents itself to players primarily as a space-themed shooter and role-playing game and secondarily as a relationship simulator—both romantic and platonic. *Mass Effect 3* players generally expect a game where the player can travel the stars with their crew aboard their spaceship, shoot and kill bad guys to save the galaxy, collect new weapons and skill points, converse with human and alien non-player characters, and have some influence over the narrative through choices made in conversation and battles won.

All of these elements tied to the game's genre are things that the player expects they can do inside the game itself through personal choice and may be a source of tension if the game does not meet these expectations. Because *Mass Effect 3* is a sci-fi space shooter, players expect to be able to choose to go to alien planets and colonies aboard Shepard's Normandy and kill the Reaper's mutated soldiers. As a role-playing game, the player expects to be able to choose new skills and weapons for Shepard, choose to talk with human and alien non-player characters, and decide Shepard's specific dialogue responses and moral intent in or to advance the conversation. In the case of *Mass Effect 3*, the player also expects to have the ability to choose the course of the narrative based on specific moral and dialogue choices made in conversation, the outcomes of interactions with non-player characters, and the major decisions the player makes through conversation and combat—an expectation the game shattered when player control and agency were revoked in the game's ending. Genre informs players how they may choose to create their own personal experience in the video game because it sets player expectations of experience based on what they will encounter but more importantly what they can do.



Figure 3.1: There are many Shepards, but this one is the author's (Screenshot by the author, Mass Effect 3).



Figure 3.2: The fate of the Krogan and Mordin are up to you (Screenshot by the author, Mass Effect 3).

Video game genre represents a vehicle for player choices and explorations. More importantly, genre depends on the player's active participation before, during and after play that expands beyond the specific characteristics tied to the game and allows them to transition to the real world. In *Mass Effect 3*, the influence of choice and expectation in the real world plays out every time the game offers players the chance to control Commander Shepard (Figure 3.1) in combat rather than simply imagining killing from an entirely vicarious position. However, this occurs more explicitly and repeatedly when players choose dialogue and outcomes designated either paragon or renegade moralities, especially because these choices typically extend to the resolution of the overall narrative. For video game players and certainly the players of *Mass Effect 3*, the production of choice and experience takes on additional moral dimension because the player does not just make a choice with an expectation for outcome, but also makes the player responsible for the action on the screen and by extension possessing a degree of psychological ownership of the action and the text. This occurs throughout the series with smaller choices such as punching an informant and then losing his cooperation. However, very often these choices result in far larger ramifications that close down or open narrative paths in the game. For instance, during the mission to the Krogan homeworld of Tuchanka to cure the Krogan genophage in *Mass Effect 3*, one of the other major alien races, the Salarisians, offer Shepard military support only if Shepard stops trusted Salarisian friend, Mordin, from completing the cure. The paragon choice is to allow Mordin to disseminate the cure while the renegade choice is to kill him before he can (Figure 3.2). The moral choice is difficult and may force the player to murder a friend, but the true outcome of this decision does not reveal itself until the game's final outcome where Shepard may have a weakened force during the final assault against

the Reapers because of this decision. Additionally, because gameplay choices begin outside the text and have a connection to the real world, players' general and moral choices have the potential to spread beyond one player's experience to form a player community in controversy. These external game choices can often exhibit their own moral or high-minded characteristics when players assist other players or when players attempt to influence developer developer choices. Or, in the case of a game like *Mass Effect 3*, it allows players as part of a pre-established community to initiate a controversy if the game does not meet expectations.

3.3 Interfaces: Player Expectations and Experiences

While genre represents the core element of player experience in video games that sets the stage and expectations for what a player can influence in a video game, the graphics—and more specifically the graphical user interface—represent the method that players are able to input their choices and directly influence the outcome of the game. When players and game critics talk about graphics, they typically evaluate the aesthetics and visual design of the game's imagery, its beauty and verisimilitude or lack thereof, and the complexity and sophistication of the renderings of character models, environments, and depth of field. There are different player expectations for different video game genres. Casual mobile games are expected to provide simple but colorful graphics that a phone would be capable of rendering on-the-go while console and PC games are often considered failures if they don't provide detailed, photorealistic graphics that vary throughout the course of the game. Additionally, these expectations often shift depending on the genre of the video game being played. Players typically expect a survival horror game to have gruesome depictions of blood and gore in shadowy environments while a game oriented to younger players may be forgiven for simpler graphics if the character models and colors are pleasing. The conversations surrounding whether or not video games should be considered art

use the beauty and sophistication of some game graphics and design as one of the key reasons why video games should be understood as part of an art form along the line of fine arts traditions and not simply as games.¹⁸⁶

Despite the beauty and allure of many video game graphics, they are mostly an aesthetic pleasure within the player's experience of the game and typically do not allow the player much if any influence, control, or choice over the video game. The key graphic element for the player experience and player choice in the game lies in the graphical user interfaces that allow the player to directly interact with the game according to player choice. Interfaces at their most simple are mechanisms layered into the primary video game image that players can interact with to alter the game in some way. They appear in each individual video game in a manner particular to the game through a combination of diegetic and nondiegetic choices. Some of these types of interfaces are common to most games and include such as options menus that allow players to change settings, map overlays that allow players to navigate the environment, and in some cases allows navigation for fast travel to another location. Along with menus and maps, many games particularly in the role-playing genre such as *Mass Effect 3* allow more direct player interaction through character customization tools for appearance and gear. Additionally, games with higher levels of choice often include dialog menus or dialog wheels that are often overlaid over diegetic space to allow players to make conversation choices that advance dialogue and narrative. Within the space of the gameworld itself, video game interfaces allow players to direct the actions of nonplayer characters and collect items by interacting with them in the world. Significantly, interfaces allow players to activate a combat system to effect actions into the gameworld through the initiation of combat directed towards individuals or elements in the game space. The

¹⁸⁶ Grant Tavinor, "Art and Aesthetics," in *The Routledge Companion to Video Games Studies*, ed. Mark J. P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York: Routledge, 2014), 61.

interface serves as the most direct and active means for player influence and choice and the most important mechanism that allows the player to choose a video game experience.

Every video game and video game player must directly engage the game's interface and make choices in order to progress the gameplay and the game narrative. For a game like *Mass Effect 3* with a high degree of openness and choice in the text, the player experience may change dramatically depending on how the player engages the game in its interfaces. Some of these choices—primarily options available to the player in the game's menu and settings—are not specifically tied to what happens in the game's diegetic world and are instead geared towards making the player experience more personal and comfortable. In *Mass Effect 3*, this includes settings that allow the player to remap some of the controller's buttons for a more comfortable control experience, adjust volume levels for music and sounds, or turn off camera blur that can potentially cause motion sickness in the player. How the player chooses to engage the map and galaxy mission interfaces in *Mass Effect 3* can also affect the course of the game and experience in ways both subtle and dramatic. A player who ignores the world map may spend hours lost in frustration searching for characters or locations while a player who utilizes the map and its customizable waypoints may have a much briefer, streamlined, and controlled game experience. The player's choices within the galaxy mission interface can be similar but also far more dramatic than lost time and internal frustration. The galaxy interface allows players to travel through the galaxy and select when to attempt game missions and more importantly in what order missions will be completed. These choices allow players to determine how they experience the order of events in the game. These choices may also change the course of these events significantly such as the sequence of Quarian-related missions over the course of *Mass Effect 2*

and *Mass Effect 3* that will condemn squadmate, Tali, to suicide if not completed in the correct order.

With video games, the interface necessarily requires that interface mechanisms function as dual systems that exist in both the material and video game worlds and operate in parallel in order to create as seamless an experience as possible for the player. Typically this means that the player utilizes a physical game controller or computer keyboard to press buttons mapped to specific actions within the digital game interface. This allows the player to extend real world choices and actions into digital consequences and, to some degree, dissolves the line between just a game and a real life experience. A player sits in their living room holding a game controller, pressing buttons, and pushing on the joysticks. In the game, Commander Shepard fires a weapon and biotically shoots fire from their hand or walks around the deck of the Normandy engaging in conversations with individual crew members. The availability of the interface for player interaction is the key difference between the experience of a video game and other visual media such as film or television and defines what it means to be a player of a video game because playing a game produces the experience of action and changing the text. If the *Mass Effect 3* player presses the R1 button in the real world, Shepard fires a grenade launcher in the game world. Players first experience a video game as a digital image on a screen and decide what they would desire to happen within the game. When they make choices and engage with the video game's interface, the game provides real time feedback and outcomes based on these choices as the world changes and responds to the player's inputs. Video game interfaces allow choices that the player makes in the real, material world to play out in the digital world, which bridges the two worlds and sometimes extends the world past a single player's experience when many players choose to band together in controversy or collaboration.

Ultimately, the video game interface is not simply a tool for player choice, but the primary vehicle for player choices that leads to a sense of agency over the video game world and achieved in cooperation with developer choices that, in turn, influence player choice. Player choice as a necessary function of the game allows for a degree of collaboration and a strong sense of not only meaningful play but a strong sense that a player's choices and actions have meaning and consequences. Katie Salen and Erik Zimmerman described interactivity as part of what they describe as a core mechanic of play but especially the play of video games and that creating a meaningful experience for players requires a formal system that allows an experience.¹⁸⁷ This means that the interface, in essence, acts as the mechanism that allows interactivity in any game. Additionally, video game interactivity emerges from the system designed by the developer as the player images several levels of action within the game in terms of cognitive, functional, overt choice-making, and extension of experience beyond the game into activities such as fan cultures.¹⁸⁸ Video game interfaces permit interactivity with the game world, and for the player who experiences the game through these mechanisms the interface and the game world may appear to be or feel like the same thing. Interactivity and the seemingly direct connection between player choice and action and the action in the game that encourages a sense of player agency over the video game and develops specific to this experience.

3.4 Narrative: Player Expectations and Experiences

Along with genre and interfaces, narrative serves as one of the other core characteristics of player experience of a video game and a driver of player choice. If genre influences expectation and interfaces allow players to act on their choices through interactivity, then

¹⁸⁷ Katie Salen and Erik Zimmerman, *Rules of Play* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 316.

¹⁸⁸ Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 59-60.

narrative represents the outcomes a game provides based on player choices and interaction within the video game. In other words, narratives and narrative choices in video games are the result of the combination of player expectations and actions—both of which are influenced by developer choices—and are necessarily a product of the player’s decisions and interactions within the video game. The combination of these elements allows players to create an experience through individual choices. Undoubtedly, these narratives and how they progress seems simple with almost no or barely any development such as in a game like *Tetris* (1984) with little beyond the story of how one cube fell onto another and then another or a game like *Pokemon Go* (2016) where players travel from one location—in the real world and at the same time in the game—catching wild monsters and then pitting them against other player’s monsters in battles to make them grow. However, narratives in most contemporary mainstream games tend to be much more complex and much more dependent on player choices in order not just to progress the game but also produce a narrative. While some games are as simple as *Pokemon Go*, other games such as *Fallout 4* (2015) or *Infamous* (2009) allow players to choose the order to undertake and experience missions in any sequence, choose to align with factions within the game, remove nonplayer characters from the gameworld, and utilize these choices to produce a narrative and conclusion based on potentially hundreds of smaller choices made throughout the playing of the game.

In any video game, players must make choices or choose not to make choices to move the narrative no matter how simple or complex toward its conclusion in order to complete or beat the video game. Because the progression of the game and its narrative depend on player choices expressed through the interactivity of the interface, the power to interpret and determine the outcome is in the player’s hands and always an ongoing process for the player. Expectations may

influence choices made in the interfaces, but the player may not always accept the resulting outcome in the narrative for many reasons that may persuade the player to replay the game and make different choices for a more desired outcome. In a game like *Mass Effect 3*, this could mean reloading an older save in order to bring Commander Shepard back from the dead after a failure during combat or in the event that an encounter with a non-player character ended unsatisfactorily. Alternatively, the player has the option to replay the entire game in order to make different choices in conversation with the goal of romancing a new crew member—for instance the Asari Liara instead of human Kaidan—or choose a different method to end a conflict, which could potentially create a new outcome for the game. For the player, the game narrative represents not only a series of choices made within the game. It also represents a series of choices to revise the text and the video game experience and craft a personalized narrative every time the game is played. This is true not just for a single player but for hundreds or thousands of players who create many narratives and many experiences.

Ultimately, this means that player choice, play, and narrative cannot exist separately but must always be experienced in concert with each other. For many years, the interrelationship of play and narrative was the subject of debate between those who felt that video games were primarily works that should be understood as games and those who felt that video games were primarily works that should be understood as narratives until the compromise of ludonarratology. This debate lingered precisely because play and narrative in video games exist as two critical facets of the same process that creates player experience. Narrative in video games is clearly not the same as narrative in other media forms because of the necessity of player choice in determining its progression. In their handbook *Rules of Play*, game designers Salen and Zimmerman argued that video games narratives should be understood as a construction of

situations that change over the course of the narrative, the characters that personify systems of representation, and the form that creates a pattern in the representation. They felt that this understanding suits video game narratives because it is succinct in definition while also broad enough to allow for many types of games to be considered narratives.¹⁸⁹ In *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Janet Murray examined MUDs in order to describe how video games inherently complicate understandings of narrative and argued that a video game's structure establishes certain narrative conventions in a video game, but that ultimately players decide through their actions how scenarios will play out and how they wish these events to be represented on screen.¹⁹⁰

Some examples of narrative in video games are indeed quite simple and require the player to fill in the blanks between events, but most contemporary video games offer the opportunity for complex narratives and—with the exception of most mobile games—players typically expect them to offer a complex, satisfying narrative that allows the player some control over its progress and resolution. The sophisticated narratives in *Mass Effect 2* and the other two games in the BioWare trilogy offer prime examples of narrative and the opportunity for player influence over the narrative and represent one of the series' main selling points and sources of player expectations. In fact, because of the high number of player choices and the often precise method they must be decided in order to produce a satisfying narrative, much of the *Mass Effect* series requires players to prioritize the weighing of game choices in a moral and narrative calculus that often feels more like a logic game than a shooter.

¹⁸⁹ Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 380-381.

¹⁹⁰ Murray, *Hamlet in the Holodeck*, 123-125.



Figure 3.3: Will Urdnot Wrex survive the standoff with Commander Shepard? (Screenshot by the author, Mass Effect).

For *Mass Effect 2* and the entire series to be successful in terms of narrative and choice, the game must present a mix of types of choices in order to build a complex series of interactions and outcomes to persuade the player that choices affect multiple aspects of the game world. For the *Mass Effect* games, this develops through the player's ability to influence major narrative decisions that often affect the life or death of other characters and effect a reasonable outcome. The first and least refined *Mass Effect* game offered fewer of these choices—and most of these choices did not represent major shifts in the overall narrative of the trilogy—but each influenced the course of the narrative in the next two games. One of these major choices comes late in the game when Krogan squadmate Wrex becomes enraged when Shepard commits to destroying a possible cure for the Krogan genophage plaguing Wrex's people (Figure 3.3) . The game offers the player a choice in how to resolve the conflict: talk Wrex down from his rage or deal with him

by shooting and killing him. If the player chooses to talk Wrex down, Wrex's story continues through the next two games, he becomes the leader of the Krogan, helps Shepard defeat the Reapers, and further develops his personal relationship with Shepard along the way. If the player chooses to kill Wrex, Wrex's story ends, an anonymous Krogan replaces Wrex in critical scenes, and Shepard's personal relationship with the Krogan people develops more superficially. For Shepard and *Mass Effect* players, a single choice in the first game has the power to alter the player's entire experience of the game and its narrative.



Figure 3.4: Admiralty or death for Tali'Zorah vas Normandy? (Screenshot by the author, Mass Effect 2).

These big choices provide momentous opportunities for players that can persuade players their narrative choices matter but the game's smaller choices also influence player experience. Throughout all three of the *Mass Effect* games, players must very often make seemingly less impactful decisions that affect the narrative that reinforce the idea that players have choice and

can influence the game through these choices. The *Mass Effect* games achieve this by offering the player hundreds of choices that may or may not ultimately affect the overall narrative on both the personal/micro level as well as the global/macro level throughout not just the course of one game but over all three. The uncertainty of the scope of player choices and their larger influence helps to sell the idea that every choice matters because every choice *could* matter in significant ways. Some of the more micro decisions such as endorsing a vendor on the Citadel may give the player a discount at that store but not affect the game overall.

However, some of the more micro decisions can have profound effects on the narrative and the game. These choices may seem minor on a first playthrough but can be the difference between life and death for other characters such as Quarian crew member Tali (Figure 3.4). In *Mass Effect 2*, the player encounters an injured Quarian soldier named Kal'Reegar attempting to hold off the advance of Geth troops. Shepard and Shepard's squad must ultimately defeat the assaulting force but the player also has the choice to ask the injured Quarian for combat assistance or tell him to stand down. If Shepard asks Kal'Reegar to fight, he dies. If Shepard asks Kal'Reegar to stand down, he lives. The death of one random quarian may seem inconsequential. However, if the Quarian dies on this mission, he will not be able to testify on behalf of Quarian squadmate Tali when she is accused of treason later on in the game, which makes it far more difficult to reach a positive resolution in her trial. This small choice can disastrously affect the major outcomes in *Mass Effect 3*. If the charges against Tali are cleared in *Mass Effect 2*, then she will become an admiral in *Mass Effect 3* and help to save the Quarians in their war with the Geth. If Shepard asks Kal'Reegar for assistance and he dies, it is unlikely Tali will become the admiral who sways the outcome of the future war between the Quarians and the Geth. As a result the Quarians will likely be exterminated and Tali will commit suicide by throwing herself off a

cliff on the Quarian homeworld. Seemingly small choices in the game can have massive effects and the frequency of these choices drives home the idea that every choice matters. On the other hand a major, macro decision such as choosing how to deal with the Reapers by selecting from three drastically different, color-coded approaches will essentially lead the player to the same conclusion of the series with the reapers destroyed and Shepard's story finished.

One of the fundamental characteristics of *Mass Effect* and games in general is that players not only can but must weigh these choices and act on their desires. As a result, players expect this as a primary function of most video games and illustrates that video games are driven by choices that affect gameplay and narrative and produce an experience for the player. However, there are limitations to player influence—even if the player is not aware of these limitations—of whether or not player choices will truly result in a meaningful outcome. While the player can alter much of what occurs over the course of *Mass Effect 2*, the trajectory of the main story and required missions, for the most part, is directed and set by the choices of the developers. As long as the player continues to engage with the game, it will run its course in a proscribed narrative direction. No matter the player choice, the Normandy will explode and Shepard will be recruited by Cerberus, the player will be required to recruit new team members from across the galaxy and gather information on the enemy, and the game will always conclude with Shepard's crew attempting a suicide mission to stop the primary enemy of the game, the Collectors, and save the galaxy. The player has no choice but to follow this script, but the player always possesses the ability to choose how the narrative progresses in between these major points as well as the ability to affect some of the micro and personal outcomes of the major missions. The player has the choice when to talk to squadmates on the Normandy and how to respond to conversations. The player has the choice regarding which character to take the time to romance, which planets to

visit, and which missions to attempt or ignore. The final suicide mission of the game, for example, always concludes the game, but which characters survive and which die—any of the squad members, the player character, and most of the crew could potentially die—is entirely based on a series of choices the player had made over the course of the entire game.



Figure 3.5: There's no Shepard without Vakarian (Screenshot by the author, Mass Effect 3).

Who lives and who dies is no simple matter as it depends on choices the player did or did not make over the course of the game but also choices made in the immediate battle of the final suicide mission. In order to illustrate how the player's choices can affect how the suicide mission unfolds, it would be constructive to focus on one of Shepard's squad members, Turian sniper Garrus Vakarian (Figure 3.5) and some of the many choices that could potentially determine his fate in the game and possibly even the series. The first choice the player must make is whether or not to accept Garrus' recruitment mission early on in *Mass Effect*. If the player decides not to recruit Garrus, he will simply not exist in the game until forced to recruit him in *Mass Effect 2*. If

the player does choose to recruit Garrus, he will ask the player midway through *Mass Effect 2* to assist him on a mission that will earn his loyalty to Shepard by completing the mission according to his request—a task that is simpler than other squad members with more complex requests and several others who require an additional loyalty check late in the game. Additionally, Garrus will offer his expertise in upgrading the ship's weapons systems—other squad members offer different critical upgrades as well—that the player may choose to or not to perform before the final suicide mission. During the suicide mission itself, the player will be required to assign each of the squad members to various combat, leadership, and technical roles in order to complete the suicide mission. If the player does not secure Garrus' loyalty, does not perform all of the offered ship upgrades, or assigns Garrus to a role in the suicide mission for which he is not tactically suited, then in all likelihood Garrus Vakarian will die during the course of the suicide mission. His story will end there and he will not appear as a character in *Mass Effect 3*. On the other hand, if the player does choose to complete all of these missions and tasks, Garrus will likely survive and fight on into the next game and its narrative to its completion. The final, contentious three choice ending will play out in nearly the same manner provided that the player chooses to progress the game and its narrative. However, the ending, the narrative, and the emotional impact of the narrative—based on the player choices—will not be the same and, in fact, will likely play out slightly differently for each player.

The choices made by developers during their interactions with a video game system directly result in the opportunity for player choices, interactivity, and experiences. While there are many aspects of a video game system that help to create the player experience and influence choice, video game genres, interfaces, and narrative represent features that substantially influence experience and the primary mechanisms that allow players to collaborate in the

production of the text. Video game genres set the stage for player expectation of what the game will present in terms of themes and aesthetics but perhaps more importantly set player expectations of the type of interactivity available in the game and therefore the types of choices the player will be able to make to produce the game according to player desires. If genre represents the expectation of choice, then interfaces are the primary system function that allows players to interact with and exert their will in the video game. The ability to make choices through a game's interface separates video games from other narrative media and is the fundamental feature that opens a video game up to player influence and collaboration. While video game genres set expectations and interfaces allow influence, the video game narrative represents the outcomes of player interactions and choices. As players make gameplay choices based on their experiences, player interactivity is necessary to progress the narrative forward and produce what players expect to be logical, meaningful conclusions to their choices.

3.5 Conclusion

For developers and players every choice matters and every choice leads to a gameplay and narrative experience created from the personal choices of each individual as part of a larger whole. Every time a developer makes a choice in what is possible in the game—this character can be killed by the player while this one can be romanced—the developer makes a choice to allow or limit what players will be able to decide for their own interaction with the text.

Sometimes as in the case of Electronic Arts insistence that BioWare use the less-than-ideal Frostbite engine in the development of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, developer choices are limited by external factors that determine the developer's ability to create and eventually determine the player's experience of a video game. At other times, the financial strain that developers often feel to release a video game within a certain timeframe may persuade developers to employ labor

crunch that will often create errors in the game or even to release a game unfinished. Either of these outcomes will severely limit the player's ability to interact with the text similar to what happened with *Cyberpunk 2077* or even encourage players to choose to fix game errors as so often occurs with Bethesda's *Fallout* and *Elder Scrolls* series. Developer choices for video game production often begin with specific desires to produce a specific type of game with a specific, meaningful narrative, and these development choices and this intent shapes the player experience and interactivity, but this creative intent is always in competition with the limits of video game technology and the lurking question of how to pay for production according to the developer's vision.

