

Real or Not Real:  
Fragmentation, Fabrication, and Composite Identity in *The Hunger Games* and the *Mass Effect*  
Trilogy

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### Abstract

As one glance at box office ratings from the past decade can attest to, twenty-first century Western society seems particularly fixated on coming-of-age stories. These stories reflect the quintessential search for identity, as explained by developmental psychologist Erik Erikson. As Erikson argues throughout his works, the fundamental task of the individual on his journey to becoming a healthy, mature adult is the formation of a personal identity and sense of self that is both unified and whole. What seems particularly ironic, however, is that these coming-of-age stories are released into a culture that is largely dismissive of Erikson's theory of identity. Instead, theorists such as Jason Zingsheim insist on the mutability of human beings, arguing that identity is plural rather than singular and that contemporary society has made it impossible for the individual to develop an integrated sense of self.

Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* and BioWare's *Mass Effect* trilogy, however, reveal that the gulf between Erikson's theory of the self and postmodern theories of identity may not be as large as typically thought. Both narratives highlight the complexity of human beings, maintaining that individuals do not remain static over time, but rather change as they grow and mature. Individuals may take on different roles throughout their lifetime, and various aspects of their personalities may often seem at odds with each other, but they make sense of their identity by piecing together the different elements of their inner self to form one unified and intelligible whole.

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## Chapter One: Introduction and Critical Frame

The Cognitive Questions (asked by most artists of the 20th century, Platonic or Aristotelian, till around 1958):

“How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?”

The Postcognitive Questions (asked by most artists since then):

“Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?”

– Dick Higgins, *A Dialectic of Centuries* (qtd. in McHale 1)

### Introduction to Topic

From the film adaptations of Veronica Roth’s *Divergent* series to the release of 20th Century Fox and Marvel’s most recent X-Men movies, audiences appear quite willing to pay to see characters struggle over what it means to be human—and, more specifically, what it means to grow and develop as a unique individual. Though such films may initially seem to have little in common apart from their genre, they are also similar in that an essential part of their narratives can be found in the characters’ journeys to discover themselves. As such, these coming-of-age stories represent the quintessential search for identity, as explained by twentieth-century developmental psychologist and psychoanalyst Erik Erikson. As Erikson argues throughout his works on human development, the fundamental task of the individual on his journey to becoming a healthy, mature adult is the formation of a personal identity and sense of self<sup>1</sup> that is both unified and whole.

What seems particularly ironic is that these coming-of-age stories have been released into a culture that is largely dismissive of Erikson’s theory of integrated, singular identity. Instead,

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this thesis, the terms “identity” and “self” will for the most part be used interchangeably. The phrases “sense of self” and “sense of identity” refer specifically to how an individual sees himself as separate from other individuals. Essentially, it is the answer to the question “Who am I?”

twenty-first century theorists such as Jason Zingsheim emphasize the changeableness and mutability of human beings, arguing that identity is plural rather than singular and that contemporary society has made it impossible for the individual to develop an integrated sense of self. However, as a close look at coming-of-age novels and narrative-driven role-play games (RPGs) such as Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* and BioWare's *Mass Effect* series reveals, there are more similarities between these two views of identity than is initially apparent. Personal identity as Erikson understands it is never static and unchanging, as he argues that the healthy individual is able to take the seemingly incongruous aspects of his identity and arrive at a sense of self that is for the most part unified and whole. In order to come at an adequate understanding of how *The Hunger Games* and *Mass Effect* solve the tension created by the presence of these two views of identity, a closer look at the theories themselves is necessary.

### **Erikson's Ego Identity: Action and Integration**

As Erikson claims in *The Challenge of Youth*, the term identity had become so much a part of mainstream culture even in his time that it was used "with faddish ease" (13), and often with little regard for what the term meant. Despite the ubiquity of the term, however, Erikson argues that laymen and experts alike often have difficulty pinning down its meaning:

"Identity" and "identity crisis" have in popular and scientific usage become terms which alternatively circumscribe something so large and so seemingly self-evident that to demand a definition would almost seem petty, while at other times they designate something made so narrow of purposes of measurement that the over-all meaning is lost, and it could just as well be called something else.

*(Identity: Youth and Crisis 15)*

With these misgivings in mind, Erikson seeks to define the term in the prologue of *Identity: Youth and Crisis* through the use of two testimonies—one from William James, and another from Sigmund Freud.<sup>2</sup> In a letter to his wife, James describes what Erikson calls “a sense of identity”: “A man’s character is discernible in the mental or moral attitude in which, when it came upon him, he felt himself most deeply and intensely active and alive. At such moments there is a voice inside which speaks and says: ‘*This is the real me!*’” (qtd. in 19, emphasis in original). Identity (or “character,” to use James’ term) therefore involves both cognitive and behavioral components: not only is it “I think, therefore I am,” but “I *act*, therefore I am.” This sense of identity also “came upon” the individual in James’ description, suggesting that it is not something that can be constructed through conscious effort.

These two components—the action-oriented and the primarily unconscious means through which identity is realized—seem central to Erikson’s theory of personal identity. However, Erikson is not the first well-known figure to speak of identity in terms of action. Aristotle also recognized the importance of action as an outward expression of one’s identity, although like James he seemed to prefer the term “character.” According to Silvia Carli in “The Love Affair between Philosophy and Poetry: Aristotle’s Poetics and Narrative Identity,” Aristotle defines character in his work *Metaphysics* as the “essence” of who we are, determined “in virtue of [ourselves]” (qtd. in 152). However, as Aristotle argues in his *Poetics*, works of literature are not primarily driven by those unseen, inward qualities of men, but rather “men in action” (59). The main principle of character development that writers should follow, according to Aristotle, is that “[their] characters should be good,” a goodness that is shown when “some

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<sup>2</sup> According to Erikson, these men “are bearded and patriarchal founding fathers of the psychologies on which our thinking on identity is based” (19). Freud’s involvement in developmental psychology and psychoanalytical criticism may go unstated, but Erikson claims that James eventually became “*the* Psychologist-Philosopher of American Pragmatism” (20, emphasis in original).

preference is revealed in speech or action [. . .] for what is good” (76). The decisions that characters make consequently seem to be the primary indicators of their identity. As Carli points out in reference to *Metaphysics*, “according to [Aristotle’s] theory of Being, an agent is one thing because he is a substance with attributes, and all of his attributes—including actions—can be predicated of that one substance” (152). Although character is concerned with the qualities that make up a man, that character is revealed through its outward expression—through action. Aristotle’s view of identity as character in action therefore seems in line with Erikson’s explanation of the term in *Identity: Youth in Crisis* and serves as a template through which to analyze identity in *The Hunger Games* as well as in *Mass Effect*.

Another significant aspect of Erikson’s theory of personal identity is that the individual is largely unaware of the identity process until that moment of clarity typically occurring during adolescence when “a sense of identity” comes upon him. In *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, Erikson argues that “[w]e are [. . .] most aware of our identity when we are just about to gain it” (165). Erikson is specifically referring to the fifth stage of his theory of psychosocial development where individuals develop a unique sense of self in relation to society and the environment around them. During this stage, individuals ask the important questions of “Who am I?” and “What can I be?” and—if they are successful—ultimately gain an established sense of self (328). In *Childhood and Society*, Erikson draws from the works of Freud to further describe the unique, personal identity that healthy individuals establish by the end of this stage. Now termed “ego identity” (306) for the duration of his discussion, Erikson’s understanding of personal identity is tied to Freud’s concept of the id, ego, and superego. In order to provide a clearer picture of his concept of ego identity, Erikson also defines the other two parts of Freud’s theory of the psyche. The id is the seat of an individual’s desire, “everything which would make us ‘mere creatures’”

and that “must be overcome before we can be quite human” (192-3). On the other end of the spectrum is the superego, which serves as the governing factor and “limits the expression of the id by opposing to it the demands of conscience” (193).

However, the aspect of Freud’s theory that Erikson focuses on most intently throughout his own works is the ego: “Between the id and the superego, [. . .] the ego dwells. Consistently balancing and warding off the extreme ways of the other two, the ego keeps tuned to the reality of the historical day, testing perceptions, selecting memories, governing action, and otherwise integrating the individual’s capacities of orientation and planning” (193). Achieving this balance, this state of being “in-between” (192), seems to be a necessary achievement in order for an individual to arrive at what Erikson argues is the goal of adolescence, “the creation of a sense of sameness, a unity of personality now felt by the individual and recognized by others as having consistency in time” (*The Challenge of Youth* 13). The “consistency” and “unity of personality” emphasized by Erikson’s theory of psychosocial identity may at first glance seem at odds with postmodernist assurances of the unbridled multiplicity of the self<sup>3</sup>, but many postmodern popular narratives ultimately draw upon this earlier definition of the self in the characterization of their primary protagonists.<sup>4</sup>

In coming-of-age stories such as *The Hunger Games*, protagonists Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mallark exemplify the fifth stage of Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development as they

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<sup>3</sup> Several postmodernist identity theorists use this argument to highlight the flaws in Erikson’s theory of identity, without realizing the similarities in the modern and postmodern concepts of the self.

<sup>4</sup> In Walter Truett Anderson’s *Reality Isn’t What It Used to Be: Theatrical Politics, Ready-to-Wear Religion, Global Myths, Primitive Chic, and Other Wonders of the Postmodern World*, he differentiates between the terms “postmodern” and “postmodernist” in his discussion about fiction. According to him, “Postmodernist fiction [. . .] is quite self-conscious in showing its awareness of the social construction of reality, calls our attention to the games it plays with the conventions of literature. Postmodern fiction—which is simply anything written in the postmodern era—reveals its own awareness of the social construction of reality in different, and sometimes more interesting ways” (101). Unless explicitly stated otherwise, the term postmodern shall be used in this work to refer to the time period of postmodernism, whereas the terms postmodernist and postmodernist thought will refer to this “self-conscious” and generally relativistic mindset of contemporary Western culture.

struggle to alternately discover and maintain a firm sense of their identities. Critically acclaimed, narrative-driven video game franchises such as the *Mass Effect* trilogy also draw from the fifth stage of psychosocial development in that they focus on the gradual revelation of their primary characters' identities. The player decides how the narrative's protagonist interacts with the game world, altering how the game progresses as the player participates in the construction or revelation of that character's identity.<sup>5</sup>

### **Fragments of a Postmodern Identity**

Despite the apparent dissimilarities between Erikson's understanding of identity and contemporary postmodernist theories of selfhood, several critics have traced a "growing interest in the role of culture and history in shaping the content of basic psychological processes" (Hermans, et al. 23) to Erikson's work on psychosocial development. According to Lewis D. Wurgaft in "Identity in World History: A Postmodern Perspective," "Since Erik Erikson's clinical and psychohistorical writings of the 1950s and 1960s, the notion of identity has served as a bridge between formulations of personality development and the psychosocial aspects of cultural cohesiveness" (67). Rather than seeing identity and society as singular, contained entities existing in objective reality, "postmodern reformulations of identity theory challenge the notion of cultural boundedness by emphasizing the discontinuities to modern life and the inescapably plural character of contemporary identity" (67). These widespread assumptions about contemporary society in postmodernist theory and criticism are evidenced in *Postmodernist*

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<sup>5</sup> RPGs in particular provide players with numerous opportunities to construct the playable character's identity, although some RPGs such as *The Witcher 2: Assassin of Kings* (CD Projekt RED) come with an established identity as players change limited aspects of the character's inner self. First-person shooters such as *Halo* (Bungie, 343 Industries), on the other hand, can be heavily narrative-driven, but players are typically called upon to *facilitate* the revelation of the playable character's identity rather than decide the path that identity might take.

*Fiction*, where Brian McHale seems to take these assumptions to their logical extremes by extending them to postmodernism in general:

There is no postmodernism “out there” in the world any more than there ever was a Renaissance or a romanticism “out there.” These are all literary-historical fictions, discursive artifacts constructed either by contemporary readers and writers or retrospectively by literary historians. And since they are discursive constructs rather than real-world objects, it is possible to construct them in a variety of ways [. . .], none of them any less “true” or less fictional than the others, since all of them are finally fictions. (4)

Though McHale does not specifically discuss identity, this excerpt is significant because it makes frequent use of the word “construct,” a term not unfamiliar to postmodernist discourse and that points toward contemporary theorists’ emphasis on the individual as primary constructor of his worldview and of his own identity.

For example, in “The Dialogical Self: Beyond Individualism and Rationalism,” Hubert J. M. Hermans, et al. draw heavily from the work of the American psychologist George Kelly—the “founder of the *psychology of personal constructs*” (23, emphasis in original)—in their discussion of the critical framework that backs their theory of identity. According to Hermans, et al., “Much of Kelly’s thinking is based on *constructive alternativism*. To make sense of the world, one must interpret it, and alternative interpretations are always available [. . .]. However, absolute construction of the universe is impossible, and therefore one must settle for a series of successive approximations to it” (23, emphasis in original). This image of “a series of successive approximations” is mirrored in *Simulacra and Simulation*, where Jean Baudrillard argues that the contemporary world is saturated with “signs” and “images” of the real that have lost their

referents. What mankind perceives as reality has been artificially manufactured, “and it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times” (Baudrillard 2). The flickering shadows in Plato’s cave are not cast from figures passing in front of an unseen fire, but from yet *more* shadows, and we can never escape the prison of the cave to reach the unfiltered light of the world above.

