Final Frontiers:

Masculinity in the Video Games of Obsidian Entertainment

Robert Wayne Mangum III
ROANOKE COLLEGE

1. Introduction and Background

As someone who is quite enthusiastic about video games, I am well aware of the heavy dude-centric culture surrounding them. The culture is aware of feminist critique leveled against the medium, which it reduces to jokes and memes. For example, mocking the notion that games appeal to a male fantasy (Adam). This sort of culture never sat well with me, but I could not put my finger on why until I took a May Intensive Learning course on Hollywood screen violence. Then I realized that video games—like television and movies—are just part of countless media which tell similar, often violent stories, about masculinity. This project builds on what I learned in that class as I dive deeper into three video games to inspect the narratives of violence that may be present, how they speak on masculinity, and whether there are any opportunities to subvert these stories.

In *Walden* Thoreau writes: "A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind… It appears as if men had deliberately chosen the common mode of living because they preferred it to any other. Yet they honestly think there is no choice left" (9, 10). Though *Walden* does not decry traditional masculinity here—in fact, Thoreau's writings helped form the basis for the self-sufficient man—his rhetoric rings true as we think about masculinity. Escapist media hide the messages that often create the very despair from which we attempt escape.

George Gerbner's cultivation theory states that the messages in media—he spoke specifically on television—influence worldviews, and are so common that oftentimes we fail to even notice them. This makes media "a significant source of general values, ideologies, and

perspectives as well as specific assumptions, beliefs, and images" (Gerbner 185). That is not to say that media are the sole influencers of thought, but they work in tandem with other sources to mainstream dominant attitudes (Gerbner 183). With this in mind, it is important to analyze the 'games and amusements' of both mankind and the 21st century: video games. They are a dominant force in media, with *Red Dead Redemption 2* boasting the highest-grossing opening weekend in entertainment history (Huang).

Using Cultivation Theory as a framework, it becomes apparent that media mainstreams what is referred to as traditional masculinity. Television shows depict a nuclear family where the father is detached physically and emotionally from his own children (Feasey). Advertising repackages images of men as great warriors for the modern audience alienated from such traditions (Katz). Although these beliefs already existed in society before media, the entertainment juggernaut spreads and ingrains it into popular consciousness.

Traditional masculinity is made from a variety of individual parts, and while men do not by nature exhibit these norms, society often expects and especially encourages it through media (Katz). Conventional aspects of masculinity include a lack of emotion, self-reliance, sexual conquest of females, dominance, and aggression (Burk et al.) (Levant et al.). In short, an ideal man should be able to stand on his own, surviving out in the woods and even resolving all his emotional trauma within himself. Traits like self-reliance are not inherently destructive, but taken together and to a logical extreme, consequences can become disastrous. Typical stock figures that embody these traits are the body-builder, warrior, and bad-boy rapper (Katz). At the same time, the gamer, often imagined as alienated from the masculine mainstream, embodies the same values. Here "masculine self-esteem and social capital are built through

specialized technical knowledge and skills, rather than through mainstream indices of masculinity such as athletic or heterosexual prowess" (Salter 250). Masculinity is redefined into a realm of intellectual domination that puts emphasis on the rational and logical (Salter 248). Instead of providing an alternative to traditional norms of masculinity, this 'geek masculinity' merely recontextualizes traditionally masculine traits and trappings into a technocratic field of dominance.

This project will primarily focus on two traits which are intrinsically linked: dominance and aggression. Dominance represents control and attempting to maintain oneself at the top of the hierarchy. Dominance broadly pertains to the belief that men should control finances, lead groups, and make important decisions (Levant et al.). It is represented through subordinating women via hegemonic masculinity, such as men commonly occupying powerful roles (Connell and Messerschmidt). Dominance can also manifest in intimate partner violence towards women (Moore et al.) (Smith et al.). For a gamer, dominance may involve unlocking every achievement in a video game.

Aggression, on the other hand, is a method of dominance. Aggression is the tendency to lash out or confront perceived affronts. Men who exhibit higher levels of masculinity are generally more aggressive (Weisbuch et al.). There are several different methods of aggression in masculinity. Sexual aggression sees men exerting control over women (Moore et al.) (Smith et al.), while it also includes getting into fights if one is challenged (Burk et al.). During Gamergate, which will later be discussed in greater detail, it manifested in targeted harassment (Salter 252). Dominance and aggression work together as catalysts for sexual violence, but they

also come together as paternalism (Burk et al.). Protecting one's family—often their women—is more socially acceptable but still builds on the belief that men are in charge and violent.

Media narratives reinforce the cultural perceptions of masculinity. Through repeated usage archetypical motifs develop. Walter Wink describes another violent myth, this time an archetypical one present in multiple world religions. Called the Myth of Redemptive Violence, this postulates a divine being—oftentimes male—obliterating an entity of evil. From this dead being the deity creates a new world, one populated by humans. The myth teaches that humans are naturally born from conflict, and that it is hardwired into their very existence. It also preaches the necessity of violence and conflict to create a new order; "It is the ideology of conquest, the original religion of the status quo" (Wink 5). Redemptive Violence represents the fundamental narrative of good and evil, a narrative with no room or reason for compromise, in which the only consequences for death and destruction are new life.

Second is the quintessential American myth of Regeneration Through Violence, outlined by Richard Slotkin in his works. The hero is a frontiersman, someone caught on the boundary between the metropolitan city and the wilderness, occupied by Native Americans. The hero crosses into 'savage' territory and regresses, where he fights the Native Americans (Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* 14). His victory sees him become "in the process a reflection or a double of his dark opponent" (Slotkin *The Myth of Regeneration Through Violence* 563). Through using the Natives' strategies against them, the hero is regenerated. Slotkin explains that this myth was partially constructed by the United States' elite to redirect aggression outward and prevent the possibility of class warfare within the nation (*Gunfighter Nation* 20, 21).

The marriage of these two mythologies—both the descent of man into violence at the edge of civilization, and the necessity of violence to remake the world anew—is a fundamental aspect of American media. They both feed into the American construction of masculinity. The belief that violence is "genetically programmed male behavior" (Katz) finds both its origin here (man is made from the destroyed) and its disastrous consequences. The violent and dominant actions of men cease to be viewed as dangerous, and are instead transformative and beautiful, as they enter into and birth new worlds in their destruction. Analyzing this narrative and its media depictions, especially video games, is vitally important. Research has often asked whether there is a causal relationship between video games and violence, but just as necessary is the study of video games' commentary on masculinity. The presence of violence itself needs to be analyzed, to determine whether there are non-masculine alternatives to it or whether the player is merely stuck repeating archetypical myths. In addition, if violence *is* included, it is vital to look at the context of it, whether it is beneficial or destructive.

For a project aiming to analyze the narrative repercussions of the violence within gameplay, Gordon Calleja's framework for video game analysis—the Player-Involvement model—is most productive. Calleja outlines six matrices for narrative engagement, which map the various ways the player affects the game space and story, and vice versa. First, Kinesthetic involvement is the potential for action within the game world. This is the fundamental act of movement, shooting, fighting. Second, Spatial involvement is the act of engaging and relating to the game world itself, such as exploring an abandoned building. Third, Affective involvement relates to the game's effect on the player's thoughts and mood. Fourth is Ludic involvement, which is the player's engagement with the game rules, especially in relationship to achieving

their goals. For example, the player may want to go through a certain door, which only opens if they complete a specific quest. Fifth is Scripted involvement, which is the player's engagement with the story as written by the developers, which may be interwoven into objects and the game world. Finally, there is Shared involvement. This relates to the experience with other player inhabitants of the game world but, due to the fact that these three games are single-player, this dimension is primarily irrelevant.