Nevertheless, no matter how or why a choice is made during production that affects the final video game product, each one of these choices ultimately produces a text that provides players the opportunity to make their own choices in the text and the power to change the game according to their own intents and desires—intent that begins when a player chooses to interact with a game and change its outcome. For video game players, this means that external factors of expectation are very often influential when it comes to how a player chooses to interact with a video game. For many players, knowledge and expectations of genre will likely influence a player's desire to play a specific game or—as was the case with the *Mass Effect* trilogy and *Mass Effect 3*—expectations that player choices from previous games would have a direct effect on the outcome of a game could influence player response to the game or even provoke a controversy if the outcome does not conform to player choices. While developers may experience video games primarily through code and game engines, players experience a video game as a world and a narrative they can interact with and influence through a game's interface that allows players to determine the course of the game and very often the identity of the player character and therefore

the perspective of the video game and its narrative. If player choice and control over the game are disrupted, player revolt may persuade developers to make the choice to change a video game to meet the external pressure of player demands and allows player choices to directly influence the production of the text.

4 CHAPTER THREE: THE MASS RELAY

While players generally loved the *Mass Effect* series, its characters, the gameplay, and its branching narrative, the controversy made it clear that they intensely hated the series' ending. The general consensus among players—although this consensus was expressed with varying levels of articulation and nuance—was that players hated the ending because they felt it reduced a minimum of nearly one hundred hours of gameplay and hundreds of personal player choices to a standardized ending that blatantly disregarded the player's hard work, input, and agency.¹⁹¹ Any agency players earned through their interaction with the *Mass Effect* series vanished down a black hole when confronted with only the illusion of choice in the game's final moments (Figure 4.1). Prior to the last fifteen minutes of the series, players had been convinced that every one of their choices in the game mattered and that these choices gave them a significant degree of control over the game and its narrative progression. The sudden revocation of their agency over the text after years of choices and labor felt intolerable for a large group of highly motivated players, and many players turned to social media and online forums to express their unhappiness over the ending. As a result, these players found solidarity with others in the community and

¹⁹¹ Kyle Orland, "Protests Over Ending of Mass Effect 3 Show Fan Investment in Story Control," *Ars Technica*, March 12, 2012, <https://arstechnica.com/gaming/2012/03/protests-over-ending-of-mass-effect-3-show-fan-investment-in-story-control/>.

quickly joined forces to demand a new ending to the game that would respect player control and influence—a demand that developer BioWare conceded under pressure.¹⁹²



Figure 4.1: This is it. This is the end (Screenshot by the author, Mass Effect 3).

Although the circumstances and specific grievances in player-led controversies sometimes vary dramatically, these video game controversies are nearly always triggered by the direct actions of developers that players perceive as a threat to their agency over a specific game or their presumed control of gaming culture as a whole. These perceived threats vary from controversy to controversy—although some specific objections reoccur in multiple incidents—but they often originate with an event that seems to diminish a specific facet of the game, the player’s status within the game system, or its production culture. For players of the *Mass Effect* trilogy, their ability to influence the narrative gave them a sense of control and power over the

¹⁹² Christopher MacManus, “With Pressure On, BioWare Enhances Mass Effect 3 Ending,” *CNET*, April 5, 2012, <https://www.cnet.com/culture/with-pressure-on-bioware-enhances-mass-effect-3-ending/>.

text that encouraged a sense of agency. When developers summarily revoked player choice and agency, players protested their loss. For participants in the Gamergate controversy, their objects followed a similar pattern when the young male gamers who had been catered to by the industry and exerted a certain degree of control over gaming culture began to fear that the inclusion of women and minorities in the industry would diminish their favored status and erode their control.¹⁹³ Even the recent controversies against microtransactions and loot boxes such as the *Middle Earth: Shadow of War* controversy follow the overarching pattern of these controversies because they objected to the naked cash grab of the game's publisher—although they certainly despised that element of industry motivation—but also because these loot boxes eliminated player control over the gameplay by reducing the game to a series of transactions rather than something the player can master through choices and effort.¹⁹⁴

In each of these controversies, the player's sense of agency over the game drives the controversy and its eventual outcome. The question is then what qualities of video games encourage players to assume that they have agency over a video game and the authority to reject the game as presented? The answer to this question lies in the fact that video games and the experiences they provide are the result of collaborative produsage between developers and players. Every choice of code, graphics, and narrative remains dormant until a player makes the choice to interact with the game and complete the text according to player actions. Video games exist because of the collaborative choices of developers and players that drive the game and its progress. As part of the process of collaborative development of video games and their

¹⁹³ Suzanne Scott, *Fake Geek Girls: Fandom, Gender and the Convergence Culture Industry* (New York: NYU Press, 2019), 18-20.

¹⁹⁴ Evan Lathi, "The Real Reason Shadow of War's Loot Boxes are Bad: They Make the Game Boring," *PC Gamer*, October 18, 2017, <https://www.pcgamer.com/the-real-reason-shadow-of-wars-loot-boxes-are-bad-they-make-the-game-boring/>.

experiences, the line between producer and player becomes blurred as developers revise and tinker with the game after release and the player reproduces narrative and game outcomes through interaction with the text. Instances where developers engage with players through official and unofficial channels to utilize player feedback to alter the text further erode the line between who is a producer and who is not. Ultimately, video games are not simply games people play but necessary choices that developers and players decide and enact through shared but granular game labor. This shared game labor produces the text while also encouraging a sense of control over the text and its outcomes. Ultimately, the production of a video game and video game controversies resides in how players interact with video games, how their actions and expectations have the ability to affect a video game, how players are inherently producers of video games and how interactions with video games lead to feelings of player agency and ownership.

Video games are complex texts with various moving parts that require the interactivity of users during development and during play. Developers initiate the production of the game through story and character development, the creation of game mechanics through programming and game engines, the construction of the game world through the rendering of its graphics, and the construction of opportunities for player interaction. For a video game like *Mass Effect* and its sequels, this means that the game's developers function as the initiators of the trilogy-spanning story for survival against a powerful synthetic enemy fought by Commander Shepard and his or her diverse human and alien crew. They program the initial parameters of the conversations with non-player characters, possible firearm and power-based combat experiences, and design the game's setting, aesthetic and tone. In other words, developers are the initiators of what is often thought of as the product called a video game. However, video games do not exist simply

because their code is stored on an optical disk or computer drive. They exist because players choose to engage with that code by playing the game. Player actions produce changes in the game text through small and large choices that push the game towards its narrative and game end, which can only be realized through the player's input. The developers of *Mass Effect 3* began the story through coding and design, but the player delivers it to its conclusion through player intervention and choice over the course of the game. The developers initiated and provided the starting conditions for combat, but there is no firefight without the player's attack on enemy forces. The character of Commander Shepard is merely the potential hero and savior of the galaxy until the player crafts an identity and history for Shepard by constructing his or her appearance, deciding on the commander's moral code, and changing the character and the game through conversation and tactical game decisions.

With this necessary relationship of developer and player engagement, older concepts such as active audiences, textual poaching, or even collaboration seem inadequate for describing the process of creating a video game text and the creation and recreation of meaning through player influence. Much like blogs, Wikipedia and open-source software, developers and players produce video game texts while acting as both users and producers of the text. Essentially, video games are texts produced by developers and players through a creative, collaborative process of video game produsage that allows for a shared sense of ownership.¹⁹⁵ Further, this arrangement opens up the direct opportunity for video game controversies by allowing for the development of agency through interactivity with the text. In the production of a video game, developers and players represent critical users and producers of an evolving video game text and engage in this process without the supervision of the other. In video game produsage, developers and players

¹⁹⁵ Axel Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia and Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Produsage* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 19-20.

possess a sense of total control over the text and develop a strong sense of ownership over the video game because they have been allowed the ability to contribute to the text's creation. This relationship encourages a sense of ownership that affords developers and players agency over the text.

This chapter argues that video games are produced through the interactive collaboration between developers and players as users engaged in produsage. Additionally, this collaborative produsage arrangement encourages a sense of agency and ownership in both developers and players and that threats to agency, ownership, and control that enabled by produsage represent the catalyst for player-led controversy campaigns and the catalyst for the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy. Understanding video games as produsage texts, how they are constructed, and how this contributes to the development of video game controversies requires understanding the mechanisms that both developers and players interact with to produce the game—specifically in terms of interactivity, collaboration, and labor. Interactivity is a core function video game production and play, but it is also the primary mechanism that allows developers and players to alter the video game text and permits collaboration—typically asynchronous and independent—between developers and many players in order to create many versions of the same video game text through various types of developer and player labor.

This dual uncoordinated labor between developers and players represents a necessary feature of video game texts that allows their development to be understood as produsage created by hybrid users who collaborate through fluid, open participation and create a product that is understood as part of an unfinished process and the common property of all who participate.¹⁹⁶ Video games, as argued in this chapter, represent texts produced by hybrid users—in other

¹⁹⁶ Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia and Second Life*, 23-29.

words, developers and players who both interact with the game in order to change and produce it—who collaborate through open participation. This collaboration allows developers and players to engage, interact, alter or abandon the game at will with the ability for developer or player to revise the game as desired. The idea that produsage texts are seen as community property by those who participate is what also leads both developers and players to a sense of agency and ownership over the video game text because—as co-producers of the text—all users producers share claim over the text. Player-led video game controversies and revolts nearly always arise from disputes over agency, ownership, and control of the video game text and culture as an attempt to reclaim agency and ownership believed to be lost or threatened by another collaborator.

4.1 Video Game Interactivity

Interactivity, choice, and collaboration reside at the core of video games as texts. These key characteristics set video games apart from other media because they create experiences constructed by the personal choices of both developers and players. The collaborative interactivity between humans, the text, and other humans inherent in the process of creating a video game experience also enables game production and audience interaction. Film, television and video game producers all interact and engage directly with the texts they create and enjoy direct control over most aspects of that production in a manner specific to the medium. Film and television producers typically control—among other things during the production process—framing, acting, narrative, and the recording of images onto the film medium by interacting with and mediating each element into a whole. Much like film and television producers, video game producers also control—among many other things—framing, voice and motion capture acting, linear and branching narrative, and the rendering of images by interacting with and mediating

each element into a whole. However, the potential for audience interactivity is where these media diverge and where video games demonstrate their inherent need for player interactivity. As part of playing a video game, players control textual elements like framing, dialogue, and narrative and act as directors over the action in each scene. For most film or television audiences, direct interactivity with the text tends to be limited to home viewing engagement with the film's menus and chapters via the typically simple remote control to skip ahead, rewind or exit the viewing, while television audiences—provided they are not viewing on home media and have the same choices as film viewers—generally find their direct engagement with a show limited via the remote control and interface to pause, rewind, record or change the channel completely.

While the option for audience interactivity exists within other narrative media, video games require interactivity and direct player action in order to be video games and advance their narratives at all. The necessity of interactivity in video games and its inherent role in their production also means that interactivity is something easily taken for granted as simply natural to video games and overlooked. As such, Katie Salen and Erik Zimmerman's older but influential discussions of interactivity still offer one of the most functional and multifaceted understandings of its role in video games and help provide insights into *Mass Effect* and its controversy. In terms of how interactivity operates and what it provides, Salen and Zimmerman argue that a video game's core mechanics—the activities and mechanisms that allow players to make meaningful choices and play—represent the building blocks for player interactivity, which permit player behaviors that cultivate meaningful experiences for players.¹⁹⁷ What constitutes interactivity from game to game and how we understand the process can often seem obvious and ambiguous at the same time because interactivity is always an ongoing process of player engagement with a

¹⁹⁷ Katie Salen and Erik Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), 316-317.

video game. At its most basic, Salen and Zimmerman define interactivity as “the explicit interaction of the player that allows the game to advance,”¹⁹⁸ but acknowledge that broad of a definition can lose its meaning because of its lack of specificity.¹⁹⁹ Similarly, in *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*, Janet Murray agrees with Salen and Zimmerman that the term’s lack of specificity undermines its usefulness and argues that interactivity—which she describes as the responsiveness of computers to human input—is a primary function of computers that create procedural representations through participatory human interactions.²⁰⁰ According to Murray’s argument, if video games depend on programming and code to represent choices and experiences, then they also depend on the behavior and actions of players in order to render these representational outcomes within the text. A video game’s dependence on player interactivity in order to render these outcomes also naturally leads to player agency through the production of outcomes.

The concept of video game interactivity and its vagueness potentially makes it difficult to explain interactivity in a game with even simple narrative and mechanics. In a game like *Mass Effect 3* that incorporates multiple, complex systems of interactivity tied to gameplay, narrative and world building within the game, the task has the potential to be overwhelming and the analysis unruly. The complexity of a video game like *Mass Effect 3* and many other contemporary video games demands a complex framework of interactivity in order to understand how these games operate and produce their outcomes—both in the game and in controversy. Salen and Zimmerman’s multivalent model of interactivity represents an especially useful

¹⁹⁸ Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 58.

¹⁹⁹ Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 59-60.

²⁰⁰ Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 74.

method for understanding interactivity between the player and the game because it incorporates multiple types of interactivity into its analysis. More importantly this model connects the interactivity in the game to the interactivity between the individual player and the interactivity of the video game community outside the game. Additionally, a multivalent model of interactivity that examines video games as interrelated modes of cognitive, functional, explicit interactivity, and interactivity with the culture of the object allows for understanding of video game activity virtually through the interface, physically through the keyboard or controller, and culturally as an object of action and interaction through a community. Each of these types of interactivity plays a role in allowing developer and player collaboration that cultivates a sense of control and agency over the game. This multivalent model shows that interactivity is not just a primary feature of video games, but that interactivity is the backbone of video game production both in the text and the community.

Salen and Zimmerman present their core types of interactivity by first considering the psychological and then working through design, input, and external participation. However, for this current discussion, it is more useful to emphasize the process that enables the player experience of interactivity first through the explicit, then functional, then cognitive, and finally to participation outside the text as this progression aligns more closely with the production of experience. According to Salen and Zimmerman, explicit interactivity represents the overt interactivity that players have within the video game and encompasses the most basic physical controls that a player may have over the experience of playing a game.²⁰¹ This includes basic interactive choices such as following the rules of the game or piloting the player character around the space of the game, but also the player's choices to physically interact with the game

²⁰¹ Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 60.

through material inputs anchored in the real world such as a keyboard or console controller. Engaging rules and settings are critical to playing the game and the player's physical interaction with the game through its input device is critical to the development of the player's investment in the game and desire to participate with its external culture. In *Mass Effect 3*, this type of basic explicit interactivity comes in the form of such actions as piloting Commander Shepard around in the Normandy or a battlefield. It is also critical because the ability to move the player-character around allows the player an object of interaction and an agent of self-representation in the game. *Mass Effect* players experience explicit interactivity by moving Shepard's ship, the Normandy, to star systems and planets via the game's star map, the piloting of small, exploratory vehicles on planets, and one brief sequence in *Mass Effect 2* where the player moves the Normandy's pilot, Flight Lieutenant Jeff "Joker" Moreau, through a besieged Normandy after the insect-like Collectors board the ship. None of this explicit interactivity is possible without the player also engaging the explicit interactivity of the game rules themselves—which in any game may be opened or closed to player freedom of movement and choice—and can determine such basic actions as where a player can or cannot maneuver the player-character, when the player can initiate interactivity, and the specific sequences players must progress in order to achieve the choices and desired outcomes within the restrictions of the overall and specific game rules.

The explicit interactivity of video games leads directly to what Salen and Zimmerman call functional interactivity. They describe this as the type of interactivity that bridges the material actions of the player, the material components of the game system, and the responsiveness of the structured game interactions.²⁰² If explicit interactivity is the how of player experience, then functional interactivity represents the what of player experience produced from

²⁰² Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 59.

the player's interactive choices and made possible by the player's engagement with the game's explicit interactivity. Salen and Zimmerman's examples of functional interactivity in their explanation are primarily keyed towards the user-friendliness of interfaces, the responsiveness of buttons, and the latency between player input and game action.²⁰³ In this arrangement, functional interactivity ties directly to the player's impression of how well a game is constructed and how well it performs in response to the player's actions in order to produce a smooth and satisfying experience for the player. For *Mass Effect* players, this interactivity evolves over the three games, particularly in terms of control and interactivity with the player-character. In the first *Mass Effect* game, player control lacked smoothness and intuitiveness that made the movements of Shepard in response to player input feel, metaphorically, like driving a proverbial tank. Additionally, the combat cover system response was unsophisticated and depended on the player—and a certain degree of luck—to run Shepard's face into a wall and hope the inconsistent system would hit the sweet spot that activated cover according to player intentions. The impreciseness of the game's response to the player's input introduces a difficulty of functional interactivity and control into the game that has the potential to decrease satisfaction or even deter players from interacting with the game at all. However, in both *Mass Effect 2* and *Mass Effect 3*, developers improved the responsiveness as well as the accuracy of Shepard's movements to allow for greater fidelity between player input and smoother player-character movement. This included the addition of the option of a quick button to the cover system that intuitively plants Shepard up to the nearest hard surface into cover from danger. All of these changes resulted in an interactive experience for the player that feels more satisfying, less difficult, and does far less to distract from play.

²⁰³ Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*.

Explicit and functional interactivity open the door for cognitive interactivity and the potential development of agency and investment in the video game text. Cognitive interactivity arguably represents the most critical interactivity in the development of agency, controversy, and the willingness to interact with a game to change it. While functional interactivity represents the immediate, physical engagement and response that players have with a video game, cognitive interactivity represents the long-term psychological interactivity and investment that players develop as they engage with the text, its systems, characters and narratives. Psychological interactivity motivates players to interact with the game, develop a sense of agency over it, and occasionally fight to maintain their investment in it. Salen and Zimmerman describe this interactivity as the “psychological and emotional participation between a person and a system” and illustrate their point with the complex, imaginative interactions that players have while playing an adventure game over time.²⁰⁴ For games like the *Mass Effect* series and player-led movements like the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy, the ability to develop and explore cognitive interactivity is one of the key factors to understanding why people play and why people protest because cognitive interactivity is often the threshold where playing the game becomes a personal, psychological relationship with the game and has the potential to become more than just a game.

If a player experiences a psychological, emotional interactivity with a video game system, then the player is developing a form of emotional connection to the system triggered by the game’s response to the player then manifested through the projection of the player’s expectations, desires and personal feelings onto the system. The fact that video games encourage players to project these feelings onto the game and then allow players to enact them in the text

²⁰⁴ Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 59.

through interactivity indicates that the mechanism of functional interactivity combined with cognitive interactivity produces player agency. The experience of cognitive interactivity occurs specific to each game. Some games like the multiplayer combat simulator *Call of Duty* series may encourage cognitive interactivity by assigning significance to accomplishments such as kill counts and leveling up while other games like the *Mass Effect* series assign greater significance to personal interactions with non-player characters and the player's influence over the game's narrative. However a game achieves it, cognitive interactivity occurs when a game system persuades a player to assign personal feelings to game outcomes—the thrill of the fight, the despair from a lost comrade, the pleasure from deciding the fate of the narrative and the game's characters—and is critical for any game for successful engagement between the player and the game system.

While cognitive interactivity is arguably the most broadly defined, it is also arguably the most critical to continued engagement and satisfaction because it allows players the space to put themselves into the game itself. Essentially, cognitive interactivity moves players to play and become personally invested in their activities in the video game. Additionally, cognitive interactivity represents a successful part of the game system if it allows players satisfactory choices, outcomes, and the freedom to make personal choices with the expectation of a personally directed response from the video game system that, in turn, help develop player attachment to the game's characters, narratives and outcomes. This can be achieved in a multitude of ways through the player's interaction with the system. One of the common ways a game might enable cognitive interactivity is through player interactions with non-player characters because this activity often resembles real-life interpersonal engagement with human beings and—when done well—elicits similar feelings through interaction with non-player

characters. Katherine Isbister in *How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design*, identifies the relationships players often experience as decidedly parasocial in nature—although for many, many players the relationships and emotional connections feel very real—and argues that developers include complex representations of social cues from non-player characters such as crying from a baby in order to evoke an emotional response triggered by the player’s interaction. This interaction encourages the player to become emotionally invested in the character and by extension the video game.²⁰⁵ The interactivity and resulting player investment often results in the player’s sense of emotional, cognitive connectedness to the non-player characters not just because of players interactions with non-player characters but more specifically because non-player character responses communicate how they feel about the player. As a result, these responses persuade the player that they matter to the game, which encourages emotional investment from the player in the game itself.²⁰⁶ If players feel they matter to the game and become invested, then players may believe that their interactions have real consequences and may persuade the player that they possess a real agency over the game and its outcomes.

In the *Mass Effect* series, cognitive interactivity through the player’s interaction with non-player characters represents one of the series’ strengths as a game and its ability to develop player emotional investment, engagement and a strong sense of agency. Like many role-playing games across video game genres, the three *Mass Effect* games require players to spend most of their experience of playing the game in conversation with non-player characters who need something from the player, who can offer knowledge or assistance that helps the player, or who provide camaraderie and the potential for relationship that opens the door for psychological

²⁰⁵ Katherine Isbister, *How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017), 23-32.

²⁰⁶ Scott Rigby and Richard M. Ryan, *Glued to Games: How Video Games Draw Us In and Hold Us Spellbound* (Santa Barbara: Preager, 2011), 65-68.

investment. Throughout the *Mass Effect* games, the player experiences cognitive interactivity with the system through interactions with non-player characters and the system's feedback from non-player character responses. This interactivity contributes to the player's overall sense of investment in the game, its characters and its world. Game responses take many forms from the mundane and simple to the emotional and complex and an accumulation of both types of moments are necessary to cultivate player investment.



Figure 4.2: Mordin Solus, the very model of a Scientist Salarian (Screenshot by the author, Mass Effect 3).

The tragic death of Salarian Dr. Mordin Solus on Tuchanka in *Mass Effect 3* represents one such instance (Figure 4.2). When the player and Shepard meet Mordin in *Mass Effect 2*, he seems to be just a twitchy Salarian doctor with a shady military past when he joins the mission to help defeat the Collectors. However, over the course of the game, the player may visit Mordin in his lab to discuss various topics and gradually gets to know who he is, the things that he likes,

and his regrets in life. The player learns that Mordin once served as Salarian doctor and special operative tasked with modifying the Krogan sterility plague, the genophage, to ensure their population remains artificially low. He sings Shepard a stunning rendition of Gilbert and Sullivan's "I am the Very Model of a Modern Major-General" with the lyrics adapted to a "Scientist Salarian." He confides in Shepard his gnawing reservations about his role in the Krogans' fate. The player's repeated and personal interactivity with Mordin in these small conversations over time builds a sense of connectedness to the character and helps the player become invested in Mordin, his outcome, and by extension the game itself. In *Mass Effect 3*, Shepard takes Mordin to the Krogan homeworld, Tuchanka, to help stop the Reapers and in the process also cure the Krogan genophage that haunted him all these years. In the end, Mordin makes it to the lab to distribute the cure into the planet's atmosphere, cheerily but knowingly working at his console amid explosions while humming his beloved Gilbert and Sullivan—until the facility abruptly explodes and kills him while mid-phrase into "Scientist Salarian." This is one of the points in the series where most players' investment in the character and the narrative brings them to tears. However, without the continued instances of cognitive interactivity, the player investment required for this outcome most likely would not be realized or persuasive.

