

Mass Effect 2

Studio: **BioWare**

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

Part of series: **Mass Effect**

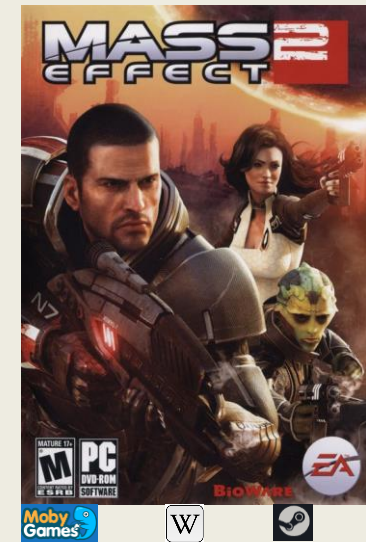
Release: January 26, 2010

Main credits: Lead writer: **Drew Karpyshyn**
Lead programmer: **David Falkner**
Art director: **Derek Watts**
Composers: **Sam Hulick, Jack Wall**

Useful links: [Paragon playthrough](#) (32 hours 55 mins.) [Renegade playthrough](#) (32 hours 38 mins.)

Basic Overview

Just about any extensive list of *Greatest Video Games Of All Time* published on any of the miriads of game-related resources is bound, one way or another, to include a mention of **Mass Effect 2**. If it is a list that is heavily skewed in the direction of shooters, platformers, and other action-based products, it'll be closer to the bottom; if it's a list more expressly oriented at plot-based adventure games and RPGs, it'll most likely be in the Top 10 ([IGN](#), [GO](#), etc.). With the release of **Mass Effect 2**, BioWare truly made Commander Shepard into a household name, and, more importantly, introduced miriads of new players to the RPG experience — in a way, selling out the genre like it had never been sold out before. Everybody seemed to love **Mass Effect 2**: the old fans, the new fans, the critics, the cosplayers, and even the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Everybody *still* seems to love **Mass Effect 2**: with the re-release of the entire trilogy in its *Legendary Edition* in 2021, a new stream of rave reviews still continues to praise it as undoubtedly the highest point of the franchise, arguably the highest point in BioWare history, and possibly even one of the highest points in video game history, period.



Yet there have also been dissenters along the way — people who may have had their original doubts as to whether BioWare would be able to fully retain its integrity upon its acquisition by the unscrupulous moghuls over at Electronic Arts in 2007 (right at the time of release of the original **Mass Effect**, all of the work on which was still done without any real interference from EA). A good example is the incredibly long, but generally fun to read, [*Mass Effect Retrospective*](#) by the blogger Shamus Young, in which he goes into tremendous detail on most of the aspects of the entire trilogy (concentrating primarily on the construction and flow of the main storyline) and makes a wealth of — on the surface, at least — convincing arguments that BioWare did, in fact, largely lose their way starting not with **Mass Effect 3** (or, more accurately, the near-universally hated *ending* of **Mass Effect 3**), but rather with **Mass Effect 2** — a game that pretty much sacrificed the original serious vision of Drew Karpysyn for poorly engineered melodrama and brainless adrenaline. (Which is probably why everybody bought it, but I think Shamus is being polite about it and reserves most of his jabs for the game's writers rather than the poor consumer slobs bamboozled by said writers and their conniving managers at EA).

Much of what Shamus writes about makes perfect sense (although, like any obsessed writer trying to validate his perspective with 10,000 arguments where just 10 would have sufficed, he frequently oversells it with forced, overblown, and vaguely manipulative reasoning). **Mass Effect 2** is indeed different from the first game in tone, atmosphere, priorities, and mechanics — not different enough to feel like a completely different game, but different enough to open up whole new layers that were only faintly hinted at in **Mass Effect**. (Just one more reason why the games absolutely *must* be played in proper sequence: do *not* be a clueless noob and follow the conventional «*oh, Mass Effect 2 is always hailed as the better game, so I think I'll just skip the first one and go right into this one*» line of thinking — the only proper way for **Mass Effect 2** to work is in confluence with its predecessor. Would you just skip to the third volume of *War And Peace* right away because that's where all the action is?.. on second thought, maybe don't answer that).

This very fact is a good thing: a fantasy universe can only be said to live on *properly* as long as it remains capable of reassessing and reinventing itself with each new installation — the reason why the transition from *A New Hope* to *The Empire Strikes Back* (which, in some ways, is mirrored with **Mass Effect**, and we shall be returning to this analogy quite a few times) will always be regarded as a masterstroke, while the recent third trilogy of movies in the Star Wars universe will ultimately be forgotten as a crass, pointless, and artistically sterile exercise in 21st century plagiarism. But it is also true that each instance of reassessing and reinventing carries with it the risk of losing something *good* at the expense of something *bad*. Very few works of art that thematically build upon previous works of art can be a total success in every imaginable way; as a rule, life dictates that there will necessarily be some trade-offs and compromises. To this rule **Mass Effect 2** is no exception.

If there was one major, overriding weakness to the original **Mass Effect**, it was that the game was originally envisioned as an opening shot in a grand sci-fi trilogy — yet nobody, not even the primary designers and writers behind the game, had any idea of what the *closing* shots would consist of. This inevitably left the door open for a lot of possibilities for «ret-conning» whenever the future lead writers would lack the time or inspiration to devise a reasonable continuation of the original story-line. Worse, although Drew Karpshyn is still listed officially as one of the lead writers on **Mass Effect 2**, it looks like his personal involvement had significantly decreased, while that of Mac Walters, now also promoted to the status of lead writer, had skyrocketed — and since the world of *Mass Effect* was never Mac Walters' personal baby, it was inevitable that there would be, at the very least, some «spiritual discontinuity» in between 2007 and 2010.

The other unhappy development, whose malignant consequences come through in a number of cases, is that *Mass Effect's* positioning under EA control meant the designers and writers would now have to pay much closer attention to the results of market research and the accursed «fan feedback» than usual. It was, in fact, announced as early as 2009 that BioWare's work goals were to take into very close consideration a variety of recommendations from fans and critics of the first game — which is almost never a good thing if what you are aiming for is artistic integrity rather than algorithmic product. For all the flaws of the original **Mass Effect**, I have never seen it accused of the sin of «fan service», whereas **Mass Effect 2** already gets quite a bit of flack for pandering to the desires of the «Average Joe Gamer». The good thing is that most of the fan service is well counterbalanced by the strictly preserved choice-based ideology of the game: you can turn it into a more «Hollywood-ish» experience or try to get it going into a more «alternative» direction based on your own preferences. (I am mostly referring here to the game's «romancing» strategies, which we shall discuss in more detail later, but not only that).

Yet at the same time, the flaws of **Mass Effect 2** may all be overlooked in the light of its unquestionable ambitiousness, inventiveness, professionalism, and inspiration. Like any great, epic, overwhelming work of art in its respective medium, the game tries to be many things at once — it is an expansion of an intriguing, «derivatively original» fantasy universe; a dark-themed psychological adventure game with many subtle and not-so-subtle tests of your personal morality; a simplistic, but fun RPG with lots of customization; an involving and addictive shooter that is neither too demanding for the players nor too insulting of their intelligence; and a great showcase for the artistic, musical, and acting potential of the entire BioWare team assembled in Edmonton and Montreal for the project. Above all, no matter what occasional dissenters like Shamus would say, its differences from the first part of the trilogy in terms of atmosphere, character development, and plot expansion feel natural and believable — even if I also concede that a little more «realistic thinking», as opposed to «player-wooing thinking», could not have hurt from time to time...

Content evaluation

Plotline

As we remember, the original **Mass Effect**, after its stylishly cheesy Hollywood finale of triumphing over the imposing Reaper machine, «Sovereign», and its organic minion Saren, ended in a relative lull — the big bad guy was done with, but it was also clear that his pals would eventually catch up with him, providing the necessary set-up for the continuation of the story. Anybody who had completed the game in 2007 would, most likely, expect that the sequel would double up on its «epic» aspects and have the hero fighting an army of Reapers instead of just a single one — given how explicitly this outcome was hinted at in the final cutscenes of the game.



The very first thing that the writers of **Mass Effect 2** did for their sequel was to confound those expectations. There is little question in my mind that they were quite heavily inspired by the plot and atmosphere shifts of *The Empire Strikes Back* (this comparison has been on people's mind for a long time; see, e.g., [Hollander Cooper's glowing writeup](#) in GamesRadar+ from 2012) — but it could also be argued that they took a page out of *The Two Towers*, with its temporary shift of focus from «public enemy #1» (Sauron) to a secondary antagonist (Saruman). Needless to say, neither of the two analogies ended up developed with the kind of depth and intelligence you expect from a solid work of literary or cinematographic art — but at least both analogies *were* used, and in the context of a mainstream, market-oriented video game, they probably work as efficiently as at all possible.

As expected from a typical RPG, the plot of the original **Mass Effect** was subdivided into the «main quest» — the story of Commander Shepard's struggle with Saren and Sovereign — and the «side quests», which gave the player extra opportunities to accumulate experience and level up, to examine their standards of morality, and to add extra breadth and depth to the sci-fi universe. However, very few of those side quests actively involved the player's own companions — human and alien alike; with the exception of just a couple tiny events (such as helping Wrex the Krogan recover his lost family armor, or settling an old score between Garrus the Turian and a sadistic doctor), the personalities of those companions were mostly built up through

dialog, or even merely by their standing at your side during all those dangerous missions. Given that most of BioWare's RPGs had been «buddy games», starting with **Baldur's Gate** way back in 1998, this could have been considered a serious oversight — excused, however, by the fact that **Mass Effect** needed to allocate way too many resources to just set up, describe and «activate» an entire new universe. Basically, it was humanly impossible to take care of the game on the «micro-level» of human (and alien) relationships and the «macro-level» of planetary exploration at the same time in the same proportions. Impossible *and* unnecessary: as long as the game designers made sure that players would fall in love with Commander Shepard's crew anyway (which they did), it was always possible to put off their serious character growth until the sequels.

