



GAME NARRATIVE
SUMMIT

Beyond the Blue-Skinned Space Babe: Deconstructing the Empowered Asari in *Mass Effect*

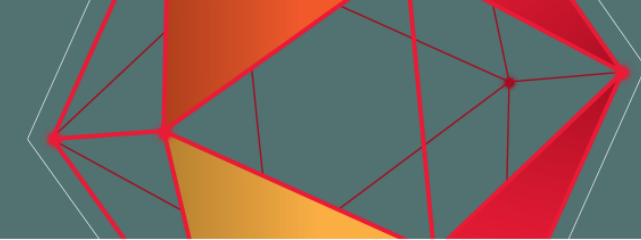
Alexandra M. Lucas

Content Writer | Microsoft Cortana

GDC

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE® | MARCH 19-23, 2018 | EXPO: MARCH 21-23, 2018 #GDC18

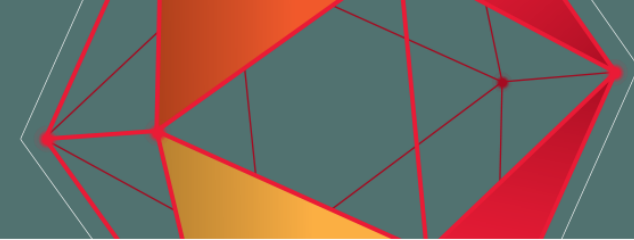




Topic Overview

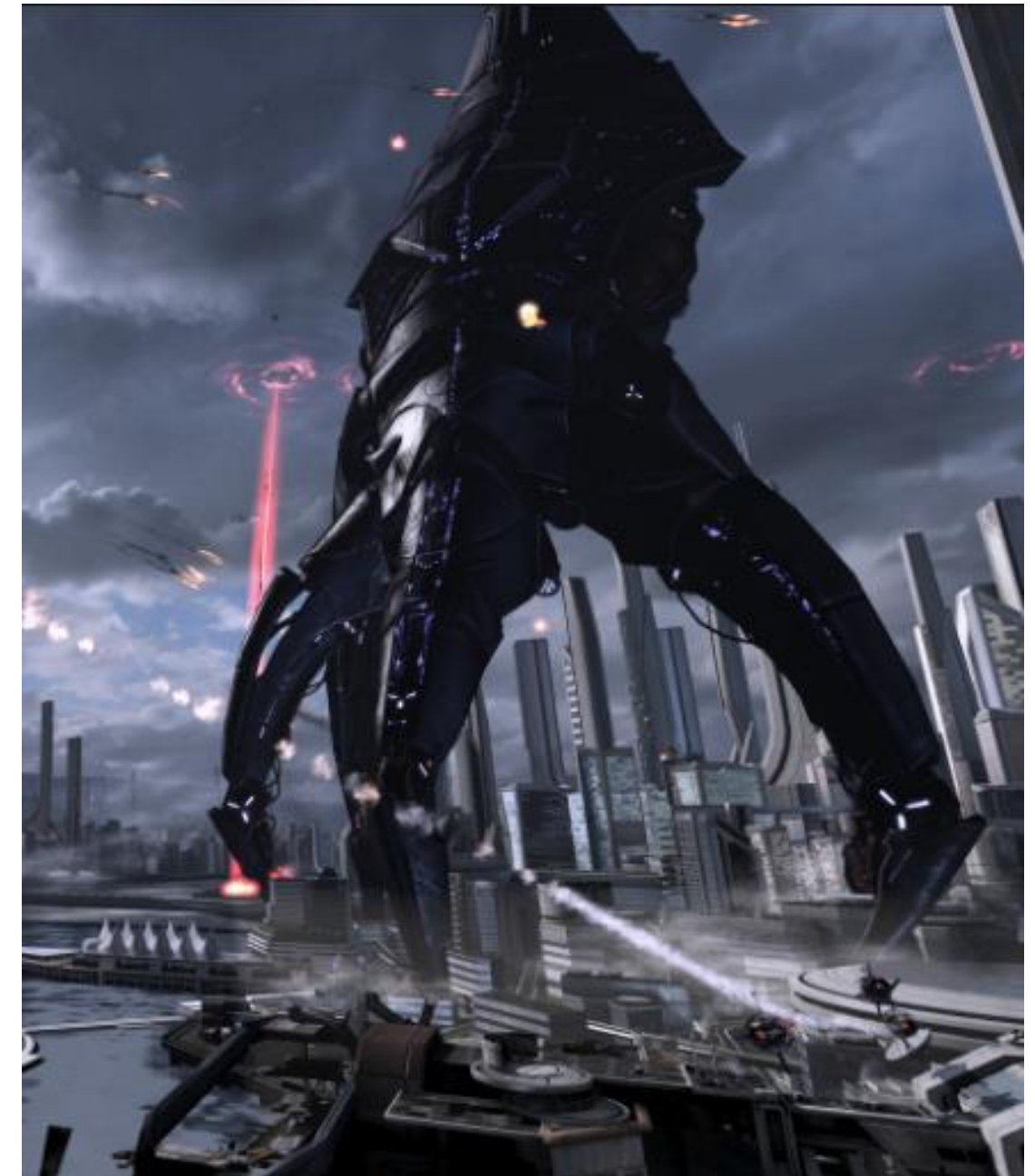
- How *Mass Effect's* Asari built on the classic Triple Goddess paradigm
- Why these changes to the classic paradigm are empowering and how you can follow suit
- How revising the green- (or blue-) skinned space babe trope can improve the world

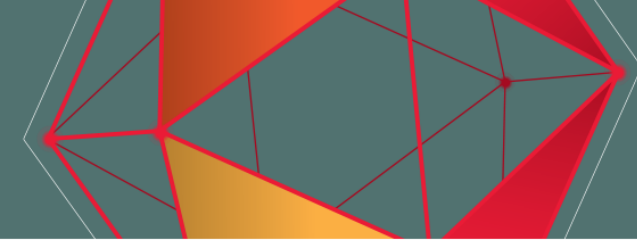




CONTENT WARNING

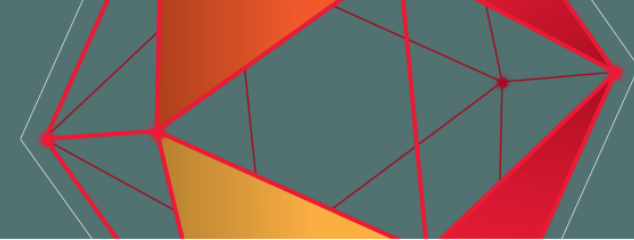
- Partial nudity
- Sexually explicit content
- *Mass Effect 1-3* spoilers



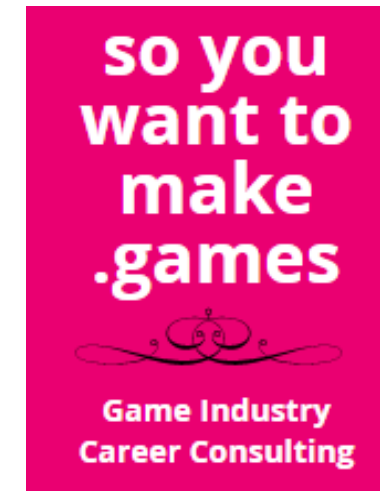
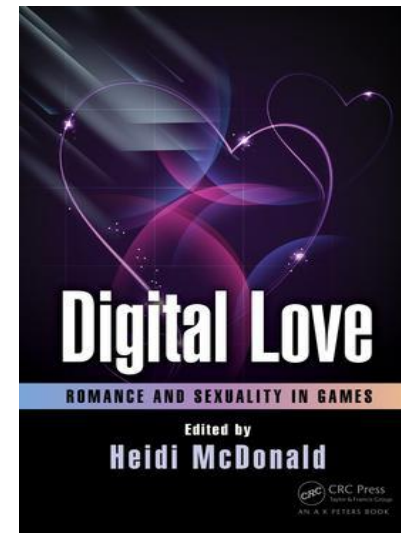
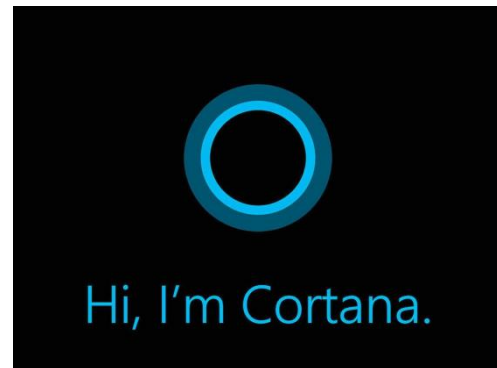


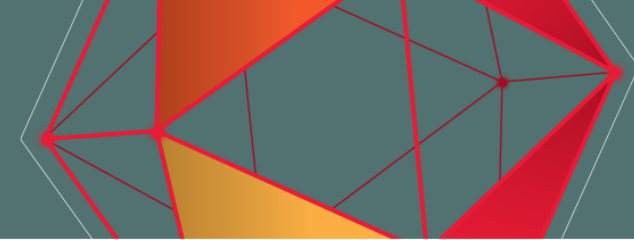
Glad
You're
Still
Here!





