Mass Effect

Studio: **BioWare**

Designer(s): **Casey Hudson / Preston Watamaniuk**

Part of series: **Mass Effect**

Release: November 20, 2007

Main credits: Lead writer: **Drew Karpyshyn**

Lead programmer: **David Falkner**

Art director: **Derek Watts**

Composers: **Sam Hulick, Jack Wall**

Useful links: [Paragon playthrough](#) (22 *hours* 34 *mins.*)   [Renegade playthrough](#) (22 *hours* 46 *mins.*)

Basic Overview

This review, written during a tumultuous period in world history and, by extension, in my own life, is dedicated to all the brave heroes of Ukrainian resistance in their own war against the Reapers, and to all my good Russian friends, steadfast in their struggle to resist their own brand of Reaper indoctrination from fascist state media.

Mass Effect is a pretty personal experience, so bear with me for a while as I lay down the I-me-mine groove on y'all. It'll get better eventually, I promise.

All through the 2000s, I was not much of a gamer, having largely given up on the medium after the collapse of the classic adventure game industry, and by the time I got my first taste of *Mass Effect*, the original trilogy had been done with for quite a long time (along with all the hullabaloo stemming from the infamous ending of *Mass Effect 3*); I think that around the same time that I first booted up the original *Mass Effect*, the gaming community was getting busy knocking the shit out of the unfortunate cash-grab that was *Mass Effect Andromeda*, so it must have been around 2017-18 or so. My initial impression, inevitably backlashing like mad against the immense hype
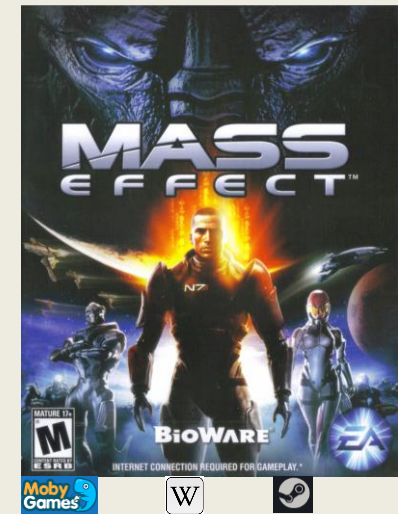
attached to the game, was not particularly strong — in fact, after a few hours of playing I set the game aside, somewhat confused by the combat system, unmoved by the clumsy, pretentious, and derivative lore, and disillusioned by the rather formulaic RPG mechanics. I was, after all, an adventure game veteran through and through, and it had to be far more than what I was seeing to lure me back to the conventions of the RPG format.

Odd enough, I cannot properly recall what exactly prompted me to return to the game — or at which particular point my initial indifference turned to addiction, intoxication, and that particular kind of feeling which drives players all around the world to write things like «I've lived two lives — my fake, boring real one and my true existence in the *Mass Effect* universe». For a while, *Mass Effect* became the single «druggiest» video game franchise for me since *Quest For Glory* in the early 1990s, and even today, I remain a bit afraid of starting it up once more, lest everything else goes to hell until I have completed the entire trilogy. (One of the reasons, actually, why I still manage to hold out on the remastered *Legendary Edition*). And I know for sure that I am not alone in this — the feeling of personal intimacy with the franchise is evident in a lot of stuff people say about the games, and it goes way beyond collecting action figures of Commander Shepard or celebrating International N7 Day with your friends. Formal rituals are silly; true empathy with fictional art is priceless.

So what was it, specifically, that made *Mass Effect* so outstanding in a veritable sea of RPG, adventure and action-based video game franchises? The most natural benchmark for comparison here would probably be BioWare's own history. By 2007, the studio was already one of the leading giants in the CRPG universe, having established its reputation with the *Baldur's Gate* franchise, expanded and defended it with critical successes such as *Neverwinter Nights* and *Jade Empire*, and then carried it on a whole new level by taking over the sci-fi genre with *Knights Of The Old Republic*. As I wrote in my review of *Baldur's Gate*, easily the most important secret of BioWare's success was their ability to *humanize* the CRPG experience — leave in all the combat fun and all the tricky stat business, but add up the feeling that you are invested in the lives, actions, and feelings of actual people, rather than simply playing a chess game of strategy and tactics. Fans loved and got attached to the characters, empathizing with them stronger than they would empathize with actual people — let's face it, real people, as a rule, tend to suck, and you can hardly ever count on them to match your hopes and ideals, whereas a well-designed travel companion in a RPG is *precisely* like that perfect friend you could never afford in real life.

For all their excellence, though, those early BioWare games still had their limits, both technical and substantial. On the technical front, the graphic design left a lot to be desired — the isometric perspectives of *Baldur's Gate* and *Neverwinter Nights* left way too much for the imagination if you really wanted to fall in love with your characters, and the still-too-crude 3D polygons of *Jade Empire* and *KOTOR* were an insufficient, if important, step forward. In the substance department, the

games still suffered from a lack of realism — the dialog was largely situation-based, centered around player quests rather than focused primarily on immersing the player into a believable environment. If you so wanted, and if you really put your mind to it, you *could* make the Sword Coast into your second home. But it took effort.

Yet the most important deficiency — even though some hardcore RPG fans would rather call it an advantage — was the blank slate state of your main playable character. Other than a few insignificant biographic details, these guys never had much of an in-game personality, offering you complete freedom to fill that one in with the aid of your own imagination, subtly directed by the sets of choices made throughout the game. Nobody at BioWare could be blamed for this: the designers were, after all, just loyally following the classic RPG formula, in which having a blank-slate protagonist, built by the player from the ground up, was one of the essential ingredients, separating it from the «adventure» genre in which the name, physical appearance, and biography of your character were set in stone from the start.

Mass Effect was the first BioWare game to dispense with that — not as radically, perhaps, as CD Projekt RED's *The Witcher* from the same year, in which pre-game customization of your playable character was eliminated completely (Geralt is Geralt, right?), but radically enough to create an entirely new type of RPG experience. Your character had a preset name (Shepard), a preset military rank (Commander), several finite and quite concrete variations on his or her backstory, and, most importantly, a well-defined sense of purpose. Choices still mattered, and Shepard's personality could be cosmetically shaped by the player in different ways, but ultimately *Mass Effect* was a specific story, set around a specific character. Freedom of player's vision was significantly sacrificed in favor of player's empathy and involvement — a tactic that must have turned off quite a few of those hardcore RPG fans, but bought BioWare millions of new admirers, including those that would not previously touch an RPG with a 10-foot steel pole (damage 1d8 +3 crushing, THAC0 -2 bonus).

Yet if the player's vision was somewhat limited by the game's design, the designers' vision was anything but. *Mass Effect* was BioWare's first — and best — out of two major franchises (the second one being *Dragon Age*) built upon a completely original foundation, rather than a «rented» one like the Forgotten Realms for *Baldur's Gate* or Star Wars for *Knights Of The Old Republic*. Two persons deserve our primary gratitude for this: project director Casey Hudson, who thought that creating a sci-fi universe of its own would be a proper development step for BioWare after the success of *KOTOR* — and Drew Karpyshyn, the main artistic mind behind the creation of the *Mass Effect* lore and the storyline of the first game in the series. By the time of *Mass Effect 2*, Karpyshyn's role in the game would already be seriously diminished, and by the time of *Mass Effect 3*, he would no longer be involved with the project at all — a factor which, as some would claim, contributed to the deterioration of the writing — but the *Mass Effect* universe as a whole was fathered by Drew, and so, naturally, Drew's influential shadow and

all the threads that he set in motion would be reflected in each of the franchise's installments to come.

This circumstance is actually more important than it looks, since conventional gaming critical consensus for the past 10 years has tended to separate the three parts of the trilogy with a narrative that looks something like this: (a) the original *Mass Effect* was where it all started and established all the major lore, but now looks somewhat dated and underdeveloped; (b) *Mass Effect 2* is where it's really at, the best game in the series and one of the best video games of all time; (c) *Mass Effect 3* is an okay continuation to *Mass Effect 2*, but thoroughly ruined by its inept and offensive ending. I understand the logic behind each of these opinions, yet strongly disagree with every single one of them — and in my reviews of the trilogy, will try, to the best of my limited ability, to show why.

Most importantly, in my opinion, the *Mass Effect* trilogy is precisely what it is — a trilogy, a single, logical, wholesome, and well-rounded story told in three installments, being the ideal video game equivalent of what *The Lord Of The Rings* is in the world of literature and (the original) *Star Wars* is in the world of cinema. If you, too, are a novice and want to ask the question, «where should I begin with *Mass Effect*?», the logical — in fact, the only adequate — answer is to begin at the beginning; do not be a clueless noob by listening to brainless advice like «well, the first game may be too rough about the edges for a modern gamer, and all critics agree *Mass Effect 2* is the best game in the series, so...».

At the same time, just like each of the three parts of *The Lord Of The Rings* have their stylistic and atmospheric differences, so would it be ridiculous to deny that the same goes for *Mass Effect*. After all, each game in the series was designed and produced by its own team in its own time interval, with different sets of writers, programmers, and artists who took into consideration both technological progress and fan feedback — plus, even though Hudson and Karpyshyn had planned *Mass Effect* as a trilogy right from the start, it only takes a single attentive playthrough of the three games to understand that there was nothing like a wholesome, unified conception of what the story would be all about when the original *Mass Effect* went into actual development. (Rule #1 for any long-term project: *always* take care of the start *and* the end from the beginning, and fill in the middle as you go — alas, only a miserable share of such projects takes this rule into consideration).

Seen from that perspective, the original game — *Mass Effect* — was, indeed, the most «lore-oriented» of the series: one of its main purposes was to introduce, in as much detail as possible, Karpyshyn's vision of the Milky Way galaxy circa 2183 A.D., with all of its star systems, planets, races, technological advances, and civilizational risks. *Mass Effect 2* would concentrate far more on the «buddy» aspect of the game, being a bit more chamber-like in format and downplaying the grand scale of the conflict in favor of personal melodrama. Finally, *Mass Effect 3*, with its Reaper invasion theme, would finish things on an

overwhelmingly epic scale (much like *The Return Of The King*), bringing in a completely different set of emotions. Yet not one of the three parts is completely autonomous or self-sufficient; not one of the three parts summarizes all the best about *Mass Effect* without flaunting some of its worst; not one of the three parts can be fully and satisfyingly appreciated outside of the context of the other two. Together, all their deficiencies notwithstanding, they probably represent the single most grandiose artistic achievement in the history of videogaming — not likely to be topped in the near future of the medium, definitely not if it continues to evolve along its current lines of evolution.

Content evaluation

Plotline

As a rule, in my mind I tend to immediately penalize the plot of any video game whenever its central theme follows the «protagonist saves the world» trope. As gratifying as the feeling can be if *you* are the protagonist, eventually all those saved worlds begin to clog up space at a dime a dozen, as more and more hack writers forget that only the smallest fraction of all our favorite myths and fairy tales to date had its brave heroes rescue the universe from utmost destruction — let's face it, we have really all been way too spoiled by J. R. R. Tolkien to agree to take anything less than *everything* as our default stake. From a general perspective, this is ridiculous, and tons of plot-based video games would have vastly benefited from discarding that tired trope (unless, of course, the trope itself is being parodied or inverted, as in something like *Day Of The Tentacle*).

