

Mass Effect 3

Studio: **BioWare**

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

Part of series: **Mass Effect**

Release: March 6, 2012

Main credits: Lead writer: **Mac Walters**

Lead programmer: **David Falkner**

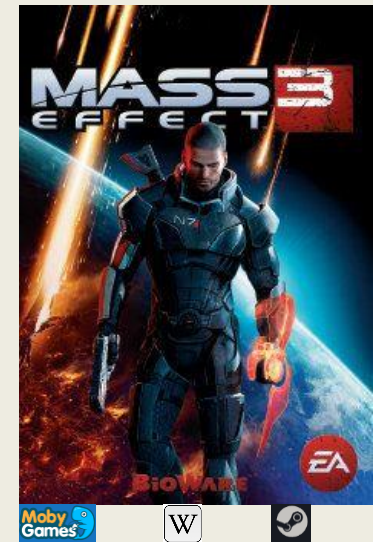
Art director: **Derek Watts**

Composers: **Sam Hulick, Clint Mansell**

Useful links: [Paragon playthrough](#) (41 hours 55 minutes) [Renegade playthrough](#) (41 hours 10 mins.)

Basic Overview

On March 6, 2012, the final third act of sci-fi's grandest video game epic triumphantly shipped for Xbox, PlayStation, and PC; strictly on schedule and, although the year count may be misleading (2007 = **Mass Effect**, 2010 = **Mass Effect 2**, 2012 = **Mass Effect 3**), the actual chronological intervals of development were essentially the same for all three games (the fact that for many players, including myself, **Mass Effect 3** feels «rushed» compared to the other two games is only due to how much stuff the developers had to cram inside the game to tie up as many loose ends as possible, and how much of it had to end up on the cutting floor because of deadlines). Long-time fans of the series predictably rushed to the stores, offline and online, and spent the next few days in expected and predictable paradise. The Reapers, as they all knew, were back in full force, and now it was up to Commander Shepard to eliminate the threat on a grander scale than ever before, once and for all. Blow them all up and go home, right?... and then — and then the shit hit the fan, and hit it *hard*. The Mass Effect fan, that is.



Even if you never played the game, unless you are a total and absolute stranger to video gaming, you probably have heard something about the [Mass Effect 3 ending controversy](#), one of video game industry's most famous alleged fuck-ups that even has its own Wikipedia page. Since I myself was taking a break from gaming around that time, I did not pick up my own copy of the **Mass Effect** trilogy until several years later, and never got to experience **Mass Effect 3** in its original incarnation — without the *Extended Ending* and the *Leviathan* DLCs — which means that I have to psychologically reconstruct the archetypal frustration of the average fan in those early days of March 2012 by reading about the differences between the original game release and the modified ending, or by browsing old dust-covered gaming blogs and forums from around that time. But on the whole, it is not too difficult to understand what all the hoopla was about — and a mighty interesting hoopla it was, actually telling us quite a bit about the human condition in the modern world. Again, even if you couldn't care less about video games in general or **Mass Effect** in particular, there is no denying that the stand-off between the game designers and the fans, its reasons, nature, and consequences were a *big* cultural event at the time — and, a bit more arguably, that their reverberations are still an influence on mass-produced art these days, for better or worse.

In retrospect, it is certainly the controversy that surrounds the ending of **Mass Effect 3** which prevented it from ascending to the same pedestal as its predecessor. No matter how many hours one pours into a video game, the two things that matter most are the way it begins and the way it ends — and on both these counts, **Mass Effect 2** had its successor solidly beat. For sure, the opening to **Mass Effect 3** was impressive, but we *knew* it would be impressive and in what ways it would be impressive, whereas the «death» of Commander Shepard at the start of **Mass Effect 2** sent out shockwaves. And while the grand finale of **Mass Effect 2**, with the success of its tense-as-hell «suicide mission» depending on all the amount of hard work you'd completed or failed to complete throughout the game, was (at least emotionally) perceived by just about everybody as nearly flawless, the ending of **Mass Effect 3**... oh well. No wonder, then, that the third game in the series usually gets positive mentions these days only as an integral part of the overall trilogy, and pretty much never on its own, as a stand-alone title.

Which, in my humble opinion, is thoroughly and utterly unjust. **Mass Effect 3** is certainly flawed — as are *all* video games, no exceptions whatsoever — and most definitely not above serious criticism, but generally speaking, it does exactly the same thing that a part of the **Mass Effect** trilogy is expected to do. That is, it carefully and lovingly preserves the «soul» of **Mass Effect**, honing it and cherishing it even as the commercial, stylistic, and substantial requirements for mass-oriented video games keep changing and skewing in a completely different direction. And at the same time, it has its own identity that helps it stand out and not simply look like a regurgitation of the same images, tropes, and impressions we'd already lived through in the previous parts. To put it short, the original **Mass Effect** was all about world-building; **Mass Effect 2** focused on

exploring the dark underbelly of the newly built world and the psychological profiles of its characters; and finally, **Mass Effect 3** «externalizes» all the conflict, adding an epic dimension and turning the heroic bombast dial all the way up to eleven. It is a line of development that is *very* similar to the overall arcs of both *The Lord Of The Rings* and the original *Star Wars* trilogy — but, thanks to the original concept left over from Drew Karpysyn and, curiously enough, to the fact that it is set in the medium of video gaming rather than literature or film, it totally works on its own without simply looking like an unimaginative rip-off of previous artistic triumphs.

The thing is, it would have been the easiest feat in the world to tarnish the legacy of the game's two first installments and come out with a thoroughly embarrassing finale. By 2012, BioWare was nearing the end of its glory days — with its being essentially swallowed up by the corporate monstrosity of Electronic Arts, it was fast travelling down the path of every typical independent gaming company cursed with too much commercial success, and its games were accordingly getting bigger, flashier, and more soulless, as the world would eventually feel with such disasters as **Mass Effect Andromeda** and **Anthem**. Corporate integration meant the possibility of a bigger budget, but also the heavy hand of marketing strategies — which, for one thing, imparted to the game designers that people are much more likely to fall for *shooters* than *story-based RPGs*, which meant, accordingly, that the **Mass Effect 3** team, want it or not, would have to allocate much more resources to improve the game's combat angle. Worse, by the early 2010s, it was all about team work in the gaming community — so, of course, **Mass Effect 3** had to include a multi-player mode, because how could one hope to sell a million copies without the possibility to turn your game into a **Call Of Duty** clone?

Basically, with all the global developments in the world of video gaming in general and inside BioWare in particular, **Mass Effect 3** could have easily been — *should* have been — a flaming disaster, from start to finish. Even Drew Karpysyn himself was no longer around to supervise his original brainchild; he left BioWare one month prior to the release of the game and, allegedly, was not involved at all in its design or writing, leaving everything to Casey Hudson and Mac Walters, both of them old-time veterans of the team but not the authors of the original idea. It would have been the easiest thing in the world to just turn the game into a massive shoot-'em-up, with Commander Shepard and his arsenal of supercharged *Wunderwaffe* wreaking havoc on the poor Reapers, who wouldn't even know what hit them in the first place. Smash 'em up, get the girl of your choice, and cruise around the galaxy for the rest of your days, vying with your competitors in multiplayer mode over loot boxes in the Hades Gamma cluster, or wherever.

So we all owe a great big *thank you* to the designers for not going that way — and even a reluctant thank you to EA for not twisting the designers' balls so as to force them to go that way. In fact, the original plans for **Mass Effect 3** were even more

ambitious than what we got to see: according to various information leaks, a veritable *ton* of story-related stuff had to end up on the cutting floor, as the writers diligently strived to cleverly resolve each of the conflicts carried over from the previous games but then had to make inevitable concessions so as to ship the game on time. Unfortunately, those seams show — at least as long as you are not caught up in the heat and flurry of the game too much — but, as a rule, they can be forgiven. The major point stays true: **Mass Effect 3** was a worthy and meaningful conclusion to the trilogy, even if you are one of those who could never forgive the designers that ending. It also had flaws — many more of them, perhaps, than its predecessors, for a variety of reasons — but flaws are always great food for thought, and the true bread-and-butter for any serious reviewer.

Content evaluation

Plotline

The principal conflict line of **Mass Effect 3** was perfectly clear to everybody who played the first two games in the series even before the first trailers came out. In **Mass Effect**, Commander Shepard's challenge was to stop a single Reaper from taking over the Galactic Citadel in order to invite all of his creepy cuttlefish friends to share in the feast. **Mass Effect 2** unexpectedly added a secondary opponent — the Collectors — and unpredictably (but very efficiently) switched our attention to «smaller» things, such as settling the domestic issues of Commander Shepard's long queue of teammates. But it was clear that, sooner or later, we would have to deal with a full-fledged Reaper invasion, one way or another, and that this confrontation would have to take place on a scale far more grandiose and epic than whatever we got to experience earlier. What's one Reaper, after all, compared to hundreds or thousands of the big guys, raining death and destruction all over our monitors?

As if obvious common sense wasn't enough, BioWare gave fans a more-than-clear indication of what was to come in the form of the **Arrival** DLC, the last semi-separate adventure released for the completion of **Mass Effect 2**, in which Commander Shepard had to destroy a «compromised» mass relay by driving an entire planet into it so as to delay the inevitable invasion of the enemy (and sacrifice a whole lot of allegedly innocent Batarians in the process). **Arrival** was never a fan favorite: its challenges were somewhat too monotonous, its difficulty seriously revved up because of a lack of the usual companions for



Shepard, and its ambitious plotline had too many holes and jack-in-a-boxes to be taken with respect. Still, it was only a small piece of DLC, and any mistakes it made could and would have easily been rectified in the next proper game, right?

As it turns out, the next proper game would actually be heavily dependent on the events of **Arrival** — not the most auspicious of signs. At the start of **Mass Effect 3**, we find Commander Shepard detained at the Alliance's headquarters in Vancouver where an inquiry has been initiated into his actions (the classic *hero-put-on-trial-for-saving-the-world* trope). Just as judgement is going to be passed on him (most likely, with the planned outcome of demoting the hero to the status of Roger Wilco, Janitor Second Class), the Reapers start their invasion of Earth — which, as it seems, they have specially timed to coincide with the start of Commander Shepard's trial, so as to generously save the Alliance Defense Committee some face... before pulverizing said face out of existence, that is.

Everything that is monumental / epic / breathtaking about **Mass Effect 3**, and everything that is clichéd / cringeworthy / the stuff of facepalms is already ensconced in its opening sequences. On one hand, you have the premonitions, the intensity, the emotional punch, and a nicely thought out touch to «personalize» the horror of the invasion by giving it the face of a little kid who shall, from then on, occasionally return as the voice of Commander Shepard's own conscience. On the other hand, you also occasionally want to kick whoever wrote that dialogue in the face — *hard*. "How do we stop them?" one of the panicking counsellors asks Commander Shepard, probably hoping for a useful piece of advice. "Stop them?" the Commander retorts. "This isn't about strategy or tactics. This is about survival!" (because *survival*, of course, requires no strategy or tactics). "What do we do?" blurts out another counsellor, on the verge of total nervous breakdown. "The only thing we can", replies the Commander, putting on his finest friends-Romans-countrymen face, "WE FIGHT OR WE DIE!"

I remember perfectly well how just about everything died inside me when I first heard that *WE FIGHT OR WE DIE*, which, somehow, had a more stupid and cheesy ring to it than any of the occasional moments of generic pomp sprinkled across the first two games. Perhaps it was because it felt like such a crowning culmination to the entire opening scene, so poorly written that my initial impression was that of BioWare *really* throwing in the towel and putting the entire story on mindless autopilot. The danger of **Mass Effect 3**, story-wise and emotion-wise, turning into the video game equivalent of a Michael Bay movie was all too real. Whatever depth and complexity **Mass Effect 2** might have added to the brave new universe of **Mass Effect** was being squandered away under my very eyes. Now that the hype had really gone to the designers' and writers' heads, they were probably thinking that they could get away with the corniest tripe... all that was left was some dark shades and *hasta la vista, baby!* for Commander Shepard as he prepared to tear Harbinger into pieces with his bare hands.

Yet fortunately for us, and fortunately on an almost miraculous level — because, as a rule, video games show their spirit and essence right away at the very start — **Mass Effect 3** gets better as it progresses. In general, much the same holds here as it did for **Mass Effect 2**: the main storyline often feels contrived, sagging and occasionally crashing under its own weight, while the side stories, delving into the fates of specific characters, feel much more accomplished and much less influenced by stereotypical Hollywood blockbuster motifs. Unfortunately, since this time the Reapers are pretty much everywhere you go, the line between «main storyline» and «side quests» is now much more blurred than it used to be in **Mass Effect 2**, meaning that the proverbial «cheese» and the provisional «genius» are sometimes so tightly intertwined that my feels about the game become a jumbled mess of admiration and frustration. Then again, this is *exactly* the kind of feels I also get from the likes of, say, *The Lord Of The Rings* movie trilogy, so I suppose that, ultimately, the way things roll for **Mass Effect 3** is pretty much the best possible way they *could* roll, given the fact of how many different groups of target audiences the final product had to satisfy, one way or another.

Speaking of *The Lord Of The Rings*, there is a more than obvious parallel introduced here: with the unstoppable Reaper onslaught that clearly cannot be suppressed even if all the forces in the Galaxy unite against the enemy (which makes the "*we fight or we die!*" slogan even more stupid than it looks outside of context), the Alliance has to put all of its trust into the construction of a mysterious MacGuffin known as «The Crucible», a superweapon designed by the extinct Protheans which, of course, they never had the time to properly implement before being wiped out. In a convenient move, plans for this weapon have been discovered by our good old friend Liara T'Soni during her visit to the Prothean Archives on Mars — where, apparently, humans have been too lazy to discover or decipher them over the previous one hundred years. (I have always wondered why the writers could not come up with the easiest and most logical idea of having Shepard recover those plans from the ruins of the Collector Base — given that the Collectors had already been identified as mutated Protheans, this would have been the perfect way to properly integrate the main storyline of **Mass Effect 2** inside the overall trilogy. But the obvious answer is that, most probably, the idea of the MacGuffin in question was not yet apparent to anybody by the time the writing for **Mass Effect 2** was complete).

Anyway, allegedly «The Crucible» is some sort of superweapon capable of wreaking havoc on The Reapers — nobody really knows how, why, or according to which particular laws of thermodynamics, but since this is Art, not Hard Science, nobody really needs to, as long as the blueprints themselves are clearly legible. The main block of the story, therefore, centers around Commander Shepard providing the necessary resources for the construction of the magic gizmo, as well as rallying the forces of the Galaxy so as to extinguish their petty conflicts and make them all work toward the final goal. And while doing so, the

Commander also has to wage ceaseless war on two fronts — not just the Reapers, who, just like their spiritual influencers Morgoth and Sauron, keep wiping out the Forces of Good one by one, but also the mysterious «Cerberus», that powerful Earth-based organization led by the Illusive Man that, at one time, was instrumental in bringing the Commander back to life, but now seems hellbent on thwarting each of the Commander's efforts to do good for the Galaxy. Instead, Cerberus seems to promote a different agenda that advocates cooperation and even symbiosis with the Reapers, rather than direct conflict with the ultimate goal of destruction — an agenda that all but turns them into the main de-facto antagonists of the game.

This aspect of the story is usually the one that attracts most of the criticism, and I can easily understand why and concur with much of it. Even if we dispense with any sense of realism — «Cerberus» seems to have more resources at their command than any potential alliance between Vladimir Putin, Saudi sheiks, and Elon Musk put together — it is hard to get rid of the idea that the «Cerberus threat» was essentially introduced into the game, first and foremost, so as to provide the player with plenty of humanoid shooting targets. In the original **Mass Effect** and **Mass Effect 2**, human enemies were plentiful, but the Galaxy did not have a common and obvious enemy back then and you could simply dress them up as members of various criminal gangs and mercenary groups, snooping around the Milky Way in search of easy prey. In **Mass Effect 3**, fighting simple criminals and mercenaries no longer makes much sense — in fact, quite a few times we see Commander Shepard trying to make friends with criminals and mercenaries, rallying them to his side to fight against the common enemy — but having no human gooks to pew-pew at might have made the experience boring to **Call Of Duty** fans, so «Cerberus» was advanced to the ranks of Human Enemy No. 1, and equipped with a potentially unlimited supply of heavily armed bad guys who try to stop you from whatever it is you're doing, regardless of how much sense it does.

Why does Cerberus take such a heavy interest in preventing the Commander from brokering peace between the Krogan and Turians, for instance? The writers could have at least bothered to let the Illusive Man explain his motives to us, rather than having the poor fans waste time on message boards around the globe, coming up with their own theories. And what's up with the ridiculous idea of having Cerberus stage a «coup» against the Citadel Council, for no specific purposes and with such apparent ease that one is only left to wonder about how much all that impressive security and all those armed defenses were worth in the first place? Clearly, some particularly bright BioWare employee must have come up with an idea like «hey, wouldn't it be fun to have Commander Shepard fight his way through a partial map of the Citadel itself? All that techno-space taking up, uh, space and not a single opportunity to blow shit up!» — and some unfortunate writers had to take up the challenge of creating a convincing story about how a rogue para-military organization from Planet Earth is almost able to neutralize the political, economical, and military hub of the Universe in one swift stroke.