For this paper I have specifically chosen to look at the games made by Obsidian Entertainment. The company is well known for making Role-Playing games—RPGs—with a heavy focus on narrative. Players are often given a choice in controlling the story in RPGs, which means they are potentially equipped to change these myths. The three games I am analyzing are *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II: The Sith Lords, Fallout: New Vegas,* and *The Outer Worlds*. These games span from 2003 to 2019, and therefore coincide with changes both in American politics and within gaming subculture, especially the notorious Gamergate, wherein several high-profile women in the gaming subculture were subjected to sexist attacks. All three of these games have Metacritic scores of over 80, and are therefore considered to represent 'good' RPGs. Importantly, these games draw heavily on the frontier symbolism of western mythology, from *Star Wars*' struggles at the edges of civilized space to *Fallout: New Vegas* and *The Outer Worlds* incredibly blatant symbolism. This situates them firmly within the context of American violent myths. Through these games this paper seeks to find whether Thoreau was incorrect, and man does have a choice to break away from the stories that society has led him to believe are the only way.

Within Obsidian's games choices are an important method of player control. The narrative itself is intertwined with gameplay, and looking at them from purely a ludic or narratological stance would lead me to only viewing an incomplete picture. Calleja's framework allows for a broader perspective of these games, and a lens through which to identify alternatives to playing with masculinity.

2. *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II: The Sith Lords*

Obsidian formed from the game company Black Isle, developers of *Baldur's Gate II* and *Fallout 2*, after parent company Interplay entered financial straits. Several developers from Black Isle left to form Obsidian Entertainment, which contracted itself out to various game publishers. Their first published game was developed in partnership with Lucasarts and was notorious for being rushed to launch, with only 15 months of development. This was *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II: The Sith Lords,* released in 2004 (Schreier).

2.1 The Star Wars: Battle and Conflict in Knights of the Old Republic II

The player character of *Knights of the Old Republic II*—referred to in-game as The Exile—was shaped by war. Before the narrative, two conflicts—the Mandalorian Wars and the Jedi Civil War—occurred. The first of these, the Mandalorian Wars, saw violence across the galaxy which the Jedi refused to help stop. The player followed two fallen Jedi, Darth Malak and Darth Revan, to this war. Subsequently, they were cast out of the Jedi order for their actions. The player's only choices relating to these wars are giving justification for their decision to follow Revan.

One of the earliest moments for this reflection on the relation between Jedi and combat occurs when the player meets Atris, one of the last remaining Jedi and part of the council responsible for the player's exile. The player and Atris discuss this, and the player may defend their actions. The light side option has the player justify their engagement by saying, "I went to war to protect others, not for battle" (*Knights of the Old Republic II*). Atris then responds by criticizing the player's actions by saying meeting aggression with aggression is "not the Jedi way" (*Knights of the Old Republic II*). This assertion is a simplistic view of violence and the Jedi.

Atris' argument is built on the belief that the Jedi are a pacifistic order, but this is not the case. Despite being called peacekeepers, the Jedi engage in violence. They subscribe to a theory of 'just war,' wherein certain combats are justified. Michael Walzer adopts the theory that war is justified in "defense of a political community against aggression" (qtd in Norman 203). In *Knights of the Old Republic II*, the Jedi the player gathers on Dantooine confirm their belief by saying "Now that [the Sith] have attacked Onderon, we can act." Not only do the actions of the Jedi within *Knights of the Old Republic II* indicate a just war doctrine, but so do their actions throughout the *Star Wars* canon. Of the films, McDowell writes, "Defense against an aggressor is observably the main reason underpinning the violent hostilities in and throughout the saga." Through going to war, specifically to protect others against the violence of the Mandalorians, the player was in-line with established doctrine. Atris' both expose hypocrisy and invite a new kind of reflection as the player continues through the game, one which asks them to consider the Sith's aggression in contrast to Jedi defense.

Unlike the latter games discussed in this paper—*Fallout: New Vegas* and *The Outer Worlds*—*Knights of the Old Republic II* has far fewer options for avoiding combat. There are

many fights that the player is forced to participate in. The destruction of the three titular Sith lords—Darth Traya, Darth Nihilus, and Darth Sion—is mandated to finish the game. A pacifistic approach during these fights is impossible. In particular, Darth Traya's fight is the most impactful of the three. Darth Traya—also known as Kreia—is the player's former mentor, a counterpart to the Obi-wan Kenobi of the original trilogy. She is also the final boss of the video game. On confronting her, the player may offer her redemption, to which Darth Traya responds by saying, "I do not want your mercy. I want you to break" (*Knights of the Old Republic II*). From there the final fight may only be initiated by the player. Otherwise, they are to remain in dialogue with Darth Traya and are unable to complete the video game.

Despite appearing to be an obvious example of Redemptive Violence, this combat prompts a greater engagement with the game's themes. Victoria Lagrange et al. write that those exposed to a highly violent story where they have no choice are often more dissatisfied. Appropriately, the inability of the player to resolve the fight with Darth Traya peacefully indicates a decrease in enjoyment of the game. Through forcing the player to commit violence, the game is actually indicting the experience. Speaking on another game, *Spec Ops: The Line*, Murray says, "But *The Line* shows how this dissonance between the ideals of a humanitarian mission and the use of excessive violence can be maximized, the apparent hypocrisy mined as constitutive of the main character, instead of being a flaw of the game design." Similarly, the player must contend with the cognitive dissonance of playing both a peacekeeping Jedi who offers redemption and being actively forced into fights where only total destruction is an option.

Combat within *Knights of the Old Republic II* is a modified version of the Star Wars D20 system (Hudson et al.). The game rolls hypothetical dice to see whether the attacks of both the player and opponents land, and how much damage they do. Once combat is initiated, all the player can do is select one of a few options (Force powers, for example) and grow frustrated as the character misses their attack. This combat system feeds into the technocratic narrative of geek masculinity. The player dominates the game through rationally understanding mechanics and working within them to become as powerful as possible. Although the visceral satisfaction of a combat grounded in a simulation of violence is not present, *Knights of the Old Republic II* still taps into the same aggressive machismo.

Since this combat is often a necessity in *Knights of the Old Republic II*, instances where the player may turn from it are vitally important. One such instance is on the Sith world of Korriban, where the player may enter a cave and confront a series of visions. One of these visions sees Kreia confronted by the player's companion Atton, who tries to kill her. Steadily, *all* the player's companions arrive and threaten Kreia. The player is then left with the choice to attack Kreia or help her—or do nothing.

This choice was one I struggled with the most: do I betray my companions by helping Kreia, or betray her by siding with my companions? I chose to do nothing, which I realize mirrored the actions of the Jedi council. When my choice was made, every single character said, "Apathy is death" and attacked me (*Knights of the Old Republic II*). I subsequently lost the fight, and gained dark side points for my action—which was frustrating due to the fact that I had increased skills from having the maximum amount of light side points. The only way to gain light side points is to protect Kreia against your companions. Though the game offers binary

points for the choice—which seems to remove nuance—the three distinct options allow for a greater chance for the player to reflect on their actions (Knoll 219).

2.2 An Elegant Weapon: Lightsabers and Firearms

Unsurprisingly, *Knights of the Old Republic II* features lightsabers, one of the most iconic weapons in fiction. The lightsaber is a sword whose blade is made from energy used by both Jedi and Sith. As a former Jedi, great emphasis is placed on the player's ownership of a lightsaber. Unlike the blasters one can use, the lightsaber is constructed by the player to their specifications. They may choose the type of blade—single or double—the color, and other modifications to the weapon. Characters even point out that the player and their lightsaber are fundamentally intertwined. Bao-dur, a soldier who served under the player during the Mandalorian wars, says, "A lightsaber is part of who you are. Without it, you're not complete" (*Knights of the Old Republic II*).