This suspicion of objective reality also extends to postmodernist views of identity. As McHale suggests, the very name of the postmodernist movement “signifies a poetics which is the successor of, or possibly a reaction against, the poetics of early twentieth-century modernism” (5). The postmodernist response is not just reserved for modernist theories of objective reality, but extends to their conceptions of identity and being. McHale highlights this two-fold divergence with an excerpt taken from Dick Higgins’ *A Dialectic of Centuries*. According to Higgins, artists from the early half of the twentieth century tended to ask questions such as “How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it?” Artists living after the second half of the century, however, gravitate more toward questions like “Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it?” (qtd. in 1). Here, McHale suggests that within modernist thought, the world is singular and the self, “I,” at least appears unified and whole. Postmodernist thought instead suggests multiple worlds and “selves,” calling the reader to *choose* between them.

Postmodernist thought on the whole seems to reject the very idea of an integrated self along with the possibility of an objective, fixed reality. According to Wurgaft, contemporary psychoanalysts see the notion of a stable identity as a construct of Western thought that neglects the subjective experience of humanity (70). For instance, according to psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas, “There is no one unified mental phenomenon that we can term self [. . .]. The concept of self should refer to the positions or points of view from which and through which we sense, feel,

observe and reflect on distinct and separate experiences in our being” (qtd. in Wurgaft 77). Not only is reality subjective, then, but identity is as well—one’s being is composed of “distinct and separate experiences” that could never produce a unified sense of self. In their article, Hermans, et al. focus heavily on the idea of a subjective identity, arguing that an individual internalizes various “other people [who] occupy positions in the multivoiced self” (29). Instead of the centralized, singular self espoused by classical Western thought, “The self is not only ‘here’ but also ‘there,’ and because of the power of imagination the person can act as if he or she were the other. [. . .] *I* construe another person or being as a position that *I* can occupy and a position that creates an alternative perspective on the world and myself” (29, emphasis in original). Identity becomes plural as the individual adopts the various roles he occupies (and imagines that he occupies), and there is no indication of these roles coming together to form a unified whole.

The mutational theory of identity also highlights a shifting multiplicity of the self, although it manages to do so without the borderline schizophrenia suggested by the theory of identity espoused by Hermans, et al. According to Zingsheim, the mutational theory regards identity as never fully realized, but as always being constructed and reconstructed according to the “various [. . .] subjectivities” present in an individual—subjectivities that are constantly changing and adapting to one another (226). Zingsheim quotes from several experts in order to express his point about the unfinished nature of postmodern identity. For instance, according to him, Lawrence Grossberg, et al. argue in their book *MediaMaking: Mass Media in a Popular Culture* that the shifting subjectivities of the self “are culturally constructed and can be understood only relationally. Consequently, they are always in process and incomplete” (qtd. in Zingsheim 226). Although the theories of identity maintained by these various postmodernist

scholars recognize the fact that human beings are influenced by their environment and do indeed change over time, there seems to be a lack of cohesiveness in their definitions of the self.

Both *The Hunger Games* and *Mass Effect* also appear to draw on these postmodernist theories of identity. Katniss in particular reflects the theory of identity espoused by Hermans, et al. as she adopts several conflicting roles in order to survive. Although these roles are initially adopted for the sake of appearances and to gain sponsorship in the arena, they ultimately impact her actions and consequently her inner identity in significant ways. *Mass Effect* likewise draws upon postmodernist understandings of the self in its character development throughout the games—especially in regards to playable character Commander Shepard. Like most narrative-driven RPGs, the player has the ability to make choices throughout the three games that directly impact Shepard’s identity. This ability suggests a progression of Shepards whose identities—similar to individuals living in postmodern society—seem incapable of being integrated into a singular sense of self. However, despite the unrestrained multiplicity of identity suggested by the theories that these narratives draw upon, a close look at Erikson’s body of work reveals that there are more similarities between his understanding of identity and at least some postmodern views of the term.

### **The Convoluted Nexus of Identity**

Erikson has often been criticized for having a narrow view of identity formation that, according to Wurgaft, argues for “a more cohesive account [. . .] than is warranted by the complexity of psychic experience” (72). Wurgaft goes on to argue that a close reading of Erikson’s historical writings reveals “both an ideal of wholeness and a contrasting awareness of the centrifugal forces threatening the ego’s cohesion” (72). The consequence of this supposed contrast is that “a tension emerges between a fluid notion of wholeness, receptive to creativity

and existential indeterminacy, and a more totalistic version of identity which emphasizes its rigid and absolutist elements” (72). Although Wurgaft acknowledges nuances in Erikson’s work that are often overlooked in contemporary criticism of the psychoanalyst, he also sees Erikson’s view of “the fluid notion of wholeness” as something that contradicts the “totalistic” theory of identity that many critics attribute to Erikson.

What Wurgaft does not take into account, however, is that Erikson’s assurances of the fluidity of a healthy identity is not at odds with his overall argument that an individual’s fully realized sense of self is both unified and whole. For instance, Erikson’s work *Identity: Youth and Crisis* reveals a clear division between “wholeness” and what Erikson would term as an unhealthy “totalism”:

Wholeness seems to connote an assembly of parts, even quite diversified parts, that enter into fruitful association and organization. [. . .] As a Gestalt<sup>6</sup>, then, wholeness emphasizes a sound, organic, progressive mutuality between diversified functions and parts within an entirety, the boundaries of which are open and fluid. Totality, on the contrary, evokes a Gestalt in which an absolute boundary is emphasized: given a certain arbitrary delineation, nothing that belongs inside must be left outside, nothing that must be outside can be tolerated inside. (80-1)

This totality, according to Erikson, is not a characteristic of a healthy individual’s identity, for totalism serves as a reaction to an individual “los[ing] an essential wholeness” whereby he drastically “restructures himself and [his perception of] the world” (81). Rather than the static,

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<sup>6</sup> According to Merriam-Webster, a gestalt is a term used in psychology to describe “something that is made of many parts and yet is somehow more than or different from the combination of its parts” (“gestalt”). As such, Erikson seems to be using it to describe how the “wholeness” of identity suggested by his theory of psychosocial development is made up of various parts that come together to form a unified identity.

unchanging identity suggested by totalism, a healthy personal identity is characterized by a sense of fluidity that is not entirely resistant to change. Erikson's theory of identity is thus more cognizant of the shifts that occur in the human psyche than contemporary critics suggest, for as Erikson also argues in *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, "identity is never 'established' as an 'achievement' in the form of a personality armor, or of anything static and unchangeable" (24).

Despite the claims of postmodernist theorists such as Hermans, et al. that identity is characterized by a host of selves in constant flux, there are some contemporary theorists who do not unilaterally dismiss all claims of a coherent and moderately consistent self. For instance, Wurgaft mentions "clinician and feminist" Jane Flax, who he argues may be "sympathetic to postmodern deconstructions of the cohesive self, [yet] is unwilling to abandon all discourses rooted in a sense of continuous or integrated subjectivity" (82). According to Wurgaft, Flax even goes so far as to state that "those who celebrate or call for a 'decentered' self seem self-deceptively naïve and unaware of the basic cohesion within themselves that makes the fragmentation of experiences something other than a terrifying slide into psychosis" (qtd. in Wurgaft 82). Stephen Mitchell likewise seems to realize the dangers of taking a theory of identity that purports the multiplicity of the self too far, arguing that the difference between healthy individuals and those with multiple personality disorders is that the latter have "no recognition of a continuous, enduring subjectivity" (Wurgaft 82). Flax's recognition of the cohesive elements inherent within each individual and the sense of continuity that Mitchell argues is characteristic of a healthy identity both bear remarkable similarities to Erikson's theory of personal identity.

Another author who makes an effort to recognize the fluidity of identity, while also acknowledging its inherent cohesiveness, is Zingsheim in his article "Developing Mutational

Identity Theory: Evolution, Multiplicity, Embodiment, and Agency.”<sup>7</sup> Zingsheim attempts to arrive at a theory of identity that does not deny the coherency of an individual’s sense of self, but also accounts for the small and large shifts in identity that can occur over time. According to him, “theories of identity must acknowledge the fragmented nature of the self without abandoning the self, its material conditions, or the desire for coherence (even if temporary and partially illusory)” (25). Although Zingsheim’s suggestion that the coherence of the self could be “partially illusory,” he does realize that there is danger in disregarding the unified self and that there is something inherent within the individual that moves inexorably toward coherency.

Zingsheim draws from the science fiction franchises of the *X-Men* films and the television series *Heroes* in order to support his relatively balanced approach to identity. In his article, the author uses the metaphor of mutant teams to describe how each individual is comprised of shifting subjectivities that sometimes contradict one another:

Mutants—as discrete beings—never operate entirely alone; they exist in community and in relationship with other mutants. A mutational perspective of identity must also be drawn at this level of relationality. Mutational identity leads us to view identity and individuals as composed of multiple mutants or subjectivities. An historical individual is not simply a mutant; rather he or she is composed of a multitude of mutants—a team of subjectivities—each shifting and morphing, with his or her own power, and with unpredictable relationships to others. (28)

The mutational theory is thus similar to the theory of identity espoused by Hermans, et al., apart from the fact that those separate and mutating fragments of identity come together “to function

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<sup>7</sup> Zingsheim deviates from this more balanced account in “X-Men Evolution: Mutational Identity and Shifting Subjectivities,” where he specifically highlights the shifting and unstable elements of mutational identity theory.

as a unified and quarrelsome team” (28). Zingsheim goes on to argue that identity is also mutational in that it specifically has the ability to change, stating that “[t]o view identity as mutation is to acknowledge that it is kinetic. Identity is not static or stable; it shifts over time and space” (28). These shifts in identity tend to occur gradually over the course of one’s life, but Zingsheim argues that there are also moments when “one’s identity is radically altered” (29), such as when one loses a loved one.

However, Zingsheim goes on to acknowledge the dangers of focusing too heavily on the shifting and uncertain elements of the mutational identity theory, claiming that “[t]aken to its extreme, this constant reconfiguring of identity risks sliding into a Baudrillardian postmodernism, making the notion of a self untenable” (29). Despite the “motion and instability” that Zingsheim argues characterizes identity, “we must act *as if* we were stable. [. . .] We attempt to hang on to those identity formations that assist us in making sense of the world and our immediate contexts” (29). Despite his claims to marry both the semi-permanency of Erikson’s concept of the self and the fluidity of postmodernist approaches to identity, the author’s understanding of identity seems to lean toward a more postmodernist view, as he argues that identity is characterized by constant change and that any stability or cohesiveness is something that is wished upon it by an individual attempting to make sense of the world around him.

The postmodernist leanings of Zingsheim’s theory of identity notwithstanding, his view on how human beings understand and make sense of reality is echoed in James K. A. Smith’s *Imagining the Kingdom*. Like Hermans, et al., Smith seems to find fault with dominant Western theories regarding reality, arguing that Christian educators’ fixation with the concept of worldview paints human beings “as primarily *spectators* of the world rather than as *actors* in the

world” (8, emphasis in original).<sup>8</sup> Smith’s concern with action over mere perception is seen in his description of identity. Echoing both Aristotle and Erikson’s understandings of the term, Smith argues that “[w]hat we do is driven by who we are, by the kind of person we have become” (32). Smith spends a good deal of his book detailing how human beings perceive and make sense of the world as active rather than passive participants in it. According to Smith, “We live entirely [. . .] by the imposition of a narrative line among disparate images” (108). Although a given series of images perceived in reality may in truth be disconnected entities, humans perceive them as a whole in order to make sense of them and gain “preconscious knowledge” (Smith 44) of the world around them.

This preconscious knowledge is a kind of “know-how that is irreducible and inarticulable, and yet fundamentally *orienting* for our being-in-the-world” (45, emphasis in original). Smith claims that this preconscious understanding of the world is achieved by the use of our “imagination,” a term that he uses “to name a kind of faculty by which we navigate and make sense of our world, but in ways and on a register that flies below the radar of conscious reflection” (19). Smith goes on to quote Phil Kenneson, who argues that the imagination is “that complex human social capacity to receive and construct an intelligible ‘whole.’” (qtd. in Smith 19). As suggested by the use of the phrase “intelligible whole,” there is a connection between Smith’s understanding of how individuals view the world and how Erikson argues an individual perceives his own identity.

An individual’s identity may consist of various changeable parts that shift as the individual grows and matures, but the individual perceives his identity as a cohesive whole that

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<sup>8</sup> Smith does not seem to have an issue with the concept of worldview in general, but with the possible implications if the term were to be taken out of context. For instance, the inclusion of the word “view” places emphasis on the faculty of sight, suggesting that individuals are mere viewers of the world around them rather than active participants in the adoption and construction of how they perceive the world.

is linked to his past and pointing toward to his future. Erikson recognizes the largely unconscious manner through which an individual realizes his identity in *The Challenge of Youth*, where he states that “ego identity is partially conscious and largely unconscious” (13). This idea of the unconscious (or “preconscious,” to use Smith’s term) in regards to identity echoes Erikson’s initial definition of the term in *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. After providing excerpts from James and Freud’s writings, Erikson goes on to explicate James’ understanding of identity. According to Erikson, “To him [identity] is both mental and moral in the sense of those ‘moral philosophy’ days, and he experiences it as something that ‘comes upon you’ as a recognition, almost as a surprise rather than as something strenuously ‘quested’ after” (20). Occurring at a largely unconscious level, identity therefore “comes upon” the individual similarly to how Smith argues that an individual’s perception of the world comes upon him as he gathers the disparate pieces of information from objective reality.