ALEXANDRA M. LUCAS





What I'm Covering Today

I. Green-Skinned Space Babe Trope

II. *Mass Effect* & Asari Basics

III. Asari Adult Life Stages

IV. Classic Triple Goddess Comparison

V. *Mass Effect* Examples

VI. Focus Areas For Improving Representation in Games

VII. How Improving Representation Can Affect Society





GAME NARRATIVE
SUMMIT



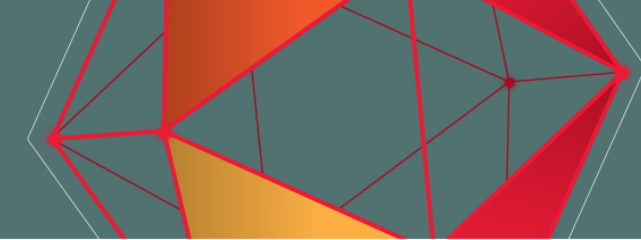
THE GREEN- (BLUE-)SKINNED SPACE BABE TROPE

It's not great.

GDC

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE® | MARCH 19-23, 2018 | EXPO: MARCH 21-23, 2018 #GDC18



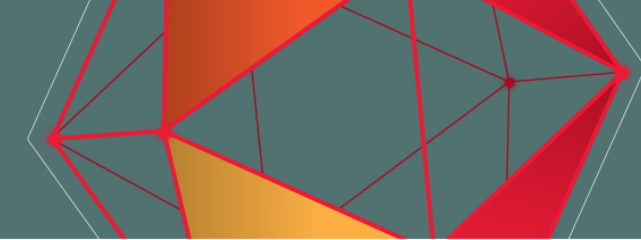


Green-Skinned Space Babe Definition

"An exotic yet attractive female alien, tending to look exactly like an attractive female human except for odd coloring and a couple minor features added."

-- TVTropes.org





Green-Skinned Space Babe Background

- Most well-known contemporary example: *Star Trek TOS*' first pilot, "The Cage"
- Typically green or blue
- Assumed sexual interest in men
- Common thematic elements
 - Slavery/bondage
 - Sexually insatiable
 - Ignorant of human love, infantile
 - Erotic performance for male gaze



Vina in "The Cage"



**Liara is not
impressed.**

And you
shouldn't be,
either.





GAME NARRATIVE
SUMMIT



'Member *Mass Effect*?

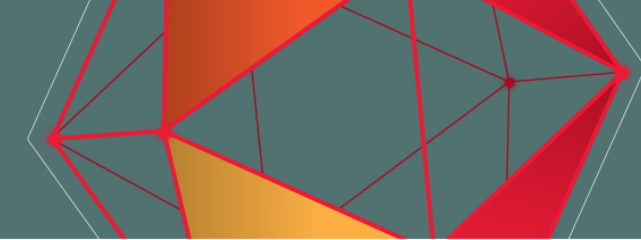
GDC

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE® | MARCH 19-23, 2018 | EXPO: MARCH 21-23, 2018 #GDC18



OOH YEAH I MEMBER

UBM



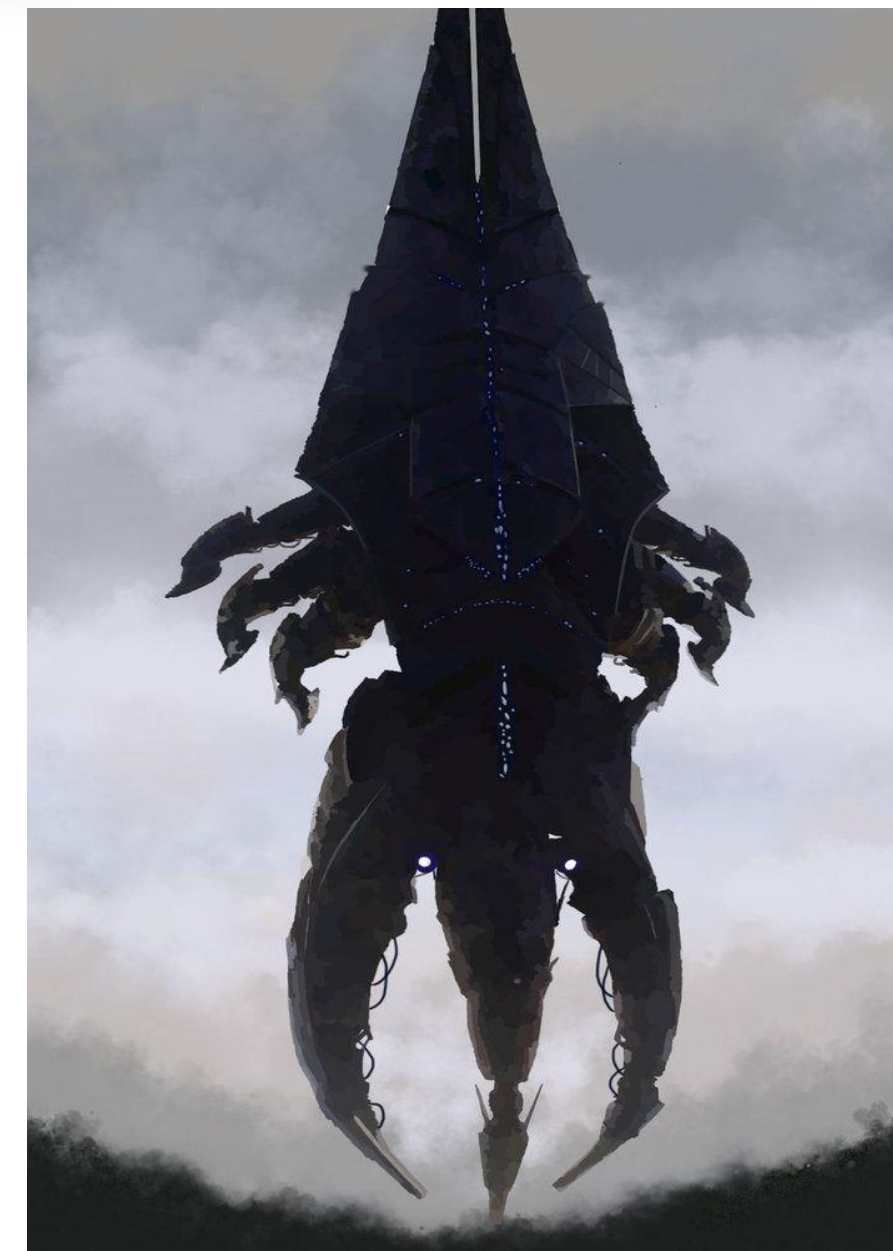
Mass Effect Trilogy Basics 1/2

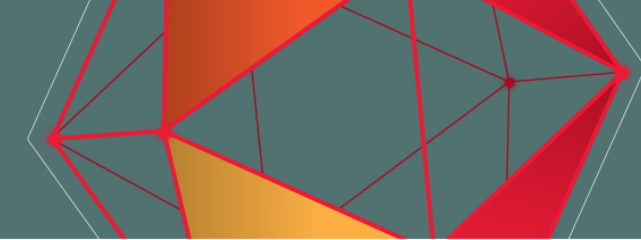
The year: 2183 CE

You: Commander Shepard

Your mission: Unite all species to save the galaxy from the Reapers, a powerful race of ancient mechanical beings, and their agents.

Final battle: A war with the Reapers to save the galaxy from another purge of sentient lifeforms.





Mass Effect Trilogy Basics 2/2



Mass relays provide the **mass effect**, facilitating swift travel across the galaxy and interspecies collaboration to fight the Reapers.





GAME NARRATIVE
SUMMIT



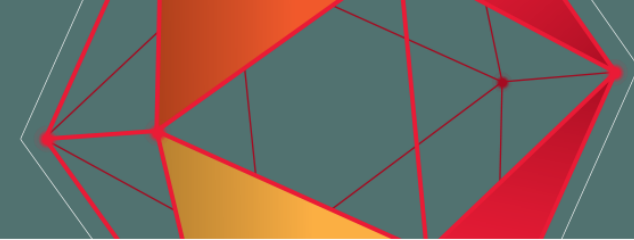
ASARI

A Crash Course

GDC

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE® | MARCH 19-23, 2018 | EXPO: MARCH 21-23, 2018 #GDC18

UBM



Asari Basics 1/2

Homeworld: Thessia (RIP)

Social organization: Matriarchal

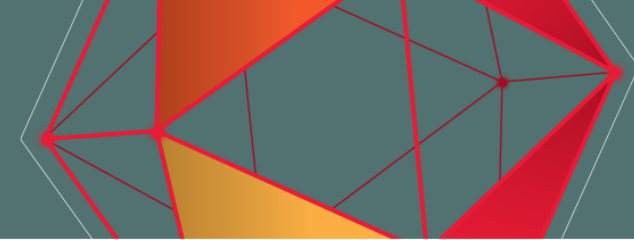
Gender structure: Monogender

Typical lifespan: 2000+ years

Strengths: Diplomacy, biotic powers, elegance, intelligence

Known for: Being among the earliest species to achieve interstellar flight and settle the Citadel





