Why would I do a senior thesis on a roleplaying game?

This is pretty long, but I believe important to understand my perspective. You can also find this in the "About" section of this site. It's probably much easier to read there.

I started Radical Roleplayers because I had so many emotions about RPGs. It's hard to describe being a part of a video game fandom to someone who doesn't play these kinds of video games and when I try, I usually end up with a blank or confused stare from the person I'm talking to. When I began I knew two things about my senior capstone project: 1. it needed to be something I love and 2. it needed to be something that related to media studies. I love roleplaying games. I love stepping into another world and feeling like I'm a part of something else for a few hours. I love taking control of a character I've created and making decisions that are actually reflected in my game. It's more than just a game and RPGs are part of the way that I express creativity and passion. They offer me opportunities for escape from everyday life, but they also offer ways to reflect on some of the aspects of our society by providing contrasts or parallels to draw.

I started Radical Roleplayers for me. I got a lot of feedback and advice from people who wanted me to push the project into something else. I appreciated what they had to say, I really did, but at the end of the day, I didn't know how to express to them that Radical Roleplayers was a way for me to engage with my video game roleplaying in another form and to examine my own motives and passion for RPGs. Mass effect in particular. Throughout the semester, I played through all three games in the trilogy and journaled as I went along. Some of my journal entries were:

http://commanderhillaryshepar
for-all-my-roleplay-partners

greg relieved:

For all my roleplay partners:

Never hold your muse back. For real, if your muse wants to lash out at me, or kiss me, or tell me a horrible secret, or slam me against a wall and give me a slap. Don't even feel like I get your reply and judge you or your muse. Your...

Completely agree with this. From a personal point of view though, I can't help but wonder why this is so hard to do. Especially in a space that offers such creativity and freedom. If this isn't a place to let your muse run wild, I don't know what is.

I am in love with this. It's perfectly me.
filled with shit that we don't know about or understand. That vastness both terrifies and excites me. There are so many things there to be uncovered and explored. But with all of that unknown, there is equal great and unknown danger. As I let my vigilance against the universe go, I slowly start to become its protector. I guess I'm saying this because I feel like we're getting closer to something. That collector ship I wrote about a while ago felt like a big milestone. We're going to spend some time building up the team a bit more. Doing some more missions, solidifying our friendships, and setting us up for when we finally break the collector ship. I'll need to think about that. It seems like something big is about to happen, or end, or begin. I don't know, I wish I did, but we're all a part of this. I can only hold on tight and charge full speed ahead.

journal entry #5

Just to put a few things in perspective: Jacob's father is a power-hungry sadist. He runs a joint called the Syndicate. His son, Jacob, is the Syndicate's head of power and control. Jacob's childhood was brutal and marked by his desire for power. His family has a history of abandonment and abuse, and I sense the festering. Gordin, Ersus, Grunt, me—all of our crews are built on heavy accumulation and emotional scars. We're a bunch of misfits, people who have been handed shitty deals in life and we're doing the best we can with what we have.

Sometimes it's crazy when I think about how all of our crews are connected. What we're trying to accomplish. Literally the most important task in the entire universe is in our hands. Knowing that, I wouldn't ask for a different crew. What do I have to do if I am not a soldier who don't know loss or anguish?

journal entry #4

Picked up one last assignment on Illium. I ran into a slaver broker in Eternia who was trying to sell a Quarian to the syndicate. The first time I was out to do business, I ended up in the Strix rep to buy the contract. I saw a Quarian with a completely different look and I thought I could help her. She turned out to be just another Quarian. I helped her, and that was that.

Anyway, all of this reminiscing has a point. I promise, I gave up games for quite a few years after that. I didn't see the world for a few years. I was just at home. However, when I was finally able to go back to school, I discovered the love of playing games. I discovered new friends, new scenes, and new worlds. I found myself at home. I was ready to start over. I'm getting the feeling that I'm not the only one who feels this way.
I'm starting a roleplaying video diary!

Of course, I'll be playing Commander Shepard. As part of my ongoing exploration of roleplaying both in digital and physical spaces, I've decided to create Shepard's video diary. I'll be posting the first of my entries this weekend.

journal entry #2

So we are now on Illium. It reminds me of that world I lived in last year. In Earth history, it's all about money and scamming! Craziness. First thing I did when I got to Illium was go see Liara cause seriously, it's been 2 years... I hate to complain, but was there really nothing to do? Thought I'd go look for some work... never heard back. Never heard from them again. Guess I'll head out and explore some more.

journal entry #3

OK, not gonna lie. I find Miranda ridiculously attractive. I mean, I do have eyes. Realized after a while that she's not gay and doesn't even bat an eye at my charming smile. Tough crowd... She probably reads this journal too, but she knows she's not so whatever.

