THE MECHANICS OF WAR: PROCEDURAL RHETORIC
AND THE MASculine SUBJECT IN THE GEARS OF WAR AND MASS EFFECT SERIES

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A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green
State University in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

December 2015

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis attempts to illustrate how war video games deploy their rules and mechanics to rhetorically reinforce or reconfigure the male-gendered (hyper-)masculine player-subject. Because video games enable player-subjects to interactively take part in simulations of war, video games have rhetorical power that scholars, video game developers, and players must learn to critically harness in order to tell imaginative narratives that value peace over violence. Split into three chapters, this thesis critically examines what I believe constitutes a small representative sample of influential or potentially influential war video games. The first chapter argues that the *Gears of War* series of video games reinforces the traditional hyper-masculine subject of war with a xenophobic narrative that glorifies violence against a feminized and reified enemy threat. By contrast, the second chapter argues that the *Mass Effect* series of video games responds to this violence by more imaginatively reconfiguring the masculine subject of war through its encouragement of diplomacy instead of aggression. The third and final chapter argues that the independently-produced *September 12* and *This War of Mine* both further reconfigure and ultimately redefine the masculine subject of war by enabling the player to embody the subject positions of multiple civilians adversely affected by war. The thesis comes to the conclusion that critical video game studies must seek to access larger portions of the video gaming population in order to shift the public’s demand toward narratives of peace that nonetheless entertain.
For my two cats

Erin the Human and Frankie the Trash Cat

Without whose support this project would never have materialized
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the faculty in Bowling Green State University’s English Department for their openness and attentiveness. In particular, I would like to acknowledge Kim Coates and Kris Blair for being so patient with me. Without their generous support and brilliant guidance, this thesis would have been a disorganized mess. Because of the hours they spent helping me to organize and hone this manuscript, I have grown as a writer, a thinker, and a person. I also owe a debt to Bill Albertini, who listened to my ideas for this thesis and offered helpful insight when I felt very lost.

I am also grateful to my parents, whose emotional availability, occasional financial support, and unwavering confidence in me fueled my desire to continue in my career when my personal feelings of academic fraudulence threatened to stop my progress.

I would also like to thank my siblings and all my friends back home, who asked me questions about my research and reacted to it with curiosity and insight. They encouraged me to continue exploring the discipline I adore the most, and for that I am eternally grateful.

Lastly, I would like to thank Seal for making “Kiss from a Rose,” because nobody dislikes that song.
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INTRODUCTION: WAR VIDEO GAMES, HYPER-MASULINITY, AND PROCEDURAL RHETORIC

Since their inception, popular video games told narratives about invading enemy forces that need to be destroyed and it was the player’s job to take on the role of the hero and save the planet. Tomohiro Nishikado, creator of the bestselling 1980 Atari 2600 game Space Invaders, admitted that the bug-like pixelated enemies slowly descending from the black skies above were inspired by and capitalized off of the already classic 1953 filmed adaptation of H.G. Wells’ The War of the Worlds (Donovan 75). Themes of war and invasion by these tiny pixelated alien enemies moved millions of Atari 2600 consoles and popularized an industry that at the time marketed only to young boys. While the game was limited by the computing heft of the then-powerful Atari console, Space Invaders showed that video games could potentially tell narratives—albeit very simple ones—that drew players into their strange interactive worlds.

It was not long before video games began translating the anxieties reflected in these games about invasion into the real world and capitalizing off of the paranoia surrounding international conflict. In an attempt to harness video games’ interactive features for soldier training, the US military began its involvement with video gaming technology in 1980, when Atari released Battlezone, a three-dimensional precursor to today’s high budget first-person shooters. In the game, players view action on a barren, visually primitive moonscape through a tank periscope. Understanding that young men would respond better to electronic simulations than to print- and lecture-based lessons, the US military asked Atari to modify Battlezone for use in soldier training simulations (Mead 18).

In 1982, soon after Atari’s innovation, air force captain Jack A. Thorpe created SIMNET, a virtual network for combat simulation (Mead 19). Years later, Thorpe repurposed the project as
a way of collecting entire units of troops together into an environment simulated after the Battle of 73 Easting, a major military campaign that took place during the first Gulf War, in which the U.S. military destroyed over a hundred Iraqi fighting vehicles and killed hundreds of Iraqi soldiers. The SIMNET project was so large and ambitious that it took eight years to roll out units for use by army personnel. This heralded a transition in video gaming technology and military training from simple home entertainment to complete digital immersion and replication (McMaster 18; Mead 20).

The U.S. military continued its involvement with video games in 1995 after the release of Doom II, the sequel to a popular and innovative first-person shooting space fantasy in which the player views action through the eyes of a protagonist—a space marine—stationed on a Mars military outpost. The marine’s sole objective is to use a selection of military weapons to fell demons from hell that emerge through portals. Over the summer of 1995, Lieutenant Dan Snyder modified Doom II by replacing the hellish Mars landscape with military bunkers, and the demonic enemies with characters modeled after scans of GI Joe action figures. The resulting simulation was titled Marine Doom. The game’s goal was to translate Doom II’s largest innovation, the multiplayer “deathmatch,” into a tool for teamwork and cooperation among military personnel (Grossman and Ressner; Mead 22).

Military spending on video gaming technology had already dropped off sharply by 1994, when the U.S. government imposed limitations on resources the pentagon could allocate to defense contractors. The pentagon now had to rely solely on commercial off-the-shelf technologies (i.e. existing technologies developed in the private sector). Left on their own, defense contractors sought buyers for their products. The entertainment industry became that buyer. The relationship between the two industries was symbiotic: defense contractors began
releasing new technologies to the entertainment industry. The entertainment industry would then create something out of those technologies and bounce the result back to the defense contractors (Mead 23).

The events of 9/11 have since spawned a number of military war games that have generated critical attention, since many of these games attempt to mirror real world conflicts, such as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (Power 272). One example of this is America’s Army, a free game and unabashed recruitment tool created as a joint effort between the U.S. Army and the video games industry. America’s Army approximates real-world physics to create accurate simulations of wartime scenarios (Mead 93). The game has players employ principles of teamwork and leadership as they participate in simulated missions to capture what are called High Value Targets (al-Rawi 230). The war video game had suddenly transitioned into three-dimensional space, and it could no longer be recognized as a harmless child’s toy.

In 2004, the popular development studio THQ released Full Spectrum Warrior, a realistic war simulation game where the player leads two units of soldiers through Zekistan, a fictional country in which a brutal dictator has ethnically cleansed his own people. The game’s box disclaims that the product is in no way associated with the U.S. military. That same box qualifies that the gameplay is based on a U.S. Army training aid (al-Rawi 235; Lugo 12). This military influence suffuses subsequent projects like the Call of Duty: Modern Warfare franchise, which like Full Spectrum Warrior recreates a realistic war environment in which American military units shoot their way through war-torn battlefields. Authenticity later afforded by technologies like Microsoft’s Xbox 360 and Sony’s Playstation 3 allowed game companies to follow suit and create profitable digital war games that represent the U.S. military as virtuous, a common feature of post-9/11 war video games that manufactures consent for the military and enables the
fulfillment of militaristic fantasies about being a strong, hyper-masculine male soldier who plows through enemy hoards and saves the day (Power 273).

War-themed video games, which are some of the highest selling video games, have since increased in popularity as console technology has become powerful enough to render war realistically. Most of these games predominately feature hyper-masculine male soldiers fighting their way through destroyed cityscapes and marauding hoards of enemies in order to advance through the narrative. However, the content of these games hardly reflects who consumes video games in general. According to the Entertainment Software Association’s 2014 demographic analysis *Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry*, of the 59% of Americans who play video games, 52% are male and 48% are female. In spite of this almost even split between the rigid gender categories espoused by the ESA, war video games are generally marketed to young adult males (Donovan 270). What might explain this is not only the video games industry’s routine of historically selling military-themed video games to young boys during the 1980s-1990s boom in home console and computer gaming, but also the fact that the most recent industry statistics reflect only a 22% female developer base (Brown; Donovan 271).

This strange disparity is partly reflected in reactions by male developers to the potential for more female representation in video games. One of the most popular narrative war epics in recent memory is the science fictional *Gears of War* series of video games, all of which feature visually exaggerated hyper-masculine male soldiers who phlegmatically gun down marauding hoards of alien enemies that have been taken over by a human female ruler. In response to an interview question with the *Official Xbox Magazine* on the potential for a female protagonist in a future entry in the *Gears of War* franchise, Epic Games’ art director Chris Perna explains that “if you look at what sells, it’s tough to justify [creating a female lead]” (Evans-Thirlwell). It is
worth noting that Perna makes this claim directly after discussing Gears of War 3’s positive popular reception by female gamers. Perna simultaneously acknowledges the series’ robust female gamer base as well as the unfortunate reality that content decisions in the games industry are dictated by hypothetical economic factors. These economic concerns exceed Perna’s influence, as the logic of the market has long been guided by the contention (partly influenced by the military’s involvement) that only men consume war narratives. Still, this logic is a chicken-and-egg formulation: who determines market demand? Does the industry guide consumer demand, or do consumers guide the market? With the advent of powerful home console technologies that enable large teams of programmers and artists to render hyper-realistic fictional worlds, production costs naturally rise to accommodate technical horsepower, a growing base of developers, and more complex marketing strategies. The high cost limits the risk studios are willing to take. Hence, Perna’s economic logic falls in line with the industry-wide belief that male-targeted games must feature destruction and chaos, while female-targeted games should emphasize puzzle solving, avatar personalization, and community dialogue (Bulik). Lars Konzack calls this marketing strategy to young women the “pink games approach to girl gaming,” a harmful gender-specific marketing strategy that reinforces American culture’s belief that men ought to be emotionally restrained and masculine, while women ought to be diplomatic, emotional, and feminine (117).

Perna’s claim about the current impossibility to market a female protagonist in a war video game is what initially sparked my critical interest in the Gears of War series. The possibility had occurred to me that these games I enjoyed playing with my best friend over Xbox Live had all along been manipulating me into uncritically accepting reinforcements of maleness and masculinity. I also recognized that these games had not just been manipulating me, but had
accessed an entire population of male gamers who seemed to adore them without questioning their content. To date, the first three games of the series have collectively sold over 20.77 million units worldwide. The overall sales figures for *Gears of War* may not represent a female gamer base quite as representative as the almost even split between male and female gamers in general. But *Gears of War 3*, at least, appeared to have contradicted Perna’s claim that female protagonists are improbable in a genre that markets predominately to males. Strangely, in *Gears of War 3* there are two female protagonists who, by the game’s logic, have just as much physical power as their male counterparts. They can carry the same heavy weaponry, take the same amount of damage, and kill oncoming enemy hoards just as effectively as their male counterparts. However, as I played through *Gears of War 3*, I noticed that I could not embody the role of any of these female soldiers. They existed only as background characters. This confused me. Why include a female soldier if the player cannot embody her? I suspected the mostly-male team of developers had included these non-playable female protagonists to forestall grievances about a lack of female representation. I was perturbed by the game’s illogical prohibitions and wondered what impact these prohibitions had on other (presumably male) players.

After discovering how intimately the military had been involved with the video games industry and how frequently they had co-opted industry technology to train soldiers, I began looking into video game studies in order to puzzle out what made the medium so alluring and persuasive. If war video games had the persuasive potential to be used as recruitment tools, and if those products about war were consistently being marketed predominately to males, then what did this say about the power of video games to form player-subjects? More specifically, what did this say about the power of war video games to form hyper-masculine player-subjects? In his
book, *Persuasive Games*, Ian Bogost argues that the interactive and computational features of video games are persuasive in ways other media are not. This mode of persuasion, which I will go into greater detail about in the first chapter of this thesis, Bogost terms procedural rhetoric. Procedural rhetoric provides scholars, developers, and players the methodological tools to unpack the computational arguments video games make via their rules, or mechanics.

In the thesis that follows, I wish to deploy Bogost’s methodological tool to unpack the persuasive components of what I believe constitute a small representative sample of influential war video games. The video games I will be analyzing in the pages that follow are the *Gears of War* series of video games, the *Mass Effect* series of video games, the independently-produced viral flash game *September 12*, and the independently-produced *This War of Mine*. Because, as I have illustrated above, war video games which feature hyper-masculine soldiers as their primary protagonists have historically and are currently marketed to males, it is vital to recognize what impacts these games have on male player-subjects. Therefore, the central questions of this thesis are as follows: how do war video games deploy their own procedural rhetorics in the service of either reinforcing or reconfiguring the masculine soldier subject of war? In what ways are enemies positioned in relation to these masculine soldier subjects? What do we make of the function of hyper-masculinity in games that focus not on the soldiers in combat, but on the civilians adversely affected by war? In what ways do games that reconfigure and reimagine the masculine subject of war lead developers, players, and scholars to imagine better war video game narratives that espouse peace instead of violence? As I attempt to answer these questions, I will often refer to the general player (i.e. “the player”) with the male pronoun (i.e. “he,” “him,” “his”). In this case, I will use male pronouns because these war video games typically attempt to capture the male demographic. Consequently, when I discuss games that attempt to reconfigure
(or deprogram) the masculine player-subject who has been previously and presently formed by other war video games, I hope to illustrate the potentially positive impact these games have on the subject.

In the first chapter of this thesis I argue that the *Gears of War* series of games largely constitute a post-9/11 anxiety narrative that glorifies violence against a feminized enemy Other by deploying hyper-masculinity as the tool that makes war intelligible. I also argue that this narrative of brazen violence relies on the disposal of a locatable and reified enemy force in order to reinforce the narrative that American-analogue soldiers are the “good” bodies defending their territory against the invasive “bad” enemy army. I argue that besides relying on a traditional narrative of good versus evil, *Gears of War* deploys its own procedural rhetorics to reinforce these themes (e.g. advancing the narrative requires the disposal of enemy hoards; there is only a single pathway down which the player must travel in order to advance). Far from being an imaginative or even unique narrative in relation to other war video games, *Gears of War* continues the trend of military-themed video games that reinforce rigid parameters surrounding what makes a hyper-masculine soldier effective.

In the second chapter, I look at the *Mass Effect* series of games to explore how war games that market to a wider array of demographics potentially reconfigure the masculine soldier subject of war. While *Mass Effect* is, in many ways, very similar mechanically to *Gears of War* in the sense that the player must gun down assailants in order to advance the narrative, the series puts a great deal of work into conditioning the player to (re)conceive of the so-called enemy as dispersed and unrecognizable. In *Mass Effect*, for example, the enemy is ideology—a dispersed, diffracted Other—that takes on the physical form of a de-gendered and identityless technological species. In the end, I argue that in refusing to locate a reified enemy threat, *Mass Effect* deploys
its own procedural rhetorics to argue that war can be won only by questioning the ideological assumptions of war itself. Nevertheless, while *Mass Effect* is an imaginative, forward-thinking narrative of peace that promotes diplomacy over aggression, I will argue that it is nevertheless troubled by its anxieties surrounding the erasure of one’s gender or identity.

The third and final chapter will cover the independently produced games *September 12* and *This War of Mine*. Both of these games move toward amending the tendency of war video games to map concrete masculine or feminine identities onto the enemy and onto soldiers’ bodies. Furthermore, I will argue that both of these games help us to apprehend civilian lives adversely affected by war by enabling the player to embody multiple avatars at once. I will first argue that Frasca’s *September 12* deploys a number of procedural rhetorics to force us to question the very nature of terrorism, enemy Otherness, and hegemonic masculinity. Nevertheless, *September 12* is haunted by its own limited telling of war that ignores the complex sociopolitical struggles that attend the complicated transition from civilian to terrorist. However, *September 12* does present a vision for how war narratives might begin to apprehend the lives hurt by hyper-masculine violence. Following my analysis of *September 12*, I will argue that *This War of Mine* further questions the hyper-masculine violence of war video games before and since by forcing the player-subject to embody multiple civilian subject positions at once. In foregrounding these multiple civilian subject positions, *This War of Mine* decenters the masculine soldier subject of war, questions enemy Otherness by refusing to support the contention that enemies are anything other than imaginary constructions, and calls to task other war video games that have espoused violence over peace.

It is my hope that by reading these eight video games critically, scholars, developers, and players might learn to imagine and demand war video games that encourage player-subjects to
question the moral viability of war. Furthermore, if we learn to unpack the computational arguments therein about hyper-masculine aggression and the enemy Others that have been set up as feminized foils to emphasize that hyper-masculine aggression, then perhaps we can shed light on how American culture conceives of itself in relation to its so-called enemies. It is vitally important that as video game scholarship matures, so too must our analyses of the video games American citizens consume on a daily basis. After all, if we wish to build a more peaceful world, perhaps we should learn to demand more narratives about peace.
CHAPTER I. (HYPER-)MASCULINE POSTURING: GENDER AND ENEMY OTHERNESS IN THE GEARS OF WAR SERIES

Few modern games equal the almost cartoonish absurdity of *Gears of War* in their representations of hyper-masculine soldiers. While other entertainments about war generally feature muscular but realistic male soldier bodies (the *Call of Duty* franchise of games, for example), upon starting up the first *Gears of War* the player notices that the soldiers’ muscles of this series bulge flamboyantly out of their heavy metal armor. The guns they wield are no less absurd. Attached to a semi-powerful machine gun whose powerful bullets penetrate and eviscerate huge, thick reptilian enemy bodies is a noisy chainsaw that appears to run off of an invisible and limitless supply of gasoline. If the player gets close enough to an enemy while pushing the controller button that activates the chainsaw, the camera shifts to the side and the player is treated to a spectacle of gruesome violence. The chainsaw penetrates one shoulder of the enemy. As the enemy grasps at the air to fight off the player’s avatar, the chainsaw moves cleanly through the enemy’s body until his bisected remains twitch disturbingly on the cracked pavement. The player is rewarded for his victory with a cut scene. He may now move to the next section of the game. How are we to make sense of such gleeful and excessive violence? Why position the player in the role of this hyper-masculine soldier? Why is this soldier killing this enemy? In order to adequately answer these questions and to make sense of these scenes of violence, we must first understand our hyper-masculine hero.

In her article “Making Sense of War and Masculinity,” Kimberly Hutchings argues that masculinity in war is complicated by its various performative behaviors. She points out that the term describes “the highly rational, technologically skilled nuclear intellectual (unemotional, rational, calculating)” just as much as it describes the “just warrior (chivalrous, protective)”
War, she argues, relies on these privileged versions of masculinity in order to construct the ideal soldier of war. The just, chivalrous, hyper-masculine warrior contrasts with any lower-grade (or weaker) masculine warrior. Furthermore, Hutchings argues that war relies on these privileged and lower-grade masculinities in order to set up contrasts with oppositional, feminized enemy “Others.” Hutchings does not mean to suggest that war and masculinity—or, more specifically, hyper-masculinity—constitute one another, but that the former is made “intelligible and acceptable as a social institution and practice” by the latter (389). In other words, hyper-masculinity is a tool used by hegemonic states to make war conceivable. Hutchings further suggests that gender figures significantly in war precisely because hyper-masculinity—which is hegemonically coded male—and femininity—coded hegemonically as female—are mutually exclusive in a wartime context because masculinity is only intelligible with regard to its opposite (masculinity requires femininity to remain intelligible). Consequently, soldier heroism generally relies on feminized enemies in order to remain intelligible, both for the soldiers who participate in war, and for the citizens who consume images of it. Furthermore, Hutchings argues that masculinity needs to be rethought “in terms not of the hegemony of a specific type of masculinity,” but rather in terms that reframe masculinity as “infinitely diverse” (401).

Hutchings’ discussion does not invite us to equate hyper-masculinity with violence, but to question war’s usage of it as a tool to fashion these “infinitely diverse” soldiers of war.

