

I mean it's one fictional relationship, what could it cost? — Romantic
videogame fanfiction: Exploring desire and self-insertion in players'
reinterpretation of player/videogame character relationships

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Abstract

This thesis aims to contribute to the field of fanfiction studies with the introduction of *tiefempfunden* into the academic lexicon through the combining of fanfiction studies, videogame theory and romance novel theory. This thesis aims to explore how authorial desires and fantasies bleed into fics, sometimes without the author consciously including them. This will be shown via the inclusion of certain relationship dynamics, and the descriptions given to characters and their appearance and personality.

The unique aspect that video games give to this thesis is that there is a dichotomy at play, namely that players are supposed to become immersed in a gameworld, and insert themselves into their playable character; whilst, in fanfiction there is a distinct rejection of any form of self-insertion within fics. What will be argued is that *tiefempfunden* offers an acceptable way of self-insertion in fics via the inclusion of desire and fantasy, given that romantic fanfictions often revolve entirely around desire, both of attractive characters players/authors are emotionally attached to, and of romantic situations and narratives. The *fictionality* of fics cannot be stated enough, for it is precisely this fictionality that allows space for desires and fantasies to be explored in a context far removed from real-life, and nowhere is this more obvious than within incest-fics.

Tiefempfunden may be a novel concept to academic discourse, but it is something that has existed within fics for a long time, as evidenced by the fact that some fics within this thesis herald from the early 2010s. This thesis is merely giving a name to something that has thus far been unstated and lends to romantic fics the attention and significance they deserve.

Content warning: this thesis contains explorations and conversations about topics that are controversial, even illegal, in real-life contexts. This thesis talks about such themes within a **fictional context**, revolving around **fictional characters**. Such content includes a chapter exploring fictional incest, as well as discussions/more minor mentions of non/dubious consent (rape), bestiality and underage sexual content. Less controversial relationships include student/teacher, adultery, and fraternization.

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“That’s how we’re gonna win. Not fighting what we hate. Saving what we love” — Rose Tico, *Star Wars – The Last Jedi*

“Sex has no value because it lives and dies in the present. But love doesn’t. Love is dangerous because it looks to the future” — *The New Pope*, S01E06

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List of abbreviations

AO3 — archive of our own (website)

AU — alternate universe

Dub/non-con — dubious/non-consent

Fic/fanfic — fanfiction

GTA V — Grand Theft Auto V (video game)

MMO — massively multiplayer online game

NPC — non-playable character

OC — original character

PC — playable character

PWP — plot what plot

RPG — role-playing game

SWTOR — Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic (video game)

List of terms

AAA game — a game with the highest level of budget, often developed by hundreds of people working for a large developer

Canon — content contained within original texts: the ‘official’ version of the narrative/characters etc.

Dub/non-con fics — fics—generally sexually explicit—involving sexual consent which is unclear or absent. Given the debated and contentious nature of rape, these fics are themselves controversial

Fandom — the group of fans around a particular text

Fanfiction — fan produced written texts that alter the canon/original text in some fashion

Fluff — light-hearted fics that contain little serious drama and usually focus upon more ordinary aspects of life like having coffee or watching a movie etc. as well as affection between characters

Genfic — fanfiction that contains no romantic/sexual content or relationship pairings

Kink — a kink is a sexual preference, and can encompass sexual acts, fetishes, or desires

Non-playable character — these are all of the other characters featured in a game, and can range from highly developed characters with many lines of dialogue, to a character with one or two lines of ambient dialogue

Playable character — the character that a player physically controls during gameplay, though a game can contain more than one playable character

PWP/plot what plot — short, self-contained fics that focus entirely upon a sexual scenario/fantasy and usually contains explicit language/imagery

Role-playing game — a genre of video game that places emphasis on fleshed out narratives and characterisation, and often contain vast, complex worlds. Player choice, and the affect it has upon the world, is an important part of this genre, and players can often customise the appearance of their playable character

Ship — short for ‘relationship’, and refers to a romantic/sexual pairing between two characters

Ship name — a nickname given to a romantic/sexual pairing, often a combination of the pair’s names

Introduction “In a world full of choices I know I am enough.”¹

What is fanfiction? It is hard to give an exact definition of what exactly ‘fanfiction’ is, but it could be suggested that it results when someone takes an existing work and modifies it—for without modification, it would be plagiarism, which is to be avoided. There are as many fanfics as there are people writing them, and the subject matters are vast, including overarching genres like genfics, which contain no romantic or sexual content, to fics containing niche, specialised explorations of sexual desires.

Fanfiction encompasses a vast ocean of desires, wishes and what-ifs, a bright hot sun of infinite possibilities that could overwhelm if considered for too long. Fanfiction authors tend to avoid this by adhering to niche corners of that ocean, exploring these true desires within a more manageably restricted area where like-minded individuals also reside, sharing acceptance of these desires no matter how bizarre or outlandish they appear. The particular corner of ocean this thesis will focus upon is romantic video game fanfiction. Furthermore, many of the fanfics explored within this thesis contain examples of inappropriate relationships, namely a relationship that is in some way socially unacceptable.

Throughout all fanfiction, however, there are conventions, rules, and expectations. One cardinal rule revolves around self-insertion, where some aspect of the author bleeds into the fic, possibly in an overt fashion which then disrupts the fictionality of fics. Personally, I have found that the assumption by many fic authors is that a self-insert is a flawlessly perfect and special character who infiltrates into every atom of a fic-universe, reflecting the author’s unfiltered ego. Because the self-insert represents self-indulgent desire, it should be avoided at all costs. Such transgression will only be accepted if the author is a first-time, inexperienced fic-author and therefore does not know any better,² or if it is included deliberately as a pastiche of the concept.³

What this thesis will argue, through exploration of the unique hybridity allowed by interpreting games into fic, is that some form of self-insertion occurs within nearly every *romantic* fanfiction via authorial desire and fantasy, even if it not a conscious inclusion of Self. This act that I am proposing, is called *tiefempfunden*. Along with the unique narratives,

¹ *Real Housewives of Durban*, Nonku Williams, season 1 tagline

² Patrycja Biniek “Evolution of the Mary Sue Character in Works by Wattpad Social Platform Users”, *Polish Journal of English Studies* 4.1(2018) 35–55, p. 44.

³ Effie Sapuridis and Maria K. Alberto, “Self-Insert Fanfiction As Digital Technology Of The Self”, *Humanities*, 11.3 (2022), 68 <https://doi.org/10.3390/h11030068>, p. 5.

romances, and immersions that video games provide, and the overt fictionality and endless possibility that comes under the umbrella of fanfiction, *tiefempfunden* aims to shed light on how authorial desire innately shines through, and affects, romantic narratives, and how this form of self-insertion can be acceptable within fanfiction conventions because exploring those desires and relationships are more important than fidelity to the original text.

Tiefempfunden

The concept of *tiefempfunden* is an as yet unexplored concept within academia and ties this thesis together. It is a theory that has been simmering within me for a number of years, emerging during my bachelor's degree where I began to reflect on how I approach writing fics, and how I deal with self-insertion, or lack thereof.

In a nutshell, *tiefempfunden* is the act of self-insertion into a fic via *authorial desires*.

Self-insertion is, at its core, the author placing some aspect of themselves into a fic, irrespective of the specific form that self-insertion might take; for it is not an all or nothing act, ranging from an author actually inserting themselves into a fic as a character, to something at more surface level, such as an author and character sharing a love of cats or drinking wine. It can also mean something far more subtle and nuanced, potentially easy to overlook, or implying little hints and inclusions that only the author will recognise, for *tiefempfunden* is ultimately about *authors and their self-insertion*, not readers and their experiences gained by reading fics, perhaps misinterpreting the author's intent, or even the characters written about—this line can become blurred, given the unique aspect of personalised playable characters within games. Self-insertion, and therefore *tiefempfunden*, could even arguably encompass the very act of writing fanfiction, given that every author has their own voice and writing style, and inevitably leaves a part of themselves within a fic.

I argue that *tiefempfunden* may be a novel theory, but it is not a novel thing in and of itself. I would suggest it is something that has existed for as long as people have been writing fanfiction, which leads to the desire being a major factor by definition. *Tiefempfunden* may be focused upon authors and *their* intents, the way *they* insert themselves into the text, but *tiefempfunden* cannot work without the emotional attachment and/or attraction to fictional characters provided by the writers that is then extended to the reader, because that attachment/attraction provides the *desire* to write fic and self-insert in the first place, as well as the drive to explore romantic and sexual desires, and different relationship types/dynamics. It could be perceived as a form of symbiosis, like the dark and light side of the Force (as

introduced within *Star Wars*): one cannot exist without the other—the author and fictional characters, and the emotions that revolve around them as well as their readers’ responses are all intertwined.

The word *tiefempfunden* was chosen due to its German definition: meaning both ‘deeply rooted’ and ‘deeply felt’, which reflects the core concept of romantic and sexual desires that are explored within this thesis, and within the fics examined. To feel so deeply—not only about desires but also about the characters explored within the fics—suggests a deeper level of engagement than can perhaps be reached though merely ‘playing a video game’.

Throughout this thesis, and within this introduction to the academic concept of *tiefempfunden*, I mention both *tiefempfunden* and self-insertion. The two terms can be used somewhat interchangeably—though *tiefempfunden* is of course far more than just self-insertion *per se*—however whenever only self-insertion is mentioned within this thesis, I am referring to the concept of *tiefempfunden*, and ‘self-insertion’ should therefore be read in this context. When authorial desire and fantasy are mentioned, they too are utilised in this vein, as *tiefempfunden*, even when it is unsaid, is present, and relevant to every aspect and theory discussed within this thesis.

Within fanfiction circles there is an ongoing struggle: whether authors should be able to profit from fanfiction and turn it into a profession, or whether it should remain as a hobby-centric art. Some of this confliction, as Anne Jamison argues,

stems from fear of legal consequences, some from an exaggerated sense of the originality of the source material as opposed to the fanworks it inspires, and some from taking pride in “fic for fic’s sake” and the ethos of the gift economy. The fan culture tenet that “thou shalt not profit from fanworks” has been, depending on who you talk to, an almost sacred and inviolate, wholly necessary founding principle of fandom.⁴

The idea behind this is that usually fanfiction is a *labour of love*. It is not meant to be published by large publishing corporations; authors are not meant to make money from it. Fanfiction is meant to be a gift for readers, authors, and wider fandom/fanfiction communities: fic *is* the be all and end all. The fact that fic authors can truly write about what they love—about their sometimes bizarre or niche fantasies—as well as the fact that

⁴ Anne Jamison, *Fic: Why Fanfiction Is Taking Over the World* (Dallas: Smart Pop 2013), p. 259.

ultimately fic-authors do not have to appeal or even consider their readers, unlike ‘professionally’ published novels,⁵ means that *tiefempfunden* can take place because the risk of failure that comes with professional publishing is removed. As long as an author possesses love, energy, and time to sit at a computer or pick up a pen, they can write fanfiction, and they can explore their desires and fantasies.

This means that *tiefempfunden* romantic fanfiction may have several things in common with romance novels, not least because both romance novels and romantic fanfiction share a fundamental exploration of desire and fantasy, as expressed by Kathleen Gilles Seidel, who has been writing romance novels since the 1980s:

I assert that fantasy is the most important element in the appeal of popular fiction. I’m not talking only about texts populated by dragons, scorceresses [*sic*], and vampires. My idea of fantasy is much broader than that, and I focus my definition not on the text but on the reader, the writer, and their experiences.

[...]

Fantasy is the power that drives the reading and writing of romances. It is the energy, the magic, the content. Fantasies permeate the books. Critics often refer to a single romance fantasy, but the fantasies are everywhere in the books: in the plot, the character, and the setting.

The plot of a romance novel—especially its happy ending—sets up fantasies about the way the world ought to work.

[...]

Because of the ending’s guarantee, the heroine has license to behave, during the unfolding of the plot, in ways that most of us don’t dare.⁶

While a happy ending is not necessarily a requirement within romantic fanfictions—as explored in chapter two—the fantasy and fictionality allows the heroine—who is sometimes the conduit through which self-insertion occurs—to act in ways that are not possible in real-life, or perhaps not realistic, but are nevertheless desired. It is fascinating, however, that Seidel focuses the conceptualisation of fantasy upon the *reader* and *author* rather than the text itself, and this thesis will employ similar analyses of fics to show where and how desire

⁵ Francesca Coppa, *Fanfiction Reader: Folk Tales for the Digital Age* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), p. 4.

⁶ Kathleen Gilles Seidel “Judge me by the joy I bring”, in *Dangerous Men & Adventurous Women: Romance Writers On The Appeal Of the Romance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), pp. 159-161.

shines through these narratives, even within fics where little to nothing about the author is known—after all, *tiefempfunden* is not always consciously included, and therefore may not always be signposted by the author.

Sometimes a fic comes into existence because an author is attracted to a particular character, and there will be explorations into how authors insert themselves via personalised playable characters such as the heroine romancing the beloved hero. Sometimes *tiefempfunden* is enacted via obvious self-insertion within reader—and original character—fics.

Though sometimes *tiefempfunden* is not about being attracted to a character. Sometimes it is more about authorial desire and self-insertion via the exploration of forbidden and inappropriate relationships such as infidelity, fraternization, or incest—relationship dynamics that would not be possible in real-life. Often it is the acknowledgement of fanfiction’s fictionality that helps to allow such a relationship to take place in the first place.

In combining game studies, fanfiction theory and romance novel theory, this thesis aims to introduce *tiefempfunden* into the academic lexicon as a way of helping to understand how authorial desire and fantasy is included and explored within romantic fanfictions, even when nothing about the author is known.

Adaptation Theory

Adaptation theory is a vast subject and central to explaining fanfiction as a whole, despite the fact that I have found the word ‘adaptation’ is often avoided within academic texts on fanfiction in favour of other words like appropriation, borrowing, bricolage or poaching. If the word *adaptation* is used, it is often used to describe other forms of adaptation, such as a film adaptation of a book.

Nevertheless, fanfiction is all about adaptation, about taking a beloved text and bending it to the will and desires of the author. It is also different from other forms of adaptation, for unlike a film producer trying to get a book made into a film, a fic author does not have to worry about recouping financial investments. Fic authors do not even have to really worry about pleasing their reader audiences and keeping ‘true’ to an original text, for many authors already know their audience and their likes and expectations, or at the very least an author will know that they will personally gain satisfaction from their personal retelling of a story. Within fanfiction adaptation there is much variance and nuance, with different fandoms

having their own conventions and expectations, and because adapting different source mediums comes with its own set of problems.

At its core, *adaptation*—as a concept, not just in relation to fanfiction—is the act of transforming an existing text into a new interpretation.⁷ While it may be often assumed that this also means a transition from one medium to another, like a book being adapted into a film, this is not always the case because adaptation can certainly occur within the same medium. For example *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* is an adaptation of the Jane Austen novel *Pride and Prejudice*, but they are both books, employing a written medium.

It could be argued that adaptations have a cultural hierarchy of ‘worth’, for the choice to begin adapting literary works into films or TV shows, as well as general contemporary popular media adaptations, has been described as being derivative and lowering the cultural tone.⁸ Nevertheless, the commercial appeal of such adaptations cannot be denied, and such adaptations have earned billions of dollars in revenue as well as creating new cultural markers, creating new fandoms and therefore new fanfictions. Many *Harry Potter* fanfictions are based upon the actors seen in the films rather than the characters described in the original books because of how steeped in our modern popular culture the films are.

Linda Hutcheon and Siobhan O’Flynn in their text *A Theory of Adaptation*, which gives a broad overview of adaptation theory as a whole, details early on three different perspectives of adaptation, that can apply to any medium:

First, seen as a formal entity or product, an adaptation is an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works. This “transcoding” can involve a shift of medium (a poem to a film) or genre (an epic to a novel), or a change of frame and therefore context: telling the same story from a different point of view, for instance, can create a manifestly different interpretation.

[...]

Second, as a process of creation, the act of adaptation always involves both (re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation; this has been called both appropriation and salvaging, depending on your perspective.

[...]

⁷ Linda Hutcheon and Siobhan O’Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 2nd edn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), p. 7.

⁸ Hutcheon and O’Flynn, p. 2.

Third, seen from the perspective of its process of reception, adaptation is a form of intertextuality: we experience adaptations (as adaptations) as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation.⁹

All three perspectives are correct in their own disenable way, because an adaptation can be all three of these forms or just one. Fanfiction is all of these, for often the original text is not a written one, so transcoding and change of context must occur, which often takes the form of a lesser character—often someone other than the original protagonist—taking centre stage and having their story told. Reinterpretation is also central to fanfiction—it would not be in the title of this thesis otherwise—because if a fic author lifted large pieces of the original text verbatim it would be considered plagiarism, which is never acceptable, even in fanfiction.

While it may seem obvious that fics are intertextual, for they source from other mediums describable in terms of artistic originality or appropriation, the use of the word *memory* within the third definition is important, for fics can be taken to another creative extreme. A fic can bear almost no passing resemblance to its original text: an author can change the world, characters, narrative, yet there will still be that trace-memory of the original text, some essence which will mean a reader will take one glance at a fic and think ‘*yes, I recognise this*’. Repetition is also a key factor in fanfiction, for the same relationship, the same scenario or moment can be written by a thousand authors, but each retelling will be different, each will explore or highlight or omit a different thing—and therefore result in something original.

Hutcheon and O’Flynn also bring up Darwin’s theory of evolution in relation to adaptation:

To think of narrative adaptation in terms of a story’s fit and its process of mutation or adjustment, through adaptation, to a particular cultural environment is something I find suggestive. Stories also evolve by adaptation and are not immutable over time. Sometimes, like biological adaptation, cultural adaptation involves migration to favorable conditions: stories travel to different cultures and different media. In short, stories adapt just as they are adapted.¹⁰

This is certainly true of fanfiction. A fic written in the 1980s, with its societal contexts, expectations, convention etc. may well not be seen in a fic written today, for trends come and go, and the world is a very different place to what it was forty years ago. Fics do not exist in a

⁹ Hutcheon and O’Flynn, pp. 7-8.

¹⁰ Hutcheon and O’Flynn, p. 31.

vacuum; like the novel, they reflect current popular culture, world events and social acceptability.

Nevertheless, there are things that remain steadfast within fanfics—sexual kinks, tropes, and beloved characters. It would be a misnomer to state that, because fics evolve over time, this means earlier fics are ‘worse’ or not as well written as later fics. As seen with Classic literary novels, something written three hundred years ago can be just as emotionally resonant and moving and brilliant as a novel published in 2023. Instead, the evolution of fanfiction comes with societal shifts given the original texts being adapted, as well as cultural changes and popular cultural focuses that shift and change as time goes on.

Julie Sanders, in their text *Adaptation and Appropriation*, speaks about film adaptations of other mediums, that

the full impact of the film adaptation depends upon the audience’s awareness of an explicit relationship to a source text. In expectation of this most formal adaptations carry the same title as their source text. The desire to make the relationship with the source explicit links to the manner in which the responses to adaptations depend upon a complex invocation of ideas of similarity and difference.¹¹

Fanfiction is all about explicit awareness of the original text, for it is expected that a reader will know at least the basic premises of said original text—the setting, main characters, main narratives etc.—meaning that things will often be assumed, small details not explained. An author may well choose to describe a planetary landscape from the original text, but it will be for the purposes of helping the reader to imagine the scene in their minds rather than explaining it all for the first time. In-world phrases and concepts will similarly be utilised as if the reader knows instantly what is being talked about, for example the specifics of biotics in *Mass Effect* would not be explained, but to an outsider the concept would be entirely unknown and confusing. If a reader was unfamiliar this would also mean that a fic would be likely to have less emotional impact, would not evoke as strong feelings than with a reader who is intimately familiar with the original source.

This explicit relationship to the original text goes far beyond just the content within fanfics. Whilst the vast majority of fics do not share the same title as the original text, markers such as tags—which will be explained further in the next section—reveal what original text the fic

¹¹ Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. 22.

is based upon. In previous years, fic authors would often provide a disclaimer that the characters and story etc. belonged to the original creators, not the author. This perhaps might answer why the words ‘borrow’ and ‘poach’ are often used instead of adaptation, for fanfic authors are very aware that they are only temporarily borrowing the beloved characters and worlds and narratives already in the common domain for their own purposes for a short time. The original work is not theirs, but with the self-insertion, I argue, runs within all fics there is simultaneously a form of ownership taking place: an author placing their mark upon the world through the inclusion of themselves, an act that would not be possible unless they wrote an original take as a variation of the original text.

It would be impossible to explain every facet of adaptation theory in this short introduction, as well as unnecessary, for this thesis concerns itself with a very specific form of adaptation: the adaptation of video games, an ‘active’ medium, into a written ‘passive’ one. This thesis goes further than that, in that it is about adapting romantic narratives—often found in the original game but limited by hardware and software capabilities and societal difficulties with exploring sexual content in games—into the more limitless confines of fanfiction, and of how desire drives, and limits, how the romantic narrative appears in a fic. There is also the adaptation of the playable-character-player/author-self, and how this combined self is often still entangled in the finished fic.

Even if not explicitly stated, much of this thesis deals with some form of adaptation, because fanfiction would not exist without adaptation, without the imagination of many, many fic-author’s minds. Otherwise it would merely be a lesser form of plagiarism, devoid of any creativity or original thought. After all, is it really possible to have a truly original work that can argue to be devoid of *any* prior cultural influence or inspiration?

Fanfiction theory

The focus of this thesis lies upon fanfiction case studies, and the original contribution to knowledge lies within the fanfiction field, meaning that fanfiction studies is vitally important to this thesis. Fanfiction studies is an offshoot of the similar academic area of fandom studies.

The two seminal texts that sparked off fandom and fanfiction studies are *Textual Poachers* by Henry Jenkins, and *Enterprising Women* by Camille Bacon-Smith. Both were published in 1992, yet both explored fandoms/fanfictions of the 1980s. Although ‘fanfiction’, as modern

concept, has existed since the 1960s with the emergence of *Star Trek*.¹² Nevertheless, it has been argued that the broader concept of *fanfiction*—taking an existing work and playing with, altering, furthering it—has existed for hundreds, if not thousands of years.¹³

For many years, since modern fanfiction’s inception and before the rise of the internet, the primary way of distributing fanfiction was through hand-made ‘zines’.¹⁴ These had to be distributed cautiously, because creating fanfiction was technically illegal due to copyright issues.¹⁵ Even once fanfiction accessibility shifted to being mostly online, there were still issues with copyright, and legal threats towards fic-authors. The most (in)famous case of this was the late author Anne Rice, who threatened many an author with legal repercussion for writing fics within the *Interview with a Vampire* universe.¹⁶

Nowadays, the legal restrictions on fanfiction have eased up, for it is recognised as a unique form of writing.¹⁷ In 2013 Heidi Tandy wrote:

in the last ten years, in cases utterly unrelated to fan creativity, US courts have expanded the definitions of “fair use” and transformative works. At the same time, the Organization for Transformative Works and their fanfiction archive, archiveofourown.org, have invested in their own servers so as not to worry that some ISP will overreact to a bogus and legally untenable complaint from a copyright holder and delete thousands of person-hours of transformative works.¹⁸

The use of the word *transformative* is important, for it pivots fanfiction away from something that merely copies existing works, and also rejects the notion that fic-authors are just stealing ideas and worlds and characters. Instead, it sheds a far more positive light upon fanfiction, as something that takes an existing work and runs with it. To offer a personal insight resulting from reading/writing fanfiction for over thirteen years, transformation reflects the fact that fanfiction allows authors to explore concepts that would hardly ever be explored in the

¹² Francesca Coppa, “A Brief History of Media Fandom”, in *Fan Fiction And Fan Communities In The Age Of The Internet* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2006), p. 46.

¹³ Jamison, pp. 26-36.

¹⁴ Camille Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), pp. 44-48.

¹⁵ Bacon-Smith, pp. 3-4.

¹⁶ Heidi Tandy, “How Harry Potter Fanfic Changed the World (or at Least the Internet)”, in *Fic: Why Fanfiction Is Taking Over the World* (Dallas: Smart Pop 2013), p. 165.

¹⁷ This ‘fair use’ protection is a uniquely US legality of fanfiction and other transformative works. In the UK, as far as I could find within my research, the law only has protections regarding pastiche and parody, which does not really cover fanfiction. Nevertheless, sites like AO3 are US-based, so they consider all works uploaded there to fall under US jurisdiction and are therefore protected from copyright takedowns.

¹⁸ Tandy, p. 169.

original text, for example an incestuous relationship never even considered within the original text, or asking the question of ‘what if Leia was the one who grew up on Tatooine instead of Luke in *Star Wars A New Hope*?’ Transformative thinking implies innovation, something new blossoming from the pre-existing soil.

In her book *The Fanfiction Reader: Folk Tales for the Digital Age*, Francesca Coppa, who is one of the founders of Organization for Transformative Works—which also created the fic-archive Archive of Our Own (AO3)—remarks that it is only in recent times that there has been the concept of ‘ownership’ over stories, combined with the rise of the Author¹⁹ in the Barthesian sense, of authorial presence and authorial dominance over meaning within a text. However, Copyrighting writing as a concept began to exist in the early 18th century.²⁰ Coppa also remarks that within the past few decades many fanfictions are being based upon stories and narratives that

aren’t even owned by individual auteurs, but by huge corporate conglomerates: that is, movie studios, television networks, production companies, and, increasingly, online behemoths like Apple, Netflix, Amazon, and Google. [...] It is only in such a system—where storytelling has been industrialized to the point that our shared culture is owned by others—that a category like “fanfiction” makes sense. [...] Fanfiction is what happened to folk culture: to the appropriation of fables and the retellings of local legends, to the elaborations of tall tales and drinking songs and ghost stories told round the campfire.²¹

Perhaps the most well-known modern example of this industrialized storytelling would be the Marvel Cinematic Universe, comprised of films, TV shows, comics, and books, as well as extensive physical merchandising. Despite its huge social reach, and the vast number of canonical stories already told within this universe, fic-authors have still been able to create a vast array of other stories, have been able to expand and explore the already expansive worlds and stories told within the original texts.

Fanfiction offers a space where things can be explored that are not possible in real-life—either due to illegality, or social unacceptability—or impossible due to video game hardware/software/budgetary limitations. Fics also allow a space where authors can imagine

¹⁹ Coppa, *Fanfiction Reader*, p. 6.

²⁰ Kristina Busse “The Return of the Author”, in *A Companion to Media Authorship*, (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), p. 51.

²¹ Coppa, *Fanfiction Reader*, p. 7.

themselves within the framework of a character's mind, can explore thought and reasonings within a particular film scene that would not be possible in the actual film, especially as thought/personal narrative can be hard to translate within film. Such elements can usually only be conveyed via voiceovers or characters physically expressing their thoughts. A long, detailed exploration of thought and mind can easily feel at home in a fic, but it would likely become quickly boring in film if a character spent minutes monologing internally or externally.

Within all fanfictions there is a dividing line: fics that are Genfics, and Everything Else.

A genfic, is short for 'general fic', and most readers expect it to contain no form of romantic/relationship/sexual content whatsoever, whereas all other fics would contain some of the aforementioned content. While there are a great many fanfictions that focus upon sex, and describe it in very explicit detail, this thesis will focus upon those fics that emphasise *relationships* over pure explicit content, given sexual fanfictions often lend less time to aspects of personality or deeper plot narrative.

However, it is undeniable that sexual fics will usually contain some form of *tiefempfunden* given that authors would likely prefer to stick to their own sexual kinks and would avoid personal squicks—sexual kinks an author finds unpleasant. Ultimately, an author decides what to include and what not to include. Focusing on sexual desires/fantasies would also mean missing out on the more hidden, unobvious desires explored within more romantic-based fics, which could also exclude a variety of nuanced and nonsexual desires that authors can choose to include within their fics.

Henry Jenkins, the founding father of fandom studies, recognises that within all fics—regardless of how near or far away from an original text a fic is, whether it focuses on relationships or friendships or purely sexual content—there is a common level of reinterpretation unfolding. Taking De Certeau's concept of 'scribbling in the margins'²² Jenkins gives agency to viewers that become authors:

The fans' particular viewing stance—at once ironically distant, playfully close—sparks a recognition that the program is open to intervention and active appropriation. [...] [fanfiction authors] pull characters and narrative issues from the margins; they

²² Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 2nd edn (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 154 -155.

focus on details that are excessive or peripheral to the primary plots but gain significance within the fans' own conceptions of the series.²³

This active (re)interpretation of texts mentioned by Jenkins is still prevalent today, even though dynamics between creators of books/tv/games and authors/readers have shifted considerably. Fans are still reworking texts to suit their desires, to explore new possibilities, or to even just go beyond the hardware/budget/time etc. of the game world, especially given videogames are often limited by the aforementioned aspects. There are many characters, plots, worlds, quests, etc. that are cut from games because of these limitations, and sometimes developers will express regret that something was not included that should have been.

Within much of early fanfiction there was a focus upon *slash fiction*—stories that feature male-male relationships. Slash originated within the *Star Trek* fanfiction community, namely those who wrote K/S—Kirk slash Spock—fanfictions,²⁴ hence the name slash. Bacon-Smith states that many K/S fics are sexually graphic in nature, often depicting the first sexual experience between Kirk and Spock.²⁵ In *Textual Poachers*, an entire chapter is dedicated to looking at slash fics, with many more references throughout the text, whereas *Enterprising Women* is almost exclusively about slash fiction.

This emphasis by Jenkins and Bacon-Smith is important, because it has meant that the vast majority of academic texts within fanfiction studies focuses upon slash fiction, whilst discussions around fanfictions that contain straight pairings are far rarer. In order to provide a new perspective, this thesis is only looking at fanfictions with male/female relationships—not due to any personal dislike or problem with slash fiction—because there are gaps in knowledge when it comes to discussions around fanfictions with straight pairings. In her exploration of identity within *Twilight* fanfiction, Sanna Lehtonen remarks that

When contrasted to queer fan fictions, heterosexual romance may seem more conservative [...] In actuality, heterosexual romance fiction consists of a variety of gendered discourses, and writing and reading romance as activities have a long history of being associated with both moral conservatism and dubious immorality [...] Writing, reading and rewriting romance are key discursive practices where norms for

²³ Jenkins, p. 155.

²⁴ Jenkins, p. 185.

²⁵ Bacon-Smith, p. 229.

gendered and sexualised behaviour are created and maintained but can also be challenged and reimagined.²⁶

From personal experience it is possible to see that many heterosexual fics explore, question, and push the boundaries within ‘traditional’ relationship dynamics. Simply because a fic contains a hero and heroine, or borrows from romance novel conventions, does not exclude space for the forging of new roles and territories. Heterosexual fics have space for gendered and sexualised behaviours to be challenged, for real-life to be altered into something far more fantastical, especially when it comes to fics that contain some form of inappropriate relationship with regard to social unacceptability. This is even more relevant when pertaining to video game fics, for often the heroine of the fic will be the playable character, meaning they are often far more powerful, competent, and higher up in the chain of command than the hero. This will be explored more fully in the first chapter, but I argue that if a fic contains a heterosexual relationship, it is not automatically conservative or beholden to traditional societal roles and expectations of male/female relationship dynamics.

Fics also do not exist in a vacuum.²⁷ They are shaped by other fanfictions, the original text, and sometimes other fans/authors.²⁸ As mentioned before, copyright issues have, until recent years, been an issue, especially when it came to hosting fanfictions in a social space once physical, printed collections of fanfictions became an unsustainable way of collating and publishing fanfictions in the wake of the digital age. Originally Fanfiction.net (FF.net), created in the late 1990s, included fics from many different source-materials, and quickly became a very popular place to upload fics. However, in 2002 and again in 2012, the so-called ‘FF.net purges’ occurred, where NC-17, or ‘mature rated’ fics with sexual content, were removed from the site without warning.²⁹

In 2007 on the website LiveJournal—a website popular with fandom communities rather than being strictly for fanfictions, but fics were also published here—the so-called ‘LiveJournal strikethrough’ occurred, similar to the FF.net purge, where overnight hundreds of blogs and

²⁶ Sanna Lehtonen, “Writing Oneself Into Someone Else’s Story – Experiments With Identity And Speculative Life Writing In Twilight Fan Fiction”, *Fafnir – Nordic Journal Of Science Fiction And Fantasy Research*, 2.2 (2015), 7–18, pp. 8-9.

²⁷ Jamison, p. 379.

²⁸ Abigail Derecho, “Archontic Literature: A Definition, a History, and Several Theories of Fan Fiction”, in *Fan Fiction And Fan Communities In The Age Of The Internet* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2006), pp. 64-65.

²⁹ “FanFiction.Net’s NC-17 Purges: 2002 and 2012”, *fanlore.org* https://fanlore.org/wiki/FanFiction.Net%27s_NC-17_Purges:_2002_and_2012 [accessed 29 September 2023]

communities were suspended for containing ‘indecent content’ following the complaints of a right-wing conservative Christian group called ‘Warriors for Innocence’. Many fannish blogs were also deleted simply for containing sexual content that was deemed ‘inappropriate’ and un-Christian.³⁰

Both the first FF.net purge and LiveJournal strikethrough led to the non-profit website Archive of Our Own (AO3) being created in 2008 as a safe space for all fanfictions, and this quickly became the main platform to upload fanfiction. The use of the word ‘archive’ is important, for it posits itself as a storage facility which allows *any* kind of transformative work to be uploaded, regardless of whether it has racism, bestiality or any other illegal or socially unacceptable content in order to prevent something like the FF.net purge or Strikethrough from occurring again.

Within AO3’s terms of service, the only things banned completely from the site are links to real-life child pornography, malware, and classified information.³¹ It is important to note that all these elements are within a real-world context, meaning that the content in-fic is not restricted. This allowance of any content-type meant that it was really the only viable option when it came to sourcing fics for this thesis, especially as many fics explored within this thesis contain some form of inappropriateness and mature content which is not allowed elsewhere on major fan-sites—another popular fic website Wattpad states in its content guidelines that it does not allow illegal sex acts like incest or bestiality to be included in fics uploaded to the site.³²

The process of tagging a fic, where authors indicate content such as age-ratings, characters, relationships, sexual kinks, and other major content aspects, is seen as a vital part of publishing fanfics, and can “easily classify a story into many categories at once without insisting on a hierarchy among them”,³³ allowing readers to both find the things they want to read, as well as avoid the things they do not want to encounter.

³⁰ “Strikethrough and Boldthrough”, *fanlore.org* https://fanlore.org/wiki/Strikethrough_and_Boldthrough [accessed 29 September 2023]

³¹ “Terms of Service #IV.H.”, *Archiveofourown.Org* <https://archiveofourown.org/tos#content> [accessed 29 September 2023]

³² “Content Guidelines”, *Wattpad.com* <https://policies.wattpad.com/content> [accessed 29 September 2023]

³³ Jamison, p. 55.

An AO3 uploaded fic will usually look something like this:

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Underage
Category:	F/M
Fandom:	Assassin's Creed – All Media Types
Relationship:	Evie Frye/Jacob Frye
Characters:	Jacob Frye, Evie Frye, Ethan Frye, Henry Green
Additional Tags:	Sibling Incest, Twincest, Consensual Underage Sex, the twins are 17, All The Tropes, I'm Sorry, Porn With Plot, Light Dom/sub, Utter trash, Dirty Talk, Alternate Universe – Modern Setting
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of the Very Good Bad Thing series • Next Work –
Stats:	Published: 2016-10-19 Completed: 2017-01-31 Words: 54211 Chapters: 22/22 Comments: 337 Kudos: 423 Bookmarks: 32 Hits: 18094

Are You Mine?

PoetHrotsvitha

Summary:

Frycest Modern AU. Underage warning for 17. A plot somehow snuck into this but it's still pretty much straight smut.

Fig. 1 What a typical AO3 fanfiction header will look like.

The first tag, the rating, is at the top for a reason: to give readers an idea of the level of mature content within a fic. This explicit tag means there is a near-certain chance the fic will contain explicit sexual description. Regardless of where a fic is being uploaded online, there will almost always be some kind of rating system to let readers know of the level of sexual content, given its proliferation within so much of fanfiction. The second tag, the Archive Warning, is unique to AO3 and gives a more specific idea of potentially distressing content within a fic. There are four archive warnings: rape/non-con, underage, graphic descriptions of violence, and major character death.³⁴ This list is not exhaustive, and many content warnings are left up to the author to include in the lower tags. It is interesting that the relationship, tagged in the above image as Evie Frye/Jacob Frye, comes rather high up in the order revealing the importance of relationships within fics. Given there is a / between Evie and Jacob, a reader will know it's a sexual/romantic relationship, for an & between names implies a platonic friendship. An X/x between names will also imply a romantic/sexual relationship between characters, though this practice has waned in favour of using / instead.

The additional tags allow authors to be as detailed or as ambiguous as they want to be in terms of warning/content/tropes/themes. Including such detailed tags are a feature that is

³⁴ "Posting and Editing FAQ | Archive of Our Own", *Archiveofourown.Org* https://archiveofourown.org/faq/posting-and-editing?language_id=en#posteditwarnings [accessed 29 September 2023]

unique to AO3. This freedom means that the author can also add-in humorous/meta/self-referential tags, instead of merely stating what tropes/kinks/genres etc. the fic contains. Tags are almost always accompanied by a summary, which usually states the narrative points in the fic, but can also contain additional warnings/comments from the author.

Sometimes the author will reveal their motivations or desires within the summary of their fic, which certainly does help when exploring the act of *tiefempfunden* when analysing fics throughout this thesis; but is not a necessity for it is the inclusion of desire and fantasy *within the fic* that reveals whether a form of self-insertion is taking place.

Game studies

This thesis balances the line between game studies and fanfiction theory, and while the contribution to knowledge lies within the field of fanfiction theory, this thesis would not be possible without the unique aspects to video games that are translated into fanfiction. The concept of the playable character (PC) is especially vital to this thesis, for it helps to explore and explain the varying ways in which player-authors are able to insert themselves into a fic in a way acceptable to readers, though this will be, of course, studied in greater detail in chapters one and two.

It is only within the 2010s that academics began looking at relationships which exist within the game as a stand-alone, (usually) optional side-narrative. This is partially because sexual content in games has historically overshadowed relationships owing to the controversial nature of sex within game, for including sex—explicit or not—is often a far more controversial than including a relationship.³⁵ The controversiality of sexual content could also help to answer why it is only in the last few decades that Western³⁶ AAA³⁷ games, usually role-playing games (RPGs), have begun to include in-game romances as a standard part of gameplay.

³⁵ The most infamous example of controversial sexual content is likely the Hot Coffee mod within *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (2004, Rockstar Games), which became a widespread media controversy, despite the fact that the mini game was not in the final release and was only found when modders went through the game's code and reinstated the mini game within a mod.

³⁶ Historically games have been Western (i.e.. American, Canadian, and British) or Japanese, given they were the two main regions producing games. Nowadays many more countries develop games, but the term has stuck, and instead the term Western now points to the overall style/theme of the game, as well as giving a set of pre-existing expectations. A Japanese RPG like *Final Fantasy* is very different to *Dragon Age*, a Western RPG.

³⁷ AAA denotes the highest level of budgets given to a game. They are the Marvel blockbusters of video games, as opposed to smaller indie games. However it must be said that budget does not mean a game will be 'good' or have emotionally impactful narratives and characters.

The rationale behind focusing on more romantic fanfics, over those that are purely sexual, means this thesis is choosing to focus more upon relationships that are found in-game, occurring between the PC and a non-playable character (NPC) over games that focus on sexual encounters. This choice is also because narratives within an in-game romances are often explored further in-fic, meaning there is a baseline with which to compare what the author has chosen to alter, expand or get rid of entirely; exploring romantic relationships means also a far wider field of desires and fantasies can be explored that may not be overtly present within in-game sexual encounters.

Two main texts have emerged within the still-burgeoning field of examining in-game relationships within AAA Western games: *Game Love* ed. by Jessica Enevold and Esther MacCallum-Stewart (2015) and *Digital Love* ed. by Heidi McDonald (2018). Both texts focus on how relationships have become an important part of an increasing number of games, especially RPGs, and how these relationships—and the characters you can romance—emotionally affect players.

All the games studied within this thesis are games that have 30+ hours of narrative storylines. With some you can spend over 100 hours playing within that world, which is a considerable amount of time to spend potentially interacting with fictional characters, both playable and non-playable. In forming attraction, the initial meeting between player/PC and the NPC is incredibly important,³⁸ but time spent *with* characters is equally as important,³⁹ as it is only with time that a fuller, more complete picture of a character emerges, and deeper personality is revealed.

Within academic discourse, the focus is often given to the PC of a game, which is primarily how a player interacts with the gameworld. Within games there are two types of PC—the pre-defined, non-customisable PC and the personal-PC, which is usually the type of PC found in RPGs. With a personal-PC, players can customise aspects of their character, like appearance, name, or voice. A personal-PC, sometimes known as an ‘avatar’, is supposed to be a *personal* insight into the game world. The lines between player and PC are often blurred, which is meant to happen and often encouraged by developers: players are *meant* to be pretending to

³⁸ Jennifer E. Killham, Arden Osthof, and Jana Stadeler “Designing Video Game Characters for Romantic Attachment” in *Digital Love: Romance and Sexuality in Video Games*, ed. by Heidi McDonald (Boca Roton: Taylor & Francis, 2018), p. 197.

³⁹ Killham, Osthof and Stadeler, p. 198.

be someone else, to allow the real world to melt away as they inhabit the gameworld for a period of time.

Annika Waern utilises an already existing theory called *bleed*, which is a concept used primarily within tabletop and live action role-playing communities, but not within a compute/console video game context. This distinction is important, for both tabletop and live action role-playing scenarios contain multiple people in the same space, interacting with each other and the ‘imagined’ gameworld, though often physical props are utilised to facilitate immersion and heightened imagination. While LAN parties and multiplayer games exist, they are a fundamentally different form of play from everyone sitting at a table, talking freely, with a flexible narrative—that is, nevertheless, still at the gamemaster’s discretion—along with a gameworld that is largely imagined rather than 3D graphics displayed on a monitor that players individually interact with.

This distinction, and difference, between tabletop/live action RPGs and video game RPGs is important because the close-human contact of tabletop/live action RPGs explains why *bleed* is needed, for it “capitalizes on the (tabletop and role-playing) design ideal of a fictional character in a fictional context, as this creates an alibi—a safe zone—for exploring emotionally complex or difficult subjects”.⁴⁰ It is far more emotionally difficult to commit morally grey acts when there are other people sitting around reacting in real-time. Even within a multiplayer RPG, there is usually still a screen and computer graphics and a visible PC, as well as physical distance, that separates players—other players are usually not in the room, and therefore there is a large spatial buffer as well as a moral one.

Within single player RPGs, this safe zone almost collapses in upon itself at the same time as the importance of the PC grows. For the PC becomes a human/alien/creature sized safe zone, especially when engaging with emotionally difficult topics and in-game relationships and attraction towards characters or other morally difficult decisions. As will be explored in chapter two, the ability within many RPG video games to customise a player’s PC leads to an even greater connection between player and PC and increasing emotions felt between them, but also renders the safe zone more unstable as the player and PC become more of a singular entity. However, the virtuality of the gameworld also *becomes* a form of safe zone, a reminder to the player that this is not real, that there can be distance between player and

⁴⁰ Annika Waern, “Bleed In The Context Of A Computer Game”, in *Game Love Essays On Play And Affection*, (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, inc., Publishers, 2015), p. 41.

PC/gameworld even as the player immerses themselves in the gameworld to an extent that reality begins to fall away. This idea of real-but-also-not-real is a key concept within this thesis, especially when it comes to explaining how *genuine, real* emotions and attraction can flow between gameworld and player, and how players can come to find a fictional character made up of polygons and textures attractive enough to potentially write hundreds of thousands of words of fanfiction inspired by them.

Waern describes *bleed* as a dichotomy whereby, “players must at the same time distinguish themselves from their characters *and* identify with them”,⁴¹ showing that emotions are a two-way street. Waern describes a *bleed-in* effect, where the player influences the avatar, and a *bleed-out* effect, where the “player cannot distance himself/herself from the (simulated) emotions of the character”.⁴² This is an important distinction as it helps to explain how attraction can leap from PC to player, and also helps to cement that, ultimately, players are the ones who choose the in-game choices, who choose which in-game romance to follow based on who the *player* finds attractive. After all, a PC will always be attracted to an NPC within a romance, as it is written and hard-coded into the dialogue, but the player has to choose to enter into the romance first, even if they are only choosing a romance because it fits in with their personal-PC’s personality. However the two-way-street means there is also the implication that whilst the player plays through a romance narrative, the romantic feelings felt between PC and NPC may bleed into the player and help explain why players would subsequently choose to write fanfictions about characters they are attracted to.

Within both fics and games the common element is the *player*, for they are both playing games and writing fics, and it is ultimately their will being enacted, for often a player will only engage with the in-game romances that they want to and will write fics containing the characters they are attracted to. Given the mirror-relationship between player and PC and the ultimate dominance by the player, this means that in many cases the PC is nothing more than a vehicle to facilitate the relationship between the player and character they are attracted to, which posits the PC in a unique position of being both an individual character, separate from the player, and simultaneously a puppet enacting the player’s wishes.

Regarding controversial content within games, which I do briefly explore in chapter one, it is usually *sexual* content that provokes controversy, regardless of whether the scene is sexually

⁴¹ Waern, p. 42.

⁴² Waern, p. 42.

explicit or more ambiguous. Games can also be controversial in relation to violent, criminal, or ‘immoral’ content, and I am aware of the well-studied areas of ethics, morality, and consideration of ‘dubious acts’ within some games studies—a number of texts from this field do feature within this thesis.

Ethics and morality in video games have generated discussion for years, such as Miguel Sicart’s 2009 text *The Ethics of Computer Games* or Matt McCormick’s 2001 essay on *Is it wrong to play violent video games?*, and these areas do go hand in hand with these areas of games studies that relate to the aforementioned areas of controversial sexual content, transgressive acts, and dark play within games—and were all considered when formulating this thesis., Richard Schechner’s 1993 text, for example, *The Future of Ritual*, discusses the concept of dark play, defining it within five points:

- 1 is physically risky;
- 2 involves intentional confusion or concealment of the frame “this is play”;
- 3 may continue actions from early childhood;
- 4 only occasionally demands make believe;
- 5 plays out alternative selves. The play frame may be so disturbed or disrupted that the players themselves are not sure if they are playing or not—their actions become play retroactively: the events are what they are, but by telling these events, by reperforming them as narratives, they are cast as play.⁴³

While Schechner is referring to dark play in a real-life context, the points can quite easily be applied to fictional contexts, for interacting with a game or fic involves real emotions, and these emotions can affect players/writers long after the game has ended. The idea, too, of ‘alternate selves’ does fit in well with the concepts of utilising PCs and OCs within fics, acting to act as a conduit through which authors can enact their form of *tiefempfunden* in a safe environment.

However, after exploring these various areas, I made the decision to focus upon in-game *relationships* within this thesis, none of which have been considered particularly controversial given they are dialogue-and affection-based, usually with a singular sex scene

⁴³ Richard Schechner, *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 38-39.

that either fades to black or leaves much to the imagination. I chose this route because I wanted to focus upon *sustained, love-based relationships* over sexual content or transgressive sexual acts such as rape, because in-game and in-fic relationships develop over time, and focusing upon relationships over sex allows for a greater connection to character and narrative—and more opportunities for *tiefempfunden*.

I also wanted to focus upon *fanfiction* exploring the infinite ways within which authors can alter and explore a canon text, rather than adhering to the scripted, often formulaic romance narratives seen in-game. Games are a springboard in this thesis from which fic-authors are free to take the reins and run within their imaginings—for often in-game narratives and events are left unsaid as it would become repetitive to rewrite/explain battles and dialogue already in evidence. Fics fill in these gaps, even when explicitly talking about in-game events.

My wish to focus upon *relationships*, in both fic and games over purely sexual content is reflected by the majority of the fics studied not being sexually explicit, and in the few cases where they are, it is the relationship that is still the primary focus. Admittedly, while I am focusing upon fics that contain varying forms of inappropriate relationship, I have discovered—and explore throughout this thesis—that such relationships are often structured utilising traditional romance narratives.

During my fic-research process, I also found that many fics containing a form of inappropriateness actually appear to be quite conventional in terms of their narrative, relationship-dynamics and dramatic arc—they are focused upon love-filled, *sustainable* relationships, the inappropriateness acknowledged, but not the main feature. It is also worth restating these in-game relationships are not seen as controversial in-game, and often any controversiality is added later by the fic-author, especially when it comes to more niche, and controversial relationship dynamics such as incest.

When fanfiction initially emerged, it was seen as a transgressive act, and I like to think that focusing upon inappropriate relationships continues this spirit of creative anarchy, the notion that authors are free to write about whatever fantasy and desire they wish, leaving their own traces within a fic through narrative, writing style, characterisation. There is also something intrinsically satisfying about authors taking a basic, formulaic, ‘vanilla’ (conventional) in-game romance, that is relegated to side-quests and plays out the same for every player and

turn that romance into the star of the show, a narrative that is filled with love and commitment and so much *more*.

Romance novel theory

Romance, as a literary concept, has existed for thousands of years, going as far back as the Ancient Greeks, despite it not being an established concept within Classical literature.⁴⁴ Were one to imagine the original romantic text, the medieval romances between Tristan and Isolde or Lancelot and Guinevere may well come to mind; in the several hundred years hence, romance narratives have changed considerably. One could imagine that modern romance novels have little in common with these historic texts, and on one hand that would be entirely correct, but on the other, romantic *narratives* have also not really changed at all.

Love, the exploration thereof and study of relationships and their dynamics, still remains at the heart of romantic narratives. This thesis focuses upon modern romance novel theory that revolves around specifically American/British romance novels, for the two major publishers of mass-market romance novels—*Mills & Boon* and *Harlequin*—are British and Canadian respectively. These two publishers, and the types of romance novels they produce, have often been considered as a ‘trashy’, trivial literary subgenre, representing the lowest forms of intellectual content. However, as Lynne Pearce argues in her essay on popular romance and its readers:

what is most degenerate is also most *defining* [...] the template originating in these mass-produced romances that has become the twenty-first-century’s base-line definition of romance; and largely, I would contend, because they are where the “deep structures” [...], conventions, and clichés are laid most bare and become most repeatable. Impossible as it might be to define in terms of a more complex literary history, in this – its most popular and, indeed, most “degenerate” form – romance is a “story” that everyone knows.⁴⁵

Pearce’s endorsement of the ‘trashy’ romance novel is important, for one defining feature of the mass-produced romance novel is that each and every one has certain conventions it must adhere to in order to be considered worthy of publication. These conventions are central to

⁴⁴ Judith Weiss, “Insular Beginnings: Anglo-Norman Romance”, in *A Companion to Romance: From Classical to Contemporary* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), p. 27.

⁴⁵ Lynne Pearce, “Popular Romance and its Readers”, in *A Companion to Romance: From Classical to Contemporary* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), p. 538.

the genre and will be explored within this thesis as being central to the fanfictions studied. These elements are fascinating, for a fic-author may have never read a romance novel, ‘trashy’ or not, yet these core romantic elements still remain as vital in creating a successful romance narrative.

Pamela Regis, in her history of the romance novel, argues that there are eight core elements that are central to *any* romance novel/narrative:

the initial state of society in which heroine and hero must court, the meeting between heroine and hero, the barrier to the union of heroine and hero, the attraction between the heroine and hero, the declaration of love between heroine and hero, the point of ritual death, the recognition by heroine and hero of the means to overcome the barrier, and the betrothal.⁴⁶

Many of these elements, namely the initial meeting between hero and heroine, the barrier/conflict and happy ending will be explored within this thesis as central tenets of romantic fanfiction. The concept of soulmates, which is often unstated but equally central to romantic fiction, is also a critical part of exploring how romantic fanfiction can borrow or poach—to use the forementioned Henry Jenkins term—romantic conventions within contemporary fanfics. As noted above, it is not necessary for a fic-author to have ever read a mass-market romance novel because such romance narratives are not unique to the romance novel: they are embedded within popular culture, immersed in TV shows, rom-com films, and other novel genres.

Even when one looks purely at mass-market romance novel formats, other elements within these eight core elements have evolved over the last forty or so years. For example, the rape of the heroine by the hero or another male rival—that was detailed in founding text *Reading the Romance* by Janice A. Radway—is no longer a prerequisite within more contemporary romance novels, given that rape is reprehensible and certainly not desirable within any healthy relationship,⁴⁷ nor is it something a modern heroine needs to go through. Similarly, the last of the core eight elements—the betrothal—is not a necessity of modern romance novels; a modern woman is no longer required to get-married-and-have-children to reach

⁴⁶ Pamela Regis, *A Natural History of The Romance Novel* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), p. 38.

⁴⁷ Catherine M Roach, *Happily Ever After* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2016), p. 185.

their happy ending.⁴⁸ Instead a happy, functioning relationship is perhaps perceived as being more important and relevant in today's world.

This is perhaps especially true for fics, as within games the climax of an in-game relationship is usually a sex-scene and declaration of love or affection for one another rather than any sort of marriage or proposal, for often the relationship is still in its initial stages of being. There are some, but not many, games that contain an in-game romance which results in a marriage, but usually they are only possible with strict prerequisites. Two such romances lie within *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare, 2009) where a human female noble PC can choose to marry Alistair, who is a romanceable NPC and heir to the Ferelden throne. In *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare, 2014) a female PC who romances Cullen Rutherford can choose to marry him in the four-year post-endgame story expansion *Trespasser*. Both of these marriages are player-dependant and occur after the main in-game storyline. They are also not a requirement of the happy ending, and this is perhaps reflected within the fics written not just about the *Dragon Age* universe, but within other games as well.

It would be difficult to refute the statement that romance narratives are *everywhere*, regardless of whether they are advertised as such, as they are seeped within Western culture and ideals, and have been for a very, very long time. They are almost innate, meaning that even if a fic-author decries *Mills & Boon* novels as pure trash that provide no value to society or romance narratives, there will still be a number of similarities between the 'trash' and the fic, similarities core to *any* romance narrative. Perhaps the most important feature is that all these romance narratives contain *love* at their core, love in all its permutations.