Consequently, **Mass Effect 2** adds a new layer of complexity to the franchise. Its plot now consists not of two, but of *three* types of events — there is the main story, a continuation (or, rather, an offshoot) of the main plot of **Mass Effect**; the «buddy quests» that revolve entirely around Shepard's companions and are only tangentially related to the main quest (in that their outcomes may seriously influence the outcome of the main story); and the actual «side quests» that, like in the first game, are in there mostly to help the player level up, have more fun, and learn some new details of the game's universe. It makes sense, therefore, to take a look at these three separate, only faintly tied together, layers of the plot one by one. (This is probably the place where I give out the necessary warning of *MAJOR SPOILERS AHEAD*, but then I have no doubt that most people reading this have already played the game anyway, and are simply interested in learning my opinion on the moral aspects of the Krogan genophage...).

The main plot of the game — and this is where I have to largely agree with Shamus Young — is arguably its weakest part, at least in terms of story content and the underlying meaning. Despite certain noble intentions on the part of the writers, it is, more than anything else, subjugated to (a) the demands of cinematic Hollywoodery of the Michael Bay kind, and (b) the demands of the stereotypical mechanics of RPGs and shooters. No better example of this is available than the very opening of the game, in which Commander Shepard, ambushed in space by a previously unencountered and highly deadly enemy, suffers the destruction of his beloved Normandy, is ejected from the burning ship and suffocates in space. That's right: you start the game as a *dead* protagonist, whose body is transferred over to a semi-legal, semi-criminal shady organization known as «Cerberus» and then resurrected, in a deeply complicated and lavishly expensive operation, appropriately titled «Project Lazarus». What an awesome start to a role-playing game, eh?

There is one serious catch here, though: the decision to kill off Commander Shepard and then just as quickly resurrect him from the dead was *not* motivated by any specific demands of the plot, but rather by the designers' necessity to start the game with a «clean slate». Because of a major re-design of the entire RPG mechanics for **Mass Effect 2**, the skills and attributes

your character ended up with at the end of the previous game were poorly compatible with the new system — which meant that it was easier for the developers to «reboot» Commander Shepard from scratch, yet it also had to be the exact same Commander Shepard from the first game, since BioWare had to deliver upon the promise of all character saves from the first game being importable into the sequel. When somebody came up with the idea of bumping off and resurrecting the character, it was probably seen as a touch of genius — and, sure enough, most of the fans and early reviewers, after going through the near-orgasmic initial shock of the experience, could not stop raving about this marvelous artistic decision. «*Has there ever been a video game out there that starts off with the protagonist dying? How unforgettable is that?..*»

However, there are two problems with that decision — although, admittedly, it is not until the original emotional surge is over that you might begin contemplating them. *One* is that the very existence of «Project Lazarus» very bluntly and explicitly takes the franchise out of the niche of «relatively serious sci-fi», where it did manage a mostly cozy stay during **Mass Effect**, and pushes it squarely into the territory of «sci-fi magic»; and by that I do not *merely* mean all the impossibility and absurdity of the idea of organic resurrection being merely a question of monetary expenses (any half-decent scientist can always tell you that money is only a cathalyst, never a main reason for major breakthroughs) — I mean that with this act, «Commander Shepard» ceases to be the Extraordinary Hero and Superefficient Leader which he was in the previous game, and essentially becomes the Messiah, the Chosen One whose destiny is to rewrite the very fabric of the Universe. If this were not so, why the hell would a shady mafia organization spend pretty much all of its profits to bring this guy back from the dead?

This not-so-subtle transformation of science fiction vision into fairy-tale vision could, perhaps, be easily forgivable if the writers had been able to better exploit its, uh, metaphysical implications. With Shepard's resurrection, they have transformed him not so much into Lazarus as into the next coming of Jesus Christ himself — but it would not really be until the infamous ending of **Mass Effect 3** that Commander Jesus Shepard would really take upon himself all the sins of humanity and act as its ultimate redeemer, somewhat inverting the historical process (normally, you'd expect to be crucified *before* you get resurrected — **Mass Effect** thinks it actually works better in the opposite order). Throughout **Mass Effect 2**, however, Commander Shepard typically acts as if nothing *too* much out of the ordinary has happened — and so do most of the people who encounter him in his travels, both old friends and new ones. It is never really justified, either, what made Cerberus so goddamn sure that it was Shepard and *only* Shepard who could resolve all of the world's troubles. What *was* it that made him so irreplaceable? Other than all those stored save game files from 2007, that is.

This itchy style of falling upon a cool idea and then being unable to fully, logically, and consistently see it through to the end from now on truly becomes the bane of most of the «main story» developments in **Mass Effect**. Thus, soon after Shepard is

killed off by an unknown enemy, magically resurrected by the super-rich Cerberus and its leader (the archetypal chain-smoking evil genius who goes by the name of Illusive Man and probably has a picture of Elon Musk in his secret shrine), he is surprised to learn that the imminent, but faraway threat of the Reapers has been replaced by a smaller, but more immediately relevant threat of the Collectors — a poorly familiar race of creatures who have, apparently, been abducting human colonists from all sorts of distant planets, for unspecified but probably sinister purposes.

Where those Collectors come from and why there has not even been a single mention of them in the first game is unexplained, although it is made clear that knowledge of the existence of their race had been there all along. Why the entire human fleet is completely powerless to do anything about pursuing them all the way to their home base and kicking their ass is not explained in any convincing manner (although some attempts are made, they feel extremely half-assed). Of course, only Commander Shepard — with the help of the Illusive Man's bottomless resources — can help humanity solve that problem, although not before he has assembled his own super-team of the Magnificent Space Cowboys...

Without going into too much detail, I don't think that the main story twists of **Mass Effect 2** could be convincingly salvaged through any post-game analysis. They seem to be driven way too much by the demands of the game's RPG and shooter mechanics to make any sense. Commander Shepard's stats need to be rebooted? Just kill him off and resurrect him. The Collectors need a superboss enemy to make life really tough for the player? Let a Reaper take telepathic control of any random Collector and make him ten times as tough at random. Some of the decisions also feel influenced by fan feedback — for instance, Shepard's human companions Ashley and Kaidan from the first game did not turn out to be particularly popular with players, so, whoever of them survived from the previous game will turn his or her back on Shepard because he is now working with Cerberus, without even taking the time to properly listen to the Commander's explanations. And so on.

Most importantly, by simply treating the Collectors as mute, personality-deprived puppets of the Reapers, **Mass Effect 2** loses the opportunity to inject any actual *meaning* into this second part of the story. The decision to introduce a secondary enemy is understandable if it helps open up additional dimensions in the plot — thus, for instance, the idea to concentrate fully on the struggle with Saruman rather than Sauron in *The Two Towers* has to do with exploring the consequences of trying to compromise with absolute evil, etc. The Collectors, however, are not free-will agents — in fact, they are nothing more than mooks for you to shoot your way through — and the «shocking» realizations of who they are, historically, and of what they are trying to do with all those abducted colonists are mostly there for two purposes: (a) to gross you out and (b) to properly set you up for the exciting final combat sequences.

That's not *too* bad for a video game, but not too good for a video game that tries, for better or worse, to create its own philosophy of how the entire universe is supposed to work. Come to think of it, you could pretty much throw out most of **Mass Effect 2**'s main plot and proceed straight from **Mass Effect** to **Mass Effect 3** — without losing any particularly important developments in the process. It does not really matter if Commander Shepard died and was reborn; it does not matter if the Collectors were just a scary nightmare. In the end, the main story of **Mass Effect 2** serves more or less the same purpose as the «lore» in shooters like **Doom** or **Quake** — completely subdued to the game's purposes of pure action. For all of **Mass Effect 3**'s much-maligned ending, it was at least a noble effort to add a resolving touch to the game's conception; the main story of **Mass Effect 2** hardly *has* any conception in the first place.



On to the good news: provided you play the game *properly*, without focusing all of your attention on simply completing the main mission and picking up on every offered opportunity, the «main story», I would guess, barely covers about a quarter of the entire **Mass Effect 2** experience. If the game were transposed to the world of literature, it would be the equivalent of a great writer of gripping short stories, whose talents would, however, be insufficient to let him properly master the form of a large epic novel. For all the inanity of the tale of the Collectors, **Mass Effect 2** does a great job with almost everything else — and by this I mean, first and foremost, the «buddy stories» that introduce and highlight all of Shepard's individual companions. Taken one by one, they may all be easily criticized for presenting not-particularly-original variations on old literary and movie tropes; collectively, however, their diversity and the artistic care invested in the presentation make this series of vignettes into one of the most impressive achievements in video game history.

Compared to the first game, where Shepard only had about six companions for the entire game, **Mass Effect 2** presents far more choice — the full roster (including the two extra companions from the DLCs) is twice as large, and almost each of the possible companions has his or her own personality influencing almost every mission in the game (albeit faintly, usually with their own bits of unique dialog every now and then). They really come to life, however, on missions that are more related to themselves — of which there are usually two, the Recruiting Mission and the Loyalty Mission: the first one is self-understood,

the second one needs to be completed in order to raise your buddies' morale so they can be fully efficient (and immortal) by the time of the game's finale. The real meat of the game resides inside these paired missions rather than its main quest.

The Recruiting Mission, as a rule, is the one that is more straightforward and action-packed — it usually has Shepard extract his new companion out of some dire situation, fighting through the familiar bunches of mooks and goons, although these situations also provide an excuse for guiding the player through some eerie environments, such as the plague-infested quarantine quarters on Omega (to get Mordin Solus), the grim high-security prison station (to get Jack), or the dying planet that is about to be permanently grilled by deadly ultraviolet sunrays (to get Tali). The Loyalty Missions, however, are much less predictable — all of them have a strong «morality» component, and some even do not include any shooting at all (e.g. Samara's quest to find and punish her evil daughter, or Thane's quest to rescue his son from the life of a trained assassin like himself). And where there *is* shooting, it almost inevitably takes a back seat next to character interaction.