Asari Basics 2/2

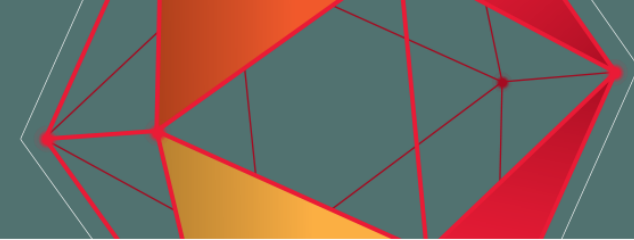
Society

- Self-actualization
- Sex-positive
- Community-oriented
- Diplomatic and peaceful

Characteristics

- Conventionally feminine appearance
- She/her pronouns (typically)
- No specific sexual orientation assumed
- Can reproduce with any gender or species
 - Taboo to reproduce with other Asari → Ardat-Yakshi
- 3 adult life stages





Asari Adult Life Stages



MAIDEN

- 250 years old
- Exploration
- Experimentation
- Sexual freedom
- Researchers, mercenaries, nightclub dancers



MATRON

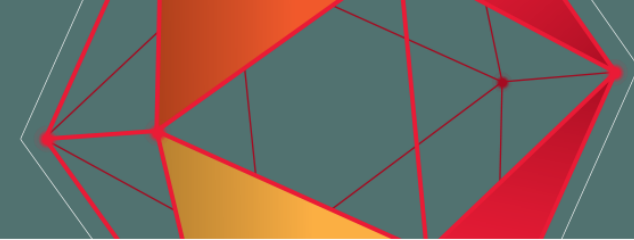
- 350 years old
- Melding/mating
- Refinement of purpose
- Number of potential career choices increases



MATRIARCH

- 1000+ years old
- Community focus
- Extremely skilled and wise
- Self-actualization
- Full sexual empowerment
- Endless possibilities





Classic Triple Goddess Overview



MAIDEN

- Huntress
- Preoccupied with finding a husband
- Virginal
- Youthful, infantile
- Conventionally beautiful



MOTHER

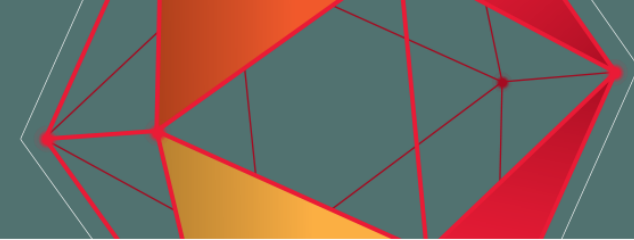
- Pregnant
- Reproduction as core focus
- "End of journey"
- Children & husband



CRONE

- "Ugly"
- Devalued because cannot reproduce
- Soothsayer of doom
- Invisible burden





For Those Keeping Score

Triple Goddess

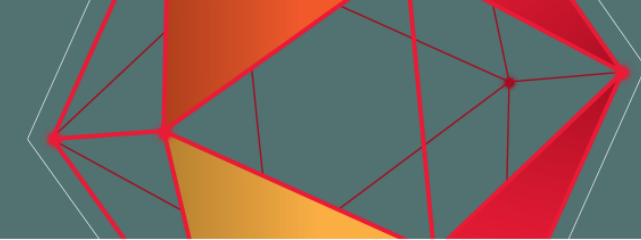
Maiden → Mother → Crone



Asari Stages

Maiden → Matron → Matriarch





Classic Maiden v. Asari Maiden



CLASSIC MAIDEN

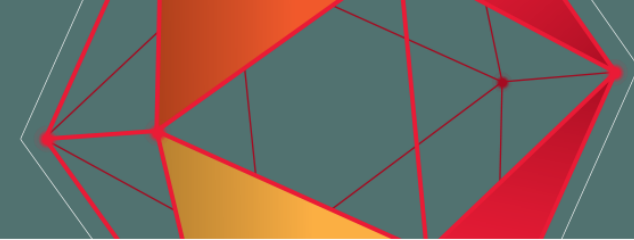
- Huntress
- Preoccupied with finding a husband as only goal
- Valued for purity and beauty
- Infantile; in need of saving



ASARI MAIDEN

- Explorer and researcher
- Experimenting with sexuality
- Valued for intelligence
- Seeking maturity, identity, knowledge, and purpose





Classic Mother v. Asari Matron



CLASSIC MOTHER

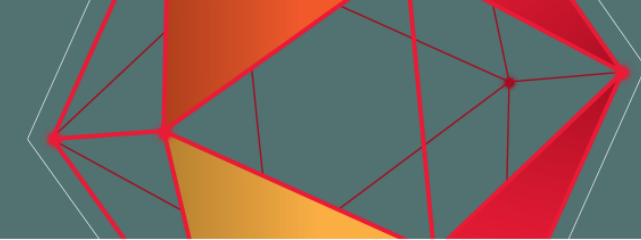
- Pregnant; sex as obligation
- Reproduction as core focus
- "End of journey"
- Focus on children & husband



ASARI MATRON

- Sex and reproduction as optional, consenting, and fun
- Multiple possible journeys
- Men may not factor in at all





Classic Crone v. Asari Matriarch



CLASSIC CRONE

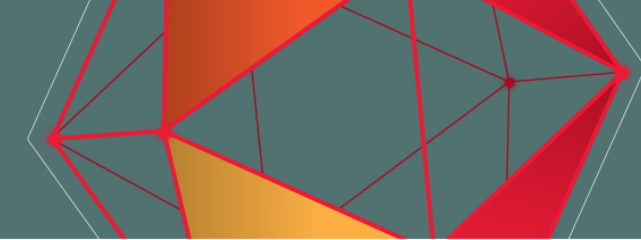
- Devalued and “ugly” / cannot reproduce
- Soothsayer of doom
- Invisible and yet also a burden



ASARI MATRIARCH

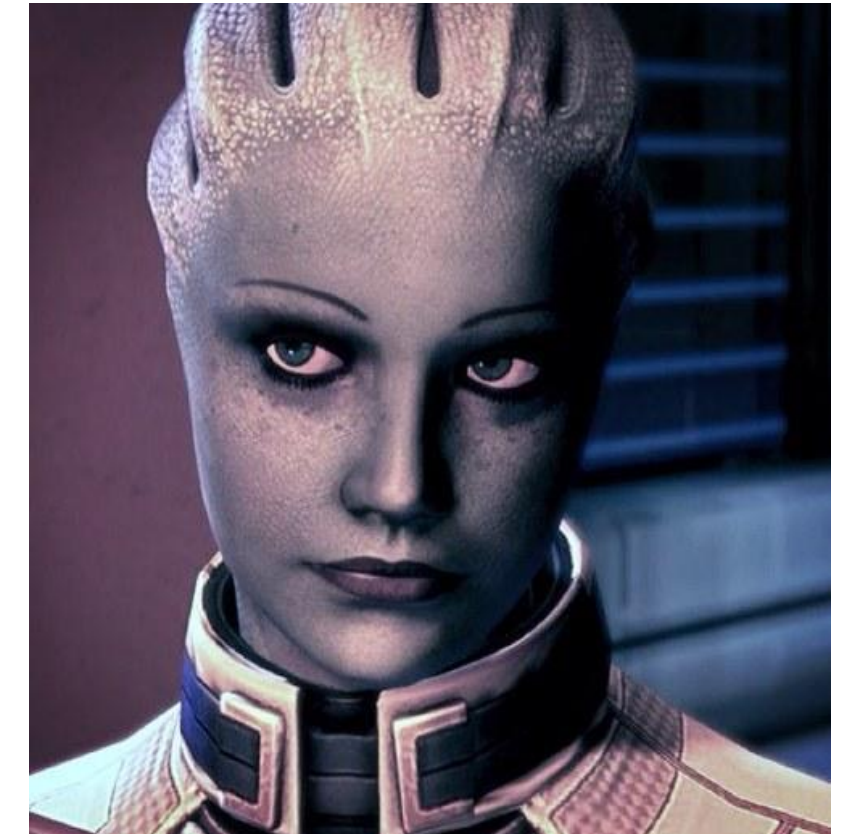
- Mature beauty; sexually confident
- Provides helpful wisdom
- Powerful and established





MAIDEN: Dr. Liara T'Soni

- Explorer & researcher
- Open to sexual encounters and romance with male or female Shepard
- Initially a virgin
- Intelligent; seeks knowledge to bring back to Asari society
- Powerful biotic squadmate



ARC

Naïve → Hardships, battles → Shadow Broker & useful ally





GAME NARRATIVE
SUMMIT



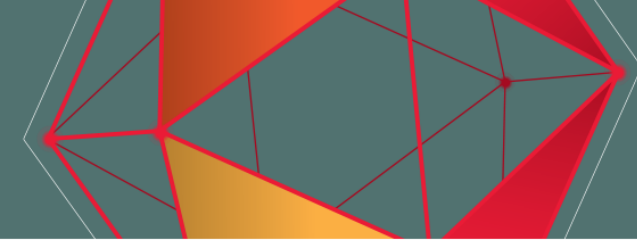
THE GREEN- (BLUE-)SKINNED SPACE BABE TROPE

Remember this gem? I know...I try to forget, too.