It all culminates in the setting up of what is perhaps the least impressive and successful of **Mass Effect**'s huge, and generally impressive, arsenal of villains — the armored badass Kai Leng, who looks and acts like a cross between Boba Fett and some generic dark knight from some generic anime series. He serves exactly two purposes: (a) to infuriate the player by killing off some of your closest friends and allies and (b) to infuriate the player even further by having him humiliate Shepard time and time again in cutscene format even after you have properly whopped his ass in controlled combat. His dialog is minimal, his personality is non-existent, his appearance is grotesque, and his ability to turn any potentially serious-looking scene into unintended comedy unparalleled. Whoever wrote that guy into the game was most probably a secret agent planted inside the team by the developers of **Mortal Kombat** or **Street Fighter**. More seriously, Kai Leng is a good example of how generic and misguided marketing strategies can shatter the loyalty of the original fanbase without attracting fresh ones — to the best of my knowledge, absolutely *nobody* was a big admirer of this guy, who fit inside the universe of **Mass Effect** about the same way Batman might fit the universe of *The Godfather*. (It did feel satisfactory to eventually be able to run Shepard's Omni-Blade through the guy's torso — but you still probably ended up hating that guy for the very fact of his existence rather than for his actual annoying meddling and devastating carnage.)

I do not want to go into too many specific details — a thorough analysis of the many story-writing flaws of the game's main quest has been produced by [Shamus Young](#), already referred to several times in my previous review of **Mass Effect 2** — but I do want to stress the obvious: many, if not *most*, of the cheesy, clichéd, illogical, or downright lazy bits of writing in this department are due to the inevitable compromises the designers had to make between the «adventure-like», «RPG-like», and «shooter» aspects of the game. More than in any previous **Mass Effect** title, more, in fact, than in any previous game that was developed by BioWare, they wanted their final product to appeal to fans of all those genres, and depending on which specific angle you are looking from, they both spectacularly failed *and* admirably succeeded at that task.



The only thing that was handled reasonably well within the Shepard — Reapers — Cerberus relationship triangle was the evolution of the Illusive Man, and even that I might be exaggerating just because of the excellent character portrayal by Martin

Sheen. In both **Mass Effect 2** and **3**, Sheen as the Illusive Man basically takes on the character of Tolkien's Saruman — the classic case of the «let's-cooperate-with-evil-rather-than-confront-evil» mentality — but, unlike Saruman, we get to spend a lot of time with the guy (especially in the second game, where he and Shepard are working side by side) and see his gradual transformation as his deep belief in his superior ways of thinking, unaccompanied by the proper moral compass, eventually leads him to his own downfall (a situation I have, alas, so often observed in practice with many of my own formerly respectable countrymen, now reduced to the status of evil clowns). The nice detail in this is that the BioWare writers did not make the mistake of turning the Illusive Man into a simple clone of Saren from the first part — he is an «intellectual upgrade» over the first villain: Saren's idea was to simply submit to the Reapers, acknowledging their superiority and invincibility, whereas the Illusive Man promotes the agenda of using the Reapers' own technology to learn to control them and use them for humanity's own gain — and, of course, in the end both things inevitably reach the same outcome (with the Illusive Man's end intentionally mirroring Saren's, especially if you are a bona fide Paragon). I still wish the writers would give Mr. Sheen less corny lines than "*this isn't about you or me, Shepard, it's about things so much bigger than all of us*", but oh well, I guess Ray Bradbury was too busy dying in 2012 to stick around with the BioWare team for literary advice.

In any case, while the entire line of fighting out Cerberus for the ability to construct «The Crucible» and find the even more mysterious «Catalyst» to complete it is nowhere near a triumph of creative philosophical writing, it is good to see that it takes up only one (albeit sizeable) chunk of the story. Just as important for the Commander's success is his ability to help put to rest two crucial intergalactic conflicts, both of which had been introduced in the earliest stages of **Mass Effect**, played a serious part in **Mass Effect 2**, and diligently waited to be resolved in the last part of the game: the Krogan Genophage and the Quarian Exile. Both issues are taken quite seriously, each of the two taking up an entire «Act» of the game and forcing the player into making arguably the most challenging moral conclusions in the entire trilogy.

The resolution of the Krogan vs. Turian-Salarian galactic conflict is, in fact, easily one of the most outstanding pieces of «alternate story-telling» in the entire history of video gaming, at least, based on my experience with the medium. First of all, from a purely technical standpoint, the sheer number of possibilities (*all* of them artistically valid from some point of view) is staggering. The fate of the entire Krogan nation here depends on the course of your actions throughout all three games, starting with your ability / willingness to save Wrex, the bounty hunter, from getting himself killed in **Mass Effect** and continuing with your decision to save or destroy a vital piece of data in **Mass Effect 2**; additionally, the story rolls out fairly differently depending on whether you have managed to keep your Salarian scientist friend, Mordin Solus, alive at the end of the second game or not (most people, of course, always save Mordin, since he is one of the coolest characters in the game, but

because of that, few people actually know that his «understudy», Padok Wiks, who replaces him in **Mass Effect 3** in case of the former's death, is quite an individual and intriguing personality in his own right).

These three parameters — Wrex alive/dead, Maelon's data saved/destroyed, Mordin alive/dead — create no fewer than *eight* significantly different scenarios along which the story of the Krogan genophage can unfurl, and each of them carries its own weight, placing a serious dent in the late Roger Ebert's theory about how video games cannot be «art» because «art», by its very nature, precludes the possibility of choosing between different outcomes, having to represent the artist's perspective in a linear manner. In my own recorded playthroughs of the game, I have recreated two opposite scenarios — a Paragon one, in which Wrex rules over the Krogan, Mordin lives (temporarily), and the data is saved, ending in an optimistic outcome with a whiff of noble tragedy (Mordin's sacrifice); and a Renegade one, in which Wrex's brother Wreav is the Krogan ruler, Mordin is replaced by Padok Wiks, and the data is lost, bringing on a much darker ending with an unpleasantly cynical flair. *Both* endings were equally great — logical, reasonable, thought-provoking, and totally artistically valid.



Like so much popular art, of course (and not just *popular* art), the story of the Krogan genophage and its cure places way too much importance on the feelings, words, and actions of individual characters. In real life, we learn all too well — and sometimes, alas, a little too late — that outstanding individual actions often have more symbolic than genuine importance, and that outstanding individuals have to appear «in the right place» «at the right time» in order for their outstandishness to be of any service for the course of history. But the intelligence, if not to say downright *genius*, of the writing involved in the Krogan story is that there is a subtle touch involved where the different individual characters themselves seem more like symbols of different scenarios according to which history may have unrolled — with our imagination completing the missing social and political details, of course.

In case you have not actually played the game or have forgotten the gist of the story, I remind you that the «Krogan» are essentially a race of sturdy reptiloids, having evolved in the particularly harsh conditions of their native planet Tuchanka to become a nation of professional warriors, with few interests other than fighting (either with other races or with each other,

when nobody else is available), feasting, or reproducing (which, apparently, they used to do really well before the genophage). Once their fierce nature, with the aid of modern technology, transforms them into a formidable collective foe, Salarians and Turians manage to infect them with an artificial genetic modification that drastically curbs their fertility — a bioweapon that brings the race to order, but inflicts a terrible curse upon all subsequent generations. Now that some of the morally conscious Salarian scientists have finally devised a cure for the genophage, do you, as Commander Shepard, wish to assist them in this task, gaining an ally in the Krogan but putting the post-Reaper fate of the world at risk, or to sabotage the results, not willing to take chances with such an unpredictable breed of creatures?

The game does not shy away from presenting the player with the option to play out the most brutal solution possible — where Commander Shepard essentially betrays everyone and ends up looking like precisely the kind of nasty jerk that the Reapers would like to cleanse the universe of — but, interestingly enough, it also gives you a scenario where sabotaging the cure for the genophage looks like a bitter, but almost inevitable solution; this happens if Wrex, the «voice of reason» for the Krogan, is dead, and the Krogan are instead dominated by his gung-ho brother Wreav, who does not even try to hide his desire for wreaking terrible revenge on the Galaxy for their crippling of the Krogan race. Parallels with our own world are more than obvious here — Westerners will want to draw analogies between Krogan and oppressed third-world countries, while for the Russian mindset, for instance, Krogan will be more akin to Chechens, the proverbial «bad boys of the Caucasus» — and, as perusing the occasional reviews or forum discussions or YouTube comments amply demonstrates, public sympathy always tends to land on the side of the Krogan, even if the game pulls no punches about it, and even Wrex explicitly acknowledges that the Krogan did bring all their troubles upon themselves through their *own* recklessness and stupidity, rather than simply falling victim to the technological superiority and moral treachery of other races.

Absolutely each and every time I replay the character arc of Wrex and Mordin, or that of their replacements, I cannot help but admire how brilliantly everything has been handled. Everybody is given the chance to speak out their position; every involved agent is a personality rather than just a cliché-spewing stereotype; every outcome is valid, showing the player how complex such situations usually are, and how incredibly difficult it is to come up with a black-and-white solution for any of them. You even get to discern the tiny seeds of nastiness within the usually sympathetic Wrex, and the tiny bits of reason and humanity within the usually fascistic Wreav. Throw in such non-trivial characters like the rarely seen Padok Wiks, whose discussion on the subject of intelligent design might *almost* make you want to start doubting Darwinian theory, and «Eve», the last fertile female Krogan who acts like the voice of empathy and reason among her testosterone-driven male companions, and it is not difficult to understand why Act I of **Mass Effect 3**, centered on Krogan issues, is not just the best-written part of the entire

game — it might be one of the best-written choice-based plots in the entire history of video gaming, period. (Not to mention that it also contains the first and best of the game's tear-jerking moments, but we shall return to that later on, in the «Atmosphere» section.)

There is even a bone thrown in for all those whose attention span is too short to keep on reveling in all the political intrigue and moral dilemmas — at one point, further progress in dispensing the genophage cure becomes impossible unless an immediate Reaper threat is removed, and doing so necessitates enlisting the «services» of a giant Thresher Maw (you used to hunt these things down all over the galaxy in **Mass Effect**, or run away from them like crazy — this time, you get to actually be happy to see one as an ally, albeit an involuntary one). The result is an epic fight of Wagnerian proportions which feels genuine rather than corny, and, for the first time, gives you an important clue that Mother Nature still holds the ultimate trump card over both human *and* artificial intellect, no matter how evolved. (An idea that goes all the way back to *The War Of The Worlds* at least, but H. G. Wells emphasized the significance of the little things, like viruses or bacteria — something that would not translate well to the cinematic scope of **Mass Effect**, I guess). Unfortunately, the game does not bother to exploit this idea any further, taking us into a completely different direction when it comes to solving the Reaper puzzle — and yes, lack of proper semantic integration of the game's different segments is a problem, but what can you do when you have so many different writers working semi-independently from each other?

It almost feels like a shame when the excellent plot of Act I comes to an end and life immediately thrusts you back into the open arms of Cerberus for the infamous «Citadel Coup» and your first encounter with the caricaturesque Kai Leng. The good news is that this is a relatively short segment, and most of Act II is going to be centered around the second major conflict inherited from the previous two games — patching up the differences between the exiled Quarians and their creations, the synthetic Geth, where you have the more difficult option of brokering peace between the two and acquiring both parties as your allies, or the easier one of siding with one party while condemning the other to extinction. Again, much of this depends on your previous actions (as well as your current Paragon / Renegade score), but on the whole it is not too difficult to get a «perfect» outcome — more of a question whether you *want* to have a perfect outcome or whether you have become so pissed off yourself at the Quarians or the Geth that it becomes more morally satisfying for you to invest in a little virtual genocide.

The storyline here is also quite strong, especially when compared to the entire Cerberus part of the game, but does not *quite* reach the peaks of Act I. Where the Krogan-Turian conflict made a great parable for our treatment of nationalism, tribalism, social-darwinism etc. etc., the Quarian vs. Geth line is a reiteration of the age-old «Man vs. Machine» trope ("*Does this unit have a soul?*") that, by itself, hardly brings anything new to the table. The character of Legion, your unexpected Geth friend

who was already able to provide a solid perspective on the Geth conscience and way of life in **Mass Effect 2**, is at the forefront here, and he continues to make such a convincing case for his «species» that, by the time the final resolution of Act II comes about, sacrificing the Geth over the Quarians will, for most people, be an absolute no-go — even if Shepard still has to fight his way through hordes of them over the course of the entire act, Legion will be guiding his hand and presenting irrefutable evidence of the Geth being innocent victims in the conflict. (For what it's worth, there are also rather striking parallels with the Israeli-Palestinian clash here, although, technically, we find the «Israeli Quarians» still in a state of exile from their promised land, occupied by the formerly oppressed «Palestinian Geth»).



And yet again, the wittiness of the game's writers shows through if you play different scenarios, once again emphasizing the importance of personality in history. If you have saved Legion in **Mass Effect 2**, he will almost certainly continue to raise your level of sympathy toward the Geth, narrating their history as a tragedy stemming from the Quarians' unwarranted bias against the threat of Artificial Intelligence. If, however, you allowed Legion to die, an alternate version of your old pal will arise in his place, the «We Are Not Legion» replacement — which, although his basic narrative will remain the same, shall be constantly adding a strain of cold mistrust; unlike the *real* Legion, he will make sure to raise your suspicion of the Geth wanting the world to pay for the injustice done to them with even *more* injustice, and this is definitely going to set back your trust quite a bit, even up to the point of deciding that, perhaps, the preventive strike against the Geth that was the Quarians' biggest tactical mistake, in retrospect, might have been a reasonable and even morally responsible strategic move.

The weakest link in this story — if you judge it from a general artistic standard, not a «relaxed» version of it applicable to video games — is the resolution, where Commander Shepard is capable of appearing as the ultimate mediator between the two warring forces and convince them to shake hands just as they are ready to nuke each other into oblivion. If only real history could be done this way — with a wise guy telling the warring parties that they are both idiots and making them both realize it — the world would clearly be in a much better state than it is today. As it happens, most of these wise guys spend their time writing for BioWare rather than influencing actual political leaders. But then again, let us not forget that what we are dealing

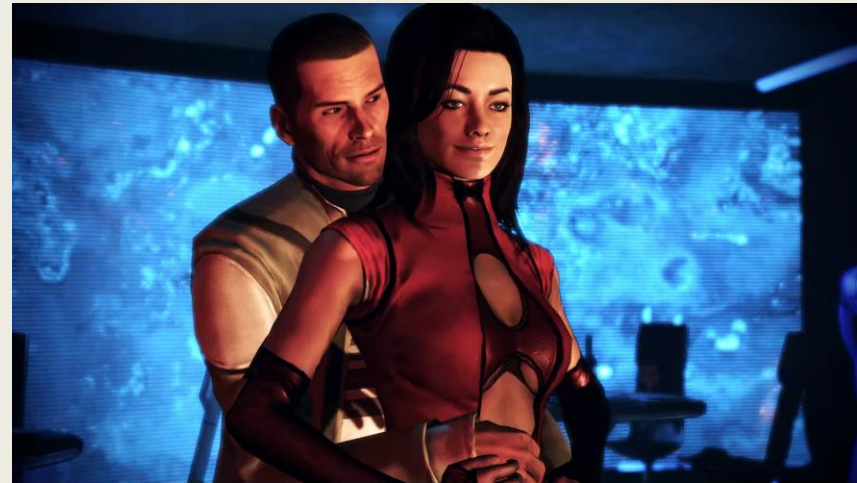
with is essentially a parable — besides, it does require a bit of hard work for the Commander to rise to that level of diplomacy, implying that peace cannot indeed be achieved with just a snap of somebody's finger.

It should also be appreciated to what lengths the writers of the Geth sideline went to present a mildly original take on the topic of AI and its eventual possibility of rising to the heights of organic life — a subject that might seem all too relevant in the 2020s, what with the rise of chatbots and all, even if we're actually still light years away from the kind of genuine artificial intelligence as portrayed by Legion and his friends. The concept of the Geth as neither a community of synthetic individuals nor a stereotypical «hive mind» but rather something in between, a collective will operating based on optimal «consensus» solutions (of a Bayesian kind, I would guess!), not only represents a fresh strand of thinking (although, granted, I am not too familiar with the science fiction genre to claim it is completely original), but also provides convenient justification for you, as Commander Shepard, to step in from time to time and take the initiative when the «consensus» cannot be reached.

The «epic hero» moment of Act II, with Shepard single-handedly taking on the Reaper (well, technically he just needs to paint the guy as a target for the Quarian fleet, but it's still a one-on-one fight) goes a bit too heavy on the «all pathos, little reason» side and is not as well thought out as the Reaper vs. Thresher Maw epic fight of Act I, but since this time around it is not a cutscene and you won't have a good opportunity to ponder on the absurdity of the situation in real time, it is not that much of a problem. The resolution of the conflict, on the other hand, is rife with dramatic possibilities of Shakesperian proportions (adjusted for video game market consumption, naturally), and, again, represents **Mass Effect** writing at its peak.

