Video games’ ability to allow players craft and interact with digital narratives have changed with technological developments and ongoing feedback loops, which affects the media theory areas of convergence and production of culture studies. In March 2012, publisher Electronic Arts and developer BioWare released the third and final game in their popular role-playing game series Mass Effect, promising gamers an unprecedented level of control over the outcome of the game story. When gamers felt that their choices did not actually impact the final outcome of the game, they responded with a furor that stunned the video game community and prompted BioWare to issue a press release where they promised to make changes to Mass Effect 3 (ME3) to address fan criticisms. This study discusses convergence of player and developer in video games, questions beliefs about production of culture within gaming audiences, and features a textual analysis of games journalism in the face of these changes. I found that gaming blog site Kotaku’s coverage of the controversy trades upon traditional narrative theory of games, and that this coverage contributes to a larger issue of the meaning of convergence within games journalism.

Background – The Mass Effect 3 Controversy

The video game Mass Effect 3 was released to widespread critical acclaim on March 6, 2012, and selling 1.85 million copies across multiple platforms [Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, and personal computers (PC)] in its first week of North American release (D’Angelo, 2012). BioWare, the developer of the original Mass Effect (released in 2007) and its two sequels, had an ambitious idea behind the series. The connecting theme
between all three games was that the player could create and control the protagonist character throughout the story. What separated this game from others was that each player’s input would have a direct effect on the story choices, rule sets, player equipment supporting characters, and endings available in each subsequent installment.

Many fans were unhappy with the final ending of the game. The fan dissatisfaction resulted in one of the most vocal protest movements the gaming community had ever seen. Within a week of Mass Effect 3’s release, a fan movement named “Retake Mass Effect” had promised to dedicate money to charity organization Child’s Play if game developer BioWare would change the ending of the game to fit player choices and previously chosen story outlines (Plunkett, 2012b). According to the site’s mission statement, the protestors recognize that "it is the right of the writers and developers of the Mass Effect series to end that series however they see fit" (Plunkett, 2012b). However, since they were dissatisfied with the ending of the game in its current status, they "respectfully request additional endings be added", including "a heroic ending which provides a better sense of accomplishment" (Plunkett, 2012b).

Soon after this protest gained ground within the community, BioWare co-founder Dr. Ray Muzyka issued a statement that said his company would address unspecified narrative issues and incorporate constructive fan criticism into changes released in April 2012. After BioWare issued this press release, the “Retake Mass Effect” protest site closed donations, resulting in $80,000 worth of donations to charity organization Child’s Play.

The amount of news coverage this event received in the two weeks between the game’s release and BioWare’s response to the event was relatively unprecedented.
Mainstream news sites covered various facets of the fan protests, from the charitable donations to a complaint filed by a gamer with the Federal Trade Commission against BioWare for “false advertising” (Thier, 2012b). In between these extremes, games journalists and legal counselors noted that the level of interactivity and control on the part of games consumers had shifted, with gamers exercising an unprecedented level of involvement in the development process.

Throughout the entire story, online gaming publication Kotaku provided news and commentary on the ME3 reaction and protest “movement.” A site dedicated to covering gaming news, Kotaku allowed for columnists to provide opinions that were representative of both pro- and anti-ME3 protestors. The site also offered users a chance to directly respond to stories in asynchronous fashion on their discussion boards.

From the wide release of the game to the press release given by BioWare’s president (Martinez, 2012), the coverage of the fan protests represents an uneasy transition in the way that games journalists view the cultural effects of the gaming communities. By focusing on a specific blog publication dedicated to gaming news and online communities (Kotaku) and a widespread issue that was known by gamers and non-gamers, my research provides a glimpse into this transition and examines how this new level of interactivity between users and developers applies to the research on convergence and production of culture studies.

**Literature Review**

*Video games*

Ian Bogost argued that video games did not derive their persuasive power through traditional narrative elements, but through game design or *procedural rhetoric.*
“Arguments are made not through the construction of words or images, but through the authorship of rules of behavior, the construction of dynamic models” (Bogost, 2007). This game design forms rules that dictate how a player can interact with the game environment and other characters in the game, along with how other players are rewarded. Through game play, a player is able to interact with multimedia texts in an enthymematic fashion, or working as a player facing a puzzle and forced to solve it via inferred logic of the game rules and system. In other words, game play allows a player active participation with a simulation through a rule set and standard of practices.