Throughout the game the player character is asked to consider the role of the lightsaber within the trappings of the Sith and Jedi. One conversation with Bao-dur sees the player vouches for the lightsaber by claiming it as "a symbol of the Jedi. It inspires others and gives them hope" (*Knights of the Old Republic II*). The player draws the distinction between Sith and Jedi use by stating the lightsaber is "a Jedi tool and a Sith weapon" (*Knights of the Old Republic II*). Despite this assertion, gameplay sees the lightsaber used only offensively, even for the most light-aligned character, with its only other application the ability to cut through doors.

The lightsaber functions for both Jedi and Sith as a symbol of masculinity. Kreia sums up the very obvious by saying "for the male it [their lightsaber] has an inordinate importance"

(*Knights of the Old Republic II*). However, the masculinity of the lightsaber runs even deeper, and mirrors gun rhetoric in America. In an ethnography of gun ownership in rural America, Gahman collected interviews that sound nearly identical to the player's lightsaber advocation, such as one individual saying, "They [guns] are just tools, they can be used for good or bad."

The heroic use of the lightsaber to protect the innocent mirrors the paternal masculinity of gun ownership. In a study of prospective gun owners, Warner found that "Despite being significantly less fearful than women, men were more open to owning a gun in the future, and expected higher levels of empowerment were they to acquire a gun at some point" (17). Gahman finds a similar opinion in his paper: guns empower a man by allowing him to protect his family. Similarly, the ideal Jedi's "life is sacrifice" and it therefore stands to reason that the lightsaber is not to protect their own wellbeing but that of others (*Knights of the Old Republic II*). Through this usage, it becomes a symbol of masculine dominance, a method of protecting that which is dear.

Lightsabers also represent imperialism, much like guns. Audiences were first introduced to the lightsaber in 1977's *Star Wars*, later subtitled 'A New Hope.' Obi-wan Kenobi describes it as "an elegant weapon for a more civilized age," a line that is later referenced in *Revenge of the Sith* (Lucas *A New*). Following his defeat of General Grievous using a blaster, Obi-wan Kenobi calls the weapon, "So uncivilized" to contrast it with his lightsaber (Lucas *Revenge*). The lightsaber is tied to the imposition of law across the galaxy, acting as an agent for a civilizing force. One other common theme in Gahman's ethnographies was the relation between the gun and the frontier, noting the connection between gun ownership and xenophobic 'us versus

them' discourse. Guns offer a connection to the past through father-son hunting trips and as a symbol of protecting settler interests on the frontier (Gahman).

Firearms are used to protect the status quo and maintain control, despite tying into rhetoric of freedom and individuality. "Historical pillars of colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchal nationalism… create 'individuals' who in perceiving themselves as such, are paradoxically much more likely to unknowingly submit, conform, and obey," Gahman writes of gun owners. Paradoxically, both sides in *Knights of the Old Republic II* fight for this same aim. A dark side player may side with General Vaklu, the head of the military on the planet Onderon. Vaklu aims to join the Sith and maintain independence from the Republic so that he can maintain Onderon's culture (*Knights of the Old Republic II*). Conversely, in everything they do a light side player fights for the Republic, who for all its ideals is still a stagnant governing body which dominates every corner of the galaxy. There is no option for a lightsaber wielder to truly shake up the galaxy and fight for a completely novel cause, and so they must be an agent for imperialism.

Finally, lightsabers never need to be used by the player character within *Knights of the Old Republic II*. Instead, they may rely on blasters and explosives. In my experiences I attempted to play the game using only ranged weaponry. Unfortunately these made the game far more difficult and whenever I fought opponents wielding lightsabers of their own, my blasters became worthless. When my lightsaber was completed, it had a high damage output and boosted my wisdom stat which allowed my Force attacks to connect with greater frequency. A player who chooses not to use a lightsaber is intentionally crippling themselves and creating a much harder experience.

2.3 Using the Force: Paradoxes in the Utilization of The Force

The Force is an unseen energy that moves through all life in the galaxy. It is used by both the Jedi and Sith. The Force is that which Obi-wan Kenobi says "gives the Jedi his power" (Lucas *A New*). This slots it firmly into masculine rhetoric, as power represents the "ability to dominate or influence others" (Hearn 56). Like its wielders, The Force exists on a spectrum of light and dark, which the game affirms through its mechanics. Within gameplay, the Force is primarily used as a weapon. Many actively destructive Force abilities are restricted to the dark side, and used by Sith, such as Force lightning and Force screams. However, other offensive abilities exist, such as Destroy Droid, which are not restricted.

Although one cannot miss the pseudo-mystic aspect of The Force, which scholars have likened to religions ranging from Abrahamic beliefs, to the Tao, and even to Aztec concept of *teotl* (MacMullan), rarely is the actual power of the Force in focus. Within *Knights of the Old Republic II*, the Force is oftentimes presented as an alternative to aggressive combat. The game has six character attributes: Strength, Dexterity, Charisma, Intelligence, Constitution, and Wisdom. Strength governs melee weapon damage and Dexterity governs a character's ability to both land and dodge attacks. Meanwhile, Charisma determines the potency of Force powers while Wisdom increases the likelihood of Force powers landing successfully. As can be seen from this, a character could feasibly have abysmal skill with weapons but have incredible Force powers.

Although the player is ostensibly given the option to choose an alternative to the masculinity of combat, Force use merely presents a different mode of masculinity. One of the

most notable powers of the Force is persuasion, once again embodied through Obi-wan telling Stormtroopers “These aren’t the droids you’re looking for” (Lucas *A New*). The player may unlock the ability to choose Force Persuasion options in dialogue by selecting two powers available to all Force users, both light and dark. The weaker power is named Affect Mind and, quite tellingly, the other is Dominate Mind. This is a seemingly peaceful and subversive option, which allows for a de-escalation of conflict. For example, at one point the player may use Force Persuasion to deescalate a confrontation where soldiers are harassing a journalist (*Knights of the Old Republic II*). But using the power of Dominate Mind is an action that relies on domination. Beyond simply the name of the power, the player is performing actions highlighted by the Auburn Differential Masculinity Index as masculine, exerting both “power over other people” and being in control of a social situation (Burk et al. 16). Although the player can certainly rationalize their actions as avoiding greater violence, the choice to use Force Persuasion still sees engagement with masculinity. Even characters within the game point out the unfortunate nature of Force Persuasion, with companion Atton highlighting that the Jedi and Sith *both* invade people’s minds (*Knights of the Old Republic II*). It is entangled into the false binary of the Force, an illusory choice.

A driving goal for the player in *Knights of the Old Republic II* is the quest to both regain their connection to the Force and discover why they lost it in the first place. To do this, the player must reassemble the remaining members of the Jedi council, who are hiding on worlds across the galaxy. When they are brought together, the player learns that they cut off their connection to The Force following the battle of Malachor V, the last battle of the Mandalorian Wars. There, a superweapon was deployed which killed nearly all life on the planet. The

player—who is able to form empathetic connections through The Force—needed to sever their connection, lest they die. They became a wound in The Force (*Knights of the Old Republic*).

In this meeting, the Jedi enclave inadvertently reveals the player's connection to antagonist Darth Nihilus, one third of the titular Sith Triumvirate. A *Wookieepedia* article discusses how Darth Nihilus was another survivor of Malachor V, much like the player, but he lost everything there. Driven by hunger, Darth Nihilus scoured entire planets of life, such as the home world of player companion Visas (*Knights of the Old Republic II*). The player's strength comes from the same place as Darth Nihilus. The council marvels at, "All the death you've caused to get here" and point out that the player has grown stronger through killing (*Knights of the Old Republic II*). This is a clever diegetic explanation for the ostensibly ludic experience points the player has gained throughout gameplay.