Without cognitive interactivity and player investment, there would likely be no opportunity for what Salen and Zimmerman call beyond-the-object or participation with the culture interactivity, which makes it both critical to video game fandom general and video game controversies specifically. Beyond-the-object interactivity exists when players bring their experience of the video game system outside of the system into the real world and interact with it as part of a larger expression of cultural interactivity. Salen and Zimmerman describe this type of interactivity in terms of the fan cultures that develop in some gaming communities where

“participants co-construct communal realities, using designed systems as the raw materials.”²⁰⁷

Beyond-the-object interactivity in video games and video game culture resembles Henry Jenkins’ descriptions of participatory fan cultures where fans poach the raw materials and ideas from other texts to create new culture to be shared with other like-minded fans.²⁰⁸ However, there is a key difference between Jenkins’ textual poaching and the beyond-the-object interactivity in that Jenkins’ poachers may take the ideas from a text and repurpose them, but players engaged in beyond-the-object interactivity very often take ideas and repurpose them but often also take elements of the interactive system itself to create a new version of the system. *Mass Effect* players as an example are prolific creators when it comes to more traditional participatory fandom activities that take from the text to create fan fiction, fan art, and cosplay. But they also directly utilize the game system and code to create mods that can be integrated into the video game itself, or to utilize the game system to write walkthroughs and gamefaqs to assist players through the video game, or even band together to influence developers to change the game. For many players, beyond-the-object interactivity represents one of the first self-aware acts of creative collaboration, but for players collaboration begins with the interactivity of gameplay itself.

Interactivity represents one of the most intrinsic features of what makes a video game a video game. However, the process of interactivity alone is not what makes it critical to a player’s experience of a game. Interactivity represents a critical aspect of the player experience because it allows player control over the text, encourages player investment, and opens the door to player agency and player-led controversy through interaction and influence over the text. The basic

²⁰⁷ Salen and Zimmerman, *Rules of Play*, 60.

²⁰⁸ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 33.

concept of interactivity as a player's interaction with a computer system remains useful as a starting point to understanding a player's interaction with a video game system. However, a more sophisticated, multivalent model that accounts for the various interrelated types of player interactivity enabled by the text allows for an essential understanding of player actions to change a video game and as part of the larger community. Explicit interactivity with the text enables players to influence the game through its most basic and fundamental modes of engagement with the rules and navigation of the system. When combined with the functional interactivity that allows for player interactions with the interface and player expectations of performance, the game's interactivity establishes the smoothness and playability of the interaction with the game but also provides a framework for players to evaluate the game's effectiveness according to player expectations. However, it is the long-term psychological investment that players develop as a function of cognitive interactivity that is most critical to player satisfaction with the game and allows for the potential to revolt if a game fails to deliver to player expectations. Cognitive interactivity is the stage of the interactive process where participation becomes personal and when a player begins to assign personal feelings to the outcomes of the games. These personal feelings often become part of a player's beyond the object interactivity where players interact with other players as part of the larger community. The multivalent model of interactivity that begins with the text and transitions to the community suggests that progression of video game play to video game controversy—in order to affect video game play back in the text—is a natural extension of the core interactivity of video games.

4.2 Video Game Collaboration

On its most basic level, interactivity between a developer, a text, and a player is necessary for any game to play out. This interactivity also necessarily exists and progresses as

multiple, complex forms of both physical, mental and emotional engagement with the video game system. Because of this critical arrangement and the labor between developer and player to assemble a video game into existence, video game interactivity—in all its forms from interactivity with the game system to interactivity beyond-the-object and interactivity with other players—should be recognized not simply as interactivity but rather as video game collaboration. While video game interactivity relies on the developer's and player's interaction with the text, the reality of these interactions is that they are ultimately interactions between developer choices and player choices with the game acting as an intermediary between the two groups. The interaction between these two groups and their choices drives the development and progression of the game as both a game and a text. Essentially, for a game to be a game with interactivity and meaning, it requires the collaborative effort of both developers and players to produce the text. Interactive video game collaboration can take many forms from the system to cognitive, but this is never the work of a single person. Instead, many individuals make the choices behind every act of interactivity and collaboration. If interactivity is one of the key aspects of what makes a video game a video game and separates it from other media, then it stands to argue that the collaboration it allows between users—whether a developer or a player—suggests that video games and the relationship between video game developers and players may be not just that of creators and consumers. Instead, developers and players act as collaborators in the text with interactivity and play at the core of this collaboration.

While interactivity between members of a development studio to create a video game is more likely to be understood as collaboration, player interactivity and collaboration with the text has typically been seen as taking place separate from direct interaction from the game. The concept of player collaboration is often relegated to beyond-the-object repurposing in spaces

where player choices have little effect on the video game itself. Much of what has been recognized as collaborative player practices in video games have been practices that allow players to augment or extend knowledge of a video game beyond the text itself in collaboration with the skills and labor of other players. One of the most ubiquitous practices of collaboration that almost all players encounter is the production and sharing of game FAQs or walkthroughs composed as a guide to players to help them successfully achieve a specific goal tied to the video game. Game FAQs and walkthroughs represent the collaborative efforts of players beyond-the-object of the game itself in two significant ways that allow players to engage the text as partners in play. While some walkthroughs are produced by a single individual based on interaction with the video game, many walkthroughs are assembled either through organized or ad hoc collaboration by multiple players who pool their knowledge and experience together to produce the guide, which may be revised as new knowledge and collaborators become available. Additionally, game FAQs and walkthroughs typically come from experienced players for the benefit of less-skilled and less-experienced players with the intention of helping them through the challenges of the video game.²⁰⁹ In this way, walkthroughs allow skilled players remotely to collaborate with the playthrough and experiences of other players. Similarly, forums and message boards allow for more focused collaboration where players may seek advice on specific topics and receive assistance through the labor and collaboration of other players.

While walkthroughs and forums allow players to collaborate on the gaming experience independently and beyond-the-object of the video game itself, other common collaborative player and by extension developer video gaming practices achieve similar results and through utilization of the game and its available code without necessarily creating a new text. Most of

²⁰⁹ James Newman, *Playing with Video Games* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 96.

these player collaborations fall under what would typically be considered cheating through the activation of hidden game code and functions—which are then shared with other players for the use in their own playthroughs—but can also sometimes be used to uncover cut scenes or gaming mechanics that the developers have chosen to obscure but not remove from the game. Cheating allows players to collaborate through the game code in order to circumvent or even subvert intended gameplay. This cheating can take multiple forms but almost always manifests in activities that seek out collaborative knowledge from other players for the purpose of changing the player’s experience. This collaboration can take the form of anything from asking for help from friends or walkthroughs, employing cheat codes for specific game functions, tinkering with the game in order to alter its code or even resorting to paying real money for useful game items.²¹⁰ Players intend these specific practices for the use of other players, but ultimately they also represent collaborative practices to alter the video game between players and the developers who allowed for the use of codes. In many cases developers encourage this behavior by inviting player collaboration by allowing glitches and exploits to remain active in the game²¹¹ or even by purposely giving players access to tool kits and codes that can be used to alter the game, its mechanics, or environments.²¹² The inclusion and exploitation of glitches and cheats codes represents an invitation to collaborate on the game beyond standard interaction. Most of these cheats and glitches are ultimately benign and only change the game for any player utilizing the workaround, but the player use of codes has on occasion forced a developer to alter the game entirely because of outrage over the text such as the case of *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*’ so-

²¹⁰ Mia Consalvo, *Cheating: Gaining Advantages in Video Games* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 68-69.

²¹¹ Consalvo, *Cheating*, 116-117.

²¹² Consalvo, *Cheating*, 121-122.

called “Hot Coffee” incident where players uncovered a hidden sex game that was later removed by its developer.²¹³

Game modifications, on the other hand, allow for players to collaborate with each other and with the work of developers by modifying the video game to suit player needs and creativity. Video game mods give players the power to insert new experiences into the video game text that would not exist without their intervention including the addition of new graphics and textures, game mechanics, character skins, entirely new game levels, or even the creation of a new, separate video game such as the famous player modification of Valve’s *Half-Life* (1998) into first person shooter *Counter Strike* (2000). Ultimately, video game modifications represent the collaboration between developer labor and player labor because the mods could not exist without the work of both groups. A developer’s openness to player collaboration can also have a significant effect on collaboration and many developers encourage player collaboration by releasing editing and modding tool kits alongside the original game. This can range from simple creations such as skins and textures but may also allow for the more complicated process of creating new levels.²¹⁴

Developers that do encourage player collaboration tend to have an ulterior motive tied to extending the video game beyond the abilities of the developer or even to fix deficiencies in the developer’s creation. In *Co-Creating Video Games*, John Banks describes several notable but not uncommon examples of developers utilizing player collaboration to achieve their own personal goals for their video games. This includes everything from developer ID Software’s successful cooperation of player-created content in order to extend the relevance of their first-person

²¹³ David Kushner, *Jacked: The Outlaw Story of Grand Theft Auto* (Hoboken: Wiley & Sons, 2012), 183.

²¹⁴ John Banks, *Co-Creating Videogames* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 13-14.

shooter, but also more problematic examples such as Maxis and Electronic Arts' reliance on and appropriation of player-created content in games such as *The Sims* and *Spore* in order to first engage player interest and make them feel as though they were collaborative partners. The feeling of partnership encouraged player labor to the point that they willingly performed labor and marketing for the game—and typically only compensated with cultural capital rather than monetary rewards—only to have their efforts absorbed and repurposed by their developer collaborators.²¹⁵

T.L. Taylor argued in her study of the online MMO gaming cultures of *Everquest* players in *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture* that the need for both developers and players to push the boundaries of the video game production allowed for collaborative creation that extended past the original text into online spaces. This shared collaboration makes it difficult to assign creative ownership to any one collaborator. As a result, collaboration encourages conflict between developers and players who believe they have a stake in the text and its ownership.²¹⁶ According to Taylor, player collaboration in video games should not be discounted simply as activities that enhance the video game experience, but rather as a collaboration fundamental to the player's enjoyment and engagement with the video game text that developers appropriate to extend the game and encourage play. This had led developers to—in a controlled and regulated environment—allow players the ability to influence the production of the game through such activities as unpaid beta-testing and feedback, but has also opened the door for competition between collaborators who may have different values, goals and understandings of

²¹⁵ Banks, *Co-Creating Videogames*, 13-15.

²¹⁶ T. L. Taylor, *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 126.

what the video game should be, and, critically, what it should mean.²¹⁷ The result in *Everquest* and many other games is a situation where developers initially create the parameters of the game and its world, and then player labor populates and grows the text and the community. In Taylor's example, the players in *Everquest* created dynamic characters through status, stats, and accrued experience that essentially become the text itself. However, the developer and player are trapped on an uneven playing field where the developer nearly always retains the rights to the product of this collaboration and where player collaboration is not recognized as legitimate labor.²¹⁸

Video games require interactivity and collaboration between developers, players, and the text in order to produce any given video game experience. Because this collaboration produces both the text and the experience, it's more accurate to say that video games require the labor of both developers and players in order to produce a video game experience and intrinsically requires the collaboration of labor to create and realize the text and its potential iterations. On the surface, it may seem as if developers appear to have a greater claim to ownership and power over the text—and, in some ways, it's difficult to argue against that assumption—but players and their labor are necessary to the production of a video game text and therefore have a degree of power over some parts of the process and far greater control over other parts that developers have little to no domain over in practice. Salen and Zimmerman's types of interactivity illustrate that the balance of power in this collaborative labor relationship does not reside in a static space in the text and instead shifts depending on how and where interaction occurs. For instance, explicit and functional interactivity represented by the rules, systems, and interfaces encoded into the video game and determine how a player can or cannot interact with the text are almost

²¹⁷ Taylor, *Play Between Worlds*, 126-127.

²¹⁸ Taylor, *Play Between Worlds*, 133-143.

entirely under the control of developer choices and labor with very few exceptions. On the other hand, cognitive interactivity depends on the player's emotional labor, which may be influenced by developer labor but not determined by it. Additionally, beyond-the-object interactivity resides entirely outside the control of the developer and represents instances where players control production. While developer labor initiates a video game text and may seem to have more power over it, player labor and choices ultimately revises the text and shepherds it to its final form.

4.3 Producers, Video Games, and *Mass Effect*

The interactivity, collaboration, play, and choices of both developers and players serve as the most critical features to the production of a video game. However, these features on their own do not explain how these activities encourage investment in a game or the controversies that have become commonplace in video game culture. Interactivity and collaboration exist as separate but intertwined aspects of a more unified process of play and production of the text dependent on the alteration by the greater community of developers and producers. Ultimately, developer and player groups both produce a video game text and the interactivity inherent in this process represents the primary means of video game production. Typically, developers produce through constructing the raw materials of the video game while players produce through their roles as players and as users of the raw game materials who alter the text through action. In order to understand video games and video game controversies, these separate activities should be understood as intertwined, multimodal aspects of video game production and the production of video games and understood as a unifying principle of the medium. Additionally, the collaborative production of video games means that video games intrinsically have more in common with new media produced through user collaboration and producers than with other narrative media. According to Axel Bruns, producer media relies at its heart on the dual action

of users simultaneously producing and using a text as produser-users and the “continuous building and extending of existing content”²¹⁹—much the same way that video games rely on the actions of developers and players. This reliance on dual producer-users opens the text to the control and ownership by everyone who participates in its production and reproduction. Additionally, this reliance on the combined producer and user actions of producers—both developers and players—also opens the text up to formation of agency for participants through their influence.

In video games, interactivity and choice no matter how big or small allow the creation of a video game through produsage. The concept that video games could be understood in terms of produsage is not an entirely new idea in video games research, but it is a concept that remains underexplored as a primary component of video games or their production. Although he is not necessarily in agreement with the idea of video game produsage, John Banks does engage with the concept in his *Co-creating Videogames* in some depth. In his argument, Banks examines the participatory, co-creative nature of industrial video game production, amateur producers, and the connections between the practices of both groups. Banks recognizes the critical role of player produced content in video game development and how this content factors into the choices developers make during game production to encourage these player behaviors. According to Banks, many video game development studios seized on the practice of player-created modifications and skins as a method for promoting and distributing their games—such as Electronic Arts’ reliance on player-created content in *The Sims* series and ID Software’s success with player-created *Doom* (1993) mods—and willingly share some of the same video game editing tools with players and allowed these modifications to be installed in the base video

²¹⁹ Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia and Second Life*, 21.

game.²²⁰ By opening up the development process and intellectual property and tools to players, developers open up a potential transformation in how video games are produced because developers need player labor and feedback in order to create the game. Many developers recognize that significant player investment in the game can be cultivated not just because they played the game but because they helped create it.²²¹

On the surface, Banks seems to be leading to the conclusion that video game production is a produsage practice, but instead he, for the most part, argues against this conception in his examination of co-creativity. Banks, who describes Bruns' work on produsage as "exemplary," argues that Bruns' description of produsage "so thoroughly involves and integrates users in the process of making content in their own right that it exceeds and fundamentally breaks from industrial modes of organizing production."²²² Despite his complimentary appraisal of Bruns' analysis and the potential that produsage as co-creation holds for video game production relationships, Banks criticizes produsage—in terms of video game consumer content and it seems in general—as an abstraction that ignores that most production remains the domain of commercial producers using their intellectual property and tools. Furthermore, he argues that media professionals and their work initially create the game and as originators allow for player co-creation in the first place. In other words, there would be no space for player creation if developers did not provide it to them.²²³ Ultimately, Banks' understanding of video game production heavily invests in the supremacy of commercial production and labor—despite seeing developer and player co-creation as a potential site for the transformation of video game

²²⁰ Banks, *Co-Creating*, 13-15.

²²¹ Banks, *Co-Creating*, 13.

²²² Banks, *Co-Creating*, 20.

²²³ Banks, *Co-Creating*, 20-21.

production—and seems to have a difficult time recognizing player production as more than simply an add-on to industrial production. However, this focus on the dominance of developer production may be a detriment to understanding the potential for the concept of video game production as produsage because it disregards the extent of the player role in production and even the reality that industrial video game production is oftentimes itself organized according to produsage practices.

Banks argues that player production is always limited and secondary to industrial production and this may indeed be the case for many developer and player production relationships for games that lack a complex interactivity. However, the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy and subsequent video game controversies suggest that even limited player production may be enough to allow players to effect change in a video game from outside traditional development studios. The concept of video game production as occurring primarily from centralized, industrial sites of production is antiquated at best. In reality, video game production requires the actions of many decentralized individuals in order to produce the text. Overvaluing one type of production over another ultimately obscures the true nature of video game production, the player's relationship with the text, and the player's ability to develop an actionable sense of agency. However, approaching video games from Bruns' concept of produsage—a concept that acknowledges the fluid but not always equal participation of user-producers and their varying talents²²⁴—expands the understanding of video games and their production beyond the primacy of industrial developers who manage the text and permit some controlled co-creation. The concept of video games as produsage shifts power away from developers and better recognizes player influence. The interactivity, choice and labor required to

²²⁴ Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia and Second Life*, 24-27.

produce a video game from beginning to completion from all participants cannot be properly understood by a model that separates the actions of participants. A concept such as produsage suits video game production because it accounts for many actions from many actors is arguably a better fit for the medium.

In order to understand video games as produsage, it is necessary to understand produsage as a concept beyond the basic idea of the producer-consumer relationship and how it connects to video game texts. In *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life and Beyond: From Production to Produsage*, Bruns explains that he initially adopted the term “produsage” because he felt that “producer” was no longer an adequate way to describe the production processes he saw in many new media forms such as Wikipedia that required “creative, collaborative, and *ad hoc* engagement” in user-led spaces, in part, because the concept of production only described a portion of user activities in these spaces. According to Bruns’ observations, users collaborating in the creation of texts such as open source software, user-edited Wikipedia, and online community *Second Life* do so outside of traditional industry and without traditional models of production—large communities working without official controlling hierarchy and organized *ad hoc*—which he identified as having more in common with emergent media than traditional industrial production models.²²⁵

Just as Bruns saw that the concept of producer and traditional models of production were not adequate to describe user participation in new media, the traditional conceptions and divisions of developers, players and traditional production may no longer be an adequate conception of video game production driven by many centralized and decentralized users. The idea of many decentralized users creating texts is not limited to produsage or even new media, but produsage is critical to the specific production processes of video games. Additionally, the

²²⁵ Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia and Second Life*, 1.

historical foundations for some of these practices can be traced back to what Henry Jenkins has described as participatory fan cultures where fans actively transform their experiences and readings of the text into new creative works and use the raw materials of the original text for their creations and interactions with other fan creatives.²²⁶ In Jenkins' model, fans effectively poach elements from the traditional producer's creative work and remake the text and its meanings according to their personal desires. Fans typically create poached media through such endeavors such as fan fiction, fan art, and the cultivation of fan communities. With participatory fan culture, fans and traditional producers sometimes form uneasy relationships because the ownership rights of traditional producers and the perceived fan ownership of the text and the meanings they create can often be at odds.²²⁷ When traditional producers and fans find they have creative differences and fans feel that their perceived control has been disrupted, participatory fan culture can quickly transform from pleasurable creative writing to determined letter writing campaigns to save their favorite show or character. In a highly limited form, these campaigns allow fans to see themselves as co-creators of their invested text and its desired continuation.²²⁸ While there are evident similarities between participatory fan practices and produsage in new media and video games, there is a significant difference between the two practices that makes participatory culture in itself an insufficient conceptual model to account for player production in video games despite its role as a precursor to both production and controversy practices. What makes video game production and produsage different from other participatory fan practices is that video games and produsage don't simply use the original text as the raw materials for a

²²⁶ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 23-24.

²²⁷ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 32-33.

²²⁸ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 28-29.

separate and derivative creative work, but rather use the raw materials to continually alter the original text itself.

Video game production occurs before, during, and after engagement with the text and includes the labor and creative investment of those in traditional production and individuals outside industrial systems and does not neatly conform to traditional production models. Therefore, a concept like produsage that acknowledges many creative participants who may take on many different creative roles more efficiently allows for both developers and players to be understood as significant and recognized as creative users. Bruns initially developed the concept of produsage as an alternative method of understanding the emergence of social software, the collaborative practices enabled by the interactivity of Web 2.0, and the development of collaborative digital media such as blogs, Wikipedia, and open source software projects that resulted in an explosion of user-created content.²²⁹ In produsage, all users who interact with and alter a text also engage in the production of the text through individual intervention. This allows for an alternative, user-focused understanding of production that decentralizes production and spreads ownership amongst all users. However, in doing so this also complicates production and ownership of these communal properties by removing formal divides between industrial owners and users who now all have a stake to claim in the text.²³⁰ Wikipedia may have dozens of authors who write and rewrite a single entry, a single blog may have several blog post authors and hundreds of commenters, and a video game may have hundreds of collaborators who develop the text and thousands of players who produce video game outcomes as users, producers, and stakeholders.

²²⁹ Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia and Second Life*, 3-4.

²³⁰ Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia and Second Life*, 5.

Television and film watchers, book readers, and video game players have typically been conceived as part of the same class of readers and consumers, but of course even those assumed to be passively consuming a text are actively reading their own meanings into them. However, because video games require direct interactivity, choice, and labor from both traditional producers and consumers, the terms consumer and even player unfairly undercut the influence that players exert over the text. However, the idea of players as users rightfully suggests that players have influence over the text as part of a larger system production. Bruns argues as part of his rejection of traditional production models and elevation of user-led creation that the acknowledgment of the “user” rather than simple consumer engagement implies a much more active role in the process that allows for “the active expression and communication of views, values, beliefs, ideas, knowledge, and creativity” as the expression of the choices of the users.²³¹ When users interact with and edit a pre-established Wikipedia entry, they don’t simply add information to the entry. They choose what is appropriate to add or remove based on personal beliefs about the topic, cultural perspectives, breadth of knowledge, and even personal grammatical style. When players interact with and play a video game, they don’t simply navigate the player-character around the game space. They choose appropriate combat and narrative ‘edits’ that influence the progression of the game text based on personal morals, cultural perspective, breadth of game knowledge, and even personal play style. In other words, when a user interacts with and alters a produsage text such as Wikipedia or a video game in basic or complex ways, they don’t—to call back to Stuart Hall’s model of encoding and decoding—simply decode the text, but instead use their personal decoding as a starting point to encode their own meanings and desires directly back into the text itself. According to Bruns, produsage and

²³¹ Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia and Second Life*, 14-15.

the intercreativity it allows steps beyond simple interactivity that allows users to take control of creativity and elevates them to active creators and users in media.²³²

Producers should not be considered producers or consumers according to traditional models because of the fluid nature of their roles and the always unfinished nature of their content and real outcomes that will never exist as finished products for consumption.²³³ In the example of produsage content such as the aforementioned Wikipedia, users build on existing content that will always be unfinished because of constant creation and intervention of other users. Wikipedia users edit information in the site's entries to provide or recontextualize subject knowledge. In the creation of open source software programs, producers incrementally add lines of new code and functions to the software. In the creation of video games, developers and players incrementally add to the progression of the game or revise choices for new outcomes. Player-created mods and skins take the base video game text from traditional developers and incrementally add or remove experiences in the text such as the player creations in *Doom* or *The Sims* are one accepted form of video game produsage. However, there is another form of video game produsage that is far more common and necessary to the production of video game content. This produsage occurs in the basic many-to-many collaborative acts of players who incrementally change the video game text through their choices every time they play the game and gradually improve the text by moving it towards a state of completion—a completion that always resets when the game reaches tentative completion.