You can probably tell by this point that, with all these «massive» problems to deal with, **Mass Effect 3** has little time to deal with any side assignments. You do get to meet all of your companions from **Mass Effect 2** — provided they had not been lost in the Suicide Mission at the end — but this time around, you do not get to solve too many of their personal problems, and even those that can be solved are now tied in very directly to the main storyline, such as the continuation of the story of Miranda's sister or the fate of Samara's genetically cursed daughters. This is fair and logical — under the circumstances, the time for aggressive psychotherapy has clearly passed; however, it also means that the characters in **Mass Effect 3** only exist as functions of their presentation in **Mass Effect 2**, except, of course, for those who are new to the game, such as your possible team member Lt. James Vega, the melancholic (and gay) shuttle pilot Steve Cortez, and the perfectionist (and also gay) Comm Specialist Samantha Traynor. You do not get to babysit those new guys, though, with the possible exception of Cortez, whom you can optionally assist in getting over the loss of his loved one (and, if you progressively feel like it, finding a new romantic interest in yourself).

Speaking of romantic interests, one area in which the writers of **Mass Effect 3** spared themselves no expense was the ongoing story of Commander Shepard's love life. Old romances, started as early as in the first game, get carried into the new one, sometimes even forming faint outlines of romantic triangles (for instance, if you «bonded» with Ashley or Kaidan in the first game, then forcedly broke up with them in the second, you can sacrifice your new **Mass Effect 2** romance in the third game to rekindle the old spark with the newly returned and once more available «Virmire Survivor»); in addition, there are various opportunities for temporary casual flings, some of them openly crossing into corny / self-parodic territory (such as Shepard's ability to «woo» the Normandy's resident reporter Diana Allers, for no reason at all other than a gratuitous realization of the Commander's James Bond instinct). Of course, there is no denying the power and attraction of «apocalyptic sex» as we gravitate toward satisfying our wildest pleasure instincts on the brink of extinction, but BioWare always had a problem to make their romances believable rather than laughable, and, alas, **Mass Effect 3** is no exception.



Some of the messy solutions stem from technical issues, of which arguably the most complicated one was the «fallout» from **Mass Effect 2**. At the end of that game, almost any of your companions protecting you on the Suicide Mission could have ended dead, even including such series veterans as Garrus and Tali; this meant that none of them could return back to the Normandy as regular squad members (although for Garrus and Tali an exception was made, since, apparently, the designers believed that players would do anything possible to protect their two most beloved friends), and, in fact, Shepard's interaction with most of his old friends from **Mass Effect 2** is limited to occasional encounters. Hence, if you happened to romance any of them in the previous game, tough luck — no romantic trysts aboard the Normandy. Somebody like Miranda Lawson will be available for a thirty-second «quickie» in a remote corner on the Citadel, and the romance with Thane, the noble assassin, which was actually one of the high romantic points of **Mass Effect 2**, will be reduced to a few moments of dry-humping — yes, precisely that — in a hospital waiting room (!).

Oddly (or maybe not so oddly), I would say that the best romantic lines of **Mass Effect 3** are the new ones — with Steve Cortez as male Shepard's possible new gay partner, and Samantha Traynor as female Shepard's possible lesbian love interest.

Naturally, these characters and these romances were added, first and foremost, for the sake of «representation» — by 2012, BioWare and EA were taking that angle into account on a far more strict basis than they did back in 2007 — but my take on that is that I do not mind «representation» as long as it is well written, and although both Cortez and Traynor get a very limited amount of screen time, it is used wisely: Steve gently walks us through his personal tragedy of losing a loved one, and Samantha is just an adorable nerdy gal driven more by a sincere desire to do good in the world than by any sort of millennial narcissism. (Her *own* narcissism apparently amounts to dreaming of a house with a white picket fence).

On the whole, though, the aspect of *love* in the story development of **Mass Effect 3** certainly pales in comparison to that of *death*. There is a whole lot of it in the game, and this time around, it is not going to be mostly depersonalized death (of which there was a lot in the previous two games, but very little of it affected us on a personal level), and it is not going to be casual and transient death like the demise of your squad members in the Suicide Mission of **Mass Effect 2**, but the game is *really* going to savor its stuff, leading to some of the most memorable and, might I say, poetically rendered character farewells in video game history (Mordin, Thane), as well as some of the most tragically brutal demises in the same if you take the wrong turns, or happen to delight in particularly abysmal Renegade decisions (Wrex, Tali, Samara). The drama is not particularly deep or terribly original, but I'd be the first to admit that it is absolutely essential to the story. (Since it's *drama*, more on that below in the «Atmosphere» section).

Both the romance aspect of **Mass Effect 3** — largely because of the important role that same-sex flirting and courting plays in them — and the morbid aspect of **Mass Effect 3** — everybody loves Mordin! — have been discussed to death in the gaming community, but the repercussions of those aspects were really nothing compared to the repercussions of the game's ending and then, later on, those of the accompanying DLC add-ons, such as *Citadel*. Let us, therefore, take a couple of special detours here, before making any final conclusions on the plot / story side of the game.

Detour #1: The Ending Of Mass Effect 3

As I mentioned several times already, I was a latecomer to the **Mass Effect** magical seance, meaning that back in 2012, I was not holding my breath for the final part of the trilogy and never had a chance to experience the game in its original form, without the *Extended Ending* DLC produced as a result of the fan outrage. That said, the majority of the fans were hardly all that satisfied with the *Extended Ending* either, since all it did, essentially, was clarify a few plot details and add a few extra emotional perks, without changing the most offensive and disappointing parts of the **Mass Effect** finale. Even today, the general consensus among critics and fans alike remains that the resolution of **Mass Effect 3** is a spectacular failure, unlike,

say, the resolution to **The Witcher 3** (since **The Witcher** trilogy, in many respects, is the epic fantasy RPG counterpart to the epic sci-fi RPG of **Mass Effect**, I request permission to make use of that analogy from time to time) — and the few occasional dissenters, whenever and wherever they arise, are usually quickly overwhelmed and silenced.

Personally, I would define myself as a «semi-dissenter», feeling confident enough to go against the voice-of-the-people on certain counts but admitting the fairness of its criticism in others. Let us start from the simple idea, though, that the main problem of how **Mass Effect** ended had to do with the fact that nobody had any idea of how **Mass Effect** *should* have ended while thinking about how it should *begin*. When Drew Karpysyn came up with the linchpin of the game's plot — the Reapers' periodical purging of the Galaxy — the main intrigue was, of course, in that nobody had the slightest idea of who the Reapers were, where the Reapers came from, and why the Reapers were doing what they were doing. They were just this terrifying, transcendent, Cthulhu-like collective, totally beyond the grasp of pitifully primitive organic intellect: "*There is a realm of existence so far beyond your own you cannot even imagine it. I am beyond your comprehension*", as Sovereign boasts to Shepard in the first game. Clearly, in order to defeat the Reapers, one would have first needed to understand the Reapers, and if Sovereign were to be believed at all, understanding the Reapers was almost physically impossible.

Mass Effect 2 did relatively little to shatter that mystique, although, some might grumble, it had cheapened it a little with the introduction of «Harbinger», the supreme Reaper, and his corny habit of possessing the enslaved Collectors (*ASSUMING DIRECT CONTROL!*) that was not particularly terrifying once you got over the initial surprise. However, with the inevitable approaching of the final denouement, it became inevitable that *something* had to be done. The mystery had to be clarified in some way, or else you would just have to allow all the good folks of the Galaxy to accept their destiny and become Reaper fodder — and maybe H. P. Lovecraft could have been fond of such a solution, but the millions of **Mass Effect** fans around the globe, impatiently waiting to be allowed to tear the Reapers a new one, would not be very likely to appreciate such artistic bravery. In fact, they'd be more likely to lynch Casey Hudson and throw his lifeless body out of the top floor of EA headquarters, in proper Renegade fashion.

In assorted interviews, Karpysyn and other BioWare veterans relayed some of the painful experience of trying to come up with the proper «Reaper Revelation», and we now know that several variants had been considered, including a dark energy-related one that would directly tie into one of the unresolved loose ends of **Mass Effect 2** (the «dying sun issue» of the planet Haestrom where the team had to rescue Tali from the Geth). But for one reason or another (including really annoying ones such as «content leaks» from the studio), all of the early ideas were ultimately discarded. It is not entirely clear just exactly how much time did Casey Hudson have to hone his final conception — but we do know that it was hatched quite late into the

development cycle of **Mass Effect 3**, and that there was very little discussion about it, probably more because of a general feel of «let's finally get it over with!» rather than any dictatorial behavior on Casey's part.

On the basic level of sci-fi philosophy, the fundamental idea behind the ending, I think, was pretty good. The conception of inevitable destructive chaos in the universe as a result of conflict between organic beings and their artificial creations is, at the very least, interesting, and the idea of a superpower having to emerge and initiate a «cosmic cleansing» every once in a while to reboot the cycle is even more so — at the very least, it is no more absurd than any other sci-fi conception out there.

We have, in fact, been just given a vivid example of a life-and-death struggle between organics and robots (Quarians vs. Geth), and although some irated fans did point out that Shepard could broker peace between the two, thus apparently shattering the Reapers' idea of eternal conflict, this is but a minor logical infraction (after all, who could really tell whether that peace would not have been broken after a few generations or something?).

Likewise, the fundamental idea behind how that cycle could be broken also works — at least, in theory. At the end, you are granted the power to accept one of three possible solutions: «Destroy», leading to the total annihilation of your enemy (as well as any other forms of synthetic life in the process) but with the imminent risk of having the cycle later repeat itself in exactly the same way as it did before; «Control», where Shepard transforms into some sort of transcendental, omni-powerful entity to divert the actions of the Reapers into a more constructive scenario; and «Synthesis», where the Commander sacrifices himself or herself in order to help blend all life in the Universe so that everybody is organic and synthetic at once and the principal cause for conflict is removed by definition. All three solutions make sense, and the fact that the game subtly nudges you in favor of the «green» Synthesis solution also makes sense — it is the central button of the three, it is the most difficult one to be able to unlock, and it is the only one that seemingly helps living creatures to achieve the state of stable balance (even at the cost of all of us flashing sickly green implants all over our bodies, yucky-yuck).

Admittedly, there were two big problems with this scenario — although, might I add, both of them were probably realized by players post-factum, already *after* having been buried by the emotional waves of the ending, because realizing and voicing



them would require some cold-headed post-game analysis. One is the issue of the so-called *space magic*: pretty much everything that happens to Shepard upon meeting «The Catalyst» has no basis whatsoever in «hard sci-fi science» and seems to have been rather randomly pulled out of someone's *derrière*. How is it, for instance, that an instant synthesis between organic and synthetic beings, triggered all over the galaxy, becomes possible, and how exactly does it take Commander Shepard's dissolution in a flash of white light and a puddle of green goo to achieve that? Not that it isn't a viscerally powerful scene and all, but this is essentially a page torn out of the New Testament (Shepard, the Chosen Messiah, sacrifices himself for the salvation of the world), and you'd rather expect a turn like this from **Final Fantasy** than **Mass Effect**. Similar questions are to be asked about the Control solution; only «Destroy», which does not do all that much except, well, Destroy, feels realistic enough, if definitely not too satisfactory.

The other problem is the already mentioned «cheaping» of the Reaper phenomenon: once introduced as that unfathomable, incomprehensible, terrifying force that transcends past, present, and future, at the end of the game they are reduced to the role of blind, routine servants of «The Catalyst» — which, in turn, was itself not transcendental at all, but a creation of the organic super-race of the «Leviathans» (whose story is only revealed properly in the **Leviathan** DLC, not available in the original release of the game and, consequently, causing even more confusion among veteran fans). As many have pointed out, this essential transformation of the Reapers into simple pawns of some bigger game pretty much annulled the impact of Sovereign's introduction in the first game. It's as if yesterday Cthulhu was Cthulhu, and today he's bringing an order of pepperoni pizza to your front door, extra sauce not included.

Both of these problems *are* problems, there are no two ways about it. But at least the second one was probably inevitable. How are you expected to introduce an invincible enemy in the first part of a trilogy, when all the players already know for sure that the enemy *will* be defeated at the end of the third part? In a way, the blame lies on Drew Karpysyn — for getting himself into a fix with no easy way out right from the start, taking a big bluff that would be impossible to pull off without reputation loss. If your enemy is the *real* Cthulhu, there is simply no way to win, period. The only way to win is to show that your enemy is actually a bit of a phoney Cthulhu, which is what the **Mass Effect 3** writers tried to do — clumsily and with unpleasant elements of retconning, but in a way that made *some* sense, at least.

The «space magic» angle is worse, but I think that the main problem here was a lack of time and resources. With more time to think things over and a bigger budget, the Destroy / Control / Synthesis thing might have been handled better, without offending so much all the bright nerdy intellectuals who'd already defended their Reddit PhDs on the chemical constituency of Element Zero and the electromagnetic interpretations of the mass effect phenomenon. As it is, I do not find it difficult to let

my own imagination fill in the missing links, if I feel like wasting my time on any of that. But I don't, really; instead, I prefer to take the ending as a rather powerful metaphor — one that might, perhaps, one day become *really* powerful if any of our descendants actually live to see a true conflict between natural and artificial intelligence become the main existential problem of this world of ours, rather than much more ugly and less romantic conflicts between a bunch of very, *very* much organic assholes addicted to their disastrous power trips. (In this way, although many of its smaller themes resonate very deeply with what is going on today, I find, curiously, that the moral lessons of **Mass Effect** are somewhat less relevant for the current situation than those of the far more campy and shallow **Resident Evil** franchise).

In the end, though, it was neither the reinvention of the Reapers nor the proliferation of «space magic» that caused the outrage of **Mass Effect** fans throughout the galaxy. While playing and replaying the game, I ended up reading quite a few reviews, critical analyses, and fan meditations / discussions splattered all across the Web, and what struck me as the most common denominator between all of those was one major complaint which, in condensed form, reads simply: *MY CHOICES DID NOT MATTER!!* Meaning that, first and foremost, the players felt themselves not so much *confused*, *surprised*, or *irritated* over the ending as they felt *betrayed* — and that, for sure, is easily the worst emotion one can ever experience over anything, even something as ultimately insignificant as a video game.

The odd thing, for me, is that this was totally not the feeling I got. There were quite a few moments scattered across the ending that I found cringeworthy — but their density did not seem all that higher compared to the rest of the game. Some ideas were poorly thought out, some things that were supposed to make sense did not make sense until you started exerting your own imagination to fill in the gaps, etc. etc., but that clear feeling of disillusionment, disappointment, breach of confidence, betrayal, etc., that so many players obviously experienced was not there. As much as I even tried to, I just couldn't see the ending of **Mass Effect 3** as that one bleak moment when the writers and designers of the game intentionally spat their vile black spit inside my soul and trampled on it with their insensitive, offensive six-inch heels. And it was *particularly* weird in that, up until then, my emotional response to the game was very much similar to the majority of the players — the game moved me in the same mysterious ways. So maybe, unlike the majority of players, I preferred realistically romancing my human companions rather than Tali or Garrus, and maybe I had no qualms about bumping off occasional good guys in true Renegade spirit, but in general, I laughed where they laughed and cried where they cried. How did we split?

It is absolutely true, as the fans were complaining, that the three different endings weren't really *that* different: most of the ending cutscenes unfurled almost the same chain of events, only run through three different color filters (red for Destroy, blue for Control, green for Synthesis — even here, somewhat confusing since throughout the game, Red stood for Renegade and

Blue for Paragon actions, whereas Destroy and Control solutions could both be easily selected by a full-on Paragon or a full-on Renegade Shepard). But then, thinking about it, there was even less diversity in the endings for both **Mass Effect** and **Mass Effect 2** — at best, a few final options that could slightly (only slightly!) influence the events of the following games, such as saving or abandoning the Citadel Council at the end of **Mass Effect**, or saving or destroying the Collector Base at the end of **Mass Effect 2** — and those choices did not depend on the player's actions throughout the game, either. Yet there was never any outrage about either of those endings, even if they, too, railroaded the player into a rather predictable, pre-set conclusion, taking away the illusion of choice with nary a squeak from anybody.

In the end, while different people could certainly have their own different reasons for actively disliking the ending, the sheer *massiveness* of the outrage could be explained by one thing only: the ending of **Mass Effect 3** gave the majority of the fans a totally *unpredictable* outcome — one that they were simply not ready for. As formidable an enemy as the Reapers had been presented, most of the players booted up **Mass Effect 3** with a clear, well-determined goal: shoot up the baddies, power up the wonder-weapon, blow 'em all to hell, and ride off into the sunset, better still, back home to the lovely Liara and half a dozen blue-skinned babies. You have other things in mind? Fine, whatever, masturbate to your space voodoo or whatever you wish, but we've worked *way* too hard for our happy ending to be so arrogantly deprived of it at the last moment.