But these incidents also serve to highlight the narrative of Regeneration through Violence. Through slaughtering his way across the galaxy, the player has literally regenerated himself. With every level earned, he regains his connection to the Force. Even the severance from the Force itself is regenerative, with "the alternative of facing the frontier… always steeped in violence, conquest, and domination" at Malachor V (Mejeur 207). Kreia even tells the player that through losing The Force, they have become whole (Mejeur 207). Kreia's worldview sees "confrontation [as] the only soil fertile enough for people—and peoples—to bear fruit" (Hanuszkiewicz 266). For her, conflict is the way the world evolves and people grow. As seen from the revelations at the Jedi Enclave, she is correct. The player needed conflict to grow, and throughout the *Star Wars* franchise this war is an inevitability (Mejeur 208).

One last revelation from the enclave connects the player to another Sith Lord: Darth Revan. Revan was the player character of *Knights of the Old Republic,* and characters within the sequel constantly wonder how they accumulated such a vast following. The Jedi enclave reveals that the player is naturally empathetic, and others flock to them. “Your actions affect others more than you know. You draw others to you, especially those strong in the force,” one of the Jedi masters tells the player (*Knights of the Old Republic II*). The mere presence of the Jedi enclave insinuates a light-side playthrough; a dark aligned player has the option to fight and kill the Jedi masters before the meeting (*Knights of the Old Republic II*). Despite this, even a light-side player shares abilities with Revan. The constant overlap between light and dark actions provides legitimacy to the musings of Kreia, who sees “the factions [of Jedi and Sith] for what they are—sides of a coin, parts of a whole pretending to be the whole” (Hanuszkiewicz 267).

The existence of this Force empathy reveals that the player is unwittingly performing masculinity. Rugged individualism is a part of masculinity, so engaging with this party system would appear a subversion of masculinity (Burk et al. 14). However, the revelation that the player subtly influences those around them invites the question of just how willing their companions are to follow. For example, Visas—a former servant of Darth Nihilus—says, “When I tell you my life for yours, it is my choice” (*Knights of the Old Republic II*). However, this is not entirely clear for other party members. Ones such as Mandalore and Goto, who are dark-aligned and have interests opposed to the player’s, may not be going along willingly. The player’s relationship with their companions moves from an arrangement of mutual benefit, to one that can not shake the specter of control.

The game's presentation of choice in regards to violence is quite robust. Frequently the player is presented with situations where there is no good answer, choices that encourage the player to engage with the narrative itself (Domsch 135). As Kreia and Atton's observations indicate, the Force is divided into a binary when it is only part of a larger galaxy. There exists an underlying thread of peering beyond this binary, but oftentimes this compresses down into a singular option. Darth Traya must be defeated; the Sith's quest for power and the Jedi's defense of the innocent both demand it—as do the game mechanics. However, perhaps through this necessity a fundamental flaw of the *Star Wars* universe is revealed: *est perpetua.* War is unending within *Star Wars* (Mejeur 208). The cycle of regenerative violence and the Jedi choosing to fight to protect what is theirs only breeds more war, and only through leaving this cycle behind can it be broken.

3. *Fallout: New Vegas*

Fallout: New Vegas released in 2010 and came after a short stint of critical failures for Obsidian and failed publishing deals. Bethesda, who just developed *Fallout 3*, approached Obsidian about developing their own *Fallout* video game. Many of the employees at Obsidian had experience working on *Fallout 1* and *2* and felt the game would be familiar ground. Despite high ratings, *Fallout: New Vegas* was rushed as well, and ended up being criticized for a plethora of bugs and crashes at launch (Schreier).

3.1 The Empires Strike Back: Constructing Masculinity in the Factions of Fallout: New Vegas

Presenting itself as a western from the opening, *Fallout: New Vegas* begins with the player being shot and left for dead in a graveyard, and from there the game follows them on a

quest to find their attempted killer. Along the way they stumble into a complex web of factions vying for control of the Mojave Wasteland and New Vegas itself, various factions which they can choose to support or hinder. The whole time the western atmosphere never vanishes. Groups unaligned to the major factions are 'tribals,' obviously evoking Native Americans. Songs on the in-game radio include the quintessential Vegas sounds of Frank Sinatra, but also a cover of 'Big Iron' from Marty Robbins' *Gunfighter Ballads and Trail Songs*. The player is primed for an experience that utilizes the tropes of the western.

The three key factions are empires consistently constructed as an extension of masculinity. Caesar's Legion is a patriarchal society literally named for its male leader: Caesar. They keep sex slaves and, most notably, believe women are incapable of fighting. If playing as a female, the player is barred from entering the Legion's arena, being told by its gatekeeper Otho, "Know your place woman... only men are allowed to fight in the arena" (*Fallout: New Vegas*). Sawyer, lead designer of *Fallout: New Vegas*, says of that Caesar's Legion actually uses sex slaves to outbreed their opponent, which he describes as, "'Follow these gender roles for army min-maxing'" (qtd *Caesar's Legion*), with min-maxing being the practice of abusing a game's system to become as powerful as possible. This blending of the rational prowess of the masculine gamer with the active aggression of the archetypical warrior sees the Legion straddle multiple modes of masculinity.

Another faction is Mr. House, a Howard Hughes-pastiche who controls the New Vegas strip and formerly headed RobCo Industries. Already presenting as a patriarchal figure through the 'Mr' epithet, he maintains similar control over women as Caesar's Legion. The player meets Jane, a robot with the personality of a human girl Mr. House once knew. She tells the player

"I'm Jane, one of Mr. House's girls. We keep him... entertained," which indicates that Mr. House also uses them for something similar to sex and views them as his property (*Fallout: New Vegas*). Mr. House similarly represents the same Empire as Caesar's Legion. Both Neocolonialism and corporatism are linked, as the "relations of the state, the nation, the multinational corporation" are often complex and the lines between empire and company blur (Luke et al. 2). Therefore, Mr. House is effectively both a nation state and a multinational corporation; a victory for Mr. House sees him control merely Vegas and not the Mojave, unlike the other two factions. Though an imperial power, his state does need other bodies to thrive via transnational exchange (Luke et al. 3).

The third faction presents the most nuanced case of the three. The New California Republic, or NCR, is a democratic society which is actually coed. Many of the major quest-givers are female, such as Colonel Cassandra Moore, who is in charge of all NCR operations at Hoover Dam. Despite this, the NCR is still constructed as a masculine entity. Cass, one of the player's possible companions, refers to the NCR's conquests via masculine terms, thus connecting their expansion to manhood—literally. When pressed about the NCR, she says, "They [NCR] try to put their stake in everything they see. Nobody's dick's that long, not even Long Dick Johnson, and he had a fucking long dick," which likens expansionism to overcompensation (*Fallout: New Vegas*). Despite greater diversity amongst its members, the NCR still functions as a masculine body governed by masculine thoughts of conquest.

Agency is one of the main weapons in the player's arsenal, and they are presented with the choice to side with either of these three factions in the coming battle—or take a fourth option, which will be discussed shortly. Consalvo et al. found that players often claim ownership

of their choices as an extension of their own beliefs or a rationalized decision of their character. The player has some level of engagement with their choice of faction, rationalizing it either within a constructed game narrative ("this is what she's seen… this is her experience") or their own ethos ("this is me, I have made the decisions that made this character who I am") (Consalvo et al. 227, 225). Therefore, try as the player might to avoid engaging in masculinity, the ending forces it. The final battle, taking place at Hoover Dam, embodies the masculinities of nationalism. The Legion wants to avenge their defeat at Hoover Dam, the NCR wants to reenact it, and Mr. House wants to expand his control. The game invites the player to perform nationalism springing from "masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masculinized hope" (qtd in Nagel 244). Up until the ending, the player may have been able to avoid combat, but the Battle of Hoover Dam sees them thrown into a battle with little option for pacifism. They've essentially enrolled in the army. For men, this act of going to war is a chance to experience adventure and be part of something generation defining; it is a chance to prove their manhood (Nagel 259).