Hyper-masculinity in war entails the avoidance of feminine traits, emotional regulation, aggressiveness and toughness, self-reliance, and an emphasis on personal status. Each of these features account both for why masculinity has historically been coded male and for why it is the most encouraged performance of masculinity during war (Jenkins; Onyango and Hampanda 241; Tasker). Masculinity in general is more complicated than this, since embodying a specifically
hyper-masculine persona in war entails a prohibition on performing other “inferior” masculine behaviors. However, as Judith Halberstam argues, “penises as well as masculinity become artificial and constructible when we challenge the naturalness of gender” (128). In Halberstam’s view, constructions of masculinity are not biologically fixed, but are instead policed by patriarchy to enforce a specific ontology. Increasing awareness of how and why bodies have historically and presently been policed will, Halberstam suggests, lead us to “drop altogether the constrictive terminology of crossing” from one sexual identity to another (130). Halberstam further argues for a posttranssexual world in which “we examine the strangeness of all gendered bodies” and in which we recognize that “all gender should be transgender, all desire is transgender, movement is all” (132). In other words, the language of crossing itself reinforces a hegemonic binary because it relies on that binary to remain intelligible. While one might expect that the language of “crossing” from one gender category to another culturally intelligible one (i.e. male to female) would statistically decrease in a culture that creates and accepts a wider variety of ontologies, the reverse appears to be true (Halberstam 129). Halberstam’s argument allows us to rethink how art and media internalize the anxieties surrounding the transgression of the rigid categories of masculine/feminine and male/female. The very existence of these legible, coherent identities establishes what a deviation from those norms look like. Exposing where art and media accomplishes the feat of reinforcing these identities will teach us how to subvert hegemonic structures (like state systems) that discursively enforce particular ontologies.

For the purpose of this thesis chapter, I am most interested in applying Hutchings and Halberstam’s ideas to analyze post-9/11 anxieties and the hyper-masculine identity figuration of the “just warrior” as they apply in Gears of War. I call Gears of War a post-9/11 videogame series because of its tendency to mediate the experience of killing feminized terrorist analogues
(i.e. aliens instead of Middle Easterners) through the genre of science fiction. I selected *Gears of War* for this analysis—rather than, say, the more direct post-9/11 games of the *Call of Duty* franchise—because this unusual tendency has garnered the series the distinction (by critics as well as by fans) of being imaginative and visionary. Apart from achieving its goals only visually in the same way that a film or a painting might, the *Gears of War* series persuades also through its game rules. For example—and I will go into greater detail about this later on—instead of passively watching a soldier shoot at familiar Middle Eastern bodies like one would in a film, the player himself shoots at aliens whose bodies mirror those of the male humans in the narrative. Each successful kill rewards the player with scenes of violence, enemy dismemberment, and narrative progression. I argue that these enemies are disposable precisely because they are feminized, and they are feminized in order to emphasize the contrasting hyper-masculinity of the heroic soldiers. Consequently, it is not far-fetched to read these alien bodies as being means of avoiding representing literal Middle Easterners. Ultimately, I am interested in analyzing *Gears of War*’s overall representation of war and what it requires to be an effective soldier of war. The genre of the war video game has long normalized the idea that enemy threats are easily identifiable, monstrous bodies that need to be destroyed. It is my hope that by helping to unveil this tendency, developers might, in the future, desire to conceive of more imaginative and peaceful war videogames.

While I support the position that the *Gears of War* series does have persuasive impact on player-subjects, I do so with the qualification that the causal links between violent behavior and the consumption of violent videogames is tenuous at best (Ferguson, et al.). Therefore, I do not mean to take the behaviorist approach to videogame criticism and suggest that players of violent video games are increasingly likely to become violent aggressors. Indeed, it is important to
recognize how subjective the experience of playing a video game is (a player’s ideology may neither align with nor be influenced by the product). Instead, what I wish to support is the notion that videogames, like film, television, literature, art, and music, constitute a narrative medium that attempts, in its unique way, to form subjects. By unique, I mean that videogames accomplish subject formation via their rule-based systems instead of only through textual or visual rhetoric. Therefore, for my discussion of *Gears of War* I will be invoking and detailing further what Bogost terms procedural rhetoric—a new form of rhetoric that goes beyond textual and visual representation to describe the ability of videogames to persuade the player through their rules and mechanics—in order to show how the series forms the player as a hyper-masculine subject. In doing this, I hope to contribute to the critical game studies literature about war video games in order to illuminate how these products are not just harmless playthings, but persuasive works of art. Before moving forward with this analysis, a description of each game in the series is necessary.

The series is set on the planet Sera, where an alien known as the Locust emerge from the planet’s core through sinkholes and attempt to eradicate humanity during a time of great economic and social prosperity. The first game in the series takes place 14 years after the day the Locust first emerge from the ground (known on Sera as “E-Day”). All of the human cities have been destroyed by the Coalition of Ordered Governments’ (COG) overuse of a weapon known as the Hammer of Dawn, which is powered by valuable oil called Imulsion and utilizes low orbit satellites to incinerate subjects and buildings from space. The player controls Marcus Fenix, the gruff, aggressive, and emotionally disconnected leader of Delta Squad, a military unit that falls under the jurisdiction of the COG. The object of the game is to travel through the destroyed cities
of Sera, fight off Locust hordes, and detonate a Lightmass bomb to collapse the Locusts’ subterranean tunnel networks.

*Gears of War 2* takes place six months after the Lightmass bomb’s detonation. As it turns out, the bomb incinerated the Imulsion fluid underground. Humans exposed to the Imulsion vapor develop a fatal disease called rustlung, which is named for the brown liquid its victims cough up. Eventually, humans begin transforming into monstrous, feral, enraged, and frantic zombielike husks that attack anything in their path. In the midst of this crisis, Locust hordes reemerge from their underground lairs and use large, monstrous worms (called Riftworms) to create sinkholes big enough to swallow the last remaining human-occupied cities on Sera. The player leads a once again all-male Delta Squad into the Locust stronghold, where it becomes apparent that the Locust are locked in battle with the Lambent, an army of Locust that have been exposed to and transformed by Imulsion into more monstrous incarnations. Queen Myrrah is the respected leader and sole human subject among the Locust. Her aim is to lead the Locust in the war to retake Sera and occupy the surface. The final game in the trilogy concludes the battle against the Locust and Lambent when Fenix vengefully stabs Myrrah in the heart. This final act of vengeance disables the Locust army and ends the series.

To many, it might seem pointless to problematize a war videogame series like *Gears of War*, particularly because videogames in general have, up to now, been seen by the United States public as mere playthings for children (Gee 21). Why attempt to argue that any videogame internalizes the anxieties of its cultural moment if the series in question is seen by the public as trivial entertainment? Why complicate the ubiquitous critical praise of the series as a gorgeous, whimsical, and entertaining adventure? Are videogames really so vital to our understanding of war and state violence, anyway? In fact, one of the most bizarre paradoxes in recent years has
been the public’s contention that videogames are trivial children’s playthings and, at the same time, too violent for children (Donovan). The former narrative appears to disavow the power of videogames to shape one’s subjectivity, while the latter places supreme importance on the medium’s subject-forming impact.

Siding, in part, with the latter position, I contend that *Gears of War* attempts to form hyper-masculine player-subjects by placing them in morally corrupt positions that require their complicity as they kill enemy Others that have been feminized by Queen Myrrah. That feminization plays into the construction of the soldier protagonists’ (and player’s) hyper-masculinity because the constrictive rules of these particular games require that the player gleefully dismembers these apparently motiveless enemies. This lack of fluidity, I argue, is a type of procedural rhetoric that enforces the player’s identification with the protagonists, regardless of the ethical repugnance of their actions. One might object that I am splitting hairs and that *Gears of War* has no effect on the subject who chooses to continue playing it. But context is vital to our reading of the series. For example, *Gears of War* might be more likely to raise objections in the player if the alien enemies of the series were instead direct offensive stereotypes of Iraqi and Afghani citizens. However, while *Gears of War* does not have the player shoot directly at Iraqi and Afghani bodies, it shifts the context in the game by turning enemy Others into reptilian looking aliens and removes the player from the setting of the planet earth to the planet Sera in order to make the violence more palatable. Hence, in spite of the widespread belief that the *Gears of War* games are mere entertainment, I intend to show that they—and hopefully videogames in general—are not harmless, meaningless, and ephemeral products. They are, instead, insidious examples among a long line of post-9/11 war videogames that have largely internalized United States anxieties over terrorist threats.
While reified, locatable enemies in videogames have been around since at least *Space Invaders*, the horsepower of current generation home consoles renders marauding hordes of enemies realistically (i.e. the violence is far bloodier and more visceral). The realism itself is not an issue, but the way games like *Gears of War* render violence as almost cartoonishly trivial is. It is dangerous because of how uncritically players are impelled to consume that realistic violence against terroristic analogues. This is especially problematic after 9/11, when United States citizens began depending increasingly on often unreliable media to receive their information. The information the media selected to report in the years following the attacks on the twin towers galvanized many US citizens against the intangible threat of terrorism. Subsumed within the political language of the so-called “War on Terror,” that threat at once became a locatable, reified enemy that drove much of the US into a moral panic (Rothe and Muzzatti 327).

In addition to gunning down these terroristic analogues, the player (consumer) embodies and therefore identifies with the *Gears of War* avatars (e.g. Marcus Fenix) he controls. Hence, the violence he enacts in these virtual worlds is forced upon him and the game gives him no room to criticize his own actions. Furthermore (and perhaps most importantly), games like *Gears of War* utilize feminized terrorist analogues in order to masculinize the soldiers the player controls and identifies with. Again, this is dangerous because uncritical killing, in this context, is not only mediated by the safe physical distancing afforded by videogames, but is enacted distantly by the player embodying the killers. After all, if the player is disallowed by the series to enter into diplomatic talks with—and is encouraged to kill—the enemy Other, then the game gives him no space to question the signifier “enemy.” Consequently, that enemy never can become an ally.
One might dismiss these assertions as overwrought, particularly because, at first glance, there appears to be no way of knowing whether or not games can successfully persuade player-subjects into aligning with their ideologies. While this is technically true on an individual basis, there are various metrics that offer us insight into what consumers demand and therefore accept. In his book *Persuasive Games*, Bogost argues that a videogame’s cultural impact “is always related to a method of measurement that already implies players’ support of the system that produced the videogame” (318). Two metrics, he argues, provide evidence of a videogame’s persuasive impact: critical praise on review aggregate sites like Metacritic.com and a videogame’s financial success (Bogost 319). The *Gears of War* trilogy fits both of these criteria. The trilogy on the Xbox 360 now yields an average score of 92 on Metacritic.com, and a remastered version of it is to be released in the second half of 2015 (suggesting widespread support of the series). While I recognize that individuals who consume a product can be both critical of and entertained by it, the overwhelming positive reception of the *Gears of War* series makes it difficult to locate where and whether the public finds the series problematic. Hence, it is vital for us to recognize that the dearth of available scholarly criticism about contemporary war videogames like *Gears of War* is itself problematic and must be amended.

Furthermore, if we accept Bogost’s logic that a culture’s uncritical response to an otherwise complex piece of art means that more products like it will be produced, then it is necessary to consider why the public might want to consume these products and what the consequences of that consumption are. James Paul Gee argues in his seminal book *What Videogames Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* that while there is nothing particularly wrong with war videogames playing on cultural models about the individual against the group, or about the lone fighter romantically defeating the enemy hoard, there is something
wrong with these models going unchallenged. Gee suggests that failing to challenge these
cultural models presupposes that videogames either have little persuasive impact, or have
nothing to teach us about war (162). If videogames are persuasive and if they are powerfully
instructive for the player, then what can war video games teach us about war? More specifically,
what can war videogames teach us about hyper-masculinity in war? Understanding how war
video games in particular interpellate masculine player-subjects into a larger ideological
framework is vital in order for developers to utilize the potential of video games to espouse
peace rather than violence.

The overall aim of this chapter, which treats Gears of War as a single cohesive story, is to
locate these intersections between race, gender politics, and performances of masculinity
countenanced in part through the positioning of alien (i.e. racialized) enemy Others as disposable
bodies that have been rendered feminine—and, by the game’s logic, abject—by their
subordination to a human female ruler. In locating this intersection, I hope to expand the reader’s
understanding of how entertainment media like the Gears of War series conditions player-
subjects to recognize and support the master narrative that the United States is the heroic paragon
in the fight against terrorism. By analyzing in what ways the game mechanics, visual renderings
of war, dialogue, and representations of female authority figures in Gears of War inscribe hyper-
masculinity on soldiers’ bodies and minds, I hope to argue that post-9/11 war video game series
like these not only confine masculinity to biological maleness, but posit that there is a particular
performance of masculinity that functions best in a wartime context. In other words, I wish to
argue that the Gears of War series of games is unimaginative insofar as it fails to recognize the
various possible performances of masculinity. I do not wish, therefore, to put forward an
essentialist definition of masculinity, but (following Hutchings and Halberstam) one that is
unstable, multiple, and embodies a wealth of performative behaviors that frequently belie what it means culturally to be male. Dominant cultural ideas of what it means to be male or manly fall under the purview of hegemonic masculinity, or a pattern of behaviors (and not just identity figurations) that enable men to dominate women (Connell and Messerschmidt 832). In many ways, *Gears of War* works very hard to represent women fairly and sidestep this issue; nevertheless, it ultimately excludes women from the means of cultural production by ceding the narrative to hyper-masculine male soldiers. In effect, the series enacts an erasure of the possibility for feminine masculinity in a wartime context by positing its own version of male-centric hyper-masculinity as the one legitimate discourse. Being critical of war videogames in this way enables us to reject narratives that favor violence over peace. After all, in order for game developers to use the violence of war as a tool to tell narratives of peace, they must first understand what makes their depiction of hyper-masculine violence in these fictional worlds problematic.

**Procedural Rhetoric and its Relationship to Masculinity**

Part of what grants video games their appearance of truth is what Aaron Delwiche calls the “four I’s,” which are immersion, intense engagement, identification with the game world and avatar, and the inherent interactivity of the medium. The “four I’s” suggest that video games’ unique ability is to immerse and engage the player by enabling him to identify with avatars via the interactive features of the medium (Delwiche 92). In other words, video games constitute a uniquely persuasive medium because of their combination of the visual and aural vocabulary of film (expressed in filmed cut scenes) with computation (expressed in the code underlying rendered game worlds that both enables these imagined spaces to exist and gives the player interactive agency within those imagined spaces). In his essay “Narrative in the Video Game,”
Mark J.P. Wolf calls this the “diegetic world of the video game.” Already a familiar concept for film and television, the diegetic world denotes the world seen and interacted with on-screen. In Wolf’s terms:

The very ‘rules’ and cause-and-effect logic that dictate the events of the video game’s diegetic world contain an imbedded worldview which matches actions with consequences and determines outcomes, and it is here that an author can best guide a player into a particular way of thinking (and acting).

In other words, the very act of interacting with what is onscreen means the player buys into the game’s worldview. For example, to complete any objective the gamer must accept that it is necessary to gun down enemies in order to move from one area to the next. In this context, the player justifies these acts of killing not only through the game’s logic that these enemies will kill his avatar if he does not kill them first, but because the gamic universe mediates that killing to make it palatable. Thus, video games are inherently political subject-forming tools because, unlike film and literature, the player is complicit as part-creator in the events occurring onscreen.

Following Louis Althusser’s model of interpellation, whereby subjects are reconstituted as subjects of ideology in a larger social framework, Matt Garite argues that “by repeatedly demanding user input, video games lock players in a self-replicating, integrated circuit of instructions and commands” (2). Video games, in Garite’s view, only operate “under the guise of freedom,” but caught within their grasp the player is disciplined to accept the ideology encoded into the rendered worlds themselves.

The question of whether or not games are powerfully persuasive in ways film, literature, music, and painting are not has emerged most recently out of Bogost’s participation in the “serious games” movement, which arose out of a desire to see radical games that could be used
for solving problems instead of for pure entertainment. Bogost’s two influential books on this subject, *Unit Operations: An Approach to Video Game Criticism* and *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Video Games*, outline the ways in which video games persuade through computational processes and mechanics, or constrictive game rules that structure the player’s experience of playing a game in order to make it functionally interactive. Bogost argues in *Persuasive Games* that, for video games, “procedural rhetoric is a technique for making arguments with computational systems and for unpacking computational arguments others have created” (3). In other words, procedural rhetoric describes the art of persuasion through the utilization of the rule-based aspects of video games. By being aware of how games function at the level of their procedures, game developers can envision new ways of solving social problems instead of exacerbating them.

Bogost offers up a real world example to illustrate this point. In Bogost’s scenario, a store manager decides whether or not to accept a customer’s DVD return after the return policy expiration date. The manager can choose to break the procedure and accept the return, or follow the procedures outlined in the return policy and send the customer on his way. In this scenario, a process is something created that imposes a constraint within which the customer is impelled to operate. Breaking that procedure expands, at least temporarily, the frame of that process. Bogost argues that while popularly, we conceive of procedures as being rigid and unbreakable, “the imposition of constraints also creates expression” (7). Importantly, game worlds provide playgrounds with limitations, and those play spaces and limitations express certain ideas, political or otherwise. Rhetoric here becomes important because those very limitations (e.g. *Gears of War*’s forcing the player down a linear path, its attendant narrative linearity, and the fact that the player is prohibited by the game’s logic from diplomatically ending the war) expose
the ideological components of the games. Whether these limitations signify a protagonist’s (in)ability to communicate with enemies diplomatically, or they signify the programmed boundaries of a game universe (a popular metaphor to illustrate this limitation being the wooden frame of a sandbox—a small, limited playground outside of which both the gamer and programmer can conceive of a larger world and inside of which both can create a unique play experience), they become part of the structural and artistic language of video games. Bogost further argues that computational processes structure the game world by placing a frame around it. By establishing boundaries in the game world, we in fact expose the processes inherent in the creation, and can thus see what rules can (or need to) be broken in order to expand, or break, that frame (*Persuasive Games* 7). Furthermore, because games are constrained by processes, “a game’s procedural rhetoric influences the player’s relationship with it by constraining the strategies that yield failure or success” (Bogost 241). In other words, procedural rhetoric argues that games express ideas not only with words or visuals but with models they construct through computational processes (i.e. game mechanics and the interactive features of video games), and those computational processes shape player-subjects by constraining their actions in the virtual playground.

The value of procedural rhetoric as a methodological tool is that it enables both scholars and developers to unpack the ideologies in videogames, to question those ideologies, and to subvert hegemonic structures (in my particular case study, hyper-masculinity and state sanctioned violence). Procedural rhetoric enables scholars to move beyond analyses of only representational forms (like textual and visual rhetoric) in video games to investigate the computational components therein. Bogost argues that one useful function of procedural rhetoric is its ability to “expose and explain the hidden ways of thinking that often drive social, political,
or cultural behavior” (“Rhetoric of Video Games” 128). However, not every game is equally persuasive about the same concepts. For Bogost, context matters, because video games “offer meaning and experience of particular worlds and particular relationships” (Persuasive Games 241). An example of this particularity would be the representations of the criminal underworld in Grand Theft Auto. Through its procedures that “[constrain] the strategies that yield failure or success,” Grand Theft Auto influences the player’s ideas about how to thrive within that particular simulated criminal atmosphere (Persuasive Games 241). For example, in Grand Theft Auto, it might be necessary for the player to kill a number of individuals in order to advance the narrative.