That this reasoning is at least close to the truth is easily corroborated by quite a few objective statistical facts — such as, for instance, the fact that even today, with the *Legendary Edition* out, almost half of the players pick the «[Destroy](#)» ending over «Control» and «Synthesis», for the simple reasons that (a) *REAPERS MUST DIE!* and (b) *Shepard must live*, even if it is only subtly hinted at that he may be alive at the ending's end. In reality, «Destroy» is the most simplistic and the most unsatisfactory of all possible outcomes — it basically means that the Commander limits himself to a temporary solution rather than grasp the unique chance to put «An End, Once And For All» to the billion-year old conflict — but hey, we did not romance Liara / Tali / Garrus all this time just so they could build a memorial shrine to our green / blue goo, right? Another, even more obvious hint at the true nature of the situation is the existence and actual popularity of the so-called «Happy Ending Mod» for PC players, whose name is pretty much self-explanatory (the description for the latest version on Nexusmods.com is as follows: «*The primary focus of the mod is to allow Commander Shepard to survive the final mission, as well as provide satisfying closure to this incredible trilogy through tweaked cutscenes, edited videos, new ending slides, and an overhauled memorial scene*» — yeah, right). I'm proud to say — yes, actually *proud* to say — that I never ever felt even the slightest temptation to download and try it out (although I have tried out quite a few other mods for the trilogy that actually enhanced it in a wide variety of tiny ways).

It's not that I *fundamentally* object against the possibility of a proper «happy ending» for **Mass Effect**. This is, after all, a choice-based RPG, in which multiple scenarios and outcomes are possible — are, in fact, obligatory — by definition, and to add a save-everyone-and-go-home ending as an alternative would be no biggie: I could cringe at it, others could be satisfied with it, and we'd all have our cake and eat it. Such is the way that was, for instance, chosen by the designers of **The Witcher 3**, which had a «proper» bittersweet ending (Ciri and Geralt part ways) and an alternate «happy» ending (Ciri and Geralt become partners). But even with **The Witcher 3**, many astute players have noticed that the «happy» ending feels somewhat more forced and less logical than the «unhappy» ending — not to mention less emotional — and this is because one thing that **Mass Effect** and **The Witcher** have in common is their desire to rise above the average RPG standard and amount to what might provisionally be called «video game High Art»; and as we all know, «High Art» and «happy endings» rarely go hand in hand in the first place. I'm sure some of us would love for Romeo and Juliet to live happily ever after, or for Hamlet to marry Ophelia, but this is not how things usually work on that artistic level — or, for that matter, in real life.

Another hole in the «*my choices did not matter!*» argument is that it fundamentally distorts the very idea of how choice works in choice-based role-playing or adventure games. From a certain point of view, the player's choices *always* matter — at the moment in which the player is making them — and they also *never* matter, because whatever you choose, you are still selecting one of the paths pre-made, pre-programmed, pre-tested for you by the game's authors (in this way, adventure games and RPGs seriously differ from strategy games like **Civilization**, where there is an infinity of possible outcomes, even if they all fall into the same class). Let us not forget that approximately 90% of the choices made by **Mass Effect** players throughout the game do not go *anywhere* — they are simply there to help you get into character, to feel more like a cynical badass or more like a knight-in-shining-armor depending on your own spiritual constants and variables. Of the remaining 10% that actually go *somewhere* (in that your saved games store them and check on them later at least once), an absolute majority tweaks the game in very minor ways. Finally, the importance of the major choices is that they make you feel good (or bad) in the *here and now*, and if you refuse to accept that, you're already setting yourself up for almost certain disappointment, which concerns not only **Mass Effect** but the majority of choice-based games out there.

A good example here is the resolution of the Quarian vs. Geth conflict on Rannoch. If you side with the synthetic Geth, or if you play the game well enough to save both sides, the Geth become your allies in the global war with the Reapers. However, later on, if you choose the «Destroy» ending in which Shepard wipes out all artificial life in the galaxy, the Geth automatically perish along with the Reapers. So what was the point of saving them in the first place? The game just ignored your choice and negated your success in proving that organic and synthetic life can peacefully co-exist in the universe. When The Catalyst

states to Shepard that destructive conflict between organics and synthetics is "inevitable", in a know-it-all tone that seems to allow no objection, surely the Commander *should* have been able to retort that he just put an end to such a conflict, and demand that, uh, the «Destroy» mechanism be modified so that only the *asshole* synthetics should be vaporized, and the cute little Geth friends be left alive and blinking?..

In this situation, I totally agree that the omission of this option is a serious flaw — one of the many such flaws — in the rushed writing of the ending. (And by *rushed*, I certainly mean crappy dialog like: [Shepard] "*Who designed the Crucible?*" — [Catalyst / Star-Child] "*You would not know them, and there is not enough time to explain*" — yes, because the game has to be shipped in two weeks' time). But I certainly would not agree that this is some sort of blatant stumbling block that renders everything stupid and meaningless. Everything could, in fact, be made much easier by the insertion of just a few additional lines of dialog, e.g. [Shepard] "*Inevitable? Haven't we just proved to you that peace and understanding between synthetics and organics is a reality, down there on Rannoch?*" — [Catalyst / Star-Child] "*Irrelevant. Do not delude yourself with minor successes on the spur of the moment. Your kind thinks, at best, in hundreds, maybe thousands of years; my intelligence spawns billions. Temporary alliances between synthetic and organic life have been many, yet in the end they still came back to the same thing — assertion of mutual superiority through struggle for power, death and destruction. Your limited mind is only capable of temporary solutions; my intelligence and experience can offer you a rare chance of achieving a permanent one.*" Hmm, this feels more convincing than Mac Walters.

This is just one possible example of how the writing could have been better. The concept could have been better elaborated, the plot holes could have been more impressively covered up, and certainly the idea of the «war assets» gathered by Shepard over the course of the game could have been better exploited (as it happens, the difference between the Commander going inside The Crucible virtually unprepared and him doing it while backed by the strongest fleet possible is minimal, plot-wise). But that sort of criticism is really applicable to almost *any* video game ending; 100% satisfaction is really hard to come by when you're pining for your just rewards upon beating all the challenges. The *major* criticisms of the ending, though — namely, that it (a) does not make any kind of sense whatsoever and (b) that it betrays the players by intentionally ignoring all their choices — do not hold water. All they do, really, is simply emphasize the greatness of the trilogy, which made even the «average» player fall in love with it so much that their unreasonable expectations for the ending caused them to crash and burn in one of the most notorious crash-and-burn situations in the history of the medium.

And for all the flaws of the ending, it is hard *not* to admit the relative bravery of Hudson, Walters, and others for their flat-out refusal to give the players a simplistic, watered-down, feel-good finale. Even more than that, I actually *welcome* the fact that

the players, right at that crucial moment, find themselves relatively stripped of agency as Commander Shepard realizes that he or she is not able to exercise absolute free will, but must obey a pre-determined path (well, one out of three, to be precise). Were I to set a proper «canon» ending for the game, I would probably have the Commander toy with the «Destroy» solution for a brief while before wisely realizing that destruction is not the proper path, and that even if the Reapers may be seen as «evil» by our moral standards, that does not really make them any more «evil» than any other destructive race of organic or synthetic entities. Shepard then realizes that, despite all of his efforts and achievements, he is still little more than a pawn in the overreaching hand of destiny — well, maybe a Knight — intended to fulfill an important, but subservient function in the tissue of the Universe... and, by initiating the Synthesis path, humbly accepts that destiny.

Of course, the finale really makes a Christ-like figure out of Shepard (= out of yourself), as he ascends The Crucible, beaten, battered, and bruised, to make the ultimate sacrifice for the sake of the Universe — the parallels are almost trivial — and it is this Christ-like analogy that the writers were pining for first and foremost, building the resolution of the Reaper conflict around this Ultimate Sacrifice rather than the other way around. Most of the players likely expected a finale close to the Grand Battle Victory conclusions of **Mass Effect** and **Mass Effect 2**, rather than a sci-fi take on the New Testament — and if I were to let my cynical bitterness override my compassion, I'd probably suggest that the same players would much rather prefer SNL's [Djesus Uncrossed](#) to the original ending of the Good Book. But hell no, I *shouldn't* be letting my cynical bitterness override my compassion. Or should I?

My prediction is that, if some video games are bound to go down in history after all and the **Mass Effect** trilogy is one of them, then history will eventually look far more kindly on the ending of **Mass Effect 3** than its veteran fanbase. One major reason for this is that the game's focus on the conflict between natural and artificial intelligence might eventually turn out to be more prophetic than it looks today, when the «AI bubble» triggered by LLM-based chatbots, upon close analysis, turns out to be no closer to *true* artificial intelligence than an abacus (the word «intelligence» instead means *understanding*, which no modern day computer system is capable of). Sometime in the future the situation may change — though it would require a complete reversal of today's science economics, at the very least — and then, perhaps, the future envisaged by the creators of **Mass Effect** will be far easier to relate to, and the ending of **Mass Effect 3** far more terrifying to behold.

The other reason, far more probable in a short-term perspective, is that, as the game gets older and its fanbase inevitably shrinks to those who play it for its uniqueness rather than its technological innovation, a larger percentage of the players might be forgiving the flaws and welcoming the feels. At present, the ending probably comes across as particularly irritating to the two opposites of the spectrum — the «video game jocks», who are basically there to shoot up baddies and gather trophies

and have no patience or tolerance toward any Star Child bullshit, and the «video game nerds», a.k.a. the real-life equivalents of Sheldon Cooper who get off on analyzing every piece of sci-fi through the prism of their physics textbooks. In between are all those who love **Mass Effect** for its storyline more than they do for its weapon arsenal, but who are also more willing to take **Mass Effect** as an artistic metaphor than a realistic alternate universe — and, consequently, to revel in its bittersweet ending without demanding a reasonable explanation to the «space magic» of The Crucible.

On the whole, I must say that it's probably a good thing that Shakespeare lived in pre-Internet days. The outrage over the «no-good-ending» controversy of **Mass Effect 3** ties in very well with such things as statistics on **The Witcher 3**, where most of the polls I have seen vastly favor the ending in which Ciri becomes a Witcher with Geralt over the one in which she gets to make the *responsible*, if emotionally heartbreaking, decision of becoming Empress; or with a similar, though on a much smaller scale, outrage over the finale of **Life Is Strange**, where the game clearly hinted that the morally right and spiritually satisfactory way of ending things was to let go of the hand of your best friend whose life you'd been fighting for all through the game's five episodes. What can I say? People love their happy endings — not a lot has really changed since the days of classic Hollywood — and artists will always have to defend their tragic finales against popular demand. If you ask me, though, I'd say that «*we need more tragic endings in video games these days*» is a slogan that makes much more sense than, say, «*we need more strong female characters in video games*» or whatever else of the kind they keep pushing forward in responsible gaming magazines these days. Because, honestly, we have a *shitload* of strong female characters. But bittersweet endings that make you feel, think, and improve your own character? Nowhere near true sufficiency.

Detour #2: The DLCs Of Mass Effect 3

Although a discussion of the **Mass Effect 3** ending and a subsequent discussion of its additional downloadable content might look like two completely different issues, they are, in fact, not — because most of those DLCs were either directly related to the ending, or indirectly aimed at offering the offended fans a chance for an ultimate reconciliation with BioWare. But first, a little backstory to remind ourselves of the grounds for comparison.

The first **Mass Effect** game was released back in 2007, when the concept of «downloadable content» was still relatively fresh. «Expansion packs» for successful games, which you could purchase physically in stores, had been around for quite some time, and BioWare made good use of the format as early as with **Baldur's Gate**, but DLCs — smaller packages of additional content that could hardly even warrant a physical wrapping of their own — were only beginning to get real traction, and thus **Mass Effect** only had two of them: *Bring Down The Sky*, a solid little stand-alone novella about a Batarian terrorist threat,

and *Pinnacle Station*, a shooting training mission that was mostly of interest to those interested in the combat angle of **Mass Effect** and did not enjoy a warm response (in fact, it was not even included in the *Legendary Edition* remaster as the developers claimed that they «lost» the original code; of course, this did not stop the modders from actually «finding» it, once again proving that everything coming out of corporate mouths is bullshit by definition. Not that it should change anybody's mind about the quality of *Pinnacle Station*, of course).

By 2010, the situation had changed drastically: online game sales had surpassed physical purchases, and small add-ons to commercially successful titles were becoming a major source of profit, so **Mass Effect 2** already got the green light for a whole bunch of DLCs, some of which were almost as highly acclaimed on their own as the base game itself (*Lair Of The Shadow Broker*) and some, while not as popular with critics or fans, featured important components of the story, such as *The Arrival*, playing which was necessary to make the opening of **Mass Effect 3** (with Shepard imprisoned) make any sense. Unlike the DLCs of **Mass Effect**, these ones were taken good care of so that they could be properly integrated into the main game: for instance, new characters such as Kasumi Goto, the master thief, or Zaeed Masani, the rugged mercenary, could not only become Shepard's potential squadmates on older missions, but even have additional dialog lines written for them so as to offer you even more replay value.

It was obvious that **Mass Effect 3** would continue going down the same route, but it was also obvious that the «EA-ization» of BioWare would also use the scheme to prioritize profit; thus, **Mass Effect 3** was the first game in the franchise to adhere to the strategy of «Day 1 DLC» — the first piece of content was released on the exact same day as the main game, but you had to pay extra for it. This was *From Ashes*, a side story that also introduced an additional potential member of the team — Javik, the last surviving Prothean, miraculously frozen in time for thousands of years — and certainly caused some grumbling among fans, since not only was Javik pretty well-written, quickly becoming popular among the more renegadishly-minded groups of players, but his role seems to have been quite of vital importance to the overall plot (at least, his presence on the team is certainly far more relevant to the struggle against the Reapers than that of Zaeed or Kasumi). It was certainly not a



good thing to let fans feel like they were being ripped off on the very first day — a feeling that could not be related to the outrage about the ending, but probably ended up enhancing it.

Today, now that all the DLCs have been dissolved within the *Legendary Edition* upgrade, the confusion over Javik is largely a thing of the past, but back in 2012, it actually mattered; neither **Mass Effect** nor **Mass Effect 2** ever gave the fans serious grounds to claim that the studio loved money more than its characters, while **Mass Effect 3** seemingly established such a precedent from the get-go. Fortunately, in this case one could not at least complain about not getting one's money's worth: while the basic plot twist of the discovery of Javik's pod was, like so many other things about the plot of **Mass Effect 3**, heavily contorted and illogical, the character himself was *awesome* — basically a walking, talking, metaphoric kick-in-the-gut for all the history revisionists out there who like to imagine human past as a fragrant bed of roses that wilted and decayed with the arrival of Western imperialism. Javik throws a healthy Prothean wrench into any such idealism, shedding some light on the «actual history» of his nation — who, as it turns out, were not so much a race of benevolent, humanistic entities dedicated to spreading Enlightenment throughout the galaxy but a militaristic, self-consciously social-Darwinist organization of strict believers in the survival-of-the-fittest theory. Throughout the game, Javik shows himself as a courageous character, ready to sacrifice himself for the greater good and all, but his ruthlessness and cynicism basically make him into the ultimate sidekick for a full-on Renegade Shepard. If you are a fully idealistic, goody-two-shoes kind of type, you might consider saving yourself some time and avoiding that trip back to Eden Prime altogether, just to save yourself some nerve cells...

...but, of course, all the true **Mass Effect** fans will readily embrace Javik's colorfulness, as he is easily the most frequently quotable character in the entire game; and how could he not be, if his memorable lines range from "*throw him out the airlock!*" (a running gag throughout the series) to the almost Remarquian (not really, though) "*stand in the ashes of a trillion dead souls and ask the ghosts if honor matters*". Much like Kurosawa's Kikuchio, Javik is there for both the laughs and the pain, and is always equally convincing, thanks to the excellent talents of senior writer John Dombrow (who, as it happens, also wrote most of the Krogan-related plotline for the first act of the game — all the more impressive considering that he only joined the BioWare staff around 2010). So I guess, in retrospect, we can forgive EA their blatantly crass move; as of 2024, it certainly feels *far* more forgivable than having to run *Legendary Edition* through their crappy app each time I have a craving for **Mass Effect** coming on!

The second major piece of plot-related DLC, released about three months later, constituted a rare case of unscheduled change of plans — it was the *Extended Cut*, already mentioned earlier, that represented a compromise between BioWare and the angry fan crowds and, honestly, was probably the best kind of compromise that could be achieved at the time: refusing to

change the ending as such, the team added more closure, more explanatory dialog, more romantic moments between Shepard and his potential love interests, and gallantly made it all available free of charge. It did not really satisfy anybody who had problems with the ending in the first place, but it was a solid step in the right direction, and a good example for everybody on how to be able to listen to constructive criticism without sacrificing one's individual artistry. At the very least, I do not think that anybody ever said that the *Extended Cut* made the ending even *worse* than it was before. (Also, it did introduce a very specific feature that finally made amassing a large bunch of «War Assets» worthwhile — if you don't have enough of them, your love interest dies; if you do, he/she survives — and *now* you finally have enough incentive to keep on scanning all those planets like crazy!)

Far more debatable would be the addition of the *Leviathan* DLC. With this additional journey that is at the same time a seriously different experience from the main game *and* a crucially relevant piece of the overall plot, **Mass Effect** writers truly pushed the game into Lovecraftian territory. Suddenly, you are aware of a terror more deep and mysterious than the Reapers themselves — it is really at this point in the plot when all the past encounters with Sovereign and Harbinger start to feel like seances of hyperbolic bragging, as the writers and designers go all the way to make the Reapers look small against the perspective of their actual creators. For this reason, the decision to release *Leviathan* as a DLC add-on has often been criticized, and indeed, it *does* look a lot like the team simply did not have enough time on their hands to program in that entire development by shipping time. Had the *Leviathan* revelation been included from the very start, it is possible that at least the proverbial «nerds»' reaction to the ending might have been a little mollified, as we get to learn a huge lot about the Reapers' backstory with a super-ambitious plot twist that may be opening more questions than answering, but at least these are questions that logically belong in the story and which you may answer through your own imagination.