This plot device has occasionally resulted in **Mass Effect 2** being dubbed «[Seven Samurai In Space](#)», although the nature of the game still prevents it from integrating the characters' personal story arcs into the main narrative as logically as it happens in the movie — there, it is ultimately the hand of fate that decides who and through which defining actions gets to live or gets to die at the end; here, the player has complete agency over the fate of the heroes, meaning that usually who gets to live or gets to die depends on just how much the player in person cares about this or that character. (By the way, it is not *that* difficult to save everybody at the end as long as you're not in a frenzied rush to finish the game and take the time to prepare everything and everyone for the final mission; amusingly, it might sometimes take you more time to figure out how to bump off a particular character if, for some reason, you do not want him or her tagging along with you in **Mass Effect 3**.)

The actual character-based missions vary strongly in quality and originality, which is no big surprise given how many different people — some of them more and some less talented — were involved in the writing process. Some delve deeply into the mythological aspects of **Mass Effect**, such as the Loyalty Mission for Grunt, the young «incomplete» Krogan, tainted by his shameful birth from a test tube and redeeming his ancestry by going through the Krogan warrior initiation rites (this leads to the game's most memorable Slaying-The-Dragon moment). Some take you on a complicated path of questioning the base aspects of morality — most notably the character arc of the Salarian doctor Mordin Solus, which might even possibly have been inspired by the plight of [Andrei Sakharov](#), or could at least be compared to it. Some are just devilishly sexy, like the mission in which you have to help Samara, a «paladin» of sorts for the Asari race, detain and execute her own biologically corrupted and morally infernal daughter — and resist the temptation to fall under the daughter's own spell along the way (or, if you so prefer, *not* resist the temptation).

Occasionally, the missions veer off into fairly risky territory, like the one in which you have to help your human comrade Jacob find his father, stranded with his crew on a distant planet after his ship crashed and, in accordance with some twisted *Lord Of The Flies* logic, instituting his own reign of terror of the strong against the weak (including turning all of the crew's female members into his sex slaves); or the one where you assist Jack, the rescued convict, in reliving her tortured past and recalling the brutal experiments conducted on her by the same Cerberus group that currently happens to serve as Shepard's primary employer. These are examples of «mildly shocking titillation» (the game has to be family-friendly, after all) that really work only inasmuch as the voice actors involved in them are willing to take the (sometimes quite half-assed) dialog seriously and with enough dedication; fortunately, they usually do.

If epic initiation rites, heart-breaking morality plays, diabolical sexual temptations, mental illness, and desert islands with dystopian rules are not enough for you, how about throwing in a philosophical treatment of artificial intelligence (the missions for Legion, Shepard's new Geth friend), or a Shakespearian tragedy of a father sacrificing his life and his reputation for the future of his daughter (Tali's court trial in the Quarian flotilla), or a touch of James Bond on a ninja-style stealth mission for Kasumi, the super-thief with a gentle heart? **Mass Effect 2** really tries to infiltrate upon the territory of pretty much every story-telling device invented by mankind, all the way from the *Mahābhārata* to *The Manchurian Candidate*, and even if the inventiveness and word-smithery of the writers is quite seldom adequate to the task — mildly speaking — their verve and dedication to it, as well as the ability to get their visual artists, animators, and voice actors are beyond reproach.

Of course, one might grumble that this burning desire to make each of the quests as different from the rest as possible, and to incorporate half of the world's literary legacy into these mini-plots, largely cancels out everything that was original about Drew Karpysyn's initial vision for **Mass Effect**. Instead of the game being about the future of humanity in a universe populated with physically and mentally incompatible and challenging phenomena, it has pretty much turned into a staging of «*Shakespeare in Space*» — no wonder that one of the running gags during Shepard's presence on the Citadel, which would even be carried on into the next game, is the presentation of *Hamlet* by an Elcor-only theatrical troupe, which, given the stereotypical features of the Elcor race, is genuinely [the funniest moment in the entire game](#).

Yet this is precisely the mechanism that not only ensured the game its critical respect, but is, I believe, almost single-handedly responsible for the deep adoration it has earned from its massive fanbase. Had it stayed more on the realistic, socio-political side of things, attempting to seriously explore the mechanisms in which the galactic world could be working in the year 2185, it would probably just give us all a major headache, and the plot would have been so stuffy that we'd all end up impatiently waiting for the action bits to start. Classic dramatic tropes, on the other hand, are (a) easily accessible and (b) eternally

efficient — as long as you get the technical aspects right, you can't really go wrong with a classic moral fall-and-redemption story, or with a friend's betrayal, or with a coming-of-age rite-of-passage ceremony.

Most of these things the game does really well. A major exception, as usual, are the romantic lines — this is where the sin of «fan service» truly rears its ugly head. The first game only had three options for romance: two of Shepard's human companions, Ashley and Kaidan (without the option of same-sex love affair), plus an interspecies liaison with Liara, made possible due to the fact that the entire Asari race was created as monosexual and naturally designed to assimilate genetic material from just about any other species in the world (a little space magic here, too). **Mass Effect 2** introduces a lot more variety: although same-sex unions are still not possible (the LGBTQ community would have to wait until the third game to get its interests vindicated), Shepard can now theoretically romance at least half a dozen different members of his or her crew, including a whole bunch of aliens — such as the fan favorites Garrus and Tali, or the newcomer Thane, a trained assassin from the half-man, half-bug race of the Drell.

Unfortunately, BioWare's writers had always sucked at writing credible romantic storylines, and **Mass Effect 2** is no exception to the rule — it just makes the situation a whole lot worse because it faces the additional challenge of somehow fitting in romantic lines that were thought to be *out of the question* in the first game. Garrus, the ruthlessly suave Turian, and Tali, the nerdy Quarian, were not supposed to be romantic partners for our hero because they were, well, *aliens*, and they were not equipped with any special genetic benefits à la Asari. At best, you could expect them to develop a deep friendship with Commander Shepard, perhaps even some sort of intimate Platonic bond that could go beyond mere friendship but still stop at the border of sexual contact and family-building. *That* might have been an interesting, and fairly challenging, line to explore in **Mass Effect 2**; in its place, however, comes a series of crudely and laughably built dialogs, all centered around the idea of physical mating between a human and an alien. The effect, most of the time, is at best comical rather than romantic, yet the fans do not really care as long as they are given a chance to bang that hot alien ass. And, in all honesty, inter-human romances in the game do not fare that much better — BioWare's writers are way too preoccupied with titillation to offer us any proper scenarios of soul-bonding between two romantically involved people.

(One notable exception is the relationship build-up between Shepard and Thane, for which Thane's writer truly deserves a gold star: unlike any other romance, this one is not so much about finding the correct angle for screwing as it is about redemption — Shepard offering her love to the troubled ex-assassin is seen as a token of moral convalescence for the sinner, and there's quite a bit of simplistic, but believable psychology involved there. Had all of the game's romantic lines taken their clues from the dark tale of Thane and Shepard, it is possible that they would not have served as the basis for so many hilarious

Internet memes on the subject of «hot alien sex». Alternately, it might have made sense if the player could distinguish between «serious relationships» and «sexual flings» — but I guess I might be asking *way* too much of BioWare's staff).

Finally, the third component of the game's plot are all sorts of side missions and assignments that are not directly tied in to the lives and fates of Shepard's crew members. These fall into two categories: minor problem-solving quests that you pick up for extra XP, Paragon / Renegade points, and possible financial benefits at one of the game's several hubs (The Citadel, Omega, and Illium), and minor action sequences on various planets around the galaxy where you can actually land instead of just scanning them for minerals. The latter part, honestly speaking, sucks — most of these mini-missions just seem thrown in at the last minute to give you something «extra» to do, and feel like unnecessary mini-games that just detract you from the really important things to do. They're basically atavistic remains of the old RPG ideology, which was fine and dandy for old RPGs but is largely out of place here. Given that all these mini-missions take place in identical environments, feature the same types of enemies you already face during the main quest or the loyalty missions, and have almost no dialog accompaniment, they can only be interesting as extra platforms to practice your shooting or teamwork.

The former part, on the contrary, adds a bit of extra world-building and occasionally even conceals some writing gems — my favorite of these character-oriented quests, for instance, is the encounter with a [love-struck Krogan](#) on Illium, which does a great job at inverting the beauty-and-the-beast trope as well as features some impressive post-modern poetry writing (*come to me, Blue Rose of Illium, let our three hearts beat as two*). It's also a treasure trove for nostalgia, where you get to briefly revisit some of the characters from the first game (provided you left them alive — **Mass Effect** remembers *everything!*), and although most of this is clearly fan service (e.g. the reappearance of annoying fan boy idiot Conrad Verner), it is usually made *not* to look like fan service, as most of these encounters feel fairly logical. As usual, there's a good balance of comedy and tragedy, and in the end, exploring the big hubs of the galaxy down to the last nook and cranny is an exciting and rewarding affair, unlike the comparatively less nutritious exploration of the galaxy itself.

Last, but not least, admiration should be expressed for most of the DLC expansions that followed the base game. Two of those introduced extra companions with their own backstories and loyalty missions — the one for Zaeed, the grizzly mercenary with the usual dark past, is relatively mediocre, but the half-stealth, half-ferocious action mission for Kasumi, the ninja thief, is a total blast. *Overlord*, in which you have to bring down a rogue AI all the way to a shocking final revelation, is the darkest and creepiest of them all, giving you a pretty tough moral choice at the end. And *Lair Of The Shadow Broker*, which gives you an opportunity to reunite with your former companion (and potential lover) Liara T'soni so as to bring down one of the most powerful guys in the universe, is like a short, well-engineered action movie in itself (although the ending seemed a little

disappointing to me — the mystery of the omni-powerful Shadow Broker feels somewhat banal once it's finally cleared up, much in the same way as **Mass Effect 3** would manage to spoil the mystery of the Reapers).

