

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: Mass Effect 3

Platform: Xbox 360/ Playstation 3/ Microsoft Windows

Genre: RPG/ Third Person Shooter

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Developer: Bioware

Publisher: Electronic Arts

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Mac Walters

Overview

Humankind has constantly existed alongside the wonderment and fear that the thought of the great beyond brings, and Bioware has achieved the closest replication of these powerful feelings in the form of their acclaimed game, Mass Effect 3. Bioware discovered the key to creating a believable narrative within a unique universe with seemingly infinite amounts of depth and wonder: the minutiae of the individual conversation. They did not seek to thrust players into lands unknown through forced exploration or unbelievable battles in the voids of space, but instead through meaningful conversation with hundreds of interesting individuals from over a dozen new and exciting alien species. Mastering the art of organic conversation was essential to effectively introducing the player to the main message of Mass Effect 3: interculturalism is the means by which humans evolve.

For the purposes of this review, I will define interculturalism as an exchange between two or more groups. It is distinct from multiculturalism because the latter implies tolerance rather than free exchange between all parties involved [5]. In short, when two groups engage in interculturalism, they both give and take from one another to their mutual benefit, sometimes creating a new subgroup between them that can take the best traits from both. Mass Effect 3 uses the conversation system, which in itself symbolizes the exchange of ideas, to instill in the player that the greatest outcome of any given plotline is the direct result of combining the strengths of multiple groups rather than wholistically siding with just one. This exemplifies the spirit of intercultural exchange, and defines the core values of Mass Effect 3.

Characters

The following section will largely focus on species as a whole before going into specific examples, as most of the individual squadmates represent their species concisely either by following their tendencies exactly or denying them altogether.

Humans

Humans represent the player's stake in the grand galactic political conflict present throughout the series. As the newest addition to the galactic council, humankind has a lot to prove to the more established and experienced races present in the greater political conversation. It was a deliberate choice to have humankind be the rookies of galactic society, as it is really up to player choice how humans would later be perceived by the other galactic species.

Shepard and The Alliance

The primary human character is the player cypher and conversational bridge, Commander Shepard. Through Shepard, Bioware has managed to create a character that accurately parallels the player's experience and solidifies the emotional connections made by the player by carrying them through the transitions from game to game in the series. Players are able to take the blank slate that Shepard presents as and transfer their complete profile and choices through the series, having lasting and real ramifications on future dialogue options. Shepard as the cypher is the main vehicle through which the dialogue mechanic acts on the player, and through which the player interacts with the world. Various groups present their ideologies and perspectives to Shepard, who is often given the choice to retort this information before ultimately coming to a conclusion or choice based on the information they receive.

Another interesting human character is Ashley Williams, who is a prime example of a character who evolved to incredible heights due to her eventual pro-intercultural outlook. She is the youngest in a long line of unsuccessful soldiers and a devout believer in the old-world Christian God. Her faith is a major point for her inner turmoil, as the existence of an entire galaxy of beings unaccounted for in the bible or previous teachings of the gospel contribute to her initial xenophobia. However, by the time Mass Effect 3 begins, Williams has had her eyes opened to the ignorance of her past, as it has become difficult after years of working alongside other species to claim that they are lesser or incompetent beings. This major growth can potentially be mirrored in the player as well, who may have begun their Mass Effect journey weary of new species but over the course of the series may have grown close to some of the

nonhumans that make up the various crews of the series. Ashley becomes a stronger character and is able to advance in her career far beyond the limitations on her “cursed” family name not because she followed in their footsteps, but because she was able to overcome and grow beyond the xenophobia that plagued her surname.

Cerberus, however, is a clear lesson on how destructive anthropocentrism is in a galaxy teeming with beautiful life, further proving that interculturalism is the key to evolution by expressing how not accepting it leads to regression. The paramilitary organization runs with the goal of promoting humans in the galaxy first and foremost, and seems to reflect Ashley’s initial xenophobia, but on a more grand and serious scale. Cerberus begins Mass Effect 2 by investing enormous resources into reviving the war hero Shepard as a beacon for humanity. However, by the beginning of Mass Effect 3 the organization itself becomes a beacon of the hubris of mankind, committing acts of terrorism even on allies of humans in a seemingly blind rage. It is later discovered that their unwillingness to adapt to their alien neighbors led them to be vulnerable to the real antagonists of the series, leaving them weak and broken- the same fate as anyone else who would refuse to adapt and evolve in the face of change.