Actually, the only serious problem I have with *Leviathan* is that its ambitiousness, morbid seriousness, and overall darkness almost makes the ending with *The Catalyst* trivial by comparison. The visually and atmospherically impressive underwater meeting between Shepard and the Reapers' creators should rightfully have belonged somewhere in between his talk with the Star Child and his final sacrifice, as difficult as it might have been to insert it in there plot-wise (technically, that *is* the way in which the original players experienced these encounters, but these days, of course, with the DLCs all integrated right inside the game, many people might want to run through the *Leviathan* segment in the middle of the game, which is *not* a good option — if you are still new to **Mass Effect 3**, take my advice and put it off until the very last moment possible). In all other respects, it is a respectable achievement that adds at least one extra emotional vibe to the universe of **Mass Effect** without compromising any of the previous ones.

The next plot-related piece, released at the end of 2012, was *Omega*, and in plot terms, it's really nothing to write home about, because the entire thing was clearly designed with the trigger-happy part of the saga players in mind. Most of the time that you spend on Omega, the classic den of iniquity from **Mass Effect 2** that you have to wrestle away from Cerberus and put back in the hands of Asari mafia boss Aria T'Loak, you actually spend shooting — Aria herself and her Turian love-hate partner Nyreen are colorful characters, but both are given fairly little time to flash and expand their colorfulness; far more impact is given to introducing new types of terrifying enemies to provide more complex challenges for those who prefer talking with their



guns to their mouths. The villain («General Petrovsky») is cartoonish in a James Bond kind of way, his monstrous creations («The Adjutants») are gross in a Peter Jackson kind of way, and mostly this is just a couple extra hours of shallow, delicious entertainment for the Renegadeish player who wants to be rewarded with a juicy kiss from a hot, sexy, murderous Asari crime gal at the end. (Totally worth it, I'd say, before sacrificing yourself in a puddle of green goo for the greater good of humanity).

Nowhere near as many people remember *Omega*, though, I guess, as they do the last, most unusual, and, in some ways, most controversial DLC for the base game — *Citadel*, released in March 2013 as a last symbolic farewell to Commander Shepard and all of his friends. Reputation-wise, *Citadel* quickly went on to be acclaimed as one of the best, if not *the* best, **Mass Effect**-related DLC of all time — I think that only *Lair Of The Shadow Broker* can compete with it on this front — even if, both plot- and atmosphere-wise, it took a turn into a completely different direction, one that not even the most penetrating fans of the saga probably could have predicted from the series' writers, and one that has fairly few, if any, direct analogies in the history of video game franchises.

One of the main complaints about the ending of the game, as you remember, was the lack of the proverbial «closure»: the players were never offered a chance to learn about the fates of Shepard's beloved companions after the Blue, Red, and Green Debacle, or even to simply spend a bit more time with them in the same manner that made it possible past the Suicide Mission in **Mass Effect 2** (the only game out of three that was essentially open-ended, as you could still roam the galaxy and complete uncompleted assignments after the main quest was over). Although *Citadel* still takes place *before* the final confrontation

rather than *after* it, the DLC was clearly designed to remedy that specific issue — apart from the rather bizarre main piece of «plot», it is *all* about Shepard's interaction with his current and former squadmates, and it does play out like one long, detailed, in-depth goodbye to all those lovable buddies who had always constituted **Mass Effect's** primary selling points.

Pretty much everybody who ever wrote about *Citadel* was sure to drop the phrase «fan service»; but BioWare would not be BioWare if it lowered itself to the practice of offering *pure*, predictable fan service. Instead of simply having the characters do what they were supposed to do — Garrus being dashing and suave, Tali being bashful and nerdy, Jack being rude and punchy, Miranda doing her ice-queen-melting thing, etc. — the writers of *Citadel* decided to put an openly humorous touch on just about everything, often veering into the direction of self-parodic spoof. The main «storyline» of the DLC was the most openly ridiculous twist ever introduced into the game (the Commander facing his own Doppelgänger — ironically, that line of development brings to mind the conflict with Sarevok in **Baldur's Gate**), and after it was resolved, the Commander had open access to a large entertainment sector of the Citadel that he probably never even suspected of previously existing. And pretty much *everything* there is played for fun — lambasting stereotypes about Shepard himself, his friends, his surrounding NPCs, galactic politics, economy, and culture, and even the perks and oddities of the game's multiplayer community (!).

I am not going to say that *Citadel* feels perfectly natural within the confines of **Mass Effect 3**. Curiously, it must have felt *much* better at the time of its original release, when the absolute majority of players downloaded it after completing the game, then played it separately by restoring one of their mid-game saves, as a sort of small, separate, stand-alone **Mass Effect** game (not that it is objectively small — in terms of available story and arcade content, it is clearly the hugest piece of DLC in the entire franchise, taking hours and hours to properly complete, especially considering that it features some of *the* toughest combat assignments in the history of **Mass Effect**). For everybody who was late to the party, like myself, *Citadel* became a regular part of the game, unlockable right after the end of Act I and the Cerberus coup — and it felt *way* bizarre to be able to veer between the classical tragedy of the main story and the comedic punchlines of *Citadel* at will. One second Commander Shepard is witnessing death, destruction, and despair on an unimaginable scale; the next second, Commander Shepard is off for drinks with one of his girlfriends at some posh casino or to test his skills in an arcade game of skill — or, finally, to throw a classic college dorm party for all of his friends, which may or may not even intend in accidental sexual intercourse with a real-life Prothean, depending on the amount of drinks consumed and the general status of your love life.

This contrast did weigh heavy on my own shoulders for a long time and even made me question whether the humor of *Citadel* (and some of it — not counting all the running gags, perhaps — is *very* high quality humor indeed) did not blow up the serious themes of the main game in an almost irreparable way. I mean, it is *definitely* difficult to take the Reaper threat seriously

after something like this party dialog:

Javik (to Jack): *You there. Tattooed human. I would like to touch you.*

Jack: *I'm not nearly drunk enough for that.*

Javik (to Steve Cortez): *You then, shuttle pilot? How about you?*

Cortez: *Um... Why's Javik getting all touchy-feely?*

Jack: *Hey, Collector-looking asshole, maybe go touch yourself?*

Javik: *That does not happen until the end of the party.*

This is *Citadel* for you, in a nutshell, making all your favorite characters let their hair down like they never did before and even uncovering all sorts of previously hidden or repressed attributes in characters you might originally have found too flat or boring. But it's more than that — one minute, they were all a bunch of straight-faced space cowboys on a mission to save the world, and then the next one they all magically mutate into one of the casts of *Saturday Night Live* (and a *much* funnier one than any of those from at least the past decade, I'd add). Cool or cringey?

Somehow, this sharp contrast between the hilarious and the horrendous feels *much* more relevant to me these days, in 2024, when you find yourself obligated to somehow balance between living in the nightmare of nearby war (waged by your own country against your neighbor with all the expected brutality of an aggressive invasion) and incessant political repression (some of it already affecting your own friends and colleagues), and having to cope with your daily duties. Lightweight humor, under these conditions, is a crucial part of the recipe on how not to lose your sanity — apparently, once you find out that you have *permanently* lost your capacity for having fun and enjoying yourself, you're pretty much done for. I mean, if Anne Frank and her family were still capable of having parties and lightweight recreation in their hideout, why shouldn't Commander Shepard and his friends be unable to host a party right before going off to storm Cerberus headquarters? In that way, as you gradually adjust to the contrast, *Citadel* actually ceases to be simply a parodic spoof and takes on a therapeutic function.

One might find it strange — a defect of the writing or a case of poor judgement on the rationality level of human beings? — that life in *Citadel* goes on almost as if the impending Reaper threat did not exist: people go out to restaurants, gamble away in casinos, vividly discuss issues of shopping and grooming, even despite the fact that just a few miles away, the cargo holds of the Citadel are bursting with loads of homeless refugees, many of whom have just witnessed unimaginable horrors. Which, come to think of it, is *precisely* the picture I saw for myself in Prague and Vienna last summer, so who's to blame BioWare for telling it to our face exactly the way that it is? People will still be enjoying themselves on the threshold of any potential apocalypse, and there's nothing you can do about that except taking it easy.

Besides, it gives BioWare writers a good chance to unleash all the remaining social sarcasm they had to bottle up previously — now that *Citadel* has pretty much removed all the constraints of the action taking place in a multi-racial galaxy in the distant future, they can throw in as much jarringly relevant critique as possible. For instance, my favorite mini-character in the Casino segment of the DLC is a young lady who goes by the name of Aishwarya Ashland, whose presence is unforgettable if you have had any experience of communicating with similar people in real life:

Croupier: *Round and round and round she goes...*

Aishwarya Ashland: *What's that supposed to mean? Is that, like, code for how wasted I am?*

Croupier: *Uh, no, ma'am... we just call the wheel «she».*

Aishwarya Ashland: *That's sexism! Wait, I mean objectivism. That's sexism for inanimate things.*

Shepard: *...Miss, where exactly WERE you educated?*

Aishwarya Ashland: *Oh, online. You can take these courses, and it teaches you responsibility, because YOU do the grading.*

(This last line should hit *particularly* close to home to anybody well familiar with the current state of the education sector in just about any part of the world where the percentage of Aishwarya Ashlands goes above the two-digit level... well, like I said, in just about any part of the world, period.)

Considering that *Citadel* is pretty much all about jokes — with just a couple notable exceptions — it never ceases to amaze me just how many of them actually work, and how diverse the subject matters are. Some are inside jokes that will only be funny to those who are well familiar with the Trilogy (such as the ones sending up Shepard's trademark goodbye of "I have to go", or Shepard's casual exchanges with Wrex in the first game — "Wrex", "Shepard"). Some slip in casual references to popular culture that will only be decipherable by those in the know (e.g. Grunt the Krogan, working as a bouncer for the final party and turning away unwanted guests with one-liners like "*sorry, you've just lost the [fight for your right to party](#)*"). Some display a deep knowledge of gamer culture, culled from observing player interaction in **Mass Effect 3**'s multiplayer mode (not something I am too familiar with, but even I can appreciate the humor of a clueless arms dealer trying to sell a shotgun to an Adept biotic not suited to carrying around heavy weapons). Some take a page out of Andy Kaufman's textbook, such as the idea to have Shepard execute 183 push-ups in a row in a bet with James Vega... for absolutely *nothing at all*. And some simply send up character stereotypes... in pretty much the same way cynical gamers had been sending them up for years themselves.

In fact, this is not so much «fan service» here as it is «fan echo»: in an astute turn of creativity, BioWare takes all the jabs and criticisms of its own production accumulated from online discussions and turns them on itself. Like presidential candidates who not only appear on *Saturday Night Live* in the election cycle but even willingly allow the show to let them make fun of

their own foibles, BioWare writers calculate correctly that if they not only allow fans to make fun of their creations, but join in the action themselves, this will only ensure the prolonged longevity and «waterproof-ness» of the characters themselves. So Commander Shepard used to be ridiculed because of clumsy animators messing up his dance moves in the first two games? Let's make «Commander Shepard goes out on the dance floor» a central motif of the Citadel Party and tear him a new one, turning what used to be an embarrassing animation slip-up into a comic victory of the *I can't dance, I can't sing* variety. So you thought the catfights between Ice Queen Miranda and Tough Bitch Jack in **Mass Effect 2** were overacted and clichéd? Let's

throw them another one that will be so grossly absurd and over-the-top, it'll be like a secret message: «*see, we realize all too well ourselves that our games are soaked in hyperboles and clichés all the time, but hey, how else do you expect us to make a living or anything?*» And even if it's all planned and calculated, it's just so inventive and efficient that I cannot help but admire the creativity of the writers. In my humble opinion, the only thing missing from this shenanigan is Commander Shepard opening up the last and rowdiest segment of the party with one big "*WE DRINK OR WE DIE!*"



Softly sprinkled among the non-stop waves of humor are just a few serious notes, such as the memorial service held for Thane (very touching if your female Shepard had a doomed romance with the philosophical Drell assassin) or the opportunity to read the *Band Of Brothers*-style memoirs of Captain Anderson. That said, even most of the romantic bits are «funny-cute» rather than emotional/sentimental, as if they were presenting Shepard and his/her love interest as well-established, jaded partnerships where it is more important to decide who is going to let the dog out or take out the trash than how to survive in the coming apocalypse — again, a good move from the writers who seem to realize that «romantic writing» has always been one of the weakest links in the BioWare chain, and that taking a classic *SNL* stance on representation of romantic partnership is the only way to actually save those romances from crashing and burning.

Yet, at the end of the day, there is still one moment in the *Citadel* DLC where pretty much everybody capable of tearing up tears up — after the final party is over and everybody returns to the *Normandy* for impending battle duty, when Shepard takes one last pause to have a quick chat with either his romantic partner or (in the absence of one) his closest friend inside the

docking bay: "*It's been a (damn) good ride*", the partner remarks — "*The best*", Shepard replies after a brief pause. Aside from this acting as bait for a gazillion corny pathetic tribute videos on YouTube, it's a genuinely beautiful moment — and also, yes, a solid reminder that the game, with all of its thrills, surprises, moral ambiguities, and tough decisions along the way, means so much more than its ending, regardless of the attitude you prefer to choose toward it.

All in all, *Citadel* delivers the goods on many levels — so much so that even the embarrassing «Happy Ending» mod has predictably integrated it as a sequence that plays out *after* the defeat of the Reapers, which might seem logical at one time but now, to me, feels like it completely misses the point of the DLC: how much more brave and dashing is it to allow yourself to laugh impending death in the face than to simply commit to a life of non-stop partying after Evil has been vanquished? There's a good reason we learn almost nothing (other than a short bunch of dry biographical facts in the Appendices) about the subsequent lives of the characters in *Lord Of The Rings* after the defeat of Sauron, other than *they all lived happily ever after* and suchlike. No need to change the basic psychological rules of the game for **Mass Effect**, either.

In conclusion, all of the games DLC's, one way or another, fit rather nicely inside the base game — a most important point given that the life age of a «DLC» as an actual «DLC» is relatively short, and sooner or later it is simply going to be packaged together with its mother tree for eternity, as it did happen in the *Legendary Edition* where there is no longer any pronounced border between the main game and the add-ons. *From Ashes* and *Leviathan* should have been components of the base game from the start anyway; *Omega* is a little outside the loop but it is non-intrusive, and can easily be skipped if you do not particularly care for a tough, primarily fight-oriented segment; and finally, *Citadel* requires a bit of an open mind to sit comfortably right in the middle of the game, but what's wrong with one more stimulus to do some mind-opening? (Just in case, remember that it is highly recommendable to throw the last party right before the final mission run where you proceed to storm Cerberus' headquarters — that way, you get to pick up every «unlocked» surviving member of the team).

One last important thing to be said about the overall storyline of **Mass Effect 3** is this: good or bad, it is *finished*. The ending brings the story to such a finale that any «sequel» would have been literally impossible — to ask «what comes next?» makes about as much sense as to ask «what happens after Judgement Day?». It's not even that the three different endings, similar as they are in overall presentation, destroy the notion of a «canon» route and set up a challenge that would be impossible to override without spitting all over the players' choices (*again!!*); it's that the three different endings all end in a moment of supernatural transcendence, whose consequences are, by law of nature, unimaginable. It is impossible to suggest that the writers did not realize it themselves — clearly, they opted for the ultimate closure, deciding for themselves that the story of Commander Shepard *and* the universe as we «know» it would be made complete here, and there would be no return.

This is why, when **Mass Effect Andromeda** was finally released in 2017, what we saw was thankfully not a proper «sequel», but rather a side-story whose main concept skilfully avoided having to deal with the consequences of the tri-colored ending by taking the action back to a pre-Reaper Invasion world, with its concept of sleeper ships sent away to different galaxies in order to escape the Reaper threat. As mediocre (at least, in overall comparison) as that game was, story-wise, it at least avoided the temptation to trample directly upon the legacy of the Trilogy. Alas, as of 2024, for lack of original ideas — who even cares about original ideas in 2024, right? — a new **Mass Effect** game is currently in the works, and rumors so far have been that it *might* actually be a sequel to the Trilogy, taking place in a post-Reaper world. My sincere hopes are that it is not so, and that the game might be just another «detour» of the **Andromeda** variety; if I am wrong, my equally sincere wish, strengthened by all sorts of prayers to the Enkindlers, is that it get stuck in development hell forever, or at least until the inevitable dissolution of BioWare and/or Electronic Arts. There's only so much trauma I can handle in a world beset with the evils of greed, corruption, war, idiocy, and *Star Wars Episode 7*.