In his description of how an individual makes sense of the various aspects of his identity to form a cohesive sense of self, Erikson uses terms more typically found in postmodernist discourse. For instance, as Erikson goes on to state in *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, “The ego [identity], if understood as a central and partially unconscious organizing agency, must at any given stage of life deal with a changing Self which demands to be synthesized with abandoned and anticipated selves” (211). Furthermore, Erikson argues that “[i]t is the ego’s function [. . .] to integrate the relation of newly added identity elements with those already in existence—that is, to bridge the inescapable discontinuities between different levels of personality development” (162). Erikson explicitly uses terms such as “selves,” arguing that the identity consists of separate “elements” and “discontinuities” that must be brought together into a coherent and intelligible whole, much like the “narrative line among disparate images” through which Smith

argues that individuals perceive reality. Erikson's theory of the unified self and the more radical postmodernist theories of the multiplicity of identity may initially place modern and postmodern conceptions of the self at different ends of the spectrum, but a closer look at both sides of the debate reveals that the shifting subjectivities of an individual's identity can be brought together to form an integrated sense of self.

### **Conclusion: Analyzing Identity**

When identity is at the forefront of mainstream culture, popular narratives of contemporary Western society alternatively draw from and critically examine prevailing definitions of the term. Coming-of-age novels and narrative-driven RPGs such as *The Hunger Games* and the *Mass Effect* trilogy seem ready-made to simultaneously raise and answer questions about identity—an area of concern in postmodernist thought that should be of particular interest to Christians. For instance, in *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis devotes an entire chapter to Christian morality and psychoanalysis. According to him, both are “techniques” that share some characteristics, including the general aim of “putting the human machine right” (88). Lewis goes on to emphasize that the chief concern of Christian morality is the state of “that tiny central self” that is more than just the sum of our outward actions (93). As Gene Edward Veith states in *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture*, however, postmodernist thought ultimately leads to the erasure of objective personal identity: “If there are no absolutes, if truth is relative, then there can be no stability, no meaning in life. If reality is socially constructed, then moral guidelines are only masks for oppressive power and individual identity is an illusion” (72). Since Christian morality hinges upon matters of identity and the self, it follows that Christian individuals should be willing to critically examine systems of thought that attempt to redefine what constitutes a human being.

Produced amidst a culture largely dismissive of Erikson's theory of the integrated self, both the first book of *The Hunger Games* and the *Mass Effect* series initially seem to favor a more postmodernist understanding of identity. Katniss is characterized by the conflicting and contradictory aspects of her identity, and both she and Peeta display the kind of changeableness espoused by twenty-first century identity experts as they actively construct their outward identities in the arena. Likewise, playable character Commander Shepard from the *Mass Effect* trilogy seems incapable of experiencing a relatively consistent and integrated identity simply because the character's appearance, background, and actions are determined by the whims of each player. However, like those postmodern theories of identity that seem open to the concept of a unified and relatively consistent self, the discontinuities of identity initially present in both narratives are for the most part ultimately unified into a cohesive whole.

## Chapter Two: Reflections of the Fragmented and Fabricated Selves in *The Hunger Games*

“I realize the answer to who I am lies in that handful of poisonous fruit.”

– Katniss Everdeen, *Catching Fire* (118)

Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* alternately draws from and critically examines prevailing definitions of the self, toying with postmodernist views of identity while simultaneously looking back to the integrated identity of Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development. In the first novel of Collins’ bestselling trilogy, protagonists Katniss Everdeen and Peeta Mallark respectively discover and maintain their identities as they navigate the space between reality and mere fabrication. Although Collins never explicitly states her concerns about identity, a close look at interviews orchestrated by publications such as *Time* and *Entertainment Weekly* reveals that she is very much concerned with the difference between reality and fabrication, a concern that figures significantly into her depiction of identity in *The Hunger Games*.

### **Collins’ Creed: Influences behind the Trilogy**

Much of *The Hunger Games* is influenced by Collins’ efforts to present the consequences of war to a widely adolescent audience. As she states in an interview with *Time*, “I think we put our children at an enormous disadvantage by not educating them in war, by not letting them understand about it from a very early age” (“The Hunger Gamemakers”). Although Collins realizes that many parents find war a difficult subject to discuss with their children, she also argues that many adolescents are enlisting in the military at age eighteen without any real knowledge of what they are “getting into,” and that in some countries children are even forced to fight at ages as young as nine and ten (“The Hunger Gamemakers”). Collins’ ideas about war clearly influence *The Hunger Games* as the novel seems to serve as a first step toward teaching

adolescents about the reality and consequences of combat. In the opening of the novel, for instance, adolescents are introduced to Katniss, who has lost her father to a mining accident at a young age (*Hunger Games* 5). Though he may not have perished due to the tragedies of war, Katniss must nonetheless grow up without a stabilizing father figure in her life. However, arguably the most stirring illustration of the costs of war is seen in the arena itself when Katniss arrives too late to save her ally Rue from being killed by another contestant. Instead of merely glossing over the scene, Collins focuses in on Katniss as she mourns the death of her new friend (236). As adolescents experience secondhand these images of personal loss, Collins argues that they are able to gain a better understanding of war in their own world.

Although her depiction of war is arguably the most prominent aspect of her novel, Collins' views on entertainment and reality television also influence *The Hunger Games* to a large extent. In an interview with the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, Collins highlights the similarities between the Roman Coliseum and the events featured in her novel, arguing that both Rome and the Capitol use "fights to the death as a form of popular entertainment" ("An Interview with Suzanne Collins"). Just like the citizens of Rome in the ancient Coliseum, the inhabitants of the Capitol find pleasure in watching competitors battle for their lives in an arena. However, Collins takes her critique of entertainment further by connecting the competitive nature of the Games to the type of competition commonly found in reality television programs. Television shows such as *Survivor* resemble battlefields as the contestants form alliances and eventually betray one another in order to move on to the next round. These shows are taken to their logical extreme in *The Hunger Games* as tributes from the twelve districts of Panem fight for their very survival. As Collins suggests in an interview with *Instructor*, the "voyeuristic thrill" experienced by audiences who watch suffering contestants in

reality television is something that she “find[s] very disturbing” (“Sit Down with Suzanne Collins”).

Collins’ beliefs about entertainment seem pointedly directed at action-oriented shows like *Survivor*, but she also appears to critique fashion-driven television series such as *America’s Next Top Model* as she highlights the negative consequences of blurring the lines between entertainment and real life. As Collins states in an interview, one of her concerns with reality television that she hopes to communicate to her readers is the lack of “distinction [between] what is real and what is not real” (“Sit Down with Suzanne Collins”).<sup>9</sup> In *America’s Next Top Model*, contestants compete with one another to determine who can take the most appealing photographs, walk the most confident walk, and ultimately sell the variety of clothes and makeup they are given to wear—adopting whatever persona is necessary for the job. Collins’ tributes likewise must be astutely aware of appearances over the course of the Games. For instance, before the actual Games start, the tributes are dressed in the fashion of their districts and paraded through the streets of the Capitol in order to garner favor with their audience and hopefully earn sponsorship in the arena (*Hunger Games* 79). Once the Games officially begin, Collins also shows her protagonists actively shaping their outward personas to receive aid from their sponsors. Collins’ uneasiness with this lack of distinction between fact and fiction is seen as the

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<sup>9</sup> This concern over blurring the lines between “what is real and what is not real” is showcased throughout Collins’ *Hunger Games* trilogy, especially in the third book. Near the middle of *Mockingjay*, for instance, the resistance force that Katniss has unwittingly jumpstarted with her actions in the *Hunger Games* manages to rescue several former victors of the Games who have been held captive since the events of the second novel—including Katniss’ partner from District 12, Peeta. The resistance quickly realizes that the Capitol has not only tortured Peeta; they have tampered with his mind. Katniss is ultimately told that Peeta’s mind has been “[h]ijacked”—essentially brainwashed—to make him believe that Katniss is an artificially created “mutt” fashioned by the Capitol with the sole purpose of killing him. This brainwashing has a permanent effect on Peeta, hampering his ability to determine reality from the lies spun by the Capitol. As Peeta himself states later in the novel, “I can’t tell what’s real anymore, and what’s made up” (270). In order to counteract this latest monstrosity of the Capitol, the resistance eventually “devised a game called ‘Real or Not Real’” to help Peeta differentiate fact from fiction (272).

Capitol's fascination with outward appearances allows them to be easily manipulated by the tributes.

As Collins does with most of the cultural trends she critiques in her novel, she takes postmodern culture's assurances of a fragmented and ever-changing self to their logical conclusions. This fragmentation is seen to a large extent in *The Hunger Games*, particularly in the portrayal of the Careers' unhealthy identities as well as in Katniss Everdeen's inner struggle with the many facets of her identity that occurs throughout most of the book. Collins juxtaposes the identities of her characters, ultimately revealing the possibility of a healthy multiplicity of identity being integrated into a singular sense of self.

### **Capital Careers: Identity in and around the Capitol**

At first glance, the members of the wealthiest districts of Panem and the citizens of the Capitol stand on opposite ends of the identity spectrum; while life in the Capitol seems to consist of the frantic adoption of one identity after another, those tributes who specifically train to volunteer for the Hunger Games present an identity largely free from such multiplicity. The wealthiest of the twelve regions underneath the jurisdiction of the distant Capitol, Districts 1, 2, and 4 are responsible for the most valuable assets of Panem's ruling government—including the “luxury items” (*Hunger Games* 69) that feed the extravagant lifestyles of the Capitol citizens. Because of their connection to the Capitol, the wealthy districts seem less impoverished than the other districts and produce some of the healthiest tributes for the annual Reaping. Known as the “Careers” (95) by members of District 12 and as “the Capitol's lapdogs” (161) by Katniss in particular, these tributes are also in some ways the most damaged by their relationship to the Capitol because they are expected to be the epitome of everything that the Capitol aspires for its districts to embody: focused on survival at all costs and distinctly distrustful of the other districts.

The survivalist mentality of the Careers can be witnessed both leading up to and during the Games and is heightened by their disturbing penchant for violence. When Katniss starts training before the Games, she takes notice of the Career tributes, saying that “[t]hey project arrogance and brutality.” Illegally trained at home for their moment to shine in the arena, “they head straight for the deadliest-looking weapons in the gym and handle them with ease” (95). Cato and Clove, the tributes from District 2, are arguably the most brutal of the contestants in the 74th Hunger Games, quick to kill the other contestants and at times actually gaining pleasure from the carnage. Although the Careers form alliances with other tributes in the arena itself, these pacts are usually short-lived. For instance, Cato is quick to turn on an ally from District 3 who does not keep a close enough watch on the Careers’ supplies, snapping the boy’s neck in a fit of rage (224). Clove’s bloodthirsty nature in particular is clearly seen in her interaction with Katniss near the end of the Games. Instead of simply killing Katniss after capturing her, Clove “savor[s] the moment,” taunting her captive about the death of an ally and contemplating where to slice her open in order to cause the most pain (*Hunger Games* 284). Survival is imperative to the Careers, but it does not seem to be the only reason they excel in the Games; rather, their bloodthirsty tendencies could be an indication that the Careers’ identities are not quite as integrated as they initially appear.

A close look at Erikson’s concept of the unified, integrated self reveals that the Careers do not exemplify individuals with a healthy personal identity; instead, their identities are characterized by an unhealthy inflexibility that most likely prevents them from bringing together the different fragments of their identity into a unified and cohesive whole. As Erikson argues in his writings, there is a marked difference between a healthy personal identity and an identity characterized by a harsh “totality” (*Identity: Youth and Crisis* 80). Although the bloodthirsty

survivalist mentality of the Careers may seem particularly single-minded, it is also lacks the openness and fluidity required of Erikson's concept of a healthy, integrated personal identity. Likewise, the single-mindedness presented by the Careers as a whole seems to resist any movement toward integration with other aspects of the Careers' identities, as both Cato and Clove only briefly display qualities that run counter to their strictly brutal and violent natures.