Every game’s underlying model founds “a particular procedural rhetoric about its chosen subjects” (Persuasive Games 241). With this principle in mind, Gears of War contains specific procedures that appear to fit its war backdrop. A great deal of these procedural rhetorics encourage the player to conceive of the soldiers he controls as being hyper-masculine male paragons in the fight against an invasive enemy force. Some of these procedures include relative game difficulty, cover mechanics that enable the player to hide behind chest-high walls during gunfights, a camera angle that shifts to the left when the avatar runs toward a chest-high wall, the necessity of killing every enemy in an oncoming hoard in order to advance through the game, and the fact that the player is constrained by the game’s procedures from embodying the role of a female avatar. It must be noted that the content of this particular backdrop has partly been determined by financial constraints. A studio-produced videogame is constrained not only by its computational limitations, but also by the logic of the financial institutions that enable it to exist. In other words, popular videogames are less likely than small budget independent games to take risks or to make overt contrarian political statements if the interests of the larger corporate
entities that fund them preclude it. This means that the types of procedural rhetorics that make it into games are partly determined by what studios know has worked in the past. But as we shall see, the violence of *Gears of War* is likely to be popular because of how it capitalizes off of America’s post-9/11 vulnerabilities.

**Gears of War as an Embodiment of Post-9/11 Panic**

Shortly after the planes toppled New York City’s twin towers, the United States military funded and developed a widely consumed game called *America’s Army*, a military simulator explicitly meant to recruit young gamers to the US Army. In the game, the player controls an American soldier through a first-person shooter perspective and follows the orders of his commanding officer as he moves through training sessions (Mead 98). The game’s release sparked a number of scholarly debates surrounding video games’ inherent ability to peddle propaganda during a time of great national anxiety (Schulzke). Clearly, the US military understood well the potential for games to blunt the anxiety of wartime conflict by eliminating real physical danger. Other games, such as *Full Spectrum Warrior* and *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*, feature valorous American soldiers who gun down the enemy threat, thereby coding enemies as intrinsically dangerous and without viable motivations (al-Rawi 235; Lugo 12). Each of these games take place on the planet earth and qualify as post-9/11 propaganda because of the ways in which they render enemy others as foes that must be destroyed.

As alien invasion narratives, each game in the *Gears of War* series mobilizes powerful metaphors for fears associated with perceived threats to American nationalism. As Brian Keilen argues, “invasion video games rationalize and normalize views that support Western involvement in the Middle East and the continued ‘War on Terror,’ as well as perpetually designating Middle Eastern and Muslim peoples as Other” (37). In fact, after 9/11, the United
States instituted a powerful master narrative that framed—with pictures, news accounts, and soldier testimony—America as the reluctant heroic figure swooping in to save middle easterners from themselves (Schwalbe, Silcock, and Keith 451). In contrast, Middle Eastern nations embroiled in the so-called “War on Terror” became the recalcitrant, feminized Others whose citizens required saving from their own misguided governments. While *Gears of War* certainly does not present the enemy species of its narrative as one that needs to be saved from itself, it does both feminize the enemy force and reduces it down to a collection of terrorists. Exposing how war videogames like *Gears of War* internalize these anxieties may provide further insight into how developers in the future can subvert state-mandated violence by telling procedurally rhetorical narratives of peace.

The *Gears of War* series perpetuates the post-9/11 legacy of military-influenced war video games because it appropriates many of the war tropes that suffuse post-9/11 games like *America’s Army*, *Full Spectrum Warrior*, and *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare*. However, the series does not place as much of a premium on the realism of these games, all of which feature Iraq and Afghanistan as central backdrops. For example, invasion by marauding hordes, battles over the science fictional analogy to earth’s crude oil (called Imulsion fluid in-game), and territorial disputes figure heavily in the *Gears of War* story line. While the *Gears of War* series shares a similar cultural context as more realistic post-9/11 games, it utilizes a science fictional backdrop as a way of relocating who the victims of invasion are—the Americans or, in this particular fictional context, the humans—while simultaneously erasing the potentially legitimate motivations of the invaders in much the same way that the United States did when it labeled its new enemies “terrorists.” The “terrorists” of *Gears of War* are not humans, but aliens, and while the protagonists technically have no separate national identities, they all speak in American
dialects, often Southern ones. In other words, *Gears of War* is unusual because it avoids deploying obvious Iraqi and Afghani stereotypes by concealing them in science fictional metaphors. This covering up is dangerous—and ought to be understood as such—because of how it countenances enemy expendability by mediating the experience of war through science fictional tropes like invading, non-English-speaking alien monstrosities whose bodies uncannily mirror the human male soldier, dystopian landscapes, the fantasy of being invaded by the Other, and implausible weaponry that doubles as masculine prosthesis. As a consequence of this mediation, the games teach the player to accept not only that enemies are expendable, but also that their motivations are irrelevant.

In *Gears of War* the Locust are clearly the terrorists who attack first, while the humans are depicted as the victimized responders. This is not a new theme in video games. As Clarke, et al. point out, in most video games, enemy fighters are framed as the first offenders. They often get labeled “terrorists” upon whom valorous protagonists enact brutal torture and execution (728). Labeling enemies “terrorists” is an effective way of erasing potential motivations for their transgressions. The same is true of *Gears of War*. This alien Other occupies a series of underground lairs. When they attack, they emerge from sinkholes (literally an unseen and unexpected threat from below) and fire without warning. Their faces are disfigured, robust, and flattened. They bare razor-sharp teeth, have flat noses, and are bulky, reptilian, scaled, and pockmarked (See fig. 1). It may seem, consequently, that they are so visually distinct from the standard model of the human that they share no relation to real-world bodies. However, while attached to large alien

[Image 407x269 to 558x464]
bodies, their basic traits recall the faceless (covered up), indistinguishable, and dehumanized depictions of Iraqi and Afghani “terrorists” in military-funded video games created after 9/11 (al-Rawi 245). The series accomplishes this erasure by making every Locust drone look virtually identical. The Locust even operate complex technologies that require opposable thumbs (like large guns), speak the occasional English phrase or two in their apparently gruff and masculine, almost incomprehensible voices, and crawl on the ground for safety if they are mortally wounded by gunfire (a nearby comrade need only touch them to revive them, signifying empathy among their group even as player-subjects must be complicit in their continued eradication). In spite of the obvious language barrier, together with the prohibitive logic of the game world itself, that evidently preclude entering into diplomatic exchanges with them, the Locust must be intelligent enough to utilize—not to mention strategize with—these technologies. It is important to note that Locust drones are bipedal and share similar muscular frames and armor to the human male soldiers. They are the perfect foil for the human male in the *Gears of War* universe: they resemble the human male soldiers’ hyper-masculine frames, but their monstrous features code them as disposable threats to the human cause. Thus, the alien Other is familiar, but it is also distanced from the human and branded a collection of terrorists in a similar way to Iraqi and Afghani enemies in post-9/11 war video games.

The other category of enemy in the *Gears of War* universe is the Lambent, which are gun-wielding Locust mutants that emerge from tree-like stalks that burst out of the ground (see fig. 2). Like the Locust, the Lambent mirror the form of the strong male human soldier. Their faces, however, are more akin
to popular depictions of decaying zombies. A strip of flesh covers an area where the nose would be. Under that, a set of rotting teeth are planted in a maxilla partly covered by grey skin. Their heads look like skulls with much of the flesh stripped away. When hit with enough gunfire on a glowing section in their exoskeletal ribcage, they self-destruct, and the Imulsion fluid bursting from their remains threatens to harm the player’s health. This recalls, at its worst, imagery of suicide bombers, whose scattered explosions target not specific individuals, but entire groups of bystanders. As I have also noted, Imulsion is Sera’s analogy to earth’s crude oil. It powers weaponry and vehicles, but doubles as a parasite capable of transforming bodies into explosive monsters. The Lambent are thus further removed from human empathy than the Locust; they are symbolically tied to Iraqi stereotypes of exploding bodies and oil barons. They are fully monstrous, signifying the consequences of letting the Locust continue fighting for the crude oil whose poisonous potential only human language can articulate for us. Furthermore, because they figure in the narrative as both zombies and terrorists, they are doubly threatening.

In addition to the Lambent drones, tickers are tripedal enemies with Imulsion fluid stored in tanks on their backs. Tickers are literal suicide bombers. Their bodies are utilized by the Lambent and Locust as disposable vehicles that deliver Imulsion bombs to their targets. Unlike the Lambent, they have no agency. Resembling dogs more than they do humans, tickers are fully enslaved, mindless drones that cannot speak for themselves. Their dedication to their own disposability echoes popular conceptions of suicide bombers as being primarily suicidal and at the same time without agency, rather than as agents existing within a complex sociopolitical framework (Brym and Araj 439). The objective
of tickers is to run at the COG soldiers and explode on impact, scattering the area with parasitic Imulsion and harming anybody unlucky enough to be within the blast radius (see fig. 3).

The Lambent and tickers become prominent by the second game in the series, where *Gears of War* begins more clearly echoing post-9/11 panic through depictions of human zombies infected with air- and lung-polluting crude oil, bulky aliens (and their monstrous incarnations also infected with Imulsion) that play on American national concerns about invasion, and environmental catastrophes (i.e. sinkholes) that swallow whole cities. Many authors (e.g. Dendale; Froula; McSweeney) contend that after 9/11, the resurgence of zombie narratives became a way of bridging “past events with contemporary popular texts that confront hegemonic narratives with the collective traumas they try to suppress” (Froula 200). *Gears of War* attempts to confront hegemonic narratives by suggesting that Imulsion fluid (or crude oil) is the enemy; however, this curiously has the effect of erasing both the state system that encourages hegemonic masculine violence in the real and fictional world as well as the violent actions soldiers (and, by extension, the player) are forced by the games’ rules to engage in. Imulsion fluid does not discriminate between whose anatomy it infects. Consequently, Imulsion fluid figures in-game as the sole commodity that bridges cultural divides; yet, the rest of the narrative does not appear to place a premium on that connection. For example, the way Imulsion infects humans (or Americans) is notably different from the way it infects the Locust. Whereas a melancholy dread attends depictions of infected humans’ emaciated, emasculated frames (they are hidden in the feral seclusion of ruined cities and have uncontrollable rage, a distinct form of zombie largely popularized after 9/11), the Locust become even more monstrous and more detached from our sympathies as players because their bodies explode as a reaction to uninfected humans in their proximity. The resulting explosion of Imulsion from infected Lambent bodies threatens to infect
or harm all nearby bodies. Consequently, the game teaches the player that they are to be disposed of from a safe distance in case their explosive fallout results in a loss of health or possible infection. Health loss here constitutes a type of procedural rhetoric because of how the player-subject is taught by the game to treat Imulsion (or oil) as parasitic and grotesque. This loss of health shares a relationship with military simulators that shave off points from players for destroying roadside bombs if friendly soldiers follow closely enough in their Humvee that they get harmed by the blast (Magnuson).

While technically, the Locust are the more humanized variety of enemy Other in the *Gears of War* universe, their bodies fly to pieces as heavy gunfire pierces their thick reptilian skins. Beyond acting as mere visual representations of threatening enemies (i.e. their bodies look monstrous on the surface), that their bodies are expendable is a computational process coded into the game world. *Gears of War* here mobilizes a procedural rhetoric of moral certitude, one that proposes terrorism is easy to locate in a group of bodies, rather than in the intangible systemic attitudes that determine who those enemies are. Those bodies’ expendability is rhetorical insofar as the player has already spent time accepting that their motives are either irrelevant, or absent. For example, when gunfire pierces a Locust shoulder, an arm flies off. When the player snipes a Locust drone in the head, his skull explodes in a shower of brain, bone, and blood and he immediately dies. Thus, the game encodes into its underlying architecture a sort of point system, whereby a successful head shot signifies immediate victory over a foe as well as a quicker path to safety. For entire hoards of Locust drones, heavy gunfire indiscriminately pierces the skin of individuals in an amorphous enemy onslaught and bodies fly to pieces while red blood sprays from severed limbs and twitching, eviscerated remains. Consequently, *Gears of War* rhetorically
conditions the player to see the enemy force as a singular, locatable body. It fails to encourage the player to apprehend the individual lives within that singular force.

Meanwhile, humans hit with explosives are likelier to get wounded near to death and fall to their knees, crying “I need a medic here!” Should this happen to the player, the screen will turn red, the sound will fade out, and the faint sound of the avatar’s heartbeat will occupy the foreground. The player need only crawl to a nearby comrade in time to get revived by their seemingly magical, healing touch. The suspense of this scenario transfers to the player, enforcing investment in the avatar’s wellbeing and kindling outright frustration against the enemy force. The player may identify through language with his avatar, but not with the enemies who merely grunt to signify their presence or their inarticulate pain. This language barrier is itself a procedural rhetoric that encourages the player to consume the enemy as an inarticulate and therefore motiveless force. These game rules teach the player the general lesson that Othered bodies are disposable and allied subjects are robust, indispensable, and virtuous. The humans are the hyper-masculine heroes and the enemies reinforce that hyper-masculinity through their easy disposability; they are, by the logic of their relative weakness, coded as foils by the game in relation to their masculine opponents. Put another way, the Locust are the abject, monstrous, invasive Other, and their bodies at the same time are coded in-game as disposable, weakened, vulnerable foils for the human soldiers. These encoded differences, together with the post-9/11 anxieties the series internalizes, enables us to reread Gears of War as an insidious narrative that reinforces a rigid performance of hyper-masculinity and excludes any others deemed hierarchically inferior.

If Gears of War wished to confront its problematic relationship with enemy bodies, then it stands to reason that it would both enable and encourage diplomacy as a possible end to the
war. But this solution does not align with the games’ particular masculine framework, in which aggression and toughness figure as the most effective and efficient tools for ending war. It should be noted, however, that “ending war,” in this context, means “winning war,” a post-Cold War American obsession that regained prominence following the attacks on the twin towers (Bacevich). This obsession manifests itself through acts of aggression, toughness, and emotional vacuity, all of which are staples of hyper-masculine posturing that in a wartime context appear by the logic of the *Gears of War* universe to serve its “good” soldiers well. Ultimately, as we shall see, the *Gears of War* story ends with an act of monstrous revenge that reinforces the idea that COG soldiers are winners at any cost, even if the price of that victory is the silencing of an enemy narrative and, by extension, a possible nonviolent solution to the war. Ultimately, violence, presented here as the only alternative, signifies a hyper-masculine telling of this particular war narrative.

**The Masculine Subject of *Gears of War***

This problematic rendering of enemy Otherness raises some important questions: To what extent are women accorded any narrative space? Does *Gears of War* place women at the forefront, or does it deprive them of a voice? If they are given space, are they acceptably masculine subjects, or are they abjectly feminine? Ultimately, what performances of masculinity does *Gears of War* suggest are acceptable? As I have argued, *Gears of War* does not do much to elaborate upon the uncanny similarity between Locust, Lambent, and human bodies. Neither does it work to outline the Locusts’ potential motivations or to find a compromise between both forces. Instead, the series up through *Gears of War 2* focuses on the hyper-masculine, male human forces that fight back against that enemy Other. But by *Gears of War 3*, women are invited into combat roles. I am interested not only in whether or not *Gears of War 3* merely pays
lip service to its female gamer base by introducing two female characters; I am also interested in whether or not *Gears of War 3* places women in secondary roles by embedding in its rules and story line the lesson that war ought to be a male-dominated enterprise.

In spite of its inclusion of two female characters, *Gears of War 3* upholds the binary condition between masculine-as-male-gendered and feminine-as-female-gendered first by invoking salient personality and bodily differences, and then by pitting those differences up against the Locust and Queen Myrrah. The male soldiers have broad shoulders, large and muscular frames, prominent brow ridges, angular jaws, and distinctive facial characteristics; they speak universally in a lower pitch, sounding often as though excessive yelling has eroded their vocal chords; they hide or delay their emotions during grievous events; they are closed off and self-reliant; and they embrace their emboldened status as soldiers.

Marcus Fenix is the most prominent in-game example of this type of hyper-masculinized male soldier. Like the other male soldiers in his cohort, he has large muscles, wears a tight bandanna, and carries heavy weaponry on his back. His facial features are robust. He has a large nose, a jutting brow ridge, an angular jaw, squinted eyes, and scars covering his face (see fig. 4). His personality is marked almost exclusively by aggression. If he is not yelling orders to his squad mates during battle, he is hammering his fists against computer screens, holding somebody by their neck up against a wall for turning a female squad mate into a sexual object, or brooding sadly, angrily, and tearlessly after a tragedy. He either holds back his tears or fails to register the death of a close friend. He is the American hero-ideal embodied. He does not have to conform to any social niceties; he just has to be a tough, self-sufficient, and efficient killer.

![Figure 4 - Marcus Fenix in armor](image-url)
*Gears of War* forces the player to embody this particular unrealistic masculine subject by placing bodies like Fenix’s at the front of the COG soldier lineup (i.e. the player is never given the option to select who he controls throughout the game). In making this a necessary condition for the player, *Gears of War* mounts a procedural rhetoric about the type of masculine appearance and persona that becomes acceptable during war. In this case, aggression, toughness, and virtuous violence are necessary components of an effective and efficient soldier. These are constraints imposed by the game’s rules that the player cannot circumvent. Hence, *Gears of War* gives the player little room to critically assess his role as a COG soldier. Consequently, *Gears of War* molds a standard criterion for a body and a personality, and allows the player to indulge in the fantasy of being that hero.

In *Gears of War 3*, every male avatar (each of which receives hefty narrative treatment) is a physical variation on Fenix’s body type and personality, a fact which feeds the unrealistic standard described above. In fact, what is most remarkable about this body type and personality is how it reflects American cultural preoccupations with prominent figures in wrestling, a sport noted for its melodramatic depiction of masculine posturing. Besides sharing similar unrealistic and likely unattainable body types where muscles push veins through stretched skin, wrestlers and COG soldiers (if they are men) share similar personalities. As Henry Jenkins illustrates, the wrestler’s persona is characterized by “emotion [that] may be strongly felt, but it must be rendered invisible, private, personal; emotion must not be allowed to have a decisive impact upon social interactions” (543). Every male COG soldier’s outward physical appearance mirrors their emotional regulation and outright stoicism. For example, one scene in *Gears of War 3* features COG soldier Augustus Cole stumbling upon a trashball stadium (trashball is Sera’s analogy to American football, albeit with an added dose of violence). Walking out onto the
destroyed field, a cut scene shows Cole reminiscing about his celebrity role as a star player years before the war began. The camera frames Cole from a low angle as he hallucinates that he is playing thrashball. Suddenly, the player controls him as he mows down Lambent enemies with an outstretched palm. Imulsion fluid from the exploding Lambent covering and harming his body, Cole grabs a bomb at the other end of the arena, runs again across the arena, and plants the bomb on a Lambent stalk. Successful in defeating his opponents, another cut scene shows Cole celebrating by showboating in front of the stalk right before it explodes and sends his body flying forward. His squad mates, unperturbed, help him to his feet. Failing to register the hallucination for the possible trauma it indicates, Cole jumps to his feet, celebrates by invoking his own name narcissistically, and walks away with his squad mates.

In this scene, emotion is rendered invisible, melodramatically masculinized for the entertainment of the spectator/player and given emotional resonance only within certain affective parameters. Jenkins notes that “the conventionality of sports and the removal of the real-world consequences of physical combat (in short, sport’s status as adult play) facilitate a controlled and sanctioned release from ordinary affective restraints” (543). A soldier, in this context, can only register the sadness that attends nostalgia if the soldier reconfigures the emotion for use in a combat situation and, more importantly, reconceives of the violence of combat as sport. In other words, the soldier must suppress the affective power of the experience and function like a tool of war. In ceding control of Cole to the player during this scene, the game enables the player to indulge in the fantasy of masculine victory as depicted in wrestling narratives; namely, that “physical strength can ensure triumph over one’s abusers” and that hand-to-hand combat is a means of regaining one’s dignity after being afflicted with a burst of unwanted emotion (Jenkins 546). In reinforcing that physical strength and affective regulation are necessary ingredients for
an effective soldier—both through filmed cut scenes with low angle shots that place Cole in a position of dominance over his assailants, and through game rules that give the player agency—
*Gears of War 3* attempts to inscribe on player-subjects a dangerous and rigid narrative that hyper-masculine posturing is not only unproblematic in war, but preferred.