Methodology

This thesis came into fruition though my own many years of writing, reading, and interacting with both fanfictions and wider fandoms. During my previous degrees I began to uncover academic views and ideas about fanfiction, and due to my authorial knowledge of fanfictions began to see where the gaps lay in academia, especially in relation to video game fanfictions, and knew that this was the area I wanted to focus on. I chose to utilise my skills as a *fanaca*⁴⁹—to poach Henry Jenkins's acafan terminology—though it is flipped for the fan part

⁴⁸ Roach, p. 166.

⁴⁹ Henry Jenkins is considered to be the father of fanfiction studies, owing to his seminal 1992 text *Textual Poachers*. The term 'acafan', short for academic fan, does not appear within this text, only academic lexicon at a later date, though the exact year is unknown. Nevertheless it has become an important descriptor for academics who are also fans, for it demonstrates that an academic can be on the 'inside' and can therefore fully understand the emotions and desires a fan can go through when engaging with fan material like games and fics.

of me will always supersede the academic, to ensure that the controversial and niche relationship dynamics I explore within this thesis were handled with the delicate, understanding care they require and deserve.

Much of fanfiction studies is imbued with feminist beliefs and context, though this is often unstated and merely implied throughout the text. This thesis is therefore taking a similar approach, focusing upon the narrower concepts needed rather than looking too far outwards and being limited by focusing purely upon explicitly feminist material, especially as this thesis deals with varying inappropriate relationships, some which are illegal in real-life, which have their own contentious issues. I therefore required a more nuanced approach in order to properly explore and celebrate the positive aspects of romance conventions.

This thesis focuses on highlighting textual analysis of fics instead of their authors, given that anonymity is both prized and encouraged within fanfiction circles. I also wanted to focus upon the characters themselves, and how the authors have chosen to explore them *within the fictions*, rather than within wider fandom spaces, meaning a textual analysis-based approach was the most logical choice. I also wanted to demonstrate how *tiefempfunden*, the bleed-through of romantic/sexual desires, occurs even when nothing about the author is known—for the author is central to *tiefempfunden* working, even with anonymity.

In choosing what fics to use in this thesis, the issue emerged of where to source the fanfictions. There are three main websites for uploading broad, multi-fandom fanfictions: fanfiction.net, Wattpad and AO3. Fanfiction.net was disregarded owing to its limited tagging system, and afore explored banning of mature rated fics. Wattpad was also disregarded, given its tagging system is basic and search function ineffective; the site also does not allow any fics that contain any illegal sexual acts, such as incest, rendering it unusable, given relationships discussed within this thesis are illegal in real-life.

This left AO3. As mentioned before, AO3 considers itself to be an archive rather than ‘just a place to upload fanfic’, meaning there are fewer restrictions around what fics contain, although the etiquette is of course that such content be properly tagged and accounted for. This is augmented by the fact that AO3 has an incredibly detailed tagging system coupled with a space for authors to write a lengthy summary; if wished, as well as notes at the end of a chapter authors can impart their desires/intentions if wished, which can be helpful in potential readers analysing fics.

Then came the considerations of the criteria to select fics. The first choice made was to generally limit fics to 6000 words, to ensure that they were clear, concise examples of the character/content without being too bogged down by long, overarching narratives that would be incomprehensible by anyone not familiar with the characters/relationships. Tags became an important part of filtering fics, though I usually only used broader category tags to ensure I had as many fics as possible to choose from. For the purposes of research, usually I would start with the broader relationships, like ‘Kaidan Alenko/female Shepard’,⁵⁰ and then select fics based upon the author summary. Sometimes I would use a further tag to narrow things down, for example ‘fraternization’ or ‘student/teacher’ or ‘incest’ when looking for examples of those particular relationships, though generally just having the relationship and length filters in play was enough.

However, I will state that this was only possible because I have many years of personal experience with finding fics on AO3. Had I not had pre-existing experience of finding fics I would have found this exercise a lot harder, and the process would have taken far longer. This pre-existing knowledge was central to choosing the fics for this thesis, and I will also admit that I purposefully chose characters/relationships that I had pre-existing experience with to allow me to use this knowledge mindfully. If I had used characters I knew nothing about, then the fic-selection-process would have been far more difficult, and the in-depth knowledge of the expectations, personality or conventions surrounding a character and the implications for fic would have been lost.

Given the focus upon fics, there are a number of fic case studies within this thesis. Each fic was not chosen because it is a ‘good’ fic i.e. well-written, but because the content within reflected my chosen subject matter in a clear, concise way. Fics containing Kaidan Alenko feature the most predominantly through this thesis, given his complex character in-game, and the wealth of fics containing traces of *tiefempfunden*. Other characters include Solas (*Dragon Age: Inquisition*), Michael De Santa (*Grand Theft Auto V*), Trevor Philips (*Grand Theft Auto V*) and Malavai Quinn (*Star Wars: The Old Republic*), all of which were chosen for the self-insertion that could be visibly seen within fanfictions featuring them. The two relationships chosen for the fourth chapter—the Frye twins (*Assassin’s Creed Syndicate*) and Ryder twins (*Mass Effect Andromeda*)—were not chosen because they are the most popular incestuous

⁵⁰ From the *Mass Effect* series (2007-2012, BioWare)

game relationships, but because of personal familiarity which gave me insight into fictional incest, given self-insertion within such fics can be subtle and difficult to spot.

The evolution of in-game relationships

There are many game characters who have had fanfictions written about them, and to attempt a discussion and analysis about them all would be near-impossible, and lead to a loss in direction or effective analysis of fanfictions with detail. It was decided, almost from the beginning, that this thesis would focus upon a select few characters from a select few games. In particular, this thesis will focus upon games that *already have in-game romances included within their narratives*, with the exception of *Grand Theft Auto V* which provides a unique perspective in regard to character/relationships. Having an existing relationship means there is a baseline that fics can bounce off from/be in reference to; and also ensures that the characters and fics could be chosen carefully and with consideration instead of trying to cram in as many characters as possible.

There have been many developer-included romantic relationships in games over the past few decades, but in the early 2000s BioWare transformed the concept of in-game relationships for Western RPGs with customisable PCs⁵¹ by including player-initiated, fleshed-out romances with full narrative arcs spanning much of the main narrative arc of the game, namely within the games *Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn* (2000), *Star Wars Knights of the Old Republic* (2003), *Mass Effect* (2007) and *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009). These games had the knock-on effect of causing other developers to begin including relationships and romances in their own RPGs, like Bethesda's *Skyrim* (2011) and *Fallout 4* (2015). It is notable that earlier games of both series did not contain any in-game romances, they were added in as in-game romances became a wanted inclusion by players, and generally including several romance options for the PC has become a far more common and accepted mechanic as part of an RPG than it was in the 90s and early 2000s before BioWare released these games.

BioWare also changed the conventions for the cousin to RPGs—the MMO (massively multiplayer online game)—by including romances in their first MMO, *Star Wars: The Old Republic* (2011) (SWTOR). Before, 'relationships' would only occur between players, and would not be something hardcoded within the main narrative. Including a romance within the

⁵¹ The Witcher series has contained sexual encounters since its first game, released in 2007, but the PC Geralt is not customisable, and the 'romances' are often mere sexual encounters that take place over a single night, not a sustained relationship, plus the game does not contain the same level of narrative choice as a BioWare game.

main storyline had not been done before, but to BioWare, including a romance narrative similar to their single-player games, “felt like a natural inclusion”⁵² given their experience with including romance options, as well as the fact that by this time, there was an expectation from fans that a BioWare game would contain some form of in-game romance. However, this does not seem to have caused other developers to begin including romances in their MMOs, and this may have been purely due to the fact that BioWare chose to highlight story roleplaying within SWTOR.

BioWare’s inclusion of romance narratives has been felt most keenly within single-player Western RPGs, given that in-game romances have become a fan-wanted staple when previously they were not. In recent years more and more game genres, not just RPGs, are including romance narratives, showing that players are willing to form emotional connections with characters, and want meaningful narratives as part of the gameplay experience.

The games studied within this thesis

Mass Effect (BioWare, 2007), the first game in the *Mass Effect* trilogy, contains one of the earliest examples of a fully fleshed relationship that spans most of the game, which is also integrated with the overarching main narrative and characters lauded for being incredibly well-written; nearly every major character has a strong attached fanbase. The relationship/characters to be explored within this thesis will be the PC Shepard and Kaidan Alenko—who is romanceable by a female Shepard. The main benefit of this relationship is that it can potentially span the three *Mass Effect* games—*Mass Effect*, *Mass Effect 2*, *Mass Effect 3*—meaning there is space for character development of both Shepard and Kaidan as they, and their relationship, evolves within the trilogy, and will be explored throughout the entire thesis. In chapter one, Shepard as a personal-PC/OC will be explored. In chapter two Kaidan and Shepard’s relationship will be explored in the context of fraternization. Chapter three will explore how Kaidan’s attractiveness is depicted within fics, whereas chapter four will explore the lowest point of Shepard and Kaidan’s relationship within the romantic trope of the barrier/conflict.

As already mentioned, within most MMOs romances have not been considered a necessary part of the game-narrative. Nevertheless, BioWare fans expect their games to contain some form of in-game romance, *Star Wars: The Old Republic* (SWTOR) (BioWare, 2011)

⁵² Jessica Sliwinski, “It’s Time for This Jedi to Get Laid” in *Digital Love: Romance and Sexuality in Video Games*, ed. by Heidi McDonald (Boca Rotan: Taylor & Francis, 2018), p. 109.

included. It contains in-game romances similar to their single player games, with one for female-PCs, and one for male-PCs, though more romance options were added in later expansions. SWTOR's fanfiction presence is relatively small compared to other game-fandoms, but its unique status as an MMO with romances makes it a very interesting game to focus upon, especially the character of Malavai Quinn, a companion that a female Sith Warrior PC can romance within the main narrative. The Sith Warrior is one of the playable classes within SWTOR. Malavai was chosen as a focus over other PCs and romance options since Malavai directly betrays the Sith Warrior, yet players have remained attached to him whilst exploring this betrayal throughout the various fanfictions written about him. The fact that such a betrayal—where Malavai *literally* tries to kill the Sith Warrior—is not enough to sever attraction to Malavai is an intriguing point to explore within fanfiction. This relationship will be explored in chapter four in relation to the barrier/conflict.

Within *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, (BioWare, 2014), the third game in the *Dragon Age* series, a female-elf-PC, known as the Inquisitor, can romance the elven mage, Solas. The fact that Solas is much older than the Inquisitor, and that he teaches the Inquisitor about various topics that Solas assumes the Inquisitor knows near-to-nothing about, means that there have been arguments that it is a type of student-teacher relationship. This type of relationship dynamic is fascinating, for it shows that the student/teacher is a sexual/romantic desire that is wanted and frequently explored by authors, which may well reflect the popularity of student/teacher trope within popular media. This student/teacher relationship will be explored in chapter two that revolves around inappropriate relationships. The Inquisitor, as a playable character, will also be explored along with Shepard in chapter one exploring customisable PCs in relation to self-insertion.

The outlier to this thesis is the controversial game *Grand Theft Auto V* (GTAV) (Rockstar North, 2013, enhanced edition 2015). This game was chosen because the *Grand Theft Auto* is not an RPG, unlike the BioWare games, it is classed as action-adventure and therefore offers an entirely different set of desires and fantasies that can be explored. GTAV features three pre-defined PCs, namely Michael De Santa, Trevor Philips, and Franklin Clinton, as well as a narrative that cannot be altered much by the player. There are also no player-choosable romances aside from prostitute encounters; Michael is married to Amanda, Trevor has a fling with kidnappee Patricia, and Franklin pines for his ex, Tanisha. None of these major relationships can be altered by the player. Michael's in-game narrative between he and his wife Amanda, focuses upon their infidelities, which is particularly fascinating given societal

concepts of infidelity,⁵³ but there are also a number of fics that place Michael with the reader or an original female character, bypassing Amanda completely in order to make the author/reader, and their desires/fantasies, centre stage. Michael will be explored in chapter two in regard to the inappropriate relationship of infidelity, in chapter three in regard to fic-author descriptions of his appearances and how that ties in with interpretations of masculinity in the hyper-masculine world of GTAV. Trevor Philips will be explored in chapter one as an example of reader-fics, where some of the most overt self-insertion takes place.

Within the fifth chapter, that focuses upon fic-incest, characters from the games *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* (Ubisoft, 2015) and *Mass Effect Andromeda* (BioWare, 2017) will be assessed. Both these games have fanfictions containing incestuous pairings, despite incest not appearing whatsoever in-game. In the fics, the games themselves are less important than the characters being placed within incestuous relationships—the twins Evie and Jacob Frye, PCs of *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*, the Ryder twins, one of which is a potential PC, within *Mass Effect Andromeda*. The fact that incest is being *added* to these formally, purely sibling, relationships is intriguing as it shows how fic authors are willing to add an intensity such as incest into these relationships to further explore the dynamics within. It is also a reinforcement of the fictionality of fics and reveals how author imaginings do not have to be desires that they would want to enact or encounter in real-life. *Assassin's Creed Brotherhood* (Ubisoft, 2010) contains a rare in-game incestuous relationship, between siblings Cesare and Lucrezia Borgia, based upon the real-life historical figures, yet it is not a popular pairing, which may seem odd given it could be assumed players/authors would leap upon the chance to write about a canonical incestuous relationship instead of author-inserted ones.

Chapter breakdowns

Chapter one will form the foundational core of this thesis through a discussion around inappropriate relationships, for each of the fic-relationships studied within this thesis contains some level of inappropriateness. The main text this chapter will be drawing from is the chapter *Scarlet Letters and Whited Sepulchres: The Social Marking of Relationships as "Inappropriate"* by Steve Duck and Lise VanderVoort. Duck and VanderVoort's chapter is found within the text *Inappropriate Relationships: The Unconventional, the Disapproved, the Forbidden* and both the chapter and overall text discusses a variety of inappropriate

⁵³ Graham Allan and Kaeren Harrison, 'Marital Affairs' in *Inappropriate Relationships: The Unconventional, The Disapproved & The Forbidden* ed. by Robin Goodwin and Duncan Cramer (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 2002), p. 45.

relationships rather than focusing on only one. While their text functions in a real-world context, the relationship dynamics explored can easily be transferred to a fictional fanfiction context. I will also touch upon why sexual content is such a controversial inclusion within games, and why this may mean inappropriate relationship content is therefore often left out. I will then pivot the discussion towards romance novel conventions, to explore the concept of fantasy as a motivator for what a fic-author writes about, and how *tiefempfunden* may emerge through the exploration of desires and scenarios the *author* wishes to engage with. Romance novel theory will be further utilised to underpin the convention of the ‘happy ending’, which is frequently poached by fic authors as method to support, and legitimize, an inappropriate relationship by depicting it as a functioning relationship that can sustain the trials of time.

In chapter two I will focus on the long-standing and controversial fanfiction convention of the Mary Sue—a perfect female character who dominates the narrative and often functions as a self-insertion for the author. I will look at varying definitions of a Mary Sue, as well as the origins of the term and explore why such a fundamental fanfiction tenet—thou shall not write a Mary Sue—possesses such a nebulous definition. This will lead into an exploration of the dichotomy present within game fics—that video games demand immersion/self-insertion yet fanfiction abhors it. This will lead into a discussion around whether Mary Sue traits are inherent in game PCs (playable character) via the examination of the in-game actions of the PCs Shepard (*Mass Effect*) and the Inquisitor (*Dragon Age: Inquisition*), and whether this helps to solve the self-insertion problem of game fics, as well as a discussion around whether the interactive and expansive nature of games and fics allow player/author’s PCs to become a form of OC (original character), allowing for a new avenue of self-insertion *tiefempfunden*. Lastly I will explore the more explicit form of self-insertion found within reader-fics, which posit the reader/author directly in the fic and examine why this overt self-insertion is accepted within those circles which enjoy such fics.

In chapter three I will be focusing upon two video game characters, Kaidan Alenko (*Mass Effect*) and Michael De Santa (*Grand Theft Auto V*), in order to explore how appearance in-game builds emotional expectations for players, and how these initial expectations are translated into fics. I will argue that appearance allows the lines to blur between player and PC when it comes to character-attractiveness and attraction, facilitating a form of *tiefempfunden* as emotions flow between player and PC. I will also explore how attraction provides a bridging device between game and fic, especially in terms of signalling how much of the canon text is being brought over into fic, as well as other time/spatial differences. The

romantic trope of the ‘first meeting’ will be examined to see how romantic fics poach and interpret this trope, and what role physical attraction has in allowing for deeper emotional attraction further down the line, alongside how masculinity is depicted, in order to see how games, and the fics derived thereof, may take ‘traditional’ romance masculinity conventions, and adapt them to reflect a more modern society or completely reject them in favour of a more complex, emotionally sensitive man. Michael De Santa will be utilised within this discussion, given the game he features in; *Grand Theft Auto V* is a surreal hyperreal, masculine-fantasy satire on early 2010s America, and provides a wealth of material pertaining to masculinity in all its forms.

In chapter four, I will be focusing upon the romance novel trope of conflict and betrayal. Conflicts, drama, betrayals et al. are central to many narratives, fanfiction included, and often these disagreements will be the driving force that furthers a fic-narrative, gives reason for actions, and provokes emotional responses from characters, authors, and readers. This trope is being explored in order to show how different fic authors reinterpret in-game canon events, demonstrating differing levels of *tiefempfunden* via authorial reimaging of scenarios and emotions. However, conflict can also provide a base of commonality between authors, those similarities that exist within different fics by different authors. This common thread will be explored within the lowest point in the in-game relationship between Shepard and Kaidan Alenko (*Mass Effect*), examining how different authors reinterpret the same events in completely different ways yet still retain familiar and common elements. I will also be exploring a specific form of conflict, namely a betrayal by one character towards another. The betrayal will be contextualised within romance novel theory and extrapolated between two different forms of betrayal, within the aforementioned Kaidan/Shepard relationship, and within the uniquely unambiguous betrayal by Malavai Quinn towards the Sith Warrior PC (*Star Wars: The Old Republic*), focusing especially on how different authors interpret these betrayals in order to shine new light and perspectives upon characters, events, and emotions.

Lastly, chapter five will focus-in upon a singular inappropriate relationship which is still somewhat niche even within fanfiction—incest. Given that much incest featured within game fics is included *by the author*, rather than being present in the original game, I will look at how incest—specifically sibling incest—provides a unique facet of *tiefempfunden* through the inclusion of niche authorial desires that authors may well not want to explore in real-life. Given my experience with writing and reading fictional incest, I will utilise my personal knowledge, as well as examining real-world incest in order to demonstrate the key points in

which incest in fics is kept within a purely fictional context with fictional characters. I will briefly examine one of the few games that does feature a canonical incest relationship—between a brother and sister—in order to set up why fic-authors often end up including the incest relationships they have chosen to create. Within romance novels, the trope of the soulmate is often used to demonstrate that the hero and heroine are indubitably destined for one another and will end up falling in love no matter what; this trope is often transposed onto fictional incest relationships to help legitimize, explain, and rationalise the characters falling in love. In addition to romance novel theory, modern reflections on soulmates as well as more historical conceptualisations of soulmates found within Plato and Romantic/Gothic ideals will be utilised to show how the concept of soulmates has evolved over time. This chapter will focus upon the author-included relationships between Sara and Scott Ryder (*Mass Effect Andromeda*) and Evie and Jacob Frye (*Assassin's Creed Syndicate*), both sets of twins, which further posits a unique aspect to their relationship.

Closing thoughts

The formation of *tiefempfunden* was incited partially due to a personal desire to further explore and explain how self-insertion can work in ways that are *not* the obvious and negatively received Mary-Sue-self-insert. This results from the realisation that I personally have never been able to explicitly insert myself into the fics I write, nor can I write about my own desires in a way that relates back to me, for there must always, *always* be a barrier between myself and the characters I write about—otherwise it becomes too real, too close, and frankly uncomfortable. Fics are an escapism for me, and I have no desire to bring me or my real-life-self into that. Even in games there must be some form of distance, as I discovered when playing *Cyberpunk 2077* (CD Projekt Red, 2020), for the first-person, rather explicit sex scene was intensely discomfiting given the perceived closeness and immersion experienced during gameplay—discomfort I have never experienced within a third-person sex scene. This personal requirement of distance means I will never write a fic that includes a character who in any way resembles myself, my personality or physicality, and I can never write a fic where I am imagining *myself* as partaking in the fantasy/desire.

Yet it is undeniable that I am emotionally attached to my fics and to the characters I create—for I tend to instinctively create OCs to become a central figure in my fics—as well as those pre-existing characters I write about. I do not write about characters I feel ambivalence

towards; I write about characters I feel emotionally engaged with, as these are worlds and narratives and characters that I have spent countless hours writing about.

It is also ongoing: I have characters/original texts which I have been working on and writing about for over a decade, for example *Mass Effect* and my OC that emerged from my everlasting affection towards Kaidan Alenko, or my *Dragon Age: Origins* PC-turned-OC Cerise Amell. There are also newer discoveries that have become fascinations, these will no doubt evolve and grow as the years go on. Creating an OC almost as soon as I discover a new text has almost become instinct by this point, a process that occurs naturally without my even consciously creating one. This is, in a sense, the form my *tiefempfunden* takes: safe self-insertion. I get to control the character and how they operate within a world, I get to enjoy seeing them be with my beloved characters because I get to control the narrative and surrounding events; I even get to experience and explore the full range of emotions the characters do, yet I am safe in the knowledge that *they are not me*.

The other major form that my personal experience of *tiefempfunden* takes is a proclivity towards including fictional incest as much as possible within my fanfictions. As with my OCs it has become an almost instinctive inclusion: as will be explored, fictional incest within original texts is almost non-existent within video games so needs must be included by the author—and often the OC that is being created/written about at the same time becomes one half of the incestuous relationship. For me, the *fictionality* of the incest I write about becomes absolutely key in allowing me to explore it in a satisfying manner; a major element of my enjoyment in including fictional incest is the inherent, unique set of relationship dynamics present, as well as dramas that unfold with two blood-relatives falling in love and wanting to make the relationship work. My personal affinity for incest-fics meant it needed its own chapter as I wanted to focus upon an area of fanfiction studies that has often been overlooked in favour of other controversial relationship forms. Much of my personal knowledge and experience made its way into the chapter, as I have been including fictional incest as a core fantasy for almost as long as I have been writing fanfics.

Due to the highly personal nature of my OCs, none of them have been put online for others to read, and very few of my incest fics have been published online, given the incest relationship is usually combined with an OC. My fanfictions are written with the intention of being read by myself and no-one else—which does go against the community aspect discussed

throughout this thesis, but it is what works for me; I am all for people melding *tiefempfunden* to suit their own wants and needs.

Throughout my fourteen-years-plus writing fanfiction, this barrier-issue has remained which led me in recent years to begin questioning how else I and other authors might insert themselves into a fic without being overly explicit about it; of how we might insert ourselves into a fic without inserting *ourselves* into a fic. Eventually, thanks to the process of creating and developing this PhD thesis, my dilemma helped to create the concept of *tiefempfunden*, which forms the contribution to knowledge.

Chapter One “My life may not be a fairy tale, but I’ll always get a happy ending”⁵⁴ — Inappropriate relationships within fics and games

Introduction

A student-teacher relationship is grounds for dismissal in many countries, yet there are many TV shows, films and even games which represent such a relationship. Despite their popularity within popular media, video games have seemed more prone to controversy than other forms of media⁵⁵ meaning inappropriate relationships are not usually present in-game and only given life within various fanfictions. The inappropriateness in-fic sometimes veers into territories that would be illegal in real-life but are permitted in the fictionality of the game and fic worlds. However, what ties all these inappropriate relationships together is that often one can discover a functioning love-filled relationship that is unhindered, at least not irreparably, by the inappropriateness. In some cases, it is even possible to see a happy ending for the pair as these fics offer confirmation that those characters are meant to be together *despite* the inappropriateness present, and/or perhaps even *because* of it.

There are some forms of inappropriate relationships that are permissible within Western AAA games, and such relationships range from fraternization to infidelity. Though as will be explored in the next chapters, fanfiction allows for a far wider range of fantasies and relationships to be explored. This chapter will explore inappropriate relationships which *are* present in-game, to examine how fic-authors have chosen to reinterpret and expand upon these relationships, and how they are transformed into new narratives.

Utilising romance novel theory, I will look at the forms of inappropriate relationships most common within romantic novels, and link those to the concept of ‘fantasy’—the inherent acknowledgement of a text’s fictionality and what that allows fic-authors to include. Control, both in-game and in-fic, is strongly linked to fantasy, and will be explored using Navarro-Remesal et al.’s essay⁵⁶ highlighting BDSM⁵⁷ practices within in-game player-developer relationships. The fanfictions themselves will be studied with consideration, and highlighted

⁵⁴ *Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, Denise Richards, season 10 tagline

⁵⁵ Frans Mäyrä “Little Evils” in *The Dark Side of Game Play* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 85.

⁵⁶ Víctor Navarro-Remesal and Shaila García-Catalán, “Let’s Play Master And Servant: BDSM And Directed Freedom In Game Design”, in *Rated M For Mature* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015)

⁵⁷ BDSM is a combination of abbreviations — Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and submission and Sadism and Masochism.

whether they function as love-filled, working relationships allowing for a happy ending, or whether a happy ending has become a requirement for a romantic fanfiction that contains an inappropriate relationship of some form.

Inappropriateness is such a loaded word

In order to define inappropriateness, three levels of inappropriateness—unconventional, disapproved (split into subsections: notable/scandalous) and forbidden—as defined by Steve Duck and Lise VanderVoort in *Scarlet Letters and Whited Sepulchres: The Social Marking of Relationships as “Inappropriate”* will be explored. These three levels provide the foundation for categorizing all the fanfictions studied within this thesis. This three levels approach is important, for it covers an array of inappropriate relationships whilst other texts tend to focus on one kind of inappropriate ‘relationship’,⁵⁸ e.g. only incest, or only patient-therapist, or rape, and thus do not have the same scope. It is also important to gain an overview of inappropriateness before focusing-in upon the individual aspects.

The most important aspect to be gleaned from this labelling of a relationship as inappropriate usually comes from the *observer*,⁵⁹ not those within the relationship. That ‘inappropriateness’ is generally placed upon any relationship by someone extraneous meaning that a relationship may not be inherently inappropriate to those within such a relationship. This concept works well for fanfiction, as the authors themselves often understand that what they are writing about is inappropriate in some form or another but have accepted this and continue to write about it, purposefully placing inappropriateness into the fic even *if* the characters do not feel or experience it as such. It is other people, other players and authors and readers—‘the observers’—who may perhaps deem that what someone is writing is inappropriate and therefore questionable, unfit for consumption and possibly *unfit for existence*. As with the Mary Sue/self-insertion trope, the onus falls upon the author to self-censor and limit, and they are at fault if they still choose to include inappropriate relationships within their work.

In-fic, the characters in the relationship have, at least by the end of the fic, generally accepted whatever form/level of inappropriateness present, even if overcoming or accepting the inappropriateness is a major theme within the fic. This means that the inappropriateness

⁵⁸ Not all of the inappropriate relationships highlighted in such texts occur within what can be defined as a ‘relationship’, like rape, paedophilia, or incest.

⁵⁹ Steve Duck and Lise VanderVoort, ‘Scarlet Letters and Whited Sepulchres: The Social Marking of Relationships as “Inappropriate”’ in *Inappropriate Relationships: The Unconventional, The Disapproved & The Forbidden* (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 2002), p. 4.

sometimes becomes a point of conflict within the narrative as well—although conflict will be discussed later in chapter four. Another form of observatory inappropriateness occurring in-fic usually concerns those characters *outside* of the relationship who condemn it within the fic, often when first learning of the inappropriate element, or that such a relationship exists.

It cannot be denied that authors/readers/players bring their own real-world morals and opinions with them when engaging with a text. Fanfiction works within the framework of an unstated acknowledgement that it exists as a fictional construct, and this fictionality provides the space to deal with topics that may be uncomfortable or challenging to an author and reader. Traditionally published works of fiction are working within limitations set out by editors, publishers, and audiences, whereas fanfiction is largely unregulated and really only policed by other fanfiction authors and fandom communities, meaning conventions are by fans, for fans, and allows for a wider exploration of taboo issues.

Even within this framework of fictionality there is the acknowledgement that fiction can evoke strong thoughts and feelings that are perhaps genuinely distressing or negative.⁶⁰ It is possible that a person writing, for example, incest fanfiction finds real-world incest abhorrent and disgusting, yet considers it a guilty pleasure within their fics, or sees fics as a place of fascination with which to act out the complex relationship-dynamic that emerges within incest relationships. The desire to explore a fantasy in-fic \neq the desire to explore it in real-life.

Duck and VanderVoort talk about the difficulty of marking a relationship as truly inappropriate, as “partners are unlikely to be in a relationship that they truly consider unjustifiably inappropriate themselves”.⁶¹ This means that many discussions of inappropriateness are relevant to the point of view and morals of the observer, *not* the characters within the in-fic relationship or the authors/readers engaging with the relationship. Fic authors themselves acknowledge that fanfiction can be set in worlds and galaxies completely unlike our own, and that given such fictionality, relationships cannot be judged within a real-world context.

Duck and VanderVoort state that within real-world inappropriate relationships there has been a shift from ‘sinful’ to ‘inappropriate’ that “denotes something deviating from propriety rather than bearing testament to the inherent corruption of the person”,⁶² which reflects the

⁶⁰ Kristina Busse, *Framing Fan Fiction* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2017), p. 199.

⁶¹ Duck and VanderVoort, p. 4.

⁶² Duck and VanderVoort, p. 6.

rise of secularism within modern Western societies. Nevertheless, if looking at things from an Aristotelian point of view,⁶³ it has been argued within games studies that players committing inappropriate acts in-game are also morally corrupting their character in real-life and are doing harm to themselves, however this is merely one viewpoint. Generally, the shift from sinfulness to inappropriateness reveals that the ‘inappropriateness’ of these ‘inappropriate’ relationships is a social construct rather than inherent,⁶⁴ the inappropriateness comes from the observers not the authors/readers/players or the characters in the fic-relationship.

Duck and VanderVoort further note this shift from a religious (primarily Judeo-Christian) viewpoint to a more secular one. Instead of seeing the individuals within the inappropriate relationship as sinners, or otherwise morally corrupted and needing atonement for their sins,⁶⁵ modern Western society focuses on the specific inappropriate behaviour with the idea of future rehabilitation to prevent such inappropriateness from happening again.⁶⁶

From personal experience, many fanfictions containing an inappropriate relationship do not take this stance, and generally do not contain narratives wherein the characters are required to be rehabilitated. For example, one of the most popular fics within the fic-author-initiated incestuous relationship between the twin-PCs Evie and Jacob Frye from *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate, Are You Mine?* by PoetHrotsvitha, is set in a modern-day alternate universe. The twins are seventeen and, within the plot, their parents find out about their relationship and separate them with the intention of preventing their ‘unnatural’ behaviour. If the fic were following the rehabilitation approach, the parents would have succeeded in ensuring no further incest took place—however in this fic, the twins choose to be with each other and leave the Frye family permanently.⁶⁷

Duck and VanderVoort also state that modern society has adopted “a relativistic position based on the recognition of particular circumstances justifying or not justifying behavior on a particular occasion and taking account of consequences as well as intent”.⁶⁸ This suggests that wider context is now taken into consideration, and that the focus is less upon the individual’s “evil nature”⁶⁹ and more around the circumstances that led to such behaviour.

⁶³ Matt McCormick, “Is It Wrong To Play Violent Video Games?”, *Ethics And Information Technology*, 3 (2001), p. 285.

⁶⁴ Duck and VanderVoort, p. 5.

⁶⁵ Duck and VanderVoort, p. 6.

⁶⁶ Duck and VanderVoort, p. 6.

⁶⁷ PoetHrotsvitha, *Are You Mine?* (Archive of Our Own, 2016-2017), p. 113.

⁶⁸ Duck and VanderVoort, p. 6.

⁶⁹ Duck and VanderVoort, p. 6.

Interestingly, it is also stated that “the label “inappropriate” reflects abstract and idealized social norms, not actual social practice”, and that “normative behaviour is often the exception”.⁷⁰ This is not so reflected within games or fanfictions, for inappropriate relationships—that are obviously inappropriate—rarely appear in games, and when they do are rarely explicitly explored; it is mainly within fanfictions that a number of inappropriate relationships create their niche, and even then they are niche when compared to fics containing ‘non-inappropriate’ relationships.

Duck and VanderVoort have constructed a theory outlining the three levels of inappropriateness, as pertaining to real-life relationships:

The first level—*Unconventional*—means relationships that “stretch the norms in some way and inspire unpleasant gossip, but do not break any codified rules”.⁷¹ Duck and VanderVoort provide examples such as a large age difference or class mismatch, hatred/rivalry. Many of the relationships highlighted in this level would no longer be considered truly inappropriate and have become more acceptable societally in the real-world. This discrepancy may be because this text was published in 2002, over twenty years ago.

The next level—*Disapproved*—is split into two sections.

The first revolves around behaviours that are seen as unwanted but do not violate “formal role ascriptions”;⁷² these include relationships such as consensual sadomasochism, prostitution, and serial casual seduction.

The second contains behaviours that are “scandalous and damaging to social reputation because of violation of prescribed roles”,⁷³ where “social ostracism, and legal or institutional reprimand”⁷⁴ is a possible consequence of such actions. These include teacher-student sexual relationships, extra-marital affairs, and fraternization. Such relationships are interesting given they border illegality whilst not being quite as socially unacceptable as a relationship from the highest level. These relationships will be studied within this thesis, as several games contain these kinds of relationship, and because they are a common feature within select fanfictions.

⁷⁰ Duck and VanderVoort, p. 7.

⁷¹ Duck and VanderVoort, p.18.

⁷² Duck and VanderVoort, p.18.

⁷³ Duck and VanderVoort, p.18.

⁷⁴ Duck and VanderVoort, p.18.

The final level is *Forbidden*. This contains relationships which are seen as entirely reprehensible and lead to “significant formal punishment”,⁷⁵ such as incest, paedophilia, abuse, and rape. Such relationships are illegal and as well as being overtly and intentionally unacceptable. Often they have also been forbidden for a significant period of time, for example incest has been taboo even before modern humans had evolved.⁷⁶

While the ‘three levels’ concept is designed for a real-world context, fanfictions do generally tend to follow the same levels of inappropriateness, for fics containing incest, rape—or even more extreme elements such as necrophilia and bestiality—are certainly the most controversial fics and usually the most niche as well in terms of the number of fics that exist on AO3.

It is rare for a Western AAA game to contain any kind of overtly inappropriate relationship due to their controversial nature, and often the inappropriateness is merely mentioned or alluded to. Some Japanese game series—like *Fire Emblem*—do contain varying forms of incest, but even within mainstream Japanese developed games, incest is far from the norm, except perhaps within more pornographic/sexually explicit games where indulging in varying types of sexual fantasies is the entire point of these games, but that is a niche market.

Assassin’s Creed Brotherhood (Ubisoft, 2010) is an outlier within AAA games. Given the historical nature of this series, and the penchant for including real-life historical people, *Brotherhood* contains historical characters from Renaissance Italy. The developers also chose to include an allegedly incestuous relationship between Cesare and Lucrezia Borgia who were siblings. Historically, this relationship has only been hinted at and never actually verified, but it is a pervasive rumour that began whilst they were still alive and remains prevalent today. It could be argued that, given Cesare is one of the main antagonists of *Brotherhood*, showing such a morally corrupt act cements his depravity and reinforces his villainy to players, rather than just being a nod to the carefully researched historical elements that exist throughout the *Assassin’s Creed* series. This relationship will be discussed in greater detail in the fifth chapter.

What this discussion around Duck and VanderVoort’s three levels of inappropriateness has shown is that real-world considerations of inappropriateness certainly do reflect what is seen

⁷⁵ Duck and VanderVoort, p.18.

⁷⁶ Anne Pusey, “Inbreeding Avoidance in Primates”, in *Inbreeding, Incest, And The Incest Taboo* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 71.

as appropriate or inappropriate within fanfiction. However, the most important takeaway from their theory is that the label of ‘inappropriate’ emanates from the observer.

Players/authors who are writing these ‘inappropriate’ fics know and acknowledge that fanfictions are fictional, and that within this fictional space real-world morals do not apply in quite the same way, and that writing about any inappropriateness does not mean the author endorses or condones such behaviour in real-life.

The *Mass Effect* ‘pornography’ controversy

When BioWare released their epic sci-fi action-RPG *Mass Effect* in late 2007, the game began to attract a great deal of media attention in early 2008. It did not garner attention for its new, unique narrative or complex characters, but for something entirely different—the claim that it allowed players to engage in explicit, realistic sexual scenarios akin to virtual pornography. This story was picked up by Fox News and gained traction in US and international media.⁷⁷ Once it became clear that the ‘sex scene’ was entirely optional and did not even contain any graphic sex or nudity, some of the inciters retracted their criticism of the game.⁷⁸

The actual sex scene of the game contains this level of nudity:

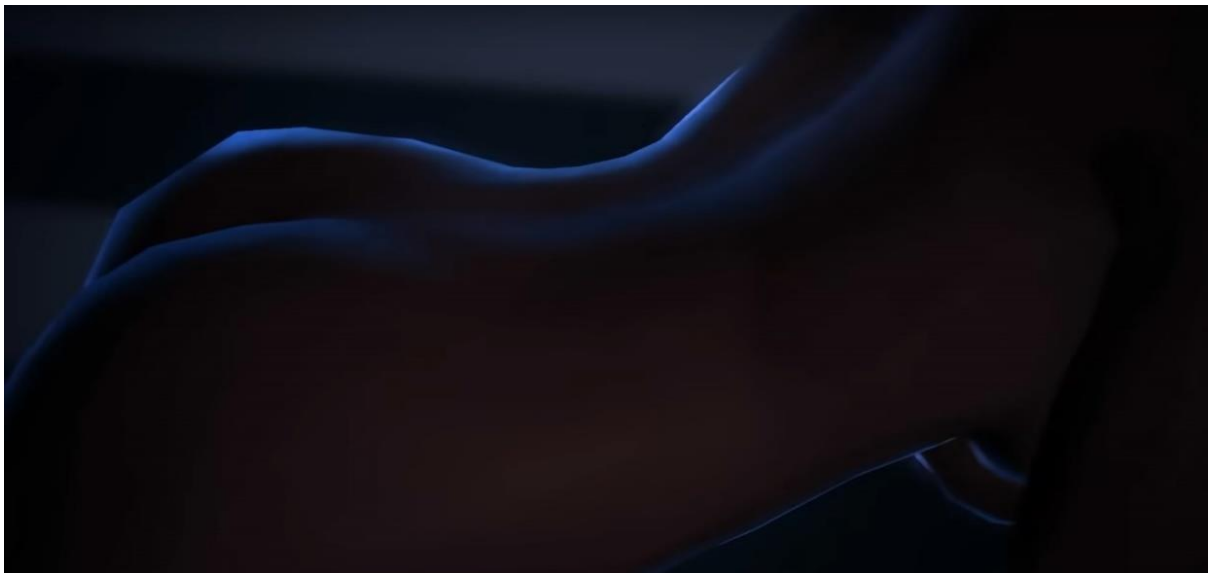


Fig. 1 A split-second screenshot from the in-game sex scene that occurs near the end of *Mass Effect*⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Nathan Dutton, Mia Consalvo and Todd Harper, “Digital Pitchforks And Virtual Torches: Fan Responses To The Mass Effect News Debacle”, *Convergence: The International Journal Of Research Into New Media Technologies*, 17.3 (2011), 287-305 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856511407802>, p. 290.

⁷⁸ Christopher A Paul, *Wordplay And The Discourse Of Video Games* (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 47.

⁷⁹ It must be noted that this flash of nudity is so brief I had to use a recording of the scene, then parse the video frame-by-frame in order to capture a screenshot of it.

There is no high-definition full-frontal nudity, no explicit sex. Instead, the scene fades-to-black a few moments after this, allowing the player to utilise their imagination around what happens next. But the issue Fox News had with the game was not necessarily the fact that sex was being included within a game, instead their concern was “that the game was being marketed to children”.⁸⁰ Given *Mass Effect* was released with an ERSB⁸¹ rating of 17, it was unpurchasable by children, and the game was clearly marketed towards older gamers.

It must be stressed that this thesis is ultimately about *relationships*. While sex is definitely an important aspect of many relationships—and in-game romances often use the sex scene as the culmination of the narrative—fanfictions range from containing no sex to being purely about sex, and often sex is merely a component within the context of a larger relationship setting. Highlighting this particular *Mass Effect* controversy is important because it reveals how including even a relatively tame sex scene can become incredibly controversial and helps to explain why AAA Western developers are hesitant to include overtly inappropriate relationships in their games—such as incest or infidelity—let alone overt sexual elements.

In more recent BioWare games, the sex scenes have become slightly more explicit. Both *Dragon Age Inquisition* (2014) and *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017) contain sex scenes with full-frontal female nudity, but the inclusion of overtly inappropriate relationships is still largely absent, with elements such as fraternization merely mentioned or alluded to. The contentiousness of including inappropriate relationships, as well as explicit sexual acts within games, directly contrasts with fanfiction where player-authors have the space to potentially explore any fantasy or desire, be it romantic or sexual.

Modern fanfiction began in the early 1970s and grew out of women’s desire to explore the relationship between Kirk and Spock from *Star Trek*,⁸² at a time when homosexuality was still illegal in many parts of the world, and at a point when copyright laws meant that any and all fanfiction was technically illegal as well.⁸³ Fanfiction began as a transgressive phenomenon, a space in which to push boundaries—which means it is the perfect place to explore aspects which cannot be explored within games.

⁸⁰ Paul, p. 46.

⁸¹ The Entertainment Software Rating Board rates games based on their content, and is effectively the same as film ratings, only those older than the age rating can buy said game, though of course parents can choose to let younger players play older rated games, but the onus lies on the parents.

⁸² Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 192.

⁸³ Camille Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), p. 4.

Some tropes or relationships represent only a handful of fics out of millions, some kinks vastly more popular than others, but they are still there for those who want to read them. An extreme example includes, perhaps surprisingly, nearly 10,000 fanfictions tagged as having bestiality in them.⁸⁴ The five most popular English-language bestiality fics have *each* been clicked-on by over four hundred thousand readers, which is almost double the most popular, hits-wise, *Dragon Age* fic—one of the most popular game series on AO3—showing that even the most extreme sexual fantasies can have a space within fanfiction.

In direct contrast, including a graphic bestiality scene in a videogame, regardless of whether it was AAA or indie developed, would most likely incite uproar from a multitude of sources—news outlets, players, forums—and would most likely never be published by any major developer or sold by any of the major retailers, in-store or online.⁸⁵ Bestiality is, of course, an extreme example, but clearly shows the difference between audiences, and can help explain why players might turn to fanfictions to explore such an inappropriate relationship, as the medium allowing the space to explore such diverse themes.

Fantasy and control within romantic narratives

Within romance novels it can be argued that no inappropriate relationship remains beyond the boundaries of exploration. The author Mary Jo Putney states that she has written romance novels containing themes ranging from incest to alcoholism, and more in-between.⁸⁶ She argues that “virtually any topic can be handled if it is done properly, with a romantic sensibility”,⁸⁷ and that these darker topics “that deal with intense emotions can provide catharsis and insight into [any] painful problem”,⁸⁸ meaning the negatives within narrative can be transformed into positives, and that reading about a heroine going through such trials and tribulations and emerging into the other side a more complete human being can be healing rather than harming.

⁸⁴ “Bestiality - Works | Archive Of Our Own”, *Archiveofourown.Org*

<https://archiveofourown.org/tags/Bestiality/works> [accessed 29 September 2023]

⁸⁵ In August 2023, *Baldur's Gate 3* was released by Larian Studios. It contains a romance scene between the PC and companion Halsin, where Halsin can transform into a bear for the duration of the sex scene. However because the bear is a sentient being temporarily inhabiting an animal body—and therefore still possessing complex thought—it avoids the controversy of bestiality for Halsin consents to the act, even as a bear, and will only remain transformed if the player tells him it is okay to be. It is also not ‘true’ bestiality, it is a form of shapeshifting.

⁸⁶ Mary Jo Putney, “Welcome to the Dark Side”, in *Dangerous Men & Adventurous Women: Romance Writers On The Appeal Of the Romance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), p. 101.

⁸⁷ Putney, p. 101.

⁸⁸ Putney, p. 103.

Putney argues that it is precisely the “fantasy framework”⁸⁹ which allows women to “confront emotions too painful to deal with in a more realistic context”,⁹⁰ and that these darker romance novels still adhere to the necessity that love can heal any wound. But they still adhere to the happily-ever-after—a convention all romance novels must contain⁹¹—which provides a safety net for the reader, a reassurance that, no matter how many awful things the hero and heroine must endure, they will emerge by the end in-love and forever bound together through mutual adoration.

Despite the happy ending still appearing in these darker romances, Putney is quick to point out that “romantic love is not presented as a panacea; instead, it is a catalyst that helps the hero and heroine become whole enough to give and accept love”,⁹² showing love as an almost active force, and that the hero and heroine must strive to make things work, to seek that happy ending; love is not a magic wand solving all of their problems instantly.

When reading a romantic fanfiction it is all too easy to see these themes and conventions being poached into fics that contain some form of inappropriateness. A good example of this is shown within Shadow_Scribe_Maiden’s fic *Carver’s Claim*, which was originally published on the Dragon Age Kink Meme in 2011, but was republished, along with their three other intertwined Carver/Hawke Kink Meme fills, on AO3 in 2018. Hawke is the PC of *Dragon Age II* (BioWare, 2011), and can be male or female, but in this fic is female, while Carver is their younger sibling, who only survives the prologue if Hawke is a mage class character. Within all four of Shadow_Scribe_Maiden’s fics containing this relationship, the author depicts a rivalry-based, acrimonious relationship between the siblings. Nevertheless, they are still able to reach a happy ending, with the couple being bonded by the fact that Hawke is seven months pregnant and Carver satisfied with the physical manifestation of their love; the final line states that “[f]or the first time in a long time, the raging beast in Carver’s mind was completely silent”,⁹³ showing that they are finally happy in their relationship, despite the inappropriateness of incest, and an incestuous child, being present. It is the concept of ‘fantasy’ that makes it all so fascinating, for it is present within romantic fanfictions as well as the videogames they draw inspiration from—it is the acknowledgement

⁸⁹ Putney, p. 104.

⁹⁰ Putney, p. 104.

⁹¹ Valerie Parv, *The Art Of Romance Writing*, 4th edn (Crows Nest NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2004), p. 136.

⁹² Putney, p. 104.

⁹³ Shadow_Scribe_Maiden, *Carver’s Claim*, (Archive of Our Own, 2018), p. 4.

that *this is all not real*, and that readers/players/authors are gently reminded to suspend belief for the duration of reading/playing/writing.

Another romance novel author, Kathleen Gilles Seidel, tackles this idea of fantasy inherent in romance novels, stating that “fantasy is the most important element in the appeal of popular fiction”.⁹⁴ She categorises fantasy as being successful when “you have, within the reading experience, achieved that desire”.⁹⁵ This places desire in the same realm as fantasy, in that characters/authors/readers get to enact their desires within the fantasy of a novel, game, or fic. She also states plainly that

We should not assume that fantasies are necessarily goals, things people actually want. Enjoying such a book doesn't mean you want to sacrifice the sense of accomplishment that comes from success or that you want to abandon your independence and authority for the sake of some overbearing, overcontrolling male. It only means that your imagination wants to dance, for a moment, a different waltz.⁹⁶

This is an important aspect to remember when considering inappropriate relationships in fanfiction, for while they can evoke entirely real feelings ranging from distressing to elated, these stories, these fantasies, take place in a fictional world, a place where real-world morals and expectations and relationships do not have to be translated one-to-one. There is licence for the fantastical, the desires, and—certainly within fanfiction—authors have the *control* over the fantasies they want to write about, not the fantasies that will sell them the most copies, in keeping with fanfiction's for-love-not-profit ethos.

Seidel argues that “[writers] are more or less doomed to write certain kinds of books. You can only write your own fantasies”.⁹⁷ She furthers this by comparing sincerity to yeast, in that “If there is none in the kitchen, forget about making a recipe that calls for it”,⁹⁸ and provides the example of professional writers attempting to make easy money by writing romance novels, and then failing because they believe all they need is a formula rather than a genuine desire and passion for the romantic narrative. She also states that an author's success depends on “how well she conveys those fantasies”.⁹⁹

⁹⁴ Kathleen Gilles Seidel “judge Me by the joy I Bring “, in *Dangerous Men & Adventurous Women: Romance Writers On The Appeal Of the Romance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), p. 159.

⁹⁵ Seidel, p. 159.

⁹⁶ Seidel, p. 160.

⁹⁷ Seidel, p. 168.

⁹⁸ Seidel, p. 168.

⁹⁹ Seidel, p. 169.

Fanfiction is all about expression of fantasy and control of how that fantasy translates into written word, especially in the context of self-insertion *tiefempfunden*. However, one aspect not so apparent within traditionally published media is that fanfic authors and readers, get to be *precise* in what they read and write, especially thanks to the tagging systems put in place by fic websites like AO3. Authors can ensure that their fics are read by those readers specifically searching for their type of fic. Readers can ensure they are only reading fics about the characters they love, not the characters they dislike.

As mentioned in the introduction, on AO3 there is specific space for authors to write their own tags, usually what kinds of tropes, kinks, content is within the fic, but also anything else the author wishes to highlight. Some example tags include, ‘dubious consent, Alternate Universe – canon divergent, slow burn, size kink, angst, accidental voyeurism, fluff, enemies to lovers’. These serve a double function, both to advertise and ensure fans of a certain kink/trope can find that fic easily, and also as a warning for those readers who know they would not want to read such material and therefore know not to click on that fic. There is also an assumed etiquette that if someone clicks on a fic which is tagged as containing, say, incest, they cannot then complain to the author that the fic contains such material, because they were forewarned.

A scene from the TV show *Arrested Development*, where Michael Bluth opens a paper bag labelled ‘Dead Dove: Do Not Eat’, and then states, “I don’t know what I expected.”¹⁰⁰ influenced the tag ‘Dead Dove: Do Not Eat’. Including this tag means that a fic will contain dark, controversial, inappropriate material, and is a warning that the reader cannot make complaints, because its content was clearly tagged beforehand. This tag has spread beyond just being used for fics, and has become a more general tag for dark, inappropriate content, whether it be art, text, or an internet rant.

Fanfictions, unlike romance novels, are not a mass-market phenomenon, and never will be, given the content that appears within many fanfictions would be impossible to market to anything but the most niche audiences. For example, the *Dragon Age* fic *Set Aside and Allow to Thicken*, published by ao3afterdark on AO3 in 2016-2017, is their second most popular fic with nearly 10,000 hits, and has the tags:

¹⁰⁰ *Top Banana (Arrested Development: Series 1, Episode 2)*, (Los Angeles: Fox Broadcasting Company, 9 November 2003)

Malcolm Hawke, Female Hawke, various unnamed fereldans, Carver Hawke, Bethany Hawke, Incest, Parent/Child Incest, nonconsensual voyeurism, take one parts noncon and two parts table sex and let it simmer with resentment, and as of chapter two:, even more voyeurism, along with nonconsensual gangbang, Sibling Incest¹⁰¹

This is a very extreme example, but many readers or outsiders, who do not usually deal with such content, would most likely not understand these tags and their specific contexts. Also, the extreme content within this fic renders it unpalatable to all but a very niche subset of *Dragon Age* fans, showing that the author has had the freedom to write about such an extreme situation, for while romance novels do contain rape,¹⁰² such an explicit drawn-out and truly non-consensual scene would most likely be considered too unpalatable within even the darkest romance novel. But here, within fanfiction, authors have the ability to control their fantasy, to write what they truly enjoy writing, and know their fics will reach their target readers.

This ability to freely explore fantasy and desires within fanfiction, may be a drawing-in point for authors, because in-game players do not possess quite the same freedom. In Víctor Navarro-Remesal and Shaila García-Catalán's 2015 essay, *Let's play master and servant: BDSM and directed freedom in game design*, they look at just how much freedom a player has. The freedom a player possesses in-game is generally termed as 'player agency', and implies the player has agency to move about their virtual world, to change things, and decide to turn left instead of turning right. However, a player is always working within the limits and constraints placed upon them by the developer, which has led Navarro-Remesal et al. to turn to the sexual practice of BDSM to gain an insight into power dynamics and the idea of dominant and submissive parties. They argue that:

[BDSM is] a staging of desire as a game of unbalanced power [...] Both participants agree and accept their roles without a previous fight [...] But this does not mean it is all just pretend: although a Slave wants to be a Slave and is never forced to take that role, he surrenders himself completely to the (consensual) domination.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ ao3afterdark, *Set Aside and Allow to Thicken*, (Archive of Our Own, 2016-2017), p. 1.

¹⁰² Linda Barlow, and Jayne Ann Krentz "Beneath the Surface: The Hidden Codes of Romance", in *Dangerous Men & Adventurous Women: Romance Writers On The Appeal Of the Romance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), p. 26.

¹⁰³ Navarro-Remesal and García-Catalán, p. 124.

Given Navarro-Remesal et al. place the developer in the role of dominant, and the player as the submissive, this would imply that the player is the one surrendering control and allowing themselves to be dominated by the developer, especially within games where the PC is customisable by the player, for the player is then purposefully placing part of themselves into the game. But it is not so clear cut as that: for just as players submit themselves, they have the power to stop and walk away, to not accept what they are being given, and Navarro-Remesal et al. argue that the “expressive potential of games [...] comes from the tension between the designers and the players: what is offered by the former and what the latter do with it”.¹⁰⁴ This shows games to be a *negotiation*, and players have more power than perhaps initially thought.

They further state the player can in fact become dominant by “agreeing to use only the mechanics and dynamics proposed by the game”,¹⁰⁵ and that when the game doesn’t hide the fact that there are limits, then the player’s agency is never total. This in turn increases desire, because “[d]esire requires limits to restrict the vast totality that pleasure yearns for. Without limits there is no desire, no freedom”.¹⁰⁶ This is interesting, for within fanfiction authors have near-complete control of narrative and desire, without limits. This may well mean that the author takes on the role of *limiter* within fanfiction, that they produce self-imposed limits in order to achieve perceived freedom, and that either adhering to or breaking the societal expectations and conventions of the original text is an explicit acknowledgement that there *are* limits in play, and that these can be broken if desired. This would in turn imply that the complete freedom of fanfiction is merely a façade, kept in check by fanfic-community conventions, ‘good taste’ and opinions of canonicity, as well as the author deciding just how far they are willing to go, and what rules present in-game they are willing to keep or break.