According to Bruns' produsage model, production of a text occurs when individual users form into larger, fluid groups performing collective creation of unfinished texts with common

²³² Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia and Second Life*, 16.

²³³ Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia and Second Life*, 21.

ownership across the produsage group. In order for this to be possible, produsage texts at their core must be open texts that require user interactivity with the text and by extension other users, allow for the personal choices of users to be enacted as part of the creation of the text, and utilize the creative labor of many participants to progress and create the text. Interactivity, choice, and labor are arguably at the core of what makes a video game a video game and here serve as the means for produsage in video games. In video games, interactivity and play are effectively acts of produsage. In his produsage model, Bruns shifts the outmoded concept of the passive consumer towards the active choice of the user. The shift from player of a game to user of a video game text is critical to understanding a player's gaming activities in general as the production of the text and specifically as produsage. In fact, the term player—though it connotes a certain lack of seriousness and is assumed to be the opposite of work—has always implied something closer with the power to affect the progression of the text. In making the case to expand the idea of who is a player beyond the rigid proscriptions of so-called hardcore gaming, Jesper Juul defines the relationship between a player and a game in terms how players interact with games and vice versa as “a player is someone who interacts with a game, and a game is something that interacts with a player; players choose or modify a game because they desire the experience they believe the game can give them.”²³⁴ In this arrangement, players or video game users from both the development and player positions interact with the game text and modify it through the “collaborative and continuous building and extending of existing content in pursuit of further improvement”²³⁵ in a chain of interaction and content creation that allows for intercreativity between video game users within the text and beyond.

²³⁴ Jesper Juul, *A Casual Revolution: Reinventing Video Games and Their Players* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012), 9.

²³⁵ Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia and Second Life*, 21.

At the core of produsage, Bruns defined the four key principles common in produsage creation and content that occur in the production of video game texts. They include the key features of open participation with communal evaluation, fluid heterarchy with ad hoc meritocracy, unfinished artifacts and continuing process, and common property with individual rewards. Video game collaboration mirrors each of these principles in a manner particular to the video game as a text and enabled by the game's interactivity. Bruns argues the first of these principles, open participation with communal evaluation, allows for and encourages the participation of many users from many backgrounds who possess various skill and knowledge sets. Open participation with communal evaluation encourages collaboration but it also strengthens the content through the interactions of diverse viewpoints. The openness of produsage allows more participants to evaluate and contribute to the content through substantial or even minor changes and makes it more likely the content will improve in quality. Subsequently, this openness encourages the best possible content created from the participation of a wide range of users.²³⁶ The resulting product draws on the collaboration of users with a wide range of skills, knowledge, talent, and ideological frameworks that can be utilized to expand content and constantly improve upon the work while also encouraging the best content and collaborators to expand the text.²³⁷

Through their roles as video game users, developers and players engage in continuous collaboration to improve the content as desired. As Salen and Zimmerman outlined in their description of what makes a video game a video game, it is critical that the developer's text be open to player input through interactivity. Therefore, the function of a video game is that it must

²³⁶ Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia and Second Life*, 24.

²³⁷ Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia and Second Life*, 25.

be open to participation from multiple users and by extension open to evaluation by these users as part of the interactivity. With video games, this openness and evaluation occurs both in and outside of the text when video game users alter the text or extend the creative content beyond the source material. This process may be more obvious when considering practices such as the mods created for *Doom* or *The Sims* or when users evaluate and modify the base code of the video game to produce substantial changes to the text. However, most of the openness and evaluation in video game texts occurs as part of the interactivity and alteration of the video game within the text itself because a video game's interactivity opens alteration to any user. Video game users who are part of the development side of the creative chain—as part of the necessary functions of the initial video game text—build player-user evaluation into the interactivity of the text as conditions for progress and individual rewards such as unlocking locations, unfolding of narrative, or the awarding of ranks or trophies after player-users perform certain interactions as an evaluation of desired progression. Player-users, on the other hand, perform evaluations simply by playing the game and deciding on a course of action that leads to a desired outcome. For instance, this often occurs when players choose one path or another down a road, which items to equip or sell, which missions to accept and perform in what order, when to reload the game from a save point and try a section again for a better outcome, or when to restart the game to revise decisions from previous playthroughs.

The next principle of fluid heterarchy with ad hoc meritocracy builds on the open and communal nature of produsage by explaining how producers organize their labor and roles within the collaboration—despite the fact that there is often no formal guidance or organizing structure during produsage collaboration. In fluid heterarchy and ad hoc organization, not every participant has the same skill sets but nevertheless possesses the ability to contribute. In this

process, leaders are likely to emerge—and then eventually rejoin the anonymous group—based on immediate need of the process with the fluid nature of this arrangement in marked contrast with the traditional, industrial hierarchical models of production.²³⁸ According to Bruns, the fluidness of the produsage collaboration creates a community structured along the path of the flow of content and user engagement flows according to networked, non-hierarchical pathways that are in a state of constant flux both in terms of content and the community itself. Because of this flux and lack of true hierarchical organization, the community very rarely if ever works together as a single collaborative creative group. Instead, the group organizes content creation into more granular problem-solving units where producers often work in small groups or individually to progress content incrementally with temporary leaders.²³⁹

The fluid heterarchy and ad hoc meritocracy present in produsage texts may not be obvious in video game produsage if—much like Banks does in his criticism of Bruns’ concept—developers and players are imagined as completely separate groups with unequal power over the text. Traditionally, developers produce and players consume, but produsage reconfigures this relationship to recognize both groups as users contributing to the text in the ways most appropriate to their individual skills and desires. Despite the prominence and assumed greater power of the developer in the production of a video game text, there is no formal structure or hierarchy that dictates how player-users may decide to interact with or modify the video game, how much or how often the player-user will engage the text, or if certain tasks that progress the text will be completed or how well. Once the video game ships from the developer to the player, what happens in the game is almost entirely out of the control of the developer. Most developers

²³⁸ Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia*, 26.

²³⁹ Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia and Second Life*, 26.

retain little to no recourse to direct player choices because players are entirely free to play or not play—or rather contribute to the text or not contribute—based on what they want out of the video game and how they want it to unfold.

Developers and these unsupervised, undirected individual players represent part of a network of users connected by the text with each user incrementally producing changes in the text. These changes occur through small interactions such as player-character navigation, combat outcomes, narrative completion, or even adjustments to interface and settings. Each participant in the creation of the game text does not have the same skills or abilities nor are they able to contribute the same quality or form of content—for instance, the developer may create the physics and environments of a video game, but the player directs their action and even whether or not they manifest in a given playthrough—but each participant’s interaction with the text creates a new version of the video game that exists as part of the overall aggregate text. Although formal video game development conjures the image of a monolithic, corporate entity that releases video games into the wild fully formed, much of development is organized into hierarchical teams who create the game sometimes even after its official release. Video games are made by many people with varying skills working together to make incremental, granular contributions to the video game text as a whole—and often continue to do so even after the game is declared completed and released.²⁴⁰

While the first two key principles of Bruns’ produsage center on the organization or lack thereof of participants, the second two are geared more towards understanding the formation of produsage content itself. The first of these two describes content in terms of unfinished artifacts created through a continuing process of development. As collaborative participation becomes

²⁴⁰ Mark Deuze, Charles Bowen Martin and Christian Allen, “The Professional Identity of Gameworkers,” *Convergence* 13, no. 4 (2007): 342-343.

more fluid, granular, and open to alteration, the content created through this process remains always unfinished because there is no formal structure in place to prevent the shared, communal and continual changes to the content, nor is there a traditional production model geared toward shipping content to consumers. Rather, in this model, the continued, open creation of content is the end unto itself, which Bruns likens to medieval palimpsest but could also be compared to the surrealist collaborative “exquisite corpses” where creation would occur along a blind, collaborative chain. The communal nature of these always unfinished produsage works, Bruns argues, means that it is more appropriate to think of them as artifacts more than products because they represent a temporary glimpse at a text at a specific moment within a changing culture without formal direction or structure.²⁴¹

The fact that video games users can interact with the text and make incremental contributions over time necessarily means they are always unfinished because they are always open to new modifications by users. A developer may release a game and a player may beat it, but there is no formal structure or limitation that prevents a developer from releasing patches to the game, additional content, or disabling game features. There is also typically no structure to prevent a player from reloading the game and starting again with new choices and contributions. Much like Wikipedia or open source software, user production in video games is not geared toward creating a specific unit of content to be shipped to consumers. Although it may seem as if this is the developer’s goal, developers nearly always continue production on the game even after its initial release. The function of video game play and the point of interaction is to progress the video game experience and effect positive improvement of its current state. This, of course, may take different forms and there may be different concepts of positive improvement specific to

²⁴¹ Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia and Second Life*, 28.

each video game in both large and small moments. For a game like loot shooter *Borderlands 2* (2012) positive improvement comes from leveling up and acquiring better guns while a game such as narrative-focused survival horror game *The Last of Us* (2013) positive improvement comes from surviving to the next location and unlocking the story. Modification or play as the primary mode becomes an end to itself with each playthrough representing a temporary glimpse or artifact of the text that subverts the possibility of a finished text.

Fluid participation and unfinished texts in produsage naturally lead to the fourth and final key principle of produsage with the concept of common property with individual rewards. According to Bruns, the fluid and communal nature of content creation persuades users that content and the ability to alter it will always be available to the community, those who have participated in the content's creation, and those who may participate in the future. Additionally, produsage participation is typically motivated by the possibility for producers to contribute to the content as part of a shared purpose with the community's values and ideals.²⁴² This assumed right of communal content encourages participation by rewarding personal and communal contributions to the unfinished content, but also encourages a sense of communal and personal ownership over the content that must be protected from attempts to capitalize on or claim the content beyond the legitimate rules of the community. Bruns specifically calls out the rules of open-source and creative commons works that often stipulate that content must remain free of charge, that modifications must adhere to the same conditions, and that the contributions of individuals must be acknowledged appropriately according to community standards and values. As a result, produsage texts remain in the hands of the community, but individual, personal

²⁴² Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia and Second Life*, 28-29.

contributions are also rewarded and recognized for their value to the community and its content.²⁴³

Fluid developer and player participation and the unfinished nature of video game texts naturally leads to the reality that video game texts are assumed by users to be a common property among contributors. The idea of common property also assumes that participants earn individual rewards. Everyone who interacts with a video game text contributes to its production and contributes to how and why it is made. The reality of collaborative production means that everyone who contributes—no matter how small or great—may claim ownership over personal contributions and by extension ownership as a contributing member of the community. Ownership over a video game text may mean different things to different contributors. For a video game studio that began initial development of the text, ownership is typically understood as legal ownership over the video game code and copyrights along with ownership over financial capital accrued from sales of the video game and any ancillary products. For an individual player and the larger player community, the ability to control the direction of how a video game text will proceed narratively and as a game, leads to a sense of ownership over the player's personal choices and personal production of the text. This ownership extends over the creative course of the specific video game, the world and its characters, and future, continuing iterations of the text. The contributions of participants from the developer group and the player group all share the same purpose of progressing the video game, but their goals and outcomes in the service of personal rewards may not share the same purpose. Developers and players tend to share the same purpose of creating a satisfying text through production and interactive opportunities, but both groups find individual rewards in distinct forms of capital and specific awards for user

²⁴³ Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia and Second Life*, 29.

contributions. For developers, this may include financial profit, industry awards, and funding for more game development. For players this may include, the accumulation of items of varying value, award trophies, cultural capital of accruing game knowledge, and being able to brag about in-game achievements are all common pursuits for players.

Much like the interactivity that enables it, produsage operates through a multimodal, intertwined process within the real world text of a video game. The trilogy of *Mass Effect* games represents a significant illustrative example of this process and how the key elements of produsage work together. The key principles of open participation, fluid heterarchy unfinished texts, and common property with individual rewards exist in some form and configuration in every produsage text including video games. However, the specific acts and parameters of produsage vary from game to game with some games such as the *Mass Effect* series possessing both standard and more sophisticated frameworks for user production. More basic functions include the openness to move Commander Shepard around alien environments while some of the more sophisticated functions allow the player's choices and ideological persuasions to construct the narrative over the course of the three games. The *Mass Effect* games more so than many other games up until that time period encouraged open participation and communal evaluation in large part because the developers at BioWare created an intricate, multimodal base text that opened up layers of creation to the hands and desires of player-users. Some of these choices were more technically-focused such as the relatively standard role-playing game feature of choosing a combat class such as soldier, biotic, or engineer and the decision to pick and choose how to evolve and deploy combat skills based on the chosen class. Others involved choosing dialogue responses in conversation that lead to a specific outcome, killing or sparing non-player character adversaries who may offer Shepard assistance down the line, or how the player chooses a

romantic relationship with one of the Normandy's crew, which the player may develop throughout the series. Additionally, at the start of each of the games, the game provides the player the opportunity to sculpt in detail the face of Commander Shepard to reflect the player's desired representation of the player self that may or may not correspond to real life.



Figure 4.3: Khalisah al-Jilani, Westerlund News. Punchable face (Screenshot by the author, Mass Effect 3).

Each of these elements of openness and produsage represent crucial features that allow for game production because without these player choices the text would not progress. The inherent openness enables many users to produce video game texts through the collaboration of many diverse participants who are available to evaluate the options in the video game and embed it with their own diverse viewpoints, perspectives, and morality. Over the course of the trilogy, users encounter a matrix of hundreds of choices that determine the course of the game and its narrative and ultimately do not encounter hundreds more as user choices foreclose parts of the

game. For developer users, these choices often deal with the coding of environments, textures, and narrative decisions such as whether to allow for a specific choice and the possibilities of its outcomes. For player users, this runs the gamut from seemingly small encounters with lasting effects such as the choice for Shepard to punch reporter Khalisah al-Jilani (Figure 4.3) in the face when she harasses Shepard regarding the Reaper invasion of Earth. This small choice feels good at the moment, but it comes at the cost of critical war assets needed to defend the galaxy. On the other hand, the apparent gravity of certain galaxy changing decisions such as curing the Krogan genophage in exchange for critical Salarian military aid for the war present more immediate consequences. Large or small, all of these choices contribute to the development of who Shepard is and how the narrative will play out through the incremental production of the text by many users. This diversity allows for fluid heterarchy with players contributing to the overall text according to the viewpoints and skill of playing the game.



Figure 4.4: The author's personal Mass Effect 3 Commander Shepard build (Screenshot by the author, Mass Effect 3).



Figure 4.5: Jack the psychotic biotic. Gain her loyalty and she'll wear clothes (Screenshot by the author, Mass Effect 3).

For many players of *Mass Effect 3*, the continued creation and recreation of the video game text—which is never truly completed but always reset to an earlier state with the option to play anew—and its content is the end unto itself with at any given moment potentially thousands of versions of *Mass Effect 3* existing in various states (Figure 4.4). One player may know *Mass Effect* as a series starring a black male Commander Shepard with impressive biotic skills who saved the Council in the first game, fell in love with human biotic, Jack (Figure 4.5), in the second game, and defeated the Reapers in the third game by choosing to synthesize all synthetic and organic life. Another player may know *Mass Effect* as a series starring an Asian female Commander Shepard with a soldier's grit who saved the Council in the first game, allowed human biotic, Jack, to die during the suicide mission in the second, and defeated the Reapers in

the third game by choosing to destroy all synthetic life. These are just a few examples of some of the choices available to players and the resulting differences in the outcome.

In reality, *Mass Effect* offers hundreds of choices that allows players to create potentially thousands of different versions of the text produced through the collaborative actions of developer and players. Additionally, each player may create many different versions of their own experience every time the player starts a new playthrough and makes new choices, produces new content and outcomes, or even a new playthrough that makes the same choices again. That there is not one version of the text of *Mass Effect 3* but many versions created by many player-users means that *Mass Effect 3* and its outcomes, narratives, choices belong not just to the developers or any player, but to some degree to all who participate in the creation of its content. There are also, of course, personal rewards for participating in creation in *Mass Effect 3* that may range from earning credits to purchase items, achieving trophies for accomplishments, successfully romancing a beloved partner, or completing missions with desired outcomes. However, for players of *Mass Effect 3*, the most prized reward that players could earn is the feeling of ownership over their version of Commander Shepard and their personal experience of the text and its narrative—a reward so personal and felt so strongly by a massive number of players that they were willing to protest when they felt their ownership over the game had been essentially stolen from their control.

Some of the collaborative elements of *Mass Effect 3* appear in other video games in one form or another, but few video games have ignited such a contentious pushback over a video game narrative. What set *Mass Effect 3* apart from video games that preceded it and drove player users to fight for changes to the text occurs in the specific shared-production, user-led elements that function as primary operations in the player side of the production of the text, the connection

of these elements, and the critical influence they have over the character development of the player's personal Commander Shepard. Over the course of the three *Mass Effect* games—with a grand culmination of the player's choices and influence over the text in *Mass Effect 3*—the game tasks the player with shaping the game narrative through a sophisticated network of interactive choices that incrementally alter the course of the text. However, these choices do not simply alter the narrative. They also demand that the player embed their personal desires and morality into these choices, the text, and Commander Shepard, who is essentially a stand-in for the player themselves. The player-user's ability to alter the text according to choices that incrementally create narrative and morality are only part of what made *Mass Effect 3* produsage compelling enough for players to feel that their personal rewards and ownership over the video game was stolen from them. The vast majority of the narrative choices available to players do not present themselves in the diegetic world of the game as part of active navigation, combat and play, but rather occur as part of non-diegetic interfaces that allow players to create the text according to choices from a database—an activity that more closely resembles video game development and creation than simple play.



Figure 4.6: Commander Shepard gets to know Cerberus operative Miranda Lawson (Screenshot by the author, Mass Effect 2).



Figure 4.7: Commander Shepard decides to commit to Garrus Vakarian (Screenshot by the author, Mass Effect 2).

In many video games, production of the narrative centers on navigating the player-character through multiple game levels, progressing through combat, and then completing the video game narrative at the end of the text. However, in the *Mass Effect* series, most of the narrative is created and progressed through the player's repeated interaction with the contextually evolving "dialogue wheel" that provides the player with response options while in conversation with non-player characters. As seen in figures 4.6 and 4.7, the dialogue choices range from simple questions to critical life choices. The choices in the dialogue wheel almost always provide the player the opportunity to choose how to handle the major narrative decisions such as killing or sparing foes, providing aid to allies, and whether or not to complete missions. The wheel itself appears as an overlay during conversation as a rounded ring-shaped object with forked branches that offer potential, truncated dialogue options that the player may select and that Commander Shepard will then speak aloud with more detail in conversation. The non-player character will respond based on what the player chooses and this procedure continues until the player chooses to leave the conversation.



Figure 4.8: The critical dialogue choice between paragon, renegade or neutral (Screenshot by the author, Mass Effect 3).

However, the dialogue wheel is more sophisticated than a simple conversation simulator. Potential responses on the left side of the wheel typically lead to responses from the non-player character that offer exposition to flesh out the game world and its characters. Potential responses positioned on the top half of the wheel are generally considered paragon choices while the potential responses positioned on the bottom half are generally considered renegade choices. Every time a player makes a decision in the dialogue wheel, new branches of narrative open up to the text while other branches are closed off. This is especially true when it comes to top-wheel or bottom-wheel choices of morality that will either allow or deny subsequent options based on the accumulation of the player's moral decisions. Throughout the game's numerous conflicts, the dialogue wheel offers players solutions to these conflicts that are often coded to a specific morality that the player may unlock if they have accrued enough paragon or renegade points

Figure 8). For instance, when the Krogan Wrex becomes enraged because before the battle to stop Saren on Vormire, the player may talk him down peacefully if the player has earned enough paragon points—or be forced to kill him if not. Over the course of the series and *Mass Effect 3*, player choices produce the text through incremental change and according to the player's creative choices craft the video game text, close and open narrative options, and ultimately decide the narrative's conclusion.



Figure 4.9: Press L2 to help the injured Salarian worker or don't and let him die (Screenshot by the author, Mass Effect 2).

The morality system in *Mass Effect* adds another layer of personal, incremental creation that expands the produsage creation of the text and solidifies the player's sense of ownership and control of the video game. Choices of morality occur according to two key interfaces throughout the series that primarily rely on the non-diegetic reasoning of the dialogue wheel. Occasionally, these choices also occur through rapid and emotionally charged, timed interrupt prompts that

allow the player to interrupt a non-player character's dialogue in order to perform a scripted paragon or renegade action (Figure 9). So-called "karma systems" that force players to choose between morally coded choices typically offer players some sort of binary choice between "good" or "bad" with some sort of moral feedback for their choices and very often assigns point values to either category that players accrue over the course of the game.²⁴⁴ In the *Mass Effect* series, every paragon or renegade choice accrues points in either a paragon or renegade bank that is mostly hidden from the player but will have significant effects on the development of Commander Shepard and the narrative of the game as many dialogue options that lead to a resolution of a conflict have a minimum moral threshold that must be reached in order to unlock dialogue that gives the player the opportunity to choose how the narrative progresses. However, if moral control over the text is removed—in a video game or other narrative medium that has encouraged audience investment in the outcome—players will often shift their moral authority over the text to the real world and assert their moral right to protest developer actions that disrupt player interests and draw on the power of the community to exert their moral choice.

The idea of a separation between the labor of developers and players is simply not adequate to explain the production process of video games because it overvalues developers and undervalues players. Video games are not just games but sophisticated systems created through the produsage efforts of both developers and players through interactivity and collaboration, and the concept of the producer-user arguably better describes the relationship of individuals to the game text. Produsage acknowledges the reality of video games in that they require many users with many different roles who collaborate to create gradual, incremental improvements in the text according to each individual's skills and desires. The key principle of produsage of open

²⁴⁴ Tobias Knoll, "'Instant Karma'—Moral Decision Making Systems in Digital Games." *Religions* 9, no. 4 (April 2018): 13.

participation with communal evaluation, fluid heterarchy with ad hoc meritocracy, unfinished artifacts with continuing process, and common property with individual rewards are all features inherent to video game play and production. Video games enable fluid participation because the player is always the one to choose whether or not to engage and interact with a game, to alter it, or to leave it alone based solely on the player's desire to engage or not engage. Nearly every video game created represents an unfinished text open to continuous development because video games as text can always be abandoned, replayed, or played by a new player who may produce different choices and outcomes in the text. The openness and interactivity inherent to playing a video game means that every user who alters the game to produce a new version of the text may develop a feeling of personal rewards within the community because whoever plays the game and alters it earns a degree of ownership over what is produced.

4.4 Conclusion

The core features of interactivity and collaboration set video games apart from other narrative media because these features enable and encourage the development of player-led agency, player-led controversy, and the growth of the controversies into a normal part of the culture. While there are many elements common to the medium, a video game and meaningful outcomes cannot exist without interactivity between a text and player. In order to be a video game, the text must allow the player to act on personal choices in order to advance the narrative and game progress. This means that, unlike more static narrative media such as film, the creation of the text input depends on the actions of players and cultivates player investment through interactivity, which makes players necessary to production and opens the door for them to develop a sense of ownership over what they have created. The experience of interactivity during gameplay occurs for the players on several levels that include interaction with the physical

controls that then translate the player's intent to the game, navigation within the game space, feedback from the game itself to player inputs, and interactivity beyond the text with other members of the community through walkthroughs, mods and forums. These critical features of video game interactivity and the creative opportunity of video games allow for both developers and players to interact with the text and for both groups to contribute to the production of the experience of the video game and produce incremental changes based on the desires of any given participant. Interactivity in video games means that video games as texts are inherently collaborative, but video game collaborations also occur through player collaboration outside the text—most notably in video game controversies.