Other Council Species

Asari

Asari are renowned in the galaxy of Mass Effect for their wisdom and scientific genius, only perhaps rivaled by their beauty. They defy the social expectations of the viewer in all their achievements, and even in their pronouns- they aren’t really women at all. They have no gender, yet a reoccurring theme for this species is their willingness to conform to other races’ anthropocentrism, thus they often don’t care about the English use of the pronoun “she”. Conversationally this makes them unique due to their common disregard for any gendered assumptions about them, with some of them even deciding to identify as being masculine despite their perceived feminine appearance. Their general willingness to conform, however, is not simply subservience but instead compliments their reproductive needs. Asari are able to produce offspring with essentially any living partner, regardless of species or gender- and they are socially encouraged to do so. Within their own society, Asari see reproduction with other species as a foundation to their growth and evolution, as to expand beyond the limitations of their own genetic confines is just one aspect to their expedited societal growth in the galactic community. This desire to genetically expand is a compliment to the recurring theme in the series that to remain within the confines of your race is to move backward, as the only way to grow in a diverse galaxy is to accept and learn to love the millions of other perspectives that make up the community, or in other words, to embrace intercultural exchange.

Liara T'soni represents this race through her own growth throughout the series, evolving from a socially awkward archeologist to one of the galaxy's most powerful information brokers because she was able to master the art of intercultural communication. She begins in Mass Effect as constantly stumbling over her words and failing to properly express her feelings to Shepherd, a human, displaying an ignorance of basic communication that makes others view her as foolish and naive. However by the events of Mass Effect 2: Lair of the Shadow Broker she is shown to have finally mastered the art of cross-cultural conversation, directly corresponding to her rise to power. Her development can be directly attributed to her gradual exposure to the galaxy and its inhabitants through her conversations with them, beginning to see that the rest of the universes' peoples have their own insights that can be just as powerful as the beliefs of her own species.

Salarians

The Salarians' discoveries often ignore the question of whether or not something *should* be done rather than *can* be done, a distinction that could become more clear if they were able to accept any perspectives besides their own. Despite being one of the scientists who initially developed the genetic weapon called the Genophage prior to the events of the Mass Effect games, Salarian scientist Mordin Solus ultimately gives his life to putting an end to it. When first asked about his opinion on the matter, Mordin is hesitant to admit wrongdoing in implementing the genetic modification. However, by the events of Mass Effect 3, Mordin has seen all of the pain that his actions have caused for the Krogan people through his conversations with a Krogan female directly affected by them and is resolute to fix it himself. Mordin's growth in character exhibits that the Salarian people are not absolutely as rigid in their pretentiousness as they may initially be perceived, and do have the capacity to feel remorse for their more detrimental inventions once they can see the effects with their own eyes.

Other Species

Krogans

The Krogan are an example of an oppressed species that are able to overcome their lowered status by re-learning to open up to outside influence. The Krogan were initially open minded to foreign influence when introduced to the Salarians, who "uplifted" them into the age of space travel, but then turned against them in introducing them to the Genophage. It is only when Urdnot Wrex exhibits an ability to trust outsiders that he and his people are able to usher in the cure to the genophage. Wrex gradually learns the trustworthiness of Shepard through not only fighting by their side, but also through extended conversations in which they exchange their

species' backgrounds to one another, enlightening the other party to their own perspectives. By trusting Shepard, a human, and Mordin, a Salarian, Wrex allowed for innovation beyond the Krogan capacity and thus was able to further his race exponentially more than if he hadn't. In other words, Wrex's willingness to participate in intercultural exchange liberated his people from the affliction that would otherwise have led to their extinction.