Anyway, what I wanted to bring up is our latest mission. Our task was pretty much to shadow escort her sister and her family to a safe relocation point. As I'm beginning to learn in common with us, everything went to shit. A crapload of Eclipse men, some weird toxic gas, and on top of that, Miranda gets betrayed by her childhood friend and almost kills him. Literally. Obviously couldn't let her do that, thought I care about her too much and as Biiar and the people in the city may seem, that would have been a huge deal. I know that girl's got a hard heart, but I chose to focus on Mass Effect for several reasons. I love the characters, the storyline, the community, and now Biiar has created in Mass Effect. I can never again hear the name Shepard without adding a silent "Commander" in front of it—it's a part of my life and many of my friends don't even know I play. As I was presenting my thesis...
journal entry #1

Goddess, so much has changed. This new crew, working for Cerberus, the fucking abusive Man (really, what’s with his eyes?). I’m still not sure who I trust on this ship, at least not like it was on Normandy the first (and last) time I ever saw her. Anyway, that being said, I’ve decided to start journaling. At least I’ll have somewhere to put all of these damn thoughts. I probably should have started journaling back when all that stuff first started going down with Saren and the Reapers. Goddess knows I was stretched to the limit… but yeah, so this is my first entry if this works out there will be many more to come.

Shepard, signing off.

1 note

journal entry #2

So we are now on Illium. It reminds me of that Wall Street I read about in Earth history. It’s all about money and scamming! Craziness! First thing I did when I got to Illium was go see Liara. She’s been serious. It’s been 2 years… I hate to complain, but I was really disappointed after my meeting with her with what happened between her and I, and I could understand Asari’s reaction. She’s an Alliance soldier, through and through. But Liara, she changed. Putting aside the fact that she seems more like a mob boss than a scientist now, I’m most confused about how she acts like nothing ever happened between us. We went through a lot of shit together, and I know I can’t expect her to just drop her life and come with me, but she hardly acts like we have history together… Why does she seem so cold? It gives me a cold and makes me think, ‘fuck it, I’ll do what I want!’ At first I was feeling a bit guilty about flitting so hystically with Kell, but now just feel annoyed with Liara. She acts like her whole crusade for the Shadow Broker revolves around the fact that he tried to take my body. I don’t know, I am grateful though. If it weren’t for her I wouldn’t even be here right now. I still need to be rescued. I can’t be too pissed at her, I guess I just wish I knew where we stood. I wish she would say something about us… And that whole thing with Kelly—that’s another story. She’s cute and seems so eager. She’s just about the only normal person on this whole damn ship. I don’t know where this flirty relationship is going, but I’m liking it so far.

1 note

To answer Radical

Roleplayers, just sign up!

Play on, my friends.

1 note
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me to engage with my video game roleplaying in another form and to examine my own motives and passion for RPGs, Mass Effect in particular. Throughout the semester, I played through all three games in the trilogy and journal as I went along. Some of my journals were in character while others were personal and introspective.

But I wasn’t always this open about how much I love video games. In fact, this is a relatively new thing. For a long time I felt an odd sense of shame for being so invested in a fictional world and I know others who belong to fandoms have felt this at some time or another. When I was a kid, I was a huge fan of Pokemon. I would literally play Pokemon on my Gameboy every free moment I snatched. It got to a point where my older sister and her friends would make fun of me for being “weird.” She would pretty much torture me both physically and emotionally. She’s six years older, and she was always jealous of how popular she was at her school. Not only was her skin tone much lighter than mine (she’s part white and our family used to call her “Red”), but she was also thin, had long straight hair, and everybody loved her outgoing personality. But these issues are other points that I’ve held to work through and I can’t really go into them now or this would be much longer than it already is. So anyway, I wanted her and her friends to like me, as well as the kids at my school, but I wasn’t yet willing to give up any of my games to make that happen. I got to a point where I would hide my games in my pantry and my family wouldn’t see me playing games anymore. I’d turn on the shower and hide in the bathroom and play, or I was going to bed early and play, I’d even say I was going to the playground and instead sit in the library and play. In middle school, I joined a secret club where a group of us would get together and do Star Wars live action roleplaying. It wasn’t actually a secret club, the other members were just fine with letting others know that it existed, but I was too embarrassed. I would deny I was in the club even if my club friends were present. I’m surprised they didn’t kick me out. I would have.

Anyway, all of this reminiscing has a point, I promise. I gave up games for quite a few years. I didn’t want to be the weird loner kid when I went to high school because I was already that at home. So I sort of remedied it, I dressed differently, acted differently, actually hung out with people instead of playing games alone. I discovered smoking, and women, and sex, and all the other shit you would expect from “rebellious teen years,” but I did it in secret. At home I was still the weird loner kid who never got in trouble. I used to scuff at movies where the school “nerd” would abscond with the things that made them who they are and pretend to be someone they aren’t because of the superficial desire to be popular. In hindsight, that’s exactly what I did. It seems like some sort of right out of a movie, but exactly what I did. I didn’t really start being my full self again until after a year ago. I stopped trying to model myself after other people, I stopped giving a shit about what everyone else thought. I started dressing however the hell I wanted to (some of my friends now say that I dress like a grandpa in the 50s… I dig it). I openly admitted that I love fanfiction, and I started playing video games again. This may seem trivial to most people reading this, but I’d just like to let you know that I don’t give a fuck. It was important to me and it was important to really feeling like myself again.