3.2 The End of Worlds: The Failure of War to Change the World

As a game set in the aftermath of a nuclear apocalypse two centuries prior, the landscape of *Fallout: New Vegas* is dominated by ruined symbols of America. "America sleeps in the Divide," Ulysses tells the player as the player moves to confront him in the Divide—an even more recent wasteland littered with ruined missile silos and slices of small-town Americana. These ruins, Watts writes, "serve as a tangible manifestation of the parallel destruction of the social structures of that society" and represent freedom from its bonds (249). Therefore, the collapse of America should have triggered a reordering of society within the game. It did not.

An old-world terminal within the massive solar plant HELIOS ONE warns workers not to blab to their wives about their work, for "a woman's tongue is the devil's plaything" (*Fallout New Vegas*). The old world was male-dominated, with women playing only secondary roles. The new wasteland, and the factions vying for control of it, have not changed anything and remain just as male-dominated as before.

Fallout: New Vegas presents a narrative wherein the violence of war is insufficient to enact significant change. The famous line "War. War never changes" is spoken by the narrator at the end of the Lonesome Road DLC (*Fallout: New Vegas*). Throughout the story of Lonesome Road, Ulysses has consistently proven this axiom true. Ulysses attempts to launch nukes at both NCR and Caesar's Legion, a chilling reflection of the Great War, in which China and America bombed each other. War itself has not changed, nor has it changed the hearts of men. Just as Ulysses repeats history, the various factions the player can side with all represent bygone elements of the past. Mr. House is corporate oligarchism, the Legion is a distorted Roman Empire. Even the NCR is unable to decouple itself from the past. Their flag, a two-headed bear, is intended to represent the flag of California and their money resembles United States currency. Democracy is shown to have failed within the *Fallout* universe, due to the destruction of the Great War.

However, Lonesome Road provides a new ending to the quote, "War never changes. But men do, through the roads they walk." The Player has the choice to prevent or direct nuclear annihilation just as they have the choice to talk Ulysses down. In speaking about *Fallout: New Vegas*'s precursor, *Fallout 3*, Watts says "The demolished social structures of gender are in this case not necessarily those within the game world, but those that govern action within it" (259).

The quote directly reflects this. The ruins of the Divide—and the rest of *Fallout: New Vegas*—represent the player's ability to escape the actions of the Old World and find a better way. The reordering of society is still in progress, and the ruins tell the player to "Let go, and begin again" (*Fallout: New Vegas*).

Fallout: New Vegas does present a paradox, that while one can break from the pre-ordained social order, the alternatives are no better. For example, the game has a 'Wild Card' ending with an independent New Vegas, which is no less violent than supporting Empire. The slides for this ending differ depending on whether the player upgraded the New Vegas army of Securitron robots. The slides say either, "Anarchy ruled the streets. When the fires died, New Vegas remained…" or "Chaos became uncertainty, then acceptance, with minimal loss of life" if they were not upgraded or were, respectively (*Fallout: New Vegas*). Both scenarios involve violence, the first calling to mind the fires of violent rebellion and the second downplaying the loss of human life. While the Wild Card ending presents an alternative to the masculinity of nationalism, it merely shifts the onus onto the player's masculinity. The ending cards make it clear that independence is shaped by the player, with a good karma player supporting "the ideals of independence" while a player with bad karma supported "all the chaos that comes with independence" (*Fallout: New Vegas*). A player engages the dominance of their own masculinity by exerting power over all the other denizens of the Strip. Even the title of the final quest for the Wild Card ending, 'No gods, no masters' echoes the ADMI statement of "I am my own master" (Burk et al. 15).

Much like the issue of Empire, the questline 'The Courier' must resolve in violence. If the player is unable to talk Ulysses down from launching the bombs, has not played all of ED-E's

tapes, or collected all of Ulysses' audio logs, the two couriers must do battle. If Ulysses is talked down, however, Marked Men—zombified NCR and Caesar's Legion soldiers—flood into the room and the player must work with Ulysses to fend them off. This ending sees the player's goal change from attempting to violently stop Ulysses to working with him to mutually protect each other. Instead of performing the Myth of Redemptive Violence, the player has switched to another form of masculinity, forming an in-group where relations "are characteristically those of protection rather than aggression" (Spaaij 386). Despite finding an ostensibly peaceful resolution to the conflict between themselves and Ulysses, the player is still forced to engage in a display of violent male bonding to seal the deal; there is no escape from this.

We can see in this ending an interplay of the myth of Regeneration through Violence and pacism. Ulysses has travelled to the edge of the world (The Divide) in a fight against the player. Due to the nature of gameplay, Ulysses can never truly win unless he adopts the power of his opponent, in the same way Slotkin theorizes that the frontiersman adopts the strategies of his native captors. A player must choose non-aggression to spare Ulysses, the same non-aggression that Ulysses adopts towards the player. Only through this does Ulysses emerge stronger. This perversion of peace and violence is disturbing but is not out of character for the rest of the game.

3.3 Patrolling the Mojave: Refuting Masculinity Through Gameplay

Fallout: New Vegas' game systems all coalesce together into a subversive construction of masculinity. The game may be played as either a first-person or third-person shooter, where much of the action involves gunning down opponents. However, one effective strategy for

success is employment of the V.A.T.S. system. Essentially, this freezes the action and allows the player to target induvial body parts on opponents with each shot having a percent chance to hit. The strategy may help players without aiming skills, but it also serves to alienate the player from their character (McClancy). The agency is stripped away from the player, and "it can be infuriating to watch V.A.T.S. continue to shoot at an enemy who has hidden behind a wall or behind an ally" (McClancy). V.A.T.S. indicates a violent act committed without any control. While it seems to fall into the rhetoric of violent actions being taken because one has 'no choice,' it instead removes the power of the player. The empowerment offered by a weapon is removed as it potentially betrays the player, and no longer infuses them with control.

"Patrolling the Mojave almost makes you wish for a nuclear winter," NCR soldiers will often repeat, a line which pretty much accurately sums up exploration in *Fallout: New* Vegas. Exploration, especially in games, is linked to masculine actions (Fuller *Nintendo*). In addition, it is fundamentally tied in with Empire. *Fallout: New Vegas* itself highlights this link with imperialism through the Explorer perk. This perk reveals every location on the map, with the icon clearly evoking colonial garb (*Fallout: New Vegas).* The *Fallout* franchise has been praised as one of the best open world franchises (PCGamer *Best*) (Wald *Best*). However, exploration in *New Vegas* is cited as being quite terrible, with locations rarely having any interesting items for the player to obtain. A Reddit thread asking about the weakest aspects of *Fallout: New: Vegas* had several posters criticize the exploration, with user notsomething13 saying "There's nothing particularly interesting to find, and they didn't really stick much hidden away for the persistent explorers to find. Sometimes the Mojave even managed to feel incomplete if you did try to

explore around" (Guts0247 *What*). As infuriating as this approach to exploration may be, it succeeds at denying the player the masculine pleasure of exploration.

A ludic analysis of pacifism shows that it is completely possible, but a very difficult alternative to mere violence. One experience I had saw me trying to convince a faction of tribals—the Great Khans—to support the NCR and abandon Caesar's Legion. About midway through this quest two legionnaires confronted and attempted to murder me. Refusing to kill them was difficult, and consisted of letting them chase me for a while and then leaving, so they would not block anything important (*Fallout: New Vegas*). Similar events happened to me a few times during the course of gameplay: pacifist actions that made me feel as if I had manipulated game systems. These experiences raised several questions for me, such as whether the developers intended this and whether I was breaking the game. Leino dismisses some of these questions in his analysis of glitches in *Fallout: New Vegas*. "Unless I am doing game design research, my object of study is not the 'ideal game': i.e. the assumed designer's assumed intentions fallibly manifested in the playable artifact, but the playable artifact as it exists in the world," Leino says of his experiences with *Fallout: New Vegas*. Therefore, it is folly for me to approach these experiences and consider what they could or should be. Instead, they exist as they are. Pacifistic approaches do exist within the game, and the only thing truly separating them from violent actions is a greater deal of effort. Only my response is different—the experience feels 'incomplete.'