While these particular procedural rhetorics that reinscribe wartime performances of hyper-masculinity rely on male bodies, the one woman who receives narrative treatment, Myrrah, reinforces that hyper-masculinity through her villainous and transgressive femininity. Toward the end of *Gears of War 3*, for example, the player has just defeated Queen Myrrah. Bloody and limping, she emerges from the final battle’s exploded wreckage and attempts to explain her motivations: the Locust, she says, are living creatures, too, and have just as much of a right to life on the surface of Sera as do the humans. Myrrah’s explanations are relegated to the end of the narrative, after the player has already blown thousands of these enemies to pieces, the cities of Sera have been destroyed, and Fenix’s best friend and comrade, Dom, has sacrificed himself by driving a large war vehicle into a fuel tanker. The anger has mounted (for both the player and the characters) and the damage has been done. Fenix vengefully stabs Myrrah with Dom’s knife. It is an act that does not and cannot constitute merciful euthanasia, since Fenix utters the final unsympathetic words Myrrah hears before dying: “this is from Dom!” Revenge is thus justified by the means; Myrrah is not herself an end. In this scene, the game precludes stopping the vengeful stabbing, leaving the player to watch as Myrrah dies unceremoniously.

Bogost argues that every gesture, interaction, and experience a game either allows or disallows “make up the game’s significance” (“Rhetoric of Video Games” 121). In this particular case, the game confiscates agency from the player, which is a type of procedural rhetoric that constricts the player’s agency and forces him to identify with Fenix’s (and, by extension, the
player’s) decision to kill Myrrah. The rules of the game enforce complicity with the ideology that killing a leader kills the army that leader leads. If the player does not align this ideology, the rigid game mechanics preclude making the decision not to stab Myrrah. This lack of fluidity mounts a procedural rhetoric that reinforces the game’s ideology that power is localized in a reified enemy force (in this particular case, a feminine ruler or dictator controls bodies and therefore represents the aggregate threat), rather than in any systemic order. Thus, acts of terror are rendered monstrous and monolithic through feminine dominance. By the end, Locust agency has always been an illusion because Myrrah’s feminine control is the alleged impetus for the Locust threat.

Given that the Locust receive little more narrative treatment (until the very end) than that they are monstrous aggressors, Myrrah’s motivations are framed as transgressively sympathetic. In contrast to the COG heroes of the narrative. Myrrah’s identification with the Locust is unlikely to inspire sympathy in the player who has already spent three games identifying with male avatars whose role is to kill as many of these enemies as possible. In fact, in the *Gears of War* universe, women can only occupy roles of dominance if they qualify as enemy others, or antagonists. While there are strong female soldiers, they never take on leadership roles. Myrrah constitutes the sole liaison between the Locust and the humans. The player is left to question how she manages to communicate with an army of enemy Others that utter no more than a few muddled English phrases and seem unwilling or unable to enter into diplomatic talks with their human opponents. Because Myrrah, a human, is that liaison, the Locust become framed by human descriptions; they cannot speak for themselves. This limits the scope of the enemy narrative and silences the Locust once more. If there are any rights for the Locust, they are
voiced through a villainous and unreliable medium, and the player knows nothing of their grievances.

That the leader of the Locust happens to be an identifiably human woman comes from a long history of narratives that frame the prospect of female control as a source of male dread (Sjoberg 30). Myrrah speaks in a crackling low register—recalling Maleficent of *Sleeping Beauty*—flies around on a mutated bug for a ship, and wears armor that resembles a bug’s exoskeleton. The player consumes these ideas as signs of Myrrah’s violence and Delta Squad’s virtuousness. Fenix’s final act of vengeance against Myrrah thus comes off as unchallenging, unsurprising, and even relieving. Consequently, Myrrah’s death reinscribes the cultural fantasy of male dominance, which posits finally that the brand of masculine performance the player reads in Fenix and Cole (both representationally and through the procedural rhetorics described above) is of the most virtuous kind. Fenix’s murderous act does not register on the faces of his fellow soldiers; they do not protest. Nothing emerges by the final scene to condemn the act. Myrrah’s body is a disposable Other because her influence over Locust bodies signifies those bodies’ mass “crossing” from gender to gender. Always in flux, always crossing and never crossing over completely, the Locust are themselves figured as monstrous results of feminine control over male bodies.

The secondary positioning of women in the COG outfit supports my contention that the game figures feminine dominance as abject. While female soldiers participate in *Gears of War 3*’s battle against the Locust and Lambent, they are positioned at the back of the lineup. A second player, for example, can join the campaign against the Locust and the Lambent, and while in almost every scene of battle a female soldier supports the unit, the second player cannot embody that female’s role in the campaign. Only a fourth player (provided there are enough controllers
available—an economic hurdle given the hefty price tag of game controllers) has this option. Even in the single-player experience, the player switches back and forth between different male leads (usually Marcus Fenix and Augustus Cole) as the story mandates, and never has the chance to identify with by embodying one of the two women (Any Stroud or Samantha “Sam” Byrne). Hence, *Gears of War* mounts a procedural rhetoric that women in war are secondary and without agency. After all, if the player cannot embody those avatars and vicariously grant them agency, then they technically have no agency. Since the game precludes the player from playing as a female avatar, the player cannot experience the combat choices that avatar might make. This particular procedural rhetoric constitutes an anxiety surrounding women as soldiers. By rendering the female COG soldiers unplayable, the game renders them invisible. This means the player consumes the larger, external narrative (encoded into the game’s rules) that women are less tenable as soldiers. In this case, the player is constrained by procedures that determine what type of soldier he can consume, which pushes forward the tacit ideology that war is a man’s (and in this context, specifically hyper-masculine man’s) game.

Apart from relegating female COGs to the back of the lineup, *Gears of War* gives them only cursory narrative treatment. Female soldier bodies move in and out of the frame only as shootouts occur between the COGs and the Locust and Lambent. They then disappear into a narrative black hole as the action moves along, the male soldiers positioned as heroic American analogues and the women’s roles erased. Put another way, women in this universe are almost disallowed from occupying masculine space. Consequently, the two female soldiers, bereft of agency, are abjectly feminine. Given Myrrah’s role in the narrative as a signifier of the fantasy of normative masculinity and male dominance, it is perhaps unsurprising that the architecture of the game precludes primary female leads. For example, a type of procedural rhetoric the game
mobilizes is in its rendering of Queen Myrrah as a disposable body in contrast to the female COG soldiers who receive no narrative treatment. The game rhetorically argues through this contrast that a female in a wartime context with any power ought to be destroyed or defeated. Meanwhile, COG soldiers are non-playable and without agency. This is not unusual in war video games. Females are usually, to some degree, non-playable and underrepresented; this underscores their secondary status (Behm-Morawitz and Mastro 809). Game rules can thus reinforce social constructs like gender binaries, even if it becomes clear that those binaries are not necessarily reinforced by textual or visual aspects of the story.

However, some scenes in *Gears of War 3* reinforce this procedural rhetoric. The two female combatants of *Gears of War 3*—Sam Byrne and Anya Stroud—are framed as high status and powerful. They can carry the same heavy weaponry on their backs, don the same heavy armor, and take the same number of hits as their male counterparts. To that end, the game technically places them on equal footing with the men, but their secondary status is reinforced by many in-game cut scenes. In one scene, Delta Squad approaches an outpost guarded by an irritable sentry. Augustus Cole, the temporary leader of the unit, offers to trade supplies for food. The man initially refuses on the basis that the soldiers are “COG assholes,” but then relents when he sees Sam Byrne, the female soldier of the unit. As he jokingly offers to trade a side of bacon for the sexual enjoyment of her body, the camera pans up from Sam’s pelvis to her unfazed expression. Damon Baird, a fellow soldier, urges Cole to make the trade because he has not eaten bacon for months. While Baird and Sam’s conflicted relationship throughout the game seems to explain Baird’s reaction, there is no counterpoint in this exchange. The camerawork is itself complicit in objectifying Sam’s body. That the camera begins at the pelvis, the point of origin of the male gaze on the outpost wall, and pans up from there makes the player perform that
objectification (for the moment, the player embodies the sentry). Because the game precludes player involvement in this cut scene, the player has no agency, cannot interject, and must remain complicit. Furthermore, Baird’s response belies any possible objection suggested by the camerawork, which makes the player and the camera reconceive of this event as a joke. This frames (quite literally) the female body in the male gaze and reaffirms the modifier “female” to Sam’s soldier status.

Apart from merely framing Sam’s body as an objectified Other through negative visual representations, the game mobilizes a procedural rhetoric that females in war have no agency. Since this scene precludes the player from embodying Sam Byrne during her moment of sexual objectification, the player cannot himself grant Sam any agency. Consequently, the game imposes constraints that confiscate the player’s agency by determining who he is allowed to embody. While this constitutes a procedural rhetoric about the dominance of male soldiers during war, it also mounts a more insidious procedural rhetoric about the necessity of marginalizing female soldiers in order to emphasize this dominance. In this scene, *Gears of War 3* effectively reinforces the male/female and masculine/feminine binaries through these restrictive procedural rhetorics.

Besides cinematic cut scenes that make women objects of the male gaze, stray lines of dialogue reinforce that women are secondary war combatants and femaleness is abjection. Fighting the Lambent on their way through a deserted and ruined store, Byrne yells “never get between a woman and a bargain, dickhead,” which reinforces the essentialist stereotype of women as materialistic consumers at the same time as giving Byrne dialogic space to reassert the irony of her role as a woman in war. Later, the squad reaches a barrier that only a large machine—called a mechanical loader—can destroy. When faced with the prospect of having
Byrne control the loader, one of the men in the unit jokingly objects and says “I know what happens when you let an angry chick loose with a mechanical loader.” The mechanical loader doubles, no doubt, as a man’s penis and as a tool for feminine catharsis, suggesting both the sexual ravenousness and all-around irrationality of women. Men control the narrative in both of these cases. In the first instance, Byrne has agency over the expression, but her recognition as secondary soldier—a dynamic instituted by male dominance itself—suffuses the dialog. In the second instance, men frame Byrne as both sexual object and irrational agent.

Men also receive gendered insults. At one point, Baird says to Cole, a former sportsman, “tell me, Cole, what was it you played again? Ladies field hockey, right?” This constitutes an attempt to brand Cole a weakling. To call a male soldier a lady is to underscore that soldier’s femininity. Soon after, expressing reluctance to rescue a large ship, called Sovereign, from an intimidating sea monster, one member of Delta Squad objects and says “look ladies, one way or another we gotta help Sovereign.” Once again, to call a soldier a lady is to call that soldier a weakling, to force that soldier to confront his waning masculinity. These gendered insults partly serve the function of quashing emotional expression in order to realign soldiers with masculine roles, since the expression of a vulnerability (like fear, or panic) in response to something that might be emotionally taxing (like risking one’s life to help fellow squad mates) receives an outright dismissal from the other squad mates. This gendered language passes in and out of the story, but it does not seem to resonate with the characters. In other words, while the often-gendered dialogue frames females as “female” soldiers (a modifier that, once again, removes women from equal combat roles), characters do not dwell on the information or seem to act in ways that would reinforce the insults directed at them. This gendered language is thus a social construct that reinforces a masculine/feminine binary and disallows any crossing from occurring.
To be a “lady” is to be Other, to occupy a marginal role, to be something with which a male soldier would never want to be associated. In that sense, to be a “lady” is not merely to be feminine, but to be anti-masculine.

Since the game qualifies Samantha Byrne and Anya Stroud as “female” soldiers, they become nudged between two poles, but the game at the same time erases this precariousness. On the one hand, they constitute one half of a dubious gender binary. On the other, their equal strength in combat accords them the same hyper-masculine traits as their male counterparts. This precarious positioning between poles means these women can never fully fit in with their cohort. They are thus removed from both masculine and feminine roles. They are also silenced by the limited script and accorded very little story space. Anya speaks solely during moments of tenderness with Marcus, in which she attempts to calm his aggressions with diplomatic gestures because, evidently, she is the only one who understands him. She becomes a disposable love interest whose feminized masculinity is eclipsed by the fact that she is a feminized indication of Marcus’s masculinity. In her capacity as Marcus’s emotional supporter, Anya’s prominence in the story becomes clear: she is the nurturing diplomat, and Marcus is the aggressor. Sam, meanwhile, is verbally sexualized, visually desexualized, and otherwise invisible. Her voice emerges during some battles to make a quip here or a joke there, but as a character, she exits the story undeveloped. The player learns nothing about her. By the end of the game, the player may get the impression that Sam has no backstory; she is just a female soldier with a gun and wit.

Importantly, the representational aspects and procedural rhetorics described above appear to frame Sam Byrne and Anya Stroud as secondary soldiers, and Myrrah as a feminine aberration. In doing this, Gears of War more easily reinscribes an unrealistic body standard for not only the hyper-masculine male soldier, but the hyper-masculine male subject in general. It
accomplishes this by rendering the tough male soldier as the primary source of player identification and casting female soldiers as background tools that the men merely react to. *Gears of War* never pretends to be a deep, meaningful, or even imaginative adventure for the player, but that is precisely what makes it so dangerous. By limiting the critical lens through which to reflect on the role of female soldiers in a wartime context, enemy subjects, and player identification, the game teaches the player to accept that female soldiers, enemies, feminine control, and emotional openness are not only secondary, but abject.

In the second chapter, I look at how the *Mass Effect* series of video games reconfigures the hyper-masculine formulations rigidly defined and reinscribed on player-subjects in the *Gears of War* series. *Mass Effect* relocates who the player conceives of as a masculine subject by opening up the procedural world and granting the player agency over events as they unfold. I hope to show in the following chapter that *Mass Effect* functions as an objection to *Gears of War*’s message that emotional regulation, toughness, and aggressiveness constitute the most virtuous way of embodying the masculine persona dictated by war itself. *Mass Effect* presents war from another angle: the enemy is both reified and abstract; gender and masculinity is more imaginatively figured as multi-faceted and unstable; and personal relationships take precedence over conflict. In order to understand how war games can uniquely deconstruct our ideas about gender and otherness, it is vital that we look at war from another angle.
CHAPTER II. MASCULINITY REDEFINED: NONVIOLENCE, DIPLOMACY, AND THE GENDERED SUBJECT IN MASS EFFECT

The year is 2005 and a group of developers at BioWare surround a conference table in Alberta, Canada to brainstorm ideas for a science-fiction video game series that could coexist in the same canonical space as Star Wars and Star Trek. But would this series be a dark, Blade Runner-like noir spectacle with neon lights and grey clouds obscuring the stars above, or would it be an optimistic, exploration-style adventure among the speckled blackness of space in the same vein as Star Trek? Neither of these options alone seemed viable for creating an initial product that hardcore and casual gamers alike would consume. Instead, BioWare opted for a compromise—set the series in space like Star Wars and Star Trek, but give it a grittier feel than both by using the technology of contemporary video game consoles to focus on visual immersion, new styles of character development, and emotional depth. The result of these brainstorming sessions became the Mass Effect trilogy of games (Bissell 113).

All three games in the series have gone on to garner a number of industry awards, praise from critics and fans, a robust fan culture that produces fan fiction and fan art, and millions in sales. What fascinates me about the series is not so much the ubiquity of its consumption as the consumed product’s ability to form player-subjects in ways that other mass-produced entertainments do not. The culture that cropped up in the series’ wake is evidence of its profound power. In particular, I am interested in how Mass Effect responds to Gears of War’s message that enemies occupy expendable bodies, and that those expendable bodies are signs (and enhancements) of the “good” soldiers’ masculinity. Is there a locatable enemy in Mass Effect, or is that enemy dispersed, delocalized, and intangible? Whatever the case may be, does that enemy depart the narrative without legitimate grievances or viable motivations? Is that enemy merely a
tool to make the player feel as tough and aggressive as the avatar he controls? In other words, is that enemy Othered? I frame these games as connected for two reasons. Their releases are staggered, with *Mass Effect* and each of its sequels releasing the years following *Gears of War* and each of its sequels (they cater to similar demographics). Also, *Mass Effect* is a war video game series that redefines the brand of masculinity espoused by the *Gears of War* series of games.

It is vital to note a major difference between *Mass Effect* and *Gears of War*. Whereas *Gears of War* in many ways follows cinema’s visual linearity in the sense that it guides players along one specific, non-branching path where expository cinematic cut scenes stage events in the narrative, *Mass Effect* affords freedom of movement along various branching paths where the player often controls how cut scenes play out. In other words, while *Gears of War* limits mobility and therefore encourages the player to accept its worldview by limiting his ability to question it or play with it, *Mass Effect* is predicated on giving the player supreme control over events as they unfold. This glaring difference between the two series is part of what draws me toward comparing them. The degree of player agency video games afford has sparked a wealth of scholarship (e.g. Gee, Bogost, Juul) surrounding whether or not the medium is uniquely capable of teaching complex, often abstract, concepts in ways that other media cannot. These differences and similarities lead me to ask the two central questions of this thesis chapter: how does the *Mass Effect* series mount its own procedural rhetorics to challenge our understanding of how enemy antagonism, the masculine subject, and the soldier personality can figure in war? In what ways does *Mass Effect* interrogate how war video games have traditionally mapped hyper-masculinity onto soldiers’ bodies and minds?
The answers to these questions are complicated, but in what follows I will attempt to show that *Mass Effect* not only decenters the enemy threat which, in this case, is bisected into social indoctrination (interpellation) and irresponsibility with technology. It also de-genders that same enemy threat. In other words, *Mass Effect* does not locate power in a gendered body or group of bodies but in intangible ideologies. I begin by analyzing *Mass Effect*’s major theme of indoctrination in relationship to the widespread response to the series’ ending. In doing this, I hope to show how *Mass Effect* is conscious of its intimate and persuasive relationship with gamer subjects. Furthermore, the theme of indoctrination in *Mass Effect* appears to show that the series encourages the gamer to be conscious of games as powerful subject-forming tools (e.g. the player might recognize that he has been indoctrinated by the games). Each game in the *Mass Effect* series forces the player to question his own decisions in the gamic universe in order to critically assess how other war games typically indoctrinate masculine player-subjects. In that sense, *Mass Effect* is self-consciously interpellative.