The collaborative nature of video game production and play also means that video games are texts made and remade by many participants who incrementally alter the game. Fundamentally, video game production occurs through the collaborative produsage of developers and players who interact with a text. In doing so, developers and players both act as producers and users of the text in order to develop the characters, outcomes and narrative. Whenever a developer or a player interacts with a video game, they make choices to alter the text and its meanings and produce a new text. In doing so, each participant claims the reward of ownership over their personal contributions. Although the key principles of produsage have traditionally been applied to social media such as blogs and Twitter, the principles apply to video games and represent the foundation for video game producer and user play and the critical space where the boundary between developer and player breaks down and allows for the conflict of controversy. Much like other produsage media, video games rely on the open participation of players to join in the collaborative play of the text in order to create the text, encourage communal evaluation of player actions as part of the game system, and allow for players to join or leave the game as they

please. The always unfinished nature of video games where a game can be reloaded, replayed, and countless new participants may join the game and change its outcomes means that video games are never truly completed and instead reside in a state of continuing process. As the many video game controversies have shown throughout recent years, the collaborative nature of developing and playing video games has allowed participants from both groups to develop a sense of ownership over the text—and rightly so in this case—because both groups can claim to have contributed to the production of the text through individual labor.

5 CHAPTER FOUR: THE FATE OF THE GALAXY

Within hours of *Mass Effect 3*'s release, player complaints about the ending and its lack of player choice exploded throughout the internet.²⁴⁵ Within days, the anger of individual players drove them to form online alliances on Facebook, Twitter, and the official BioWare forums and unite to “Retake *Mass Effect 3*” from the control of the developers through various ad hoc campaigns directed at BioWare and its developers. After weeks of campaigning and interacting with BioWare representatives regarding player suggestions on how to revise the game into a satisfactory outcome, BioWare effectively ended the controversy when it announced the studio would produce a new extended ending for *Mass Effect 3*, an outcome that most players welcomed even if cautiously.²⁴⁶ Significantly, the players did not achieve this success by overwhelming BioWare with harsh personal attacks that bullied the studio to relent. Instead, players fomented success by persuading BioWare to acknowledge the legitimacy of the player's collaborative input into the games by reaching out to players for comments and feedback on

²⁴⁵ Ravanofdarkness, “Mass Effect 3 Endings,” *BioWare Forums*, March 6, 2012, <https://forum.bioware.com/topic/267421-mass-effect-3-endings>.

²⁴⁶ Mike Fahey, “The Verdict is In: Fans Love / Hate the Mass Effect 3 Extended Cut,” *Kotaku*, June 26, 2012, <https://kotaku.com/the-verdict-is-in-fans-love-hate-the-mass-effect-3-e-5921394>.

what they believed should appear in a new ending. Furthermore, the BioWare developers included at least some of players' most commonly suggested changes and new content into the final ending, which clearly demonstrate that BioWare valued player contributions and their importance in the production of the text.

The *Mass Effect 3* players expected a reasonable outcome to the series—reasonable not just in terms of logic but also in terms of what the player had chosen for the narrative and its characters—based on personal choices over a text they believed they controlled. However, the controversy clearly indicates that this is not what happened for players. Critical player responses to the ending were swift, unrestrained, and singled out the ending specifically for closing the game off from player control with players often citing the feeling of abrupt loss of control as the main failure of the series' ending minutes. Some of the earliest objections to the ending on the BioWare forums cited issues that “the ultimate ending has nothing to do with what you have done before” making it all meaningless.²⁴⁷ Other common responses indicated that players saw the ending as meaningless because player choices didn't matter and ultimately also depressing because there existed no way to ensure that Commander Shepard “got to walk off into the sunset with his love interest and live happily ever after.”²⁴⁸ Eventually, professional video game critics and writers amplified and legitimized player complaints by also criticizing the way the final moments of *Mass Effect 3* undermined the complex narrative and morality system by forcing players to choose a predetermined ending.²⁴⁹ Even sympathetic reviews pointed to the ending as

²⁴⁷ Legionaireshen, “Mass Effect 3 Endings,” *BioWare Forums*, March 7, 2012, <https://forum.bioware.com/topic/267421-mass-effect-3-endings/page-3#entry8026381>.

²⁴⁸ J5550123, “Mass Effect 3 Endings,” *BioWare Forums*, March 6, 2012, <https://forum.bioware.com/topic/267421-mass-effect-3-endings/page-3#entry8027551>.

²⁴⁹ Luke Plunkett, “Why Mass Effect 3's Ending Was So Damn Terrible,” *Kotaku*, March 12, 2012, <https://kotaku.com/why-mass-effect-3s-ending-was-so-damn-terrible-5892676>.

somewhat disappointing for being somewhat nonsensical and “ultimately too simple” for the conclusion of such an epic series.²⁵⁰

The reason players and critics felt the ending of *Mass Effect 3* was meaningless stems from the produsage nature of video games and the sophisticated system of the *Mass Effect* series that allowed players to control as collaborators over the text. This collaborative control ultimately fostered a sense of player agency to change the video game within the text and by extension outside of it in the form of the controversy. The produsage nature of video games not only suggests that player actions can affect the game but in fact demands player action to progress creation. According to Janet Murray, a player’s sense of agency in digital environments serves as one of the primary features—or, as she puts it, a “characteristic delight”—of the player’s experience of agency tied to the actions we take in the digital environment that produce expected results.²⁵¹ For nearly the entirety of the *Mass Effect* trilogy of video games, the textual creative choices available to players to develop Commander Shepard and the narrative produced meaningful outcomes from player choices. These consistently satisfying outcomes resulted from player choices throughout the *Mass Effect* series and persuaded players to form expectations that the actions the player takes in the *Mass Effect* environment will continue to produce expected results. The closed and highly unsatisfying ending of the series disrupted player agency by omitting the results of player actions in the ending of the narrative and Commander Shepard’s fate and in doing so essentially demolished player expectations of their actions and divested player ownership and agency over the text.

²⁵⁰ Tom Francis, “Mass Effect 3 Review,” *PC Gamer*, March 6, 2012, <https://www.pcgamer.com/mass-effect-3-review>.

²⁵¹ Janet Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 126.

The collaborative produsage of *Mass Effect 3* encouraged players to develop personal agency over the text until BioWare's ending shattered many players' sense and perceived control over the text. Despite this loss, a significant number of players maintained a strong sense of agency over *Mass Effect 3* and the theft of their control did not diminish player expectations that their choices could still meaningfully affect the game. As a result, the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy formed with the intention of forcing BioWare to produce a new, satisfying ending for *Mass Effect 3* that succeeded in its quest for a new ending. None of the tactics that the *Mass Effect 3* controversy participants were necessarily new. Online Twitter and Facebook campaigns found success during political protests during the Arab Spring,²⁵² and fan campaigns directed to persuade producers to alter or bring back television shows have occurred for years.²⁵³ However, this type of online player campaign and its resulting outcome represented a new aspect of the video game community that persists even years later. Additionally, even though the singular event of the *Mass Effect 3* ending provoked players to fight for a satisfying ending, the openness of the text meant that meaningful outcomes and satisfaction did not necessarily mean the same thing to every player. The *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy itself divided into two main ideological groups—those who wanted to “Retake *Mass Effect 3*” and alter the ending and those who believed in the “Indoctrination Theory” and attempted to rectify their dissatisfaction through an alternative reading of the text. Ultimately, the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy succeeded in persuading BioWare to produce a new ending for the game—something unheard of at that

²⁵² Radwa A. Mobarak, “Political Activism in Egypt: Youths Break the Spiral of Silence,” in *Social Media Goes to War: Rage, Rebellion and Revolution in the Age of Twitter*, ed. Ralph D. Berenger (Spokane: Marquette Books, 2013), 367-368.

²⁵³ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 28-30.

time—because they recognized the significance of player collaboration and legitimized their concerns by officially asking for player input into the ending.

This chapter examines the player response to the *Mass Effect 3* ending, why the community organized in revolt to demand a better ending, the tactics employed, the various camps that formed, and ultimately what players accomplished when they persuaded BioWare to change *Mass Effect 3* and as a result video game culture itself. This chapter argues that the controversy ignited because of disrupted player agency and individual sense of ownership over the text that players attempted to resolve because of collaborative, produsage-based organization, which was ultimately satisfied through developer changes to the text. Agency functions as a critical aspect of video game play, controversy, and the development of psychological ownership over a text. As a result, this chapter examines the concept of agency from the perspective of its psychological origins as the ability to make things happen through individual actions, video game specific discussions that stress individual actions in digital environments, and the development of the collective agency of a larger community. The *Mass Effect* series presented players with a sophisticated, persuasive system of gameplay, narrative, morality, and choice that this chapter argues encouraged the development of player agency, ownership, and controversy. In order to place the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy in context and analyze the events, this chapter examines fan campaigns as part of participatory fan culture, the tactics of the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy participants, and the factions that developed during the controversy.

5.1 Agency and Ownership

It's been a long, hard journey to defeat the Reapers, but you're Commander Shepard and you're the only person in the galaxy who can do it. Every choice you've made has brought you to this fight. Paragon or renegade or somewhere inbetween, every choice mattered. When you

stopped the rogue Spectre Saren from cloning an army of Krogan on Virmire, you chose to save Lt. Kaidan Alenko and left Sgt. Ashley Williams behind to die while she detonated the nuke to destroy the cloning facility. During the final confrontation with Saren at the Citadel, you were faced with an impossible choice to either save your Systems Alliance ships or save the galactic Council to ensure peace and stability. You made the hard choice to save the Citadel Council who were forever in your debt. From the destruction of the Normandy to the attack on the Collector base, you built the strongest team of soldiers and specialists and did everything you could to gain their loyalty. You provided them with their strongest tools and assigned them duties based on their strengths and weaknesses. If you had neglected your team before the suicide mission to take the base, one or all of your team would have died in combat and the mission would have been a failure without their survival.

When the Reapers finally invaded the galaxy in force and you needed the unified support of the galactic races, you chose to go against centuries of repression to cure the genophage plague the Turians inflicted on the Krogan and convinced the two races to join your cause to fight the Reapers together. As a tragic result of your choice, you also lost your trusted Salarian friend, Dr. Mordin Solus, who died ensuring the cure was effective and that the war could be won. After spending one last night with your Turian boyfriend, Garrus Vakarian, you lead the fight to take back Earth from the Reapers, fought through hordes of monstrous enemies with your squadmates Garrus and Kaidan by your side, and finally make it aboard the Reaper-controlled Citadel by yourself to end this invasion once and for all. As you reach the core of the Citadel, you meet the artificial intelligence that controls the Reapers called the Catalyst who appears to you in the form of a shimmering hologram of a boy you watched die during the initial attack on Earth. He does not offer you a battle to defeat the Reapers but rather a choice telling

you that you can choose to destroy the Reapers, control the Reapers, or synthesize all organics and synthetics in the galaxy into a new form of life. You choose to destroy the Reapers and activate their destruction through the Citadel's systems. A red beam of light shoots out from the Citadel. Your ship flies away from the blast before crashing on a jungle planet. The ending cuts to black. You have successfully saved the galaxy, killed the Reapers, and killed yourself.

These, of course, represent only a fraction of the choices players make throughout the course of the *Mass Effect* series, but no matter what the player chooses the ending remains the same. The shimmering AI boy offers the player a choice that triggers either a red beam to destroy the Reapers, a blue beam to control them, or a green beam to synthesize with them. The resulting flight and crash of the Normandy, the defeat of the Reapers, and the death of Commander Shepard remain nearly identical no matter what the player does. The superficial changes in the color motif of the ending cutscene sequence represent the only substantial difference from ending to ending. Additionally, the ending offers little in the way of closure for any of the other major characters. Other players might make different choices throughout the three *Mass Effect* games. They might save Ashley and leave Kaidan to die, romance Kaidan instead of Garrus, choose to play as a male Commander Shepard with different romance options entirely, or select different squadmates for combat. However, no matter what they decide, they would also find themselves presented with the same three ending choices with the same unavoidable outcome. The seemingly unconstrained choices in *Mass Effect* represent the series' greatest strength because these choices allow players the opportunity to develop agency through the meaningful outcomes that they create as they progress the text. These seemingly unconstrained choices undoubtedly also represent the downfall of the three games because, for one reason or another, the player's choices and actions had little to no effect on the ending. The lack of satisfying

outcomes resulted in the abrupt revocation of meaningfulness in the narrative, the theft of agency for anyone who engaged the final sequence of *Mass Effect 3*, and the widespread player backlash that followed.

In order to understand why this loss of agency was so critical to *Mass Effect* in general and the controversy as a whole, it is necessary to examine video game agency and what it provides to players. Despite the fact that agency may seem obvious as an experience of being able to effect change in the world, defining the concept of agency in general terms and in the context of video games requires more in-depth explanation in order to understand the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy and the controversies it has spawned. The most influential and detailed assessment of agency between humans in the physical world comes from social psychologist Albert Bandura's "Social Cognitive Theory: An Agentic Perspective" where he defines agency and its types. He argues that interactions of people that produce agency are both products and producers of the systems they live in—a description which shares a strong similarity to Bruns' description of produsage. According to Bandura, agency between people is based in the concept that:

To be an agent is to intentionally make things happen by one's actions. Agency embodies the endowments, belief systems, self-regulatory capabilities and distributed structures and functions through which personal influence exercised, rather than residing as a discrete entity in a particular place. The core features enable people to play a part in their self development, adaptation, and self-renewal with changing times.²⁵⁴

The most basic understanding of human agency does not often extend beyond the idea that agency develops when people make things happen by one's actions, but Bandura's definition

²⁵⁴ Albert Bandura, "Social Cognitive Theory: An Agentic Perspective," *Annual Review of Psychology* 52 (2001): 2.

significantly moves past this basic definition to suggest that agency is just about as much if not more critical to a person's ability to effect changes in themselves as it is their control over their interactions with their social systems. In the context of the physical human world and in the context of the digital world of a video game such as *Mass Effect 3*, a person's agency does not simply change the world through interaction, but also develops a sense of self, personal beliefs, and changes how a person situates themselves as part of the world.

Bandura's definition of agency stands as a useful as a starting point for understanding human agency, but he expands this understanding of agency beyond that starting point by breaking down the core features of human agency—intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness and self reflectiveness—into the main features necessary to produce human agency and allow for a person to make things happen according to their own actions. Intentionality as a core feature of agency stipulates that the actions taken by a person to create change must be done by design rather than accident in order for there to be agency. In terms of agency, intentionality should be understood in this context as first the mental representation of an action before it is taken in the physical world and the “proactive commitment” to take action to bring change about in the world.²⁵⁵ Closely tied to intentionality, the core feature of forethought extends agency temporally and allows a person to devise a plan of action. Forethought is critical for agency because it functions to motivate people to carry out their intentions by providing self guidance to act towards goals and imagined outcomes, to choose actions likely to produce positive outcomes, and to regulate their behavior according to these expectations.²⁵⁶ In combination, the core features of intentionality and forethought produce a layer of agency that interacts directly with

²⁵⁵ Bandura, “Social Cognitive Theory,” 6.

²⁵⁶ Bandura, “Social Cognitive Theory,” 7.

the world through a conversation with a person in the real world or the virtual world of a video game. These interactions directly affect the world to produce changes based on personal choices and beliefs.

Similar to how intentionality and forethought work in tandem as a function of agency, Bandura's final two core features—self-reactiveness and self-reflectiveness—function together closely as part of the overall production of agency and a person's motivation for action. According to Bandura, self-reactiveness is a person's ability to self-regulate thought and transform it into action by regulating personal motivation through self-monitoring, self-guidance, and the implementation of self-corrective action to ensure sustained direction of action toward goals. Bandura argues that the goals created through forethought are not what motivates a person to act, but rather that a person's self-evaluation of goals and actions in terms of how challenging and interesting they are motivates a person to act to achieve goals with a specific intention.²⁵⁷ Self-reflectiveness critically links to self-reactiveness and also represents the core feature that Bandura suggests is the most essential to a person's agency. Bandura sees this feature as the most essential because agency depends on a person's ability to effect control over their self, their actions, and the environment around them. Central to agency, self-reflectiveness allows people to believe that they even can create positive results through action and serves as the primary motivator for people to act with agency.²⁵⁸

Bandura's discussion of human agency focuses on the interactions between people in a social environment, but human agency exists beyond the physical world and can develop between physical humans and their interactions with a digital world and the environments found

²⁵⁷ Bandura, "Social Cognitive Theory," 8.

²⁵⁸ Bandura, "Social Cognitive Theory," 10.

in video game texts. While agency over a film watched by an audience or a book read by reader may be limited to audience imagination in one-sided textual poaching, a video game text's inherent interactivity and requirement for player choice means that players must intentionally make things happen in the video game through direct interaction with the system and its characters. This direct interaction subsequently develops a sense of agency when the text responds to player choices with meaningful results. Additionally, player agency in the video game system much like agency in the physical world must naturally exist because of a player's sense of the core features of agency of intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflectiveness as a player interacts with the text.

With a video game, intentionality acts through multiple layers of the text when a player crosses a threshold and chooses to play the game, evaluates the interactive gameplay possibilities of the game, and commits to the button and joystick actions that the player assumes will produce a desired outcome based on the internal planning, foresight, and experience within the video game system. Player self-evaluation of actions intrinsically occurs through every interaction of the video game based on how the system responds to the player's chosen actions. This self-evaluation comes into play especially after gameplay actions that result in a failure to complete a mission, carry out a combat goal as desired, or after player death—any of which will either motivate the player to apply self-corrective action to subsequent choices or abandon the video game because the player evaluates it as too challenging. Player self-reflectiveness occurs every time the player knowingly decides to press a button or manipulate a joystick to effect their desires in the video game world. However, the process begins before the player ever interacts with the video game. Player self-reflectiveness and player agency begin when a player chooses to act in the video game based on the knowledge that the player is able—or even entitled—to

create desired results within the world if the player chooses to act. The key difference between agency in the physical world and the digital world of the video game is that many of the “humans” a human player interacts with through the video game environment are not humans at all but bots lacking their own true agency—despite appearances to the contrary. This creates a one-sided agency that allows players to project desires onto the characters and text without external regulation and allows for a stronger sense of connection and control than possible otherwise.²⁵⁹

Although the connection between agency and video game play may seem clear, the direct discussion of agency in video games has not necessarily been an extensive one. Janet Murray’s examination of video game narrative and agency from *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* represents the most significant and influential exception. Murray defines agency as “the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices.”²⁶⁰ She further stresses that in a digital environment users expect that inputting actions into a computer system to produce a desired result—for instance to open or close a file or input information—produces a sense of agency but typically not a narrative. As for narrative, Murray argues that audiences do not generally have that same expectation of being able to take meaningful actions with meaningful results when it comes to narrative media such as television or theater that display a clear demarcation between the world of the narrative and the audience. However, the medium of the video game has developed to include the agency of the player, the call and response of an interactive computer system, and the construction of narrative

²⁵⁹ Leah Miller, “Designing Video Game Characters for Romantic Attachment: Practical Application and Design Pitfalls” in *Digital Love: Romance and Sexuality in Games*, ed. Heidi McDonald (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2017), 161.

²⁶⁰ Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 126.

as joined elements. This combination allows players to interact with the computer system and subsequently influence the player's experience of the narrative. According to Murray, this is possible in digital environments such as video games because their specific qualities contain properties that create a space for interactivity and a sense of immersion, which allow for agency within the environment. These essential properties of digital environments—which permit the game to be played but also permits collaboration between developers and players in the creation of the text—produce environments such as video games that are necessarily procedural, participatory, spatial, and encyclopedic and are the foundation for interaction and agency.²⁶¹

The four properties of digital environments together create the potential for digital texts as literary texts that provide a sense of immersion and control for the user. The property of procedurality in Murray's description refers to the algorithms and heuristics that developers program into the environment. These algorithms define the rules and boundaries of the environment and how the player may interact with the text. In general terms, procedurality defines how the player can interact with the environment but also how the environment will respond to the player's input, which are both necessary for players to be able to exert their intentionality and apply self-reflection based on the feedback from the system.²⁶² Following from the digital environment's procedurality, Murray argues that the text's inherent participatory nature presents one of the key factors for why people choose to interact with digital environments at all. The participatory aspect allows us to induce behavior within the system, and functions as the "primary representational property of the computer is the codified rendering of

²⁶¹ Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 71.

²⁶² Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 71-73.

responsive behaviors.”²⁶³ One of the key features of video games in particular is that they present a navigable space for the player’s interaction and allow players the freedom to move within these spaces as they desire and control the action through personal input. According to Murray, the freedom of movement within the digital environment creates a satisfying experience for players because it mimics the freedom of real world movement but also allows the player to “express a sequence of thoughts as a kind of dance” in the environment motivated by a player’s forethought and interactions.²⁶⁴ The encyclopedic potential of digital environments—which provides the environment with details and information that help produce immersive environments—enables narrative development and persuasive experiences that encourage player interaction.²⁶⁵

Ultimately, all of these features come together in the medium to create the potential for agency through the procedure and interaction in digital environments such as video games. Through much of the discussion of agency in digital environments, Murray likens interactivity and agency to that of a dancer who can influence their partner—in this case the computer and its code—who can create their own performance and feel as if the dancehall operates at the dancer’s command. This feeling of agency, she warns, does not develop from interactivity or activity alone. The player’s actions produce an effect directly influenced by player intention within the environment and that games with the highest potential for agency allow “actions that are highly autonomous, selected from a large range of possible choices, and wholly determine the course of the game.”²⁶⁶ A game such as a slot machine has numerous opportunities for interactivity but the

²⁶³ Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 74.

²⁶⁴ Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 81-83.

²⁶⁵ Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 86.

²⁶⁶ Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 127-128.

randomness of results produces little player agency if any at all. Instead, players develop agency through the interaction with a video game as they exert control over the text by exercising their intentions based on their desires and the game's response to their actions. However, Murray suggests that the sense of agency developed in the video game also allows players to experience a symbolic sense of agency over their real lives and allow players to rehearse actions and ideas in a safe space before transferring them to real life.²⁶⁷ The idea that video game play and agency functions as a precursor to real world activity means that the demarcation line between the experience of the real world and the video game world is thin, at best, and even naturally flows from one space to the other.