GDC

GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE® | MARCH 19-23, 2018 | EXPO: MARCH 21-23, 2018 #GDC18

UBM



Liara's "Enhancements" from 1-3



ME 1

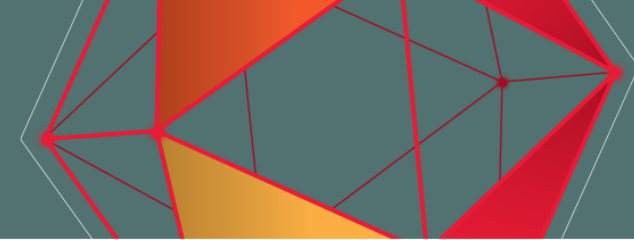


ME 2

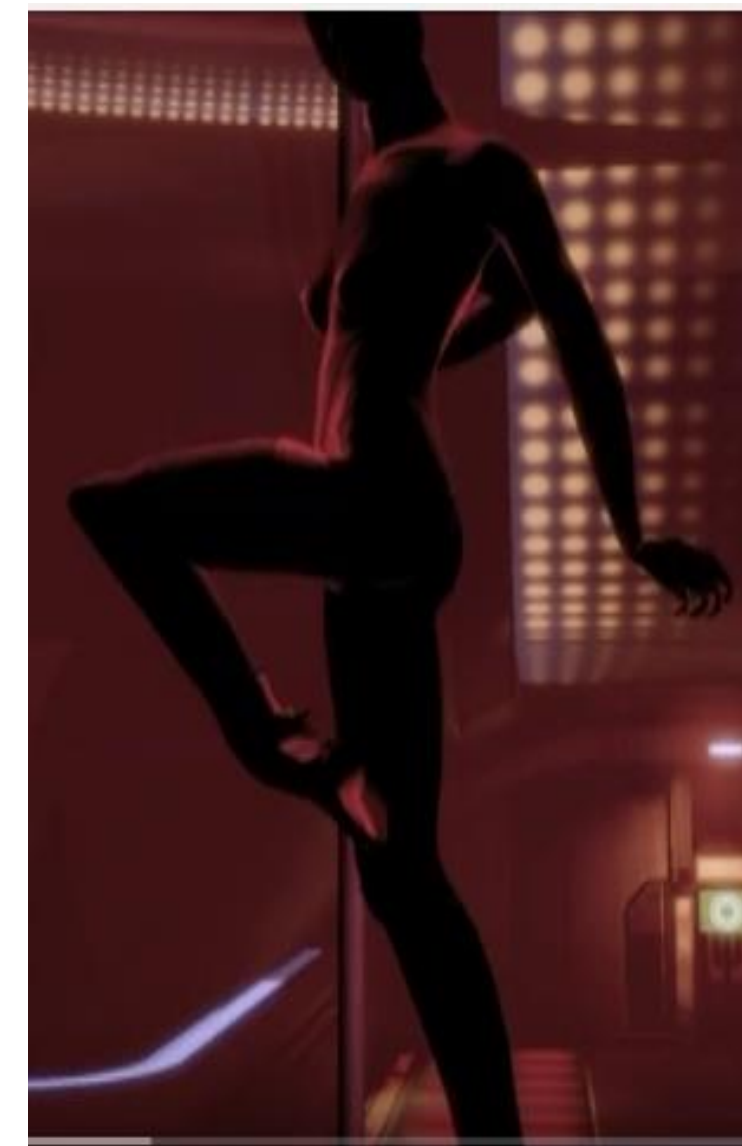
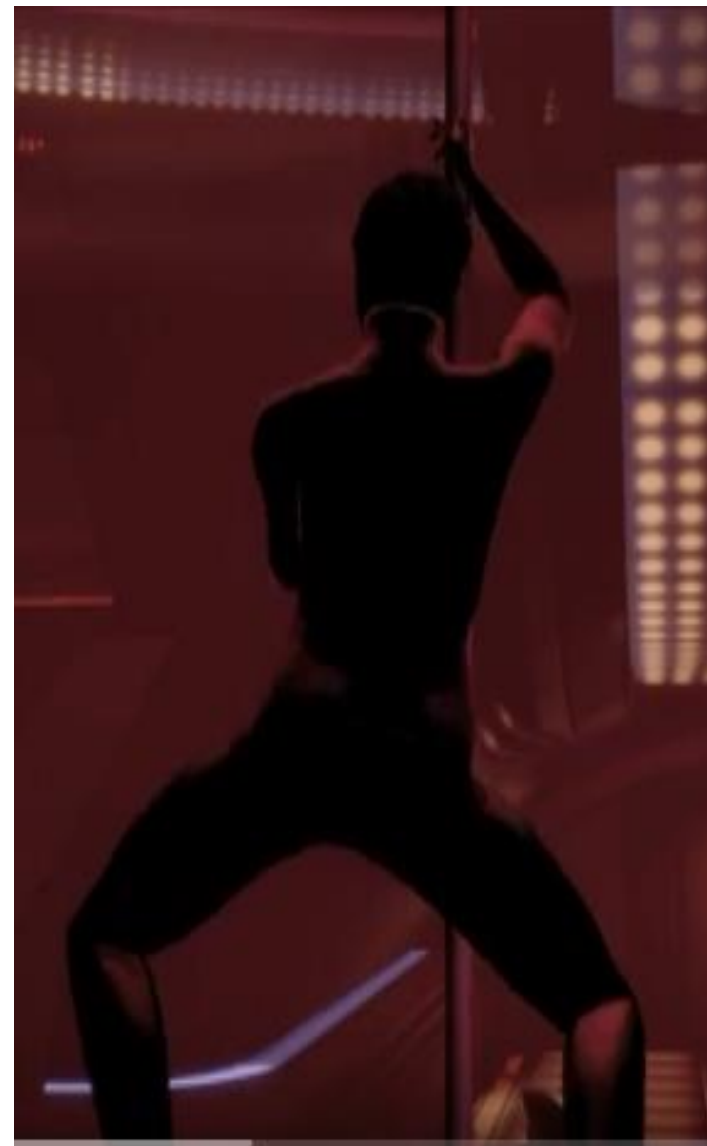


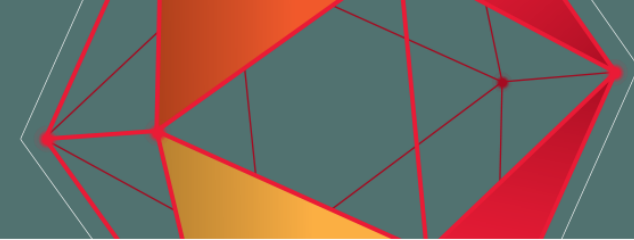
ME 3





Asari Nightclub Dancers IN THE SHADOWS



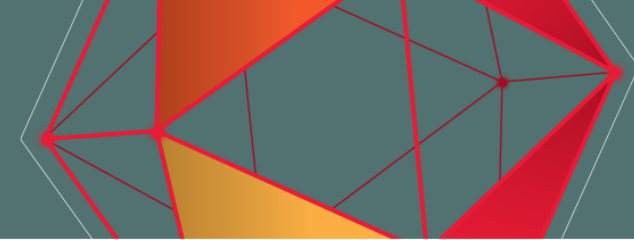


Asari Nightclub Dancers IN THE LIGHT



Lesson learned: Don't image search "asari dancer" or "sexy asari."
Or do, if that's what you're into.