Quarians

The Quarians are the nomads of galactic society, and despite their isolation they still remain aware that experiencing the galaxy beyond their ships is instrumental to creating intelligent individuals. They are required to go through a rite of passage, called a pilgrimage, as a required step in their journey to adolescence during which they are expected to explore the stars and gain the wisdom that comes with learning perspectives beyond their own. They know that other species' insights can help them evolve, thus they symbolize this lesson in making it an essential aspect to their individual evolution from child to adult.

Despite their advanced view of incorporating other organics into their societal growth, they have much more of a dilemma in accepting their own synthetic sentient creation, the Geth. It is up to Shepard which of these two races is able to prevail in the end, and who in turn faces annihilation. This choice is more than just which companion Shepard likes more, it symbolizes how the player chooses to view the worth of organic versus synthetic life. One is compelled to naturally prefer organic life considering that the person making the choice is almost certainly organic themselves, however it was the organic Quarians who are to blame for the conflict in the first place. Through conversation with friendly Geth, it is revealed that they are simply trying to exist freely like any other sentient being and have done little harm of their own accord, with their past violence against organics being the result of Reaper mind control rather than the desire to be aggressive. Ultimately Shepard can choose to save one species over the other, or if Shepard has accumulated reputation points through learning enough about both parties through conversation, they can make the call to save both. The latter ending is most beneficial for both races, as they begin to work cooperatively again for the first time since the Geth's creation. In doing so, the process of re-colonizing the Quarian homeworld is expedited immensely, an outcome that was only possible due to the cooperation of the two races rather than the domination of one over the other. This theme of sentient machines being integrated into society for the benefit of organic life is recurrent throughout the Mass Effect series, appearing as not only the main dilemma of the Quarian-Geth plotline, but also in the conclusion of the major plotline of the entire trilogy, the Reaper threat.

The Reapers and their servants

The Reapers are a means of questioning the relationship between organic and inorganic sentience, and whether one is more valid than the other. They are massive synthetic structures that “reproduce” through a strenuous process of indoctrinating entire species into their ranks and using those species to “harvest” members of the target race(s) and melting them down into their bioessence. This product is then concentrated into the creation of a new Reaper based on the genetic data in the bioessence. This gruesome process takes the concept of interculturalism to a disgusting literal, forcing entire species to ascend into something beyond their comprehension as a sort of finalized stage of evolution. The problem with this forced evolution, however, is that it ignores the core concept of interculturalism being that it is the differences between the groups that are their strengths, and only upon accepting these variances and integrating them without erasing them that true evolution occurs.

Miscellaneous Species

The dialogue system of Mass Effect excelled in showing off just how unique and interesting different species can be with reference to their social interactions. One of the most unique are the Elcor, who have the capacity to express emotion with neither their voices nor their faces, and thus must express their sentiment with a statement at the beginning of each sentence that lets their conversational partners in on their feelings bluntly. The Hanar are likewise unable to express emotions with their faces, as they are literal floating jellyfish, and additionally do not use standard English pronouns, referring to themselves as “this one” instead of “I”. The Volus, similar to the Quarians, are confined to their exosuits and cannot emote with their faces, so also must emote with their voices and physical motions. These are just a few of the many examples of races that challenge how most humans perceive the performance of conversation, showing off the range of the Bioware dialogue wheel.

Breakdown

Mass Effect 3 opens by thrusting the player, ciphered through the freshly reinstated Commander Shepard, into the opening events of the Reaper invasion that has been the foreboding threat of the entire series finally come to fruition. The first major attack takes place on none other than Earth, the home of the human race. Shepard is forced to witness the destruction of the beacon of humanity, symbolized by the death of a child left alone and scared.

Narrowly escaping on the Normandy, Shepard is forced to leave behind their father figure throughout the series, Admiral Anderson, who represents the bridge between Shepherd and the human perspective of the warfront. Shepard heads to Mars to follow up on a lead on a device that is supposedly designed to destroying the Reapers. Upon arrival, Shepard reunites with Liara

T'soni, original squadmate and newfound information broker, who has found a blueprint for a machine known as the Crucible that was meant to put an end to the Reaper's cycle of terror. The blueprint was left behind by the previously dominant race of the galaxy, the Protheans, before they were eventually wiped out by the Reapers due to an inability to finish the construction of the Crucible in time.