To be quite honest, I am still not entirely sure if the *Mass Effect* saga could be completely excused and exonerated from succumbing to the same temptation. Many things about its central plotline — the fight against the giant, omnipotent, mysteriously Lovecraftian Reapers in their crusade to eliminate organic civilization — did not make sense back in 2007 and made even less sense upon the completion of the Trilogy. But some ideas work better when simply felt up your spine rather than when subjected to cold intellectual analysis; and with *Mass Effect*, BioWare's designers showed a level of unprecedented ambition that deserves unequivocal respect even if you still reserve the right to ridicule Karpyshin & Co.'s concepts.

One such type of daring plot decision is giving you, the player, essentially no time to familiarize yourself with this brand new world of 2183 A.D. before it *already* finds itself on the eve of destruction. The game seemingly begins slow and humble — as Commander Shepard of the Systems Alliance (a.k.a. ˈEarthˈ, really), you have been directed to proceed to the remote colony planet of Eden Prime in order to retrieve and protect a recently excavated artefact, apparently left behind by the elder race of the Protheans, whose nature and purpose are to be ascertained by scientists. Even before you set foot on the planet, things begin to fall apart when the Eden Prime colonists and soldiers are attacked by a mysterious enemy — the robotic Geth, who are themselves guided by an even more terrifying and baffling opponent that looks like a giant squid-shaped spaceship. One of the very first things that the plot does is send you straight-on into raging combat, and it is only after you have been properly baptized by fire that you actually get a chance to look around and thoroughly immerse yourself in the game's universe. For me on my first playthrough, this was a turn-off, what with my liking to take things slow at first and all; later, however, I learned to enjoy the game's prologue as an artistic decision rather than simply a clever excuse for an early combat tutorial.

As a video game rather than a movie franchise, *Mass Effect* can afford itself the luxury of not being completely anthropo-centric. The Milky Way Galaxy circa 2183 A.D. is supervised by a Council run by three races, none of which is human — the «philosopher» race of the formally gender-less (yet still strikingly feminine) Asari; the «military» race of the Turians, each of whom looks like a cross between a praying mantis and a Roman centurion; and the «nerdy» race of the Salarians, nicely evolved lizards with a Thomas Edison fetish. The main residing location of the Council is the Citadel, an interplanetary marvel of technology that was originally discovered by the Asari — who somehow decided to turn it into the galaxy's central hub of operations even despite not completely understanding how the whole thing works (somewhat similar to a tribe of apes deciding to establish lodgings at an abandoned nuclear power station, but whatever). The Citadel eventually becomes a harbor for all races — including humans, the last species to discover the wonder of interstellar travel, but also one of the most impatient to grab a proper seat on the Council and impose their nasty Western capitalist-colonialist ways on the peacefully grazing (not really) alien civilizations.

Somewhere at this point, *Mass Effect* still can't help falling back upon anthropocentrism, and, frankly, I do not blame it. Although Commander Shepard may be customized as male or female, have different backgrounds, class specializations, hair colors, and neck shapes, one thing s/he may *not* be is not human (in stark contrast, mind you, to most of BioWare's previous franchises where you could freely pick the race / species for your character). This is a plot-required limitation: *Mass Effect* is, first and foremost, a game about humans and the kind of change they bring to whatever balance of forces they encounter upon their arrival. When, later on, it becomes apparent that the giant squid-like spaceship first seen on Eden Prime is Sovereign,

the avantgarde sentry of the Reapers who appear on the world stage every 50 thousand years or so to wipe out all advanced organic civilizations... well, one might very well ask oneself the question of just *how* coincidental it is that this particular 50-thousand year cycle came to an end right at the very moment that *humans* — and no other race in particular — have appeared as an active force among the Milky Way's many cultures. Clearly, humans are special — and Commander Shepard is the most special human of them all, the only one with whom Sovereign actually condescends to have a brief conversation.

Given the rising tide of political correctness in the 21st century, one will regard this message as either astonishingly retrograde and bigoted, or surprisingly defiant and independent. I tend to gravitate toward the latter option — not because the creators of *Mass Effect* dared to promote colonialism, but rather because the entire agenda of *Mass Effect* is about posing questions without giving unambiguous answers. In what might be one of the greatest video game innovations of all time, the game utilizes the classic RPG choice-based mechanics for much more than simply shaping the biography and psychology of your playable character: it lets you shape the «moral course of history» without explicitly praising you as a cosmopolitan hero or condemning you as a nationalist villain. In *Baldur's Gate*, for instance, you nearly always had a choice between heroic and villainous resolution of presented issues — save 'em all just because good boys go to Heaven, or kill 'em all just for the *mwahaha* fun of it. But the famed morality system of *Mass Effect* is something completely different altogether.

From the very start of the game, you can begin to shape your Shepard along the «Paragon» path — marked in blue — or the «Renegade» path — marked in red; you can also try out a mixed approach, but the game will try to penalize you for that (some of the Paragon options are only open to you if you already have enough Paragon points through choosing earlier Paragon options, and the same symmetrically goes for Renegade). Many players, out of the naïve goodness of their hearts or due to the old Dungeons & Dragons influence, mistakenly think that «Paragon» equals «Good» and «Renegade» equals «Evil», which is really only right if you consistently apply the exact same dichotomy to Democrats and Republicans. More precisely, the «Paragon» path is the Henry Fonda way of doing things, whereas the «Renegade» path is the Clint Eastwood one (the ends justify the means, don't be afraid to go all gung-ho when circumstances demand it, the works), and the game rarely, if ever, castigates you for choosing one over the other... at least, not directly: *indirectly*, going consistently Renegade predictably results in a higher body count, which automatically excludes you from certain interactions or further choices due to the character becoming unavailable.

In the ultra-grand scheme of things — the war against the Reapers, which, in the first game, takes on the shape of defeating Sovereign and his chief minion, the rogue Turian agent Saren — going Paragon or Renegade does not make that much of a difference; but it does matter a lot in your pursuit of the game's many secondary quests, such as meddling in the conflict

between the nomadic Quarians and their synthetic creations, the Geth, or in the fate of the Krogans, a race of barbaric warriors condemned to «genophage» (artificial sterilization) for the safety of the galaxy. Pretty much every small side mission in the game has a Paragon or Renegade solution, and, much to the honor of BioWare's writer team, the game never pretends to judge you for your actions — you, the player, always remain as the ultimate judge for all of them. Most of the choices you can make have reasonable motivation, and many will have you deliberating for quite a while before settling on one specific part of the click wheel. (My own simple way of escaping the pains of doubt was to play out a complete Paragon path and a complete Renegade path — but admittedly, this is not nearly as fun as completely identifying yourself with Shepard and making all the decisions precisely the same way you would make them in real life). One thing about *Mass Effect* is clear: while most of the questions it asks of you are relatively simple, choosing the «right» answer is anything but.

A good example of BioWare's subtlety in designing choice-based mini-scenarios comes early on in the game during Shepard's (optional) exploration of the Citadel, when s/he comes across a pregnant woman and her brother having a heated discussion on what is to be done with her unborn child. Apparently, her husband was killed in action, and the baby, according to genetic scans, has inherited from him a serious genetic defect that could lead to an early demise. With the technological advances of the 22nd century, it is possible to cure that defect while the baby is still in the womb, but with a small, almost negligible, yet non-zero risk of severe consequences for the organism. The brother urges the woman to take the treatment; the woman, naturally, resists. It is up to Shepard to make his judgement and offer a «Paragon» solution — the mother is always right — or a «Renegade» one — cold logic should be obeyed. Obviously, if we act in accordance with the dominant moral code of today, we should opt for the «Paragon» solution; yet the «Renegade» answer is worded just as reasonably ("your husband's death was not your fault; but if you refuse the therapy, your child's death could be") — and hey, in the age of Covid and anti-vaxxer frenzy it actually takes on a whole new level of convincing force.

And therein lies the magic of the story of *Mass Effect*. Typical of video games, its plot twists and substantial themes are not at all new — in fact, much has been written about how freely the saga borrows from sci-fi and fantasy classics all over the place, starting with the obvious nod to *2001: A Space Odyssey* (the mysterious Prothean beacons that evoke the alien monoliths of the Firstborn) and ending with *Battlestar Galactica*, much of the aesthetics and conceptuality of which was appropriated for *Mass Effect* without any scruples. What *is* new is *Mass Effect*'s ultra-heavy reliance on choice and non-linear storytelling — one reason why there is no way it could ever be properly transferred to the medium of a movie or TV show (unless they invite David Lynch to turn it into a wormhole-like extravaganza filled with doppelgängers and shit).

Of course, the choice mechanics does not advance nearly far enough to truly make your head spin. Shepard is never really

given the option of turning to the dark side (no matter what all those who hate taking the «Renegade» path might say). Intermediate villains like the Thorian and Matriarch Benezia have to die no matter which path you choose. All of your companions on board the Normandy will always stay by your side regardless of whether you treat them like pals or like dirt. Even so, the amount of branching options introduced in the game was staggering by the standards of 2007 — especially when players realized how important choices made early in the game could be for events that would take place much later. Perhaps more than any other game released before or since, *Mass Effect* gave you the ultimate illusion of truly being able to bend the fabric of the universe to your will, of creating your own timeline and imposing your own values and strategies upon mankind.

When thinking about this from a cold analytic perspective, you do realize, quickly enough, that it was only an illusion. On an objective scale, any classic RPG game with random event generation — e.g. early *Elder Scrolls* titles — offers the player much more freedom, since any runthrough of such a game will be uniquely different from the rest. For all the variety of choice in *Mass Effect*, the overall number of potential scenarios to be played out is still finite, and each possible issue, want it or not, has been pre-planned and pre-programmed for you by the game designers: *those* guys saw everything there is to be seen (apart from glitches and bugs, of course) before you did. But herein lies the big dilemma. Would you rather have to choose between such unique, unrepeatable, specially-tailored-for-you quests as «the Duke of the province of Shabdallum has asked you to save his daughter from the vicious goblins of the caves of Boogagah in exchange for the magic Sword of Destiny?» and «the Lord-Mayor of the city of Turiel has offered you to save a diplomat from the ice giants of the mountains of Hullabaloo in exchange for the Amulet of Truth?» — or would you rather prefer to deliberate as to whether you should or should not exterminate the last representative of an archaic, intelligent, uniquely endowed, but mortally dangerous species in a morally significant choice, but one that is non-uniquely shared between you and millions of other players?

In some sense, this is similar to asking if one would prefer a huge, mind-boggling, widely spaced open world setting, only to find that most of this huge open world is empty space — randomly generated and verbally repetitive NPCs walking around miriads of houses with locked doors — or a smaller, more compact setting which offers far less space to roam, yet each pixel of that space is worth exploring. Which brings us to yet another important «anti-RPG» feature of *Mass Effect*: although formally the game does belong to the class of «open world games» (after Shepard becomes Spectre and captain of the Normandy, the entire galaxy is free for him to explore), it still psychologically railroads you into a more or less linear plot. The side quests of the game, even if sometimes they do present you with interesting moral choices, are little more than temporary distractions and diversions, offering you a quick break from the main series of events — to catch your breath and level up. It is possible to ignore them entirely and still have a complete and satisfying playthrough, as opposed to, say, *Baldur's Gate*, where most of the

actual fun was tied to simply roaming the environment and picking up whatever mini-quest you could find.