Despite the lack of hesitation the Careers show in slaughtering the members of other districts and the pleasure they seem to get from causing pain, both Cato and Clove trust and remain loyal to one other. When Clove goes out in the open to exchange blows with Katniss, she trusts Cato to protect her, even calling out his name when another tribute named Thresh attacks her. Cato is too far away to save his ally, but Katniss recognizes the pain in his voice when he eventually "kneels beside Clove, spear in hand, begging her to stay with him" (288-9). Although Cato and Clove are defined by their relationship to the Capitol and by their own bloodthirsty tendencies, not only is this type of totality of identity not what Erikson had in mind for his concept of a healthy sense of self, but Cato and Clove seem incapable of internalizing the trust and concern they show one another in order to recognize a sense of self that more clearly reflects Erikson's concept of "wholeness" (*Identity: Youth and Crisis* 80).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The relatively consistent group identity of the Careers is also put into question once readers are eventually introduced to a Hunger Games victor from District 4 named Finnick Odair. When Katniss first meets Finnick just before the opening ceremony of the Quarter Quell in *Catching Fire*, he seems to perfectly fit the Career mold: "Finnick Odair is something of a living legend in Panem. [. . .] While other tributes [during the Sixty-fifth Hunger Games] were hard-pressed to get a handful of grain or some matches for a gift, Finnick never wanted for anything, not food or medicine or weapons" (209). According to Katniss, Finnick has become a "sex symbol" (*Mockingjay* 11) in the Capitol since his victory in the Games: burning through lovers without a care in the world since his victory, he is the perfect image of the spoiled and ruthless Career. However, Katniss and Peeta's interactions with Finnick in the second and third books reveal that he does not quite fit Katniss' biased view of the Careers. During the Quarter Quell, Finnick shows concern for his partner from District 4—an elderly woman named Mags—(*Catching Fire* 273) and saves Peeta's life multiple times in the arena (272-3, 280-1, 314). In *Mockingjay*, the audience also comes to realize that the Careers' relatively favorable relationship with the Capitol is for the most part a lie. Katniss may have initially thought of Finnick as a fickle lover who moved from person to person like Capitol citizens moved through clothes, but in reality, President Snow used Finnick's love for "a poor, mad girl" (*Catching Fire* 348, emphasis in original) named Annie Cresta to coerce him into being a glorified sex slave (*Mockingjay* 171).

Members of the Capitol itself seem to have no grounded foundation for their identity, reflecting the more radical postmodernist theories of identity as they search for definition in outward appearances alone and shed these appearances on a daily basis; however, a select few Capitol citizens such as Effie Trinket use their fluctuating outward personae to present a fairly consistent identity.<sup>11</sup> Reflecting on postmodern culture's preoccupation with constant movement and change, professor of theology Richard Lints makes a statement about cultural icon Madonna that could easily relate to the wealthy denizens of the Capitol: "Madonna is in many ways a perfect personification of the postmodern reality; sensation without substance, motion without purpose, a self-centered persona undergoing perpetual change for its own sake" (qtd. in Long 73). Similarly, fashion is taken to its logical conclusion in the Capitol as citizens not only change their dress but often make significant alterations to their bodies in order to keep up with new trends. When Octavia, a member of Katniss' prep team, bemoans the fact that they cannot make any such changes to her, the tribute reflects on the extreme lengths that Capitol citizens will go to change their bodies, including tattooing their breasts, carving "decorative patterns" into their skin, and fashioning "curved talons" and "cat's whiskers" out of thin air (*Hunger Games* 48-9). Like the "trio of oddly colored birds" (62) that Katniss compares her prep team to as they fuss over her appearance, the Capitol citizens seem to flit from one identity to the next, shedding one

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<sup>11</sup> Although this fluctuating outward identity is projected by Capitol citizens in general, the one exception to this rule can be found in Katniss' stylist, Cinna. Katniss realizes Cinna is different the moment she meets him: "I'm taken aback by how normal he looks. Most of the stylists they interview on television are so dyed, stenciled, and surgically altered they're grotesque. But Cinna's close-cropped hair appears to be its natural shade of brown. He's in a simple black shirt and pants. The only concession to self-alteration seems to be metallic gold eyeliner that has been applied with a light hand. It brings out the flecks of gold in his green eyes" (*Hunger Games* 63). Unlike the garishly dressed, surgically altered monstrosities that she is accustomed to seeing broadcasted live during previous Hunger Games, Katniss finds that "Cinna has met none of [her] expectations" (64). Not only does he refrain from altering his physical appearance, but his identity also remains stable throughout the first two novels of the trilogy. He seems to reject everything the Hunger Games stands for, realizing just how "despicable" the Capitol must seem to Katniss (65), and eventually designing a dress that transforms her into the perfect image of a mockingjay—the symbol of the resistance—when Katniss twirls for her audience during an interview (*Catching Fire* 252). His actions eventually lead to his death at the hands of the Capitol (262-3).

persona after another in order to cater to the whims of fashion. As Brian McDonald argues in “The Final Word on Entertainment: Mimetic and Monstrous Art in the Hunger Games,” “for [Katniss’] makeup team, as for the Capitol as a whole, being a ‘real human being’ lies precisely in freedom from the constraints of identity” (16). This continuous movement from one persona to the next echoes the understanding of identity held by Hermans, et al. as members of the Capitol seemingly take on the identity of one imagined role after another.

At first glance, the Capitol’s flight from bounded identity also appears to characterize District 12’s escort, Effie Trinket, who changes her hair and outfit color several times throughout the book. According to *Capitol Couture*<sup>12</sup>, an online magazine and clothing line made specifically to market the film adaption of *Catching Fire*, Effie undergoes a change of identity each time she enters a salon, saying that she “leaves [ . . . ] a completely different woman” (“Effie Trinket”). Though Effie appears to follow the trend of Capitol society—along with its lack of grounded identity—the escort still manages to portray an identity that is for the most part consistent.

Katniss initially describes the District 12 escort as “the maniacally upbeat woman who arrives once a year to read out the names at the reaping” (*Hunger Games* 7), but she eventually warms up to the woman who coaches her on how to present herself during interviews and who seems determined to help her gain sponsors in the arena. Effie is not permitted to finalize deals with the sponsors, but she does show a determination to gain the assistance of District 12’s only mentor that even Katniss seems to admire: “[D]on’t worry, I’ll get him to the table at gunpoint if necessary” (75). The *Capitol Couture* writers also recognize Effie’s firm resolve in their

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<sup>12</sup> Although Collins is not listed among the list of “Contributors” on the *Capitol Couture* website, she was an editor for the screenplay adaption of the *Hunger Games* films, and no doubt worked closely with marketing attempts such as this one.

description of the escort's contributions to the attire of the District 12 tributes. According to her profile, Effie declares, "I have a duty: to make sure my Tributes are excited and ready for the Games. If they're not, they'll be a terrible disappointment to watch in the Arena. [ . . . ] So, I try to select pieces that will inspire them and improve their comportment. The lovely truth is, they aren't savages; they simply need an example to follow" ("Profile: Effie Trinket"). Effie may be very much concerned with the outward appearances of the District 12 tributes, but she also uses fashion to make a bold statement about their humanity. The Capitol in general mirrors the unbridled multiplicity of identity suggested by postmodernist experts such as Hermans, et. al, but Effie seems to follow the path of more balanced approaches to identity as she uses the fleeting whims of fashion as a means to project her relatively consistent identity as a determined woman who ultimately cares about the tributes she prepares for the arena.

### **Identity vs. Showmanship: The Possibility of a Unified Self**

Although District 12 tribute Peeta Mallark is adept at manipulating his Capitol audience, his identity seems by far the most consistent and integrated one presented in Collins' first novel. In the opening pages of her work, Collins reveals Peeta to be a kind boy who is infatuated with Katniss—a girl he is expected to kill in the Hunger Games. Katniss describes that when she was eleven, Peeta caught her scrounging for scraps of food to feed her starving family. Instead of following the example of his mother, who tried to frighten Katniss away, Peeta ventured out into the rain and tossed her two loaves of burnt bread. As Katniss reflects, "[T]hrowing me the bread was an enormous kindness that would have surely resulted in a beating if discovered" (*Hunger Games* 31-2). Unlike other members of District 12 who simply ignored her, Peeta risked bodily harm in order to provide her with the food she needed to survive.

However, the boy's connection to Katniss is not defined exclusively by this single memory. As the female protagonist relates, after that initial encounter she would spot him at school and often "caught his eyes trained on [her], only to quickly flit away" (32). Even when they were children, Peeta seemed unable to take his eyes off of her. His instinctive kindness and his infatuation with Katniss continue even after he is called on the Reaping day and whisked off to the Capitol. The clearest example of his kindhearted nature before they both enter the arena occurs during the train ride to the Capitol. When Haymitch Abernathy—District 12's only surviving mentor—collapses in a pool of his own vomit, Peeta and Katniss carry him to his shower and attempt to wash him off. Instead of letting Katniss call a worker to help him get Haymitch undressed, however, Peeta helps the man by himself—something that Katniss attributes to his "*being kind*" (49, emphasis in original). Peeta's inherent kindness and his obvious affection for Katniss are therefore clearly established before the two of them even enter the Capitol.

However, Peeta also appears adept at playing the citizens of the Capitol to his own advantage—a fact that initially makes Katniss question the sincerity of his affection for her. When the train finally stops in the Capitol, Katniss and Peeta both rush to the window to get a good view of the city. Whereas Katniss immediately withdraws when she sees the mass of people lining up to catch a glimpse of them, "Peeta holds his ground, actually waving and smiling at the gawking crowd. [. . .] He sees [Katniss] staring at him and shrugs. 'Who knows?' he says. 'One of them may be rich'" (60). Realizing that catering to the audience will earn him sponsors in the arena, he seems to take every chance he can get to garner their support. Peeta's most significant act of manipulation before the arena occurs during his interview with Caesar Flickerman, the host of the Hunger Games. As Rodney M. Deavault asserts in "The Masks of

Femininity: Perceptions of the Feminine in *The Hunger Games* and *Podkayne of Mars*,” “Peeta weaves a romantic narrative for the audience, casting himself and Katniss as lovers forced to compete against each other ” (195). In the interview, Peeta jokes with Caesar, earning the laughter of his audience, and then pulls at their heartstrings by declaring his love for Katniss in front of the entirety of Panem (*Hunger Games* 132). Katniss is initially furious at the fact that Peeta has manipulated the audience’s perception of her without her consent, but Haymitch argues that Peeta’s actions have actually been to her benefit. He reveals the narrative that Peeta has so effortlessly spun, telling Katniss, “You were about as romantic as dirt until he said he wanted you. Now they all do. You’re all they’re talking about. The star-crossed lovers from District Twelve!” (135). Although Peeta uses the Capitol’s preoccupation with appearances in order to obtain what he desires, the kindness he shows to Katniss seems to be a genuine reflection of his consistent, integrated identity.

Once the 74th Hunger Games officially begin, Collins shows Peeta protecting Katniss even as he actively shapes his outward persona in order to receive the aid of their Capitol sponsors. In his efforts to protect Katniss, Peeta denies the identity that the Capitol attempts to place on him and that the Careers initially seem to wholeheartedly embrace as participants in the Games. According to George A. Dunn, Peeta’s “number one goal is preserving [his] moral integrity in the arena” (65). In a conversation with Katniss the night before the Games, Peeta reveals his intent not to allow the Capitol to control him: “I don’t want them to change me in there. Turn me into some kind of monster that I’m not” (*Hunger Games* 141). Although the Capitol wants and expects the tributes to be killers by the end of the competition, Peeta does not want to destroy the very essence of who he is simply in order to survive.

In the beginning of the Games, Peeta allies with the Careers—who seem bent on finding and killing Katniss—in order to ensure that both he and Katniss stay alive longer. Although Katniss initially feels “betray[ed]” by his apparent defection to the Careers, she does recognize that he has told them nothing about her keen ability to shoot a bow—information that may have given them the upper hand in a fight. Later in the novel, a playback of the televised Games also reveals that Peeta was actually leading the Careers away from her (114, 363). Brian McDonald remarks upon Peeta’s ability to simultaneously hold true to himself and sway an audience, saying, “Peeta manages to be completely sincere while also producing a brilliant bit of theatre that gains his audience’s sympathy” (20). When Katniss eventually finds Peeta and nurses him back to health from a near-fatal leg wound, the boy reveals the depth of his feelings for her. According to him, the moment she sang on their first day of school, “every bird outside the windows fell silent,” and he knew he was a “goner” (*Hunger Games* 301). Peeta’s confession—the second one he has made in the novel—may have been another ploy to garner the favor of their sponsors, but it seems unlikely given that he has just recovered from a fever and is likely not completely aware of his surroundings. Furthermore, even Katniss, who is slow to trust anyone, believes that Peeta’s story “has a ring of truth to it” (301). Although his displays of affection toward Katniss could be chalked up to his ability to influence an audience to his advantage, even Katniss cannot deny the sincerity of his words. For Peeta at least, their relationship is real, for his identity is ultimately bound to his kind nature and to the fact that he is willing to sacrifice himself for the person he loves.

Katniss, the main protagonist of *The Hunger Games*, is the most elusive of Collins’ characters; at the outset of the novel, she seems to have only a vague understanding of who she is as a wary member of District 12 as well as the primary provider for her family. Living in the

Seam—the poorest section of the coal-mining district—has taught Katniss something that Jimmy Long believes is characteristic of the contemporary adolescent experience: “to trust only what [her] senses can verify” (73). This distrust of anything intangible is most clearly seen in Katniss’ relationship with her mother. After the death of Katniss’ father, Mrs. Everdeen became “locked in some dark world of sadness,” hardly moving from the bed she slept in and making no effort to provide for her two children (*Hunger Games* 27). Instead of being able to rely on her mother in their time of grief, an eleven-year-old Katniss had to learn how to provide not only for herself, but for her family as well. Her tendency to distrust others is also seen in the careful way she controls her body. Reflecting on the time that she came to realize that any offhanded remark against the Capitol could get her and her family killed, she says, “I learned to hold my tongue and to turn my features into an indifferent mask so that no one could ever read my thoughts” (6).