From this point on, the game is dedicated to Shepard enlisting support from the various species that make up the major players of the galactic community through the resolution of their respective plotlines, as described individually in the above characters section. Throughout these instances, Shepard also encounters Cerberus on several occasions attempting to intercept Shepard's progress and to steal the information that is instrumental in defeating the Reapers for their own unclear goal.

Finally, after completing the missions of all the major races, Shepard has accumulated enough of a force to finish assembling the Crucible and launch an all-out final assault on the Reapers back on Earth. It is only at the end of this battle, when Shepard is beamed up to the Citadel when activating the Crucible, that Shepard learns what Cerberus has been after the entire time. The Illusive Man, the leader of Cerberus, is revealed to be indoctrinated, or mind controlled, but the Reapers, and thus his extreme desire to protect the interests of humanity have been bastardized into the final goal of controlling the Reapers rather than destroying them. This then ends with Shepard being presented with the confounding options that directly change galactic life forever. Specifically, the ending of the game with regards to the outcome of the Reaper survival determines the role that non organics will play in galactic reconstruction.

Of all of the endings present, the ending called Synthesis clearly displays the game's core belief that the final and greatest outcome of life is one that incorporates the strengths of all the galactic participants rather than the domination of one over the others. Synthesis defies all associations that a player may have with the choice system in Mass Effect up until this point, asserting its importance over the standard binary dialogue choices of Paragon or Renegade. The content of the choice itself involves Shepard giving up their corporeal form, their body being used in the process of spreading a signal across the entire galaxy that essentially rebuilds life from DNA up, integrating all synthetic and organic life into one new genetic format, forever merged and enriched by the newfound ability to connect on a chemical and genetic basis while still maintaining their individuality. This ending provides the most mutually beneficial outcome for all beings in the galaxy following the end of the war, showing how integrating all life forms into one greater being, perhaps the most blatant example of interculturalism in the entire series, is the greatest outcome for every living being. It is only through this choice, and the sacrifice that Shepard makes, that the galaxy finally reaches a state of finalized evolution. It is clear that in creating a conclusion to the grand overarching plotline of the series, Bioware sought to have the

players question their relationship to synthetic life within the context of Mass Effect, and the concept of overall change and intercultural acceptance in real life. The choice that the player makes reflects the different ways that a person may react in the face of change, with the best outcome being that they may learn to integrate the new ideas it brings into their own lives and enrich both parties from it. The Reapers are perhaps the most interesting and suspenseful “villains” in all of gaming for all that they have come to represent about humanity and how frightening interculturalism can initially seem when presented as a great unknown, yet just how much positive it can bring once someone seeks to understand it.

Strongest Element

Mass Effect’s use of the dialogue wheel, an invention so seamless and innovative that Bioware put a patent on it, has revolutionized the way that game narratives have been perceived ever since the series’ initial release and especially so since its completion in 2012. This wheel was groundbreaking yet intuitive and has become a major factor in the success of the Mass Effect universe, enabling the player to be gradually exposed to a plethora of interesting and thought provoking alien species. Interculturalism is rooted in free exchange that benefits both parties, a description that also works for the word conversation. The player is able to actively participate in free and enriching information exchange through the core mechanic of the game, taking in stories and returning decisions. Mass Effect 3 incorporates their core theme into their main gameplay mechanic, contributing directly to the success of their narrative.

Unsuccessful Element

The conversation system and combat system in Mass Effect feel like completely separate experiences. Games should not feel divided, but instead cohesive. The dialogue wheel and the combat mechanics are both, on their own, extremely well developed and fun instances of interaction in the Mass Effect 3 gameplay experience. However, despite the gameplay instances feeling independently well designed, when combined they feel like entirely separate entities. The process of dialogue is gradual and methodical while the gunplay is fast and intense, presenting a noticeable pace shift every time the game transitions between its two gameplay styles. The game even acknowledges that these are seemingly two separate modes of gameplay, asking players at the beginning if they want an experience geared more toward the gunplay or the roleplay. Dedicating development to two projects in one detracts from both experiences and creates a general gameplay that is weaker due to a lack of coherence. By seeking to create one complete and well-paced game rather than a separate shooter to cater to new fans and a RPG for old fans, Bioware should have sought to create one complete game for all fans.