The main plot of *Mass Effect* is not completely set in stone: your three major missions (rescue the Asari scientist Liara in the lava-ensconced ruins of Therum; defeat the mind-controlling Thorian and rescue — or not rescue — the colonists on Feros; face Saren's aide, Matriarch Benesia, and rectify the consequences of a catastrophic biological experiment on Noveria) may be pulled off in any order, and a belated fourth one (destroy Saren's laboratory on Virmire and face Sovereign himself in an intimate face-to-face chat) can be started up right after any two out of three have been completed. But these are essentially four semi-autonomous events of a single plot, and moving them around each other makes about as much difference as moving around any several out of Hercules' twelve labors. There are funny, albeit insignificant, consequences for those who, contrary to laws of common sense, would want to hold out rescuing Liara until the very end — other than that, your choices mostly matter *within* each separate chapter of your adventure rather than in between them, and that's OK.

The plot as such is only mildly creative; this is not where the real strength of *Mass Effect* lies. A huge plant-like monster busy mind-controlling and «vegetating» its victims; the last remnants of an aggressive, super-intelligent species which stupid people try to turn into biological weapons; a special agent gone rogue and allying himself with the Dark Side «for the greater good of the Galaxy» — these are all well-explored sci-fi / fantasy tropes, and I don't think Karpyshyn or any other *Mass Effect* writer could ever pretend to introduce new philosophical ideas or unpredictable plot twists into these genres. The good thing is that most of these plotlines are generally believable, and, apart from an occasional cringe-inducing line of bullshit pathos, generally well-phrased in dialog terms.

One scene in particular — Shepard's defiant [exchange with Sovereign](#) during their short face-to-face (or, rather, face-to-hologram) meeting on Virmire — has acquired near-legendary status in the gaming community, though not everybody can properly explain what it is precisely that makes the scene so outstanding in a legion of "big-hero-taunts-big-baddie" moments in various artistic media. Karpyshyn's ambitious idea was to literally devise the biggest-threat-of-'em-all — not just one of those boring megalomaniacs with evil-empire-building goals, but a mystical force that challenges Life itself for reasons well beyond Life's limited comprehension. As charismatic as Evil can be in books, movies, or games, its face-to-face confrontation with Good is normally supposed to leave Good with at least some sort of moral victory; in his/her exchange with Sovereign, however, Shepard's moral victory is impossible simply because his system of moral values is incompatible with his enemy's, whatever that system might even be. All the hero can do is weakly generate truisms like "*You're not even alive. Not really. You're just a machine. And machines can be broken*!" and get deservedly roasted in response: "*Your words are as empty as your future. I am the vanguard of your destruction. This exchange is over*."

Although the Reaper menace as such, especially visually, was clearly influenced by the likes of Cthulhu, the most significant part of it was the enigma — the inability to comprehend who the Reapers are, why they are doing what they are doing, and if there are any possible means at all to thwart the threat they represent. The next two games in the series would attempt to somewhat de-mystify that enigma (we shall eventually try and decide just how detrimental that decision was), but the original *Mass Effect* plays around it pretty well, though, come to think of it, the ending, in which the way of taking down Sovereign turns out to be fairly conventional after all, is a bit disappointing. You could, in fact, argue that the ending is precisely where Hollywood takes over innovative artistic vision — the kind of compromise that mars quite a few other BioWare games — but you do not really play *Mass Effect* in order to get to its ending; on the contrary, if you are a true *Mass Effect* player, you shall want to put the ending off for as long as possible.

There are, after all, all those *other* assignments to do, in addition to the major parts of the mission, during which you get to explore various parts of the galaxy, stock up on your lore, level up your character, and dabble in a lot of small, but challenging moral choices. Put down or convince to surrender a crazy, murderous ex-military man turned cult leader? Negotiate with or eliminate a renegade warlord threatening the economic welfare of the Alliance? Save the hostages during a major terrorist attack on a remote asteroid, letting the terrorists escape, or wipe 'em all out while sacrificing the lives of the hostages (the plot line of the excellent, if short, *Bring Down The Sky* expansion pack)? You do see a pattern emerging here — soft and peaceful solutions for Paragon, gung-ho bloodshed for Renegade — but the missions feature plenty of small, but colorful characters with their own mini-personalities to make up for the rather uniform arrangement of options. Some of the assignments are more straightforward — roll in, shoot 'em up, collect the loot, get out of there — yet on the whole, the small side missions in *Mass Effect* are more in line with similar missions in earlier BioWare games than any such missions in *Mass Effect 2* and *3* (that is, if you count the «personal» missions related to your team members in *Mass Effect 2* as parts of the main plot rather than auxiliary side assignments).

As always in a BioWare game, Shepard can always set aside some time to pursue a romantic option — even if the game offers surprisingly little choice, avoiding same-sex liaisons (this would naturally be corrected in the following games, as time went by and mores became more progressive) and essentially just making you choose between an alliance with a member of your own species or a «sexless», but still fairly hot Asari. Romance in the first *Mass Effect* game is handled with a bit more intelligence and subtlety than it is in *Mass Effect 2* (where the whole thing was seriously sabotaged by too much fan service), but on the whole, romance in the game is fairly independent from the plot as such and has more to do with the general idea of bonding with your teammates, so we should probably come back to it in the «Atmosphere» section.

All in all, while the plot of *Mass Effect* in general is hardly its strongest point, it is solid to the point of me being able to take it seriously. As I already mentioned, the first game — for better or worse — has more to do with world-building than philosophy, but there is enough story here to keep you intrigued and occupied, with great attention to detail and rationality, even if, as befits an RPG, things are incredulously romanticized at all times, and Commander Shepard quickly becomes a figure more comparable to some legendary Indian warlord with supernatural powers from the *Mahabharata* rather than an actual military commander from some foreseeable period in humanity's future. (Still ten times more believable than any action hero in any given Japanese RPG, though).

Action

All three games in the *Mass Effect* saga are what they call «action RPGs», meaning that, in general, you spend more actual time in combat than outside of it (especially if you are playing on high difficulty levels such as Insanity, which do not take as much skill as patience, what with your weakest enemies suddenly becoming bullet sponges and all). However, all three are also very cleverly paced — to the extent that your brain is rarely, if ever, tempted to equate the experience with a regular «shooter». Whenever there are prolonged situations of armed conflict, action sequences are chopped up in short segments, completion of each of which triggers a «breather» — a cutscene, usually with some choices to be made, or a brief free-roam period during which you can interact with NPCs, collect loot, take in the sights, etc.; this helps keep things a bit more realistic and prevent you from getting bored (after all, most people probably buy and load up *Mass Effect* to get the whole package, not just to shoot up baddies with their cool guns).

The combat itself is not too complicated, though. Gone for good are BioWare's early-day AD&D mechanics, when opponents could hack at each other for hours while waiting for a lucky roll that would never come. Luck has virtually no place in *Mass Effect*; all it takes is a bit of strategic thinking and taking care not to engage in combat with enemies ten times as powerful as you, and you are largely in the clear even on high-difficulty levels. Speaking of overpowered, because *Mass Effect* is — at least formally — an open-world game, the majority of the enemies that you will encounter at the end of your run will be more or less

the same that you encounter at the beginning. Synthetic Geth that come in simple and advanced varieties; berserk half-ursine, half-reptiloid Krogan warriors; biotics-wielding, fast-moving Asari warriors; generic human mercenaries — all of them you shall encounter early on, and all of them will get progressively easier to overcome as you level up, until, by the end of the game, you just toss 'em all aside like the ragdolls they are. In other words, this is a classic example of the «generic RPG difficulty curve»: tough as hell at the beginning while you're wimpy, easy as heck at the end when you're Superman.

Combat mechanics of the first game has often been criticized for not being as well-developed as in the other two, but while I do agree that some things could have technically been designed better (worst of all is the decision to have Shepard take cover automatically whenever s/he is in the vicinity of cover — this means that you often find yourself glued to the nearest wall when all you wanted to do is charge ahead), there are a few things in it that make it uniquely and experimentally non-generic when compared to all predictable shooter patterns (amusingly, the exact same thing is observed for the first part of *The Witcher* trilogy, *Mass Effect*'s equal in the fantasy world, which also came out in 2007).

The most unusual thing is that *Mass Effect* is an ammo-less shooter: according to the lore of the universe, each gun in the game shoots not with bullets, but with tiny chips of metal accelerated to supersonic velocity by decreasing its mass in a mass effect field. This means that you always have a limitless supply of ammo, no matter what you shoot, *but* this comes at the expense of heat buildup — so every once in a while you have to slow down your firing process so as not to let your gun overheat (if it does, you'll have to wait a *long* time for it to cool down, or switch to a different weapon). This creates a quirky, possibly unprecedented combat mechanic which conservative players, for some reason, totally failed to appreciate — leading to the designers having to return to more traditional ammo-based mode of combat for the next two games (with a clumsy and unconvincing «explanation» added to the lore).

Squad-based combat functions pretty much as it does in any other BioWare game — you can give yourself and your teammates orders in real time if you wish, but it is more convenient to pause the game and bring up the command HUD, which gives you the option to change weapons and exercise your special powers on the enemy in peace and quiet while the action is frozen in place. (The PC version makes real-time combat a bit more palatable since you can map a lot of your own — but not your teammates' — special powers onto keyboard shortcuts, which is great by me since I think freezing the game with the command HUD during combat really breaks up psychological immersion). That said, my personal impressions are that your teammates, two of whom you can select for each mission from a maximum pool of six, are there usually more for a show of support than anything else — at least, when it comes to shooting in the early parts of the game. Some of them have highly useful special powers which you can exploit at will, but on their own, they are just as prone to distracting you as they are to assisting you. As

they level up along with you, they progressively become more useful, but on the whole team-based AI would certainly be much improved in the subsequent two parts of the trilogy.

Speaking of special powers, *Mass Effect* introduces quite an ingenious system of classes for characters: projecting the classic Fighter / Wizard / Thief trichotomy onto the science fiction genre, they give you a choice of following the Soldier / Biotic / Tech Guy path, with each of your companions having a fixed specialization from the outset. The Soldier is essentially the equivalent of the Fighter — with lots of blunt force and the ability to specialize in all weapons and wear heavy armor, a brute (and somewhat boring) tank. The Biotic is *Mass Effect*'s version of the Wizard: if Shepard's backstory involves being irradiated by the mysterious «Element Zero» in the hero's childhood, you get awesome supernatural powers where you can shield yourself, throw your opponents around, lift them in the air, or lock them helpless inside a «singularity field» by harnessing the forces of the universe. The Tech Guy (Engineer) is the weakest of the lot (few people like to play that class, in all honesty), but at least he's got a major advantage over all of his/her synthetic enemies, whom he can hack, sabotage, or short-circuit in a jiffy after a bit of practice. Then there are the mixed classes — my favorite is the Vanguard, the game's equivalent of the Battlemage, part Soldier, part Biotic, an unstoppable killing machine who, when properly levelled up, can throw around an entire enemy host and machine-gun them while they're floating around, completely helpless.

