

Game Narrative Review

Game Title: Mass Effect

Platform: Xbox 360, PC

Genre: 3rd Person Role-Playing Game

Release Date: November 20, 2007

Developer: Bioware Edmonton

Publisher: Microsoft Game Studios

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Drew Karpysyn (Lead Writer), Luke Krisjanson, Chris L'Etoile, Mac Walters, Patrick Weekes

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Overview

Mass Effect covers the conflict between Commander Shepard and Saren. On the surface, the story involves Saren attempting to summon the Reapers, deadly ancient machines, in order to wipe out humanity. Shepard, the hero, must stop him. Although a straightforward story, the setting complicates the details. The game presents questions of sentience and racial overtones as well as moral ambiguity. Uncomfortable decisions that cannot always be avoided give pause to the player. The typical hero's journey enthralls the player while also questioning them at every step.

Characters

The cast of Mass Effect consists of an eclectic cast divided and united under a variety of allegiances. The prominent factions define themselves along political, racial, and/or agenda lines. Aside from extreme groups, any given faction does not define itself as entirely heroic or villainous and instead exists in ambiguity. Even among the faction members, the characters are ambiguous and defined beyond stereotype. From major to minor, each character breaks free from stereotype by deconstruction or otherwise. Among the major characters are:

- **Commander Shepard** – A distinguished Special Forces officer of the Systems Alliance forms the basis of Commander Shepard. Beyond the broad strokes of being an exceptional representation of humanity, the player determines the details of whom and what Shepard is. Whether diplomatic or aggressive, open-minded or outspoken racist, Shepard reflects the ideal heroic character the player wishes to see.
- **Kaiden Alenko** –Kaiden Alenko casts himself as the romantic soldier with a sensitive side. He uses his implants to enhance his self-image of a sad romantic and broken bird. In interacting with Shepard, Kaiden demonstrates that his

sensitive and romantic nature also result in him holding people up to idealistic standards. He puts people on a pedestal, treating them as symbols he does not want to tarnish rather than fallible people. Conversely, he holds himself as lesser than those around him. Sacrifices are for the meek such as himself.

- **Ashley Williams** – A female soldier who mixes stereotypically masculine behavior with feminine traits and intellectual interests, Ashley Williams embodies the stereotype of the modern Amazon. Her sexuality falls neatly into the one extreme of having little. In exploring her character, Ashley defines herself beyond a lady of war and work. She has not put aside family or viewed herself as having to work to be equal due to sex. Rather, significantly, her gender is a non-issue. Instead, Ashley feels obligated to redeem her family's honor and prestige, a duty normally given to male characters. Equally significant though less stated Ashley holds deep religious and racist views. Her beliefs are rational rather than fanaticism.
- **Liara T'Soni** – Liara has the traits of the mousy and meek scientist. Socially awkward, Liara suggests at first the stereotypical shallow love interest who would as soon swoon into the hero's arms as crudely attempt to swing a bottle to help in a fight. Contrary to type, Liara presents a competent and capable persona, a fact commented on by herself and noted by another character. Liara also shares equal responsibility for initiating a romance whereas other love interests passively succumb to seduction.
- **Urdnot Wrex** – Drawing from the archetype of the proud warrior, Urdnot Wrex does little to dispel the perception. He acts decisively and with conviction as well as holding strong to his obligations. Laconic wit and blunt truths are his forte as much as his combat ability. Wrex thus betrays his archetype by virtue of the sour armor he wears. His proud of his own abilities makes his lack of pride in his own race more notable. The defeatist view he has for his own race contrasts to his otherwise unstoppable persona. Warfare and the culture that surrounds it only hurt his people. Unable to do anything to dull their lust for fighting, Wrex consigns himself to the belief that fighting is all he can do.
- **Garrus Vakarian** – Garrus portrays the popular action hero. He acts recklessly and with a cowboy mentality. He exemplifies the belief held and given to many protagonists that heroes can do no wrong. For him, the rules are obstacles he must overcome as much as any minion or villainous plot. In this regard, he sees himself as a better hero than those around him – he is willing to do what others cannot. His hero complex borders on obsession. Garrus obsesses over others and blames others for what may be his own failings. Whatever failures he has are thus personal matters that he feels he could have affected even as he feels that they were the result of others.
- **Tali'Zorah nar Rayya** – Tali would seem to fit the archetype of the outcast wanderer and closeted youth. However, where other characters of this archetype

are happy-go-lucky and irresponsible, Tali possesses a great sense of responsibility and obligation. Her youthfulness only adds to her maturity; she lacks the naivety and inability typical to characters in her role. She has among the most worldly of experience.