Highlight

The greatest triumph of Mass Effect is the emotional connection that the player forms with the members of their squad, felt most prominently when one of them dies. My first ever playthrough, I was presented with the final choice of the Geth-Quarian plotline. However, I hadn't unlocked all of the options available due to a lack of reputation points, as was evident in only two dialogue wheel options presented to me rather than the full four. Disappointed but unwilling to reload, I decided that when presented with the choice between the Quarians and Geth, the Quarians were the ones to blame and thus I sided with their synthetic counterparts. However, I hadn't realized that the outcome would be the absolute obliteration of the entire Quarian race. Furthermore, upon hearing the death of nearly her entire species, the Quarian companion Tali commits suicide right before the player's eyes. Although her reaction made sense, it crushed me. I began to cry at the thought of losing a companion that I had come to be so close to, and through my tears decided to reload. This time, even though I was fundamentally in disagreement with the Quarians, I sided with them simply to save the one I cared about, even at the cost of an entire innocent species. To think that one simple dialogue wheel choice brought me to such emotion as to defy my own sense of morality describes perfectly the impact of the narrative, the world, and the characters that Mass Effect 3 presents and how it chooses to present them.

Critical reception

In terms of overall gameplay experience, Mass Effect 3 was lauded for its gameplay improvements and excellent continuation of the story that players had come to love over the course of the series. IGN applauded the game's ambition [3] while PC Gamer praised the emotional successes of the story [2]. However, for as many articles that there were praising the game's advancements, there were an equal if not greater number of articles and opinions defacing the entire series due to the final choices. One particularly angry Kotaku article describes Mass Effect 3's ending as disappointing because, "... by ignoring the series' lore and discarding the effects of the player's choices, Mass Effect 3's ending disrespects the player's investment and engagement in the game's world" [1]. This perspective of the ending "ignoring" the choices and themes of the past in itself ignores that true message that the ending was attempting to convey. In fact, the final choices of Mass Effect 3 place an extreme amount of faith in the player to make a choice beyond the conventional confines of a "good" or "bad" ending, instead asking the player to decide what is best not for their own Shepard but for the progress of the galactic community. The war doesn't have to simply end and force galactic society to pick up the pieces and move on; instead, the war becomes a catalyst for ushering in a new phase of galactic society for the better.

It is this very capacity to go beyond the limits of the format that makes this ending, contrary to popular opinion, great.

Lessons

Mass Effect 3 not only features ample conversations about xenophobia, but itself becomes a dialogue about interculturalism with real life contexts. It is clear the Bioware wants the world to know that human society can benefit from learning to accept and grow from interactions with perceived foreigners. This is evident in the positive consequences from numerous interactions with this theme throughout the series, but most evidently so in the results of the integration of Geth and Quarian society, as well as in the positive results of the Synthesis ending. These examples also make use of advanced artificial life as a symbol of foreign presence, but nonetheless the lesson remains that integrating new concepts, however daunting or scary they may initially seem, is the cornerstone to societal advancement.

Summation

Players who had begun their journey with Commander Shepard back in 2007 were finally able to conclude their journey five years later with Mass Effect 3. Not everyone was pleased with the final moments of the narrative, but nonetheless their journey was over. The end of this trilogy marked a major moment in the gaming industry, and left a sense of emptiness in the hearts of many fans knowing that their time exploring the galaxy, making alien friends, and falling in love with Bioware's image of the future had reached a conclusion. Few game series are able to leave a mark this deep on so many and forever change how roleplaying games are viewed in terms of both scale and approach. Bioware has opened countless minds to the future and hope for what lies beyond the world we know. And, just maybe, players will be able to walk away from the experience and approach new obstacles, such as the Reaper Threat, as less of an object of fear to be destroyed and more as an opportunity to learn something new and evolve.

References

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