Better still, in stark contrast with today's «advanced» shooters, giving you a miriad of options, parameters, angles, displays, stats, and visual pyrotechnics, *Mass Effect* keeps it fairly simple. Winning a battle does require some work from the player, particularly if you are playing on a challenging level, but combat never feels particularly technical — having mastered the simple basics, you can just let yourself go with the flow, instead of having to keep track of five million different modifiers and statistics floating around the screen. (On lower difficulty levels, you can actually relax and have your companions do most of the dirty work for you — although, as I already said, on higher levels they become more of a liability than a relief). Yet even if, on the whole, your combat strategies are fairly limited, combining your talents with those of your companions is a bit of an art; just like in BioWare's earlier games, defeating a powerful opponent usually takes a well-thought out plan of action, rather than brute force and unlimited firepower.

Classic RPG elements that still managed to survive into the game include leveling up by means of gathering XP, increasing your attributes as you level up, and looting weaponry and tech upgrades from storage units or your enemies' bodies as you go. Interestingly, the amount of XP one can harvest in the game is limited, since enemies defeated on various planets do not respawn and the number of XP-yielding quests is quite finite; this pretty much eliminates the very idea of «grinding» from the game, although maximizing your spoils still requires quite a bit of tedious work (such as collecting all the minerals on each

planet you visit). Looting is also fun until a certain point, since in the big scheme of things most of your common-grade weaponry is interchangeable, and once you have completed the hunt for advanced-grade equipment (which begins to pop up after you have achieved a high enough level), your inventory will be clogged with endless tons of junk (fortunately, all of it can be recycled into «omnigel», a useful substance that helps you repair your equipment). Not all of this is perfectly well balanced, but the overall system is, I would say, an intelligent compromise between the strategic complexity of classic RPGs and the simplistic straightforwardness of classic shooters.

Other than «clunky combat» (pish-posh), most of the gameplay criticism used to be addressed at navigation across the various planets of the galaxy, most of which, if you really want it and have plenty of time, can be done on foot, but is usually supposed to take place in the M35 Mako, a six-wheeled supertank thing which, in addition to giving you massive firepower, can move through all sorts of rugged terrain — everything but water, in fact. The main problem with it was the frustrating control system, which constantly used to wrestle control out of the player's hands, sending the Mako into series of paroxysmal spins whenever you tried to brave a mountain peak (which was fairly often, since a huge percentage of the landscape in the game is occupied by dizzying mountain ranges). But while it might be true that this aspect of the game suffered from a little less playtesting than there should have been, the common answer to the problem was obvious — *don't* use the Mako to brave mountain peaks, try to circumvent them whenever possible. Sometimes the road takes a little longer that way, but you probably do not traverse the Himalayas right across the peak of Mount Everest, either. Just do not get it into your head that the Mako can do *everything* (it cannot scale a completely smooth wall of rock, for instance), and you'll be fine. (I also like the idea of penalizing the player's XP while fighting in the Mako — to get maximum reward, you always have to deliver at least the final kill shot while on foot, which greatly adds to the challenge).

As for the overall pace of the game, this is something you are completely free to set for yourself. Even if Commander Shepard seemingly has to hurry up in order to uncover and neutralize Saren and Sovereign's evil plan, in practice you have no limits whatsoever, and can happily waste away as much time as you want on completing various side missions, hanging out on the Citadel, or just driving your Mako around randomly chosen planets, taking in the sights and sounds. Plot-wise, this does not make much sense, but no genuine RPG can survive without its sandbox aspects, even if, as I already said, *Mass Effect* does its best to reduce and compress them (and subsequent games would go even further). The quests themselves are fairly simple, featuring almost no «puzzles» as such — other than somewhat annoying mini-games of «decryption» where, in order to bypass locks and stuff, you have to guide your cursor through a series of spinning wheels to reach the center (ah, if only decryption were *that* easy in real life...) — but they do provide precious XP for leveling up, as well as teach you valuable

combat strategy which you can then efficiently apply in the main quest, so skipping them is by no means recommendable, even if you do sometimes get to wonder what the hell you are doing here, shooting down packs of mercenaries or clearing out random dens of husks, when you are really supposed to be chasing down the bad guys who want to destroy the Universe as a whole. Oh, well. Less wondering, more shooting…

Atmosphere

The main thing that separates the atmosphere of an RPG from that of an adventure game – and, consequently, the main reason why I tend to usually prefer the latter over the former – is that the constitution of any given RPG, by its very nature, is more «technical». The typical RPG world is generated algorithmically out of a set of predetermined building blocks, and the larger it is, the more obvious, transparent, and, eventually, ridiculous and annoying those building blocks may feel to the player. Everywhere you go, you see the same textures, the same design for doors, windows, and bunk beds, the same generic behaviour for NPCs, the same action strategies for enemies. No RPG, ancient or modern, is completely exempt from that curse, even when studios realize it and try their best to make their huge worlds as non-repetitive as possible (*The Witcher 3* set itself this huge challenge, for instance, and still lost big time).

Mass Effect's remedy to the challenge was simple and efficient — if the building blocks of your universe are in danger of feeling silly or annoying to the player, make it so that the player does not even begin to concentrate on them. Instead, get the players involved, as quickly as possible, inside the plot and the general tension; make the players feel, as quickly as possible, as if the fate of the entire Milky Way *really* depended on their success. This plan is put into action already at the very start of the game, when, through the eyes of Commander Shepard, you are introduced to the wonder of the Mass Relay — at this point in our future history, it is really little other than a regular fast transit hub from one point in the Galaxy to another, but the way it is presented, in a cut scene with as much atmospheric build-up as in a regular Hollywood sci-fi blockbuster, makes you feel like a witness to something truly phenomenal. Better still, at this moment *you* are Commander Shepard, making your way to the cockpit of the SSV Normandy, so there is an immediately established equivalency between you and your character

(something that CD Projekt Red, for instance, did not get quite right with the first *Witcher* game from the same year).

This does not mean that *Mass Effect* has no «atmosphere» outside of the interaction sphere of its characters. Quite on the contrary, the combinations of visuals, cinematics, music tracks, and sound effects chosen for each single location are nearly always impressive — on the whole, more impressive, it could be argued, than in either of the following games, because one of the chief goals of the first game in the trilogy is to immerse you in Drew and Casey's vision of our future. This means great attention to detail in their world-building (there is, for instance, a ton of printed lore for each of the planets in each of the star systems you visit, including those on which the game does not even allow you to land), even if you only really get to see a tiny fraction of that world up close. Yes, most of the planets on which you and your Mako are allowed to land will be lonesome and barren, with no cities, next to no infrastructure and only occasional landmarks to draw your attention — but even so, rolling through that landscape, with the camera gently panning around you, the music setting a summer or winter mood, and the subtle lighting pushing you into dawn-or-dusk territory, can be a beautiful experience; in fact, I have more than once caught myself wondering about the potentially untapped wonders of the real universe at large while letting myself be overwhelmed by the artistic imagination of the BioWare guys. (And, for the record, this kind of experience is *only* available in the first *Mass Effect* game — *2* and *3* would be so much more story-oriented that Mother Nature would largely sit them out).

All of the locations in which the main action takes place have distinct atmospheric images of their own. Therum, the place of Liara's imprisonment, is a lava lover's paradise: red, dry, dusty, and every bit as inhospitable and unfriendly as it takes to get yourself out of there as quickly as possible. The moribund colony of Feros, a curious mix of futuristic technology and retro-futuristic archaeology, is drab, grey, dirty, and a great reminder of humans' irksome propensity to colonize even the shittiest spots on the map as long as they stand to gain something. Noveria places that technology-drenched infrastructure inside an immense, overwhelming ice palace — yet another reminder of the same follies. And Virmire, the site of Saren's dreadful biological experiments, is a lush jungle where you can always step aside and take the time to smell the roses before wiping out your next batch of Geth; too bad you cannot ever revisit it in the aftermath of the battle (unlike Noveria and Feros, where you can return any time you like until the beginning of the final mission).

Then, of course, there is the Citadel, the central hub of the universe, where you shall find yourself pretty often to pick up new missions, stock up on gear, and learn the latest news. Programming and resource limitations have unfortunately prevented it from looking as busy and lively as Karpyshyn would probably have liked it to be — and unlike *The Witcher*, whose NPCs all seem to have a dynamic life cycle of their own, people in *Mass Effect* are, for the most part, static, just standing or sitting in one place all through the game; some of them are programmed to have a bit of dialog with each other once or twice, then they

just shut up once and for all. (On the other hand, this at least saves them from all sorts of embarrassments resulting from poor AI programming, like the infamous glitches of *The Elder Scrolls: Oblivion*). Even so, the vistas, the music, the panoramic perspectives all make the Citadel — essentially a romanticized version of the O'Neill cylinder model — into a place where one can simply lose oneself for half an hour or so, before coming back to reality and wishing you hadn't.

The key word for most of these environments is 'majestic' — the panoramas, the camera angles, the music, the sound effects, the perspectives all conspire to make you feel a certain personal insignificance in light of the overall overwhelming impression of the universe at large. A detailed tour of all the available planets in the *Mass Effect* galaxy would be a great bonus for those of us who enjoy reading up on popular cosmology, astrophysics, and geochemistry and subsequently realizing that man is not really the center of the universe, but, at best, a lucky random spectator from the aisles. There is a quirky paradox hidden somewhere in here, of course, since Commander Shepard is actually one of those men (or women) who is endowed by Fate with some serious agency — but that agency feels practically non-existent whenever you are driving your Mako across some red-hot volcanic territory or through a heavy blizzard on an ice-covered planet whose only inhabitant is an occasional Thresher Maw monster who likes to have Makos for breakfast.

Still, as emotional and/or thought-provoking those vistas might be, *Mass Effect*'s major attraction lies in the design of and interaction with its organic constituents, rather than its natural and technological beauties. In general, Karpyshyn's and Brennan's take on the magical 22nd century does not stray too far from the «epic-romantic» take of most of our beloved sci-fi sagas — perhaps it is just a slight touch more grounded in realism than *Star Wars*, but in a world where most of the people dress up with a serious nod to Renaissance nobility, interact with each other in exquisite literary language (blame it on the automated translation services if you want), and make advantage of the newly opened worlds by dashing through them in swashbuckling, Wild West fashion (hello, *Firefly* influence!), you will not be troubled by too many similarities with our own pesky, mundane, boring-as-hell existence. Yet neither is the living world of *Mass Effect* just a collection of recycled clichés and stereotypes — derivative as it is, there's plenty of imaginative power here to keep you surprised and intrigued.