Murray's argument that player agency in video games stems from a video game's textual qualities and the player's interaction with it remains influential but somewhat unsatisfying on its own. Indeed, Murray's discussion of agency somewhat overemphasizes the text without much consideration for how and why players engage with a video game or the specific video game mechanisms that allow players to feel agency and control. However, Axel Bruns' concept of produsage helps to fill in some of these motivational and functional gaps when considered alongside Murray's agency because it accounts for how and why people engage creative texts, acknowledges a player's agency as part of the expression of the agency of a larger, fluid group, and explains how this agency can lead to a sense of ownership for players. While Murray described player agency in terms of a dancer performing within the confines of someone else's choreography, produsage sees the player in terms of multiple users who participate in the creation of the text as part of a collective community and recognizes that users ultimately choose how, why, and in what way they will interact with the text according to the needs of the

²⁶⁷ Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, 143-144.

community and desires of the individual. In produsage texts such as video games and other digital environments, player agency develops not just because the player chooses specific moves permitted by the developer's code, but instead develops because a player chooses specifically to interact with the video game in order to influence it as part of a community of developers and players. In this arrangement, everyone who chooses to participate becomes influenced not simply by the developer's code but by personal desire to interact. The meaningful action afforded by video games represents the action to play the game and influence the narrative and action. However, for many players—and the players of *Mass Effect 3* more so than perhaps some others—the meaningful action that requires a satisfying result stems from the control over the video game itself. With each interaction, the player produces control over the text every time the player chooses to play, activates the video game world, and presides over personal incremental changes. The personal choices that a player makes belong to the player and by extension the text belongs to the player. The resulting ownership constitutes some of the player's satisfaction and agency.

Each of the key characteristics of produsage encourages the player to exercise and develop a personal sense of agency over the text as part of the larger community, and enables a sense of ownership over individual contributions. The first key characteristic of produsage collaborations depends on open participation with communal evaluation with the participation of users contributing to the text as the user desires and with each user entitled to evaluate—and therefore influence—the contributions of others.²⁶⁸ In video games, players have the agency to decide what game to play, how much or how little to interact with or complete in the game, and what specific choices to make. They also have the agency to criticize the text online as part of

²⁶⁸ Axel Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia and Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Produsage* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 24-25.

community forums open to players and developers. The second key characteristic of produsage depends on the functional development of a fluid heterarchy and ad hoc meritocracy that allows for all participants to contribute to collaboration even if not in the same way, frequency, or volume. This recognizes that all contributions are valuable to the text because each interaction advances the development of the text.²⁶⁹ The idea that developers, their code, and their agency should be privileged over player interactions and agency is obsolete in a produsage collaboration because produsage recognizes that every piece is valuable to the whole, which means that player contributions from mods to playing the video game itself are actions that allow players influence over the game and agency through interaction.

While the first two key features are critical for the development of agency, the final two key features of unfinished artifacts with continuing process and common property with individual rewards provide players with the most space and incentive to develop agency over time and therefore develop investment in a video game text. Produsage texts—or as Bruns argues is more apt “artifacts”—develop as texts with no goal for product completion only continued creation. They exist as texts open to the influence of anyone and necessarily as texts that “must remain continually unfinished, and infinitely continuing” because they remain always incomplete as long as users can still access and alter the text.²⁷⁰ This means that these are always open to user influence and the creation of meaningful, satisfying experiences. When it comes to video games, players always have the agency to influence and reboot a video game text because—although the developer code is usually static—almost no video game finishes permanently completed after development of a mission or overarching narrative. Instead, the video text

²⁶⁹ Bruns, Blogs, *Wikipedia and Second Life*, 25-26.

²⁷⁰ Bruns, Blogs, *Wikipedia and Second Life*, 27-28.

resides in a temporal and spatial state of readiness to load parts of the video game code based on the activation of the player whether it is a save point or the video game's start after the completion of the main game. The final key characteristic of produsage of communal property and individual rewards is critical not just to individual player agency through playing the video game but also the influence agency had over the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy as well. According to Bruns, the collective creation of produsage texts encourages participants to assume that—because the text was created collectively—the text will be available to access for all who have made contributions.²⁷¹ In a video game, this means that players assume that once they exert agency over a video game text, the game cannot be taken out of their hands either through the disabling of access or in the case of the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy by removing the player's ability to exert agency over the narrative. This agency of access often works hand in hand with the agency developed through the individual rewards of contribution that motivate participants to continue and accrue social capital within the community.²⁷² Player actions as part of the collaborative creation of the text are made meaningful by personal standards but also through various rewards granted the player by other members of the community. These rewards further encourage a sense of ownership over the rewards earned and by extension the video game as a text.

5.2 Collective Agency and Psychological Ownership

Video game agency that stems from taking meaningful actions within a video game through the collaborative actions of produsage users allows for the development of collective player agency, which is critical for the development and of a video game controversy.

²⁷¹ Bruns, Blogs, *Wikipedia and Second Life*, 28-29.

²⁷² Bruns, Blogs, *Wikipedia and Second Life*, 29.

In the case of video games and other digital media, collective agency develops when the individual agency of users—in this case developers and players—interact with the text to activate its creative potential as part of a collective experience.²⁷³ Typically, collective agency has been recognized in video game culture as part of participatory fan practices such as fan fiction and fan art where players interact with the video game text, extend their personal agency to creative practices outside the text, and interact with other players who collectively produce new texts.²⁷⁴ In a video game controversy such as the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy, players developed and operated through the collective agency of the campaign, creative fan videos and writings, and the collective dissemination of these works and ideas much similar to collective fan agency. However, the players took their collective agency a significant step further by demanding that BioWare and its developers also participate in this collective agency first by joining in collective player agency on the BioWare forums and second by allowing the collective agency of players to dictate changes to the original text of *Mass Effect 3*. The collective agency of player-led controversy pushed developers beyond separate developer and player collective agency into collective developer and player agency—or rather collective user agency—that erodes the boundary between the two.

The combination of individual agency, collective agency, and the elements of produsage that open a video game text to all who choose to interact with it tends to lead all users to develop a sense of personal, psychological ownership over the text and its alterations. The concept of psychological ownership has been most notably discussed by Jon L. Pierce and Iiro Jussila in

²⁷³ Susanne Eichner, *Agency and Media Reception: Experiencing Video Games, Film, and Television* (Berlin: Springer VS, 2014), 226.

²⁷⁴ Gareth Schott, “Agency in and Around Play,” in *Computer Games: Text, Narrative and Play*, ed. Diane Carr et al. (Malden: Polity Press, 2006), 144-147.

their *Psychological Ownership and the Organizational Context* as a construct of the feeling of ownership typically produced through labor as part of an organizational workplace. The psychological relationships between the individual and the organization represent “the psychological glue that connects and bonds the individual to the work that they do—in other words to their jobs—and to the organization to which the work is performed.”²⁷⁵ Further, the sense of psychological ownership one may develop through labor often does not equate to legal ownership but rather a feeling of possession that can take the form of personal ownership over an object or collective ownership as part of a larger community.²⁷⁶ As part of the larger organization of produsage that collectively creates a video game text, the development of psychological ownership in video game players and the video game community owns through the interaction and collaboration with the text and the subsequent agency and personal rewards that a player may develop as part of this process. For any given player, the choices made to produce the text are the player’s choices that produce personal player’s text—my Commander Shepard, my boyfriend Garrus, my defeat of the Reapers—within our community of gamers. Additionally, the individually developed rewards—my trophies, my Black Widow sniper rifle, my unsatisfying conclusion—exist as their possessions associated with the text.

However, the feeling of ownership is not the sole factor that provokes people to act as part of a video game controversy on its own. There often exists a collective encouragement for individuals to transfer individual agency and ownership into collective agency and ownership. As Elena Karahanna et al. have argued in “Psychological Ownership Motivation and the Use of Social Media,” an individual’s sense of psychological ownership often develops through

²⁷⁵ Jon L. Pierce and Iiro Jussila, *Psychological Ownership and the Organizational Context: Theory, Research Evidence, and Application* (Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar, 2011), 15.

²⁷⁶ Pierce and Jussila, *Psychological Ownership*, 16.

behaviors and media that satisfy a person's individual needs related to their perceived ownership or what they describe as psychological ownership motivation. Karahanna et al.'s primary object of analysis focuses on social media platforms because they encourage users to develop feelings of psychological ownership through the inherently user-centric features of these platforms. These features constitute the potential for user-generated produsage and encourage users to feel possession over their virtual items, personal contributions to the overall platform, and standing within the social media community and motivates them.²⁷⁷ Psychological ownership motivation, they argue, occurs when an individual develops feelings of psychological ownership that they then act to maintain these feelings. The feelings of psychological ownership become more intense when they merge collectively and feed into the motivations of the individuals and the collective almost addictively. Individuals with more intense psychological motivation will be "likely to invest their time, effort, and self into the target of ownership, exercise control over the target of ownership, and come to know the target of ownership more intimately."²⁷⁸ The psychological ownership motivation for players of a video game and participants in a controversy may not be as simple as feeding off of the motivations of other players because it operates on two levels that likely feed off the player motivation and helps to encourage the extreme nature of some of these controversies. Psychological motivation enabled by social media nearly always occurs as a primary factor in player-led video game controversies as players organize and disseminate the group's messages through Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and other open social media that allows them to develop a sense of ownership over their individual contributions to the controversy as well as the collective accomplishments of the group, which

²⁷⁷ Elena Karahanna, Sean Xin Xu, and Nan (Andy) Zhang, "Psychological Ownership Motivation and Use of Social Media," *Journal of Marketing Theory & Practice* 23, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 186.

²⁷⁸ Karahanna, Xu and Zhang, *Psychological Ownership Motivation*, 188.

often motivates both the individual and the group to continue the fight. However, video game controversies at their core are built on the psychological ownership players develop through their interactions and work put into a video game. This feeling of ownership of psychological ownership collectively motivates the extreme response to threats to both individual and collective ownership in these controversies.

Mass Effect 3 puts the player in control of Commander Shepard, the game's choices, and its narrative. In spite of this control and priority of choice, any player who reaches the end of the game experiences the same predetermined ending to the series and a final choice that boils down to a difference of color. The promise that every choice mattered in the *Mass Effect* games drew players into the game and the belief in their own personal agency, but the promise also led players to revolt against the games when their agency was taken. Bandura's examination of agency shows the significance of agency in the real world beyond the act of making a choice. According to Bandura, agency is the ability to make changes in the world through one's own actions but also the ability to make changes in one's self. In other words, a person with agency makes choices and these choices influence how this person develops a sense of self, their personal beliefs, and how they see themselves in relation to and part of the world. However, as Murray argued, agency is not limited to the real world and can develop in a digital environment through a player's input and the system's response, which influence player experience and expectations of a response to action. In a digital environment such as a video game, the collaborative produsage of video game texts allows players open, fluid participation with always unfinished texts that encourages a sense of psychological ownership over the player's choices and the text. Ultimately, the disruption of agency in the real world or a video game is not simply a disruption of choice. When a video game disrupts a player's agency, it disturbs a player's sense

of self and personal ability to affect the game world, undermines their belief in the world, and destabilizes their sense of place and ownership over the world.

5.3 Participatory Fan Campaigns

Fan campaigns determined to persuade producers to change their texts have occurred for decades as a method of participatory fan practices. Historically, these campaigns arose when television fans protested in response to specific displeasing characterizations within the text or in response to series cancellation in an attempt to “save their show” as part of the larger expression of participatory fan cultures. In these controversies and the *Mass Effect 3* controversy, audiences attempted to reclaim the text after its loss. The *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy and all other video game controversies have been influenced by this history of participatory fan protest and likely would not have developed without this history and influence. The fan protests and the player controversies share commonalities even if the agency and access of controversy participants to the text is not the same. Each new video game controversy erupts for specific reasons tied to the game and the community and utilizes the methods most appropriate to send a message to developers. Reasons for controversies often include lack of choice, poor game quality, microtransactions, and even the existence of women in the community. For each of these controversies and whatever the reason for them, players typically attempt to voice their concerns directly to developers or their official representatives through one or more social media.

Controversies initiated by television fans are triggered and expressed according to the specific nature of the text and the community and usually incorporates slogan or themes from the series into the controversy as a way to identify the community and hail developers whom fans may not be able to speak to directly. While video games provide fans with influential agency in the text and the controversies often center around the disruption of this agency, television controversies

tend to focus on the temporary removal of character agency such as in the Sansa rape controversy from *Game of Thrones* or by permanently removing the agency of all of the characters through series cancellation.

Controversies regarding the perceived mischaracterization of characters are not unusual for a series and especially for one that runs multiple seasons. However, protest campaigns that develop after a series faces cancellation and motivates the most passionate fan responses share the most similarities with video game controversies since 2012. So-called “save the show” campaigns do not develop for every canceled television series. Most seem to develop in response to threats to narratively complex series that require a higher degree of attention and investment that allows viewers to develop an emotional attachment to its characters and their lives. These series don’t allow for the same experience of agency for viewers that manipulating a video game character does for players, but the complexity of these narratives, their textual openness, and the time spent invested with these characters does allow for a certain degree of projected agency—and by extension a sense of some ownership—developed through the production of personal meanings through consuming the text. The experience of loss still often persuades fans to rewrite an unsatisfactory text or enact a protest as a reaction to series cancellation.²⁷⁹ If viewer feelings of agency and ownership over the text become abruptly revoked, viewers often feel a loss of control or theft of the series they loved. However, when viewers become protestors and act in the real world in order to influence and change the text, the projected feelings of agency transform into real, actualized agency that viewers utilize in the real world.

While the agency of a single viewer would certainly not be enough to persuade a television network to change its mind and save a beloved series, the collective agency of many

²⁷⁹ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 162.

viewers has accomplished just that. On multiple occasions, fan protests to save beloved series provoked networks to reverse cancellations. Fan responses typically incorporate tactics tailored to the content of the series and their belief that specific protest actions will be most effective in getting what they want from the network or producers. Because network executives rarely provide opportunities to interact with fans, the tactics used in these campaigns tend to utilize a combination of physically mailing items to the network while also engaging in hashtag campaigns on Twitter and Facebook in order to gain media attention for the cause. With the ever-increasing number of television shows in the age of streaming and cable, opportunities for viewers to fight to save their shows have increased. When CBS canceled post-apocalyptic drama *Jericho* in 2007, fans coordinated to ship over twenty tons of nuts to CBS headquarters—nuts were chosen in reference to a line in the season finale—to express just how devoted fans were to the series. Partly because of the fan protest, CBS renewed the series, which meant victory for the fans until CBS killed the show for good after the second season.²⁸⁰ Fans of FOX’s science fiction series and spiritual successor to the *X-Files*, *Fringe*, took to Twitter and deployed a hashtag campaign designed to increase the engagement of average viewers. However, not every devoted fan has the means to mail items to television executives and not all executives can be persuaded by tokens. In response, fans employed a hashtag campaign to show network executives that viewership extended beyond Nielsen ratings, which ultimately persuaded FOX to renew the series.²⁸¹ In one of the most savvy campaigns that spoke directly to NBC's profit mandate, fans of spy comedy *Chuck* forgone sending physical tokens to network executives and instead

²⁸⁰ Meredith Woerner, “Fan Campaigns That Actually Saved TV Shows,” *Gizmodo*, January 12, 2012, <https://gizmodo.com/fan-campaigns-that-actually-saved-tv-shows-5875356>.

²⁸¹ Mar Guerrero-Pico, “#Fringe, Audiences and Fan Labor: Twitter Activism to Save a TV Show From Cancellation,” *International Journal of Communication* 11 (2017): 2080.

focused their campaign on substantially increasing sales at the show's major sponsor Subway, which helped secure funding for the next season and persuaded the network to grant a renewal.²⁸²

Fan attempts to save their beloved shows have become commonplace the past couple of decades and can trace their roots back to the earliest successful incident in 1968 and the original *Star Trek* series. When the original series faced cancellation on CBS, fans saved the show, for a time, through the organization of a "Save *Star Trek*" letter writing campaign directed to the network. Much like the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy, the campaign to save *Star Trek* represents one of the first successful fan campaigns to save a show. This fact makes the *Star Trek* campaign significant for this reason but also because it provides a view into how and why these controversies develop—particularly in the context of participatory fan culture and fan production of meaning over the text. In his seminal work *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, Henry Jenkins described how fans and specifically *Star Trek* fans engage in participatory fan practices and textual poaching of meaning from texts. The idea of fans as poachers conceives of them and their actions as "readers who appropriate popular texts and reread them in a fashion that serves different interests, as spectators who transform the experience of watching television into a rich and complex participatory culture."²⁸³ Jenkins argued that active audiences produce personal meanings from the text. As a result, they attempt to remake the text according to the fan's personal meanings and desires often through the production of fan writings, art, or other creative forms in order to remake them according to fan needs.²⁸⁴ This poaching of the text in order to produce new texts and personal meanings does not

²⁸² Guerrero-Pico, "#Fringe, Audiences and Fan Labor," 2075-2076.

²⁸³ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 23.

²⁸⁴ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 40.

necessarily produce the same type of agency that video game players experience as they directly influence the text through interactivity, but the fan production of texts and meaning outside the text itself is still sufficient to allow feelings of ownership over the text and fan authority to make demands of producers when fan meanings become disrupted.

The feelings of authority and ownership that many fans develop over these texts help provoke fans into action but were often limited to relatively slow and cumbersome letter writing campaigns and token offerings. These limitations meant that they often were not able to become massive cultural phenomena until the rise of convergence culture during the 2000s and its functional maturity in the 2010s. Jenkins argued in *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* that convergence culture has fundamentally changed the way that audiences and users connect with each other as well as with traditional producers. The expansion of media convergence, participatory culture, and the collective intelligence of networked individuals enabled the growth of convergence culture and helped circulate content across networks and domains and driven by the willingness of audiences to search out content and resources throughout the network.²⁸⁵ Convergence culture in fan or player-led campaigns represents a giant leap forward in an audience's ability to wage a campaign because it extends the reach, scope, and speed of action to protest and allows for the participants to wage battle on multiple networked fronts, allows any participant from anywhere in the world to engage according to personal abilities and desires without direct hierarchy or leadership, and do so as a collective directed by individual goals. Whereas fans may have been limited to a letter writing or token mailing campaign prior to the rise of convergence culture, recent campaigns utilized the tactical ability to occupy multiple physical and digital spaces at the same time with access to Twitter, Facebook,

²⁸⁵ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 2-3.

and YouTube among many other spaces while still employing more traditional means of attack such as token mailing campaigns and boycotts. Additionally, Jenkins argued that convergence culture has altered the relationship between users and industry and altered the logic by which these groups produce media. This has persuaded some in the creative industries to include consumers in certain elements of the production process in limited ways that nonetheless allow for the development of individual agency.²⁸⁶

Participatory fan culture and the onset of convergence represent critical factors in the development of these campaigns, but are not the last step in the chain of the creation of a collective protest. Furthermore, convergence culture does not necessarily explain what binds these fans together as a community. Paul Booth's work on digital fandom adds a critical piece to the development of collective campaigns by helping to explain how fandoms come together as a collective through the internet and how they produce meaning through their communal efforts. Booth argued that fan cooperation has at its heart a philosophy of playfulness whereby fans collaborate to playfully reimagine and reproduce commercial texts not just as individuals but as a creative group.²⁸⁷ Video game players engage in this activity whenever they play a game as part of the greater developer and player group, which they often extend to the internet through controversy. As fans join together to produce content on blogs, forums, and fan fiction based on their shared object, they collectively engage in a reimagining of the original text by expanding it to include new layers and authors. These practices make the continued production of content dependent on individual participants as well as part of a larger community.²⁸⁸ In this communal

²⁸⁶ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 15-16.

²⁸⁷ Paul Booth, *Digital Fandom 2.0: New Media Studies* (New York: Peter Lang, 2017), 29.

²⁸⁸ Booth, *Digital Fandom 2.0*, 56-57.

reimagining, the collective activity of the group and the networks their actions produce themselves become meaningful—and possibly for some participants the connections developed are more meaningful than the original texts themselves—and allows for the production of what Booth calls “narrativity” or “the communal construction of a narrative, or the ways that members of a community bring together different elements in different orders to change the narrative of a digital text.”²⁸⁹ Through the acts of participatory culture propagated among a larger fan community, fans or players converge through the collective production of a meaningful narrative created through individual actions. This shared meaning binds participants into a productive whole. For fans of popular television shows, this meaning may be produced through participatory activities such as fan fiction. For video game players embroiled in a controversy campaign such as the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy, this meaning is produced through the collective narrative of dissatisfaction and the imperative to reimagine the text primarily through persuading the developer to alter the text according to the group’s wishes and narrative.

The *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy represents the first successful player-led video game campaign. However, it does not represent this first time that fans organized a campaign to save their beloved text from producers. The *Mass Effect 3* controversy and all other video game controversies exist as part of a much larger history of campaigns motivated by the fear of losing a text to the choices of others. Prior to the rise of video game controversies, most fan controversies centered around television series with most focused on saving a series that faced cancellation. Although the experience of the *Mass Effect 3* players is not entirely the same as the experience of television fans, these types of controversies both represent campaigns by players attempting to prevent the text being taken away from their hands. The tactics of these television

²⁸⁹ Booth, *Digital Fandom 2.0*, 84-85.

fan campaigns often included letter writing, mailing specific items to the network, and more recently the utilization of social media such as Facebook and Twitter to organize and spread the message. Some of these campaigns have not been successful, but many of them—for instance, the campaigns for *Star Trek*, *Jericho*, and *Chuck*—ultimately persuaded the network to save their show. These campaigns represent part of the larger participatory drive that forms among fans when their object is threatened. These campaigns and their successful outcomes also serve as inspiration for video game controversies such as the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy because they provided the groundwork and tactics for campaigns. They also prove without a doubt that ordinary people can organize these campaigns and ultimately win.

5.4 The *Mass Effect 3* Campaign

While video game controversies developed as part of a larger history of fan protests, convergence culture, and digital fandom communities, video game controversies in practice took these fan actions to a new level because players—unlike television fans as part of an audience—have the power to change the text itself as a primary function of playing and as part of a larger digital community. The power to change the text is what makes a video game a video game and that power is not limited to reimaginings of the text through secondary participatory activities like fan fiction or participation in fan forum communities. Instead, it occurs both in the text as it is played and outside of the text in more traditional expressions of participatory fan culture such as forums, videos, and mods. At the same time, these practices forge a bridge between player choice in the text and outside of it. Although video games may not directly link users in all cases, the produsage nature of these texts allows developers and players to interact with and modify the same text and taps into the collective intelligence of a network of individual users who cooperate to produce the game. This produsage cooperation encourages users to seek out connections

across the community's network of content where users presumably have the same power to act and collaborate as part of a communal reimagining of the video game. Additionally, video game controversies add another layer to these fan actions by producing a performed rather than vicarious sense of agency for producers and users because of the direct interactivity and its outcomes. Players always maintain a certain degree of agency, ownership, and control over the text.