The ‘happily ever after’

Given the extremities that fanfics can explore, and the variety of inappropriate relationships included, it may seem at odds that such a staple convention of the romance novel, a happy ending, is possible within a fic containing these elements—given that in real-life situations, inappropriate relationships, especially illegal ones, a happy ending is nigh untenable.

¹⁰⁴ Navarro-Remesal and García-Catalán, p. 122.

¹⁰⁵ Navarro-Remesal and García-Catalán, p. 128.

¹⁰⁶ Navarro-Remesal and García-Catalán, p. 128.

The ‘happy ending’ or ‘happily ever after’ is perhaps the only romantic convention that can be found within every single romance novel.¹⁰⁷ The hero and heroine must be able to overcome all their troubles and difficulties to be together in order to spend those last pages in blissful, mutual love, for as Valerie Parv argues, “[a]bove all else, the ending must *satisfy* the reader”,¹⁰⁸ over any other kind of emotion. There also cannot be one single iota of doubt as to whether the hero and heroine feel true love for one another, and that “there is nothing more to be said, no more questions to be answered [...] They have reached their goals and found each other”.¹⁰⁹

According to Parv, the hero and heroine should be alone in these final pages in order to allow for their big moment of happiness, and that this monumental event should never be rushed.¹¹⁰ This is for the reader’s benefit, for they “are entitled to a long, leisurely finale”,¹¹¹ and that the situation must be milked for “every nuance of emotion”,¹¹² with reminders of their conflicts and difficult times and confessions of attraction during those doubtful moments.¹¹³ This is because the reader, as well as the characters, must not possess a shred of doubt about the continued viability of the relationship; these two are *destined* for one another, and the reader needs to know it. Even within a fic this destiny aspect is an important factor, perhaps even more so if the original text does not contain such certainty, or any form of happy ending, for now, within fics, there is assurance that there is hope for the relationship to have a happy ending after all.

Within the Solas/Lavellan¹¹⁴ fic *In One World, He Waited*, published on AO3 in 2016, the opening of the fic describes Lavellan as not being Solas’s first favourite student, but that “she was the only one to bridge the gap between a professional and personal relationship”.¹¹⁵ The relationship begins early on in the fic, with not much time needed to take things from platonic to romantic, for the fantasy element to begin, and allow the author and reader to wallow in it. Nevertheless, it is shown that the affair only lasts a short while and ends after they sleep

¹⁰⁷ Pamela Regis, *A Natural History Of The Romance Novel* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), p. 18.

¹⁰⁸ Parv, p. 136.

¹⁰⁹ Parv, pp. 136-137.

¹¹⁰ Parv, p. 138.

¹¹¹ Parv, p. 138.

¹¹² Parv, p. 138.

¹¹³ Parv, p. 138.

¹¹⁴ Lavellan is the surname for the elven PC Inquisitor, for in-game only a female elf can romance Solas.

¹¹⁵ Nowaki, *In One World, He Waited* (Archive of Our Own, 2016), p. 1.

together. Solas tells her that should not be in a relationship with a student, but promises her that “after graduation, if she still felt the same, he would be waiting for her”.¹¹⁶

The title of this fic plays upon a line said by Solas, “In another world—”¹¹⁷ within the in-game breakup scene within *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, which implies that had they been in another world, their relationship could have lasted. In-game the relationship between Lavellan and Solas never ends happily, for Solas will always end the relationship and break everyone’s heart, meaning this fic is just one of the many *fix-it fics* that exist on AO3. These fics are a way of putting things right and allowing Solas and Lavellan to finally be together, to get the happy ending players/authors/readers were denied in-game.

As this fic shows, it is not just in-game-universe fics that allow Solas and Lavellan a happy ending: there is space for alternate universes to be given a happy ending as well. *In One World, He Waited* is tagged with ‘college AU’, implying that it takes place within modern-day America, however, it seems to mix elements of modern-day life with elements from the *Dragon Age* universe. This also demonstrates that fics containing inappropriate relationships can also contain happy endings, that there is space for authorial desires to depict functioning, healthy relationships.

The notion of barrier-conflict will be explored later in chapter four, but here it can be said that barrier within this fic—that Solas ends things with Lavellan before their relationship gets too serious, and sometime later on tells her to return once she had graduated—may well be included to allay some of the overt inappropriateness that comes with a student-teacher relationship, because even though it is a college student-teacher relationship and they are both legally adults, it is still highly inappropriate with severe disciplinary consequences.

However, the temporary separation may have been a means to incite drama, of perhaps ensuring that Lavellan has time to grow and mature to Solas’s level and older age—especially given the fic ends with a newly graduated Lavellan arriving at Solas’s office, who is “almost surprised”¹¹⁸ that she did return to him. The final lines of the fic have Lavellan stating that she will need an archaeology partner,¹¹⁹ though the subtext is that they will romantic partners as well. They have finally gotten their happy ending—in this world at least.

¹¹⁶ Nowaki, p. 2.

¹¹⁷ BioWare, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (Edmonton: EA, 2014), in-game cutscene.

¹¹⁸ Nowaki, p. 4.

¹¹⁹ Nowaki, p. 4.

The reason so many fics write a happy ending that is so contrary to Solas/Lavellan's unhappy ending in-game may well be due to the fact that the in-game breakup is a devastatingly emotional event that has affected many players. I personally have never seen such an overwhelmingly strong emotional response to an in-game romance, and the strength is certainly due in part to the fact that it ends in heartbreak, which was not the desired outcome for those who had become emotionally attached to Solas. There was an entire forum thread on the now defunct BioWare forums called the Blanketfort which served as a place of communal support for those affected by Solas. These emotions continue to the present day, and despite Solas becoming the antagonist in the next, unreleased *Dragon Age* game, *Dread Wolf*,¹²⁰ there are still Solasmancers¹²¹ who want to see him and Lavellan back together—even as Solas becomes the very thing players are meant to destroy. Including student-teacher and placing the pair in a modern setting merely gives the relationship a different context and conflict, a different set of rules and inappropriateness-level to overcome.

Elizabeth Lowell likens romance novels to mystery novels, for in both genres readers know, before they have even opened the book, that “the ending is guaranteed; the crime will be solved”,¹²² and the couple will get their resolution. She states that for both genres it is the journey that provides the emotional intensity, as well as the uncertainty and mystery. To Lowell, love has the power to heal “and ultimately to transcend the random cruelties of life”,¹²³ and that, because in real-life love fails often, readers want romance to mirror that, to “to balance on the razor edge of the abyss of despair. And then they want to soar in triumph, their belief in love's constructive power affirmed by a battle hard fought and well won”.¹²⁴

Suzanne Simmons Guntrum echoes the romance novel's similarities to mystery novels:

So why read a novel when we already know how it is going to end? Because it is the process, not the conclusion, that we are reading for. Indeed, it is *safe* for us to enjoy the process because we are already guaranteed of the ending. [...] The romance novel provides its reader with a safe way to experience the broad range of emotions, both

¹²⁰ Author note: At the time of writing this thesis the fourth *Dragon Age* game was titled *Dread Wolf*; however, it has now been renamed to *Dragon Age: The Veilguard*.

¹²¹ The name for players who romance Solas—a shortening of Solas romancers.

¹²² Elizabeth Lowell, “Love Conquers All: The Warrior Hero and the Affirmation of Love”, in *Dangerous Men & Adventurous Women: Romance Writers On The Appeal Of the Romance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), p. 90.

¹²³ Lowell, p. 91.

¹²⁴ Lowell, p. 91.

male and female, both the hero's and the heroine's, associated with the roller coaster ride of falling in love.¹²⁵

What this infers is that the happy ending is almost a reward for the reader, for letting herself go through all the uncertainty and powerful emotions endured by the characters, and the reader as well to an extent. The use of the word 'safe' is important as well, for it shows how important the happy ending is in enclosing the narrative, of protecting the fictionality of the text and reassuring readers, and authors, that no matter how dark, upsetting, or extreme the fantasies explored within a text, it all leads to a certain path to happiness. The author can insert themselves into the text via *tiefempfunden*, and fantasies can be enjoyed because *they are explicitly held within the context of the narrative*, backed-up by the fact that there is no uncertainty of how it is going to end.

Another romance novel author, Kathleen Gilles Seidel, states that within a well-written romance novel "the happy ending becomes for me a satisfying, convincing, imaginatively realized fantasy",¹²⁶ but that she relishes "the book's entire experience with the ongoing accumulation of fantasy's pleasures, small and large".¹²⁷ What this implies is that, rather than purely focusing-in on just the ending, the entire experience is just as important.

However, if the happy ending does not appear, or appears in an unsatisfactory manner, it is not difficult to imagine that the reader might feel disappointed, even cheated,¹²⁸ that all the struggles the hero and heroine went through were entirely for naught. The fic *Shades of Cool*, published on AO3 in 2016 by Lillington_x, is a reader fic, featuring Michael De Santa, one of the PCs of *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar Games, 2013) (GTAV), and the reader, through use of second person, 'you', pronouns. The fic contains an affair between Michael and the reader but ends unhappily as Michael goes back to his wife Amanda, his canonical wife in-game.

In-game, infidelity is a core part of Michael's narrative, though Michael's own infidelities are only mentioned in dialogue. Most of the infidelities are initiated by Amanda, and Michael finding Amanda in bed with her tennis instructor causes the inciting incident of the game where Michael angrily destroys a house by pulling it down a hill.¹²⁹ This in turn leaves him in

¹²⁵ Suzanne Simmons Guntrum, "Happily Ever After: The Ending as Beginning", in *Dangerous Men & Adventurous Women: Romance Writers On The Appeal Of the Romance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), p. 153.

¹²⁶ Seidel, p. 176.

¹²⁷ Seidel, p. 176.

¹²⁸ Barlow and Krentz, p. 20.

¹²⁹ *Grand Theft Auto V*, in-game mission – Marriage Counselling.

debt to a local cartel leader, which sees him returning to his former life of crime. Another affair occurs in-game between Amanda and her yoga teacher and is the catalyst for Amanda and their children leaving Michael to exist by himself.¹³⁰ Nevertheless, by the end of the main narrative, Michael and Amanda are able to solve their differences and reunite, more in love than ever, with a firm reaffirmation that they will stick it out and remain happily married.¹³¹ Ironically, perhaps, this is a romantic happy ending, even if it is unorthodox given they have already been married for decades.

It is perhaps this definitive happy ending that already exists in-game which means *Shades of Cool* could never achieve the same happy ending for Michael and the reader; Michael is a married man, and therefore unobtainable. Of course, fanfiction is a sandbox where anything can become possible, begging the question why an author would want to stick to what they have been given in-game. However, I would argue that the answer lies in the BDSM theory outlined above, that within fanfiction *choice* is fundamental; self-limitations allow for desire because it is the author who is calling the shots and choosing how much or little of the canon/original text they are bringing with them. Choosing to stick with the narrative presented in GTAV is entirely the author's right, and they may have considered this fic to be an interesting exercise in exploring the 'what-if' of Michael choosing Amanda once again, even when presented with alternative relationship.

The unhappy ending of the fic may well have also been inspired by the song which the fic is named after, namely *Shades of Cool* by Lana del Rey.¹³² Many of her songs deal with relationships and heartbreak, and *Shades of Cool* specifically deals with a man who cannot be fixed or changed and whose heart cannot be broken. Already this paints a very similar picture to Michael and given how influential this song is to the fic—it is even tagged with 'Lana Del Rey influenced this so much'—an overtly 'saccharine' happy ending would therefore not tonally fit in with the original musical inspiration, Michael's character, or the overall tone of the fic.

The fic is also clearly tagged with "Angst, Unrequited Love, [...] Heartbreak", indicating that a reader can see, even before clicking on this fic, that things will not end happily and are therefore forewarned to the overall emotional tone, and the aforesaid unhappy ending. The five comments left on the fic all broadly revolve around how heart-breaking and emotionally

¹³⁰ *Grand Theft Auto V*, in-game mission – Did Somebody Say Yoga?

¹³¹ *Grand Theft Auto V*, in-game mission – Reuniting the Family.

¹³² Lana del Rey, *Shades of Cool*, *Ultraviolence* (Interscope, 2014)

evocative this fic was,¹³³ but only one mentions anything about wishing there *was* a happy ending. What this fic shows is that an unhappy ending can be accepted by readers if *tonally* it fits in with the overall tone/theme of the narrative, as well as being properly coded with the correct tags.

This acceptance of an unhappy ending could be answered within games studies by a paper entitled *Negative Emotion, Positive Experience?* by Julia Ayumi Bopp, Elisa D. Mekler and Klaus Opwis. They discovered that players appreciated “experiencing negatively valenced emotions, such as sadness”,¹³⁴ and that it was the *intensity* these emotions evoked that was appreciated; they provided opportunity for self-reflection which, in the end, allowed for an overall positive experience rather than a purely negative one.¹³⁵ It is not difficult to imagine that this appreciation of negative emotion can be applied to fanfics as well, given they provoke similarly strong emotional responses, especially when the author and reader are in a state of *tiefempfunden* emotional connection with a fic and its characters.

Given that fanfictions do not have to adhere to the rather strict rules and conventions of romance novels, and that videogame fanfictions are drawing from games, this may well mean that authors are more familiar with this positive-negative emotional experience. Therefore they would be more willing to include unhappy endings within their fics because they understand the emotional value that can come from such an ending. It may also be as simple as an author wanting to adhere to the canon in-game narrative, to see Michael and Amanda end up with their happy ending because it is their preferred relationship. It may also simply be an acknowledgement that the player/author/reader can never truly have Michael, that in the end he is but a bunch of pixels on a screen, translated into words.

What is interesting about Michael and Amanda’s happy ending is that it reveals it is not just the betrothal or marriage or pregnancy that is important to creating a happy ending, because they are already married and have children. Perhaps it is the *concrete affirmation of love* which is so crucial here—an acknowledgement that Catherine Roach also argues: what is vitally important is the affirmation that, within romance novels, “the woman always wins”,¹³⁶ the heroine is “happy, safe, financially secure, well loved, sexually satisfied, and set up for a

¹³³ Lillington_x – Shades Of Cool, <https://archiveofourown.org/works/6472126> [accessed 29 September 2023]

¹³⁴ Julia Ayumi Bopp, Elisa D. Mekler and Klaus Opwis, “Negative Emotion, Positive Experience? Emotionally Moving Moments In Digital Games”, in *2016 CHI Conference On Human Factors In Computing Systems* (New York, 2016), pp. 2996–3006 <https://doi.org/10.1145/2858036.2858227>, p. 2996.

¹³⁵ Bopp, Mekler and Opwis, p. 3005.

¹³⁶ Catherine M Roach, *Happily Ever After* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2016), p. 26.

fulfilling life”,¹³⁷ and that “[u]nlike in real life and much of literary fiction, women always gain power in these stories. Women never lose in the love relationship”.¹³⁸

This is a sentiment echoed by a number of other romance authors,¹³⁹ and Linda Barlow and Jayne Ann Krentz detail that, to them, the happy ending

requires that the final union of male and female be a fusing of contrasting elements: heroes who are gentled by love yet who lose none of their warrior qualities in the process and heroines who conquer devils without sacrificing their femininity. It requires a quintessentially female kind of victory, one in which neither side loses, one which produces a whole that is stronger than either of its parts. It requires that the hero acknowledge the heroine’s heroic qualities in both masculine and feminine terms. He must recognize and admire her sense of honor, courage, and determination as well as her traditionally female qualities of gentleness and compassion. And it requires a sexual bonding that transcends the physical, a bond that reader and writer know can never be broken.¹⁴⁰

What this quote implies is that the happy ending is much more than a simple cathartic release for the author; it is in fact an important lesson for female readers to not settle for any man, but to choose a man who recognizes and celebrates all of her qualities—which is also an extension of the ‘fantasy’ discussed in the previous section. It is a fantasy where women always gain and lose nothing, a fantasy where she is completely satisfied and healed no matter how many awful things occurred along the way. It is reflective of a bell hooks quote that demands “love will not prevail in any situation where one party, either female or male, wants to maintain control”,¹⁴¹ implying a similar need for equality, and, one must ask, where might such balance be better represented than within the happy ending of a romance novel, where the hero and heroine are bound together with love, absolutely committed and unquestioning in their devotion for one another?

What this indicates is that romance novels perhaps function on the same level as fanfictions in being a safe, fictional place to explore and push boundaries in relationships. As noted, romance novels have covered nearly every possible form of inappropriate relationship, and

¹³⁷ Roach, p. 26.

¹³⁸ Roach, p. 26.

¹³⁹ See *Dangerous Men Adventurous Women* for various detailed accounts of romance novel authors discussing the nature and point of the happy ending.

¹⁴⁰ Barlow and Krentz, p. 20.

¹⁴¹ bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: Harper, 2000), p. 152.

yet all are still able to come together at the end, happy and in love, the inappropriateness tamed and conquered. In real-life, as was shown with the three levels of inappropriateness, inappropriate relationships such as student-teacher, infidelity, fraternization all come with societal disapproval and perhaps even legal recourse, the real-life people in the relationship perhaps vilified or ostracized. In real-life, there is arguably less likelihood for a happy ending within such relationships, no such catharsis or female empowerment, and no place for the woman to win, to tame the once-wild hero and love to conquer all.

Within video games specifically, there are however some inappropriate relationships/dynamics presented as being more acceptable, one of which is fraternization, of having an inappropriate relationship with a subordinate or superior within the context of a militaristic, or similar, chain of command. This is mainly due to games often featuring a PC who belongs in a militaristic or otherwise highly structured organisational faction, meaning fraternization often becomes the most common form of inappropriate relationship found within AAA games.

One game providing an overt example of fraternization is within the optional relationship between a female Shepard and Kaidan Alenko in *Mass Effect* (BioWare, 2007). In-game Shepard is a Commander in the Systems Alliance, a futuristic 2100s Earth-wide military. Kaidan is a Staff Lieutenant, thereby subordinate to Shepard.

In-game, the player can flirt with Kaidan, but it is only before the final mission of the game where things can become serious, and the relationship properly realised as a ‘relationship’, not mere mutual attraction. Kaidan mentions there are regs against fraternization, but given their current perilous situation, he also remarks that “breach of protocol will be pretty far down the list of charges at our courts martial”.¹⁴² Afterwards, the fade-to-black sex scene occurs should the player initiate it. Shepard and Kaidan are never reprimanded for their relationship, indicating fraternization is rendered almost unimportant instead of a major narrative arc or source of conflict. It is mentioned once or twice, and then apparently forgotten about.

Fics that include fraternization as a focal point therefore may be expressing an author’s desire to explore this form of inappropriateness further, making it a point of contention within the relationship—perhaps even something that gets them both into actual trouble. The use of

¹⁴² BioWare, *Mass Effect* (Edmonton: Microsoft Game Studios, 2007), in-game cutscene.

fraternization may well be a way of reinforcing Shepard and Kaidan's love for one another, that they will be together no matter the consequences, that even being dishonourably discharged from the Systems Alliance is worth it if it means they are together; this reinforces attraction to Kaidan through the quasi-self-insertion of the personal-PC Shepard, as will be explored further in the next chapter, along with the forbidden thrills that come with such an inappropriateness.

The fic *Systems Alliance Instruction 53720.2* which was published in 2015 by Penthesilea1623—who has written several other Shepard/Kaidan fics, all containing their personal Shepard Ophelia—takes place in-universe shortly after the end of the first game and was inspired by a tumblr prompt. The fic begins with the Alliance policy on fraternization in italics, which the author states in the end notes that they copied verbatim from the fraternization regulations of the current-day, real-life US Navy. This borrowing-from-the-real-world is interesting, for it implies that within this fic-universe, even though *Mass Effect* takes place in the late 2100s, such a regulation appears to have stood the test of time. It also gives a sense of familiarity to the fic, that humans have not really changed all that much, even when there is an entirely galaxy to see—or perhaps it was simply an easier choice than trying to come up with an entirely new fraternization policy when there is a perfectly acceptable one already available.

It is Shepard who is reading and re-reading the regs, for she and Kaidan were about to take shore leave together when she discovers that someone had placed a copy of the regulations in her bag. This causes Shepard to feel an impending sense of panic due to the threat of court martial, and the fact that, as the superior officer, Shepard would take the majority of the blame. This in turn causes her to rethink her entire relationship with Kaidan, and makes her wonder “what if he didn't have feelings for her? [...] What if he'd felt pressured into making the relationship physical because she was his commanding officer?”.¹⁴³

Echoing the fact that in-game the player always initiates the conversations with Kaidan, Shepard begins to realise that she had always been the one to initiate flirtations and intimacy, that “[s]he was the one who joked and teased. His replies had been strangely reserved and Christ, how many times had he brought up regulations?”.¹⁴⁴ Her thoughts lead her to their sleeping together, and she wonders whether he only did it because he was following an order.

¹⁴³ Penthesilea1623, *Systems Alliance Instruction 53720.2* (Archive of Our Own, 2015), p. 2.

¹⁴⁴ Penthesilea1623, p. 2.

This doubt serves to ensure that the eventual happy ending to the fic is deserved, for it is chosen by both Shepard *and* Kaidan—they are choosing each other over the Alliance, love over duty. This certainly echoes the structures of traditional romance novels, which ensures the happy ending is earned, and is doubly satisfying because the hero and heroine have overcome everything to be with one another. This doubt is also reflective of the fact that fraternization is a serious offense within the military.

Kaidan arrives for the aforementioned shore leave. Shepard shows him the regs and tells him he should go by himself, that she should not have pressured him into sleeping with her. Kaidan angrily responds by asking her if that is an order, to which Shepard replies that it was a request.¹⁴⁵ Kaidan leaves, and Shepard begins to cry, thinking the relationship is over. However, a minute or so later he returns and declares his love and intent towards Shepard:

Here's the thing, Shepard. I've read that fraternization policy so many times that I could probably quote it back to you verbatim, and you know what? I don't care, not any more. I didn't sleep with you because you were my commanding officer, and I was afraid to turn you down, and the fact that you think that's even a possibility makes me wonder if you're really as smart as everyone says you are. I love you. I want these ten days with you and a hundred more and then a thousand, no, ten thousand more after that. I don't care who knows it. I don't care if it ruins your career or mine; it's a risk I'm willing to take. I'm in love with you Ophelia Shepard and for the first time in a long time I'm willing to take a risk on the off chance that I'll get..." His voice cracked and he paused for a moment before continuing. "On the off chance that I'll get everything I ever wanted."¹⁴⁶

This leaves no doubt in Shepard, or the reader's mind, that Kaidan is fully committed to the relationship, and is willing to brave any storm if it means being with her. The fic ends with a humorous reversal of the previous order/request, with Shepard asking Kaidan if his stating that they have a shuttle to catch is a request, to which Kaidan replies that it is an order.¹⁴⁷

Unlike the in-game narrative, within this fic the fraternization was the main source of emotional pain and doubt, but it was not unsurmountable, and finally overcome by love, for

¹⁴⁵ Penthesilea1623, pp. 3-4.

¹⁴⁶ Penthesilea1623, p. 4.

¹⁴⁷ Penthesilea1623, p. 4.

Kaidan's declaration of adoration is truly an encapsulation of the happy ending forming "a whole that is stronger than either of its parts".¹⁴⁸

Conclusion

What this chapter has shown is that there is a place for happy endings within fictionally inappropriate relationships, both within romance novels and fanfictions, for both allow inappropriateness to become a source of conflict but not an insurmountable problem. It is not difficult to understand why romance novel readers wish for everything to have been worth the effort, to be shown that love can be a healing force that she may one day get to experience in her real-life; and if not, she is safe in the knowledge that at least within romance novels and fanfictions, a happy ending is (almost always) guaranteed.

What has also been explored is the defining of 'inappropriate relationship', utilising Duck and VanderVoort's three levels of inappropriateness. The chapter began with showing what difficulty videogames have in including explicit sexual content, let alone an inappropriate relationship, in order to help explain why authors would want to explore such extreme relationships within fics. However, the fact that games themselves find difficulty in incorporating 'acceptable' inappropriate relationships is not sufficient to answer the question of why players must become fic-authors and why they must turn to fanfiction in order to explore those inappropriate relationships not shown within games; or why these inappropriate relationships require a happy ending, even if the relationship is *illegal* in real-life. Including such relationships in fics is far more than a mere supply and demand issue.

In the end, it all boils down to *tiefempfunden* and control—the wish to explore the relationships both present and not within the original text in a way that hands control entirely over to the author. In-fic the author holds the reins, free to customise a fic to explore their specific desires and fantasies, to insert themselves via these desires and fantasies—or through a more literal character-self-insertion via a personal avatar-PC, as will be explored in the next chapter. Within their exploration of sex and sexuality within romance novels, McCann, and Roach further state that

the romance story can be particularly useful in developing a woman's sense of self and in allowing her to articulate her voice because the sheer act of crafting these stories—whether or not the writer ever publishes her work or achieves any particular

¹⁴⁸ Barlow and Krentz, p. 20.

success as an author—creates a means for her to explore contradictions and quandaries of female desire.¹⁴⁹

Highlighting how romance narratives can help in developing a woman's sense of self is vital, for the beauty in romance narratives is that they provide this space for fic authors and readers to enact desires and learn more about themselves in the process. It becomes more than a mere story; it becomes a portal to exploring *so much more*. Desire is merely one aspect of that exploration, and the ability to insert elements of oneself and explore this self in a safe, fictional space can be incredibly important for discovering and exploring romantic and sexual likes and dislikes. Reading other fics can help authors to discover new kinks, preferred narratives, tropes, and characters, but it is only within writing fics that authors can truly explore a tailor-made world with unique narratives and characters specific to the author, and the author alone. Readers may well enjoy the fic, but ultimately the author determines every aspect of the story, even if it is inspired by someone else or began as a prompt.

I have come to appreciate the power of the 'happy ending' more and more as the years have gone by, especially within fics that contain some form of inappropriateness. I have a fascination with putting my characters through immense amounts of pain and drama—which is not always related to the inappropriateness of their relationship per se, as the drama would often exist regardless. I also have a love of relationships that bring out both the worst and best in each my characters. I only feel able to explore this range of inappropriate and unhealthy aspects to a relationship dynamic because I know that at the end the majority of fics that I write will end happily, with the dramas and unhealthiness resolved as the characters admit or resolutely state that they are in love and will fight for their relationship and their love.

Twilight (Little, Brown and Company, 2005) was a seminal book in my teenaged years as a template for (un)healthy fictional relationships, and the phrase “unconditionally and irrevocably in love” (though I knew it as “bedingungslos und unwiderruflich in ihn verliebt” as I first read them in German) still rattles around my brain rent free. It is possible to see the echoes of the *Twilight* books within nearly every fic I write—which forms another facet of my personal type of *tiefempfunden*: the commonality of characters who would move mountains or raze planets for their loved one, for love does not always incite 'positive' action, and I relish the darker sides of love, as it pairs so well with inappropriate relationships. A happy ending for me also does not always mean it must be a saccharine

¹⁴⁹ Hannah McCann and Catherine M. Roach “Sex and sexuality”, in *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2021), p. 420.

traditional romantic ending, as the most important aspect is that the characters are in love and committed to one another—even if devastation and despair rages around them.

Including a happy ending in a fic may well just be the bow on the present, a reassurance that no matter how dark or depraved or out-there the desire being explored in a fic, these desires are all okay, and they are worthy of love and exploration. A happy ending is a reinforcement of fictionality: even in the most inappropriate of relationships there can be a space where these kinds of relationships and dynamics function and thrive, and can contain genuine love, which would be impossible in real-life.

Chapter Two “So what if I’m self-involved, who else should I be involved with?”¹⁵⁰ — Self-insertion within video game fics

Introduction

Whilst fanfiction is not a professionally regulated form of writing, there are conventions in place to help fanfiction authors create ‘good’ fanfiction. Perhaps the most pervasive rule is that including a Mary Sue—a perfect, flawless character who is incredibly talented at everything she does, and becomes the centre point of a fic, becoming more important than the original protagonists—is possibly the worst thing one could include in a fic, and authors should be called out when they do such a thing. Including a self-insert character is similarly reviled, though there is leeway given to more inexperienced authors who do not know any better. It is considered a teething problem, to be discarded once an author becomes more proficient.

This chapter will be looking at two main concepts: the self-insert, and the Mary Sue, an idealised self-insertion by the author. Both are often conflated as one singular concept, but they are distinct from one another, even if there is often overlap. Although the act of an author inserting themselves into a fic is often a more nuanced affair. A self-insert can be many different things, whereas a Mary Sue is a more defined precept, yet both have varying negative connotations. Nevertheless, self-insertion is key to the concept of *tiefempfunden*, and this chapter will aim to explore the different facets of self-insertion, and how translating game-PCs (playable characters) into fics provides a new, unique set of challenges and expectations, given players are supposed to immerse themselves into the gameworld and insert some part of themselves into their PC.

Despite the negativity surrounding self-insertion in fics, there is a sub-genre of fanfiction in which the self-insert *is* the entire point of the fic. These are known in fanfiction communities as ‘reader fics’, and often they allow the reader to enact their sexual and romantic fantasies with a specific beloved character, for the *reader* is specifically placed as one half of the relationship rather than two external characters. This genre is all about fulfilling author/reader desires and fantasies, mostly of a sexual nature, which provides yet another aspect of self-insertion that is overtly self-indulgent.

¹⁵⁰ *Real Housewives of New York City*, Ramona Singer, season 12 tagline

Let me make my own choices

Immersion is desirable within a game. Developers want players to become immersed in a gameworld so that it becomes their reality for a time. Part of this immersion can take the form of in-game choices where the player gets to directly influence the game-world with those choices often having consequences. Though immersion also comes in far more subtle forms that are not necessarily tied to active action or choice; sometimes it is the emotional aspect where immersion truly applies.

In her essay, “*I’m in love with someone that doesn’t exist!*” *Bleed in the Context of a Computer Game*, Annika Waern states that a player must “identify—partially and temporarily—with their fictional character”,¹⁵¹ and that because the player is acting out the actions of their PC, “it becomes very difficult to act out emotions without feeling them at least to some extent”.¹⁵² As was stated in the introduction, Waern introduces the concept of *bleed*, consisting of two elements: the *bleed-in* effect, where the player influences the PC, and a *bleed-out* effect, where the “player cannot distance himself/herself from the (simulated) emotions of the character”.¹⁵³ What this suggests is that players naturally imitate a process of self-insertion via bleeding emotions between them and the PC, but most importantly, this is a process that is not unwanted; developers are not preventing players from this intense immersion.

However, this immersion can go beyond the confines of the gameworld, and players can begin to assert their own dominance over the game; this initiative is also something that is not necessarily unwanted, for as Danny Wadeson remarks:

So long as your objective is not to lead your players deterministically to one set conclusion, fans developing headcanon is a fantastic outcome. It means your players are so invested in the game or IP/wider universe that they are establishing and holding true to a conclusion they’ve parsed out and developed themselves.¹⁵⁴

The text that this comes from, *The Advanced Game Narrative Toolbox*, is designed to help *developers* to create a successful game narrative, which makes this all the more interesting as

¹⁵¹ Annika Waern, “Bleed In The Context Of A Computer Game”, in *Game Love Essays On Play And Affection*, (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, inc., Publishers, 2015), p. 40.

¹⁵² Waern, p. 40.

¹⁵³ Waern, p. 42.

¹⁵⁴ Danny Wadeson “Building A Universe”, in *The Advanced Game Narrative Toolbox* (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2019), p. 36.

it reveals the developer/game side of things, that this kind of input by players is wanted and perhaps integral to creating a ‘successful’ narrative. The usage of ‘headcanon’ is interesting, for a headcanon is a player-defined belief or interpretation of in-game narratives, characters, etc. not explicitly found within the canon—though anything in-game can technically become a headcanon and headcanons can also go directly against canon. Headcanons are usually more personal opinions, rather than broader fanon, which is a fandom-accepted headcanon. The fact that Wadeson makes explicit mention of headcanon shows that developers want in-game immersion to go far beyond that which is experienced purely in-game. It would also seem to imply that furthering immersion by writing fanfiction is a positive thing, for it is a physical demonstration of just how invested a player has become in a game if they are willing to spend their time and energy in furthering the gameworld and narrative.

But what Wadeson also shows is that the PC is merely one part of the immersion puzzle, the implication being that in the grand scheme of things the world and characters around the PC matter more than the PC itself. Wadeson further confirms this by noting that “A gripping narrative is always going to be the driving force in this pursuit, but it’s world-building that will make it believable and keep the set-dressing interesting, too”.¹⁵⁵

Perhaps, then, it is the smaller elements—for example being able to pet a cat or hug your love interest—that help to create this immersion, instead of it just being the big choices that have major consequences. Little things may well include romance narratives, which are often relegated to optional side-quests. Choices, and how they affect and shape the gameworld, are a large point of discussion within fandoms, with many a forum, reddit thread or tumblr discussion centring around a particular choice with players defending, explaining, and rationalising why they chose to make that choice.

However within fics these big, world-altering narratives are often forgone in favour of those smaller, world-building elements, especially when romance is involved because the focus is placed upon the two characters in a relationship. It would be difficult to concentrate on the romance were the author too busy describing a combat scene or some other grandiose event that overshadows the romance.

¹⁵⁵ Wadeson, p. 35.

The outcomes of these choices are often heavily influenced by the player themselves rather than necessarily considering the PC as its own separate identity. Mia Consalvo et al. in their essay *Playing a Better Me* argue that:

players are often not just constructing avatars for play—they're also constructing themselves as individuals with a particular moral code or ethos. That “self” is still a character to some extent, but it's a character that is intimately tied to how players rationalize or make sense of the decisions they make in daily life. [...] At one end, the avatar is largely conceptualized as an empty vessel for the player herself [...] this means designing an avatar that closely resembles themselves in both appearance and character. It might also mean that the avatar is a proxy for the player, and any action taken will be “her own.”¹⁵⁶

Unlike appearance in the context of player attraction to NPCs—which will be explored in the third chapter—for now the importance lies with the PC's appearance in allowing the player to not just connect with the PC, but also inject themselves into the gameworld. Of course, there are those players who do not see themselves in a PC, customisable or not,¹⁵⁷ but the implication is that there is usually *some form of self-insertion occurring when playing an RPG*.

In-game choices are ultimately chosen by the player which can be based on personal moral belief, or even how they, the player, are choosing to play the PC. Any in-game romance is ultimately chosen by the player, usually dependent on whether they are attracted to that NPC. The act of a PC moving forward only happens because a player pushes a key or presses a button. Self-insertion is inherent in the player/PC relationship, and with a customisable PC this is even stronger because a unique PC will almost always possess the ability to choose and shape the world within the confines of the rules set out—rules, of course, dictated by the developer. Things are naturally different when a player is confronted with a non-customisable PC, but as will be explored further in chapter three, this distance allows for attraction to the PC because they are *not* the player to the same extent.

The inclusion of a personal moral code implies that it is not just appearance being influenced by players, they are also basing the PC's choices and morality based on themselves, which

¹⁵⁶ Mia Consalvo, Thorsten Busch and Carolyn Jong, “Playing A Better Me: How Players Rehearse Their Ethos Via Moral Choices”, *Games And Culture*, 14.3 (2016), 216-235 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412016677449>, p. 224.

¹⁵⁷ Consalvo et al., p. 226.

would help to explain “the difficulties of getting players to play “morally difficult characters” and experiment with morally ambiguous situations”.¹⁵⁸ In fact, it seems that often players are choosing to create PCs that are “better looking or more highly skilled versions of themselves”.¹⁵⁹ While Consalvo et al.’s text deals mainly with ambiguous/questionable ethical decisions found in-game, the fact that players do grapple with difficult, moral choices—that often violence will be justified because they are ‘the hero’ of the game,¹⁶⁰ for example—shows that there is a deeper connection occurring between player and PC, that players care about their PC’s effect on the world, meaning that it is unlikely that a player will only interact with a PC on a purely surface level.

What is a Mary Sue?

Not including a Mary Sue is one of the cardinal rules within fanfiction,¹⁶¹ for a Mary Sue implies not just ‘bad’ characterisation: it foregrounds the authors gratuitous self-indulgence with usually overt idealised self-insertion. The ‘Mary Sue’ as a character first emerged in 1974, with the *Star Trek* fic “*A Trekkie’s Tale*” written by Paula Smith, which was a parodical fic reflecting the slew of *Star Trek* fics in the early 70s.¹⁶² Writing about the eponymous fic, Camille Bacon-Smith sums up this derisive character:

Mary Sue is the youngest officer ever to serve on the starship Enterprise. She is a teenager, tall and slim, with clear skin and straight teeth. If she is not blond, Mary Sue is half Vulcan, her ears delicately pointed. But Mary Sue is not just another pretty face. She is usually highly educated, with degrees from universities throughout the known universe in all fields of technical and cultural studies (or an equivalent head of her class in Starfleet Academy). She can mend the Enterprise with a hairpin, save the lives of the crew through wit, courage, and, occasionally, the sacrifice of her virtue.¹⁶³

It is easy to see why the Mary Sue could be construed as a problematic character, for she is flawless, beautiful, and uniquely capable of everything. It is interesting that the Mary Sue archetype came from a parody fic written by a woman parodying other fics at the time also written by women. This was not a case of some outsider, male or female, denigrating female

¹⁵⁸ Consalvo et al., p. 218.

¹⁵⁹ Consalvo et al., p. 226.

¹⁶⁰ Consalvo et al., p. 232.

¹⁶¹ Keidra Chaney and Raizel Liebler. “Me, myself, and I: Fan fiction and the art of self-insertion”, *Bitch: Feminist Response to Pop Culture* Vol. 31 (2006) 52 – 57, p. 52.

¹⁶² Camille Bacon-Smith, *Enterprising Women* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), p. 96.

¹⁶³ Bacon-Smith, p. 94.

driven art, this was an insider making a stark comment about other insiders. Interestingly, Smith later stated that her intention with writing the Mary Sue was never about putting down stories about aspiring females.¹⁶⁴ Nevertheless, regardless of Smith's original intentions, the Mary Sue archetype has endured to the present day, and remains just as problematic a trope as it did back in the 70s. One response to the effects of *A Trekkie's Tale* states that:

The Mary Sue story runs ten paragraphs. But in terms of their impact on those they affect, those words [Mary Sue] have got to rank right up there with the Selective Service Act.

[...]

I started Trekwriting with a Mary Sue [...] So have many other Trekwriters. In fact I would propose that just as every dog is allowed one bite, so every Trekwriter should be allowed one Mary Sue. Said story should not necessarily be published [...], but they should be given a sympathetic reading and critique, and perhaps returned to the author with the explanation that she is following a too-well-beaten path, with the encouragement to turn her interests to other stories.¹⁶⁵

This idea that authors be allowed one fic within which to explore the Mary Sue trope is interesting, for it shows a sense of understanding that this character archetype should exist in some form, whilst also very strongly telling authors that it would be better not to write such characters themselves. Again, note that this is an internal convention—it is other authors, other insiders, telling other authors in the community what they can and cannot write. There is also the inference that a story containing a Mary Sue can exist but should not be published and therefore not be read by a wide audience, thereby rendering it an almost taboo thing, hidden away by authors in shame. One could argue that since this was all written in the 1970s and 1980s, that things have changed. However, from personal experience, the Mary Sue is still just as reviled today, and unless it is a purposeful parody of the concept, authors will do anything to avoid the label being placed upon their fic.

The characteristics given to the Mary Sue allow her an obvious advantage in-universe, for no matter what problem could appear within the story, she would have a solution, and would be able to use all of her youth, beauty, and wit to do so. By the time that Bacon-Smith was

¹⁶⁴ Bacon-Smith, p. 96.

¹⁶⁵ Bacon-Smith, p. 96. [quoting Edith Cantor, "Mary Sue, a Short Compendium" *Archives*. (Danvers, Massachusetts: Yeoman Press, 1980)]

researching Enterprising Women in the 1980s and early 1990s, the reputation of the Mary Sue archetype was so bad that *Star Trek* fanzine editors still refused to publish stories containing such a character ¹⁶⁶ some fifteen-plus years after the character archetype was coined by Paula Smith.

The Mary Sue casts a long shadow, becoming the original sin of fanfiction, for there are barely any other ‘do not do this’ rules that have survived this long or remained so reviled. While today’s authors are free to upload whatever stories they want to on modern fic-websites, there is still considerable negative backlash whenever someone is suspected of creating a Mary Sue within a fic. The persistence of this trope, even to the present day, is fascinating, for as Francesca Coppa remarks, “the translation and adaptation of fannish terms, forms, and practices that have emerged from [the internet] is rapidly transforming the fannish landscape into something that older fans may barely recognize”.¹⁶⁷ In the nearly fifty years since the Mary Sue emerged, the definition of what constitutes a Mary Sue may have changed, but the negativity surrounding her generally has not.

What was fascinating is that during my research of the Mary Sue, the definitions of what constitutes a Mary Sue were revealed to be incredibly broad, and different academics and authors all appear to have very different concepts of what the key definitions are. Sanna Lehtonen highlights in her essay about self-insertion in fics, “there is hardly agreement on what kind of self-insertion characters are acceptable or what exactly makes a Mary Sue, or a realistic character, for that matter”.¹⁶⁸ This indecisiveness by academics and fic authors is odd, that a reviled trope within fics has endured for so many decades under a nebulous definition of what a Mary Sue actually is. Perhaps this is a deliberate act within fic circles: to ensure that the definition remains so broad that fic authors can brand nearly any character as a Mary Sue if desired—though this would not be a positive thing and harkens back to the fact that the negative Mary Sue label is given by insider-female-fic-authors onto other insider-female-fic-authors. What this could suggest is that the Mary Sue is more about power than an actual character archetype: the power to easily denigrate another author’s work as ‘not good

¹⁶⁶ Bacon-Smith, p. 94.

¹⁶⁷ Francesca Coppa, “A Brief History Of Media Fandom”, in *Fan Fiction And Fan Communities In The Age Of The Internet* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2006), p. 57.

¹⁶⁸ Sanna Lehtonen, “Writing Oneself Into Someone Else’s Story – Experiments With Identity And Speculative Life Writing In Twilight Fan Fiction”, *Fafnir – Nordic Journal Of Science Fiction And Fantasy Research*, 2.2 (2015), 7–18, p. 11.

enough' and therefore not worthy of publication on fic websites or being read by readers/other authors.

Patrycja Biniek, in her essay on the evolution of the Mary Sue character within fics on Wattpad, another fic-website, states that “The only characteristics that are definite while describing such characters are: female gender and lack of depth in the process of developing her character”.¹⁶⁹ In a similar, but different vein within her PhD thesis, Ashley J. Barner uses a more fandom-based definition of a Mary Sue, namely those found on the websites Urban Dictionary and TV Tropes, both of which highlight the self-indulgence¹⁷⁰ and authorial favouritism¹⁷¹ evident within the Mary Sue character. While both of these sources are not academic in nature, they are sources that are more likely to be accessed by fic-authors as opposed to purely academic texts, so they better reflect those definitions the average fic-author would know/discover, making them equally valuable sources to explore. What all of these definitions share is that they all highlight different reasons why the Mary Sue is bad—there is not one homogeneous definition.

While the Mary Sue trope has only been prevalent in the last few decades, it has also been theorised that the Mary Sue as an archetype has been in existence as far back as the 19th century—and similarly criticised then.¹⁷² Keidra Chaney and Raizel Liebler’s essay *Me, myself, and I* explores the full history of the Mary Sue. In doing so they argue that the Mary Sue is about power and perfection of women, especially when framed within a Hollywood lens.¹⁷³ As noted above, the Mary Sue-archetype accusation is often used by more influential/experienced fic-authors in criticism of more inexperienced fic-authors, where the power dynamics are particularly evident.

The use of Hollywood by Chaney and Liebler is interesting, for it implies that the Mary Sue goes beyond fic as a socially soaked trope that has bled both ways to/from popular media, which it has, for many TV/film female characters have also been given the Mary Sue label, from Buffy (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*) or Hermione (*Harry Potter*), to mention a few. The Mary Sue may have originated in fic, but it quickly spread to other forms of media, *canon*

¹⁶⁹ Patrycja Biniek “Evolution of the Mary Sue Character in Works by Wattpad Social Platform Users”, *Polish Journal of English Studies* 4.1(2018) 35–55, p. 43.

¹⁷⁰ Ashley J. Barner “I Opened a Book and in I Strode”: Fanfiction and Imaginative Reading”, (PhD, Ohio University, 2016), p. 69.

¹⁷¹ Barner, p. 70.

¹⁷² Chaney and Liebler, p. 55.

¹⁷³ Chaney and Liebler, p. 57.

forms of media, meaning that any fic based upon said ‘canon’ could assumed to be similarly received as a Mary Sue as well.

Chaney and Liebler’s definition of the Mary Sue is:

An original female character displaying unrealistically positive characteristics, Mary Sue is the enviable alter ego-part supermodel, part rocket scientist-of the writer who can’t help but insinuate her fantasy self into the lives of existing characters. [...] [she] represents a slice of [...] her creator’s own ego; [she] is treasured by [...] her creator but only rarely by anyone else. More negatively, a Mary Sue is a prima donna (usually but not always badly written) who saps life and realism out of every other character around, taking over the plot...to serve [the author’s] selfish purposes.¹⁷⁴

Like Paula Smith’s version of the Mary Sue, this definition states that the Mary Sue is a veritable Barbie-doll of perfection, beautiful and capable of being highly skilled in multiple high-intellect fields. The self-insert/ego aspect will be discussed later in this chapter, but it is interesting that as much focus is placed upon the *author* as the Mary Sue itself. It implies that the blame is almost entirely upon the author for creating such a character, and thanks to the negative tone given by other insiders—ego, selfishness, *prima donna*—the implication is that the author is not flawless like their Mary Sue; in fact it suggests the opposite: the author is not a good author for they prioritise ego and their own desires before considering ‘good’ writing.

Chaney and Liebler further explain that it is not merely the inclusion of positive characteristics that makes them Mary Sues, it is:

the exaggeration of those traits to an unattainable ideal. She’s not just smart, kind, quirky, or pretty, she’s smarter, nicer, quirkiest, and prettier than any other female around-and her creator will allow no one to forget it [...] She’s the glue that holds a story together, commenting on perceived flaws in a plan, uniting lovelorn characters who “belong together,” transforming a villainous character into a virtuous one by the power of her love, bringing together major characters in a shared adoration of her.¹⁷⁵

What this quote reveals is that it is not merely her inflated personality traits that condemn her as a Mary Sue, it is the fact that she takes over the narrative of the fic, all other characters becoming secondary to her—save for perhaps her love interest if the fic contains one. There

¹⁷⁴ Chaney and Liebler, p. 52.

¹⁷⁵ Chaney and Liebler, p. 54.

is not enough oxygen in the room for anyone else, yet the other characters could not possibly live without her. She is a dichotomy: egotistical perfection but also selfless enough to fix everyone else's problems and make their lives better as well.

It is possible to see that, once again, the inclusion of such egregious characterisation falls upon the author. It could be argued that the negativity surrounding the Mary Sue is less about the Mary Sue itself and is more about fic-authors including personal aspects within a fic or creating a character which is unrealistic and therefore 'bad'. This does fit into the highly community-driven aspect of fanfiction but feels at odds with the concept that people write fanfiction for the love of it, not for profit or critical acclaim. A Mary Sue may well be born out of ego and self-indulgence, but is that not the entire point of fanfiction, to take control of a world and mould it in a way that satisfies the author?

However, given the blame is often placed upon the author, there is conscious pressure to *not* create a Mary Sue whatsoever, to conform to 'ideal, *good, proper*' fanfiction practices. The very fact that (assumed) female authors have to be so cautious and hyperaware of not creating a Mary Sue creates a form of self-censorship that is problematic in itself, for it stifles the creation of strong, capable female characters in a world wherein the definitions of Mary Sue have become so broad.

Instead a true Mary Sue, as Bacon-Smith remarks, should be seen as a character who enables the 'ideal' American woman:

we can easily see that Mary Sue is a fantasy of the perfect woman created within the masculine American culture. Men are served by Mary Sue, who ideally minimizes her own value while applying her skills, and even offering her life, for the continued safety and ease of men. Even in her superiority Mary Sue must efface her talents with giggles and sophomoric humor. She must deny that her solutions to problems are the result of a valid way of thinking, modestly chalking up successes to intuition¹⁷⁶

This description of the Mary Sue may seem at odds with the one provided by Chaney et al., for that speaks of a far more 'capable' Sue who is perfect to the point of annoyance, swooping down to save the day as well as becoming the sun around which the other characters revolve. Both descriptions describe, it could be argued, a very specific version of femininity, one capable of everything without disrupting the status quo too much—especially

¹⁷⁶ Bacon-Smith, p. 102.

as she is rarely portrayed as falling in love with another woman. The essay written by Chaney and Liebler may have been published in 2006, over twenty years after Bacon-Smith's *Enterprising Women* (1992), but both agree that Mary Sues occur because they are trying to conform to a rigid ideal of womanhood, and that "[r]ather than offering an opportunity for self-identification, Mary Sue often reinforces the impossible idea that women must strive for effortless perfection".¹⁷⁷ Given how often the Mary Sue is conflated with author-self-insertion, I would argue that at least in fanfiction circles, as opposed to the academic discussions, the Mary Sue is received so negatively because of the *indulgent self-insertion* angle rather than any notion of womanly perfection.

There is a male equivalent to the Mary Sue—the Gary Sue or Marty Stue—but it is deployed more rarely. As Biniek states, "In literature a male character wins readers' acceptance much quicker than females, as they are naturally assumed to be likeable".¹⁷⁸ Canon characters like Captain Kirk in *Star Trek* could easily be labelled as a Mary Sue if he were female and fan-created, for within canon he is idealised and competent to the point of mythical ability.¹⁷⁹ Luke Skywalker from the *Star Wars* original trilogy, and Anakin Skywalker from the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy, also both possess many of the traits that Mary Sues are condemned for. It is worth noting that Rey from the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy has been labelled as a Mary Sue many times¹⁸⁰ despite her being a canon character and sharing many characteristics with Luke. Male characters are allowed to be perfect, whereas "[i]f a female character's capabilities were even slightly more extraordinary than readers deemed appropriate, the character was still considered a Mary Sue".¹⁸¹ As Kristina Busse remarks in her essay *Beyond Mary Sue*, the term Mary Sue has become less about the character itself and their undesirable characteristics, it is instead used to describe "characters and stories readers don't like, while those characters readers do enjoy are defended as transcending the Mary Sue trope".¹⁸²

As stated before, the one instance where the inclusion of a Mary Sue is somewhat forgiven is when it is the author's first fic, "it is the first story a fan writes, often before she knows about

¹⁷⁷ Chaney and Liebler, p. 57.

¹⁷⁸ Biniek, p. 43.

¹⁷⁹ Biniek, p. 43.

¹⁸⁰ Nicolle Lamerichs and Nieves Rosendo, 'Affect and the Analysis of Transmedial Characters', *Narrative*, 30.2 (2022), 197–209 <https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2022.0011>, p. 199.

¹⁸¹ Biniek, p. 43.

¹⁸² Kristina Busse, "Beyond Mary Sue: Fan Representation And The Complex Negotiation Of Gendered Identity", in *Seeing Fans: Representations Of Fandom In Media And Popular Culture* (New York & London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), p. 161.

the literature or its forms”.¹⁸³ According to Bacon-Smith, however, it becomes a problem when “the writer does not pass on to other forms”,¹⁸⁴ which is problematic for it once again requires the author to self-censor in order to conform to fic ideals. What is interesting to note is that many modern-day works explicitly tagged with Mary Sue are *purposefully* written rather than accidental, and it is these purposeful inclusions that are then often conflated with the Mary Sue trope. As Effie Sapuridis and Maria K. Alberto argue in their 2022 essay on self-insert fanfiction and examination of more recent examples of the Mary Sue that:

contemporary fan-authors’ own use of “Mary Sue” in tags and summaries is often connected to works that are more meta-commentary or sardonic and parodic fanfiction: that is, works more akin to a modern update of Paula Smith’s short story featuring Lieutenant Mary Sue, rather than actual female characters created by fan-authors for traditional narrative purposes¹⁸⁵

This furthers the idea that those characters who get labelled by other authors as being a Mary Sue are not intended by the author *to be* a Mary Sue, which furthers the idea that unless an author knowingly tags a work with Mary Sue as a sort of insider joke of ‘it’s okay, I *meant* to include a Mary Sue’, then the author is therefore too inexperienced or too emotionally connected to a work to be able to recognize their own Mary Sue creation. This is especially problematic given Mary Sues are often self-inserts as well, which implies that placing *oneself* into a world is unacceptable in fanfiction. This could be perceived, of course, as a reductive analysis, but the point stands that the Mary Sue represents far more than a mere ‘bad’ character: she represents the struggle that inexperienced authors have when becoming acquainted with fanfiction, that their initial fics are not deemed good enough and should therefore not be published on fic-websites or read by other authors/readers.

This relegates the new-fic author to exile until she knows better, until she produces something that is ‘good’ enough, something without ego or self-insertion. The Mary Sue may well be a representation of an author’s ego and self-indulgence, but why is self-indulgence not allowed in a form of writing that is frankly all about self-indulgence? It could be argued that the Mary Sue represents something scary *because* it is so overt with its self-indulgence, because it goes against the conventions and decorums that have infiltrated fanfiction across

¹⁸³ Bacon-Smith, p. 97.

¹⁸⁴ Bacon-Smith, p. 97.

¹⁸⁵ Effie Sapuridis and Maria K. Alberto, “Self-Insert Fanfiction As Digital Technology Of The Self”, *Humanities*, 11.3 (2022), 68 <https://doi.org/10.3390/h11030068>, p. 5.

the past fifty+ years. It unashamedly places the *author* before any potential reader, which some authors/readers may argue as going against the gift-economy ethos fanfiction relies on.¹⁸⁶

The Mary Sue therefore demonstrates an incredibly high level of *tiefempfunden* and should be celebrated as allowing authors to be fully self-indulgent, rather than reviled as being an unacceptable sign of inexperience or an unrealistic depiction of female characters. There is much about fanfiction that is unrealistic, much of it accepted, so it seems odd that this would be a step too far. Wanted or not, Paula Smith's *A Trekkie's Tale* has perhaps had the most long-lasting and invasive effect upon fanfiction as a whole, showing how something initially apparently insignificant can snowball into one of the core tenants of fanfiction: *thou shalt not write a Mary Sue*.

