# A Tale of Two Heteronormative sites: Considering Militaries and (Video)Gaming

A thesis submitted in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of PhD

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**Summary:**


*A Tale of Two Heteronormative sites: Considering Militaries and (Video)Gaming*

By Ciaran Devlin

This thesis explores two sites that have traditionally been associated with heteronormative masculinity (militaries and videogames). Through the use of qualitative methodologies, it seeks to unearth and examine the ways through which this ideology is maintained and policed in relation to gender and sexuality.


Increasing attention and demand has been given to the inclusion of women and other minorities within the setting of militaries and peacekeeping. This has primarily been in the form of international and national policies (e.g. Resolution 1325). Despite this, there remains a stalled and stymied progress towards achieving these aims and increasing the diversity of these organisations. Within videogames and contrary to the popular stereotype of gamers as young, white, males, it is increasingly reported that more diverse groups of people are playing videogames (e.g. ESA, 2019). Additionally, this thesis considers videogames as cultural and ideological artifacts in their own right (Murray, 2018), and as such it is important to critically reflect on and explore them in this way. This thesis highlights the importance of exploring the persistence of heteronormative masculinity and how it manifests and regulates itself in more subtle and nuanced ways – for example through symbolic violence. It suggests that the continuing and institutionally embedded heteronormative masculinity within these sites is responsible for making it difficult for these people to fully participate, and accounts for the stymied progress and change within both sites.


Within the interviews conducted with military personnel participating in peacekeeping, there is a tendency to continue to deploy discourses and framings of gender and sexuality in traditional and heteronormative ways. While within the gaming contexts observed, similar strategies of seeking to present 'objective' realities is also observed. Using 'close reading', this thesis also considers the ways through which videogames, via their designs and mechanics, also act to inform and are utilised in said policing and regulating strategies.

**For Mom and Dad**

**Acknowledgements:**

There are a wide variety of individuals to whom I am deeply and completely thankful for their help and assistance to get me to the finish line. First and foremost, to those who participated and are referenced in this research.

To Corrin, for being my rock throughout this whole process, for calming the storms, for keeping me moving forward always. For offering to listen to me while I vented my thoughts, for bouncing ideas back and forth and overall, for enduring me preaching and pontificating. You will never know just how much each second of assistance has meant to me.

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My family, another support network I could not have completed this without. It's been as hard and tough four years for you as it has been for me but again, you have helped me moving forward to see it through. Of course, chief among my acknowledgements is also to you for allowing and facilitating my interest and fascination with videogames from a young age, it's got me this far, let's see where else it might lead.

As videogames are a core element of my thesis as well as my daily life, I would be remiss if I did not take a moment to thank the communities and friends that I discovered while gaming. Even during this thesis, you quickly became bastions of positivity and encouragement that never ceased to make me laugh even when at my most stressed. Those ripples of kindness were deeply powerful and reassuring.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

"Moving from fan problems to academic ones exposes this gamer trouble in particular to be more than just a struggle over the definition of *gamer* or *video game* but part of a more diffuse process that disciplines critics of white supremacist cisheteropatriarchy[1]. This process allows dominant actors to refigure the defensive acts committed by the marginalized as an assault on the dominant collective, thereby recasting their own dominant assaults as acts of defence." **(Phillips, 2020, pg. 32)**

**1.1 Introduction:**

This thesis is entitled "A Tale of Two Heteronormative Sites: Considering Militaries and (Video)Gaming". It seeks to unearth and explore the experiences and realities of individuals within spaces and institutions that are traditionally, and dominantly, associated with heteronormative masculinity. Through a qualitative methodology, this thesis considers contemporary challenges to this dominance, and the responses, and how they maintain and regulate these dominant associations and the ideologies found within these spaces. There is also an overall holistic and auto-ethnographic element to this research project whereby I explicitly locate and acknowledge myself within the processes of this research.

As stated, these chosen sites have been traditionally viewed as heteronormative masculine contexts. Both sites are also facing challenges to this perceived heteronormativity. These respective challenges are that: 1) armed military forces from

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[1] Cisheteropatriarchy draws from the concept of heteropatriarchy, of which the latter is defined as a term for the broader system of masculine dominance vis-à-vis the "institution of compulsory heterosexuality" (Yep, 2003, pg.31). Cisheteropatriarchy thus expands on this by taking into consideration the role and power dynamics of conforming and meeting the normative expectations of one's assigned gender at birth.

Europe are now increasingly having to modify their traditional militaristic masculinity to participate in peacekeeping and humanitarian missions, which brings new-found and gendered expectations/associations for the personnel involved; and 2) videogames, which contrary to the traditional popular imagination, are played and have been played by a much greater diversity of people, who are now seeking to be seen and to renegotiate the medium to reflect this reality, and again encounter nuanced resistance to this challenge .[2]

This thesis is primarily concerned with the impacts and realities of these renegotiations on military personnel and videogamers. These renegotiations are heavily grounded in the politics of gender and sexuality – which I will explore further in the forthcoming literature chapter (Chapter 2). These two concepts are intertwined as the maintenance and regulation of gender is inherently the maintenance and regulation of sexuality (this is clearly visible within in the works of Herbert, 1998; Konik and Cortina, 2008; Martino, 2000; Sundevall and Persson, 2016).

Both militaries and videogames (the latter including both the companies that produce the games, and the players themselves) are no longer the sole preserve of male, heterosexual, and usually white actors (if one can even claim that they ever truly were). Militaries now actively recruit women, LGBTQ people, and people of colour to join. Videogame

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[2] I deploy the term 'videogames' throughout this thesis in contrast to some of the other variants of 'video games', 'digital games' and so forth. Additionally, when I refer to videogames, I am referring to those games played via dedicated gaming consoles (portable and non-portable), such as the PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Personal Computer, Nintendo Switch, Nintendo DS and so on.

developers are creating games that feature more seemingly diverse opportunities of play, for example more female characters and the opportunity to play characters from a range of genders and sexualities. However, in both sites, there has been resistance to, as well as a welcoming of, these strides towards greater diversity. Equality legislation and policy makes it clear that resistance is officially not allowed/tolerated. Nevertheless, there is limited progress in both spheres in terms of numbers and the culture of the sites indicate that official regulation has run into difficulties.

To explore why this is so, this thesis is concerned with the specific experiences of a) the individuals within both sites who are part of the process of challenging the previously dominant culture and ideologies; and b) what the response is to this diversity and attempts at change by the individuals who comprise the traditionally dominant demographic and cultural cohort. How are these areas, and the personnel found within them, being formally and informally managed, regulated, and are particular ideologies being promoted, at the expense of others?

As has been the case with 'feminism' in recent years, the term and concept, 'diversity,' has become a critical site of contention and a locus for political and social commentary across many sectors and contexts within society. At the centre of these commentaries and discourses is the exploration of the processes of continuity and the adaptive mechanisms through which (hetero)normative masculine ideologies maintain their presence, reinscribe their position, and seek to further dismiss and de-legitimise the critiques that challenge the status quo. Considering the manifestations and regulations of the politics of

gender and sexuality[3] makes visible, and more evident, the fight for survival between these multiple ideologies (survival of traditional ideology, and survival of contrasting ideologies).

Chapter 2 will discuss in greater detail some of the similarities and core theories/concepts for both of these sites, and in doing so, highlight the rationale for exploring both sites within the same thesis instead of exploring one or the other. Perhaps one of the most visible links/similarities being that of 'violence', and its relationship with both gender and sexuality. In the case of traditional militaristic settings, such as military organisations, and indeed many of the state-level organisations for law and keeping the peace, masculinity has been a long-lasting and central defining ideology underpinning their self-conceptions and the ways through which their image became constructed (Connell, 2002; Connell, 2005; Digby, 2014).

The same association with violence and the threat of violence is visible within videogames, their players, and the broader gaming culture. The dominant culture of videogames is embedded in a broader Internet culture, where women, LGBTQ people, and people of colour are much more likely to receive violent threats based on their gender, sexuality, or colour/ ethnicity. This is evident in the well-documented vitriol and disinhibition (Suler,

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[3] I am deploying a critical analysis and engagement with 'gender' and 'sexuality' throughout this thesis, though this is not to say I am ignoring or dismissing the importance of other intersectional constructs of marginality such as race, ableism, class and so forth. Among other reasons, it was primarily due to the limitations and scope of this thesis that gender and sexuality were chosen above some others. I explain further in Chapter 3 why gender and sexuality made particular sense to me to explore together in relation to masculinity politics.

2004), particularly towards women, queer folk and other minorities speaking up and speaking out within the medium of videogames and the Internet more broadly (Chess, 2020; Consalvo, 2012; Phillips, 2020; Ruberg and Shaw, 2017).

**1.2 Goal and Research Question(s):**

The goal of diversity, equality and equity, and the backlash against this goal, is an increasingly important issue within society, and is particularly manifest within those fields that have been traditionally deemed to be masculine and heteronormative. The military and videogames are two such fields. To understand, and better challenge, the continuance of heteronormative masculinity, regardless of context, it is important to review and explore the structures, processes, and everyday actions that enable and encourage its formation, as well as its perseverance. Phillips (2020) compares and discusses, for example, the policing and politics of silencing feminists and other marginalised folk within videogames to the broader patterns of controlling knowledge production from within their field of academic research. Their suggestion is that it is important to consider the structures rather than the results of these boundary regulations. This thesis aims to contribute to the understanding of the more nuanced ways in which issues around gender and sexuality manifest in these areas, and how resistance plays (both figuratively and literally) out through the 'regulation' of non-heteronormative masculinities.

**1.2.1 Research Questions guiding the Thesis:**

As this research is both qualitative and explorative in nature, the research questions guiding this project did not function as hypotheses, but rather as signposts and framings for how to progress and investigate both sites. Several questions drove this thesis, and while some questions specifically focused on particular sites such as within the military peacekeeping setting, other questions were more relevant to the context of videogames. That being said, heteronormative masculinity, its manifestations and persistent regulation and management remained as the core objective of the research throughout and irrespective of the specific field under examination at any one time. For this thesis, it was important to explore and draw attention to the often-concealed machinations of this concept as it will inform and enable us to question and reflect more on its role and impact on society and our everyday lives. With this in mind, the guiding questions driving this thesis are as follows:


- How is gender and sexuality being regulated among military personnel participating in peacekeeping missions?

- How is gender and sexuality being regulated among videogame players?

If we consider videogames as a medium with self-contained ideologies, and additionally to be premised on (if not defined by) 'interactivity' and 'play':

- How (if at all) do the designs and mechanics of a videogame inform us of particular ideologies, and how are these then interacted with by the players?

**1.3 Exploring some Initial Context:**

It is my objective within this research to showcase that (heteronormative) masculinity has a particular relationship with power and privilege, one that determines the lived experiences of many other individuals, often detrimentally. This power relationship pervades society and to dismantle it requires an understanding of how it works in subtle ways to preserve the status quo. Understanding how it works through exploring two seemingly disparate fields – the military and videogames – will advance our empirical and theoretical understanding of the regulation of gender and sexuality, particularly the overall protection of heteronormative masculinity[4].

While it is perhaps easy to consider videogames as wholly unique when compared to more 'offline' areas of social life such as the military; drawing a thread and connection between both was of vital importance to this thesis (and is discussed in more detail in the following chapter). Indeed, videogames share a variety of similarities with other media in relation to their ideologies, views of the world, and indeed many aspects pertinent to the representation of gender and sexuality.

> "Many contemporary video games employ the conventions, genres and iconography of traditional media, belong to the same horizontally-integrated culture industry as contemporary film, television, novels, advertising, newspapers

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[4] I should stress that it is not my intent to demonise masculinity or those that adhere to or identify as such, - for I myself still identify as a cis-gender (though effeminate at times) male. Rather the use of heteronormative masculinity throughout this thesis is in relation to the unequal power structures and marginalisation politics associated with it.

and magazines, draw upon common ideological formations and constructions of social identity" (Kirkland, 2005, pg.176)

I posit that these ideological formations, - namely the ideologies of heteronormative masculinity, its regulations and shared beliefs surrounding gender and sexuality - are shared not only among these media industries but draw from other traditional realms associated with heteronormativity. This belief serves to disrupt the idea of online and in-game worlds as completely separate spheres, as expressed in ideas like the 'magic circle' (Huizinga, 1955). In terms of gender and sexuality itself, we might consider one of the titles of work from Adrienne Shaw to dispel the myth of gender regulation as unique to online worlds, namely that: "The Internet Is Full of Jerks, Because the World is Full of Jerks…" (Shaw, 2014). The forms of gender regulations found in online and videogame settings are not isolated from the relations observed offline, many online social interactions are informed by and contribute to offline interactions and beliefs also.

It is not just the 'online' and 'offline' realities of heteronormative masculinity that are important to note in this thesis, but also the broader patterns of socialisation, and the processes behind the creation of these ideologies surrounding gender and sexuality, which will be discussed and explored further in the forthcoming chapters of this thesis. Other areas of social life, such as sport, can act as a process to 'toughen up' males, making them more ready to enact and inhabit warrior masculinity inherent in dominant forms of masculinity (Digby, 2014). These same cultural ideas of masculinity are encouraged and informed by the participation with other areas of social life such as videogames (as will be

explored in the following chapter). Videogames are viewed as masculine in their traditional orientation, and by virtue of players' participation, they encounter, and 'play,' with these ideologies in turn.

I Disentangle the regulations of some military cultures and their relationships with heteronormativity, and do the same with videogames, to showcase and explore whether the central tenets of heteronormative masculinity transcends specific contexts. While doing so, I offer insights into the contemporary reality and complexity of modern gender and sexuality politics.

### 1.3.1 Militaries and their Personnel:

As militaries and military personnel are the first area of focus/exploration in this thesis, it is important to outline some of the relevant issues and challenges surrounding gender and sexuality that are present in this area. Militaries face a recruitment crisis as technology developments mean brains more than brawn are required (de Volo, 2016; Digby, 2014). In many cases and for many national militaries, the most common reason for deployment increasingly revolves around disaster relief and peacekeeping (DeGroot, 2001). Particularly with the latter, we find that the 'soft' skills of empathy, gender and cultural awareness etc are required by their mandate of cooperation and keeping the peace. This sits uncomfortably not only with the organization's traditional 'raison d'etre' but also highlights its difficulties due to the typical military organization's lack of women and diversity, and its heteronormative institutional culture. Equality policies – for example

arguably the most well-known being Resolution 1325 (2000) have increased the number of women and LGBTQ personnel and provided a regulatory framework that aspires to greater diversity, but despite this, the numbers of women and ethnic and sexual minorities have plateaued at both the international[5] and national levels[6]. I posit that the reason for the regulatory changes limited success is a persistent heteronormative institutional culture that makes military organizations and the gaming industry unwelcoming in ways that are not obvious until one accesses the experiences of groups, whose members are in a numerical minority, in these fields.

### 1.3.2 Videogames and Players:

The militaries participating in peacekeeping are now actively seeking more diverse individuals such as women and LGBTQ folk to become personnel. In contrast videogames are not calling for women, queer and others to *become* players, rather these individuals have always been within this space (Ruberg, 2019b). They have been silenced and ignored from the everyday popular conversations and broader culture of gaming, in favour of the creation of a normative heterosexual masculinity. The presence of more diverse players within gaming has relatively recently become documented through yearly statistical reports such as the Entertainment Software Association with its reporting that the

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[5] Among UN peacekeeping missions, women have been reported to account for approximately 4% of UN staff globally, representing 3% of UN military personnel, and around 9.7% of police personnel (Dharmapuri, 2013). Additionally, more recent studies and reports are still placing the total percentage of women participating in these missions at around 4.5% (SecurityWomen.org, 2018). For further breakdowns of gender participation in United Nations missions, see for example UN, 2018a, UN, 2018b, and United Nations Peacekeeping (latter retrieved from: https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/gender/).

[6] For example, if we consider the Irish military, reporting from 2015 to present has had the proportions of female members at between 6%-7.1% (Brennan, 2015; Kelleher, 2018; Michael, 2020). With commitments seeking to double this proportion from 6% to 12% by 2022 (Merrion Street, 2017).

number of females playing games is almost equal to the number of males (ESA, 2019; 2018; 2017).



(**Figure 1:** The Entertainment Software Association, 2019. "2019 Essential Facts about the Computer and Videogame Industry" ([https://www.theesa.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/ESA_Essential_facts_2019_final.pdf](https://www.theesa.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/ESA_Essential_facts_2019_final.pdf)) .

Despite the more diverse player base, videogames have an apparent and well-documented "diversity problem" (Gilsenan, 2019). The medium is critiqued in relation to the content of videogames, and the practices behind videogame creation and engagement, and of players' communities, which are characterized by a lack of diversity.

One of the issues behind the diversity problem stems from the demographics of the companies creating videogames (Ramanan, 2017). While some report the number of women within the videogame industry increased as high as 22% in 2014 (Makuch, 2014 - cited in Chess, 2020, pg.11), this does not automatically alter the prevailing dominant

ideologies of the sector and institutional culture. Again, while we may observe nominal increases in the amount of persons entering into these institutional cultures, their presence does not automatically result in change. I posit that it is through listening to the experiences of these individuals that the subtleties and nuances behind the reactions and continuance of traditional cultures is vitally important to understand and assess the realities of these sites as well as the forms of resistance deployed.

**1.4 Why me? And why this topic?**

As with other research and researchers, this thesis is a product of my own positionality and subjectivity. This thesis owes its genesis to a combination of personal experiences with the regulation of gender and sexuality in my personal life, as well as previous research I had done around gender and sexuality within videogames[7]. Personal experience is an important dimension to acknowledge for its influence and the way it helped me to frame and consciously approach this research project.

> "Being a self-reflexive researcher is an ongoing project. What you know and what you can find out in your research is very much enabled and constrained by your own positionality." (Humphreys, 2019, pg. 831).

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[7] My undergraduate thesis was entitled ""Gayme On": An Exploration of the Impact of Introducing LGBT content into a Mainstream Video Game Series" and explored via open-ended survey the ways that players responded to and engaged with (or not) the presence of LGBTQ content (namely characters and romance options) within a popular videogame franchise. This was later published as Devlin and Holohan, (2016).

The overall engagement within this PhD is in relation to ideas of normativity, of the societal power and privilege of a particular group, specifically heterosexual males – though of course many other identification categories could also be added here, but gender and sexuality in relation to masculinity are the core of engagement within this thesis. The thesis uses a number of contexts to explore the transitions, everyday subtleties in regulation, and the processes through which normative heterosexual masculinities are resisting, adapting and maintaining their presence within society. It was this that made me thing about how I came to this as a research objective, as an area of inquiry, and indeed there are a few memories that (eventually) came to mind, some more or less whimsical than others – but that's a matter of personal opinion of course. The objective of telling both of these stories is to highlight the pervasiveness of this heteronormative ideology.

One of my earliest memories from my childhood was with my siblings down in my grandfathers' field, multiple times each year I took it upon myself to help with any weeds that had taken root. Though seemingly irrelevant it wasn't until sitting down trying to draw on my experiences that this memory came to the fore of my mind, particularly in the process of weed-removal. I turned it into a game, and my siblings and I used our imaginations to perceive the weeds as an evil army that had literally taken root in the field. I assigned myself the role of protector of the field, with my two brothers as commander and knight respectively, and lastly I assigned my sister the role of 'princess'. She could not fight – but instead had to watch – as we 'fought' our way through the weeds.

A second memory that came to mind stems from a constant awareness (initially as an

unconscious awareness) that I was not *truly* 'one of the boys', whether it was in the family

(for example a failure to develop an interest in football); in school (my childhood playtime

revolved around wanting to play games like handstands and 40-40, rather than football –

the latter being the sole activity that 'the boys' occupied themselves with). Or even more

personally, where I had explicitly taken action, through my teenage years in particular, to

conceal my sexual orientation (from the first moment I labelled myself and identified a

sexual orientation per se) and took many measures to *pass* as straight across my daily life

and its many separate contexts – for example where I had feigned to have a crush on a

girl when asked by the other boys in my class.  These practices did not shield me from

these normative regulations completely; I was often on the receiving end of being called

'pansy', 'sissy', 'fag' or simply 'gay' for the moments when I slipped up or dropped my

guise momentarily.


The above anecdotes and personal experiences highlight the multitude of ways through

which I have been face to face with the ideologies regulating gender and sexuality while

growing up, but also the exhaustive and constant effort that can be put into the work of

'passing'[8]. I feel that this resulted in me being consciously aware of the gendered

expectations that were placed upon me by society in relation to my cisgender male

identity, and in relation to actively concealed and managed sexual orientation from a

young age. This combination made me acutely aware of the politics, regulations, and

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[8] I would like to acknowledge the privilege associated with being able to participate in the practice of 'passing'; in my case it was things like my racial identity and outward gendered appearance that made it easier to engage with these practices.

expectations of gender and sexuality – specifically in relation to heteropatriarchal politics. An awareness that I still reflect on today and deploy within this research.

**1.5 Brief Summary of Forthcoming Chapters:**

Chapter 2 provides further insight into the broader literature I deemed relevant and engaged with in relation to the fields of study gaming, militaristic institutional cultures, gender, masculinity and sexuality. The chapter also includes a discussion of some of the main theoretical orientations guiding this research endeavour, including the work of Bourdieu, Butler, and Connell in relation to gender politics and theories of the performativity, symbolic violence, and power associated with gender and sexuality practices. I also consider some literatures relevant to each of the sites under exploration within later chapters of this thesis – militaries participating in peacekeeping and videogames.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the methodological structure and research tools utilised throughout this research as I address the research questions outlined earlier. The methodology chapter also provides some discussion and insights into the personal subjectivities and broader research considerations that are relevant to this dissertation. In the chapter I make the case for why I used a qualitative methodology and how it is particularly salient and useful for exploring the more nuanced nature of gender and sexuality regulation in informal and formal locations.

Chapter 4 marks the beginning of the findings, analysis and discussion sections of the thesis. This chapter explores the role, regulation and function of discourses surrounding gender and sexuality within the Irish and Finnish militaries deployed on peacekeeping missions. I analyse the regulation of sexuality as experienced by personnel on missions, and how this perpetuates the dominance of heteronormativity/heteropatriarchy. This chapter's data came from my work on the Gaming for Peace project (GAP) – which will also be outlined more in this chapter and the previous methods chapter – and draws on interviews with peacekeeping members of both the Irish and Finnish militaries. The basis of this chapter is to formulate and explore formally institutionalised traditional masculine cultures. This provides the basis for the comparison with the contemporary masculine culture of videogames.

In Chapter 5 I explore how players in videogames regulate one another, in many cases utilising the same ideas of game structures and forms to inform and legitimise their defence and discourses. I present a case study of '*Assassins Creed: Odyssey'* (Ubisoft, 2018) and the controversy surrounding one of its Downloadable content (DLC) called *The Legacy of the First Blade*. This chapter consists of an analysis of around 1,000 forum thread comments on the controversy, and is accompanied by my own gameplay experience, to explicate the ways through which gendered and sexual orientated ideologies manifest and become legitimised in the popular discourses observed within this forum thread.

Chapter 6 explores and engages with forms through which gender and sexuality and their accompanying ideologies are embedded within a specific videogame title, the chapter

uses the videogame '*A Plague Tale: Innocence*' (Asobo Studios, 2019) as its case study. The 'data' for this chapter is my own gameplay, and from this, my analysis of the game and its embedded systems of ideology, and its manifestations and reading of heteronormativity, within the context of the games design. This chapter seeks to continue the work of other scholars within queer game studies through exploring more than just representations, but also the mechanics and design of games as tools of ideology and political power, these same structures which can also represent queerness. The chapter considers more specifically the mechanical and design structures within the game as ideologically embedded tools for portraying and continuing traditional notions and expectations of heteronormative masculinity.

Chapter 7 provides a conclusion to this thesis. The chapter provides a final overview and reflection on the empirical and theoretical contributions of this thesis. It also takes a moment to consider some of the limitations and the avenues of remedy to these limitations through future research. Future research suggestions are also made in relation to projects and ideas that will continue to address and highlight conversations around gender and sexuality and the regulatory matrix of the heteropatriarchy in other fields.

**Chapter 2: Exploring the Literature**


"Gamers are still convinced that there are only:

Two races: White and "political"

Two genders: Male and "political"

Two hair styles for women: long and "political"

Two body types: normative and "political""

**(Emma Vossen, PhD. Twitter Tweet. 2019.)**


"Lying at the very core of peacekeeping is a contradiction: on the one hand, it depends on the individuals (mostly men) who have been constructed as soldiers, and on the other hand, it demands that they deny many of the traits they have come to understand being a soldier entails." **(Whitworth, 2004. Pg.3)**


**2.1 Introduction:**

The goal of this chapter is to discuss and outline the theory and literatures that inform this thesis. Before exploring and discussing the literatures and research that are relevant and specific to the contexts of videogames and militaries and peacekeeping. I will firstly outline some of the core theory and concepts that not only inform the theoretical framework of this research project, but also remain crucial to this thesis' approach to gender, sexuality, and heteronormativity. Following on from this, we will later discuss literatures and research in the that are relevant to both sites under examination in this thesis – namely militaries participating in peacekeeping and videogames.

This thesis, at its core, explores the regulation of gender and sexuality within two traditionally male and heteronormative settings, namely within militaries and within videogames. As we will see later in this chapter both of these sites, regardless of this traditional ideological association with heteronormativity, are experiencing their own forms of contestation through demographic changes and broader challenges to the established ideologies of gender and sexuality. The result of (or rather the reaction to) this provides ample context through which heteronormative masculinity must react and seek to maintain its established dominant grip and position within the social hierarchies of these settings, as such it becomes critically important to explore and consider 'how' heteronormative masculinity etc is attempting to maintain its status via performances and regulations.

Through its engagement with theory and concepts, this thesis aims to apply the critical lens back on the otherwise concealed concept of heterosexual masculinity that has often defined both of these spaces, and specifically seeks to unearth and explore the subtle and nuanced processes that not only create the concept itself, but also act to maintain its status and dominance within many social environments. In order to do so, this thesis considers the performative and ritualistic nature of gender (and sexuality) – and particularly heteronormative masculinity - as social constructs borne of performance and repetition – much like the role of performance within broader social reality. These processes and performances also act, not only to promote ideas that heterosexuality etc are 'natural' (or connotatively 'neutral') states of being, but also simultaneously act to make hypervisible deviations from this. The additional, and arguably more critical result

of this being the concealment of processes of orientation and the processes of 'straightening' of bodies along heteronormative lines.

Many of the rituals, ceremonies and performances tied to the creation of gender and sexuality (and heteronormativity) are also familiar to institutional settings and the maintenance of their values and embedded ideologies (not least of all their embedded gender ideologies as inherently *gendered* institutions). In fact, while this thesis considers institutions themselves to be gendered entities, not only ideologically but also proportionally, it will come as no surprise that they often promote and encourage a form of institutionalised heterosexuality through membership and participation.

What this means for those who participate and are a part of this institutional setting but perhaps 'fail' at these performances etc, is that they must deal with regulatory enforcement and normative restrictions that seek to maintain heteronormativity, through overt, - and more critically for this thesis - through subtle and nuanced means. These processes of policing and regulation along heteronormative lines acts to shape the realities of individuals within these sites according to ideas of what is acceptable and 'normative' and what is not. A core form of regulation and the policing of gender and sexuality that this thesis considers is the role of 'symbolic violence' and its contribution to masculine dominance in these sites.

It is the above that represents the approach that this thesis aligns itself in its pursuit to unearth and explore these sites in relation to gender, sexuality, and the regulation of heteronormativity. As such, we will now discuss and consider these themes and theories more in depth.

**2.2 Setting the Stage - Performance and Gender:**

In social sciences, and within the study of sociology, we can draw upon many theories and concepts to help us in understanding the social world. Particularly, when it comes to our interpersonal and group communications, we can use social constructionism to understand the role of ritual and performance in constructing our shared reality. For example, we may turn to the ideas of performativity in our everyday interactions with one another and the utilisation (and distinction) of our front and backstage selves (e.g. Goffman, 1959), many of which, alongside social interactions more generally, are guided by the development and adherence to social norms and expectations guiding appropriate behaviours across social settings (Garfinkel, 1967). These socialised rituals and performances are not only central to the creation of institutionalised knowledge (and, as we will see later in this chapter the creation of institutionalised heterosexuality), but they are also crucial to – and one of the core aspects of - the realities of gender creation and its maintenance.

This thesis revolves around the conceptualisation of gender not only as a social construct, but also anchors itself in the belief that:

"...gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts precede; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts* [original emphasis]" (Butler, 1988, pg.519).

The central tenet that Butler (1988; 2006) offers us is a feminist and queer critique and challenge to the normative ideation of 'gender' as a natural state of being. Through these lenses we can view the separation of gender and sex as two distinct concepts, and that the former is largely the product of social construction and socialisation. What it means to 'be a man', to 'be a woman', these are not inherently within our biology, rather they are the social products that we both consume and produce, which become a means of preserving the status quo within society through behavioural regulation if they remain unintelligible and unchallenged along these lines. It is through this constant reproduction and adherence to the 'social performances' of gender within our daily lives that the notion of gender as 'socially constructed' becomes hidden, and instead becomes projected as a 'natural' state and form (again drawing parallels with broader patterns of socialisation mentioned above).

"The disciplinary production of gender effects a false stabilization of gender in the interests of the heterosexual construction and regulation of sexuality within the reproductive domain" (Butler, 2006, pg.184-185)

Engaging with and critiquing gender in this way provides a means of destabilising the normative beliefs associated with gender as a concept and allows us to elaborate on the complexity and diversity of human gender and sexuality expression. This is particularly so with the otherwise concealed 'discontinuities' that appear through the existence of lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual and other non-heteronormative expressions of gender and sexuality.

Although we have noted the distinction between the concepts of sex and gender, the former being associated with more biological factors and the latter being more associated with socially constructed factors, the two are nonetheless linked together - and are additionally linked with ideas and understandings around sexuality and its expression - through what Butler refers to as the 'heteronormative matrix' – a 'sex-gender-sexuality tripartite system' (Tredway, 2014) that leads to the 'normalisation of heterosexuality' (Atkinson and DePalma, 2009). Butler themselves defines it as:

"…a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality" (Butler, 2006, pg.208)

As we have seen from the above discussion, gender, and indeed sexuality, are linked concepts that are tied to the same broader system of power. Butlers 'tripartite' system of knowledge production and social regulation surrounding gender is of vital important to critical explorations into the gendered and orientated ways through which the world is structured, while actively resisting the whispers of the heteronormative project to remain natural and unintelligible. This thesis actively seeks to explore and unearth some of the everyday practices of not only heteronormativity itself, but also its expression within the context of masculinity, and its dominance within the gendered and social hierarchy.

## 2.2.1 'Man'ning Up to the Gender Discussion:

The rationale for this thesis' focus on masculinity as a lense of analysis and exploration stems from the position that understanding the politics of masculinity accounts for much of the dynamics of gender and sexuality politics.

Masculinity itself can be argued to be a performance, one which if done correctly can reap numerous rewards for the successful performer. The result of this gender performance in traditional respects is a means of maintaining an 'unequal gender order' (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009). The performance of gender is highly dependent on situation and context, and often overt or subtle distinctions and forms can be observed within distinct settings, and it is often also part of a continuing process of engagement, observation and learning. "The process of learning how to signify a masculine self in situationally appropriate ways continues through life" (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009. Pg.283). The

authors also note the requisite for successful masculine performances in a military setting representing one example of this, citing the work of Higate (2007). It is in these organisational settings that situated appropriate gender behaviours become visible and actors are left to adapt and learn in order to perform successfully. In fact, Digby (2014) also notes that in societies that participate in war, ideals of masculinity become embedded within the image of the 'warrior'. It is also this ideal, he argues, that is embedded with notions of misogyny that represents a core dimension of the gender binary, particularly within militaristic societies.

Connell (2005) arguably provides the most central perspective on masculinities. Through their work, they conceptualise a multitude of different forms of masculinity which ultimately depend on the particular constellation of identities of the individual in question - due to the 'interplay between gender, race and class' (Connell, 2005, pg.76), though this can be expanded beyond these three identity categories alone. Some of these various types of masculinity can include 'white masculinities', 'working class masculinities', 'gay masculinities' and so forth.

The recognition of these multiple forms and indeed constellations of masculinity necessitate an exploration into the inter and intra relationships between these forms. In so doing they provide four forms of relationships and dynamics among masculinities. These are: 'hegemony'; 'subordination', 'complicity' and 'marginalisation'. The first of these relationships Connell calls 'hegemonic masculinity' and refers to Gramsci's concept of hegemony. In this, there is the idea that these masculinities are regulated and

engrained within an overarching social structuring which privileges and represents the dominant form of masculinity within a given society (at a particular time and context). All the other dynamics and internal politics among masculinities are shaped by the creation and maintenance of a 'hegemonic' form. By virtue of having one form being 'hegemonic' and thus 'dominant', others must be subordinated through practices of othering and diminishing their position as an oppositional form of masculinity. Complicity simply refers to the generalised reaping benefits afforded to those who can pass to a greater or lesser extent with some of the ideals of the hegemonic form and so on.

These gender relations are thus embedded within a dynamic structure that classifies and regulates power and privilege among these various masculinities at any given time, more specifically Connell argues that this social ordering usually promotes and regulates the dominance of patriarchy. As a core feature of one of society's principle binaries, masculinity as a construct is important and relevant here in terms of the fact that masculinity does not exist except in opposition to femininity.

In continuing the discussion around masculinities, more specifically within a situational context, Anderson and McGuire (2010), and Anderson and McCormack (2010), provide yet another perspective on the ordering of gender politics in society. In relation to the work of Connell, they provide an alternative theory on the inter-relations of masculinities. They argue that in societies and settings where homo-hysteria is decreased, there is no longer a hegemonic gender ordering based on Connells conceptualisations, rather it becomes what they call 'Inclusive Masculinity', whereby the various forms of masculinity

exist and acknowledge one another without any inherent hegemonic or as clearly defined value laden structures. Their research is centred on two studies in two distinct settings, one is in a boy's sixth form school in England and the second setting was a university college rugby club.

Furthermore, with wide-ranging changes across much of society in recent decades, other scholars also note a further gender dynamic that is observable within the context of masculinity, that of 'compensatory masculinity' or 'performance masculinity' (E.g. Edwards & Jones, 2009; Sasso, 2015; Sumerau, 2012). In Edwards and Jones (2009) they observed this:

> "When participants felt insecure as men, they often responded by trying to overcompensate and prove their manhood to others and to themselves" (Edwards and Jones, 2009, pg.216)

In light of changes in society over the last several decades and across the non-stable gender relations (both internally within masculinity and outside within gender more broadly), perceived loss of status among and between men prompts an effort to recapture and reclaim enough masculine capital to compensate for this perceived loss.

## 2.3 Masculinity, Heterosexuality and the Project of Orienting Bodies towards Normativity:

It is important to consider the role and processes through which heterosexual masculinity becomes a product created through the practice of performances, actions, and ideologies. The production of a hegemonically placed, heterosexually orientated masculinity requires constant and precarious work, not just at the performative level, but also in relation to the interpersonal (and personal) work needed in order to maintain and place oneself within a suitable position within the masculine hierarchy. The sum aim of a lot of this *work* is to produce and legitimise the position that heterosexuality, particularly heterosexual masculinity, is normal, natural, and preferred.

> "Though homosexual contact is a feature of straight men's private lives and friendships, it also takes ritualized forms in the institutional environments in which straight men come into contact with one another's bodies." (Ward, 2015, pg.16)

Under what processes then do individuals and bodies come into contact with ideals of normality in terms of gender and/or sexuality? An initial point of departure comes from the work of Ahmed (2006), whom provides a further delving into thinking about sexual orientation, and the process(es) - conscious or otherwise - of *straightening*. This straightening practice relies on maintaining and constructing of the normative, while these same 'straight lines' and their effects are simply 'an effect of repetition' (Ahmed, 2006, pg.92). This shares strikingly similar language and theorising as Butler in the

consideration and centrality of regular actions and performances as a means of creating and neutralising heterosexuality (and gender). In fact, much of Ahmed's discussion provides many points of criticism towards the broader patterns of normalising heteronormative orientations, - as exactly that, 'orientations' and patterning's that direct and define bodies and individuals along the lines of their conformity or rejection from this orientation process. It is instead through consultation with scholars work and reading Ahmed's work that the interesting, – and for me the particularly poignant – aspect of such theorising is to highlight that in many respects we are culturally programmed to consult with, appreciate and engage with a broader process(es) of *naturalisation* or normative enforcement. By this I mean that socially we are encouraged to view an inherent binary between the natural and the unnatural, the neutral and the political or the deviant.