- **Saren** – As the initial unambiguous villain of the game, Saren undergoes redemption as the plot unfolds and the true villain steps forward. He possesses a great amount of conviction and, notably, transforms into a fallen hero. Through his journey, he serves as a foil to the player and an analog to the greater themes of the story. Though Saren engages in irrepressible acts, he does so because he believes that everyone will be better for it and that his cause is just. Significantly, his villainy comes from a desire to preserve rather than destroy. Saren wishes to prove that organic life can be worthwhile and valuable to the Reapers so that they might not exterminate all life.

Among the minor and supporting characters, several stand out as highlighting interesting pieces of narrative or archetypes. These are:

- **The Rachni Queen** – A member of a race that threatened to conquer and eliminate other races millennia ago, the rachni queen appears as an unequivocal villain. However, this persona comes from a history distorted by outside forces, the passage of time, and the lens of victory against the rachni. Powerless to stop the player from killing her if they so choose, her status as a faceless evil power comes into question when asked. She admits the wrongdoing of her race and reflects on the influences that caused the war. In regards to herself, the queen had not even been born yet. She represents the uncomfortable truth that history often fails to ask the losers about their role and influences. As well, consideration for how much weight given to the past compared to recent action.
- **Emily Wong** – An investigative report, Emily Wong does not wait for the hero to do her job for her. Instead, well before the hero has even met her, she acts to resolve her own problem. She stands out as one of the handful of minor characters who proactively attempt to deal with their problems. Emily asks the player for assistance but it is only a request. Additionally, she actively seeks out the character to do so. As such, her role becomes one of active participant alongside the player compared to the helpless appeal to the player most NPCs use.
- **Michael Petrovsky and Rebekah Petrovsky** – Two minor characters, Michael and Rebekah arguing over whether she should undergo treatment that may prevent her unborn baby from developing a rare heart disorder. Though many choices in Mass Effect have no real right or wrong answer, these two present a much rarer situation. Whereas other situations may have many answers against an otherwise distasteful antagonist, in this situation, no antagonist exists at all. Not only does no correct answer exist, the player cannot hold any other party responsible but themselves.

Breakdown

The story of Shepard fighting to stop Saren from unleashing great evil provides a narrative framework. Decisions the player makes and the attitudes the player holds affect the perception of humanity within the galactic community. Throughout this framework and decision-making, themes of responsibility, bigotry, and sentient rights run through the setting and story. The strength of Mass Effect lays in the layered story elements woven into gameplay.

As a classic heroic tale, the story seems at first to be almost cliché though surrounded in a well-realized setting. However, the elements of the story and supporting pieces create an unexpected twist. Typically, villain characters are about destruction, chaos, and domination. Their goal has little meaning beyond their own ends. With Saren, however, he desires to save the galaxy rather than reshaping it. The choices the player makes reflect in the choices Saren makes. Indeed, Saren embodies many attributes normally reserved for heroes. His army comes not from subjugation or appeals to greed. Instead, Saren appeals to their beliefs or to altruistic desires. His way represents a slippery slope of slowly compromising ideals in pursue of a benevolent goal. Poignantly, his ultimate defeat comes not at the barrel of a gun but at his own hand through self-realization of what he is responsible for.

Mass Effect handles bigotry realistically, painting the theme as more than just extremist. Equally held at a disadvantage are biotics, volus, AI, geth, rachni, and military veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress among others. Significantly, the racism involves more than just humanity. Asking characters of their biased views opens up justification of realistic but often emotional appeal. For the geth, rachni, and AI, the treatment they receive mirrors that of the era of slavery. For the volus and the biotics, they are second-class citizens, treated as children. It is notable that the Codex, responsible for much of the minor details the player learns, is unreliable. The Codex paints a picture that becomes increasingly one-sided should the player interact with others.