The ease with which video game players may transfer individual agency and personal narratives to the collective agency, collective intelligence, and collective community enables the development of these controversies to save their game. However, the produsage activities of players in networked social media who reimagine the text becomes part of both the player and developer communities. Much like nearly every player-led video game controversy since 2012, the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy flourished and spread through social media gaining attention from the industry and more and more participants as the controversy developed. However, these various sites of social media collaboration do not all offer the same degree of collaboration between players or the critical ability to allow collaboration between players and developers. The most active “Retake *Mass Effect 3*” Facebook page and one of the initial points of organization for the controversy excelled at providing players information on the controversy as part of a centralized information center where players could interact through messages and coordinate actions with each other without developers.²⁹⁰ Gaming blogs such as *Kotaku* and *Destructoid* regularly published news of *Mass Effect 3* and the controversy and allowed players to connect in the comment sections of these articles to reimagine their communal narrative of events and emotionally vent as a community over the state of affairs. Unlike the Facebook page

²⁹⁰ Demand a Better Ending to Mass Effect 3 Community, “Demand a Better Ending to Mass Effect 3,” *Facebook*, March 8, 2012. <https://www.facebook.com/DemandABetterEndingToMassEffect3/>.

and the comment sections of gaming blogs, microblogging platform Twitter allowed players the feeling of having direct interaction with developers—although the fractured nature of Twitter may have rendered that truly just a feeling rather than a reality—because of the platform’s ability to follow specific individuals associated with BioWare and speak at them to deliver a message that may or may not be heard.²⁹¹ The presumed access to BioWare employees ranged from the powerful figures such as game director Casey Hudson to more accessible figures such as community manager Jessica Merizan—who directly interacted with players on Twitter before eventually shutting off communication.

Despite the community’s range of actions on multiple social media platforms, the primary site of player protest and unofficial home of the controversy did not reside on an independent social media platform but instead on the official forums owned and operated by BioWare as part of their forums for all of their video game properties and used for communication between participants. There are several reasons why the official forums of BioWare quickly became the primary space of the controversy that centered around the forum’s establishment as a site of player participation, functionality, and a desire for continued creative collaboration on the part of the players. On the most basic level, the forums duplicated some of the functions of other social media in that they served as a space for players to post messages to each other and coordinate actions as part of the controversy campaign. However, unlike the Facebook, Twitter, and blog posts that players created in direct response to the controversy, the BioWare forums had existed for years prior to the release of *Mass Effect 3* and represented a long established, cooperative community of players that offered participants a longstanding, stable space where they developed a sense of community and collective narrative production

²⁹¹ u/deleted, “Jessica Merizan is going crazy on twitter with ending hints...,” *Reddit*, March 16, 2012, https://www.reddit.com/r/masseffect/comments/qytqs/jessica_merizan_is_going_crazy_on_twitter_with/.

around their shared experiences of *Mass Effect*. The BioWare forums community represented a community ready-made for demanding changes to the text that was bolstered by the networked bonds of players who did not have to form a new group or change their established activities in order to protest the ending.

However, there exists another critical reason why so many players flocked to the BioWare forums to participate in the controversy and express their feelings and desired changes in this space. One of the advantages of the official BioWare forums that likely motivated players to speak out was that any player posting on these forums was almost certainly seen by an employee of the studio—even if it was only a moderator or the social media manager. From complaints to suggestions to fanart or fan fiction, the BioWare forums provided assured visibility for player comments and ideas. The actions of BioWare employees reinforced this assumed visibility for player response. Official BioWare representatives did in fact directly and indirectly interact with players on the forum during the controversy. This occurred specifically and most critically when community manager Jessica Merizan solicited player feedback and suggestions on the forum with the stated intention of incorporating player ideas into the revised ending.²⁹² The actions of the players to unite and collaborate to protest on the official BioWare forums suggests two critical things about this controversy and by extension all the controversies that came after it. First, the concentration of players at the BioWare forums suggests that in spite of player disappointment with the ending players had not completely rejected or disavowed their collaborative produsage partners at BioWare and still possessed a strong desire to work with developers on *Mass Effect* as a collective narrative. Instead, these player actions suggest that

²⁹² Jessica Merizan, “ME3 Suggested Changes Feedback Thread - Spoilers Allowed,” *BioWare Forums*, quoted by RaenImrahl, March 17, 2012, <https://forum.bioware.com/topic/286442-me3-suggested-changes-feedback-thread-spoilers-allowed/>.

their investment in the text, its narrative, and their ability to influence it as collaborative partners with BioWare developers was a relationship that they were intent on sustaining.

The forum and networked social media nature represent the most critical sites that allowed the controversy to develop. They also sustained the controversy and the player-led messaging that would eventually persuade BioWare to revise the ending of *Mass Effect 3*. Unlike Twitter or Facebook that only allow for brief, disjointed messages with a relatively low likelihood of being read by developers, the comment string nature of forums allows participants to respond directly to previous comments. The continued comment chain allows for more organized, ongoing conversation with the potential to develop into long, thoughtful discussions that move past the superficiality of other social media. Not all conversations rose to this level of sophisticated communal collaboration—some threads elicited only a few or no responses while others may go on for thousands of pages—but all of them contributed to the collective narrative of the group and did so through produsage means that, for the *Mass Effect* players, served to extend production from the text to the networked community. Participants come and go from the forum ad hoc and contribute ideas or related media when they feel it is appropriate to the conversation. Afterwards, they may shift to the role of a lurker evaluating the messages of the group when not actively involved in message production and do so without any leader, hierarchy, or ownership over the thread bestowed to the original poster. For forums in general and critically for the participants in the BioWare forums, the forums offered participants the ability to develop and maintain a sustained conversation among many participants that allowed for the sharing of information and a coherence in the controversy campaign. This enabled the production of a collaborative narrative around the *Mass Effect 3* ending and helped to shape its meaning over time.

The official BioWare forums acted as the site of the bulk of the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy development and protest as well as the longtime hub for the *Mass Effect* online community. Unfortunately, the forums no longer exist after BioWare's parent company, Electronic Arts, shut down the forums in 2016. However, several gigabytes of the *Mass Effect 3* forum threads were saved for the purpose of this project before the site's deletion. When the forums did exist on BioWare servers, they were organized into gateways for each of the studio's main properties—*Mass Effect*, *Dragon Age*, *Star Wars: The Old Republic*—with subforums for different categories of player discussion. The *Mass Effect* forums contained specific headings for each of the three games and subheadings reserved for conversation for topics such as combat, general discussion and off topic community discussion.²⁹³ Each of the forums and subforums operated in the same manner in that one person would start a thread with a relevant title, subsequent participants would continue the thread by posting their original topics, and the discussion would continue until the thread was locked by moderators or more likely until the discussion waned and dropped off the front page for lack of interest. The forums were free for players to join and post as they liked—although being banned for bad behavior was certainly possible. Players could choose to engage any or none of the conversation threads by contributing text messages, images, videos, or links to outside content and collaborate in the community discussions. These discussion collaborations contributed to the building of the communal narratives that players attached to these games and the group's participation in them. Additionally, much like the series of *Mass Effect* games, forum participants were able to personalize their presence on the forums with choices to include personally meaningful avatars,

²⁹³ BioWare, "The BioWare Forums," *BioWare Forums*, <https://forum.bioware.com>.

user names, and signatures that would be attached to every post they contributed to the group discussion and help create their unique contribution and gain standing in the group.

Players took to the forums immediately after the release of *Mass Effect 3* to express their displeasure and disappointment over the ending to anyone who would listen in the community including other players and BioWare developers. Most likely, players posted these initial complaints on the forum with the intent to blow off steam rather than jumpstart a controversy campaign. One of the first displeased posters to comment at the BioWare forums hours after release said that they had already spoken to other angry, disappointed players and that they couldn't believe they "paid 100 USD for such a disappointment!"²⁹⁴ After two days of brief comments expressing player anger, the player reactions began to offer more in-depth analysis where specific themes and complaints emerged from the postings on the forum. For one thing, a consensus developed among the players that up until the final fifteen minutes of *Mass Effect 3*, the game felt as one player put it, "Without a doubt amazing. I laughed, I cried, I shouted in exaltation of the sheer awesomeness."²⁹⁵ However, for many players the ending itself felt like a complete betrayal of player expectations of the games, the betrayal of the narrative because of the lack of closure, and the betrayal of the players because their choices simply did not matter.²⁹⁶

This thread started with one simple complaint about the ending with a minimal suggestion for changing BioWare to change the ending of *Mass Effect 3*. However, because this complaint was lodged in the BioWare forums, many other players had the opportunity to incrementally expand the complaints and discussion. As each new player commented to the

²⁹⁴ Guest_Prince_Valiant, "Mass Effect 3 Endings," *BioWare Forums*, March 6, 2012, <https://forum.bioware.com/topic/267421-mass-effect-3-endings/#entry8013689>.

²⁹⁵ CorvisRex, "Mass Effect 3 Endings," *BioWare Forums*, March 8, 2012, <https://forum.bioware.com/topic/267421-mass-effect-3-endings/page-15#entry8056577>.

²⁹⁶ CorvisRex, "Mass Effect 3 Endings."

larger thread, the push to change the game's ending and narrative became a new narrative unto itself in the community and one persuasive enough to make players believe change was possible. The comments in this thread consistently pointed to two critically unsatisfying problems with the game's ending: the game's lack of closure and its sudden lack of player choice. For those players frustrated by the lack of closure, their lingering questions went beyond a few minor mysteries and focused instead on problems that seemed to disregard both the world and the narrative of *Mass Effect*. In a lengthy post that echoed the frustrations of many on the forums, one player, Gbaggins, pleaded:

What happens to the remnants of the alliance fleet? What about the individual races? What will the galaxy do in the wake of the destruction of the mass relays? Is there enough left of the galactic civilizations to rebuild the systems? The current ending leaves more questions than answers which is sort of disappointing since this is supposed to be the end of the series, yet I still have no real sense of the exact fate of the universe.²⁹⁷

Gbaggins' comments point to the unsatisfying nature of investing hundreds of hours into a world only to ultimately lose everything if the player with the game's inconclusive ending, but many players recognized the lack of closure as part of a larger problem related to the ending's lack of player agency, control, and reasonable outcomes in comparison to the rest of the series. As one player, Farraborne, on the thread explained, the ending revealed that:

Ultimately, the biggest inconsistency is narrative style. I player ME1 and ME2 so many times over because I knew that no matter how many casualties there were, no matter how much loss, pain, suffering and sacrifice the characters had to endure—all life would endure! Free will is the ability of living beings to stare in the face of evolution and spit in

²⁹⁷ Gbaggins, "Mass Effect 3 Endings," *BioWare Forums*, March 8, 2012, <https://forum.bioware.com/topic/267421-mass-effect-3-endings/page-15#entry8056543>.

its eye.... This was ME1 and ME2. The ending of ME3 turns this right around and says: “Sorry, no. Thanks for playing but the universe is entirely determined. Screw your free will.”²⁹⁸

Some players decried the lack of closure and some the lack of agency, but their ability to communicate and discuss their issues on the forums allowed players to unite to demand solutions to these problems.

As the controversy developed and expanded in the BioWare forums, it revealed that, despite the general outcry of the community over the *Mass Effect 3* ending, the community was not actually united in its interpretation of the ending, its meaning, or what should be changed or not changed in the ending. There were, in fact, two prominent controversy groups represented by the “Retake *Mass Effect 3*” campaign and a second group represented by proponents of the so-called “Indoctrination Theory.” Both groups commanded attention on the BioWare forums and devoted considerable time and energy to advancing their preferred narrative. Logically, there likely existed an implied but silent third group of players who were not disappointed in the ending enough to publicly complain and so were not recognized in the controversy. The development of these two vocal camps and the assumed silent group demonstrates the significance of the choices, openness, and agency of the three games because it shows that player expectations of their influence over the game varied among individuals and directly led to different expectations of the ending and corresponding responses. These meanings developed through the player’s choices that in turn influenced the three games and led to the experience of player agency. It seems natural that multiple options led to multiple outcomes and multiple narratives within the same community. Considering the high number of choices available to

²⁹⁸ Farrabone, “Mass Effect 3 Endings,” *BioWare Forums*, March 8, 2012, <https://forum.bioware.com/topic/267421-mass-effect-3-endings/page-15#entry8056590>.

players, the fact that only three groups emerged may be one of the biggest surprises of this affair. Additionally, because of the silence of the group assumedly content with the ending, it is difficult to know whether the two main groups in the controversy represented a majority opinion of the community or if they were just successful at forcing others to listen to their opinions.

After hundreds of hours of play and hundreds of choices, these two main groups attempted to reassert their lost agency through collaboration within the forums by speaking directly to the developers who could give them the changes they desired. The most vocal, prominent, and active of these two groups was the group of participants involved in the “Retake *Mass Effect 3*” campaign. The campaign actions of this group on Facebook, Twitter, and the BioWare forums eventually persuaded BioWare to collaborate on a new ending for *Mass Effect 3*. The general message of this group was fairly straightforward especially in comparison to their “Indoctrination Theory” counterparts. The “Retake *Mass Effect 3*” camp felt that their choices and actions—in other words, their agency—had been rudely discarded by BioWare developers and the game’s ending. To this end, they felt that the wronged players deserved a new ending that would make their choices meaningful again by altering the ending according to their suggestions. This stance represents a direct response to the failure of *Mass Effect*’s promise to allow players to collaborate in its production through the gradual development of the characters, the narrative, and choices throughout its production. The ending ultimately revealed player choice and control to be a trick of the game system at best or an outright lie and betrayal from the developers at worst. Unlike the “Indoctrination Theory” camp and the silent players that were relatively contained or nonexistent, the “Retake *Mass Effect 3*” campaign spread far and wide online in nearly every form of social media and dominated the BioWare forums with multiple threads and many original message postings.

The second major player group that formed in response to the ending centered around the so-called “Indoctrination Theory,” which players developed over the course of thousands of pages of comments in the BioWare forum.²⁹⁹ The “Indoctrination Theory” posited that the unsatisfactory ending was actually something akin to a dream rather than what had explicitly happened to Shepard in the game’s final moments. In other words, the ending was a hallucination to be interpreted by the faithful. The initial post by player and unofficial moderator of the theory threads, clearly indicates that the conspiratorial impulse of the “Indoctrination Theory” initially grew out of the same dissatisfaction with the game’s ending and its inconsistency with the rest of the series. In the originating post, Byne wrote:

Is it just me, or does the entire ending sequence not feel like it fits in with the overall theme of the ME universe? It just feels... off. It seems otherworldly and kind of unfocused.... I am of the opinion that once reaching the Citadel, severely wounded, and losing blood, Shepard hallucinated most of the ending sequence. It would explain why the kid was there.³⁰⁰

If “Retake *Mass Effect 3*” represented the anger of a community coming to terms with loss, then the “Indoctrination Theory” represented the bargaining phase of that same community’s grief. The theory provided players a creative, collaborative means to retroactively fix problems in the text while also giving them hope that things were actually better than they seemed. In fact, many of the players who became proponents of the theory were not actually fans of the idea that the

²⁹⁹ Byne, “Was the ending a hallucination?-Indoctrination Theory,” *BioWare Forums*, March 10, 2012, <https://forum.bioware.com/topic/272351-was-the-ending-a-hallucination-indoctrination-theory/>.

³⁰⁰ Byne, “Was the ending a hallucination?-Indoctrination Theory.”

ending was some sort of trick but gravitated to it because players believed it offered them a second chance to play the game and restore agency.³⁰¹

The “Indoctrination Theory” represents a far more negotiated approach to dealing with the problem of the ending than its counterparts. Proponents of this theory did not in fact reject the ending outright the way that most of the *Mass Effect* players in the community did. Instead, they developed a theory to help reconcile the problems of the ending and viewed it not as the result of developer error but as the developer’s intended design with a deeper meaning for those willing to go down that path. The concept of indoctrination in the *Mass Effect* universe refers to the gradual process whereby the game’s sentient machine enemies, the Reapers, controlled individuals’ minds by broadcasting a signal to organic individuals who interacted with them. This process slowly occurs over time through repeated exposure to the Reapers who then take control over the individuals’ actions and produce blackouts, hallucinations, and loss of motor function control when successful. The “Indoctrination Theory” argues that over the course of the three games—but much more intensely in the final game—that the Reapers successfully indoctrinated Shepard through repeated direct confrontations with numerous Reapers while killing them. Therefore, the ending of *Mass Effect 3* had been one big hallucination created by the Reapers to finally break Shepard’s will.³⁰² Furthermore, proponents of the “Indoctrination Theory” believed that the BioWare developers had left clues to be discovered through the final game that confirmed this theory if players looked hard enough.

³⁰¹ Ibage, “Was the ending a hallucination?-Indoctrination Theory,” *BioWare Forums*, March 10, 2012, <https://forum.bioware.com/topic/272351-was-the-ending-a-hallucination-indoctrination-theory/page-2#entry8083332>.

³⁰² ACAVYOS, “Mass Effect 3 - Shepard's Indoctrination,” *YouTube*, March 19, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ythY_GkEBck&list=FL0F42MZhjSPoVkJ0ub5UxetA&index=2.

The players involved in the “Indoctrination Theory” discussions were not really interested in demanding a new ending. They were simply interested in decoding it and proving their theories correct. While they focused their discussions on the BioWare forum, their concern was not to talk BioWare into changing the ending but to acknowledge that they had interpreted the ending correctly while those upset with the events may have not. The “Indoctrination Theory” group had different aims from their “Retake *Mass Effect 3*” counterparts—to change the ending but to officially reveal its truth—and it is not surprising that this group employed different tactics in the evolution of their collective intelligence and community. Instead of producing many threads and sites of communal information sharing, the proponents of the “Indoctrination Theory” for the most part consolidated all of their efforts to a single, multi-thousand-page thread on the BioWare forums devoted to the sole communal task of proving that the “Indoctrination Theory” was the one true explanation for the *Mass Effect 3* ending. In order to make their case, the participants in this thread—that was eventually separated into four continuing threads by moderators when one thread became too large to manage—committed an immense amount of thought, discussion, and labor into the thread in order to develop their ideas as a community and prove their case. The evidence included thousands of text messages pointing out inconsistencies and positive evidence, player-made videos that used clips from the games to visually present the case, and key screenshots that were often examined with the zeal and technological focus often witnessed in police procedurals. The “Indoctrination Theory” became a text unto itself shared and built upon little by little by members of the community resulting in the formation of a subcommunity organized around the theory.

The intensity and expansiveness of the campaigns that developed in response to the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy makes it significant as a representation of player-led collaboration

through controversy. However, it is BioWare's and its developers' response to the controversy that makes this a truly groundbreaking and inspiring protest in the context of video game culture and community. Players built this controversy on the foundation of the established collaborative relationship between players and developers and anchored it around this text. Rather than fight against the controversy or deny the demands of its supporters, BioWare allowed these dissenting and bargaining discussions to flourish on their own privately-controlled forums and made no attempt to shut them down, to stifle the complaints, or refute the theories directed at them and their game. Although player trust in BioWare may have been broken by the loss of agency in *Mass Effect 3*'s ending, BioWare never intentionally attempted to break the collaborative relationship between players and developers and instead chose to bring players into the revision process and acknowledge player agency in a new space outside the game. In what became a turning point for the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy and all future video game controversies, BioWare reached out to players on the forum and formally cemented their creative partnership by asking players to contribute their ideas regarding what players believed should be included in a new ending for the game. This implied that not only did BioWare seem to need the collaboration from players in order to complete the game but that the "Retake *Mass Effect*" campaigners had already won.

Most of the discussion monitored by BioWare and presumably used to create the new ending occurred in a single thread entitled, "ME3 Suggested Changes Feedback Thread - Spoilers Allowed." The thread began with a request from BioWare community manager Jessica Merizan where she not only made the feedback request of the community, but also attempted to set up parameters for discussion and encourage player feedback. Merizan posted that:

I think I need to clarify myself. For the past few weeks, I've been collecting feedback. I have excel sheets, word documents, quotes, graphs, you name it. In order for a collaboration between the devs and the fans to work, I need you guys to CONTINUE being constructive, and organizing your thoughts. I know where to look, but I need you to help me by contributing to the dialogue. Saying "this blows" helps no one. Saying, "I enjoyed X but I found Z _____ because of A,B,C" is what I'm looking for. Channel your frustration into something positive (such as the RetakeME3 movement - constructive, organized thoughts). Chris and I are both collecting your feedback. We're listening. Make yourself heard.³⁰³

After this initial prompt, Merizan did not post again in the thread. However, nearly every player comment—and most of these comments were long and detailed—was directed specifically to Merizan as if in direct communication with her and by extension the BioWare developers. This simple prompt from BioWare effectively reestablished the creative collaboration between developers and players and based on the new ending allowed the two groups to create a new text together.

Merizan's prompt for player feedback resulted in an outpouring of player opinions, suggestions, and pleas for what they would like to see included in BioWare's new ending. Many players took this opportunity to beg Merizan and BioWare for some common things, but most notably players emphatically did not want the "Indoctrination Theory" and its solutions to be included in the new ending. Many players also took this thread as an opportunity to express their anger and frustration, as far as they knew, directly at the producers of the game. In what would

³⁰³ darthhowie, "ME3 Suggested Changes Feedback Thread - Spoilers Allowed," *BioWare Forum*, March 17, <https://forum.bioware.com/topic/286442-me3-suggested-changes-feedback-thread-spoilers-allowed/page-6#entry8450318>.

now be considered a tame rebuke in most controversies, player musicaleCA expressed a common sense of outrage, threats to exert consumer their personal consumer power, and a clear understanding that their anger tied directly to their loss of agency when they posted:

My biggest problem? You lied to us. BioWare, and EA, outright broke your promise to provide the product as advertised. This isn't a game where our choices matter. In the end, all those hundreds of hours of choice, thought, reflection, all was for nought. That's my issue. You can fix the game by making our choices actually matter in the end.... The most depressing thing is that I don't think I can bring myself to buy anything more from BioWare until this is fixed.³⁰⁴

Some players like musicaleCA seemed to have a clear understanding of what went wrong but were only able to offer anger, threats, and demands in response to what they lost.

However, hundreds of players took Merizan up on her challenge to collaborate on a new ending and in doing so definitively revealed the player's loss of agency and control as the most critical problem with the ending—and the most critical problem that players wanted solved. Over and over throughout the thread players pointed to the lack of choice as the key problem with the ending. One player declared, “Our choices should matter. We shouldn't be forced to destroy the galaxy. We should have a choice, and be able to see our choices play out.”³⁰⁵ Another critiqued that, “The rules of the universe of Mass Effect were broken. The raison d'etre of the series has

³⁰⁴ musicaleCA, “ME3 Suggested Changes Feedback Thread - Spoilers Allowed,” *BioWare Forum*, March 17, 2012, <https://forum.bioware.com/topic/286442-me3-suggested-changes-feedback-thread-spoilers-allowed/page-40#entry8461709>.

³⁰⁵ apeiros, “ME3 Suggested Changes Feedback Thread - Spoilers Allowed,” *BioWare Forum*, March 17, 2012, <https://forum.bioware.com/topic/286442-me3-suggested-changes-feedback-thread-spoilers-allowed/page-39#entry8461516>.

always been Choice, but this is thrown aside as a singular decision overrides every other decision in three games.”³⁰⁶ Another lamented that,

Mass Effect was all about choices, my decisions affected everything, right down to my ending. In Mass Effect 3 my decisions were honored up until the end, then they were tossed out the window in favor of three bland and generic endings.³⁰⁷

Over and over again throughout hundreds of pages of Merizan’s thread, players said the same thing: Give us back our choice. The most remarkable aspect of the player-led controversy and player’s demands for the restoration of their agency was that BioWare seemed to respect the player agency enough to restore it through player collaboration on a new ending.