Following my analysis of indoctrination, I argue that *Mass Effect*’s innovative conversation wheel functions as a direct intellectual and emotionally honest response to *Gears of War*’s take on masculine war. For the sake of this analysis, emotional honesty also means vulnerability, or a version of emotional openness precluded by the singular performance of hyper-masculinity in *Gears of War*. *Mass Effect*’s conversation wheel is a fluid interface that mounts a procedural rhetoric about the importance of diplomacy to fend off unnecessary violence during war. By contrast, *Gears of War* countenances enemy expendability to promote player identification with hyper-masculine protagonists whose motivations and aggressive responses to tragedy the games suggest ought to go unquestioned. In deploying the fluid mechanics of the conversation wheel, *Mass Effect* challenges the rigid hyper-masculinity
manifest in *Gears of War* and games like it. Whereas *Gears of War*’s style of gameplay mounts a procedural rhetoric about hyper-masculinity being necessarily attributed to male bodies, *Mass Effect* deliberately synthesizes its narrative content with its mechanics (i.e. its procedural elements) in experimental and often poignant ways in order to redefine what constitutes acceptable performances and appearances of masculinity during war. Consequently, the conversation wheel is itself a procedural rhetoric that doubles as an interpellative tool (i.e. a tool which forms player-subjects). Rather than making war, death, and destruction its primary focus, the core of *Mass Effect*’s gamic universe is its emphasis on openness and diplomacy. I argue that *Mass Effect* accomplishes this redefining by enabling the player to select among paragon (ethical and rapport-building), neutral, or renegade (unethical or intimidating) dialogue options. The conversation wheel encourages the player to select dialogue options that double as emotionally vulnerable and ethically diplomatic. Selecting a greater quantity of ethical conversation options awards the player in ways that discourage him from making unethical decisions. Given that war video games have hitherto revolved around predominately white, muscular, (hyper-)masculine figures indiscriminately gunning down enemy hoards (as is the case with *Gears of War*), *Mass Effect*’s encouragement of ethical and open decision-making in both its story and mechanics sets the series apart as one that makes a vulnerable masculine soldier subject conceivable. I therefore argue that instead of relying on the traditional notion that soldiers ought to be masculine, tough, aggressive, muscular, and emotionally restrained males, *Mass Effect* contends that masculine identities can also be feminine, multiple, and complicated. Ultimately, however, I argue that *Mass Effect* cannot escape its own anxieties surrounding the erasure of gender categories themselves.
While *Gears of War* is complex in its own right, *Mass Effect* places more of an emphasis on mechanical, play-based features that allow the player to experience consuming the narrative in whatever order he chooses. I decided it was vital that I play through each game twice—once as an ethical paragon and once as an unethical renegade Commander Shepard. I also played through once as a male Shepard and once as a female Shepard in order to note gendered distinctions and eliminate variables that might compromise my analysis (e.g. whether or not characters respond to Shepard differently based on gender). The reasons for this are twofold: first, I wanted to think about how the games reward or punish players depending on their choices; second, I considered it necessary to analyze non-playable character (NPC) reactions to Shepard’s decisions (and if those reactions changed depending on whether Shepard is male or female). Notably, beyond there being different voice actors and different relationship options for the male and female Shepards, the scripted exchanges appear to be identical in both cases, suggesting that *Mass Effect* does a lot of work not to essentialize its protagonists. As a result, my analysis does not reference gendered differences in dialogue. I will, however, reference the body on multiple occasions. Because *Mass Effect* is partly a player-created experience, in that the experience of each play-through depends on the player’s reactions to conflicts that emerge in-game, my analysis might differ from that of another player’s. This is not to say that my analysis of all three games in the series has been compromised. On the contrary, how games shape subjective experience is part of what makes video game studies so exciting. As James Paul Gee points out in his book *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, “good games—and the games get better in this respect all the time—are crafted in ways that encourage and facilitate active and critical learning and thinking (which is not to say that every player will take up this offer)” (38). *Mass Effect* emphasizes creative agency for the player in order to make
him aware of his critical engagement with its story. I would argue that by Gee’s logic, *Mass Effect* games are “good” games. While conflicts in the story do not necessarily mirror real-world events, the series teaches the player basic lessons about the precarity of diplomatic relations, the complicatedness of enemy Otherness, and the various performances of masculinity conceivable during war. Since each game in the series constitutes but one part of a cohesive story line, a basic outline of all three games is necessary before moving forward with my analysis.

The first *Mass Effect* takes place 35 years after humans on Mars have uncovered a faster-than-light travel method that utilizes technology created by an ancient and extinct race of synthetic beings called the Protheans. Having used the technology for the last three decades to explore the Milky Way galaxy, humans have entered the intergalactic stage to form the Human Systems Alliance, an independent governmental body that works diplomatically alongside a number of newly discovered allied alien races.

The player takes third-person (or over-the-shoulder) control of Commander Shepard, a male or female (depending on the player’s preference) representative of this governmental body and first human member of Spectre, a group of above-the-law peacekeepers harbored by the Citadel, a deep space hub for a sort of intergalactic United Nations called a Council. Shepard is tasked with taking her ship, The Normandy, through the faster-than-light mass relay system in order to contact and enter into diplomatic exchanges with allied alien races. The goal is to stop Saren, a rogue soldier from a bug-like alien race known as the Turians, who has gained control of the Geth, an army of robotic life forms whose motivations at first appear to be either nonexistent or irrelevant. As the player progresses through the game, he finds that Saren has been making choices against his will. He has become indoctrinated by a powerful race of technological life forms called the reapers, who have the ability to infiltrate any life form’s mind
and persuade it to do their bidding. As it turns out, every fifty thousand years the reapers
reappear from the fringes of the Milky Way to harvest all organic life. As Shepard attempts and
fails alone to convince the council and Citadel citizens that the reapers exist and are intent on
wiping out all organic life, a massive reaper in control of Saren, named Sovereign, attacks the
Citadel before being defeated by a fleet of Citadel ships.

*Mass Effect 2* takes place a few weeks after the first. After an attack that tears the
Normandy to shreds, Commander Shepard is thrust, unprotected, into space. Shepard’s dead
body is recovered and taken in by a shadow organization called Cerberus. Run by an enigmatic
and shady corporate suit named the Illusive Man, Cerberus functions outside of legal restrictions
to obtain technologies that might aid organic and synthetic life in their fight against the reapers.
After Cerberus restores Shepard, memories and all, the player again takes control of him. As the
story progresses, Shepard and his crew contend with the collectors, an army of interdimensional
creatures that collect organic bodies and harvest them to make a reaper out of their recycled body
parts. After discovering that the Illusive Man’s intentions have all along been to preserve, rather
than destroy, the collector base in order to learn all he can from the technologies onboard,
Shepard—provided the player follows the game’s ethical logic—ignores the Illusive Man’s
orders and detonates the base. If the player has made enough ethical decisions by this point in the
series, Shepard makes a daring and treacherous jump from the crumbling collector base to the
Normandy hovering just outside, successfully grapples onto the ledge of the departing ship, and
rejoins his crew. I will discuss this scene in more detail later on, particularly with regard to the
potential outcomes for the player should he make unethical decisions.

The final game in the series opens on earth as the reapers are on their way to attack the
planet. After the reapers ravage much of Canada, Shepard escapes with a new crew and embarks
on a mission to acquire an ancient Prothean weapon powerful enough to defeat the reapers. The game has the player traveling from region to region of the galaxy to convert different alien races to the anti-reaper cause. Shepard needs to make tough diplomatic decisions in order to persuade these alien societies that if everybody bands together, they can beat the reapers and reclaim their right to live. Throughout the game, Shepard butts heads with the Illusive Man, who has presumably been indoctrinated by the reapers and forced to work for them. The final battle against the reapers and their ilk takes place on earth. After most of humanity has been successfully harvested by the reapers, Shepard makes his way to a shaft of light at the bottom of a hill (more than likely a signification of hope) and transports to the deck of the demolished Citadel (the metonym, in this universe, for diplomacy). He walks along a corridor lined with dead bodies—victims of the war Shepard encouraged—and encounters the Illusive Man, who argues that joining with the reapers was the only way to end the bloodshed, and that organic life could never have won in a war against them. Provided the player makes ethical decisions up to this point, Shepard succeeds in defeating the Illusive Man and is transported to the top of the Citadel. At the top, a childlike holographic figure appears and announces itself as the Catalyst, the creator of the reapers and harbinger of organic life forms’ destruction. The Catalyst reveals that the reapers are and always have been a way of preventing organic life from destroying itself with its own technology; organic harvesting, the Catalyst explains, is an altruistic way of storing worthy organic life in a sort of database so that it lives on in a transcendent reaper state. The Catalyst eventually admits that the reapers have historically been unsuccessful in their attempt to stop organic life from destroying itself. In response, it gives Shepard three options of defeating the reapers: Destroy the reapers along with all synthetic life, control the reapers, or synthesize all organic and synthetic life. Each choice leads to only nominally different outcomes.
Online forums and gamer communities exploded with controversy about the ending shortly after the game’s release. One forum user claims, somewhat hyperbolically, that “the ending left me dead inside.” Sparky Clarkson of popular online gaming magazine Kotaku even chimed in with an article-length rant against BioWare’s alleged creative misstep:

The end of *Mass Effect 3* disregards the player's choices on both galactic and personal scales. In contrast to the exquisite, if occasionally opaque, ways the player's decisions dictated the outcome of Shepard's suicide mission in *Mass Effect 2*, *Mass Effect 3*'s finale is essentially a railroad. Provided a player has gathered enough military force, all three possibilities for dealing with the series-long villains, the Reapers, are available. The player can opt to control them, destroy them, or join with them in an organic-AI synthesis of some kind.

Clarkson goes on to argue that *Mass Effect 3*’s illusion of choice at the end of the game “undercuts the importance of choices made in this and previous ME (sic) games.” BioWare subsequently released an update of the game’s ending in the form of a mandatory download, which filled in a number of plot holes and explained the fate of Shepard and his crew. The three-game series had already generated a robust culture of devoted followers who had spent over a hundred hours making decisions they thought made a difference to their play experience, only to discover that the three possible outcomes at the end were virtually identical. In other words, *Mass Effect* merely offered the *illusion* of choice before pulling the rug out from under its audience. Clearly, this shows that the power of game narratives to offer choice has an impact on player-subjects and entire gamer communities. Additionally, BioWare’s decision to alter the ending exposes another computational component of video game universes—that of downloadable material to append or fix narrative content in order to patch ill-conceived plot
holes. If a game generates public outrage for its content, gamer communities have extra control over the content decisions of developers. If gamers respond unfavorably to a content decision, the developers can restructure the game itself by adding material to quell grievances. Authors often update material in their books by releasing reprints as necessary, and studios can release versions of theatrical films on DVDs or Blu-Rays with extra content. But consumers rarely receive creative jurisdiction over these products’ end results in the same way that gamers did over *Mass Effect*’s highly interpretive, somewhat vague ending.

**Interpellation, Procedural Rhetoric, and Liminality**

The concept of choice is indeed fundamental to my analysis of how masculinity and femininity functions in *Mass Effect*. Not only does the player receive creative jurisdiction over the gender and facial appearance of the avatar he embodies during the war against the reapers, but he also has jurisdiction over the decisions that avatar makes. Furthermore, the critical reaction to *Mass Effect*’s conclusion in part leads me to consider how war video games as uniquely computational art pieces enforce investment in their game worlds in ways that interpellate subjects in general and gendered subjects in particular. After all, if a series can generate so much public outrage that it impels the creative minds behind it to alter its features, then what does that say about the power of games themselves to enforce investment in their fictional universes? It is vital to understand that, while the *Mass Effect* series gives the player seemingly limitless control over events in its game worlds, this control is, in fact, merely illusory. Because of this, I wish to suggest that *Mass Effect*’s ending is a paradox where both choice and indoctrination (seemingly opposite conditions) combine to cancel out any notion that the subject has control over what he psychologically internalizes. If the player chooses among various options throughout the play experience and shapes the story in the process, then he
shapes that story only within the coded parameters of the programmed game universe. After all, there are only limited options with limited personality and body types available to the player, and those personality and body types on offer are influenced by the ideologies of the programmers, artists, and indeed the larger corporate entity behind the scenes. As I explained about procedural rhetoric in the previous chapter, the frame around the game world (or the sandbox boundary that determines what a player cannot do) exposes the creative prohibitions on the player, and enables both the player and the programmer to conceive of a means of exceeding these boundaries in future work. These prohibitions are instituted by the limited creative jurisdiction afforded by the game world itself (the coded, procedural space), together with the limitations imposed on programmers by the technology of the console that powers their creations. These limitations are where the games express their ideologies, in the same way that the author of a text might guide the reader through a story that expresses subtextual ideologies, or a filmmaker will express ideas through the visual rhetoric of mise en scène. Hence, video games are inherently ideological insofar as they interpellate subjects not only by way of the textual and visual rhetoric of literature and film, but additionally through the procedural rhetorics they mount.

Following Louis Althusser’s model on interpellation and ideology, I want to suggest that *Mass Effect* interpellates players via these textual, visual, and procedural rhetorics. Defining what he means by interpellation, Althusser argues that

ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way that it ‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or ‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: ‘Hey, you there!’
Althusser goes on to suggest that commonly hailing someone on the street proves that subjects are always already interpellated as subjects because they have “recognized that the hail was ‘really’ addressed” to them. Althusser argues that this recognition of oneself as a subject on the street is one and the same thing as evidence that one exists within an ideological framework. This ideological framework is an illusory construction governed by no material entities (i.e. intellectual elites do not govern ideological constructions); rather, ideology is nebulous, dispersed, and precedes the subject. This means that the subject’s only agency is in knowing that he is being interpellated into a predetermined framework.

Much of the literature on video game studies emphasizes identification with player-controlled avatars, and this identification, I submit, is integral to forming and thereby interpellating player-subjects. As Aaron Delwiche observes, “unlike the identification experienced with film and literature, video-game identification is active (making choices that develop the character) and reactive (responding to conditions that stem from these choices)” (98). Importantly, identification, in this context, goes beyond the player sympathizing or empathizing with his avatar; the player is his avatar (Delwiche 97). Player choice, for Mass Effect, is mapped onto the avatars themselves; consequently, choice is itself is inseparable from the avatar the player controls. Thus, the player identifies with the avatar—his temporary new body—and the choices that avatar makes as if that avatar were an extension of himself. Importantly, while the conditions of that identification with the avatar may be determined, in part, by the player himself, the player’s creative agency is nevertheless constrained by an ideological product that conditions the player through its procedural rhetorics. In apparently shaping the avatar’s persona through his control over a videogame’s dialogic exchanges, the
player feels that he has ultimate creative jurisdiction over that shaping. In fact, he is constrained by the game’s intrinsic ideological alignment and its limited conversation options.

What, then, does all of this have to say about how Mass Effect redefines the masculine subject through its deployment of procedural rhetorics? Since Mass Effect offers the player supreme but illusory agency over events as they unfold, the games’ very internal architecture denotes a direct relationship between the developer (in this specific case BioWare and its artists) and the player. Furthermore, the player embodies the avatar through which the player recognizes himself as an already formed subject. In other words, the developer says “hey, you there!” to the player, the player registers this as his call to recognize the developer’s existence together with his own as a player-subject, and the player becomes an embodied subject (via an avatar) as the experience of playing the game alters his consciousness in the real world (i.e. the world outside of simulated experience). It is partly for this reason that Bogost, citing Althusser, argues “videogames are particularly useful tools for visualizing the logics that make up a worldview” (Persuasive Games 75). Hence, the ways in which developers enable identification with avatars through game rules (e.g. enabling the player to choose how in-game conversations play out) constitutes a type of procedural rhetoric that interpellates subjects.

But unlike other war video games (like Gears of War, the Call of Duty series, and the explicit US army recruitment tool America’s Army), Mass Effect does not encourage or force the player to embody the role of a hyper-masculine avatar. Instead, it deploys a number of procedural rhetorics to offer (and even encourage) the player the choice to shape the soldier’s characteristics and persona in ways that subvert hyper-masculinity itself. The most important of these procedural rhetorics are the avatar creation model, which allows the player to mold Shepard’s facial characteristics (but not, it seems, the body) before playing the game, and the
conversation wheel, which enables the player to choose the ethical (ideologically endorsed by the game itself), neutral, or unethical path. With the conversation wheel, which I am primarily interested in for the sake of this argument, the player may mold the narrative according to his whims. Importantly—and I will detail this in the next section—*Mass Effect* coddles the player who elects to play the game ethically by rewarding him all the perks he would otherwise risk missing out on were he to choose unethical decisions throughout. That the game rewards the player for making ethical decisions and determines that ethical decisions entail nonviolence and diplomacy constitutes a procedural rhetoric about the dangers associated with state-mandated violence. By contrast, *Gears of War* instructs through its own procedural rhetorics that diplomacy cannot empower the subject, but is in fact an abject sign of weakness. Most studio-produced war video games prohibit ethical decision-making, let alone encourage it. This is because killing, in most war video games, takes precedence over diplomacy. Furthermore, killing often doubles as masculine posturing, since enemies become expendable foils that signify the strength and virility of the protagonists who defeat them. An example of an enemy foil that is easy to locate and possible to defeat is *Gears of War’s* post-9/11 terrorist analogues—the Locust—whose muscular bodies mirror those of the human male soldiers of the narrative. At the same time, those bodies are coded in-game as expendable bodies that can easily be dispatched.

Unlike in the *Gears of War* series, the enemy of *Mass Effect* is not a material entity, but one that is dispersed, delocalized, and abstract. Whereas games like *Gears of War* and *Call of Duty* conceive of a tangible enemy threat that occupies a predominately male army of bodies, *Mass Effect*’s enemy is the abstract concept of the danger of ideologically abusing powerful technologies of war. The most salient example of this is when Shepard stumbles upon Sovereign, a massive squid-shaped reaper that explains all organic life is inferior to synthetic life and so will
be wiped out without hesitation. Sovereign argues that organic life cannot comprehend the role that reapers play in the galaxy. It then reveals that it institutes its persuasive powers by indoctrinating subjects and forcing them to do its bidding. Saren, the purported villain and formerly adored political figure of the first *Mass Effect*, turns out to have been victimized and indoctrinated by Sovereign all along. Because such a stable political paragon like Saren has been compromised, the player might begin to suspect that he has also been indoctrinated by the reapers and is making questionable decisions. After all, why is the player/avatar uniquely immune from such indoctrination? As the player guides his avatar through the conversation with Sovereign, he reads his own agency into each of his conversational decisions. But if, as I have argued, the player *is* that avatar, then he has, by extension, also potentially been indoctrinated by the reapers, as knowledge of his own indoctrination may be being hidden from him.

In order to make full sense of what reapers like Sovereign represent, we must first understand the various ways reapers deconstruct enemy otherness. As the ending of *Mass Effect 3* reveals, by their own admission reapers are not enemies, but are self-professed altruistic vehicles that misguidedly store organic life in their databases in order to stop organics from killing themselves off with their own technologies of war (one of the supreme ironies being that the reapers are themselves technologies of war that constitute the central conflict of the narrative). Since reapers constitute this collective consciousness consisting of all possible genders among all organic life (including alien races), they are without gender because they are meant to embody all the possible genders stored in their databases. Therefore, recalling Halberstam, we ought to read reapers as liminal technological organisms that consistently cross between culturally intelligible gender categories and, in the process, defy those familiar categories by refusing to be defined or understood. Consequently, in order to make sense of them
as enemies, we must read them in part as embodiments of the Western anxieties surrounding the
disavowal of an assigned gender based around biological sex (both gender and biology are here
notably absent). But because they consist of the organic life that the player/avatar is attempting
to preserve, the reapers cannot fully be considered enemies (destroying a reaper represents the
destruction of organic life). Hence, the reapers are technically paradoxes that deconstruct the
physical (and feminized) enemy threats found in other war video games like *Gears of War*
because they are coded as enemies with bodies, yet they also contain the bodies the player/avatar
attempts to save.