Why are female-PCs not considered Mary Sues?

The first section of this chapter explored how, when playing a game, players are encouraged to immerse themselves within the gameworld. Sometimes, players are encouraged to immerse themselves to the extent that they are “are utterly absorbed and invested in the detailed textures of a game world”.¹⁸⁷ Players are meant to be immersed in a game and are supposed to insert at least some of themselves into the PC to facilitate proper immersion in the game world. This means many players play their PC as a version of themselves, idealised or not, regardless of what genre of game they are playing. Which, in turn, has the knock-on effect of players sometimes finding it difficult to play as an ‘evil’ character, or make morally questionable choices.¹⁸⁸ As Erica L. Neely writes in *No Player Is Ideal*,

players cannot necessarily separate themselves from their identities while playing games; instead, players experience games from their own particular social contexts. Moreover, it is unreasonable to expect a player to completely ignore his or her identity while playing a game.¹⁸⁹

Neely's essay is directed towards developers, stating that developers must stop focusing upon the ‘idealised’ gamer of a white, heterosexual male,¹⁹⁰ and that it is important to note that in-

¹⁸⁶ Anne Jamison, *Fic: Why Fanfiction Is Taking Over the World* (Dallas: Smart Pop 2013), p. 261.

¹⁸⁷ Wadson, p. 35.

¹⁸⁸ Consalvo et al., pp. 220-222.

¹⁸⁹ Erica L. Neely, “No Player Is Ideal”, *ACM SIGCAS Computers and Society*, 47.3 (2017), 98-111 <https://doi.org/10.1145/3144592.3144602>, p. 4.

¹⁹⁰ Neely, p. 16.

game choices will be perceived differently by every single player; that there cannot be one blanket interpretation of said choices, precisely because each person brings their own history and ideals and morals to the table when playing a game. On the other hand, having explored how within fanfiction the creation of a Mary Sue character—knowingly or not—is considered too perfect and dominating the narrative as well as solving everyone’s problems before getting the guy, and is possibly the worst transgression a fic-author can make, given that Mary Sue fics are “wish-fulfilment stories featuring idealised female characters [and the] self-insertion protagonist should not be published at all”.¹⁹¹

Both of these extremes form a dichotomy: games *require* some form of self-insertion whilst fanfiction strongly *discourages* it. When it comes to games, especially RPGs with a customisable female PC, the line becomes blurred, for these female PCs follow the same narrative as the male PC. Both the male and female PCs are usually hyper-competent warriors who near-single-handedly vanquish any foe, save the day, and leave a decided mark upon the gameworld; all whilst having time to form steadfast friendships with their party members as well as a romance if the player wishes. In my own experience I have never heard a female Shepard or Inquisitor referred to as a Mary Sue. In this section the concept of Mary Sue will be retroactively explored within two PCs in an in-game context—Shepard from the *Mass Effect* trilogy and the Inquisitor from *Dragon Age: Inquisition*—to see why these traits can be present within a game containing a female PC and accepted by players as simply being part of the game experience/narrative, perhaps highlighting a disconnect between game and the fics that follow.

Examining the character Shepard before the main narrative, they are already considered a decorated soldier, having graduated from the N7 program which is the toughest training program within humanity’s Systems Alliance Navy.¹⁹² Also depending on the ‘psychological profile’ that the player chooses, their Shepard has faced additional combat which would have defeated any lesser character.¹⁹³ In the opening of *Mass Effect* (ME), two of the Alliance’s highest members state, depending on Shepard’s aforementioned psychological program, either “Humanity needs a hero. And Shepard’s the best we’ve got”¹⁹⁴ or “[Shepard’s] the only kind of person who can protect the galaxy”.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹¹ Lehtonen, p. 13.

¹⁹² BioWare, *Mass Effect 3* (Edmonton: EA, 2012), in-game codex.

¹⁹³ BioWare, *Mass Effect* (Edmonton: Microsoft Game Studios, 2007), character creation.

¹⁹⁴ *Mass Effect*, opening cutscene.

¹⁹⁵ *Mass Effect*, opening cutscene.

Both statements rather decisively tell the player that Shepard is utterly unique, for she is the only person who can save *the entire galaxy*. This is not one woman saving a single city or continent or planet, she is going to save trillions upon trillions of people, and this is stated within the first minute of the first cutscene of the first game. This means that even before players get a chance to physically play as Shepard—in the sense of controlling her movements/dialogue etc.—she is posited as an utterly extraordinary character, someone who cannot be replicated. This is further enhanced by the fact that early in the main narrative, Shepard is named as the first ever human Spectre in the galaxy,¹⁹⁶ which posits her as a unique individual, capable of things no-one else could dream of achieving. She also uncovers the mysterious threat of the Reapers—a race of sentient organic-machine hybrids that purge the galaxy of all intelligent life every 50,000 years—and ends up being instrumental in destroying a Reaper in the final battle of the game, another seemingly impossible feat.

In the beginning of *Mass Effect 2* (ME2), the pro-human terrorist organisation Cerberus—an enemy to the Systems Alliance, humanity's representative body for Earth and human colonies, which encompasses the military where Shepard is a Commander—goes to extreme lengths to bring Shepard *back from the dead* so they can continue their quest in defeating the ominous Collectors, and the Reapers, because a clone would simply not be the same,¹⁹⁷ because a clone would not possess the necessary skills to save the galaxy. Shepard's rebirth is almost biblical, especially given the project to bring her back to life is called the Lazarus Project. This transcends Shepard into something mythical, larger than life, as Miranda Lawson—one of Shepard's party members, who works for Cerberus and was head of the project to revive Shepard—notes in the opening to ME2:

Miranda Lawson: But Shepard... they'll follow her. She's a hero, a bloody icon. But she's just one woman. If we lose Shepard, humanity might well follow.

The Illusive Man: Then see to it that we don't lose her.¹⁹⁸

Despite the fact that it is assumed that players have already played the first game and therefore know Shepard's great exploits, this brief sentence shows the player, new or otherwise, just how important Shepard is to the entire galaxy—if she fails, every single life is doomed.

¹⁹⁶ *Mass Effect*, in-game mission – Citadel: Expose Saren

¹⁹⁷ BioWare, *Mass Effect 2* (Edmonton: EA, 2010), in-game mission – Prologue: Awakening.

¹⁹⁸ *Mass Effect 2*, cutscene – Prologue: Save Joker.

If this were a fanfiction, the label of Mary Sue could easily be posited upon Shepard with Miranda's statement alone. Even within the canonical, original text, such proficiency and 'perfection' shown by Shepard could be enough for a Mary Sue label. This then raises the question of whether it is the fact that Shepard is a *video game PC* separating her from being considered a Mary Sue, that stops other female PCs from being considered Mary Sues, for canon female characters like Rey from the *Star Wars* sequels, and Bella Swan from the *Twilight* novels and movies, have both been called Mary Sues. As explored previously, given that Shepard is a PC, she is a character a player is meant to inhabit temporarily, to allow players immersion in the gameworld, which is intended by developers. Therefore to call a player's PC a Mary Sue would mean calling the *player* a *Mary Sue* as well—which would not make sense as it would be implying the player is unrealistically powerful and perfect as well.

The events of the first two games possibly seem almost unbelievable and hyperbolic when merely written on paper, but players will actually experience these events first-hand, feeling and playing as Shepard, experiencing these games completely differently. In the finale game in the trilogy, *Mass Effect 3* (ME3), Shepard does the impossible and manages to solve the problems of many of the dominant species in the galaxy, uniting them in one singular force to combat the threat of the Reapers.¹⁹⁹ She can end a 300-year war between the Geth and Quarians,²⁰⁰ she can cure the Krogan's genophage which rendered them near-sterile for centuries,²⁰¹ and can help the Turians stave off the Reapers long enough to survive the war. Shepard truly is an unreplicable force, fearing nothing, and managing to achieve the impossible regardless of the fact that she is a woman. She achieves just as much as the male Shepard and there is no NPC in any of the three games that comes close to possessing her levels of skill and capability.

When considering the traits of the Mary Sue, as explored in the previous section, and considering the almost unbelievable list of feats Shepard accomplishes over the course of three *Mass Effect* games, it is not difficult to see overlaps between Mary Sue traits and Shepard's. As mentioned before, canonical female characters have been labelled as Mary Sues, showing that the label goes beyond purely fan-made characters, but despite this, Shepard is accepted as a *good*, well-written PC, regardless of the fact that she follows the same narrative as the male Shepard. This may be because that, as a game PC, the player will

¹⁹⁹ *Mass Effect 3* (Edmonton: EA, 2012), in-game mission – Priority: Earth.

²⁰⁰ Peace between them is only possible with certain conditions, yet it has been a popular choice amongst players.

²⁰¹ Again, this is a choice that players can make, but it is another choice made by the majority of players.

experience her in a different way to a perhaps more passive protagonist from a book or film. Shepards are personal to the player, and players are emotionally connected to their PC on a different level to a pre-made PC or other media protagonist.

The character creator within *Mass Effect* is limited to a few sliders:



Fig. 1 Character creation in *Mass Effect* (2007) showing customisation sliders

In *Inquisition*, the Inquisitor's appearance has far more variance, for appearance is changed via a graph basis as well as sliders, and players can even choose from two different voices, one with an American accent, the other a British one.

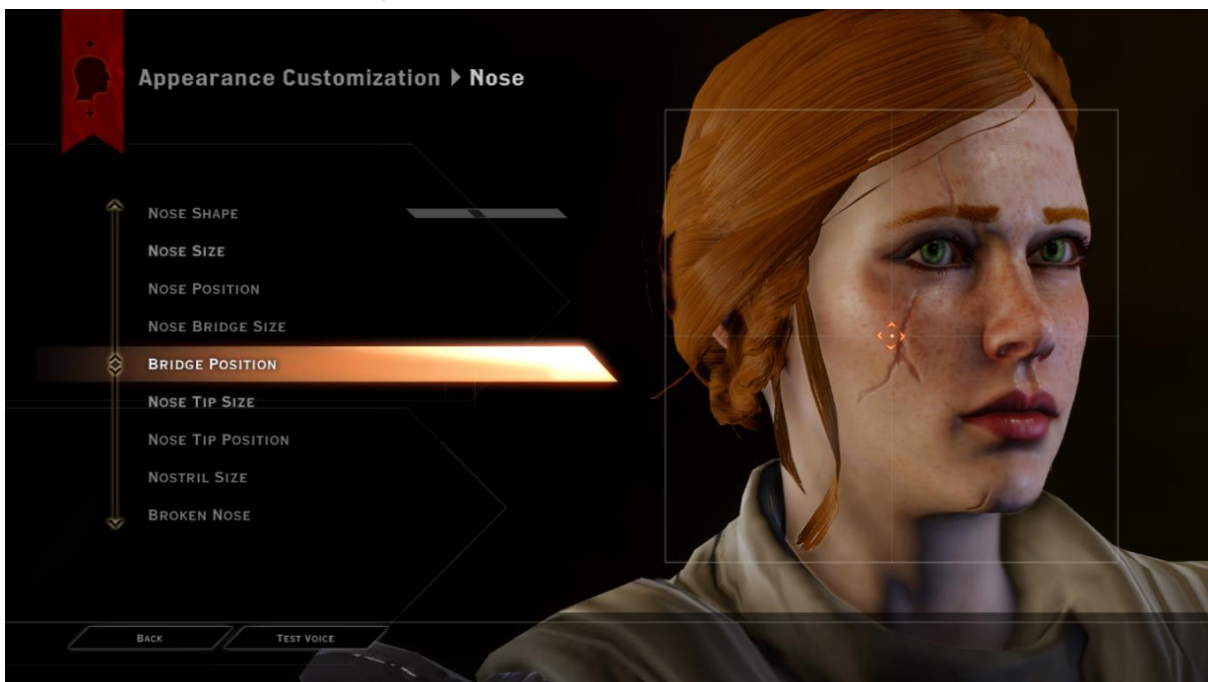


Fig. 2 Character creation in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014) showing customisation graph

Throughout the main narrative of *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, the Inquisitor goes through a series of almost unbelievable events, similar to Shepard, events that posit the Inquisitor—and therefore the player as well—as being an exceptional person who is the only one capable of saving the world. The *Dragon Age* series of games, *Inquisition* included, take place on one continent, Thedas, rather than on a *Mass Effect* galactic scale style. Nevertheless, despite this smaller scale, the stakes are just as high, with the Inquisitor having to save the entirety of Thedas from certain destruction.

The prologue of the game shows the Inquisitor as the sole survivor of a massive explosion, also coming away with a unique anchor upon her hand that can close the fade-rifts that have opened in the wake of said explosion. This already posits the Inquisitor in a wholly unique position, for, like Shepard, they are literally the only person with the ability to prevent the world ending—despite possessing some form of unique ability as being seen as a trait of the Mary Sue.²⁰²

Throughout the main narrative the Inquisitor experiences a series of world-changing events, all brought about by her actions. For example, she helps to solve the mage-templar war that has been brewing for several years within the *Dragon Age* universe,²⁰³ manages to get the Grey Wardens to pledge allegiance to her cause,²⁰⁴ as well as decide who rules over the country of Orlais,²⁰⁵ a remarkable set of achievements for one person. If that were not impressive enough, she also discovers the ancient elven temple of Mythal that had been lost for centuries. She can even drink from the Well of Sorrows, inheriting all of Mythal's knowledge²⁰⁶—although this part is player dependent. And, of course, the Inquisitor ends the main narrative by slaying the antagonist of the game, Corypheus.²⁰⁷

The Inquisitor's narrative paints her in an arguably mythical light. In a small side cutscene one of the Inquisitor's party members, Iron Bull, takes a disguised Inquisitor around their base to meet with the various soldiers in the Inquisition. The reverence and mythicity mentioned about the Inquisitor demonstrate that she holds incredible power and sway over thousands of people who will follow her every word, despite never physically meeting her. Again there are overlaps between the 'perfect' traits that the Mary Sue possesses, and the

²⁰² Chaney and Liebler, p. 54.

²⁰³ This is achieved by siding with one faction, meaning the other is wiped out.

²⁰⁴ *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, (Edmonton: EA, 2014), in-game mission – Here Lies the Abyss.

²⁰⁵ *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, (Edmonton: EA, 2014), in-game mission – Wicked Eyes and Wicked Hearts.

²⁰⁶ *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, (Edmonton: EA, 2014), in-game mission – What Pride Had Wrought.

²⁰⁷ *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, (Edmonton: EA, 2014), in-game mission – Doom Upon All the World.

Inquisitor, for she is such a capable character who in the end does not even need the support from her army or allies. All she needs, as she faces Corypheus, are three of her party members and a dragon.

What these two brief explorations of Shepard and the Inquisitor show, in two different game environments, is that Mary Sue traits are perhaps almost an inherent part of RPG PCs. Their exceptionality is accepted by players, even within female PCs, because players want the whole gameworld to revolve around *them*, for *their* actions to matter, and for them to be the hero that saves the day—as opposed to a PC who constantly loses and never manages to get anywhere.

As Heussner et al. says:

Since the player is the protagonist, writers must surround that protagonist with characters who enhance the player’s self-worth, rather than deflate it. These characters must keep the player involved and feeling important, but not overly important, so that the world no longer seems believable.

For the villain and supporting cast, the biggest consideration that affects games, but not other fiction, is the player’s ego.²⁰⁸

This description of the importance of the player’s ego echoes those negative traits that make the Mary Sue so reviled. For, as explored above, the Mary Sue archetype is seen as being an unfiltered vehicle of desire that does little else but stroke the author’s ego, such an all-encompassing character that everything and everything revolves around them.

It could be argued that PCs, customisable or not, can be considered to be a form of Mary Sue-by-default, especially given that customisable PCs are often blank slates to ensure that players can insert a personality onto them.²⁰⁹ As said before, I argue that the reason such PCs are accepted by players and are not labelled as a Mary Sue is because the level of immersion and self-insertion that occurs when playing an RPG—especially with a customisable PC—would be tantamount to calling the player a Mary Sue as well, which is not appropriate in the game context, and would likely ruin any immersion and connection previously felt for a PC.

²⁰⁸ Tobias Heussner, Toiya Kristen Finley, Jennifer Brandes Hepler, Ann Lemay, *The Game Narrative Toolbox* (Burlington: Focal Press), p. 84.

²⁰⁹ Jennifer E. Killham, Arden Osthof, and Jana Stadeler “Designing Video Game Characters for Romantic Attachment” in *Digital Love: Romance and Sexuality in Video Games*, ed. by Heidi McDonald (Boca Rotan: Taylor & Francis, 2018), p. 188.

Fics containing a *customisable PC* will therefore inevitably share many of the same traits as their in-game counterparts, but generally will not be classed as being a Mary-Sue. This lack of the label may well be because players are already emotionally attached when the time comes to read/write a fic about them, and, given the source material depicts a larger-than-life PC, it would make sense that a fic would depict the same qualities. The next section of this chapter will explore how these personalised PCs further become a form of original character (OC) when translated into fics.

How PCs become OCs in fics: the nature of self-insertion

This next section will deal further with the concept of self-insertion. This will be done in two ways, firstly with exploring how self-insertion *tiefempfunden* is included in fics in the form of autobiographical detail bleeding from author to fic-character, and secondly whether customisable PCs become a form of original character (OC)—a character within a fic that is *not* present within the original text—because they are personal and unique to the player/author. As has been explored previously, in-game, players often play as themselves or an idealised version of themselves along with the self-insertion in-fic that additionally takes place.

The OC and Mary Sue are often both associated with self-insertion in fics. As stated before, the Mary Sue is linked with obvious authorial self-insertion, of the inclusion of the author's ego and unfiltered self-indulgence which is at odds with how self-insertion is encouraged within games. I would argue that the use of a personalised PC is an acceptable way of self-insertion, for it hybridises the *wanted* self-insertion of games-playing, with the accepted veneer of a 'pre-existing' character, the PC that is not explicitly self-insertion.

As has been noted desire is a huge motivator for writing a fanfiction, particularly when it comes to exploring romantic and sexual desires with a beloved character. However, Biniek argues that the Mary Sue lies at the intersection of authorial desire:

Fanfiction readers usually identify a Mary Sue character right after being introduced to her description [...] For them Mary Sue's unreality is obvious. However, such autobiographical inserts are produced subconsciously and writers usually do not perceive them as such even after being directly confronted. They are either too

inexperienced in writing or are simply too blinded by their desire to imaginatively fulfil their fantasies.²¹⁰

This notion of the author being blinded by desire is interesting, for once again the blame is placed upon the author for placing themselves first, above any reader, even if that reader belongs to a niche genre or relationship. But that too much desire implies a stifling of imaginative creativity is interesting, for it suggests a rationality is needed in order to explore desire without falling into Mary Sue territory; that distance must be maintained between author and fic. Though this is potentially problematic in itself, for once again, authors are being required to rein-it-in in order to appease other people. From personal experience however, it is a different ballpark when it comes to more niche sexual fantasies, for when in the realms of sexual kink/fantasy/desire etc. these components become the most important aspect of a fic, and readers will tolerate many unrealistic elements so long as the fantasy ends up fulfilled, even if it is not written in the most imaginative way. Short sex scene fics are usually devoid of plot and characterisation, but they are loved because readers and authors get to see two characters engage in various sexual acts and scenarios—little imagination or creative thinking is needed.

As already discussed, when playing a game self-insertion is a natural and wanted thing, and many players *choose* to include autobiographical traits within their PCs—or even go so far as to play their PC as themselves, idealised or not.²¹¹ This provides a kind of catch-22 for players-turned-authors, where they both wish to include their personal PCs with those self-insertion traits, but simultaneously do not want to include a character that is too obviously themselves.

In her essay *Beyond Mary Sue*, Kristina Busse notes that this fear is present for fic-authors who write fics originating from other texts besides games, “[c]onsidering the fear of creating Mary Sues, fans are often torn between not wanting to self-insert while also not wanting to be completely left out”,²¹² showing that fic authors are to an extent having to self-censor in order to avoid negative reactions. Busse does however lay out ways in which authors do include themselves in an accepted manner:

²¹⁰ Biniek, p. 44

²¹¹ Killham, Osthof and Stadeler, pp. 194-195.

²¹² Busse, p. 162.

Attributing personal or community characteristics to characters ranges from the very specific to the very general. It includes characters reading or quoting beloved books, listening to one's favorite artist, or having hobbies such as knitting. It includes assigning specific identities with the characters, [...] one they want to see represented more widely, or one they may share with the characters²¹³

It could be argued that this description of 'acceptable' self-insertions feels rather ironic, for those examples are undeniably an author placing themselves within the story, especially as a self-insert is not an either/or concept, a complete inclusion of a person's self or nothing at all. Self-insertion is nuanced, especially as it is understandable that an author might want to reveal certain traits or appearances, choosing ideal personality aspects over the negative. This is particularly relevant concerning fics that contain a customisable PC, as there are undoubtedly players who model their PC's appearance upon themselves, and as was explored earlier in the chapter, players choose their PC's dialogue choices based upon personal morals and ideals.

The question emerges why authors would choose to include their personal PCs within a fic, opening themselves to the possibility of being negatively received as a Mary Sue and/or self-insert? As Busse further notes,

Mary Sue fiction at its extreme may only appeal to its author, but that it is also one of fan fiction's central virtues. While some stories appeal to many fans of a franchise or even cross-fannish boundaries in their readership, at heart fan fiction is a labor of love with an often understood small audience.²¹⁴

This rings true with game fics. While the games industry as a whole may be a multi-billion-dollar industry, within fanfiction video game fics are very much a niche area compared with the hundreds of thousands of fics revolving around characters and worlds featured in the films *Twilight* or *Harry Potter* or TV series *Supernatural*. On AO3 there are over 400,000 *Harry Potter* fics²¹⁵ compared with nearly 40,000 for *Dragon Age: Inquisition*,²¹⁶ or nearly

²¹³ Busse, p. 162.

²¹⁴ Busse, p. 168.

²¹⁵ "Harry Potter - Works | Archive Of Our Own", *Archiveofourown.Org*
https://archiveofourown.org/tags/Harry%20Potter%20-%20J*d*%20K*d*%20Rowling/works [accessed 29 September 2023]

²¹⁶ "Dragon Age: Inquisition - Works | Archive Of Our Own", *Archiveofourown.Org*
<https://archiveofourown.org/tags/Dragon%20Age:%20Inquisition/works> [accessed 29 September 2023]

25,000 for the *Mass Effect* Trilogy.²¹⁷ It is perhaps surprising that video game fics, at least on AO3, are rather niche. The pool of already-existing fics is a lot smaller, making it more difficult for authors, and readers, to find a fic that tells the story, scenario, relationships that they want to read about. Given these games also have customisable PCs, it becomes even harder to find fics involving a similar Shepard or Inquisitor, meaning authors will just have to write the fic themselves if they want to see their PCs represented.

Busse however makes an interesting point:

the continuous derision of Mary Sue stories may be surprising; however, popularity and general disdain are not mutually exclusive. Much fan fiction that could be labeled as Mary Sue fiction is repeatedly read, clearly beloved, and heavily commented upon. As long as the stories and its protagonists are not called Mary Sues, various self-insert fiction remains ever popular.²¹⁸

This harks back to my previous discussion of how most fics that are explicitly tagged Mary Sue are pastiches, critiques, discussions, or very obviously badly written. It is left to readers therefore to decide whether they see a Mary Sue or not within a fic that is not meant to contain a Mary Sue. This means that players-turned-readers-and-authors may be well aware that placing their personal PC into a fic is inciting some form of Mary Sue-ness, but that it will be accepted because readers understand how attached one can get to a PC; they will instead merely enjoy the nuances and personality quirks of the PC in that particular fic knowing that the overt traits that make the PC an Mary Sue are inherent within the original text.

I would argue that these personalised PCs are in fact a form of OC. An OC is an Original Character that does not exist in the original, canon text. The OC usually functions as a self-insert for the author,²¹⁹ but as was said previously, an OC is not automatically a Mary Sue. The fact that a PC exists within the original text may make it seem impossible for a PC to be an OC as well, but it must be considered that during gameplay players are inserting their own traits and morals into a PC, creating a unique appearance for them, and choosing dialogue options to alter the story to fit the PC—these are just the things that are presented in-game.

²¹⁷ “Mass Effect Trilogy - Works | Archive Of Our Own”, *Archiveofourown.Org* <https://archiveofourown.org/tags/Mass%20Effect%20Trilogy/works> [accessed 29 September 2023]

²¹⁸ Busse, pp. 167-168.

²¹⁹ Lehtonen, p. 8.

In fanfiction the gates are flung open, for players/authors are no longer bound by the game's limitations: personality, story, relationships, friendships etc. can go far beyond what is displayed in the original game. Authors can also include all those small little details and headcanons that were previously merely imagined, can turn a bunch of pixels on a screen into a far more deep, realistic and, perhaps ironically, three-dimensional character.

Sanna Lehtonen, in her essay on self-insertion *Twilight* fanfiction, remarks:

Fan fiction offers a venue where writers can mix elements from their real lives with a fictional setting to explore and speculate about aspects of their identity and their desires, hopes and fears in regard to romance.²²⁰

A personalised PC in that sense becomes the ideal avatar to utilise in romantic experimentation, for the author will presumably already be very familiar with their PC and how they look and act, as well as having a good sense of their overall personality. In addition, including a PC as one of the protagonists gives the fic a sense of legitimacy, for the author is not just planting some random OC that no-one cares about in a fic; they are including a beloved hero like Shepard that many people care about. The fact that the PC/OC is still a recognisable character, who will often still experience narratives and relationships found within the canon text, helps to avoid that Mary Sue label, for there are still those pre-existing traits and narratives that readers will recognize. Having a PC that also shares some of the author's traits, but is not explicitly the author, also provides the ideal balance of distance between the author and the fic, so that romantic desires may be properly experimented without the worry of personal harm.

Nevertheless, given the negativity surrounding overt self-insertion it is still difficult to find many fics where authors explicitly admit that they are inserting elements of themselves into their fic narrative, even with game fics containing a personalised-PC. Often this self-insertion emerges in different, more subtle ways that can be difficult to spot. In the author notes of the fic *Taking on the Universe* by acciokaidanalenko, they have stated that:

This fic has changed so much over the past year! I originally started writing it before I had decided a few of my HCs [headcanons] about my Shepard and her Universe. So,

²²⁰ Lehtonen, p. 10.

I've been working really hard on this since I made the decision to restart with the intention of including my newer HCs.²²¹

The fact that acciokaidanalenko is basing their fic around their own personal headcanons about Shepard and main narrative shows that they are willing to forgo the canon in favour of the Shepard *they* have created, and that they are comfortable inserting their personal wishes and desires in their fic. Acciokaidanalenko's personal Shepard is called Natasha, a deviation from the default first name Jane, which highlights a different subtle self-insertion, and suggests acciokaidanalenko spent time considering a suitable name for their Shepard. In a reply to a reader's comment, acciokaidanalenko states that "My girl is straight up *not* having a good time".²²² In referring to their Shepard as 'my' Shepard they show that they consider Natasha Shepard to be their own personal character, separate from the default Shepard.

Developers do not have the means to allow players to customise every single aspect about a personalised-PC, from their coffee preference to their favourite smell, but fic offers the chance for authors to properly explore their PC to include such small and apparently unimportant personality traits, and these may or may not be based upon the author themselves—as well as allowing the PC/OC to have a deeper, more complete personality. Having the self-insertion attached to a pre-existing and beloved PC can help to negate the negativity surrounding the whole area of autobiographical traits as being unwanted by readers, as explained by Lehtonen:

In cases where author's notes involve an explicit mention of a self-insertion character, many readers take this as an invitation to interpret the story differently from purely fictional texts. Author's notes that mention a self-insertion character may disturb those readers who want to read the story purely as fiction, while for some readers the knowledge that the protagonist has a real-life equivalent may increase the level of involvement with the story.²²³

While some readers perhaps find autobiographical details enhance the story, it might be argued these real-life equivalents may not always be obvious or explicit *within* the story. Lehtonen does note that, because they did not interview anyone within the essay, all of the

²²¹ acciokaidanalenko, *Taking on the Universe*, (Archive of Our Own, 2022-2023) p. 1.

²²² acciokaidanalenko, *Taking on the Universe*

<https://archiveofourown.org/works/42374451/chapters/116813491> [accessed 29 September 2023]

²²³ Lehtonen, p. 16.

explicit self-insertion came from fics published online, where self-insertion was revealed by the author, in author's notes, end notes or in replies to reader comments. As said, it is difficult to gauge the true extent of self-insertion within fics without interviewing the author.

Anonymity is prized within the fic-writing community, making this an even harder task.

However, when it comes to fics with a PC/OC, the *tiefempfunden* self-insertion is more evident due to authors often using their personalised PC rather than the default PC, especially as the default often lacks the quirks and unique personality and is considered more 'boring' because of it. Therefore, there is often an *expectation* of a personalised PC in romantic game fics which means there is also an expectation of some form of self-insertion, that the author has given *their* Shepard or Inquisitor some unique aspect/personality which will enhance the story and make it a unique and *distinctive* fic from the original text. These elements do not necessarily make a fic stand out from other game-fics but instead gives a new interpretation of a PC that is never likely to be played the same way twice by players—if the game allows players individuality and choice with their PC, it makes sense that fics will do the same thing.

The end notes of the Solas/Inquisitor fic by Feathersinthetardis is a good example of this. As explored, the Inquisitor is the PC of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* and Solas is a party member and potential romance option for a female elf Inquisitor. Within their fic, they state that “Characters belong to BioWare, except for Clara”,²²⁴ which implies that their Inquisitor Clara has become such a personal character to them that they no longer see her as belonging to the developers who created the Inquisitor in the first place. It is not a stretch of the imagination to believe that Clara has taken on so many unique, and perhaps personal, traits that she is a form of OC, belonging to Feathersinthetardis, and them alone.

Another Solas/Inquisitor fic, *Daughter of Fire/Herald of Spirit* by Noire12 has a rather lengthy notes section in which they reveal that both their Inquisitor and the narrative is personal to them, and them alone:

Welcome to my story, I hope you will enjoy it. This is my personal take on the events of the Inquisition. While I will mention the main events of the game, I will not write about them. My story will depict the emotional journey and the growth of Elluin Lavellan, and I will be inventing new characters and scenes that highlight her personality. Along with the characters we love and cherish.

²²⁴ Feathersinthetardis, *Burning hands*, (Archive of Our Own, 2021), p. 7.

Please be aware that while I will try to respect the canon as much as possible, I will also bend it and sometimes break it when I think it fits my story. If you notice a deviation from canon, you can be sure that my wonderful, awesome, great, and brilliant beta, Manka, noticed it and brought it to my attention, but I stubbornly refused to listen xD. If you are upset by these inflections, feel free to stop reading the story.²²⁵

The mention of a ‘beta reader’, another fic author/reader who reads and edits a fic before publication online, highlights the social nature of fics, but the fact that it is specifically stated they chose to ignore their beta when canonical disparities were flagged up shows that their personal story and Inquisitor is more important to them than sticking to canon. It shows the importance of having a unique Inquisitor that reflects the story *they* want to tell, not the story that was presented to them in-game. It reflects that a PC, bound by the limitations given to players in-game, has been able to flourish within fanfiction to become an OC, a unique and personal character cherished by the author as theirs, and theirs alone.

The true self-indulgence of reader fics

There is a more extreme form of self-insertion fanfiction, one that forgoes the PC/OC entirely. These fics allow readers to directly posit themselves into the fic world, usually into a romantic relationship or sexual encounter with a character that the reader, and author, are romantically attracted/attached to. These are commonly referred to as reader or Y/N fics, which stands for [insert Your Name here]—where the reader is supposed to insert their own name into the fic when prompted, in order to make the fic more immersive. Given the elevated position given to readers and the focus upon a (usually) male character, they are inherently romantic in nature, although fics can range from light-hearted dates and falling-in-love situations to sexually explicit fics containing some level of inappropriateness or extreme sexual kink. These fics are tagged with [character]/reader, meaning it is flagged up beforehand that such overt self-insertion is occurring, with the reader *choosing* to indulge in this overt self-insertion, whereas the author will have gone through the self-insertion during the writing process. These fics constitute some of the highest levels of *tiefempfunden*, owing to the overtness with which the self-insertion is presented.

²²⁵ Noire12, *Daughter of Fire/Herald of Spirit*, (Archive of Our Own, 2021-2022), pp. 1-2.

Desire within reader fics is more overt than other genres of fanfiction, for they are all about the exploration and indulgence of *desire*, specifically romantic/sexual desires. They revolve around imagining being with a beloved fictional character, regardless of whether that ‘being’ is sexual or romantic. However, this desire is not just depicted author self-indulgence, the reader’s desires are considered just as important. As Effie Sapuridis and Maria K. Alberto explore in their essay on self-insert fics:

For one thing, the “self” in self-insert fanfiction is meant to be more of a palimpsest, open to readers too rather than signifying merely the author [...] the interactions that this device mediates are mainly those between that palimpsestuous, created self and the fan-author’s versions of characters or personages from the original object of their focus, rather than primarily between the text’s writer and its reader²²⁶

This creates the idea of a combined reader-author ‘self’, one that indulges in the reader-self marketed within the fic, either through second person or Y/N, for a fic author is constructing a reader-self which applies to *both* the author and whatever kind of reader that may read the fic after it has been uploaded onto the internet. But there is also the elephant in the room: while the reader-author is the focus of the fic, they are, at the same time, not really the *focus* of the fic... the beloved character to whom author and reader are attracted is the true star of the show, because through the actions of beloved character, the reader gains pleasure and satisfaction of desires. Given that this genre of fic is all about indulging in romantic/sexual desire, the focus is on the romantic pursuits with the (male) character that the (female) reader wants to romance, which leads to many fics being sexually explicit:

sexually explicit self-insert fanfiction was found predominantly on Ao3 [...] On Ao3, these stories are also predominantly written in the second person and tended to feature a heterosexual female character paired with a canon male character. If the character was gender-neutral, as occurred in only about 10% of the stories that we surveyed, the work tended not to be explicit.²²⁷

This suggests that, on AO3 at least, reader fics are concerned less about their romantic aspect and more about a sexual aspect of a relationship, or a one-off, purely sexual encounter. Not all reader fics are explicit, and having explorations of non-explicit romantic desire are just as important, for the author-reader may not always want something ‘hot and heavy’, but

²²⁶ Sapuridis and Alberto, p. 2.

²²⁷ Sapuridis and Alberto, p. 22.

something ‘sweet and casual’. What is notable about this diversity is that the same author-reader will want different emotional explorations at different times, depending on mood and/or time of day. This imagining may consist of examples such as a dinner date, a walk through the park, a proposal scene. Or a fic may include a variety of sexual scenarios, allowing for the indulgence of sexual fantasies—akin to written erotica. Both reader fic types are desirable for (assumed) female readers/authors because reader fics are written to highlight the reader’s pleasure over everything else—the male character is highlighted and focused upon in order to make the *reader* happy and satisfy *their* romantic or sexual desires, which is achieved by the male character being the main focus of the narrative, allowing for the reader to easily slip into the other half of the relationship.

To explore reader fics further, romance novel theory helps to highlight the romantic nature inherent within such fanfiction. Given that reader fics allow readers and authors to have both a dream relationship and fantasy sex mean that self-insert fics are closer to romances novels than perhaps anticipated. As Catherine Roach states, “the romance genre as a whole is pornographic, including [...] sweet romances with neither on-page sex nor overt sexual references”,²²⁸ because romantic fiction allows a women-centred space correspondingly written by women.²²⁹ This is apparent especially in the case of reader fics written precisely for an assumed female audience, foregrounding desire, and fantasy. This holds true for a non-sexually explicit reader fic, as it is about the *fantasy* of relationship and sex—and “[e]ven when and if the sex is deeply off-page, the reader knows that it is happening”.²³⁰ Roach furthers this notion of written romance, and romantic fics, as being conduits of female desire:

Central to romance fiction, [...] is the depiction not simply of sexual activity but of women’s sexual satisfaction [in] which the heroine’s sexual pleasure is guaranteed. Even in non-explicit romance novels devoid of all steamy love scenes [...] readers can safely assume that the heroines are sexually satisfied. To be blunt, we believe that the women are happily orgasmic. In the romance genre, by the books’ end, readers feel assured that the lover’s embrace and the marriage bed are always pleasurable for the heroine. Their desire is taken as a good—not a shameful—thing.²³¹

²²⁸ Catherine M Roach, *Happily Ever After* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2016), p. 84.

²²⁹ Roach, p. 84.

²³⁰ Roach, p. 85.

²³¹ Roach, p. 94.

This suggests an almost utopian view of romantic fiction, but one could argue that Roach's argument can apply to fanfiction as well because of the equally female-centred nature of fanfiction. Fics are not limited by publishers or monetary concerns and are predominantly written and read by women,²³² thus fic-authors can focus upon personal desires and fantasies as well as female pleasure. Fics offer a space for female desires to be foregrounded within both romantic and sexual narratives, and for these to be the highlight of the story rather than afterthought—which makes sense dramaturgically because there are certainly gaps regarding desire and fantasies within traditionally published novels, especially when it comes to more niche or extreme fantasies including inappropriate relationships.

While fics may highlight similar female-centred desires to romance novels, many reader fics will not, interestingly, follow the traditional romance novel structure, especially as many reader fics are one-shots—short, self-contained fics that can be read and understood by themselves, encompassing romantic and sexual fics—and “there are only a few exceptions where the story is multi-chaptered”.²³³ There is also the PWP (plot what plot/porn without plot), a well-established fanfic genre used exclusively for fics centred around sexual content with a near non-existent plot.

This acceptance of shorter, less narrative formats of reader fics allows reader-authors to indulge in their desires without the pretence of ‘character’ or ‘plot’. Reader fics give them *explicit permission to imagine themselves with their beloved character*. They do away with tact and any pretence of deeper meaning and lyrical prose being necessary requirements—though this is not to say that a reader fic cannot also be incredibly well written. Reader fics are the rawest form of imaginative desire and indulgence and which allows authors a break from worrying about hiding their self-insertion, as evidenced by very usage of ‘reader’ fic.

According to Kristina Busse the self-insert-Mary-Sue is negatively received because she represents “oversharing the writer’s personal issues without mediating and coding them properly”.²³⁴ Perhaps because the self-insert reader fic *is* properly coded—via tags and author notes—it thereby avoids the Mary Sue label. According to Sapuridis et al., the Mary Sue label is avoided in self-insert fics because

²³² Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, “Introduction”, *Fan Fiction And Fan Communities In The Age Of The Internet* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2006), p. 6.

²³³ Sapuridis and Alberto, p. 22.

²³⁴ Busse, p. 162.

many of these subgenres are colloquially termed “reader-insert” fanfiction: that is, they are often understood to be highlighting the fan-reader as that self who is being positioned within their narratives, rather than the fan-author as that “self” (i.e., the common criticism that we have seen being levied against Mary Sues)²³⁵

This echoes the aforementioned notion of a specific ‘self’ understood as being a generic, [insert your name here] reader posited in-fic rather than the *author* explicitly inserting themselves into the narrative; these fics are, after all, designed to encompass the desires of multiple people, even if those desires consist of niche sexual fantasies. Sapuridis et al. further this idea of ‘proper’ coding by stating that because these fics are tagged with very certain, concrete terms like ‘reader’ or ‘Y/N’,

“mediating” or facilitating “properly” entails using formal conventions [...] to “place this self within the narrative in specific, circumscribed ways, unlike the ways in which earlier Mary Sue characters and stories were often “identified” more by fan-readers’ personal preferences, perceptions, and even biases.”²³⁶

This suggests that because reader-fics are coded properly, with the expected/proper identifying markers, and because they rely on a constructed ‘self’ that encompasses the desires of more than just the author, they then avoid the Mary Sue label because these fics are explicit in their allowance and celebration of self-insertion for authors *and* readers alike.

There are also reader fics which also contain a form of explicit self-insertion *by the author themselves*. The fic *KinkSpace* by NicoleBrandy is a Trevor Philips/reader fic. Trevor Philips is one of the PCs of *Grand Theft Auto V*, but as a non-customisable PC he is less personalised and there is obviously enough distance between the player and Trevor to find him attractive, for there are nearly 200 fics that are tagged Trevor/reader.²³⁷ This fic, *KinkSpace*, is a second-person fic, utilising ‘you’ for the reader, which is another popular form of allowing self-insertion. In the author notes, NicoleBrandy reveals that this fic is a more personal reader fic than one might expect:

This fic is admittedly based on my own kinks (and yes, blatant references to FetLife. Sue me). So I apologize for that. But I get the feeling I’m not the only one. After all,

²³⁵ Sapuridis and Alberto, p. 7.

²³⁶ Sapuridis and Alberto, p. 9.

²³⁷ “Trevor Philips/Reader | Archive Of Our Own”, *Archiveofourown.Org*
https://archiveofourown.org/tags/Trevor%20Philips*s*Reader/works [accessed 29 September 2023]

you DID click on this fanfiction of your own accord, oui? You're a dirty little slut and I (and Trevor) love you for it! ;3 (Also a quick heads-up. Trevor is kind of out of character, I feel; I actually picture him being more of a submissive, due to all those mommy issues... But oh well. This is my fic and I shall write it how I want.)²³⁸

This fic contains a rather extreme sexual kink, namely a rape fantasy, which may arguably be too extreme and unappealing for some readers, and therefore considered niche. Nevertheless, this fic has had nearly 8000 hits,²³⁹ meaning that thousands of readers are willing to partake in such a fantasy. Though the author correctly states that by the time the reader is reading the author notes they have already clicked on the fic and must be fully aware of what this fic contains—the tags explicitly state “Rape Fantasy, Rape/Non-con Elements, BDSM”,²⁴⁰ which a reader will see before the main body of the fic.

It is within such fics where proper coding—such as tags—becomes an important exercise, for it not only warns readers about what is to come, it also shows that the *author* has thought about the elements included in such an extreme fantasy—they have considered its potential effects and how such desires might be handled in a satisfying manner. Within these extreme forms of fantasy, it also becomes the responsibility for *both* readers and writers to acknowledge that these relationship narratives may well be unpleasant/illegal/harmful in real-life, and as such need be treated with kindness, consideration and reinforced through the fictional framework fanfiction offers. As Milena Popova states:

The reader's expectation to see information on consent issues in the tags is a prompt for the writer to consider them. Within the communal textuality of fanfiction, the presence of the tags is a declaration by the writer to the reader: “I have thought about this, and you should, too.” In this way, the community reinforces and normalizes the expectation to think carefully about any issues of power and consent in fanfiction stories, rather than unthinkingly reproducing dominant ideas of “just sex.”²⁴¹

As shown through the above-shown authors' notes, NicoleBrandy has certainly thought about the inclusion of a rape fantasy, though they have reinforced the fictionality of the ‘rape’ by making it an in-fic sexual fantasy, a roleplay scenario that is wanted and enjoyed by both the

²³⁸ NicoleBrandy, *KinkSpace*, (Archive of Our Own, 2016) p. 1.

²³⁹ NicoleBrandy, *KinkSpace* https://archiveofourown.org/works/8633182?view_adult=true [accessed 29 September 2023]

²⁴⁰ NicoleBrandy, p. 1.

²⁴¹ Milena Popova, *Dubcon: Fanfiction, Power, and Sexual Consent* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2021), p. 191.

reader *and* Trevor rather than a depiction of a ‘real’ rape. This is perhaps because NicoleBrandy is talking about their own personal fantasy of a rape-roleplay, and also because such a fantasy is entirely in-keeping with Trevor’s in-game personality—for Trevor displays a wide range of sexual kinks and illegal acts throughout GTAV—meaning an author does not need to extensively rewrite/recharacterize him in order to fulfil more niche and extreme fantasies, which may be off-putting to some authors and readers who prefer to stick with canon depictions of character.

Ashley ML Brown, utilising tabletop roleplaying games—such as *Dungeons & Dragons*—rather than video games, argues that no matter what format the game is in

dark sexual acts may only be included in games and made available for play so long as the suggested act is consistent with the ethical codes of the gaming system, properly keyed into by all those participating, and have diegetic relevance and impetus to occur.²⁴²

As said, Brown is using tabletop games, where players are usually physically in the same room and are using their imagination for the gameworld rather than 3D graphic, as an example, her point stands regardless of the originating text. Brown’s point also echoes what has been previously mentioned about texts needing to be properly coded before they can explore contentious issues like rape, and I would argue that this need applies to fanfictions as well. Despite the fact that fics are not regulated in the same way traditionally published novels and video games are, and the fact that tags, fic descriptions and author notes have become an integral part of sharing fics with others, shows that there is an awareness by authors that they need to communicate the things they have written about.

As Popova stated above, it shows that authors have thought about *why* they are writing about such things—in NicoleBrandy’s case a desire to explore their own rape fantasies—and have thought about *how* these inclusions will affect the text and characters within, and potentially themselves as the author and readers as well. While fics do not have to adhere to the original game narratives and ethical codes, there are still expectations within fandoms and fic-writing circles. Sometimes these expectations exist outside of the fic itself, the acknowledgement by an author that they have considered why a rape scene is in a fic, and whether it does go with or against the conventions set up by the original text. The reason why ‘I included it because I

²⁴² Torill Elvira Mortensen, Ashley ML Brown and Jonas Linderorth, *Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 133.

wanted to' does go a long way in allowing an author to write whatever they want to—especially when it comes to sexual desires, as PWP fics show much can be forgiven as long as desires and fantasies are satisfyingly explored—it is helpful that a character like Trevor already exists, who could easily be imagined in almost infinite dark, niche, and extreme scenarios. A rape fantasy fic with him is entirely in keeping with his in-game character.

Not unexpectedly, given the tags, *KinkSpace* contains incredibly sexually graphic writing and little plot aside from the sex. This fic is all about the rape fantasy. Despite the personal nature of the desire, the nine comments on the fic are all incredibly positive, and the fic has over 300 kudos, AO3's equivalent to a 'like',²⁴³ making it the ninth most popular fic within the Trevor Philips/reader category out of over 200 fics, indicating it has been well received by readers and been accepted as a self-insert fantasy by those readers who share the author's CNC (consensual non-consent)²⁴⁴ fantasy *and* attraction to Trevor.

Fanfiction is a highly social exercise and has been since its modern inception in the 1960s. Whilst the social aspect has largely moved away from in-person meetings and written communication to an online community, the importance of such communities has not waned or disappeared. Community is even more important when it comes to reader fics, as these revolve around the idea of shared desire and fantasy, for what Sapuridis et al. discovered was that:

Across multiple platforms, we noticed that self-insert fanfiction works are often requested by a fan-author's followers and readers, or else are written for story exchanges and similar events: likewise, information identifying these points of origin is often included in paratexts, such as story summaries, author's notes, etc. This occurrence caught our notice because it highlights a certain community aspect to self-insert fanfiction: that is, despite the decidedly personal nature of this type of writing,

²⁴³ Some of the more popular fics in the larger fandoms can get thousands of kudos, whereas for smaller fandoms 300 kudos would be a huge amount. However, it must be stated the kudos-amount does not necessarily reflect fic quality, and I would argue kudos represents how well an author has managed to convey a particular fantasy/desire for their audience.

²⁴⁴ CNC is the term used within the real-life circles of those who practice this particular sexual fantasy/kink, and the consensual part of the name is important, for it demonstrates the willingness between the two, or more parties, partaking in the fantasy. It is doubly important, given how contentious and problematic rape is in real-life, especially in today's climate, that such a horrific act can be practiced within a consensual safe-space, especially in a space such as fic where no actual harm is taking place.

its creation is often highly purposeful and such texts are produced on the understanding that specific people apart from the fan-author want to read them.²⁴⁵

This idea, that the inspiration for reader fics emerges from the readers *themselves* as well as the fic-authors really highlights this *want*, and *need*, for explorations of desire, and an acceptance of the subsequent manifestations thereof, even when it means explicit self-insertion is the result. This self-insertion is uniquely accepted because it is precisely what the readers and authors *want* to do. They *want* to be able to imagine themselves in a relationship with their beloved character in a space where they will not be judged for doing so, because others are imagining exactly the same thing. While some fics may slip more into a personalised author-self-insert, with others retaining an entirely neutral self,²⁴⁶ there is still general agreement that authors and readers are *here* to indulge in *their* desires, no matter how far-out or unusual they might be, and can therefore bypass the negativity of the Mary Sue because they acknowledge she does not hold any power here. When it comes to a reader/author's personal desires, it does not really matter if she is flawless or gets everything she wants, as the whole point of this reader-fic space is that it *encourages indulgence of desires*.

Conclusion

What this chapter has shown is that desire, both from an author and reader, is a powerful force, and is crucial in allowing *tiefempfunden* to take place via the inclusion of authorial desires and fantasies. *Tiefempfunden* allows authors to *bleed* in the commonalities between author and character; and allows authors to write in-fic characters as possessing the same kinks and desires as the author, regardless of whether such elements are present in the original text or not.

As mentioned in the introduction, for years now I almost instinctively create an OC whenever I encounter a new form of media. Throughout the process of writing this thesis I have come to realise that my innate need to create characters to place into a pre-existing world is perhaps the most obvious and overt facet of my brand of *tiefempfunden*, given very few of my fics do not contain some form of OC. Having an OC allows me to customise the world in a way that gives me far more control and leeway, given I am a writer who believes 'canon is merely a suggestion'. This becomes even more evident when it comes to my own incest fics, for a new

²⁴⁵ Sapuridis and Alberto, p. 21.

²⁴⁶ Sapuridis and Alberto, pp. 23-24.

character allows me to control what form the incest takes—father/daughter, sibling etc.—as well as completely dictating the way the romantic narrative emerges. I also gain far more satisfaction from writing about a character I have created and care about, especially as I relish writing lengthy biographies about my OCs and the ways they shape and alter the narrative, and doing the same with a pre-existing character is not as emotionally fulfilling.

As previously mentioned, I can never place myself into a fic, so my OCs are never a self-insert. They are instead *a safe self-insertion* because I get to be the author-God and write about any and all fantasies them that do not actually involve me. This has, however, not stopped the Mary Sue conundrum from emerging. One of my first major OCs, set within the *Star Wars* universe, that I created as a young teenager was labelled a Mary Sue by a friend, for my friend deemed by character unrealistically overpowered as well as too ‘perfect’ and ‘flawless’. This devastated me, and for years I tried to veer into the complete opposite direction, as I did not want the pain of being labelled as a ‘bad writer’ ever again. Now I am in my 30s I have become less bothered by other people’s opinions of my writing, especially as most of it is written for me and me alone, but for years it was a genuine concern. The other major focus of this chapter—that of PCs becoming a form of OC through author/player customisation and expansion—is something I too have experienced.

One of my most written about and favourite OCs started life as a PC of *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare, 2009) but has spiralled out into a far more interesting character. Cerise Amell, my mage Warden, has gone so far beyond the narrative of *Origins* that I even headcanoned her as my Inquisitor PC in *Dragon Age Inquisition*. Her story—a fic that is nearly 150,000 words long and nowhere near finished—currently spans over twelve years of her life, sees her through various relationships, many trials and narratives that do not appear in any of the *Dragon Age* games. OCs form my own fics bread-and-butter, and I honestly do not know if I would want to write any new fics that did not contain an OC of some form—even if that OC is a pre-existing character, highly reworked.

Desire within a romantic fic that features a customisable PC allows readers to accept the inherent Mary Sue traits of the PC, and to accept the personal PC that the author has chosen to include. Desire is even stronger within reader-fics for they are often sexually explicit as opposed to focusing on narrative, which allows authors and readers room to explore various scenarios and kinks in a space that is fictional and cannot directly affect them in real-life. A fic that allows such direct interfacing is perhaps the only avenue that could allow such intense

desire fulfilment, as there is no pretence of a separate character within the fic-relationship, for the protagonist *is* the author/reader.

What this chapter has also explored is how this blanket condemnation of the Mary Sue archetype and of self-insertion within fics could be a mistake, and that nuance and acceptance should be more widely exercised in the surrounding discourse. There is still external judgement from other fic communities who do not understand the appeal when authors explicitly self-insert themselves, but as mentioned before, these negative aspects emerge from insider female fic authors who are disparaging other female fic authors.

Given that fic is often about desire and wish-fulfilment, it is therefore a form of egotistical *tiefempfunden* self-insertion—regardless of whether the self-insertion is explicit or not—and perhaps some fic authors would be far happier if they stopped worrying about the narratives and characters etc. that other people are writing about, and instead focused upon the desires and fantasies that make them happy.

Chapter Three “I may not be the sharpest tool in the shed, but I’m pretty!”²⁴⁷ — Physical appearance within romantic fanfiction



Fig 1. The first time Kaidan Alenko is seen in *Mass Effect* (2007)



Fig 2. The first time Michael De Santa is seen in the main narrative of *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013)

²⁴⁷ *Real Housewives of New York City*, Kristen Taekman, season 6 tagline

Introduction

The importance of appearance and masculinity within fics, and the roles they play in helping to form attraction for both player and in-fic characters, may seem like an odd, tangential deviation from the main of this thesis. However it is not, for as this chapter will explore, appearance proves itself to be a useful bridging device between game and fic, and depictions of the initial meeting between hero and heroine, as well as depictions of masculinity are both a bridge between romance novels and fic. In-game, appearance reveals the lines between player and PC at their most blurred, as attraction towards NPCs—especially in-game romanceable ones—*bleeds* between them. In-fics there is also a blurring of player and PC desire within descriptions of how attractive a male character is, perhaps reflecting the author's own personal attraction and attachment—this too is a form of non-explicit *tiefempfunden* self-insertion.

This chapter aims to consider how descriptions of appearance within fics is as important as depictions of personality—especially within game-fics—because appearance is so important in-game, and this importance needs to be translated. The second argument of this chapter is that, while romance novels depict a highly masculine stereotypical hero, within both games and fics, there is space for a different form of masculinity to be depicted, one that subverts societal conventions and allows for nuance and emotion.