Fallout: New Vegas sees masculinity loom in the background through the course of the game as a catalyst behind the expansion of the Mojave factions and Ulysses' plan to launch nukes in The Divide. The narrative often sees masculinity performed, as every ending sees the

player reaffirm masculinity, and the most ideal outcome with Ulysses is a display of violent male bonding. However, there consistently remains a subtle hope that myths of violence and masculinity will be broken. The player may show Ulysses the error of his ways, and drive the opposing factions from the Mojave without a fight. Although war and violence may never alter the status quo, people can.

4. *The Outer Worlds*

The Outer Worlds is one of Obsidian's most recent games, released in 2019. Two important events occurred before the game's release. First, major game publisher Xbox acquired Obsidian, meaning they were no longer a contractor. Even more important, the game came out after the beginning of Gamergate, one of the most notable events in modern video game culture. Gamergate itself is a massive event, but primarily involved the targeted harassment of women in the field of video games. Questions of masculinity and female representation were thrust to the forefront of gaming discourse following the event (Dewey). With these two occurrences, the stage is set for *The Outer Worlds*.

4.1 The Final Frontier: Violence in the Outer Worlds

Taking place in the year 2355, *The Outer Worlds* is set in the far-flung colony of Halcyon. The colony is ruled by a conglomerate of corporations called the Halcyon Holdings Board, often abbreviated as just 'The Board.' The Board left the colony ship the *Hope* to drift for years, which is where the player comes in. Phineas Welles, eccentric scientist, rescues them from the *Hope*, and sends them on a quest around the system to free the rest of the *Hope* colonists. Along the way the player has an option to turn him over to The Board.

The Outer Worlds is styled as a space western. The video that opens the game, a diegetic recruitment tool for colonists, starts by asking, "Why stay earthbound when prosperity is guaranteed in the colonies?" which calls to mind Manifest Destiny of the American west. Even more specifically, the game calls to mind the hybridization of science fiction and western tropes referred to as 'space western.' The game overtly references *Firefly*, considered the seminal space western, through the cast of characters: a violent preacher, a female engineer, a strong female black gunslinger who in turn all built on tropes from the existing western genre (Wills 10). While *Fallout: New Vegas* saw many female characters fill traditionally masculine roles, *The Outer Worlds* expands on this even farther. As mentioned above, the player's engineer and gunslinger are both female, as are several CEOs. Although the greater female presence can be attributed to changes in real-world outlook, they also mirror the western's twisting of gender norms, as seen in stock characters such as Calamity Jane (Wills 5).

On entering the game, the player finds themselves at first situated between the savage and the metropolitan. The oppression of the Board—the metropolitan—casts an omnipresent shadow over the world from the start, with characters in the starting town of Edgewater being forced to repeat corporate slogans in their dialogue (*The Outer Worlds*). Meanwhile, the savage exists in the marauders, roaming bands of enemies that can not even be reasoned with, whom the player must engage with in their very first mission. Thus, the marauders fill the role of 'The Other.' Their actions consistently show them to be aggressive, as they invade the spaces set aside for civilization in the wilderness: the community center in Edgewater, the broadcasting station on Monarch, the ruins of Cascadia, and others (*The Outer Worlds*). Even the game distances them from humanity, with one character saying, "legend has it they crawled out of

the mines one day. Heard one fella suggest they might be aliens" (*The Outer* Worlds). The criteria for a regeneration through violence are laid from the beginning, and the player is fully ready to engage in war with the marauders.

This war never comes. As Slotkin describes, the fear of the savage is partly constructed to prevent class warfare between the ruling agents of America and the underprivileged (*Gunfighter Nation* 20, 21). The marauders make no actions against the player, and thus the lens of conflicts turns purely onto the Board, and the player is set on the path to enact the Myth of Redemptive Violence. As Wink outlines, ultimate evil must be overcome, and the Board certainly presents as evil. It would not be wrong to compare some of their actions to genocide. One quest reveals that employees are randomly selected to be pampered as part of an Early Retirement Fund. In reality, they're executed by robotic gunfire (*The Outer Worlds*). In an essay on what made World War II different than the reviled war in Vietnam, Walzer says of society, "We see it [Nazism]-and I don't use the phrase lightly-as evil objectified in the world, and in a form so potent and apparent that there could never have been anything to do but fight against it" (4). The Board conjures up the image of Nazism, and the audience is therefore conditioned to accept them as a total evil, ready to receive a just war.

The actions of the Board are brought into a completely new light about halfway through the game. A twist reveals "the shocking truth about the colony": Halcyon's soil does not provide enough nutrients for plants (*The Outer Worlds*). Therefore, the abuses of the Board were all attempts to manage the colony's impending famine. While forgiving the sins of the Board is up to the player's own opinions, there is at least a split-second moment where one is open to the Board's perspective. After this point, the player visits Tartarus, the Board's prison to liberate

Welles. Therein, the player is faced with several choices: forgiving the leaders of the Board. Chairman Rockwell and Adjutant Akande may both be preserved by a player aligned with Welles. Unlike *Fallout: New Vegas* above, where the game's final bosses can be peacefully persuaded to leave the Mojave, the ending of *The Outer Worlds* sees the forgiven Board members actively integrated into Welles' efforts to save the colony. The endings of the game even imply that Akande did change following the events at Tartarus: "There is another theory, which suggests that Sophia's encounter with you changed her, and she deliberately retreated from public view. However, she continued supporting the colony in secret" (*The Outer Worlds*). The player may straddle the border between civilization and the wilderness as Slotkin theorizes, but they use their knowledge to subvert both societies by choosing pacifism and forgiveness (*Gunfighter Nation* 14).

Unfortunately, this approach of pacifism does not continue through the entire game. A player has to witness at least one death to complete the game. The middle segment of the game occurs on the world Monarch, formerly Terra 1. Monarch is a moon dominated by two factions: Monarch Stellar Industries (MSI), a company with revolutionary ideas such as giving workers bathroom breaks, and the Iconoclasts, a group of religious zealots who have broken all ties with the Board and corporations (*The Outer Worlds*). The moon is a bit of a hellscape, marked by deadly wildlife and a highly sulfuric atmosphere. Prior to the events of the game, the Board cordoned off Monarch as a no-go zone through the Hazard Clause (*The Outer Worlds*).

Both MSI and the Iconoclasts present opportunities for rumination on choices and violence. Sanjar, the CEO of Monarch Stellar Industries, is presented as a pacifist who wants to get MSI back into the Board's good graces. To assist him, the player is sent off on a quest to

retrieve the BOLT-52, which is made out to be a weapon that can single-handedly force the Board to lift the Hazard Clause and accept MSI once more—calling to mind nuclear devastation and mutually assured destruction. On return to Sanjar, it is revealed the BOLT-52 is actually an incredibly complex document which can be used to legally blackmail the Board. When the player expresses surprise at this Sanjar says, "The world isn't changed with guns and speeches… but rather with meticulous documentation" (*The Outer Worlds*). While Sanjar is the game's poster child for pacifism, he is made out to be toothless. Instead of attempting to overturn the corporate status-quo, he merely wants to perfect it and make it more reasonable. Pacifism has been critiqued as an irrational stance due to pacifists believing in a right to life but not "force in defense of that right at least on some occasions" (Sterba 22).