What can we ultimately make of the idea that reapers are purportedly physical
embodiments of all organic life (they are massive databases that preserve organic bodies in order
to forestall cultures’ technological advancement beyond a certain point)? Furthermore, what can
we make of their efforts to indoctrinate subjects in order to quell resistance against them? I
submit that apart from deconstructing Western preoccupations with male/female and
masculine/feminine binaries, the reapers operate simultaneously as tangible manifestations of
organic life’s technological ineptness (since they punish technological innovation by preserving
all advanced cultures), and as the metaphorical dangers associated with organics’ proclivities for
ideology (since the reapers indoctrinate subjects and frame hasty technological advancement as
transgressive and dangerous). If there is an enemy of *Mass Effect*, then, it is not locatable or
tangible, but is dispersed into the realm of the abstract ideologies that lead civilizations to war
with one another. Ideology, then, can be said to be the enemy threat of *Mass Effect’s* narrative.
Ideology is dispersed among all organic life and operates behind the scenes, invisibly. While it
occupies a material body, that material body constitutes all material bodies that make up its
components. In other words, organic life is its own enemy, but it is, paradoxically, its own
savior. By this logic, killing a reaper amounts to killing one’s own species. Reapers are not disposable enemies. A reaper body represents a moral grey area because killing one is a veritable genocide of organic life.

Ultimately, if the enemy body is no longer gendered, tangible, or recognizable, then the subject has no Other. What this means, in effect, is that *Mass Effect*’s reapers constitute a procedural rhetoric that plays with the gendered subject in ways that subvert traditional formulations of the hyper-masculine soldier valorously defending his territory against an amorphous enemy onslaught. In this case, procedural rhetoric and representation combine to complicate enemy Otherness. For example, the player may dispose of tangible bodies whose agency has been confiscated by the reapers, but those bodies are not agents of any locatable force; they have been co-opted by the ideologies that drive warfare. Consequently, the player’s apparently violent acts against tangible enemy forces constitute a concerted attempt at fending off intangible ideological invasion. If bodies are dispersed, politics complicated, and the nebulous concept of ideology is itself the enemy, then the subject cannot be masculinized with respect to its feminized Other. The reason for this is because, as Hutchings reminds us, hegemonic masculinity relies on an ideologically constructed and coherent identity for its Other. Reapers problematize this model. They cannot be located because their identities are unrecognizable (they cannot be apprehended). If there is no Other, then one might think that there can be no anxieties associated with deconstructing the male/female and masculine/feminine binaries, since war relies on these binaries in order to remain intelligible. Nevertheless, the anxiety is here located in having one’s gender identity erased entirely by a transition from organic to technological existence (i.e. transitioning to a reaper database and existing as part of an amorphous, genderless consciousness). In other words, *Mass Effect* deconstructs the enemy
that other war games locate in bodies, thereby de-gendering that enemy and relocating the subject to a liminal space. But it cannot undo its own anxieties surrounding that newfound liminality because it cannot make sense of that liminality. In *Mass Effect*, becoming a subject without gender is to lose one’s subjectivity.

In contrast, *Gears of War*’s figuring of the feminine abject is decidedly problematic because unlike *Mass Effect*, it fails to locate the enemy in ideology itself. Instead, it locates the feminine abject in a literal human body—that of Queen Myrrah. The soldier subject of *Mass Effect*, as a consequence, is not actually a heroic, seemingly indestructible subject, but a fragile, organic body that must bridge diplomatic divides in order to build rapport among species and gain assets in the fight to maintain organic subjectivity. This organic fragility is, by the game’s logic, the ideal, paragon option, a fact which relocates the masculine subject away from tough, indestructible soldier bodies. In order to understand how this idealization of the organic body occurs—and how *Mass Effect* presents gender and Otherness as complicated and imaginary—we must look deeper into how *Mass Effect*’s major innovation, the conversation wheel, encourages the player to be diplomatic and vulnerable by making it an integral component of each game’s interface. Furthermore, we must also ask how *Mass Effect* defines diplomacy and who falls under the purview of the term. In making the conversation wheel the games’ main focus (it is the main focus precisely because of the effect player choice has on outcomes in the narrative), *Mass Effect* interpellates player-subjects by having them buy into its ideology. After all, in order to progress from one point to the next, the player must make choices and reap the consequences of those choices.
Subverting Masculinity With the Conversation Wheel

As I have suggested, indoctrination is not confined to the narrative only; it figures prominently into the game’s rules, as well. For example, as the player makes choices, the game suggests to him that selecting ethical conversation options is practically beneficial. I submit that the game’s tendency to guide the player’s decision making by rewarding him lavishly for making ethical choices is a procedural rhetoric about the importance of diplomatic—rather than violent—gestures. For example, if the player makes ethical choices during conversations, he will more effectively gain the rapport of crew members than if he makes unethical choices that intimidate interlocutors. Should the player elect to choose ethical conversation options, his avatar will have more functional relationships with his crew members as well as NPCs that play prominent roles in the narrative. Consequently (and I will detail how Mass Effect accomplishes this later), the game not only mounts a procedural rhetoric about the importance of making ethical decisions, but it tells the player what an ethical decision entails.

In order to understand how ethics plays into Mass Effect’s construction of masculinity, we must first understand how the story itself plays out. Mass Effect’s story might be characterized as a tree with various branching paths. The trunk of the tree represents the main narrative, while each branch represents side stories, together with the choices that the player makes along the way. These choices along each side narrative have an effect on the main narrative and how that narrative plays out. The fact that the narrative rewards the player for the ethical choices he makes and gradually subtracts from that pool of potential rewards for unethical decisions is what interests me. Each choice alters the narrative and guides the player’s interpretation of the effect of his decisions. As the player engages with the game in this way, he recognizes that making ethical decisions will result in a higher degree of rapport with other alien
races that have the power to fight back against the reapers. Consequently, the game itself indoctrinates the player as it progresses.

In doing this, the game creates the illusion that the player is not being indoctrinated, but it does this consciously by inscribing it on the surface text while showing the results of ethical or renegade decisions only after a prolonged process of building or degrading interpersonal relationships. In other words, *Mass Effect* is fully conscious of itself as a tool for indoctrination, but indoctrination can only occur over a gradual stretch as the player buys into the game’s ideology. Games are this way in general, but few games consciously call attention to themselves as persuasive devices. Tom Bissell observes that

Even though you may be granted lunar influence over a game’s narrative tides, the fact that there is any narrative at all reminds you that a presiding intelligence exists within the game along with you, and it is this sensation that invites the otherwise unworkable comparisons between games and other forms of narrative art (39).

The “presiding intelligence” Bissell describes is the game designers behind the scenes, designing the product in such a way that the player follows the game’s ideological logic. Consequently, in order for players to make it from area to area, from point to point, he has to buy into the game’s logic; he is, for all intents and purposes, indoctrinated. But more importantly, he is indoctrinated as a soldier of peace rather than war.

In 2003, BioWare released *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, a game that included a unique morality system which enabled the player to fashion his avatar into an unethical (dark side) or ethical (light side) character. The morality system operates on a sliding scale between light and dark. Should the player choose the light side, the avatar’s face will be pristine and unblemished. If he fashions his character into a dark, evil character, scars will cover the avatar’s
now pale face and its eyes turn bright yellow. In order to fashion the character toward either end of the scale, the player selects between ethical, neutral, and unethical conversation options that are stacked like small multiple choice quizzes. What dialogue option the player selects in each case is an accurate representation of the scripted dialogue his character utters. Every decision the player-character makes influences the outcome of the narrative, particularly with regard to how NPCs react to him. Should he elect to be intimidating—figured in-game as the “dark side”—then characters will react to him accordingly.

Bogost observes that morality systems like those found in *Knights of the Old Republic* are too simplistic insofar as they merely “attempt to create procedural models of morality, but they do so solely through an arithmetic logic” (*Persuasive Games* 285). In other words, the game’s procedural model lacks the subtlety of genuine moral systems in which human agency takes precedence over cut-and-dry good versus evil formulas. Bogost argues that the limitation in these moral simulations resides in their tendency to have morality rest “at a fixed point along the linear progression between” good and bad, or light and dark. However, *Knights of the Old Republic* is limited not only by the now ancient technology that powered its creation (the early 2000s Xbox), but by its fantasy-rich allegorical procedural representation of morality that reduces ethical behavior down to false dichotomies. In other words, *Knights of the Old Republic* exposes a limitation in the procedural systems that attempt to simulate genuine moral quandaries; namely, that morality is generally absolute as opposed to ambiguous.

BioWare honed its invention for the *Mass Effect* series and improved the morality system, but retained the structural absolutism of *Knights of the Old Republic*. Whereas in *Knights of the Old Republic* the player selects verbatim what the character will say, *Mass Effect* works off of a paraphrase system and each dialogue option is represented on a conversation wheel (see
Instead of representing the dialogue word-for-word on the conversation wheel, each choice is a truncated, paraphrased version of what Shepard ultimately says. The conversation wheel is divided into two sides. On the right side of the conversation wheel, the player can choose between the top (ethical), middle (neutral), and bottom (unethical) choices. The left side usually contains additional dialogue options that have no immediate effect on the story (one can play with these options to get more personal information from NPCs or integral characters), but occasionally special options during conversation appear on the left side of the wheel to give the player added influence over NPCs. If these special options appear on the left, the words will be colored blue at the top (ethical or paragon) and red at the bottom (unethical or renegade). A paragon decision will usually gain the trust and rapport of the avatar’s interlocutor, while a renegade decision risks alienating, intimidating, or otherwise repelling them. Additionally, if the player selects a high enough number of renegade options in all three games, the avatar’s face will become scarred, his eyes will turn bright red, and NPCs will be intimidated, distrustful, and repelled by him. The number of renegade or paragon points the player receives will be represented on a menu screen, but instead of operating on a strict sliding scale, the player may elect to complicate his diplomatic gestures by playing both paragon and renegade. Doing this effectively can gain the player nearly maximum points in both categories, and will enable him to both intimidate and charm interlocutors in equal measure.

Already we can see that the wheel and its selection consequences contain a number of semiotic signs that lead the player to decode ideological figurations of good versus bad. These
consequences accordingly mount a procedural rhetoric about the specific paths to good and evil, as the top choices are inevitably coded “good” choices, while the bottom are coded “bad” ones. For example, good, ethical decisions occupy the upper position of the conversation wheel, while bad, unethical decisions almost hide at the bottom of the screen, their elided paraphrases seeming terse and confrontational in comparison. As for the left side of the conversation wheel, when additional options appear that give the player added persuasive control over a conversation, light blue highlighted words signify paragon options, while a bright red highlights the renegade options. Besides the fact that the game directs the player’s eye toward the top of the screen first—as well as to the blue, instead of the red, option—the negative consequences of the player’s unethical decisions literally map monstrousness onto Shepard’s face (see fig 6). These visible scars pit Shepard’s face gradually as the player gains points in the renegade category. This scarring recalls the pockmarked faces of Gears of War’s Locust, or their mirrored male soldier counterparts. Scars, in war games, generally signify war wounds, stories etched in pink on the skin—that ounce of monstrousness attending the protagonist’s or, in the renegade’s case, anti-hero’s face signifies a type of ambiguous abjection. Intimidation figures as the lowest option, the option that creates war wounds, stories for interlocutors (and the player himself) to read on the face of the avatar. Interestingly, that the eyes, along with the scars on the face, glow red recalls the games’ theme of organics’ ideological obsession with technology.

While in Gears of War these wounds signify hyper-masculinity (or the memories of masculine action etched permanently into skin), in Mass Effect they signal an erasure of the
subject’s identity (hyper-masculine or otherwise). He is in the process of becoming, for all intents and purposes, a machine without a concrete, legible identity; he is no longer fully human. His impulsive, even murderous, reactions to events in the narrative are no longer linked to a singular performance of hyper-masculinity, but have become complicated by the games’ theme of technological irresponsibility. Shepard, as a renegade, turns almost literally into a machine, into that technological body that takes on a monstrous aspect linked to the malfeasance of the reapers themselves. This teetering on the verge of technophobia signifies technology’s lack of concrete identity. If identity is dispersed or erased, it is generally figured in-game as monstrously abject. Hence, unlike other war video games like *Gears of War, Mass Effect* does not mount a procedural rhetoric about toughness and aggressiveness resulting in a heroic, hyper-masculine soldier whose emotional constitution is conducive to winning war and saving a population of innocents. Rather, it mounts a procedural rhetoric about aggressive and unethical (both of which apparently describe the same thing) behavior resulting in a loss of one’s identity. In other words, the player is invited to consume a more imaginative and complicated brand of soldier warrior—one that is not easy to define—but one that results in a type of anti-social warrior whose behavior the player is taught by the game’s rules to question.

With this in mind, how might *Mass Effect*’s more nuanced morality system punish the player for electing to go full renegade? Furthermore, if Shepard selects only moral paragon options, how might the game reward him? *Mass Effect* does not make renegade decisions easy. While it might be fun to play as a loose cannon and coldly shoot an assailant in the face without registering the transgression, the game embeds in the mechanical interface that I have just described a negative conditioning system that, over the course of the narrative, subtracts rewards from the player for making unethical decisions. Technically, the player can opt to fashion
Shepard into an almost full renegade and move his and his crew through all three games successfully without a single death among them (provided she gains their loyalty and trust strategically). However, should the player decide to go full paragon (selecting only top options on the conversation wheel along the way), the game coddles the player by offering him lavish rewards (there is no danger at all of losing Shepard or her crew at the end of *Mass Effect 2*). Additionally, choosing only paragon options makes it very easy to gain what the game terms Effective Military Strength (or EMS). EMS is a point system mechanic that multiplies the percentage of collected War Assets by the Total Military Strength in the galaxy. Gaining the rapport of various alien cultures increases the player’s EMS, meaning that being a paragon throughout all three games in the series makes it far easier to garner support against the reapers.

If the player chooses renegade options along the way, it becomes far likelier for the player to lose these war assets. Failing to gain these war assets results in a less satisfying ending, as well as more superficial, rather than intimate, relationships with NPCs.

Here, *Mass Effect* mobilizes various procedural rhetorics about the importance of diplomacy during wartime. These procedural rhetorics are problematic because they link the erasure of one’s legible identity to abject monstrousness. For example, *Mass Effect* makes a concrete statement about bridging cultural divides in order to band together against the abstract threat of ideology. Consider the symbolic scarring in Shepard’s face. Not only do unethical decisions literally mark Shepard’s face and alert his interlocutors to his abjectness, but ethical decisions maintain his visible humanness, signaling to NPCs that he has not succumbed to the cold emotionlessness of the reapers. His porcelain, unblemished face signifies to NPCs that he is trustworthy; consequently, the player reads into his unblemished appearance a condition of moral goodness. This is problematic for a number of reasons. While the fluid mechanics of *Mass
Effect’s morality system mounts procedural rhetorics surrounding the goodness of communication and diplomacy, they also locate goodness in their version of an ideal of physical beauty. In other words, while diplomacy takes precedence over violence, it does so only on condition that the player retains his identity by way of the game’s pre-determined ideology surrounding moral goodness, an ideology manifest in one’s physical appearance. In effect, Mass Effect does not go far enough to deconstruct the masculine subject of war because the series simulates a universe of moral absolutes instead of moral ambiguities.

In addition to paragon options granting more open access to military assets, two major components of the final two Mass Effect games are the loyalty missions for Shepard’s crew members, together with the types of relationships successful loyalty missions can generate. Should the player opt to forgo the loyalty missions and neglect to gain the trust of his crew, Shepard (and perhaps a few of his crew members) will die at the end of Mass Effect 2 after the collector base has been taken care of. Jumping heroically from the collector base toward the drop ship hovering just outside, Shepard manages to grapple onto the ledge. Joker, Normandy’s pilot, reaches out a hand to pull Shepard in, but just at that moment a collector shoots Joker’s shoulder and he drops him. He holds onto the ship with one hand as Joker reaches for his shoulder. Before he falls to his death, he tells Joker to inform the Citadel council that more reapers are on their way. A wide angle shot shows Shepard’s body as a small silhouette falling slowly and calmly amid a collector ship that looks like a canyon of rock faces. All of this happens after the player has spent two games getting to know the character he has fashioned into an effective soldier with whom he identifies.

This scene reinforces the game’s procedural rhetoric surrounding the importance of valuing diplomacy and emotional connection. Poignant as it is that Shepard becomes a small
speck barely recognizable in front of the camouflaging rock faces of the collector ship, he is no longer heroic, but dehumanized by the negative space around him, made fragile. He has been swallowed up by the backdrop, a shaky camera trying to focus in on his falling body but failing to do so. Only the pilot Joker, the sole survivor, reminds the player of the folly of ignoring his crew members’ needs; the others died in the wreckage, and only they could have saved Shepard from falling into the abyss. The game has stripped away the characters that could have been inside of the drop ship. Thus, the game suggests that a more diligent, moral player might have gained the rapport of his crew. Failing that, the player will witness the consequences of his avatar’s cynicism. Should the player do the work of building emotionally open relationships with his crew, they will all be on the carrier ship in this scene, and they would all help to save Shepard’s life. This does more than merely “teach” the player a lesson about the importance of building relationships; it makes the player feel the consequences of ignoring the needs of others. This affective component of the Mass Effect universe is itself a procedural rhetoric because it reaches the player-subject directly. After all, having identified for two full games (about sixty hours of playtime) with his avatar, the player reads into video games an architectural condition that alters the components of the play experience depending on player choice. He has been interpellated—hailed by the game—and punished for not falling in line. In essence, the player has been punished for failing to conform to the games’ ethical logic. Consequently, the game institutes a procedural rhetoric about the importance of taking the time to bond with others, and this procedural rhetoric requires that the player question other war games’ routine of reinscribing a rigid performance of hyper-masculinity onto emotionally regulated, aggressive soldiers.

This ethical logic is consistent across all three games, as evidenced by two synthetic protagonists that embody the procedural rhetorics outlined above. One is Legion, a synthetic life
form of the antagonistic Geth species. The other is EDI, the Normandy’s artificial intelligence who in *Mass Effect 3* hijacks a woman’s synthetic body and makes it her own. Both characters are fascinating because of how each game figures them in relation to their human counterparts. Legion is a member of a species that the player is taught for the majority of the first two games is evil. His elongated “face” ends in a hood under which a single, cycloptic blue eye pierces its spectator. Each *Mass Effect* game depicts technology as cold, without gender, and inhumane, but useful. Synthetic life forms, however, are always antagonistic unless explicitly created by organics for a specific purpose—to serve. Legion is a rare exception among the Geth. A machine with thousands of programs running simultaneously in his head, Legion himself represents a mind collective. What makes him unique (and, consequently, good) is his desire to learn the ways of the organics. As Legion puts it: “we wish to learn . . . if we can model organic life, we can comprehend.”