Most of the races of *Mass Effect* do behave in relatively strict accordance with their racial stereotypes. The Asari move around and converse in gracious, elegant, eloquent manners, holding up their roles as the wisest — and, subsequently, somewhat condescending — overseers of the galaxy. The Romanesque Turians are code-bound — stern, stuck-up, gruff, and just. The big and rowdy Krogans are the proverbial burly dock workers from whom wimps like us prefer to stay away (until, by some weird chance, you manage to get under some of their skins and see them for the big babies they really are). Then there's always the next step in the advanced cogwheels of one's imagination — races like the Hanar, who look like jellyfish, talk like David Byrne

on a Brian Eno-produced record, and worship their deities (the 'Enkindlers') with all the verve of a fundamentalist sect. Or like the Volus, who look like little badgers, wear protective suits which distort their voices, and perform the classic sinister literary function of «international Jewry» with their shady financial dealings. Or like the Elcor, who, although they play a very small role in the overall story of the saga, quickly managed to become one of the most beloved races of them all due to their particular manner of conversing.

Speaking of the Elcor, I would just like to point out that they are perhaps the most transparent example of how *Mass Effect*'s world-building often (not always, but often enough) tries to ground cultural particularities in scientific explanations — the Elcor, according to the lore, have evolved in a very specific high-gravity environment, which has conditioned their large bulk, sluggish behavior patterns, and minimal physical activity. The Elcor speech, in particular, is presented as a dull, toneless, monotone chain of sound whose emotional modulation is so subtle that no other race can perceive it, which in turn requires the Elcor to preface their every uttering with an adverbial note on its emotional nature ("*genuine enthusiasm: I delight in telling the history of my people*"… "*chastising rebuke: your tone is inappropriate*", etc.). Although this is just a flourish — the Elcor play no significant role in the story whatsoever — it goes to show just how much thought, care, and humor was invested in the designers' vision of our future. It's still magic vision rather than realistic vision, of course, but the magic of *Mass Effect* is not cheap, fluffy magic; even its most whimsical applications can still have a symbolic significance. (And we might probably all gain something if we ever thought of instituting a «talk like an Elcor» day or something).

And still that ain't all — in fact, I have not even begun yet to talk about *the* truly major part of *Mass Effect*'s atmosphere. Roaming the Milky Way may be a great source of melancholic excitement (or was that exciting melancholy?), and interacting with all of its bizarrely-designed creatures may be a great way to open up one's creative and imaginative boundaries, but above and beyond everything else, *Mass Effect* is a «buddy-oriented» game. The most important characters around are the members of your multi-racial team, whom you will gradually learn to like, protect, empathize with, and ultimately treat like a part of your extended family — brothers, sisters, and (possibly) lovers.

Although BioWare had always focused on «team-oriented» RPGs, right from the very first *Baldur's Gate* game and onward, arguably no other BioWare franchise placed as much importance on the players' interaction with their party members. Unlike *Baldur's Gate*, where you can choose up to five partners from a huge pool of potential candidates, *Mass Effect* gives you a strictly limited number of companions — two humans (the biotic Lieutenant Kaidan Alenko and the gruff warrior lady Ashley Williams), one Turian (the inimitable security officer Garrus Vakarian), one Asari (the inquisitively intellectual Liara T'Soni), one Quarian (the inquisitively tech-savvy Tali'Zorah nar Rayya), and one Krogan (Urdnot Wrex, a big-hearted mercenary with

equal passion for affection and destruction). Although you can only choose two of these guys at a time to accompany you on any of your missions — resulting in billions of hours spent by despairing players trying to figure out the best candidates for the appropriate tasks — they will still always be available in the hold of the Normandy for conversation, and it is more likely than not that you will get to know each of them in detail before the game is over.

It is not just that each of the companions is equipped with his or her backstory, a full-fledged personality, and a significant role in the unfolding of the main plotline. It is the extra care invested in their *belonging* to your personal sphere of acceptance and responsibility that matters. Your chosen companions follow you each step of the way, sometimes clumsily running into or skilfully avoiding obstacles, sometimes randomly interacting with you or with each other, sometimes making insightful or funny comments on whatever is going around — and always ready to draw their guns at the smallest sight of trouble. They issue warnings about approaching enemies, express genuine concern about your welfare ("*Shepard's been hit!*" is usually the last thing I hear before I die), and are always ready to chat you up whenever you feel like taking a break from the tension and excitement of mission combat.

When it comes to chatting, the writers for specific characters took good care, in particular, to stay on a well-balanced fence between strong, but not dumb and completely predictable, stereotypization, and throwing in lots of personal nuances which, rather than diluting a character's individuality, end up somewhat sharpening it. Garrus Vakarian, for instance, is introduced as a sort of alien Dirty Harry, his mind fully bent on dispensing strict and stern justice by any means possible — yet he also has a soft, shy, almost sentimental angle to him which instantaneously makes the guy into a ladies' favorite even despite his addiction to placing well-targeted bullets in between his victims' eyes. Wrex is a ruthless, bloody mercenary who almost seems to enjoy blowing stuff up for the fun of it rather than for the money, but he is also a tragic figure, doubly trapped by the sorry fate of his entire sterilized nation *and* that of being one of its most intelligent — and, therefore, one of its most unhappy — representatives. Tali, the Quarian, combines the nerdy excitement of a tech-crazy young person with the deep resentment and psychic trauma of an entire nation that had to pay a terrible price for its oversights. And Liara, the Asari, is given the complex task of a young Sage trying to psychologically fit in with a bunch of ignorant undergraduates (amusingly, it is only when you decide to bed her that her high horse somewhat naturally and inevitably melts away).

With all those delicious aliens around, players often tend to underestimate the value of Shepard's human companions, Kaidan and Ashley — an outcome that I prefer to ascribe to either the common exotic ways of thinking ("aliens fun, humans bo-o-o-ring!") or liberal guilt ("aliens all good, humans all bad!") rather than the writers' fault, because both of these characters are fleshed out just as solidly as their interplanetary buddies. Kaidan, introduced as a victim of the corporate industry — he, like

many others, had been intentionally exposed to Element Zero in order to be trained as a biotic super-soldier — manages to overcome all his traumas and act as the voice of reason and compromise throughout the game; Ashley, on the other hand, comes across as more emotional, flippant, and ruthless, not to mention religious (a big point is made of her believing in God, though it is actually never specified *which* God) and xenophobic — traits that made her character fairly allergic to a large number of players, with reactions of the "I hate Ashley, she's so racist" type being fairly common in the fan community. This is, of course, uneducated bullshit: «racism» implies a belief in the objective superiority of your own race over everybody else's, whereas Ashley Williams, from her military-family perspective, perceives the other races as a potential threat to humans rather than a corrupted line of evolution — and this makes her story arch particularly involving and instructive, as she gradually warms up to her non-human companions and accepts that cooperation should be preferred over conflict.

One aspect of all this companionship which people often overrate, I think, is your ability to influence, over the course of the game, the personalities of your companions. For sure, there are a couple strategies and decisions you can embrace that will directly influence their fates — most notably, during the Virmire mission, where your personal history with Wrex will determine his fate and where you also have to decide which of your human companions is more suitable for a last heroic stand against overwhelming odds. But fates are not personality trajectories, and there is really very little you can do about those. You might, for instance, take a stand with Garrus on his gung-ho mentality, or you might softly (or sternly) rebuke him for being way more trigger-happy than necessary — but the farthest you will get away with this is to hear a "I'm glad we're on the same page here, Commander" or a "Well, you've given me something to think about, Commander" from his silky-soft vocal chords. Despite occasional illusive moments like these, the characters' personalities (unlike your own) are, on the whole, set in stone; you may alter some of their *actions*, but their *minds* are largely set on a pre-fixed path whose twists and turns are determined by the plot rather than your click wheel. (Ironically, the only person whose mind you can actually influence and change by the end of the game is your chief nemesis, Saren!).

But in the long run, this does not really matter: in fact, even if I am sure that this inability to change other people around you was largely dictated by technical reasons (too much trouble incorporating the consequences of too many significant choices), you could also argue that Shepard's companions are there not to serve as impressionable rag dolls, but to surround the title character with strong, resilient personalities, against which it is fun to try and employ different strategies of interaction (from the Paragon's respect and admiration to the Renegade's irony and condescension). No matter what you do here, the writers and programmers did a great job of molding, over time, your potential «travel companions» into your best friends — and it is no wonder that, above everything else, it is *this* aspect of the game which would end up as the most improved and deepened in

Mass Effect 2, ultimately becoming responsible for turning the second part of the franchise into the most critically applauded one (a decision which, as I already said, I can fully understand, even if I do not necessarily subscribe to it).

And thus it happens that, in the end, of all the great sagas *Mass Effect* is probably closer to *The Lord Of The Rings* than anything else — it is something like 40% about the wonders and marvels of an imaginary alternate universe, and 60% about the comfort and salvation one finds in genuine friendship. Oh, and, of course, there is also that end-of-the-world moment on the horizon to be considered; but just as it is with *The Fellowship Of The Ring*, so does the first part of the *Mass Effect* trilogy mainly just *hint* at the inevitability of that moment's arrival. The warning signs are everywhere — in the form of the horrifying dehumanized husks, the indoctrinated minds of the unfortunate colonists on Feros, the disturbing conversations with Saren (= Saruman?) and Sovereign (= Sauron?) on Virmire, and, of course, the climactic final battle with Sovereign on the Citadel. But the climactic final battle still ends with a Hollywood-style heroic victory, and the universe at large is still largely oblivious of the mortal danger that awaits it, so even as you discover more and more information about the genocidal cycle of the Reapers, your mind will still be way too busy processing the visual and aural delights of the Milky Way's planetary bodies, and your soul will still be mainly devoted to empathizing with your virtual human and non-human buddies.

Some might, in fact, be disappointed with the relative (I stress — *relative*) lack of a strong sense of danger in the game. By the time you get to the final battles on Ilos and the Citadel, for instance, you will probably be so overpowered (provided you were diligent enough to complete as many side quests as possible) that slicing through the thick enemy lines, most of which will consist of creatures you have already fought multiple times anyway, will be like slicing through exceedingly feeble layers of cake. (Even the last boss fight, with a huskified Saren who has an annoying habit of overheating all your weapons, always felt more tedious than exciting to me). But on the whole, this hardly seems like a big problem because *Mass Effect* is *not* a game about the *end* of the world; it is a game about the *beginning* of a world that, incidentally, somehow threatens to come to an end even before you have fully finished exploring it. And that's fine. It's far more poignant, anyway, to admire a chunk of beauty with the realisation that it is also your duty to save it from extinction, than to simply admire it, period. Isn't it?..

Technical features

Graphics

The first thing one usually hears when discussing the visuals of *Mass Effect* is the sound of heavy sighing and the perennial cliché of «well, unfortunately, the graphics of the first game have not held up as well as those of *Mass Effect 2* and *3*...» —

because, as you well know, 2010 is the year where civilization really took off, while as early as 2007 we were still living in the Stone Age. On a serious note, though, while the *graphics* of *Mass Effect* may indeed have still been technically inferior to the graphics of *Mass Effect 2* (a problem well remedied by the numerous HD mods to the original game, and in more recent times, by the texture upgrades of *Mass Effect Legendary Edition*), the *art* of the original *Mass Effect* was every bit on the level, and in no way inferior to the artistic designs of its sequels.