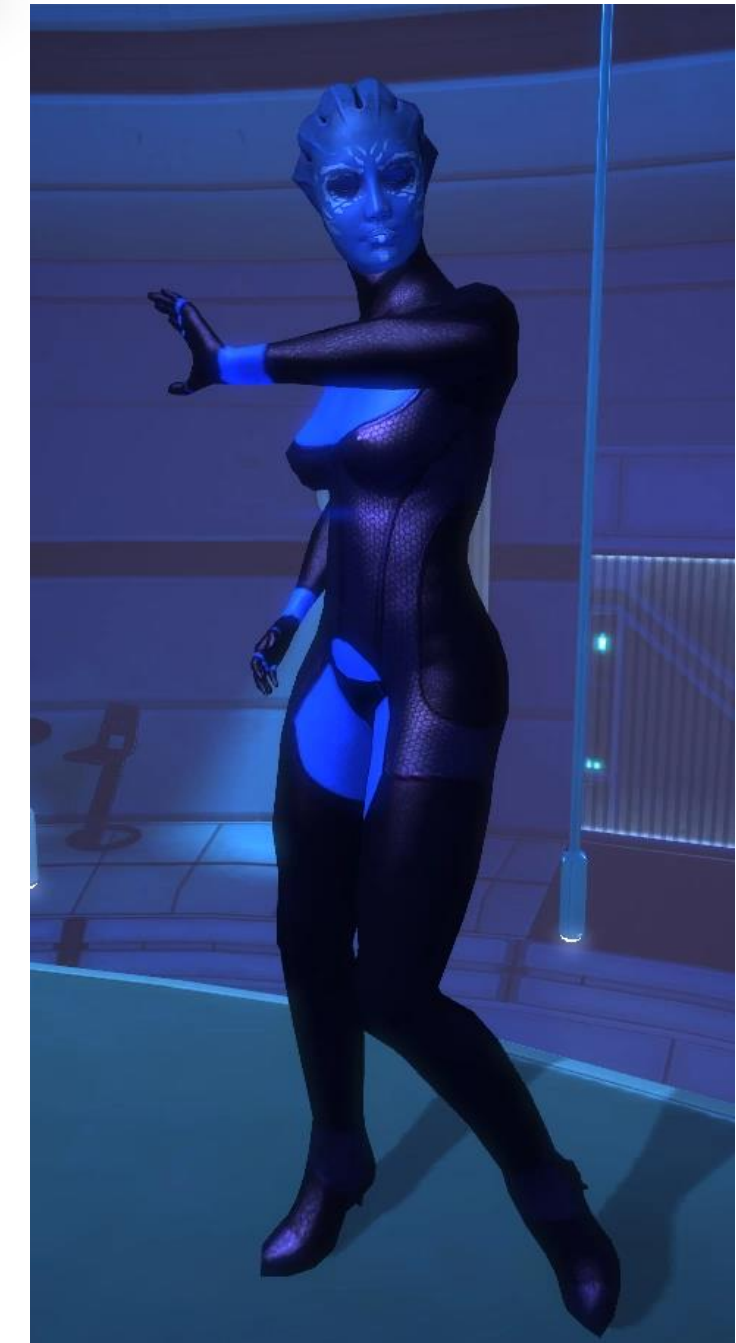
Asari Dancers

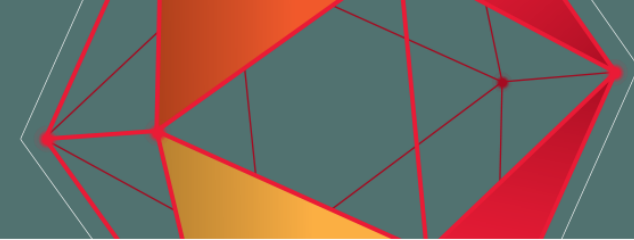
Pros

- Implied consent
- Embrace sexuality & experimentation
- Financial independence

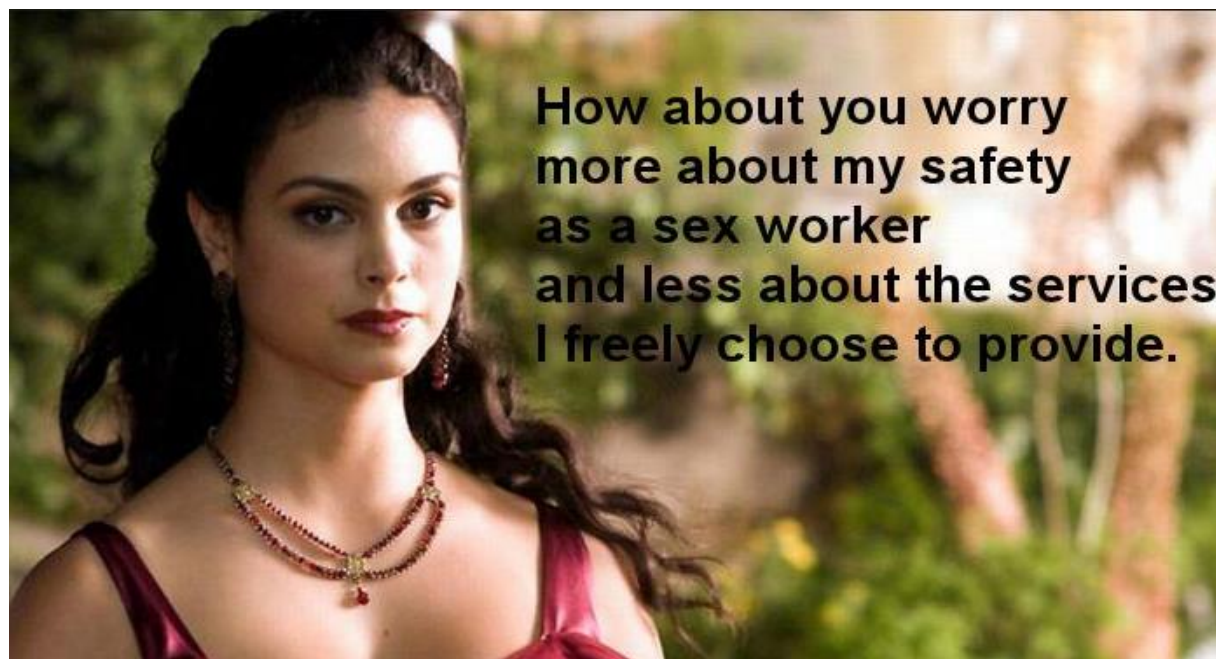
Cons

- Typically cloaked in shadow
- Same body type
- Not prominently featured in narrative in meaningful way
- Typically nameless
- Minimal lines/character dev





Quick Note About Sex Workers



- Sex workers are people who provide a service, *not* inanimate products
- Legalizing/decriminalizing is a step towards:
 - Consent
 - Workplace safety
 - Employment benefits
 - End of societal stigma
 - End of sex trafficking
- Sensitive representation in games with adequate context can help!





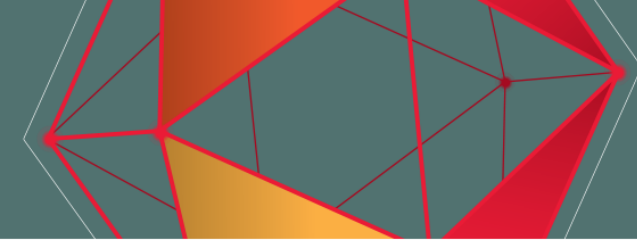
GAME NARRATIVE
SUMMIT

Yeah, that was a bummer,
so...

GDC

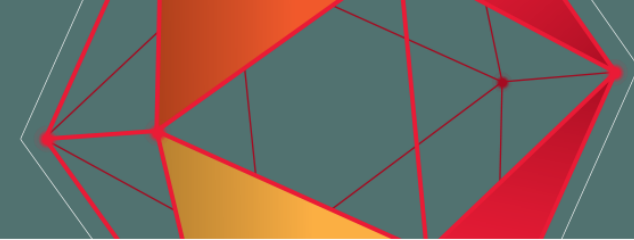
GAME DEVELOPERS CONFERENCE[®] | MARCH 19-23, 2018 | EXPO: MARCH 21-23, 2018 #GDC18





...here are some cute baby krogans!





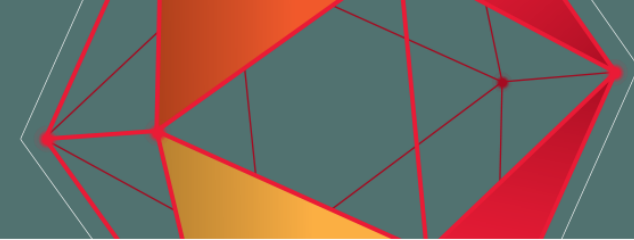
MATRON: Aria T'Loak

- "Pirate Queen" of Omega
- Sexual freedom; no long-term partner; respects others' preferences
- Intelligent, assertive, ruthless
- Most men in her life = guards, mercenaries, business partners
- Daughter: Liselle

ARC

Nightclub dancer → Pirate Queen of Omega → Accepts and provides help





She'll love you...***to death***

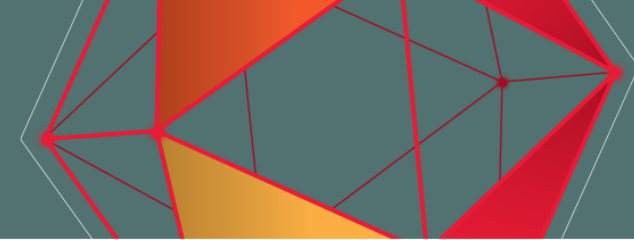
MATRON: Morinth

- Ardat-Yakshi; murders mates of all genders during melding/sex and becomes more powerful with each death
- Independent
- Fugitive from justice
- Powerful biotic; potential squadmate