"The fantasy of natural orientation is an orientation device that organizes worlds around the form of the heterosexual couple, as if it were from this "point" that the world unfolds." (Ahmed, 2006, pg.85)

Commentary from other scholars like Sedgewick (1990) posit that this binary form of thought, orientation and organisation acts as a political mechanism through which normative standards come to privilege one group over another, all the while seeking normative and natural status in such a way as to conceal its affective patterns and processes of regulation.

Throughout their approach to placing considerations of bodies and space into the conversation around the 'orientation' of sexual preferences, Ahmed argues that sexual orientations exist within a broader pattern whereby individuals are directed and understood to naturally follow a straight line (a functional structure that enacts the orientation of the body and its encouraged body types/sex) that links them and their desires to the body of the opposite sex. Ahmed also contributes through their analysis and theoretical engagements; they also engages in critique of and most importantly acknowledgement of broader institutionalised and culturally enforced practices of heterosexuality and its pursuit of normative regulation.

"The very idea that bodies "have" a natural orientation is exposed as fantasy in the necessity of the enforcement of that orientation, or its maintenance as a social requirement for intelligible subjectivity." (Ahmed, 2006, pg85).

There are a number of examples that Ahmed contributes within their work to note the presence of various 'straightening devices' that function in everyday life that seek to maintain and regulate the understandings of heterosexuality as a natural form of orientation. This 'natural' orientation is then constructed as in contrast to the queer moments of deviation and departure from these straight lines that individuals are embedded with in wider society. These straightening devices, and lines of straight orientation offer us analytical tools going forward in considering the wider politics surrounding gender and sexuality. What do these lines look like? What constitutes these straightening devices? What can we consider to be lines or objects of straightening?

While there are multiple straightening 'devices' that we may turn to, there are two such devices that are of primary relevance to this thesis and how they shape and influence ideas of heteronormativity: namely institutions themselves and the media. I now explore and discuss some of the literatures that are specifically informative on the realities of gender and sexuality within institutions, workplaces, and the sites of study in this thesis: militaries participating in peacekeeping, and in videogames.

## 2.4 Institutions, Culture, and Normative Performances:

We have seen in the above discussions on gender and sexuality, some of the ways through which (gendered and orientated) bodies are transformed and translocated through the processes of reinforcing and reifying heteronormativity. If we consider institutions and their culture(s) to be one such 'straightening device' or an avenue through which the straightening of bodies occurs, it is important to firstly define what an institution is, as well as how these institutions are gendered and contain gendered ideologies. An institution can have a number of definitions, such as "…an organized, established, procedure" (Jepperson, 1991, pg.143) or that it "… represents a social order or pattern that has attained a certain state or property…" (Jepperson, 1991, pg.145). Institutions essentially function as guiding frameworks for our everyday realities, they dominate our social world and inform us through their 'typificatory schemes' (borrowing terminology from Berger and Luckmann, 1966) and how they shape our expectations and understandings of the world. Some scholars have observed that within institutional life, once a field has become well-established that many of these organisations become

homeogeneous in form – primarily through three forms of isomorphism: 1) Coercive, 2) Mimetic, and 3) Normative pressures (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983).

While institutional theory varies in form, its 'central' interest is in the exploring and accounting for the homogeneity of form and culture (Kondra and Hurst, 2009). These authors take the work of DiMaggio and Powell (1983) and their three forms of institutional isomorphism and utilise them to better account for and explain how organisational cultures persist and transmit.

The discussions above on institutional culture is not to portray it as exempt from change, but rather that it is often resistant and slow to change. "Culture is not a monolithic, unchanging entity" (Kondra and Hurst, 2009, pg.51); in this way we can consider the processes of 'deinstitutionalization' put forward by Oliver (1992) to account for and explain how the normative and rooted institutional cultures may become subject to review and potentially to change for other cultural forms or aspects. Processes of 'deinstitutionalisation' are defined as:

> "Specifically, deinstitutionalization refers to the delegitimation of an established organizational practice or procedure as a result of organizational challenges to or the failure of organizations to reproduce previously legitimated or taken-for-granted organizational actions." (Oliver, 1992, pg.564).

Much like the discussions from Butler on the performativity and construction of gender identity at large, these same gendered organisations and sites of gendered ideological interaction are also subject to performance. Performance, ceremony and ritual are all core processes of institutional maintenance (e.g. Dacin, Munir and Tracey, 2010; Meyer and Rowan, 1977). The latter authors' work considers the role and importance of micro level interactions such as rituals as a function of 'reification or erosion of macro level institutions' (Dacin, Munir, and Tracey, 2010, pg.1414). This suggestion is in line with the purposes of this thesis, in terms of focusing its analysis on the everyday processes and regulations behind heteronormativity as a function of its maintenance and continuation.

**2.4.1 Gendered Institutions, Proportions and the Norms of Everyday Life:**

As many institutions are male-dominated (Shelley, Morabito, and Tobin-Gurley, 2011), it is important to consider the role of gender and sexuality within these environments. In many of these settings, the institutional structures are often 'organised' and realised in their everyday interactions through the lenses of gender. According to Acker (1992) "The term "gendered institutions" means that gender is present in the processes, practices, images and ideologies, and distributions of power in the various sectors of social life" (Acker, 1992. Pg.567)

Military organisations are perhaps one of the clearest examples of these gendered institutions. These same organisations are defined in relation to their state sanctioned monopoly of legitimised violence; this utilisation of violence and its threat is also part of

the toolkit of policing and maintaining heteronormative ("Hegemonic") masculinity (Connell, 2005). An additional irony is the contrast between the formalised state policies of equality and legislation with the informalised practices that resist this, found within the military organisational cultures, and their relationship with violence. This contradiction presents a tension between what one is supposed to say and do in relation to the formalised equality policies, and the behaviours and values of hegemonic masculinity fostered informally within the organisations through everyday interactions, training and practice. Even in the context of formally recognised policies and procedures to ensure positive results, informal processes, interactions and training procedures can also act as obstacles, contradicting and confounding the aims of official policies (e.g. Prokos and Padavic, (2002)).

Maintaining and regulating heteronormative masculinity does not happen in a vacuum, and in specific contexts and organisational settings gender and sexuality can manifest in different ways (for example queerness in male prisons, see Hefner (2018)). Many of these organisations and their embedded cultures simultaneously foster and depend on gendered ideology and its enforcement.

Throughout this thesis I attend to both gender and sexuality, as these two concepts are intertwined in that the maintenance and regulation of gender is inherently tied to the maintenance and regulation of sexuality (clearly visible within in the works of Herbert, 1998; Konik and Cortina, 2008; Martino, 2000; Sundevall and Persson, 2016; Ward, 2015). Gender and sexuality, specifically gender and heterosexuality, remain linked and

indivisible from one another (Schilt and Westbrook, 2009). Both concepts derive from a system that perpetuates a catch all belief in binaries of gender that are comprehensive, mutually exclusive and exhaustive. This in turn feeds into definitions and defining characteristics of sexuality based almost exclusively on the 'gender' of the bodies you choose to sleep with (as discussed in Ahmed, 2006). Again, it is this normative and 'naturalised' binary conception that feeds into broader processes of gender and sexuality enforcement, processes of regulation that are not overt but remain pervasive and enforced - referred to throughout this paper as 'policing'[9].

Additionally, the social construction and its regulation within organisational cultures is of critical importance, put simply, as Alfrey and Twine (2017) put it, "workplace cultures are not gender neutral" (Alfrey and Twine, 2017, pg.31). Many of these organisational and institutional cultures contain and perpetuate a heavily masculine culture, and this is present within military institutional cultures, presenting an ideological hurdle via these ingrained cultures (Whitworth, 2004; Digby, 2014).

**2.4.2 Norms and the myth of the 'Asexual Workplace':**

The role of social norms and the power that they have to account for and influence the behaviour of others is also an important aspect to consider for the aims of this thesis.

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[9] I acknowledge that police members are often involved within Peacekeeping missions as part of the diverse personnel, cultural and institutional network that constitute individual missions. However, I have chosen to utilise the term 'policing' within this paper to specifically refer to the processes and discourses that teased out through the analysis of the interviews and a way of referring to the ways that interviewees position gender and sexual identities within a framework of heteronormative masculine regulation.

"Norms are the language a society speaks, the embodiment of its values and collective desires, the secure guide in the uncertain lands we all traverse, the common practices that hold human groups together." (Bicchieri, 2006. Pg. ix).

The norms- that is, the social expectations- surrounding traditional patriarchal gender roles act as a marker for which the lived experiences and realities of gender politics play out, as has been shown in settings such as – but not limited to – higher education, schools, and the workplace (Embrick, Walther, and Wickens, 2007; Konik and Cortina, 2008; Martino, 2000). These norms surrounding gender politics become engrained within the broader institutional cultures, becoming cultural sites of context which enact, encourage, and enforce its own ideological expectations of gender (and sexuality performance). Reviewing the ways in which policing manifests within our sample is important for further advocating for a conscious awareness of both gender and sexuality and their impacts within the workplace (Konik and Cortina, 2008).

I would argue that one of the most common regulatory frameworks and norms present in relation to gender and sexuality within the workplace revolves around 'asexuality'. There are often formal and/or informal policies or norms around 'asexuality', - an emphasis that the workplace is an asexual space, that the workplace is exempt from discussions of sexuality and so on. Since workplaces are not the 'sex-neutral machines' that they were being defined as (Kanter, 1977), any claims of asexuality within these areas are inherently

flawed. Often this 'neutral' workplace policy is often detrimental to those outside the heteronormative standard. These same workplaces are rife with tales of heterosexual exploits, but at the same time the norm is to maintain a belief in discourses that are not sexual in nature - at least when it comes to non-heterosexual tales and exploits (Embrick et al, 2007).

### 2.4.3 Organisation and Group Proportions:

Within organisational and institutional settings, the proportions) of groups can have a strong impact on the relations and everyday experiences within these same sites, particularly in relation to the embedded ideological and typificatory elements.

Kanter (1977) notes the impact of proportions of men and women in organisational settings and the impacts of this on the everyday lives of the smaller proportion of women. In fact, the low number group members can become 'tokenistic' when the proportion difference is around 85% dominant group members to 15% small number group members. This results in small number group members' hypervisibility within these organisations and among their colleagues due to their often extremely limited numbers. As Kanter notes that these small number groups become a 'minority' at the point of a 65% - 35% proportional difference, with a potentially transformative effect on organisational cultures and interactions

In Kanter's work, it was mostly tokenism that was observed in relation to the women of the corporation under exploration. Where proportions remain too low or tokenistic, the masculinist heteronormative culture is neither challenged nor shifted. Organisations and professions that are associated with masculinity, such as police work and the military, often remain male dominated professions by numbers, which accordingly shapes the experiences of female police officers from the resulting gender dominance and bias (Archbold and Schulz, 2012). The main consideration in association with this is that policies and approaches that seek to add and recruit these 'other' personnel must also ensure that they target the embedded culture of these places in order to allow new personnel to feel welcome to participate.

**2.5 A Note on Performances in Institutional Sites:**

It is important to note that the proportions of groups have important ramifications for their lived realities within institutional, organisational and social settings. It is equally important to highlight some of the various performances and practices of individuals within these highly gendered locations as a means of seeking agency and minimising the negative effects of their marginalised status. However, the effect is insidious. The concept of the 'leaky pipeline' is used to explain the observed issue with recruitment and retention of women and others in these types of masculine institutions (e.g. The police force in the case of Shelley et al, 2011). At the core, is the issue of the embedded institutional cultures and the environments that they foster.

## 2.5.1 Militaries:

If we are to firstly consider this within the gendered institution of the military, it is notable that there is a continuation of stereotypes and historically held beliefs around women's participation in this setting (Matthews, Ender, Laurence and Rohall, 2009). Due in part if not completely to the fact that militaries are seen as historically institutions of hegemonic masculinity, and thus exclusively the territory of male bodies (Kronsell, 2005).

Herbert (1998) argues along these lines that the military

> "…is an arena that is not only numerically male dominated but ideologically male as well." (Herbert, 1998, pg.42).

Under these conditions, women in particular (as well as sexual minorities etc) must grapple and engage with the ideologies embedded within these sites (De Angelis, Sandhoff, Bonner, and Segal, 2013). The women researched by Herbert acknowledged their belief in and awareness of penalties for being perceived as too masculine or too feminine, and thus felt the need to engage in a type of additional gender (and sexuality) work to minimise this impact on their everyday interactions and experiences. As such (and has been inferred in the conversations thus far in this chapter) and in line with Herbert (1998) we must also examine the ways through which sexuality can be 'used as a mechanism for the enforcement of gender' (Herbert, 1998, pg.54). The author also notes that sexuality becomes a further tool through which regulation and policing may occur:

"Thus, homophobia interacts with gender ideology to ensure that the military remains a predominantly male institution, numerically as well as ideologically." (Herbert, 1998, pg.79).


## 2.5.2 Tech and the Videogame Industry:

Despite the role women played in the development of the Tech industry, it is equally as laden with the same gendered and ideological issues as militaries. In fact, the presence of 'brogrammer' and frat boy culture is noted within the work of Chang (2018), with an emphasis on the demarcation of masculinity and femininity within these workplaces also emphasising and contributing to hegemonic masculinity (e.g. Johnson, 2014). While women and other minorities work in this area, their marginalised status determines much of the social reality and everyday interactions. In many of these situations, those being marginalised can enact and participate in activities to diminish their 'outsider' status. Within Alfrey and Twine's (2017) study of women within STEM, they note that scholarship has shown that women tend to 'downplay femininity', to 'neutralise gender difference', and to 'leave work in STEM' altogether as a result of being in these male-dominated tech spaces. What they found within their own study was a "...gendered *spectrum of belonging* operates in occupational cultures where masculinity and heteronormativity are the norm" (Alfrey and Twine, 2017, pg.18).

**2.6 Orientation through Media:**

A brief consideration before exploring the processes of policing and symbolic violence, and indeed of the specific literatures informing our sites of militaries participating in peacekeeping and within videogames, is to explore the potential role of media as an institutionalising agent for heteronormativity.

Rich (1980) and the concept of compulsory heterosexuality, implies and delineates not solely a discussion/framing of heterosexuality as a form of sexual preference, rather the concept unboxes the broader social and political framework which have lent themselves to the proliferation and preservation of assuming heterosexuality as an inherent, and natural preference. These same institutions, structures and methods of enforcement range from the physically forceful to the subjectively coercive, and nonetheless malign female eroticism which exists beyond or outside of this 'natural' order.

Within their discussion of the concept, they review and explore the multiple methods, practices and forms through which lesbian existence is framed in response to the proliferation and emphasis of compulsory heterosexuality. In the process of her review, she also notes:

> *"The ideology of heterosexual romance, beamed at her from childhood out of fairy tales, television, films, advertising, popular songs, wedding pageantry, is a tool*

*ready to the procurer's hand and one which he does not hesitate to use"* (Rich, 1980, pg. 645).

The use of traditional cultural media [here meaning film, literature, music] is of interest when reviewing the *institution* of heterosexuality.

As videogames represent one of the primary media forms under exploration within this thesis. Blythe Adams (2015) takes Rich's concept and directly discusses it in relation to gaming; specifically they offer a distinction between the 'compulsory heterosexuality' mentioned by Rich, and the concept of 'compulsive heterosexuality', the distinction between the two being "*while 'compulsory heterosexuality' is a privileged societal norm that can be refused, the compulsive heterosexuality of the classic video game demands that the player perform a heterosexual player-character or cease playing the game altogether*" (Blythe Adams, 2015, pg40.). It is therefore crucial to reflect on the affordances offered within the majority of games, both traditionally and contemporarily, that the central feature of the 'compulsive heterosexuality' found within video games is that the narrative centrality of heterosexuality doesn't merely represent a prescribed standard to which all others are othered, rather it becomes the sole form of engagement and gameplay offered to gamers, prescribing a co-option to the norm, or else banishment from the gameplay experience.

Within the design parameters of a given game, the functionally deterministic dimension of what content is consciously included within a given game is of importance when we consider the broader institutional compulsion towards heterosexuality and its normative status.

The functional determinism of video games and their design affordances towards sexuality is of additional important when we consider the facets of institutionalised heterosexuality as elaborated within the work of Rich (1980). On reflection of the broader processes involved within the design and production of video games, who writes their stories, who designs the aesthetics, who determines the characters and so forth, much of the facets of 'male power' are present as listed in Rich's work, for example (but not limited to): 1) the power of men to cramp their [women] creativeness; 2) the power of men to withhold from them [women] large areas of society's knowledge and cultural attainment; 3) the power of men to use them [women] as objects in male transactions; 4) the power of men to deny women [their own] sexuality or to force it [male sexuality] upon them.

## 2.7 'Policing' as Process

Up until this moment in the chapter, we have considered not only the performative nature of gender, sexuality and heteronormativity; but we have also discussed at length some of the ways in which institutions and the institutional setting of media are also intrinsically gendered and contain ideologies and processes that act to 'straighten' bodies towards heteronormativity. It is now to these *processes* and means through which gender,

sexuality and heteronormativity are maintained and managed that is an important consideration for this thesis, namely how might these concepts become encouraged, sanctioned when deviated from, and so on. In this way we consider the role of policing on the creation of ('natural') boundaries surrounding gender and sexuality. 'Policing' gender and sexuality, as both a performance and a process, refers to the act of maintaining and regulating the structures and associations of power and privilege based on an individual's self-identification with masculinity and heteronormative sexuality. This is then utilised to the detriment of 'others', namely those who do not identify as male or heterosexual.

## 2.7.1 Policing through Symbolic Violence:

I would posit that it is possible that overt homophobia and discrimination is much less prevalent since the introduction of equality legislation and policies, at least within organisational settings; nevertheless, the boundaries of heteronormative gender roles and sexualities are still 'policed' through multiple processes that inherently act to define and reify [heterosexual] masculinity as the norm and the benchmark within contemporary organisational practice.

Chiefly among the measures and means through which the concepts of gender and sexuality are managed and regulated are via practices of dominance. This dominance is typified by forceful measures and looming threats of violence. This violence though perhaps more popularly considered by physical means, is also highly effective and impactful through non-violent, but no less effective violent means. The result of this is:

"…the widespread pattern in militaristic societies of men being dominated by other men, typically by men who excel at the use of force." (Digby, 2014, pg.83).

This utilisation of force is interesting, particularly when we consider the non-physical means of dominance manifesting in these various contexts, ranging from linguistic violence – or *symbolic violence*, to borrow from Bourdieu (1979). This utilisation of 'force' comes in a variety of formats, and particularly when we consider the context of videogames, and technocentric settings whereby physical force becomes somewhat more difficult. Granted, this is not to diminish the many incidents of physical threat and promises of violence directed at numerous voices of diversity and critique over the past few years in relation to criticisms, critique and commentary on some of the more problematic elements within videogames.

The role of 'symbolic violence' is also critical to the objectives of this thesis. By this, Bourdieu is referring to

"…a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition (more precisely, misrecognition), recognition, or even feeling" (Bourdieu, 2001, pg. 1-2).

At its core, the concept is utilised in their book with regards to the broader societal project of framing androcentrism or male-centric perspectives as a neutral or natural state of being, often by couching it in terms of natural sex-based anatomical variations and so forth. This simultaneously acts to frame alternatives to this as deviant or constructions against which the natural androcentric worldview is contrasted. This exists in conjunction with the more traditional regulatory process of threats of physical violence, but it is within the patterns of symbolic violence, the softer violence in many respects, that we can consider the everyday regulation to occur (whether immediately perceptible or not).

> "Symbolic violence is in some regards much more powerful than physical violence or coercion in that it is embedded in the very modes of action and structures of cognition in individuals—it is violence in both seeing and failing to see." (Gray, Buyukozturk, and Hill, 2017, pg.5)

'Policing' maintains within it, elements of threats of violence in order to effectively regulate gender and sexualities and their associated behaviours. Symbolic violence offers us a means of exploring the deployment of non-physical violence as a means of control and regulation also. Some of the mechanisms through which policing and regulation manifested within the data and analyses of this thesis are elaborated in the forthcoming chapters. These include: the use of humour and language; 'symbolic annihilation' through rendering invisible the *other* (e.g. Shaw, 2014); traditional ideological continuity; the incorporation of legitimacy and realism; and the curation of game landscapes and design.

The preceding sections and conversations thus far have sought to outline several core threads of theory and literature that are guiding this research project, its approaches, and its understandings of concepts like gender, sexuality, and heteronormativity at large. Additionally, it has sought to apply and orient these theories and concepts to rationalise the direction that this thesis is taking throughout and in the forthcoming chapters. The remainder of this chapter will now discuss and explore literature and scholarship that is more directly pertinent and informative to the sites under study within this thesis – on videogames and their cultures, as well as military environments and peacekeeping contexts – while also offering some reflection on the concepts and theories thus far discussed as the 'orientation' of this thesis and its approach.

## 2.8 Critiques of Policies and Approaches:

It is important to note in relation to the areas explored within this thesis, that critiques have been levied against many of the peacekeeping policies put forward to improve diversity. These peacekeeping policies are criticised on the basis that they contain the same gender essentialist assumptions that have traditionally been problematic in these organisational settings (Valenius, 2007; Carreiras, 2010). Karim and Beardsley (2013) add to this, stating that simply adding women in won't necessarily result in a shift or change to the military gender hierarchies and culture. These same critiques are applicable to many other policy spheres wherein it could be argued that the underlying emphasis is to 'add' minorities and 'stir' – while this also leaves the emphasis and responsibility for change on the shoulders of these disenfranchised persons.

I posit that it is the [heteronormative masculine] institutionalist culture that not only shapes the daily lived experiences of these individuals, but it also has a strong and determining influence on whether the aims and objectives of these formal policies are achieved or not. The institutional culture, reflecting the ideological culture it is embedded in, its influence and form, is of critical importance in reviewing and exploring the role and landscapes of gender and sexuality within this setting. The result of simply "'Adding and stirring' does not, however, attend to the gendered power structures to which women are added" (Valenius, 2007, pg. 513).

Additionally, other scholars have argued that attention to 'masculinity' remains largely absent from gender policies within these spheres (Laplonge, 2015). Traditionally, many of these militaristic organisations promote and encourage (heteronormative) masculinity (Connell, 2005; Digby, 2014; Duncanson, 2009). Despite this, peacekeeping also provides context wherein the 'gendering' of participating institutions may be subject to change or transition. It appears within the sample of military personnel participating in peacekeeping explored in chapter four of this thesis, that the practice of regulating the boundaries of gender and sexuality persist, in albeit more subtle and symbolic ways than outright misogyny, homophobia and violence. Despite the high-profile gender-centric policies implemented at the international and national levels of most peacekeeping organisations, there is a lack of knowledge about how the landscape of gender and sexuality is experienced by personnel within these organisations, particularly in relation to the lack of relative attention to masculinities.

**2.9 Traditional Hierarchies? Militaries in Peacekeeping:**

It has been stated that men appear to represent the majority within organisations and settings related to enforcement and violence (Connell, 2002). This holds true for both militaries and police forces alike, which Connell suggests is an intrinsic association with social masculinities as opposed to any form of biologically determined reasoning. Duncanson (2009) argues that gender remains a form of practice and essentially performance, and within a lot of militaristic cultures we often find a militarised valorisation of 'warrior' masculinity. In certain respects, the military is an institution that is largely traditional, conservative and slow to change (DeGroot, 2001). The relationship between gender and other identities including sexuality are intricately linked to the experience of conflict and its resolution (Bastick, 2014; Mackey, 2003).

> "...*war itself is profoundly gendered, and peacekeeping needs therefore to be acutely gender conscious*" - (Mazurana, 2002, pg.41).

To link war and conflict to the construct of gender is also to directly link gender to processes of conflict resolution and peacekeeping practices. As Mazurana (2002) also goes on to discuss, this increasing awareness and discussion, has manifested itself largely in the international domain in the form of dedicated policies and training programmes (see Carreiras, 2010; Mackey, 2003; United Nations, 2010; United Nations, 2014; Valenius, 2007). This increasing tendency to be more aware and focused on aspects of gender and gender issues within peacekeeping strategies is intrinsically linked with masculinity. There

is a specific tendency for institutionalised masculinity within many of the participating organisational cultures in peacekeeping and this is thus problematic for peace strategies (Connell, 2002). In fact, Gender, and more specifically masculinity lies at the heart of the organisational cultures involved in conflict and warfare, and yet, at the same time, masculinity remains relatively absent from these same gender policies (Laplonge, 2015). I would therefore also argue that, any examination of 'gender' within a peacekeeping context, requires a strong consideration of issues and concepts around masculinities.

The process of peacekeeping brings with it a number of responses and practices by men in the face of the demographic imperatives mentioned earlier, one of the most interesting is how some men reframe masculinity within a peacekeeping setting, in effect demarcating the process of peacekeeping in masculine terms (Duncanson, 2009). The function of these alternative peacekeeping masculinities doesn't challenge the hegemony of the warrior form of masculinity fully, instead they provide an example of challenging dichotomies of understanding gender, and an alternative to feminising peacekeeping processes (Duncanson, 2009). Mäki-Rahkola and Myrttinen, (2014) note that in Finland, peacekeepers are urged towards an asexual ideal, but this is problematic given the highly sexualised environments that they find themselves in (again drawing attention to the point that workplaces are not neutral spaces in relation to gender and sexuality). In fact, gender is so embedded within this site that some feminist critiques have gone so far as to suggest that the traditional hierarchical masculine organisation of the military with its accompanying ideology may be incompatible with peace and stability objectives (Higate and Henry, 2004).

Despite the historical participation of women in militaries, their experience has varied from official exclusion, quotas and occupational restrictions; with a prevailing reliance on gender stereotypes (DeAngelis and Segal, 2012; DeGroot, 2001) and gender essentialist views (Valenius, 2007; Carreiras, 2010). These essentialist perspectives of women's capabilities and capacities within the armed forces have historically shaped their interaction and admission into these organisational settings. In specific reference to occupational restrictions, it is important to note that these restricted spheres of activity have generally been the more combat focused roles and occupations, which remain some of the sections of these organisations with the least female personnel. Interestingly, a central critique offered by Valenius (2007), one that is also suggested by Carreiras (2010), is that the practice and policy of gender mainstreaming in peacekeeping operations relies on much of the same gender essentialist rhetoric and discourse that have previously excluded women from full engagement in the armed forces etc. Rather than relying on these conceptions of the 'pacifying' nature of women and their effects on men, the author argues that for meaningful change to occur, attention and focus must be on military cultures and the militarised masculinity that prevails in the peacekeeping context and within the separate organisational cultures that participate in these same missions.

However, the shift and transition away from a centralised role of combat and physical strength also means that these ideas of masculinity might also be in a state of flux, and perhaps gender-queer practices might also become more prevalent within this setting. Moreover, as a result of this shift towards peacekeeping practice, the same gender

essentialist conceptions that have dictated the limited admission of women into armed forces have arguably been effectively turned on their head, and we find these arguments and ideas in turn acting to legitimise women's participation within peacekeeping (DeGroot, 2001).

Although much of the discussion thus far has considered women and masculinity, it is also important to note that 'gender equality' is not simply a women's issue, but it should also take consideration of LGBTQ persons also (Rokvić and Stanarević, 2016). "Gender equality means equal acceptance in the community, equal working conditions, accomplishment at work and in other spheres of life, and equal opportunities for promotion, regardless of sex, gender identity or sexual orientation" (Rokvić and Stanarević, 2016, pg.27). –as 'deeply ingrained' ideas of gender roles and patriarchal stereotyping, is reflected in attitudes to both women and LGBTQ personnel in armed forces and beyond.

In a similar way to women, LGBT personnel also have a history of service in the military, though this history is effectively invisible (Estrada, 2012). One of the most prolific policies on sexual diversities within militaries has been the 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' policy (DADT)[10], which replaced an outright ban on non-heterosexual personnel's participation in the military. Effectively, this policy can be argued to have allowed their participation, through a willingness to sustain the secrecy and ignorance of colleagues in order to maintain and

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[10] The 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' or DADT policy was created in the United States in 1993. Premised on the belief that personnel within the armed forces who engaged in homosexual acts would be a risk to the overall morale, effectiveness and cohesion. The corresponding policy would ask that no personnel be asked about or permitted to talk about their sexual orientations. (Stanford Law School; Feder, 2013)

quell the prevailing debates over their impact on unit cohesion, efficiency, and mission success (Knapp, 2008) which remained the principle arguments for their outright ban from participation (Moradi and Miller, 2009; Rokvić and Stanarević, 2016).

As of yet, we have considered the theories around gender and sexuality and how they are embedded within a broader patterns and processes of institutionalised heteronormativity. To that end we have also examined aspects of normative change within organisations and the ways through which policing and proportions shapes the everyday interactions of individuals. However, before addressing the literatures on videogames along these lines, it is important to note a further linkage that exists between both sites under study in this thesis, namely how the military and videogames are connected both historically and ideologically.

## 2.10 "The military-entertainment complex":

On the subject of militarised masculinity and its production and (re)enforcement, one of the more direct linkages that is observable between military and gaming contexts is that of ideology, specifically the way through which militaristic ideologies manifest and are reproduced within gaming. In fact, it is important to note that war and games have a long-standing relationship with one another (Pötzsch and Hammond, 2016; Power, 2007). That is not to say that it is exclusively gaming that assists with and reproduces this ideology, but that there is a strong relationship that exists between militarism and broader media industries (Mirrlees, 2019).

"War justifies the making of war games, and war games – in turn – legitimate dominant forms of warfighting" (Mirrlees, 2019. Pg.243).

Aside from the ideological similarities to be observed within militaristic cultural settings and video games, both these contexts are connected in a more direct way through what is referred to as the "military entertainment complex" (e.g. Graham and Shaw, 2010; Lenoir and Lowood, 2002; Parkin, 2014; Power, 2007). This relationship can perhaps be seen most clearly in relation to the 'military entertainment complex', 'militainment' and so on (Graham and Shaw (2010); Mirrlees, 2019; and Shaben, (2013). This is a term given to the increasing interconnection between the digital game industry and the military. An important note within this article is the idea of 'moral sanitisation' and in a way, potential recruitment practices occurring within these games. For example, when we play these games, there are no blood-curdling screams when players die, generally speaking there are largely no civilian NPC's on the battlefield, instead it places 'good' and 'bad' sides in armed-opposition across a variety of settings and locations, perhaps in an attempt to valorise all military actions in the real world, and encourage civilians who play these games to consider careers in armed forces?

This concept refers not only to the formative relationship between militaries like the U.S department of defence and its funding for programmes and technology that would lead into modern videogames. It also considers the entwined relationship between militaries and themes of war with videogame settings and technology, for example, today we can observe the utilisation of war and themes of conflict across numerous gaming genres,

titles and play styles such as the more overt war-centric videogame titles like *Call of Duty Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward, 2019), and *Battlefield V* (Electronic Arts DICE, 2018); to other titles less centred on specific or *overt* war settings but nonetheless depend on and deploy violence, conflict and warfare as important components of their play. Other criticisms levied against war games, first person shooters and other similar game designs and genres, is the "sanitisation" of these landscapes and conflict settings. Typically these games are defined on the basis of an "us" versus "them", or "red team" versus "blue team" playstyle, meaning that players encounter their opponents (either NPC or other players) and the towns, countryside, suburbs etc are devoid of other individuals.

"Tucked away under televisions in millions of homes, they are banal technologies that distribute carefully crafted military aesthetics" (Graham and Shaw, 2010, pg.799).

Although these represent some of the criticisms levied against this particular genre of game, it nonetheless offers us an insight into the construction of reality and ideology within videogames and *necessitates* our exploration and examination of these media forms in this way.

## 2.11 Heteronormative Masculinity in Videogames

As shown above, there are numerous contexts and nuances behind heteronormativity and the gender-sexuality regulation matrix found within militaries participating in

peacekeeping. However, what form does masculinity and heteronormativity take within the field of videogames? Videogames can be seen as a combination of the formal 'gendered institutions' found within the tech industry, while also consisting of a more informal gendered institution through the broader videogame culture and its policing processes found and participated in by players.

Voorhes and Orlando (2018) offer an alternative analysis of masculinity in gaming, arguing that it is an increasingly neoliberal masculinity that has become normative in gaming culture, and E-sports specifically. This neoliberal masculinity requires that the hegemonic ordering traditionally found within masculinity politics is suspended, and more diverse forms – hegemonic, complicit, subordinate, and counterhegemonic – manifest in the play of these games and particularly in their research into E-sports, this neoliberal multiple masculinities allow for increases in efficiency and effective performance by contributing various different skills across the different forms. This co-option of diverse masculine forms represents not increases in diversity and acceptance, for the same authors also discuss the high levels of misogyny, homophobia etc. It is rather the means to contribute different skills, styles of play etc in ways that promote and increase the overall effectiveness of the teams and players in question. This apparent transition to comprehensively cover various masculinities within E-sports, remains simultaneously exclusive and marginalises female (and other non-male bodies).

"...as Shugart's (2008) analysis of the emergence of "metrosexual" masculinity shows, seemingly progressive masculinities do not challenge the structure of

gender relations but rather illustrate the resilience of patriarchy." (Voorhes and

Orlando, 2018, pg.222)

I argue that there is a connection here, that the means through which the propagation of

neoliberal masculinity within the E-sports setting (and arguably gaming at large)

represents a similar process of redefinition and boundary maintenance as was evident in

relation to the context of peacekeeping also mentioned in this thesis.

The central issue with this boundary in transition is thus the emphasis on shared

masculinity within these contexts. An argument can be made for critically questioning this

"neoliberal" shift (or rather this *reactionary* shift) and its tangible results on the broader

schemes of gender and sexuality regulation. The increased inclusion of diversity in this

way must be critically evaluated, as I would argue, perhaps what is becoming visible is

instead an amalgamation of masculinities for the purposes of consolidation against "the

others", those representatives of femininity, those outside of a gender binary

identification, and so on.

It is evident that the embeddedness of technology and its formative influence on daily

lives and daily politics - in a way referred to as the *Technonormative matrix* by Chang

(2012) – results in the argument that a further, reactionary identity or "archetype" has

formed as part of the continuing politics of masculinity definition, one of the chief

manifestations of this technology-centric masculine archetype is that of the 'gamer'.

"...video games seduce their players with fantasies of power and control, the chance to play as superhuman heroes battling wrongdoing, injustice, and oppression. Yet one power that gaming can never fully offer its player is choice. Some –even most- of the choices within a game have already been decided, mapped onto decision trees, and embedded in scripted encounters, cutscenes, and command structures. The player is always caught between limited gamic action and algorithmic control. Even moments where players and characters seem to go off script, they are never off the map and eventually must return to the main action in order to proceed."

(Chang, 2017, pg.238).

The above quote remains crucial for theoretical, academic and critical approaches and engagements with videogames as a medium, and a cultural entity with its own participatory cultures of engagement. The transformative promise of freedom, choice, control, are all inherent in the popularised conceptions of videogames as distinct from other media forms such as novels and films, but this promise is a fallacy.

## 2.11.1 Loading - Creating Stereotypes within Gaming

We must also consider the important and inherently "political" question of what constitutes "realness" within a videogame, and who are the individuals engaging in this regulation of legitimacy (Consalvo and Paul, 2019). The authors consider the roles of the "pedigree" of the developer (namely the history of a developer's titles and reputation

among gamers), the payment structure found within the game, and the content of the game itself; as three of the main themes involved in these politics of legitimacy. What remains clear within their work is the necessary and critical role that these politics of legitimacy play within the culture and community of videogames.

Of particular interest to me here is in relation to the content of the games themselves, not only as part of the broader systems of ideology, regulation and videogame politics; but also of particular importance to the exploration of how players incorporate their interpretations of game content as part of their own processes of maintaining and challenging status quo. Indeed, this work (and many of the others referenced within this dissertation) provide a counter to the common argument that games are "apolitical", and some even argue that they are beyond the realm of politics and political engagement (similar to the often argued apolitical nature of the workplace). The reality, as we have seen within academic discourse, popular writings and amongst both gamers and developers, is the intrinsically political nature of videogames.