Action

As I have already mentioned, one of the major goals of **Mass Effect 3** — fortunately, just one of, not the goal-to-end-all-goals — was to make it even more action-packed than its predecessors. While the action / combat mechanics of the first game, in spite of its experimental audacity, were commonly criticized for «clunkiness», **Mass Effect 2** was widely praised for having «learned the lesson» and getting its shooting system more in line with other cover-based shooters. With **Mass Effect 3**, then, the idea was to tighten that system even further, introduce some useful improvements both to the rules of the game set up for the player and to the behavior of your AI opponents, and show the world that BioWare is no slouch when it comes to keeping up with the Joneses of action gaming.



At the same time, BioWare also heard fan complaints about how **Mass Effect 2** veered *too* far away from the RPG aspects of the original game, meaning that players found themselves robbed of the right to make a lot of choices — for instance, the gun and armor inventory were greatly reduced, making the classic RPG fan delight of spending hours comparing the various stats,

parameters, and bonuses between different types of weapons pretty much non-existent. Likewise, the number of different skills available to Shepard and members of his team had also gone down to an absolute minimum, and you could only upgrade each of them four times, with the number of XP points necessary for each upgrade accumulating in geometric progression. To many players, this seemed like no fun and a clear sign of **Mass Effect** «degrading» from its strategic RPG roots into a purely adrenaline-based experience — not a crime, perhaps, but just a wee bit disrespectful to the old guard, so to speak.

Subsequently, the action-related part of **Mass Effect 3** becomes sort of a reasonable compromise between the older and newer fans, and, much to my surprise, one that works almost ideally for my personal taste. In fact, BioWare went even further here and offered the players (provided they start a completely new game without importing a save file from **Mass Effect 2**) a selection of three different modes from the very start — Action (where the conversations are greatly reduced and answers are always provided automatically, making the plot run much like in a **Mortal Kombat** game), Story (where combat difficulty is reduced to minimum, so that players can concentrate almost exclusively on the plot), and RPG (where all the aspects are balanced); to me, this seems like a nice, but unnecessary gesture, because even I, generally not an «action guy» in the least, think that combat in **Mass Effect** is a *very* important part of the general immersive experience, and that you cannot really properly get in the shoes of Commander Shepard without a little sweat and blood (and, honestly, combat on the lowest skill levels is a breeze in all three games).

The general ideology of the third game in the series did not change much from earlier times: most of the challenges you experience come from defeating your enemies in combat, with practically no «puzzle-like» tasks in sight (occasionally you have to find an object or two to complete an assignment, but that's always childplay compared to fighting). The game also preserves the pacing of **Mass Effect 2**, where any typical mission was essentially a lengthy shoot-out, usually culminating in a mini-boss fight or two, but strategically interrupted by bits of plot where you could make some relatively important decisions along the way (to earn Paragon or Renegade points, for instance); this way, action and story find themselves in relative balance, with just a few exceptions (the *Omega* DLC pushes the whole thing way too far into the combat zone — but then again, it *was* a DLC specifically targeted at action lovers who appreciate a tough challenge, and it is really a superfluous appendage to the game that nobody *needs* to complete).

Speaking of combat, the base mechanics of it did not change as much from **Mass Effect 2** to **3** as they did from **1** to **2**: the third game saw the return of grenades as an efficient means of crowd control (that said, enemies toss grenades just as well now, and these can sometimes one-shot you even at lower difficulties, so beware!), and there's a funny «combat roll» move now that can help you speed up or avoid getting stunned and swarmed by enemies, but I do not seem to recall any other

major differences for Shepard on his/her own. In terms of teamwork, though, one major change is the introduction of a large number of Power Combos, where you are able to awesomely explode your enemies in a variety of ways by combining your powers with those of your squadmates — what this means is that no previous game in the series has ever made your team members *that* much important to you. In the first game, they could be just as much of a nuisance as support, being difficult to control (especially since you could not map out team instructions as shortcuts) and often simply ruining your line of sight with their chaotic running around. In the second game, their behavior was much improved, their powers could be mapped out for easy use, and occasionally could be combined with your own to explode enemies mid-air (so-called «Warp detonations»). In **Mass Effect 3**, this latter mechanics is taken up a whole level, and it's not just some cool gimmick — in really tough and tense situations, combos like that can become the *only* way to survival and victory.

Another improvement concerns the guns, of which you now have a much bigger choice than in **Mass Effect 2**, though still smaller than in **Mass Effect** — but to be fair, the huge variety of Shepard's arsenal in the first game did not really make *that* much of a difference, as most of the guns looked relatively alike and the differences in their stats were fairly cosmetic. Here, it is quite clear that a lot of thought went into the diversification of the arsenal. Different sniper rifles have different patterns of fire; some weird shotguns have a particularly sadistic angle (like the Krogan-designed Graal Spike Thrower); some pistols (like Scorpion) shoot proximity mines rather than regular bullets, etc. Best of all, there's just the right amount of all those modifications so you do not feel *completely* overwhelmed by the variety — and you can choose if you want to spend a lot of time putting together the perfect weapon-and-armor combination for your next mission, or if you just want to chuck it and rely on your finger skills all along (and you can, though on the hardest levels of difficulty getting the essential gear can certainly help you bring your enemies down much faster).

In terms of sheer combat difficulty, **Mass Effect 3** is probably the toughest game of all three — which is, after all, no surprise, because what else did you expect from a full-out Reaper assault on the galaxy? The game revels in creating new types of monstrosities with their specific challenges — where the original **Mass Effect** more or less introduced all of its enemies in the earliest stage of the game, so that by the end of it you were cutting through them like butter, **Mass Effect 3** raises its stakes gradually, taking a cue from the likes of **Half-Life** or maybe even **Resident Evil** (considering the rather obvious element of «body horror»), with tougher and trickier opponents impeding your progress as the game progresses: Cannibals, Marauders, Brutes, and the genuine nightmare fuel of anybody playing on harder levels — Banshees, who have a nasty habit of teleporting themselves right next to you and then grabbing you helpless for an instant kill. Banshees do not appear until about halfway into the game, though, which is *very* late by typical **Mass Effect** standards.

The difficulty also increases with the transition from the base game to its DLCs, more or less the same way as it was in both **Mass Effect** (where the Batarians of *Bring Down The Sky* posed a much tougher challenge than everybody else) and **Mass Effect 2** (where the fighting sequences in *Arrival* and *Lair Of The Shadow Broker* probably made you sweat far more intensely, with larger numbers of increasingly aggressive enemies). In that respect, *Omega*, with its new types of killer droids and mutated monsters, was at least perfectly predictable — an add-on made specially for the fans of the game's combat system (the final fight with the Adjutants and the Cerberus gooks at the same time is pure chaotic murder, requiring very tough self-coordination on the part of the player); but I was far more surprised at the difficulty in *Citadel*, contrasting rather sharply with the overall humorous nature of the DLC — believe me, few things are more humiliating than dying under intense crossfire from a bunch of armed paramilitary crooks while your squadmates keep making incessant jokes at your (and each other's) expense. One minute you're relaxing in the best sushi restaurant on the Citadel, the next one you have to fight off a host of super-tough enemies armed only with a lousy pistol (actually, one of the toughest pistols in the game, but still, having to maneuver against heavy infantry *and* snipers with limited ammo and wearing a tuxedo instead of battle armor is perhaps the most difficult challenge that the **Mass Effect** universe can throw at you, *ever*).

(To be precise, the toughest fights of the game await you in the Citadel's Armax Arena, where Commander Shepard can choose to fight holographic equivalents of pretty much all enemy types, from the simplest to the toughest ones — the craziest ones are those where you have to fight multiple copies of *yourself* in all possible class incarnations; you truly have not experienced Hell until you tried fighting a couple of Vanguard Shepards, Infiltrator Shepards, and Sentinel Shepards at the exact same time on Insanity level! Fortunately, all of that is completely and utterly optional even in terms of the DLC itself; but it's so infectious that I didn't stop myself until I found ways to cheese the battle's outcome in my favor).

One other interesting moment here, which one might not even realize unless one stops to think about it, is that there are very few «boss fights» as such in the game — except for the rather awkward one-on-one Reaper encounter on Rannoch and one or two overpowered human opponents like Kai Leng, BioWare programmers mainly send generic opponents your way. Admittedly, BioWare have never cared all that much for unique type bosses in their games, but still, **Mass Effect** at least had Shepard and friends fight a hyperactive huskified Saren at the end of the game, while **Mass Effect 2** offered them a grotesque monstrosity with an almost JRPG flavor to it. In comparison, the final fight sequences in **Mass Effect 3**, when Shepard has to break through the Reapers' armies to reach the Crucible, may be even more difficult — but they only include the enemies you are already perfectly familiar with. This clearly intentional rejection of the «boss fight» trope is somewhat comparable to the Monty Python rejection of the «punchline», and I love it; somehow it adds a thin wisp of realism, so as to speak, into the

proceedings. Who knows, maybe some people expected Shepard to *really* be able to wrestle a mature Reaper with his bare hands — fortunately, the game gives you no such nonsense.

Two more important innovations were probably introduced because of fan feedback. One was the removal of the «hacking» mini-games that were so persistent in the first two games whenever you needed to loot some locker or console. Moderately fun at first, they quickly became tedious, and by the time the third game came along the designers finally realised that repeating the same puzzle over and over becomes mind-numbing torture rather than stimulating challenge, so they wisely eliminated them altogether — finally, whenever Commander Shepard needs some loot, he can simply *grab* it, and this is good. You still have to search for all those datapads all over the place, so it's not like it all just falls right into your hands.

Second was a complete re-working of the planet scanning system introduced in **Mass Effect 2**; apparently, the *idea* of probing various planets for useful minerals was appealing enough, but its realization, once again, soon turned into grindy tedium. Now, instead of randomly bombarding planet surface with your probes to extract stuff, you actually have to scan them for some positive identification blip, after which you extract the relevant asset — this time, usually not a generic mineral, but some particular resource that you can add to your constantly growing list of «war assets». Not that it still isn't tedious, but at least this time around you get a unique or near-unique result each time.

All of this just goes to show that the **Mass Effect 3** team was not merely milking the success of **Mass Effect 2**; the listed peculiarities of the game, separating it from its predecessors, show that there was still true commitment to perfecting and deepening the gaming experience. Whether it was driven first and foremost by commercial considerations or artistic ones is difficult to say (plus, when it comes to the action side of videogames, «commercial» and «artistic» are pretty hard to reliably disentangle from one another), but one thing is unquestionable: most players — myself included — found the game *fun*. It even becomes easier to forgive the stupid plotline about Cerberus when you see how well it has been used to provide the player with some of the best coordinated, most challenging AI enemy teamwork of its time — fighting off a squad of Cerberus mooks and centurions is no joke when you're doing an Insanity run.

It is no wonder that **Mass Effect 3**'s multiplayer mode, introduced because everything had to have a multiplayer mode in 2012, was so well received and, to the best of my knowledge, still retains a bit of interest, as the servers are still up and running as of 2024, with a small but loyal community continuing to honor the memory of Commander Shepard. As somebody who has never connected to a multiplayer server even once in his life (I'm neither proud nor ashamed of the fact — it's just that I'm a sore individualist when it comes to playing), I certainly cannot comment on the actual virtues of the multiplayer

mode, but clearly it wouldn't be as popular if the combat system weren't polished all the way. That said, it is interesting that the multiplayer mode was not revived for the *Legendary Edition*: apparently, EA decided that spending fresh resources on a multiplayer option for an old remastered game would not turn a serious profit — and they are probably right.

That said, I *suspect* — and I can only *suspect* here, since I am absolutely nowhere near close to Mr.-Shoot-'Em-All and my knowledge of action gaming in the 2000s-2010s is extremely limited — that in most of its action-related aspects **Mass Effect 3** is strictly a follower rather than an innovator. Having tried their hand at an original combat mechanics (with cooldown times replacing ammo boxes, etc.) with the first game and not finding a lot of fan support for it, they pretty much reverted back to commonly adopted tactics with **Mass Effect 2**, and the third game only solidifies that approach. This is why the «Action Mode» of the game makes *particularly* little sense: one simply does not play **Mass Effect** for the action — that would be like watching *Lord Of The Rings* just for the adrenaline of its combat scenes. **Mass Effect** is not **Half-Life** and it certainly isn't **Call Of Duty**; it's a game where you shoot your way through to the plot, not use the plot as a technical device to lead you up to the shooting.

Atmosphere

You do not even need to play **Mass Effect 3** to know what sort of tags should be chosen to describe its general vibes. The original game, even if it had the Reaper threat already presented to you in the intro, could not really help but *not* be about that: its main feels were all about the breathtaking discovery of a newly synthesized universe. Taking down Saren and Sovereign always took a step back to just reveling in the sights and sounds; I bet very few players actually even made the expected mad dash after the baddies on Ilos, instead of taking their time to admire the lush vegetation, the majestic ruins, and the creepy gigantic walls lined with cryo-pods full of deceased Protheans. By the time **Mass Effect 2** came along, the universe became more familiar, and you were now getting busy exploring its unsavory underbelly — learning that even all those gorgeous Asari and imposing Turians can be scummy, sleazy gangsters, and that behind every great wonder of the universe lurks a crime or a threat. The world was a dangerous place indeed, and not just because of the Reaper threat.



But as the Reapers *do* strike, all the here-and-now problems that humans and non-humans alike create for each other on their incessant gold drives and power trips fade into the background, as do the flamboyant reds-and-blacks of **Mass Effect 2**, now replaced by moodier blues-and-greens. Three emotional themes dominate the space of the third game — Terror, as the Reapers unleash their wave of total destruction that comes in multiple forms and flavors; Despair, as losses that cut closer and closer to the heart pile up around you and doubt about the usefulness of whatever you do remains a constant torment; and Epicness, as you get to feel like a True Hero every now and then — or, maybe, not so much a True Hero as a kind of «Conduit» for letting Destiny operate on the grandest scale ever witnessed in a video game. Throw in a bunch of Humor (always good to have in a situation like this) and a lot of Battle Adrenaline, and that's **Mass Effect 3** for you in a nutshell.

Let's start with Terror, which is appropriate because that is what the game starts out with. *How long do we have? — Not long. — God help us all.* Once the Reapers make their move and the atmosphere moves from suspenseful premonition to total destructive chaos, the game no longer provides that feeling of deep existential dread which may have been lingering around over the first two games: the Reaper threat becomes everyday reality, in which you soon find out that both the Reapers' mutated creations and even the Reapers themselves are not immune to damage — it's just that it is literally impossible to kill 'em all, because no matter how many enemies you put down, the game will simply spawn new ones for you until the very end. The majority of the scenes dealing with the Reaper invasion falls under the definition of «pandemonium» rather than «terror», and this is achieved pretty well — BioWare designers know how to make you feel overwhelmed, with all sorts of stuff crashing, burning, and exploding around you, enemies swarming around from all directions, gunfire coming in with blinding, deafening, and confusing potential, and very little sense of safety even when you're in cover.

Actual *terror*, though, is handled somewhat less adequately. Thus, from the likes of Steven Spielberg and other expert filmmakers BioWare have certainly learned that in order to be truly efficient, terror must be personified and individualized, so they have this little kid character in the beginning whom Shepard comes across a couple of times, then watches him as he tries to get away from the destruction in a shuttle only to be blown to bits by the Reapers a few seconds later. This feels overtly manipulative, but what's worse is that we did not really get to establish a proper relationship with the kid in advance — there were, at most, a couple of brief sentence exchanges between him and the Commander — and the impact of that death, per se, is nowhere near as hard as it could be (although the music helps quite a bit).

Ironically, the Reaper armies fare better when it comes to generating *horror* rather than *terror*. The designers must have studied quite hard the likes of **Resident Evil** and other survival-horror / body-horror franchises, coming up with several types of particularly gruesome monsters created by the Reapers from various galactic species in the process of «huskifying»

their bodies — and there is a particularly tense episode in the game, where Shepard investigates the situation in a secluded Asari monastery that has been chosen by the Reapers as the initial breeding ground for synthesizing Banshees, the game's most terrifying and dangerous enemy, which can really rival any first-rate survival horror game. New players who come to this scene unprepared have really got to make sure they have no serious cardiac issues beforehand.

But one thing that really, *really* works this time around is BioWare's ability to make you fall in love with your precious little «safe space» — in this case, the Normandy, of course. It is true that in the first two games, just as well, the Normandy was the only location in the Galaxy where nothing wrong could happen to you (unless the ship were abducted by the Collectors, and even that happened while Shepard was temporarily on leave); but the Galaxy itself was not completely going up in flames at the time either, and there were various hubs around it — the Citadel, Illium, even the slums of Omega — where you could feel relatively safe and relaxed as well. In **Mass Effect 3**, the Citadel remains as the only such hub, and even that one is filled with chaos, anxiety, and panic. Contrastively, the Normandy, plunged in the quiet, monotonous hum of its engines and in the soothing half-light of its dimmed illumination, becomes the only remaining place in the universe where you can lay your burden down, have a quiet chat or two with your loyal companions, or even just retire to the solitude of your cabin to fool around with a space hamster and meditate to the sight of fish in your aquarium (provided you have not forgotten to feed them — a typical complaint from players of **Mass Effect 2** that can, fortunately, be put to rest now if you have the cash to purchase an automatic feeding machine from the markets on the Citadel).