What sets *Mass Effect* and its story apart is its narrative. Narratologists believe that games reflect the textual elements of other narrative arts, such as film (Wolf, 2001). This is true of several games, making the parallel difficult to ignore. Furthermore, when applied to a game such as *Mass Effect* and its sequels, the narrative cannot be ignored since the game was marketed as a form of storytelling where player interaction would affect the plot and outcome of each game and their subsequent installment. As Brookey (2010) writes, “The narratives and the texts in these games are already inscribed into the software of the game, but it is through the interaction with the game player that these narratives are advanced and these texts are activated and understood.” In fact, *Mass Effect 3* is the end result of a player’s actions within a defined rule set. By accumulating the actions of various player inputs, *Mass Effect* represents a merger between game play and narrative.

**Convergence**

The continually expanding world of online interactions between gaming developers and audiences of critics and consumers has been explored by researchers
(Castronova, 2005; Jenkins, 2006; Martin & Deuze, 2009; Brookey, 2010; Booth, 2010), but convergence as an economic function has not fully been explored. If we define video games as a mass media industry, then questions of production processes, content and form must be raised. These components have not been sufficiently linked to marketing considerations, unlike other industries of mass-produced literature and television content (e.g. Tuchman, 1973; Perlmutter, 1997; Turow, 2010).

Jenkins argues against convergence as a wholly technological process, stating that it is actually a cultural shift in how consumers are involved with information seeking and connecting with media content (2006). He states that a new form of participatory culture is emerging via digital media and interactive media content and technologies, and that media producers and consumers no longer inhabit specific, separated roles (2006).

Many gamers and game reviewers have complained about the likelihood of a poor video game translation of a popular film, television, or literary property (e.g. Brookey, 2010). Often, “in the context of convergence, the design of games accommodates interests other than those of quality game play” (Brookey, 2010.) Yet while developers work on new titles, players are interacting with the current title, and through social media they are able to provide feedback directly to developers. These online interactions between developers, reviewers, and fans of video games have not been addressed in scholarly literature beyond some introductory census studies (Deuze, 2007; Martin & Deuze, 2009). The ME3 protests represent a convergence of the domains illustrated by critical media industry studies scholarship (i.e. Tuchman, 1973; Becker, 1982, 2008) and media work (i.e. McFall, 2002; Deuze, 2007).

**Method and Data**
I chose to analyze the Kotaku posts primarily focused on the Mass Effect 3 protests published between March 7 and March 21, 2012, using a method of textual analysis. By examining the discourse of professional writers in video game culture, I was able to locate a sample of the ideology surrounding the ME3 protests since the writers are also fans of the practice of gaming.

I chose that two-week span because March 7, 2012 was the day after the game saw worldwide release, and March 21, 2012 was the day that BioWare co-founder Dr. Muzyka released his press release to the public. As stated earlier, I chose Kotaku because of its centrist approach and the fact that it presented blogs and opinions of both sides of the developing story. The Kotaku posts, even in the number presented here, accurately reflect the themes and conflict found on other websites. In fact, the website offered multiple views of the topic, as opposed to the lack of pluralism available on several other sites.

To locate my articles, I performed a keyword search in the Kotaku search toolbar for articles marked “Mass Effect,” which retrieved 1,719 posts with related data. I limited my dates of interest between March 7 and March 21 of 2012. After performing this search, I found 75 stories with the tag associated with them. After searching through these stories and dropping unrelated or tangentially related stories, I narrowed my findings to 31 stories and opinion pieces specifically focused on the Mass Effect 3 ending controversy.

I chose to analyze each of the 31 stories by focusing on how they approached the issue of gamers affecting developer narrative and content, a form of convergence. Though comments would present a view of the relationship between writer and audience,
the author of the main story has a greater authority and persuasive power than a commentator would, and therefore their opinion carries greater weight.

**Findings**

Very few of the blog posts surrounding the end of *Mass Effect 3* and the gaming culture standoff that it produced mentioned any of the concepts or ideologies behind convergence as stated by Jenkins. Most of the stories written about the ME3 protests offered a critique of the protestors without mentioning any characteristics of convergence, while several others took a more objective tone in the story. Ultimately, while *Kotaku* offered a variety of views upon the subject of the ME3 protests and fan outcry, very little touched upon greater instances of convergence.