ARC

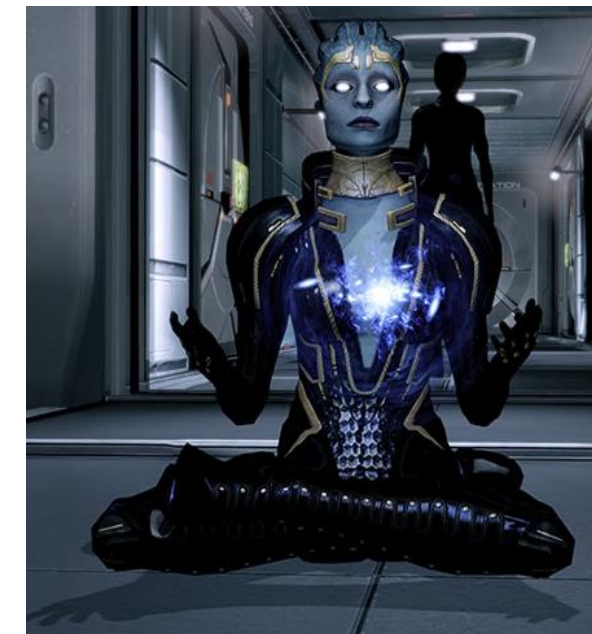
Cloistered → Freedom, sex, & murder → Potential squadmate/Indoctrinated banshee





MATRIARCH: Samara

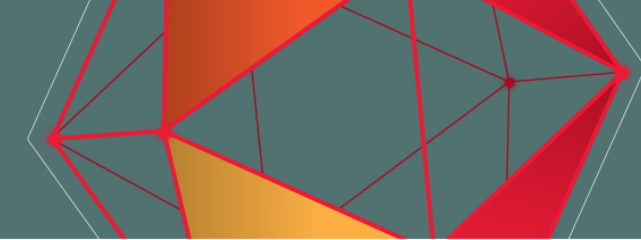
- Confident in skills and beauty
- Helpful wisdom
- Powerful biotic squadmate
- Not a romance option
- Pureblood Asari
- Melded with another (woman-identifying) Asari
- Ardat-Yakshi daughters: Morinth, Rila, Falere



ARC

Mercenary → Rigid Justicar → Wise & powerful squadmate





Other Matriarchs of Note

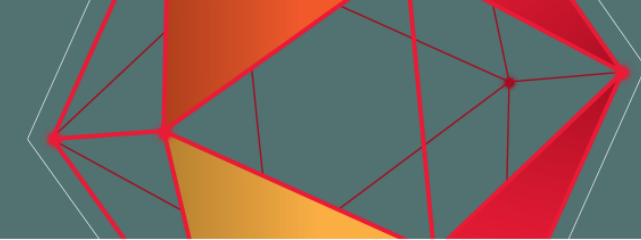


Aethyta



Benezia





RECAP – Differences Between Paradigms

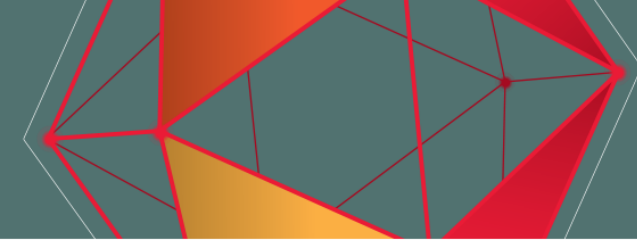


- Identity based on relationships with men
- Assumed attraction to men
- Value based on beauty and ability to reproduce
- Sex and children are obligations
- One single correct path



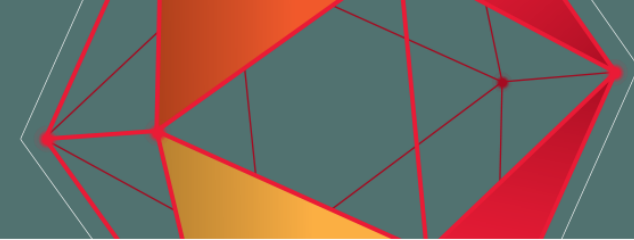
- Identity based on individual choices, personalities, and goals
- No assumptions about sexuality
- Value based on intelligence
- Sex and reproduction are fun, consenting, and optional
- Multiple possible paths





You, too, can
create dynamic &
inclusive women
characters!

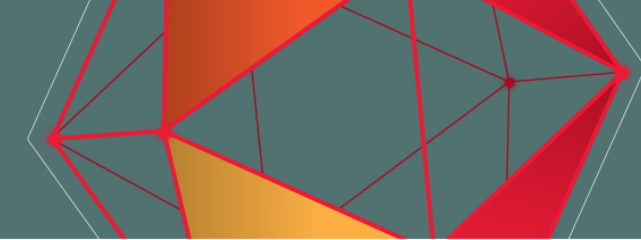




Suggested Focus Areas

1. Character Metric Variation
2. Societal Experimentation
3. Consent & Choice
4. Media Outside of Games
5. Consult Experts





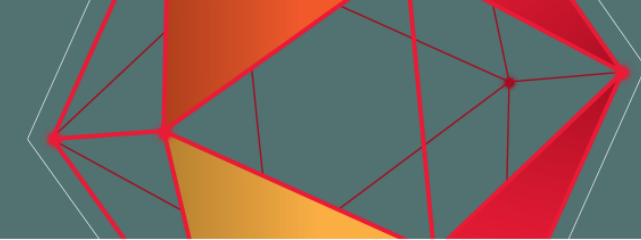
FOCUS: Character Metric Variation 1/5

- Age
- Race
- Ethnicity
- Body type
- Sex
- Gender
- Gender identity
- Sexual/romantic orientation
- Ableness



Takeaway: Diversify character representation by intentionally adjusting common metrics.





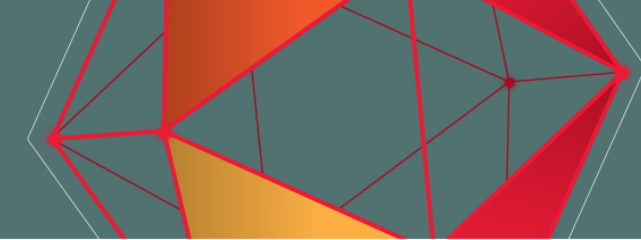
FOCUS: Societal Experimentation 2/5

- Pronouns
 - Look beyond he/she!
 - Let dialogue subtext do the work
- Extremes/absolutes
- Reversals
- Alternative norms & customs



Takeaway: Experiment with alternative societal structures and norms.





FOCUS: Consent & Choice 3/5

- Prominently feature **effective** consent
 - Core mechanic
 - Facet of character dev (but avoid trauma)
 - Societal feature
- Choice and agency
 - Feature a variety of women characters who decide their futures from multiple options

Takeaway: Consent and choice provide empowerment and many possible paths, particularly for women characters.