The only significant DLC to have been a major disappointment is, unsurprisingly, the one that has the most importance for the main quest — *Arrival*, in which the game designers suddenly remembered about the Reaper threat and decided to have Commander Shepard ward off another impending breach of galaxy security by the giant mechanical squids all by himself, just like *that*. There's a whole lot of shooting in there, including some of the game's toughest battles (in part due to Shepard's inability to use his companions for cover), and not a lot of story — and what story there is is riddled with plotholes, non sequiturs, and cheap pathos to boot. Plot-wise, it's an important missing link between **Mass Effect 2** and **Mass Effect 3** (without playing it, it is impossible to understand how the heck Commander Shepard finds him-/herself in prison at the start of the third game), but its attempt to make you feel the graveness of your moral choices is quite poor, partially because you are *not* really given any choice (whatever you do, the end result is still the destruction of a planet with millions of inhabitants on it) and partially because it's pretty hard to care about it (because the inhabitants in question are Batarians, a race that you have so far seen only in the capacity of interplanetary terrorists or ruthless mercenaries — we do not even have the least idea of what their defenseless women and children look like).

Still, even *Arrival* has its moments — especially for those who give much more of a damn about hardcore action than dialog chatter — and on the whole, the DLCs (now integrated fully with the base game in the *Legendary Edition*) do a good job at throwing in extra dimensions, instead of mere variations on tropes and plots already explored in the main bulk of the game. And if there was one game in the trilogy that could be *particularly* agreeable to the idea of «bits of extra content», it was certainly **Mass Effect 2** — with its main storyline so obviously inferior to all the secondary quests, it has always been more of a **Tales From The Mass Effect Universe** vignette series than a unified novel-like experience; in fact, a «novelization» of **Mass Effect 2**, were it ever to happen officially, would have worked much less efficiently than a «serialization».

Action

Much of what has already been written about the action aspect of **Mass Effect** continues to apply to the sequel — no big surprise here — but a lot of modifications and tweaks were introduced as well, and some of those actually have theoretical importance. In general, the role of combat in **Mass Effect 2** has been vastly increased; not only is it becoming notably more sophisticated and expressly aimed at sucking up to the «pew-pew public», but there is also much more of it — with most of the planets in the galaxy now reduced to tiny areas swarming with enemies, you're going to do a lot less exploration and a lot more

extermination (see more on that in the *Atmosphere* section below). Fortunately, the basic principle of **Mass Effect** — «never make the player forget that this is a plot-driven game» — continues to hold: no matter how aggressive the mission, it is never reduced to a mere shoot-out, as the action is continuously broken by pauses and lulls where you get to regroup, interact with various NPCs, and perhaps even take a moral decision or two. And it is *still* being done in ways, I think, that should not offend either the action- or the story-lover in you, an art in which the BioWare team has known few equals.

That said, the combat system of **Mass Effect 2** has been practically remade from scratch. BioWare always paid a lot of



attention to the combat system, but with their roots firmly planted in the realm of AD&D, the emphasis had previously been on turn-based strategic thinking; in the first **Mass Effect**, you *could* have all your combat in real time, but the game still gently nudged you to rely on your heads-up display (HUD) all the time, bringing it up to freeze the game, calmly assess your position, and issue a set of commands to your combat buddies before rushing back into the hell of it. **Mass Effect 2** retains the HUD, but the battles are so much more heated this time that I, personally, always caught myself forgetting to use it and just relying on straightforward shooting instead — it also helped that, on PC at least, the numeric shortcut system had become more advanced, so that you could map out to keyboard shortcuts not only some of *your* special abilities, but those of your partners' as well, making it easier to set up awesome destructive combos on your enemies in real time.

In addition to this subtle denigration of the turn-based approach, general mechanics of the combat brought the game even closer to conventional shooters. For one thing, enemies could now take different amounts of damage in various body parts — headshots were particularly well-rewarded — and various additional gear could increase or decrease your accuracy, coming in separate items (helmets, visors, vests, etc.) rather than monolithic sets of armor. But the most important change was in that the concept of limited ammo was brought back: the original game had experimentally replaced it with the idea of potentially infinite ammunition, with the catch being that you always had to watch out about your gun overheating. Now, apparently, the idea was sacked in favor of the more common strategy of collecting and watching over your ammo packs.

In order to explain this unexpected change and make it agree with the general lore of the game, the designers had to do a

twisted back flip and introduce the concept of *thermal clips*, little heat dispensers that help cool down your weapon after each shot. These, the game explains, were introduced — throughout the entire Galaxy, no less! — precisely in that short period while Commander Shepard was recuperating from his/her unfortunate «death» at the beginning of the game, so that by the time s/he was ready to start leveling up once more, the world at large was already living in a whole new age. The explanation is totally half-assed and practically impossible to believe, but who *really* cares, right? The important thing is that thousands of gamers, setting out to test the new combat system, would not have to kick the game in the balls, screaming «*what's that stupid overheating crap?*» and «*where the hell are my ammo packs?*».

Overall, though, combat *did* become seriously more challenging — particularly on high difficulty levels. Enemies in **Mass Effect 2** tend to move faster, their guns tend to be deadlier, their numbers greater, and their actions more coordinated; for instance, they will try to outflank and surround you much more often than in the first game. They are also tougher to put down, often featuring three levels of protection («shields» and «armor» in addition to regular health), the first two of which have to be taken down by conventional physical means before you and your buddies can start working your magic-biotic ways on them (sending shockwaves or lifting them off the ground, etc.). Here, too, the game aligns itself more openly with the common shooter ideologies of its era, but this is nowhere near as substantially bothersome as the «thermal clip» gimmick.

This increased level of challenge is compensated for by increased possibilities in producing combinations of defensive and offensive actions that offer a lot more variety than the original game. Although the six basic classes (Soldier, Tech Specialist, Biotic Adept, and their combinations) remain the same, the number of various powers available to them has increased, including lots of individual talents for specific party members — some of which they may share with you upon completion of their loyalty missions. And with so many of these members, the number of combinations in which you can plan your attacks is almost infinite — well, not really as infinite as in **Baldur's Gate**, with its miriads of spells and all, but pretty infinite for a game that not only has to invent cool ways of eliminating your enemies, but also efficiently visualize all of them.

It goes without saying that for those of us who *do* enjoy a solid shooting experience, the combat in **Mass Effect 2** is much more fun than in the first game. It is also somewhat better balanced: where the first game gave the impression of being way too tough on the neophyte player at the beginning, but a total and absolute cakewalk by the end, **Mass Effect 2** eases you in a bit more gradually. (In particular, the dreaded one-hit «assassination» sniper kills that made life so unbearable in the first game are gone for good — enemy snipers are largely replaced by various types of rocket troopers and grenade throwers that also deal massive damage but are significantly easier to evade). The final «suicide mission» is still quite easy if you have leveled your character all the way by the end of the game, though; it would have been nice to be able to meet some uniquely

overpowered enemies during your final mopping up of the Collector Base, but instead you'll just have to content yourself with another of those end-game overpowered bosses who is more of a bullet-sponge annoyance than a true challenge.

Pretty much all of the recurrent mini-games and extra challenges of **Mass Effect** have been replaced by new variations. There are two new decryption challenges — a circuit-combining game and a «programming code-matching» game, both of them fun at first but getting fairly annoying by the time you have to go through the procedure for the fiftieth time. (I, personally, would have welcomed a couple of *genuine* decryption puzzles instead of having to go zillions of times through the same type of pseudo-decryption puzzle). The Mako vehicle from the original game has been retired — probably because of angry fan feedback — but to compensate, the DLCs introduce «The Hammerhead», a flying equivalent of the old clumsy tank with better maneuverability and even more ample firepower, but almost no protection; apparently it fared no better with the players than the Mako and had to follow it into oblivion by the time of **Mass Effect 3** (where poor Commander Shepard would finally have to do *all* the work strictly on foot).

In terms of purely intellectual, adventure-style puzzle challenges **Mass Effect 2** fares just as efficiently as its predecessor, meaning that all of these challenges are trivial — usually just a matter of finding the right object in the right hotspot, or making the transparently correct dialog choice in a simple conversation. Two sub-quests that stand out a little in this respect are Kasumi's *Stolen Memory*, where you have to sweat around quite a bit in order to find your way into the bad guy's carefully guarded treasure vault; and Samara's loyalty mission, *The Ardat-Yakshi*, where everything depends on the dialog choices you make and you actually have to engage in a little bit of psychological analysis to get through. (Just a little bit, mind you: the BioWare writers must have received strict instructions to measure out very tiny dosages of intellectual effort on the part of the player — this ain't **Civilization**, you know). Of course, this should not be surprising for any long-term BioWare fan — or any RPG fan, as a matter of fact. After all, Commander Shepard never signed up to be Sherlock Holmes.

Atmosphere

Probably *the* major reason why it's a bit of a crime to immerse yourself in **Mass Effect 2** without having previously soaked in the (mass) effects of **Mass Effect** is the shift of emotional balance that takes place in between the two games. While there certainly were minor elements of drama, psychologism, and suspense in the first installment, **Mass Effect** was first and foremost about world-building. It is likely that most of the time you spent on the game was not so much spent actually *playing* as it was admiring the carefully crafted universe. Walking around the Normandy, exploring the different levels of the Citadel and, of course, taking the Mako on lengthy cruises around the forests, mountains, deserts, and glaciers of the many worlds scattered around the Galaxy was a major vibe — a *set* of major vibes — all by itself. The story, or your personal relations with your crew members, could easily come in second and third in terms of importance.