Despite how slowly she is able to trust people outside of her immediate family—and how slowly she learns to forgive those within it—Katniss instinctively moves outside of that survival mindset in order to protect the people she cares about. In keeping with her overall efforts to protect and provide for her family, Katniss finds it natural to care for her sister Prim, whom she describes as “the only person in the world [she’s] certain [she] love[s]” (18). Katniss’ love for her sister is seen in the way she refused to drown the worm-infested cat Prim brought home (3), in the goat that she went to great lengths to purchase for her (272), and in how she always tucks in the back of her sister’s shirt and calls her a “little duck” (15). However, at the annual Reaping, Katniss’ impulse for survival seems to clash with her innate need to care for Prim. In “Appetite for Spectacle: Violence and Entertainment in *The Hunger Games*,” Myke Bartlett recognizes that Katniss is “solely focused on surviving”; however, Bartlett also realizes that Katniss’ capacity to care for others results in an “act of self-sacrifice” when she ultimately volunteers to participate in

the Games in place of her sister (10-1). Katniss seems driven largely by instinct as she offers to take Prim's place—an instinct that has now become incompatible with the survival mentality that she learned while living in the Seam.

The conflicting aspects of Katniss' inner self are placed in constant tension once Peeta reenters her life: struggling with the inconsistent emotions developing within her, she initially allows her outward persona to be shaped by others. When Katniss discovers that Peeta will be her fellow tribute in the Games, she feels genuine remorse at the possibility that she might have to kill him, thinking, “*Oh, no. [. . .] Not him.*” (Collins 25, emphasis in original). His participation in the Games stirs up feelings of despair and hope that she thinks would best be forgotten, especially if they are to be enemies in the arena. Not only does Katniss feel like she still owes Peeta for the bread that saved her life five years ago; she is also moved by the kindness he shows others. When Peeta insists on cleaning Haymitch up by himself, Katniss realizes, “A kind Peeta Mellark is far more dangerous to me than an unkind one. Kind people have a way of working their way inside me and rooting there. And I can't let Peeta do this. Not where we're going. So I decide, from this moment on, to have as little as possible to do with the baker's son” (49).

Though Katniss may vow not to interact with the boy any further, her mentor, escort, and stylist all seem determined to bring the two of them together. The first time their interference comes into play is during the Hunger Games' equivalent of an opening ceremony. Before the actual Games start, tributes are typically dressed in the fashion of their districts and paraded through the streets of the Capitol. Instead of “standing stiffly apart” as the couples of other districts do during the parade, Katniss' stylist instructs them to hold hands (*Hunger Games* 79). Katniss immediately realizes that her stylist's instructions will allow her to manipulate the

emotions of her audience. However, she seems less ready to accept the necessity of her public friendliness with Peeta—not only because it makes her seem weak, but because it also confuses her. At the end of the opening ceremony, for instance, Katniss’ survival instinct and her growing affection for Peeta battle for dominance:

[H]e gives me a smile that seems so genuinely sweet with just the right touch of shyness that unexpected warmth rushes through me.

A warning bell goes off in my head. *Don’t be so stupid. Peeta is planning how to kill you*, I remind myself. *He is luring you in to make you easy prey. The more likable he is, the more deadly he is.* (72, emphasis in original)

Katniss goes through a similar inner struggle in the days the two of them spend in the Capitol, preparing for the grand event in the arena. Accidentally allowing herself to laugh at a joke Peeta makes when they are alone, Katniss thinks, “It’s messing with my mind too much, trying to keep straight when we’re supposedly friends and when we’re not” (100). Katniss’ natural attraction to Peeta is heightened by the reality that they are supposed to appear as allies, a fact that conflicts with the girl’s instinct for survival and makes her question her ability to tell truth from fiction. Katniss’ conflicting emotions confuse her enough to allow others to take control of her outward persona—but once the Games officially begin, she actively adopts the roles that have been placed upon her by others.

In the Games themselves, Katniss mirrors the postmodernist understanding of the fragmented self as two aspects of her nature are held in tension—her survival impulse and her instinctive need to provide those people she trusts. According to Kelley Wezner in “Perhaps I am Watching You Now: Panem’s Panopticons,” “Katniss struggles with the new identities<sup>13</sup> created

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<sup>13</sup> The term “identities” used here seems to more closely align with the word role or persona. These “identities” refer to the various roles that Katniss must adopt in her efforts to gain sponsorship in the arena. Although these roles may

for her, but eventually performs for the cameras [. . .] knowing that success and punishment will be based on how she appears to be” (154). Bartlett also remarks about Katniss’ ability “to play this showbiz game,” especially in regards to Katniss’ use of the “star-crossed lovers’ narrative” to her advantage (10, 15). Katniss’ first interaction with Peeta in the arena is when she is attempting to escape the attention of the Careers. To her surprise, the group of bloodthirsty combatants also includes Peeta. Although Katniss has attempted to steel herself against her emotions for Peeta, she apparently cannot help but feel something when it seems as if he has allied against her: “Betrayal. That’s the first thing I feel” (*Hunger Games* 114). Despite her conflicting emotions, however, Katniss realizes that she will get a “close-up” once she climbs down from her hiding place, so she conceals her feelings of mistrust and flashes a “knowing smile” in the camera’s direction in order to play up their relationship (163-4).

Although Katniss may have become more adept at swaying her audience, she also seems in danger of becoming fooled by the very lie she is trying to sell others as she begins to internalize the roles she previously adopted only for the cameras. According to Jill Olthouse in “I Will be Your Mockingjay: The Power and Paradox of Metaphor in the *Hunger Games* Trilogy,” “For Katniss, what starts as performance begins to shape her reality as her perception changes” (47). Katniss’ most creative attempt at crafting her appearance—as well as the most convincing example of how much Peeta has come to mean to her—comes near the end of the Games, when the Gamemaker announces that there can be two victors as long as they are both from the same district. While she claims to be “relieved” that Peeta is still alive (*Hunger Games* 157), she also recognizes that she needs to help him survive if she wants any further assistance from her “sympathetic sponsors” (275). Katniss’ decision to track Peeta down and nurse him back to

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initially manifest only on the surface-level as she is motivated by how she wishes to appear to others, they have the potential to impact her inner sense of self as she internalizes them and allows them to influence her actions.

health is therefore a reflection of both her instinct for survival and her growing feelings of protectiveness for the boy. Although she has never been one for intimacy, Katniss plays on the sympathies of her audience, faking kisses and stumbling through personal conversations so that the sponsors will send the medicine that could save him (253-74). Katniss manipulates her outward persona in order to survive, but in doing so, she also seems to affect her inner self as her actions deepen her already existing feelings for Peeta.

Katniss' interactions with Peeta therefore allow her to develop the kind of integrated self that Erikson argues every adolescent struggles to obtain on his way to a healthy adulthood. Olthouse recognizes the effect Peeta has on Katniss, saying, "His kindness contributes to her ability to find her own inner strength, gives her hope, and helps her to reinterpret her identity" (49). This reinterpretation is first triggered before the beginning of the Games, when Peeta admits that he wants to find some way to preserve his inner self. Katniss realizes how different his focus is in comparison to her own aim of survival, admitting, "While I've been ruminating on the availability of trees, Peeta has been struggling with how to maintain his identity. His purity of self" (*Hunger Games* 142). Despite the fact that his words initially started an argument, in the Games themselves, Katniss seems to take Peeta's words to heart at least to some extent.

For example, arguably the most stirring illustration of Katniss' refusal to be defined by the Capitol is seen in her relationship with the female tribute from District 11. Although Katniss realizes that Rue could become her enemy at a moment's notice, she overcomes her instinctive feelings of distrust and develops a genuine friendship with her. Recognizing that Rue is not the smartest of choices when it comes to allies, Katniss says, "I can almost hear Haymitch groaning as I team up with this wispy child. But I want her. Because she's a survivor, and I trust her, and why not admit it? She reminds me of Prim" (201). When the two of them are eventually

separated, Katniss arrives too late to prevent the girl from being killed. Her conversation with Peeta before the Games replays in her head, and Katniss sings softly to Rue as she dies, spreading an array of flowers around the girl's body in a calculated statement against the Capitol (236). Refusing to become the cold-hearted, ruthless killer that the Capitol wants her to be, Katniss instead decides to show Rue the love she had previously reserved only for her sister.

However, it is only at the end of the Games that the pieces of Katniss' identity come together to form an integrated whole. When she and Peeta are the only two left standing and the rules have been reverted to allow for only one victor, Katniss pulls out a handful of poisonous berries and convinces Peeta to take them with her.<sup>14</sup> In some ways a calculated move on the part of Katniss, who realizes that the Gamemakers need a victor for their Games, her act is also a realization of how much she cares about Peeta as she admits, "[I]f he dies, I'll never go home, not really. I'll spend the rest of my life in this arena trying to think my way out" (343-4). Olthouse also recognizes Katniss' new awareness of her identity as both a survivor and a caretaker, stating, "She shows that she's focused not only on killing [ . . . ] but also on protecting those she cares about" (50). As Olthouse suggests, lifting the berries to their lips marks the characters' ultimate refusal to be defined by the Capitol—Katniss asserting her own integrated identity as a girl who primarily cares for herself, but also has the potential to care for others, and Peeta as the boy whose identity is consistently found in the fact that he is willing to sacrifice himself for the person he loves.

## **Conclusion**

The characters in *The Hunger Games* assume a vast array of identities that seem to reinforce both Erikson's ultimate goal of a healthy, integrated, and singular identity, as well as

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<sup>14</sup> In *Catching Fire*, Katniss herself realizes the importance of those berries, saying, "I realize the answer to who I am lies in that handful of poisonous fruit" (118).

the fragmented and constantly shifting multiplicity of selves typically found in postmodern identity theory. Collins presents a relatively single-minded—if unhealthy—identity in the Careers, but turns Erikson’s theory on its head by incorporating the incompatible elements of limited trust and concern for others into Cato and Clove’s otherwise largely bloodthirsty identities. The author similarly turns postmodernist theories of identity on their head with her depiction of the Capitol: although the outward appearance and actions of most Capitol citizens seem to indicate a flight from the very idea of a cohesive, bounded identity, people like Effie are able to use this very changeableness to assert a relatively consistent identity.

However, Collins’ strongest comments about identity are found in her portrayal of her primary protagonists. Peeta’s identity remains consistent throughout the course of the novel: he cleverly manipulates his audience in order to reach his goals, but he seems driven largely by his kind nature and by his own aims to protect Katniss. Conversely, Katniss is initially characterized by a fragmented identity composed of parts that seem incapable of being integrated into a single whole. Her instinct for survival and her instinct to care for others are constantly at odds, especially as her own manipulation of her audience draws her closer to Peeta. Through Katniss’ ultimate realization of her identity, Collins reveals the manner through which a multiplicity of identity can come together into a single, integrated sense of self.

### Chapter Three: Identity Construction and the Movement to Singularity in *Mass Effect*

“Does this unit have a soul?” – Legion, *Mass Effect 3* (BioWare)

The portrayal of identity is not nearly as cut-and-dry in the *Mass Effect* series as it is in *The Hunger Games*. There are two major reasons for this lack of transparency: the two-fold nature of the game’s protagonist as equal parts customizable and containing a built-in “persona” (Brudvig), and the fact that any thorough examination of the video game medium raises questions about content ownership and player identity. While Collins’ work ultimately seems to postulate the possibility for the fragments of postmodern identity to come together to form a unified sense of self, the goal of the writers of the *Mass Effect* trilogy appears to be to get players to come to their own conclusions about identity—whether in regards to the playable character Commander Shepard or to how personal identity should be understood in the real world. Despite the primarily neutral stance that BioWare adopts throughout the course of the series, however, certain choices made by the player can reveal what seems to be an argument by the game writers that—at least for the purposes of the game—personal identity is singular rather than plural.

#### **BioWare’s Vision: A Narrative-Driven, Co-Authored RPG Third-Person Shooter**

Close examination of interviews with members of the BioWare team sheds light onto the company’s vision for the bestselling series. In an interview with *GamesRadar*, for instance, BioWare Co-Founder Ray Muzyka highlights the company’s focus on the narrative, visual, and immersive quality of the *Mass Effect* franchise. According to him, “The premise behind *Mass Effect* is to build the amazing emotional intensity and production values of a Hollywood blockbuster. It’s very cinematic and very filmic. It feels like you’re part of a movie and you’re the character within this large expansive universe” (Barratt).<sup>15</sup> Although many video game

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<sup>15</sup> This “cinematic” and “filmic” feel of the series is not conveyed through writing alone. Unlike typical RPGs such as *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (Bethesda Game Studios) and the *Fable* games (Lionhead Studios), where

developers can successfully argue that their games are immersive—the word is even given an “overused term alert” by Kevin Schut in *Of Games and God: A Christian Exploration of Video Games* (4)—what makes *Mass Effect* stand apart from other RPGs is that it also has a very distinctive narrative element. According to lead writer Mac Walters in an interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, BioWare spends a great deal of effort ensuring that their games have quality writing:

You’d be hard-pressed to find another company or another game that’s had eight writers on it, let alone eight in-house writers, plus a lead writer. [When I talk] to other people in the industry, they feel like they’re struggling constantly to get story into those games. [. . .] A lot of times writers are brought in after everything else is decided, and [have] to find a way to get the story in there. “Sprinkle that in, if you can!” (Franich)

Unlike those companies that seem to see writing as an afterthought in their games, BioWare makes it an important aspect of the development process—a fact that plays into their efforts to create a product that does not easily fit into a single game genre.