I'm a big fan of the «safe space» concept in RPGs — the feeling of cozily cuddling down in a nice room where no filthy goblin or vampire can get through to you is perhaps the single best sensation I get from the whole experience, provided it's done right — and no game in the franchise works with it better than **Mass Effect 3**. You get to decorate your cabin with all sorts of stuff salvaged from the wreckage of the galaxy; you get to have quiet, reassuring, psychologically healing conversations with your squadmates (in the previous two games, they were usually too busy unloading their own problems on you, but here it *really* feels like they're there *for* you, in earnest); you just get to experience peace and quiet, so sharply contrasting with the total ruination observed out of the Normandy's illuminators. This is done so well that even when there's really nothing left to do, every now and then I kept getting this feeling of being *very* reluctant to leave the safety and (even somewhat Spartan) comfort of the ship to leave for yet another hell-on-Earth mission of blood, sweat, toil, and never-ending gunfire.

That said, **Mass Effect 3** also offers a premium on grimness, despair, and depression. Despite Shepard's predictable tactical triumphs on the battlefield, both against the Reapers and the back-stabbing Cerberus, the game reminds you, over and over and over again, that this is a fight he/she ultimately cannot win. Victories tend to be partial (such as when you only need to

thin out the enemy's lines a little to help extract a friend from the battlefield) or arrogantly negated by cutscenes (such as the mission on Thessia, where Kai Leng is scripted to kick your ass no matter what you do); and even within the relative safety of the Normandy, most of your companions will, at one time or another, hold conversations with you in which they shall discuss finality, mortality, and fatality (throw in babality if you're romancing any one of them, of course). In fact, the idea that *winning* this fight is impossible — as opposing to, perhaps, subverting it or changing the course of history in some other hitherto unknown way — is thrown around so frequently that I am even surprised at how much people still keep craving for that «happy ending». If you did not know there was not going to be a happy ending from the game's opening sequence, you rather naïvely underestimated the spirit of the BioWare team on the job.

There's also plenty of death going around, of course — not generic, faceless death of the «hey, news just in about another billion casualties but who cares, right?» variety, but this time around, death that hits *very* close to home. In the first two games, most of the deaths around Shepard were those of baddies, and where friends were concerned, these deaths could generally be avoided — you could easily save Wrex in **Mass Effect**, for instance, and it did not take a total genius to have all your squadmates survive the Suicide Mission at the end of **Mass Effect 2**. Even very occasional unavoidable deaths of people close to you were shocking exceptions that took place offscreen — most notably, the Ashley-or-Kaiden choice on Virmire in the first game. And even if you *did* screw up and left some companions to die in the Collector Base, these deaths were quick, not particularly emotional, and even somewhat clichéd, almost as if telling you «don't be such a doofus next time, dude, here's a really silly quick scene of a good friend kicking the bucket for you, now be a good lad and reload an earlier save».

Mass Effect 3, however, does not spare your feelings in this respect — instead, it manipulates them for all they're worth. Some of the deaths here can be avoided, such as, for instance, Grunt's, Tali's, or Miranda's, but judging by the amount of soul inserted into those sequences, you'd almost think the designers intended for them to be canon (Tali's suicide after Shepard saves the Geth at the expense of the Quarians is, for instance, breathtakingly cinematic). Some minor characters encountered



along the way are given just enough screen time, dialog, and personality to endear themselves to you before being sent off to die in a blaze of glory (Turian Lieutenant Tarquin Victus, repentantly sacrificing himself for his own mistakes; Aria's love-and-hate partner Nyreen in the *Omega* DLC; your own good friend and mentor Captain Anderson at the end of the game — the list could go on). And at least two send-offs here are within their own right to be included into the Golden Pantheon of Video Game Character Demises — both have managed to genuinely move me to tears, even if you realize that this is mostly done through professional craftsmanship rather than unique inspiration.

The more iconic of the two is the death of Mordin Solus, who nobly sacrifices himself to atone for having contributed to the Krogan genophage — the classic «repentant scientist» trope presented here in the most heart-wrenching way possible: what makes the scene so emotionally effective is Mordin's generally unintentionally-humorous personality (if you spent enough time chatting up the guy in **Mass Effect 2**, he will be humming his rendition of Gilbert & Sullivan's *I am the very model of...* right before dying), integrated perfectly into the epic setting of his final feat. The death itself is not even demanded by the plot, but it is demanded by the moral code of the universe — so that I have not even seen too many of those «*why oh why did Mordin have to die?*» questions around the Web; everybody seems to understand that he *had* to.

I must say, though, that the most fantastic thing about Mordin's death scene is that it can be played out in two completely different, yet equally meaningful, ways. The Paragon way of going about it, as most people probably go in their playthroughs, is to have Mordin administer the genophage cure to secure the future of the Krogan nation, then happily go out in his blaze of glory — the epic Space Cowboy way of ending things, a noble death worthy of Greek mythology and Norse saga. But if you have second thoughts on letting the Krogan race get back on its feet again, you can also sabotage the cure — and, when Mordin learns about it, shoot him in the back to prevent him from restoring things back to normal. In this case, he dies a dark, tragic death, on the very threshold of atonement and salvation but lacking the chance to make the final crossing (*literally* so, as he metaphorically expires on the threshold of his laboratory). The drawback is that this outcome makes Shepard come across as a black-hearted Shakespearian villain rather than the savior of the galaxy — and probably *the* one episode in the game which makes players complain that by the time of **Mass Effect 3**, Renegade Shepard has completed his descent into full-out psychopath territory (though if you ask me, the ability of Renegade Shepard to bump off Shiala, the Rachni Queen, *and* Wrex in **Mass Effect** already put him/her on that path a long time ago — it's just that none of those characters, not even Wrex, were as dear to the average player's heart as Mordin The Adorable).

But if you focus on Mordin rather than Shepard for this issue, his chance to die like an Ascending Noble Hero or a Tragic Loser Cursed By Fate in equally logical and believable fashion is just one of those moments putting a serious-as-hell dent in

Roger Ebert's «video-games-are-not-art-since-art-does-not-have-branching-paths» theory. Both outcomes give me the feels, yet the feels are completely different dependent on the outcome, with *tearful admiration* as the dominant emotion for the Paragon route and *ominous pity* as the chief experience for the Renegade path. (In my own Renegade playthrough, I reserved the pitifully tragic ending for Padok Wiks, Mordin's replacement, who has an interesting personality of his own, but did not get to have a character arc with as much backstory as Mordin, unfortunately, so the impact is always lessened).

The second tear-inducing scene concerns Thane, the noble-and-tormented Drell assassin, who passes away after being fatally wounded by the wretched Kai Leng while protecting you throughout the Cerberus coup. He was probably originally scripted to die from a terminal illness, with which he had been diagnosed even prior to his appearance in **Mass Effect 2**, but then the writers decided it would be more heart-wrenching to have him go in one last blast of glory. Again, it all has to do with how well the character was written, animated, and voiced from the very beginning: useless to just watch a small clip of Thane's death on YouTube to get the whole impact. But the scene hits *especially* hard if, as female Shepard, you had romanced Thane in the previous game — as I have written in my previous review, Thane's romance line was easily the best out of all possible choices in **Mass Effect 2**, since it was the only one based less on the idea of «I love you, but how am I going to find the right hole?» and more on the idea of a spiritual connection between two souls flawed and tormented in subtly similar ways. This connection — the idea that Soldier Shepard has the same kind of moral burden on her heart as Assassin Thane — is taken to its extreme in the final moments of the scene, and while some might not realize that concisely, it is one of the major factors contributing to how it never fails to bring out the tears. Shorter and less notorious than Mordin's epic farewell, perhaps, but psychologically far more deep-reaching.

(A third commonly listed tear-jerking scene is on Rannoch, when Legion sacrifices his personality for the greater good of the Geth conclave, but Legion's robotic voice has always ruined that one for me — or maybe I am not yet sufficiently advanced to show human feelings for an AI entity. It's a decent scene, but that entire story arc about the Geth gaining true intelligence is just a little *too* sci-fi for my tastes; the Classical and Biblical connotations of Mordin's and Thane's lifelines give me far more of a gut punch. Some people do feel quite different about this, and that's perfectly all right).

Finally, there's the Epic flavor. This is the one that is always the most difficult to get right, with decades of Hollywood, Bollywood, and Yoshimi-battles-the-pink-robots daguerreotypes corrupting the primal inspirational magic of the Hero Vibe; and, in fact, I already wrote about how certain inane bits of dialog already threaten to turn the game into a flaming disaster right from the start. However, it does get better, as the game does its best to avoid corny pompous speeches and convey its sense of the epic more through music and visuals — stuff like the grandiose battle between the Reaper and the Thresher Maw, for

instance, or the final «battle for London» with its utter chaos, devastation, and massive scale, both on the ground and in the airspace above Earth. While I do believe that the game is at its best in its quiet moments, relatively few things about the loud ones bring out heavy groans and facepalms. As for the game's ending — well, I think I already wrote enough about that in the previous sections.

Perhaps, when it comes to Epic, special mention should be made of the *Leviathan* DLC. While its handling of the Reaper enigma remains very much open to criticism (people who say it's genius and people who say it's retarded both have valid points to make), it can hardly be denied that atmospherically, the whole thing is constructed to near-perfection. Starting out like some modern day *Twilight Zone* episode, with circumstances investigated by Shepard gradually pointing out to levels of mystery that go much deeper than the Reapers, the plot goes through elements of uneasy suspense, then throws in a touch of the usual Reaper body horror, and finally takes a big gamble with the epic conclusion — the last scene of Shepard wading underwater in a giant robot body that *still* turns out to be minuscule next to the original Masters of the Galaxy appearing before him in person. Shepard's «hallucinatory» underwater interaction with the Leviathan brings on memories of the original encounter with Sovereign in **Mass Effect** — of the «hero meets something way beyond his size, age, and comprehension» variety — but this time around, the focus is ultimately on unraveling rather than deepening the mystery, and the prevailing vibe quickly shifts to cautious awe over raw terror. On an emotional level, it all certainly works better than the actual ending, which explains the much warmer reception that *Leviathan* had among the fans.

Finally, even if it could hardly be called an «essential» part of the experience, there's Humor — handled pretty damn well, not too much of it and not too little; friendly humor, soothing humor, and plenty of dark humor, of course. There's the usual comic relief in the form of Joker the Pilot (now usually served within his interactions with EDI the co-pilot AI, whose appropriation of a robotic female shape lays down the ground for the game's weirdest romantic twist); Wrex and Mordin provide even more entertainment; Conrad Verner, the bumbling fanboy mascot of the series, returns to the Citadel for one final moment of inane glory; and even Ashley «She's So Racist» Williams can be a lot of tough-girl fun, especially when she drinks her ass off and only Commander Shepard can save her from a hangover more terrible than Reaper indoctrination. Of course, Javik the Prothean still wins first place with his airlock jokes, provided you get his DLC (or just the *Legendary Edition*).

I truly appreciate the *ratio* of the humor: without any funny moments at all, the game would psychologically suffocate the player with a never-ending barrage of pathos and depression, but neither does it want to ever degrade into sheer comedy — even when characters *are* cracking jokes to the left and the right, they are usually relevant to the situation and do just what they're intended to do, a.k.a. provide psychological relief from the nightmare. Maybe the game could do without a few of the

inside jokes and running gags ("I'm Garrus Vakarian and this is now my favorite spot on the Citadel!" is a little *too* obvious), but then again, people do love those, so who am I to grumble?

The only time when humor overrides absolutely everything else is with the *Citadel* DLC, but as I wrote earlier, that was its very selling point — subvert the lore and poke some friendly fun at your own past, fighting cheesy fire with even more cheesy fire and reaping tons of profit. *Citadel* does have its serious, thoughtful, and tender moments (Shepard holding a memorial service for Thane and then reading his last video messages on the screen almost brings out the tears again), but mostly it's all for laughs, and though the absolute majority of the jokes will only be dear to those who have memorized their *Mass Effect* from A to Z, this does not make them any less exquisite.



Finally, let us not forget the Romantic aspects of the game. Given the overall circumstances, romance is generally put on the backburner in the third game, and if, back in **Mass Effect 2**, you happened to exchange your DNA with one of your squadmates who did not get to be your companion in the sequel, that romantic line will be severely truncated to the point of non-existence (e.g. Jacob simply dumps Female Shepard) or an occasional brief encounter on the Citadel (Miranda literally gets just one quick hump in between assignments) that can border on clumsy ridiculousness (the Thane romance can hardly be taken seriously until the dude has finally passed away). However, romances with actual squadmates — Liara, Garrus, Tali, or Ashley/Kaidan as the «Virmire Survivor» — which can be sustained every now and then on board the Normandy are written and acted to the point of generating some actual feeling, and even the obligatory «final sex scene before the world ends on us» is handled with more delicacy and fewer laughs than the respective scenes in the first two games.

The best news is that, with the romantic lines already established, the emphasis in most of these interactions is not on the, ahem, «technical» aspects of the business, but rather on using the romantic relationship as a source of energy and inspiration for the infernal battles ahead — there's always a thin melancholic wisp around most of the romantic scenes aboard the Normandy that creates just the right atmosphere. If you want, you can still cringe, giggle, or shrug, but I wouldn't think of these reactions as «involuntarily obligatory» in the same way that it is, for instance, impossible to take the Shepard / Miranda lovemaking scene in the engine room in **Mass Effect 2** seriously. In this aspect, **Mass Effect 3** shows some maturity, and is

inarguably the best game out of all three when it comes to depicting romance. (Or breakup, for that matter — if Shepard decides to go back to either Ashley or Liara and severs his relationship with Miranda, there's a nicely acted moment between the two that features Yvonne Strahovski at her best).

On the whole, it is plain to see that **Mass Effect 3** fully delivers on the «feels» — but also that these «feels» are light years away from where we started, as should probably be the case for any successful trilogy set in an original sci-fi or fantasy universe. By now, the focus is squarely on Big Drama rather than on World-Building, and that is really how it should be, because, in my humble opinion, world-building for its own sake is boring (that's the biggest problem with the likes of *The Elder Scrolls*, who always give us these huge and meticulously elaborated universes which seem to be populated with faceless automatons) — and while I absolutely agree with Shamus Young that focusing on drama tends to have a negative impact on things like logic, reason, common sense, and causation, the fact remains that not even Shakespeare is completely guilt-free when it comes to this trade-off, much less the overpaid (or perhaps underpaid?) writers at BioWare. And for what it's worth, on the atmospheric front **Mass Effect 3** ticked off all the right checkboxes in my own soul: it made me care, it made me cry, it made me laugh, it made me fear, it made me rage, and it made me, once again, think on how much better the world could be if more of my friends were like Shepard's squadmates and less like, say, Councilor Udina.

Technical features

Graphics

No **Mass Effect** game looks *completely* different from its predecessor, for obvious aims of continuity, but every **Mass Effect** game looks *a little* different from its predecessor, both for purely technical reasons — such as transition to an updated version of the Unreal Engine 3, powering all three parts of the trilogy — and for aesthetic ones. In the technical department, changes from **Mass Effect 2** to **Mass Effect 3** were not tremendously substantial; the jump in visual quality that happened from 2007 to 2010 was notably stronger than from 2010 to 2012, and it would be difficult to convincingly argue about how the graphics of **Mass Effect 3** made those of **Mass**



Effect 2 feel «outdated». Arguably the single biggest change introduced was a major redesign in 3D model technology for the characters' faces, making them look and move even more realistically than before; unfortunately, this was achieved at the expense of making players' efforts at hand-crafting their custom Shepard in the previous two games go to waste — this is, for instance, what happened to my own killer Renegade FemShep upon reusing the same character code from **Mass Effect 2**:



This is actually a somewhat bigger issue than any non-ardent fan of **Mass Effect** might imagine: having virtually lived through the first two games with (as) the same character, being forced to accept the new rendering rules for **Mass Effect 3** could almost feel like being forced to undergo obligatory plastic surgery (I remember spending quite a bit of time looking for all sorts of graphical tweaks and hacks to return «me» as I used to be, but, alas, to no avail — updated graphical engines are no joke, and not even professional modders could do much with that). But in the end you simply had to make peace with that. BioWare wanted you to believe that technical progress was still marching on with giant strides, and what a better way to do that than a complete (unnecessary) redesign of the character construction kit?

Oh well, at the very least there seems to have been near-perfect continuity between the «stock» facial models for both Male Shepard (still relying on the same old unshaven Mark Vanderloo mug) and for most of his squadmates, as well as recurring characters from the previous two games. The single biggest image change was reserved for Chief Ashley Williams — provided

you kept her alive on Virmire so that she could return to your side for the final round — who, following her promotion to Lieutenant Commander, apparently decided to accompany this by adopting a more expressly «feminine» look, with longer hair and an extra layer of makeup (to better distract the Reapers in hand-to-hand combat, I guess). Although I do not mind the visual transformation as much as some of the more conservative (or, conversely, some of the more «progressive») fans, it is a little odd that Ashley was literally the only past character to undergo such a change — they could have at least made Kaidan Alenko to bleach his hair or something, in a compensatory-symmetric move — and it is hard to get rid of the thought that this was a conscious move on BioWare's part to raise the «attractiveness» of Ashley, formerly branded as Space Racist No. 1, for the predominantly male segment of the players. (Spoiler: it didn't really work). Personally, I always thought of Ashley as one of the most interestingly designed and meticulously written characters in the series anyway — and what hurt me more about her role in the game was not the facial redesign but the fact that, apparently, a *lot* of her dialog lines for **Mass Effect 3** ended up on the cutting floor or bugged into non-existence, as would eventually be revealed.