Mind you, by «on the level» I do not necessarily mean to say «stunningly gorgeous». Neither prior to nor after *Mass Effect*, the visual artistry of BioWare's digital painters was ever a #1 priority for the team. For what it's worth, breathtaking visuals and «scenery porn» in RPGs were still a relative rarity at the time, since the hugeness of the typical RPG world and the necessity to quickly generate imagery on the spot, rather than relying on a small number of static backgrounds, were natural obstacles to such an approach. BioWare's early games still featured isometric perspectives, while *Knights Of The Old Republic* were still developed in the polygonal infancy of 3D graphics (now *there* is something that *really* hasn't held up over time). *Mass Effect* was, in fact, BioWare's very first game in which the artistry could begin to approach a certain level of realism, and the emphasis was on making the reality of the *Mass Effect* universe feel «ergonomic» rather than «beautiful».

That said, there is a sharp visual contrast in *Mass Effect* between «nature» and «technocracy», and as far as the former is concerned, it is probably fair to say that the team's efforts in visualizing and animating the various planets across the Milky Way were pretty much unprecedented for their time. The landscapes that unfold before you as you traverse them in the Mako or on foot are relatively minimalistic — but the lack of detail helps concentrate the effort on making these landscapes realistic, and the transitions smooth as butter. The rendering never looks too schematic or blocky; you *know* that the actual planets are constructed from repeating constituents, because there's no way any artist would have drawn all those useless mountains, plains, and ravines, but you never truly *feel* like it. Ride across the lengthy perimeter of any of those planets, and while their overall look will rarely change from one point to another, you will never get the feeling of «oh, I've been in this exact spot two minutes ago» (unless you messed up your compass and you really *were* in this exact spot two minutes ago).

Lest the landscapes, most of which fall under three similar categories of «green», «snowy», and «sandy», eventually do begin to feel repetitive to you, the artists took care to diversify them with various tricks of lighting — depending on the specific physical and chemical properties of the planets' suns and atmospheres, the planets may be bathed in various shapes of purple, violet, yellow, or amaranthine, and change color depending on your position relative to the sun. There is no day-and-night cycle (which probably made sense, since you are rarely supposed to spend too much time in one place), but some of the planets are «day-time» and some are «night-time» environments, which, combined with their «winter» vs. «summer» properties, makes for a whole lot of various flavors. With all that creativity, the lonesome colorful landscapes feel like living illustrations to minimalist or ambient soundtracks — Brian Eno, Harold Budd, or Philip Glass coming to mind — and every once in a while, you get really tempted to forget all about the plot and just spend a little time rolling through those desolate, solemn, serene landscapes, contemplating the mysteries of the universe.

Things get entirely different when we get back to civilization — not human civilization, of course, which seems to have adopted the Globalized Galactic Standard by the time the events in *Mass Effect* are taking place, but the kind of civilization whose styles and trends seem to be dictated by the Citadel, where, appropriately, you are bound to encounter the latest and greatest in techno-fashion. Here, Derek Watts, the art director of the game, is quick to acknowledge the influence of Syd Mead, the famous visionary behind *Blade Runner* and lots of other stuff; Syd's futuristic panoramas, celebrating a [bright, glossy, cocoon-style existence](#) for humanity in the future, at times do seem almost borrowed, stroke-by-stroke, by Derek and his team to depict the Citadel, as well as smaller, more specialized hubs such as the ice-bound Noveria. Quite a few people, myself included, feel a bit uncomfortable with this vision, in which nature has no place whatsoever, other than contributing a few plastic imitations for nostalgic purposes; I do not really know if Watts' idea was to simply create a place of dazzling futuristic beauty or if it was his plan all along to imbue it with a sense of discomfort and underlying danger, but I'd say he fully succeeded with the latter, be it intentionally or accidentally.

For all its graphic beauty — the lakes and fountains on the Presidium, the elegant trees with autumn-color leaves in the Council Chambers, the lustful red lights of Chora's Den — the Citadel is primarily designed as a highly practical, ergonomic environment. Every single object is polished and rounded, designed in the kind of minimalistic-industrial style that is usually so revered among the intellectual parts of present day high class (as opposed to the non-intellectual ones with their golden toilet bowls and dazzling baroque grotesqueries on every corner). The same style, curiously, is carried over to every single other planet — apparently, the intergalactic IKEA delivers its furniture, as well as its wall panels and automated doors, to all corners of the Milky Way, which would probably make sense if at least the typical «rich man entourage» of the game was

visually different from the «poor man entourage», which it ain't. This is most likely a technical limitation, but the unfortunate effect is that pretty soon you may be getting sick of the same style applied whenever you go. At least the Prothean world of Ilos, where Shepard gets at the end of the game, is allowed to have its own design — you don't get to see a lot of it, but it does have its own idiosyncratic, somewhat «Atlantis-style» outlook.

In short, the *Mass Effect* universe, from a purely visual perspective, is one I'd rather be glad to visit than dwell in — too stuffy and claustrophobic when it comes to civilization, too lonesome and desolate when it doesn't. That's OK, though; it makes the idea of a Reaper invasion regularly cleansing the universe of its organic-induced disentropy somewhat more palatable. I'd be sad and blue if they were to destroy Notre-Dame de Paris, but the sterile, plastic beauty of the Citadel does not move me nearly as much, so if this is the ultimate fate of humanity, so be it. (Gunnery Chief Ashley Williams seems to share my concerns: "*they've built themselves quite the lake...*", she quips while traversing the huge space of the Presidium, "*wonder if anyone's ever drowned in it*").

Where the game *truly* excelled, however, was in its graphic representations of the characters. Interestingly, for the first time ever in BioWare history *Mass Effect* included a genuine character creation algorithm, allowing you to design your own Commander Shepard from individual components, something that was supposedly impossible to achieve with BioWare's own older game engines such as Infinity and Odyssey, but achievable with the licensing of Unreal Engine 3 (probably not the only reason why BioWare, well-known for their original engines, this time around decided to run somebody else's software, but an important one). The end result was not perfect — for some reason, while I was able to design quite a few good-looking female Shepards, most of the male ones came out as the result of way too much inbreeding, so in the end I always played the default male character, based on Dutch model Mark Vanderloo. But what *was* perfect was the way the BioWare team learned to animate their heroes. Be they pretty or ugly, the facial dynamics, all the way from the twitching eyebrows to the playful mouth movements, came out as extremely realistic — making *Mass Effect* one of the first 3D games, in effect, where it became obvious that technology had finally triumphed, and that the 10-year journey from the original Polygonal Nightmare to believable realism was finally nearing its end.

Generally speaking, the characters of *Mass Effect*, humans and aliens alike, look alive. Their mouths seem to be articulating actual words (rather than just opening and closing), their eyes reflect their emotional states, their gestures echo the intentions of their messages. Even characters whose faces are permanently hidden behind masks, like Tali or the Volus merchants, are able to convey extra psychological detail through subtle twitching, shrugging, and fidgeting. While conversing, characters sometimes move around, rather than become forever rooted to the same spot; cut scenes feature plenty of cinematographic

tricks, changing scales and perspectives to produce an authentic movie effect. Of course, this is nothing new in the 2020s, but the important thing is that it all still looks good in the 2020s — even without all the graphic upscaling of the *Legendary Edition*, *Mass Effect* still produces a highly realistic impression, and whoever would want to complain about the game «not holding up» is well advised to load up *Knights Of The Old Republic* and re-learn the true meaning of «not holding up» (note that this is only a criticism of *KOTOR*'s graphics, not the game itself).

This level of realism is not so much «awesome» in itself (though occasionally, it comes awful close to awesome) as it happens to be extremely important in opening up the realm of the RPG to a lot of people who would not previously even consider approaching the genre. As I already said several times, *Mass Effect* made a giant step forward into transforming RPGs from «dungeon-and-dragon chess» into cinematic sagas, and without realistic, believable graphics this would have been all but impossible. The visuals of *Mass Effect* were designed to place you inside a movie and hold you there right until the finishing titles. Maybe it was not the first RPG to employ that strategy — but it was the first RPG able to fully capitalize upon it. In another manner of speaking, it was the visuals of *Mass Effect*, rather than any other aspect of it, that properly «sold out» the RPG genre to all the noobs, laymen, and philistines of this world; and what a lustful, shameless, delicious sell-out it was!..

Sound

Music had always been an essential component in BioWare's atmospherics, right from Michael Hoenig's unforgettable anthems and ambience in *Baldur's Gate*; and with *Mass Effect*'s ambitions in full display even before production started, it was clear that the composer would have no choice but to go full-scale *Star Wars* on the listener. The choice for primary music director was a bit risky — Jack Wall had already made a good reputation for himself at BioWare with *Jade Empire*, but that was an «ethnic» enterprise, with lots of Chinese and other Asian influences, a style clearly unsuitable for a futuristic sci-fi saga. What was needed here, instead, was something that would definitely give off a *Star Wars* vibe — yet could not be accused of slavishly imitating *Star Wars*. Massive, anthemic, inspiring, but with a soul of its own.

The answer to the challenge was quite ingenious. The core of *Mass Effect*'s soundtrack would be electronic — a dense forest of harsh, if not overbearing, rhythmic loops, modern-sounding in terms of texture but still rather inspired by the likes of classic Tangerine Dream than Aphex Twin, I'd say. The key points in the story, however, would be emphasized with monumental, pseudo-orchestral tension-raising compositions, bringing on a John Williams vibe. To achieve that goal, Jack Wall's work would be complemented by additional compositions from newcomer Sam Hulick, and by glancing at the individual credits for each track, I can tell that Wall mainly worked on the technophile electronic loops, whereas Hulick was more responsible for the epic orchestration — although the distinction is not 100% accurate, since quite a few numbers are credited to both. But yes, the ambient 'Vigil's Theme' is all Wall, and the Wagnerian 'Sovereign's Theme' is all Hulick, so I guess I'm on the right track here.

In any case, there would be no totally clear-cut separation moment between the two styles, so you won't ever get the feeling of listening to two completely different soundtracks. Over time, as the trilogy grew more and more epic, the pseudo-classical-orchestral vibe would eventually outgrow and overwhelm the trendy-electronic vibe (no doubt owing to Hulick becoming the main composer and Jack Wall leaving after *Mass Effect 2*) — but in the original *Mass Effect* game, they complement each other in a very respectful and democratic manner. And while most of the music themes lack the emotional depth of *Mass Effect 3*, this is perfectly all right because *Mass Effect* is not supposed to be the most emotional game of the three. It is supposed to be the most *exotic* game of the three, introducing you to a whole array of sights and feelings that your brain would not be fully prepared for, and the soundtrack respects that concept and feeds off it.

Nowhere is the contrast between static and dynamic illustrated better than during the first ten minutes after you boot up the game. The opening composition — usually known as 'Vigil's Theme', since it later reoccurs during the important scene on the Prothean world of Ilos, where Vigil, the hologram, recounts the entire history of the Protheans — is a serene, meditative ambient piece, sounding like Brian Eno under the influence of Sufi motives; set against a slowly, smoothly shifting planetary background, it reminds you of the infinity of space and the relative insignificance of man in the universe (duh!). But then, as you get to the cinematic intro scene, the soundtrack shifts to a more dynamic, subtly growing and intensifying set of electronic loops, out of which, as if from a shell, eventually bursts out a full-fledged, grandiose orchestral theme, perfectly synced with the introduction of the SSV Normandy and the way its pilot guides it through the mysterious Mass Relay. You have not even begun to play, and you already get the feeling that some tremendous achievement has just taken place before your eyes... even if, when you come to think of it later, absolutely nothing out of the ordinary has happened. But hey, never underestimate the power of music — *particularly* in BioWare games.