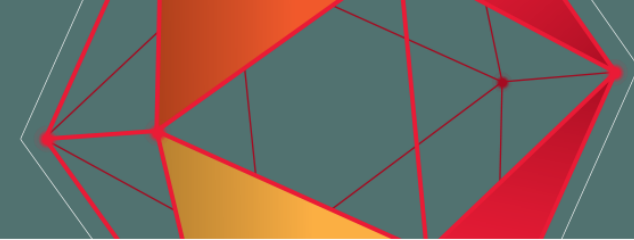
CONSENT



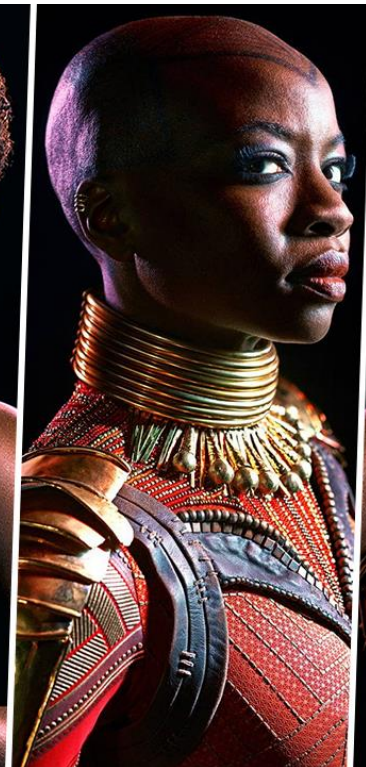
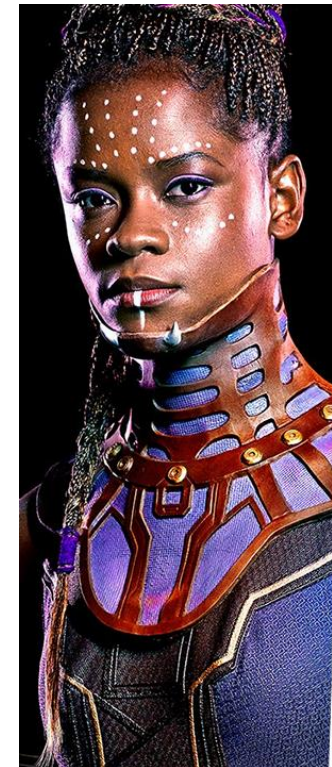
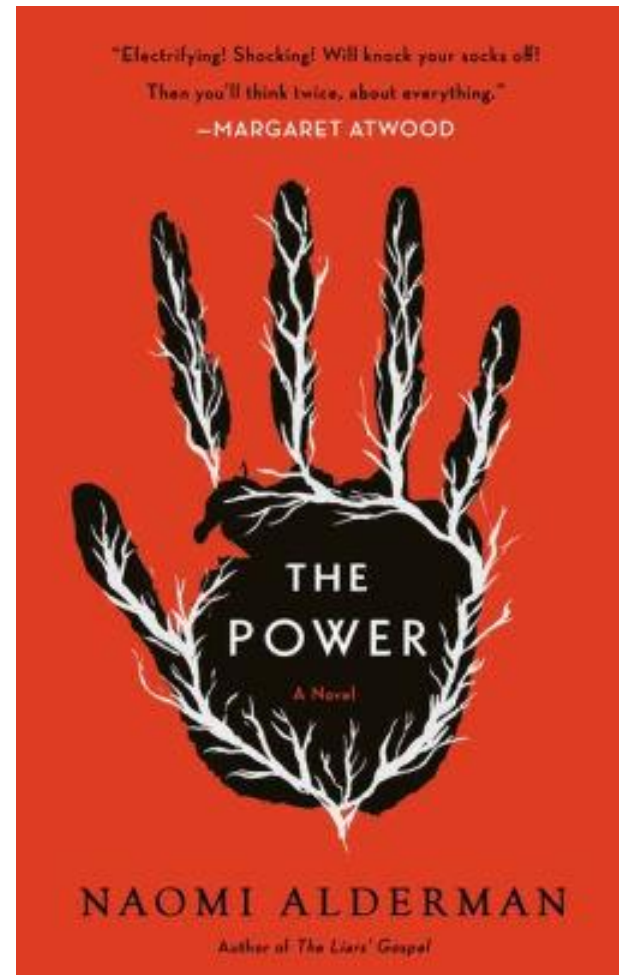
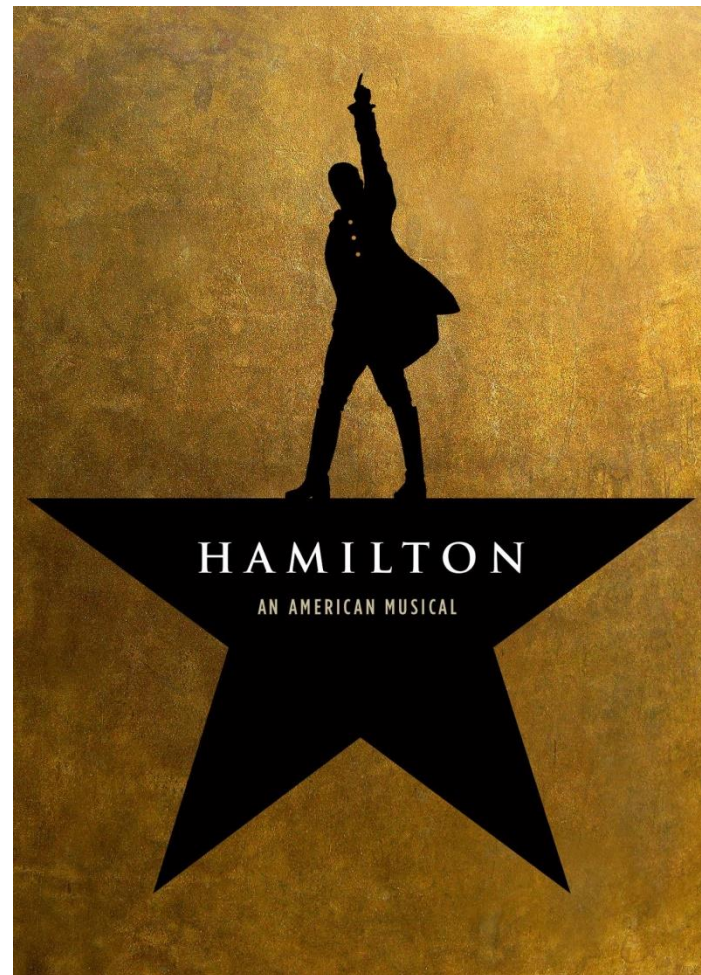
Freely Given
Reversible
Informed
Enthusiastic
Specific

 Planned Parenthood*



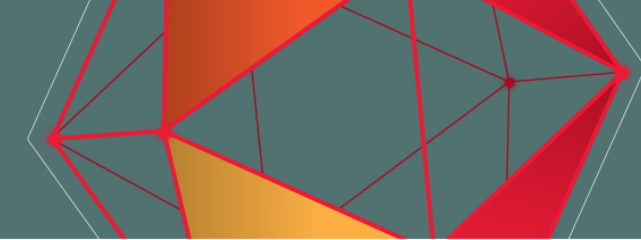


FOCUS: Media Outside of Games 4/5



Takeaway: Seek inspiration and interesting stories in other media.

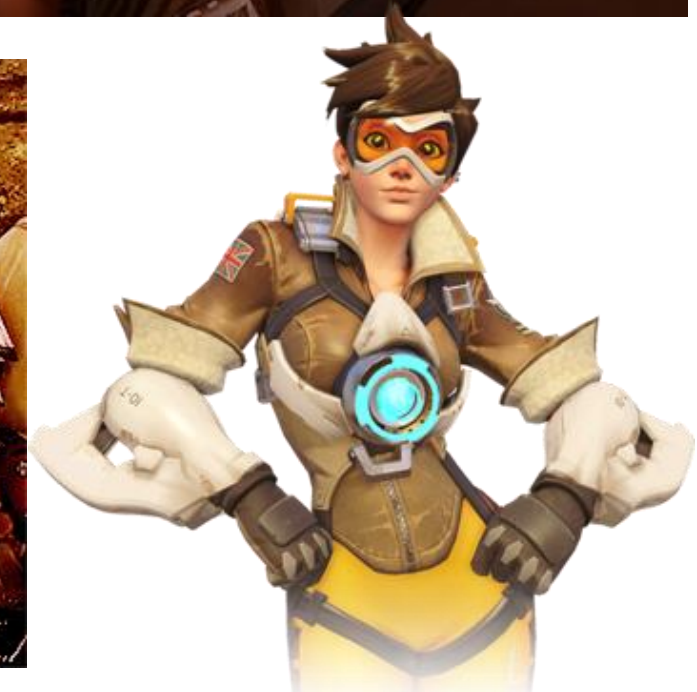


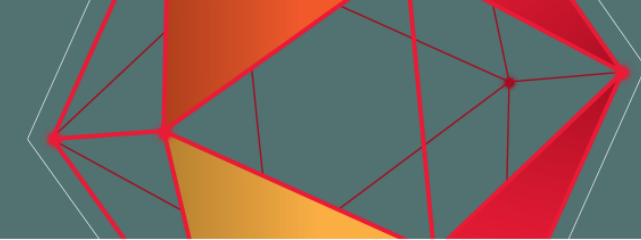


FOCUS: Consult Experts 5/5

- Consult and pay (better yet, hire!) the folks you want to represent
- Avoid tokenism
- Avoid stereotypes
- Obliterate excuse that inclusivity is “extra work” by incorporating it from the beginning of the design process

Takeaway: Intentionally engage with and empower the diverse people you want to represent.





Why It's Worth It

Diversify character representation



- More players see selves in games
- Expand player base

Experiment with alternative societal structures and norms



Ask players to reflect on society and consider how it *could* be

Use consent & choice to empower everyone



- Celebrate women's sexuality
- Combat rape culture
- Highlight multiple paths

Consume media outside of games for inspiration



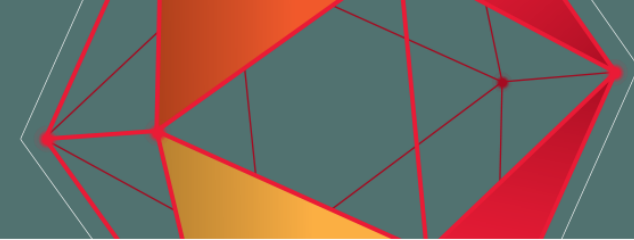
Tell exciting NEW stories

Intentionally engage with, hire, and empower the people whose untold stories you want to tell



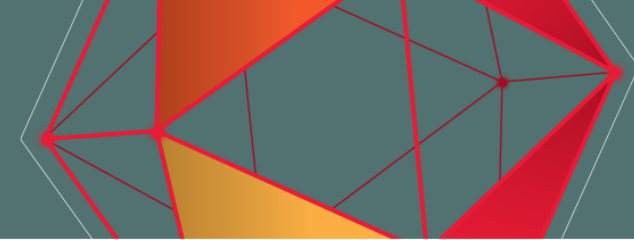
- Enrich games with real, lived experiences
- Normalization
- Support underrepresented devs





Let's wrap it up

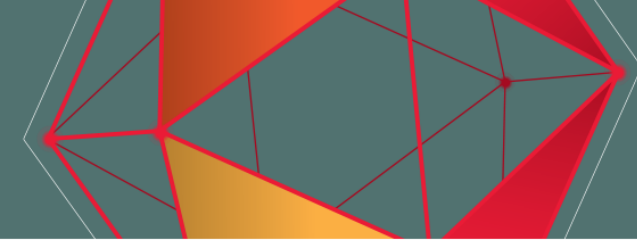




The Asari are a great example of...