Within games, often an NPC will be *seen* by a player before they discover what they sound like or encounter deeper personality traits. Initial appearance is thus incredibly important in forming a player's initial impressions of what a character will be like, for much can be gleaned from a character's external features, appearance, and the way they dress and hold themselves. Initial assumptions can be difficult to discard or completely reverse.

Within traditional romance novels, appearance often serves as an *initiator* of attraction between hero and heroine, especially when it comes to describing the mysteriously attractive hero who is almost always instantly captivating. In many romance novels the heroine is described as physically attractive,²⁴⁸ but their appearance is rarely mentioned afterwards, and this is perhaps due to the fact that she is meant to be a blank slate for the reader to insert themselves into.

²⁴⁸ Laura Kinsale, "The Androgynous Reader", in *Dangerous Men & Adventurous Women: Romance Writers On The Appeal Of the Romance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), pp. 32-33.

This chapter also examines what happens when the *PC* is the character that a player becomes attracted to. This will be explored within the context of whether a PC is customisable or not, arguing that it is *non-customisable* PCs that allows the distance for attraction to occur. This will be explored in the context of the character of Michael De Santa, who will also serve as the case study exploring depictions of masculinity.

The importance of appearance in forming attachment within in-game romances

The first thing most players learn about a character is their appearance. The way a character is presented during these first moments between player/PC and the NPC is therefore crucial for setting up expectations about that character, and—in the case of said character being romanceable in-game—can then spark player’s initial feelings of attraction; the ‘love at first sight’ notion, which gets *bled* into the PC by way of the player pursuing the romance narrative.

Attraction can, of course, and certainly does, occur towards characters that are not romanceable in-game—just a glance at AO3 will see a wealth of fics containing such secondary characters—but for the purposes of the way appearance both facilitates initial attraction as well as sustains attraction throughout a romantic narrative in-game, only one in-game romanceable character will be discussed within this section: Kaidan Alenko, from the *Mass Effect* trilogy. His romance arc is also somewhat unique in that it can span multiple games.

Within RPGs (role-playing games) the most developed NPCs are generally those within the PC’s inner circle, most commonly known as ‘party members’ or ‘companions’, both in-game and by players in real-life. These characters usually have the highest level of interaction with the PC with longer and larger narrative arcs compared to lesser NPCs. In-game romanceable characters almost always come from this inner circle of NPCs, given that they are already far closer to the player/PC in terms of narrative and time spent alongside them, which in turn can facilitate romantic feelings, as noted by Christine Tomlinson:

Being in close quarters, fighting next to other characters, working through stressful situations together – in reality, players posit, it would be unrealistic not to develop feelings for someone [...] players want characters that feel like a good match for one another. This also extends to broader story contexts, shared scenes, and if the characters’ backgrounds - whether imagined by the player or established by the game creators – seem appropriate. To some extent, physical world preferences can come

into play, but according to most conversations in interviews and online, things should feel natural.²⁴⁹

The use of the word ‘natural’ is interesting, for it suggests that attraction to a character is far more unconscious than perhaps previously thought and plays into the notion that players may have less control over who they find themselves attracted to. Tomlinson is, however, giving importance to the fact that the narrative arc and time spent with a character becomes important in a player forming attachment towards a character, as an RPG can easily take 30-60 to even 100+ real-world hours to complete, which is a long time to spend with a set of fictional characters. Time, however, can also be a hinderance, as Tomlinson remarks:

Players deliberate whether or not power dynamics feel off or lived histories of the characters create tensions that would render a relationship impossible or improbable. Some of these assessments take place after the fact – knowing the full story, players wonder if they have made the wrong choice in that playthrough.²⁵⁰

This is certainly a factor that perhaps comes into play with the Kaidan romance, because in *Mass Effect 2*, Kaidan is angry with Shepard for working with Cerberus, and states that, despite loving Shepard and mourning her death for two years,²⁵¹ his allegiance lies with the Alliance and refuses to re-join her crew.²⁵² This is a rather angry, distrustful and negative reaction to Shepard and her motivations, causing him to question her integrity and eventually leads to a refusal to join her—unlike Tali and Garrus who were also party members in the first *Mass Effect* but who drop everything to join Shepard in *Mass Effect 2*.

This barrier to their relationship will be explored further in chapter four, where the barrier/conflict/resolution will be explored in detail, but what is relevant in this context is that his rejection of Shepard, and therefore also their relationship in the *second* game, may well cause a player to question the romance arc within the *first* game—and whether they were better off choosing another of the romance options available.

²⁴⁹ Christine Tomlinson, “Priority Pixels: The Social And Cultural Implications Of Romance In Video Games”, *Information, Communication & Society*, 24.5 (2021), 717-732 <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118x.2021.1874478>, p. 16.

²⁵⁰ Tomlinson, pp. 17-18.

²⁵¹ At the beginning of *Mass Effect 2*, Shepard is killed aboard her ship the Normandy, whilst Kaidan survives. Two in-game years later Shepard is resurrected by Cerberus, a terrorist organisation. Shepard ends up working with Cerberus, despite them being the antithesis of the Systems Alliance Military Shepard was formally part of.

²⁵² *Mass Effect 2*, in-game mission – Horizon.

Kaidan and Shepard's relationship can be reignited in *Mass Effect 3*, the final game of the trilogy, but Kaidan's hesitation to re-join Shepard in the second game may once again cause players to stop and think about resuming their relationship. By this point, however, Cerberus—the organisation causing the barrier between them—is shown very early on in *Mass Effect 3* to be working against Shepard. Given Kaidan's distrust of Cerberus being validated, players may well be able to agree with him that it was a bad idea and are perhaps glad he did not join when they asked him to, that he stuck to his principles.

Games are, perhaps obviously, not romance novels. Nevertheless, many in-game romances follow rather similar narrative beats as traditional romance novels, as outlined by Heidi McDonald in *The Advanced Game Narrative Toolbox*:

First act, meet and establish mutual attraction and connection (or a question about whether this exists).

Second act, have there be some sort of conflict or obstacle to overcome between the characters in the romance. Think about personality differences between the characters and whether these create conflicts, or whether different approaches to circumstances in the world create conflicts, or whether there are outside influences creating conflict [...]

Third act, resolve the conflict. Will it be a happy ending or a sad one?²⁵³

This concise narrative structure demonstrates how the initial meeting and attraction remain core elements in creating a successful attraction between player and character, which in turn allows for a successful in-game romance—however, it is interesting that it is not specified whether the mutual attraction and connection is meant to apply to the PC and NPC, or the player and NPC. It does seem that games *need* this ambiguity, the blending of player and PC. If players approached games with themselves as an entirely separate emotional entity from their PC, then the romance would not have the emotional impact envisioned, and potentially would not work at all.

In their chapter within the text *Digital Love*, Jennifer E. Killham, Arden Osthof, and Jana Stadeler produced an essay entitled *Designing Video Game Characters for Romantic Attachment*. Using thirteen participants, they created a study that was formed around *what*

²⁵³ Heidi McDonald, "Writing Romance And Sexuality In Games", in *The Advanced Game Narrative Toolbox* (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2019), p. 29.

makes a character attractive. One of their findings revolved around the romantic concept of ‘love at first sight’ which is so often seen within romance novels and relies heavily upon a visual appreciation of a character’s appearance. Many of their participants were able to recount that first gaze upon their beloved character, with some of their participants stating that

a clear first impression [is made] through conveying a unique and specific concept; capturing the essence of a character in but a glimpse by using striking voice work, strong visual design and [dialogue] lines that give an impression of the personality right away.²⁵⁴

This reinforces the importance of appearance in the initial meeting because it subliminally uses overall characterisation in an instant; for example, Michael De Santa is first seen wearing a balaclava in *Grand Theft Auto V* (GTAV) when robbing a small-town bank, which posits him as a lowly criminal, a profession with a rather negative reputation. Ten years later Michael is seen again, now dressed in a light grey suit, a world apart from his former life. He is in a therapy session lamenting his ‘useless’ son, his own difficult, criminal past, and that he is “living the dream, baby, and that dream is fucked! It is... fucking fucked!”²⁵⁵ showing that he is unhappily retired, bitter, depressed and discontented with the life he created for himself, despite the fact that it may appear to be ‘perfect’—he has money, a large house and all the time in the world. It is not a particularly positive first appearance, yet it sets Michael apart from more traditionally masculine and heroic PC usually presented in-game, especially as he is in his mid-to-late 40s. Nevertheless, the suit implies a consciousness about the way he presents himself, suggesting he wants to look smart and put-together—perhaps as an unconscious contrast to the fact that his life is falling apart.

What is also useful is that the first impression of characters is often vague enough to apply to villains or non-romanceable NPCs. For, as has already been mentioned, attraction is by no means limited to purely in-game romanceable character. It was also noted by Killham et al. that “[a]ction without follow-up is often regarded as frustrating and having the love interest answer the player’s advances, be it through mutual attraction or rejection, helps to alleviate such frustrations”.²⁵⁶ In such cases where attraction is not reciprocated, fanfiction can become

²⁵⁴ Jennifer E. Killham, Arden Osthof, and Jana Stadeler “Designing Video Game Characters for Romantic Attachment” in *Digital Love: Romance and Sexuality in Video Games*, ed. by Heidi McDonald (Boca Rotan: Taylor & Francis, 2018), p. 197.

²⁵⁵ Rockstar North, *Grand Theft Auto V* (Edinburgh: Rockstar Games, 2013) in-game cutscene.

²⁵⁶ Killham, Osthof and Stadeler, p. 198.

the romantic conduit hero, allowing players/authors to negate any in-game rejection, and instead create a new narrative in-fic where love and the relationship is the highlight of the fic regardless of whether it is endorsed in-game or not. Fic authors have the ability to turn these frustrating disappointments into *opportunities*, to wave away any uncertainty in-game and categorically depict: ‘these are the two characters who are going to be together no matter what, because I, the author, say so’.

Moving beyond the initial meeting, importance is given to the time spent alongside a character, and the role such proximity plays in creating attraction, similar to the above argument made by Tomlinson. The longer a player spends with a character, the more of their personality and quirks are revealed, and the potential for attraction deepens.²⁵⁷ For example, with Kaidan Alenko, the player has three games within which to discover Kaidan as a character. This is admittedly a longer period of time than usual, for most games have a romance-narrative-arc that lasts for one game rather than three, but there is still ample time within a singular game to discover a lot more about a character’s personality.

In Killham et al.’s essay, all participants recounted single-game romances. When asked about what elements are most important in forming attraction to a game character, the following aspects were found most attractive:

Respondents reported emotional attraction the most often, with 90.3% or 28 of 31 respondents selecting this response. This was followed by physical attraction (83.9% / 26 out of 31), intellectual (77.4% / 24 out of 31), social (67.7% / 21 out of 31), and other (16.1% / 5 out of 31).²⁵⁸

Although physical attraction comes second in this particular study, it might be considered that appearance is at its most important in that *initial* meeting between player/PC and NPC, before emotional attraction to the character’s deeper personality can occur. It is difficult to imagine a meaningful, emotionally rewarding relationship based upon appearance alone, although this can manifest as an unrequited ‘crush’. Therefore, when it comes to an in-game romance arc, there does need to be something *more substantial* that players can engage with, in order to develop a deep and meaningful relationship between both PC and player.

Appearance is therefore a *facilitator* for the longer-term attraction for a player, especially when one considers how individual physical attraction is—each player will respond to a

²⁵⁷ Killham, Osthof and Stadeler, p. 198.

²⁵⁸ Killham, Osthof and Stadeler, p. 202.

different aspect of the same in-game character individually. After that initial spark between player and character, it is the player who will ultimately choose who they romance in-game, and also who they will find attractive. As Tomlinson notes:

Attraction does come into play, particularly when players first meet characters that are potential romantic options [...] While physical attractiveness can serve as an important starting point for some players, preferences and interests shift with exploration of the story. In interviews, participants mention initial interest being sparked by physical attractiveness.²⁵⁹

It is important to remember that physical appeal is not only limited to a character's face: attraction encompasses their entire body, what clothes they are wearing, and how their hair is styled. Do they have make-up on or does their face have some kind of wound/scar? All these aspects become equally important in helping to create attraction, especially as a character's face might not even be the first thing players see of them. As relationship develops, a character's complete personality and narrative arc/choices are just as vital in forming deeper attraction, but it could be argued that if that initial attraction is absent in those crucial opening moments it will fail to develop later on, or lead to a less intense relationship or attraction.

The function of appearance within fics containing in-game romanceable characters

Appearance thus forms a vital part in creating impressions and expectations during the initial meeting between player/PC and NPC, as well as remaining an important aspect in helping to retain attraction throughout the in-game romance narrative as well as outside the gameworld, for attraction for a player does not simply stop because they have turned off their computer or console or finished a game. In romantic *fics*, appearance assumes a slightly different role, a bouncing between the game-focused initial appearance/expectations and the romance novel-focused first meeting as an initiator of attraction: a large neon sign to readers that this is the fic's romantic focus. The pairing will, of course, already be tagged in the fic description and therefore frame the entire point of the fic, but it is a dance between author and reader, an acknowledgement that the initial meeting provides important or new context and reasons for attraction that may not be in the original text. Even in fics where the two main romantic characters already know each other, or are already in an established relationship, there will be

²⁵⁹ Tomlinson, p. 18.

a moment when they are first seen or read together, and those establishing lines will set the tone for the rest of the fic, appearance included.

What is interesting is that it has been argued that “[t]he move from the literary to the filmic or televisual has [...] been called a move to “a wilfully inferior form of cognition””.²⁶⁰ This implies that adapting the written word to a visual medium is a regressive step, and makes the adapted medium less worthwhile. With games fics, however, it could be argued that the reverse occurs—a ‘lesser’ visual medium is being adapted into the apparently more worthy literary format. I would argue, however, this ignores the fact that games combine visual and written elements, especially within RPGs where aspects like codices, journal entries and long dialogues are prevalent, and that games can incite emotions that are just as strong as any literary form.

Playwright and screenwriter Doug Wright states that

[Doug] Different forms follow different rules [...] You have to meet the demands of the form you’ve chosen, even if it means reinventing the source material to a certain degree. A good adaptation is rarely a slavishly fidelitous one.

[interviewer] **Creatively speaking, do you find a great difference in working from fictional or creative sources and working from “real person” sources?**

[Doug] A source is a source, and the adaptation process is largely the same.²⁶¹

This is a more democratic view of adaptation, for it implies that adaptation remains a constant between mediums. It is interesting that they acknowledge that the source material may need to be reinvented in order to fit into the new medium, for it gives precedence to the adapted work, and gives the adapter, the fic-author, license to change the gameworld to suit their fic-needs. This is perhaps reflected in the fact that many fics do veer away from the game’s canon, that they rewrite it in order to better reflect the author’s desires and wishes.

Admittedly, from personal experience, if a character’s appearance is altered within a fic and this is not clearly signposted or explained, the fic is usually more negatively received than when other aspects of the original text are altered.

Despite this license to rewrite the canon to fit the adaptation, many common elements often exist between the original text and the new work, and it is usually expected that there will be

²⁶⁰ Linda Hutcheon and Siobhan O’Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 2nd edn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), p. 3.

²⁶¹ Anne Jamison, *Fic: Why Fanfiction Is Taking Over the World* (Dallas: Smart Pop 2013), p. 373.

something similar between the two even if it is merely the spirit of the original. Talking about fic communities, Katrin Busse argues that the expectations of authors/readers are vital to a successful fanfiction:

Community norms both support and restrict individual readings: not only do they allow a reader or writer to default to certain expectations, but they also limit opposing readings insofar as the stories may be considered out of character. When new writers have not been initiated into a specific interpretive community, they lack the discourse established within and outside of the shared fictions. Not steeped in the community and its conventions, their readings may seem jarring and their characterizations out of character to those in the community, when they are just different interpretations of the source text.²⁶²

While Busse does not specifically talk about appearance, their reference to ‘keeping in character’ within-fic naturally also applies to a character’s actual personality/appearance. When reading a fic, readers have a pre-existing image of that character in mind and will likely assume that the author had the same image when writing. Of course, surface-level alterations to a character’s appearance—hair colour or clothing for example—would be acceptable changes to appearance so long as they are clearly signposted in the fic and are appropriate for the overall fic narrative: a character having an 80s poodle perm would be acceptable in a fic set in the 1980s but would be entirely out of place in a fic situated in the 1950s.

It is understandable why such conventions would be considered vital to a fic, especially a game-fic given the translation from the visual to the textual, and visual aesthetics are vital to games feeling alive and allowing players to become immersed within these worlds. These in-game visuals do not simply vanish from an author/reader’s mind when encountering a fic, especially as a player may have spent hundreds, thousands of hours looking at this world, the characters, the weapons etc., and all this will be recalled when reading a fic, even if it evokes the spirit of the visuals rather than any exact replica. Given these elements can be lost within the literary format, recreating the immediacy of these visuals with words and description is particularly important in helping to recreate the gameworld, regardless of whether the fic is

²⁶² Kristina Busse, *Framing Fan Fiction* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2017), p. 116.

entirely canon compliant or is a medieval alternate universe. Expectations remain, through game and fic.

However, it is important to remember that fanfictions do not exist in a vacuum, they are a tapestry incorporating different sources and contexts and popular cultural references. As Jamison argues:

Fic makes no claims to “stand on its own.” It doesn’t need anyone to point out its props and sources because it doesn’t hide them; it celebrates them. A work of fic *might* stand on its own as a story—it might be intelligible to readers unfamiliar with its source—but that’s not its point.²⁶³

Here Jamison implies that readers and authors are almost required to have a good understanding of a work’s original, canon text for a fic to be properly understood, even if only the faintest remnants of that canon remain. From personal experience, there is an unstated expectation that readers will be familiar with the basic principles of the original text, and that these aspects will not be explained again. This means authors are *knowingly* placing descriptions of character appearance within a fic despite the assumption that a reader already knows what the characters look like. As already mentioned, games are a particularly visual medium, and part of translating the visual to the textual means providing descriptions so that both author and reader can fully relate to a mutual mental reimagining, as well as signposting any new or altered changes to a character’s appearance. Authors can also find joy in taking the time to describe their beloved character, in finding new aspects and facets of personality and appearance, or simply indulge in creating their beloved character on their own terms.

It may simply be a case of an author using descriptions of their appearance to fall in love with their beloved character all over again, or to elicit more immediate emotional responses than personality would. One example of this is contained in the fic *forehead kisses* by shadoedseptmbr, published on AO3 in July 2021.²⁶⁴ This fic revolves around the aftermath of the Mars mission in ME3, in which Kaidan is badly hurt and spends time in hospital, which

²⁶³ Jamison, p. 14.

²⁶⁴ The fic was updated on AO3 in May 2023 with a different title, *pick me up pull me down*, as well as five extra chapters. However as those chapters are set after Kaidan’s injury in hospital, and as I was working off a pdf copy of the fic I had downloaded back when it was just a one-chapter fic entitled *forehead kisses*, I will still be referring to the fic as such and will still only be looking at this particular section of the fic, as it remains the same within both versions—only the title has changed, not the actual words of the fic. This evolution merely shows that fics are not static and have the ability to change over time.

acts as another low point in the overall romantic arc between Shepard and Kaidan, but the threat of his possible death can also facilitate players/PCs falling in love with him again.

In-game the player sees a rather sanitised version of Kaidan when compared to the fic, with only his face looking a little bruised and bloody,²⁶⁵ his torso otherwise appears unharmed:



Fig 3. Kaidan as he appears in hospital in ME3.

In this fic, however, a rather more near-death Kaidan is depicted:

He looks...*terrible*.

He'd been beautiful, the last time she saw him with his helmet off- the way he always has been- if older.

[...]

She'd been afraid to remove his helmet on the Normandy, the indicators on his armor in the red and screaming so she'd let his armor do its job. Medigel, painkillers, clotters, fluids and acting as a brace for...everything they couldn't see.

²⁶⁵ In-game, the facial and body textures are two separate things, so this disconnect between the bloodied/bruised face and otherwise completely normal, unharmed torso was likely a developer choice, meaning it was probably due to time/resources. It does make sense to focus upon his face as this is what the in-game camera focuses on during their conversation in the hospital. Also seeing his face—an attractive part of Kaidan—so injured would likely elicit a stronger emotional response from players than just his body.

So much blood it had seeped through his undersuit and caked on the bed.

Now- under the bruises and the scrapes the medics have cleaned but not bandaged- Kaidan looks fragile in a way she's never seen him. The solid center of her best squad is in pieces in front of her.

His eyes are wrapped shut but the thin skin is black around them from the trauma. He's splayed on his chest, to allow the stent to drain the swelling around his amp and there's a mesh...holding his shaved skull together, *oh god*.²⁶⁶

Shepard's reaction to seeing Kaidan absolutely broken, barely holding onto life, elicits deep emotional reactions—regret, guilt, sadness, anger—that she was not able to spare him this fate. In the author's notes they state that this fic was inspired by a tumblr prompt of 'a hospital forehead kiss',²⁶⁷ and this action is prompted by Kaidan's appearance—because for the first time he is not depicted as the strong, capable man he has been within the first two games. His vulnerability is evident, and this is reflected in Shepard's actions of gentleness, showing that she obviously still harbours great affection for him. *Action* is therefore directly linked with *appearance*, the two working symbiotically in harmony with one another, and it would be odd if one was contained in some form within a fic without the other. It is also perhaps a moment of self-insertion, of the author's personal emotions at seeing Kaidan unconscious and hurt *bleed* into Shepard, and therefore the fic as well.

Given that shadoedseptmbr has written nearly thirty other fics containing a Shepard/Kaidan relationship,²⁶⁸ it is quite possible that shadoedseptmbr themselves harbours a romantic connection towards Kaidan, which *bleeds* into the overwhelming affection shared between him and Shepard in these fics. After all, desire being at the heart of romantic fics, if the character's beautiful face or hands or overall body were not described, it would be a notable absence. As Catherine Driscoll muses:

it has often been claimed that women's erotica requires more "story," this evades some complex questions. Characterization and plot are less important to PWP stories,

²⁶⁶ shadoedseptmbr, *forehead kisses* (Archive of Our Own, 2021), pp. 1-2.

²⁶⁷ shadoedseptmbr, p. 1.

²⁶⁸ "Shadoedseptmbr - Works | Archive Of Our Own", Archive Of Our Own.com <https://tinyurl.com/32vv2kr3> [accessed 29 September 2023] [note as of 29th September 2023, almost all of their works are only viewable to registered members of AO3, meaning a reader has to be logged in to their AO3 account in order to view these fics]

as the label indicates, and yet they are still produced and consumed by women in the same proportion as other fanfiction genres.²⁶⁹

The notion of this need to have an overarching narrative is interesting, for as Driscoll says, it ignores plenty of fics that do not contain ‘plot’, but instead small, self-contained snapshots of a moment in a relationship, or a scene that is about sex and nothing else, like the fic-genre PWP (plot what plot).²⁷⁰ This suggests that narrative is *not* the driving force for authors to write about relationships, it is *the characters*, the *love* felt by players/authors that inspires them to start typing. It is therefore natural that the author will eventually come to describe physical attraction and physical manifestations of romantic love as part of their own love, because such aspects are just as important as spoken or implicit manifestations of love.

If physical appearance was not important there would be no need for fic genres such as PWP, *where physical attraction and action is the entire point of the fic*—a pure indulging of author/reader desire through sex and physical attraction. There would also be no need for fluff fics,²⁷¹ for these rarely contain any kind of explicit sexual content, focusing more on gestures of affection—kisses, hugs, gentle physical contact. Within both genres however, there is still the need for expectations to be upheld, for those signposts to be given. What this means is that appearance is not just limited to authors stating, ‘this is what X character looks like’; as said above, appearance is directly linked with action, with allowing authors to describe the cupping of a cheek when staring longingly into their beloved’s eyes, or a hand grabbing onto a sheet in more passionate moments.

The fic *Words* by eternalshiva, published in February 2012, deals with the final mission of *Mass Effect 2* (BioWare, 2012), known as the Suicide Mission for its high probability of failure. At this point within *Mass Effect 2*, Shepard and Kaidan’s relationship is at its lowest ebb; they are in a limbo of simmering feelings whilst on separate paths, both still reeling from Kaidan’s betrayal on Horizon—which will be explored further in the fourth chapter.

²⁶⁹ Catherine Driscoll, “One True Pairing”, in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities In The Age Of The Internet* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2006), p. 91.

²⁷⁰ PWP stands for plot what plot and is a genre of fic that revolves entire around a sexual encounter between two, or more, characters, and contains little to no plot, hence the name. Given their sexual nature, these fics often contain incredibly graphic/explicit language and imagery of said sexual scenarios.

²⁷¹ Fluff fics are a genre of fics that focuses on positives, whether that be a general happy existence for characters or loving displays of affection—sexually explicit content is not a normal part of fluff fics. Fluff fics are not always romantic in nature, but what is key is the *absence* of negative, angsty scenarios. It is about the sweet, feel-good moments of existence, nothing more, nothing less.

Action and appearance are intrinsically linked in this fic, for the fic opens at the point of Shepard lying on the ground, her lowest point in the Suicide Mission. First Kaidan's voice appears in her head,²⁷² then her memory focuses on his mouth, and then his lips:

His lips.

They always moved flawlessly. Always moved confidently across each verb and complex conjugation with such ease it had immediately caught her attention the first time she met the Lieutenant. She couldn't get enough of them - these syllables that glided and tripped across his mouth, capturing her full and undivided attention.²⁷³

As she remembers different aspects of Kaidan's appearance, she gains the strength to physically get up off the floor and continue along with her mission, because she realises that she wants nothing more than to see Kaidan again, to hear his words and feel his presence.

Throughout this fic, Kaidan is referred to in terms of both appearance and personality, and especially what he would say to Shepard if he was physically there, hence the fic's title. His emotional presence resonates throughout the fic provides Shepard with the blind rage and fury she needs to survive the Suicide Mission:

Shepard, get up.

He was still *speaking* inside her mind, his voice still held that silent whispered promise from the night before she died, before their world was torn apart by Cerberus.

She felt her aching, tired body renew its fight for survival.

She had to survive this, had to make the jump to the Normandy.

She had to hear his words again and find her place by his side once more.

She leaped.²⁷⁴

Whilst this fic does not contain appearance and action in the more traditionally romantic sense or context, linking a romantic scenario between two characters, it is undeniable that Shepard's love for Kaidan propels the action described throughout the narrative. That action is also echoed with Shepard's memories about Kaidan, not explicitly written but strongly

²⁷² Eternalshiva, *Words* (Archive of Our Own, 2012), p. 1.

²⁷³ Eternalshiva, p. 2.

²⁷⁴ Eternalshiva, p. 9.

hinting at physicality, which adds another layer of appearance-action as Shepard uses these thoughts to motivate her, to keep her motivated enough to survive an unsurvivable mission.

This section has shown that descriptions of appearance are frequently used as an initiator of attraction in both fics and game, for both utilise the look of a character in setting up and conveying expectations of personality as well as expectations of how the relationship arc might play out. In-game, this initiation occurs between the player/PC and NPC as it is for the benefit of *both* player and the in-game characters. Similarly, within fics, the description of character benefits both the reader and the in-fic characters, providing a similar set of expectations to the reader, but also signposting how much of the original canon is being transported into the fic. When inappropriate relationships come into play, appearance functions in much the same way as those fics without such material—as a way of conveying how beautiful a beloved character is, as well as highlighting how action and appearance cannot live without the other. Describing appearance also demonstrates *tiefempfunden* within the very act of taking the time to depict a beloved character, to indulge in their appearance and enjoy just how attractive they actually are.

The romantic trope of the initial meeting

There are, however, also many fics that not only describe the character's initial appearance, but they also detail the initial meeting between characters, or the initial moment where both characters fall in love with one another. The reason for such a heavily used trope may lie with the conventions and expectations laid out by romance novels, but it also serves as an acknowledgement that descriptions of appearance are there contextually within the fic to benefit *both* the reader and the characters because within romantic fanfics the focus falls upon the *two highlighted characters' relationship*, rather than simply the immersive self-identification required in-game. In fics, the player-turned-author takes on, and replaces, the role of developer, for they are creating the *whole* story as well as reinterpreting the game's characters—both the PC and NPCs—and allowing these characters to have a far greater role and agency in the ensuing relationship(s).

A romantic trope commonly utilised is within fics is that initial moment when the two characters meet each other and seem destined to fall in love with one another. Or, if they already knew each other, this is transformed into that vital moment when they realise their attraction to one another. Within this initial meeting, as has been previously noted,

appearance is incredibly important, creating the initial spark of attraction as well as expectations around the character's wider personality in both games and fics.

In her guide on writing this initial meeting, romance novel writer Valerie Parv notes that "Initially, [the heroine] will probably be attracted to his appearance",²⁷⁵ which interestingly implies that at first, there is little else to find attractive, but the initial meeting in games is not dissimilar, for players usually only have appearance upon which to form those initial impressions. The hero also falls for the heroine's beauty, as Stella Cameron, writing about romance fiction notes, but conversely:

[I]n a romance novel the heroine may be beautiful, but her beauty is a side issue, not an important aspect of her nature. The hero may be attracted to her initially because of her beauty, but the heroine will not accept him until he has recognized her heroic qualities.²⁷⁶

What this suggests is that the heroine holds the power within the relationship, but that regardless of *her*—the player/author/reader included—physical attraction to the hero, things will never work until she decides that the hero is worthy of her love, when he sees beyond her appearance and discovers her inner qualities. This may seem outdated, but it does serve a purpose, namely giving the heroine more agency and decision about the relationship. She is no longer a passive participant, accepting the hero's love just because he 'demands it'; instead he must work to earn her affection, and get to know her properly and completely. Only then will she allow him into her heart.

Parv, in her guidebook-novel for potential romance novel authors, asks the question "Do we meet the hero as early as possible and share the heroine's reaction to him, filtered through her senses?",²⁷⁷ which certainly implies that the meeting should be told from the heroine's perspective, and should focus primarily on her thoughts and feelings. Of course, within fic this is by no means a hard and fast rule, and many fics explore both sides of the story. Parv also states that this meeting should occur as close to page one of the book as possible,²⁷⁸ and their initial interaction should

²⁷⁵ Valerie Parv, *The Art of Romance Writing*, 4th edn (Crows Nest NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2004), p. 116.

²⁷⁶ Stella Cameron, "Moments of Power", in *Dangerous Men & Adventurous Women: Romance Writers On The Appeal Of the Romance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), p. 142.

²⁷⁷ Parv, p. 77.

²⁷⁸ Parv, p. 139.

Allow at least a page or longer to describe how they interact. What does she see and hear? Taste and smell? What does he say and how does he say it? What responses do his words and actions trigger deep inside the heroine?

Ideally, the response should be so powerful that it catches her by surprise. It happens in spite of any reasons she has not to be attracted to him, and she can't stop it from happening. Probably no other man has made her feel quite this way.²⁷⁹

Whilst this certainly paints an evocative picture of the emotional aspect of the initial meeting—and from personal experience these kinds of details are certainly important to the initial meeting featuring in many fics—the fact that the heroine is taken by surprise, or attraction emerges even if she does not necessarily want it to, does seem to diminish her agency. As will be explored within the fifth chapter, the notion of soulmates is another intrinsic trope within romance novel narratives, the notion that the hero and heroine are *meant* to be with one another; it is divine providence from the author-God. In fics, both characters actually gain agency because it is the author who is exacting her desires upon the beloved male character, making his emotions and response matter just as much as his love interest, and also allowing the heroine to decide how she responds to him, and what particular feelings she possesses. She may not instantly fall for him, or even like him at first—the enemies-to-lovers' trope is incredibly popular for a reason—but even in such cases the initial meeting will still be important for it will be a grain of sand irritating the oyster, the nexus point from which the feelings eventually emerge.

In a similarly intense vein, Penelope Williamson recounts her version of the initial meeting between hero and heroine, stating that

Practically from the moment he meets her, the hero wants to possess her. Yes, he is attracted by her face and body, but he also becomes intrigued by her spirit. Being an egocentric male, he sees something of himself in her; he sees the hero in her. He begins to imagine her as his perfect complement. While his desire for her might be strictly sexual at first, once the physical bonding takes place, sex is not enough; he must then possess her heart and soul, even while he in turn becomes possessed. The

²⁷⁹ Parv, p. 36.

heroine becomes valuable to the man, the one woman out of all the women in the world capable of making him happy, of making his life complete.²⁸⁰

This denotes something far more emotional, almost spiritual, occurring within the physical relationship, that there is an unbreakable bond between hero and heroine akin to swans mating for life. But the suggestion that once the hero and heroine have committed themselves to each other they are bound, body and soul is interesting, for it denotes a very black-and-white view of relationships: that these two people will never be happy with anyone else, which seems unrealistic an ideal to pursue in real-life. Perhaps, then, this is merely another facet of the fictionality within romance novels and romantic fics, this ideal that two characters will come together and be happy for the rest of their lives in the idyllic happy-ever-after-ending. It is also interesting that sexual desire is motioned, for most descriptions of the initial meeting in romance novels merely highlight physical attraction, the sexual aspect rather unstated.

The fic *You're Making Me Blush* by AlyssAlenko, published in 2017, details a first meeting of sorts between Shepard and Kaidan. I say 'of sorts', because they have already been serving aboard the SSV Normandy together for some time, but this is fic about the first time their mutual attraction to one another becomes evident. This author has chosen to use their own personal Shepard named Alyss, who is described as having lavender eyes²⁸¹ and long black hair usually kept in a ponytail.²⁸² The fact that the author has made their AO3 pseudonym AlyssAlenko, as opposed to merely including Alyss in their fics, suggests that Alyss is incredibly personal and close to them and constitutes a form of *tiefempfunden* via this acknowledgement of how special Alyss is to them.

The act of Alyss undoing said ponytail causes Kaidan to hold his breath at the realisation of her beauty.²⁸³ When his attraction to her is described, it is explicitly mentioned that it is not just her incredible beauty that attracts him to her:

Maybe it was the aura of power she exuded, that didn't come from her N7 training and the rank of Commander; it came from her very soul, but underneath, there was a certain vulnerability— hidden where no one could see, she was headstrong,

²⁸⁰ Penelope Williamson, "By Honor Bound: The Heroine as Hero", in *Dangerous Men & Adventurous Women: Romance Writers On The Appeal Of the Romance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), p. 130.

²⁸¹ AlyssAlenko, *You're Making Me Blush* (Archive of Our Own, 2017), p. 1.

²⁸² AlyssAlenko, p. 2.

²⁸³ AlyssAlenko, p. 2.

determined, inherently good, and crazy sexy beautiful; Kaidan would be the first to admit that he was very attracted to her—for more than just her looks, though those were incredible too. It was her presence; the way she inspired him to be better without even trying...she was protective of everyone around her, even if she didn't know them well, if at all ²⁸⁴

This means that this initial meeting already differs from romance novels because the two already know each other, and the attraction has already gone beyond being purely skin-deep. Nevertheless, a *relationship* has not yet been initiated—though this is due to the fraternization that exists between the two, as was explored in the previous chapter: they are both Alliance Navy, and Shepard is Kaidan's superior:

when they were around each other, they shredded every scrap of control they had. It wasn't a good thing, and definitely something no one else should hear about: fraternization on the Normandy between Commander Shepard and her lieutenant, would spell out disaster....the Alliance Brass would have a field day.²⁸⁵

The author and readers will of course know that the threat of fraternization is not enough to stop their relationship from developing, especially given in-game it is not an insurmountable barrier. Nevertheless, the inclusion here of a barrier merely serves to heighten the sexual tension between them, to allow the author and reader to enjoy the denial, enjoy the precipice before they finally give in and consummate.

Kaidan, so far as his physical appearance goes, is described far more than Shepard due perhaps to the fact that Alyss Shepard is only truly meaningful to the author, and because they would rather indulge in their attraction to Kaidan. It is not just his face that is described in this fic, but his body also:

He stretched his arms over his head; her eyes glued to the flexing muscles of his arms and back, not to mention his amazing hindquarters and perfect thighs...the BDUs left little to the imagination. And her imagination was in overdrive.

[...]

His black hair was styled and perfect and his muscles filled out his uniform perfectly [...]

²⁸⁴ AlyssAlenko, p. 2.

²⁸⁵ AlyssAlenko, p. 2.

her attention, her gaze infused with appreciation and heat. [...] there was a little more time to stoke the fires of her indecent mind. A little indulgence wasn't a bad thing. And besides, watching Kaidan, working or not, was the best part of her day, even if it got her all hot and bothered with no outlet.

[...]

the look on his handsome face and the dare behind his chocolate eyes had her wanting to throw regulations and inhibitions out the airlock...²⁸⁶

Kaidan is described in an implicitly sexually charged manner, and it is obvious that the author intends for Kaidan to be read as highly attractive, both to Shepard *and* the author/reader. The emphasis on appearance in this fic serves to highlight *Kaidan's* attractiveness for *both* Shepard and the reader, but it is the inclusion of the 'first meeting' narrative that allows for the attractiveness to incite the sexual element of the relationship, for the attraction between them causes Shepard to say "'God, you're beautiful.' She breathed".²⁸⁷

The use of the word 'breathed' implies it is said softly, a slip of the tongue before she can think about the repercussion of those words. Kaidan replies with "'Commander, please. You're making me blush.'"²⁸⁸ His tone is not stated by the author, but one can imagine him saying this in a humorous vein, a playful flirtation rather than serious accusation. Action and attraction are once again intrinsically linked, tied up with the initial meeting and serving as an initiator of deeper feelings and the hints of a future relationship.

The fic ends with them both going off on their separate duties, but there is now the knowledge that they are both incredibly attracted to one another. There is definitely something simmering below the surface, and they know that they are on the precipice of a relationship, of breaking the chain of command once and for all.²⁸⁹

What this section has discovered is that the initial meeting between characters is a crucial step within romantic narrative arcs in setting up the overall tone for the relationship. In the context of inappropriate relationships, setting up the tone is even more crucial, for it helps signpost whether the pair will be able to have a happy ending, or whether things will end

²⁸⁶ AlyssAlenko, pp. 1-2.

²⁸⁷ AlyssAlenko, p. 2.

²⁸⁸ AlyssAlenko, p. 2.

²⁸⁹ AlyssAlenko, p. 3.

more tragically; to ensure that the narrative tone makes sense throughout the fic—that a happy ending does not come out of nowhere within an otherwise bleak narrative.

Appearance in this context is incredibly important, and descriptions allow fic-authors to write more emotionally engaged material because they allow for emotion, action, appearance, and attraction to be rolled into one, regardless of whether the author is describing the initial meeting between characters, an explicit sex scene, or just meeting-up in a café on a cold winter's day.

Rejection of traditional masculinity within the appearance of Michael De Santa

Within many of the texts surrounding in-game romances, the quite understandable assumption is that almost always it is an NPC who will be considered attractive by players, owing to the fact that in-game, a player cannot romance their PC-selves. Whilst this is entirely acceptable in regard to in-game romances, a problem arises for players who want to explore this concept further. There is a decisive difference between a *customisable* PC as explored in chapter one, and a PC that is *non-customisable*, one whose appearance and personality/backstory is predetermined by the developer. I argue that it is the non-customisability of pre-made PCs that allows for attraction to occur, for the player is not inserting themselves into the PC via personalisation or filling-in the blanks, because the PC is already a defined, complete character that has more in common with an NPC, meaning *tiefempfunden* must take place via another form. This is usually done with the insertion of a character that romances the attractive PC, be it a character from the original text, an original character, or the reader themselves.

To explore this concept, one of the PCs of *Grand Theft Auto V* (GTAV) (Rockstar Games, 2013)—Michael De Santa—will be focused on. Because Michael becomes the beloved character by being physically attractive, his appearance will be explored through its ties with masculinity, given that GTAV is a hyperreal masculine fantasy whilst also ironically subverting traditional masculinity, which is echoed in the fics.

A 2011 conference paper by Adrienne Shaw entitled, “*He could be a bunny rabbit for all I care*”: *Exploring identification in digital games*, challenges the assumption that a player will *bleed* part of themselves into the PC and visa-versa. The paper is interview-based, and opens with one interviewee's opinion of the PC within *God of War* (Santa Monica Studio, 2005), Kratos:

“He’s just the thing on the screen. He’s holding the knives, that’s all.” She was not the only interviewee who felt this apathy towards the identity of her on-screen character, though most were more ambivalent than apathetic. This troubles the dominant assumption that players invest heavily in the identities of their characters, an assumption which conflates the activity of playing games with how the games as texts are interpreted.²⁹⁰

The use of the word ‘apathy’ is interesting, for it is the antithesis of the words normally used in conjunction with PCs: immersion, bleed, emotional affect, playing a better version of themselves.

Apathy implies that, instead of forming an emotional pathway between player and the gameworld, a PC is instead nothing but a tool to facilitate gameplay. While this may seem a bleak view of PCs, Shaw is right in questioning how games *as texts* are interpreted, especially as if one takes the prevailing assumption that ‘players become their PC’. Therefore, finding any PC attractive would be little more than self-incest, which would likely be an unattractive prospect for most people. The fact there are romantic fics, some incredibly sexually explicit, containing a PC shows that identification with a PC is not as unanimous as one might assume. However, Shaw does admit that when it comes to customisable PCs that the relationship between PC and player is almost entirely different, and that attachment is far stronger than with non-customisable PCs,²⁹¹ which lines up with what was theorised in the first chapter.

Interactivity is a word which often emerges in games theory: the idea that because a video game is interactive, it can therefore be assumed that players will become one with the PC as a conduit into the gameworld. Shaw does bring up an interesting concept, that perhaps games should be described as *reactive* rather than *interactive*,²⁹² which does make sense in terms of controlling/playing as a PC, for a PC can only react to a player’s button or key press, can only react to a dialogue choice *chosen by the player*.

As Shaw elaborates:

²⁹⁰ Adrienne Shaw, ““He Could Be A Bunny Rabbit For All I Care”: Exploring Identification In Digital Games”, in *DiGRA*, 2011 <http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/he-could-be-a-bunny-rabbit-for-all-i-care-identification-with-video-game-characters-and-arguments-for-diversity-in-representation/> [accessed 29 September 2023], p. 1.

²⁹¹ Shaw, pp. 10-12.

²⁹² Shaw, p. 4.

As the player actively experiences what is going on in the game, she/he is not necessarily as concerned with engaging with the thought process of the character, the exception being games with developed characters where the player wishes to play as that character. In those games, players may attempt to understand the character's thought processes rather than merely control their actions. Often, however, it frankly does not matter what the character is thinking, as the player ultimately commits the action.²⁹³

Shaw's point that it is the *player* committing the actions within a game is important because it is a concept central to this thesis: the notion that it is the *player's* desires and wishes that come through areas such as attraction. A PC—even a customisable, personal PC—is still ultimately controlled by, and limited to, a player's desires, perhaps even more so when personal emotions are involved. A player may choose to romance a character for an achievement or certain reward, but often, as explored earlier in the chapter, players romance the character that *they* are attracted to, that they *feel* is the 'right' choice, for both the player *and* PC. But what this means for non-customisable PCs is that there is less opportunity/motivation to identify as the PC, which in-turn allows for the distance between player and PC that could lead to players becoming attracted to the PC.

Shaw goes extensively into what identification means, for it was discovered that the interviewees had a different way of defining identification which:

[focused] on seeing the character as separate from them at the same time they formed a sympathetic or empathetic connection with that character²⁹⁴

[...]

In most of their descriptions, however, it seemed that interviewees identified *as* the on-screen character, in the sense that they are taking on the character's role in the game world, but they do not identify *with* the character in the intellectual/emotional sense.²⁹⁵

This is vital to understanding the dynamics of player attraction to a PC. Because these non-customisable PCs are *not* a personalised PC, they only require the player to engage enough with them to play the game; they do not require any deeper emotional identification. We must

²⁹³ Shaw, p. 6.

²⁹⁴ Shaw, p. 3.

²⁹⁵ Shaw, p. 4.

not forget however, that many PCs are fully formed characters in their own rights with their own pre-defined stories and personalities, which means that the player, perhaps rather ironically, has little agency in getting to change any pre-defined traits.

While Michael is certainly one of the more well-developed and complex non-customisable-PCs in terms of narrative and character within modern games, he is still bound by the restrictions placed upon him by the fact that his entire character is defined by the developers, not the player. For example, the overarching narrative of GTAV does not change according to a player's choices—except at the very end of the main story. In cutscenes the player does not get to choose dialogue options. The only customisation options are clothing and hairstyles, and even the romances in-game are pre-defined—Michael is married to Amanda, and the player cannot alter this.

This means that with a game containing a non-customisable PC, emotional investment is not a certainty, and that while players may well identify as a PC during gameplay, this may not last once the game has been quit, and certainly may not lead to any long-lasting emotional attachment with a PC. This lack of emotional attachment is vital in allowing the distance needed to find a PC attractive, and also avoid the self-incest pitfalls that may come with becoming attracted to a personalised PC. This distance also means that appearance can once again play a role in creating attraction, perhaps *because* the player cannot alter their appearance or personality, meaning they have a fully formed character, like an NPC, to fall in love with.

When Michael De Santa is first introduced within the main narrative—after a younger Michael is introduced within the prologue set ten years before—he may well be mistaken for a suave, classically handsome older man in his late forties, with slicked-back hair, icy blue eyes, and a penchant for expensively tailored suits. Yet beneath the suit lies physical attributes that do not tally with this initial impression.

In an examination of masculinity within romance novels, Jonathan A. Allan explains that romance novels follow an 'ideal' of masculinity as appropriated by popular culture:

The male body, we are told, over and over again, ought to be “slim, toned, and muscular” [...] the “archetypal heterosexual male body” suggests that “it is one that is

muscular, but not too muscular. It is also a body that is devoid of fat and hair. It must be that one is ‘cut’ and ‘chiselled,’ and it must appear strong and powerful”²⁹⁶

Such an image of masculinity is often seen in-games, with male characters possessing a six-pack and little to no fat, and even BioWare cannot escape this trope—as seen earlier in the chapter with Kaidan—for characters are uniformly fit and muscular. However, Rockstar chose to take a risk and decided on different path with Michael to create a dichotomy, a character who appears to be highly masculine but underneath subverts some of these ‘ideal’ masculinity expectations: while Michael may have a liking for expensive suits and appears well-groomed, the façade hides a body that shows a fondness for unhealthy food and is therefore podgy and without a six-pack, a far cry from the chiselled, slim, and muscular ‘ideal’:



Fig 4. Michael De Santa without his shirt, showing his not so muscular body.

Here it is possible to see that Michael’s body is far removed from any masculine ideal, yet the fact that there are over a thousand fics containing Michael in some fashion²⁹⁷—many of

²⁹⁶ Jonathan A. Allan, “The Purity Of His Maleness”, *The Journal Of Men’s Studies*, 24.1 (2016), 24-41 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1060826515624382>, p. 28.

²⁹⁷ “Michael De Santa - Works | Archive Of Our Own”, *Archiveofourown.Org* <https://archiveofourown.org/tags/Michael%20De%20Santa/works> [accessed 29 September 2023].

which posit Michael as attractive—show that perhaps this masculine ‘ideal’ is not shared by players/authors/readers themselves.

It is also not just his torso that rejects the ideal of masculinity. Because he is in his mid-late forties, his face reveals wrinkles, discoloured teeth and fingers from his pack-a-day smoking habit,²⁹⁸ whilst he is also depicted as a (barely) functioning alcoholic. Collectively, these traits could make him anything but attractive, yet these ‘negative’ traits are perhaps exactly what makes him appealing, because he is *not* a cookie-cutter ‘manly’ man. As Allan remarks:

The male can, in many ways, never achieve all of the qualities we define as masculine, precisely because these are always in flux, always changing, and this is precisely why the male in romance is so ideal, such an object of fascination and fantasy.²⁹⁹

What this suggests is that the ‘ideal’ of masculinity, so often reinforced within romance novels and popular culture, is a moot ideal. Nevertheless, it cannot be ignored GTA V is designed as a hyperreal satire of modern (~ 2013) day America that criticises the politics of the Left, Right and Capitalism, as well as highlighting the absurdity of Hollywood and surrealness of Los Angeles.³⁰⁰ Bearing this in mind, it is not difficult to imagine Michael’s duality as another poke at the Western ‘ideal’ of masculinity; that appearances can very much deceive, and that the expensive, manicured exterior can easily give way to something less stereotyped and conventional. What this means for fics is that there is space for this duality to be explored, for Michael to both be devastatingly handsome but also unattractive due to his actions and demeanour, as this next fic will explore.

The fic, *Shades Of Cool* has already been explored within the first chapter, but it is interesting to reframe in this chapter, for its second-person ‘you’ perspective directly places Michael, originally a PC, into the role that the NPC usually takes in a fic-relationship—i.e. the object of attraction that the PC/reader/author is supposed to romance. What this implies is that rather than identifying with the PC-Michael, readers are instead supposed to posit *themselves* in the dominant PC position and is reflective of the distance that is created by Michael, as a PC, being fully formed and non-customisable. Otherwise the fic might fall into the

²⁹⁸ *Grand Theft Auto V*, in-game mission – Dead Man Walking.

²⁹⁹ Allan, p. 28.

³⁰⁰ DER SPIEGEL, “Grand Theft Auto V: Interview Mit Dan Houser Von Rockstar Games”, Spiegel.de, 2012 <https://www.spiegel.de/netzwelt/games/grand-theft-auto-v-interview-mit-dan-houser-von-rockstar-games-a-866662.html> [accessed 29 September 2023]. [translation by self]

aforementioned self-incest pitfall that would occur when trying to write the PC as attractive but also the main character at the same time.

This fic also provides a good example of an *interpretation* of Michael, whose appearance is enticingly handsome but also retains enough of his pre-defined, in-game personality to ensure that he can both easily cheat on his wife Amanda but also end up choosing her, just like his in-game counterpart. This fic also echoes the concept discovered earlier in this chapter: that appearance and action are intrinsically linked, and that appearance is more than merely a simple description of someone's eye colour or what they are wearing.

Within the first paragraph of this fic, Michael is not depicted as a classically handsome man, nor is he described as being particularly attractive, at first glance, to the reader:

The gall of this stocky man, after only ten minutes of casual conversation, to place a hand on your thigh and give it a gentle squeeze. You couldn't see it beneath the table and you hadn't been concerned enough with his introduction to spot it earlier, but you could very well feel the cool, hard nodule of what you assumed to be a wedding band pressing against the fabric of your denim jeans.³⁰¹

It is possible to see that his actions compliment his appearance—he is quite obviously married yet is happy to flirt with a stranger he has met minutes before. This in turn means that even “The half smirk, half smile on his worn, handsome face didn't help the nausea tickling at the back of your throat”.³⁰² This implies that he is handsome, undeniably so, but his actions undercut handsomeness, making him instead appear rather sleazy.

This is fascinating mainly because this is a reader fic, which directly invites the reader to indulge in the beloved character, PC or NPC. It can be assumed that in order to read/write a romantic fic that there must already be some sort of attraction present, so to have such a dichotomous description of Michael shows that beloved characters do not have to be described as the most beautiful and attractive individual the reader/author has ever laid eyes on, that nuance and other explorations of relationship dynamics are just as valid and important.

As the reader and Michael have more and more coffee 'dates', Michael's appearance descriptions begin to change, becoming more positive as time passes, that with the initial

³⁰¹ Lillington_x, *Shades Of Cool*, (Archive of Our Own, 2016), p. 1.

³⁰² Lillington_x, p. 1.

sleaziness dissipated, Michael is free to become the handsome in-game version that players would have originally found attractive. His eyes are described as being “bright blue [that] always diced you to pieces”,³⁰³ which then turns into a description as to the expensive looking suit that he always wears,³⁰⁴ both of which are defining features of his in-game presence.

In terms of masculinity, it is not difficult to see how this version of Michael hardly represents the ‘ideal’ portrayed within romance novels. The very fact that he slips so easily towards infidelity indicates this, for it goes against the soulmate-narrative favoured by many romance novels, as well as the fact that he chooses his wife over the reader-heroine, negating any chance of a happy ending between them.

Allan remarks that when it comes to an older hero that, “even his advanced age—“the lines of experience”—do not “detract” from his looks, his claims to “lithe masculinity.””,³⁰⁵ which would imply that Michael could still be considered ‘ideally’ masculine, for underneath the podge are still muscles that allow him to rob a bank in-game, and that even his wrinkles and stubble can be highly attractive. He may not be an ideal personality-wise, but perhaps what this means is that Michael represents a different, perhaps more realistic, form of masculinity. Given GTAV is a satire, this rejection of the ‘ideal’ man is in all likelihood purposeful, a statement of modern society and Hollywood ideals, that a man does not have to look like a chiselled superhero to be attractive, and that his flaws may even make him more attractive than any perceived ‘perfectness’. The end of the fic, where the reader sees Michael happy with Amanda, returns to the unattractiveness felt by the reader-heroine at the beginning of the fic, for the final line is:

His icy blue eyes were distant and cold, but focused in your direction. You hadn’t been concerned enough when the two of you first met to try to spot it earlier, but now, it was as clear as the sky had been the day you two met - you realized his gaze had always been as cold as the pale yellow band around his finger.³⁰⁶

This almost serves to shatter the illusion that the reader-heroine and Michael could ever have worked out, and the return to describing his wedding ring is interesting, for it reminds the reader that they will never truly have Michael is, both because he is married, and because

³⁰³ Lillington_x, p. 2.

³⁰⁴ Lillington_x, p. 2.

³⁰⁵ Allan, p. 33.

³⁰⁶ Lillington_x, p. 4.

ultimately, he is a fictional character, as well as a PC who will therefore never be romanceable in-game.

In some fics however, this unavailability may not matter, for authors can choose to include a female character who Michael ends up in a relationship with instead of Amanda or can write a fic where Michael and Amanda do divorce. As bell hooks notes:

Most of the time, we think that love means just accepting the other person as they are. Who among us has not learned the hard way that we cannot change someone, mold them and make them into the ideal beloved we might want them to be. Yet when we commit to true love, we are committed to being changed, to being acted upon by the beloved in a way that enables us to be more fully self-actualized. [...] True love *is* unconditional, but to truly flourish it requires an ongoing commitment to constructive struggle and change.³⁰⁷

This is reflected in the in-game narrative arc between Michael and Amanda where they both admit they are not the same people they were when they first met, but that they are willing to work on accepting the people they have become, and that no-one else understands their family like they do.³⁰⁸ This is reflected in fics containing Michael and Amanda, for they often explore how the true love and affection that lies at the centre of their relationship remains, even if it often does not seem apparent. However, this sense of *wanting* to change for someone you love is evident in many fics containing Michael and the reader/original female character, for Michael becomes the partner willing to become ‘a better man’, as opposed to the inadequate husband he often has been to Amanda. *Tiefempfunden* allows such transformation to occur by enabling fic-authors to rework the text into something that reflects their fantasies and desires, to allow Michael to become a better man and not fall into some of the pitfalls he does in-game. It gives *him choice where he had none before*, given in-game almost all of the choices are made by the developer, and Michael too is beholden to the confines of the gameworld.