Meanwhile, Normandy’s AI core EDI adopts an explicit gender when the anthropomorphic ship hijacks a defunct female synthetic body. Unlike Legion, EDI helps the crew by joining as a soldier combatant. Approached by Shepard for the first time since she occupied her new body, EDI asks Shepard permission to modify her programming in order to mimic human behavior. Selecting the paragon option—“choose your own path”—elicits EDI’s response that decisions should not be made irrationally in a vacuum, but ought to be made according to context. In other words, EDI advocates for learning organics’ moral codes in order to adapt favorably to her new team. Telling EDI that modifying her programming would be too dangerous—the renegade option—results in EDI modifying her programming, anyway, and so adopting the same human traits she intended to in the first place.
In both of these instances, synthetic life is given a gendered identity. Legion is clearly male, as evidenced by his body mirroring those of the human male soldiers and his voice a synthetic facsimile of a human male’s. While other Geth lack a voice or an identity, Legion is unique among his species, as he expresses himself with language, communicates motivations, and lays bare his intention to learn organics’ ways. Conversely, EDI is a female, replete with metallic breasts, a metal cast of shoulder-length hair, a gracile and unblemished face, and a bodily frame that mirrors those of her organic female counterparts. In both of these cases, machines can only become good if they conform to organic culture. They must have a legible gendered identity before they can coexist with organics. Each paragon option on offer for each conversation with Legion and EDI aims to recognize their desires to become more human. Renegade options, meanwhile, aim to erase their organic aspirations and keep them in line. Shepard can elect to keep EDI subdued by her default programming. Shepard can choose to interact with Legion in a cold, almost heartless way. But choosing these options conditions the player in both cases to accept that EDI and Legion will disobey him. Should Legion abandon his desires to learn organic cultures, he would disappear into the Geth collective as a silent, genderless part of a larger system. He would be without identity. If EDI abandoned her own project, she would disappear into the ship; she would become illegible again, merely to be used as a tool of convenience. EDI’s contention that decisions ought to be made according to context is an ironic subversion of the game’s procedural rhetoric that “good” and “bad” decisions are cut and dry instead of ambiguous. Shepard’s potential decision to keep EDI and Legion in line reinforce this procedural rhetoric, as their decisions have already been made and the player who selects the renegade option observes their disobedience.
Mass Effect accomplishes refiguring the masculine soldier subject as a vulnerable, organic body that can be a machine of war at the same time as it is a vulnerable subject. The series accomplishes this by mounting procedural rhetorics about the importance of diplomatic solutions instead of violent ones. Since Mass Effect decenters the enemy Other and disperses it as an abstract (un-gendered) concept along time and space, enemies cannot be located in bodies, but in ideology itself. Consequently, this enemy Other does not have a gender, but is still abject, as it lacks the emotional vulnerability of the ideal organic (human) soldier subject. Electing to be a renegade instead of a paragon etches monstrousness onto Shepard’s face in what appear to be scars and circuit boards. Technology, then, is refigured as a source of dread, since it erases gender. This is problematic because if war games are to gain any prominence as narratives of peace, then they ought to experiment with genuine moral systems that mount morally ambiguous procedural rhetorics that require the player to think through the complex sociopolitical realities of war. Conversely, they ought first to look to Mass Effect in order to envision these new narratives. After all, in spite of the series’ fixation on these moral absolutes, together with the erasure of gender itself as a source of dread, the series at least exposes these constraints that game developers in the future can choose to expand.

The concluding chapter will discuss this future by examining contemporary war games that developers have released in recent years that use gaming technology in creative ways to tell narratives of peace. Instead of looking at masculine soldiers, these games examine the emotional effects on civilian subjects caught up wars enacted by oppressive state ideologies. As a prelude to these creative narratives of peace, Mass Effect shows that video games are uniquely capable of building characters by allowing the player to shape how conversations play out. In making this mechanical interface its main focus, the developers of Mass Effect have invented a way of
explaining to player-subjects that games are powerfully interpellative tools in themselves. It now becomes a question of where developers can go next. Is player choice enough? How do other developers define player choice? Why does choice factor so heavily into our understanding of how war works? Should more developers expand on this re-envisioning of the gamic war narrative, perhaps it will become tenable to apprehend lives in ways that before seemed impossible.
CHAPTER III. THE FUTURE OF THE WAR VIDEO GAME

This final chapter’s purpose is to consider two games that have creatively mobilized their procedural rhetorics in the service of challenging studio-produced war games’ routine of taking enemy otherness, masculine aggression, and violence for granted while also failing to apprehend the damage that state-sanctioned masculine war has on civilian populations. Because studio produced games are troubled by the logic of the financial system (i.e. games must entertain based on styles of violence that have been known to sell), this chapter will look at what independent developers have created to challenge studio-produced games’ reliance on hegemonic masculine violence to entertain consumers. The first object of analysis is Gonzalo Frasca’s viral flash game *September 12*. Predating both *Gears of War* and *Mass Effect*, it stages this thesis’ departure from big budget studio-produced videogames to independent productions that shift the focus away from the hyper-masculine soldiers who fight in war, to the civilians affected by the violence necessitated by the logic of hyper-masculine posturing. Because studio produced games capitalize on a wider array of demographics, they are unsurprisingly consumed in far greater numbers than independent productions. Furthermore, studio-produced games’ messages are often guided by the woeful economic precept that simulated violence and destruction sells. By contrast, independent productions cost less, are marketed more modestly, often contain bolder political messages, and reach only gamers who care to search for them. This is both a blessing and a curse—it is a blessing because the political messages embedded in the procedural features of these products give gamers insight into what games can accomplish rhetorically; it is a curse because fewer gamers consume them. It is also a problem for those who are unaware of their existence. After all, that war games like *Gears of War* are more widely consumed and demanded than independent productions means representations of hyper-masculine heroism are more likely
to become the norm. If we accept these representations, then we accept those games’ contention that in spite of the number or type of casualties incurred during the war effort, the heroes are justified in their acts of violent aggression. I will therefore argue that *September 12* is a political response to war videogames in general and masculine war videogames in particular. Its procedural rhetorics are intrinsically political insofar as they force player-subjects to witness the often underreported consequences of war.

In the second part of this chapter I discuss *This War of Mine*, a persuasive and logical expansion (and improvement) on Frasca’s provocative experiment. It focuses in great detail on the civilians affected by the hyper-masculine violence of war. Whereas the typical war video game asks the player to defeat feminized enemies in order to advance the narrative and quell her (and her avatar’s) frustrations, *This War of Mine* is a recent experiment in visual storytelling that deconstructs enemy otherness and masculinity, both of which *Gears of War* and, to a far lesser degree, *Mass Effect* take for granted. It accomplishes this by having the player take on the roles of a few surviving civilians who have to work together to survive in a war-ravaged city. What it takes to survive is part of the game’s emotional and intrinsic difficulty. Because survival as a civilian during wartime is its primary focus, *This War of Mine* forces the player to consider the consequences of one’s actions by embedding its political and ethical messages almost entirely in its rules and mechanics. I argue that unlike studio-produced fare that conditions the player to accept its worldview, *This War of Mine* complicates gamic violence in extraordinarily imaginative ways in order to question war games’ routine of unquestioned masculine violence-as-entertainment. Indeed, it deconstructs our understanding of what it means to experience the fun of playing a videogame at all, let alone one featuring war as its primary backdrop. In doing this, it raises a series of important questions that I wish, in my modest way, to answer: where can
we locate the masculine subject where the masculine soldiers represented in other war video games are absent? If the player is now not participating in destroying feminized enemy forces as a soldier of war, then where can we locate the enemy? Furthermore, is gender, masculinity, and enemy Otherness a concern of This War of Mine at all, or does the game decenter the gendered subject and propose that enemy Otherness is imaginary? Because the story’s narrative is vaguely defined and each play through is so vastly different from the last, I cannot adequately answer these questions by describing the game’s effects only on the general player. For this reason, I will often refer to my particular experience of playing the game and connect this experience with what I believe the game attempts to accomplish rhetorically for the player who has been formed by other war video games as a masculine subject. Taking Bogost’s procedural rhetoric to its logical end, I argue that This War of Mine is an oddity that offers an alternative vision for how war games ought to be made and consumed.

*September 12 and the Seeds of Dissent*

In 2003 game designer, critical theorist, and Professor Gonzalo Frasca felt that the United States’ decision to invade Iraq would only further destabilize the Middle East. Banding together with experienced and like-minded developers, he and his team created and released September 12, a game meant to galvanize Americans enough to discuss the war on terror critically (Thompson). As the game begins, an orange-and-white “Instructions” page emerges that turns out not to be detailed instructions at all, but what looks like an ominous warning. It reads:

This is not a game. You can’t win and you can’t lose. This is a simulation. It has no ending. It has already begun. The rules are deadly simple. You can shoot. Or not. This is a simple model you can use to explore some aspects of the war on terror.
The player clicks “Continue” and the instructions page gives way to an overhead view of an Iraqi townscape. Civilians don blue garbs as they saunter among gun-wielding terrorists clad in white and black. At first, the player can easily distinguish between the “bad” guys and the “good” guys, suggesting that the game initially works to inscribe enemy Otherness on bodies. But the game soon subverts the player’s potential expectation that a masculine, valorous American soldier will rid the town of terrorists. The cursor, now a crosshairs, struggles to capture the terrorists in its sights, but the terrorists and civilians never stop moving even as the player shoots a missile from her apparently concealed vantage. The missile explodes. Along with killing a terrorist and two civilians, the missile destroys a portion of an adjacent building. Four nearby civilians huddle, weeping, around the splayed corpses of their fallen beloved. An arcade sound-effect accompanies a brief animation of the weeping civilians transforming into terrorists, their now black and white clothing a sign of their apparent evilness.

*September 12* deploys some philosophically and politically problematic procedural rhetorics. Most of these problems result from the game’s simplistic premises. At first glance, the game only exploits intellectual weaknesses in the player whose worldview initially aligns with post-9/11 American foreign policy (in particular, the decision to invade Iraq). But *September 12* actually tells the player more in its limitations than in how it enables the player. For example, the player will no doubt read the terrorists as male aggressors (images meant to personify post-9/11 conceptualizations of terrorism), but the game skillfully resists the player’s tendency to read a gender identity into the apparent enemy. Instead, explosions indiscriminately result in the transformation of ambiguously-gendered civilians into terrorists. This limitation erases the potential identities of the civilians affected by state-mandated war, a move that sidesteps the complexity of a political situation that in the real world inscribes gendered identities on enemy
bodies. Consequently, while the game does critique the violence of war as it has been represented both procedurally and visually in video games before and after it, it does so without regarding the reality of those video games; namely, that enemy Others have historically and presently been rendered by video game development teams as feminized antagonists fighting against a predominately masculine force.

Where, then, can we locate the soldier who kills these terrorists and civilians? Does that soldier have any real agency? How do we read the soldier’s identity in the absence of a visible soldier body? The game appears to give the ambiguously gendered soldier avatar—rendered here as a crosshairs—agency, but this agency is only an illusion. This lack of agency serves to resist constructing the player as an emotionally regulated, hyper-masculine subject by forcing the player to reflect on the consequences of shooting indiscriminately at the citizens below. As evidence of this, unlike war video games before and after it, the player is encouraged not to shoot at the terrorists (i.e. not to play the game at all). For example, the instructions page prefaces the player’s engagement with *September 12* with a warning—“You can’t win and you can’t lose . . . You can shoot. Or not.” This means that the player can play the game carefully without receiving any rewards. The instructional warning is an admission that the game upends traditional gamic rules: the illusion of choice offered by so many games up to this point is just that—an illusion—and the player’s only choice in this case is to choose whether or not to play the game at all. Such a tautology appears noncommittal—even vapid—but assuming for the moment that the player’s avatar is the crosshairs, and that those crosshairs are extensions of the state mandating the indiscriminate violence on the population below, then the claim is rhetorically meaningful insofar as it purportedly gives the player (soldier) the ultimate agency *not* to shoot. Indeed, in order to “play” the game at all, the player must accept (after reading the crosshairs as the power
to destroy) that each click of the left mouse button will result in demolishing not only the terrorists apparently controlling the means of cultural production in this Iraqi townscape, but the lives of innocent bystanders and their property, too. Consequently, unlike *Gears of War*, where gleeful violence enacted by the player’s hyper-masculine avatars yields rewards, *September 12* refuses the player’s tendency to identify with the aggressive, emotionally regulated male soldier avatar who receives rewards for committing state-mandated violent acts. Instead, *September 12* confiscates those expected rewards and renders the soldier behind the crosshairs invisible (the soldier has no body) and thereby erases the soldier’s identity (the crosshairs become an extension of the ambiguously gendered soldier). While we must read these procedural features as necessary constraints imposed by Frasca and his team of developers to guide the player’s consensus toward more peaceful alternatives than shooting innocent civilians (since those procedures, at their core, critique draconian US foreign policies and the masculine soldiers who enforce those policies), the game is philosophically problematic because it creates the illusion of agency where real world soldiers may have none.

Furthermore, the transition from civilian to terrorist the player witnesses mounts a procedural rhetoric that resists the player’s potential beliefs that terrorists emerge in a vacuum and that soldiers are the heroic ones who defeat them. Indeed, the transition is a powerful—albeit limited—way of communicating that the player is apparently complicit in the violence on-screen (perhaps even in the real world), because at first glance, the player is the one who creates the terrorists in the first place. One could choose to ask what the ideology and identity of this invisible soldier is, but the game decenters the masculine soldier subject of war by rendering it as a crosshairs instead of a person. Hence, the soldier the player generally consumes in products like *Gears of War* and *Mass Effect* is no longer the tough, aggressive hero, but a sign and
extension of the state that mandates war. Into the crosshairs the player reads a de-gendered soldier controlled by the player, who is controlled by the urge to operate the game in order to witness its consequences. Thus, in this context the soldier, like the terrorist, has no identity.

After the player clicks the left mouse button, the civilians become the villains. What does this transformation signify? What happens during the transition from civilian to terrorist? Who is the terrorist? Does the terrorist have a legible gendered identity, or is that identity erased in order to challenge our preconceptions of who a terrorist is and what a terrorist is supposed to look like? Is the game’s rhetorical power compromised by omitting the detail of this usually complicated and difficult transition? Here, the relationship is between the player-subject and the rules of the game. If the player’s worldview aligns, for a time, with the crosshairs (the player is the crosshairs), then the game forces the player to question that worldview and its consequences when the player’s loose trigger finger leads civilians to become violent agents of their oppressive regime. By the logic of the game’s restrictive and cyclical rules, the player is now the agent of the conflict in question. Or, more precisely, the player is the agent of the initial conflict (the force) that establishes the secondary conflict in this townscape (that of the creation of more terrorism). Ultimately, the game refuses to inscribe a legible identity onto the soldier, a fact which appears

One recognizes that the terrorists in the townscape only existed in the first place because violence befell their communities. However reductionist these philosophical and political premises are (Frasca himself claims not entirely to support his game’s simplistic political arguments), September 12 has the effect of shifting the player-spectator’s attentions from her imaginary role in the violence enacted by the state’s hyper-masculine, emotionally regulated soldiers (e.g. the brand of masculine violence espoused by the Call of Duty franchise and the
Gears of War series), to the nature of the violence the player-spectator (and, by extension, the soldier) engages in (Thompson). Consequently, September 12 refuses to inscribe a masculine identity onto the avatar or the player.

In deploying these procedural rhetorics, the game pushes forward Frasca’s contention (detailed in his essay “Videogames of the Oppressed”) that interactive art ought routinely to force players to question its ideological assumptions. September 12 turns American imperialism on its head by forwarding an unorthodox proposal rarely found in war-themed video games: violence begets violence; terror begets terror. This proposal encourages the player to reflect critically on war video games that value violence against feminized enemy Others over diplomacy. Even more jarring is how the game refuses to indulge the often male player’s fantasy of aiming the crosshairs and shooting ballistics. Rather than rewarding the player with a peaceful townscape bereft of the threat of terror (a reward that other war video games would offer), the game utilizes a ubiquitous staple of the studio-produced war game—the fatal and indiscriminate explosion—in order to challenge the American-dominated narrative that America’s hyper-masculine military is a heroic and altruistic force for good. In other words, context is vital to our reading of this particular game. September 12 functions as a persuasive game precisely because it occupies a genre in a medium that predominately yields products that depict masculine men being rewarded for gunning down feminized enemy Others. In refusing to reward the player (with narrative progression or other such prizes), September 12 subverts these expectations and presents an alternative way for game developers to envision interactive war. Furthermore, September 12 refuses to form the player as a hyper-masculine subject (like Gears of War would), but instead asks that the player apprehend innocent (and terrorist) lives lost and share in the trauma of that loss.
*September 12* gives the player an alternative way of seeing war through the lens of a soldier and the state entity through which that soldier operates. It functions as a possible response to the way war becomes acceptable in the real world and, by extension, in a gameplay setting. Its minimalism enables and encourages the player-subject to apprehend civilian lives affected by war and resists the player’s desire to Other and feminize an enemy force. It accomplishes this feat by restricting the player’s agency to two alternatives—shoot, or refrain. Indeed, it challenges the essentialness of the term “enemy” by rendering violence as contingent, contextual, and unnecessary. In the process, *September 12* resists war games both before and after it in which soldiers’ lives during wartime become the primary focus of those narratives. By uncoupling gamic representations of war from the hyper-masculine soldier, developers might begin to imagine narratives that favor peace by deploying procedural rhetorics that enable the player to apprehend lives on both sides of a conflict.

The limitation of *September 12*, it seems to me, is in its politically questionable procedural rhetorics. It merely suggests a perspective we, as gamers, might indulge in—that of the perspective of civilians affected by the war—but its minimalistic nature does not enable the player to embody that alternative perspective, nor does the game detail the nuances of those perspectives during the transition from civilian to terrorist. Instead, the player still embodies the state apparatus through which the soldier operates (the crosshairs). While the crosshairs functions as a critique of state-mandated hegemonic masculine violence and the consequences of shooting ballistics through those crosshairs at a townscape below forces the player to question who terrorists really are, this lack of perspective limits the scope and impact of the narrative and renders a complex sociopolitical situation ironically simplistic. Nevertheless, these drawbacks are important precisely because they expose rhetorical limitations that developers must now
work to exceed, much like an editorial might respond to a scathing critique of American foreign policy that lacks important details. While these limitations appear to expose the flaws in minimalistic productions like it, *September 12* manages still to give us a view of a possible world where war videogames can be narratives of peace instead of narratives that favor hyper-masculine violence. If we are to accept, as Hutchings suggests we should, that state systems that utilize hyper-masculine violence as a tool to make war intelligible require a feminized enemy Other (exemplified by and mediated through the alien bodies of *Gears of War*) to continue said violence, then that violence might become unfeasible by stripping away that Otherness. Uniquely equipped with the technology and tools to realize this goal, game developers ought to utilize the tools of videogame technology to tell these narratives of affected civilians.

**This War of Mine: Deconstructing Violence, Masculinity, and Enemy Otherness**

Released in 2014, *This War of Mine* acts as a logical expansion on Frasca’s provocative experiment. It leaves behind the tired narratives of masculine men lugging heavy weaponry through destroyed cities to eradicate visible, reified threats and shifts the focus to civilians who usually become background characters in these narratives. This independently produced two-dimensional game takes place after an unspecified violent conflict has ravaged the fictional city of Pogoren. Stray survivors occupy half-crumbled buildings and scavenge for supplies to build rudimentary technologies for subsistence. During the daytime, unseen snipers pick off those wandering the streets for supplies. During the nighttime, while soldiers sleep, survivors feel safe enough to sift through piles of debris for random supplies.

As the game begins, the player is given control of three civilian avatars, but the game offers no instructions for how to play. The civilians have taken refuge in a dilapidated dwelling that the player views cross-sectionally like a doll’s house. One avatar is a celebrity chef named
Bruno who used to host a show on a now-defunct food network. Another is a reporter named Katia with serviceable social skills for bartering and avoiding violent conflict. The last is a local athlete named Pavle who is useful for scavenging at night. This is the only context offered to the player upon starting the game. Save for the pictures and short civilian character biographies tucked away in the lower right corner of the screen and circular, apparently clickable icons in each room, the player has no way of knowing how to play the game. The player must, like the survivors themselves, learn how to navigate this fictional wasteland.

The player’s ability to embody these three (and, later, more than three) civilian subject positions destabilizes the rigid hyper-masculine performances of *Gears of War* and the more fluid masculinities of *Mass Effect* by excising the military context. As a result, hyper-masculine military violence becomes an unexplained background narrative, while the player embodies civilian characters that have been adversely affected by hyper-masculine military violence. The ability to embody these multiple subject positions also brings us further than *Mass Effect* because we are able to apprehend a greater number of casualties of war. Whereas *Mass Effect* envisions war from a military perspective in which soldiers still take on the mantle of heroic defenders, *This War of Mine* places the player in the shoes of vulnerable civilians who must become tough and aggressive in order to survive in an inhospitable city. At the same time, as we shall see, many of these civilians are openly expressive about their emotional states in the absence of a society that enforces a specific masculine ontology on male bodies. Consequently, the usefulness of a civilian subject is not determined based on his or her ability to emotionally self-regulate in the same way that a soldier often must, but on what he or she is able to offer to the safe house and the other civilians who live there. In the absence of a governing body that enforces a specific
hegemonic masculine performance, then, a wealth of masculine and feminine performances become possible.