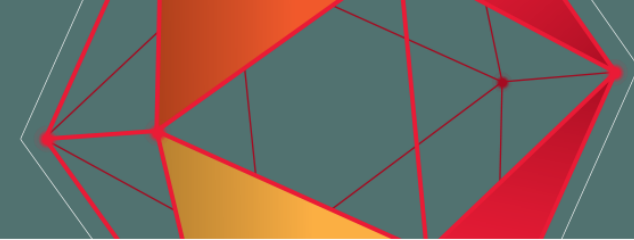
1. Character Metric Variation
2. Societal Experimentation
3. Consent & Choice
4. Media Outside of Games
5. Consult Experts



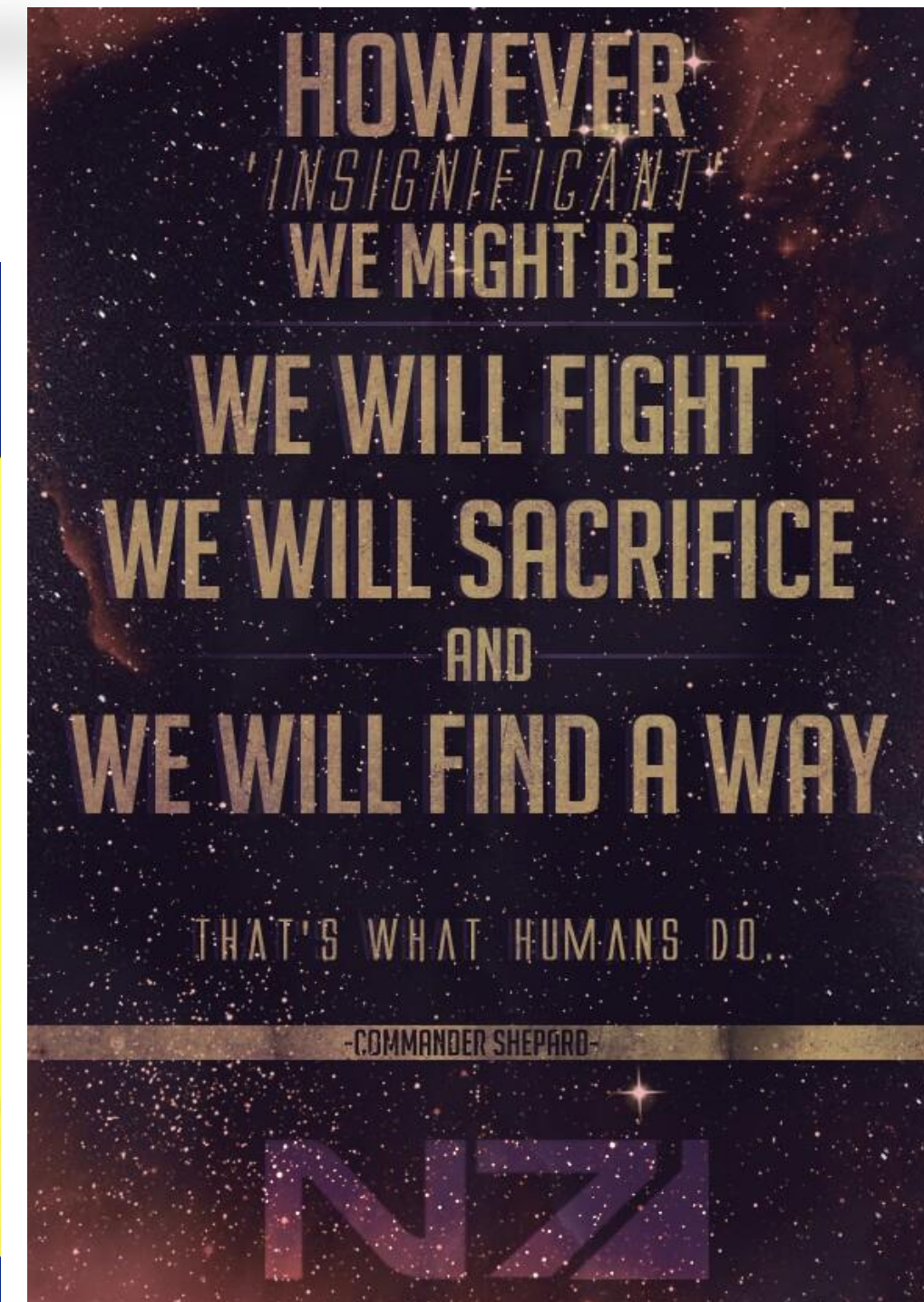


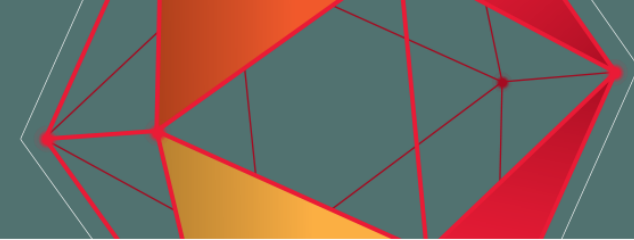
Fan service is a thing... 🙄





...but it's always possible
to improve!





Let's Chat!

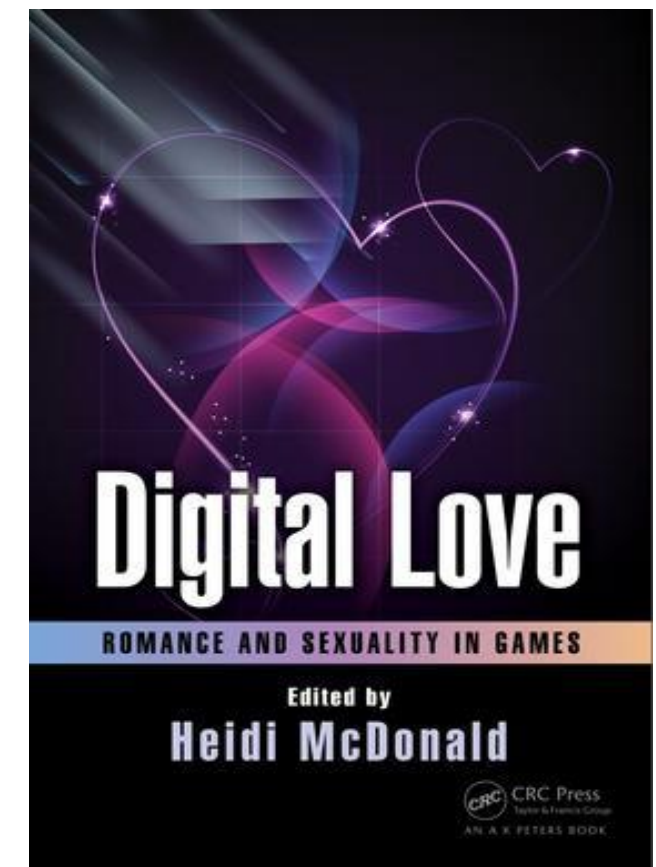


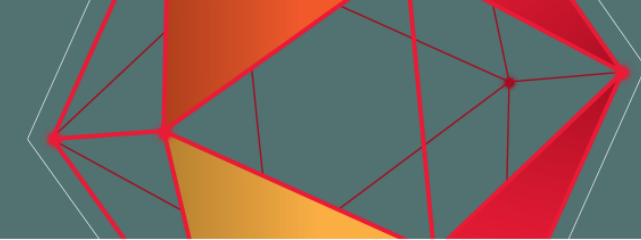
ALEXANDRA M. LUCAS

- @silkenmoonlight
- alexandramlucas.com
- soyouwanttomake.games
- CheatCodesPodcast.com

Digital Love: Romance & Sexuality in Games

Editor: Heidi McDonald * Taylor & Francis, 2017





Sources



- <https://www.routledge.com/Digital-Love-Romance-and-Sexuality-in-Games/McDonald/p/book/9781482237986>
- Pike, Sarah M. (2007). "Gender in New Religions" in Bromley, David G. (ed.)(2007) [*Teaching New Religious Movements*](#). Oxford University Press US.
- <http://masseffect.wikia.com>
- [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Triple_Goddess_\(Neopaganism\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Triple_Goddess_(Neopaganism))
- <https://i.pinimg.com/736x/83/d9/e6/83d9e659f0e091c8d8ae26f0e9b4d643--samara-mass-effect-mass-effect-.jpg>
- <http://lintufriikki.tumblr.com/post/85331433723/baby-krogans-are-the-death-of-me>
- <https://uwm.edu/lgbtrc/support/gender-pronouns/>
- <http://potvor.tumblr.com/post/131853311281>
- <http://masseffect.bioware.com/me2/media/wallpapers/>
- <https://i.pinimg.com/736x/83/d9/e6/83d9e659f0e091c8d8ae26f0e9b4d643--samara-mass-effect-mass-effect-.jpg>
- <https://www.plannedparenthood.org/learn/teens/sex/all-about-consent>
- <https://uwm.edu/lgbtrc/support/gender-pronouns/>
- <https://www.polygon.com/2017/3/27/15074856/mass-effect-andromeda-asari-pronouns>