One other major theme of the game involves war, genocide, and the cyclic nature of them. At first glance, the back-story presents humans as special for their quick rise to prominence on the galactic stage. This specialness breaks down upon historical study. For the Citadel species, encountering the rachni resulted in a galactic war. Defeat of the rachni came when the salarians and asari uplifted the krogans. As a result, the krogans drove the rachni to extinction. The success of the krogans in turn drove them to conquest themselves. Their defeat and eventual extinction come about due to the turians and the genophage. By the time of the game, turians and humans have already engaged in a notable war of their own. The appeasements humanity receives from the Citadel seem to stem from fear of the cycle continuing as much as anything else. Moreover, the responsibility the Citadel has for the krogans receives only minor acknowledgement in the game.

Though not a perfect game, Mass Effect stands out as presenting a mature story that generates debate about the issues it utilizes. Players justify killing the rachni queen while others defend her. To some, the volus ambassador has no reason to complain about not

having a council seat. To others, they ask why he does not. The decisions the player makes on these matters or the questions they have on them highlight the unique quality that games like Mass Effect can have.

Strongest Element

Mass Effect goes beyond elements learned from other media and takes advantage of one emotion unique to games. As a narrative and a game, Mass Effect cultivates regret born from personal agency. Throughout the game, the player must often take action with only incomplete truths and unreliable narrators as their only guide. The immediacy combined with the long-term uncertainty of these often-forced choices give pause to the player. A player must accept the results of their decisions, both good and bad.

Unsuccessful Element

The idea of player agency contrasts sharply with the lack thereof within the world itself. Though the world contains a rich background, rarely does the world proactively act on its own and behave independently. There are few instances of life or agency beyond the player's own. As such, the lack of life to the world offsets the richness of the world.

Highlight

The pivotal moment that highlights regret comes during the Virmire mission. During this mission, the player must choose whom between two squad members to sacrifice. The decision forces itself based on necessity of action; the player understands why the reasoning behind the sacrifice. Similarly, the lack of options comes from the same compared to simply lack of effort and lateral thought. The player has no reconciliation as to a correct answer. Whatever choice they make becomes a permanent change they cannot reverse. They question the situation as much as any similar real world situation, feeling guilt and responsibility.

Critical Reception

Mass Effect garners almost universally positive reception. Reviewers generally rate the game highly with only minor complaints on the gameplay and smaller elements. As a whole, most reviewers make a point that the story appears trite and cliché on the surface. The strength of narrative and experience lies in the characterization and decisions. They note that while a perfect game, as a whole, the game utilizes all aspects of the design and craftwork.

Gamespy's Gerald Villoria gives the game five stars while noting "...the quality of the narrative...including moral and ethical questions without a clear right or wrong answer." Villoria praises the integration of gameplay with story as well as the distinctive characters, whether they are minor bit players or major plot characters. Brad Gallaway at Gamecritic.com, which does not give out ratings, shares similar sentiment though highlighting different areas of the narrative. He found that "...the plot may not revolutionize the... genre in terms of originality, the relationships that develop...are the

heart and soul of the experience...” Specifically, Gallaway finds that the expressive faces are particularly resonating while their “...logic, emotion and attitudes ring true.”

Of the few negative reviews, most conversely also cite the narrative. Specifically, the richness of the setting falls flat against the uninteresting story. The reviewers agreed that the side quests offer more interesting plots than the main story. Notably, some reviews pointed out the lack of player agency. Decisions, they felt, are unimportant due to any perceived influence on the outcome.

Off-putting aspects of the game – minor bugs, poor AI, weak gameplay – vary among the reviews. All point to the same handful of issues in need of improvement, though the specifics differ. Emphasize of these elements depend on the importance of the game narrative.

Lessons

- Clichés and stereotypes balanced with additional detail create richer characters. Easily identifiable traits present a broad canvas to the player. By adding detail to every representative of a type, individuals become distinct and unique. Something as simple as an elevator conversation will challenge the basic traits that form the basis of a character. Urdnot Wrex responses to another squad member’s comment that he isn’t what they expected, “Yes, because you humans have a wide range of cultures and attitudes, but krogan all think and act exactly alike.”
- Game narrative should strive for emotions and agency not normally associated with stories. Emotions such as regret over difficult decisions are narrative elements that resonate as strongly with the player as fieros over a harsh battle or sadness over a scripted story death. In resolving the debate between the Petrovskys, the game offers no resolution good or bad beyond.

Summation

Mass Effect combines narrative with agency and atypical emotion. During the story, the game presents the player with minor and major decisions across the entirety of the playspace. The player invests in a constant environment combining gameplay elements, design, and narrative. Minor and major decisions feel meaningful in a manner not necessarily possible in other media.

References

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