When my senior year of college (this year) began, I knew I needed to do something for my capstone project that I could actually care about if I didn’t want it to be painful. This project was still painful, but in a good way. So let me reiterate that I started Radical Roleplayers for me. I wanted to publicize my roleplaying and play (pun intended) with what it means to be a roleplayer; I experimented with video roleplay, written roleplay, and I engaged with my roleplaying in a critical manner that I had never considered before. I didn’t start this blog to be something that received a lot of traffic, even though I knew that was something my professor wanted more of whether or not anyone read it at all. I chose to focus on Mass Effect for several reasons: I love the characters, the storyline, the community, and the world that Bioware has created in Mass Effect. I can never again hear the name Shepard without adding a silent “Commander” in front of it—it’s a part of my life and many of my friends don’t even know. As I was presenting my thesis earlier in the semester, I often said my goals were to “challenge how we think of roleplaying” etc etc. When I really think about it though, the only person I really wanted to challenge was myself. I threw myself head first into video games, roleplaying, cosplay, and all the other stuff that I had given up and I didn’t hide it. It will most likely continue to use this as a roleplaying forum.
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Play on, my friends.
Game Info

About the Games
Not everyone who lands on this blog is familiar with the Mass Effect games. Here is an excerpt from the official description to lay some groundwork:

“The galaxy is trapped in an endless cycle of extinction. Every 50,000 years, an ancient machine race invades the galaxy. With ruthless efficiency, the machines wipe out all advanced organic civilization. They leave behind only the scattered ruins of technology, destroying all evidence of their own existence.

Few believe this ancient legend. You, however, know it to be true. It is your mission. As Commander Shepard of the SSV Normandy, you will take your elite recon squad across a galaxy in turmoil, in a desperate race to stop the return of an enemy without mercy...

Mass Effect allows you to create your own customizable version of Commander Shepard (or jump in and use the pre-created character) and plunge yourself into the center of an epic science-fiction story. Choose your squad-mates, your weapons, skills and abilities, and customize your vehicles, armor and appearance - you are in complete control over your experience.”

My Squad
Throughout the game, you, as Shepard, are able to recruit people from across the galaxy to join your squad. They come from many walks of life and essential skills to your success in the game. Here are the people I recruited to fight by my side through the games:

Liara: Asari research doctor who spends most of her time obsessing over ancient civilizations and being awkwardly adorable. She’s a powerful biotic (at least in ME3) and my occasional girlfriend when she’s not busy hiring mercenaries to hunt and kill the Shadow Broker.
Garrus: Turian ex-police officer turned vigilante. He's always got my back on the battlefield and off. Spends most of his time performing "calibrations."

Miranda: Human, Cerberus officer, daughter of a ridiculously wealthy man who used some crazy eugenics to create the "perfect human." Strong powerful woman who keeps a lot of secrets. Also hates her father because he's a controlling maniac. Also kind of a bitch.
Jacob: Cerberus operative. Pretty much an overall nice and fair guy. Often a good person to approach for an objective opinion.

Mordin: Salarian mad scientist that speaks in sentence fragments. Really smart and adorable. Also pretty handy with a gun.

Grunt: Tank-born krogan soldier who is technically about 2 years old, but the size of a full-grown krogan. Generally says things that don’t make any sense.
Thane: Drell assassin who has a terminal disease and a recently rekindled relationship with his son. Pretty soft-spoken and introspective most of the time. Nice to talk to.

Jack: Nicknamed “the psychotic biotic.” Fits her well. She spent most of her life in a cell in a Cerberus facility as they used children to build the “perfect” human biotic. Escaped from the compound and then spent a lot of time in prison cells. She’s got a bad mouth and a giant chip on her shoulder for all people.
Tali: Quirky and opinionated quarian engineer. Spends a lot of time doing nerdy tech things and trying to do what she can to help her people reclaim their homeworld.

Others characters to know

Kelly: My assistant and makeshift ship therapist. Not sure what her job is exactly...
Joker: The most awesome ship pilot in the entire galaxy. Literally can fly through anything. A loyal friend and always offering comedic relief to any tense situation. Secretly in love with EDI.

EDI: An onboard AI who’s slowly developing her own personality and trying to understand humans. She makes jokes like, “I enjoy the sight of humans on their knees.”

All squad photos from: http://masseffect.wikia.com/wiki/Mass_Effect_Wiki