Mass Effect 2, for all of its alleged «stand-alone» potential, more or less assumes that you are already familiar with that world — that there is no need whatsoever to rebuild it for you from scratch. Sure, there will be some new environments, new species, new hitherto unknown secrets (sometimes annoyingly ret-conned), but for the most part, the game is all about *action* and *drama* rather than presentation. To that end, for instance, you no longer have the opportunity of «cruising». Almost every planet that opens up before you has a strictly pragmatic function — you land on it to complete a mission (for instance, recruit a new team member); you move across it in a linear fashion, usually too busy shooting or talking your way through to admire its visuals; and, most importantly, once you're done, you are unable to return to it again, with some very rare exceptions. The message is very clear: «There's *work* to be done, Commander. If you came here to gawk as a tourist, please go back to **Mass Effect** and stay there for as long as you like».

The difference may not be so sharply felt in the prologue sections of the respective games. Both of them made a point of very quickly flinging you into action, letting you understand that survival skills come first in this brave new world and that properly arming yourself and learning to use your powers is an essential pre-requisite of honing your aesthetic perception. But in **Mass Effect**, once the turbulent prologue on Eden Prime was over, you found yourself in the vast spaces of the Citadel, where you could wander freely between the different levels and compare the highbrow with the lowbrow. In **Mass Effect 2**, after the

opening shootout missions, you can go to the Citadel, too — but this time, you can only visit a few enclosed areas of the Citadel, all of them very perfunctory and pragmatic; in general, the time you are going to spend in that vital center of the Galaxy is only a tiny fraction of the respective time in the first game. You can even not go there at all, if you so desire — and turn your full attention to recruiting your future team members instead.

On the whole, where the atmosphere of **Mass Effect** focuses on *wonder*, **Mass Effect 2** seems more concentrated on showing you the inner side of the wonder — a.k.a. the *nightmare*. To paraphrase Jim Morrison, *what have we done to the Galaxy? what have we done to our fair mega-sister?* The principal hub from which Commander Shepard, now himself in the service of the shady criminal organization Cerberus, conducts his business has been changed from the Citadel, whose defining colors were white and blue, to Omega, a space station run by interstellar mafia — with deep, lusty red being its principal color all the way through. Nobody on Omega operates in the name of anything but profit and personal gain, and if Commander Shepard needs to get anywhere, he has to adapt to those new conditions. He does get to perform a few noble deeds there, such as defeating some of the most odious gangs and curing the station from a deadly artificial pestilence, but in the end it's almost always about siding with the lesser evil against the bigger one.

Later in the game, another hub is opened up — the Asari-run planet of Illium, essentially a huge commercial depot where, upon first sight, business is conducted in a more reasonable manner than on Omega... but only upon first sight. Most of Shepard's time on Illium is spent engaging in shootouts with various mafia groups, and the myth of the «beautiful and wise» Asari race quickly dissipates as, once again, most of the encountered aliens seem far more interested in securing deals, often through nefarious strategies, than aiding the Commander in his/her noble quests. The atmosphere seems to even rub off on some of the good guys (Lara, whom Shepard encounters on Illium, undergoes a barely believable transformation from shy, nerdy scientist to a hardcore badass — more on that later).

In short, the Galaxy is just one large shithole, with **Mass Effect 2** ripping out a bunch of pages from the script of *Firefly* and the entire Milky Way sometimes feeling like an expanded version of the *Grand Theft Auto* universe, except that it takes itself a tad more seriously. Nobody is to be trusted; everybody wants a piece of Shepard and his friends; and even those friends all have to be worked upon in order to get through to their good sides. This is a kind of atmosphere that, in my opinion, fully justifies a Renegade playthrough of the game — forcing your Shepard to dispense trust, mercy, and generosity all the way through sometimes feels like forcing somebody to adopt waste sorting in the middle of a nuclear winter. (Occasionally, the game even *punishes* you for choosing the Paragon option — for instance, generously sparing a character's life may easily result in getting stabbed in the back). And the only place in the entire galaxy where you can get *some* respite is... the Normandy.

With the huge increase in the number of potential companions, who might end up occupying every free corner of your ship, and the equally large number of different conversations scripted for each of them, the Normandy of **Mass Effect 2** becomes even more of a mix between a confessional and a psychiatrist office than it was in the first game. Actually, it might be a total introvert's dream: a small, confined, but generally techno-cozy space hosting an impressive, but still small group of people who are, like, the only people in the world to understand you, care about you, and need you (to solve their problems for them, but they're all so nice, why *shouldn't* you be solving their problems for them?). Knowing that wherever and whenever you leave your ship, you are most likely in for a world of pain and a buttload of firepower, you might find yourself *really* embracing the Normandy as your second home, and all those companions as your true friends.

Several times, while reading people's thoughts on the Paragon vs. Renegade playthrough options, I came across confessions that it was easier to use the Renegade options on various NPCs scattered across the Galaxy, but that the players could hardly ever bring themselves to use the same options on their companions (even if using a Renegade option on any of your team members usually means little more than being rude and blunt, whereas the bad guys *not* on your payroll more often get to feel the touch of cold steel). Indeed, «renegading» your active or potential companions feels like an even more assholeish thing to do in **Mass Effect 2** than it was in the first game, and, honestly, could sometimes use a bit more subtlety in writing.

A good example of a sorely missed chance is the stand-off between Samara, the troubled Asari Justicar, and her corrupt, succubus-nature daughter Morinth, whom you are supposed to lure into Samara's trap and bring to justice. During the climactic culmination of the scene, Shepard has the option of choice between standing with the mother and the daughter — visually and atmospherically echoing the stand-off between Palpatine, Mace Windu, and Anakin in *Revenge Of The Sith* — and while, naturally, choosing to help Morinth over Samara would count as a properly «Renegade» thing to do, the writers could not come up with a suitable justification of that choice. Apparently, Morinth is a monstrous, maniacal psychopath whose specialty is killing people with fabulous sex (hey, hardly the worst way to go, if you ask me), and the only reason why Shepard should want to take such a person for his companion is summarized in one brief line: «*Morinth will be more useful to me*». Every single time I hear that line, I just want to use a well-deserved Renegade interrupt on the writer who came up with this Machiavellian «brilliance». We know perfectly well that the Renegade way of doing things is the Dirty Harry way — but it is hard to imagine Clint Eastwood's character partnering up with «Scorpio» because *he will be useful to him*.

I am specifically bringing up this example just to illustrate how much harder the job of a Renegade-style writer for Shepard is than that of a Paragon-style writer. In order to resolve this kind of conflict in favor of the criminal, one needs to try *very* hard to find an angle that would allow us to see the criminal as the wronged victim and the justice-seeker as a heartless by-the-book

executioner. In the case of Samara vs. Morinth, such an angle would be immensely difficult, but possible — had they bothered to include a line of defense other than «*I just do it for the thrill of the act*» (for instance, it could be argued that Morinth offers her victims a pleasant and meaningful way out of their boring and depressed existence, euthanasia-style, etc.). But **Mass Effect 2** is not *Silence Of The Lambs*, and there are no writers on the team who could make their psychopathic characters as «charming» (so to speak) as Hannibal Lecter. (Not to mention that Morinth's voice actor, although she is not at all bad, certainly has a long way to go if she ever hopes to catch up with Anthony Hopkins). Consequently, this is one of several cases in which the Paragon-Renegade mechanics of the game simply breaks down. (It's rather telling that the team could not find a proper way to reintegrate Morinth, unlike her mother, into the storyline of **Mass Effect 3** if you opt to save her in **Mass Effect 2**: apparently, nobody could bring themselves to further develop her character arc). Moral of the story: it simply takes more wit and talent to create a likeable ruthless character than a lovable righteous one.

Anyway, had the entire atmospheric dynamics of the Milky Way in **Mass Effect 2** been made to sway between the perfidious, dog-eat-dog spirit of the colonies and the aura of brotherly and sisterly human-alien love aboard the Normandy, there would be little to complain about. However, there is also the main story to take into consideration, and this is where the game runs into problems with its atmosphere just as much as it has already run into with the respective plot. «The Collectors», regardless of whether they are tackled in the relatively normal environment of a human colony or on their own turf (aboard the Collector Ship or inside their home base), somehow end up being goofy and annoying rather than coldly terrifying, like the Geth in the first game. This is the first time that we get properly immersed in the game designers' idea of «Reaper Mutations», which would be explored to its fullest in **Mass Effect 3**, and somehow the transition into body-horror style à la **Resident Evil** feels exaggerated and contrived. All of the Collector enemies — the Collectors themselves, as well as their combined and advanced variants such as «Scions» and «Praetorians» — are grotesque mutated monsters, bred in oddly exotic locations (all of which only serve as polygons for combat, except for one brief atmospheric, tension-setting trek across the Collector Ship), and to me it feels as if the designers were really trying *way* too hard to spook the player instead of really putting their minds to answering the question: what would a *true* totalitarian future run by giant AIs with the power of 3D-printing their own armies of mooks look like? Something tells me it wouldn't be a grotesque projection of a Herbert Welles' Martian tripod. Maybe these days we could get an answer from our latest brand of generative AI (though I have a hunch it would simply use the **Mass Effect** scrapbook itself to come up with one), but in 2010, it was all about humans deciding that the best way for an artificial super-intelligence to prove its superiority to the unworthy organics would be to scare the pants off them. Or, alternately, make them die of laughter.

Do not get me wrong — the atmosphere during the combat sections with the Collectors is *very* tense, and unless you are playing on the lowest difficulty levels, you won't have that much time or desire to stand around and guffaw at your hideously (but amusingly) deformed enemies. But that's just the combat; psychologically, I am not sure that the BioWare team has truly managed to achieve what they were striving for. **Mass Effect 3**, with its introduction of Brutes and Banshees, would be a bit more successful in inflicting the «horror vibe» upon the player; **Mass Effect 2** is really quite family-friendly in this particular department. For myself, I definitely know that once I learned the ropes of handling the Collectors in combat, battles with those guys quickly became the most tedious part of the entire game for me. And *don't* get me started on the final boss fight, which looks and feels quite stupid and anticlimactic after the final boss fight of the first game (the mutant Saren).