We move across the aisle now and into the wilds of Monarch to the Iconoclasts. Sanjar's counterpart and former friend in the Iconoclasts is Graham. Graham runs the Iconoclasts as a commune which has broken the chains of the corporations and aims to completely upend the status quo. The Iconoclasts evoke various movements, from Anabaptists to Luddites, but their invocation of the in-game Marauders is particularly notable. Location and aesthetic tie the Iconoclasts and the Marauders together. Ten years before the events of *The Outer Worlds*, pirates stormed the MSI offices at Amber Heights and killed almost everyone present there, leaving Sanjar the highest-ranking member of MSI. The Iconoclasts have now claimed the ruins of Amber Heights, situating themselves on top of the memories of the pirate invasion. The armor of the Iconoclasts is not dissimilar to the Marauders. Just as American history presents a "cycle of *separation* and *regression*," so too does *The Outer Worlds* (Slotkin *Gunfighter Nation*

11). MSI and the Iconoclasts represent a microcosm of the struggle between the metropolitan and the savage, respectively, and the player must act as an emissary between both.

Through a side quest (with world-shaping ramifications) Graham is cast in a brand-new light. The player discovers evidence that Graham let the pirates into Amber Heights, and the blame for the massacre is partially on his shoulders (*The Outer Worlds*). On confrontation, Graham expresses guilt but deflects his own responsibility by saying, "The massacre of Amber Heights… presented the slim possibility of saving the souls of Terra 2" (*The Outer Worlds*). A similar approach to violence is expressed during the research of Brookman et al. into street violence, wherein many of those interviewed claimed they had 'no choice' in their actions, presenting a narrative that actions were outside their control (22). Graham employs the same tactic by claiming that he had to take the slim possibility of religious salvation, absolving himself of responsibility and acting in accordance with a greater code. The same code is foisted onto the player, with Graham ruminating on the power of free will by claiming it "is a double-edged sword… Whether your choices are helpful or harmful to the cosmos is not up to you" (*The Outer Worlds*).

Here it is important to pause and analyze *The Outer World's* outlook on choice. Vicar Max, one of the player's companions, initially follows a religion with a similar belief to Graham. This belief is 'The Plan,' which represents the various paths followers can take to reach the same end. He explains that people do have free will, but says The Plan is "Like an unbreakable elastic band. The further it is stretched, the more violent the correction" (*The Outer Worlds*). Accordingly, the choices one makes cause the path to become either more or less difficult (*The Outer Worlds*). All of these conversations are reminiscent of the nature of free will while playing

a video game. *The Outer Worlds* presents a plethora of ways to progress through quests but they lead to the same conclusion, creating an illusion of player agency (Domsch 90, 91). Therefore, avoiding killing opponents in the games makes the path harder, but ultimately leads to the same conclusion. As Sanjar attempts to reintegrate MSI into the Board, he must abuse loopholes in documentation, just as the pacifist player must stretch the elastic band of the game systems (such as reloading an earlier save when an enemy spots them) to avoid killing. At this point one must step back and realize that many of the techniques for pacifism, which will be discussed shortly, in *The Outer Worlds* do not apply to real life. Sanjar states that the world is not changed through guns or speeches—the two main tools of a player—but instead with documents. Rarely do we have opportunities to express pacifism in everyday life, but the process to register as a conscientious objector is a decent framework. The Selective Services website states that, "A registrant making a claim for conscientious objection is required to appear before his local board to explain his beliefs" and may even provide writing describing his beliefs and the history of them. While many video games are often cited as power fantasies, *The Outer Worlds* offers the chance to play out a peace fantasy through accomplishing world-shattering goals in a pacifist manner.

On Monarch, these tensions between the Iconoclasts and MSI finally come to a head when a Board ship crash-lands on the moon. Both factions want the ship's targeting computer, and task the player with retrieving it. The Iconoclasts want it to strike back against the corporations, and MSI needs it to protect themselves. Here, the player is poised to either engage in an extermination of The Other or turn their eyes on the metropolitan and enact class

warfare (Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* 20, 21). However, a third option is presented, one to avoid most bloodshed.

The conditions for this peaceful resolution are difficult. First Sanjar wants a performance review of Graham's second-in-command Zora (with whom he would be willing to work out a deal), but for the Iconoclasts the requirements are even more steep. Graham refuses to seek a peaceful resolution, while Zora does. Zora and the player confront Graham with the knowledge they gained of Amber Heights and attempt to force him to step down. Refusing to back down, Graham says, "If you want to lead them, you'll have to kill me" (*The Outer Worlds*). For what it's worth, Graham does have to be killed. It would not be an understatement to call the moment incredibly tragic; Zora says that death is often difficult and "This time… it's especially wrong" (*The Outer Worlds*). The impact of this decision resides solely in narrative consequences, for game rewards are never outlined to the player, and the "meaning of that choice is of the highest importance" (Domsch 135).

The long-term consequences for this confrontation are positive. Later on, MSI and the Iconoclasts broker peace. Even farther down the road, they assist the player at Tartarus and, in the ending, help the townships that may have "fallen into the cracks" (*The Outer Worlds*). However, none of these change the fact that immediately, Graham is dead. Killing him to secure Zora's promotion eerily echoes the events at Amber Heights. The player does learn a new consciousness from Graham and the occupants of the wilderness, which he puts to good use (Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation* 14). Even though this represents the most pragmatic of the endings, those around the player still cast doubt on the wisdom behind it.

4.2 SpaceMen: Companions and Masculinity

The colorful crewmembers that join the player on their adventures offer intriguing insights into the game's construction of masculinity. First, almost all of them join through their own volition. For example, Felix asks to join by saying, "That's a fine-looking ship. Only thing it's missing is me" (*The Outer Worlds*). Unlike *Knights of the Old Republic II*, seen above, the player does not subtly influence their companions, but invites them aboard as part of a mutually beneficial agreement. This reciprocity is emphasized through the presence of companion quests, wherein the player may help out their companions.

One of the most notable quests sees the player help Parvati, an adorkable female engineer from Edgewater and engage with a non-heterosexual experience. Her quest sees her meeting another female engineer, Junlei Tennyson of the Groundbreaker, a ship independent from the Board, and falling in love. Throughout this quest the player is constantly unable to perform traditionally masculinity. For example, early in the quest Parvati reveals that she is asexual, and five options are available to the player. Four of them involve the player encouraging Parvati ("Everyone's different. Don't worry about it") and the fifth has the player admit to asexuality (*The Outer Worlds*). Any of these options see the player reject masculinity by either accepting a sexual minority or revealing themselves as both a sexual minority and as someone who does not enjoy sex (Levant et al.). This choice both makes the game more accessible to those of other sexualities and creates an asexual experience, where the player never needs to—or can—perform any sort of sexuality to proceed.

On the other end of the spectrum from the likably sweet Parvati is Felix, a young urchin from Groundbreaker who mirrors the constructed image of "the angry, aggressive, White, working-class male as anti-authority rebel" (Katz). Felix is discontented with the corporate status quo and has frequent bouts of rage, such as smashing a "tossball stick" over the head of someone who insulted his favorite sports team (*The Outer Worlds*). Felix parallels the image of the alt-right activist, a man angry at the world and lashing out (Boehme 5). However, the parallel stops here. While the alt-right male is angry at the world and lashing out at minorities and marginalized groups, Felix gets along fine with his crewmates—a group diverse in race, gender, and sexuality. His rage exists without either gender or race, targeted at the corporate entity of The Board. He is mad at society for stagnating, not for changing. His engagement in violence throughout the game codes him as masculine, but Felix meets no other major criteria of masculinity. He is content to be a follower, accepting other sexualities, and not sexually active (*The Outer Worlds*). The game's endings never go well for him—Felix always ends up discontented at best or dead at worst. The only 'happy' ending for Felix sees a player complete his companion quest and then side with Phineas—which a pacificist player is likely to do. Ultimately, Felix realizes "the work of a revolution was done with two hands" (*The Outer Worlds*). In the end, he sheds his final vestige of masculinity to become content with manual labor.