Conclusion

Over the course of this chapter, what has been discovered is that within both games and fics in that physical appearance plays an important role. Within games it can help players to create initial expectations about character, given that it takes a player time and repeated

³⁰⁷ bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: Harper, 2000), p. 185.

³⁰⁸ *Grand Theft Auto V*, in-game mission – Reuniting the Family.

interaction to learn about a character's personality.³⁰⁹ In some cases, a first glance at a character is enough for a player to become near-instantly attracted to that character, much as in real-life, much as in romance novels.

Within fanfictions, readers are assumed to already know the characters within a fic, familiar with both appearance *and* personality so there is less need to build up expectations and hints around character traits and flaws unless they need to be included. Nevertheless, appearance description is still vital in creating a rounded world, especially if authors are introducing any new aspects of a character.

What has been discovered is that action and appearance are intrinsically linked for often appearance is dispersed amongst action; for 'appearance' is not merely what a character looks like, it is how they react to events and inform dialogue responses. This hybridity enables authors to create a far more vivid narrative setting, especially as romantic narratives rely on those intimate scenes between the hero and heroine.

The fact that non-customisable PCs can also be found attractive by players is an important aspect to explore, for it is too often assumed that because a PC is a PC, the player will automatically identify *as* the PC and therefore utilise them as if they were an extension of themselves. However, as was shown with Michael, his being a PC does not exclude him from being attractive to players. Given that masculinity plays an important role within romance novel heroes, it felt important to explore this area with Michael, for GTA V is a hypermasculine fantasy game that nevertheless also manages to be deeply satirical of American popular culture—including such 'ideal' masculinities. This means that while Michael is symbolic, both adhering and rejecting masculine ideals, fic authors are free to pick and choose those traits and create a form of divergent masculinity that is less macho and more sensitive, rejecting traditional romance novel conventions.

The way that I utilise appearance has changed over my many years of writing fanfiction. When I was a teenager, appearance was all about highlighting the male character's utter attractiveness, especially when it came to the more sexually explicit fics. There was perhaps, back then more *bleed* between me and the purpose of my fic, namely imaginings around a beloved character and indulgence of personal fantasies. In more recent years, as my fics have

³⁰⁹ Killham, Osthof and Stadelers, p. 198.

become less sexually explicit and far more *romantic* in nature, I have found appearance has assumed a more nuanced role in my work.

I have come to realise that nowadays I usually focus on facial expressions as opposed to descriptions of bodily appearance. Also, as I explored in this chapter, these facial expressions usually appear as an action/reaction to events and other characters rather than utilised to describe the scene. Usually when I describe bodies, I describe the clothing they are wearing—in exacting detail, as I have always loved fashion and will often create folders filled with pictures for reference—and in a few of my most recent fics I have also embraced the art of using clothing to express/show a character’s mental state. When I considered this shift, I realised it was because in many cases I have been writing about the same characters for years, a decade or more, and therefore these characters are comfortably familiar without the initial hyper-sexual attraction. I know them intimately, and find more pleasure in minutiae, in seeing how characters interact and how this changes appearances. One of my longest-standing beloved characters is Kaidan Alenko, and looking through all of the fics featuring him, I found I have shifted away from describing his ‘shredded six-pack’, and I have moved towards seeing how his eyes light up when looking at his beloved, or his greying hair and crow’s feet more pronounced over the years served upon the Normandy.

However, there is one area that has remained a constant, and that is an utter enjoyment of the ‘initial meet’ within a fic. Given many of my fics contain some form of incest, the initial meet is not a literal ‘first time two characters are meeting’ scenario; instead it is a ‘first time the dynamic shifts from familial to romantic’ situation. Descriptions of physical appearance and attractiveness here still play a major part in my fics, as my favourite parts of writing fictional incest is what I call ‘the precipice’—when the attraction has occurred, the boundaries have shifted, and whilst the two characters are still very much trying to deny their attraction and stop thinking indecent thoughts—because me the author-God knows they are utterly doomed and will cave-in eventually. Usually it is during this ‘initial meeting’ where my fics will be at their most sexually explicit, though it is usually just stray indecent thoughts and imaginings rather than any actual sexual content. But regardless, attraction, attractiveness, and physical description, are always revealed here, for it is the best way of signposting a shift in dynamics towards the inevitable slide into *want* and *need*.

What this chapter has shown is that appearance *is* intrinsic to a fic, and *tiefempfunden* occurs within the describing and appreciating of a beloved character’s appearance, when the lines

are most blurred between player and PC. Because readers/authors know what a character looks like, such descriptions are often for their own benefit, an extra way of creating enjoyment. What has also been discovered is that action and appearance are so intrinsically linked it is difficult to include one and not the other. Personality is also similarly bound-up with appearance. However, appearance has the advantage of being able to be an *initiator*: allowing for near-instantaneous attraction in both games and fics can give authors/readers/players that initial expectation and overall assumption of subsequent character. Personality takes time to explore and develop, whereas appearance provides an instant flash of information, and is therefore a vital tool in any fic-author's creative arsenal.

Chapter Four “When life gives me limes, I make margaritas”³¹⁰—

Active reinterpretation and conflict/betrayal within game fics

Introduction

To bestselling romance novel writer Valerie Parv, a romantic work without a realised, overarching conflict becomes “a series of chance meetings and unplanned events where the characters argue endlessly before falling inexplicably in love on the last page”.³¹¹ This implies that conflicts, both large and petty, become as important to the narrative as the romance and relationship. Without conflict, and therefore without drama, the happy ending would not possess the same emotional weight for readers missing how the main characters have to fight for their love to flourish, and how much they earn their happy ending. Even within lighter fanfiction genres there is usually some form of drama or conflict. The conflict may not be ‘serious’, but without drama there would be little to drive the narrative or relationship forward.

What is interesting to note is how, within games, the drama/conflict present within relationship narratives often lean toward some form of betrayal, usually by the NPC hero action’s concerning the PC heroine. This chapter will highlight one particular betrayal that occurs between the Sith Warrior PC and their love interest Malavai Quinn, within the BioWare MMO *Star Wars: The Old Republic* (SWTOR), to explore how fic authors are actively reinterpreting these in-game events and shaping them to the authors’ wills and desires. The use of active reinterpretation is deliberate, and will highlight the active-passive debate, where games are often touted as being ‘active’ and ‘immersive’ compared to their ‘passive’ book, film, and TV counterparts.

Romance novel theory will support an inquiry into how some fics use a romantic narrative in order to expand upon the conflicts present in-game, and to demonstrate that *reinterpretation* does not necessarily mean *abandoning* the original text altogether and creating a new, vastly different alternate universe or narrative. Reinterpretation can also signify something far more subtle; it can simply be a new retelling of the original event in a way that highlights and foregrounds a new detail. To explore this, I will be employing three contrasting fic-interpretations of the romantic low-point within the aforementioned in-game relationship

³¹⁰ *Real Housewives of New York City*, Bethenny Frankel, season 11 tagline

³¹¹ Valerie Parv, *The Art Of Romance Writing*, 4th edn (Crows Nest NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2004), p. 116.

between Shepard and Kaidan. This low point is found within *Mass Effect 2*, after the in-game main mission Horizon that leads to a separation between Shepard and Kaidan.

The active vs passive debate

Within video games, their *interactivity* is often highlighted to set this medium apart from other forms of popular media. Games are relatively unique in allowing players to actively—or reactively, if one takes the argument laid out by Shaw in the previous chapter³¹²—influence a gameworld and alter the events depicted, whilst books, films, and TV series³¹³ are often defined by their apparent non-interactivity: a reader cannot change the words on the page of a book to keep a beloved character from dying; a viewer cannot pause a TV show to move characters around and change their dialogue. Nevertheless, within games theory, there is the assumption that all games are interactive and, that, as Jonathan Frome argues, *gameplay=interactivity*.³¹⁴ Fanfiction thus possesses a unique vantage point, straddling the line between activity and passivity. Authorial control means that fics can closely resemble the original text or possess only the slightest hints, which demonstrates active control of a text, and therefore *authors* gain interactivity, the ability to alter in-world events. Yet it is still passive because it is a written form, and *readers* therefore cannot alter what they see upon the page.

Annika Waern, with her concept of *bleed*—as explored a little in the second chapter—argues that during gameplay the player becomes entangled with the PC’s emotions, unable to properly distance themselves.³¹⁵ This then implies a loss of control by the player whilst they are playing the game, that they are so immersed within a gameworld they no longer have active control over their own emotions. Perhaps, then, fic is an active *reclaiming* of these emotions.

Nevertheless, *bleed* provides a safe zone where “emotionally complex or difficult subjects”³¹⁶ can be explored without harm. *Bleed* allows for an establishment, and then breaking-down of

³¹² For the purposes of clarity this chapter will use the word ‘active’ to describe the player’s interaction with the gameworld, given it is the most common word used within games theory and to use another phrase could otherwise be unnecessarily confusing.

³¹³ Mentioned because these are the three most common mediums besides games which get transformed into fanfiction.

³¹⁴ Jonathan Frome, ‘Interactive Works and Gameplay Emotions’, *Games and Culture*, 14.7-8 (May 2019), 856–874 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412019847907>, p. 858.

³¹⁵ Annika Waern, “Bleed In The Context Of A Computer Game”, in *Game Love Essays On Play And Affection*, (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2015), p. 42.

³¹⁶ Waern, p. 41.

the separation between player and PC, by sometimes “invoking such strong emotions in players that they cannot fully distance themselves from their characters”,³¹⁷ perhaps once again implying a loss of control for players whilst they are in-game. However, this does not mean a loss of interactivity, and the implication being that a game is *so interactive* a player cannot truly distinguish between their and their PC’s emotions. It could be suggested that ‘true’ immersiveness comes at the cost of player control, both in the physical actions the player can enact, and emotional distance between player and PC.

This specifying of emotions as a major factor as to why a player cannot distance themselves is very important, for it suggests *emotions* are indeed the most important aspect of *activeness* for a player—emotions that would surely be stronger when dealing with a personal-PC that is unique to the player. Emotions also encompass romantic attraction; it could be argued there may well be a similar *bleed* effect occurring when writing a fic, a collapsing of the barrier between author and character(s) as they weave a new narrative together. This also implies another aspect of *tiefempfunden*, when the emotions between author and character become indistinguishable, and self-insertion cannot be helped, for there is not enough distance to prevent authorial details and fragments from entering the text.

In his article on interactive works and gameplay emotions, Jonathan Frome argues that “interactive works differ from noninteractive works in that they present audiences with a type of situational object that noninteractive works don’t: namely, the audience’s authorized actions that affect the work’s features”.³¹⁸ This description of an interactive work—i.e., a video game—can just as easily apply to fanfiction, for fanfiction is a communal agreement wherein texts are malleable, and can be transformed into something new by an author—actions that affect an original text’s focus.

Frome also states that “Self-conscious emotions such as pride, shame, and guilt often rely on a sense of responsibility tied to action”,³¹⁹ and that non-interactive texts “rarely incite self-conscious emotions like pride because the audience ordinarily is not responsible for any of the work’s features”.³²⁰ This is a sentiment echoed by Will Wright, creator of *SimCity* (1989) and *The Sims* (2000), who stated in an interview that:

³¹⁷ Waern, p. 41.

³¹⁸ Frome, p. 865.

³¹⁹ Frome, p. 865.

³²⁰ Frome, p. 865.

I'm interested in amplifying the players' natural abilities. I want a player to feel surprised: "Wow, I made this thing!" Then, because you feel ownership over it, you start feeling things like pride—or even guilt if you run the situation badly. People talk about how games don't have the emotional impact of movies. I think they do—they just have a different palette. I never felt pride, or guilt, watching a movie.³²¹

From personal experience, pride and guilt are rampant within fic writing—pride from completing a fic that was wonderful to write, and guilt from often putting beloved characters through emotionally tough and otherwise challenging situations. This is because fanfiction requires an author to interact emotionally with the text, though this interaction goes beyond merely typing on a keyboard; it requires immersion—it requires *tiefempfunden*, for an author to become part of the text whilst interacting with it.

However, such emotions tend to only exist for the author of a fic and not the readers, and if such emotions are worked on, readers might not experience them quite as strongly or recognise them at all. This does imply that fics are indeed an interactive medium, although given it is a *written* form, it is still prone to the same limitations as other forms of creative writing, namely that only the author truly has any agency in how the story evolves. If a reader wants to alter a fic's narrative, then they will have to pick up their pen or start typing on a keyboard and become an author themselves, creating their own story reflecting their wants and desires.

Fics are active in that they are *reinterpretations* of an original, pre-existing text. They are commentaries, not only drawing upon the original source material, but utilising popular medias and tropes, even contemplating other unrelated preoccupations that the author decides to include simply because they can and want to. Fics are also conversations about 'what if' that character fell in love with that other one, as well as "conversations the writers [do not] have the opportunity to have in their day-to-day lives".³²²

³²¹ Alan Burdick, 'Discover Interview: Will Wright', Discover Magazine, 1 August 2006 <https://www.discovermagazine.com/technology/discover-interview-will-wright> [accessed 29 September 2023].

³²² Anne Jamison, *Fic: Why Fanfiction Is Taking Over the World* (Dallas: Smart Pop 2013), pp. 184-185.

In her essay highlighting the *archontic* nature of fanfiction—which relates to the word archive as laid out by Jacques Derrida³²³—Abigail Derecho summarises just how active fanfiction really is:

there is an acknowledgment that every text contains infinite potentialities, any of which could be actualized by any writer interested in doing the job: fic authors posit the question “what if” to every possible facet of a source text [...] and explore situations that the makers of the source text simply cannot, because of the need for continuity and chronological coherence in the source text’s universe [...]. In fan fiction, there is a constant state of flux, of shifting and chaotic relation, between new versions of stories and the originary texts: the fics written about a particular source text ensure the text is never solidified, calcified, or at rest, but is in continuous play, its characters, stories, and meanings all varying through the various fics written about it. Fan fiction is philosophically opposed to hierarchy, property, and the dominance of one variant of a series over another variant.³²⁴

This notion of ‘infinite potentialities’ is especially important within game fics, given their interactivity—though it begs the question, if a game provides infinite possibilities through action, then why are game-fics even needed?

The answer is because games are limited by their programming and hardware—at least with current games. If a game does contain romance narratives, then most of the time they are limited to a few characters in order to enable developers to create a deeper, more complex, and emotionally satisfying romance narrative. This lack of interactivity, the inability to romance whichever character a player is attracted to, becomes one of Derecho’s ‘what ifs’—what if this character were romanceable? Exploring situations that the source text cannot is especially pertinent to games-fic-authors, for developers are limited by currently available hardware and software, as well as what a developer team can realistically achieve within months or years of development time and within a set budget. Often within game-fics it is still possible to see a sense of fidelity, or at least a respectful nod towards the original game-text.

³²³ Abigail Derecho, “Archontic Literature: A Definition, a History, and Several Theories of Fan Fiction”, in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2006), p. 64.

³²⁴ Derecho, pp. 76-77.

Many fanfictions follow the narrative structures and canon events shown in-game, or at least an interpretation thereof, for as Derecho remarks, “one scene [...] can be rewritten in fifty, or five hundred, different ways, with each repetition elucidating some different aspect or dynamic of the scene”.³²⁵ This point reinforces the notion of active reinterpretation, it is very rare to see a fic that follows an in-game scene exactly as it appears onscreen: this particular chapter focuses upon how romance narratives which *are* found in-game have been adapted into fic, for the in-game content posits a baseline upon which fics can build, making it easier locate those aspects actively interpreted, as well as what is being discarded.

The active retelling of original texts demonstrates that writing fanfiction is *not* a passive act, but rather a form of interactive media for authors, encompassing a degree of interactivity not even games can hope to achieve. Fanfic allows for truly infinite possibilities of form, and because they do not have to appease audiences, make a profit, or spark joy in anyone but the author, *can be whatever the author chooses it to be*. This ability to choose therefore constitutes another form of self-insertion despite it being far more subtle; fics are saturated with choice and the evidence of authorial will and desire. Choice, and the ability to choose material, is key to fanfiction working as a transformative, and therefore active, medium.

Adapting in-game romances within fic

A cursory glance over any game-fic will show evidence of game-narratives being actively interpreted and transformed into something original by fic authors, as opposed to (passively) absorbing elements of the game. As was explored in chapter two, the BSDM theory by Navarro-Remesal and García-Catalán suggest there is still a negotiation of control within games, and a loss of control by the player in accepting the rules and limitations of the game. In-game romances are especially prone to such limitations, given they have only become a commonplace element in narrative-heavy games in the past decade or so, and even when they are included players are often faced with only one or two possible romanceable NPCs, alongside a limited narrative that often has little impact on the main overarching storyline. Fics therefore offer new possibilities and allow authors the control to go beyond what is presented onscreen in the game, to actively take part in the romance as opposed to simply following the motions programmed into the game.

³²⁵ Derecho, p. 76.

The MMO (massively multiplayer online game) *Star Wars: The Old Republic* (SWTOR) (BioWare, 2011) broke the mould in the games industry by including romances that ran alongside the main class storyline. Given MMOs are defined by their multiplayer and community-based status and the fact that players can interact and talk with one another whilst they explore a world, meaning romancing an NPC was not something considered important enough to include before. However, as BioWare has become well-known for its in-game romances, there was almost an expectation by players that SWTOR would contain romance as well, regardless of the game's genre.

Each class, of which there are eight, generally receives two romance options: one for male PCs and one for female PCs. The romance option that will be focused upon for the purpose of this thesis is between a female Sith Warrior PC and Malavai Quinn,³²⁶ one of the Sith Warrior's companions. This romance is fascinating and important within the game context, for it contains a very clear-cut betrayal of the PC/player by Malavai in which he literally attempts to kill the Sith Warrior. This, naturally, has led to strong emotions experienced by players as well as the myriad fics that explore and reinterpret this defining moment within the in-game romance. Most importantly, perhaps, such a betrayal has not been enough to make Malavai unattractive for/to players thereafter. This could be argued as another aspect of self-insertion *tiefempfunden*, that because the player is still able to find Malavai attractive post-betrayal, the fics reflect the Sith Warrior showing similar forgiveness and continued attraction.

As has been seen in chapter two, the difficulty games have with including sexually explicit content means it is still controversial including explicit sex in mainstream games. Including some inappropriate relationships would be similarly controversial. However, as was shown, games *can* include relationships like infidelity and fraternization, so long as they tonally fit into the overarching narrative of the story and romantic arc. Malavai's status as a Lieutenant in the Sith Empire, and his unyielding loyalty to the Sith Empire, informs why, at the point of the betrayal, he chose to side with the person who saved his military career from ruin instead of the Sith Warrior PC/love interest. Tonally it makes sense that Malavai would trust Baras, the man who saved his position and kept his dignity for years, over the Sith Warrior, who is Baras's enemy and threatens to tear down everything he has ever done. The complete adherence to military doctrine also informs the relationship between Malavai and the Sith

³²⁶ Players can only romance Malavai with a female Sith Warrior PC.

Warrior, for Malavai is hesitant to enter into a relationship with her for fear of potential fraternization, unsure if his career is worth sacrificing for love.

Of course, by the end of the narrative, Malavai is totally committed to the Sith Warrior and would happily die for her, any anxiety about fraternization becoming memory. Malavai's romance is accepted in-game because it *makes sense contextually* and has an appropriate place/purpose in the overarching narrative, especially within the context of the betrayal. Nevertheless, whilst this is accepted, many more forms of inappropriate relationship would not be, even if they too tonally fitted into the narrative, partially explaining why authors are so keen to actively reinterpret in-game romances in fics so they can write-in these forms of relationships if they so wish. There may, however, be another reason for such active reinterpretation within romantic-game-fics, and that is because when a romance narrative *is* present within a game, it is usually presented as a side-narrative, and as such *cannot* obstruct the main questline narrative or assume a primary focus.

Even within the Sith Warrior's narrative, the major narrative points still play out in the same way: Malavai will betray the Sith Warrior upon the Transponder Station, regardless of whether he has been romanced or not. The emotions felt by a player romancing Malavai will most likely be different to those felt by a non-romanced player, but the point remains. Within games, unless it is a romance/dating simulator, the romance *cannot* get in the way of the main narrative and cannot irrevocably alter it. Romantic fics allow for the relationship to primarily take centre stage, which requires an active reinterpretation of the text. Fic author Eurydice, in an interview with Anne Jamison in her book *Fic*, states that

My [fic] readers had one expectation most of the time: to see the pair they love get together. I could bend or ignore a lot of rules on the road to getting them there. It's not the same in original romance. There are genre expectations that typically need to be met. Depending on the audience [...], I might have to specifically choose to limit secondary characters, for instance, or stick to monogamous relationships even if they're not committed.³²⁷

This implies that *everything* is secondary to the two main characters within a romantic fic, and that previously important narratives or heavily featured characters can easily be removed

³²⁷ Jamison, p. 264.

so the romance can flourish. It even suggests that realism can be overlooked in favour of love.

In a narrative such as that within SWTOR—where Malavai’s betrayal remains the same regardless of romance status—fics can highlight the emotional fallout of this event and allow Malavai’s romantic feelings to inform the betrayal. Some fics—like *Deception* by ProseEdda,³²⁸—contain a Sith Warrior that discovers the betrayal before it even happens, altering the narrative fundamentally yet retaining the spirit of the romance at its centre, for Malavai and the Sith Warrior choose to act-out the betrayal as if she did not know about it, in order to “put on a convincing show”³²⁹ for their former master Baras. Love is the entire point of romantic fics: to see those desires realised, to see the characters an author feels great emotion for enduring the trials and tribulations of a relationship, even if it ultimately ends in heartbreak.

Another reason fic authors may choose to centre upon the romantic relationship may arguably be because many romances present in-game are arguably formulaic, despite their perceived complexity.³³⁰ Even the praised BioWare in-game romances usually follow the same pattern of flirtations, admittance of feelings, conflict, resolution (usually a sex-scene), and the happy ending epilogue. This formula even remains the same within those cases where inappropriateness is inherent in the relationship, for example, the in-game fraternization within the Malavai-Sith Warrior does not act as a true barrier against their mutual feelings. Any doubts Malavai may have had about entering a relationship with his commanding officer quickly fall away once the Sith Warrior confirms that she intends a *relationship*, not a one-off sexual encounter.

As Jessica Sliwinski³³¹ notes, “Quinn must be aggressively pursued by the warrior and refuses to give in to physical temptation without the security of a monogamous relationship (even in the face of a possible Force choking)”.³³² Therefore, for Malavai the barrier is *security*, the knowledge that he is in a relationship, rather than representing purely sexual

³²⁸ ProseEdda, *Deception*, (Archive of Our Own, 2017)

³²⁹ ProseEdda, p. 4.

³³⁰ Peter Kelly, “Approaching the Digital Courting Process in *Dragon Age 2*”, in *Game Love Essays On Play And Affection*, ed. by Jessica Enevold and Ester MacCallum- Stewart (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2015), pp. 81-82.

³³¹ She was one of the writers for SWTOR, and wrote some parts of the Sith Warrior storyline, though she did not help to write the Malavai romance.

³³² Jessica Sliwinski, “It’s Time for This Jedi to Get Laid” in *Digital Love: Romance and Sexuality in Video Games*, ed. by Heidi McDonald (Boca Rotan: Taylor & Francis, 2018), p. 119.

entertainment. This may well be because he knows that in the hierarchy of the Sith Empire he is insignificant compared the Sith Warrior's far higher position and would not have the moral or power high ground should he try to refuse a Sith, as shown in-game during the betrayal scene. There may also be a selfish reason for this barrier, for Malavai treasures his rank in the military and the power it gives him, and to be by the side of one of the most powerful Sith would inevitably help him career-wise as well, but this is not his issue or motivation.

The fact that security, the safe haven of a relationship, represents the in-game barrier between Malavai and the Sith Warrior is fascinating, for within SWTOR and the wider *Star Wars* universe it is shown many times that Sith practice *passion*,³³³ not love. In relationship terms, this means it is more realistic for a Sith to have multiple casual encounters than practice monogamy. Sith thrive on pure desire and whim, especially as love is taught by both the Sith and Jedi as something to be avoided; having a relationship, and potentially marrying Malavai, poses an incompatibility with in-game Sith doctrine. Therefore, a player's want and need to romance characters becomes noticeably more important than strictly adhering to in-game lore.

In the chapter *Agape*, in the fic *Eros/Agape*, the author catlincyemaker chose to provide an external perspective of the Malavai/Sith Warrior relationship, namely through the eyes of two of the Warrior's other companions, Vette and Jaesa. This perspective offers a unique, less biased view of the relationship. The chapter takes place shortly after the commencement of Malavai and the Warrior's relationship, implying that the betrayal has not yet occurred though this is not explicitly stated. Vette's interpretation of the relationship is entirely positive:

Just lately, Quinny kinda relaxed, or stopped being wound so tight, or something. Not anything too obvious, except he wasn't muttering anymore and he wasn't ducking her. [...] I don't know what happened exactly but they both came to breakfast looking really relaxed one morning, she wasn't crackling purple anymore and he even smiled once. And right after that, she finally put in for that engine overhaul, and cut us all loose for the week. So I think they finally got together, and went off for a little R and R together. About time!

[...]

³³³ Sliwinski, p. 117.

things should get a whole lot easier around here from now on. I'm betting they won't say a word, so all we have to do is pretend not to notice so we don't embarrass 'em. Don't want to get in the way of a good thing!³³⁴

It is interesting that Vette is focusing upon how the relationship benefits everyone else on the Warrior's ship, and this demonstrates an aspect to in-game relationships that is often overlooked both in-game and in-fic: how a relationship affects other NPCs and might alter dynamics and overall atmosphere, especially within the PC's inner circle of companions.

This fic shows that, before the relationship begins—during the time the Warrior is having to pursue Malavai—there is a negative cloud surrounding them both that is distinct enough to be noticed by others. However, what Vette's account also reveals, is that the Warrior and Malavai are able to show affection towards each other, that the Sith Warrior can be happy and tender—again unlike the other Sith shown in-game. The fact that an author has included such tenderness shows that they are happy to accept this un-Sith-like behaviour because it furthers the relationship, and this tenderness may well be included because makes the author happy, and because they are happy to reject the in-game lore about the Sith in favour of a fulfilling relationship.

As already mentioned, after the initial happiness Malavai will betray the Sith Warrior and attempt to kill her, romanced or not, via two war-droids rather than with his own hands. This is where another seemingly lore-breaking choice is made within the Sith Warrior's narrative, for the Sith are shown in-game to show no mercy or compassion, who happily kill anyone who gets in their way. Had Malavai been any other character, or another Sith, he would most certainly not have survived the encounter.³³⁵ His survival, and the unusual tenderness afterwards, is entirely for the player's benefit. It may be an entirely unrealistic action for a Sith, but not for romanced players who have become attached to Malavai, who want to see the happy ending for both the player and their Sith Warrior PC. This tenderness allows the betrayal to become a point of transformation, where both the Sith Warrior and Malavai

³³⁴ Catlinyemaker, "Agape" in *Eros/Agape*, (Archive of Our Own, 2015), p. 6.

³³⁵ In earlier, beta versions of SWTOR the player could kill Malavai, but this was scrapped because players complained that they had then lost their only healer, meaning the change was a largely gameplay-related one, rather than a lore-based one.

realise where their true feelings and allegiances lie rather than becoming an insurmountable feat that ends the romance for good.³³⁶

Given that developers presumably *want* players to interact with in-game romances in a meaningful fashion, and players do not want to be constantly reminded how inappropriate the relationship is, the in-game barrier must pivot to contain some other form of inappropriateness, for example with Malavai the barrier is relationship security, not fraternization. For if too much attention were paid to the inappropriateness, it may become uncomfortable for the *player*, and may form a barrier for *them* that prevents completion of the romantic narrative.

On the other hand, betrayals can incite strong emotion, both positive and negative as well as providing a crux around which the romance can revolve, meaning a betrayal presents an easy and effective narrative barrier. When done well, a betrayal feels entirely natural within the overall romance. Betrayal is also often utilised within romance novels as a form of barrier/conflict, meaning fic-authors can draw from both game and romance traditions to inform their own fics. In terms of *tiefempfunden* and desire, what the betrayal and subsequent reconciliation can provide is the knowledge that the beloved characters can weather any storm and that their love is truly unbreakable. It also provides a moment of insight and reflection, a point where an author can learn more about their characters' personalities and motivations—and in turn more about themselves.

An essay by Julia Ayumi Bopp et al.—mentioned briefly in chapter two—explores how 'negative' emotions can be received positively instead of negatively by players. Their findings on character attachment are important to note:

In our study, character attachment was one of the most frequently mentioned reasons for why players deemed their experience as emotionally moving, which was also reflected in the high ratings of character engagement. These findings suggest that character loss must not forcibly reduce feelings of relatedness. Rather, loss may

³³⁶ The player can choose to end the relationship after the betrayal, but this thesis explores players/authors who are strongly attached to their beloved characters and would therefore not choose to willingly end an in-game relationship, even after such an emotionally difficult event.

actually serve to emphasize and intensify the connection players feel towards characters.³³⁷

While they are talking about an NPC dying within a game, the sense of loss can often be transferred to a betrayal, for there is a great sense of loss in a betrayal especially when a romanced NPC is betraying the PC/player.

The loss of the love shared between the player/PC and NPC can lead to a loss of the overt romantic relationship, as well as a loss of security and trust. Even if this loss is temporary, the emotional resonances may well remain felt even once the relationship has been resumed. Similar to real-life relationships, the trust may never be fully recovered—or perhaps the betrayal becomes the point around which the relationship can consolidate, safe in the knowledge that it can withstand any trial. Of course, the trust may be irreparably broken, and the relationship finished, but this thesis deals with those authors/players who remain fully emotionally engaged with their beloved characters, even after any betrayal.

It is precisely this lasting emotional engagement in the face of betrayal where the *tiefempfunden* self-insertion occurs, for the author cares enough about the relationship to further explore a betrayal within a fic. The author inserting their own explorative ideas of how two characters will move forward once the betrayal has occurred will differ with each player/author. For each will experience the betrayal in different ways and feel different emotions and opinions which will inform the shape and narrative of any fic they write. Time, too, becomes a factor in fics, for a fresh betrayal will be felt differently in its immediacy as opposed to when time has passed, and further narratives and events have occurred.

The barrier/separation within romance novels

Only game-related betrayals have been discussed thus far, but in order to gain a deeper understanding of how fics can borrow from the betrayal/separation trope so commonly found within romance novel conventions, as well as the in-game present betrayals explored previously, this section will tackle how romance novels deal with this emotional centre-point.

In her close examination of *Silhouette* romance novels, Helen Mae Sterk notes that one of the essential steps inherent within the narratives of this type of romance novel is the betrayal. It

³³⁷ Julia Ayumi Bopp, Elisa D. Mekler and Klaus Opwis, “Negative Emotion, Positive Experience? Emotionally Moving Moments In Digital Games”, in *2016 CHI Conference On Human Factors In Computing Systems* (New York, 2016), pp. 2996–3006 <https://doi.org/10.1145/2858036.2858227>, pp. 3003-3004.

usually comes after the admittance of feelings, after the couple have begun to settle into a happy routine:

Almost at the moment of happiness, some discovery made by the woman threatens to destroy all the trust that has been developed between her and the man. The woman relaxes her guard only to be devastated by finding out an ugly secret about him or his past.³³⁸

This betrayal also reveals that the hero has hidden his true identity from the heroine,³³⁹ and suggests the man she fell in love with may not even exist.

Sterk remarks that in *Silhouette* romance novels the hero's revelation/betrayal is that he is not poor and struggling career-wise, he is in fact a wealthy, successful individual which underpins his good looks, as was explored in the previous chapter. This betrayal of both the relationship and impression of the man the heroine is falling in love with imparts a huge emotional blow, which pre-empts the separation where the *heroine* withdraws from the relationship—given she has had the rug pulled out from under her—and must grapple with this new truth. Sterk remarks upon the power dynamics within the couple that are revealed once the betrayal has come to light:

She feels betrayed, feels a fool for having allowed him such power to hurt her. Harshly, she has been shown that his power over her is unlimited while hers over him is miniscule. Her power over him is so small that it cannot even command his honesty. [...] Defeated, she feels she has no power to change the situation by confronting him and having it out with him; instead, all she can do is retreat.³⁴⁰

The idea that the heroine holds so little power over the hero that she does not command his honesty is interesting, for it obliquely places the blame upon the heroine, suggesting that had she tried harder, or portrayed herself differently, then the hero would not have had to betray her or could have been honest about his true self from the beginning. It could, however, be argued that the hero is to blame for hiding his true self at all in the first place, though Sterk is talking about a very specific form of betrayal, that of hidden identity, which is contained within a very specific genre within the romance novel form, those published by *Silhouette*.

³³⁸ Helen Mae Sterk, "Functioning Fictions: The Adjustment Rhetoric Of Silhouette Romance Novels" (PhD, The University of Iowa, 1986), p. 86.

³³⁹ Sterk, p. 86.

³⁴⁰ Sterk, p. 87.

However, the ascribing of blame is interesting, for it is at odds with more contemporary texts theorising romance novels, such as Catherine Roach's *Happily Ever After*. But what it clearly reveals is how in the forty-odd years since Sterk's thesis was written, romance novels have changed considerably, and are *capable* of changing in order to reflect the changing role of women in modern societies—Roach does remark that romance novels are “sexier and more diverse than ever, with more empowered and kick-ass heroines”.³⁴¹ Nevertheless, this trope of the heroine retreating from the relationship because she has no other choice is still a realistic reaction to any form of betrayal: it is simply more likely modern readers would know that the heroine is not to blame, and that *his* betrayal is not due to *her* lack of power, for in leaving, even temporarily, she shows strength of character.

One could also argue that the heroine does indeed possess power over the hero; he just has not realised it yet. For at this point in the romantic narrative he is selfish and as yet unaware of how happy he could be if he merely let himself love. This would mean that both hero and heroine are, at the point of the betrayal, naïve about the true nature of the relationship, and therefore do not realise its importance.

Once the separation occurs, the heroine has the space she needs to contemplate and work out whether the relationship can survive this betrayal. This separation also gives the hero pause to see how much he needs her; without the presence of her love, the hero realises that he cannot live without her.³⁴² This realisation sees the hero begging the heroine to return to him, that he will love her forever, which then gives way for the inevitable happy ending. This has the effect of both levelling the romantic playing-field and giving the heroine a new sense of power.

Roach explains:

In a romance story, the woman always wins. By the end, the heroine is happy, safe, financially secure, well loved, sexually satisfied, and set up for a fulfilling life (as is the hero). A warm circle of friends supports her; bad guys have been brought to justice; families are reconciled. The main characters go from conflict to harmony and from disequilibrium of power to equality. Unlike in real life and much of literary

³⁴¹ Roach, p. 8.

³⁴² Sterk, p. 88.

fiction, women always gain power in these stories. Women never lose in the love relationship. The romance story is a woman-centered fantasy³⁴³

It is not hard to imagine that this line of thinking would be absorbed into fanfics as well—for it is notable that both romance novels and fanfictions are written mainly by women—especially as within romantic fics the motivation for writing a fic is mainly to see two beloved characters come together in a happy, functioning relationship, where the heroine has just as much importance and value as the hero. Within game fics, however, the heroine is usually the dominant, utterly capable PC of the narrative, with the hero often fulfilling the more passive role usually ascribed to the heroine. This means that the PC-heroine already holds greater power within the narrative, although this does not mean that the betrayal has any less emotional impact, for the heroine is supposed to be an all-knowing, all-powerful partner in the relationship, yet she has been blind-sighted by someone she thought she could trust. Her temporary retreat from the relationship signifies an appropriate emotional response, not submission, for the dynamics were equalised long before any romantic relationship.

As already noted, in the Malavai-Sith Warrior romance the betrayal emerges when Malavai reveals that he has actually been working for the Warrior's sworn enemy, Baras, and been instructed to kill her—which he does indeed attempt to do. His betrayal poses the question of whether the Malavai that the Sith Warrior, and players, fell in love with ever existed—and serves to, at least temporarily, destroy the trust and love between them.

Within fics there is often a narrative twist added in by authors. The marriage between Malavai and the Sith Warrior only occurs after the betrayal in-game; however, I found during the fic selection process, many fics reinterpreting the betrayal contained a Malavai and Sith Warrior that are already married by the time the betrayal occurs. This is interesting, for in many traditional romance novels the marriage, or engagement of a future marriage, is central to the happy *ending*,³⁴⁴ not as a plot-point halfway through the narrative—although this is perhaps reflective of more modern views around marriage. The in-game narrative follows the traditional romance novel expectations more closely, for a proposal and subsequent marriage

³⁴³ Roach, p. 26.

³⁴⁴ Pamela Regis, *A Natural History Of The Romance Novel* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), p. 18.

only occur near the end of the romance arc, with the discussion of children being the final cutscene,³⁴⁵ a concept present within many romance novels.

Including a married Sith Warrior and Malavai does have the effect of making the betrayal far more personal and emotional, and presumably for the author/reader, which suggests that *bleed* can occur within fic as well presenting another facet of *tiefempfunden*, where authors are inserting their own personal emotions into a fic. Francesca Coppa, in her fic-based text *The Fanfiction Reader*, remarks how the written word “privileges interiority”,³⁴⁶ suggesting that fic is highly suited to personal expression, for each fic allows for detailed descriptions of thought and feelings, far better than could ever be expressed in-game. Games, on the other hand, must rely upon filmic techniques such as long voice-overs or monologues, or in-game written elements like diary entries and codices in order to give insight into a character’s mind, and even then, such techniques could quickly become tedious—a half hour cutscene would become nearly unbearable.

Coppa even states that “fanfiction writers are obsessed with point of view in a way that most professional writers are not”.³⁴⁷ Therefore, to an author/reader who is in a state of *tiefempfunden*, adding in a marriage between Malavai and the Sith Warrior may merely be a simple way of heightening the emotional tension and enhance the written characterisation afforded by fic, in that it can incite deeper feelings felt by both the characters and author/reader—which is then obvious to the reader—for the point of view has changed; it is no longer a tale about two people in a casual relationship, it is about two people who have ceremonially committed themselves to one another. It also means that the disparity in usual Sith doctrine—to kill anyone who betrays a Sith—is allowed to be broken, for a married Sith Warrior has a solid reason not to kill Malavai.

At the end of the betrayal mission in-game, Malavai’s last words are “I will see you back on the ship”,³⁴⁸ which leaves the immediate aftermath of the betrayal ambiguous: the betrayal is seemingly forgotten once it has occurred. For players, however, the emotions felt in the wake of this event might not be so easily forgotten—especially if *bleed* or *tiefempfunden* is taking place. Fics are the perfect place to explore such pre- and post-betrayal narratives as well as

³⁴⁵ The romance arc does continue past the main storyline if the player chooses to, but this thesis is focusing upon the main SW storyline, as the narratives after this play out nearly exactly the same regardless of class or Republic/Sith Empire alignment.

³⁴⁶ Francesca Coppa, *Fanfiction Reader: Folk Tales for the Digital Age* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), p. 14.

³⁴⁷ Coppa, p. 14.

³⁴⁸ BioWare, *Star Wars the Old Republic*, (Edmonton: EA, 2010) in-game mission – The Transponder Station

allowing the author and the Sith Warrior space and time to process and express the strong emotions undoubtedly associated with such an event—indeed, whether the trust can be rebuilt, and relationship resumed.

Interludes by thievinghippo is a multi-chapter fic exploring various vignettes throughout a range of in-game romances found within SWTOR, though only the singular chapter *Malavai Quinn Romance - The Fury* features in this thesis, for it focuses on the Malavai romance, specifically the author's interpretation of the betrayal. The author, thievinghippo, has written several fics within the SWTOR universe, utilising multiple romantic pairings, including a few with Malavai and the Sith Warrior. Due to individual chapters not being dated, it is impossible to know when each chapter was uploaded, but this fic was first uploaded in 2014, three years after SWTOR was first released showing that there is still demand for SWTOR fics, including this particular take on it all. However, because SWTOR is an MMO and in-game content is still, to this day, being released, this means that many players are still playing the game on a regular basis which is then reflected in fics that explore such new content.

This fic takes place immediately after the betrayal, so it can be assumed that the betrayal itself occurred as it did in-game, so the purpose of this fic is instead filling in this immediate post-betrayal narrative gap and allowing these emotions to be explored in a fashion not possible in-game. The chapter begins with a physical separation: Malavai is on the bridge whilst the Sith Warrior's "body language all but screamed 'stay away' when she stalked into their quarters".³⁴⁹ As mentioned before, a physical separation between hero and heroine is an entirely appropriate response to this betrayal and reflective of the destroyed trust.

Intriguingly, thievinghippo chooses to highlight *Malavai's* thoughts and feelings about the betrayal, not the Sith Warrior's:

That left the bridge as his only refuge, and even it provided no comfort. Every inch of the bridge had memories which haunted him. In that corner, Quinn experienced the happiest moment of his life, when Maevry agreed to marry him. Then across the way, stood the wall they made love against a number of times.

What had *happened*?

Everything had made so much sense before the fight. Darth Baras had contacted him while they were on Voss, explaining what they needed to do for the good of the

³⁴⁹ thievinghippo, "Malavai Quinn Romance - The Fury" in *Interludes* (Archive of Our Own, 2014-2021), p. 17.

Empire. Quinn, naturally, resisted the idea at first. Maevry was his wife. But the more Baras spoke, the more Quinn realized she put her own goals ahead of the Empires. That simply could not be tolerated and he began the calculations at once.

But now...

Quinn rubbed his temples, trying to lessen the pounding in his head. How could he have doubted Maevry, even just for a moment? Like him, she only wanted the best for the Empire and fought for that vision every day. It was one of the things that made him fall in love with her.

And yet he overlooked all of that and tried to kill her. He had tried to kill his wife. Thank the stars he hadn't succeeded. Glancing at the door behind him, Quinn wondered how many minutes of life he had left. She didn't kill him on the station, as was her right, but perhaps she didn't want to lower herself to kill a traitor. Perhaps Pierce or Broommark would walk through that door any minute now. Quinn wouldn't resist if they did.

He thought of all the dreams he had that would never see fruition now. A week ago, he dreamed of standing by Maevry's side as they brought glory to the Empire. Then there was his most cherished hope, watching his wife grow heavy with their child, raising a son or daughter together, ideally with her eyes.³⁵⁰

This has the effect of changing the possible intention of this fic. It is no longer a means by which the Sith Warrior and author are given time and space to process the emotions that appear in the wake of the betrayal, but instead the fic provides insight as to *why* Malavai chose to betray the Warrior, offering a more sympathetic approach to an act that is understandably quite unforgivable. In-game, all Malavai says on the matter is that Baras was his true master who wanted the Sith Warrior dead, and Malavai was happy to comply. This fic is therefore already showing signs of *active reinterpretation* by expanding upon Malavai's motivations, which in turn allows for a more compassionate version of Malavai's personality, and help explain why the Sith Warrior, and therefore player, should show mercy towards him. This indicates a form of *tiefempfunden* present, a self-insertion via the empathy shown towards Malavai, as there is love and affection for this character going beyond the Sith Warrior's own affections.

³⁵⁰ thievinghippo, p. 17.

Having Malavai and the Sith Warrior married within this chapter heightens the betrayal, and lends far more gravitas to the situation as well as foregrounding the sense of emotional conflict for Malavai—does he betray his wife or his master? However, thievinghippo does seem to imply that the Sith Warrior’s former master Darth Baras is the one truly at fault, that Malavai was merely swept up in his lies:

“My lord, I tried to *kill* you.”

“Yes, and you failed miserably, which leads me to believe Baras coerced you. Droids, Quinn? Really? [...] If you truly wanted me dead you would have killed me in my sleep. You know plenty of methods to make it appear I died a natural death, I’m sure.”

“The thought hadn’t even occurred to me,” Quinn admitted. Why hadn’t it? He could have had her killed a dozen different ways, thanks to her trust in him, and he only begun to think of them now. The pounding in his head grew stronger, like a dozen drums in sync.

“When did you start the calculations on the droids?” Maevry asked softly.

Closing his eyes, Quinn answered, “Just after we arrived on Voss. Baras contacted me through Darth Severin’s office.”

“And used the Force to manipulate you, no doubt,” Maevry said. She sat down on one of the chairs and leaned back, crossing her legs. She looked absolutely exhausted and it pained him to see.

[...]

“I worry that because of your years dealing with Baras he might have left more of an impression on you than you realize. A sort of foothold into your mind.”³⁵¹

This explanation, the use of Force manipulation to bend Malavai to Baras’s will, does in a way provide exoneration for Malavai, for he was being coerced, perhaps reflecting the author’s feelings and explains how they are able to forgive Malavai and continue with his romance arc. As stated before, the actions of the Sith Warrior—regardless of the dialogue

³⁵¹ thievinghippo, pp. 18-19.

options chosen by the player—do not really align with the established canon for the Sith, and that this ‘mercy’ shown towards Malavai is for the player’s benefit.

This gentleness bleeds into this fic, for when the Warrior enters the bridge, Malavai notices that “Her tone was soft and gentle, not angry at all [...] [he] heard the weariness in her voice and it killed him, knowing he was the main reason it could be heard”.³⁵² Given the author could have chosen to characterise the Sith Warrior in any way they choose, this reveals a desire to have a more loving, and romantic, relationship/marriage between the two—contrary to the Sith way; for there to be genuine love, and a willingness to stand by their beloved, this betrayal notwithstanding. This may be another reason why authors choose for them to be already married because it means that Malavai is someone that the Sith Warrior has *chosen* to be with for the rest of her life, rather than a still-casual fling.

In Sterk’s examination of Silhouette novels, after the betrayal comes the union where hero and heroine “admit the extent of their desire for the other”.³⁵³ However, in this fic, instead of the heroine stating her dependence upon the hero,³⁵⁴ this is flipped as Malavai admits he cannot exist without his wife and would be nothing without her. The Sith Warrior will always be the dominant partner with the power, which remains in-line with how she is presented in SWTOR—in keeping with the discussion in chapter one—as a near unstoppable force demolishing everything that gets in her way, holding one of the most powerful positions in the entire Sith Empire. She is infinitely capable, and her actions throughout the game affect the entire galaxy.

The Sith Warrior in-game and within this fic is operating both as ‘hero’—saving Malavai from a dead-end career on a backwater planet, therefore giving him purpose in life—and as ‘heroine’—capable of being betrayed and emotionally devastated by the man she loves most and having to retreat from Malavai so that he realises that he cannot live without her. The romantic betrayal is therefore portraying a crucial centre point within the relationship; a narrative low-point which will either make or break the relationship. That players and authors can forgive Malavai after he betrays and attempts to kill their PC-Sith Warrior, shows *tiefempfunden*, an empathetic *bleed* between them and their PC, as the forgiveness shown in-

³⁵² thievinghippo, p. 18.

³⁵³ Sterk, p. 90.

³⁵⁴ Sterk, p. 90.

game is reflected in the forgiveness and deeper exploration within the subsequent array of fics which explore the betrayal, lovingly nicknamed the ‘Quinnincident’.

The barrier/conflict within a multi-game romance narrative – Shepard/Kaidan

The romance narrative arc between Shepard and Kaidan spans not just one game, but an entire trilogy—*Mass Effect* (2007), *Mass Effect 2* (2010) and *Mass Effect 3* (2012), all developed by BioWare.

A multi-game romance is rare within games, for while game sequels often contain characters that were also in the previous one, these characters are rarely romanceable twice. Thanks to the fact that *Mass Effect* was designed to be a trilogy of games, it allowed many elements to be carried from one game to the other including romantic narratives. This romantic longevity means that the low point of the romantic narrative—the betrayal/separation—takes place in *Mass Effect 2*.

During this narrative, there is a physical separation between Shepard and Kaidan both before and after the betrayal. Shortly after the ending of the initial *Mass Effect*, Shepard dies,³⁵⁵ and remains dead until resurrected using futuristic technology two in-game years later in the *Mass Effect 2* prologue. This means Kaidan has spent two years mourning Shepard, and the betrayal comes halfway through *Mass Effect 2*, when Kaidan and Shepard meet for the first time since her death.

The betrayal is caused by Shepard working for a pro-human terrorist organisation, Cerberus—which is the antitheses of the Systems Alliance, Earth’s military where Kaidan is a Staff Commander—and Kaidan’s loyalty to the Alliance means he betrays Shepard, and their relationship, by refusing to work with Shepard or rekindle their relationship while she is with Cerberus. It could be argued that if Kaidan truly loved Shepard, he would have followed her anywhere, even onto a Cerberus ship.

Nevertheless, by the time of *Mass Effect 3* Cerberus has become an enemy instead of an ally, meaning Shepard is back in the Alliance. This means that there is an opportunity for reconciliation of the relationship, an admittance that they love each other unconditionally.

In her 2003 text, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, Pamela Regis argues that after the initial attraction between hero and heroine, a romance narrative contains the following points:

³⁵⁵ Shepard’s death is not depicted in *Mass Effect*, namely it occurs right at the beginning of *Mass Effect 2*.

the *barrier* between them; the *point of ritual death*; the *recognition* that fells the barrier; the *declaration* of heroine and hero that they love each other; and their *betrothal*.³⁵⁶

Despite appearing obvious, wider narrative studies acknowledge that *conflict* is key to moving plots forward, and keeping readers entertained and wanting more. In trying to define narrative, Marie-Laure Ryan states that “‘event’ implies transformation and ‘action’ involves agents; if these agents decide to take actions, they must have motivations, and they must be trying to solve problems. If agents have problems, they must experience some sort of conflict”.³⁵⁷ This clearly applies to romance narratives, where the agents have love as their motivation, and strive to solve all their relationship problems in search of their happy ending; the commonality of these narrative beats providing comfort or familiarity, like a lighthouse in a storm.

As Susan Elizabeth Phillips puts it, in her chapter *The Romance and the Empowerment of Women*:

In the romance novel the domineering male becomes the catalyst that makes the empowerment fantasy work. The heroine isn't as big as he is; she isn't as strong, as old, as worldly; many times she isn't as well educated. Yet despite all these limitations she confronts him—not with physical strength but with intelligence and courage. And what happens? She always wins! Guts and brains beat brawn every time. What a comforting fantasy this is for a frazzled, overburdened, anxiety-ridden reader.³⁵⁸

These fantasies are comforting because they allow the heroine, and therefore the reader, to always win in the relationship, to tame the previously untameable hero and gain his everlasting affection. It is comforting *because* it is familiar, because it is happy and offers a respite from whatever real-life troubles the reader, and fic-author, might be going through; the conflict/separation becomes another stepping-stone in fulfilling this true-love fantasy. The roles are somewhat different for an in-game relationship for, as has been explored, when a game contains a customisable PC that can be male or female, a female PC is therefore often

³⁵⁶ Regis, p. 23.

³⁵⁷ Marie-Laure Ryan, ‘Toward a Definition of Narrative’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 24.

³⁵⁸ Susan Elizabeth Phillips, ‘The Romance and the Empowerment of Women’, in *Dangerous Men & Adventurous Women: Romance Writers On The Appeal Of the Romance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), pp. 56-57.

on the same level as the male PC and shows the same heroic strength and capability. However, the *idea* of the heroine winning, and therefore the player/author/reader winning as well, prevails.

Most romance narratives share these common threads, but this does not mean there is endless repetition, especially within fanfiction. The reinterpretation of texts within fanfiction means that the same fic does not exist twice, and that the same conflict will be experienced differently by each/every individual reader. It is then a comfort within *communal familiarity*, of picking a particular pairing because an author/reader knows that *that* particular dynamic resonates with them to meet their current emotional needs. There is a reason why ‘comfort fics’ and ‘comfort pairings’ exist within the fanfiction lexicon—fics can easily be a warm blanket on a cold winter’s day, just as they can be white knuckles gripping the edge of a surface. Fantasies, desires and favoured relationships often come and go and change throughout the months and years, but often there will be at least one relationship pairing that an author/reader will keep coming back to, especially when they need that hit of familiar comfort, when they need to feel safe in the knowledge that they are returning to treasured, well-trodden paths, with romantic conflicts that are as familiar as the back of their hands.

Within romance narratives, without the conflict, there would be no real way of propelling the narrative forward; as stated, without conflict a relationship becomes a series of happenstances and little arguments leading to a nonsensical falling-in-love at the end.³⁵⁹ Conflict can also be a way of uniting a couple against a common barrier. As was shown with Malavai’s romance, the conflict allowed Malavai to realise his true allegiances and pledge his allegiance to the Sith Warrior. Without this obstacle the romance would not carry such emotional weight, and neither would Malavai’s proposal.

Regis describes the *barrier* as the main source conflict within the narrative—and there can also be external barriers to overcome—but must keep “the union of heroine and hero from taking place”.³⁶⁰ While the use of the word ‘barrier’ implies a physical aspect, this barrier can in fact be anything the author chooses: a series of miscommunications between the hero and heroine,³⁶¹ or other external challenges, showing that the conflict does not have to always be dramatic or ‘negative’, in the sense of causing distress, pain or anger—particularly if the

³⁵⁹ Parv, p. 116.

³⁶⁰ Regis, p. 23.

³⁶¹ Regis, p. 24.

barrier is more serious, like alcoholism or incest³⁶²—but this will consequently mean the overall narrative needs to be darker in order to fit in tonally, and this requirement also applies to fics.