BioWare’s willingness to collaborate with players represented a critical step in changing the video game community. However, BioWare did not just take a single step. They delivered what would become a significant change in the industry when they ceded to player demands. The studio’s announcement and production of an extended ending for the game told players across the video game community that their choices, desires, and protests mattered if they were willing to collaborate with each other and developers in order to produce what they wanted. The new *Mass Effect 3* ending came in the form of a free, downloadable “Extended Cut” in an astonishingly quick four months after the game’s original release. The new ending changed how the final moments of the game played out, added several cutscenes to flesh out a new degree of closure, and altered the game’s system to make it easier for players to earn the one ending where

³⁰⁶ Dreogan, “ME3 Suggested Changes Feedback Thread - Spoilers Allowed,” *BioWare Forum*, March 17, 2012, <https://forum.bioware.com/topic/286442-me3-suggested-changes-feedback-thread-spoilers-allowed/page-38#entry8460587>.

³⁰⁷ Mr Indivisible, “ME3 Suggested Changes Feedback Thread - Spoilers Allowed,” *BioWare Forum*, March 17, 2012, <https://forum.bioware.com/topic/286442-me3-suggested-changes-feedback-thread-spoilers-allowed/page-37#entry8459909>.

Commander Shepard could survive the final battle.³⁰⁸ Specific changes requested by players included changes to account for plot holes such as cutscenes where squadmates are evacuated from the battlefield rather than disappearing, the fleets being ordered to leave whereas they fled seemingly without cause in the original version, and the option to reject all of the ending choices. However, most of the changes were a direct response to player requests for more closure in the game's ending. These included cutscenes from other planets of other races defeating the Reapers, a narrated slideshow informing the player of the fates of many of Shepard's squadmates, and hope for the future through cutscenes showing the repair of the Normandy and the galaxy's long range transportation system, the mass relays.

The collaboration between players and developers to create *Mass Effect* and BioWare's willingness to acknowledge and legitimize this relationship produced the collaborative "Extended Cut" and in doing so signaled to other players and developers in the video game community that collaboration and agency in video games opens the text up to all with a desire to interact with and change it. The reception to the "Extended Cut" from players and critics was generally positive although many were not entirely satisfied because ultimately the DLC represented a new cut but not an entirely new ending. Player responses on the BioWare forums to the announcement suggested that players still doubted their partnership with BioWare and the studio's ability to deliver.³⁰⁹ Some critics shared player anxieties about the ending and BioWare's seemingly impossible task of fixing all of the ending's problems noting that the "Extended Cut" doesn't change the quality of the ending, just the quantity of what is included

³⁰⁸ Jim Sterling, "Mass Effect 3 getting free 'Extended Cut' DLC," *Destructoid*, April 5, 2012, <https://www.destructoid.com/mass-effect-3-getting-free-extended-cut-dlc>.

³⁰⁹ fir3storm, "EA announces Mass Effect 3: Extended Cut," *BioWare Forums*, April 5, 2012, <https://forum.bioware.com/topic/312911-ea-announces-mass-effect-3-extended-cut>.

and noted that the cut “couldn't possibly fix an ending whose problem was that there was already too much.”³¹⁰

However, when the “Extended Cut” became available to players, most agreed that, if nothing else, the new ending represented a far more satisfying and conclusive experience than the original version.³¹¹ Players throughout the community respond to the “Extended Cut.” One player wrote on gaming website *Kotaku* echoed many players of satisfaction tinged with a certain degree of resignation when they wrote that:

I am a fan and I am happy, was [a] bit disappointed before, more options are welcome. They should make the games more in the way that our decisions affect the world we are in a way we can reverse or select different endings :) This ext cut was really welcome :) Before 70% of ppl hated the ending, now with the ext cut we divide that in 3, 1. the ones that loved this new addition 2. the ones that said it was ok 3. the ones that hate for the sake of hating. :)³¹²

The new ending may not have solved all of the game's issues, but it seemed to sate players enough that, for the most part, the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy died down and faded into the background—although any news on the final game will still elicit complaints in the comment section. The campaign and its success showed that it was possible for players to come together as a collective with a common goal and pool their agency and actions to influence developers to

³¹⁰ Rowan Kaiser, “It's all Too Much: Why Mass Effect 3's Extended Cut Ending Can't Possibly Fix Everything,” *Engadget*, June 29, 2012, <https://www.engadget.com/2012-06-29-its-all-too-much-why-mass-effect-3s-extended-cut-ending-cant.html>.

³¹¹ Ben Kendrick, “Mass Effect 3: Extended Cut' DLC - Is It Worth Playing?” *Gamerant*, June 27, 2012, <https://gamerant.com/mass-effect-3-extended-cut-dlc-reviews-worth-playing>.

³¹² GamodQuitKotaku, “Comment on,” Mike Fahey, “The Verdict is In: Fans Love / Hate the Mass Effect 3 Extended Cut,” *Kotaku*, June 26, 2012, <https://kotaku.com/the-verdict-is-in-fans-love-hate-the-mass-effect-3-e-5921394>.

change the game to be satisfying and meaningful to players no matter what that may mean or what that may take. The *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy proved that player choices matter.

5.5 Conclusion

The *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy exploded and dissipated over the course of four months but still left a lasting effect on the video game community. Players believed that their choices in the games mattered. When the choices of developers challenged their beliefs about the game world and their influence over it, they organized as a collective community and proved to themselves and developers that their choices did indeed matter. They persuaded BioWare to give them a new ending for *Mass Effect 3* and in the process chose a new ending for their own experience and restore their lost agency. Player agency through interaction with the text resides at the core of video games and their player-led controversies. Player agency is not simply the ability to make things happen within the video game text, but also how players develop a sense of self, personal beliefs, and how a player sees themselves as part of the world. The *Mass Effect 3* players developed a sense of self tied to the player-controlled actions of Commander Shepard, developed personal beliefs about how the *Mass Effect* world should operate, and through interaction and choice developed a sense of someone who could make things happen in the world through their actions. When the choice-less, color-coded ending of *Mass Effect 3* shattered what they knew of the world and their place in it, they revolted in an effort to restore their control.

The *Mass Effect* games offered players the opportunity to influence the games and the overall narrative through a sophisticated system of interactivity and choice. Players believed in this system and understood its promise of reasonable outcomes enough that they also understood that *Mass Effect 3*'s ending represented a theft of agency and player control. As soon as they completed the ending, players knew exactly what was wrong with the game and this knowledge

enabled them to organize as a community around the idea that they could “Retake *Mass Effect 3*.” Although this was the first major successful player-led controversy campaign in video game history, fan-led “save the show” campaigns and the tactics they employed served as a foundation for the *Mass Effect 3* campaign, which utilized old and new tactics in their successful victory for a new ending. Facebook and Twitter served the controversy as spaces for organization and communication, but ultimately the players tipped the balance of the controversy through their postings on the official BioWare forums. Unlike Facebook and Twitter, the BioWare forums represented a space where players could share their thoughts and issues with the ending where other players and BioWare would be able to read them, develop their ideas together through community discussion, and speak directly to the BioWare employees who engaged with the community and solicited player feedback. The players and developers resolved the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy together through the collaborative production of a new ending that restored player agency to the game and provided closure. In doing so, the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy opened the industry to player influence and ensured that players have a say in the games they help produce.

6 CONCLUSION: FAREWELL AND INTO THE INEVITABLE

In the end, player agency changed the ending of *Mass Effect 3* and forever changed the way developers and players collaborate. In the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy and the controversies since 2012, agency and control represent the common factor among them. However, this was not always the case as outsider-led moral outrage campaigns against the sex and violence in games such as *Death Race* and the *Grand Theft Auto* series dominated video game controversies for nearly four decades from the 1970s through the 2000s. These mainstream conservative controversies focused on removing the agency of players through attempts to

control the medium and by extension its audience. Despite this outside interference, player-led controversies overtook these moral outrage controversies in the 2010s and developed into a critical part of video game culture thanks to the emergence and quick success of the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy to “Retake *Mass Effect 3*” from developers. The prominence and scale of players’ ability to converge online and collaborate through social media and the official BioWare forums eventually served as a blueprint for many controversies. However, the true significance of the controversy lies in the fact that players ultimately convinced BioWare to revise the ending based on player demands. This success most certainly inspired players to fight and rebel in other controversies and opened the floodgates for player-led controversies. The actions and outcome of the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy represented a critical turning point where players believed they earned the right to influence and control the game.

The existence of this player-led turning point revealed a key truth about video games and their controversies. At their core, video games depend on player choice and the developer’s respect for the player’s agency. In the *Mass Effect* series, players believed that every choice mattered and their agency deserved reasonable outcomes. Additionally, the players’ belief in their own agency over the video game did not develop solely because of their perception of the game, but because developers included elements in the game that helped persuade players their choices mattered and created expectations of player choice and control. These expectations may be created through any of the technological elements of a game, but for most games and certainly *Mass Effect* there are three specific elements hold greater influence over the player experience: genres, interfaces, and narrative. *Mass Effect 3*’s genre created player expectations of the sci-fi world, the combat, and the player control over Commander Shepard as a character. The game’s interfaces created player expectations of control over the action and dialogue of the game

through interactions with the game. Along with genre and interfaces, the game's narrative and the player's ability to make direct choices that influenced it created expectations that players control the narrative and that logically the outcomes should clearly result from player actions. However, the ending ultimately failed to deliver on these expectations and the players revolted just as other aspects have failed players in diverse controversies surrounding quality in *Cyberpunk 2077*, microtransactions in *Star Wars: Battlefront II*, and even the gendered gatekeeping in the Gamergate controversy.

The expectation of player choice naturally creates an expectation of agency and control over a video game. Although it can sometimes be overlooked, video games need players just as much as they need developers to exist and to progress as a text. As a result, the production of any video game requires the collaboration between developers and players through interaction and activation of the text through the practice of produsage. From one game to the next, developers create the initial elements of a video game that serve as the foundation of production and then players advance the text through their choices that create incremental changes in the game based on the fluid and open participation of players. This collaborative production allows video games to become common property to all who participate in its production and encourages a sense of ownership over the text for both developers and players. Ultimately, the player's expectation and ability to produce *Mass Effect 3* or any video game and advance it according to the player's desires results in a sense of ownership that reinforces a player's sense of agency because it represents a clear indication that player choices produce specific personal outcomes. However, these expectations, agency, and sense of ownership potentially represent sites of tension between players and developers if participants don't see eye to eye and potentially evolve into controversy in order to reassert creative control and agency.

Agency and its loss represents the most critical aspect of video game play, the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy, and video game controversies in general over the past decade. From *Mass Effect 3* to Gamergate to *Cyberpunk 2077*, controversies erupt when players feel their agency and ownership over the game becomes disrupted by the interference of others. In response, player agency and control must be reclaimed in order to restore their position over the text. Players feel agency when they believe their choices and actions produce reasonable outcomes that line up with their expectations. When *Mass Effect 3*'s ending obliterated players' sense of agency and ownership after hundreds of hours of play and hundreds of player choices, players individually and collectively felt devastated by the loss of their game and its characters but refused to concede their agency and ownership to developers. Instead, players transferred their agency from the game into the real world and collaborated through the controversy campaign to "Retake *Mass Effect 3*" and reclaimed what they believed was rightfully theirs: *Mass Effect* itself. This collaborative effort among players led to renewed collaboration with developers that produced a new ending in the "Extended Cut" and opened the door for a new era of player-led controversy.

6.1 *Mass Effect* and Beyond

Despite the ending controversy and the disappointment in the final game, *Mass Effect* remains an essential series in video game culture whose relevance endures thanks in part to the release of new *Mass Effect* games and player love for the series. Unfortunately, not all of the responses to these games have been positive. In March 2017, Bioware released the studio's first new, non-Commander Shepard focused game in the series, *Mass Effect: Andromeda*. The sequel centers around an entirely new cast of characters who are part of a Systems Alliance mission to travel to the distant Andromeda galaxy in stasis, awaken more than 600 years in Shepard's

future, and settle new worlds far outside the Milky Way galaxy's reach. In other words, the narrative and characters of *Mass Effect: Andromeda* had almost nothing to do with BioWare's beloved trilogy or Commander Shepard. To distance this game from the trilogy even further, BioWare's Montreal studio took over development from the Edmonton-based team behind the original trilogy and—much like what had happened with BioWare's *Dragon Age: Inquisition*—publisher Electronic Arts forced the ill-equipped Frostbite Engine on the game's production. This meant that BioWare developers needed to build critical game systems from scratch and the resulting strain from development and studio politics led to a hastily-built game produced under less-than-ideal conditions.³¹³

The changes to these fundamental aspects of the trilogy resulted in a game that played similar to a *Mass Effect* game but offered players a shallow version of the world they had come to love and was further hindered by an inability to focus on anything in depth. Critical response ranged from seeing the game as “good but flawed”³¹⁴ to the extreme but not entirely unwarranted assessment that the game only gestures at being a proper *Mass Effect* game and features certain design elements that could only be described as a mess.³¹⁵ In the end, this wasn't the *Mass Effect* players expected and they hated it. However, this time negative responses from *Mass Effect* players didn't persuade BioWare to create a better version of the *Mass Effect: Andromeda* or produce any kind of revision. Although the game had been intended as the first entry in a new trilogy, the response to *Mass Effect: Andromeda* instead persuaded BioWare and Electronic Arts

³¹³ Matt Kim, “The Frostbite Engine Nearly Tanked Mass Effect Andromeda,” *USGamer*, June 7, 2017, <https://www.usgamer.net/articles/the-frostbite-engine-nearly-tanked-mass-effect-andromeda>.

³¹⁴ Patricia Hernandez, “*Mass Effect: Andromeda*: The Kotaku Review,” *Kotaku*, March 22, 2017, <https://kotaku.com/mass-effect-andromeda-the-kotaku-review-1793496930>.

³¹⁵ Arthus Gies, “Mass Effect: Andromeda Review,” *Polygon*, March 20, 2017, <https://www.polygon.com/2017/3/20/14886618/mass-effect-andromeda-review-PS4-Xbox-One-PC>.

to shut down all future development on this series, a planned DLC, and patches for game issues only six months after the game's release.³¹⁶ At this point, the arguable overreaction of players and developers to the game's response appeared to have doomed the *Mass Effect* series indefinitely.

However, all was not entirely lost for *Mass Effect* or its players when BioWare went back to *Mass Effect's* roots announcing two major developments in 2021. The first sign of a comeback was the release of the *Mass Effect Legendary Edition* in April of 2021. The new edition of the trilogy collects all three games and all released DLC—with the exception of the *Pinnacle Station* DLC because of its corrupted base code—with remastered graphics, additional character creator options, and improved combat mechanics in the first *Mass Effect*. Essentially, the *Mass Effect Legendary Edition* is the same game players loved but built according to contemporary standards of high definition and character modeling. The outrage at *Mass Effect 3's* original ending must have finally dissipated because critics and players universally loved the updated version of the games—despite no new changes to the ending. Positive player response and sales surprised even Electronic Arts with CEO Andrew Wilson commenting that the remaster “reignited the passion of fans around the world, driving sales performance well above our expectations.”³¹⁷ Critics praised the *Mass Effect Legendary Edition's* positive improvements to the playability of the first

³¹⁶ Sam Machkovech, “Mass Effect: Andromeda Officially Shuts Down Its Single-Player Updates,” *Ars Technica*, August 19, 2017, <https://arstechnica.com/gaming/2017/08/bioware-slams-the-door-on-any-more-mass-effect-andromeda-single-player-content>.

³¹⁷ Andy Chalk, “Mass Effect Legendary Edition Sold Even Better Than EA Expected,” *PC Gamer*, August 5, 2021, <https://www.pcgamer.com/mass-effect-legendary-edition-sold-even-better-than-ea-expected>.

game,³¹⁸ its adjustments to graphics without detracting from the core elements,³¹⁹ and its undisturbed focus on player choice.³²⁰ Shockingly, the one thing critics don't mention is the ending. Despite the fervor and outrage during the controversy, players and developers in the present seemed to have gotten over their issues with the ending, forgiven BioWare, and have begun to look to the future with a new *Mass Effect* game reportedly in early development and possibly meant as a successor to the original trilogy.³²¹

Since the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy in 2012, player-led video game controversies have become a normal part of video game culture and an almost expected stage in video game production. In a typical year, four or five new player-led controversies emerge in response either to threats to player agency or in response to threats to developer agency and well-being. The first of these common controversy types follow the direct lead of the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy typically forming to recover lost agency and game choice from developers who limited player control. Many of the "Retake the Game" controversies in recent years share a common enemy in the industry's obsession with the inclusion of microtransactions. Loot boxes represent the most common and limiting of these microtransactions and at times make these games more like gambling than a game that allows players to make choices that result in meaningful outcomes. However, much like the *Mass Effect 3* protestors, player-led controversies

³¹⁸ Ash Parrish, "Mass Effect Legendary Edition Makes The First Game Required Playing," *Kotaku*, May 14, 2021, <https://kotaku.com/mass-effect-legendary-edition-makes-the-first-game-requ-1846899558>.

³¹⁹ Joshua Duckworth, "Mass Effect: Legendary Edition Review," *Game Rant*, May 26, 2021, <https://gamerant.com/mass-effect-legendary-edition-review>.

³²⁰ Jordan Ramée, "Mass Effect: Legendary Edition Review," *Gamespot*, May 25, 2021, <https://www.gamespot.com/reviews/mass-effect-legendary-edition-review/1900-6417679>.

³²¹ Malindy Hetfeld, "Mass Effect 5: Everything We Know So Far about the New BioWare Adventure," *Games Radar*, September 1, 2022, <https://www.gamesradar.com/mass-effect-5-guide>.

over microtransactions such as the pushback over *Middle Earth: Shadow of War*³²² and *Star Wars: Battlefront*³²³ ultimately persuaded developers to alter the loot box systems to better accommodate player choice and agency. The fact that players remain willing to fight for their agency, their outcomes, and their games and developers remain willing to listen and collaborate stands as the most positive and enduring legacy of what the *Mass Effect 3* players achieved.

Unfortunately, not all player-led controversies have positive collaborative motivations. Many of the “Retake the Game” controversies focus on claiming gaming from other members of the player community rather than developers and continue to expose the uglier side of the video game community. Inspired by the momentum and tactics of the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy, Doritosgate and the attacks on Anita Sarkeesian in 2012 directly led to the formation of one of video gaming’s most divisive and dangerous incidents in the Gamergate controversy. The goal of Gamergate was to “Retake the Game” and the gaming community from women, minorities, and anyone who would defend these groups by utilizing social media networks to attack women in gaming.³²⁴ Rather than simply protesting to persuade developers to alter a game or delete loot boxes, the Gamergaters wanted to delete women and minorities from games and the community. Unsurprisingly, this strain of retake controversy did not die with Gamergate. Smaller incidents and interactions that reinforce taking gaming back from women and other minorities occur throughout social media and online multiplayer interactions on a regular basis and drive these controversies. This includes prominent incidents such as the review

³²² Luke Plunkett, “Six Months After Release, Shadow of War Will Remove Microtransactions,” Kotaku, April 2, 2018, <https://kotaku.com/six-months-after-release-shadow-of-war-removes-microtr-1824270848>.

³²³ Chris Chenard, “Why Star Wars Battlefront 2 is Worth Playing in 2021,” Screenrant, January 22, 2021, <https://screenrant.com/star-wars-battlefront-2-good-worth-playing-2021/>.

³²⁴ Eliana Dockterman, “What Is #GamerGate and Why Are Women Being Threatened About Video Games?” *Time*, October 17, 2014, <https://time.com/3510381/gamergate-faq>.

bombing of *The Last of Us 2* and death threats against its developers because of the inclusion of queer characters and hate for one of the female characters.³²⁵ While these controversies drew inspiration from the tactics and sense of ownership employed by players during the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy, the controversies that attempt to “Retake the Game” from other players have never actually been successful at getting what they wanted and have ultimately failed where controversies focused on direct player agency have succeeded. Women and minorities continue to be part of the video game community, representations of women and minorities have become more common and nuanced, and these protestors have never been able to gain agency by taking it away from someone else.

The legacy of the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy and the collaboration between players and developers to change the game appears to have one surprising side effect. In the past few years, there has been an increase of video game controversies triggered by the mistreatment of game labor during the development process. Perhaps influenced by player collaboration with developers as creative partners in recent controversies, many players seem to have developed a sense of solidarity with gameworkers that has made players more sympathetic to the labor issues faced by developers and helped bring attention to their cause. Labor controversies in video game development first became part of the public culture of gaming with allegations against Electronic Arts in 2005, but didn’t gain much traction until the past few years when overwork and crunch time became issues that players cared about and felt should change—admittedly, in part, because players have become conscious of the effects of labor on the finished product. Some of these recent labor controversies include the recurring charges of extreme sexism at Riot

³²⁵ Jen Glennon,, Dail Johnston and Eric Francisco, “The Rest of Us: The Last of Us Part II Trans Controversy, Explained,” Inverse, May 14, 2020, <https://www.inverse.com/gaming/last-of-us-2-trans-controversy-explained-abby-tlou>.

Games,³²⁶ sexual harassment and toxic behavior in development at Ubisoft,³²⁷ charges of excessive work hours and poor working conditions at Rockstar Games,³²⁸ and the walking back of promises not to require crunch time made by CD Projekt Red during the production of *Cyberpunk 2077*. Even if players didn't care about the individuals producing the games they play, the collaboration between players and developers has made players more aware of the effects of reducing developer agency through forced labor and harassment on the finished product.

The *Mass Effect* series and its developers may have promised that “every choice matters,” but the players' choice to revolt against the game's disappointing ending and convince BioWare to change the game made that promise a reality. However, this reality could not have been possible without BioWare's text or the studio's willingness to collaborate with players through produsage to develop the characters, narratives, and outcomes over the course of the three games. BioWare entrusted players with a multitude of complex, intertwined choices that allowed players to co-produce an experience dependent on player choice and agency. As the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy shows, player agency rarely relies solely on interactions with the text. When BioWare's ending abruptly destroyed player choice with its color-coded final “choices,” the agency developed by players in the game through meaningful decisions and satisfying outcomes evolved past the boundaries of the game into real world controversy. The player-led

³²⁶ Cecilia D'Anastasio, “Inside The Culture Of Sexism At Riot Games,” *Kotaku*, August 7, 2018, <https://kotaku.com/inside-the-culture-of-sexism-at-riot-games-1828165483>.

³²⁷ Chaim Gartenberg, “Ubisoft survey Reveals that 25 Percent of Employees Have Seen or Experienced Workplace Misconduct,” *The Verge*, October 2, 2020, <https://www.theverge.com/2020/10/2/21499334/ubisoft-employees-workplace-misconduct-ceo-yves-guillemot-response>.

³²⁸ Owen S. Good, “Red Dead Redemption 2's Labor Controversy, Explained,” *Polygon*, October 27, 2018, <https://www.polygon.com/2018/10/27/18029154/red-dead-redemption-2-working-conditions-rockstar-games-overtime-labor>.

campaign to “Retake *Mass Effect 3*” represents a significant turning point in video game controversies because it was the first player-led campaign to organize through social media and successfully pressure developers to alter a video game. Perhaps more importantly, the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy represents the first time that a developer acknowledged players as collaborative partners whose contributions and feedback unquestionably hold value in the creation of a video game. The success of the *Mass Effect 3* controversy subsequently created an expectation within the video game community that player revolt driven by player agency represents an effective method for creating change—an expectation that has fueled every controversy since 2012 and continues to influence video game production.

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