There is an interesting politics of gender and regulation within gaming that is clearly visible when considering the demarcations of 'hardcore' vs 'casual' games (and their players), with casual play seen as the more feminine of the binary (see Consalvo and Paul, 2019). There was an interesting example of contradictory regulation within this binary that emerged within the popular discourse surrounding videogames during this thesis. This discourse was surrounding male players who seek out 'easy' play have been applauded among some of these same gamers (Rivera, 2019). Rather than some of the more elite

tier weapons which require more practice and training in order to utilise most efficiently, Clark highlights that those using the 'dad loadout', will most likely turn away from these weapons needing training etc, and use other weapons that are passable and hold their own in a player vs player setting.

"A big part of the appeal of the dad loadout is that though these guns aren't the best in the game, they're very much more than good enough" (Clark, 2019, paragraph 9).

Although the article does give reference to the 'moms' playing these games too, the overall language throughout the article is rife with an androcentric focus on dadification, or other utilised variants such as 'dad guns', 'dadliness', and so on. The utility of language here, by virtue of central focus on 'dadification' of loadouts etc, acts to conform to and reinforce some of the traditional emphasis on dadification within games and their developing relationships with masculinity at large. The fact that this easier play style and loadout have been reframed as an aspect of dadification, runs contrary to the traditional association with 'easy play' as connotative of femininity, unprofessional and non-hardcore play, the latter associations being explicitly policed and regulated against within the broader gamer culture (Consalvo and Paul, 2019). The emphasis in language and discourse of 'dads' as the group being discussed, acts to reframe casual play or play that is not time intensive or at least 'fully hardcore', within the confines of masculinity, and therefore as less threatening to the broader structures of masculine play. By discussing players who engage in casual play, using the language of dads and therefore grounding it in the

masculine sphere, women and others are cast out of the immediate discussions, and the

associations between the latter groups casual play style is not reframed from its negative

connotations, but left outside of the new dad discussions where these so called dads seek

out less time consuming and intense gameplay, but gameplay experiences nonetheless.

In a similar vein, rhetorical and design-based features of these games are often utilised as

part of the broader discursive regulation practices within gaming. If we consider, in

relation to the patterns of representations for LGBTQ individuals and content within

games, this design tendency appears to be one where this content is optional, where

players can engage or ignore at their discretion. Although the mere possibility of

encountering this content is better than not to experience or be present at all, the current

pattern of representation is one of deviance, whereby it is relegated to the margins of the

game experience and only if a player actively pursues an interest in this content will

encounter it. This is the case with some of the more prolific titles known for including

LGBTQ characters such as the *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* franchises (BioWare). Østby

(2017) notes that in the case of BioWare, 'the game structure itself is crucial to how game

content operates in a dual enabling/disabling dialectic: agency and choice give freedom

to both developers and players alike, but simultaneously imply restrictions' (Østby, 2017,

pg. 2).

The normative holding of videogame culture aligns itself with the neutralising standards

of heteronormative masculinity, and this ideological underpinning remains at the core of

a lot of the controversies and commentaries of these same games and their content.

There have been numerous research pieces done on the nature of masculinity as a defining feature of 'toxic gamer culture', - to borrow from the work of Mia Consalvo (2012) - as well as broader internet technologies cultures at large. It is the purpose of this chapter thusly, to explore and interact with the literatures surrounding the spheres of technology and the continuity of the heteronormative project therein; representing not just the core politics of gender and heteronormativity, but also the context-specific rationalisations of these political strategies of continuity and public shifts in discourse and practice. As with the previous chapters, there will be a focus on the symbolic violence and regulation practices, though I will also give reference to the more vitriolic manifestations where relevant.

## 2.11.2 Pixels and Policing - the Role of Regulation in Videogames:

Policing (gender-based or otherwise) functions as a regulatory tool and process through which marginalisation and dominance can be exerted by the status quo in order to preserve current standing within a given context. Harassment and conflict are often found within online game settings (Fox and Tang, 2017; Hilvert-Bruce and Neill, 2020). Some studies have stated that as many as 74% of adults who play games in online multiplayer games have personally experienced some form of harassment (Anti-Defamation League, 2019). The study also observed that around 50% of participants reported experiencing some of the more severe forms of harassment and over a more sustained period of time. What is interesting here is that the report represents an examination of online multiplayer-based games, games which by their nature function with players from various geopolitical locations around the world, almost all of whom will be strangers to one

another, participating and co-habituating within the same virtual world. This shared world environment, which is social by nature, - and indeed by code – provides the basis of shared experience and social dynamics to manifest and filter from the offline to the online, along with a large proportion of offline-based prejudices and regulatory practices.

The utility of harassment derives in part from the belief of videogames as sites or cultural products that are inherently normative, exempt from critique and commentary, or any other voice from outside. One of perhaps the most common iterations of this viewpoint, and an additional indicator of the manifest heteronormative hold on videogames and their cultures, is the arguments for videogames as an 'apolitical' space, and 'apolitical' product, and 'apolitical' site that does not seek *political* commentary nor critique to threaten this apparent neutrality. This claim to neutrality and objectivity act as further ideological tools through which the maintenance and regulation of social orders can be enacted. They're neither "objective" nor "neutral" nor "apolitical"; claims of neutrality etc consistently perform as a regulatory framework for participation, visibility and legitimacy across these varied contexts observed in this research. Aversion of game companies to align with or publicly acknowledge the political elements of their games, in whatever political form they constitute.

"...the gameworld mimics beliefs persistent in the world: people are straight until proven otherwise." (Østby, 2017, pg. 274)

Østby discusses in their writing and with reference to Mia Consalvo (2003), the idea that the presentation of this assumption of heterosexuality, offers in some games something to rebel against through pursuing same sex romances, and other queerer routes of engagement. However this can be limited to some degree, when we consider it is this neoliberal logic of queer and non-normative representation that dictates that those outside of this norm must make themselves visible, take responsibility for themselves, and ultimately through playing these games, actively choose to push this 'gay button' and engage in playersexuality to trigger the non-normative into in-depth inclusion (Cole, 2017; Shaw, 2014). The alternative is to avoid or conform to this structure of reifying normativity. Beyond the mainstream development of videogames and normativity, particularly within the indie genre, we find an increased prevalence of queerness and diverse practices of game design (e.g. Harvey, 2014; Ruberg, 2020a).

In fact, the same author in their exploration and analysis provides evidence of heteronormativity being part of the wider set up of the world, the embedded ideology and assumptions in these various game worlds are ones where heterosexuality and masculinity remain. The cases of embedded and in some cases essentialist based structures of gender and sexuality exist in ways that are 'minor', meaning for example there are not directly and overtly homophobic, transphobic or sexist forms present in the games they assessed, but no less within these mundane and minor forms, the same ideology can latch on and cling for survival.

"Minor contexts do not mean they should be disregarded, however, because this is where problematic assumptions can easily find their survival and become mythologized, and it is important to see what the player can expect the game to engage in and allow them to question." – (Ostby, 2017, pg. 282)

## 2.12 *"Codes"* of Conduct:

We have seen arguments that masculinity, and the militarisation of masculinity may be considered part of a cultural production (Digby, 2014); we have also within this chapter considered briefly the role of media and popular culture for the production of, and manifestation of ideology (e.g. Rich, 1980). I posit further that in relation to formal organisational culture, videogames can be observed as more direct examples of codified ideology – resembling in some ways the informal and formal dimensions of organisations "codes of practice/conduct" which directs employees to behave and perform in particular ways. In the same way that organisations demand and expect conformity to their ideologies through membership and participation, what ways might videogames be demanding the same? What way(s) are players directed towards particular ideological "codes" of conduct through design, participation and play?

### 2.12.1 Behind the Code:

"Game rules and dynamics are neither innocent nor neutral, and they can bear biases and stereotypes as well as plot and visual characterization." (Gandolfi and Sciannamblo, 2018, pg.344.)

Although less of a formalised institutional culture in comparison to militaries, videogame culture incorporates much of the same ideologically based regulation and enforcement. Specifically, this enforcement and regulation stems from a combination of the developers and gaming industry (arguably a more direct and formal organisational culture) and the players themselves through additional (informalised) regulation processes – as we shall see in one of the forthcoming chapters.

Even the most basic moments of assumed agency, freedom or choice within a game is still structured and coded by the developers of the game (Chang, 2017). Each location, character, mission, moment of dialogue is encoded and designed in a way that furthers the progression of the narrative. These 'straight lines' (to borrow from Ahmed, 2006) exist as rails, and raw code, which become emblematic of normative structures of regulation, but this same normativity is rendered natural and therefore invisible.

It is the *sense* of control, freedom and of power within the context of the gamers self-perception of their play that is central to the continuity of heteronormative masculine gameplay and its status in relation to videogame culture. The utility of choice and agency represents a dynamic of maintaining the status quo traditionally observed within videogaming, and technology fields at large (see Keogh, 2018). A critical aspect of this ideology is the desire to present and couch itself within discourses and tangible moments of *objectivity* and *neutrality*, all the while concealing the political and subjective essence of its discourse. In the case of videogames, this subjective essence and discourse is anchored within literal constructions in the form of game design and mechanics.

"The sense of power and control that videogames afford must partially come from the fact that the game system, like any computer, responds instantly to our input, obeys our commands, and consistently responds the same way to the same input. In this way, agency is considered by many to be the natural result of interactivity and therefore inherent to the medium." (Stang, 2019a, paragraph 5).

As such, "code" is literally the guiding principle within gaming that effectively dictates the gameworld to the player, from pixelated and rendered plants and structures, to the varied (or not) permitted actions available to the player.

In a similar sense, there is a similar "coding" supplied within the context of a hierarchical organisational culture (such as in militaries), which also seeks to regulate and govern the behaviours of its members through their codes of conduct and other organisational channels. Upon a closer examination of many game as a whole - when we explore the interactions, the core narrative, linguistics, and so forth; more often than not we shall find that the default orientation of adventuring across these spaces is rendered within the heteronormative structures:

"Mass Effect has certain rejectable and optional heteronormative assumptions, but an uncontestable and rather mundane default galactic heterosexuality is proposed after Eden Prime." (Østby, 2017, pg.123).

Even beyond the *Mass Effect* franchise (BioWare), Østby also explores the *Dragon Age* franchise (BioWare) along similar lenses

"Homosexuality is (possibly) much more visible in these games, though here the topic can actually become more unstable and more subjected to the rather harsh dominion of the gay button. There are no "exclusively gay" characters prior to the release of Dragon Age: Inquisition, and the first two games rely heavily on conditional bisexuality." (Østby, 2017, pg.257).

In Vossen (2018b), they discuss the work of Huizinga and *the magic circle* as a bound system in which play occurs, this space is marked by its boundaries, this is what demarcates it as separate and self-contained from that of the real world or other spaces. Vossen notes that the engagement with other players in these spaces means that the boundaries become blurry, more so than in a single player experience or context where these same boundaries are largely set and easily understood/defined. This emphasis on the constraints (rules) and individuals engaging with these rules (the act of play) are central to the process of play, this however foreshadows some interesting tangents in relation to the process of play and the constraints of gender, sexuality and masculinity. The act of play herein, becomes somewhat of a system of playing with the game rules, while simultaneously engaging with broader system of play in the form of regulation across these intersectional identities.

"...the "order" that Huizinga insists play "creates" is now frequently based less on the rules of the game itself and is instead based on which social behaviours and play practices are considered part of hegemonic masculine gamer culture". (Vossen, 2018b, pg.196).

**2.12.2 Meaning-Making and the Unearthing Process:**

Feminist epistemologies, that find themselves deployed within the context of a heavily stratified society, can bring several benefits to the study of videogames. One such benefit is that it "excavates the counter-hegemonic voices that are so often buried beneath the detritus of dominant industry discourses" (Jennings, 2018, pg.159). The author also notes the interactivity of these games as textual forms through which interactivity allows for varied meaning making, some of which may run counter and disrupt static associations to the appearance of masculine, exclusionary, and hegemonic meanings. It is this intertextuality that is also important for the aims of this paper, as it seeks to explore the shared meaning-making of these gamers and how these differing interpretations and meanings are policed and managed in the broader context of the game and its community. This interactivity with the game and its textual essence also means that queer readings can be applied to even the most 'overtly' heterosexual of game texts (Shaw, 2019; Ruberg, 2019b).

Queer game studies within the context of gaming represents a political practice of unearthing queerness, a queerness that has always been present within these videogames (Ruberg, 2019b). However, despite always being present, this same

queerness has found itself rendered invisible and embedded within a context (being videogames) that has so often emphasised its own 'apolitical' and neutral qualities. These same claims to neutrality and being apolitical serve as nothing more than tools through which status quos of content and ideology can be maintained.

Additionally, beyond purely interpretative means of contention, gamers can alter institutionalised heteronormativity within gaming in a number of other ways. Those who game via PC's are often in a position to subscribe to and access 'modded' content, content that has been created by the same consumers of the game with the purpose of adding, removing, or altering in-game content (such as observable in Thompson (2018) and what they refer to as 'narrative mutations'). Within their work exploring gender and race in gaming, Gray (2014) also explores videogame narrative in their discussions. Framing it in relation to its connections with power and political regulation. In fact, they state "...narratives can contribute to the reproduction of existing structures of meaning and power." (Gray, 2014, pg.39).

## 2.13 Conclusion:

This chapter has engaged with a variety of different areas in order to present an overview of the scholarship that has contributed to and informed this thesis and its approach to study. The initial sections of this chapter provided an outline of the theoretical framework that directed the approach of this thesis and its understandings of gender, sexuality, and heteronormativity; before outlining and discussing in the latter half of this chapter the

literature and scholarship that was relevant to each of the sites under exploration in this thesis.

There is a complex and intrinsically political relationship observable in relation to gender and sexuality within videogames (their content, their producers, and their consumers) and within the setting of militaries participating in peacekeeping. These fields are embedded with heteronormative politics of visibility and legitimacy and share many themes across both sites.

This research takes a feminist and queer stance to deploy a critical lens to explore how performances and rituals construct (and conceal) heteronormative masculinity as an ideology, and how 'straightening devices' contribute to the orientation of individuals in particular ways (Ahmed, 2006). Institutional environments are one such way through which the processes of ritualised heterosexuality can be observed. Literature has shown the role of proportions in shaping lived experiences within these settings as well as how asexuality is argued to be a default aspect of workplace culture, the latter of which conceals norms that perpetuate heteronormativity. The result of which is the demarcation and othering of individuals who live outside the heteronormative bounds of these environments – those who depart from these straight lines. These same processes of maintaining and regulating gender and sexuality, whilst conforming to and perpetuating heteronormative masculinity, are principally achieved through the active process of policing these concepts, in particular, through the use of 'symbolic violence' as a non-lethal yet no less effective means of domination and control (Bourdieu, 1979; 2001).

Within militaries, as one of the premiere examples of a gendered institution (Acker, 1992), there is a traditional reliance on 'warrior' masculinity and the role of violence more generally to create soldiers – as well as issues of misogyny (Digby, 2014). This association, that has long-defined militaries is increasingly less required as advancements in technology are made and militaries primary mode of engagement shifts towards peacekeeping practices. Peacekeeping invokes new associations and ideas of gender and its place within these organisations. Policies at the national and international levels have sought to increase the diversity of personnel to better achieve the aims of their mandates, however these have not yielded the desired results and have seen a stall in the proportions of women and others signing up.

Videogames and the military share a direct link in the form of the military-entertainment complex and their shared history. There are also a number of other similarities observed when we discuss how videogames and the IT sector more broadly are seen as the domain of straight, white, males, which has resulted in documented issues with sexism, misogyny, homophobia, issues of harassment more generally, and the promotion of default heterosexuality. Voices from the margins are increasingly making themselves visible by challenging the stereotypical assumptions surrounding *who* plays videogames and contesting who gets to define what constitutes *real* videogames.

Both sites referenced in this chapter and throughout the thesis are dominated by a traditional association with heteronormative masculinity. In recent years there has been an increased contestation within these sites to challenge this association. Through the performances and rituals necessary for the construction of heteronormativity and masculinity as the norm within these institutional environments, the function of processes like symbolic violence remain critical to their objectives. The findings chapters of this thesis (Chapters 4,5 and 6) will explore this in greater depth and within specific case studies.

The following chapter will now provide an overview of the methods deployed.

# Chapter 3 - Methodology

"The methodologies of this project are a crucial component of its politics."
(Ruberg, 2020. Pg.23)

"My opinions, values, beliefs, and social background accompany me through the research process, shaping each methodological and analytical decision that I make." (Vanner, 2015. Pg.3)

**3.1 Summary of Research:**

Both of the fields under exploration in this thesis (Militaries participating in peacekeeping, and videogames) are key sites in which gender, sexuality, and broader diversity issues are being challenged. The overall objective of this research thesis is to explore these contestations. Specifically, to get behind the stalled efforts to make the culture of both fields more inclusive and less heteronormative and see what is happening in the everyday and at the individual level. To this end I use a qualitative methodology to unearth and explore how heterosexual masculinity is practiced and enforced, and how gender and sexuality are socially regulated within fields that are traditionally heteronormative.

Through exploring the sites of militaries participating in peacekeeping and videogaming, at a time when both are struggling with challenges to their traditional association with heteronormative institutional culture, this thesis will provide a contemporary and comparative case study of how each possess policing practices around gender and sexuality that shape participation, inclusion and legitimacy within these spaces. Additionally, by including and offering a comparison of both cases, this thesis seeks to

consider whether they share similarities or differences in relation to these processes; and in so doing, posit the potential of generalisability to other similarly heteronormative masculine spaces.

Drawing from the work of Hochschild (1989) and their concept of the stalled revolution in relation to gender, there are a variety of barriers and difficulties for women (and indeed other groups) in traditionally male-dominated fields (some of these barriers and difficulties are also discussed, for example, in Friedman, 2015). Many of these barriers and difficulties experienced by these groups within masculine fields boil down to issues of hegemonic masculinity and heteronormative expectations. In order to achieve this and to fully explore how heteronormative masculinity manifests and is used to regulate individuals across these spaces (and many others), I chose to deploy a qualitative methodology that utilised varied methods. The methods deployed consisted of a combination of face-to-face semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis, discourse analysis, and research through personally playing through the videogame titles themselves. The rationale behind the utilisation of a qualitative methodology, as well as the methods deployed herein, will be the subject matter of this chapter.

## 3.2 Methodological and Philosophical Approaches to Research:

There are several guiding philosophies that I apply to my research methodology for this project. I argue that qualitative orientations are better suited for the purposes and intentions of this thesis and its interest in heteronormative masculinity and its regulations.

Additionally, it is important to acknowledge and incorporate myself and my place within the research – for example through autoethnography. I will provide an overview and explanation of my adoption of these.

### 3.2.1 The Case for Qualitative:

One of the initial considerations in relation to the methodology of this research is the rationale of why I chose to deploy a qualitative methodology over quantitative methodologies. Debates surrounding the utility of qualitative and quantitative methodologies in research have been discussed by numerous authors, outlining each one's 'relative worth' to the research endeavour and their respective focus (e.g. Natasi and Schensul, 2005). In quantitative terms, while it is possible that we can measure the number and proportions of female and non-white recruits to militaries who are deployed on peacekeeping missions, it is not so easy to determine the number and proportion of LGBTQ personnel as different militaries have different policies on recruitment and recognition of non-heterosexual personnel. This is due to, for example, the inherent complexity and difficulty of utilising discrete questions on identity and the risk of erasure of gender queer and gender flexible persons (Baker et al, 2018); and how the traditional modes of collecting demographic information is 'insufficient' in accounting for the lives of LGBTQ persons (Ruberg and Ruelos, 2020). Beyond this complexity, there are also ethical considerations that come with the 'head counting' of LGBTQ persons within settings such as the military. Others have suggested that the use of questions that prompt reflection on themes of inclusion, lived experiences and policies are perhaps more beneficial in exploring and researching into this area (Polchar et al, 2014).

The aims of this research are to explore the experience of military personnel and of people playing videogames in institutional settings that are heteronormatively masculine, and to consider how their experiences reflect the institutional culture of these fields and to add to our understanding of why there is a plateauing in progress within both of these sites.

Organisations, militaries and videogame companies are aware of the need for greater inclusivity. Efforts including legislating for this in the case of militaries and including LGBTQ characters and romantic options in some videogames, which have produced some degree of change but nonetheless run up against resistance. My theoretical orientation is that the institutional cultures of both militaries and gaming communities, and their everyday forms and subtle manifestations, play a key role in regulating and limiting this change. To understand how this happens requires an exploration of the experience of personnel and gamers within these sites and settings, specifically when they are put in a context where the values of heteronormativity are problematised and challenged. It is the rationale contained within this thesis that similar values and problems are contained within the realm of videogames, the gaming process and its embedded ideologies. Qualitative methodology, which is concerned with 'illumination', 'understanding' and 'extrapolation' (Hoepfl, 1997) better enables me to contextualise the experience of the personnel and processes within both fields and to shed light on what is slowing change within the institutional culture, which will also give insights into what can be done to address this.

"While qualitative research prioritizes depth and quality of data collected, quantitative research maintains premium on the number and volume of data collected." (Anyan, 2013, pg.1)

The prioritisation of 'depth' and 'quality' of data not only marks the qualitative orientation of this thesis, but it is also this data that will be of more direct benefit to me, my research interests, and the explorations that are planned within this project. This is for several reasons, first and foremost - as discussed in chapter 2 – in both fields there are increased calls for diversity and widespread inclusion within militaries participating in peacekeeping processes, and within videogame creation, consumption and discussion. Both sites were chosen in accordance with their traditional associations with heteronormative masculinity and values of the same kind, while also both formally and informally being sites of contention and challenge regarding their gendering and orientation within heteronormative expectations. Despite this, these calls and policies for increasing diversity are commonly rejected and managed by the status quo through normative regulation and policing. It is the objective of this research project to explore the ways in which institutional norms and cultures are regulating these sites and hindering the change that is sought within these same policies.

**3.2.2 Autoethnography:**

Autoethnography is both a process and a product of research, as it acknowledges the various ways through which our individual experiences, subjectivities and positions come

to shape the research process (Custer, 2014; Ellis et al, 2011). Part of the reasoning behind the more reflective and critical elements of this thesis was also "…the postmodern scepticism regarding generalization of knowledge claims." (Anderson, 2006); which in some ways also highlights the discussions surrounding the spectre of 'objectivity' as an illusion within research practice (England, 1994; Franks, 2002; Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis, 2002). As such, it is important to emphasise the auto-ethnographical element that can be found within all research endeavours, from the initial conceptualisations to the collection of data, from data analyses to the presentation of findings. I utilise and acknowledge aspects of autoethnographic research orientation (to play with Ahmed's discussion of 'orientation' from Chapter 2) within this project, to fully highlight the ways through which I (as researcher) and my personal positionality and relationship with heteronormativity and masculinity, manifest and indeed shape the 'process' and 'product' that is outlined here.

I have tried to ensure that self-reflection and positionality are acknowledged within this this research endeavour. This is perhaps easier to achieve in relation to positioning myself and my experiences in the form of data discussions from my personal play with the games covered in later chapters. However, my positionality is also present in the direct relationship that I have had with heteronormative masculinity personally as an initial frame for pursuing and conceptualising this thesis. By including myself within the research and my positionality in relation to its various components, I aim to strengthen the overall claims made within this thesis and to enhance the research process through reflexivity (Mosselson, 2010).

"Qualitative methodology recognizes that the subjectivity of the researcher is intimately involved in scientific research. Subjectivity guides everything from the choice of topic that one studies, to formulating hypotheses, to selecting methodologies, and interpreting data." (Ratner, 2002. Pg.1)

I must account for myself and the constellation of identities to which I cling to (as a white, homosexual, cis-gendered – though sometimes effeminate - male, able-bodied, Irish, etc.), within the entirety of this research endeavour; and how these various and intersectional identities I have listed of myself, contribute in many ways to the subjectivities through which I engage with the material mentioned in this PhD. It is not the objective of this research, in any section or chapter, to present the knowledge I produce and discuss with herein as *the* truth, or *the* knowledge on the subject. Rather, I must acknowledge that my research contains my subjectivity throughout, my engagement with various literatures, how I became shaped and my thoughts developed as a result of this engagement and interaction, and how I produced the findings and discussion points in the relevant sections.

Autoethnography is particularly more relevant for the research and chapters exploring videogames (Chapters 6 and 7). In these chapters I explore and analyse the ideologies of gender and sexuality that I found to be present in *Assassins Creed: Odyssey* (Ubisoft, 2018) and *A Plague Tale: Innocence* (Asobo, 2019). In these chapters I present my theories, arguments and suggestions through my own familiarity with and engagement through play. In Chapter 5 I use my reaction as an initial reasoning to then primarily explore and

analyse an online forum thread around the game and a controversy that emerged within Assassin's Creed Odyssey in early 2019 with one of its downloadable content (DLCs)[11] – outlined in detail in Chapter 5 itself. Analysing the online forum and their discussions was with the objective of exploring how other players were feeling and reacting to the controversial moment in the DLC, and how these feelings and reactions were being met and managed among the gamers themselves.

While it is important to acknowledge the previous utilisation of ethnographic methods to study online and gaming environments (e.g. Boellstorf, 2008); several other scholars have also claimed to have deployed autoethnography to their explorations and analysis of gaming, gamers and videogames (Beyer, 2019; Borchard, 2015; Downey, 2012; Owen, 2015; Stamatov, 2015;). In fact, autoethnographic approaches to the study of videogames have not been as popular as other methodologies or more ethnographic studies into virtual worlds and videogames populated by multiple players at any one time and interact with one another in these same spaces (for example Massively Multiplayer Online games). However, Beyer (2019) notes that autoethnography as a method is particularly useful in so far as it presents itself as a means through which to meaningfully engage with single-player videogame titles as both experience and research data. These single player titles and the 'lone experience(s)' that they provide can also be argued as viable ethnographic and autoethnographic material to research if we again consider videogames as ideological artefacts. If, as this thesis contends, videogames possess self-contained ideological

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[11] Downloadable content for videogames is any content available after the release of a title, it can include new stories and locations unavailable in the base game, cosmetics for playable characters etc.

landscapes, then even single player experiences into these gameworlds and their ideologies represent an important avenue of unearthing and exploring overt and subtle manifestations of these ideologies, as well as the interplay between player and the gameworld itself. Miller (2008) provides a number of ways through which videogames may appeal to the ethnographer, even single player ones; whether through the politics and aesthetics that the designers populate the gameworld with, or the fact that to understand players discussions and understandings of these gameworlds and its content (as well as other player created content) one must visit and become familiar with these sites.

Additionally, it is important to consider more broadly constructivist grounded theory and its suitability with the previously outlined emphasis on reflexivity and self-awareness of the position of the researcher within the research process and its theory creation. The goal here being that - rather than proposing and promoting an organic or seemingly neutral creation of data and theory - it considers the role and influence of the researcher in the production of the research narrative (Charmaz, 2014; Vanner, 2015). While this has obvious ties back to the autoethnographical elements and aims of this research project, it also ties into one of the next areas that I wish to discuss, the effects of 'doubt' and its place within this thesis.

### 3.2.3 Doubt and Knowledge Production:

With regards to an approach to epistemology, I feel that it is important to discuss the relationship with 'doubt' that informed and stayed with me through much of this thesis and its many phases. This is not to say that a sense of doubt is unique to me as a researcher, nor to this research endeavour or my personal PhD pursuit. I am sure that doubt is a common companion among my peers and many others. Rather, and out of principle, I wish to highlight how doubt manifested and shaped both my research product and process from the beginning, if for no other reason than to dispel assumptions about objective and self-confident research processes – which for me personally was not always the case.

As with other research seeking to explore and offer critiques of the normative and regulatory cultures across gender and sexuality, it is also important to flag the internalisation of doubt within the broader epistemological and research processes and endeavours. Janish (2018) is one such scholar that offers a meaningful engagement with doubt and its relationship to knowledge production - particularly along the lines of gender - while the author recognises this doubt as it relates to the broader power and privilege within patriarchal society.

"It is so typical, such a classical internalization of the silencing effects of a sexist and anti-feminist culture. Doubt is the most effective tool for anti-feminists,

because it is instilled in us, and we use it against ourselves without prompting."

(Janish, 2018. Pg 229).

In offering critique of the predominant heteronormative masculine cultures explored within this thesis, doubt and uncertainty were intimately embedded within the continuing research process. For me the experience of conducting this research and writing this thesis were not grounded in constant self-confidence and self-assurance, I often found myself second guessing myself and my work. Doubt manifested itself for me in relation to the claims, observations, and arguments that I was making in the thesis. Was the same sense of self and positionality that was grounding and embedding me within this research process also acting to hinder me and result in me 'looking too closely' to find answers? Was I simply 'reading too much into things' because of my orientation and positionality as a gay man exploring heteronormative masculinity? Internalised doubt was present encouraging me to second guess many of my arguments, thoughts, and claims within this thesis, as well as causing me to question the ways through which I was trying to collect and analyse data to answer these same questions and arguments.

Janish (2018) concludes their writing on their experiences of doubt and notes that there are some potential benefits to the presence of doubt; enabling a more intimate relationship with our research, permitting a slow and thoughtful progression throughout the research. Nonetheless, doubt was a constant bedfellow through this research endeavour, and again I feel it is my duty to acknowledge this – if not for myself, then for those coming after me following their own path and conducting their own research. I want

to acknowledge the role and influence of concepts such as doubt in my research process, rather than ignore it and promote a more clinical perspective on the research endeavour. Doubt and self-reflection remain important aspects of research practice which should be accepted and recognised.

**3.2.4 Grounded Theory:**

This research utilises data collected in the form of qualitative in-depth interviews with personnel from militaries participating in peacekeeping, online forum thread analysis and autoethnographic data from the researchers' play of two videogame titles. Throughout the collection and analysis of this data, principles of grounded theory underpinned my approach within the context of exploring both sites.

Grounded theory approaches are centred on an inductive approach to a given social phenomenon or interest, more centrally it is an approach that is focused on deriving an understanding and meaning from the data itself in order to produce theory. Not only is the central focus placed on the collected data, some, such as Martin and Turner (1986) have placed this approach as particularly relevant/useful for analysing qualitative data, along with its application in organisational research. They suggest that in order to examine and explore the complexities that are often found within organisations and their cultures, research methods need to pay attention to these complexities rather than risking ignoring them, and that grounded theory is one such methodology of achieving this aim – though I also argue that qualitative methods are important for similar reasons.

The theory and explorations presented in this thesis, rather than being generated or proposed by the researcher before they conduct their work (generally the deductive approach), were produced during the research stages. This was achieved through the interaction and mutual shaping of the collection of data and its analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). While the guiding principles behind grounded theory and its approach to research were certainly utilised throughout this project, it was more directly and specifically utilised as a method of theory genesis and data analysis when it came to 'playing' and indeed the 'replaying' with data for the analysis of and engagement with videogames (Chapters 5 and 6 of this thesis). This was achieved mostly through the practices of playing through the videogames in question multiple times, exploring different dialogue options and scenarios where possible to identify and review the aspects of these games that informed the analysis and exploration into the themes of gender and sexuality.

## 3.3 Making Case(s) and Comparing:

There is an argument that can be made that this project be both a single and a multiple case study piece of research. In relation to the former, the central 'case study' is in relation to the concept of heteronormative masculinity. This regulatory and enforced concept has very real consequences on the lives of those whom exist outside of or challenge its domain and status and has been of interest to researchers in gender, race, and sexuality (etc). It is in this way that we might consider 'heteronormative masculinity' as the core subject or 'case' that is explored within this thesis at large. I engage with this concept across two different contexts/fields acting as further and differentiated case studies where I explore *how* heteronormative masculinity may manifest itself and shape the lives of others in

these areas. The opportunity to explore two cases emerged through the opportunity afforded by the GAP project to explore the experiences of military personal and I followed this with an exploration of experiences in another heteronormative space – videogames.

The 'issue under study' here is how heteronormative sexuality, specifically masculinity, is enacted, policed and enforced across traditional strongholds undergoing change, resistance and contention. Through exploring both spaces, this research is afforded the opportunity to observe similarities and differences, which would be otherwise unclear in single case observations - which a benefit of utilising multiple cases of study (Baxter and Jack, 2008).

> "Multiple-case designs allow for replication in data collection across sites, which can be beneficial in understanding the issue under study." (Anderson et al, 2014. Pg.89)

Additionally, the primary benefit of compiling and using two or more sites to study, particularly for the interests of this research and its objectives, is to allow for exploring the potential similarities and differences that are observable between them as well as to develop data and details on the individual sites themselves. Comparisons across cases and indeed comparative case study designs have been used for this very reason by many other scholars across many fields (e.g. Chavkin et al, 2018; Daniels, 2016; Festing et al, 2015; and Krehl and Weck, 2019). Heteronormativity and its processes of regulation and

maintenance (and change) are important aspects of gender politics within any site, but given the shared history and ideological landscape of the sites utilised in this thesis (as outlined in the previous chapter), this thesis makes use of both sites in order to offer potential generalisability towards other traditionally heteronormative sites to explore and discuss the nuances behind how gender and sexuality politics play out here and potentially may be seen beyond.

While it is important to note that an exploration into the military/peacekeeping environment or videogames alone would still yield valid and interesting results, some of the real value of this research is in the contrast and comparison between both of these sites along the lines of heteronormativity and its processes of maintenance, contestation and alteration.

As shown in the later parts of this chapter, there are variations and specific methods used to collect data from both sites – (section 3.6 and 3.8 respectively). However, there were also some differences in the approaches taken to studying both sites. As such, and with the intention of being clear and concise in outlining the methods of collection, analysis, and sampling. I have chosen to organise and separate the discussion around the methods used etc, based on whether they were exploring themes within the videogame or military setting.

**3.4 Playing with Research? – Gameplay as part of a reflective methodology:**

A final consideration before delving into the specifics of the methods deployed in this thesis, is a consideration of the role of 'play' and its relationship with the research process that was briefly mentioned in the preceding sections.

Part of this research endeavour also aimed to delve into and contribute to the broader area of game studies, which as a field itself is multidisciplinary and as varied as the videogames that they study. Individuals who engage with game studies come from varied fields such as media studies,  philosophy and sociology (to name a brief few); but equally the videogames that they study are equally diverse in terms of genre, for example, first person shooters, action, puzzle, strategy, roleplay and so on. Researchers also have a particularly interesting relationship with pleasure, productivity and research in relation to conducting game research – which often requires that the researcher plays the game first-hand to fully explore it for analysis (e.g. Østby, 2017).

Play as a tool of research is also uniquely placed within the field of game studies. While the technology industry itself remains heteronormative and masculine (e.g. Chang, 2018) topics around diversity and representations have also increasingly become part of wider conversations within videogames themselves. This was particularly evident in the emergent 'culture wars' around 2014 in relation to feminist and queer critiques and observations within videogames and among their players. Increases in the frequency of representations of female protagonists and other character have been observed (E.g.

Jansz and Martis, 2007). Yet, as is the position of this thesis, in many of these cases when there is a deeper analysis of these games, exploring their narratives, characters and so on, there are still a plethora of ways in which associations, representations and ideologies of heteronormativity can be seen to persist.

Drawing from queer game studies, which offers a framework for researching and understanding gender and sexuality within videogames - but also beyond them - remains crucial to the project of exposing and exploring the norms that are guiding these sites. The aim through this thesis is that I am, as Naomi Clark put it  locating "unspoken norms by which a field of activity or knowledge is operating" and to find "points of rupture that destabilize those assumptions, opening up those fields to a wider and potentially more liberatory set of possibilities." (cited in Ruberg & Shaw, 2017 (eds) Pg.X). Playing with games in this way also allows us to play with their meaning, messages, and interpretations.

Videogames are cultural artefacts which reflect the ideologies present in the societies within which they are produced (Murray, 2018), therefore it remains critical to explore and assess these themes in line with their inferences, connotations and embedded values. To explore the cultures of gaming and how gender and sexuality manifest and are regulated within this field, I chose to analyse and play through two separate titles to explore themes of gender and sexuality. They will be the subjects of discussion within Chapters 5 and 6 of this thesis, where chapter 5 will explore the institutionalised ideologies and themes that are embedded within games themselves and their designs;

while Chapter 6 builds on this by considering the ways through which these designs are incorporated and utilised by players to regulate and police the meaning-making of other players outside the heteronormatively acceptable boundaries.