**Convergence**

However, the first post that addressed the fan campaign to change the ending was decidedly negative in tone. *Kotaku* blogger Owen Good begins his post with a picture of a *Mass Effect* character in a portrait of their head, replicating the Internet meme of “facepalm” to indicate a tone of disbelief. He then refers to Internet petitions as worthless and “manifestations of the distorted expectation – cultivated in grade school – that First Amendment rights extend to your relationship with a private business” (Good, 2012c). He also states that it amazes him “how unhappy people choose to be in a leisure pursuit” (Good, 2012c). After stating that “I have no idea where to begin” with the ME3 protest, he presents a traditional narrative criticism of the complaint, claiming that the gamers’ protests are the result of entitlement and misguided ownership rather than accepted convergence. Regarding the possible right of gamers as developers of content, Good claims that these gamers are instead customers of commercial products.
The following day brought another contributor to offer a counter-opinion. While addressing the traditional narrative criticism of storyteller authorship and control, blogger Jason Schreier wonders if “video games can be the first [media] form that allows for the democratization of storytelling” (2012). He then presents an argument for developers to make changes to gaming narratives based on how massively multiplayer online games are modified in accordance with player suggestions. “In a video game, a player’s desires are constantly at odds with a game’s limitations” (Schreier, 2012). Therefore, he argues that fan-driven change would be a unique and possibility-filled subversion of expectations.

In a medium that is constantly changing based on what audiences want and how players play, maybe there's room for stories that evolve and adapt based on our criticism. The solution won't come through petitions or message board moaning. It will come through smart, reasoned discussion and interaction and justification on both sides of the aisle. It will come in a way that is more like the tabletop game Dungeons & Dragons, in which the audience is just as important, if not more important than the storyteller. Stories don't have to flow in one direction. (Schreier, 2012)

Elsewhere, writer Luke Plunkett stated that the lack of player choice after a long experience with substantial emotional investment was counter to expectations created by BioWare. By stating that the biggest offense in the game comes because of a breach with the player contract, Plunkett informs the reader that a lack of convergence is indeed why the game disappoints so many players. After examining the many sides of the argument, Plunkett offers this final criticism:

Someone had to win, someone had to actually finish that story, and of course BioWare were always going to play the more important role in that. We, the players, were never writing the story, we were just the ones with our shoulder to the wheel…But I think they played too important a part. With all three endings being incredibly similar, down to many shared assets, it gave players the impression their choices no longer mattered, that they were being Sheparded (sorry) through a cutscene rather than actively determining its outcome. (Plunkett, 2012a)
One final story that mentioned convergence was constructed after BioWare co-founder Dr. Muzyka stated that the developer was going to make changes to *Mass Effect* 3 in response to fan criticisms. *Kotaku* blogger Stephen Totilo offered an endorsement of games as distinctly interactive, fluid media that are separate from other forms of storytelling media by nature of their use of game play.

More than one smart game developer has described the medium as a conversation between game players and game creators. The devs make a game. We play it. We react. The devs make a new game that answers those players and so that cycle continues. (Totilo, 2012)

Totilo’s summary of the conversation between gamers and developers is a direct reflection of the ideas behind Jenkins’ work on convergence culture. By changing the rule set to include possible player contributions, Totilo’s argument is that games developers already converge with gamers to enhance experiences. Therefore, a fluid narrative would increase the convergence and impact the player experience (2012).

*Production of Culture*

What occurs in all of these threads is the continuing production of culture by video game fans in the cultural and social realm, but it is being done via traditional narrative theory criticism. By providing blog posts and either creating or contributing to an ongoing narrative of fan culture and its impact on gaming, bloggers are providing an interpretive lens into the production of culture within gaming. They are also acting as opinion leaders, presenting news and opinions based on their authority and interaction with gaming developers and publishers. In this form, not only is their commentary on the possible convergence of gaming and narrative in *Mass Effect* 3 a form of labor, but so is the response from audiences and producers of digital content.
What is different about this case from all other instances of media work by gamers and bloggers is that the gamers and bloggers are responding to the ME3 protests based on aspects of traditional narrative and literary criticism. In instances of blogging, the Kotaku staff’s narrative places their voice as a central interpretive lens watching the story unfold, much like a participant observer within an unknown culture. While the outcome may be unclear, the writers continue to offer a more professionalized, “standardized” form of criticism and communication regarding this topic.

**Conclusion**

This case study should provide evidence that further studies into the ME3 protest and the ongoing study of the effects will demonstrate changing perceptions of audience and developer convergence within games journalism. In particular, the relatively small sample size of this study shows an already wide diversity of views on a very polarizing subject. Whether it is due to the ambiguity of the subject matter or the continuing struggle to define where a person’s involvement in video game development begins and ends, the idea of convergence as a theoretical framework for this argument holds strong promise for the future of the topic.

**Future Studies**

I believe that this is an important first step into a larger reevaluation of the tenuous relationship between gaming developers and audiences. The news coverage and discourse surrounding these changes and protests indicates that these products of culture may require greater examination as objects of convergence. Future studies will provide more examples with greater clarity and distance from the story, thus offering a more holistic representation of this point of convergence.