All of this goes hand in hand with my criticisms of the plot: basically, the game succeeds on most levels as long as it stays within the borders of its film-noir and revisionist-Western aesthetics, yet fails as soon as it redirects our attention to «pure» sci-fi — almost as if those duties had been equally divided between Team Smart and Team Moronic. Of course, it is ultimately the latter team that rewarded us with one of the most widely propagated memes from the game (*ASSUMING DIRECT CONTROL!*), but I am personally more of an "*I'm Commander Shepard, and this is my favorite store on the Citadel*" kind of guy, really (I'll take Shepard's exploration of the Citadel over his exploration of the Collector Base every time).

Technical features

Graphics

Although the basic system for **Mass Effect 2** remained the same as it was for the first game (Unreal Engine 3), most of the specific features were improved and polished to such a degree that the result produces a vastly different visual impression. If the original **Mass Effect** still had faint echoes of the «age of early 3D graphics» visible in its textures, frame rates, and animations, by 2010 advances in hardware and software finally removed that problem for good. Of course, these days, if you play the original games in their modded versions (with most of the textures upscaled to 2K or even 4K), or if you choose to play the official **Legendary Edition**, this wide gap is quite efficiently



bridged, but even then it is still possible to notice the added

realism and smoothness of the visuals of **Mass Effect 2**. More than ten years later, complaints about the game's graphics having become «dated» and «obsolete» are still few and far in between, usually voiced by people who are truly anally obsessed about their numbers of pixels per square inch; unless you're one of those dudes who believes that nothing is worth playing today if it ain't got ray tracing and stuff, you won't have any issues with the technical level of this game's graphics.

On a *substantial* rather than purely technical level, though, I would say that the aesthetic difference between **Mass Effect** and **Mass Effect 2** is smaller than it is between **Mass Effect 2** and **Mass Effect 3**. All the basic tenets of the first game remain in place: environments consist of standardized interchangeable blocks (which feel fairly diverse for the first few hours but later still start to oppress you with their monotonousness), characters come to life with realistic, but repetitive animations, and cutscenes are smoothly integrated inside the action to give the proceedings a cinematic feel. All of this is simply given with more detail — *same as before, but with leather seats*, as Joker would have remarked. However, since **Mass Effect 2** is so much more about action than atmospheric immersion, you are not likely to remain spending a whole lot of time admiring the graphic scenery, the way you could do on all those planets in the first game while chillin' around in the Mako. (I do believe this difference is intentionally ironized by the innocently dropped AI comment while Shepard is flying the Firewalker on one of the DLC missions: "*Geographic conditions indicate an aesthetically pleasing view nearby. Organic life forms may wish to take note*"). There are almost no wide open spaces anywhere, and very few panoramic views — most of the time is being spent crammed inside pretty claustrophobic environments.

Thus, even a major new hub such as the Asari world of Illium, at best, looks like a futuristic mega-mall; and outside of a few backdrops of skyscrapers, the only thing you get to see is a set of similar-looking plazas as backdrops for interaction with companions, merchants, and random NPCs. It gets a little better in the *Lair Of The Shadow Broker* DLC, which takes you on a breathtaking skycar ride through the huge city's towers and skyways — the only problem is that you have no time whatsoever to stop and gawk at the surroundings, or you'll lose your object of pursuit and it's game over for Shepard. You do get to form an idea that Illium is really a sprawling megapolis rather than just one glorified trade center, but that's about all you have time to form, and the same applies to most of the other settings.

That said, whatever the graphics of the game lack when it comes to backdrops and panoramas, they more than make up for when it comes to creating dynamic, cinematographic imagery. Action sequences are rendered gloriously, with all those shielding fields glowing, enemies frozen to pieces or incinerated in realistic (and badass) ways, bullet hailstorms coming at you in perfect trajectories, and the most awesome explosions and implosions caused by use of heavy weapons (something that did not even exist in **Mass Effect**). Accompanying cutscenes have the ambitiousness and excitement level of a solid Holly-

wood action movie ([Kasumi's acrobatic feat](#) of disabling the shields on her enemy's aircraft is one of the most stylishly graceful pieces of video game animation I have ever seen), lighting and shadow effects are beyond reproach, movement of both friendly and hostile NPCs looks and feels logical and natural, and the only bitter thing I can say about this combination of realism and aesthetics of violence is that plenty of other action-based games have adopted the exact same standard since 2010. On the other hand, I can't exactly say that they have, as a rule, raised that standard to significantly more impressive heights.

Yet the most impressive bit of visual progress from **Mass Effect** to **Mass Effect 2** concerns the depictions and animations of the game's characters during conversation — fully in keeping with the implicit idea of the game's transition from a more «atmospheric» to a more «psychological» experience. The way your companions and the various NPCs acted in the first game — not just moving their mouths, but using the full arsenal of face and body language — was already striking, but **Mass Effect 2** runs deeper with those technologies, making even the most mysterious of its aliens, such as Tali with her permanently masked face, feel like genuine souls with genuine feelings, troubles, and perks. The way Kasumi shrugs her gracile shoulders in cynical melancholy; Mordin Solus squints his huge Salarian eyes in mental and spiritual anguish; Grunt and Wrex, the Krogan warriors, incline their heads in subtle menace; or even Legion, the friendly Geth, twirls his synthetic neck in digital processing of information — all these little things are executed superbly, and there is clearly a lot of talent here that goes beyond mere understanding of advanced rendering technology.

Sound

Although music and ambient sounds have always been an integral part of the Trilogy, I have to confess that of all three soundtracks to the three games, the one for **Mass Effect 2** leaves the least individualistic impression on my brain. This probably has less to do with the quality of the music itself and more with the fact that there are very few spots in the game that would try to actually focus your attention on the music. The first game, with its lengthy exposition and vast stretches of open territory that simply begged to be silently explored, did rely heavily upon the music: be it the majestic orchestral swells rolling on like waves all over the Citadel Presidium, or the



otherworldly electronic textures creeping up on you as you cruised in the Mako around the lonesome deserts and mountains of uncharted worlds, the score was *extremely* integral to the atmosphere. Conversely, in **Mass Effect 3** there would be increased attention to the epicness, monumentality, and even discreteness of the sound — with quite a few cut scenes highlighting specific music pieces, a few of them register pretty strongly in the mind and have even gone to become my personal favorites (e.g. the unforgettable ‘Leaving Earth’ theme).

Stuck in between the two, **Mass Effect 2** never really lets down with the quality of its music but does not really have its own special «angle». Since most of the time you will be too busy with either dialog or combat, the music is consistently subservient to these needs; where it is, perhaps, most attention-grabbing is around the time of the final Suicide Mission, which is replete with lots of Hollywoodish eye-candy (chasing, fighting, blowing up stuff etc.), and this, in turn, implies lots of John Williams-style epic touches... but this is still the kind of music I probably wouldn't want to listen to on its own. That said, not being able to overpraise the soundtrack does not mean that we have to underrate it, either: I can hardly recall even a single sequence in which the score would deviate from the proper atmosphere of the moment. The decadent night life of Omega, the brutal maximum security prison of Purgatory, the posh mansion of the crime boss in Kasumi's mission, the barren desolation of the Krogan homeworld of Tuchanka all get their appropriate sonic treatment, alternating between electronic dance music, cold ambient soundscapes, soothing pseudo-classical piano muzak or whatever else is necessary for the equation to work. No complaints registered anywhere along the way.

Even so, the game would still work pretty well even without the music, riding out on the strength of the voice acting alone. Everybody from the original **Mass Effect** reprises their roles, and this time, many of the actors have a much tougher task set before them. As we have already established, **Mass Effect** was less about character arcs and evolving personalities than it was about world-building; consequently, actors had less dialog that had to do with their emotional states, anxieties, personal feelings etc. and more that was simply related to their backstories or the ongoing plot. **Mass Effect 2**, on the other hand, is drenched in psychology and existential crises, and this means that everybody has got to raise the stakes and step up their game. Ironically, Commander Shepard him/herself is arguably the least affected here: even despite suffering a most gruesome death and a most unusual resurrection, the main character still prefers to spend less time on post-traumatic self-analysis and more on simply solving problems. However, since «solving problems» now also involves playing psychoanalyst to his many friends, both old and new, Shepard's duties now include gaining new levels of wisdom and confidence, and both Mark Meer and Jennifer Hale rise to the challenge as best they can, particularly Hale, who excels in both the Paragon and the Renegade attitude. The hardest times for them would still be lying ahead, though — in **Mass Effect 3**.

Compared to this, Brandon Keener (as Garrus) and Liz Sroka (as Tali) have a far more difficult time; in the first game, they had relatively little dialog, and their characters only had maybe two or three opportunities to come across as genuine personalities with their own passions, flaws, and inner demons. With **Mass Effect 2**'s emphasis on character building and personal drama, Garrus and Tali quickly grow up from supporting characters to key members of the cast, as Garrus goes through his own test of betrayal and revenge and Tali finds herself the innocent victim of a conflict between tribal loyalty and family allegiance — and that's not to mention the poorly-written, but fan-beloved romance arcs that require an «amorous» component to feature prominently in both actors' deliveries. Here, the actual challenge before the actors is to impact on you their character growth while overcoming — or, rather, making the best use of — the handicap of their voices fed through «alien filters» (after all, Garrus is a straight-walking praying mantis, and Tali spends all her life behind a germ-isolating mask), and they definitely succeed at that, proving that the cast decision for **Mass Effect** was no fluke.