My contribution is to draw from my background in Sociology, while adapting and consulting with some of the methods and approaches that are used within game studies. The aim of combining these is to assist with my explorations of gender and sexuality within this space, while allowing me to become familiar with some of the ways through which videogames are analysed and assessed on these terms – particularly through queer and feminist lenses. This is not only deeply disruptive to the more normative expectations and the held beliefs within this space, but also, this is particularly seen within approaches such as close readings and queering 'straight games' and so on. In doing this, research of similar orientations to my own aims act to dismantle and disrupt the status quo of imagined 'white, straight, cisgender, male "gamer"' in videogames (Ruberg, 2020).

Furthermore, it is also important here that I emphasise the role and insight to be found within videogames as sources of data in their own right (Østby, 2017; Ruberg and Shaw, 2017; Ruberg, 2019b). It is twofold why it is important to acknowledge the process of play in relation to this methodology chapter. The more obvious reasoning is that in order to perform the appropriate exploration outlined in Chapter 5 required a meaningful familiarity with *Assassins Creed: Odyssey* in order to fully understand and be aware of the discourses and regulations present within the forum of gamers discussing the game and its content, as well as relating my personal experiences from play with those observed

and explored within the forum setting. The same applies for any analysis of *A Plague Tale: Innocence* along the lines of themes of gender and sexuality in Chapter 6. This play-research process was also critical to explore the moments in the game where I found themes of gender and sexuality to emerge, without having played the game, I would be missing some of the core insights that come from first-hand experience with specific moments, circumstances, and mechanics of note. However, it is also important to reflect on the more subjective and personal reason behind incorporating play into this methodology.

As Østby (2017) reflects in their own methodology chapter, there is a distinction between personal/pleasure play and analytical play, the former is less so experienced in relation to a testing of the game and its design, whereas the latter is very much considerate of the design mechanics and many other features often not dived into deeply within a personal play/pleasure play. I agree and constitute the same distinction with respect to my play of the games mentioned and explored in this thesis, often the personal and pleasure centric play occurred first – which often led to instances where I had to reflect on my 'pleasure' play through, and consider particular themes that took root in my mind (with some notes taken when something of obvious note occurred). With these rooting ideas and thoughts from initial play sessions, this was then followed with a subsequent explorative play experience occurring after.

**3.5 Accessing and exploring two fields:**

To account for the two fields that were chosen to become the focus of my research, it is also important to provide a brief account for how I was uniquely placed to engage with and access both sites and the goal of combining them within one study. As will be discussed in the forthcoming subsection, some of my data was gathered during my work on the Gaming for Peace (GAP) project which gave me unique access to military personnel from multiple military organisations across Europe who were participating in peacekeeping. My personal interest and history with playing videogames allowed me to utilise my experiences and understandings of gaming, and to bring my knowledge to compare it with what was observable within militaries participating in peacekeeping.

**3.5.1 Access to Field One: Militaries in Peacekeeping:**

The first site was militaries involved in peacekeeping. In short, - and as has been discussed in the preceding chapters of this thesis - military personnel who participate in peacekeeping are positioned in an interesting location for understanding the role of ideologies and regulations of gender and sexuality. As we discussed in chapter two, there is a perceived 'feminisation' that occurs in relation to peacekeeping when compared to the tasks, competencies and values of traditional military and combat participation. The traditional emphasis on the warrior is necessarily supplemented with many other qualities that have historically not been associated with traditional conceptualisations of masculinity such as altruism, communication, empathy and sensitivity. Despite these motivations and requirements in the form of public and formalised policies from

international, national and even intra-organisational levels (e.g. Resolution 1325), progress in making the institution of the military transition in this way is stymied.

This field was accessed through the Gaming for Peace Project[12]. The data provided by the GAP project will be outlined in chapter 4 of this thesis. During the first three years of my thesis, I worked on the GAP project as a PhD research assistant, specifically seeking to explore and analyse the ways through which gender and sexuality manifested among personnel on peacekeeping missions. This contributed to the overall goal of the project to develop a curriculum in soft skills and develop a role-playing game in which this curriculum could be embedded to train individuals in essential soft skills before deployment to help them with their performances overseas. These soft skills included gender awareness and sexuality awareness, but also areas like cultural awareness, communication, cooperation and trust. 177 in-depth interviews were conducted overall for the project with experienced peacekeeping personnel from six different countries across Europe, to discuss their experiences and the utility of these soft skills. The content derived from these interviews was combined with state-of-the-art research in soft skills and the context of peacekeeping to produce a curriculum which was embedded within the storyline of a 2D digital role-playing game, with assessment built into the game, and assessment to do before and after the game to measure improvements made.

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[12] Gaming for Peace (GAP) Project is a European Horizon 2020 Project, seeking to assist with the training of peacekeeping personnel along the lines of cultural awareness, gender awareness, trust, cooperation and communication. The delivery of this project was via the utilisation of a custom designed videogame as part of training process to develop and encourage the fostering of soft skills for missions and deployments. See GAP website for more information: https://gap-project.eu/

The opportunity to work as a research assistant on this project provided me with a key opportunity to explore heteronormativity within a more formalised institutional culture. The similarities that I observed through the GAP project in terms of the experiences of personnel in the heteronormative military institutional culture that was struggling to change and transition towards becoming more inclusive, and my own experiences within videogames where there was a similar gap between the aspirations and realities, led me to conclude that it would be fruitful to use gaming and videogames as a second site of research.

### 3.5.2: Access to Field site Two: Gaming

In terms of accessing the field of videogames and gaming, I benefited from personal access to the specific games that I chose to explore through my ability to purchase them and play them first-hand. These titles were 1) *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* (Ubisoft, 2018) and 2) *A Plague Tale: Innocence* (Asoba, 2019). The former is an open-world RPG (with a linear main story) entry into the popular Assassins Creed franchise set in the world of Ancient Greece, which was well received and became infamous for one of its DLC's (downloadable content in the form of extra storylines etc). In Assassins Creed: Odyssey, players choose either a male or female sibling to be their playable character, and through the various quests and side quests also potentially encounter romance options from a range of genders. In one of their 3-part episodic DLC's, players – regardless of their previous playthroughs, and the sexual orientations that they associated with Alexios or Kassandra – were forced to settle down and have a child with another NPC as part of a heteronormative family-centric plotline. A Plague Tale is a more traditionally linear title,

set in medieval France during the 100-year war and the onset of the Bubonic plague, playing as Amicia – a fourteen-year-old girl from a noble family- players must help escort their sick little brother through the game world and keep him safe.

Both games were selected because of their themes of gender and sexuality that were evident as I read about them pre-release, and through subsequent gameplay experience and reflection. Specifically, they were selected for the fact that they had female protagonists[13], and in the case of *Assassins Creed:* Odyssey (Ubisoft, 2018), a more open approach to the inclusion of sexuality, but on reflection and through engagement through play there were multiple observations and themes relating to gender and sexuality that became increasingly visible and important to explore.

In both above cases, and the outlining of 'why' to consider these sites at all, what becomes clear is the necessity of conducting in-depth and detail orientated qualitative research to explore the experience of players and personnel within these sites in the context of understanding the institutional culture. Across videogame culture and amongst military personnel participating in peacekeeping – and indeed further beyond – gender and sexuality are core concepts that remain entrenched within the politics of legitimacy, belonging and identity. Where the image of the traditional soldier has been male, indeed part of the warrior archetype of masculinity outlined by Connell (2005), and discussed

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[13] In the case of *Assassins Creed: Odyssey* (Ubisoft), the female protagonist Kassandra is one of two choices for protagonist that the players have, the other choice being her brother Alexios. Whereas in *A Plague Tale: Innocence* (Asoba) Amicia is the only protagonist – outside one level where players play as her little brother Hugo.

since by other scholars such as Digby (2014); the images of gamers are also historically seen to be 'young, pale and male' (e.g. MacDonald, 2020). This research will aim to better elaborate on how and why these ideologies, associations and traditionally held values persist and shape the lived realities of these spaces.

## 3.6 Methods, Timeframes and Processes:

### 3.6.1 GAP Project – What I did:

I will now outline the approaches and methods deployed in both sites of research. The first of which is the military personnel participating in peacekeeping.

### 3.6.2 Sampling:

One of the major initial decisions of this thesis concerned '*who*' the participants would be. The sample of military personnel was provided by the GAP project, who organised and sorted out the access, sampling and other methodological concerns prior to the beginning of my PhD commencement. Which made this phase of my research relatively smooth and avoided any personal difficulty surrounding gaining access and conducting research within and about a more traditionally closed hierarchical organisations such as the military (e.g. Woodward, 2014), and particularly in relation to gaining access to minorities within these settings (e.g. Braun et al, 2015).

Due to working with the GAP project, research personnel were able to draw from a large qualitative data source of experienced peacekeeping personnel from across various European countries. These participants consisted of militaries (Ireland, Finland, Bulgaria, Poland), police forces (Northern Ireland, Portugal, Poland), and civilian/NGO's (Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland). These participants were selected by the participating organisations on the project in relation to an outlined eligibility criterion. These criteria included that each organisation provided a gender parity of participants – or as close to this as possible, that they had prior experience peacekeeping, and that there was no restriction on their position or rank. The final sample comprised approximately 177 participants (Holohan, 2019), who were chosen for the initial round of semi structured interviews to gather insight into soft skills in peacekeeping, including the current experiences of the impact of gender and sexuality within peacekeeping missions, specifically positive and negative experiences, interactions with colleagues, with other organisations' personnel and with the local population, stress and isolation – which is where the main value for this research project lies in relation to the military setting.

### 3.6.3 Data collection:

This combination of sources, and the collection method of semi-structured face to face interviews fell under the collection strategies of the Gaming for Peace project. My specific interest within the project and the interviews were the questions on gender and sexuality (see appendix 3). The questions were designed to explore the ways through which gender and sexuality were discussed within this setting. To explore the ways through which participants discussed how gender and/or sexuality impacted on their experiences, their

performances, or the role of these concepts within the military and on the peacekeeping missions themselves. A total of 38 qualitative in-depth interviews were utilised and analysed in the forthcoming chapter on military personnel participating in peacekeeping, - 16 with Irish army personnel (15 male, 1 female); and 22 Finnish army personnel (14 male, 8 female). Of these, 3 were conducted by me personally with some members of the Irish Military[14], while the remaining 35 interviews with members from both organisations were conducted by my colleagues on the project consortium from the Republic of Ireland and from Finland.

Overall, the emphasis for the project was to gather the experiences and stories of participants from these organisations and from these missions. Beyond my interest in the area of gender and sexuality, other areas were explored and defined by my colleagues on the project. The questions found on the interview guide were divided into their component categories (a range of categories were present in the interviews – cultural awareness, communication, cooperation, gender, sexuality, trust, stress and so forth). Within the interviews themselves, the questions and conversations aimed to allow participants to talk about the nuances of themes like gender and sexuality in a non-direct and reflective manner, one what would allow us to garner insights into the complex realities of their lived experiences across these lines.

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[14] I conducted a total of 17 semi-structured qualitative interviews out of the total sample of 177 for the projects first stage. My interviews were conducted with members from the Irish military (mentioned above), and with members of the Portuguese Police force and the Bulgarian Navy. However, for this thesis I decided it was pertinent to explore the military specifically and of those interviews I felt that it was within the Irish and Finnish militaries that there was more engagement with questions and themes surrounding gender and sexuality.

The GAP methodology package for these interviews included information sheets, consent forms, as well as the interview guide that acted as a guide for all interviewers across the project in how they conducted the interviews (appendices 1-3 respectively). This was important as there were teams interviewing in six different countries (Ireland, Northern Ireland, Portugal, Finland, Bulgaria and Poland), and it was important to ensure that the interviews were done in a similar fashion across each of these locations.

My data from GAP thus comprises of primary and secondary data sources for the exploration of regulation among military personnel. Primary data for the GAP project side of my thesis, came from the interviews with Irish military personnel that I personally conducted and transcribed; whilst the secondary data was from those remaining interviews with Irish military personnel and those with Finnish military that were conducted by my peers on the project (numerical breakdown listed at the end of the preceding sampling section). The resulting analysis of these interviews and their corresponding transcripts were both data-driven and in-depth. The aim of this was also to minimising one of the main critiques of relying on secondary data within research, namely that it 'truncates' the process of research (Murphy and Schlaerth, 2010).

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were selected as a method of data collection because it allows for the interviewees to share more of their points of view, while being flexible and allowing them to flesh out the areas that the researcher is seeking to explore (Bryman, 2012). The semi-structured interviews themselves were conducted with personnel from organisations that were presently participating or had participated recently in peacekeeping missions. These interviews were presented as a means of

assessing the current and past practices and realities within this setting regarding gender and sexuality (and the projects four other areas of interest: cooperation, trust, stress and communication). These interviews were – at least in terms of the military personnel considered in Chapter 4 – conducted on the site/base of the organisation itself. In my case I had travelled out to the Curragh camp in Co. Kildare, Rep. of Ireland. The Interviews varied anywhere from thirty minutes to close to two hours from participant to participant. These interviews were carried out in empty classrooms, boardrooms, and meeting rooms on the compound, which in some ways neutralised some of the power dynamics of having participants come to an alien/new location for the purposes of the interview. It is important to also note that an inhibiting factor or effect from conducting these interviews on site was that the interviewees were still 'on the job' and within the official premises of their organisations. From the data collected, with interviews lasting up to two hours in some cases across the GAP samples, it appeared that the interview participants were eager to share their thoughts and experiences from their deployments with the researchers.

Conducting the interviews within the grounds of the Curragh Camp was also an interesting experience and provided a moment of reflection for me as the researcher. Specifically, I found myself being conscious that the site of the Curragh was unfamiliar and alien to me, entering and walking down a long road, surrounded by red brick buildings and passing vehicles and personnel, trying to make sense of my surroundings and where I needed to go to be directed to the interview locations. The classrooms and boardrooms where the interviews were conducted were also places that I had never been before, and I couldn't

know if even the participants had been in these same rooms either. And while the purpose of the interviews was to explore and allow the personnel to share their experiences and expertise, given the trade-off between the difficulties of gaining access to the site and its personnel and control over the recruitment, the fact that the interviews were conducted on site and facilitated by the institutions whose cultures I was exploring in relation to gender and sexuality is an important moment of reflection not only for me as a researcher, but also for the research project itself.

Specifically, in relation to the latter, for the interviewees themselves as members of the organisation/institutional culture it would have been similarly impactful, if not more. To them, the camp space was something familiar to them, but it was also the site of their primary interactions with the institution. They presumably walked around and entered these buildings on an almost daily basis, they sat in some of these classrooms, in these meeting rooms, or perhaps only their superiors inhabited these spaces where they were now being asked questions which were potentially uncomfortable particularly as they asked about institutional life and they were asked these questions within institutional spaces. If the interviews had been performed (had it been in our control for access) on more neutral grounds, the interviewees may have been even more relaxed and willing to discuss material more at length, or at the very least the data would have most likely been different.

In relation to power dynamics, one of the main benefits of using semi-structured interviews as opposed to structured interviews is the allowance for participants to

elaborate and more easily engage with the topics of interest to the researcher. In the process of allowing for this, interviewees can elaborate and move outside of the specified areas outlined by the researcher via the design of questions, to allow for the interviewees to highlight and discuss what is of importance and relevance to them. Semi-structured interviewing also represents a break in the 'transactional power differentials' found within other more structured qualitative interviewing methods (Anyan, 2013). Power can be exercised within interview research methods through the creation and setting of questions for example, though this is not to ignore the power held by interviewees to rebuff questions, or to end interviews at any time (also mentioned by Anyan, 2013) – rather it is important to view qualitative interviews are negotiations of power and discourse between both parties. By using semi-structured interviews, I sought to allow participants to share their experiences and knowledge of being within these gendered and orientated environments – as their stories and experiences were the material of value for this research – particularly as we must also acknowledge that they are the '*experts*' of what the regulations and policing's of gender and sexual orientations are within their given field.

### 3.6.4 Data analysis:

When the interviews were complete, my first task was to complete the transcription of the recordings of the interviews, which provided an opportunity to become very familiar with every word of the data.

Since grounded theory remains a central fixture of this research, the same stress on the data will be present within the analysis of all data. Coding of interviews and the forum

threads were done manually *without* the use of NVivo or other software that would have saved time. I chose not to engage with NVivo for the purposes of manually becoming more engrossed and familiar with the interview data, with the objective of being better able to see threads, to observe and sift through the connotations not just the larger patterns, but to also try to more clearly see the other possible ways through which these regulations of symbolic gendered/androcentric violence manifests in the everyday and in the casual conversations with participants. This, I feel, was achieved, but at the cost of a little more time than would perhaps have been saved through utilising NVivo or other similar software packages.

After I completed the transcription of the interviews I personally collected, I downloaded the encrypted transcripts of the other interviews of interest – namely those others carried out by colleagues with the Irish Military personnel, and those done with the Finnish Military personnel. The process of analysis itself was through coding for thematic analysis – a method also utilised in the gaming studies, as we will see in the coming sections. The recognition of themes and subthemes was achieved through multiple iterations of reading the transcripts and breaking them down into patterns and visible commonalities observable within the data set.

> "The themes and subthemes are the product of a thorough reading and rereading of the transcripts or field notes that make up the data." (Bryman, 2012. Pg.579).

**3.7 Gaming – What I did:**

The second area of exploration in this thesis was videogames and their cultures. In order to explore this area, I deployed a qualitative methodology again, this time utilising different methods. These methods consisted of autoethnography, content analysis of personal experiences shared within an online forum, and exploration and analysis of a specific videogame title itself. The reasoning behind the different methods deployed at this stage of research will also be clarified in the below discussions.

**3.7.1 Sampling:**

In order to explore the wider nuances of regulation and policing of gender and sexual orientation within gaming, one of the main differences was in that I decided to take part of my research online. This was due to several rationalisations from the researcher, namely that gamers often play in physical isolation but exist in shared social spaces online such as online forums, (or socially in the virtual worlds themselves – e.g. studies such as Boellstorff (2008). Furthermore, gamers as a cohort, or group, are generally seen to be quite tech-savvy, and therefore online avenues for sampling, data collection and so forth seemed beneficial for me to pursue.

There were two different 'samples' that were used to observe and analyse in relation to videogames. These two samples are broken down as follows : a) single-player game titles that I played over the course of this research project (namely: Assassins Creed: Odyssey (Ubisoft, 2018), and A Plague Tale: Innocence (Asoba, 2019)) that I compiled notes and

reflected on my own gameplay experiences through play; and b) an online forum thread on one of the video games that I played with around a thousand comments about a controversy within one of the DLCs (downloadable content) for Assassins Creed. I started my exploration into these game titles with an autoethnographic approach, seeking to play these games and explore my reactions and thoughts through a close reading of them. Writing on and noting what emerged as important or relevant to me in relation to themes of gender and sexuality. In Chapter 6 on *Assassins Creed: Odyssey* (Ubisoft), my own reaction was compared and contrasted with how others had reacted and how other players were regulating and managing their reactions to the controversy. The locus of this exercise was an online forum with threads dedicated to the storyline and choices in the game that I had reacted to.

Both samples were chosen with the aim of providing an exploration of the specific gendered and orientated ideological landscapes that can be found and utilised within given game titles themselves. These ideological regulations and practices are then comparable with the ways through which similarities may be observed among military personnel participating in peacekeeping. Within the context of videogames, in earlier phases of this research I considered conducting an ethnography within a videogame company to explore the ways through which these concepts of gender and sexuality were informally regulated within the workplace as well as within the design processes and decision-making (but was unsuccessful in gaining access). I then decided to focus on the product or outcome of this environment – the game itself and the experiences of videogamers. In this way, both the military personnel and videogamers become the

frontline individuals within this institutionalised heteronormativity who then interact and play with the various typifications found within these settings.

## 3.7.2 Data Collection:

The methods of data collection differ from the previous method with the military personnel, not just in terms of being online, but also the absence of face-to-face interviews. The data collection for videogames and their cultures was through the examination of two data sources (forums and play) as individual and reinforcing cases that together provide better insights into the ideological and regulatory landscapes of the medium.

In the earlier phases of this research project, I considered another avenue of data collection - conducting interviews and observations of videogame developers and creators to gain insight into the themes of heteronormativity, gender, and sexuality within videogame design. I found it difficult in some cases to get access and some of those who got back to me stated that they had been interviewed recently by academics about their processes, ideologies and videogame design at large. As a result of this, I decided that seeking out and exploring videogames and the players themselves were also highly relevant to the purposes of this project, namely exploring some of the ways that they regulated and policed on another along the lines of heteronormativity. As such I will now discuss the use of online forums and of play as part of the data collection of this research project.

**3.7.2.1 Exploring online forums:**

After consulting with the literature, I utilised Pulos (2013) as an initial methodological inspiration gaining insights into the regulations of gender and sexuality amongst gamers. Their paper shared theoretical similarities in terms of their aims and objectives and that of my own research. They explored themes of gender, sexuality and heteronormativity within World of Warcraft (Blizzard) – their study consisting of a combination of their play, their analysis of the game's structures and, more critically, the analysis of forum thread comments. As mentioned above, I chose to supplement my own gameplay experiences with *Assassins Creed: Odyssey* with the discussion taking place in an online forum around controversial decisions within one of its DLCs[15], the aim of this was to also gain insight beyond solely my reactions and feelings and explore how other players were reacting and regulating each other in relation to this.

The use of forum thread comments for collection and analysis have been widely discussed for internet-based research methods (Jowett, 2015; Kantanen and Manninen, 2016; Rodham and Gavin, 2006; ) and used in research on gamers (Bourgonjon et al, 2016; Pulos, 2013). I decided that using online gaming forum websites would suit the objectives of this research endeavour, as a means to observe and analyse the discourses and policing strategies that occur among gamers in a way that is not determined by my personal intervention in the field– an also represented a site that would be easier to access for the time limits of this thesis. For Chapter 5, I used an online forum thread discussion which

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[15] DLC stand for Downloadable Content, this can be either paid or free content that is added to the videogame. DLC's are often in the form of new storylines, expansions, new places, weapons, items, and so on.

contained around 1,000 comments as a means of exploring a naturally occurring site of regulation and policing of gender and sexuality around a specific controversy that emerged within a game title in early 2019 – namely a later released DLC for Assassins Creed: Odyssey (Ubisoft, 2018). The use of this data was also a basis for ethical consideration, which will be discussed more in-depth in the ethics section of this chapter.

Online forum websites and forum threads are relatively easy to participate in and often provide a high level of anonymity to their users through usernames etc. These sites and threads revolve around open discussions around numerous issues and topics. Suler (2004) noted what they call the 'Online disinhibition effect', which they state comes from the phenomenon of people saying and doing things in online settings that they would not do in real life. The concept of disinhibition itself remains of interest for this research given its specific focus on gender and sexuality, which for some are classed as more 'sensitive' topics. Hollenbough and Everett (2013) also discuss Sulers' work in reference to blogs online, they found that people disclose more in these settings than in face to face. I felt that in terms of data collection, an online forum thread would be ideal for the above reasons, as well as the fact that for the most part the one thousand comment thread would also generally stay on topic and therefore present a large amount of conversation, critique and commentary from members of the gaming community around the issues found in relation to gender and sexuality within this given title, and those issues felt by its player base.

**3.7.2.2 Playing with Autoethnography:**

As we discussed earlier in this chapter, in order to explore the ideological regulation and gendered policing observable within video game spaces and their gameworlds, it is necessary that the researcher *plays* these videogames for themselves (Aarseth, 2003). As such, the researcher must become a player, and their play becomes part of the research through the process of becoming familiar with the gameworld and its content. The principle benefit of this play is in the familiarity with the videogame itself and its content. I discovered that during the analysis and writing of the Assassins Creed Odyssey (Ubisoft, 2018) chapter, that the data and analysis presented in relation to the forum thread discussions were particularly important as they revolved more around the regulations and actions of the players of these games and how, in some cases, they drew upon the aspects of play and game design to regulate and de-legitimise particular claims made around the controversy. Exploring research through gameplay was also interesting and useful in terms of providing the opportunity for a 'close reading' (e.g. Ruberg, 2019b) – of a particular game titles for their embedded designs and what ideologies it is reinforcing through its explicit representations as well as its connotation (other examples include Stang, 2019b; Youngblood, 2015). The purpose of the chapter exploring A Plague Tale: Innocence (Chapter 6) was to explore – through close reading - how games not only persist as ideological tools, but also how many of the same *seemingly objective/neutral* design choices and mechanics within these videogames are utilised as tools of heteronormative regulation among gamers (emphasis my own).

### 3.7.3 Data Analysis:

Outside of the different data collection strategies, the processes of data collection were largely the same – particularly in relation to the principles that were guiding the analysis.

### 3.7.3.1 Analysing an online forum:

In relation to the forum thread analysis, I deployed a similar approach to that mentioned in the analysis section of GAP data outlined previously – namely utilising thematic analysis again.  I read through all the comment posts of this particular forum thread – close to 1,000 comments. With each post, I began to provide multiple summarising codes to each comment – a similarly grounded theory-based mode of analysis as was the case with the GAP interviews. When this was completed, I re-read and reflected on the initial codes that I had produced, before merging them into larger codes and themes wherever possible that provided insights into the overall narratives and discourses occurring within the data. The result was a thirty-eight-page document of themes that had emerged from the multiple re-readings of the thread posts, this document was then consulted again for the purposes of further and final analysis.

### 3.7.3.2 Analysing videogames as artefacts

As part of the process of providing a 'close reading' of the two videogames explored in this thesis, both textual analysis and content analysis were deployed in the process of unearthing and exploring the regulations of heteronormativity within videogame sites. While forum thread data consists of literal text and ready-made transcripts in the

participants own words, which can be subjected to analysis, videogames themselves are a little more nuanced but nonetheless subjectable to textual analysis as a media form. For example, in Chapter 6 and its objective to specifically explore the ways through which ideology and regulation may become informed and encouraged through the design choices and other elements found within videogames. This is because, as media artefacts they promote and possess embedded ideological undertone(s) (Murray, 2018). As such, textual analysis was deployed here in combination with previous methods of thematic analysis which were informed through my own experiences of play.

"A prime strength of textual analysis is that it allows the analyst to seriously consider texts and practices as important cultural phenomena that are inscribed with meanings, beliefs, norms, politics, ideals and desires." (Østby, 2017, pg65).

Text-centred and thematic analysis of gameplay (Chapters 5 and 6), and even of the forum threads referenced in Chapter 5 are also relatively common approaches to research and analysis in game studies. These methods of analysis were chosen as the most productive to explore the practices of informal regulation within this setting, and the embedded ideologies observable within these videogame settings.

**3.8 Ethical Considerations:**

A final consideration in this chapter is in relation to the ethics of this thesis. Ethical considerations remain of the utmost importance within this research project, and each of the three component parts of the thesis went through ethical consideration and sought approval.

**3.8.1 Researching the Military and the GAP Project:**

Once more, for the parts of this thesis concerning the explorations and interviews with military personnel, this was achieved via the GAP project, and the ethics for this part were part of the previously approved and continually monitored ethical package that was finalised before this thesis began[16]. Some of the main – and familiar - ethical research practices done within the project included the use of pseudonyms for participants, the encryption and secure storage of data, no harm to the participating individuals, and an overall adherence to the guidelines of GDPR

**3.8.2 Exploring an Online forum:**

As mentioned previously, Pulos (2013) was an initial source of methodological inspiration to me on how I might explore themes of gender and sexuality regulation within online gaming, specifically through utilising online forum threads as a data source. While the other ways through which I analysed and explored these themes were from 1) close

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[16] For more information on the Gaming for Peace (GAP) Project ethics: https://gap-project.eu/gap-team/ethics/

readings of the games and their structures, and 2) my own self-play of the titles, these were not of primary ethical concern for the project (these methods of play and researcher-centred analysis have been deployed not only by Pulos, 2013; but also by scholars previously mentioned such as Ruberg, 2019a; Stang, 2019; Youngblood, 2015). These explorations into videogames as texts were absent any participants beyond my own personal experiences of playing.

One of the core concerns ethically within this research was in relation to the use of the online forum thread for the discussion in Chapter 5. While the data found within many online settings such as online forums are often considered to be 'natural' data (Holtz et al, 2012), and the use of online forums are popular among research studies (Boutonnet, 2016; De Wildt and Aupers, 2017; Pulos, 2013.); it is still important to reflect on the ethics of their utilisation.

With the increasing use of the Internet as a popular tool through which research can be conducted, enabled and utilised, there is an increasing complication when we try to apply traditional models of ethical research practice (Lotz and Ross, 2004). One of the main ones that I debated over for this project was whether the forum thread data used in chapter seven of this thesis constituted public or private data. This is in line with much of the ethical concerns with internet and online research practice.

"…the easy availability of research data made possible by social media raises new ethical questions such as what is public and what is private." (Kantanen and Manninen, 2016, pg.86)

This complication of public and private is one of the main aspects that complicates the use of online forum threads as a data source (Cote and Raz, 2015; Holtz et al, 2012; Rodham and Gavin, 2006; Kantanen and Manninen, 2016). Most of the literatures consulted, although they vary – and some of these sources explicitly state that there is generally consensus on the overall methodology of using forum threads (e.g. Jowett, 2015). Most seem to advocate a context specific engagement with the ethics of using forum threads, others suggest we simply apply the same level of ethical rigour as offline practice (Rodham and Gavin, 2006), while others also discuss the negative impact of overly rigid restrictions on critical research practice (e.g. Jowett, 2015). As such, I decided to use a forum thread post discussing the game that I deemed to be public, in this case that messages and the thread itself could be viewed without requiring a password or account to be set up, though these were needed in order to engage or contribute directly with the post.

"Individual contributions to the message board can therefore be considered in the same way as individual naturalistic observations in a public space. Furthermore, message boards are generally perceived and acknowledged by users as being public domains." (Rodham and Gavin, 2006. Pg.94)

In addition to this, in an effort to further preserve and ensure the anonymity of the thread and its contributors, I elected to not reveal the identity of the forum thread or site itself – and additionally through applying pseudonyms and paraphrasing the comments from the forums that were discussed in the analysis. This was in an effort to improve the anonymity of those posting to the forum thread, and limit the potential of identifying individual posters of this thread from the later chapter of this thesis (Holtz et al, 2012; Lotz and Ross, 2004; Cote and Raz, 2015).

## 3.9 Conclusion:

Throughout the discussions and explanations supplied across the sections and subsections of this chapter - and from the opening quote of the chapter- the methodology, method and design of a research project is critically important, not only to its completion and credibility, but also to the inherently political aspect of conducting research. This research project, although varied in terms of the sites of analysis and in the methods of data collection, has sought to remain keenly aware of the politics of its research methods, the power differentials of participation and knowledge production, and acknowledging the position of the researcher. As is the case with all research, no one methodology can be perfect, but it is deeply important for researchers to rationalise and explain their choices in design – not only for clarity, but also for reflexivity. The ways through which knowledge has been 'produced' within this thesis are embedded with several core concepts as well. For example, the role of doubt prompted my self-reflection throughout the processes and claims of this thesis, while grounded theory influenced and encouraged a data-driven process of theory creation and inductive data analysis. I have included elements of

autoethnography within the analysis of videogames as a means of engaging with videogames as ideological texts, and where relevant I have also tried to incorporate an awareness of reflexivity throughout this research, and the effects that 'being me' will have had on this research project.

I have made the case for the utilisation of a qualitative methodology within this project as a means of exploring the experiences of and informal regulations of gender and sexuality across two traditionally heteronormative masculine fields. I argue – at least via the construction of this thesis' methodology – that it is primarily through qualitative modes of collection and analysis that we might explore and find some of the more nuanced ways through which this heteronormative regulation and its maintenance is achieved and may persist. Through the incorporation of these two sites that have been traditionally associated with heteronormative masculine ideologies and maintenance, this research also offers the potential argument for generalisability. The observed patterns and processes unearthed in these seemingly distinct settings may also be like those observed in other ideological sites. Ethics were an additional consideration within this research thesis, particularly in relation to online spaces and the complexity of online research methods. The principle issues were in relation to conversations of anonymity and the constitution of 'public data'.

With the conversations of this chapter in mind, we shall turn now to explore the processes and practices of policing gender and sexual orientations across the contexts mentioned in

this and preceding chapters. The first of which being within militaries participating in peacekeeping.

# Chapter 4: Regimes of Change?

**4.1 Introduction:**

The goal of this chapter is to unearth and explore the lived realities of personnel from military organisations who participate in peacekeeping, as examples of what happens when traditional ideologies around gender and sexuality encounter a new site and process, namely peacekeeping, which is at odds with and in many ways contradicts the traditional sense of institutionalised heteronormativity in the military.

The two military organisations selected for exploration here are the Irish and Finnish militaries. Both nations possess a high level of formal regulation and recognition of equality (e.g. The Marriage Referendum, 2015). Despite this, the militaries in both countries continue to have difficulty recruiting and retaining female and LGBTQ members. Therefore, it is important to explore the realities and interactions on the ground as potential explanations behind this observed difficulty. This chapter explores whether the answer to the disconnection between formal policy aims and achieved inclusive recruitment and retention lies in the institutional culture of these militaries, as institutional norms and practices are much more challenging to change than formal organizational policy.

This chapter provides insights into the questions below:

- How is gender and sexuality regulated among military personnel on peacekeeping missions?

- How might these practices of regulation manifested in everyday interactions and processes inform us about the embedded ideology of institutionalised heteronormativity in this setting?

As was mentioned in the preceding chapters of this thesis, recent years have seen the introduction of formal equality policies to promote and encourage the participation of more diverse genders and sexual orientations within militaries and peacekeeping operations. One premiere example being the UN Resolution 1325[17]. I have discussed some of the trends and proportions of gender within peacekeeping in the introduction chapter of this thesis[18]. Overall, much of the emphasis has been on legislative change aimed at increasing the diversity of military organisations and consequently within peacekeeping operations, while simultaneously these arguments have been couched in rationalisations around the positive impacts on mission effectiveness and so on. Through looking deeper into the realities in this field and within these organisational settings, I argue that this may provide further insight into the realities of gender and sexuality politics in these sites. I specifically focus on the daily interactions and ways through which personnel construct and discuss their participation as well as others, as a means of maintaining and contributing to the heteronormative ordering of this institutional setting.

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[17] The objective of UN Resolution 1325 was to clearly address and emphasise the role of war and conflict on women, and the role that women could come to play in conflict resolution and achieving goals of peace (See Theidon, Phenicie, and Murray, 2011).

[18] In the introduction chapter of this thesis, I outlined some of the statistical and proportional patterns of female participation within the UN peacekeeping setting. While some claim that approximately 3% of UN military personnel are women (Dharmapuri, 2013), and others report that women account for 4.5% of personnel on these peacekeeping missions (SecurityWomen.Org, 2018). In relation to individual military organisations we can see a similar statistical pattern, for example with some reporting suggesting around 6-7.1% within the Irish military (Brennan, 2015; Kelleher, 2018; Michael, 2020). With plans to promote an increase in this proportion further over the next several years (Merrion St, 2017).

Scholars like Valenius (2007) and Carreiras (2010) critique some of these policies surrounding peacekeeping and diversity on the basis that, at their core, they contain the same gender essentialist assumptions that have traditionally been problematic in these organisational settings. Through the valuation and emphasis of traditionally feminine qualities as a result of female participation– that women may have a calming effect on the men, that they better carers and are more emotionally sensitive etc.

"Simply 'Adding and stirring' does not, however, attend to the gendered power structures to which women are added" (Valenius, 2007, pg.513).

Karim and Beardsley (2013) also echo this point, stating that simply adding women in won't necessarily result in a shift or change to the military gender hierarchies and culture. Which is compounded by the claims of other scholars that many of the policies in these spheres do not pay adequate attention to 'masculinity' (Laplonge, 2015). In their study, Karim and Beardsley (2013) claim that it is the 'relative risk' associated with particular missions that may be having a determining effect on the degree to which female personnel are deployed (with 'safer' missions having more female personnel present than other higher risk areas). Within this chapter and this thesis overall, I argue that this both results from and contributes to the continuation of a core institutional gender ideology around female personnel within what is traditionally a masculine space. It is in this way that these stereotypes and beliefs around gender (and sexuality) are not being challenged. I argue thus that these same policies, if they do not directly question and critically reflect on the embedded and prevailing ideologies, can result not only in their reduced

effectiveness, but also places the responsibility for enacting change on those individuals who find themselves marginalised and othered within these settings.