What is interesting is that Regis describes the overcoming of the barrier as benefiting the heroine more than the hero, for by “overcoming the barrier, the heroine moves from a state of bondage or constraint to a state of freedom”.³⁶³ This transition into freedom makes sense in order to allow for the ritual death to then take place, one of the romantic narrative beats previously laid out by Regis. The ritual death is important in showing the heroine what she has to lose, when she realises it is possible she may not experience a happy ending after all—for the heroine is “threatened, either directly or indirectly, actually or symbolically. Her escape from ritual death involves an overthrow of the most fundamental sort. It is death itself that is being vanquished, and life itself that the heroine will win”.³⁶⁴

For Kaidan and Shepard, the ritual death is an actual death, for Shepard’s death ends the relationship for two years, and in her following rebirth, she is given a new outlook on life and her own priorities. Given that many fics incorporate Shepard’s death and subsequent fallout, into their fics, her rebirth is perhaps almost as important to the romantic narrative as the barrier is, important enough to incorporate and retain within these fics that actively reinterpret the original romance.

It is the ritual death that allows for the happy ending, for the heroine is “freed from all encumbrances to her union with the hero. She cheats ritual death, symbolically or actually, and is freed to live. Her freedom is a large part of what readers celebrate at the end of the romance”,³⁶⁵—which means that without the barrier, the conflict, or the ritual death, the heroine would not be able to *choose* to live her life with the hero, for Regis emphasises the heroine’s freedom *after* the ritual death.

What is notable within Regis’s analysis of the barrier, however, there is a lack of consideration about the hero, for Regis focuses almost exclusively on how any barriers affect the heroine. Within fics, as seen in the first Malavai fic explored in the previous section, there

³⁶² Regis, p. 24.

³⁶³ Regis, p. 24.

³⁶⁴ Regis, p. 24.

³⁶⁵ Regis, p. 25.

is space for both the hero *and* heroine's emotional states, to properly examine why each character would want to be with the another, why they love each other irrevocably.

Valerie Parv offers a similar heroine-centric view of the barrier, stating it is “[h]ow the hero stands in the way of her goals provides the conflict”.³⁶⁶ Like Regis, Parv argues that until the conflict is resolved, the characters cannot give-in to their attraction,³⁶⁷ meaning the conflict does appear to affect both hero and heroine. Parv also remarks that conflict cannot take the form of constant arguing between characters, that they require some “concern in common which will eventually help to draw them together”.³⁶⁸ She also brings up the question of overall tone within a story, stating that unless it can be skilfully and appropriately handled, the conflict should not be something like drugs or alcohol. I would therefore argue that the *overall tone* of the narrative is key to creating a romance narrative that works, which in turn allows authors to properly fulfil their desires via *tiefempfunden*.

As noted at the beginning of this section, one of the unique aspects to the in-game relationship between a female Shepard and Kaidan is that it spans three whole games rather than merely one. This means that within each game there is a subsidiary romance narrative as well as the main overarching romance narrative stretching over the three games. The first barrier, that only truly exists within *Mass Effect*, concerns their mutual worry about fraternization and possible court martial if they go ahead with a relationship and are subsequently caught. Nevertheless, it is not an unsurmountable barrier for the relationship is indeed consummated.

The barrier/separation exists more strongly in *Mass Effect 2*, given a physical separation due to Shepard's literal death—although as Regis states, the ritual/literal death gives way to a Shepard who is free to win—and Kaidan setting up a barrier between them by refusing to join her and Cerberus. By not returning to her ship, he separates them both physically once again, and with his betrayal the relationship seems doomed.

In *Mass Effect 3* there is a smaller barrier, when Kaidan is severely injured in the prologue of the game, leading to the possibility that *Shepard* might lose him, however, he does eventually recover, and this leads to the long-awaited reconciliation between Shepard and Kaidan. After this admittance of love, the romance is little more than a series of happy moments highlighted

³⁶⁶ Parv, p. 115.

³⁶⁷ Parv, p. 116.

³⁶⁸ Parv, p. 120.

against the bleak background of intergalactic war which is most likely for the player's benefit—the overall tone of the third game is more serious with far more loss, and to add more pain with a failed romantic relationship might seem gratuitous and too punishing.

The fics *Letters for Between the Stars (Letters)* (2020) by inkberry, *Re: About Horizon... (About Horizon)* (2010) by Eleima, and the chapter *Words* (2020) within the fic *It's The Little Things* by N7Pharaohess, all deal with the lowest point of Kaidan and Shepard's relationship: the separation and betrayal by Kaidan in *Mass Effect 2*. In-game, immediately after the conclusion of the Horizon mission, Kaidan sends Shepard a message that strongly implies he still harbours feelings for her. However, in-game Shepard, and therefore the player, does not have the ability to answer any messages received, which removes agency from both Shepard and the player. Along with the physical separation between Shepard and Kaidan, this removal of agency serves to ensure that no form of reconciliation can take place until the *developers* choose to allow reconciliation, which in this instance is the next, and final, game in the trilogy.

This removal of agency by the developers means that players are left without an in-game outlet to process their emotions, for Shepard does not talk about Kaidan to anyone else, and it is in this context that fics become the perfect place to explore the unsaid spaces. There are, however, some similarities between all three fics: each contains a Shepard who dies at the end of the first game—though this is almost a given, because to include a Shepard that survived would alter the narrative so profoundly that the fic would have to be marked as an AU—and all three fic authors have also all chosen to include some form of message from Shepard to Kaidan, which does seem to suggest that players would send messages from Shepard if they were given the chance to do so in-game. It also shows that even a betrayal and physical separation is not enough for players to stop feeling romantic feelings towards Kaidan, especially given two fics were written an entire decade after *Mass Effect 2* was first released, meaning these romantic feelings have remained strong, and perhaps even intensified, years later.

The fact that all three fics contain a message from Shepard to Kaidan reveals a communal reinterpretation of the original text, even though these three authors may have never read each other's fics, or interacted with them, and suggests a desire for Shepard—and perhaps the author via *tiefempfunden*—to have been able to express her feelings in-game. They also

contain the previously explored separation between Kaidan and Shepard, emotional and physical, along with the uncertainty whether the relationship could continue.

Letters appears to begin rather shortly after Shepard receives Kaidan's original message. The fic itself is made up of messages sent between her and Kaidan, and the first message from Rosie Shepard is a direct response to the emotionally charged message players receive in-game,³⁶⁹ which suggests that the author possesses the desire to be able to have that dialogue between Kaidan and Shepard instead of being able to nothing but passively read Kaidan's message. After this near-immediate response from Shepard, the fic and back-and-forth letters span the rest of the *Mass Effect 2* main narrative, as well as crossing over into the six-month gap between *Mass Effect 2* and *Mass Effect 3*.

About Horizon takes place much later in the *Mass Effect 2* narrative, just before the final mission of the game,³⁷⁰ but Kaidan's message has weighed on Alexandra Shepard's mind, for she is described as meaning to "[open] the folder containing her incoming messages and read one in particular, for what seemed to be the millionth time",³⁷¹ and has only managed to gather the resolve to reply to this message at the end of the game rather than the near-instantaneous reply in *Letters*. The majority of the fic is written in fic-world-real-time, detailing the long letter Shepard composes to Kaidan. In the author notes Eleima states that they are frustrated by the fact that players could not reply to messages especially the ones from the love interest,³⁷² which demonstrates that this fic is a direct response to the agency of reply being taken away from players—which is in turn a reflection of desire: to further deepen and explore Shepard and Kaidan's relationship and to have that agency returned to the player/author.

Words, on the other hand, is not as clear regarding its timeframe, only that it exists within an indeterminate time after Kaidan's betrayal in the second game: "She'd known at the very least she owed him a reply, but had avoided it for days until they turned into weeks...and that at least was not what he deserved".³⁷³ Like the previous fic, Kira Shepard finds replying to Kaidan an emotionally challenging task, and uses wine to bolster her courage.³⁷⁴

³⁶⁹ inkberry, *Letters for Between the Stars*, (Archive of Our Own, 2020), pp. 1-2.

³⁷⁰ Eleima, *Re: About Horizon...*, (Archive of Our Own, 2010), p. 2.

³⁷¹ Eleima, p. 2.

³⁷² Eleima, p. 1.

³⁷³ N7Pharaohess, "It's The Little Things" in *Words*, (Archive of Our Own, 2012), p. 75.

³⁷⁴ N7Pharaohess, p. 75.

What all these fics demonstrate is that, despite the commonality of the separation within the three fics, the separation itself is not a fixed point in time. The player's choice to spur on reconciliation, as initiated by Shepard's reply to Kaidan's initial message, can take as long or as short a time as the author wishes. In-game the reunion only occurs within *Mass Effect 3*, meaning the separation lasts around a year of in-game time although it is not certain if these three fic authors would also choose to only have Shepard and Kaidan's physical reconciliation occur during the events of the third game, or if it would happen sooner.

With the separation comes the barrier that is keeping them apart. As noted, in-game the barrier in the second game is Shepard is working with the terrorist organisation Cerberus. This pertains to another commonality: they all feature Shepards who remain loyal to the Alliance, and who do not trust Cerberus themselves, which is the paragon³⁷⁵ line of thinking for Shepard in-game:

In *Letters*, Shepard acknowledges this by stating "And I get it, I do. I'm with the enemy",³⁷⁶ in a manner that implies she recognises that what she is doing is morally questionable.

In *About Horizon*, Shepard is similarly clear about her intentions, "*You asked me to watch my back, to not trust Cerberus. I tell you, here and now: I don't*".³⁷⁷

Finally, in *Words*, Shepard's first attempt at a message back to Kaidan is struck through, deleted, but is clear in its original message: "~~I don't work for Cerberus~~".³⁷⁸ These all imply that their barrier, of Shepard working with Cerberus, is temporary at best, and that once Shepard has returned to the Alliance Kaidan will have no qualms with re-joining her.

All three fics also mention that Shepard still loves Kaidan, with the explicit use of the word 'love' within each fic:

For *Letters*, the admission of love only comes near the final part of the fic,³⁷⁹ after Shepard has left Cerberus and been detained on Earth, implying that there could not be an admission of her feelings until after Shepard had left Cerberus.

³⁷⁵ Mass Effect's morality system is divided into paragon and renegade, with paragon being the 'good' decisions, and renegade being the more morally questionable ones.

³⁷⁶ inkberry, p. 2.

³⁷⁷ Eleima, p. 3.

³⁷⁸ N7Pharaohess, p. 75.

³⁷⁹ inkberry, p. 7.

In *About Horizon*, Shepard states it in clearly within her singular message to Kaidan, “I love you, Kaidan. I’ve always loved you”,³⁸⁰ though given that this Shepard is about to embark on the final suicide mission of *Mass Effect 2* and does not know whether she will return alive, it could be a case of now-or-never, regardless of whether such honesty will lead to her and Kaidan getting back together.

In *Words*, Shepard does not state her exact feelings within her message to Kaidan, but her internal thoughts reveal her feelings are quite clearly, “She loved him still, and this hurt more than she would ever admit”.³⁸¹

In all three fics there is a desire by both Shepard, and therefore the author, to overcome the separation/barrier and continue the relationship along a path that will lead to the now inevitable happy ending.

These three fics share a great deal, yet they are completely different entities when read individually. The commonalities show how active reinterpretation is more than just saying ‘what if’, it is also about saying ‘what do I wish this text contained?’. Often there are overlaps, given that some authorial desires, such as seeing beloved ones together again and achieve their happy ending, are understandably more common than others. What these fics also illustrate is that, even within the infinite possibilities of fic, there is often still respect towards the original text, and a wish to retain elements of it even when asking ‘what can be altered?’.

Conclusion

A fic-author can sit down at a computer and simply begin to type a fic—and there are certainly genres which deal with a freeform approach to narrative—but generally a fanfic demands a narrative, a series of (unfortunate) events to unfold. Often these events emerge from some form of conflict, something that complicates things, and creates drama. This is where *in-game romances* and *romance novels* share a commonality, for many in-game romances face some sort of barrier that either temporary prevents or casts doubt upon the relationship, in the same way a romance novel requires a barrier that precludes separation and eventual reunion. All the fics studied within this chapter—as well as many I have personally read—follow the same conflicts found in-game, but authors are free to explore and expand

³⁸⁰ Eleima, p. 4.

³⁸¹ N7Pharaohess, p. 76.

upon these conflicts in new and unique ways not evident in-game, as well as provide new perspectives and reasonings as to why these conflicts exist.

The conflict can be an event that shatters the relationship, and as examined by Sterk in romance novels this often takes the form of a betrayal where the heroine discovers that the hero has been lying about some aspect of his personality or status. This would most likely feel out of place within games, meaning the betrayal needs here to be something more dramatic, but still fitting in contextually and tonally to the overall game narrative.

The betrayal between Malavai and the Sith Warrior was perhaps a more extreme example of betrayal, given Malavai actually attempts to kill the Sith Warrior, but it shows how even after such an extreme event, players are still able to feel strong romantic feelings towards Malavai and write fics showing him in a sympathetic light. The fics detailing Kaidan's betrayal of Shepard demonstrates how a singular event can be reinterpreted into a myriad of fics that are all read completely differently, whilst sharing a common thread.

However, a major aspect of portraying a betrayal scene is that it imparts *drama* into the narrative. Within fics there will usually be a happy ending at the end, and if not, this will likely be signposted in the initial tags; yet the temporary unhappiness, the temporary fear that the relationship might not work out after all, serves to make that happy ending all the sweeter and more deserved. The tension helps to make things more exciting as well, to keep the narrative flowing instead of stagnating. As Milena Popova notes:

The happily ever after ending is important, but for many romance readers, the process of getting there is just as crucial. The expectation of the happily ever after ending is what gives us strength and helps us feel safe enough to go through the story's trials and tribulations alongside its characters. Both romance novels and fanfiction are a bit like comfort food in this way: we read them because they are familiar and predictable.³⁸²

There is something to be said for the comforting repetition of these scenarios and relationships, of the *familiarity* that comes with exploring these betrayals in multiple fics which can be comforting to both authors and readers, and helps to explain how an author is able to write dozens of fics about the same two characters; it is comforting to know that no matter what happens in real-life or in-game, within fics your beloved characters will

³⁸² Milena Popova, *Dubcon: Fanfiction, Power, and Sexual Consent* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2021), p. 97.

eventually emerge safe and happy and together and *in love*. This is another aspect of *tiefempfunden*: that authors are inserting these conflicts in order to provide sustenance for themselves, whether it be drama or comfort or a ‘what-if’ event. Narrative conflicts are a means to an end, tried and tested methods within romantic narratives and fic, as well as a shortcut to allow authors to definitively state that these two characters will remain united in their love. If two characters can overcome any betrayal or conflict then in this fic(tional) world, love really can conquer all.

I have found in my own fic-writing that familiarity and repetition are very important to create a sense of comfort and familiarity when both reading and writing my own fics. Given that I write fanfiction intended to be read by me alone, if I did not feel a sense of comfort there would be, I feel, less incentive to write at all. Often the repetition comes in the form of writing about the same characters, of exploring different facets and time-periods within a given relationship.

However, as mentioned, I take great joy in putting my characters through drama-filled, unhappy, and unhealthy situations, meaning that the barrier-conflict becomes a key element in creating a satisfying narrative. This, for me, is even more important when paired with the happy ending, for I like to know that all the pain and suffering will ultimately be worth. Admittedly, I do use incest within my incest fics as a source of drama/conflict, usually in the form of the characters denying their feelings or trying to keep the relationship a secret, but it is never a true barrier because the incest relationship is not insurmountable. I cannot think of a single incest fic I have written where the two blood-related characters do not end up together. I have written fics with unhappy endings because the relationship does not last, but there is never a rejection of feelings before the relationship begins, and the breaking-up is usually due to other unhealthiness/conflict withing the relationship-dynamic.

Because I am also a ‘canon is a suggestion’ fic-writer, I usually utilise any canon/in-text drama and conflict as a springing-off point. For example, the relationship between my Malavai and Sith Warrior, Errah, largely follows the in-game version, however I decided to introduce the fact that Errah was born on the Republic world of Coruscant to a wealthy Republic-allied noble family and began her training as a Jedi before an accident/kidnapping brought her to Korriban and the Sith Empire. This provides both an internal conflict for Errah, who is fiercely loyal to the Empire yet still harbours affections for her home planet and

family, as well as an external one, for Malavai must reconcile that some part of Errah is everything he despises, this is not something that will ever go away.

As previously mentioned, I write fics to be a comforting presence in my life, as an escapism; it just happens that this comfort derives from making my characters suffer, but this drama and depravity makes those soft, tender, loved-filled moments all the more satisfying— especially the ending when the wounds are healed (or at least stitched-up) and love can become the main focus of the relationship. Comfort and needs of course change, as they should, and sometimes I need a fluff-filled drama-free fic to sit on my lap and purr loudly, but regardless of exactly what sort of comfort I currently need, I always find that *love*—and the pursuit thereof—is vital, and a fic without those elements simply would not be a comfort whatsoever.

Chapter Five “I Believe in an Excess of Everything... Except Moderation”³⁸³ — Incest within romantic fanfiction

Introduction

As explored in chapter one, some form of inappropriateness within a fic-relationship does not preclude the relationship from being romantically successful. The characters and author-desires are still foregrounded, alongside the desire to see a relationship work out in the end. There are fics where the relationship does not reach a happy ending, unable to overcome the inappropriate barriers, but within fics that contain incest, the bar has often swung to the other extreme; many fics containing an incestuous relationship posit two blood-related characters as *soulmates*, destined to be together, notwithstanding the sometimes-problematic nature and difficulties when dealing with incest.

Despite its controversial nature as one of the most forbidden of inappropriate relationships, incest fanfiction has largely escaped academic attention in favour of discussions around rape and underage relations, two other major controversial, yet popular, relationship forms within fics. On AO3, incest fanfictions are incredibly niche—just over 120,000 fics are tagged with incest³⁸⁴ which is small compared to the over 314,000 fics³⁸⁵ tagged with rape/non-consensual. Those tagged with dubious consent are just over 139,000 fics,³⁸⁶ and fics tagged with rape/non-con elements make up just over 216,000 fics.³⁸⁷ This demonstrates that there are far more fics containing some form of consent issue, perhaps reflecting real societal concerns and preoccupations with fic authors exploring these issues in a counter-cultural, female dominated format.

What is interesting is that when one adds the rape/non-con tag to the incest tag, there are only around 21,000 fics.³⁸⁸ If the underage tag³⁸⁹ is added to incest, then there are just over 32,000

³⁸³ *Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, Dorit Kemsley, season 8 tagline.

³⁸⁴ “Incest - Works | Archive Of Our Own”, *Archiveofourown.Org*
<https://archiveofourown.org/tags/Incest/works> [accessed 29 September 2023]

³⁸⁵ “Rape/Non-Con - Works | Archive Of Our Own”, *Archiveofourown.Org*
https://archiveofourown.org/tags/Rape*s*Non-Con/works [accessed 29 September 2023]

³⁸⁶ “Dubious Consent - Works | Archive Of Our Own”, *Archiveofourown.Org*
<https://archiveofourown.org/tags/Dubious%20Consent/works> [accessed 29 September 2023]

³⁸⁷ “Rape/Non-Con Elements - Works | Archive Of Our Own”, *Archiveofourown.Org*
https://archiveofourown.org/tags/Rape*s*Non-con%20Elements/works [accessed 29 September 2023]

³⁸⁸ “Incest & Rape/Non-Con - Works | Archive Of Our Own”, *Archiveofourown.Org*
<https://tinyurl.com/mpu2py7n> [accessed 29 September 2023]

³⁸⁹ The tag ‘underage’ is used by AO3, and I am using the same terminology for clarity. It is important to note that on the site, everything under 18 is considered underage, regardless of countries’ individual laws—a fic

tics.³⁹⁰ However, when *both* tags are added to the incest tag there are only just over 11,000 fics,³⁹¹ demonstrating that most incest fics *do not* contain rape or underage relationships. This is important, for, as will be explored within this chapter, both consent issues—and one party usually being underage—are defining features of real-life cases of incest. Therefore fics allows authors to utilise the well-known trope of forbidden love in a way that suggests a rejection of realistic elements of incest. This implies that within fanfiction there is space for writing fictional incest as being a *loving* and *consensual* form of relationship, whilst still being completely forbidden. The conflict of shared blood is not enough to extinguish love and put an end to the relationship. Fics also do provide a conversation wherein fictional incest ≠ real-life incest.

Romance novels most often include sibling incest—though parent-child is also a common incestuous theme within romance novels—and this coincides with fanfictions. Over 61,000 fics are tagged with ‘sibling incest’³⁹² representing around half of incest fics available. This chapter will therefore mirror this skewing by exploring two different sibling incest relationships. The first revolves around Frycest, the ship-name for Evie and Jacob Frye,³⁹³ who are the twin PCs and protagonists in the Victorian-era *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate*. The second relationship is Rydercest, which details the relationship between the twins Scott and Sara Ryder, who are both potential PCs³⁹⁴ within the standalone game *Mass Effect Andromeda*, set within the afore-explored *Mass Effect* universe. Neither of these incestuous relationships are present within the original game, meaning *fic-authors* have made space for this fantasy to contain loving, functioning relationships—complete with happy ending despite the forbidden nature of these relationships.

Within both *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* and *Mass Effect Andromeda*, there is absolutely nothing to suggest attraction—romantic or sexual—between the twin protagonists. The fact

containing two 17-year-olds would not be seen as underage in the UK as the age of consent is 16, but on AO3 it would still have to be marked as underage.

³⁹⁰ “Incest & Underage - Works | Archive Of Our Own”, *Archiveofourown.Org* <https://tinyurl.com/mryvj9xn> [accessed 29 September 2023]

³⁹¹ “Incest & Underage & Rape/Non-Con - Works | Archive Of Our Own”, *Archiveofourown.Org* <https://tinyurl.com/2w53xm25> [accessed 29 September 2023]

³⁹² “Incest & Sibling Incest - Works | Archive Of Our Own”, *Archiveofourown.Org* <https://tinyurl.com/mrjh3p65> [accessed 29 September 2023]

³⁹³ A ship name is a fandom term, which is used to quickly refer to a particular relationship. Often it will be formed of a condensing/combining of the character’s names, or a defining feature or nickname. Within incest ships, the ‘cest’ of incest is often added after the character’s surname to form their ship-name.

³⁹⁴ The player can choose to play as either twin, with the other twin becoming a secondary character who is actually in a coma for much of the main narrative. Both twins can have their appearance customised, and the player can choose their first names.

that authors are *choosing* to include incest as a relationship format reveals a form of *tiefempfunden* self-insertion via the personal desire to explore fictional incest.

The rarity of in-game incest relationships – Cesare/Lucrezia

As already discussed, AAA Western games have difficulty including any form of controversial sexual content, and this includes incest—hence this chapter relying on fanfictions and authors who have *chosen* to include incestuous relationships where none exists in-game.

Nevertheless, within *Assassin's Creed Brotherhood*, (released in 2010, five years before *Syndicate*) which takes place in Rome in the turn of the sixteenth century, there is a rare example of incest within an AAA game. It is perhaps only because the earlier *Assassin's Creed* games placed an emphasis on including real, historical elements into their games that meant Ubisoft were able to get away with including the historically rumoured incestuous relationship between Cesare and Lucrezia Borgia. It must be said that it has not been verified whether they *actually were* engaged in an incestuous relationship, but that has not stopped the speculations, both historical and contemporary.³⁹⁵

Ubisoft were even able to go so far as to include a kiss scene between the pair, without too much uproar from media outlets, as well as inducing the probably desired effect of disgust from players. For Cesare is a major antagonist in *Brotherhood*, meaning that having handy historical accusations of incest could well have been an easy pointer for the player that this is not a good person, given the generally negative viewpoint of incest within many societies, fictional or not. Here, incest has been used to amplify his villainy, for if he is willing to bed his own sister what other morally reprehensible acts can he be capable of?

It is clear that within this context incest has a different motivation from that of a fanfiction—it is not a 'positive' relationship or a romantic narrative that deserves a happy ending. Nor does it portray Cesare and Lucrezia as soulmates, destined to be with one another. Instead, the suggested relations between the two is portrayed as entirely negative, as a shortcut for the reveal about what kind of person Cesare is: morally corrupt, the antithesis of the PC Ezio, who strives for justice and peace.

³⁹⁵ Lois E. Bueler, 'The Structural Uses of Incest in English Renaissance Drama', *Renaissance Drama*, 15 (January 1984), 115–45 <https://doi.org/10.1086/rd.15.41913883>, pp. 130-131.

There over 13,000 works within the *Assassin's Creed* section on AO3,³⁹⁶ yet only three are marked as containing Cesare/Lucrezia.³⁹⁷ This is somewhat surprising, for it could well be assumed that, given this is a rare example of a canonical in-game incestuous relationship, fanfiction authors with a proclivity for fictional incest would have leapt upon the chance to explore such a relationship more fully. Its absence from fanfiction, in favour of pairings who have no incestuous hints in-game, suggests that the desire to write about fictional incest in the first place is perhaps not just about the incest as a forbidden relationship dynamic, and more about the *characters* that authors choose to write about, that x + y characters fit well together. In turn, the use of incest becomes a unique and fascinating challenge to overcome, for the characters, as well as adding an element of spice and drama into the mix for the writer—especially around people finding out about the relationship.

What can be learned from the in-game inclusion of Cesare and Lucrezia, is that incest, and other inappropriate relationships can indeed be included in AAA games without too much controversy so long as they are appropriately placed and fit-in with the overarching narrative and theme of the game. This is a similar sentiment to inappropriate relationships within fics: if the tone is right, authors can get away with including many things that might otherwise be questionable or unacceptable. What the Cesare and Lucrezia relationship also suggests that including something in-game does not mean that fanfiction authors are going to continue exploring it, and that they are more willing to invoke fictional incest than merely accept the morsels handed to them by the developers.

It is a shame that incest was only included in *Brotherhood* to enhance Cesare's sense of being an evil character, that inappropriate relationships in AAA games merely serve the purpose of character exposition in order to tell players that the incestuous character is a *bad person* who does *evil things*.

If fictional incest is not real, then what is it?

In terms of *tiefempfunden*, fictional incest provides an intriguing exploration of desire; unlike relationships containing dubious or absent consent, there is not inherent harm within an incestuous relationship between two consenting adults yet is still a controversial and taboo

³⁹⁶ “Assassin's Creed - All Media Types - Works | Archive Of Our Own”, *Archiveofourown.Org* <https://archiveofourown.org/tags/Assassin's%20Creed%20-%20All%20Media%20Types/works> [accessed 29 September 2023]

³⁹⁷ “Cesare Borgia/Lucrezia Borgia | Archive Of Our Own”, *Archiveofourown.Org* <https://tinyurl.com/47kyr62x> [accessed 29 September 2023]

subject even within free-for-all fanfiction communities. It is unlikely that a fic-author would ever want to experience incest in real-life, given its negative and taboo status, but by placing such a relationship into the fictional world of fic it can be explored safely, regardless of *why* the author is choosing to write such a narrative. As Busse remarks:

Readers and writers know that they share both real-life beliefs and fictional kinks about consent issues, and that allows the safe exploration of these kinks. [...] it is the implicit contradiction of getting off on something that is objectively wrong and bad, the transgression of acceptable norms and behaviors

[...]

distress at [an author's/reader's] own desires is in fact inextricably linked with those desires, how the horror and the hotness go hand in hand. [Authors and readers can be] unsettled by their own desires, even as they have accepted them and are comfortable sharing them within the context of this discussion, and their fan fiction communities more generally.³⁹⁸

It is perhaps precisely this *push-pull* between horror and desire that allows it to function effectively within fic, and if an author has never felt some of discomfort at their desires there would perhaps not be such awareness of *why* they enjoy a particular desire, or what a certain kink or relationship dynamic means to them. It also suggests that the decision to include some of the more controversial fantasies, such as incest, becomes a very purposeful choice, which is accepted within these niche incest-fic fandoms *because* the other authors and readers understand what it is like to want to explore such a taboo subject; they too have experienced the 'why am I so drawn to this fantasy' conundrum, they understand the discomfort. It is ultimately *the fictional aspect* of fic that allows such a relationship to exist, and to try and equate fic-incest with real-life incest is arguably incomparable, and perhaps does a disservice to how damaging real-life incest often is, given the power/consent imbalances usually at play.

Fictional incest is also nothing new—the tragic Ancient Greek tale of Oedipus is widely known—and the same can be said for traditional, fiction novels. Some famous novels include relationships that cross cousin-boundaries, as seen in novels by Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters and Virginia Woolf;³⁹⁹ but such works are not seen as particularly incestuous both in

³⁹⁸ Kristina Busse *Framing Fan Fiction* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2017), p. 211.

³⁹⁹ Mary Jean Corbett, *Family Likeness: Sex, Marriage And Incest From Jane Austen To Virginia Woolf* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).

their historical and contemporary contexts, given cousin marriage is a rather grey area. Some would consider cousin marriage just as unacceptable as parent/child or sibling incest, and in China and much of the United States it is banned, whilst there are societies across the globe who still today practice cousin marriage, for example in the Middle East and Pakistan. Cousin marriage was an accepted practice in British society within the seventeenth and eighteenth century,⁴⁰⁰ although it was more common within the upper classes, suggesting a class-based rationale for this type of relationship,⁴⁰¹ an acceptance reflected within novels of the time.⁴⁰² In recent decades, cousin marriage has generally fallen out of favour within mainstream British society, but it is still legal. A more contemporary depiction of a cousin relationship lies within Meg Rosoff's novel *How I Live Now*, published in 2004.

As stated before, fanfiction is not a literary genre belonging to literary conventions. Incest is a desire, a wish to explore a unique relationship dynamic between willing family members. Writing about rape fantasies, Bivona et al. conclude their findings by stating that:

Although rape fantasies do show similarities in structure to actual rape through the use of force and the presence of non-consent, as fantasies, they do not typically include uncontrolled violence, nor do they accurately simulate the distress of being forced to do something one does not want to do [...]. A key difference between rape and rape fantasy is that in a rape fantasy two women are involved: the character in the fantasy and the person who is constructing the fantasy. An erotic rape scene often occurs against the will of the character [...], but it is not against the will of the fantasizer.⁴⁰³

Despite these findings focusing on rape fantasies, the sentiments can refer equally to incest fantasy—the author gets to play-out their fantasy with an acknowledgement that it is not real, and therefore lends space to shape the fantasy into what the author needs it to be. What is most important is the idea of two women being involved within the fantasy: the author creating the fantasy, and the character enacting it. This notion of consent being given by the fantasiser and not the character implies that there is a hierarchy, that the author-God has the final say over what a character does and does not do, that the author is ultimately writing how

⁴⁰⁰ Adam Kuper, *Incest & Influence: The Private Life of Bourgeois England* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 22.

⁴⁰¹ Kuper, pp. 36-38.

⁴⁰² Kuper, pp. 31-35.

⁴⁰³ Jenny M. Bivona, Joseph W. Critelli and Michael J. Clark, "Women's Rape Fantasies: An Empirical Evaluation Of The Major Explanations", *Archives Of Sexual Behavior*, 41.5 (2012), 1107-1119 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-012-9934-6>, p. 1118.

both characters will react to a sexual encounter, consensual or not. Given Bivona et al. highlight *inaccuracy*, the *fictionality* is therefore vital in creating a successful rape fantasy, and there seems to be a similar scenario taking place with these incest-fic fantasies, for as has been noted it is unlikely that a fic-author would actually want to ever experience incest in real-life. It is the fantasy itself which creates the limitations necessary to enjoy the fantasy as such without being emotionally harmed by it.

The whole point of *tiefempfunden* is that there is some form of self-insertion present within a fic, conscious or not. This is evident within incest-fanfics, for nearly every incestuous relationship present within game-based fics has been *added into the narrative by the author*. These are not relationships present in the original text. The desire, therefore, to include such a radical amendment to a familiar dynamic comes from the author, and the author alone; it is *their* desire being enacted. Given incest in fics is still controversial, there are readers/authors who cannot stand the mere notion of reading such a relationship but can of course avoid doing so given the appropriate tagging etc., echoing the previous discussion of proper coding. Given fanfiction is an author-driven, non-professional form of writing, it is not beholden to the same rules as published texts and incest will only be explored if the *author* has chosen to explore that desire.

Returning to incest within Literary texts, in an exploration of eighteenth-century novels and Romantic poetry, Alan Richardson finds that within eighteenth-century novels:

the incestuous brother and sister are separate from birth and never meet until they begin their amorous intrigues; nor do they discover their blood relationship until after their involvement begins.⁴⁰⁴

This separation trope, both within eighteenth-century novels and more recent Literary novels and popular media, is often utilised to perhaps help ‘legitimise’ the incest, for it becomes an accident, not conscious design. This also would imply that once the incestual nature of the relationship has been revealed, it is too great a barrier to overcome, given the incest taboo. It is not hard to imagine that if a modern TV show or film showed a consensual incestuous relationship, it would be a transgressive and controversial element to include, and in all likelihood incite much controversy. However once again, the overall tone is vital, for the TV series *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-2019) included a great deal of incest, yet it fit into the

⁴⁰⁴ Alan Richardson, “The Dangers Of Sympathy: Sibling Incest In English Romantic Poetry”, *Studies In English Literature, 1500-1900*, 25.4 (1985), 737 <https://doi.org/10.2307/450672>, p. 739.

world, which was tonally dark, and was a part of several major plot-points, so it did not create enough controversy to have it taken off air, and was, at its height of popularity, one of the most viewed and celebrated TV shows.

Regardless of how the incest comes to be, and of what medium it is contained in, there is an implicit implication that these individuals were drawn together, and that:

[L]ike many features of the eighteenth-century novel, this pattern evokes the romance tradition, with its emphasis on nature over nurture, birth over experience; the couple is drawn together not by shared memories but [...] by the intuitive attraction of a blood tie.⁴⁰⁵

I have found that these conventions, and the discussion on separation at birth/mistaken incest, are almost always reversed in incest-fics since many fics I have encountered feature siblings or a parent/child that grew up in close proximity to one another, i.e. in a normal household that only becomes incestuous *once the feelings have been admitted/realised to one another*. Partially this could be seen as being so popular because it allows for maximum drama and tension within a fic, but also serves a double purpose of further reducing the harm by nixing any potential grooming/coercion: by only explicitly flipping the incest switch once *both* characters have fallen in love with one another. However, this concept of intuitive attraction is important, for within incest-fics this switch from familial to incest emotions often occurs due to some unseen force that pulls them together, as well as an unstated acknowledgment that it is precisely their blood-tie which causes this intense attraction.

Incest-fics therefore generally follow the pattern of Romantic poetry, which Richardson states emphasise shared childhoods, “on experience that unites the couple through countless mutual associations built up during the most idyllic stage of life”.⁴⁰⁶ Of course this shared bond may well just be part of the fantasy within incest-fics, the titillating desire of writing about two people who *know* that what they are doing is ‘wrong’ and improper, but potentially thrilling. It evokes a different kind of drama to the ‘they only find out they are related once the relationship has started’ trope, and perhaps also leads to a deeper interrogation of what it means to enter into an incestuous relationship consciously/willingly, to transform the familial into the romantic. Nevertheless, Richardson argues that the concept of ‘sympathetic love’ that

⁴⁰⁵ Richardson, p. 739.

⁴⁰⁶ Richardson, p. 739.

evokes a love “more intense and complete than either sibling could feel for anyone else”,⁴⁰⁷ which is an important concept, for it is a feature seen within many incest-fics, not just sibling relationships. This sympathetic love also becomes an extension of the romantic notion of the soulmates ideal often central to both romance novels and incest-fics—that those two characters *must* be together, that the love they share *cannot* be replicated anywhere else with any other person.

Romantic poetry, however, has the incestuous couple’s relationship almost always ending unhappily, often with a death or insanity,⁴⁰⁸ quite unlike the often-happy ending of incest-fics. The idea that Romantic authors were trying to find “a perfect sympathetic union”⁴⁰⁹ is poignant, for it shows that there was a need for the subject to be explored given the unique relationship dynamics that manifest between fictional incestuous relationships. This does not mean that all incest fics end with an explicit happy ending; some do follow a more Romantic path of exploring incestuous relationships, and end in tears. As this next fic will explore, there can be an interesting hybridisation of old and new, namely 19th century opera and the 29th century setting of *Mass Effect Andromeda*.

Whilst *Andromeda* is set in the previously explored *Mass Effect* universe, the game takes place centuries after the trilogy, and is set in the Andromeda galaxy rather than our Milky Way. The player can choose to play as one of the Ryder twins, default names Scott and Sara,⁴¹⁰ with the other twin being relegated to an NPC that is in a coma for most of the game. The incest-relationship between the Ryder twins is known as Rydercest. This pairing provides an incredibly niche pairing on AO3, with, at present, only seventeen fics⁴¹¹ out of just over 4,000⁴¹² fics set within *Andromeda*. Nevertheless, the interesting aspect to this pairing is that Rydercest revolves around a set of twins, meaning there is already that heightened bond between them, the sense of being more than *just* siblings.

Given how niche this pairing is, it was difficult to find a fic that really encapsulated the relationship and highlighted the soulmate aspect of their being together, but one fic stood out:

⁴⁰⁷ Richardson, p. 739.

⁴⁰⁸ Richardson, pp. 753-754.

⁴⁰⁹ Richardson, p. 747.

⁴¹⁰ The player can choose a different name for the Ryder twin that they choose to play as, but for the purposes of ease the default names will be used, especially as many fics use the default names as well.

⁴¹¹ “Female Ryder | Sara/Male Ryder | Scott - Works | Archive Of Our Own”, *Archiveofourown.Org* https://archiveofourown.org/tags/Female%20Ryder%20%7C%20Sara*s*Male%20Ryder%20%7C%20Scott/works [accessed 29 September 2023].

⁴¹² “Mass Effect: Andromeda - Works | Archive Of Our Own”, *Archiveofourown.Org* <https://archiveofourown.org/tags/Mass%20Effect:%20Andromeda/works> [accessed 29 September 2023]

Venusberg by EnricoDandolo, published in 2019, two years after the release of *Andromeda*. Out of twenty-seven fics published by them on AO3, twelve are tagged with incest, showing that this is not a new fantasy being explored, that they are comfortable with including incest in the narrative, as well as comfortable enough to put such fantasies online for anyone with a similar fantasy to indulge in. The title was inspired by the opera *Tannhäuser* by Wagner, and the fic opens with an excerpt from the opera, in its native German, namely a section sung by Tannhäuser himself:

Zu Gottes Preis in hoch erhabne Fernen,
blickt auf zum Himmel, blickt auf zu seinen Sternen!

Anbetung solchen Wundern zollt,
da ihr sie nicht begreifen sollt!

Doch was sich der Berührung beuget,
euch Herz und Sinnen nahe liegt,
was sich, aus gleichem Stoff erzeugt,
in weicher Formung an euch schmiegt, -
dem ziemt Genuss in freud'gem Triebe,
und im Genuss nur kenn' ich Liebe!⁴¹³

[To God's price in high, sublime distances,
Look up at heaven, look up at His stars!
Adore those wonders, that deserve reverence,
That you should not touch!
Yet that what compels you to touch,
your heart and senses lying close by,
that are made from the same cloth,

⁴¹³ EnricoDandolo, *Venusberg*, (Archive of Our Own, 2019), p. 1. [quoting Wilhelm Wagner, "*Tannhäuser*" (Opera, 1845)]

nuzzled up to you in soft form –
the befitting enjoyment in joyful drift,
and only in joy do I know love!]

[my own translation]

This excerpt reveals a great deal about the fic already, for the plot of *Andromeda* is about travelling to the previously unexplored Andromeda galaxy—in a sense touching those forbidden stars. The ‘cut from the same cloth’ line is important also, for that reflects the Ryder sibling’s status as twins, and the assumption that by the mere virtue of being twins they are one and the same—as will be explored further on in the chapter, Plato saw soulmates as being a single body split in half. Finally, by stating that only within joy does one feel love, this reflects upon the twins’ relationship and the reflection of them being soulmates that is woven throughout the fic.

Most of the fic takes place before the events of the original game, on the day they are due to enter the ship and go into cryostasis so they can make the centuries-long journey to Andromeda. The scene opens with Sara being woken by her alarm, and then watching the form of her still sleeping brother beside her,

following the curve of his shoulder blade, the tendons of his neck, the shadowed line of his jaw. She knew every inch of his body as well as her own, but never did she fail to be entranced, nor did her heart ever fail to leap when she saw him like this.⁴¹⁴

That the relationship is an established one, that they have obviously woken up next to each other countless times before, reveals a sense of romanticism in the description; that Sara’s heart leaps despite the nature of their relationship shows her continual love towards him, and the above quote could easily be transplanted to any romantic fanfiction about any ‘normal’ couple.

As Sara prepares for their shuttle, she muses on their relationship, but decides she just has to “sit it out, she told herself, the way they’d planned. Once things got settled in Andromeda, they’d have all the time in the world”.⁴¹⁵ This reveals how even in a new galaxy the pair

⁴¹⁴ EnricoDandolo, p. 2.

⁴¹⁵ EnricoDandolo, p. 3.

plans to continue relations, that their love is more important than exploring a new galaxy or helping to settle everyone into the unknown.

However, it is also revealed that it was Scott who wanted to go to Andromeda, and that Sara is a reluctant companion—only going in order to be with Scott, “They’d come into this galaxy together, after all. She wasn’t about to let Scott outlive her by six hundred years”.⁴¹⁶ The fact that Sara and Scott came into the world at the same time is raised, iterating how the innate connection between twins is perhaps distinctly stronger than that of normal siblings.

Scott tries to excite Sara about the prospect of leaving everything behind, and it is revealed that he has been recounting tales of their potential life together in Andromeda:

How often had he painted that picture for her? The details differed—now a cabin in the mountains of Habitat 4, then a ship of their own charting the course beyond Heleus, then a beachfront villa on Habitat 7—but always, always, always they were together. The more excited he got, the less she wanted to object. *We won’t be alone. Dad will be there. Nothing will change.* They would still have to hide, as they had their entire lives.⁴¹⁷

This reveals a latent fear about anyone finding out about their relationship—especially their father—and implies that the relationship has been going on for a considerable amount of time. The tale of a beachfront villa feels like an almost cliché romantic trope, but the implication is that beachfront villas and cabins in the mountains are secluded places, away from prying eyes; all they want is to be together.

It may not be explicitly stated, but the author seems happy to paint them as soulmates, wanting only each other, even in the face of severe consequence should anyone find out about them. There seems to be the worry about their father, a common theme among sibling incest fics, for sometimes the fallout from another relative discovering their secret life forms a large part of the subtext and can become part of the thrill of fictional incest, the explicit knowledge that the subject matter is still socially *unacceptable*. However, I have found over the years that relatives within incest fics are often more understanding of the situation than one would imagine real-life relatives would be, more accepting than the possible evocation of real-life damnation and disgust.

⁴¹⁶ EnricoDandolo, p. 4.

⁴¹⁷ EnricoDandolo, p. 4.

Similar to Fryceest, as will be explored later, there are absent parents. Within the in-game canon, their father Alec Ryder is depicted as distant throughout the twin's life, being more concerned with his work and AI project. Their mother seems to have been more involved with the children, but still devoted to her work as a scientist. She develops a terminal condition and dies some time before the rest of the Ryder family travelled to Andromeda, meaning that when Alec dies in the in-game prologue, the twins are left orphans, the only family the other has left.

When Scott asks Sara if she is scared about the impending cryostasis and journey, she replies that she wants them, and their relationship, to be their future rather than “something dad chose for us. Not something we just fell into because it was the path of least resistance”.⁴¹⁸ Sara also questions how viable their future will be if they are bringing any emotional baggage with them, and also points out that their father will kill them when he finds out.⁴¹⁹

This causes an outburst from Scott:

“Fuck dad. Fuck all of them.” The outburst took her aback. She wasn't used to Scott losing his cool. “This is us. No one else gets a say in this. *No one.*” He paused. A fire had lit up in his eyes. When he continued, his voice was gentle once more. “I love you, Sara. You want to stay, I'll stay with you. But I'm sick and tired of hiding all the time. Whether here or in Andromeda, it's high time for us to come out and face the music. And we're gonna do it together.”⁴²⁰

Scott's stance is that he unequivocally wants Sara and does not actually care if their father finds out. He is even prepared to tell his father just to get that weight off their shoulders. It fuels a certainty to their love and relationship, that it can withstand anything, regardless of its status as ‘wrong’—which causes Sara to attempt to imagine what might come afterwards:

That log cabin on Habitat 4, those white beaches on Habitat 7, but always: Scott, Scott, Scott, and her always by his side, the way it should be. Waking up together (ish) every morning, going to sleep together (ish) every night, all the things they could never have in the Milky Way.

Children? Why the hell not? It wasn't as though they wouldn't have genetic engineers in Andromeda. [...] Little Scotts and little Saras, born into a new world their parents

⁴¹⁸ EnricoDandolo, p. 4.

⁴¹⁹ EnricoDandolo, p. 5.

⁴²⁰ EnricoDandolo, p. 5.

had forged for them ... She glanced at her sweet, brash fool of a twin, heart melting. Well, maybe that would be something to consider, at least when they were a bit older and things in Andromeda had settled down.⁴²¹

This is an idyllic imagining of their future together. It is interesting the concept of children is brought up; within the stark fictionality within incest-fics, biological children are still a relatively rare feature. What is notable within the *Mass Effect* universe is that it contains a futuristic, technologically advanced society, meaning that most genetic defects can be cured in-utero, erasing the problem of genetic inbreeding that has long been a significant argument against incestuous relationships per se.⁴²² However, the mere thought of an incestuous-baby may be too much for many incest-fic authors and readers, a taboo that should not yet be broken—thanks to tags and author’s notes, an incestuous child is usually forewarned, and authors would not usually include such elements unless it formed a part of their fictional *tiefempfunden* fascinations and creative desires.

Sara asks Scott to promise that they will always be together; Scott complies. Had the fic ended here, the ending would be optimistic, if not an overtly ‘happy’, one. But it does not end here: there is a section that takes place at some point within the main in-game narrative of *Andromeda*, with Scott in a coma and Sara forced into their now late father’s role as Pathfinder, exploring and securing the Heleus Cluster for the new inhabitants.

Sara laments that it was not supposed to be like this, and dislikes that she is forced to hide her thoughts and feelings from “the spy inside her brain”⁴²³—an AI called SAM who was transferred into her brain by her father Alec in his dying moments—implying that she cannot even indulge in private fantasies and thoughts anymore. It is stated in-fic that she “wants to kiss her prince awake or share in his slumber, wants to feel him once again, but *it* is always watching. She wants to spend eternity by his bedside, but she cannot shirk her duties”.⁴²⁴ Her and Scott’s happy ending, their new future, has been taken away from them by their father in his last living moments, and—worse still—the sanctity of her mind has also been invaded. This depicts a rather bleak ending to the fic and does line up with the aforementioned Romantic poetry perspective of incest that ends in tragedy, with the characters negatively impacted. It could even be suggested that the insanity that befalls Romantic incestuous

⁴²¹ EnricoDandolo, p. 5.

⁴²² Arthur P. Wolf, “Introduction”, in *Inbreeding, Incest, And The Incest Taboo: The State Of Knowledge At The Turn Of The Century* (Stanford, California: Stanford, California, 2004), p. 2.

⁴²³ EnricoDandolo, p. 5.

⁴²⁴ EnricoDandolo, p. 5.

characters is also included here, given Sara has lost the privacy of her mind, meaning she has nowhere to hide or imagine or desire.

The final lines of the fic are another excerpt from *Tannhäuser*, which Sara plays on her violin as Scott lies in a coma next to her:

Dir, Göttin der Liebe, soll mein Lied ertönen,
gesungen laut sei jetzt dein Preis von mir!
Dein süßer Reiz ist Quelle alles Schönen,
und jedes holde Wunder stammt von dir!
Wer dich mit Glut in seine Arme geschlossen,
was Liebe ist, kennt der, nur der allein!
Armsel'ge, die ihr Liebe nie genossen,
zieht hin! Zieht in den Berg der Venus ein!⁴²⁵
[You, goddess of love, shall play my song,
loudly sung is now your fee from me!
Your sweet allure is the source of all things beautiful,
and every lovely wonder stems from you!
Whoever holds you in their arms with fervour,
what love is, knows he, and him alone!
Those poor souls, who have never enjoyed your love,
take them! Take them to the mountain of Venus!]
[my own translation]

Again, intense feelings are revealed—yet there is a vaguely optimistic tone implying that love will bring them back together, that if Sara plays her song of love often enough things will eventually right themselves.

⁴²⁵ Enrico Dandolo, p. 6. [quoting Wilhelm Wagner, “*Tannhäuser*” (Opera, 1845)]

Given this fic has no sequel, the ending is left up to the reader to imagine, but it certainly ends far less happily than many other incest fics, certainly less happily than the fics that will be explored later in the chapter. It must be noted that, in-game, Scott wakes up from his coma near the end of the main narrative, which would suggest that perhaps in this fic his waking will occur as well, and there may well be a continuation of the relationship; but the author-included barrier of Sara hiding her thoughts from the AI in her mind still persists, and remains a barrier/problem to be addressed.

This fic does show that authors are willing to explore incest-fics which are not saccharine sweet, that sadness and ambiguous endings can be present yet still feature the blood-related characters as soulmates, that once they are together, they could not possibly be with anybody else. This fic implies that *tiefempfunden* authorial desire within incest-fics is not just about happiness and perhaps relatively unrealistic depictions of relationships, but instead the weight of incest relationships offers a far deeper and, in some ways, more realistic dynamic than one might anticipate. These two characters are the heart of the story, and just because they are related does not preclude them from having hopes, fears, and dreams. Within fictional incest the realistic and unrealistic, in fanfiction terms, is accepted, and can contain the same emotional nuances as fics that do not contain incest.

In a contemporary exploration of fictional incest, Lydia Kokkola and Elina Valovirta state that within modern incest fiction, incest narratives are “not of abuse, victimhood and psychological damage, but rather that of thwarted, ‘bad’ romance”,⁴²⁶ which is certainly reflected within incest-fics, for they depict a highly fictionalised version of incest that generally moves away from any harm and pain in the equation.

Kokkola and Valovirta also describe incest narratives as being both disgusting and fascinating,⁴²⁷ which is similar to the horror-desire earlier explored by Busse: that desires and sexual kinks can be both attractive and terrifying at the same time, that desire is certainly a grey area. Nevertheless, to an author who writes incest-fics, the fantasy of incest is perhaps more compelling than disgusting otherwise incest would simply not appear in these fics—though the disgust factor may well be more apparent within authors/readers who are only starting to write/read incest-fics, as opposed to those who are used to such controversial content. More seasoned incest-fic authors may gain nothing but positive emotions from

⁴²⁶ Lydia Kokkola and Elina Valovirta, “The Disgust That Fascinates: Sibling Incest As A Bad Romance”, *Sexuality & Culture*, 21.1 (2016), 121-141 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-016-9386-6>, p. 122.

⁴²⁷ Kokkola and Valovirta, p. 122.

working on such fics, the horror having been completely overtaken by the enjoyment in exploring these relationship dynamics.

Kokkola and Valovirta state that within the 29 incest novels they studied there was a uniformity with which authors portrayed the incest,⁴²⁸ and that within these novels all of them contained “full intercourse between willing partners aged 16 or more”,⁴²⁹ which reflects the argument that *consent* is key in allowing fictional incest to function as a form of relationship exploration. They also found that within the incest novels studied that the parents were often emotionally/physically absent and/or abusive.⁴³⁰ From personal reading experience, absent parents are a more common element within sibling relationships—as opposed to parent-child incest relationships—and fundamental to both the incestuous relationships explored within this chapter.

Another interesting note by Kokkola and Valovirta is, that in order to help readers read the plot as romantic, authors often make the sister more powerful than the brother, which included making the sister older than the brother, which facilitated her power.⁴³¹ In both Frycecest and Rydercest, the sister is the older twin, though this does not mean more powerful in the fic reality; in-game in *Andromeda* the player plays as one of the twins with the other being relegated to an NPC in a coma for much of the main narrative, meaning the stronger Ryder twin can be either male or female. In *Syndicate* both Evie and Jacob are PCs, though there are considerably more Jacob-centred missions; however it is their bond and relationship as twins that is central to the story, and Evie is shown in-game to be rather dominant and bossy, often taking control of a situation and fixing Jacob’s mistakes.

As with Romantic poems, the relationships within the novels explored by Kokkola and Valovirta end unhappily, often with death or madness, which have negative effects on the siblings and their relationship⁴³²—contrary to the romance novel necessity of the happy ending. This is also not reflected in many incest-fics, which generally do possess some form of happy ending, or at least a mutually understood break-up, and underlying love or respect for the other character.

In their conclusion, Kokkola and Valovirta state that:

⁴²⁸ Kokkola and Valovirta, p. 123.

⁴²⁹ Kokkola and Valovirta, p. 125.

⁴³⁰ Kokkola and Valovirta, p. 128.

⁴³¹ Kokkola and Valovirta, p. 135.

⁴³² Kokkola and Valovirta, p. 136.

because shame is a cultural phenomenon, the argument becomes circular: sibling desire incites shame because it is wrong, and it is wrong because it incites shame. If we step outside this circle, [...] we see two opposing discourses. The clinical literature defines incest in terms of abuse, and even the sociological data that has the potential to capture the presence of loving relationships is interpreted within a discourse of negative outcomes and violent behaviours. The fiction toys with the tension between desire and guilt as it invites readers' to empathise with the characters' desires, encouraging them to condone behaviors the work on the disgust reflex suggest they would normally oppose.⁴³³

This echoes that fictional incest is incompatible with reality, but also reinforces that there is a push-pull of comfort and discomfort taking place, and that fictionality allows for the fantasy *tiefempfunden* exploration of the in unacceptable real-life.

The introduction of the word 'guilt' is interesting, for it recognises the notion of the 'guilty pleasure'—something to be enjoyed in secret, hidden away from others to avoid embarrassment. This does tie in with how fic-authors upload fics onto AO3 under a pseudonym, and usually very little is known about the author and their real-life personality/identity. More likely, however, the notion of guilt is linked in with the horror-desire as already explored, with heightened awareness of how forbidden and inappropriate such a relationship is perceived to be. Nevertheless, Kokkola and Valovirta do reflect a negative view of fictional incest, for it is stated that both fiction and reality portray a "bad romance whose impact and consequences are harmful for the individuals engaged in it".⁴³⁴ This, as has been explored throughout this thesis, is not the case for incest-fics.

The quest for the soulmate/one true love

Many romantic, and incestuous, fics are fixated implicitly upon the notion of soulmates, which is why this section focuses upon the historical, literary, and romantic significance of the 'soulmate'.