Throughout the game, the music is usually unintrusive; except for an occasional tense orchestral swoop in climactic cutscenes, it will subtly influence your emotional immersion into the game rather than command your undivided attention. The default volume levels often tend to merge it in a sea of sound effects (for instance, it is really hard to hear it if you are driving your Mako through a blizzard), and sometimes the ambient soundtrack fades out completely, only to reemerge after a new screen has loaded. But it *does* play a significant role all the same, perhaps nowhere more so than during your lengthy, solitary drives through all those lonesome planets, where Wall's cold, unnerving, and slightly mystical loops enhance the feeling of a huge, impassionate universe in which you, the player, and your entire race are just a random accident.

The only place where the music goes over the top for my tastes is the only place where the *game* goes over the top — in its rather stereotypically adjusted Hollywood finale, where the good guy (or gal) emerges as the savior of the universe (that scene where Shepard is briefly taken for dead and then cockily re-emerges in Western fashion is always more than I can take, unless you decide that you are supposed to take it tongue-in-cheek... well, maybe that's the only way out, really). The triumphant orchestration in the sequence loyally matches the trope, somewhat spoiling my overall impression of the soundtrack as a completely fresh and innovative development in video game scoring. But that is not a *really* big deal: we all know, after all, that even the best-of-the-best video games are not allowed to confound our expectations all the time — a video game without a little cheese to boost sales is like a pop hit in 15/8 time.

As important as the music is to the game, though, *Mass Effect*'s ultimate triumph was in becoming BioWare's very first fully voiced RPG — their previous games would only feature partial voicing, and none of them actually provided voice acting for most of the lines delivered by the protagonists. The latter circumstance was, in part, an unavoidable side effect of the freedom of choosing the race of your character: since you could be just about anybody in *Baldur's Gate* or *KOTOR*, it would have looked weird if you were always voiced by the same actor or actress. Since, however, Commander Shepard is pre-defined as a human character, the only real choice you have is to make the Commander a *him* or a *her*. This meant hiring no more than two different actors to provide voice support for the title character, and the roles were assigned respectively to Mark Meer and Jennifer Hale, both of whom had already done work for BioWare (Meer was pretty much BioWare-exclusive, whereas Hale had already been an established presence in video game voice acting before BioWare even came into existence: her first role was that of Katrina in Sierra On-Line's *Quest For Glory IV*).

Tons of manhours have been spent in discussion on various Web forums over who is the better Commander Shepard of the two — Meer or Hale — often resulting in inevitable accusations of sexism (if you prefer Meer) or virtue signaling (if you're on Team FemShep). Personally, I happen to think that both were able to create their own personalities for the title character, and

one of the beauties of the game is that you can replay it from Meer's or Hale's perspective, as they often imbue the exact same vocal lines with completely different shades of meaning. Meer's general reading is a little warmer and friendlier, as he usually portrays Shepard as your basic optimistic, helpful, reliable neighbor from across the street, with just a tiny bit of military roughness and straightforwardness thrown in for good measure. In contrast, Hale delivers her Command-*ess* Shepard in a much drier, colder, and detached manner, precisely fitting the idea of how only a tough, iron-willed, naturally dominant woman could ever happen to rise to the military rank of Commander, let alone become the Savior of the Galaxy. Yet behind all that sternness still lurks a sensitive and occasionally vulnerable human heart, and she gives us plenty of opportunities to catch it in action — be it Shepard's romance scenes with Kaidan or Liara, or her (potential) acts of mercy toward the many sinners and general lost souls scattered across the Milky Way.

Still, I confess that in my own playthroughs I always go for Meer whenever I stay on the Paragon path, and for Hale whenever I feel naughty and go for full-on Renegade. This is because Meer always sounds so cheerful and uplifting when delivering his «neutral» lines — making the switch to cynical, sarcastic, and downright mean Renegade tone quite jarring in a lot of places — and because Hale, on the contrary, tends to sound so intimidating and controlling in her own «neutral» phase, which makes for a perfect transition to her Renegade actions. (I remember, though I cannot find the exact quote, Hale replying, when asked which role she preferred, something to the effect of «*Paragon is who I am trying to be in real life, Renegade is who I'd really like to be*», and believe me, it *does* show in her performance a lot). I dunno, I just think that something like «*[Would you rather be a snitch or a corpse](#)?*» sounds *way* more convincing in Hale's than in Meer's voice. In the end, if I were *really* hard pressed to make a single choice, I'd probably have to vote for Hale over Meer — just because her Shepard is ultimately more nuanced and multi-faceted than Mark's comparatively stable and monotonous delivery. Then again, some people out there think that Hale is sometimes overacting and exaggerating, while Meer is staying more on the realistic side of things. In any case, both were great choices for the role, and if you happen to be a male gamer, do take my advice and alternate between a male and a female playthrough (you'll most likely play the trilogy more than once anyway); you really do not get the full experience here until you've tasted all possible flavors.

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of what Meer and Hale did to the game — along with *The Witcher*'s Doug Cockle from the same year, their performances ushered in the era of what might be called the «Adventure-RPG Merger», putting a lid on the blank-slate approach to the title character in an RPG game and, one way or another, making you accept their preset personalities rather than imagining your own. Indeed, by doing so, they took away much of the «game» spirit of the RPG; but they compensated for this by adding quite a bit of the «art» spirit, and I can most certainly live with that. Throw in a lesser

talent than Mark or Jennifer, and the whole thing would have been horribly botched. Fortunately for us all, Hudson and Co. made the right choices and came out with a winner, even if they had to «sell out» an entire genre in the process.

Naturally, Meer and Hale are merely the top billed ones in a veritable sea of first-rate video game voice performers. With the entire game designed to surround you with realistically portrayed virtual characters, everybody does their best to make them come alive — in fact, the voice acting is probably *the* one thing about the game that could not have been improved in any remaster or remake. Even the minor NPCs, sometimes with just a bunch of short replicas under their belts, often establish their personalities with perfect clarity; and the big ones are likely to stay with you forever.

In particular, the game made a hero of Brandon Keener, up until then largely a minor, totally unknown episodic TV actor who seems to have been seriously struggling to establish any sort of memorable screen presence — but whose soft-yet-crispy vocal tone turned out to be an ideal match for Garrus Vakarian, the coolly rational Turian security officer who somehow managed, overnight, to turn into the proverbial videogame sex symbol for all the lady fans of *Mass Effect* (you cannot romance him in the first game, but, of course, the laws of fan service would quickly command him to become a potential love interest in the second one). While the world of art knows a multitude of cool, suave noble assassins, Keener's Garrus still somehow manages to stand out — perhaps by managing to simultaneously include individual character shades of a rational, collected bureaucrat, an expertly manipulative psychiatrist, and a romantic idealist who'll stop at nothing short of a nuclear war in order to make the world around him into a thing of peace, love, and beauty. Over time, his suaveness and braggart humor would slowly overshadow every other aspect of his personality, but in the original *Mass Effect*, they are all perfectly balanced.

Another of my (but, apparently, relatively few other people's) favorites is Kimberly Brooks as Ashley Williams — creating here yet another complex, multi-faceted, and somewhat deceptive personality. Her Ashley can range from shrill, harsh, and nasty (sometimes *much* shriller and nastier than prescribed by the standard «tough military bitch» prototype) to pensive, brooding, and caring, with a twisted mix of progressive and conservative features and a vast range of emotional states to go along with it. The surprisingly strong hatred which many players seem to have developed toward the character shows that Brooks hit just the right spot (her male counterpart, Kaidan, despite not having earned the same degree of disaffection, usually goes around as the game's «wet blanket» character; I'd *much* prefer to be hated instead) — one of Ashley's defining features is that she always gets by without trying to be nice to anyone, so you know that if she is nice to *you*, you must have *really* deserved it. As one of the finest written characters in the game, it's good to see her voiced so perfectly as well.

Of the other actors, special mention should probably be made of Ali Hillis as the Asari scientist – and Shepard's potential love

interest – Liara T'Soni, whom she manages to play with just the right combination of naïve «girly» idealism and centuries-old accumulated experience; of Steven Barr as Wrex, the burly and justice-thirsty Krogan mercenary, whom he built up from the ground as the Voice of Mother Earth itself; and of Seth Green, arguably the best known TV personality of the lot, as Joker the Pilot, who usually acts as the game's comic relief and is pretty much just Seth Green himself in a galaxy far, far away. But really, like I said, there isn't overall a single patently bad choice in the entire lot. (Oh wait, there is. Marina Sirtis, no matter how much we like *Star Trek*, decided to completely overact in her role of Matriarch Benezia, playing some sort of pathetic, Shakesperian-level Ice Queen which simply does not fit in *Mass Effect*'s overall setting; her death scene – *NO LIGHT? THEY ALWAYS SAID THERE WOULD BE…* – is easily the corniest moment in the entire game, and I really hate applying the word «corny» to anything about *Mass Effect*. Sure, it's also about poorly written lines, but they *could* have been delivered with a little more finesse, rather than this «tremble before me, all ye lowlives and laymen» attitude).

In addition to significant characters, «minor» voice acting frequently helps the world of Mass Effect come alive when random dialog from surrounding NPCs is activated after Shepard's party approaches their vicinity — unlike *The Witcher* and other RPGs, these bits of dialog usually get triggered only once, which makes more sense to me than having the same random dialog be spilled out over and over again in a Groundhog's-Day kind of cycle. The same praise, unfortunately, cannot be offered for voiceovers during the game's combat moments, which simply carry on the tradition of *Baldur's Gate* by having enemies and friends alike recycle the exact same one-liners to the point of choking ('*GO, GO, GO!*', '*I WILL DESTROY YOU!*', etc.); at least they could have used a little more diversity here, or recorded different battle cries for different battles on different planets. This often makes even the most tense battle scenes unintentionally humorous, and provides even loyal fans with enough fuel to go on jabbing the game for years and years after its release. But, of course, even so these are just minor quibbles; if anything, such annoyingly funny details have their own function — to remind you that the roots of *Mass Effect*, after all, lie in a strategy game rather than in an artistic-cinematic experience. And this gives us a good pretext to transition over to discussing the mechanics and interface of the game before pronouncing final verdict.

Interface

As expected, when compared to BioWare's previous, largely AD&D-compliant rules and mechanics (let alone hardcore RPG layouts from previous generations), *Mass Effect* is essentially child's play — though, probably, still seriously convoluted for those who are only interested in the story, or, conversely, only concerned about pew-pew button mashing. Personally, I am always a fan of the «depth over width» approach, and if it comes to building up an RPG character, will always take fewer, but

more meaningful, attributes over an enormous amount of pointless sliders that create an illusion of diversity at the cost of getting the inexperienced gamer hopelessly confused — which should mean that the creators of *Mass Effect* were targeting their efforts at precisely the kind of people like myself, for which I suppose I should be grateful... but there's still plenty of ground left for grumbling, of course.