An additional observation made through the analysis of the interviews and the presentations of the findings in this chapter, is that although topics and questions relating to gender and sexuality were often dismissed as non-issues or 'fine' within these environments (or simply dismissed and not talked about at all in a lot of interviews) – what we see in the explorations and discussions later in this chapter is the nuanced and subtle means through which the project of maintaining heteronormativity persists. This is achieved through the gendering of mission effectiveness, the 'natural' differences between men and women, and particularly the comparative invisibility of queer personnel in these environments – there were only two or three examples of queer personnel who were 'ok' because they were not sexually deviant or were 'too big' and strong to ridicule.

## 4.2 Organisations, Heteronormativity, and Politics:

As discussed in the introduction and in Chapter 2, gender and sexuality are core concepts that inform the construction of heteronormative masculinity. These concepts were selected as primary lenses due to their intertwined nature and shared maintenance (again see Herbert, 1998; Martino, 2000; Konik and Cortina, 2008; Sundevall and Persson, 2016; for examples of this). Work such as Schilt & Westbrook (2009) show how gender and sexuality, specifically gender and heterosexuality, remain linked and indivisible from one another. Both of these concepts derive from a system that perpetuates a catch all belief in binaries of gender that are comprehensive and exhaustive. This in turn feeds into

definitions and defining characteristics of sexuality – the 'gender' of those you sleep with (as discussed in Blank, 2012). Again, it is this normative and 'naturalised' binary conception that feeds into broader processes of gender and sexuality enforcement, processes of regulation that are not overt but remain pervasive and enforced - referred to throughout this paper as 'policing'[19].

## 4.3 Policing as Process?

I posit that while overt homophobia and discrimination is perhaps less prevalent with the introduction of equality legislation and policies, the boundaries of heteronormative gender roles and sexualities are still policed through a number of processes that act to define and reify (heterosexual) masculinity as the norm within contemporary peacekeeping practice. The process of policing, as it is discussed within this chapter and thesis, refers to the process(es) of and attempts at maintaining the power structures and associated privileges of heteronormative masculinity.

Martino (2000) provides an example of where gender (i.e. masculinity) and sexuality remained linked through the same process of policing. This is also similarly discussed within Konik and Cortina (2008) in relation to the practice of policing gender within the workplace, and the intersections of sex and sexuality. The norms - that is, the social

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[19] I acknowledge that members of police forces are often involved within Peacekeeping missions as part of the diverse personnel, cultural and institutional network that constitute individual missions. However, I have chosen to utilise the term 'policing' within this paper to specifically refer to the processes and discourses teased out through the analysis of the interviews and a way of referring to the ways that interviewees position gender and sexual identities within a framework of regulation.

expectations - surrounding traditional patriarchal gender roles act as a marker for which the lived experiences and realities of gender politics play out. These norms surrounding gender politics become engrained within the broader institutional cultures, becoming cultural sites of context which enact, encourage, and enforce its own ideological expectations of gender (and sexuality performance). Reviewing the ways in which policing manifests within our sample is important for conscious awareness of both gender and sexuality.

As a socially constructed concept, gender is regulated and reinforced through the everyday performance of acts and their repetition, the result of which is to cement them as a given norm (Butler, 2006). As such, the reality of gender performance leads us to examine gender beyond the limitations of a binary and examine the spectrum of ways in which gender becomes manifest. Additionally, the social construction and its regulation within organisational cultures is of critical importance, as Alfrey and Twine (2017) put it, "workplace cultures are not gender neutral" (Pg. 31). Their research specifically explores these themes within the IT sector, but this is nonetheless important for organisations in general. Scholarship has shown that many of these organisational cultures contain and perpetuate a heavily masculine culture, and this is present within military cultures, presenting an ideological hurdle within ingrained cultures (Whitworth, 2004; Digby, 2014).

These (military) organisations are defined in relation to their state sanctioned monopoly of legitimised violence. In a similar way, heteronormative (hegemonic) masculinity

depends on the threat of violence as a means of constructing and enforcing itself (Connell, 2005). An additional irony is the contrast between the formalised state policies of equality and legislation with the informalised practices found within the military organisational cultures, as these organisations exist and are defined in relation to their existence as extensions of these same states. This contradiction presents a tension between what one is supposed to say and do in relation to the formalised equality policies, and the behaviours and values of hegemonic masculinity fostered informally within the organisations through everyday interactions, training and practice. Some research has shown this tension (e.g. Prokos and Padavic, 2002) where they examined the informal practices in training procedures within police organisations and how these often contrast often with the 'official' policies of equality and 'gender neutrality'. Examples of these informal procedures of exclusion and othering that were noted within their study included teaching male police officers how to conduct searches on female bodies, without training the female police officers how to conduct a similar search on male bodies, alongside the prevailing use of gendered language.

Aside from these tensions, what remains pertinent to the practice of policing gender and sexuality is also the threat and practice of symbolic violence; where the soft tools of language, and more specifically humour, also present a means through which power differentials are negotiated and maintained in social practice.

"Symbolic violence is in some regards much more powerful than physical violence or coercion in that it is embedded in the very modes of action and structures of

cognition in individuals—it is violence in both seeing and failing to see." (Gray et al, 2017. Pg.5)

Policing maintains within its elements of threats of violence in order to effectively regulate gender and sexualities and their associated behaviours. Symbolic violence offers us a means of exploring the deployment of non-physical violence as a means of control and regulation also.

## 4.4 Initial Plan and Deviations:

An important point that is worth mentioning before the remainder of the findings are discussed in the forthcoming sections was in relation to the sample that was initially planned for this research into the military and peacekeeping setting. In addition to the army members from Ireland and Finland that are used in this chapter, I had also intended to include and explore interview data from the GAP participants from Eastern European countries (namely Bulgaria and Poland). One of the main difficulties that emerged through the initial read through of transcripts and attempted analysis was that there was a noticeable lack of engagement from both the interviewers and interviewees in relation to discussing gender and even more noticeably with questions on sexuality.

Although this was notable trend in the data and presents an interesting insight in and of itself, I decided that the material was too sparse to adequately explore it in depth within this chapter as intended. As such, I ultimately decided to only include the interviews from

the Finnish and Irish army personnel, who (although there were some similar trends observed in these interviews – namely the comparable silence and unawareness of any LGBTQ personnel) still engaged more with the subject matter of the interviews that were of specific relevance to this thesis. Not only this, but some of the specific interests of this thesis to explore some of the more subtle and nuanced means through which heteronormativity can be maintained and regulated across these sites required some degree of engagement and interactions with these concepts and their related questions. Through the analysis of the Irish and Finish interviewees there was a lot of conversation around life in the military and on these missions that also touched upon themes of gender and sexuality in more subtle and nuanced ways. Most of which still contributed to ideologies of heteronormativity and army life on these missions. We will now consider these findings in turn.

**4.5 Findings and Discussion:**

The remainder of this chapter will provide an insight into the findings and analyses of the data that emerged from the interviews with personnel from the Finnish and Irish militaries. It examines and explores the various themes that were identified in relation to the broader patterns and processes through which normative ideals of gender and sexuality manifested in the military cultures of these two institutions. The objective is to provide data on the ways through which informal practices, discourses and ideologies manifest and may actively shape the experiences of individuals within these settings, regardless of formally recognised official policies.

**4.5.1 Proportions and Cultures:**

As was discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis, the role that proportions have within organisational environments are important and have a determining impact on both the overall organisational dynamics and everyday interactions of its personnel (Kanter, 1977). Simply put, proportions matter in terms of the organisational culture and the lived realities of its personnel. A premiere and subtle aspect of this is through visibility and the need for constant 'gender work' or 'sexuality work' as part of an individual's impression management within these spaces (e.g. Sion, 2008). Herbert (1998) also showed this while reviewing the experiences of women and LGBTQ individuals within militaristic organisations and how they were more cognitively aware of how their gender was being perceived. Just as Kanter noted with minorities being given a 'token' status, male respondents noted that because they were so few, the female peacekeepers actions were magnified in relation to their visibility.

An Irish soldier, JM, noted in some of his earlier missions, that there were cases where there were as little as one or two females, and this impacted on the female experience of peacekeeping.

> JM: "… they were a limited edition, and it was awkward for them, you know, because it meant that if there was a function or something going on, they always had to be squeaky clean, because the small village syndrome, that if they were seen to be talking to a guy two or three times, oh, there's a relationship going on

there, so it was hard on them, because the magnifying glass is on them all the time."

[JM, 56. Male, Ireland]

Elle from the Finnish respondents also describes this in relation to her experience.

Elle: "…And I also noticed that other females were, we were so carefully, you know, so carefully inspected and so carefully watched all the time that anything we did was reported and heard what others had done and behaved. So, if female had some, it was certain that everybody knew but if that happened for a male that was not so big news. So you just need to accept that you are under radar. At least in Finnish contingent, you are under radar and magnifying glass so to say."

[Elle, 34. Female. Finland]

The above two quotes clearly support the previous works of scholars like Kantor (1977) and Herbert (1998) on gender relations, gender politics and the lived experience of gendered individuals within an organisational setting. What is particularly salient within the military organisational context is that this lived experience is different to that discussed within Kantor's work, as there is no ability and capacity to *go home after work*, for peacekeeping personnel remain on site and on the missions geographically without a reprieve from the contextual culture within which they find themselves; meaning that the same degree of hypervisibility and the need to manage how they are being perceived etc.

remains a constant requirement. These same women and or LGBTQ individuals find themselves embedded within a cultural setting which they must come to terms with, manage, and overcome throughout their time on base or on peacekeeping missions.

Proportional differences were important in relation to service and activity provision in this study also. Kiia, from the Finnish military, disclosed the impact that the proportionally small numbers of fellow female peacekeepers had on her lived experience on the missions, specifically in terms of access to recreational facilities. Saunas act as a source of social interaction, relaxation and hygiene for many Finnish peacekeeping personnel when they are on missions. However, access is segregated by gender and time, which means that females tend to have less time to participate in saunas and the services they provide.

> Kiia: "Because there might be for example 400 males and maybe 15 females. So you can't get anything that you want, so…for example sauna, it's really important for Finns, and females has had for example in Lebanon we had maybe two hours sauna time or one hour sauna time per one day and for male it was for the rest 23 hours…"
>
> [Kiia, 41. Female]

What became clear from the interviews when exploring the role and impact of proportions was that there was a sense not only of hypervisibility for females and other minority personnel, but also the awareness of and feeling of being outside the 'norm'

within this institutional culture. Despite efforts and practices to accommodate more gender diverse personnel, it is still difficult to completely move beyond this discomfort and location within the organisation.

However, when the numbers of a minority group, such as women or LGBTQ, plateau and stall, what happens to the broader organisational culture, and more specifically what happens to the process(es) of cultural change that initial increases in proportions began to shape? Rather than the traditional association with overt policing and discrimination, there is a subtler process of policing gender and sexuality which was common throughout the interviews consulted.

### 4.5.2 Forms of Policing:

What emerged from the analysis of the interviews with military personnel was the variety of ways through which gender and sexuality were policed. I argue that the overall effect of this contributes to and perpetuates the association of military participation, even within peacekeeping environments, as a heteronormative masculine endeavour. These will be discussed over the coming sections.

### 4.5.2.1 Gender and Differences - It's all about Mission Effectiveness:

Policing through attributing the necessity of a heteronormative organization for mission effectiveness was evident in the experiences of the interviewees. Respondents framed gender differences in relation to their impact on the overall mission effectiveness (beyond

local emphasis), and how the mission plays out on the field. Karim and Beardsley (2013) also note that the discourse of effectiveness has increasingly been adopted by the UN in terms of framing its gender policies and mandates in relation to the improved chance of achieving mission goals. The prevailing discourse surrounding effectiveness is also highlighted within Mäki-Rahkola & Myrttinen (2014) in relation to the 'operational benefits' of deploying women within a given mission. Sion (2008), who also notes that peacekeeping is an inherently masculine space, despite the act of peacekeeping itself being feminised, talks about 'functional exclusion', which is the "gender-based exclusion of women from taking an active part in peace missions"(Pg.575). This gendered form of participation for most male and female personnel is reflected in their specific roles on a given mission, with women being much more likely to be assigned desk work than roles directly involved with front line or public space, such as patrols or medical-based work. This can be seen coming from the data via conversations with interviewees like Mick, who acknowledges that a large proportion of women going on deployment generally end up away from front lines, combat based duties.

Mick: "… you seen then when you go overseas, you kind of see the vast majority of women end up in a medical role or a transport role kind of thing, you know. Not in every case, mind you, but if you looked at the Defence Force as a whole, you'd see a lot of women will end up in an office somewhere…" [Mick, 29. Male. Ireland].

Perhaps unsurprisingly, discussions and framings around efficiency were also posited by participants on the bases of local knowledge collection, and female personnel being

utilised to deal more effectively with local women and children; interactions and information that would otherwise be 'impossible' for male counterparts to collect. One example of this comes from a Finnish interviewee, Chief:

Chief: "… if you forget women in the mission area, than you are losing 50% of your information. So it is beneficial for the locals and for mission, I would say. In many countries it is impossible for a male soldier to approach a local woman. It is a no go. The women actually have a lot of information and they are willing to pass that on and in that sense we should have some kind of balance in the troops that we are deploying." [Chief, 59. Male. Finland]

In this way the framing of the inclusion of women into the mission becomes linked inherently with local female knowledge, and the gathering local female knowledge by female peacekeeping personnel.

Sion (2008) also notes other forms of exclusion: 'physical exclusion' – on the basis of physical requirements and abilities between genders; and 'sexual exclusion' – on the basis of women having to police their sexuality so as not to attract too much attention. These additional forms of exclusion were also part of the experience of the interviewees (and will be teased out in the forthcoming thematic sub-sections).

Additionally, some female interviewees made reference to the pre-deployment training and preparation that they experienced as women going into these missions as being too severe, and not reflective of their own personal experience after being overseas.

> Elle: "… because they were all male [the mentors], they had been there but they did not know how it was to be female there. So, I think that they were like overwarning us of all the difficulties that were going to be ahead but me, I thought it was much easier than what the picture was painted to me, it was."
>
> [Elle, 34. Female. Finland]

What is interesting with the above quote, is in relation to practices of informal policing mentioned in [police training academy reference], whereby informal actions within the training structures contribute to reminding women of their perceived 'otherness' in the institutional setting in which they find themselves. In this case, the overly severe training could be indicative and interpreted as a form of subtle informally realised regulation along gender lines. Forewarning female trainees of the difficulties of the mission as experienced by a woman, and in doing so, begin to potentially foster thoughts of doubt and internalised otherness in the female trainees.

Ultimately we must critically reflect on and recognise the embedded ideologies and cultures within a number of these organisational settings and how they provides challenges to individuals who do not conform, and are therefore themselves a barrier to

the overall effectiveness and success of missions, policies and objectives (Lewis, 2009). Within these discussions surrounding mission effectiveness, the prevailing ideology that acts as a means of policing gender and sexuality is seldom problematised. It is not acknowledged in terms of the negative impact it can have on mission effectiveness and cohesion, and many discussions persist in placing the responsibility and blame is placed on those being policed, as their impact.

**4.5.2.2 Gender and Differences - Blaming it on the Locals:**

Gender was also frequently discussed in terms of the differences between males and females and how these differences related to the missions. Respondents framed these differences specifically in relation to locals and how female peacekeepers could be received within their culture, and in relation to the ways in which it contributes to the overall mission and its effectiveness and in doing so, respondents invoked the norm of the male heterosexual peacekeeper.

> Sami: "It does not [come] as surprise that peacekeeper can be male. No I think that its other way around if I would be female then my gender would make a difference. It could be surprise to someone. I'm guessing that some Islamic people could have felt a little uncomfortable if there is higher ranking officer who is a woman dealing with them." [Sami, 46. Male. Finland]

Not only does the respondent place the emphasis on local cultures in the context of problems and conflict arising from gender, but clearly demonstrates the visibility of being a male peacekeeper as the norm within this setting. The result of this was, in this instance, to cast women and femininity as outsiders.

Additionally, respondents mentioned where it was problematic for the overall effectiveness of the mission in relation once again to the local cultural context.

> Patrick: "Em, again like that, when you're out in towns it can make it a little bit of difference, especially with some of the Muslims and stuff like this, like, they, they don't like it as much, of the women as, if a woman is approaching them, but within the Irish army it doesn't make any difference, like, you know, but again you have to just be sensitive out there because of religion and stuff like that."
>
> [Patrick, 31. Ireland]

Utilising gender as a means of articulating the comparative effectiveness and reception of male and female peacekeepers marks itself as one way through which male participation becomes legitimised, while female and the participation of others becomes implicitly (and explicitly) de-legitimised. Khalid (2011) talks about the co-option of gender within broader discourses that legitimised the USA's 'War on Terror', more specifically in relation to gender discourses surrounding the local people and their culture, which the author links with Said's (1979) work on 'Orientalism' permeating discourse. In a similar vein within the

interviews conducted for this thesis, the same co-option of gender through discourse, this time of local culture and its views and values of implicit heterosexual masculinity, arguably presents a type of gendered orientalism. With the gendered hierarchies of local men becoming discursive anchors against full participation within missions for female peacekeepers, on the context of what is locally appropriate; and in a similar vein, framings around non-heterosexual peacekeeping personnel showcasing their sexuality or making their sexuality known.

**4.5.2.3 Nurture *and* Nature? Mothers, Fathers, and the Home:**

A persistent combination of paternalistic and protectionist approach to including females within the peacekeeping mission, seeking to place them safely out of conflict or risk effectively polices the peacekeeping space. Deployments are typically between 6 and 12 months long, with some notable exceptions of 'family friendly' 3-month deployments. The structure of deployment is not family friendly and the experiences within deployments of parents, but mothers in particular, reinforces this.

Falling in line with the nurturing image of women and their inherent maternal instinct, respondents acknowledged child rearing and the role of being a mother in relation to their fellow personnel. In the following quote, Eoin discusses that he and his wife have gone on peacekeeping missions. He gives an example of another female with three children who went on a mission for 6 months; he stresses how mothers being away from their children to participate on missions is more impactful on the children than it is for the father to be

away participating on these missions. He also relates this to be something that hinders women from participating and volunteering on these same missions. He was the only man interviewed who was a parent who had availed of organizational family friendly policies.

> Eoin: "Yes, but I would say, and it is just my opinion that it is harder on the women, without a doubt it is hard to be away from your children, fact, but I think it is harder for the mother and it is harder on the children for the mother."
>
> [Eoin, 29. Male. Officer. Ireland]

The perceived female affinity with primary caregiver and motherhood and childrearing also came up where participants discussed how females on patrols and in the missions were better able to interact with local children and helped their male peers to interact and engage better as a result. Central to this is the assertion of paternalistic masculinity, and maternal femininity, and the boundaries between them. The association of female peacekeepers with maternal instincts and roles, speaks to the same discourse of gender essentialism mentioned previously. It is also indicative of a paternalistic framing seeking to protect and safeguard women within this given institutional setting and practice. Which further echoes the patterns of perceptions of risk and the allocation of female personnel suggested in Karim and Beardsley (2013). Respondents in their interviews for this thesis reported that women were more likely to be given assignments on base, and to office duties.

Irish interviewee, MP, discusses his experience working with a single mother among his fellow personnel while on deployment, when he had been given a task to retrieve the bodies of three men who had been killed. Despite performing risk assessments and being confident they could perform the task safely, he was "very conscious" that the lead searcher of the team was a single mother, and this was on his mind for the entire time that the task was being performed.

> MP: "…so I did my risk assessment and I was confident that we could do this safely and we could mitigate the risk to be sure we did it and we did, but I was very conscious of the fact that the lead searcher of the team was a single mother. I was very comfortable with her skills but I was always conscious of the fact that she was a single mother…"

MP was then asked what about the single mother being on the team was making him conscious, to which he responded:

> MP: "…It was to do with the fact of how I was to cope if she was killed, how her family would cope with her death, how her parents would cope looking after their granddaughter who was four years of age. It didn't stop me from sending her."
>
> [MP, IDF, rank undisclosed]

MP then finally goes on to say that they [the DFI] have never lost a female while on peacekeeping missions, and if it were to come to pass, it would be challenging to deal with at both a national and organisational level.

**4.5.2.4 Women Don't Like to Get Dirty:**

Some of the same narratives of gender-based essentialism and their critiques become present within the discussion of the perceived 'natural' qualities of these women, (e.g. being nurturing) and acts as a means to demarcate and regulate differences between men and women within this setting.

When respondents discussed differences across the genders in relation to the organisation and peacekeeping, gender-based physicality was also brought in a number of interviews as a reason why women did not suit military life (again thinking of physical exclusion as in Sion, 2008). Patrick discussed physical differences in relation to why there are less females in the military and less applying and coming through training.

> Patrick: "…They just, I suppose they just don't take to it as well, like you know as lads do. Lads don't mind getting down and crawling in the dirt and it just is a male-orientated thing, like shooting guns and all this kind of stuff, and especially with fitness and stuff like that, a lot of girls would be thrown off pretty early in recruit training with fitness because lads play football all their lives and are used to

running and do you know, it doesn't bother them at all, whereas girls, they aren't, they don't like the fitness thing like cause they don't like running with lads…"

[Patrick, 56. Male. Ireland]

The overall arguments for physical requirement/barriers were echoed in similar ways within other responses. This is interesting when we consider arguments against the centrality of physical attributes in modern warfare, and peacekeeping missions, and as Sion (2008) posits in their work, conforms to aspects through which females can become excluded from roles within peacekeeping.

Mick: – "That's, I'd say that's a good discussion that's already going on up high, but it's em, to be honest the only way you'd get more women into Defence Forces is if they're promised they'll go to certain areas, and they won't have to do all the gruelling stuff like. So like I know the army have, and they're brilliant for it, so the backpack, the army backpack, there's a female version as well, so that's so that the backpack's not sitting on a woman's hips and all that, because of long-term damage and whatever right, em, they're very good for all that, but, the only way you'll get women is, and I know they've looked at everything, an only female platoon kind of thing like, but they're, they'll all have to be given the promise that after basic training, they're going into the medical core or they're going into somewhere else, you're going into an office or whatever and you won't be touched. But that's the only way that you'll up it, I think." [Mick, 29. Male. Ireland]

An overarching discourse remains reflective of the more socially constructed and gender essentialist narratives previously outlined and critiqued by other scholars, with the function of providing implicit and subtle means through which justification can be sought for segregating individuals within a mission on the basis of their gender and or sexualities.

**4.5.2.5 The Noticeable Difference When Discussing Sexuality:**

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, there was an observable lack of engagement with themes of gender and sexuality by participants from some members of the GAP Consortium, which ultimately led to me not including them in the sample for this chapter (Poland and Bulgaria in this case). However, even within the sample that was utilised and discussed in this chapter, namely the army members from Finland and Ireland, there was still a notable decrease in the level of discussions around sexuality. This is reflected in some of the themes around sexuality outlined in forthcoming discussions, however I wanted to highlight this before delving into these themes and place them in context with the broader pattern observed in the data.

While gender was discussed in ways that retained subtle elements of heteronormative regulation and maintenance, the principle difference between discussions of gender and discussions of sexuality was in that the discussions and engagement with sexuality was noticeably less than when discussing gender, often dismissed as a non-issue while also claiming to have not known any LGBTQ persons that they had worked with.

**4.5.2.6 Sexuality and the Unknown/It's not an Issue:**

Through the analysis process, there were several ways through which the regulation of sexualities within the contexts of these militaristic institutional cultures existed. Within the work of Embrick et al (2007), we see an exploration into the practices that keep variant sexualities from the workplace culture. They specifically explore working class masculinity and how sexuality exists within the organisational culture of this work environment. The findings included three main themes through which workers discussed or related to non-heteronormative sexualities; 1) Outright disgust; 2) Don't Ask, Don't Tell; and 3) Ostracism and Fear. The largest proportion of respondents in their study conformed to Don't Ask, Don't Tell [DADT], whereby they stated that homosexuals had no reason to express or acknowledge their sexual orientation, placing the workplace as an 'asexual' space. This was not reflective of the broader heteronormative practice of performing masculinity within this space, as the authors also noted in the research, the practice of 'sexual exploitation of heterosexual men's behaviour was seen as the acceptable norm in the workplace' (Embrick et al, 2007, pg. 761). This is further echoed in other works, such as Herbert (1998); who argues that variant sexualities are critiqued if they appear to 'flaunt it', yet these same critics remain oblivious to the ways in which heterosexuality enjoys normative status, therefore rendering its dominance invisible. Mäki-Rahkola & Myrttinen (2014) also note specifically in the Finnish case, that although 'asexuality' is the stated organisational ideal, the work environment itself is highly sexualised.

As mentioned, there was a notable lack of awareness of LGBTQ persons across most participants when asked in the interviews about whether they knew of or worked with individuals of diverse sexual orientations. I would posit/interpret that this may also be

emblematic of a wider and more subtle ideological framing. This framing being present contextually within the institutional setting of militaries and peacekeeping cultures, stemming from the continuity of traditional heteronormative masculine association within the values and practices of traditional military organisations. This is also persistent here in the way that seeing few or no openly LGBTQ people on their missions is unreflective of the proportional distribution of sexualities among the general population and among their ranks is likely not true of statistical probability. Gates (2010) in discussion surrounding statistics within the USA, describes estimates of 2.2% of personnel within the US military identifying as Lesbian, gay or bisexual (these three were the only identifications within the index); Polchar et al (2014) provide us with the LGBT military Index, and assess over 100 countries on the basis of their dimensions of exclusion or inclusion, with Finland and Ireland placing 17th and 27th respectively. However, it is important to note that the conscious dismissal of their [LGBTQ] presence, alongside relegating these variant forms of sexuality as a topic that is not discussed is linkable to the practices referenced in Shaw's (2014) discussion of representation and visual presence; and furthermore clearly represents a practice of policing these variant sexual orientations in order to maintain the traditional status quo.

In their book on gaming culture and the intersections of gender and sexuality, Shaw (2014) argues that "not being represented is essentially 'symbolic annihilation' and exclusion from the sociocultural milieu" (Shaw, 2014. Pg.19). The lack of visibility or acknowledgement of personnel with variant sexualities is perhaps emblematic of a continuation of this 'annihilation', but also, a point of continuity for the 'Don't Ask, Don't

Tell' policy that dictated much of the lived experience of LGBTQ personnel within these military organisational cultures.

> Hank: "Yeah, I think that's taboo still in the military organisations and I have seen things but I don't think the persons who probably were gay really felt themselves uncomfortable…" [Hank, 37. Male. Finland]

In the small number of cases where the interviewee did mention knowing someone who was LGBTQ, sexuality was often framed by the interviewee as somewhat ambiguous or not fully known, for example some interviewees stated they were unsure of whether the individuals that they met or worked with were gay because they didn't display any problematic attributes such as coming on to fellow male personnel. The importance of this is again as a function of reifying notions that these variant sexualities, more specifically gay male sexuality, as problematic within the setting of the military organisation and among its personnel.

> Jack: "I don't think it would have been a problem, as far as these person would not try to hit [on] you, to try to come on [to] you, that might have been a kind of reason to have a quarrel or even a fight, but otherwise I would say: 'who cares?'…"
>
> [Jack, 55. Male. Finland]

Despite the framing and problematisation of variant sexualities (and specifically the conflict provided by homosexual male sexuality), heterosexual discussions were prevalent

throughout the interview discussions. This suggests that its fine to be openly heterosexual as it conforms to the ideological gold standard, however it becomes then problematic when someone is openly LGBTQ (specifically Gay) as there is an association of gay personnel with being predatory and threatening to the heterosexual order.

The experiences of the interviewees reflected Embrick et al (2007) findings when looking at working class masculinity within workplace reading, that there are strategies of adopting heterosexual masculine stories and narratives as a natural aspect of the workplace, while at the same time framing 'asexuality' (typically with relation to variant sexualities) as a core attribute of the workplace. This acts as a further strategy of policing heteronormative masculinity within the workplace, and simultaneously mystifying and 'othering' these same variant sexualities.

Another similar example comes from Pekka, who describes his experience working with and sharing saunas with a bisexual colleague while on one of his missions.

> Pekka: "That's a tough one. This bisexual did not have any problems. He didn't shove it in our face so there was no problem, nobody got upset. So little experience I have it was not an issue. " [Pekka, 46. Male. Finland]

## 4.5.2.7 Gender, Sexuality, and Humour:

Interestingly, from the analysis conducted by the researcher, one of the more common means through which discussions surrounding sexuality diversity, LGBTQ awareness and

so on came into play in the interviews, was often through discussions around the humour present in the setting of the military. The deployment of humour, Humour can be deployed and used as a means of expressing views and opinions subtly, in a way that will not result in the individual being socially reprimanded, which is evident within both social and work settings (Plester, 2015). The persistence of humour does not exist in a vacuum and remains part of wider social and political regulation of gender and sexuality within the organisation or social context in question.

For example, in the following quote, the interviewee is asked about whether they knew of incidents that may make LGBTQ personnel uncomfortable:

> Benjamin: "Yes, yes, all the time. The whole kind of cultural scheme of Finnish Defence Forces is kind of like anti-gay or like… it has all the masculine values. They are really kind of like strong there and of course I can imagine it was both for females or the only female and for anybody with the mixed sexuality, it must be pretty hard to hear all the time these kind of infant gay jokes and stuff like that."
> [Benjamin, 35. Male.  Finland]

Humour being deployed in social context as a means through which gender politics become manifest and re-structured is not a new concept, in fact, particularly with masculinities and their regulation the interviewees commonly used humour as a tool for

maintaining both the status quo and the complicit benefits reaped by individuals who both passively and actively benefit from its enforcement and engagement.

"Hegemonic masculinity may include expressions of fantasies, desires and norms, and humour may be one way of articulating these" (Plester, 2015. Pg.541).

Respondents commonly chose to highlight the centrality of 'army humour' as something separate and distinct within the setting of armies. Something that members of the organisation had to recognise and permit, something that, by virtue of membership to the organisation, they then have to accept, acknowledge and adapt to.

Additionally, Jim provides not just an example of 'army humour' in practice, but also presents an interesting personal dynamic with regards to ideas of compensatory masculinity within the army. Additional traits of masculinity, - meaning traits or characteristics associated with masculinity that can be cumulatively built on and drawn from - that helped this individual gain some compensatory masculine value, which act to somewhat mitigate and offset the status of his homosexuality among his peers and within the organisational culture, and made it less likely to have his sexuality made the butt of humour. Answering as to whether his colleague would feel uncomfortable, he said:

Jim: No, not to that individual anyway, he was maybe the only person I worked with who was gay and he was 100% confident, so nothing ever made him

uncomfortable, I think anyway. He's a big fella so there's nobody going to say something and walk away from it anyway haha. [Jim, 27. Male. Ireland]

The army was often discussed as a setting within which there is an esoteric sense of humour that respondents must acknowledge and accept, or by virtue of being part of the organisation, it is something that they must get used to and take for granted, which was sometimes directly or indirectly referenced by a few respondents also.

Joe: "… To be honest with you I think it because a bit, because you're always going to have arseholes everywhere, if you know what I mean, so I dunno. See it depends on the person themselves as well I think. Lads get slagged anyway and they *mightn't even* [my emphasis] be gay….. You have to have thick skin in the army."

[Joe, 36. Male. Ireland] [My Emphasis].

The deployment of this humour and the necessity for 'thick skin' … often interviewees acknowledge using phrases along the lines of '...that's a bit gay though isn't it', even when referring to non-sexual aspects, such as showcasing new equipment etc, which lends to the utilisation of humour as a tool through which regulation (in this case heteronormative masculinity regulation) can exist relatively unquestioned, existing not as a mechanic of regulation, but as inherently relevant to the army and its culture, and since its often just as 'just a joke', it is therefore unproblematic. The utilisation of humour and language found among the participants resembles processes and manifestations of symbolic

violence mentioned in Chapter 2. These subtle processes provide a means of framing and 'othering' women and sexual minorities within this institutional setting to demarcate it as still a heterosexual masculine space.

**4.6 Conclusion:**

With increasing international, national and organisational attention being given to the subject of gender diversity (and sexuality diversity) within the workplace more broadly, the focus of this chapter has been within the organisational culture of militaries, and within the context of international peacekeeping practice. Organisational cultures, militaries, workplace environments and so forth have shown the presence of similar regulatory utilisation of harassment, language and other tools as policing measures (Acker, 1992; Embrick et al, 2007; Shelley et al, 2011). Harassment, specifically sexual harassment within militaries is a frequently observed occurrence (Bell, Turchik, and Karpenkno, 2014), and represents one manifestation of control and power within strongly masculine institutions (Shelley et al, 2011). Traditional gender ideologies within many organisations that participate in peacekeeping have been linked with heteronormative masculinity, a relationship borne out of a longstanding association within armed forces and 'militaristic masculinity' (e.g. Digby, 2014; Herbert, 1998). This privileging becomes embedded within broader organisational structures rendering explicit and complicit benefits to individuals who conform to these values and expectations.

This chapter has explored the ways through which gender and sexuality are discussed and framed by members of the Finnish and Irish armies who participated in peacekeeping.

What became apparent within the interviews was that a privileging of heteronormative masculinity remains, albeit in more subtle ways, via the process of policing. These subtle forms of policing are perhaps reflective of 'heteroactivism' in the recent work of Nash and Browne (2017) and the pursuit to maintain the privileging of heteronormativity within a given setting. This chapter also found that respondents invoked a number of discourses that reduced and essentialised the role of women and their impacts on these missions, arguably reflective of the same gender essentialist ideologies that are critiqued in some of the policy approaches to gender diversity (as per Carreiras, 2010; Valenius, 2007).

While for the most part personnel were relatively open to discussing gender and its manifestations/roles on the mission, these same discussions tended to continue to frame masculinity as the norm within this setting, and consequently femininity was 'othered' as something that must be catered to. Personnel acknowledged physical differences, motherhood, and females' dislike to get down and dirty as some of the issues and reasons behind lower female participation in the militaries. In contrast to the willingness to discuss gender within these interviews, when the subject of sexuality was broached there was a notable difference. Most of the respondents stated that, to their knowledge, they hadn't worked with or known of any LGBTQ colleagues. Those few personnel who mentioned having worked with someone, did so in terms of acknowledging how they weren't a problem to work with, that their LGBTQ peers did not in these instances 'come onto' or 'hit on' them. Outside of a minimal few cases where the predatory nature of LGBTQ (exclusively gay and bisexual men mentioned in the interviews), the vast majority of personnel interviewed stated that to their knowledge they did not know anyone who was

LGBTQ. The result of this, I argue, is the presence of a Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy that is persisting informally within this setting, which subsequently contributes to the symbolic annihilation of LGBTQ personnel from reflections and discussions surrounding peacekeeping and military service.

The discussions and findings presented within this chapter showcase that despite formal policy and pushes towards equality, informal regulation and the policing processes behind them are vitally important in perpetuating and maintaining embedded ideologies within these institutional settings. While this chapter has explored heteronormative masculinity and its maintenance within the context of militaries participating in peacekeeping, we will now turn to the next chapter to explore the potential ways through which it is maintained within the context of videogames and among their players.

# Chapter 5: 'Legacy of the Forced Baby': An Exploration into the *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* Controversy[20].

## 5.1 Introduction:

This chapter seeks to explore and answer the question stated in Chapter 1 of this thesis:

How is gender and sexuality regulated amongst videogame players? In order to do this, it

uses a naturally occurring controversy surrounding *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* – henceforth

ACO - as a case study, whereby players who had experienced the controversy engaged in

a discussion that utilised and deployed ideologies of gender and sexuality. Within the

controversy (which will be outlined in forthcoming sections) the issue revolved around a

forced heteronormative romance that clashed with previously advertised promises of

freedom of choice and sexual preference for the game's protagonists.

While the previous chapter's focus was in exploring the processes through which

gendered and orientating ideologies presented themselves in the context of military

personnel participating within peacekeeping, this chapter's focus is on videogame players.