Several interviews reveal that the *Mass Effect* franchise was BioWare’s attempt to blend multiple video game genres into a single game. In the opening segment of his interview with Walters, for example, Darren Franich argues that there are two emerging lines of thinking regarding the evolution of video games. Video games should either “become more cinematic and/or novelistic, with emotionally realistic characters undertaking a classical hero’s journey in

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conversations between the playable character and non-playable characters (NPCs) are limited to face-to-face discussion with little to no movement, *Mass Effect* often integrates Commander Shepard’s conversations with the various NPCs into the actual gameplay. According to Muzyka in his interview with *GamesRadar*, “We’re using the language of cinema to really convey the story and dialogue of the game. You’ll notice [. . .] there’s the depth of field where the characters are very sharp and in focus, while the backgrounds are a little blurry. Also, notice the camera angle cuts back and forth to whoever’s speaking” (Barratt).

the context of shooting aliens or stealing cars,” or video game writers “should embrace the medium’s unique offer of exploration, and create a whole new kind of narrative. Players should invent their own characters from the ground up; the ‘story’ should be a series of personal decisions.” However, Franich states that BioWare does not make the mistake of falling on just one side of the spectrum.<sup>16</sup> Instead, “[t]he eccentric genius of the *Mass Effect* series is how seamlessly those two apparently divergent strands of narrative DNA are woven together” (“*Mass Effect 3*”).

BioWare attempts to make *Mass Effect* cross genre boundaries in other ways as well, recognizing that games are first and foremost *played* rather than simply viewed by an audience. For instance, an interview with BioWare producer Adrien Cho reveals that one of the company’s primary aims in the development of *Mass Effect 2* was to be able to say to potential players “[H]ey, give it a try—we’ve made everything a little more accessible, combat, the shooter aspects of it.” According to Cho, the game is designed to be accessible even to those players who have never experienced an RPG before.<sup>17</sup> For the second instalment of the trilogy, BioWare attempted to create a game that “hold[s] up with the best shooters out there” while simultaneously offering “some real cool role-playing elements as well” (Doree). BioWare producers such as Cho tend to boast about the streamlined third-person shooter mechanics and the cinema-like experience of playing the trilogy; however, another important aspect of

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<sup>16</sup> At least, not with *Mass Effect*. The first installment of BioWare’s other famous RPG franchise, *Dragon Age: Origins*, is very much about developing a character from scratch. Although traditional (literary) narrative is still a large part of *Origins*, it is clear from the first few hours of gameplay that the game’s primary selling point is the fact that players can project an identity onto the various Wardens that they create.

<sup>17</sup> In order to cater to potential customers, BioWare even went so far as to offer three different “modes” through which to experience *Mass Effect 3*: story, action, and role-play mode. According to Hudson’s interview with *Game Informer*, those who simply want to play a third-person shooter can choose the action mode and sit back and watch the “default” decisions made by the game, whereas story mode and role-play mode offer an experience catered toward those players less interested in the combat portion of the game (Kollar).

BioWare's vision for *Mass Effect* is how it allows players to gain ownership of the gaming experience.

Throughout the development process of the games, BioWare strove to allow players to become “co-creators” (Takahashi) of the *Mass Effect* experience. In an interview with *Game Informer*, executive producer Casey Hudson states that the decision to keep track of player choices was part of the initial design of the *Mass Effect* franchise and was a key part of BioWare's vision for the series: “The idea of creating a trilogy that preserved your choices—not just throughout one game, but across the entire trilogy—was actually in the very original concept for *Mass Effect* and what the trilogy was about. And that's one of the things that I'm most proud of, actually” (Hanson). BioWare must have achieved at least some of the impact it was striving for, since several reviews of the games highlight the series' ability to preserve player choices. In her article, Fish Griwkowsky states that “*Mass Effect* is an unprecedented act of continuity, literally changing the game” (“Release of *Mass Effect 3* Sparks Supernova in Video-Game Galaxy”). Andy Boyan, Matthew Grizzard, and Nicholas David Bowman echo Fish's statement, arguing that “[t]he games were unique in their design due to the extent to which a player's actions and decisions determined how the plot unfolded. Such games had been released, and even commercially successful before, but never before had player-driven choices arced over an entire series” (42). What seems particularly noteworthy, however, is that BioWare took all of the players' decisions and the possible avenues through which the games could develop and brought them together to form a single storyline—though that storyline might change depending on each playthrough of the game.

*The Question of Co-Authorship: Mass Effect and the Player-Author*

BioWare keeps track of the choices that players make throughout the course of the games and allows fans to impact the trilogy in other ways as well, but the *Mass Effect* experience is still very much a joint venture. As Benjamin Baker states in his review of the third game, “The *Mass Effect* series, although bound by the general narrative constraints and software rules implemented by BioWare’s designers, plays very much like an interactive choose-your-own adventure novel, wherein players are able to build an experience that is, to a large extent, their own” (239). This sense of ownership that *Mass Effect* players typically experience is something that Hudson touches upon in several interviews. For instance, in an interview with Josh Wingrove about fan backlash from the ending of *Mass Effect 3*, Hudson is quick to state that video game developers must “recognize that, to some degree, a game is a little bit different than a lot of media because the players feel like they own it. They co-own everything that happens in the world” (“Q&A: An Interview with BioWare’s Casey Hudson”). Hudson also frequently mentions that players are “co-creators” of the *Mass Effect* trilogy because of the effort the company went through to respond to fan feedback after each installment of the game (Takahashi). One example of this feedback-driven ownership is discussed in an interview with *Engadget*. Hudson reveals that after the first game came out with only one possibility for players to romance alien non-playable characters (NPCs), “there was a lot of interest” in allowing players to romance the alien Garrus Vakarian. As Hudson states, “If people want to have a romance with this bird-like guy with an exoskeleton, then okay” (McElroy). Players therefore had some say over who Commander Shepard can romance, a fact that could change various aspects of the game.

The “text” of the *Mass Effect* games is fluid in that the player is able to influence the narrative of the game and the playable character’s interactions with NPCs such as Garrus; however, all of the options provided to the player are scripted by BioWare, and the final game only has four possible outcomes. In “Mass Effect 2: A Case Study in the Design of Game Narrative,” Jim Bizzocchil and Joshua Tanenbaum describe this dual dynamic of player agency and scripted gameplay:

*Mass Effect 2* is like a river—as you make progress you inevitably get carried downstream, but you have some choices on *how* you get there. You also have choices on how widely you decide to experience the potential arcs of the game. You can change how wide or deep the river is as you navigate, but in the end, you go where it takes you. This is a form of “bounded agency” where the player’s actions can only deepen each narrative arc in the game, without derailing the direction of the story. (401, emphasis in original)

Despite the various ways through which the player can take ownership of the narrative, there are key moments that the *Mass Effect* writers leave out of the player’s hands. For instance, in the “Arrival” downloadable content (DLC) for *Mass Effect 2*, Shepard must venture to a batarian facility to investigate rumors of a Reaper invasion. At the conclusion of the mission, Shepard’s only option is to destroy a nearby mass relay<sup>18</sup>, thus ensuring the demise of all of the batarians in the vicinity. The player does have the option of whether or not to warn the batarians before Shepard destroys the relay, but the decision to *not* destroy it is taken away from the player.

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<sup>18</sup> According to the *Mass Effect* codex from the first two games, mass relays are “enormous structures” created by the now-extinct alien race of the Protheans that permit “instantaneous transit between locations separated by years or even centuries of travel using conventional FTL [faster-than-light] drives” (BioWare). These relays are the main avenue through which the various alien species in the Milky Way galaxy travel from one star system to another. The player learns in *Mass Effect 3* that the relays were actually manufactured by sentient machines known as the Reapers so that they could control the way organic lifeforms populate the galaxy (BioWare).

Anyone who decides to play the DLC will always experience the repercussions in *Mass Effect 3* when Shepard is blamed for the destruction of a batarian colony.<sup>19</sup>

Likewise, the final ending of the *Mass Effect* franchise leaves little room for player choice and interpretation despite massive fan outcry over the initial three endings of the game. It says something about the power of the *Mass Effect* narrative that fans raised at least \$78,000 for the charity Childs' Play to increase awareness about their petition to change the ending of the third game (Hick).<sup>20</sup> As Megan Crouse states, "*Mass Effect 3*'s ending was one of the most poorly-received story decisions in recent game history. After three long installments of branching choices, Commander Shepard's final decision resulted in nothing more than a color change in the 2012 game's ending scene" ("*Mass Effect: The Futility of the Hero*," emphasis in original). In the "Extended Cut" DLC of *Mass Effect 3* eventually released by BioWare, the three original endings of the game remained largely the same, apart from the fact that they were extended to include additional dialogue and footage to differentiate one ending from another.<sup>21</sup> In an FAQ post concerning the "Extended Cut" on BioWare's official blog, the company states that the DLC "expand[s] on the existing endings," but that "[t]he goal of the DLC is not to provide a new ending to the game, rather to offer fans additional context and answers to the end of Commander Shepard's story" ("*Mass Effect 3 Extended Cut*"). The fact that BioWare felt led to release the "Extended Cut" DLC reveals that they do take fan feedback and "co-creator[ship]" seriously, but the FAQ post also suggests that BioWare does not reject all rights to their ownership of the *Mass Effect* experience.

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<sup>19</sup> In the side mission "Citadel: Wounded Batarian," one batarian even tries to guilt trip Shepard into helping him commit suicide (BioWare). Interestingly, doing so is considered a Paragon option by the game.

<sup>20</sup> Of course, there will always be those fans who go so far as to file FTC complaints against Electronic Arts and BioWare for "false advertising" (Smith).

<sup>21</sup> The "Extended Cut" DLC also added a fourth ending, allowing the player to refuse the options provided at the end of the third game (BioWare). This fourth option seems remarkably similar to the response of those fans who refused to accept the ending of *Mass Effect 3* without a fight.

## Fluidity of Identity in *Mass Effect*: Player Choice and Interpretation

A thorough analysis of the subject of identity in a video game series such as *Mass Effect* runs into a major setback when one takes into account the sheer number of possibilities involving player choice and how each player's decisions shape the content of the game. As Hudson states in an interview with *Game Informer*, "We have a rule in our franchise that there is no canon. You as a player decide what your story is" (Kollar). In the opening of the first game, players are required to choose the backstory of their character and decide upon Shepard's gender, class, appearance, and first name. Through options provided on a "dialogue wheel" at various points throughout gameplay, players also make decisions that further develop their character and alter the experience of the game.<sup>22</sup> According to Muzyka in his interview with *GamesRadar*, these choices "affect the game right from the start. There will be different dialogue and different reactions as a result of the background you choose" (Barratt). However, the series' portrayal of identity is made even muddier when one takes into account the large cast of NPCs that Commander Shepard interacts with throughout the course of the games.

Shepard's interactions with the various NPCs color the overall experience of the game and can sometimes lead to small changes in the identities of the commander's most trusted allies.

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<sup>22</sup> Whatever decisions the player makes will often gain him either "Paragon" or "Renegade" points. As several members of the BioWare team have stated in interviews, the Paragon and Renegade options do not simply code as "good" and "evil." According to Hudson in an interview with Matt Peckham, "[W]e're always working on improving the decisions that feed the system so they're less about being good or evil and more about the agonizing choice between sacrifices. For example, sacrifices that are personal or selfless versus more brutal choices that might accomplish something more quickly but at significant cost to someone else" ("Building Bridges: Casey Hudson Talks *Mass Effect 2*"). This attempt to have less of a black-and-white morality code can be seen in how the game awards Paragon and Renegade points. For instance, during the mission "Noveria: Rift Station" in the first *Mass Effect*, the player has the option of destroying the last queen of the alien race rachni. The rachni were supposedly killed off by the krogan in the Rachni Wars, but Saren Arterius' team of scientists must have either found a living specimen or cloned one of the rachni remains. A conversation with the queen reveals that her species was possibly forced into the war by a being like the Reapers, who "forced the [rachni] to resonate with its own sour, yellow note." The queen begs Shepard to set her free and let her "seek a healing place to teach [her] children harmony" (BioWare). Letting her live would certainly be the more merciful option—and may lead to the queen showing her gratitude later on—but the decision is not an easy one since the rachni were also responsible for a centuries-long conflict with the Citadel races and could once again be manipulated to the same ends.