While both characters were already popular after the first game, I will probably not be mistaken in saying that the Crazy Cult of Garrus — with guy gamers considering him the epitome of the virtual buddy, and girl gamers declaring him the perfect *husubando* — only truly arose after **Mass Effect 2**, which gave Keener far more opportunities to present his character as both a tormented soul and that «perfect friend to always have your back», not to mention the whole routine of cold-ruthless-killer-gone-shy-bumbling-lover if you plan to go that way (as I already said, I think the romance path for Garrus and Shepard is quite poorly written, but Keener saves it as best he can). Likewise, Tali, in addition to her already seductive «alien girl nerd» image in **Mass Effect**, acquires extra facets, both endearingly comical and ennoblingly tragical, with Sroka never giving in to the temptation of overacting and spoiling the impression with severely exaggerated delivery. The scene where [Tali finds her dead father](#), for instance, is a textbook example on how to make the player tear up without overselling the drama (although it certainly fares better if you work your way up to it gradually). Ironically, even though Liz (Ash) Sroka has pretty much vanished off the face of the Earth after her work on Tali through all the three games, while Keener has a rather extensive list of supporting roles in video games, TV shows, and movies, both will likely go down in acting history for one part and one part only — the super-smooth Turian gentleman officer and the super-cute Quarian lady engineer.

All the other main actors from **Mass Effect** get but supporting roles in the second game. The mutually exclusive human companions Ashley (Kimberly Brooks) and/or Kaidan (Raphael Sbarge) only appear in one poorly scripted scene to piss you off, having to wait until **Mass Effect 3** to prove their worth in a new setting. Steven Barr's Wrex, the Krogan warlord, gains confidence, wisdom, and extra weight (provided you have not bumped him off in the first game), but, again, you only meet him in a single episode. Ali Hillis' Liara has a harder cross to bear, as she must convincingly demonstrate her barely believable

transformation from shy-and-innocent idealistic researcher to cold-and-calculated business dealer; she tries as hard as she can, but the sweetness still comes through the ice — then again, perhaps this was intentional, and the whole setup is meant to symbolize that if you're gentle and sweet by nature, no circumstances of your biography will allow you to properly transition into Al Capone on demand. Regardless, it's always nice to have you back, Liara.

With the diminished presence of all those «veterans», it is up to fresh new faces to step up and prove their worth, and here, too, we have to thank the almost phenomenal talent of voice director Ginny McSwain for getting the best out of a whole bunch of newcomers. Tricia Helfer, hired over from her memorable performance as a Cylon in *Battlestar Galactica*, does EDI — the perfect cross between a subservient AI and a mental dominatrix, an ideal counterpart for the clownish personality of Joker, the pilot. Yvonne Strahovski does an excellent «ice-queen-waiting-to-be-melted» as Miranda Lawson, the bioengineered epitome of female perfection with — naturally! — a broken heart under the surface, expecting to be eventually treated as a human being (years later, amusingly, she would play a psychologically similar role in *The Handmaid's Tale*). Courtenay Taylor gets completely invested in the character of Jack, the badass female biotic with a traumatized past; maybe she does not really elevate her character above the respective stereotype, but the power and sneer in her voice alone make it easy to live with the stereotype. Maggie Baird (the mother of *the* Billie Eilish, for those not in the know!) brings just the required amount of calm, wisdom, melancholy, and compassion to Samara, the Asari justice warrior saddled with more children health problems than Neil Young. And towering over all of them is Michael Beattie, who has one of the most complex roles in the cast — Mordin Solus, the Salarian genius scientist who has to represent all the comical tropes associated with scientists (obsessiveness, jargon, paranoia, rapid-fire vocal delivery, etc.) and all the tragic ones (responsibility, moral dilemmas, repentance, etc.) at the same time.

Less prominent characters are simply too numerous to mention, but I struggle to remember anybody who does not do his or her job at least «adequately». Special mentions must probably go to Martin Sheen as The Illusive Man, leader of Cerberus (his dialog is generally shitty, as it mostly serves to drive all the inconsistencies of The Main Plot, but hey, it's Martin Sheen, so who cares?); Carrie-Anne Moss as Aria T'Loak, the Iron Lady of the all-powerful Asari mafia (don't we just love blue-skinned badass bitches?); and Kym Hoy as Kasumi Goto, the ninja stealth master — *this* character, as I was afraid, could easily have been voiced as a generic anime cliché, but Kym provides her with a beautiful mixture of maturity and playfulness, sarcasm and sadness, experienced wisdom and childish mischief, making [her side mission](#) (originally a piece of DLC) a particular pleasure to go through. Again, it's useful to note that Kym hardly has any other credits to her name (you can more frequently see her on YouTube as a yoga instructor or a jazz singer), if only to remember how much credit in such cases should be given to voice

directors, imparting their understanding of character personality to the actual mouthpieces. With writing much more often handled poorly than brilliantly in video games, it's the voice director's job to ensure that we forgive the plot holes and the banality of clichés, and **Mass Effect 2** fares even better here than its predecessor — at least, in quantitative terms, given that the total mass of characters and character dialog in the game is at least 50% weightier than it was in **Mass Effect**.

Interface

The technical layout of **Mass Effect 2** was quite significantly redesigned from that of the first game — and if there ever was a general ideology behind the redesign, it must have been framed as an answer to the question: «How can we make a formal RPG that will appeal to as many non-RPG fans as possible?». Actually, that question was already relevant to **Mass Effect** as well, but the sequel goes even further to minimize the classic «RPG mechanics», shifting the focus to action and story elements and farther and farther away from all the loot-gathering, stat-twiddling, and character-building that typically constitutes from 50 to 90% of the average RPG experience.

For starters, **Mass Effect 2** almost completely dispenses with such an important parameter as XP. Technically, your character still gathers a certain amount of XP, which you can always check on the appropriate character screen; but where the standard RPG practice has you «micro-manage» XP gathering, with points typically gained for killing individual enemies, performing small tasks, reading, talking, etc. — a practice that was still diligently observed in **Mass Effect** — here, the bulk of your XP will be automatically collected upon completing major missions, with very few additional actions leading to any increase in XP. This may have been implemented as a tactical response to the frequency of combat situations where Shepard has to deal with an unlimited supply of infinitely spawning enemies — situations that could easily be exploited as loopholes for the practice of «XP farming»; but in practice, it looks like an intentional simplification of RPG mechanics, reducing the players' opportunities for strategic calculation and «grinding» their character, a practice generally held in high esteem by RPG fans but hated by most people outside the club.

Next, there is a significant drop in the number of overall stats for Shepard. In **Mass Effect**, there were about 11-12 different parameters to juggle, and the total number of XP that you could accumulate over the game would not allow you to max out all



of them, so there was a lot of choice to be made depending on whether you wanted to prioritize offense, defense, armor, special abilities, communicative strategies etc.; furthermore, each of the parameters had 12 levels to it, again, implying a rather fine-grained degree of improvement (though still nothing compared to classic D&D, of course). **Mass Effect 2** reduces the overall number of parameters to 6-7, and each one is limited to a measly four levels of upgrading. To compensate for that, the game introduces a slightly more complex mechanics of interaction between different abilities: for instance, combining different types of ammunition or different tech or biotic effects with offensive powers creates cool «combos» like the ability to explode your opponent in mid-air (this would be even further refined in **Mass Effect 3**). But overall, of course, this is yet another big step away from old-school RPGs where you could spend literally hours pondering over the best character builds, spell combinations, and weapon types to take out any particular opponent.

Speaking of weapons, that system, too, has undergone drastic changes. In addition to the introduction of ammo («thermal clips», see the *Action* section above), you no longer have to juggle a huge system of different weapons from different types of manufacturers, further stratified by levels. Instead, you have a limited amount of options in several available slots (pistols, assault rifles, sniper rifles, etc.), each of them unlockable as part of some particular mission as you progress through the game; furthermore, you have to make a specific choice of weapon each time you leave the Normandy and cannot change it without returning to the ship — for the sake of realism, I suppose, since it was always a bit of a mystery how Commander Shepard, without a special freight train in tow, could always lug dozens, if not hundreds, of different marks of weaponry on his back in the first game. A few of these weapons can be purchased over in select trading spots across such hubs as the Citadel, Omega, or Illium, but overall, the arms trade is pretty much non-existent in **Mass Effect 2** — you're much more likely to be spending your credits on space hamsters for your cabin or seedy erotic magazines of the interstellar variety. Apparently, this simplifying decision actually caused some serious backlash — so much so that the possibility to buy arms of different levels from different manufacturers, like in the first game, would have to be reintroduced in **Mass Effect 3**.

Likewise, the armor system no longer looks like anything in the first game: in place of the mechanic of buying or looting your armor suit «wholesale», with armor sets of different levels from different manufacturers offering their specific ways and degrees of protection, Commander Shepard now has a single «base» suit of armor (which s/he can, however, colorize to the proper tint of his/her choice — *yay fun!*) that can be modified with different components (helmets, breastplates, gloves, etc.) acquired from different manufacturers or looted on one of the missions. Unlike the weapon system, this modification would be carried over to **Mass Effect 3**, probably because it agreed pretty well with the general ideology prevailing in shooter games of the same period. I cannot really tell if it makes me happy or sad, but if pressed hard, I'd probably have to conclude that I

liked the original design better, though it was for aesthetic rather than pragmatic reasons. (It was *actually* fun to pick out different matching ensembles for the Commander depending on the environment!). Also, there's very limited choice now in picking out different outfits for your squad members, which is even more of a pity (and a wealth of opportunities, of course, for legions of game modders).