More specifically, this chapter explores and considers how these players encounter, make

sense of, and informally regulate and police one another. In a number of instances

throughout the analysis, the design and other aspects of these videogames are drawn

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[20] As mentioned in the methodology chapter of this thesis, specifically within the 'ethical considerations' section, in addition to not stating the name of the forum or the thread which was utilised for this chapters analysis, I have also chosen to paraphrase all of the used quotes from the forum thread as a means of providing additional privacy and protection to the posters. (See Chapter 3 for the discussion).

upon by players as a means of legitimising and regulating the responses, critiques and opinions of other players.

Research into the demographics of gaming consistently shows that the population of gamers is diverse. For example, the Entertainment Software Association, in their 2018 report states that approximately 45% of US gamers are female (ESA, 2018). While statistics like this are in direct contrast to the more popularised stereotype of young, heterosexual, white, male gamers playing, this stereotype continues in popular discourse and in the public imagination. Despite this diversity, scholars have also shown that the culture of videogames and those that play them, is often wrought with sexism, homophobia, and racism (Gray, 2014; Johnson, 2018; Ruberg, 2019b; Shaw, 2014; Vossen, 2018a).

The inequity and inequality observed within these fantasy worlds and virtual settings can be in part understood via the performative nature of identities and constructs like gender and sexuality. The processes of videogame development and production, when explored structurally, also denotes a production culture steeped in a particularly heteronormative masculinist ideology, termed 'technomasculinty' by Johnson (2018). Technomasculinty can be viewed as a fusion of masculine values and identifiers with modern technology and technological mastery – representing a dimension of both hegemonic masculinity, and militarised masculinity. The idea of technological mastery is of additional importance when we consider the work of Keogh (2018) and their distinction between two ideologies readily found within gaming; the first is the 'cyborg' which represents a fusion and interaction between the body and the machine, while the second is the 'hacker', centred

on a distinction between the body and the machine, and that the hacker must become the master of the machinery, thus bestowing social status among their peers as a result of this mastery.

Vysotsky and Alloway (2018) note that the dynamics within the videogame industry act as barriers to the full engagement and participation of women and other marginalised individuals. The barriers and limited participation of some individuals within the video game industry results in a cycle of masculinity, (and I would add - heteronormativity more broadly) reification, and normalisation, which by extension attracts those adherents to the above, who then go on to produce more of the same content. Looking beyond the videogame industry to the IT sector at large, we have seen in Chapter 2 that many of the same embedded ideologies of gender and sexuality are also present (Alfrey and Twine, 2017; Chang, 2018; Johnson, 2018).

## 5.2 Patterns and Playing with Gender and Sexuality:

We have already talked about some of the overall patterns and common approaches to gender and sexuality and how they are included within videogames in Chapter 2. Across the settings of fantasy and fiction within many videogames, these same spaces where magic and monsters often exist unquestioned, we find that the ideological reality present within these games is often one of heteronormative masculinity. The fact that these aspects of marginalisation and the reaffirmation of offline norms persist and permeate these virtual and fantastical settings is of particular importance when exploring videogames more broadly (Greer, 2013; Schröder, 2008; Shaw, 2014). We have seen this

in a variety of forms, such as in terms of fantasy based racialisation and stereotyping of characters and races in games like *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004) (Williams, Martins, Consalvo, and Ivory, 2009); strict racial regulation and racist interactions within gaming (Gray, 2014); and in the proportions and depictions of gender and sexuality across gaming platforms and titles (e.g. Fox and Bailenson, 2009; Heron, Belford, and Goker, 2014).

Exploring gender and sexuality within the context of gaming, gender is commonly coded in binary terms, included through character customisation options, and within common binary gendered representations. Sexuality, particularly 'non-normative' sexualities are not as easily represented through character customisation for example. One of the more common means of including non-normative representations typically tend to fall into the paradigm of the 'gay button' or 'playersexuality' (Shaw, 2014; Cole, 2017.); more often than not in relation to optional same-sex romances in game. In these cases, players must actively pursue for example same-sex romances in the game or else bypass them altogether, resulting in nonnormative representations existing within what I would argue to be a dichotomy of *active engagement* or *passive avoidance* [Emphasis my own]. The ideology behind this, is neoliberal in nature according to Shaw, who argues that via the existence of a 'gay button', the responsibility for representation is placed on the marginalised, while maintaining a lower threat of backlash from the *real* gamers who wouldn't want to see any of that in the games that they play (see Consalvo and Paul (2019) for an exploration into the politics of legitimacy and the discourses that create and distinguish 'real' versus 'casual' gamers).

Within their work exploring gender and race in gaming, Gray (2014) also explores videogame narrative in their discussions. Framing it in relation to its connections with power and political regulation. In fact, they state "...narratives can contribute to the reproduction of existing structures of meaning and power." (Pg.39). Narratives, therefore, represent further tools of power regulation, hegemony and heteronormativity. Narratives are not objective; they are predicated on and enable the particular ideologies upon which they are based and can often be seen to contribute to the perpetuation and naturalisation of the symbolic violence found within videogames and media at large. It is in this way; we should consider the design and aspects of videogames such as its narratives, to be important considerations around the straightening of bodies both in and outside of the games themselves. Players encounter ideological landscapes within the games that they play and must grapple with these ideologies through their presence and playing in the gameworlds, but this chapter also seeks to more specifically consider and explore the roles of players and their interactions and engagements with institutional ideologies.

### 5.3 *Playing* at research:

As mentioned in the methodology chapter, autoethnography was an aspect of the research process that was particularly relevant in the explorations into the videogame case studies. As noted by Beyer (2019) autoethnography represents one such way through which we can explore single player games and their gameworlds, a means of "...approaching the games as a solitary experience that players of the series share." (Pg.35). It is in this way that my own gameplay and experiences within the game help me to understand and remain familiar with the reactions and the discussions from the forum

that are explored later in this chapter. With this in mind, I will now provide a brief outline of some of my experiences with the game, as well as an overview of the events of the DLC that would later become the source for much of the controversy and reaction among players.

In total I spent over one hundred and twenty hours playing through the storylines of the main game as well as the DLC storylines on my PlayStation 4 console. As discussed in the methodology chapter of this thesis, my playthrough of the game in the name of research took two forms, first was my playing for pleasure phase, followed then by my more serious play.

Taking my ship to the waters of the Aegean, customised with a Hydra bowhead, red colour scheme and legendary lieutenants; travelling on horseback astride my customised horse with a Sacred Bull cosmetic skin, or simply walking my way through the streets and scenes of Ancient Greece with my legendary weapons – Athena's spear and Hade's bow were my staple weapons of choice – I looked and felt like something taken from Greek myth or legend. Such was the premise and promise of *Assassin's Creed: Odyssey* (Ubisoft, 2018) and its open world rendering of Ancient Greece around the time of the Peloponnesian War (around 431BCE). A self-proclaimed Role-Playing Game (RPG) which marked a significant departure from the traditional linear action story of previous members of the series. Players choose as their playable character (PC) either Alexios or Kassandra[21], a

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[21] Of the two siblings, it is Kassandra that is officially recognised as the canon character of the game, and to the wider lore of the franchise.

brother and sister originally from Sparta, who are at the centre of their own Greek Odyssey of family reunion, personal development, and exploration) for its newest (at time of writing) title of the Assassins Creed franchise. Allowing me to explore and create my own 'Odyssey' through gameplay.

I decided that Alexios would be my playable character. I would be lying if I said I played Alexios for any reason other than personal preference and aesthetics. I wanted nothing more than to have my Alexios partake in the promises of the Greek world and adventures, mythologies, and its sexual freedoms. As advertised by the developers of the game, Assassins Creed: Odyssey would provide numerous opportunities for sexual encounters throughout Greece, from an assortment of genders and sexualities, and without any judgement or negative commentary or reaction in-game based on players choices of romantic interests. Players had the choice to accept and participate or decline these advances and suggestive comments while travelling around the Greek world as a misthios (a mercenary or warrior for pay), meeting them as part of the story missions and side quests. From the outset I decided that *my* Alexios was gay, a gay man who was strong and capable in battle, who declined one of the first romantic encounters that I found in the game, a young woman by the name of Odessa. As the game progressed, I flirted back with several of the male characters that I had the opportunity to flirt with, from the wiley Alkibiades, to the strong Thelatas. This 'cassonova' playstyle did result in an awkward situation at one stage during my gameplay. During a side quest mission called 'A Brothers Seduction', I met Lykinos and Timotheos, brothers living in the fishing village of Kechries (the former being a poet from Athens, the latter a retired soldier of the Athenian Army).

The brothers were having difficulties with some local bandits and their leader due to their fathers gambling before he died, which is where Alexios comes in to help. Throughout the several missions assisting the brothers, instances occurred where I had the opportunity to flirt and romance each of the brothers during personal missions with them, which my Alexios chose to pursue… in both cases. In the final mission helping the brothers to deal with the bandits, I had to choose which brother I had feelings for, which – regardless of my choice, and due to my previous actions – resulted in me being outed as having romanced/seduced both brothers. Which, admittedly, left me a little red in the face from embarrassment.

After the videogame was played for pleasure, and I had completed the story and worked through many of its side quests, all the while exploring and relaxing within the game, I then conducted the more 'serious' gameplay and research. The principle difference here being a much slower pace of play which focused more on the content within the game. This was accompanied by notes that I had taken about aspects and moments of the game that were particularly relevant for the analysis and aims of this chapter. Primarily much of the events that concern this chapter occurred within the games DLC, but the overall journey which players like me had are of vital importance to contextualise and place their responses and reactions.

In order to assist in this, the serious play analysis and engagement with the game utilised multiple manual save points through my gameplay, several of these were saved as important moments in the storylines that I was then able to load up to engage with the

dialogue and game moments and pursue different choices to explore the differences in occurrences across the choices (or lack thereof).

We will now consider the specific events of the DLC that resulted in the controversy, before discussing the themes observed within the forum thread.

**5.4 What happens in the games DLC, and why is it important?**

After completing the main game, there were two separate DLC storylines[22]. In this case, the DLC's were three-part episodic story arcs for the players to further engage with in the stories of their characters odyssey. These are titled *The Legacy of the First Blade* and *The Fate of Atlantis*; however, this chapter will be more specifically exploring player reaction to the second episode of 'The Legacy of the First Blade', which was called '*Shadow Heritage*'[23].

In the DLC storyline, we meet Darius, a legendary assassin in the game's universe who assassinated King Xerxes of Persia and was on the run with what remained of his family. Depending on whether a player chose to play as Alexios or Kassandra in their playthrough, they met Darius' Daughter Neema, or son Natakas and by the end of the second episode, romance and heterosexuality with Darius' daughter/son becomes the 'compulsive' reality for players and their character for the purposes of progression through this particular

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[22] Downloadable content for videogames is any content available after the release of a title, it can include new stories and locations unavailable in the base game, cosmetics for playable characters etc.
[23] The three episodes of The Legacy of the First Blade DLC were called: *Hunted, Shadow Heritage*, and *Bloodline.*

story arc (to borrow from Blythe Adams, 2015 and the concept of 'compulsive heterosexuality').

Released in mid-January 2019, Shadow Heritage quickly became infamous in the *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* player-base. There was widespread coverage of the DLC due to its narrative, and the fact that players had no choice but to engage in a romantic heterosexual relationship for the purposes of producing a son (Arif, 2019; Muncy, 2019; Messner, 2019; Makuch, 2019). Prior to this controversy, GLAAD had announced a nomination for *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* for a 'GLAAD Media Award in the new outstanding video game category' (Durkee, 2019) for the main game, and decided to maintain its nomination on the basis of the main game rather than the DLC.

In the final moments and climax (and subsequent post-climax) of the narrative of 'Shadow Heritage' represents perhaps the more critical source of the controversy. Players fight against the episode's primary antagonist, *the Tempest*, on the shores of Achaia, after having destroyed her fleet blockading the nearby waters. Upon completing this boss fight, players are then tasked with returning to a nearby pier to meet the people now departing safely by boat. Darius and his daughter Neema are among those at the pier, and in the ensuing in-game cutscenes, players are given a dialogue option (a game mechanic that Ubisoft decided to roll out into the franchise in this iteration of the franchise), ultimately asking the players to decide whether to wish them well in their travels and say goodbye, or to ask them to stay – professing your love. In the post-controversy patch, dialogue changes were among the primary reparations made (e.g. Philips, 2019), as seen in the

image below where in the post patch, 'stay' was given a heart symbol to indicate it is the romantic option. Salter (2019) discusses narrative in games and aligns this form of dialogue structuring as one that maintains the core/primary narrative while allowing player's agency – defined as player's actions that change the game world or its narrative in some way - within the smaller details of story progression alone, while enabling the core arc of the story to remain unchanged.
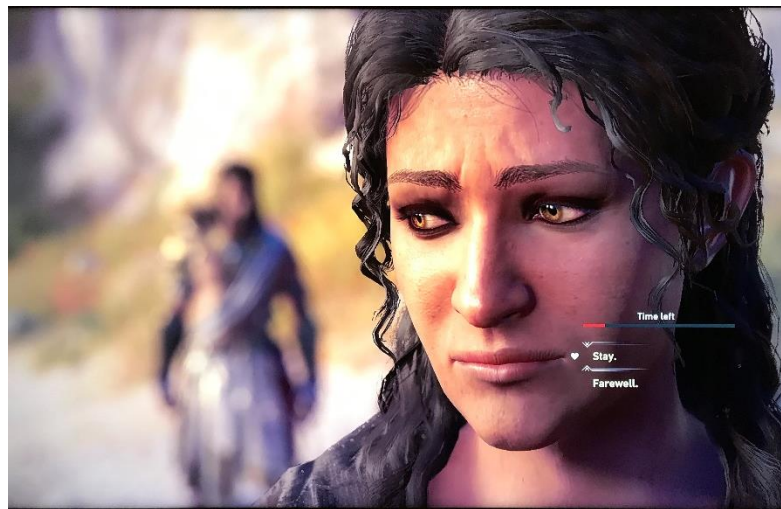


**Figure 2 - Dialogue Options:** Picture depicts the (post-patch) two dialogue options at the pier. Screenshot from Authors gameplay.

The moment that a dialogue option was chosen then, the game proceeded through a further (and lengthy) cutscene, with no further engagement from the players until after it had played out. This scene included the PC returning to the house that they had all used as a sort of safe house for some time in the episode, eventually in tears and upset, the PC turns to find Neema/Natakas at the threshold professing that "real connections with people are rare, Alexios. We shouldn't be too quick to let them go". They both embrace,

followed by a blackened screen and a short mission where players must fetch some groceries from the nearby town and bring it back, we then find out (by interpretation) that around nine months have passed. The PC returns to the house to see that Neema/Natakas is holding a child, my child, our child, called Elpidios (see images below). This was a strange feeling for me personally where I most definitely felt a bit strange. As mentioned earlier, up until this moment, I had been allowed to play my Alexios how I wanted, to have pursued any and all male lovers offered in the game, and gotten into funny moments where I was left red faced for being a little too romantically inclined. These moments were part of my Odyssey, how I had built my adventures and my memories of exploring through the gameworld and its plotline. I had imagined Alexios (as I had played him) to be gay, an openly gay male who had no issue being who they were in the ancient Greek world. But it was at this point through gameplay and particularly at this moment that I decided to turn to Google and read up around what happened in the game, it didn't take long before finding those same news stories mentioned above around the controversial moment in the DLC and it prompted me to explore how others had reacted and what their thoughts of this moment in the game were, in short I took to the online forums.

**Figure 3 – Sad Farewells:** The 'post-pier' cutscene wherein the Playable Character is in tears over Neema/Natakas' departure. Screenshot from authors' gameplay.



**Figure 4 – The Face that launched a Thousand Comments:** Elpidios, the 'Forced Baby', in the arms of Alexios. Screenshot from authors' gameplay.

Drawing on the above literature and calls from authors for future research to consider things like "How do players reflect on the game content?" - Among other calls and directions (Østby, 2017, pg.413), this research seeks to explore the ways through which the *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* controversy was discussed and regulated within the broader

gamer discourse. The case study will also be providing an answer to the question in Chapter 1 around how gender and sexuality is being regulated among videogame players, as well as how the designs and mechanics of a videogame can inform and contribute to particular ideologies.


## 5.5 Themes from the Forum Thread:

Several themes were observed over the course of analysing the forum thread and the posts made by its participants. Specifically, there were three main themes that were the most reoccurring and the most visible within the data, which will be outlined individually in the coming sections, wherein I will follow up with attempting to elaborate on these arguments in context.  Firstly, the role of 'reality' or the insistence in the separation of the events of the game with that of 'real life'. More broadly this theme spoke to the preservation of heteronormativity, while (in a similar fashion to the previous chapter) there were attempts to rationalise this and defend this in line with 'neutral' sources such as the games historical setting and the canon[24] of the game. The second theme that was commonly observed within the thread was in relation to senses of lost control, loss of bodily autonomy and an overall sense of alienation from the character they have been playing throughout their gameplay – which in some case poster referred to and equated the experience with 'corrective rape'. The third major theme that was observed within

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[24] "Canon, in a field or art, generally refers to a body of rules or principles generally established as valid and fundamental." (Zagal, 2012. Pg.666). In relation to videogames, I am referring to 'canon' in terms of what is considered to be some of the elements of these games that are viewed as 'established' and/or 'legitimate'.

the data also draws upon the more structural aspects of the game design and specifically dwells on the nature of 'player agency' and choice.

### 5.5.1 It's NOT Real Life - Heteronormativity, Historical Settings, and Canon:

The first of the main themes observed within the forum thread revolves around observable attempts to regulate and guide the discussions of the controversy along heteronormative lines. Additionally, it looks at the ways that the canon of the franchise was deployed for various ends, and the utilisation of the historical setting of the game as additional regulatory tools.

It is likely to come as no real shock or surprise to find out that throughout the forum thread there were numerous posts made by participants along the more traditional lines of diminishing and de-legitimising any claims by players that the events found within the downloadable content (DLC) constituted a valid controversy or something that was legitimate to complain about. These individuals simply stated that those who had issues with the DLC needed to effectively move on and get over it. I argue that the core function of this as a practice is to actively maintain heteronormativity as the 'norm' within this game, its narrative, and indeed contributes to the continued association between heteronormativity and videogames at large.

The broader conceptualisations and discourses surrounding games, from ideas of who plays them, to understandings of what best constitutes a game (what does a 'real game'

need to have to be legitimate) and so forth, all resemble perhaps the work of Foucault (1980) and the power/knowledge nexus and conceptions of subjugated knowledge. As such, it is of relevance and interest for this chapter to consider the various discourses that are to be found within the forum analysed, not only for a glimpse of the various meaning-making projects of different players in response to the controversy, but also in terms of the broader policing regimes across gender and sexual orientations, and which discourses become privileged over others (if at all).

Typical of findings in other research that has explored gaming discourses and online discussions of gender and sexuality in videogames in settings such as forums, this research also observed as a main theme within the forum thread in relation to the ACO controversy was the association between those who were criticising the content with those enforcing an agenda on gamers and the videogame at large.

> Poster 1 (of those referenced in this chapter, and whom quotes have been paraphrased), explicitly stated that there should be no political correctness in gaming. Furthermore, the poster argued that the gay population was around 10% and that as a result the developers stand to lose the money and support from the other 90% of its player base if they don't stand up to this.

This argument against the social justice warriors and their encroaching political correctness agenda is common but also acts to attempt to delegitimise their presence and

their critique for the sake of maintaining the heteronormative status quo. By attempting to deliver this ultimatum of 'money or PC correctness', the poster is also invoking a neoliberal logic within the debate, with the incentive of monetary loss for the sake of gaining in political correctness.

Another way that some members who posted to the forum thread dismissed people's issues with the DLC and its story on the basis that through their emphasis that the players character [Alexios and/or Kassandra] are a fictitious character and that this is a fictitious romance that doesn't affect the individual in reality. The arguments made that emphasised offline/real world divide also argued in some cases that perhaps these characters were 'bisexual all along', meaning that the fact they now have a child is not something to kick up a fuss about.

> The second poster referenced here diminished the complaints made by some of the posters as people overreacting and simply going overboard. The poster went on to state that the events of the game and the characters don't have any effect on the player, going so far as to say that players should accept its occurrence and simply move on.

What's more, aside from participant 2 claiming that the 'freaking out' is simply people going overboard, their claims that the actions have no impact or effect on the player and that we should simply accept things and 'move along' arguably all function to place those with alternative readings and perceptions of the events of the game as irrational, and

overreacting. This point of emphasis that it's 'not real', and 'doesn't affect' the player in real life therefore it is a non-issue is also somewhat ironic when we consider the previous instances and public backlash against queer content in other videogames (e.g. Brightman, 2012; Farr, 2012). Rather it arguably becomes part of strategy to maintain heteronormative control over the medium, through its active dismissal of critiques that the story went against what was promised and that – at the end of the day – they simply returned towards heteronormativity.

What is interesting here, which we will also see in the forthcoming theme discussions in this chapter, is a consideration on the role of the body within the processes and experiences of gameplay. We may recall the work of Keoghs (2018) and their discussion around the dichotomy of the cyborg and the hacker. The above critiques that emphasise the separation and indeed isolation of these 'fictional' game characters and that of the 'real' bodies of the players is somewhat reflective of the hacker ideology, a separation of human from machine etc. However, as we shall also see in some of the remaining themes, particularly among the themes revolving around the body itself, while the physical body is engaged in gameplay, so too is the virtual body and for some players the circumstances and events facing these virtual and 'fictional' characters have some very real meaning for them.

The arguments from some individuals within the thread that there is nothing to be concerned with because the events primarily revolve around a fictitious character, alongside the other arguments pleading to stand against political correctness etc are all

reflective of some the traditional debates around videogames and gaming as an 'apolitical' space. As we have seen from the discussion and themes thus far, this emphasis and reliance on the claim that videogames are exempt from politics is perhaps one of its primary and most common means of promoting and maintaining its heteronormativity. However, the reality of this assertion and association, is that the emphasis of being 'apolitical' is simultaneously a state of being 'heteronormatively masculine'. Thus the 'non-political' becomes synonymous with the claims of straight, white, male identity as neutral, objective, and natural states of being, while at the same time those who claim alternatives to this are labelled as deviant, transgressors, and not real gamers etc (Vossen, 2018; Condis, 2018).

### 5.5.1.1 Firing off the 'Canon': The use of Historical Setting and Game Canon

The use of and rationalization on the basis of 'canon' represented a further example of a policing mechanism deployed in the pursuit of preserving heteronormativity, and indeed by some as a means of countering this preservation. Firstly, several posters sought to regulate and dismiss the critical commentary of others by reminding them that the game is set in Ancient Greece (roughly 431 B.C.E.), and back then they did not have the technology for alternative methods of procreation. The result of which was to simply posit to other posters, how else was one to produce a child with the PC's lineage?

The third poster referenced in this chapter utilised the games historical setting as a means of rationalising the games approach to sexuality. Stating along the lines

that sexuality was simply different in the Ancient Greece world and that we should not be applying todays 'ideas' of sexuality to that era.

In their response they also state that those who are having issues with the events of the DLC are the problem, that these individuals are simply trying to apply labels rather than letting Kassandra or Alexios be bisexual or pansexual, asking why isn't it ok for them to fall in love and have a child. Rather than, this poster states, forcing Alexios or Kassandra to be gay or lesbian or what the complaining players identify as.

The inclusion of the historical setting of the game was deployed by the above poster and others as a means to frame and naturalise heteronormativity and heterosexual procreation. It is also to reflect on the work of Bourdieu (2001) and symbolic violence, by virtue of some posters articulating through their comments that it boils down to the 'natural' association between this historical setting and heterosexual procreation. Furthermore, the poster is again painting those who critique or criticise the game as being the deviant actor who is seeking to bring their agenda into the natural history of human procreation and ancestry.

Other posters responded by using canon as a counterargument to those who were policing fellow players on the grounds of historical setting and procreation. They did this by arguing that the game has strong science fiction elements, such as the Animus (a machine capable of accessing DNA to replay and experience ancestors and individuals' memories - the core source of the historic gameplay setting experience, as present day

characters have to use the Animus to 'relive' or experience the memories of these figures

of the past). Additionally, one of the meta narratives within the franchise are the various

objects from the 'Isu' – a fantastical civilisation of individuals that existed before humans-

and that these objects were capable of mind control etc, so it would not be outside of the

'canon' nor the restrictions of the games historical settings to utilise this technology as a

means of alternative procreation, as proposed by the poster below:

> Other posters, including the fourth referenced here, attempted to provide some
>
> solutions to the in-game issue that remained within the confines of the game
>
> canon and elements of the story. In this case, one of their solutions was through
>
> using the same Isu technology that allows for some of the more fantastical
>
> elements of the game, to collect genetic samples in order to create the child and
>
> in this way.

One of the most direct results of poster fours suggestion, would be a means of still having

the baby, but would allow for the bypassing of the controversial heterosexual procreation

which some players found upsetting.

Despite this, canon was clearly an interesting site of exchange and interaction among the

posters on this forum thread, and it was often that canon came into view with respect to

demarcating queerness as antithetical to procreation in this setting. This demarcation of

queerness as anti-canon is not something new, as we can see in a number of studies that

have shown how queerness has often traditionally been hidden within videogames, for

example, behind the 'gay button' (Shaw, 2014). Queerness is often also included via connotation rather than overt explicit narrative, one such example of this is within the work of James (2019). In their paper they talk about 'easter eggs'[25], highlighting the fact that queer Easter eggs exist, but structurally function to align queerness and queer connotations to a marginal existence bound by secrecy, and non-canonical power structures.

In spite of the reality of the franchise as a work of science fiction, imagining itself in the context of historical locations, and including a wide array of historical figures over its many settings throughout the franchise, the historical setting is utilised by numerous posters as a grounds for dismissing critiques of the narrative, and reinscribe the historical basis for procreation to neutralise their discursive opponents. This is met in response by those posters who offer alternative plot suggestions and remind the other posters of the science fiction elements of the series and its titles, which render arguments of historical accuracy as porous.

## 5.5.2 My Character doesn't feel like mine anymore:

The second main theme observed within the data of this forum is regarding the role of the body – virtual and non-virtual- and its placement within the discourses of regulation and heteronormativity. Representing perhaps one of the more interesting and salient responses from individuals within this forum thread was the discourse around a sense of

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[25] They define easter eggs as: "…hidden artifacts--such as people, messages, places, scenes, or items--that players are not likely to come across in normal play and that require some sort of special attention, game hack, or obtuse combination of player actions to discover." (James, 2019).

loss and alienation from their characters, and the centrality of the body in relation to the experience of gameplay - both in terms of loss and the violence of the cutscene and its connotations.

Players talk about being at odds with their character after the events of the DLC, that it broke their headcanon[26] in some cases and left the behaviour as being 'out of character' (OOC), in some cases this left players uncertain as to how to proceed or make sense of the incident. In most of these cases, commenters on the forum suggest avoiding the DLC altogether, or reverting to a previous game save to avoid the heteronormative future for their character, though for some the events of this DLC were more long-lasting and would not be as easy to avoid or ignore.

> Poster 5 stated that for gay players or those who chose to play as gay characters, it will be hard to fully move on and deal with what happened; similarly they also note that plenty of those who identify as a woman were also all forced into a heterosexual romance and a relationship with someone that they had said "no" to.

This disjuncture between their played character in their gameplay throughout the main game and the broken reality they discuss having to deal with after the fact was an

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[26] By 'headcanon' I am referring to and adopting a similar definition as that found within the work of Andrew Scahill (2019), namely that "a headcanon refers to a fan's personal interpretation of a character's identity and backstory, particularly as it runs counter to the official or canonical source material." (Scahill, 2019. Pg.121).

interesting theme that emerged from the comments and arguments made by a number of posters.

Along the lines of players reporting a sense of disconnection and disruption from their PC's, others in the forum discussed that they felt their character had changed and moved in a direction that they did not intend. Such as the participant below, who recalls the once heroic character that they played as and explored Ancient Greece with, known throughout the Greek world as 'the Eagle Bearer' for their exploits and actions, who has since been effectively reduced for the overall purpose of producing a child for the overall narrative:

> The sixth poster referenced in this chapter also related their comment to body of the character. While the hero became known as 'the eagle bearer' (due to their pet eagle used to survey the Greek landscape etc), the poster states that they are now simply called the 'child bearer'.

Disconnection and alienation over the course of this DLC storyline has also produced some strong reactions among some of the posters on the forum thread, throughout the thread there were a number of comments posted about perceiving the events in terms of rape of their character. Posters discussed the structure of choice, and the way that the dialogue allowed them to refuse romantic prompts throughout meeting Neema/Natakas, yet despite all of this, they were met with heterosexual family-building storyline regardless.

Poster seven questioned why the game offers players the option to decline and reject Natakas multiple times and still end up having a child with them. The poster goes on to suggest that the events 'feel like rape'. They also question the fact that through the game their character is a demi-goddess who can take down beasts, mercenaries and enemies effectively by themselves, and yet, they are powerless to stop this man from having a child with them.

In the above quote, the poster is echoing the comments made by a number of other posters about their previous choices being ignored, and the romance happening regardless - the role of choice being a theme we will consider momentarily. Those players who played their PC as LGBTQ also referred to the connotation of 'corrective rape' being present within the narrative of the game itself, or in the headcanon that they have since developed to make sense of the events in the games narrative.

Poster eight resolves to explain that it boils down to sexism by forcing a woman to have a child and naming the achievement 'growing up'; as well as their emphasis that it is homophobic because it is assuming the only 'acceptable romance' is found in heterosexual instances. Additionally, the poster also states that the events of the game resemble 'corrective rape' through its promise of the capacity to play as bisexual, lesbian, gay, or asexual but still forcing players down a heterosexual romance.

By virtue of saying no to the romance, and it happening regardless, and in the way that the cutscenes (by their very nature) lack options for direct input, resulted in loss of control in the moment, and the passive observation of events unfolding for the players. The rape connotation appears at its core to be tied to 'control', what was promised, and what occurred in reality.

Poster nine acknowledged that many of the gay players will find being forced into a heterosexual relationship problematic but goes on to state that the primary issue of the controversy is to do with paying customers and control. That the events of the game effectively removed players from their previous levels of control and reduced their experience to a form of autopilot.

Accounts and posts about rape were often directly contested and challenged by other players through the policing of their interpretations, and presenting them as non-valid on the basis of fictional characters and so forth, with individuals simply telling these posters to 'get a life' (mentioned previously). Nonetheless, the accounts above outlining perceptions of rape towards their characters represents a real and powerful process of meaning-making for the wider narrative of the DLC and what it means for their representative PC's in-game. What is at the centre of a lot of these arguments and comments from posters along these lines is the loss of control of their character, and an inability to stop events from unfolding, which also ties us into the next main theme that was observed within the data, and was visibly the most prevalent.

**5.5.3 'It's about Choice' - Choice, Agency, and Game Structure:**

Thirdly, and finally, this section contains the final main theme observed within the analysis of the forum thread, that being the role and articulations of choice, pre-release advertising of choice and legacy, and so forth. This section will also be utilised to question the role of choice and other aspects of game design as a means of regulating heteronormativity within this setting.

Most interestingly, a number of forum thread participants also framed their issues with the DLC in relation to a more pragmatic reasoning, namely that it constituted false advertising on the part of the developer, and that the issue was not to do with sexual orientation, but at its centre it was about choice. This was also reflected in the forum in some of the responses given by posters that the controversy was not simply a LGBTQ versus the straight players issue, and other posters even emphasising their own 'straightness' and outrage in equal measure.

> Poster ten, who simply stated that they were straight and yet they were still a part of this cohort who had issue with the content.

> Poster 11 repeated these sentiments, stating that the romance and the resulting baby were forced on everyone, on players of all gender or sexual orientations.

What is somewhat more interesting, from the position of applying a queer lens to the game, is the rationale around choice and agency as the core issue. What happens when we consider the question of whose agency we enjoy? What mode of agency is normative in 'real' games? Is the question of choice and agency itself problematic or complicit within the dominant heteronormative framework of 'real' game design?

> Poster twelve brought up the marketing promises surrounding choice and romances with regards to sexuality. They simply ask if they ever considered how the players who chose to play their characters as gay would feel.

> Poster thirteen, went through the array of problems with the DLC content and what it meant for the various players. From forcing the romance despite promising choice, 'forcing' sexual encounters, the impacts and inferences for women's bodies in relation to childbirth, and that forcing queer and asexual players to engage in heterosexual romance.

Choice was perhaps one of the most frequent words present throughout the forum thread; its apparent centrality in relation to the controversy is evident in its role in the previously mentioned themes. Seen in the comments from the above posters, there is a clear distinction between the level of choice and agency promised within the game, and what is offered. For individuals (like those mentioned by poster thirteen), experiences of choice and control within the context of the game and its controversial DLC are overwritten and embedded within a broader narrative of heteronormativity.

Many players also gave reference to the illusion of choice within their posts. Though the core illusion here was in how the game disrupted its pre-release advertising on how players could develop and determine their own odyssey, and promising choice on the lines of romances and so forth, the role of choice and its illusion within given gaming titles is something of a particular irony here. Central to the overall controversy, posters often resorted to 'choice' and its removal, which in some cases also implied alienation from the characters similar to what was discussed in the previous theme.

> The fourteenth poster simply stated that they felt like the choice was taken away and they lose their control of the character.

What I also want to suggest here in this section is a queering of 'choice' in the context of videogames and their design, by presenting some of the ways through which we can view the rationalisation of choice as the issue with some irony – at least in the context of videogames. Not least of all if we consider, as I discussed in Chapter 2, that videogames and their codes and mechanics are metaphorical examples for the same guiding structures we face within our day-to-day lives, structures/institutions such as heterosexuality and masculinity. Many of the structures and designs found within videogames remain largely unseen but are no less effective in contributing to ideologies of gender and sexuality. An example of these metaphorical structures that guide us and are embedded within videogames can be found in Ruberg, (2019a). Here they talk about the structures that guides and determines a player's movement through videogames, and how these 'rails' can contain and encourage particular heteronormative meanings and connotations.

Chang (2012) offers a discussion within their work on the 'immersive fallacy' (citing Salen and Zimmerman, 2003) found within videogames, representing a fundamental critique of the common (and often defining) association with interactivity, agency and choice within videogame play (Stang, 2019a). Yet upon reflection, Chang (2012) highlights that this freedom is bounded within the systems of the game, in essence the code, the written limitations of what is possible and what is not in a given game context.

"In other words, even as a video game evinces a player's power and agency, it naturalizes and obscures its algorithmic and protocological control" (Chang, 2012, Pg.119).

What we can see when we consider the suggestions and discussions from the work of scholars such as Chang (2012), is that videogames and the deployment of choice (and other similar design-centric arguments) are an ironic basis upon which to defend and rationalise the continuation of the status quo. It remains no less critical to the pursuit of symbolic violence through the neutralising processes through which design is placed within objective and seemingly neutral discourses.

## 5.6 Reflecting on the 'Code':

At this point, through the comparative case studies and the explorations into heteronormativity that have been provided within this chapter and the previous one, I would additionally argue that we have observed some degree of similarity. While both

sites can, immediately and contextually be considered separate from one another, the politics of heteronormativity and its more subtle and nuanced forms remains critically important and relevant in both environments. We have seen that military personnel refer to 'natural' and 'neutral' aspects of their work such as the physical differences between men and women etc to demarcate the established norms of their institutional environment. Whereas within videogames, some players chose to draw on similarly 'natural' and apparently 'neutral' aspects of their games, such as the games historical setting to police the boundaries of what is acceptable in relation to reaction and commentary on their games in the case of this chapter.

As such, I would posit that in this way both the players and peacekeepers engage and interact with processes of straightening through their participation and presence within these institutional fields. As such, they can effectively function as agents of both the institutional ideologies and the broader project of institutionalised heteronormativity. It is in this way that the idea of 'codes of conduct' becomes a useful analogy to explain this shared reality, as both groups are encouraged by the 'code' to behave in particular ways (those deemed normative) while at the same time, they interact and shape these through their actions.

**5.7 Conclusion:**

This chapter has sought to explore how gender and sexuality was regulated and managed amongst videogame players. To achieve this, it explored a naturally occurring case study of how players responded to the *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* DLC *'The Legacy of the*

*First Blade*' and how the processes of symbolic violence, straightening, and regulation manifested among these gamers. Utilising data from an online forum discussion, this chapter explored a number of diverse arguments from individuals surrounding the controversy which were placed into three of the more common observable arguments/themes made within the thread. What emerged from the data consulted, analysed and presented herein is that the heteronormative masculine culture often cited within videogame research, remains present within the context of the public discourse surrounding this controversy. The regulation and enforcement of heteronormativity was varied and often reactionary with the discussions and arguments brought in by those 'others' present within the discussion who criticised the DLC's content.