Both popular Western culture and romance novels are steeped in the idea of the *soulmate*, of the One True Love between two people so perfectly matched to one other that they epitomise the pre-requisite for a 'happy ending'. Within many fics, the soulmate concept is as inherent as within romance novels, perhaps subliminally included by the fic-author through its

⁴³³ Kokkola and Valovirta, p. 138.

⁴³⁴ Kokkola and Valovirta, p. 138.

seepage within much of popular culture. However, as will now be explored, incest fics display perhaps some of the most persuasive soulmate-narratives.

In explaining what a real-life soulmate is, Alain de Botton states that upon seeing one's soulmate there is an almost instantaneous *knowledge* that this person is the *one*:

*It may come very fast, this certainty that another human being is a soul mate. We needn't have spoken with them; we may not even know their name. Objective knowledge doesn't come into it. What matters instead is intuition, a spontaneous feeling that seems all the more accurate and worthy of respect because it bypasses the normal processes of reason.*⁴³⁵ [author italics]

This instantaneousness of attraction is similar to the importance of the initial meeting, both within games and romance novels as explored within chapter three, but what de Botton's quote exemplifies is the *inherentness* of the notion of soulmates, the idea that it happens regardless of choice; it is utterly instinctive. This is a contemporary perspective of love and relationships, but its origins lie in Romantic ideology,⁴³⁶ a phenomenon that favours intuition and instinct. Across Western history, arranged marriages were the norm, completely disregarding any notion of 'love' within the relationship in favour of monetary or influential gain. Perhaps this is why the soulmates concept has veered so much towards highlighting emotional connections in so many romantic narratives, of being utterly *in love* with the *right* person,⁴³⁷ a rejection of those cold, unfeeling arranged dynastic marriages.

De Botton, however, argues decidedly *against* the concept of soulmates, that one should not allow emotions and that initial rapt glance to decide the course of the rest of one's life. To him, love—and later marriage—is a partnership of negotiation and bumps, of evolutions and a concrete desire to make things work.⁴³⁸ Reason will prevail, and in de Botton's eyes, marriage is not about perfection, it is about:

a matter of deciding exactly what kind of suffering we want to endure rather than of assuming we have found a way to skirt the rules of emotional existence. We will all by definition end up with that stock character of our nightmares, "the wrong person."
[...] *We should look for ways to accommodate ourselves as gently and as kindly as we*

⁴³⁵ Alain de Botton, *The Course Of Love* (Penguin, 2017), p. 4.

⁴³⁶ de Botton, p. 6.

⁴³⁷ de Botton, pp. 210-211.

⁴³⁸ de Botton, p. 210.

*can to the awkward realities of living alongside another fallen creature. There can only ever be a “good enough” marriage.*⁴³⁹ [author italics]

This may seem like an overly mechanistic view of marriage and love, one that leaves little room for the idealised concept of soulmates, but it is perhaps a more realistic view of contemporary life, for de Botton is recounting real-life relationships not fictional ones. He further blames art for causing people to aspire to soulmates, for causing high expectations of the ‘perfect’ relationship.⁴⁴⁰ But this does reveal a flaw in his criticism of soulmates: while art may often reflect reality, fiction—especially romantic fictions—allows for exploration of these areas otherwise deemed impossible, illegal, or unwanted in real-life. There is space for the *inappropriate relationship* to end happily, and there is space to allow two characters to just *know* that they are meant to be together in fictional contexts.

While it may have been the Romantic and Gothic eras that helped cement modern-day ideals of the soulmate, the original concept of soulmates actually emerged in Ancient Greece with the philosopher Plato. In *The Symposium*, Plato wrote that Zeus punished primordial humans by splitting them in two, meaning that afterwards

the two parts longed for each other and tried to come together again. They threw their arms around one another in close embrace, desiring to be reunited, and they began to die of hunger and general inactivity because they refused to do anything at all as separate beings. [...] love of one person for another has been inborn in human beings, and its role is to restore us to our ancient state by trying to make unity out of duality and to heal our human condition. For each of us is a mere tally of a person, one of two sides of a filleted fish, one half of an original whole. We are all continually searching for our other half.⁴⁴¹

Written in the 4th century BC, nearly two and a half thousand years ago, Plato encapsulated the concept of soulmates, the idea that a soulmate does not merely entail two people being perfectly matched to one another; instead soulmates are *literally two halves of a whole being* and one cannot function properly without the other. This goes beyond mere love and

⁴³⁹ de Botton, pp. 211-212.

⁴⁴⁰ de Botton, p. 215.

⁴⁴¹ M. C. Howatson, and Frisbee C. C. Sheffield, *Plato - The Symposium* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 24.

adoration; it rests upon an almost molecular scale—one's soul can only be healed once we have found our other half.

The idea that the soulmate is a being split in two does, perhaps ironically, go some way in helping to understand why incestuous pairings can be written as soulmates, because within such narratives the soulmates share an inherent blood connection. They are not two random people destined to be together by chance, they share the common blood and DNA, are literally woven from the same cloth. If anything, the implication is that incestuous pairings are closer to the concept of two interconnected halves than two non-related people. Plato describes the reuniting of soulmates in a rather poetic, and romantic fashion:

[when someone] meets his own actual other half, the pair are overcome to an extraordinary degree by sensations of affection, intimacy and love, and they virtually refuse to be parted from each other even for a short time. These are the couples who pass their whole lives together [...] It is clear that the soul of each wants something else which it cannot put into words but it feels instinctively what it wants and expresses it in riddles.⁴⁴²

Such a statement would not be out of place within a romance novel, revealing that, at its core, the concept of soulmates has not really changed in thousands of years apart from the fact that we would now not consider humans to have been split in half by Zeus. Also, again the instinctiveness is highlighted, that the two soulmates do not *choose* to fall in love, they are simply drawn together, providing fic-authors with another easy method of initiating an incestuous relationship. The initial meeting between soulmates is also highlighted, but the fact that Plato concretely states that the feeling is one that cannot be put into words is fascinating, for it suggests that there really is an intrinsicity, a feeling that can never be properly expressed. Romance novels work in exactly the same vein, with a feeling, a *knowledge* that these two protagonists should spend the rest of their lives together which transcends explanation.

As de Botton comments, it may be an unrealistic view of relationships and of the work required to maintain them but given that fics are about the fictionality around the expression of desire, there is a sense of literary leeway. Fic and romantic novel authors are allowed to bypass the mundane elements of maintaining a relationship in favour of highlighting these

⁴⁴² Howatson and Sheffield, p. 25.

romantic soulmates elements. It would not be fun if the two characters were just okay with each other—passion and feelings and action are what drive the romantic narrative, over possibly more realistic apathy.

There is one further step that exists beyond merely being torn in two within sibling incestuous pairings, namely twin-incest relationships, which is what both of the incestuous-sibling-relationships in this chapter are. Within popular media, even non-identical twins are often depicted as sharing a bond that only twins can possess, of being far closer than traditional siblings by the fact they shared the womb simultaneously. Non-identical twins do not share identical DNA; like other siblings, their genetics, appearance, and personality are just as random, yet they are often still seen as two halves of a whole, lumped together as if they were less likely to have their own individual likes and dislikes.

The fic *The Life and Times of Evie Frye* by samwysesr will be explored within the context of the Fryceest relationship, which, as was briefly mentioned in the introduction, is the incestuous relationship between the twins Evie and Jacob Frye, both non-customisable PCs within *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*, set in London in the year 1868.

The Fryceest community on AO3 is a small, niche community with only 115 fics⁴⁴³ out of just over 13,000⁴⁴⁴ *Assassin's Creed* fics, but the community is a nevertheless strong and passionate one.⁴⁴⁵ This fic demonstrates a more philosophical musing around the Fryceest relationship, utilising the aforementioned Platonic concept of *soulmates*. It was published in February to April 2018, though it is marked as incomplete and has not been updated since, making it a 'dead' fic.⁴⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the fic is made up of several short self-contained chapters which stand-alone and do not require reading of the previous chapter to be understood.

The specific fic-chapter studied for the purposes of this thesis is a journal entry by Evie, dated 8th of March 1868, shortly after the twins leave Crawley for London—which occurs in-game in the prologue. This diary entry takes place before any relationship has occurred between the twins, making it, at the time, a one-sided pining by Evie towards Jacob. This in

⁴⁴³ “Evie Frye/Jacob Frye - Works | Archive Of Our Own”, *Archiveofourown.Org* https://archiveofourown.org/tags/Evie%20Frye*s*Jacob%20Frye/works [accessed 29 September 2023]

⁴⁴⁴ “Assassin's Creed - All Media Types - Works | Archive Of Our Own”, *Archiveofourown.Org* <https://archiveofourown.org/tags/Assassin's%20Creed%20-%20All%20Media%20Types/works> [accessed 29 September 2023]

⁴⁴⁵ This is personal knowledge due to involvement within the Fryceest community for a number of years, which includes two Fryceest fics that I have uploaded on AO3.

⁴⁴⁶ A dead fic is a fic that has not been updated in a considerable amount of time and remains unfinished.

itself means this yearning is not technically incest in the physical sense—yet the overwhelming conclusion Evie draws to is that she cannot live without Jacob, her twin, her other half.

The chapter opens with Evie, unable to sleep, realising that she needs the

warm, solid comfort of Jacob’s body curled around mine—his breath hitching slightly in his throat as a gentle warning, followed by the slow even sound of his breathing as sleep claimed him. Even the occasional snores he emitted [...] are things I find myself straining to hear as I lay awake in my narrow, uncomfortable bed. The absence of those sounds is a constant reminder that I am alone for the first time in my life... and I detest the wretched solitude⁴⁴⁷

This passage reveals the loss she feels without her twin by her side, her incompleteness without him, unable to even perform basic actions such as sleep. This is reinforced by the fact that she recounts that they have been sleeping in the same bed since infancy, their limbs “entwined like living vines as we drifted off into dreams”.⁴⁴⁸ This closeness in sleep, however, has apparently “conveyed so much more than mere comfort”,⁴⁴⁹ hinting that the connection between them has always been there, that they were perhaps always destined to become more than just siblings given their near-symbiotic need for one another.

In an examining of the Romantic formation of the soulmate, Fay Bound Alberti remarks that:

a soulmate needed both material and emotional fulfilment. Significantly, that person need not be a spouse; an important part of Romantic culture was the quest for human connection, and the need for lasting bonds between individuals. [...] in Romantic ideology, that one’s spiritual, sexual, and emotional needs could be fulfilled through a particular kind of human rather than spiritual relationship.⁴⁵⁰

This does reiterate what Evie reveals early on within this diary entry, that her need for Jacob goes beyond merely wanting to sleep in the same bed as him, that without him there her soul is incomplete, her life lacklustre, and that no other soul will be able to make her feel the same things or help her to feel at peace.

⁴⁴⁷ samwysesr, *The Life and Times of Evie Frye*, (Archive of Our Own, 2018), p. 5.

⁴⁴⁸ samwysesr, p. 5.

⁴⁴⁹ samwysesr, p. 5.

⁴⁵⁰ Fay Bound Alberti, *A Biography of Loneliness the History of an Emotion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 69.

Loss is a resonant theme throughout this fic; it follows the in-game canon of their mother dying in childbirth, their father being emotionally and physically absent during much of their lives, and their being raised by grandparents. Evie remarks that “What [her parents] represented wasn’t a sense of love and family—they signified something that was supposed to be there, but was gone from our lives and could never be recovered”.⁴⁵¹ This perhaps explains why Evie is so intrinsically drawn to Jacob beyond being merely his twin; they are the closest family members each other has, for their father dies shortly before the commencement of the game—and subsequently this fic. Evie’s relationship with Jacob is therefore the closest thing to a long-standing and stable relationship she has experienced.

Further reinforcing Plato’s definition of ‘soulmates’, Evie goes on to muse that the pain she feels at not being physically close to Jacob “is comparable only to the pain one might feel from a phantom limb that has long been removed. He is a part of me—it hurts not to be beside him”.⁴⁵² This author has truly written them as unhappy and incomplete when not together, and Evie wonders whether it is “the very act of sleeping apart that feeds the turbulent emotions that have sprung up between us”,⁴⁵³ which further suggests that their emotional and physical distance is unnatural, that their souls will only be quietened by reunification. The author further reinforces this Platonic notion of soulmates with Evie’s statement that “when twins sleep, their souls rejoin, reforming into the perfect whole they were in the beginning before being split in two”.⁴⁵⁴ Evie considers whether their souls, unable to be joined by their sleeping, are somehow punishing them, causing “haunting flights of illicit fancy that are so indecent I dare not record them here or anywhere else”.⁴⁵⁵

This also links in with the Romantic view of soulmates as explained by Alberti:

the term ‘soulmate’ to mean an individual who was intended to complete the self (as it meant in Plato’s time), with the added thrill of romance. This redefinition of love, from the companionship and duty of a friend to a sexual ideal [...] characterized by individual desire [...] with the Romantic association of love, longing, and the natural world with the passionate desire for individual fulfilment through a union that was both otherworldly and physical.⁴⁵⁶

⁴⁵¹ samwysesr, p. 6.

⁴⁵² samwysesr, p. 7.

⁴⁵³ samwysesr, p. 7.

⁴⁵⁴ samwysesr, p. 7.

⁴⁵⁵ samwysesr, p. 7.

⁴⁵⁶ Alberti, pp. 69-70.

While this statement is not specifically about incest, it is undeniable that within incest relationships there is an added layer of familial connection that lends itself to longing; it is also interesting that an incestuous relationship almost fulfils both roles of companionship and sexual compatibility. The familial aspect already present, desire is sometimes explored within incest fics in context of the precipice—namely when the two blood-related characters are attracted to one another but have not yet admitted or consummated that attraction. The use of ‘otherworldly’ in this quote is also important, for it harks back to Plato’s summation that soulmates cannot properly express *why* they are soulmates, they just know that they *are*. It almost lends a sense of acceptance to incest fics, as the matter of their desire and attraction is taken out of the character’s hands, they cannot help but fall in love as they were preordained to do so.

Of course, it is the fic-author in this case that is deciding they will be together, but it makes sense to invoke soulmates within a romantic incest fic, for it is an allowance, of this force beyond reason, a purely emotional response. Evie, at the end of this fic, finds she can only sleep soundly once she is no longer alone,⁴⁵⁷ and crosses the threshold from merely being a twin to becoming a lover; just being in same room as Jacob is not enough, they need to completely connect on an emotional and physical level to become *One*.

Looking at more recent romance novels from the 1980s onwards, the concept of soulmates still remains a core tenet, even if it is not always explicitly stated. Within the romance novel format, there is the hero and the heroine: everyone else around them little more than supportive roles to enhance their love-narrative. Within the first moments of those two titular characters meeting there will be no doubt they are going to end up together by the end and be happy.⁴⁵⁸ The concepts of soulmates and the happy ending are therefore inseparable—one cannot exist without the other.

Hsu-Ming Teo argues in their essay on romantic love:

contemporary popular culture reinforces the message that “true love” is the love relationship that lasts. If it doesn’t last because it is no longer thrilling or fulfilling,

⁴⁵⁷ samwysesr, p. 8.

⁴⁵⁸ Valerie Parv, *The Art Of Romance Writing*, 4th edn (Crows Nest NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2004), p. 116.

then it wasn't "real love" to begin with, and the search begins again for the one true love.⁴⁵⁹

This may be a product of popular culture, but nevertheless it is possible to perceive in many fanfics the pervasiveness of this idea that two characters might be preordained to be together, and that they remain in love whilst doomed relationships fail because what they were feeling was 'obviously not real love'. This is best expressed the fandom OTP, *One True Pairing*; a person's personal beloved relationship that supersedes any others, regardless of whether their OTP is canon or not. An OTP is important, for it shows a different form of *tiefempfunden* within the level of emotion that emanates from a player/author/reader, that they are willing to disregard canon and rewrite personalities and events in favour of their own perceived beloved relationship; only *their* love counts, and only *they* can be soulmates.

If someone's OTP were Evie and Jacob, for example, they would react rather negatively to fics in which Evie paired up with another character in *Syndicate*—Henry Green, who Evie in-game-canonically goes on to marry. It requires rewriting of the canon to ensure that Evie ends up with Jacob—meaning Henry is relegated to a rival and overall unsavoury character within many Fryceest fics. This rejection and dislike of canon is evident within the summary to *The Life and Times of Evie Frye*, where samwysesr writes "100% Anti-Henvie/ not Henry Green friendly",⁴⁶⁰ which does not bode well for Henry in this fic and implies Evie will most certainly never end up with him. This illustrates how the canon is pliant when it comes to beloved and OTP relationships, and that authors will do whatever necessary to ensure that their desired relationships occur, and happiness prevails—even if only the slightest bit of original canon narrative remains.

In her novel exploring romance stories in modern day media, Catherine M. Roach does share the sentiment already expressed by de Botton, that romance narratives should not be an imperative for women, despite being so pervasive within modern culture,⁴⁶¹ and that:

Of course, a woman doesn't need a man to be complete—just like a fish doesn't need a bicycle [...] There are other satisfying life options for love, connection, community,

⁴⁵⁹ Hsu-Ming Teo, "Love and Romance Novels," in *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2021), p. 460.

⁴⁶⁰ samwysesr, p. 1.

⁴⁶¹ Catherine M Roach, *Happily Ever After* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2016), p. 59.

and fulfillment. There are other answers to the central question of how to live a good life outside of romantic pair-bonding.⁴⁶²

For Roach and de Botton, this is not merely a rejection of the Platonic view of soulmates, it is also a renunciation of the very notion that a soulmate exists. 'It was not real love in the first place' as argued earlier by Teo, does not exist because *True Love* does not really exist. Despite soulmates being such a fundamental trope to romance narratives, a woman, in real-life, is completely capable of creating her own happiness and love, with or without a man; she may love as much as she wants and is not beholden to the outdated, yet still prevalent, concept that only one perfect man exists for her without whom she will be miserable and alone.

Instead there is a return to the concept that romance novels are a fantasy playground:

The genre is a fantasy play space to explore and try to work out this conundrum: that to be human is to seek connection and love, and yet love entails great vulnerability. It entails risk and loss and pain. So how can love ever work out? In the romance novel, writers and readers play the script through in endless permutations within the big story line. [...] The genre becomes a fantasy breathing space of reprieve, even of amnesty or freedom, from the dissatisfactions and tragedy of love that everyone knows [...] Reading a romance is like respite for the caregivers, a break from harsher realities of life.⁴⁶³

What Roach here suggests is that, in a modern-day-real-world context, soulmates are redundant, that love, and relationships can still cause pain and hurt. Therefore the soulmate has a perfect place within romance novels, for they are *not* supposed to be realistic, and women can read and write them happily, for authors and readers are both safe in the knowledge that in this fantasy soulmates can exist; that there can be two people so perfectly matched with one another that there can be no other ending but a happy one, and that the story will end without domination—perhaps even with a hero submitting to the heroine, and stating once and for all that she is his soulmate.⁴⁶⁴

This same logic may also be applied to fics, given their overt fictionality. With relation to incestuous relationships, fantasy and desire are foregrounded which means there is space for

⁴⁶² Roach, p. 59.

⁴⁶³ Roach, pp. 69-70.

⁴⁶⁴ Roach, p. 67.

such an unconventional relationship—which in real-life so often ends badly—that not only ends happily but features two characters who are meant to be together *because* and *regardless of* their shared blood. Their love prevails because these stories are fantasies and desires typed out onto a page, safely away from real-life.

Roach also uses bell hook's text *All about Love* as a way to help describe an 'ideal' relationship within romance narratives:

A "one true love" is one who loves you truly, [...] As a true love, I must be willing to act, in an extension of self, in ways that are caring, affectionate, and respectful, in order to nurture my beloved's growth. Such true love also implies that, as I nurture my lover's growth, I nurture my own as well. We cannot, do not, love another truly if we abandon the duty to love ourselves and to act in our own best interests. True love, in other words, does not make one into a martyr or a doormat. If such loss of self happens—if I extend myself to the extent of loss of self—the relationship is not true love. A true love would never request from the beloved, nor allow of that beloved, any practice not in the beloved's best interest. Such practice would be false love ⁴⁶⁵

This suggests that the 'ideal' soulmate situation exists wherein both the hero and heroine support and uplift one another, which follows hook's assertion that love will never blossom in a relationship where one party wants to maintain control over the other.⁴⁶⁶ There is perhaps a misconception that within romance novels it is the man who always retains power in the relationship. While it is certainly true that many romance novels function within, and support, a patriarchal society—where the end goal is marriage and children—many modern romance novels are drifting away from this stereotype to reflect cultural shifts,⁴⁶⁷ but as has been shown, the heroine does carry considerable power within the relationship in transforming the cold, masculine hero into someone far more sensitive.⁴⁶⁸ She has gained the safety of a loving relationship, and while she may still be bound within the patriarchal parameters, she has the everlasting love and respect of her hero, and therefore a safe and secure existence within it.

Within incest-relationships it is harder to translate these traditional relationship 'ideals' given that it *is* illegal in many places in the world to marry close blood relatives, and to have

⁴⁶⁵ Roach, pp. 127-128.

⁴⁶⁶ bell hooks, *All About Love: New Visions* (New York: Harper, 2000), p. 152.

⁴⁶⁷ Roach, p. 166.

⁴⁶⁸ Roach, p. 103.

children in such a context is socially unacceptable in Western society. The happy ending of the incest-fic-relationship must come from elsewhere and positing the incestuous couple as ‘soulmates’ arguably provides the perfect solution. For they are able to exist happily as a couple, safe in the knowledge that they will always have each other, and that their love is sustainable because they are so perfectly matched.

A more cynical view would suggest that the soulmate narrative is forced upon an incestuous couple simply because, once that line has been crossed, it would be impossible for the characters to return to a ‘normal’ non-sexual relationship, be that relationship sibling or parental or other, which is an apt point, and for many fics that line cannot be uncrossed. This means many incest-fics posit the hero and heroine as being genuinely in love with one another so that the soulmate narrative works as a natural continuation of the relationship. Here the *fictionality* of incest-fics is particularly important—given that such a relationship would probably be morally reprehensible to many readers/authors in real-life—for within many fics the author will explicitly state that their fictional exploration of incest does not mean they enjoy or condone incest in real-life.

Fictionality is vital in allowing incest-fics to work, and the soulmate narrative—both the single-body-split-in-two soulmate described by Plato or the more modern, nebulous concept of ‘instinctive soulmates’—is a useful stepping-stone in allowing and explaining why an incest relationship might well be happy one, with a happy ending. As the happy ending is one of the pillars of the romantic narrative, within the fictional space of fanfiction many incest-relationships are also able to end with a romantic happy-ending. Positing the hero and heroine as soulmates also alleviates some of the blame that might accompany such incest relationships—they could not help but fall in love, for they are *soulmates*.

The mistake of equating fictional incest with real-life incest

While real-life incest may be considered one of the universal taboos,⁴⁶⁹ in fanfiction an ‘idealised’ version of incest is permissible which largely follow certain patterns, regardless of whether the incestuous relationship is sibling, parent/child or other. I argue, therefore, that the vast majority of incest-fics contain at least one of the following aspects, and only work as fictional incest *because* they follow these rules:

⁴⁶⁹ Wolf, p. 12.

1 – **Consent.** Both parties are either of age, and can therefore consent to the relationship, or in some cases of sibling incest, both parties are underage but there is no power imbalance between them and they both consent to the relationship. There are of course fics where consent is dubious or absent, but these fics are generally in the minority, explicitly labelled/contextualised as such, and are usually more of a ‘dark indulgence’ of these darker themes.

2 – **Genuine feelings.** The relationship is wanted by both parties. They feel a genuine love towards one another, a love that is decidedly un-familial. The feeling is strong enough to make the involved characters do anything to ensure their relationship works and continues for a long time.

3 – **Longevity.** The relationship is generally sustainable as a proper, working relationship as opposed to a one-off event that gets denied and forgotten. Given the genuine love between two characters, there is usually a willingness to risk *everything* to sustain the relationship, and this determination usually pays off in the form of a happy ending where they are both free to live together, happily in love, often in a place where their familial relationship is not known.

4 – **Spontaneity.** The relationship begins spontaneously, with the romantic/sexual feelings for one another usually developing suddenly after an inciting incident—which differs from fic-to-fic and is sometimes explicitly sexual in nature—instead of any coercion or grooming to feel such emotions. There is usually a passing of time, where these new, budding feelings develop more fully and eventually leads into the initiation of a relationship. In sibling relationships, it is more common for there to be romantic/sexual feelings towards one another in the teenaged/underage years before a full relationship begins.

5 – **Westermarck denial.** The Westermarck effect has zero standing within incest fics. The Westermarck effect was a hypothesis forwarded by Edward Westermarck in 1891 which states that people who grow up together from childhood will not be able to be sexually or romantically attracted to one another.⁴⁷⁰ However this has since been subject to controversy and criticism,⁴⁷¹ given the time-period and colonial framework

⁴⁷⁰ Edward Westermarck *The History of Human Marriage*, 3rd edn (London: Macmillan and Co., 1901), p. 320. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/59386/59386-h/59386-h.htm#CHAPTER_XIV

⁴⁷¹ Arthur P. Wolf, “Explaining The Westermarck Effect”, in *Inbreeding, Incest, And The Incest Taboo: The State Of Knowledge At The Turn Of The Century* (Stanford, California: Stanford, California, 2004), pp. 76-91.

Westermarck was writing within. It has since been found that siblings who were raised apart were more likely to be sexually attracted to one another than those raised together.⁴⁷² However, within many incest-fics the hero and heroine—regardless of whether sibling or parental incest—have been raised together and know each other incredibly well as relatives before the relationship becomes romantic/sexual.

6 – **Acceptance.** While there are a lot of fics which do feature some sort of rejection by friends and family members, there are as many fics where the incest-relationship is accepted by others outside of the relationship. How quickly the incest is accepted by others is variable, but usually the incest ends up being able to be overlooked, so that it does not disturb the utopian depiction of incest featured within so many incest-fics.

There are, however, certainly incest fics which go against one or more of these general guidelines, but from my own observations, most romantic incest fics mirror non-incest romantic fics in that they are about two people who fall in love and just want to be together and happy, regardless of familial connection. It cannot be reiterated often enough that, 99% of the time, *fictional incest is not intended to be realistic and cannot truly be equated with real-life incest experiences*. As briefly mentioned above, authors who write incest fics and readers who read incest fics *are not* endorsing or condoning real-life incest: it is an area for exploration and pursuing the boundaries of fictional characters and situations in the context of *tiefempfunden* authorial fantasy.

What remains intriguing is that incest, within literary fiction, did at one point mirror real-life. As said before, in the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century, cousin marriage was a commonplace practice in Britain, particularly within the upper-class and aristocracy.⁴⁷³ This implies that novels of the time, by writers such as Austen and Brontë reflected this practice by also including cousin marriages, or at least considerations of such a union in their works.⁴⁷⁴ Within modern-day fanfiction there are certainly fics that do contain cousin pairings, although these are usually discarded in favour of the far more forbidden, and illicit, pairings of siblings or father-daughter. Mother-son and father-son fanfictions do exist—in fact one of the most popular pairings within the *Assassin's Creed* fandom on AO3 is Haytham/Connor, who are father and son—but they are normally in the minority.

⁴⁷² Irene Bevc, and Irwin Silverman, “Early Separation and Sibling Incest: A Test of the Revised Westermarck Theory,” *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 21 (2000), 151–61 [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/s1090-5138\(99\)00041-0](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/s1090-5138(99)00041-0)

⁴⁷³ Kuper, p. 18.

⁴⁷⁴ Kuper, p. 31.

Both sibling and father-daughter incest is highly illicit, and it must be stressed that this thesis is *not* about real-life incest, but only fictional incest. It must be mentioned, however, that according to clinicians who have investigated the matter in real-life, modern day incest, or at least incest within the last two and a half centuries, appears to have been surprisingly common, with Herman et al. claiming that around 4-12 percent of all women in the US had had a sexual experience with a relative,⁴⁷⁵ with Lynn Sacco claiming that this figure is actually around the 25-30 percent mark.⁴⁷⁶ These familial sexual encounters are said to be largely made up of fathers who abuse their usually underage daughters,⁴⁷⁷ though Herman et al. and Sacco are looking at purely US demographics, meaning that their discoveries may not necessarily be true for the UK and elsewhere in the world. In another study by Inga Tidefors et al. who looked at sibling incest, found that incest occurred in families with a high level of dysfunction,⁴⁷⁸ often where the abuser had been abused themselves.

What is apparent is that with both sibling and father-daughter real-life incest, the incest itself is not necessarily the main problem: it is the fact that it is child sexual abuse, that happens to be incestuous, which causes such emotional damage, and is primarily about power and control than mutual, consensual love. This makes real-life incest little more than rape and child sexual abuse, with the familial tie only serving to complicate things for the child/young adult, given their supposed caretaker is taking advantage of them.

Real-life incest *cannot* be equated to fics containing fictional incest, even within fics that contain darker aspects to them, depicting harmful and abusive relationships. From personal experience, many incest-fics remove the harm from these relationships by making both parties over the age of consent, and as fully consenting to the incestuous relationship. The Fryceest relationship will here once again be examined, in order to see how many fics do contain some sort of ‘inappropriateness’ beyond the inclusion of incest. There are five fics tagged with ‘rape/non-con’ in the Fryceest tag,⁴⁷⁹ however upon closer examination three fics are multi-fandom fics, and the Fryceest fics within this tag do not contain any form of rape.

⁴⁷⁵ Judith Lewis Herman and Lisa Hirschman, *Father-Daughter Incest*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 12.

⁴⁷⁶ Lynn Sacco, *Unspeakable: Father-Daughter Incest in American History* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), p. 17.

⁴⁷⁷ Sacco, p. 5.

⁴⁷⁸ Inga Tidefors and others, “Sibling Incest: A Literature Review and A Clinical Study”, *Journal Of Sexual Aggression*, 16.3 (2010), 347-360 <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552600903511667>, p. 358.

⁴⁷⁹ “Evie Frye/Jacob Frye & Rape/Non-Con | Archive Of Our Own”, *Archiveofourown.Org* <https://tinyurl.com/mthpjzww> [accessed 29 September 2023]

There are also only eight fics tagged with underage,⁴⁸⁰ meaning that only 9% of fics within the Fryceest tag on AO3 contain some form of rape or underage—which are generally the two markers within real-life incest—showing that the vast majority of Fryceest fics show a genuine, love-filled and above all *consensual* relationship between the twins, a world away from the harm-filled incest of real-life. These fics are therefore an almost Disneyfied version of incest, heavily idealised and detached from reality.

Three of the fics tagged with underage are in Mandarin, but when read through a translator, two have no real indication of their ages and one seems to only imply that there was sexual activity between them as children. One fic, *Disproving Feelings*, has Evie being attracted to Jacob and there is mention of ‘middle school’, though the author states that they are not British, so it is not certain whether they are referring to American or the now-defunct English middle school, which would place the twins at 11-14, although the writing suggests they are older, more around 15-16, but it is never explicitly stated. There is also no explicit sex within this fic, but the sexual tension between the twins is very much evident. It is unfinished, meaning that if future chapters were to be published, they may well have explicit underage sexual content within them.

The other two fics both feature the twins as seventeen-year-olds, with both authors indirectly revealing that they are British, for it is stated that they personally consider the twins to be of age as the age of consent is sixteen in the UK and are merely using the underage tag because online anything under eighteen is considered underage regardless of individual countries’ laws. Both fics are sexually explicit, and one of the fics, *Are You Mine?*, has the highest amount of hits of *any* Fryceest fic—over 21,000⁴⁸¹—showing that including underage is not necessarily a barrier to apparent enjoyment of incest fics, and the fact that an underage fic is the most popular Fryceest fic suggests that it is the element of *consent* which makes incest-fics apparently acceptable. Utilising the soulmate trope may help give these fics validity, may help to create a ‘divine reason’ for them to be together—a reason that would fall apart if the relationship were not entered into willingly.

As mentioned in the introduction, the overall stats on incest fics on AO3 that also contain rape/non-con or underage content shows that there are far more fics containing underage than

⁴⁸⁰ “Evie Frye/Jacob Frye & Underage | Archive Of Our Own”, Archiveofourown.Org <https://tinyurl.com/bdn8ymez> [accessed 29 September 2023]

⁴⁸¹ PoetHrotsvitha, *Are You Mine?* <https://archiveofourown.org/works/8324944/chapters/19066891> [accessed 29 September 2023]

rape, which further suggests that *consent within the incestuous relationship* is vital in allowing an incest-fic to function. It is also important to note that within those fics tagged with rape, the rape may not even occur within the incestuous relationship, as was found within the Frycecest fics. Thus, even within a fic tagged with rape/non-con, the incestuous relationship may well be a consensual, functioning dynamic that echoes the soulmates narrative discussed throughout this chapter and distances it from reality.

What must also be noted is that it does seem somewhat unlikely that fanfiction authors, before writing an incest-fic, would research academic texts discussing real-life incest and its effects on societies and those affected, or more philosophical discourse around whether incest should be allowed or not, and whether inbreeding is the main cause of incest taboos. Most Western fic readers/authors will likely arrive with a societal pre-disposition that ‘incest is a bad, morally reprehensible thing and needs to be avoided at all costs’, and through the act of writing incest fics will discover, as academics have, that incest is not always black and white issue.

Nevertheless, it is understandable that even after writing incest-fics, authors will likely never wish to see or experience incest in real-life—I personally have never encountered a fic author who has stated they wish incest were an accepted thing in society; if anything most fics have a disclaimer that fictional incest does not mean they are condoning real-life incest. This is even more understandable given most people, when thinking of real-life incest, would immediately go to the royal families of Ancient Egypt and the Hapsburgs, both famous for their interbreeding and the health problems that emerged thereafter. This may also help to explain why fic containing incestuous offspring are a rare inclusion in incest-fics, seemingly a step too far for fic-authors, even within such an already controversial relationship dynamic. However, the two fics that will now be explored do contain an incestuous child, to examine how authors do explore this contentious addition.

The fic *I will give you Mine to Hold...*, is a rather more recent fic, having been published in October 2021, showing that the Frycecest fic community on AO3 is still active, even eight years after *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* was originally released. It is also set a considerable amount of time after the events of the original game—London in 1868—for this fic is set two years after WWI with the twins are nearing their 70th birthday.⁴⁸² They are greying now,

⁴⁸² This may have been an oversight by the author, for the twins were born in 1847, meaning they would turn seventy in 1917, during WWI, not two years after it. However, as has been explored in previous chapters, canon is suggestive within fics, and authors are entirely free to ignore it.

wrinkles becoming apparent,⁴⁸³ yet still together after all these years, which already suggests a soulmates narrative given they have been able to survive in this relationship for decades. Above all, they are depicted as happy, and still very much in love, Jacob being described as being Evie's "one true love".⁴⁸⁴

In opening of the fic, they are waiting for their daughter Lydia to arrive at the house. In-game, Lydia Frye appears in a mission within *Syndicate*, and is depicted as being Jacob's granddaughter, helping the war effort during WWI. However, in this fic she has become their daughter, who seems to have grown up with Jacob and Evie as her parents.⁴⁸⁵ It is not stated whether Lydia knows Evie and Jacob are twins, but her relationship does appear to be very close, for Lydia still calls Jacob daddy, even as an adult,⁴⁸⁶ and names her son Jacob.

The inclusion of a grandchild is interesting, for it could help to allay any fears a reader, or even author, may have about the incestuous relationship/family having negative consequences due to excessive inbreeding, or of having an incestuous attraction forming towards the child and becoming something more harm filled. The fact that Lydia's child is fathered by someone unrelated allows the author and characters to avoid incestuous attraction to anyone else and is a clear sign that the incestuous relationship is between Evie and Jacob, and them alone. They are not attracted to anyone else; they have not groomed Lydia to become part of their relationship; it is all about Evie and Jacob's love and their love alone.

The Fryceest fic *I Want Some More*, by PoetHrotsvitha (published in 2016-2017), also contains a child born by Evie and Jacob, but its inclusion of an incest-child is vastly different and is far less saccharine in tone than the previous fic. In this fic Jacob only discovers that he has a child when Evie returns from India with a four-year-old boy in tow, and much of the fic revolves around Jacob coming to terms with the fact that he is a father. Even so, by the end of the fic Evie and Jacob have fallen back in love, although their relationship is being kept a secret from their mother—the fallout of their parents finding out is the main theme of the first fic in the series, *Are You Mine?*, though *I Want Some More* begins with their father's death. Evie and Jacob's son Thomas is also being kept in the dark, for Jacob is helping to raise him as an uncle rather than the fully parental role taken in the other fic. Nevertheless, Jacob is now very much involved, and they are making it work—especially as in the last chapter it is

⁴⁸³ Angel_Baby01, *I will give you Mine to Hold...* (Archive of Our Own, 2021), p. 1.

⁴⁸⁴ Angel_Baby01, p. 6.

⁴⁸⁵ Angel_Baby01, p. 3.

⁴⁸⁶ Angel_Baby01, p. 6.

revealed that Evie is once again pregnant, though this time the father is a donor, and not biologically Jacob's. The author does provide some insight into why they chose to write it this way:

I know there will be a bit of disappointment that Frye Baby #2 isn't biologically Jacob's- but for me, it just wasn't in-character that Evie would roll the dice on that twice. For what it's worth, I'm a big believer in blended families and that family is what you make of it. Plus, I was quite attached to the idea of the contrast, wherein Thomas was biologically Jacob's but he wasn't emotionally there for the pregnancy or early years; this baby won't have Jacob's genes, but he'll be there right from the beginning and have a chance to build that early bond.

[...]

Plus, for a crack fic, I am weirdly committed to the idea of keeping realistic consequences in place for this relationship. Yes, he'll never officially be a full Dad. But that's the price of them being together without absolutely abandoning the rest of their lives. On the plus side, he gets to be with the woman he loves, be regularly and consistently be around two kids that are (for all intents and purposes) his, and fulfil all the father-type roles in their lives. Sounds like a win to me!⁴⁸⁷

Again, this shows a limitation within the inclusion of an incestuous child, with the concrete suggestion that this is where the incest stops; Evie and Jacob will be loving parents to their children and nothing more. This is especially important, given that Thomas was not planned, and Evie and Jacob had broken up before Evie found out she was pregnant, for she had moved to India and Jacob had decided not to follow her.⁴⁸⁸ This fic begins with an Evie and Jacob who have not only been separated, but subsequently not spoken, for four years. Perhaps a far more realistic view of an incestuous relationship—wherein things might not always work out—but it also highlights the soulmates aspect, for the author and reader have a strong sense they are going to end up back together as soon as they see each other again, and Evie and Jacob do indeed end up falling back into each other's arms.

The importance is once again *Evie and Jacob's love*. It can survive and endure. Given this fic being set in a modern alternate universe means that the main narrative is nothing like the canon, in-game narrative, but there is still a firm focus upon the twins, and it has meant

⁴⁸⁷ PoetHrotsvitha, *I Want Some More* (Archive of Our Own, 2016-2017), pp. 118-119.

⁴⁸⁸ PoetHrotsvitha, p. 25.

PoetHrotsvitha has been able to keep their parents alive and explore the what-if of them finding out. There is less acceptance of the incestuous relationship by outsiders within this fic, given Evie tells her mother that she is going to a book club,⁴⁸⁹ when she is actually going to visit Jacob, but this is likely because PoetHrotsvitha's fics are more drama-orientated.

Given incest's status as completely inappropriate, it is perhaps surprising that it is so easy to include a happy, and above all healthy, incestuous relationship within a fic that negates any notion of 'harm', as opposed to a fic containing rape or underage. This may be due to the fact that, within rape and underage, the harm is inherent whereas within fictional incest harm can easily be removed by the inclusion of genuine love and consent. Fics provide the space required to enact this fantasy/desire in a safe and—most importantly—*fictional context*, a unique relationship dynamic, to explore the struggle with the 'we should not be feeling these feelings' emotions, as well as the realisation, and coming to terms with that realisation, that a blood-relative is the only person they ever want to be with.

Fictionality is key to incest-fics being able to exist at all, for as Katrina Busse, in her book *Framing Fanfiction*, argues that:

The argument is one of antirealism, where the appeal is directly dependent on the transgression of shared community norms and the eroticization of sexual acts that are clearly only acceptable within a fictional space. In other words, the very reason rape fiction can be eroticized safely within fan fiction spaces is that everyone agrees that rape and sexual violence are truly despicable crimes in need of punishment.⁴⁹⁰

While this is about rape/non-con fics, the sentiment does apply for incest-fics as well, for as has been said authors will often be explicit stating that incest-fics are *fantasy*, and that they do not enjoy or condone or endorse real-life incest. There is an unstated acceptance of incest's unacceptability and harmfulness within real-life contexts, that the authors *are* writing about fictional characters within fictional worlds. Incest-fics are not trying to be realistic, they are exploring this unique relationship dynamic, exploring what-ifs. Merely including incest in a fic shows a deep level of *tiefempfunden*—for it is all about self-insertion through desires and fantasy, because in the vast majority of cases the incest is added in by the author and *not* present within the original text. Fictional incest chimes with *tiefempfunden*, with the author-centred desire to write about such taboo issues; it is a form of pure self-indulgence and

⁴⁸⁹ PoetHrotsvitha, p. 115.

⁴⁹⁰ Busse, Kristina, *Framing Fan Fiction* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2017), p. 210.

curiosity, but accepted in these fictional spaces because it is an indulgence that can be explored in very few other places or in print.

Incest fanfiction is an extreme form of the soulmate trope/genre, and the fact that those two people happen to be related is also a means through which authors can introduce a romantic barrier/conflict. Yet it is a barrier that can be overcome, for within many incest fics the relationship survives and ends happily, the characters safe in the knowledge that they have each other no matter what.

Conclusion

It is possible to see that romance narratives—both in romance novels and fanfics—are designed to be satisfying and explore *all* of the desires one may not want to experience in real-life. There is an overall expectation of a happy ending within romance novels, and romantic fanfictions often follow this expectation. Within the niche potential of fanfiction, however, there is no need for authors to worry about profits or making readers happy; all fanfic authors really do is write what makes *them* happy, what fulfils *their tiefempfunden* desires.

Though the concept of pushing narrative boundaries allowing for desire and fantasy fulfilment may well be in play here, as explored within the second chapter, the self-imposed limitations of knowing that incest is taboo and considered morally abhorrent may arguably allow for the fantasy to be enacted upon the page. There is a push-pull resistance between indulging in the fantasy and yet fully not endorsing incest in real-life which is perhaps why fic incest is so utopianised, a way for authors to separate their fic situations and fantasies from real-life incest.

What has also been revealed within this chapter is that incest fics do not seem to follow the patterns set by mainstream literature, which depict incestuous relationships as problematic. Fics tend to skew the situation to provide romantic ideals of not just happy endings but depicting fabled soulmates destined to be with one another, regardless of blood ties. While the sample size within this chapter was small, it reflects a wider trend of romantic incest fiction that, from personal reading experience, tends to be the norm within this type of relationship depiction.

From personal insight, the initial struggle of going from familial to romantic love, the drama and pain that this causes, is not just there for the indulgent enjoyment that such drama brings

to both reader and author; the drama is also included to ensure the eventual happy ending feels deserved and worthwhile. Drama has always been a central feature of my incest-fics, drama incited by the push-pull of ‘we should not be doing this, but it feels so right’, of the heightened relationship dynamics that emerge with two characters desperately trying to not fall in love. Trying not to fall for one another is a popular fic trope, but I have found that the inclusion of blood relation—for I personally do not consider fics with adopted family members to be ‘incest’ per se—just makes the inevitably futile denial all the more satisfying.

I stumbled across incest fics in the early 2010s with Holmescest—incest between Sherlock and Mycroft Holmes—back when I was part of the BBC *Sherlock* fandom, along with various incestuous relationships fic authors decided to write about within the early *Assassin’s Creed* games. It spiralled from there to the point where nearly every single one of my fics contain some form of incest. Like with my innate need to create OCs, I find myself exploring the incest trope. I simply cannot help myself. Often the OC is created in order to facilitate the incest, creating new relationships and possibilities not found in the original text, for I prefer to mould the incest and narrative into something personal and unique to myself, and because I gain far more satisfaction from seeing my own personal OC go through trials and tribulations than two stock characters who have history and expectations.

The combination of OCs with the inclusion of incest is truly my form of *tiefempfunden*, where I can feel safe because I am in complete control—of the characters, of the emotions, of how far I want to take things or how dark/unhealthy the relationship will become. Fictional incest for me is not really about enjoying the concept of incest—real-life incest does make me queasy—it is the unique set of relationship dynamics and trials that exist within fictional boundaries, the thrill of something so ‘forbidden’. So I guess it is about the incest, whilst not necessarily *about* the incest—for my fics revolve around characters being so in love with one another that they are willing to do *anything* to make things work, overcome any trial or barrier to be together, that speaks to my inner-romantic. Fictional incest relationships are some of the most *romantic* fics I read and write, for I truly believe there is beauty in the absoluteness with which two characters *choose* to be with each other, though admittedly often this choice is also guided by the soulmates aspect discussed within this chapter—but even then, there is always a conscious choice to choose *love* over everything else.

With incest fics there is a huge *need*, both for authors and readers, to feel *safe* and *comforted* in the knowledge that everything turns out alright in the end, that the pain and temporary

unhappiness is worth it, even within such a socially controversial relationship. The pattern indicates what is wanted is a satisfying ending that fundamentally importantly fits-in with the overarching narrative/theme/tone. A sad, tragic ending—where the characters fall out of love, or one or both character dies—can still be satisfying *if the rest of the fic is similarly dark*. Suitability and context are vital when it comes to deciding the fate of the [incestuous] relationships in fanfiction, whether they live happily ever after or remain nothing more than star-crossed lovers.

Conclusion “My yacht may have sailed, but my ship is comin’ in.”⁴⁹¹

This thesis is all about is the concept of *tiefempfunden*, the self-insertion that manifests itself in fics in ways that may be completely overt—as seen with the literal self-insertion within reader fics—whilst equally the self-insertion may only be visible to the author or may not even be a conscious inclusion. That is the beauty of *tiefempfunden*: its inclusion can be as little or as pronounced as the author wants; it is entirely shades of grey (yes, a terrible pun, I am aware) rather than a stark either/or. It can be far more extensive than just the egotistical, unfiltered desires of inexperience that are considered the defining features of the Mary-Sue character archetype. No, *tiefempfunden* is present within the fics of even the most experienced, celebrated, and prolific fic-authors, ingrained within the desires and situations and narratives and characters they write about. *Desire* is key to *tiefempfunden*, for it is within the fictional four walls or endless meadow of fanfiction that desires can be properly explored, no matter how depraved-seeming, saccharine, unconventional, inappropriate, or impossible in real-life they might be.

As stated within the introduction, introducing *tiefempfunden* in academic lexicon created a nexus-point around which each of the five chapters in this thesis could revolve:

In chapter one, I found that, despite the negative assumptions about the Mary Sue and self-insertion within fics, such aspects are nevertheless rife within fanfiction, and are happily accepted by authors and readers alike. *Tiefempfunden* is demonstrated within the personalised PCs found within games, which players/authors have expanded with unique personalities, appearances, and quirks—which are then translated into fics, as an acceptable form of self-insertion because of the personalised nature of adapting the original text. Reader fics are an even more explicit form of self-insertion, yet they are accepted because writers are upfront that desire and fantasy—usually sexual in nature—are the entire point to these fics, and because they are properly coded as allowing such explicit self-insertion.

Chapter two identifies *tiefempfunden* romantic and sexual desire within fics containing inappropriate relationships, and recognising that fanfiction offers a safe space to explore ‘forbidden’ things and enjoy them—because the *fictionality* offered is vital in allowing such relationships to be enjoyable and successful as a romantic or sexual fantasy. *Tiefempfunden*

⁴⁹¹ *Real Housewives of New York City*, Sonja Morgan, season 7 tagline

allows authors and readers to temporarily imagine themselves or their beloved characters in a student/teacher relationship, or having an adulterous affair, or merely a relationship dynamic that they would not want to experience in real-life, whilst feeling safe in the knowledge that they can remove themselves from the fantasy at any point in time.

Chapter three explored a more subtle form of *tiefempfunden*, which occurs through the enjoyment found within re-expositions of character appearance, even though authors and readers likely already know what a character looks like. Indulgence of appearance descriptions demonstrates a willingness to engage with the fantasy of a beloved character. Action and appearance also go hand in hand, for describing a sex scene would be difficult without describing emotions upon a face or how a character's body looks, providing another avenue of *tiefempfunden*. How masculinity is portrayed in a fic also provides a subtle form of *tiefempfunden*, for authors are able to let more hypermasculine characters have a softer side, or vice versa, showing self-insertion via the ability to change and alter worlds and characters within fics to suit authorial desires and fantasies.

Chapter four saw how the romantic trope of the barrier/conflict allowed for *tiefempfunden* because such drama provides a relationship-base that can withstand any storm. Conflict also provides familiarity in allowing fic-authors to explore and reinterpret a dramatic event found within the original text, multiple times in varying ways if wanted; as well as allowing fic-authors space to explore conflicts and the fallout thereof at their own leisure, in order to process any emotional responses felt by both authors and in-fic characters. *Tiefempfunden* occurs within these reinterpretations as a demonstration of authorial will, that fic-authors only have to take with them the elements from the original text that *they* wish to take with. Canon is a pliable thing within fanfiction.

Lastly, chapter five showed how *tiefempfunden* can emerge through an author's desire to explore a relationship dynamic that is completely forbidden and taboo within much of the real-life world. Incest was chosen due to fic familiarity, but the very fact that fanfiction allows the space to explore such desires is so important, given *fictionality* is key to exploring them in the first place. Fictional incest may not be a personal desire, as an author will likely never wish to experience it in real-life, but there nevertheless might be a part of them which desires of exploring such an extreme relationship dynamic, of how such a taboo relationship would even exist or work—and, as shown, many fics allow for a happy ending, perhaps

reflecting another aspect of *tiefempfunden*, that happy endings can occur even in the most unusual of relationships.

Perhaps the most vivid realisation emerging from this thesis is that, despite fanfictions poaching narrative conventions from genres such as romance, drama, sci-fi and fantasy, *fanfiction has become a genre of its very own*, regardless of whether the characters and worlds come from books, films, TV, or video games, because fanfiction functions on a fundamentally different level to traditionally published novels—they are fuelled by desire, and *tiefempfunden* merely helps that desire to be translated into fic.

Fanfics are a community driven phenomenon. Fics are written for the love and passion—and sometimes anger and betrayal—felt for the original texts. They are motivated by fans, and because of their (still relatively) underground, niche status, are not beholden to the same limitations as traditionally published texts; this does mean that ‘quality’ varies wildly from author to author although arguably the same could be said for traditionally published novels. What is most important is that fics are all linked by their focus upon *character* and *character-relationships*, regardless of whether they are platonic, romantic, or purely sexual. Narrative is allowed a back-seat in favour of characters and *situations*. The same romantic conventions studied throughout this thesis can be applied to a *Twilight* incest fic, or a *Gossip Girl* OC student-teacher fic.

I have, in this thesis, focused upon the unique relationship that occurs between a player and a personalised PC that allows for a deeper connection than a non-customisable PC; this means self-insertion becomes possible and acceptable when using a personalised PC within a fic. The unique qualities possessed by a personalised PC is an area that needs more academic research and attention within both games theory and fanfiction studies.

However, the romantic conventions—the happy ending, soulmates, appearance, and barrier/conflict—as well as the discussions around *tiefempfunden* and self-insertion, can apply to *all* kinds of romantic fanfiction originating from *any* original text, which was the intention from the off, for I strongly believe that trying to enforce overarching limitations or tell authors what they can or cannot write is antithesis to the spirit of fanfiction. As mentioned above, fanfiction relies on the authors who write them, on the readers who read them, and on the communities that discuss and explore these infinite relationship possibilities. As explored in chapter two, personal limitations and fandom-specific conventions are both vital in creating the desires and fantasies central to *tiefempfunden*; however, I argue that

trying to restrict fanfiction as a whole, like decrying authors who create Mary Sues, will only lead to *harming* those who write fics, who dedicate their love and energy in taking original texts and running with them without boundaries or conventional limitations. Fanfiction is not a competition to see who can write the best fic, it is something that anyone can write for *any* reason—a fic-author may not even care about becoming a ‘better’ writer or appeasing anyone else—and it feels egregious to state anything else, or to argue that things like the Mary Sue should be discouraged because they are ‘bad’ writing, for what constitutes ‘bad’ writing within fanfiction anyway? One woman’s comfort fic is another woman’s nightmare.

Looking forward and to the future, I hope that this thesis will spark off more discussions about romantic fanfiction, as well as a destigmatising of romance novels and narratives, that these narratives should not be written off as being nothing but frivolous or trashy, and I also hope that such discussions extend into the academic discourse. I argue that considerable emotional impact can be achieved within fictional romantic relationships, and exploring such relationships can also seek to answer questions of *humanity* and where societal boundaries lie. I also hope that this thesis will spark off more discussions around other forms of inappropriate relationships within fanfiction studies, and of how they are represented—or not—within popular media. Fanfiction has the unique status of being written for love, not profit, but this means that critiques of content, like incest, often comes from other fic-authors, and this self-policing too needs to be examined within academia.

Video game fanfiction also needs to be brought to wider academic attention because it is becoming more and more prevalent online, and as shown within this thesis, produces a unique form of fanfiction thanks to the hybridising of an active, visual medium into a written one. Game fics also highlight the limitations found within games, especially when it comes to romantic narratives, for often authors will have to turn to fic in order to explore a relationship that is in-game predominantly rather formulaic and shallow, as well as often being secondary to the main game narrative. Fic allows relationships to take centre-stage, even if one of the characters was not actually romanceable in-game—which highlights another limitation: players do not always choose who they become attracted too, and developers cannot make every single NPC romanceable.

Tiefempfunden allows for authors to place a barrier between themselves and their fantasies in a way that allows for fic-inserts without explicit self-insertion, whilst also allowing authors to directly insert their fantasies. Desire is such a highly personal concept, and I hope this thesis

assists fic-authors in committing and exploring those desires within fanfiction, for fanfiction is a great passion within my life, and I truly believe fanfiction deserves all the love and respect and recognition as its own, *worthwhile* literary art form.

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