The basic interface for dialog and combat, being an integral part of the original **Mass Experience**, does largely remain the same. Dialog is governed by the «click wheel», with Paragon-style options usually at the top, Renegade-style answers at the bottom and «neutral» replicas in between. Combat is operated by means of the HUD, which pauses the game and gives you the options of issuing commands to your squadmates, using your own powers, or simply taking a breather to determine the best available course of action in a dangerous situation. For PC users, the necessity to use the HUD, however, has slightly diminished since it is now possible to map out not only Shepard's powers, but also those of his squadmates, to a set of keyboard shortcuts — for instance, you can realize a powerful biotic or tech combo, ripping your enemy to shreds, merely by pressing a couple of number keys, rather than having to bring the game to a temporary standstill, disrupting the immersion. Overall, the interface has been quite significantly improved for the convenience of shooter lovers (as is the entire combat system, which we have already discussed above).

Finally, the mini-game and resource-collecting systems of **Mass Effect** have been dropped completely. In place of the frankly annoying «decryption» game, where you had to crack lockers and containers by nimbly guiding the cursor through a shifting maze of obstacles, **Mass Effect 2** introduces a couple of visual puzzles instead (such as matching two similar-looking pieces of «code» or joining correlated circuits), which are just as annoying but (a) there's two of them, so that's at least a little bit of diversity, (b) they have cooler sound effects, (c) ...uh, can't really think of anything. I think they were ultimately hated by players as much as the ones in **Mass Effect**, so by the time the third game came along, the developers got rid of the hacking system altogether (apparently, by the time of the full-fledged Reaper invasion Commander Shepard's powers had become so awesome that all the complex computer systems simply hacked themselves in his mere presence).

The other annoying grinding element of **Mass Effect** — collecting resources scattered all over the different planets in the galaxy — has also been converted to a whole different shade of annoyance. The resources in question now have an actual in-game purpose (you need them to make various improvements to the Normandy, crucial to the survival of your crew members in the final mission, as well as to build various advanced weapons), but to get them, you need to probe various planets, seeking out particularly resource-rich environments and then «bombarding» them until they slowly get depleted. The process looks quite cool at first, but, of course, becomes more and more boring and monotonous as time goes by, especially since it hardly

requires any effort from the players — just their time. (It does, of course, provide the basis for a cheap fun Easter egg when EDI, with a sigh, has to report on «*probing Uranus*» upon being prompted to do so — if, for some reason, you decide to hang around the resource-poor Solar System). All in all, the introduced changes are smart enough to let you know that BioWare developers are still open to exploring new venues for exhausting the players' efforts, *and* that they still have no clue on how to design a generally satisfactory mini-game to save their lives.

That said, I have absolutely no aesthetic gripes with the interface. Shapes, colors, transitions, sound effects, everything has been mildly improved upon, Steve Jobs-style, to provide the coolest-looking and feeling experience. Even if you're grinding your teeth at the prospect of probing yet another generic planet, the swishy-smooth sound of your resource bars filling up offers subtle consolation all by itself. And I, for one, do not spend too much time crying over all the shifting of balance from RPG-style to shooter-style gameplay — not because I'm a bigger fan of shooters than RPGs, but because none of these aspects really matter next to the character interaction and atmosphere aspects of the game. The laconic bottomline is that **Mass Effect 2** does offer the player a smoother and generally more satisfying gameplay experience than **Mass Effect**, at the expense of almost completely abandoning its RPG roots and some of the clumsier-but-more-innovative features of its predecessor. Whether this makes it a better or a worse game is up for debate, but this wouldn't be a debate I'd have a lot of personal interest in — my general position on such matters is that, as long as you find the game aesthetically and spiritually pleasing, you'll eventually get used to its style of playing, no matter how smooth or bumpy it is.

Verdict: *A naturally mature sequel — carrying within itself all the expected blessings and curses of maturity.*

Any retro-review, by definition, is going to be taken in the context of prior assessments of its object — which is the main reason why parts of this one have been relatively vitriolic, and why, when we eventually get to **Mass Effect 3**, you might form the impression that I like the final part of the trilogy more than the middle part: but this would only have to do with the fact that, in the past, **Mass Effect 2** got *too* much praise while **Mass Effect 3** suffered a somewhat unjust treatment. Like



most companies that grow too big for their own britches, BioWare in their «cinematic RPG» days traded in the stylistic perfection and clarity of their early games for boundless ambition, and from that point of view none of the **Mass Effect** games are as flawlessly accomplished as, say, **Baldur's Gate** was for its own time. Furthermore, **Mass Effect 2** worsens the situation by feeling even more calculated towards «big market appeal» than its predecessor: its emphasis on combat action and multiple elements of «fan service» can leave a nasty aftertaste, and its clumsy handling of the main plot is a good example of how one can successfully build up a sci-fi universe only to have it torn down with too little logic and too many clichés. Miriads of glowing reviews that have been cropping up since 2010 preferred to either not notice those things at all, or downplay their importance, or, worse still, treat them as *virtues*. (Fan service? Cool! Fans are there to be serviced!).

Yet just like in music, for instance, we have multiple examples of bands and artists that, through their own aesthetics, send out a poor signal for generations of imitators to come but are still phenomenal in their own right (everybody from Queen to Bruce Springsteen, etc.), so does **Mass Effect 2** point to a poorer future for sprawling, action-packed RPG epics while in itself still remaining a masterpiece on so many levels. The smooth and seamless shift from the brightness of the Galaxy's wide open spaces to dark matters of the heart and mind; the persistent brilliance of returning and freshly recruited voice actors; the atmospheric qualities of the sounds and visuals; the excitement of the new combat system; the endless moral dilemmas of the Paragon vs. Renegade decisions — and that's just if you take the game on its own, but, as I already said multiple times, the only *proper* way to savor **Mass Effect 2** is to take it as the logical second stage of the original **Mass Effect**, with the shift of emphasis between the two games counting as a legitimate artistic achievement in itself.

Returning to the parallels with *The Empire Strikes Back*, it becomes more and more clear that those were not accidental: there is hardly any single source more appropriate for pilfering the whole «shit has to get darker» idea than Lucas' sci-fi trilogy, even if **Mass Effect 2** is most certainly not the first (and even more certainly not the last) franchise to have adapted that idea to its own needs. Yet where the two creations differ is the placement of the heart of that darkness — in *Star Wars*, it is firmly ensconced in the main storyline itself, while the most genuinely disturbing and uncomfortable content of **Mass Effect 2** resides anywhere *but* in the main storyline. Sure, images of thousands of living people kidnapped by goofy insectoids to suck out their fluids and convert them to organic biomass for their sinister purposes is gross enough, but it's still cartoonishly gross; nothing, really, compared to the unsettling reality of the interplanetary prison system or the almost complete mafia takeover of all the business affairs in this brand new world, or the depressing back stories for most of your favorite characters. In the end, it's a bit of a mess — it's like the entire team working on the game got this general directive to keep things as *noir* as possible, and then it was all up to the individual bits and pieces. But if you ask me, messiness like this is far preferable to

ideally calculated corporate planning.

One of the reasons for the over-the-top appeal of **Mass Effect 2** is, perhaps, its ability to imprint inside the player's head the (still somewhat illusive) idea of how «your choices really matter», as the final outcome of the final mission does indeed depend on the decisions you made or did not make over the course of the game — depending on how well you took care of your ship and the psychological comfort of your team members, you increase or decrease their chances of returning back safe and sound (and if you fuck up real bad, you might not even come back alive yourself). Many people have described their experiences with the end of the game as truly nerve-wrecking, what with it becoming a rare example of a gaming situation where you are skilfully manipulated into caring more about the benefit of your friends than yourself — an «emotional roller coaster» that was lacking in **Mass Effect** (where one of your crew members dies regardless of your actions and the rest survive, also regardless of your actions) and would only return in a diminished manner in **Mass Effect 3** (where you are also responsible for the death or survival of a large number of characters, but it's scattered all over the game rather than delivered in a single big punch).

This is, of course, not a specific innovation of the game — there had already been plenty of adventure games and RPGs where your actions influenced the final outcome — and, to be perfectly accurate, it's not so much a matter of actual «choice» as it is simply that of playing the game *properly*. To ensure the loyalty and psychological comfort of any select crew member, it does not really matter (with a couple of exceptions, e.g. Tali's trial for treason) which particular choices you make at the end of their «loyalty missions» — all that matters is that you complete them, period. The whole thing could certainly have been fine-grained to far more subtle degrees. But the effect lingers nevertheless, and since you are already more than likely to have been emotionally charmed by many, if not most, of your companions, being able to keep them alive at the end of the game matters much more than, you know, saving the Galaxy and trillions of lives of organic beings to whom you have no emotional attachment whatsoever (let alone the fact that, like, 90% of organic beings you encounter throughout **Mass Effect 2** are hardly worth lifting a finger for, let alone storming the Collector Base with your seven samurai). In this way, you can really look at **Mass Effect 2** as the culmination of everything BioWare stood for from the beginning: namely, using the RPG system to forge out a proper «team spirit» that grows out of a chain of personal attachments.

It is, I think, precisely for the reason that this «team spirit» was somewhat downplayed in **Mass Effect 3** in favor of the mega-global-ultra-serious issues concerning the very tissue of the universe itself that the third game could never carve out the same cozy niche in players' hearts as its little psychological predecessor did. It is for *that* particular reason that some people are quite happy to play **Mass Effect 2** without completing the other two parts of the trilogy: they're going in for the ultimate

«buddy experience», and it's hard to blame them for that. Indeed, within the context of the entire Mass Effect saga the buddy story looks a bit extraneous — imagine, if you will, *Seven Samurai* embedded in the middle of the *Star Wars* trilogy (not as an influence, which it certainly was, but as an actual part of the story). But video games, in which you are an active force rather than a passive recipient, live on their own wild logic, and I, for one, am more than happy to see **Mass Effect 2** take about as many artistic risks as it makes pre-planned moves. It's a fascinating mix of conservatism and innovation, creativity and calculation, genius and hackjob, artistic freedom and fan service. It is inseparable from the two games that frame it upon both ends, and it still has its own face. It gives you a good idea of almost everything that can be wrong with a video game — and a flashing example of how to turn a video game into an outstanding piece of art.