The controversial events of the DLC provide not just a specific case and insight into contemporary regulation and policing within the culture, but also showcases the more subtle arguments and articulations of those enforcing the regulation. As we have seen here, the three largest themes were divided as follows: 1) The role of 'reality' and broader patterns of policing comments that critiqued the issues of the DLC, while attempting to maintain heteronormative ideologies of gender and sexuality, in some cases drawing on the game's historical setting and its limited procreational possibilities – despite the science fiction elements of the canon and setting. 2) The virtual politics of the body and how the DLC impacted players experiences. These arguments included dismissing contention on the basis of it happening to a virtual body, the strong associations with rape (corrective or otherwise) felt by some of those who played the game, and an accompanying sense of loss and alienation from the character and their relationship with

the character they had been building. 3) Choice and heteronormative design of the game's narrative, revolving around players placing choice and agency (or more accurately a lack thereof) as being at the centre of the controversy. This was then briefly queered, with reference to Chang (2012) and Stang (2019a), via questioning the traditional role of choice and its place within the broader (heteronormative) design structure of videogames. Through reflection and comparison with the findings and discussions of the previous chapter, I would posit that many of the arguments and forms of regulation (for example the anchoring in 'neutral' and 'normal' aspects of game design and play) function similarly to the processes observed within the previous military chapter.

With play being an important (if not defining) feature involved in videogames and their enjoyment, what does it mean then when we consider the role of embedded ideologies and their inferences? To what extent then (if at all) are the players of these videogames also 'playing' with ideology? The more mechanical and design-based elements of a given videogame represent an interesting area through which to explore the ways through which institutionalised heteronormativity (in the case of this research orientation) may persist and, as was seen in some of the findings discussed in this chapter, inform us on how players may use these design elements to reinforce this traditional heteronormativity of videogames. It is to this end that the next chapter will seek to unearth the often hidden realities of queerness as a virtue inherent in game studies, for the simple reason that 'Video games have always been queer', to cite Bo Ruberg in the title of their recent book (2019b). Scholars from game studies, particularly Queer Game Studies, are considering lenses that critically explore many of the taken-for-granted attributes and characteristics

that are often painted as inherent in 'real' videogames. Many of these studies assist with

the broader political challenge of reclaiming a traditionally heteronormative medium by

those whom have been pushed to the edges by the regulation and enforcement of their

marginalisation.

# Chapter 6: "Is that your only ambition for me? To follow?" – Gender in *A Plague Tale: Innocence (2019).*[27]

"It is essential to interrogate the ideological implications of video games"

**(Magnet, S. 2006, pg.157).**



(**Figure 5 – Resting on the River:** Amicia holding her sleeping brother Hugo. Screenshot taken by author during gameplay)

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[27] A version of this chapter (Devlin, 2019) was published on the First Person Scholar website on the 29th of November, 2019. (http://www.firstpersonscholar.com/is-that-your-only-ambition-for-me-to-follow/)

**6.1 Introduction:**

The purpose of this chapter is to explore how the design and mechanics of videogames may also reflect and inform us of wider institutionally embedded ideologies – specifically surrounding ideas of gender, sexuality and heteronormativity – within a given videogame title. The premise of this chapter was informed via the observations made in the preceding chapter and the *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (Ubisoft, 2018) controversy. Within said chapter, it was shown that some of the posters on the forum drew explicitly upon aspects of the games design such as its historical setting and choice, to anchor their arguments. Therefore, not only are these elements of a games design important material for academic investigation, but they are also important dimensions and aspects that actively inform and influence the negotiations and regulations of particular ideologies within videogames and amongst their players. It is in this way (and the aim of this chapter) to thus explore this game title to show how the designs and mechanics alongside other aspects of gameplay can contribute to and encourage heteronormative ideologies that players must navigate and participate in through their gameplay.

As such, this thesis draws from the argument that the culture surrounding the production of these videogames are also problematically gendered, and arguably resembles the institutionalised culture surrounding gender, sexuality, and heteronormativity that we have explored in the preceding chapters (e.g. Heron et al, 2014; Johnson, 2014; 2018.). As was discussed in Chapter 2, videogames as well as the Tech industry at large are laden with the ideologies and enforcement of heteronormative masculinity, as well as struggling with issues like sexism, homophobia, and racism (Chang, 2018; Chess, 2020; Consalvo, 2012; Gray, 2014; Salter and Blodgett, 2012). As cultural products of these environments,

the result of these embedded ideologies of gender and sexuality is, for example, in the deployment and prevalence of stereotypical and often problematic patterns of gender and sexuality representations within videogames (see Fox and Bailenson, 2009; Schröder, 2008).

Recent transitions within queer game studies and among its scholars have encouraged a move 'beyond representation' when applying and considering queerness with videogames (Bagnall, 2017). Further to this, Ruberg (2019b) states that the 'non-representational elements' of videogames, such as their controls or interactive systems, are important sites of analysis in queer game studies, and this is reiterated by Malakowski and Russworm (2018) who also argue that these aspects of videogames cannot be fully separated from their representational elements. It is towards this transition beyond an exploration solely focusing on representation that this chapter contributes to.

In order to achieve this, this chapter provides an examination into *A Plague Tale: Innocence* (Asobo) - henceforth APT:I - to explore some of the design choices seen within this given title and how it presents and draws on particular and established tropes and patterns of representation in relation to gender and sexuality. This chapter does so by going beyond just the visual representations of gender and sexuality within this game title to explore the more subtle and nuanced mechanics and gameplay design choices (as a mirror to the more subtle and nuanced ways through which we find gender and sexuality regulated elsewhere within this thesis). In this chapter, I demonstrate that within this game world, players (playing as the young girl Amicia) are beset by manifestations of

masculine violence in the form of soldiers and armed civilians who will attack Amicia and Hugo on sight, this threat is compounded by the supernatural horror of the hordes of flesh-eating rats from the Bubonic Plague. As the game progresses, the hordes of rats themselves becomes a tool utilised and fought over by two male characters within the game narrative, namely Amicia's younger brother Hugo, and the Grand Inquisitor Vitalis (antagonist of the game). All of which conform to and confirm an institutionally embedded ideology of heteronormative masculinity encouraged by the mechanics, design and structures of the game itself – despite the apparent progress made in terms of having a female lead character.

Game scholars have identified an observable increase in the number of 'tough' and 'competent' female leading characters in video games, a trend they have identified as 'the Lara Phenomenon' (Jansz and Martis, 2007). Although they highlighted this trend, Jansz and Martis also highlight that these same female leads tended to be more visibly over-sexualised, revealing a continuity of tropes around females in games as sex objects, and sexualised individuals. This research demonstrates that it is important to evaluate and consider the representation of gender in games and the various ways through which gender and other constructions of social identity can be interpreted from game texts and mechanics. For example, Østby (2017) observed seemingly progressive representations and specific instances of diversity in BioWare's Dragon Age and Mass Effect games – principally in the form of player intimate romantic relationships – yet noted that other aspects of play outside of specific intimate relationships and in the broader game world reinscribe heteronormativity.

This chapter explores some of the main ways gender is constructed in APT:I's narrative and gameplay. Indeed, there is much value to "unearthing the connoted meaning of games", (Ruberg, 2018. pg.81), and that is what this essay seeks to do. In other words, my aim is to closely examine APT:I's approach to gender beyond the fact that it has a leading female protagonist. I offer the contention that a number of thematically and traditionally gendered depictions are present within the setting and story of the game, including normative femininity and motherhood, as well as the feminisation of stealth gameplay.

## 6.2 Videogame Design and Landscapes of Ideology:

In addition to the forms of representation, the mechanics, and the designs of these videogames, their embedded ideologies are also of vital importance to the concerns of this thesis (and chapter). As we observed in Chapter 5 within the context of player to player policing in response to the DLC controversy of *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*, the construction, design, and choices made during the creation of a videogame also informs and influences these regulatory practices. This is achieved via the prescription of a particular view of our social life along gendered and straightening lines – with videogames ultimately acting as 'designed experiences' (e.g. Muriel and Crawford, 2018).

In a similar vein to the idea of videogames as 'designed' experiences, and a medium through which alternative realities, histories, ways of experiencing social reality can be experimented with and engaged with – I would suggest that rather than being *designed*, videogames, at least with specific reference to the ideologies of gender and sexuality, are *curated* ideological landscapes (to borrow from the work of Murray (2018) and the

ideologies of landscapes within videogames) [emphasis my own]. By referring to them as curated, I wish to emphasise the nature of how their content, structure and design are inherently produced by individuals and within an environment that contains particular ideologies, assumptions and worldviews.

Some academics have used the term 'gamescape' as a means to provide "...a way of thinking about the implications of the way in which landscape is actively constructed within video games." (Magnet, 2006. pg. 143). In this way, additional lenses through which the project of game studies can provide meaningful and engaging explorations into the study of games is through their respective landscapes. Within their own study, Magnet (2006) explored the overall gamescape of *Tropico* (Poptop Software, 2001) and found the ideology present therein to include themes of heteronormativity, colonialism, and masculinity. This is salient when we consider the authors discussion of the game being used for governance education, and simultaneously the elements of ideology and representations of Latinos within the game which furthermore emphasises and underlies the importance in considering more deeply ingrained ideologies within the games that we play. Longan (2008) encapsulates this (and other points mentioned above) within their work, noting the varying degrees to which the creators of these videogames often conceal their labour. In this case the concealment is also pertinent to the concealment of ideologies present within these media forms – all of which again draws on the ideas of neutrality, objective, and natural states of being that act as concealer to the regulatory and constructed reality of concepts like gender, sexuality and heteronormativity.

Constructing and maintaining a sense of neutrality is not new to gaming and its culture, in fact and often in relation to queer and feminist critique these arguments arise from the woodwork. Many self-proclaimed members of the gaming community have sought to defend and maintain videogames as an inherently 'apolitical' medium, against which the dreaded 'social justice warriors' seek to undermine this neutrality with their political motivations, and for example their 'gay agenda'. It is erroneous and highly problematic to refer to or consider videogames as anything other than political in nature, and imbued with meaning, connotation and ideology. Research has shown that embedded within these gamic landscapes, are various symbolisms, meanings, and messages of ideology (e.g. Murray, 2018). Though the characters and their plotlines within these videogames are important sites of critique, evaluation and exploration, it is also important that we consider the role of the gamescapes, movement, and broader features of these videogames in presenting and reinforcing particular ideologies.

Whilst exploring the work of the aforementioned scholars, I decided to choose a game title to explore along these lines, to examine and espouse what particular form of *curated landscape* might the chosen videogame be proposing, reinforcing, and contributing to the broader patterns of regulation and policing within the context of gaming culture. In the end I chose to explore *A Plague Tale: Innocence* (Asobo, 2019).

**6.3 *Playing* at research:**

Much like the previous chapter, my research approach to exploring this game consisted of, if not required me to play through and experience the game firsthand. APT:I was arguably a more traditionally linear videogame than ACO was, the gameworld of APT:I was not an open-world where I was able to navigate where I wanted by ship, horseback or foot as my very own version of a Greek Hero. Instead my experience of this game was through helping Amicia and Hugo to traverse through the seventeen narrative chapters that make up the game. From underground crypts, to a small French town, - or perhaps most poignantly for me - to a post-fight battleground populated by bodies and rats, the game was visually darker and haunting environments and landscapes to match the themes and context of the game. Similar to the gamed approaches of the previous chapter, the same processes were adopted for my playthrough of APT:I, namely that my initial engagement was to play the game for pleasure, to explore and experience the game.

Throughout the initial gameplay, I manually saved the game at points on each of the chapter, which became loading points that I could use to replay through some of the more notable and memorable game moments (to me) for the more 'serious' play and analysis that occurred afterwards. However, since the game was broken up by design into 17 distinct story chapters, navigating through the events of the game and re-visiting particularly relevant moments was made easier by default. Nonetheless, the analysis and discussion that follows later on in this chapter is comprised of particularly salient

moments through the games narrative and plot, as well as other design elements that stood out to me as relevant to and indicative of particular ideological landscapes in-game.

**6.4 *A Plague Tale: Innocence* – Background to the game:**

When Focus Home Entertainment developed and released "*A Plague Tale: Innocence*" (hereafter APT:I), it was positively received among gamers and reviewers alike (Parkin, 2019; Chan, 2019.) The game is set in France in the year 1348, during the 100 year war and the onset of the Black Death. Players experience the world as Amicia de Rune, a young girl from a wealthy French family and an elder sister to Hugo de Rune, a young boy who suffers from an unknown illness (at least unknown at the beginning of the game). The idyllic beginning of the game gives way to a darker and perilous journey as, in the midst of the emerging plague, the children are pursued by the Spanish Inquisition who (after slaughtering members of their household, including their father) seek to capture Hugo for reasons that become clear through the games progression. In the midst of their travelling across the French countryside in order to find safety and individuals who can help them, they encounter dangers not only from the Spanish Inquisition, but also from threats posed by armed French villagers, English soldiers, and of course the monstrous rats for which the Black Death is known.

## 6.5 Forging Ahead? – Amicia and the path ahead

> **Father:** "You are dawdling Amicia! How will you be able to follow the lords at hunt?"
>
> **Amicia:** "Is that your only ambition for me? To follow? I will beat them and I will watch them eat my dust as I forge ahead! But for that, I shall need a good horse."

From the above opening dialogue of the game between the main character Amicia de Rune, a 14 year old noble girl in 14th century France, and her father, I was intrigued and curious to see how the game – and specifically Amicia – would progress. Little did I know that despite this opening dialogue in which Amicia declares that she does not wish to merely follow, but rather seeks to 'forge ahead' and make her own path, I would find tension between how her character is presented in the opening sequence of the game, and her gendered gameplay mechanics throughout the remainder of the game.

In the opening level of the game, Amicia is in the woods with her father and her dog 'Lion' as they hunt a boar. Amicia seeks to retry her 'Knights challenge' – a time trial to shoot 6 apples in 10 seconds with her sling (her sole weapon throughout the game). On completion of the trial, Lion starts barking and heads into the woods, with Amicia and her father in pursuit. Eventually Lion disappears into a burrow, injured and dragged down by an unknown threat beneath the surface. This leaves Amicia visibly shaken and grieving the loss of her dog as she returns from the woods to the family estate.

**Figure 6 – Forest trails:** The opening level of the game, where the teenage Amicia is accompanied by her father and Lion (the family dog) as they are exploring in the woods on the hunt. Screenshot taken by author during gameplay.

Shortly after their return to the family home after the incident in the woods, Amicia goes to talk with her mother and tell her what happened. It is at this moment that a group of armed people show up at the family home looking for Hugo – who has been kept quarantined most of his life under the careful watch of the children's mother, Béatrice de Rune. When they do not get answers, they begin to kill everyone, including the children's father. We later find out that these armed men are from the Spanish Inquisition.

At this point in the game it is unclear to the player as to why the Inquisition is violently seeking out Hugo, but as the game progresses we later come to learn that he possesses the 'prima macula', a supernatural ancient curse said to be carried in the blood of a few noble families, which includes the de Rune family. As the game progresses, the 'prima

macula' becomes key to granting the ability to control and instruct the plague rats as a weapon Hugo can use against the soldiers. This power is taken by Grand Inquisitor Vitalis by inserting Hugo's blood into his veins in the latter chapters of the game narrative. The rats therefore, as I argue later in this chapter, transition from a supernatural threat based on the historical setting of the game, to becoming a tool of masculine violence through the manipulation of the rats by Hugo and Vitalis. While Hugo and Vitalis come to fight for control over the rats, Amicia remains excluded from this power struggle, retaining her role as guide and protector of Hugo who must lead him through the gameworld.

It is relatively soon after the opening forest scene that the Inquisition arrives that we are introduced to what becomes the principle mechanic dictating Amicia's and Hugo's relationship with one another for the remainder of the game: remaining out of sight from inquisition soldiers and other predominantly male threats, all the while grasping Hugo's hand and guiding him.

The emphasis is placed on staying silent, staying out of sight, and avoiding danger at all costs. This is highlighted further through dialogue with both of Amicia's parents. Very early in the game while exploring the woods with her father and performing the knights challenge, if players attempt is successful, Amicia's father says 'Well well…I must say I'm impressed! But your sling is frightfully noisy…'. Later on (also very early in the game), Beatrice whispers guidance that aids the player throughout the game, to "Hold your brother's hand and follow me in silence." This brings us into one of the more central mechanics of how Amicia is to explore and wander through the game world and avoid its threats, namely by being silent and hiding in the shadows.

**6.6 "Hold your brother's hand and follow me in silence, all right?"**

Violence, while also a key concept in masculinity and gender politics and relations (as discussed in Chapter 2), also remains a central theme and threat throughout APT:I. Traditionally within games that involve conflict and threats of violence, there is a stereotypical representation of femininity in association with passivity and victimhood with the casting of a heteronormative white male playable character as protagonist (See Murray, 2017; 2018). APT:I seems to break with this trend as it features Amicia as the protagonist who functions as our agent and our guide through the world. Simultaneously she also literally acts as Hugo's guide, as we shall explore further in this essay. But Amicia still exists precariously within this world with tides of flesh-eating rats that explode onto the landscape across the different levels of the game, Inquisition soldiers, and other visibly gendered male bandits that will kill on sight.

The central human threats come in the form of various soldiers from the Inquisition and the English army who, on seeing the children, will attack and strike down Amicia immediately. Amicia remains armed with only her (noisy) sling throughout the game and is limited in terms of her combat capabilities. Even in player-created situations where Amicia and Hugo are seen, the sling more often than not will not assist in protecting the children from violence and death. Aside from these military-based threats, players are also at risk from villagers and bandits who will also attack on sight, but these threats are also typically and visible gendered as male. One of the only interactions with adult female non-playable characters (or NPCs) outside of the children's mother and some of the workers in the family estate at the beginning of the game is when Clervie, an elderly

French woman, offers to shelter Amicia and Hugo from the male villagers chasing them. In the brief scene/exchange that occurs between the children and Clervie, we can assume that she has lost her other family members, including her grandchildren to the plague.

> **Clervie:** You're soaking… There are clothes you can change into upstairs… in a chest in the bedroom.

> **Amicia:** Are… Are you sure?... Thank you…

After Amicia and Hugo get changed upstairs and return downstairs in their fresh clothes

> **Clervie:** They fit you, good… They belonged to my grandchildren…

Outside of this, females are less visible and confined more to the background here than males are. The above pattern can be seen to cast this violent game space as inherently masculine, simultaneously casting Amicia as a feminine trespasser, and Hugo as a feminised boy due to his frailty and illness, accounting for their need to stay in the shadows to avoid detection.

This form of travel and engagement with the game world in stealthy and non-lethal means is often seen with a number of other female characters and their relationship with their game world. In so doing, these games recreate what Malazita calls 'misogynist media tropes':

"...another in a list of women game characters forced to less-effectively navigate game systems designed for violent characters and masculinist problem-solving strategies..." (Malazita, 2018, pg.46).

One example of this is in the *BioShock* series during 'Burial At Sea Episode 2', where players control Elizabeth, who is the first non-male playable character in the entire series. Rather than the traditional combat centred exploration in the series, players must keep to the shadows and move stealthily as Elizabeth to avoid combat – despite Elizabeth's earlier magical powers and her use of these powers to help the male character of 'Booker', before players can progress through the world as Elizabeth, her powers are stripped from her (Wysocki and Brey, 2018). Similar to Elizabeth's survival tactics, in APT:I, much of Amicia and Hugo's survival is determined by successfully sticking to the shadows and out of sight of nearby armed villagers, soldiers and bandits In so doing, the already supernaturally dangerous space of the game is even more dangerous, and players must successfully navigate this violence through less effective and less-direct means, such as causing noise and distractions to move around guards and other armed individuals.

Aside from the feminised experience of stealth within the context of this violent game world, the threat posed to Hugo and Amicia differs slightly. Where Hugo (as players learn through progressing) possesses some fantastical blood that is connected to the plague (which I will account for more specifically in the coming discussion), he is considered more valuable alive than dead to the soldiers of the Inquisition, as heard in the variations and cries of their soldiers, such as: "Kill the sister! Take the boy alive!". The immediate threat

to Amicia is death, permanent and violent. Hugo will escape death, but be taken alive, rendering their victimhood slightly different. Alternatively, the more immediate and permanent threat to Amicia also casts her as 'less useful' or 'not as valuable' as Hugo and therefore she is clearly more disposable to the antagonists of the game. This disposability also marks Amicia in the context of the militarised setting of the game with military organisations and the backdrop of the game being during the 100 year war; as a young woman she is surrounded by threatening and deadly men that will kill her on sight, whether they are soldier or civilian, marking a similar pattern to the relationship observed between war, games, and gender (e.g. Gandolfi and Sciannamblo (2018).



**Figure 7 – Blood and Steel:** A death scene cinematic playing out after being 'discovered' by a soldier. Here Amicia has been seen and a nearby soldier comes towards her in their armour and with their weapons. Screenshot taken by author during gameplay

The universality of armed male threats throughout the game is perhaps one of the most visible signifiers of war and violence as masculine spheres within the game. This is reflective of a traditional 'masculinisation of war' (Herbst, 2006); whereby warfare and violence are seen as masculine domains. This corresponds to a simultaneous and traditional association between victimhood and femininity, an association that has hindered female participation and framed their experiences of warfare. Therefore the background to the game of the historical setting of the 100 year war and the Bubonic plague, provides an eerie landscape with battlefields of dead corpses, and a visibility of armed men that indicate this war-torn setting as a masculine setting, one through which Amicia must stealthily traverse in order to survive.

During the gameplay at a later stage in the game, Amicia and Hugo are captured by English soldiers and taken to their military camp. Amicia wakes to find herself in a cage, and is told that someone has paid for the children to be kept alive, especially Hugo. Shortly after this brief cutscene, one of the other children, named Mélie, that Amicia and Hugo saw right before they were captured shows up and lets her out of the cage, as they both proceed to sneak their way through the camp to find Hugo while Mélie's brother Arthur distracts the guards with rocks as they go.

When they get close to Hugo, he is surrounded by several guards, and players can hear him calling out for Amicia:

**Hugo:** Amicia? Where is she?

**Soldier:** Your sister… I think we're gonna keep her with us, right guys? Ha ha!

**Hugo:** No please don't.

**Soldier:** Just be thankful you're still alive..

The apparent connotation here is that Amicia is subject to an implicit sexual violence should she remain captured in the camp. The above interaction, though passively observed by the players, falls in line with the above-mentioned tropes of femininity and its place within conflict, and the conflation of the two to predominantly represent this through themes of sexual violence.

**6.7 "Mummy would protect us!"**

Traditionally, video games have preferenced fatherhood over motherhood, with mothers being largely excluded from the gameplay experience in favour of richer father-daughter tropes – often termed 'dadification' (Vanderhoef and Payne, 2018; Stang, 2017;). APT:I breaks from this traditional 'annihilation' of mothers and motherhood in games, offering visibility to motherhood. The children's mother and their sole-surviving parent Beatrice survives to the end of the game. On the surface level, the mother replaces the father in the traditional sense, with their father dying in the beginning of the game at the hands of the Inquisition. However, Beatrice's storyline revolves around caring for and isolating Hugo as she deals with his supernatural affliction, and after being captured by the

Inquisition, she is held hostage until the children can save her, fulfilling simultaneously a visibility to mothers and motherhood, but also fulfilling a 'damsel in distress' plotline.

Arguably motherhood also persists in some less direct/overt forms, one being in the form of the core mechanics that govern gameplay. As Amicia, players must summon Hugo to hold Amicia's hand as the player leads them through the world, while also instructing him to stay when needed. This micro-management mechanic between the children is also coupled with the fact that Hugo will get upset if players (as Amicia) leave him alone and move too far away, which will make noise and attract any nearby soldiers to investigate the noise. The core mechanic here acts to frame Hugo not just as a hindrance to the player in terms of limiting their mobility through the game world, but also contains within it a narrative of motherly duty for Amicia, from the beginning of the game she must take care of her brother, guide him and protect him from dangers. Ultimately, it is Hugo and his supernatural blood – which allows him to control the flesh-eating rats – that allows the children to overcome the Inquisition and beat the antagonist of the game. Read one way, this casts Amicia's role throughout the game as one where she must protect Hugo, who will eventually become the principle agent in 'saving the world' from the machinations of the Spanish Inquisition and the deadly rats of the plague. Although still armed with her sling, in the final few chapters of the game it is Hugo's powers that assist the children in dealing with dangerous men, armed soldiers, and the remaining horrors of the game.

**Figure 8 – Hold my Hand:** Image of Amicia holding her little brother Hugo's hand and leading them through the game level. Screenshot taken by author during gameplay


## 6.8 Horror, Violence, and Power - The role of the rats and masculine control:

After reviewing many of the other themes that have been discussed thus far, I took some additional time to review through my notes and some of my thoughts that I had written down during gameplay. One thing I had circled was the word "the rats", over and over again my mind returned to the hordes of small furry rodents with menacing red eyes. Their place in the game and its narrative were clear in terms of the games setting of the bubonic plague, but I felt that there was something else. Particularly, when I considered how they were incorporated into the more fantastical aspect of the games plot – the ability to control the rats in the final few chapters of the game – but the realisation of *who* gets to exert and vie for control of the rats was particularly enlightening. I argue that we

might also consider the relationship between masculinity and violence as a further important way through which gender and sexuality manifest within APT:I is through the primary threat of the game, the supernaturally horrific rats. The rats in this case resemble the agents of violence – along with the armed male soldiers and civilians – and through the course of the game these rats later become tools through which two of the game's male characters (Amicia's brother Hugo, and the antagonist Vitalis – head of the Inquisition) try to exert their control.



(**Figure 9 – Death and Decay:** Amicia, Hugo and another child making their way through the war-torn, and rat-infested landscape. Screenshot taken by author during gameplay)

Violence and gender are important facets of gameplay and the dynamics found within a gameworld (and outside them), and violence is tied to masculinity and femininity in different ways. Femininity within the domain of videogames is often portrayed through the use of characters and narratives around the threat of the 'monstrous feminine'. In

fact, monstrosity has been of interest across many disciplines in relation to what physiological or cultural features, qualities and bodies come to symbolise the monstrous – often being portrayed or associated with femininity, whether these are negligent mothers, seductive murderous sirens, horrifying birthing monsters and so on (Stang, 2019a). These same tropes and stereotypes found within gaming are similar in form to many of those found within research into film and other media , indeed the analyses of the 'monstrous feminine' has also been applied to the area of popular media (Massanari and Chess, 2018), for example exploring film genres such as Horror and slasher films (e.g. Rieser, 2001; Kelly, 2016). The former note that the concept of the monstrous feminine remains one example of the 'patriarchal undercurrents' that are present in popular media.

These 'monstrous' bodies represent the 'abject' (Creed, 1986), what we might consider to be outside of the normative expectations and thus expected to be undesirable and dangerous to it (that same normative order). These bodies are coded as feminine, queer or othered in some way. Othered in the sense that they are not part of the normative and symbolic societal expectations grounded in much of the design and ideologies embedded within much of popular media. By casting them in such a way, these othered bodies represent outsiders to the social order that must be dealt with to remedy and preserve the normative order – whether actively tasked with its enforcement in videogames, or passively spectating in film etc, individuals become witnesses to the preservation of this ordering.

What is perhaps most salient within the realm of videogames, is that players are asked to – and indeed forced in many respects – to become the agents of will for this normative and hegemonic order. In many ways through the design of the game, and the immersive fallacy inherent within them, players are tasked with carrying out the actions and ideals embedded within a given video game in order to play it and progress through it.

"…by forcing the player to control a generally normative, non-monstrous heroic representative of the symbolic order, games make players complicit in the violence enacted against monstrous bodies" (Stang, 2019b, pg.237).

The issue of normativity and societal expectations was also mentioned by Rieser (2001) as an important critique around ideas of monstrosity etc. Namely that horror films - through aspects like their writing – provide interesting points of departures towards questions and expectations over subjectivity, heroine power, and an overall relationship with masculinity and femininity when compared to other film genres. Nonetheless they ultimately conceal and fail to completely challenge the fact that "…normative masculinity itself is the source of the monstrous." (Rieser, 2001, pg.390).

What is interesting in the case of APT:I, is that the 'monstrous' entities in this game are primarily its hordes of flesh-stripping rats, though these monsters are inherently violent and threatening to the normative order outlined within the game's opening tutorial, they become another tool through which masculine violence and power can be utilised within

this gamescape as the game progresses. It is through this aspect of the game that I will argue that masculinity and the monstrous is evident. This power of control over the rats is between Hugo and Vitalis, both of which represent departures from the expectations of normative and hegemonic masculinity; Hugo because of his cursed bloodline, and Vitalis through stealing some of Hugo's blood.

Kimmel (1998) states that "violence is often the single most evident marker of manhood. Rather it is the willingness to fight, the desire to fight" (as cited in Consalvo, 2003, pg.31). Indeed if we consider 'bodies' not only as the vessels through which violence is utilised, for example within sports (Messner, 1990), we can also consider bodies as one of the primary sites upon which violence is enacted. Though the relationship between monstrosity, masculinity and violence is a little more nuanced, namely – as Consalvo (2003) discusses – violence is permissible and justified within some articulations of masculinity such as protecting the damsel in distress, or through heroic actions; however, when the relationship between masculinity and violence goes beyond the realm of the socially acceptable, it is subjugated, othered and becomes monstrous.

Amicia, throughout the course of the game has no influence or control over the rats, in this way her femininity is cast as comparatively powerless to Hugo in the late game. Hugo's relationship to masculinity and violence is non-existent in the beginning of the game. As a young boy with an initially unknown illness, he must stay with Amicia, hide, be quiet and follow – in this way he is also feminised under traditional hegemonic masculine expectations. When he becomes able to control the rats due to the curse progressing, he

gains power. For Amicia her relationship with these rats is unlike the other men, she must always be fearful and avoid.

Ultimately, although the 'monstrous' is more clearly tied to masculinity in the late game, the failings of this association are in that it does nothing to remedy or fully challenge the traditional and normative casting of femininity within this game as less capable and less powerful than masculinity – and this is ultimately reflected in the various mechanical, narrative and thematic aspects that have been discussed in this chapter.

## 6.9 Conclusion:

As was discussed in the preceding chapters of this thesis, the central aim and importance of this chapter was to engage with and provide a close reading of *A Plague Tale: Innocence* (Asobo). This exploration set out to analyse how within videogame titles we find embedded meanings, knowledge and expectations – in other words, how we find elements of institutionalised ideologies within videogames. As we observed in the literature review (Chapter 2 of this thesis), while the processes behind the production and maintenance of heteronormative masculinity are both widespread and influential, they are also largely invisible and act in secrecy through their rituals and repetition (Ahmed, 2006; Butler, 2006). In the context of videogames, the presence of these embedded ideologies typically also remains concealed. This concealment occurs through the use of the more technical and mechanical aspects of games, such as the code and the math, and the overall processes behind the production of a videogame as objective and neutral

aspects of their design. The product of this process is the often-utilised arguments against feminist and queer critique and commentary on the medium, that videogames are a politically neutral or 'apolitical' space.

While there are potential signs of change within videogames, from scholars like Jansz and Martis (2007) who refer to the 'Lara Phenomenon' as an observable increase in the number of female protagonists in video games (though they themselves also note a continuation of hypersexualised females within their work). Despite this, we must also look deeper than surface level representations and consider the practice of 'unearthing' meaning and connotations present within these videogames as a whole – primarily through exploring other aspects of these videogames such as through the structure, design and mechanics.

This chapter has explored the ways that – despite having a non-sexualised female protagonist – APT:I maintains a number of traditional gender roles within its narrative and within the mechanics of gameplay. Those discussed in this chapter have mainly been motherhood and the feminisation of stealth. While others have critiqued and discussed femininity within games along the lines of oversexualisation, the tropes of damsel in distress and so on, with little comparative attention being paid to 'women as monsters' (Stang, 2019b). This chapter has considered the relationship between monstrosity, violence and gender politics – specifically the violence of masculinity.

The fact that Amicia and Hugo are children compounds their limited options for traversing and navigating through the game world, which also results in Amicia performing a type of protective motherhood over her brother. Amicia is tasked with guiding Hugo and literally holding his hand throughout the game world as a visible limit on the overall mobility and freedom given to Amicia as she traverses the dangerous game world. Through the required stealth mechanic for movement through the world, Amicia also succumbs to the common feminisation of stealth within gaming, and the relationship between femininity, conflict, and war in general. She is placed in a violent and dangerous world, surrounded by exclusively male threats from soldiers and armed civilians who will kill her if she is seen, she must traverse a war torn and plague-ridden landscape, all the while escorting her younger brother and keeping him safe from harm.

Ultimately, through the setting of the game, its threats and mechanics of play become gendered, and act to reinforce Amicia's status as a trespasser within this masculine dominated space of warfare, violence and conflict. This is further emphasised, I would argue within the final chapters of the games story, when Hugo comes to learn how to use the power in his blood to control and issue orders to the hordes of rats, a power simultaneously given to Vitalis when he inserts Hugo's blood into his veins, and marking a further supernatural form of masculine-wielded violence that Amicia is excluded from. Overall, for Amicia, despite her wishes at the beginning of the game to forge ahead and reject normative gender expectations, through the course of the story, she never finds that good horse she needs to ride at the front of the hunt.

Through the exploration and discussions outlined above, I would argue that two things become clear as a final consideration and close to this chapter. Firstly, it provides a clear example of the benefits and merit of exploring and analysing videogames on their own terms. Secondly, it provides evidence for the arguments and suggestions that we must move beyond just considering core representational elements such as character per se and, at a deeper level, explore and unearth what is happening within videogame titles and what is their implicit meaning.

# Chapter 7: Conclusion

"The main contention here is not simply that not enough scholars in the field are doing focused studies on race, gender, and other issues of power – though I am saying that too." **(Phillips, 2020, pg.59)**

## 7.1 Introduction:

This PhD thesis has explored the regulation of gender and sexuality within two traditionally male and heteronormative settings, namely within militaries and within videogames. These sites were selected as both possess a shared experience of contestation in response to recent changes in participant demographics, and challenges to prevailing ideologies of gender and sexuality. Irrespective of the wider conversations and policies promoting increased diversity and equality, both sites struggle to move away from their traditional associations with particular forms of hegemonic masculinity, heteronormativity, and power.

It is important to note that while aspects of this thesis have actively sought to explore themes across gender and sexuality – the rationale for this was outlined in previous chapters in relation to the indivisible nature of gender and sexuality; the explicit and implicit lens through which this was achieved was through a critique and explorative reflection on (heteronormative) masculinity as the guiding force regulating these same gendered and sexually orientated lived realities across both sites.

We have seen how (in Chapter 2) personnel from the militaries who more proactively participate in peacekeeping are met with newfound gendered expectations that run contrary to the traditional image of, and socialisation into a militarised masculinity that is being a 'warrior' (Digby, 2014). With respect to videogames, this contestation primarily occurs between the traditional ideas of who plays games and who games are for, and is contested via the increased visibility and voices of those from outside the 'ideal' or normative masculine heterosexual gamer cohort. And yet, queer folk, POC's, and others have played videogames for a long time (Ruberg, 2019b). These contestations across both of these sites represent very real circumstances in which heteronormative masculinity must actively seek to maintain its dominant hold and position within the social hierarchies of these settings (much like the hegemonic politics of masculinity outlined by Connell, 2005), and thus is the premise of this thesis.

In order to achieve this, I used a qualitative methodology as my primary concern was to unearth and explore the nuanced and subtle ways through which these institutionally embedded ideologies of gender and sexuality are maintained and managed. As was outlined in the introduction chapter to this thesis, the research questions that guided this process were as follows:

- How is gender and sexuality being regulated among military personnel participating in peacekeeping missions?

- How is gender and sexuality being regulated among videogame players?

And thirdly, if we consider videogames as a medium with self-contained ideologies and a medium premised on (if not defined by) 'interactivity' and 'play':

- How (if at all) do the designs and mechanics of a videogame inform us of particular ideologies, and how are these then interacted with by the players?