The player is given ample opportunity to directly impact his squad members' actions and consequentially some aspect of their identities—especially in *Mass Effect 2*, where the entire game centers on building a team to combat an alien race known as the Collectors.<sup>23</sup> One example of Shepard's influence can be found in the loyalty mission “Garrus: Eye for an Eye.” In the first *Mass Effect*, the player is introduced to Garrus while on the Citadel, where the alien serves as a C-Sec investigations officer.<sup>24</sup> By the time Shepard meets up with him in the second game under the pseudonym “Archangel,” Garrus has become the leader of a vigilante task force known for its work tackling mercenary groups in the crime-riddled Omega space station. However, the player soon learns that Garrus is the last member of his team and that they were betrayed by a comrade. In the mission “Garrus: Eye for an Eye,” Garrus asks Shepard to help him get revenge on his former ally. The player has the option of either facilitating Garrus' efforts—leading to the traitor's murder—or blocking Garrus' shot and convincing him to show mercy (BioWare). While either course of action ultimately results in the player receiving Garrus' full loyalty, the interaction both impacts the character of this version of Shepard and colors the player's perception of Garrus' character. Moments such as this one are scattered throughout the trilogy and allow for the possibility of multiple interpretations of the identities of Shepard's staunchest allies.

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<sup>23</sup> According to Hudson in his interview with *Engadget*, “the story of *Mass Effect 2* is very much about how you get ready for a mission by building a team and understanding who they are, and about learning the magnitude of what you're facing. The funny thing is that people will say ‘other than gathering your crew and building your team and getting ready for this mission, there's not much story there.’ But that is the story” (McElroy).

<sup>24</sup> According to the *Mass Effect* codex—a list of entries provided in-game to describe places, people, and objects of interest—the Citadel is “an ancient deep-space station, presumably constructed by the Protheans.” Various alien species throughout the Milky Way galaxy come together at the space station, which “serves as the political, cultural, and financial capital of the galactic community” (BioWare). C-Sec serves as the policing force for the Citadel, keeping the peace among the various alien races. Garrus was initially in charge of the investigation into Saren Arterius, the main source of conflict for Shepard's team in the first *Mass Effect* (BioWare).

Game mechanics can also alter the way the player interprets the identities of *Mass Effect*'s NPCs. One example of this can be found in Bizzocchil and Tanenbaum's case study, where they completed several playthroughs of *Mass Effect* to arrive at an understanding of the overall narrative of the game. According to them, "It bears mentioning that conversation choices were not the sole contributors to our personal narratives for Shepard: playstyles and tactical choices also inflected the character" (399). For their playthrough with "Adrian Shepard," for instance, they decided on the class of "engineer," which forced them to take the squad member Grunt on various missions so that the combat would not be negatively impacted whenever there were close-quarter encounters with enemies. They go on to state that as they progressed through the game, "[they] grew to imagine Adrian as a 'hands-off' fighter, and [they] developed a strong sense of camaraderie for Grunt, whose trusty shotgun would obliterate any enemies that got too close" (Bizzocchil and Tanenbaum 399). The fluidity of the "text" of *Mass Effect*, which has no official canon, and the ability for there to be multiple versions of Shepard—and, to a lesser extent, different versions of Shepard's companions—draws from both the multiplicity of identity found in postmodern theories of identity, as well as from the fluidity of identity acknowledged in several of Erikson's works. However, several aspects of the trilogy ultimately point toward a more singular, integrated depiction of identity than an RPG might typically suggest.

### **Commander Shepard's Identity: The Jack Bauer of the Spectres**

Despite the multiplicity of identity suggested by the player's ability to customize each version of Shepard, the series also offers the possibility for Shepard's identity to be both integrated and singular. The first indication of this singular identity can be found in the beginning of the first *Mass Effect*, when BioWare deviates from the typical RPG to present a playable character who remains relatively static at the beginning of the game apart from changes

in appearance, gender, and class statistics. In their article, Bizzocchil and Tanenbaum discuss just how different Shepard is from other run-of-the-mill RPG protagonists:

Shepard exists in dialogue with the player: unlike many game protagonists, who are designed to be empty vessels for the player to project his or her identity into, Shepard has a fully formed identity that is independent of the player. There is a core of character traits, values, and design decisions that comprise Shepard, and which are unchanging regardless of how the player chooses to interact with Shepard. [. . .] At the same time, however, the specific personality traits of Shepard are mutable: the player interacts with the character at the level of *attitude* rather than *identity*. (397, emphasis in original)

Although one could argue the decisions that the player controls do have an impact on Shepard's identity, Bizzocchil and Tanenbaum have a point in their statement that Shepard is not one of those "empty vessels for the player to project his or her identity into." Hudson echoes their argument in his interview with *IGN*, discussing how the *Mass Effect* series was explicitly designed to create a protagonist unlike the blank character often found in RPGs: "Mass Effect is so much more cinematic and real than anything we've ever done before that we really needed that extra bit, those extra sensory aspects to a story that you can't get if you just start out with a completely blank character" (Brudvig). The company's narrative-driven and cinematic approach to the series seems to have allowed BioWare to follow a path not typically trod by large-scale

RPGs such as *Fable* and *Dragon Age: Origins*<sup>25</sup> to present a playable character with both a built-in persona<sup>26</sup> and the ability to develop an integrated sense of self.

Despite the player's ability to alter the protagonist's surface-level attributes at the beginning of the game, the Shepard that each player is introduced to essentially differs only in how he arrives to his place of prominence in the Alliance military.<sup>27</sup> The player must choose from three different backgrounds—"hero," "ruthless," and "sole survivor"—in order to determine Shepard's backstory. Apart from the significant differences in character suggested by the "hero" and "ruthless" options (Shepard is either a famous hero, or is known for ruthlessly killing his enemies) and the fact that being the "sole survivor" of a colony may have some bearing on how this version of Shepard interacts with the world around him, every player begins the *Mass Effect* journey controlling the actions of a seasoned veteran of the Alliance who is being considered for the first human position of the Spectres.<sup>28</sup>

According to Hudson in an interview with an individual posting on *RPG Codex*, BioWare purposely starts the player off with a protagonist who has "already proven himself," someone with a sense of presence who does whatever is necessary in order to further his goals. Hudson

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<sup>25</sup> Both the *Fable* franchise and *Dragon Age: Origins* allows the player build a character from scratch, with little-to-no information provided about the playable character's identity apart from what the player brings to the story. While *Dragon Age: Origins* does have a fully developed plot that runs alongside the role-play elements of the game, some of the *Fable* games seem to favor its role-play elements over its overall storyline. For instance, in *Fable III*, much of the second half of the game consists of the player choosing between several clearly labeled "good" and "evil" choices, with little narrative investment for the player's decisions (BioWare, Lionhead Studios).

<sup>26</sup> The term persona is here used instead of identity to suggest that while this built-in element of Shepard's character significantly impacts how he sees and interacts with the world around him, it does not necessarily constitute his entire identity, and would only serve as one aspect of the cohesive whole.

<sup>27</sup> According to the *Mass Effect* codex, "The Systems Alliance is an independent supranational government representing the interests of humanity as a whole." Furthermore, the Alliance serves both as humanity's government and military presence beyond the star system Sol (BioWare).

<sup>28</sup> The Spectres (Special Tactics and Reconnaissance) serve as the covert intelligence service of the Citadel Council, the governing body of the Citadel made up of representatives from the asari, turanian, and salarian races. According to the *Mass Effect* codex, "Though they have no official power over the independent governments of other species, the Council's decisions carry great weight throughout the galaxy" (BioWare).

also states that the BioWare team had a very specific character in mind when they created Commander Shepard, one who similarly has to make difficult decisions in extreme situations:

That's really the essence of the experience of being Commander Shepard, which is very similar to being Jack Bauer. So if you think about "24", the famous TV show that kept us on the edge of our seats for 5 years, the secret of its success and popularity is the extreme stuff that Jack constantly goes through. [. . .] Both Jack and Commander Shepard are elite agents of a military outfit that's really among the best of the best, and both characters will stop at nothing and will be stopped by nothing, breaking anyone and anything. ("Mass Effect Interview")

Shepard is not an "empty vessel" simply waiting to be filled by the decisions made by the player; rather, Shepard serves as the Jack Bauer of the Spectres, a veteran soldier and a member of the most elite military force in the Milky Way galaxy. In this manner, BioWare moves away from postmodernist affirmations of the lack of consistency and cohesion present in an individual's sense of self to depict Shepard's identity as both consistent and ultimately singular.

Likewise, although Shepard is not entirely malleable by the player, the game mechanics often lead the player to construct what he can of Shepard's identity into an integrated and cohesive whole. Players are free to be as inconsistent as they wish to be, yet gameplay often encourages them to make the kind of consistent choices that would lead the protagonist to an integrated sense of self. Options throughout the game lead to the player receiving "Paragon" or "Renegade" points, which in turn allow Shepard to either charm or intimidate the characters with whom he comes in contact. The player's decisions therefore impact the course of the game since some courses of action are impossible to accomplish without a certain number of points in either direction. During the mission "Race Against Time: Final Battle" at the end of the first *Mass*

*Effect*, for example, the only way to convince Saren to stand down and realize that he is being controlled by the Reaper Sovereign<sup>29</sup> is if the player passes a Paragon/Renegade check. If the player has insufficient points, this redemptive storyline is closed to him, and Shepard must first fight Saren to the death before battling his reanimated corpse (BioWare).

The number of Paragon or Renegade points the player amasses can also impact whether some of Shepard's squad members live to see the final battle of *Mass Effect 3*, therefore encouraging him to make more consistent choices as he progresses through the games. For instance, in the mission "Virmire: Saren's Plan" in the first *Mass Effect*, the player learns that Saren has been breeding an army of krogans and that in order to stop him Shepard must destroy a facility that might hold a cure for the genophage—an artificially created plague developed by the salarians to prevent the warlike krogans from forcibly gaining control over planets already claimed by other alien species. However, there is one major problem with this mission: Urdnot Wrex, a squad member who has been supporting Shepard since he was recruited at the Citadel, happens to be a krogan. If the player does not have enough Paragon or Renegade points, Shepard is unable to convince Wrex to step down, and the squad member is either killed by the player or by one of Shepard's subordinates.<sup>30, 31</sup> Making consistent choices allows the player to experience storylines that would not have been possible otherwise, and sometimes ensures the survival of

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<sup>29</sup>As Shepard discovers in the mission "Feros: The Thorian," Sovereign has the ability to "dominate the minds" of those who come in contact with it, causing them to become "indoctrinated" to its will. While the asari Shiala suggests that this indoctrination is how Saren controls many of his followers, it becomes clear throughout the course of the game that Saren's starship is actually a sentient machine known as a Reaper that has brought Saren himself under its control (BioWare).

<sup>30</sup> It is also possible for the player to convince Wrex to stand down without the help of Paragon or Renegade points if he has sufficiently gained the krogan's loyalty (BioWare).

<sup>31</sup> This interaction also has significant impact in the rest of the *Mass Effect* trilogy—especially in the third game. For instance, if Wrex is alive in *Mass Effect 3*, the player has the opportunity to gain additional assets in the war effort against the Reapers (BioWare). The player therefore has even more reason to make decisions that would allow him to keep Wrex alive because of the severity of the consequences if the krogan does not survive to the final game.

certain members of Shepard's party. The consistency of these choices makes for a more integrated, healthy sense of self for the protagonist.

Furthermore, the persona that BioWare presents at the beginning of the first game is consistent with Shepard's image at the conclusion of the trilogy. Despite the massive range of choices provided to the player, the protagonist almost always ends up perishing by the end of the final game.<sup>32</sup> According to Crouse, the ending of *Mass Effect 3* is a fitting one for the franchise if one considers the futility of Shepard's journey. As she argues, "[T]he seeming pointlessness of the endings could be interpreted as a statement about the inevitability of heroism. Maybe Shepard's choices were never meant to matter" ("Mass Effect: The Futility of the Hero"). The commander is left with few real choices throughout the course of the trilogy, and yet he must still find a way to stop the Reapers. The futility of Shepard's (and the player's) journey very easily fits in with the persona that BioWare created for Shepard at the beginning of the first *Mass Effect*. Just like Jack Bauer fighting against terrorists in twenty-first century America, Shepard must make hard-and-fast decisions with little consideration of how these decisions impact him personally. This aspect of Shepard's identity therefore follows him throughout the course of the games and adds to the consistency of the character's overall sense of self. Despite the various avenues through which each individual Shepard can develop, there is still the possibility for Shepard to mirror Erikson's concept of a healthy integrated identity.

### **Legion's Identity: Moving from "We" to "I"**

The movement from the initial multiplicity of identity suggested by *Mass Effect's* role-play elements to Shepard's potentially integrated sense of self is mirrored in the progression of

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<sup>32</sup> There is the slight possibility of Shepard surviving the final battle with the Reapers, given that the player has enlisted all the help he can get and that he has gained a sufficient "readiness rating" by playing the game's multiplayer on Xbox Live (BioWare).

the NPC Legion's identity. The player is introduced to Legion in the *Mass Effect 2* mission "Reaper IFF," where Shepard comes across an apparently non-hostile geth<sup>33</sup> who has parts of the commander's old armor fused onto its metal exoskeleton. The geth sustains damage during the course of the mission, but if the player decides to activate and talk to the NPC, it reveals that the machines Shepard has been fighting up to this point are not actually part of the geth, but are "heretics" who would rather put their trust in and be obedient to the Reapers than "build [their] own future" (BioWare). The ensuing conversation is especially important because it sheds light onto the identity of this non-hostile geth:

Shepard: What is the individual in front of me called?

Geth: There is no individual. We are geth. There are currently 1,183 programs active within this platform.

EDI: "My name is Legion, for we are many."<sup>34</sup>

Shepard: That seems appropriate.