Two other companions have trouble finding any healing in acts of violence. The first is the aforementioned Vicar Max, who is on a quest to discover a religious text which he thinks will help him to unravel the mysteries of the universe and achieve inner peace (*The Outer Worlds*). The book turns out to have been written in French, which Max cannot read. Vicar Max

wants to take his anger out on the man who sold him the book by beating him (possibly to death). “Will punishing you fix any of that? Of course not, but by Law, it will make me feel a whole lot better,” Max says (*The Outer Worlds*). The player has the ability to talk Max down, and peacefully go about the quest. If this option is taken, he thanks the player for preventing him from this course of action, saying “You saved me from myself. I don’t know if I could have lived with myself had I gone through with it” (*The Outer Worlds*). Nyoka, the black gunslinger, wants to lay her former friends to rest in their old base, which has unfortunately been overrun by vicious Mantisaurs. Once she and the player clear out the infestation, Nyoka says, “I thought I’d storm in here in a rage and exterminate all these bugs and everything would be alright in the end” (*The Outer Worlds*). Obviously, it was not. The killing itself accomplished nothing, and Nyoka can only truly be happy because the player chooses to help her and offers her a place in their crew. As can be seen, the majority of the player’s companions come to terms with violence and realize that it does not make them happy.

4.3 Rootin’, Tootin’, a Good Chance of Shootin’: Gameplay of The Outer Worlds

Finally, the gameplay of *The Outer Worlds* introduces the most possibilities of the three games. Dialogue skills (simply Speech in *Fallout: New Vegas*) have been subdivided into three categories: Persuade, Lie, and Intimidate. The player may level all three of these up, and avoiding combat often requires it, as some situations may only be resolved by one of the three (*The Outer Worlds*).

Even more appealing, stealth mechanics have been greatly expanded from the previous two games. While *Knights of the Old Republic II* relied on both an item and stealth skill to avoid

combat, *Fallout: New Vegas* merely relied on the skill, which the player could boost through use of aids. *The Outer Worlds* includes a stealth skill but greatly expands the system to make it more robust. Patches of grass may hide the player from prying eyes, and the game gives leeway before the player is spotted by enemies, as opposed to *Fallout: New Vegas*. Unlike *Fallout: New Vegas*, where masculine gameplay is stripped of enjoyment, *The Outer Worlds* strives to provide fun in the act of rejecting masculinity. There is something deeply amusing about taking a stealth approach to the final battle at Tartarus and merely strolling right past dozens of armed guards.

Despite the improved stealth and speech, gunplay has also been greatly improved. Combat remains a tantalizing possibility throughout the gameplay. Violence is cemented as the easy option and is objectively useless. Everything the violent player wants to accomplish can be achieved through stealth and conversation. With the right perks, the player can beat the game with only one death (the aforementioned death of Graham).

One final twist in the gameplay of *The Outer Worlds* is its off-brand VATS. Called TTD (Tactical Time Dilation), it allows the player to slow down time but maintain control over their aiming, unlike VATS. One additional aspect it throws in is a quick tidbit on each enemy targeted. A robot may be overdue for service, or a marauder may enjoy watching a soap opera. Although these facts are often humorous, they serve to construct humanity for the opponents. The violence becomes all-the more disconcerting as empathy is built for the opponents.

The Outer Worlds presents a game where non-violence can be achieved through the bounds of gameplay, and not through abusing systems. This non-violence is not merely simple,

but takes a deal of effort on the part of the player, as they must juggle multiple speech skills, stealth, and make peaceful choices. Violence may be an answer, but it is an easy solution. Breaking free from traditional narratives is a difficult task, but completely possible.

5. Conclusions

The games of Obsidian Entertainment had a greater engagement with the nature of masculinity and violence than I expected. It must be noted that the depictions of Wink's framework of Redemptive Violence are, with some exceptions, not present throughout these games. It must be said that with each subsequent game there were greater opportunities for the player to offer forgiveness to their enemies and avoid using violence to achieve their goals. I believe the medium of role-playing games specifically encourages this behavior. While violence is prevalent in games because it provides "a route to a sense of control (agency) that is satisfying," games with robust non-violent mechanics present another form of agency (Lagrange). Mechanics allowing for more robust options in solving quests without confrontation provide a diversity of playstyles for a variety of players, and having the opportunity to broker a deal with the villain gives allows the player to feel in control of the narrative. Even among gamers who prefer to use combat to resolve problems, the existence of pacifism makes the choice of violence more satisfying (Lagrange).

On the other hand, all three games presented completely uncritical depictions of Slotkin's Myth of Regeneration Through Violence. All three games see the player travel to the very edge of civilization, where they encounter enemies. Instead of becoming a reflection of their opponent, the player instead encounters a villain who mirrors them and has the choice to

close the circle (Slotkin, *The Myth of Regeneration Through Violence* 563). And for all the options seemingly available to the player, there actually is no choice. The player must always mirror this opponent.

In *Knights of the Old Republic II*, the player must always feed off killing, like Darth Nihilus. Ulysses in *Fallout: New Vegas* is a fellow courier like the player, who seeks to replicate the same destruction the player accidentally brought to the Divide. All roads lead to the player and Ulysses becoming doppelgangers. They either fight, with only one surviving, or join together in violence to defeat the Marked Men. Even in *The Outer Worlds*, a game offering so many non-violent options to the player, the circle is closed. The best choice on Monarch requires a violent seizure of leadership from Graham. In the remains of Amber Heights, the player must reenact the horrific events that took place there. At the frontiers of consciousness, there is no other choice but to give over to one's opponents.

Despite the bleakness of these situations, it should be acknowledged that there is an actual attempt to critique American masculinity. *Knights of the Old Republic II* offers the players many situations where masculinity must be performed (dominate this fight or dominate their mind). This illusion of choice is appropriate, as it reflects the illusion of the Force's binary—the same binary behind the Jedi Civil War which ripped apart the galaxy. Similarly, *Fallout: New Vegas* offers an even more scathing critique of manhood. It is indicted as the source of imperialism, oppression, rage, and rape. The very gameplay itself rebukes male pleasure, by pulling the player from the action and withholding meaningful exploration. Although completing the game requires engaging with the masculinity of nationalism, it shows the warfare that bleeds out of this unchecked machismo.

Only *The Outer Worlds* allows the player to break from masculinity. Siding with Phineas sees the player as nothing more than a follower. All the player's crewmates come aboard willingly as part of a transactional relationship, and the player character must respect diversity of sexuality. However, the irony is that this is constructed through a game that is clearly post-gender. Gender—and race—are little more than character traits like blond or brown hair. Felix is an angry, white male where there is no meaning to his masculinity or whiteness. Female companions are just as—if not more—masculine than the males. The villainous Board is a diverse body, and the final boss of it is even a female. Masculinity is never truly brought into question or criticized by the game, primarily because it isn't a topic the game chooses to address. Only through stripping the discourse around gender does *The Outer Worlds* achieve a world without masculinity.

Obsidian's games have consistently attempted to give the player as much agency as possible, both through narrative choices and within the game-world itself, which does allow the player with greater opportunities to break from both traditional narratives of masculinity and violence. However, despite engaging with themes of violence and masculinity, Obsidian's games never radically overturn them—which may be appropriate, given the context. War never changes—the world must be changed through meticulous documentation. Within the games is no magic solution to masculinity or violence. Rejecting them is a difficult process, requiring time and effort.

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