_This War of Mine_’s rules and procedures are structured such that the player feels the anxieties and sadness of being a civilian caught in a war, and it is these anxieties that the civilian avatars most readily express as they traverse the wasteland. These anxieties contrast heavily with the affective restraints imposed (by procedures) on the masculine performances of both _Gears of War_ and _Mass Effect_’s soldiers. Conveniently, because the soldiers in both _Gears of War_ and _Mass Effect_ have almost unlimited access to resources, they (and, by extension, the player) never feel the same anxieties as the civilians of _This War of Mine_. For example, _This War of Mine_ aims to make the player feel the futility of trying to maximize his use of time. Each day progresses in day and night cycles. A ten-minute increment takes five seconds to pass, meaning that the game runs off of an expedited clock whose speed cannot be slowed down to benefit novice players who may require extra time to think through a problem. During the daytime, the player must spend time wisely at home base building technologies like stoves, water catches, moonshine stills (for bartering with alcohol), beds, metal workshops, and heaters out of supplies gathered from the rubble. The player will eventually exhaust the supplies found in the dwelling. In this case, the player may choose to click a button to expedite the day toward evening in order to avoid witnessing the civilian avatars nervously smoking away their days (each day takes roughly ten minutes to pass, resulting in an awkward process of waiting absent in most video games). However, expediting the clock will risk missing the man who sometimes knocks on the door and asks to barter for goods that the household may require. At nighttime, the player must select between the co-op of civilians to determine who stays behind to sleep, who guards the dwelling, and who ventures out to find supplies on the streets and in abandoned buildings (it is usually
wisest for the player to select the civilian with the largest backpack). The player must be careful while having the avatar sift through the rubble of buildings for supplies, as some of the dilapidated dwellings may house stragglers intent on violently protecting their stashes at all costs. As time progresses and the civilians hunt for supplies, they will develop ailments like hunger, sickness, and fatigue. If a character should die for any reason, the other characters at home base will become depressed and mourn the loss of their comrade.

I submit that the anxiety and sadness created by these procedures constitute the central vulnerabilities of This War of Mine. These are vulnerabilities that popular war video games like Gears of War exclude (or ignore) in order to construct avatars that embody the hegemonic ideal of the hyper-masculine soldier. While Mass Effect, as I have argued, values diplomacy over aggression (a fact which questions the violent actions of Gears of War’s soldiers and enables the player-subject to embody alternative masculinities), the series still focuses on tough, logical, and, to a degree, emotionally regulated soldiers. By contrast, most of This War of Mine’s procedures aim to create anxieties in the player-subject in order to encourage the player to feel the damage done by military institutions that encourage hyper-masculine violence. As is the case with September 12, in the context of an industry that creates war games like Gears of War and Mass Effect, This War of Mine gains persuasive power precisely because it foregrounds these vulnerabilities in ways these other war video games do not. As a result, the player is encouraged to question how war video games before and after This War of Mine form masculine player-subjects.

Importantly, when the player begins the game, he has no idea what the clickable circular icons inside the house signify. In one black-and-white circle appears to be a crude drawing of a hill. In another, there is a wrench over what looks like a workbench. In still another, there is only
a splayed hand. As the day progresses rapidly toward night and the avatars get dangerously hungry, tired, and sick, the player must experimentally select different avatars to interact with these icons. Playing the game for a few minutes, the player learns slowly that the hill actually signifies a pile of rubble that requires a shovel to dig through, that the wrench signifies building survival gear out of scavenged scraps, and that the hand allows her either to interact with an object, or to sift through a pile of debris for supplies.

This requirement for the player to explore in order to decipher the environment constitutes a procedural rhetoric about the difficulty of surviving without any prior knowledge of how to do so. These procedural rhetorics subvert other war video games—in which soldiers are depicted as nearly invincible, hyper-masculine heroes—by enabling the player to feel what it might be like to experience the complicatedness of embodying a vulnerable civilian affected by war. For example, one might ask why the developers make the environment ambiguous. Why subvert the player’s expectation to be given instructions? After all, even a game as easy-to-understand as September 12 offers simple—albeit ideologically-charged—instructions before the player engages with the game. These ambiguities subvert depictions of the nearly invincible hyper-masculine subjects depicted in Gears of War. In order to understand—even feel vicariously—the violence of war, the player must first be as lost and confused as the civilian avatars. The player must feel what it is like to have to look through rubble for parts. The player will, at first, not know the function of each part, but after experimenting he will learn how to utilize what he finds. He must provide his own instructions by facing the inhospitable cityscape and making decisions that appear sometimes counter-intuitive (especially by the standards of games that offer the player instructions from the beginning). Most importantly, he must expect that that world will offer him only limited resources, and that, given time, he will become
hungry, alone, and tired. In other words, in order to feel how civilians might be affected by a war that has destroyed their city, the player must engage with that city in the way the civilians do. Consequently, the player-subject reads the violence of war as that which turns all subjects into vulnerable bodies. These vulnerable bodies are now at the mercy of the war-ravaged world around them. By enabling the player to embody multiple subject positions—all of which are vital to the other subjects’ survival—This War of Mine complicates other war games’ tendency to render hyper-masculine soldiers as nearly invincible aggressors.

The violence of This War of Mine provides further evidence of this vulnerability. Whereas with Gears of War and even Mass Effect violence is a central component that results in rewards for the player, in This War of Mine violence is the last resort. For example, at night, when the player must select which avatar will scavenge in other buildings for supplies, he quickly finds that many of the buildings are populated by stragglers or mendicants intent on fighting to protect their stashes of supplies. In my particular play through, I selected Katia, the reporter, to scavenge through an abandoned cottage. I quickly discovered that the cottage was not, in fact, abandoned, but was instead populated by a husband and wife. As I moved carefully through the cottage, my view limited to what was directly in front of my avatar, I saw a woman moving from room to room. Opening a door, my avatar confronted the woman behind it, who promptly ran up the stairs to grab her husband. A man descended the stairs just as I attempted to retreat. The man pulled a knife out and swung it at Katia’s chest. The only exit obscured and Katia’s health bar decreasing, I commanded Katia to swing a shovel at her assailant. The shovel struck the man’s head three times as he sliced into Katia. Critically injured and one swing away from dying, the man staggered back and hung his head. Suddenly, Katia refused my commands
and would not use her shovel to kill the man (I assume she shared my reservations). During her hesitation, the man sliced into Katia one last time and she fell to the ground, dead.

The game transitioned suddenly to the dwelling during the following day. A prompt emerged to alert me that Katia died the previous night during a chance encounter with another civilian. Throughout the day, my civilians felt sluggish. Bruno, the cook, walked around the house and lamented the death of his companion. He worked on building implements out of supplies, but he worked slower than usual. Meanwhile, Pavle, the local athlete, marinated in despair until the night fell, lamenting that she died too young, and that he could not believe that she was gone.

It was at this point during my experience that I realized *This War of Mine* had effectively persuaded me through its rhetorical processes to read the violence of war in a different way from that of *Gears of War*, *Mass Effect*, and even *September 12*. Recalling Delwiche’s contention that the player embodies rather than merely controls an avatar, by enforcing my investment in Katia’s wellbeing both through her (in my particular case unexpected) death and through the subsequent civilian avatars’ reactions to that death, Katia’s mortality here mounts a procedural rhetoric about the importance of apprehending the individual casualties of war. Most importantly, Katia’s vulnerability and eventual death—like the vulnerability of the man with whom Katia engaged in a fight to the death—responds to the tendency of other war video games to treat the heroic, hyper-masculine soldiers as nearly invincible machines of war. Both Katia and the man are here presented as attackers and their respective genders become irrelevant. Katia’s death is tragic and permanent, but her death is no less hypothetically tragic and permanent than her attacker’s. She cannot be revived by a simple game reset. Hence, the other characters must deal with her loss, their repeated laments echoing through the two-dimensional doll’s house as a depressing
reminder of the trauma she left behind, and as an admission of their own mortality. In this case, we might recall Marcus Fenix’s failure to register his friend, Dom’s, death so that he remains an unaffected machine of war. By contrast, *This War of Mine* contends that while it may be difficult (or even impossible) to apprehend the countless lives lost or affected by the violence of state-mandated warfare, one should work to apprehend them, anyway. Consequently, the game critiques hyper-masculine warfare by encouraging the player to identify not only with Katia, but also with the various subjects in the dwelling, together with Katia’s attackers. While the player may find himself initially frustrated with Katia’s assailants, it quickly becomes apparent that the assailants were merely protecting their dwelling, their scavenged goods, and themselves.

With this harrowing scene of violence in mind, what does the game suggest about enemy Others? Are enemies locatable in physical gendered bodies, or is enemy Otherness diffracted into the realm of ideology? The deceptive simplicity of *This War of Mine* constitutes a more challenging and subtle procedural rhetoric than *Gears of War, Mass Effect*, and *September 12* about the folly of establishing a feminized enemy force against which to wage war. Whereas *Gears of War* locates the enemy in feminized male bodies, *Mass Effect* locates the enemy in the abstract and de-gendered threat of ideology, and *September 12* locates the enemy in the ambiguously gendered state that enacts the violence, *This War of Mine* suggests that enemy Otherness is entirely imaginary. *Mass Effect* diverts its attentions entirely from the civilian populations affected by war and *September 12* narrows its scope in order to enforce the player’s investment in a political statement that even the authors admit is too limited. Expanding on these procedural rhetorics, *This War of Mine* suggests that while the state’s moral repugnance sets the stage for hyper-masculine violence, it is the conditions in which people live that establishes the need for survival through violent actions. Hence, the enemy other cannot be gendered because
the player recognizes himself as an enemy in relation to any assailants intent on protecting their scavenged goods. Moreover, the player reads into the civilian avatars’ struggle to survive a life of prior enculturation into civilization (i.e. Katia was a reporter, Bruno was a television chef, and Pavle was a local athlete). These prior lives partly determine how the player will utilize the avatars (e.g. Bruno would likely best be utilized as a cook or builder who remains in the dwelling). Any avatars who remain at night in the dwelling could just as easily become enemies to a civilian rummaging through their stock looking for food or supplies. Hence, in *This War of Mine* gender does not play into the construction of an enemy Other, a fact that subverts the hyper-masculine violence of *Gears of War* that relies on a feminized enemy force. In stark contrast to the state-sanctioned violence of *Gears of War*’s hyper-masculine American soldier analogues, *This War of Mine*’s civilians are not the hyper-masculine heroic figures deployed by a powerful state system, but the many-gendered civilians of a formerly prosperous state that has succumbed to anything but a just war.

After I lost Katia, my remaining civilian avatars had difficulty keeping themselves healthy and alive. Bruno became sick, tired, and hungry. Pavle became very sick, very tired, and very hungry. Prior to the violent incident that made surviving complicated, Katia’s role in the dwelling was vital. She spent time building beds, stoves, and stills out of supplies scavenged during the nighttime by Pavle. Meanwhile, Pavle slept in the bed during the daytime to maintain his health, and Bruno cooked meals when possible. In Katia’s absence, my dwelling fell apart and the other civilians for whom I felt responsible wasted away torturously before succumbing to their fate.

Katia’s death deploys an intricate procedural rhetoric about the complicatedness of violence and the necessity of the state’s prosperity. The loss of a single member in the dwelling
compromises the other civilians who live there. In a larger context, This War of Mine appears to suggest on its most basic level that cooperation is necessary for survival. While cooperation is valuable in both Gears of War and Mass Effect (e.g. soldiers must cooperate to achieve their ends), both game series suggest that enemies are beyond diplomacy. Apart from feeling the emotional and logistical difficulty of losing a vital member of her team, the player recognizes the necessity of maintaining peace. Conversely, the player also recognizes that, given certain conditions, violence may be the only road to survival. On the other hand, violence may clash with a civilian avatar’s worldview (a fact which explains Katia’s refusal to deal a fatal blow to her assailant). Consequently, the game does not make a cynical statement about the impossibility of peace, but the necessity of communicating with all subjects regardless of gender or positionality. In other words, the game argues that violence is only necessary where the larger state entity has failed to forestall violent conflict. More specifically, violence is only necessary where the state entity that has engaged in violent conflict has created the conditions for civilians to engage in said conflict. In this view, the player’s privileged position as a distant participant in fictional violence is not certain, but contingent.

Unlike war video games before or since, This War of Mine mounts a number of procedural rhetorics that reconfigure the masculine subject of war and question the efficacy of state-sanctioned violent conflict. This War of Mine expands on September 12, which deploys its own procedural rhetorics to comment on the inadvisability of developers to uncritically simulate brazen violence in gamic playgrounds. Furthermore, September 12 asks that the player recognize himself as an embodied subject of war by forcing him to reflect on his actions in programmed spaces. As responses to war games that uncritically mobilize violence as a way of entertaining the player, both September 12 and This War of Mine ask that the player (and, by extension,
developers) demand imaginative narratives of warfare that shift player-subjects’ attentions away from hyper-masculine soldiers who fight in wars toward those negatively affected (even traumatized) by the violence of war.

**Conclusions**

In the three chapters of this thesis I have sought to illustrate how war video games alternately reinscribe or reconfigure the (hyper-)masculine subject of war. In the first chapter, I have attempted to show that—in spite of its being mediated through the genre of science fiction—the *Gears of War* series of games constitutes a post-9/11 anxiety narrative that plays on fears associated with terrorism, femininity, and female control over male bodies. I have also attempted to show how these fears reinforce American military standards of hyper-masculinity as they become mapped onto male soldiers’ bodies and minds. In deploying its own procedural rhetorics that reinforce these themes, *Gears of War* is a dangerously persuasive product that reinscribes unrealistic and unimaginative standards of hegemonic hyper-masculinity onto male bodies. Reading war video games in this way enables both players and developers to envision less xenophobic narratives of peace. Peaceful war video game narratives can alter our understanding of how war operates, redefine what passes for acceptable performances of masculinity and femininity in a war context, and complicate American ideas surrounding what constitutes an enemy.

In the second chapter, I argued that *Mass Effect* is an example of a studio-produced video game series that complicates *Gears of War*’s themes by proposing via its procedural, visual, and textual rhetorics that enemies cannot technically be located in reified and feminized bodies, but are instead diffused into the realm of the abstract and de-gendered threat of ideology itself. In this particular case, *Mass Effect*’s central dread concerns organic life’s transgressive overuse of
technology to the degree that organic life gets absorbed by its own technological inventions; absorption into a technological apparatus, in this context, results in the erasure of one’s legible gender and overall identity. *Mass Effect* does present video game developers and players with an imaginative narrative (which encourages the player to make ethical decisions throughout with its conversation wheel mechanic) that complicates Western tendencies to feminize a reified force of enemy bodies and thereby reconfigures acceptable performances of masculinity during war. However, *Mass Effect* does not go far enough to question war games before or since because it does not enable the player to embody multiple subject positions (such as those of civilians adversely affected by war). *Mass Effect* also has a problematic relationship with liminal bodies, as its abstract enemy signifies the erasure of a legible (gender) identity. While *Mass Effect* does present us with a model for war video game narratives of peace that enable more complex masculine soldier identities to unfold, it cannot undo its anxieties surrounding the erasure of recognizable identities.

In the third and final chapter I argued that independently produced *September 12* and *This War of Mine* both move toward amending the tendency to map legible (masculine or feminine) identities onto the enemy and onto soldiers’ bodies. Furthermore, I argued that both of these games help us to apprehend civilian lives adversely affected by war and thereby enable us to occupy multiple subject positions. Frasca’s *September 12* deploys a number of procedural rhetorics to force us to question the very nature of terrorism, enemy Otherness, and hegemonic masculinity. Since the soldier is a crosshairs instead of a body (a mechanized sign of the state that mandates war and violence), that soldier’s identity is wholly ambiguous, even erased. Furthermore, the terrorists and civilians in the townscape below the crosshairs are rendered as equally ambiguous, as the explosion resulting from firing a missile indiscriminately kills off
members of the population. The civilians’ resultant transition into terrorists forces the player to question war games’ routine reinforcement and valorization of hyper-masculine violence during war by questioning the efficacy of said violence. Nevertheless, September 12 is haunted by its own limited telling of war that ignores the complex sociopolitical struggles that attend the complicated transition from civilian to terrorist. However, September 12 does present a vision for how war narratives might begin to apprehend the lives hurt by hyper-masculine violence.

This War of Mine appears to make amends for the hyper-masculine violence enacted in war video games before and since by presenting the player with a procedural space that enables him to embody multiple civilian subject positions. In effect, This War of Mine shifts the perspective from the hyper-masculine soldiers who fight in wars, to the civilians who often become background characters in those wars. While war is merely the backdrop of This War of Mine, these multiple civilian subject positions constitute all genders affected by state-sanctioned hyper-masculine violence. Even the enemy cannot be located in a gendered body, but is constructed by the conditions of war. Hence, the player’s chosen avatar (regardless of gender) can be killed in the nighttime by an assailant intent on protecting his or her scavenged goods, but that does not make the assailant the enemy. Ultimately, the enemy is constructed by a state-sanctioned war that complicates the lives of numerous civilians.

If Gears of War and Mass Effect are any indication, studio-produced war videogames have a long way to go before they will effectively tell narratives of peace. While Mass Effect does complicate Gears of War’s unimaginative simplicity by deconstructing our understanding of hyper-masculinity in war and mounting procedural rhetorics about the importance of diplomacy over aggressive, hegemonic masculine violence, it does not go far enough to challenge the player’s understanding of war itself. Mass Effect appears to value peace without
fully understanding what peaceful alternatives truly look like. Most importantly, *Mass Effect* is, perhaps, a little too optimistic about the state’s ability to generate allies in a fight toward a common goal. While *Mass Effect* does touch on the devastating effects war has on cities and the populations of civilians who occupy those cities, it never once enables the player to embody the role of an affected civilian avatar. Surprisingly, very few games enable the player to apprehend civilian lives through their direct deployment of innovative procedural rhetorics, but *September 12* and *This War of Mine* move in the right direction.

It is difficult to predict what might come after *This War of Mine*, but it is clear that video game developers have sought to harness the persuasive power of video games to tell narratives of peace instead of violence. I pointed out in the final chapter that *September 12* and *This War of Mine* are independent video games that only reach an exclusive market of consumers who care to search for them. By contrast, *Gears of War* and *Mass Effect* are studio-produced fare whose evidence of their uncritical reception—Bogost reminds us—can be found in their high critical rankings and sales figures. How might a challenging video game like *This War of Mine* gain popularity in a consumer environment that values these big budget narratives about war that rely on violence, the construction of a feminized enemy Other, and hyper-masculine protagonists in order to entertain? How might critical video game studies access a larger portion of the American population in order to illuminate the cultural anxieties intrinsic to these products that deploy war for entertainment? While the first question no doubt yields a complicated answer, it is the answer to the second question that might shift the public’s demand toward narratives of peace that nonetheless entertain.

Ultimately, this thesis has sought to provide a possible model for developers and player-subjects to unpack the computational arguments in war video games. Where developers can go
next is unclear, but the general goal should be for developers to imagine ways to enable player-subjects to embody multiple subject positions that signify developers’ awareness surrounding how gender, masculinity, femininity, and enemy Otherness realistically function during war. This means that video games about war ought to enable players to embody both the soldiers who fight in war and the civilians affected by it in order to grant perspectives on war that before seemed impossible.
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