Geth: Christian Bible, the Gospel of Mark, chapter five, verse nine. We acknowledge this as an appropriate metaphor. We are Legion, a terminal of the geth. (BioWare)

As a member of the geth, Legion has no personal identity but is rather many "programs" networked to one another inside a single machine, only able to take action when all of its programs come to a "consensus" (BioWare). This portrayal of identity is reminiscent of the multiplicity of selves postulated by identity experts such as Hermans, et al. and Zingsheim—

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<sup>33</sup> The geth are a race of semi-sentient machines created by an alien species known as the quarian. The machines were allied with Saren and the Reaper Sovereign in the first *Mass Effect*, so it will no doubt come as a surprise when players find one of these beings sniping off Shepard's enemies during the "Reaper IFF" mission (BioWare).

<sup>34</sup> EDI is an artificial intelligence that is eventually given complete control over the Normandy's primary systems in *Mass Effect 2*. It makes sense that she is the first one to understand Legion's predicament, given that she is also what the *Mass Effect* universe terms a "synthetic" being (BioWare).

especially given the fact that Legion constantly refers to itself as “we” throughout the course of the second game and most of the third. However, as the player discovers later in the series, Legion does not maintain this lack of personal identity.

Over the course of the second and third games, Legion slowly transforms from the logically minded drone that its creators first envisioned to an entity capable of individual thought and action. As the player discovers in the first *Mass Effect*, the geth were created by the quarians in order to primarily serve as a labor force. The quarians designed these advanced machines to have little intelligence, but gave each unit the capability to network and communicate with other units—thus accidentally creating a semi-aware hive artificial intelligence.<sup>35</sup> In the *Mass Effect 3* mission “Priority: Geth Dreadnought,” Legion acknowledges just how far it has come from its original programming. If Shepard comes across an imprisoned Legion on the dreadnaught, the player can choose to question Legion’s loyalty<sup>36, 37</sup>:

Shepard: How do I know you’re not under Reaper control?

Legion: Our architecture prevents it. We are too complex. (BioWare)

This conversation occurs between Shepard and another geth if Legion did not survive the final mission of *Mass Effect 2*, but when this new geth states that it is “a holographic reconstruction of a unique intelligence network” (BioWare), it is most likely talking about Legion. Despite

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<sup>35</sup> This action—unwitting though it may have been—eventually culminated in the quarians’ flight from their own homeworld and in their expulsion from the Citadel, since creating an artificial intelligence is strictly prohibited by the Council (BioWare).

<sup>36</sup> An understandable decision, given that Shepard has been informed that the main force of the geth have allied with the Reapers and that the player has spent a good portion of the mission fighting past Reaper-controlled machines (BioWare).

<sup>37</sup> Interestingly, as Legion reveals after the mission’s completion, the geth agreed to work with the Reapers only out of desperation when a significant portion of their stored “programs” were deleted in an unprovoked quarian attack. Apparently, the geth were in the process of constructing “a megastructure to house all geth, store all memories” in order to “end [the geth’s] isolation from each other” (BioWare). The geth’s effort to bring all of their programs together in one platform suggests that they are not satisfied with their limited sentience as a hive artificial intelligence. Their efforts to escape “isolation from each other” seems remarkably similar to Erikson’s concept of personal identity as the multitude of geth programs would have come together to form a unified whole.

Legion's acknowledgement that it is no longer operating under its initial programming, it is only later in the third game that the machine develops to such an extent that it begins experiencing individualized emotions.

One example of Legion's ability to portray these emotions occurs in the beginning of the *Mass Effect 3* mission "Priority: Rannoch." During the mission, Shepard must travel to the old quarian homeworld to destroy the Reaper base there. As Shepard and his team prepare for the mission while onboard the Normandy shuttle, Legion reveals that its body still contains "remnants" of the upgrades that the Reapers programmed into those geth under their control at the beginning of *Mass Effect 3*. If the player has Shepard show friendly concern over the fact that Legion kept the upgrades a secret, the ensuing conversation reveals another interesting development regarding the NPC's identity:

Legion: You were tolerant of our recovery of geth intelligences from the server, but this matter is different. Personal.

Shepard: You were ashamed.

Legion: Shame is an emotional or cognitive response to societal judgment. It should not apply here. [. . .] We did not intend to cause offense. (BioWare)

Despite Legion's suggestion that it is incapable of feeling ashamed, the machine does lower its robotic head several times throughout the conversation, as if it truly feels shame and remorse for its actions. The presence of these complex emotions suggests that the Reaper upgrades, as well as Legion's interactions with Shepard and the rest of the Normandy crew, have allowed it to move away from its programming as a hive intelligence composed of multiple entities and to start developing into a more lifelike being, complete with a personal identity.

At the end of the mission “Priority: Rannoch,” Legion’s conflict with identity—and the quarian-geth conflict in general—comes to a head in arguably one of the most climactic moments of the trilogy. After Shepard’s team destroys the Reaper controlling the geth fighters on Rannoch, the machines are left defenseless in the face of the quarian armada. Legion argues that they should upload the Reaper upgrades once more into the geth—this time, rewriting the code so that the machines retain their independence and free will. As Legion states, “Each geth unit would be a true intelligence. We would be alive, and we could help you” (BioWare). If the player allows Legion to upload the Reaper upgrade, the machine realizes that it is unable to simply copy the code from its body into the entire geth consensus, saying, “Shepard-Commander, I must go to them. I am . . . I’m sorry. It’s the only way” (BioWare). Legion collapses shortly after this statement, and a few moments later another geth confirms that the machine has sacrificed himself in order to bring personhood to the entirety of the geth.<sup>38</sup> A conversation between Shepard, EDI, and Joker<sup>39</sup> after the “Priority: Rannoch” mission reveals that Legion’s switch from using the pronoun “we” to “I” was not an error made by the *Mass Effect* writers. Reflecting upon Legion’s sacrifice, EDI states, “The singular pronoun indicates Legion’s independent personality had fully actualized. In its last moments, it was not an avatar of the geth consensus. It was a person” (BioWare).<sup>40</sup> As EDI’s words suggest, Legion begins as a multiplicity of programs within a single geth platform but ultimately develops into an individual with a singular, personal identity.

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<sup>38</sup> Interestingly, regardless of the decision Shepard makes (or is able to make, considering the amount of Paragon/Renegade points the player has acquired), there is always a moment before Legion dies when he asks Tali’Zorah (the quarian member of Shepard’s team), “Does this unit have a soul?” Her response is always a tearful “Yes” (BioWare). Legion’s question is significant because, as the player learns in the mission “Rannoch: Geth Fighter Squadron,” it is the fact that the geth had the audacity—or, rather, the self-awareness—to voice this same question that the quarians grew afraid and attempted to destroy their own creations.

<sup>39</sup> Joker is the human pilot of the Normandy for all three games.

<sup>40</sup> What seems particularly ironic, however, is that he manages to achieve this feat only moments before his death.

## Conclusion

Identity in the *Mass Effect* games ranges from a kind of multiplicity similar to that maintained by postmodernist psychoanalytic thought, to a singular and integrated personal identity closely resembling Erikson's understanding of the term. At first glance, the role-play elements of the trilogy make for countless Shepards whose identities differ depending on what choices each player makes and on how he interprets the text of the games—interpretations that are all equally valid since there is “no canon” (Kollar) version of the *Mass Effect* experience. However, some consistency can be found in the built-in aspect of Commander Shepard's identity, as he regularly fights Reapers with the same no-nonsense attitude that Jack Bauer exudes when taking on potential terrorists. *Mass Effect's* game mechanics also make it possible for Shepard to develop an integrated sense of self by encouraging consistency in player decisions.

However, arguably the clearest and most profound statement about identity in the games is found in the portrayal of Legion's identity. As the geth develops away from his initial programming, his understanding of his identity shifts from a multiplicity of selves to a singular sense of self. Furthermore, by having members of Shepard's crew explicitly state that Legion has gained personhood in this shift from multiple to singular identity, the *Mass Effect* writers seem to go against postmodernist thought in suggesting that a prerequisite for a healthy personal identity is a unified sense of self.

### Conclusion: Making Sense of Identity

“We live entirely [. . .] by the imposition of a narrative line among disparate images.”

– James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (108)

“The ego [. . .] must at any given stage of life deal with a changing Self which demands to be synthesized with abandoned and anticipated selves.”

– Erik Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (211)

Mainstream culture’s fascination with narratives that focus on questions of identity helps reveal that the gulf between Erikson’s theory of the self and postmodern theories of identity may not be as large as typically thought. In *The Hunger Games*, Collins initially places modern and postmodern theories of identity on opposite ends of the spectrum in her depiction of the Careers and the Capitol citizens. However, readers eventually come to realize that the singularly bloodthirsty, survivalist mentality exhibited by the Careers would be seen as unhealthy by modern and postmodern theorists alike. For instance, theorists such as Zingsheim who praise the fluidity and mutability of identity would most likely agree with Erikson that there is something unhealthy about a personal identity that is rigid and resistant to change.

The clearest example of the similarities between modern and postmodern theories of identity in the novel, however, is found in Collins’ depiction of her primary protagonists. Both Peeta and Katniss eventually become adept at manipulating their audience to their own advantage—managing so well, in fact, that when Katniss returns to District 12 at the end of the Games, her childhood friend Gale seems convinced that her relationship with Peeta is real (*Catching Fire* 9).<sup>41</sup> Though Peeta and Katniss’ ability to take on whatever persona is needed to

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<sup>41</sup> The events leading up to and during the Hunger Games were televised throughout all of the twelve districts, in addition to being televised throughout the Capitol. Gale therefore saw everything that happened in the Games, including the moments in the cave where Katniss nursed Peeta back to health.

survive in the arena is similar to the image of “the multivoiced self” presented by Hermans, et al. in their article, the roles that the two tributes adopt before and during the Games do not necessarily constitute their entire identity. For instance, Peeta’s decision to play up his feelings for Katniss at the start of the Games and his decision to ally with the Careers once the Games begin are both made with Katniss’ ultimate wellbeing in mind. His identity remains consistent through the course of the book because he knows who he is and he is determined not to change in the arena.

Katniss, conversely, has no clear sense of who she is at the beginning of the novel; although her love for Prim ultimately drives her to take her sister’s place in the Hunger Games, she enters the arena with only survival on her mind. The roles that Katniss takes on leading up to and during the Games—a star-crossed lover, a survivor, an ally to the small tribute from District 11—only make up parts of her identity as she internalizes these roles and allows them to impact her actions and her inner self. Although her identity is initially fragmented as her instinct for survival comes at constant odds with her desire to protect the people she cares about, Katniss’ interactions with Peeta deepen her already existing affections for him and gradually allow her to integrate the various aspects of her identity into a single sense of self. In this manner, the eventual revelation of Katniss’ identity exemplifies Erikson’s fifth stage of psychosocial development. The “selves” (*Identity: Youth and Crisis* 211) that Katniss has acquired as a member of District 12 and as a combatant in the arena come together to form an integrated sense of self that “comes upon” (20) her at that pivotal moment near the end of the book.

The *Mass Effect* trilogy likewise reveals the often-overlooked elements of compatibility between modern and postmodern theories, especially in the trilogy’s depiction of Commander Shepard and the NPC Legion. At first glance, BioWare’s portrayal of identity in the games falls

heavily on the side of postmodernist theories of identity: each player has the opportunity to create multiple copies of Shepard, and although players are encouraged to make consistent choices throughout the games, they are ultimately permitted to be as inconsistent as they wish to be. Despite BioWare's wish to have the trilogy be largely "co-creat[ed]" (Takahashi), however, the game writers present a relatively consistent identity in *Mass Effect*'s playable character. Throughout the trilogy, Shepard remains a seasoned soldier who will go to any lengths—including sacrificing himself—in order to accomplish his goals.

With the NPC Legion, on the other hand, there is a clear image of the multiplicity of identity suggested by postmodernist thought ultimately coming together to form a singular sense of self. Similar to Katniss, Legion is initially characterized by a fragmented, plural identity. However, instead of following Collins' example by having their character adopt a variety of roles in constant battle with one another, the *Mass Effect* writers take postmodernist views of the multiplicity of identity to their logical extremes. When players are first introduced to the NPC, Legion uses the pronoun "we" instead of "I" and is made up of numerous entities networked together in a single apparatus. The machine has no concept of personal identity and is only able to take decisive action when all of its programs come to an agreement. However, by the end of the trilogy, Legion is able to realize a singular sense of self in that climactic moment when he sacrifices himself for the betterment of his people. As EDI states in the last game of the trilogy, the machine only gains personhood once those separate programs (or "selves," to use Erikson's term) come together to form one unique individual—an "I," rather than a "we."

Collins' *The Hunger Games* and BioWare's *Mass Effect* trilogy help reveal the similarities between modern and postmodern theories of identity. Both narratives showcase the complexity of human beings, shedding light on the fact that individuals do not remain static over

time, but change as they grow and mature. Individuals may take on different roles throughout their lifetimes, and various aspects of their personalities may often seem at odds, but they make sense of their identity the same way that Smith argues that human beings make sense of the world around them—by unconsciously piecing together the different elements of their identity to form one “intelligible ‘whole’” (Smith 19).

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