## 7.2 Chapter Summaries and Research findings:

The opening chapters of this thesis provided overviews and introductions into the scholarship that informed the approach that this thesis took. Specifically, by exploring and laying out relevant literatures around the areas utilised and drawn from throughout this thesis.

Chapter 2 provided a literature overview of some of the key concepts, and discussions surrounding the areas included and utilised within this thesis. I considered the critical role and function of 'performativity,' not just in terms of gender and sexuality creation (Butler, 2006; Connell, 2005), but also within much of broader social reality (Garfinkel, 1967; and Goffman, 1959). Institutions and the media were also considered within this chapter as examples of agents through which 'straightening' occurs (borrowing from Ahmed, 2006). This is achieved through the performative and ritualised practices that constitute and construct typifications within these institutional settings, particularly of relevance to this thesis is how it achieves this in the pursuit of heteronormativity – and the resulting institutionalised heterosexuality, which, alongside demographic proportions, are important factors shaping the lived realities of individuals within these institutional

environments. These typification systems manifest across both sites in relation to the belief of their 'inherent' masculine nature, determined by not only their proportional dominance within both of these sites, but also the ways through which heteronormative masculinity persist and shape everyday interaction (e.g. Chang, 2018; Digby, 2014; Herbert, 1998). Symbolic violence was discussed as a core form of regulation and policing of gender and sexuality, one intricately tied up with masculine dominance (Bourdieu, 2001).

The remainder of Chapter 2 reviewed and explored some of the various literatures specific to militaries, their culture and their participation in peacekeeping; alongside a similar overview of videogames, their cultures and aspects of their design. The objective of this was not only to elaborate and investigate both sites on their own merit, but also to begin to draw comparisons and theorise about their connections and similarities going forward.

Chapter 3 provided an overview of the methodology and rationale for the approaches that this thesis took to address the previously stated research questions. As an initial point of departure the chapter stressed that in order to explore and examine the more subtle and potentially more nuanced ways through which gender and sexuality might be regulated and policed within these heteronormative masculine environments qualitative methods would allow for more in-depth exploration and analysis. The thesis also utilised elements of autoethnography not only in terms of placing myself as researcher into the overall processes of the research, but also in terms of utilising my familiarity with videogames

and my own personal play as a useful research tool. 'Play' became a core element through which the ideological elements of videogames can be explored in-depth.

The remainder of the methodology chapter outlined the methods of data collection, analyses and sampling, including qualitative semi-structured interviews etc. There was also an important consideration of the role of ethics with an emphasis on the data presented in Chapter 5 through data collection and analysis from online forums. The ethics of internet research is comparatively new, often context-specific, and brings complications to the deployment of traditional ethical practices to these new sites (e.g. Lotz and Ross, 2004). The chief ethical concern elaborated and discussed in this chapter was whether the forum data can be considered 'public' or 'private' data. I rationalised and sought to mitigate this ethical concern by deploying additional means of preserving anonymity via paraphrasing direct quotes, and not referencing any specific sites.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 all represent the chapters that provided this thesis with insights and answers to the previously stated research questions above.

Chapter 4 explored the ways through which gender and sexuality were regulated and 'policed' among military personnel from two European countries, Finland and Ireland, who were participating in peacekeeping. The chapter sought to provide an answer to the question of how gender and sexuality were being regulated within these settings (if at all).

While participants did acknowledge some of the ways through which the proportions of men and women impacted them on the missions. The chapter discussed hypervisibility whereby some respondents noted that they were very aware of women because they were a 'limited edition' on the missions. Others referred to proportions and their impacts in more direct or literal ways, such as in the  gendered time allotments to facilities such as the sauna, resulting in women having less hours in the day where they can relax in the sauna compared to their male colleagues.

The real strength and central findings of chapter 4 were in relation to the various 'policing' strategies that emerged from the interviews that were utilised to regulate and frame discussions of gender and sexuality within this site. This was done with the result of maintaining or contributing to the continuation of a heteronormative masculine ideology surrounding peacekeeping missions and their personnel. While these strategies did not take the form of overt and direct sexism, homophobia, and misogyny, they remained more subtle in form but with the same overall effect of silencing, marginalising and 'othering' these non-conforming individuals. Some of the discussions from personnel were reflective of the more typical discussions of mission effectiveness and gender – specifically in relation to the deployment of women, and the relationship and interactions with local cultures on the basis of gender (similar to the observations of Mäki-Rahkola and Myrttinen, 2014; Sion, 2008). Additionally female personnel were discussed in relation to their dislike for the physical elements of training and military life by several interviewees, reducing discussions of gender to essentialist and stereotypical framings. Gender specifically, throughout the interviews was discussed almost exclusively in relation to

female personnel and their experiences and difficulties in this environment, with a comparative lack of attention or discussion around men on the mission.

In relation to sexual orientation, the principle finding observed within the data was the lack of knowledge or acknowledgement from most personnel regarding having worked with or encountered non-heteronormative personnel on missions – which provided a form of 'symbolic annihilation' (Shaw, 2014) that removed or hid these individuals from the collective consciousness when discussing these sites. In most cases discussions of sexuality focused on gay or bisexual men, with personnel acknowledging that the individuals in question did not 'hit on' them and make them uncomfortable (which again goes back to usual arguments around effectiveness, cohesion etc). As observed in Plester (2015), humour was also deployed here as a popular policing mechanism to subtly achieve othering non-normative (masculine) sexualities. The deployment of humour in this way represents another form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1979) that maintains heteronormativity as the de facto norm within this area of social life, and simultaneously others individuals who do not conform.

Chapter 5 marked the first findings chapter concerned with the ways through which gender and sexuality are regulated and managed within the videogame setting. This was aimed to begin to explore and answer the question of how gender and sexuality were being regulated within the context of videogames and among their players. This chapter used a naturally occurring case study during the research period, namely an exploration into a controversy that surrounded a DLC for *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (Ubisoft, 2018).

This was achieved by exploring an online forum discussion consisting of around one thousand comments, combined with my own experience of the game through my personal play. The key finding of this chapter was its exploration into how players themselves – in a similar way to military personnel of chapter four - regulate and manage each other in relation to heteronormativity, gender, and sexuality.

A variety of ways were observed through which some players posting in the forum sought to maintain and regulate heteronormativity. For example, through invoking the games historical setting and arguments revolving around 'historical accuracy' in relation to reproduction.  These arguments, and others, were a means of anchoring the discussions and critiques of other players as contrary to the elements and designs of the game that were 'objective' and neutral. Other players who took offence at the occurrences of the DLC argued that it resulted in a sense of alienation from their character and they had invested time into. Some also discussed the reductive meaning behind their female hero being reduced to have a child, while others further compared the experiences of the DLC to 'corrective rape'.

In addition to the above themes, posters discussing the Assassin's Creed controversy also stated more specific grievances in relation to the promises of choice and agency within the game and what was delivered in the DLC. Players from the forum noted that choice was a central element in their expectations of the game, and one of the principle sources of objection to the events of the DLC. They felt that the promises and expectations of choice and player agency were removed from them in the unfolding narrative of the DLC,

and this produced a moment of rupture for them. In relation to some of the more fundamental gameplay elements, - particularly when we discuss and consider 'choice' and agency within a videogame – an important reality is what Chang (2012) discusses as the 'immersive fallacy' (citing Salen and Zimmerman, 2003). If 'play' is a core element behind the experience of videogames and gameplay, the broader rails and design systems dictating the reality and degree of 'play' are often also concealed (not unlike the ways through which we have considered and explored heteronormativity and its regulation).

Chapter 6 was also rationalised as a result of the analysis of Chapter 5, and the observation that posters to the forum were actively and consciously using mechanics and design elements of the game to anchor their 'asexual', heteronormative discourse in. With videogames being cultural artefacts that are reflective of wider societal values and ideologies (Murray, 2018), the ways through which these design choices inform and present ideologies is an important consideration not only into the study of the medium but also in the contributions of queer game studies. When conducting a 'close reading' (Ruberg, 2018) of game titles in this way, we allow for and encourage the creation of alternative knowledge, and unearth the – in many cases – inherent queerness of even the most speculatively non-queer games. Through the close reading of *A Plague Tale: Innocence* (Asobo), despite its leading female protagonist, the analysis found that it still contained traditional inferences and stereotypes of gender and sexuality.

Throughout the game, Amicia is forced – through game mechanics and designs – to carefully explore and traverse an inherently violent and masculine gameworld. This

gameworld is gendered as masculine in a variety of ways. Throughout the narrative of the game, Amicia and her little brother Hugo are on the run from soldiers of the Inquisition, townsfolk, and soldiers from the 100 year war, all of whom are almost entirely male and will kill her on sight. This feminisation of stealth marks one of the ways through which she must, as a woman, traverse a masculine game world in a less effective manner than male counterparts might. Additionally, and despite the potential break from 'dadification' observed in the game, 'motherhood' was another theme through which gender manifested itself in the mechanics and design of the game. Hugo became, in effect, a crutch for Amicia making her travel across the masculinist gameworld of APT:I all the more difficult. She must hold Hugo's hand at all times and be led through the levels without being left alone for too long.

I made the argument in chapter 6 that the hordes of rats (as one of the core horrors and additional threats of the game), could also be argued to represent manifestations of masculinity, violence and power. In much of horror film and media, and even within gaming, the 'monstrous-feminine' has been deployed as a means of othering and vilifying aspects of the female body (Massarani and Chess, 2018; Stang, 2019b). In this chapter, we sought to discuss masculinity in this way. While the flesh-stripping rats ultimately becoming tools through which Vitalis and Hugo literally fight each other for the power to control them, Amicia is left as nothing more than a spectator and an escort for Hugo despite her being the protagonist of the game.

**7.3 Comparisons and Similarities between Sites:**

Before progressing into the closing points of this thesis, I would like to make a note of an additional benefit to the use of two sites as units of analysis, namely the ability to compare and observe similarities between the two. As was discussed before, particularly in Chapter 3, the selection of this research's sites as militaries participating in peacekeeping as well as videogames and gaming was not solely due to the opportunities afforded to me by the GAP project in terms of gaining access to the former (though this was an important and influential aspect). The choice to utilise and compare both also stemmed from the engagement with literature outlined in Chapter 2 where we saw how, in relation to gender and sexuality, videogames and the militaries have a variety of shared threads, patterns and ideological underpinnings. These included their shared history and the development of the 'the military-entertainment complex' (Graham and Shaw, 2010; Lenoir and Lowood, 2005); as well as the fact that videogames are also one of the primary ways through which most men engage vicariously with violence - outside of sports (Digby, 2014).

While it is perhaps unsurprising, given the military is a typical example of a gendered institution, we find that militarism and the cultural production of a militarised form of masculinity is apparent among the military personnel interviewed within my research. Through the comparison of both sites observed within this thesis, there were similarities in the ways through which heteronormative masculinity was regulated and policed among both military personnel and forum posters (outlined in the preceding chapters). As observed in the interviews and among the forum posts, the presumed 'asexual' and

'apolitical' narratives of both the workplace and gaming at large rely on, and by default promote, heteronormative masculinity.

It is not surprising in this way that we find several similarities overall to the project of maintaining heteronormative masculinity in both sites, particularly when we consider that the broader strategies towards gender and sexuality regulation are arguably uniform in both. In videogames, for example, we have discussed the increasing 'Lara phenomenon' (Jansz and Martis, 2007) of more women and others being seen and represented within gaming. And indeed in other works we have seen companies and developers including a wider array of gender and sexual identities in their narratives and as characters (e.g. Greer, 2013; Østby, 2017). Through conducting deeper analyses, such as in Chapter 6, we may follow the advice and example of scholars like (e.g. Bagnall, 2017; Malkowski and Russworm, 2017; Ruberg, 2019a; Shaw, 2014)and go 'beyond representation' to uncover the ways through which ideologies such as heteronormativity may persist – and indeed the ways that they do. In a similar fashion within the setting of militaries participating in peacekeeping, we saw earlier critiques from scholars such as Valenius (2007) and Carreiras (2010), that these same diversity and recruitment policies are based on the same gender essentialist narratives that have been problematised and critiqued in the past.

What I argue is that in both sites there is a general approach of 'adding' and 'stirring' rather than perhaps a more meaningful engagement and reflection on the embedded institutional cultures of both sites. In the case of the militaries participating in peacekeeping, the expectation is that more women etc. will result in a shift in culture and

behaviour among male personnel. The placing of responsibility for change and representation on those more marginalised individuals is also found within videogames, reflecting perhaps the most popular representational paradigm of optional content and 'playersexuality', which has become the primary means through which queerness and non-normative content is usually promoted within videogames. This once again places the responsibility of changing the culture on those at the margins, rather than actively challenging and reflecting on the assumed norms and expectations of heteronormative masculinity more broadly.

Throughout this thesis and its chapters, there was an intent to apply the critical lens back on the otherwise concealed concepts of heteronormative masculinity. Doing this, it seeks to make them part of the discussions around gender and sexuality, where others have noted their absence (e.g. the absence of masculinity from policies noted by Laplonge, 2015). The process of seeking to align these concepts with qualities like 'neutral' and 'objective' not only conceals the ways in which they actively shape the lives of individuals, but it also speaks to the broader processes of self-maintenance. The aim is to conceal itself in all but name as a social construction, and as the product of repetition, rituals, and complicity.

With Chapter 4 we saw this in relation to how personnel drew on the same themes of physiological and sex-based differences to account for gender disparities among peacekeeping personnel on deployment. Personnel by and large dismissed any knowledge of gay or lesbian peers from their ranks, while those few that did, drew on tropes of sexual

predation or hid behind humour. As seen in Chapters 5 and 6, we saw the institutionally embedded heteronormative ideologies found within the mechanics and design choices within videogames, and how elements of gameplay are taken by players to be utilised in the same way as 'naturalistic' aspects observed within the interviews with military personnel. These were also utilised as a means of policing the participation of others, their critique(s) and the overall commentary on these games and their aspects of play. In this way, this thesis posits that both players and military personnel operate similarly as 'agents' of institutionalised ideology through their participation, play, and engagement within the codes of conduct of their respective sites. While both share some degree of agency, the confines and limits of the gameworld as well as the established norms and expectations of the military and its cultures act to shape and encourage particular forms of engagement and action.

**7.4 Contributions:**

While the above can be considered part of the contributions of this thesis, there are also several others worth noting here.

A key contribution of this thesis is to continue and further the conversations around gender, sexuality, masculinity, and heteronormativity within militaries participating in peacekeeping, within videogames, and arguably within any institution in society that is dominated numerically and culturally by heteronormative masculinity. This is also pertinent to the potential policy implications of this thesis, in relation to the persistence

of and continued policing of heteronormative masculinity and the institutionalised heteronormativity observed across both sites.

I explicitly aimed to unearth and explore the subtle and daily practices through which this pattern of gender and sexuality regulation is reacting to challenges. Furthermore, in relation to the explorations into videogames and their cultures, some scholars have stated the potential contributions and benefits of deploying sociology to the study of videogames (Crawford, 2014); while others have stated that there has been a neglect of applying gender studies to videogames (Forni, 2019). This thesis has sought to address and help fill in this gap, while also seeking to contribute further to the expanding field of queer gaming critique (Holmes, 2016).

My thesis contributes by adding to our knowledge through its conscious attention and focus on heteronormative masculinity and its role in the regulation and maintenance of gender and sexual identities and politics more broadly. It was discussed in the preceding chapters of this thesis how some of the policies and formal responses to gender and sexual diversity have often relied on and utilised the same essentialist framing that are problematised to begin with (e.g. Valenius, (2007) and peacekeeping). A further gap identified by scholars has been the comparative lack of focus on masculine aspects of videogames, in a similar fashion to tropes and stereotypes observed in military and organisational settings where 'gender=women' is often the association, or indeed arguments that masculinity is not considered or as present within many of these policies such as within militaries participating in peacekeeping (Laplonge, 2015).

"…few academic studies focus on masculine ideals in video games, while most of

the attention was and is focused on female aspects." (Forni, 2019, pg.95)

Future research, particularly into videogames and in relation to gender and sexuality,

should consider "…how players play the games, what choices they make and what the

romance options might mean to them." (Østby, 2017, pg.413). Chapter 5 in particular

addressed this suggestion for future research from the cited author, where we explored

not only *what* the choices – or removal of choices – 'meant' to players, but also *how* their

reactions and meanings were placed within the larger context of heteronormative

regulation and policing by their fellow players.

Additionally, the discussion and decisions around ethical concerns pertinent to this thesis

are also arguably of use to other researchers who may find themselves in similar positions.

The transition of research methods and ethics into online spaces is often messy and

complicated. I did state my own opinion and rationale that the forum thread site in

question represented public data – for example, using Rodham and Gavin (2006) for

guidance. I made the decision to further preserve anonymity via paraphrasing direct

quotes as a means of using the data whilst mitigating some of the difficulties associated

with online research ethics, in this case public vs private data.

**7.5 Limitations of the research:**

As with all research, there are limitations in the scope, function and form. These considerations will now be overviewed in the context of the research outlined in this thesis.

As is the case with all research, no singular study can present an all-encompassing engagement and overview of a topic. Limitations of time, cost and so forth often result in the specificity of the research endeavour for the sake of completion. With this research, gender and sexuality have been the focus through which we may explore and critique the manifestations of heteronormative masculinity. The use of these two concepts made sense to me for several reasons; 1) As mentioned previously, scholars have noted the linkages within gender, sexuality, and their regulation, particularly when the politics of masculinity are involved (as mentioned in Introduction chapter and within Chapter 2 this linkage is clearly visible within in the works of Herbert, 1998; Konik and Cortina, 2008; Martino, 2000; Sundevall and Persson, 2016, and many others). The regulation of heterosexuality is inherently gendered, and by default centred on sexuality. 2) Although gender has been studied often within research on games and gaming (though this has also been limited to within the constraints of the binary gender system), sexuality by comparison has not been so readily or frequently studied.

The rationale for the study of gender and sexuality is also linked with one of the first limitations of the study, and that is the fact that other important intersectional categories are not included within – chief among them being issues around representations and

ideologies of race. Even in the literature cited from previous chapters we can see the importance of critical engagements with race and gaming (see the work of Gray, 2014; Gray and Leonard, 2018; Higgin, 2009; Leonard, 2003; Murray, 2018; Nakamura, 2012; among others). This research does not seek to stress one intersectional category over another – as this contradicts the concept of intersectionality – however, given the above rationale and constraints on the research, other important categories such as race, class, ablebodiness, nationality, age, etc. were not the focus of this thesis.

Both of the videogame case studies that were selected for exploration and analysis within this research thesis revolve around (at least in part) a historical context/setting – Ancient Greece for *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (Ubisoft, 2018), and the Black Death for *A Plague Tale: Innocence* (Asobo). It may be the case that the role of "authenticity" and historical accuracy played a larger part than they would in other videogames not based in a historical setting. The role/function of authenticity is simultaneous with that of legitimacy and what is real; this emerged in the context of the *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* romance controversy, being utilised by gamers to regulate and manage each other's reactions on the basis of legitimacy. Additionally, within the examination of *A Plague Tale: Innocence*, this manifested in the playful way through which games are developed with ideas of authenticity, but meander and adopt various approaches within and outside of these same restraints of authenticity and therefore legitimacy.

**7.6 Suggestions for Future Research:**

The latter chapters of this thesis have explored two particular game titles for their relationship to heteronormative masculinity and the formation of its regulation and policing. Future research could take this and explore further titles and conduct deeper dives into this regulatory behaviour, furthering the field of queer game studies. As an expanding and growing field, there are a variety of suggestions that are possible for future research that are open to researchers following after. For example, with every new release of a videogame title, there is a rich subject matter ready for analysis; in some cases, new videogames may contain instances and elements of controversy that also provide a potential and ample reason to investigate. Others have conducted work on considering some of the more troubling elements of gamer culture and the methods of regulating and policing marginalised persons in gaming – i.e. trolling and toxic gamer culture. While this thesis has sought to explore some of the more nuanced and subtler means of policing that is observable within gaming, particularly with the consideration of how the design and mechanics of games themselves become tools through which ideological maintenance and regulation can occur.

Future research may also benefit from an exploration into the more 'formal' setting of videogames – i.e. developers and the production companies making these games – to better understand and explore how the design choices and processes of creating these titles inform  and are shaped by everyday interactions. One such way is through utilising ethnographic methods (such as observed in Boellstorff (2008)) within these workplaces and their cultures, in order to explore the everyday interactions and some of the more

subtle regulations of gender and sexuality (and other identities) that shape the videogame

creation process and the ideologies we come to play with.

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# Appendix 1: Information and Consent Forms

## Gaming for Peace (GAP): Information Sheet for Participants (Interview)

### Principal Investigators: Dr Anne Holohan

**WHAT IS GAP?**

Gaming for Peace (GAP) is a project funded by the European Commission, led by Trinity College Dublin, Department of Sociology. The Gaming for Peace (GAP) project aims to generate an online game based training curriculum for personnel (military, police, civil) involved in conflict prevention and peace building (CPPB) missions. The purpose of the research study is to develop an online training game for personnel (military, police, civilian) who are/will be engaged in CPPB missions. This game will be used for training in:

1. 'Soft skills' such as negotiation, cooperation and communication, crucial for successful CPPB missions where diverse organizations must work together and with local actors to achieve the mission goals.
2. Empathic understanding of other people and roles within a CPPB setting in order that players may better understand the roles and motivations of different people they may encounter in the field.
3. Gender awareness (both inside and between participating organizations and in the local context of the CPPB mission) and cultural competency (including religious, ethnic and national sensitivities).

**WHAT'S MY ROLE?**

You are invited to take part in an interview for the GAP project. We seek to collect experiences, through one to one interviews, of personnel (military, police, civil) who have been deployed in Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding (CPPB) missions. You have been chosen because of your experience on CPPB missions, or relevant domestic experience. You will be asked questions about experiences that you have had on CPPB missions, what your objectives were, other people that you worked with or encountered, what went well, what did not go well and what skills you used/needed. The interview will take up to 60 minutes.

**WHAT WILL MY INTERVIEW BE USED FOR?**

The experiences you share with us will be used to develop a curriculum which will ground scenarios for an online role playing game, thus feeding into a game that is based on real-life experiences. The results of the study may also lead onto further studies into CPPB missions and

further development of the game.  We will also use information from your interview in sociological analysis, and writing these findings up into academics journal articles and books (with your details anonymised).   At the end of the project we also intend to make anonymised interview transcripts available to other researchers upon request to the project lead investigator.

**HOW WILL MY DATA BE HANDLED?**

The interview will be recorded on audio tape and then transcribed onto a computer. The audio tapes will be encrypted and stored in a locked secure place at all times and the computer data will also be encrypted and will be protected from intrusion. The audio tapes will be destroyed at the end of the study and the transcripts will have all identifying information removed. Your response will be treated with full confidentiality and anyone who takes part in the research will be identified only by code numbers or false names. You can request a copy of the interview transcript if you wish. The interviews will be analysed by using a computer package by researchers at Trinity College Dublin. No research participant will be identifiable from any publication or presentation resulting from the analysis of your interview.  Your informed consent form will be stored securely at a location separate from the tapes and transcripts.  A full description of our approach to data handling may be found in the GAP Data Policy document (available on request).

**WHAT ARE MY RIGHTS?**

As a participant in the GAP project you have the right to:

- Freely decide whether or not to participate in the research
- To change your mind about your participation and withdraw from the study.  You may withdraw your participation at any time, and withdraw your data up until the point at which the data has been anonymised.

If the interview upsets you and you feel you would like some additional help after the interview I will be able to advise you who to contact, for example occupational health or counselling support in your organisation, and/or in an external organisation.

**TO NOTE**

If, during the interview, you report any illegal or prohibited behaviour, this will be reported to the Director, Military Police Branch. Further information about this may be found in the GAP Incidental Finding Policy document (available upon request)

**WHAT NEXT?**

This information sheet is for you to consider and keep. If you decide to take part:

- you will also be asked to sign a consent form
- we will arrange a time for you to complete the interview at your convenience

You are welcome to phone me if you would like any further information.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the GAP External Ethics Committee, the Research Ethics Committee at Trinity College Dublin

Thanking you in anticipation,

Project Principal Investigator – Anne Holohan aholohan@tcd.ie  +353 1896 1478

School of Social Science and Philosophy

Trinity College Dublin

# Gaming for Peace (GAP): Consent form (Interview)

## Principal Investigators: Dr Anne Holohan

### BACKGROUND

The Gaming for Peace (GAP) project aims to generate an online game based training curriculum for personnel (military, police, civil) involved in conflict prevention and peace building (CPPB) missions. In this project we will seek to collect real life experiences of personnel deployed on CPPB missions through one-to-one interviews with such personnel, and will use these experiences to develop an online role playing game which simulates scenarios from CPPB missions.  We will also use interview data to develop academic journal articles, books and theses.

If you consent to participate, this interview will be recorded and the conversation transcribed later.
Transcripts will be anonymised and will be made available to other researchers at the end of the project.  Original interview recordings will be stored securely and destroyed by the end of the project.  A copy of the transcript of your interview is freely available to you upon request. This form will be kept securely in a separate location from the interview transcript. Your participation in this interview is purely voluntary and you are free to end the interview at any time.

### DECLARATION:

I have read, or had read to me, the information leaflet for this project and I understand the contents. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I freely and voluntarily agree to be part of this research study, though without prejudice to my legal and ethical rights. I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time and I have received a copy of this agreement.  I understand that any reports of illegal/prohibited behaviour will be reported to the Director, Military Police Branch.

PARTICIPANT'S NAME: ………………………………………………………………..

CONTACT DETAILS: …………………………………....………………………………..

PARTICIPANT'S SIGNATURE: ……………………………………………………..

Date:…………………………..

Statement of investigator's responsibility: I have explained the nature and purpose of this research study, the procedures to be undertaken and any risks that may be involved. I have offered to answer any questions and fully answered such questions. I believe that the participant understands my explanation and has freely given informed consent.

Contact details for investigator should be included here as well.

INVESTIGATOR'S  SIGNATURE:…………………………         Date:……………………………

# Appendix 2: Recruitment Statement

# Gaming for Peace Project

## Recruitment statement

### 1.1 Purpose:

Gaming for Peace (GAP) is developing a new curriculum in soft skills (communication, cooperation, gender awareness, cultural sensitivity) for personnel (police, military and civilian) deployed in peacekeeping missions. This curriculum will be embedded in an online immersive role-playing game with standardized metrics to measure learning outcomes. To ensure relevance for end users, GAP is interviewing approximately 150 personnel from end user partners (including Name of Organisation) to identify best practices from stakeholder and end-user perspectives and requirements. It is anticipated that the interviews should take approximately one hour each. Through these interviews, it is anticipated that the researcher will collect the experiences of police personnel who have been deployed in Conflict Prevention and Peacebuilding (CPPB) missions and/or crisis management and peace operations. These experiences will be used to develop the scenarios for an online role playing game and the game will be used for training personnel for deployment in current or future CPPB missions.

It is important to note that the emphasis within the training will be in the soft skills of communication and cooperation, empathy and understanding of the position and priorities of personnel in other organizations and roles in the field, and in gender awareness and cultural competency, as CPPB missions are diverse in terms of the range of organizations deployed and the local contexts. Therefore, the interviews will be structured around such themes, with the interviewee being prompted to draw on their personal experiences and use examples to illustrate their points.

### 1.2 Recruitment:

The study requires that potential interviewees have previous experience of CPPB and/or crisis management and peace operations. More specifically, it is anticipated that X (name of organisation) will provide **30** interviews. Furthermore, it is important that the following guidelines are applied when selecting participants:

- **Gender makeup of participants**: 50% male and 50% female
- **Length of Service**: Must have been deployed in the field after January 1$^{st}$ 2003 and if relevant, retired not more than five years
- **Missions**: Not more than four individuals from the same mission

### 1.3 Interview content:

The interviews will be semi-structured and require participants to reflect back on missions, with a focus on the preparation, time on the mission, and the immediate period after the mission.

**1.4 Project requirements:**
All of the interviews must be completed by Feb 28th 2017

**1.5 Further information:**
If you require further information relating to any aspects of the project please contact:

Name of WP Lead
Contact address
Email address

# Appendix 3: Interview guide
# Gaming for Peace Project



## Interview Guide (Military)

Make sure you cover every **topic** in the left hand box (but not necessarily every question) in the interview.

Shape of interview: Expectations – what happened – reflection.

For every topic, go through it with regard to their own org/other similar org (e.g. other military)/police/ngos/civilian personnel/local people/any other relevant actors

| | | Check box |
|---|---|---|
| **Age?** | | |
| **Gender?** | Don't ask, record on transcription document | |
| **Organization name?** | Don't ask, record on transcription document | |
| **Your position in the organization?** | | |
| **How long have you been in the organization?** | | |
| **How many and which deployments have you been on? [interviewer jot down]** | | |
| **How long did each deployment last and when was it?** | | |
| **Was it voluntary to go?** | | |
| **Why did you go?** | | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **What was your specific position/responsibility in each deployment?** | | |
| **Topic** | Questions | |
| **Preparation**<br><br>**[see what they identify or not as soft skills]** | **You were told to 'cooperate' but were you told how to do this? What kind of training did you get?**<br><br>**What did you expect?**<br><br>What happened in the field?<br><br>What are the lessons to be drawn from your experience? What kind of training would you advise the mil to provide for anyone going on deployment?<br><br><br>How did you figure out who you are supposed to be working with? How do you establish a working relationship with them?<br><br>How do you figure out who is the best person to talk to and find out what is going on?<br><br><br>How do you figure out who you can trust? | |
| **Cooperation** | **What organizations did you work with on x deployment?**<br><br>**For each organization [INTERVIEWER, JOT DOWN ORGS AND GO THROUGH EACH ONE WITH INTERVIEWEE], what was it like working with them? Were they easy to work with? Difficult?**<br><br><br>Daily or weekly routine | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | Who do you interact with, what do you do? Difficulties/challenges? | |
| | **Can you think of a situation where cooperation helped/did not help achieve the goals of the mission?** | |
| | **What helped cooperation in the field? What hindered it?** | |
| | Was status a problem? Who could give orders? Who would follow them? | |
| | How did the amount of cooperation achieved affect the local populations? | |
| | Were you given contact with other orgs or did you have to make contact yourself? | |
| | Were there problems around<br><br>• Decision-making<br>• Accountability<br>• Operational styles<br>• Management styles<br>• Use of force<br>• Approaches to time<br>• What was success | |

| | For Officers: what permission do you give your enlisted to gather intelligence? Act with initiative if necessary? | |
|---|---|---|
| **Trust**<br><br>**[within your own org, with other orgs and with local population]** | **Who would you trust if you are in a potentially dangerous situation on the ground?**<br><br>**(if they ask what do you mean, say someone from a specific organization, male or female, a particular nationality?)**<br><br>**Who would you NOT trust?**<br><br>**How do you get people (from your own org, other orgs, local people) to trust you in the field?**<br><br>How do you build trust?<br><br>Is there a tension between trusting you as a person and trusting the organization? | |
| **Interaction/Communication** | **Were you given any training about how to talk to the different people you'd encounter on deployment? [make sure to ask about other** | |

| | mil personnel, other organizations like police or civilians, different nationalities, the local populations] | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| | **What was communication like between the organizations?** | |
| | **What was communication like with the local population?** | |
| | Describe the differences in communicating with personnel from<br><br>• Own force<br>• Personnel from police forces<br>• Different armies<br>• International NGOs<br>• International civil servants<br>• Local people<br>• Local government | |
| | What were the difficulties? | |
| | **Can you think of a situation where communication helped or did not help achieve the goals of the mission?** | |
| | Where did you get information? How was it analyzed? How was it acted upon? | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | **Socializing**: Were there opportunities to interact with people outside work? How important was that? | |
| **Cultural sensitivity** | Was there training in cultural sensitivity before you went on deployment? [preparation]<br><br>Was there misunderstandings around what was polite or culturally appropriate<br><br>- with personnel from other nations within military<br>- with personnel from other pking organizations (e.g. administration or military)<br>- with the local population (e.g. not talking to a woman not related to you in a conservative muslim country)<br><br>Did that affect your mission? [experience]<br><br>**Can you think of a situation where cultural difference affected operations? (positively or negatively)**<br><br>What would you advise the trainers as to what is needed in this respect, based on your experiences? | |
| **Gender** | ❖ **Did you receive training on gender awareness before you left? Was it useful when you got there?** | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | ❖ **Gender mainstreaming is part of every mission – does the aim of gender equality overlap or even compete with other important goals of the mission?** | |
| | **Have you worked with men/women only or in a mixed environment?** | |
| | **How is it different in each case?** | |
| | **Can you think of a situation where your gender made a difference? (for good or ill)** | |
| | Probe on this – any other examples?? | |
| | Pros and cons to single sex/mixed set up on deployment? | |
| | ❖ What do you consider to be a violation of gender equality on a mission? Has this ever happened to you or have you witnessed this? | |
| | ❖ **With technology nowadays, physical strength is not as important anymore and combat is rarely a part of a peacekeeping mission, do you think this means women can be just as effective on missions?** | |

| | Can you think of any changes that would encourage women to volunteer for peacekeeping missions? | |
|---|---|---|
| | Most people working on peacekeeping missions are male – how does this affect the atmosphere of the mission? Is it masculine or 'macho'?? What was your experience? | |
| | Have you witnessed incidents on deployment where anyone was disrespectful of female peacekeeping personnel or local female population? | |
| | How do you handle that practically and emotionally | |
| | Could can things be improved? | |
| **Risk/Stress**<br><br>**(loneliness, boredom, frustration, witnessing suffering, not being able to respond to insults etc)** | How well prepared were you to deal with dangers or risks experienced on deployment?<br><br>How could you have been better prepared?<br><br>**What was the most stressful thing about being on each deployment/ peacekeeping mission?**<br><br>*[if they say they didn't see anything or reported what they did see, then ask '**did you ever hear stories even if you yourself did not witness them or do not know who did it?**']* | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | ❖ Why do you think Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (SEA as it's known) has received so much attention?<br>❖ Do policies and mechanisms to prevent SEA work? If yes, which ones, if no, which ones and why for both.<br><br>How do you feel when you see sexual or racial abuse or other exploitation of vulnerable people by your colleagues? (stressful, etc, or doesn't bother you as you accept it as part of the scene)<br><br>Did you ever try and intervene or stop something that you felt uncomfortable with?<br><br>Did you approach your superior officers, if applicable, and how was it responded to?<br><br>❖ Actually, what kind of things are you supposed to report a colleague for?<br><br>Did you feel in danger? How was that dealt with? Well or badly? | |
| **Sexuality** | ❖ [You mentioned your girlfriend/wife/boyfriend/husband earlier (if they did)] For those who weren't in relationships did they form any over there? How did others | |

| | perceive that? I mean, there are so many things to consider, the culture of the camp, the culture of the locality, and the culture of your org! | |
|---|---|---|
| | **Have you witnessed incidents where personnel in your organization or in another organization or a member of the local population have done or said something that might make someone who is gay uncomfortable? (either someone who is gay within your own organization or in another organization or member of the local population)** | |
| | ❖ What is your organizations policy on LGBT issues? How does it work in practice? What is it like to be gay or lesbian or trans in your organization? Do you know anyone who is openly LGBT? | |
| | **Whether gay or not gay, how do people cope with restrictions on their sexuality/sexual activity on a long deployment?** | |
| | **Have there been problems with different norms around sexuality with the local population?** | |
| | Do you think that policies and approaches to sexuality could be improved on? If so, how? | |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Final Question #1**<br><br>**[reflection questions – give interviewee lots of time to consider]** | ❖ If I told you that you were going back again to do the very same deployment, but this time as a woman/man/different nationality, what would that be like? |
| **Final Question #2**<br><br>**[reflection questions – give interviewee lots of time to consider]** | ❖ So we spoke earlier about gender and LGBTQ awareness within the mission, what do you think a civilian going on a mission for the first time should be told about interactions between those within the camp and locals outside it? |
| **Final Question #3**<br><br>**[reflection questions – give interviewee lots of time to consider]** | What was the **best** thing about your experience on a peacekeeping mission?<br><br>What was the **worst** thing about your experiences on a peacekeeping mission? |
| **Final Question #4** | These interviews are preparation for scenarios in an online/virtual reality role-playing game – can you tell me about some of the **sounds** and **smells** and **sights** that you associate with your time on mission? |