Like in any classic RPG, your character's «growth» in the game is measured in XP; *unlike* in any classic RPG, the total amount of XP you can earn in any single playthrough happens to have a fixed limit — you earn it from completing quests, which are finite, and mowing down enemies, which are *also* finite. Play the game meticulously and, after a while, you shall find yourself in the most peaceful galaxy in the known universe, with nary a single bad guy around. The fact that baddies never respawn probably makes the playing experience more realistic, but also means that you will eventually run out of things to do — and, yes, «farming for XP» is really not an option in *Mass Effect*, unless you're willing to exploit a couple of bugs and glitches here and there. This certainly gives the game its own face, for better or worse.

One practical reason for such a decision may have been the resulting impossibility for the player to reach the highest possible level in one playthrough, necessitating a «New Game+» where you could start again at precisely the level you ended at (actually, the reality is even more complicated because in the original game, you could only reach Level 50 upon your first playthrough; subsequent playthroughs removed that level cap, but if you started a completely new game, you could still reach no higher than something like Level 57 in one go, leaving you a bit short of the coveted Level 60 watermark). However, I was never tempted to go for the «NG+» trick for one simple reason — it is only available with the exact same character you had just finished your game with, which is totally no fun, because *the* proper way to replay *Mass Effect* is, of course, to do it with a completely *different* character, changing gender, class, background, moral alignment, etc.

So, in the end, putting a fixed cap on XP levels by limiting your enemies simply does more to remind you that *Mass Effect* is a story-driven game — there is absolutely no point in returning to the locations you have already explored a second time, unless you're simply pining to revisit the futuristic beauty of their landscapes. A more traditional and formal outcome is that, even in an NG+, you shall not be able, with all of your leveling up, to maximize all of your attributes: the interface gives you about 12

slots in which you can invest points after reaching your next level, and on an average playthrough, you will probably reach maximum abilities in about half of them.

Predictably, the attribute system is mostly geared toward combat training, with just a couple of exceptions such as the «Decryption» skill, which gradually allows you to crack more and more complex lockers and safes, and the «Charm» and «Intimidate» skills, which work as a combined analog of «Personality / Charisma» parameters in classic RPGs and allow you to make bolder Paragon or Renegade choices as you progress through the game. (More on that later). As usual, you can decide for yourself if you'd rather be an average Jack-of-all-trades in all the skills available to your class, or rather concentrate on becoming a total boss in just some of them — the latter option is probably the more fun way to go, especially if you are a Biotic (those high-level things Shepard can do with his/her Throw, Lift, or Singularity abilities look and feel really amazing on screen — I mean, it's not even so much about gaining a superb advantage in combat as it is about imagining yourself as a totally badass wielder of the Force). On the whole, it's a pretty good system, and relatively well presented on the screen so that even a total RPG noob can get the basic mechanics of it in just a few minutes.

Although the turn-based combat system of BioWare's previous games is gone here, what is retained is the ability to pause your game in combat by bringing up the HUD (Heads-Up Display), giving you a chance to catch your breath, check your stats, change your weapons (if necessary) and issue specific orders to your squadmates. Unlike something like *Baldur's Gate*, where pausing your game is often vital to your survival, you *can* rip through *Mass Effect* without relying too much on the HUD — for one thing, your squadmates usually work pretty well on autopilot, for another, you can assign certain actions to keyboard shortcuts (at least if you're playing the game on PC). However, it is only through the HUD that you can properly master any truly advanced teamwork, like setting up biotic-tech or tech-firepower combos to disable and eliminate your opponents in all sort of badass ways — although, truth be told, the «combo approach» to combat would only become a priority in *Mass Effect 2* and reach its apex in *Mass Effect 3*; here, it is more like a side effect of the game mechanics, but one that is quite fun to pursue in hopes of discovering something new and unpredictable (and possibly glitchy: with multiple options and visual effects inevitably comes a window for bugs, such as when, for instance, you biotically blow away one of your enemies under the floor and have no way whatsoever of finishing him through the tiles).

The weapon and armor system in the game remains fairly complex: items come in many varieties and will be available to you and your squadmates depending on your class (e.g. Sniper Rifles will only be available to Soldiers or «half-Soldiers» such as Infiltrators), race (certain armor types are specifically «Krogan», «Turian», «Quarian», etc.), and level (higher level armor and weapons will open up progressively as you level up your character). As is common in RPGs, there will really be many,

many more types of guns and stuff that you'll ever need, and while at first you can always sell off your excess and older stuff, or convert it to omni-gel for repair purposes, chances are that about midway through the game you won't even be able to make any more cash. Add to this the rather tedious safe-cracking minigames and suddenly the looting process isn't too fun any more, at least not after several hours of playing — though, of course, *Mass Effect* forums will always remain full of people arguing the relative flaws and advantages of preferring Ariake Technologies Level V armor over Mantice VI and suchlike. Me, I confess to mostly selecting armor based on its shape, color pattern, and classiness rather than actual protective features. I mean, if you're saving the galaxy and all, you might at least do that in style, right?

Outside of combat-related stuff, the biggest innovation of the *Mass Effect* interface was, of course, the famous «click wheel» for the dialogues. Earlier BioWare games just gave you a list of possible choices for your interactions with people, usually coming in random order, so that it was not always possible to tell from the way your answers were formulated if you'd get a compliment or a slap in response. The «wheel» introduced a clever and convenient system where, typically, you'd have your «noble», Paragon-ish reaction in the top right sector, your «rude», Renegade-ish reaction in the bottom right, and your «neutral», emotionless reaction in the middle; meanwhile, the left part of the wheel was typically reserved for information-related interrogation, i.e. the regular dialog tree with no immediate consequences for the player. It was a cute, nifty, a bit Steve Jobs-ian touch that nearly everybody liked — though its integration with the morality system of *Mass Effect* did leave quite a bit to be desired, resulting in endless memes and parodies. (Probably the worst consequence of it was that nobody ever used the blandly «neutral» conversation options — which is why they were removed altogether by the time of *Mass Effect 3*).

Many people also praise the game's mighty Codex — a detailed encyclopaedia of the *Mass Effect* universe, which would be constantly updated throughout the game as you meet more and more races, explore more and more planets, and gain access to stranger and stranger artifacts — but apart from the fact of all of itd main entries being voiced, I have never been fascinated with it *that* much; you can easily play the game without having to read a single line from it, and my personal admiration for the world-building magic of *Mass Effect* comes from seeing and feeling its textures rather than reading about them. (In all honesty, I hardly ever took the time to read through all the books in *Baldur's Gate*, either. With my day job and everything, there's only so much lore this poor head can accommodate). Still, the addition of the Codex adds a whiff of monumentality to the game — and Neil Ross' solid voicing of it most likely brought on associations with Leonard Nimoy's voicing of Civilopedia in 2005's *Civilization IV*, subtly implying that, once again, you were holding the fate of the known universe in your hands. (Of course, Neil Ross was also the narrator for all those late-period *Leisure Suit Larry* games, but that's the big difference between the 1990s and the 2000s in video gaming for you…).

Summing it up, the really good thing about *Mass Effect* is that it is easily playable as either a story-driven, sensually immersive experience where you can just let the game take its course without having to poke too much under the hood — or, if you wish, as more or less a traditional, if somewhat simplified, RPG experience where you get the best results through careful calculation, balancing, and strategic thinking. The former strategy is usually associated with romantic noobs; the latter — with seasoned, experienced fans of video gaming in general and RPG / shooter genres in particular. The good news is that the game managed to build up a solid fanbase for *both* of these categories — and one big reason for that is the clever, thoughtful design of its base mechanics and visual interface.

Verdict: *One does not simply pronounce judgement on Mass Effect…*

No matter what the circumstances, it still always feels a little funny to apply words like «great» or «genius» to video games, particularly those whose commercial priorities preclude their authors from putting psychological depth over adrenaline rush (which is approximately 99.99% of all video games ever made). This is a disclaimer that should probably appear before the start of each and every video game evaluation — but it almost pains me to have to slap it on one for *Mass Effect*, just because this game comes *that* close to overcome its categorization as that of a shoot-'em-up-space-soap-opera and transcend into something much bigger. Even so, in terms of artistic and intellectual content it ain't no *Dune* or *2001 Space Odyssey*, let alone any major work outside the science fiction genre. I can't even think of that many brand new ideas that would appear for the first time in *Mass Effect* — you can find a precedent for just about anything in there. Maybe the Elcor speech is new. I mean, the Elcor did at least win the «Best New Species of the Year» award from Xbox Magazine. That's gotta count.

And so this is as good a time as any to forget the word 'reason' and remember the word 'magic', because this is what playing *Mass Effect* felt like — a wonderful, at times almost orgasmic experience for which reason and science have not yet found a proper explanation. Just like a great rock guitarist, playing all the same chords as the average rock guitarist, carries you away to another dimension by infecting you with his spirit through the subtlest of modulations, so does *Mass Effect*, staying firmly

within the boundaries of a sci-fi RPG pattern, achieve a miraculous outcome that no other sci-fi RPG before or since has managed to beat — «mass effect» indeed. It stimulates you to cherish and admire the mysteries of the large-scale universe; it gently pushes you to expand your mind beyond your everyday petty problems; and at the same time, it makes you better understand the (rare) value of true friendship and camaraderie here on Earth. It doesn't do it in any sort of hip modernist or post-modernist fashion, either; it's perfectly happy to rely on age-old tropes and moralizations which we all saw last time around... well, probably around the era of Hollywood's golden age. How the hell it manages to succeed in its ambitious goal is something I tried to explain above — and most probably failed.

As for the inevitable duty of comparing *Mass Effect* to its successors, well, the observations here would probably match a priori expectations. *Mass Effect* does have the *dis*-advantage of being less polished than the second and third games in the series, both of which benefited from even larger budgets and teams, advances in graphic and software technologies, and lots of useful fan feedback. But it also has the advantage of being the first and, thus, the freshest installment — the most imaginative, the most inventive and original, the riskiest and the most independent of critical pressure (because yes, fan feedback is really a double-edged sword that can hurt just as strongly as it can heal, and we'll certainly touch on that briefly when I get to quibbling about *Mass Effect 2*). Now that the entire trilogy is a «thing of the past», in the rapidly moving history of video game development, it becomes much easier to overlook its relative technical flaws and once again focus our minds on its brilliantly inspired exuberance, which would take a step back next to the increased psycho-depth and world-weary experience of the second game. Many games before *Mass Effect* created alternate fantasy universes for us to escape in, where we could aggrandize ourselves and feel like we were sitting on top of them. No game before *Mass Effect* created an alternate fantasy universe for us to get *lost in*, where we could feel ourselves small and insignificant against the unfathomable vastness of the world around us... and yet still strive to make a difference, a sizable dent in these incomprehensible textures. It was just one of those lucky once-in-a-lifetime moments — and it really makes me hope that *Mass Effect* is one of those games that will always find an audience, even in that distant future when it will need a complicated emulator to run on your next-gen OS.