As for the general visual aesthetics, **Mass Effect 3** steps away from the overriding red-black-and-brown colors of the previous game (which were intended to raise a feeling of permanent «hidden danger») and returns to blue as the dominant color — in fact, Deep Blue is pretty much everywhere you go, be it the Citadel, Normandy, or any of the planets Shepard has to visit in this last round. The only exception is the iniquity den of Omega, which preserves its traditional red hue, but since it has now been turned into a direct war zone, the red colors are dusky and tattered rather than flashing in all their infernal neon glory as they used to during the station's better days. Other than that, you have blue skies, blue armor, blue uniforms, blue shields, blue Reapers, blue asari — mixed with an occasional red such as the color of your own blood or the devastating laser beams the Reapers shoot out of their blue hides.

One might say that this brings the game closer to the original palette of **Mass Effect**, where blue was also the overriding color *par excellence*, but the blue of **Mass Effect** was generally lighter, warmer, and more welcoming — a sort of «cozy hospital room blue», if you will — not to mention that one of the biggest joys of the game was wheeling through all the different planetary landscapes that ranged from the same icy wintery blue to lush prairie green to deep volcanic red and beyond. In **Mass Effect 3**, the blue is not so much welcoming as suffocating: you cannot escape it anywhere, and ultimately it becomes symbolic of a sort of «deep freeze death» where being blasted away in the red heat of Reaper fire might actually feel welcome for a change. I'm not entirely sure of how I feel about this; on one hand, the symbolism is powerful, but on the other, **Mass Effect 3** is a huge, long game, and having the same palette splashed over most of it can get wearisome. One thing you are certainly *not* going to remember **Mass Effect 3** as is a provider of starkly contrasting, memorable visual environments.

One area in which the visual artists really let it all hang out, though, is the portrayal of «Reaper horror». To be fair, it has never been made understood what in the world motivates the Reapers, emotionless machines capable of destroying the entire galaxy with nothing but their lasers, to create all sorts of mutated monstrosities out of their captured prey — other than, perhaps, some irrational desire (can machines even *have* irrational desires?) to play a sadistic game of cat-and-mouse before going in for the final kill. Well, that and the understanding that Shepard and his friends *must* have some crazyass synthetic enemies to shoot at, because not even the craziest power combo can be enough to take out an actual



Reaper. In addition to giving us some juicy pew-pew targets, though, the idea also provided **Mass Effect**'s visual artist team with a whole wide berth to practice their **Resident Evil**-influenced fantasies.

The problem with real spooky baddies in a shooter game is that you can only get properly creeped out by those during cut scenes — once in action, they're going to be too small and you're going to be too busy shooting or running to allocate any mental resources to getting scared shitless. (This is one of the benefits of classic **Resident Evil**'s survival horror mode, with the average zombie being slow on the move and in full focus much of the time). However, «Reaper horror» in the game is following you everywhere, not just in combat, and there will be a lot of opportunities to get zoned out by monstrously grotesque fusions of «meaty», lumpy organic matter with cold'n'robotic blue implants. This style works so well and results in so much first-rate ugliness that it actually has a negative impact on choosing the «green ending» for the game — no matter how much BioWare designers try to push you toward accepting the idea that the key to universal happiness is a synthesis between organic and synthetic matter, how can you actually bring yourself to getting those freaky implants after you just spent a hundred hours fighting implant-choked killing machines?

Most of these opportunities arrive with cut scenes, and, predictably, the actual number of cut scenes for you to witness now goes through the roof — almost every mission gets its fair share, though I must say that the actual cinematics of **Mass Effect 3** do not impress me nearly as much as they should. A few of the vistas are quite unique and breathtaking, such as visions of the Alliance fleets burning up in space around Earth, or the above-mentioned epic fight between the Reaper and the Thresher

Maw, but overall, while the technical level was certainly outstanding for 2012, all those explosions and stuff are fairly routine for the modern viewer. In general, I am much more impressed by the care lavished on Shepard's (and his friends') facial expressions — the sight of my Ruthless Renegade FemShep in close-up shedding the only tears of her life while watching Thane's recorded farewell video is a far stronger emotional trigger than any of the action-oriented cut scenes.

Overall, the best thing I can say about the graphics is that they're on the level — you don't see *too* many people complaining about them in the 2020s, which is a good sign — but it is not really through eye-candy that the game achieves its goals. The visuals were tremendously important in the first game, which was all about world-building, after all; by the last part of the trilogy, no more spectacular visual introductions to the universe of **Mass Effect** are necessary — what matters is what you *do*, not what you *see*, and this means that voice acting is far more important for this game than pretty pictures.

Sound

As the priorities of the **Mass Effect** saga in general gradually shifted from innovative world-building to Shakesperian drama and Tolkienist neo-epos, so did the music — which, from the very beginning, was every bit as important as the visuals (and sometimes more). Although the soundtrack, from the very beginning, was basically a mix of oddball futuristic electronic ambience with Wagner-meets-Williams epic orchestral bombast, you could say that the general memory of the music in **Mass Effect** would rather paint the soundtrack as a technophile's wet dream — all that cruising around in the Mako



through endless alien terrain sure did the job — while in **Mass Effect 2**, the symphonic pathos had already started the drive for extra prominence... and now **Mass Effect 3** completes the job: with Jack Wall no longer involved in the soundtrack at all, and the atmosphere more frequently calling for *power* than *solitude*, the music has evolved into full-fledged space drama.

About four or five different composers were responsible for writing the score, with Sam Hulick inheriting the bulk of the duties from his previous part-time engagements; but the most famous newcomer, of course, was Clint Mansell, best known at the time for his many soundtracks to Darren Aronofsky's movies. BioWare's proposal to Clint was a stroke of genius — his «tiny-rays-of-light-lost-in-eternal-darkness» style, so much responsible for the overall atmosphere of Aronofsky's bleak tales

of human depravity, would be perfect for a game in which the idea of good-triumphs-over-evil comes off as either impossible or circumstantially irrelevant. That said, as far as I can tell, Mansell himself only wrote a small part of the soundtrack; in the official soundtrack, he is credited only as the sole composer of 'Leaving Earth' and as Hulick's partner for 'An End, Once And For All' (although the two pieces are atmospherically similar enough to suggest that the main melody of the second theme is primarily Mansell's creation as well).

Not that this ain't sufficient, because, in this writer's humble opinion, '[Leaving Earth](#)' is easily the single greatest piece of music written in the 21st century — or, to put it in more accurate and less provocative terms, there are no other songs or instrumentals written in the past 25 years that manage to make more of an emotional impact on yours truly. Barely two minutes long — so you should hear it by all means even if you never played or intend to play the game — it carries the full weight of an epic symphony, telling the tale of the universe as we know it from start to finish: the darkness, the proverbial tiny ray of light, the nightmares, the glorious rises and achievements, the extinction and shutting down. Drawing part-time from the minimalists (the piercing little piano theme) and part-time from the neo-classicists, 'Leaving Earth' is equally relevant for the purposes of the game — those massive distorted horn blares representing the battle calls of the Reapers — and for, well, just about any purpose that has to do with the idea of inevitable extinction. Over the entire trilogy, no single moment hits harder and harsher than the final sustained note of the tune as the **Mass Effect 3** logo materializes on the screen.

Ironically, I have seen many people expressing their admiration for the tune itself and the accompanying cinematics by saying how their visceral reaction was sheer anger, a raging desire to kick the Reapers' asses into the next dimension. This tells us a lot about basic human psychology — and also brings to mind the classic trope of the young inexperienced gunslinger from a Western movie, you know, the one who earns himself an early grave if his older and more seasoned companion does not succeed in stopping him from some suicidal move. 'Leaving Earth' is not a bombastic call to arms; as a musical piece, it is a lament, a philosophical rumination on the subject of fate and transience. It does not exactly tell you to lay down your arms and surrender to the inevitable — that is not what Commander Shepard is about, anyway — but it does tell you, in no uncertain chords, that your own ray of light cannot turn the general tide of events; it can, and *should*, be there as part-time observer, part-time influencer, but sooner or later, it will go out, and there's nothing you can do about it in the long run, no matter how much fuss you raise in the short one. It's beautiful, tragic, and indescribably authentic to the core — two minutes of music in which every single note is imbued with layers of meaning. Unfortunately, as a piece of «incidental» music for a video game, its recognizability shall always be limited — even so, it's still got millions of views on YouTube, as compared to only hundreds of thousands for most of the other compositions on the OST, and that's gotta stand for something.

A similar, though much less harsh vibe, of sadness and acceptance permeates 'An End, Once And For All', the theme that plays during Shepard's final sacrifice; two minutes of isolated piano playing (the same key of E minor, in fact, quite a few chords are the same and 'Leaving Earth' itself is occasionally re-quoted) followed by a rapid buildup — the buildup, representing the universe-changing consequences of Shepard's choice, is nowhere near as interesting as the quiet piano melody, though, which once again sends out a signal of... *humility*? I wanted to write «our insignificance», but this is not really true: neither the game itself nor the accompanying soundtrack really propagate the idea that nothing we do ever matters — rather, it is the idea of teaching you to know when to fight against overwhelming odds and when to accept fate because there is no way you can *always* be stronger than the tide. It's the kind of musical theme that agrees particularly well with Shepard's blissful self-disintegration in the Synthesis ending, but, of course, it also works fairly well on its own. Had somebody like Harold Budd or Philip Glass released these compositions on their original LPs, they would certainly have gained much larger prominence.

The third most memorable theme from the game is arguably 'I Was Lost Without You' — the main romantic piece to accompany the Commander's love life — and since it's mostly Sam Hulick, without Mansell's involvement, it does not quite possess the same gut punch; also, its pseudo-orchestral final movement veers on corny, perhaps intentionally so (in the game's lore, it is supposed to be the main theme of the trashy romantic soap opera on interracial love) but still feeling a tad awkward when it accompanies the game's most, ahem, intimate scenes. Even so, it shares the atmosphere of reclusive melancholy with Mansell's themes, and cuts deeper than any of the «romantic» music previously scored by Wall, Hulick, and others for the first two games.

The rest of the music ranges from occasional throwbacks to the original **Mass Effect** (such as the harsh, jarring electronic pulses of 'Mars') to all sorts of bombastic-epic anthems ('A Future For The Krogan', which almost feels influenced by all those Celtic war motives from **The Witcher**; 'The Fleets Arrive', smartly quoting from **Mass Effect**'s opening theme to restore the feeling of excited hopefulness, if only for a brief while); for the most part, these are perfunctory, and their main function is to constantly remind you that you're doing real badass, heroic stuff — here I cannot help being reminded on how most of the backing music for the big missions on Feros and Noveria in the first game had a covert-and-dangerous feel to it instead, making you feel more like a thief-in-the-night than the God of War incarnate. But that is precisely the point of **Mass Effect 3**: it is a game that constantly and relentlessly raises you up, only to brutally bring you down and ruthlessly remind you of your *true* place in the fabric of the universe in the end. Unless you're ready to accept that, I think, you're not *really* ready to experience the full impact of **Mass Effect** — or, for that matter, understand why its designers chose to cooperate with the composer for *Requiem For A Dream* rather than *The Lord Of The Rings*.

Concerning the voice acting, relatively little needs to be said since **Mass Effect 3** remained loyal to its veterans and invited almost everybody back from their parts in the first two games — with maybe just one or two exceptions. As usual, Mark Meer and Jennifer Hale continue to shine as the respective MaleShep and FemShep, and this time around, their jobs are actually harder, because in the third game our Commander is given quite a bit of extra depth. He/she will have to deal with friends (and, potentially, lovers) dying all around in packs; suffer from nightmares; have second and third thoughts on important moral and political choices; and, at the end of the game, essentially take on the function and mission of a latter-day Jesus Christ — all in a day's work for BioWare's voice veterans, who rise to the task admirably. Once again, my own heart always gets stolen by Ms. Hale, who is capable of making even the most psychopathic and misanthropic Renegade Shepard come across as a loveable bastard; but even Meer, whose delivery on the whole had always been more stiff and monotonous than Hale's, gets to break out of his shell by the end of the game, switching from the «never-forget-you're-a-soldier, soldier!» delivery to something more human and vulnerable.

Special honors go to the only significant replacement in the game — William Salyers, who had to replace Michael Beattie as the unique voice of Mordin Solus; he did such a fine job with this that not all the players were even quick to notice the voice actor change. While Mordin does not exactly get any new layers to his personality in the game — most of his moral pains and spiritual torments had already taken place in **Mass Effect 2** — it is in this game that he gets his grand hero moment, and Salyers preserves the same delicate balance between pathos, seriousness, and unintentional humor as his predecessor, and keeping up at the same insane tempo, too! God bless professional voice actors.

Of the (relatively few) fully new arrivals, a short word of support should probably be dropped for Freddie Prinze Jr. as Lt. James Vega — his job was to make us feel sympathetic for a presumably routine and boring muscle-crazy jock in an Alliance uniform, and he does his best to present his character as a human being with thoughts and feelings rather than just a heap of meat (well, okay, as a heap of meat with thoughts and feelings); by the end of the game, you might even agree to include him on the list of your intimate friends (not *too* intimate, though — you can only get intimate with James as a last resort in the *Citadel* DLC). Alix Wilton Reagan is also quite adorable as Samantha Traynor; I suppose her mission was to convincingly portray a lesbian character that all the nerdy non-lesbian players could fall in love with, and based on my own example, I suppose she carried it off splendidly. Samantha's pre-written personality basically consists of two aspects — her curve-busting intellect and her curve-heavy sexual orientation — but Reagan can add the appropriate touches of shyness, sentimentality, and «girlishness» that ultimately make Samantha more of a human being than just a walking lesbian encyclopaedia.

Arguably the only vocal performance I would be tempted to write off as «overdone» would be the reprisal of the role of Aria

T'Loak by Carrie-Ann Moss: you're going to be hearing *a lot* of her if/when you take on the *Omega* DLC, and she somehow feels obliged to put that «tough iron bitch» imprint on pretty much every single sentence. I do realize that this is probably the way the character was written, but I'm sure that even real tough iron bitches in real life do not utter *every* single word as if suffering from an unending toothache or constipation. Actually, I would say that *Omega* could have offered Moss as Aria a chance to try to expand on her role and show us a little bit of what really goes on underneath that impregnable barrier — but neither the writers nor the actor seemed too interested, so that in the end the iron lady basically stays the iron lady, even if a suitably smart Renegade Shepard manages to finesse her a tiny bit. Then again, perhaps there is something to be said for consistency — if we can respect AC/DC for religiously staying away from romantic ballads, we could probably respect a tough-as-nails Asari mafia boss for never disclosing any additional aspects of her personality to any sorts of galactic riff-raff that she might come across while putting her business back in order.

On the whole, though, it's useless to spend a lot of attention on such minor quibbles — this is a gigantic game with hours and hours of voice actor performances, so every once in a while there is going to be a bit of a dud here and there. The obvious general thing to note, of course, is that by now most of these roles have become second nature to the artists, and some of them, like Liara's Ali Hillis or Garrus' Brandon Keener, had already shown us in **Mass Effect 2** how they were perfectly capable of leaving their «comfort zones» for something seriously different (with Liara transforming from the «naive young scientist» trope to the «confident badass» type, or Garrus shifting from the «reserved subordinate» to the «familiar friend» image), so in the final part of the trilogy they are not really expected to prove anything — they just jump into character straight away and give us joy through their very presence, *even* when they're handled irritatingly crappy dialog on occasion.

Interface

In terms of basic game mechanics and controls, changes between **Mass Effect 2** and **3** were nowhere near as drastic as between the first and second parts of the trilogy (and today, with the *Legendary Edition* version completely redesigning the combat interface for **Mass Effect**, these changes feel even more cosmetic). It seems as if the designers were pretty much convinced that they'd achieved near-perfection with these things in **Mass Effect 2**, and would only implement cosmetic changes so that they could have a pretext to not be accused of staleness. For instance, the HUD now accompanies the little pictures of your two active squad members with icons showing the readiness status of their most relevant powers — and hey, it didn't do that in **Mass Effect 2**! That's even more revolutionary than all the amazing innovations between iPhone 15 and iPhone 16, don't you know?

That said, there *were* actually a couple of experimental decisions adopted for **Mass Effect 2** that seem to have received too much negative feedback to carry over. For instance, comparing the combat interfaces of the two games shows that **Mass Effect 3** has two different status bars for the state of your Shields / Barriers and that of your Health, while **Mass Effect 2** only had one overlapping bar for both. This is because of an important mechanic change in the second game where both your Shields *and* your Health (not just the former) would automatically regenerate over time without having to use Medi-Gel — the latter, conversely, would only be saved for occasions where you had to revive your fallen squadmates. Apparently, this was deemed to be too odd — regeneration of energy shields is understandable, but health? does Shepard have krogan genes or something? — and in the third game they went back to the old **Mass Effect** (and general shooter) tradition of normally using health items to replenish health. Less revolution, more filling.



Another visible onscreen change is the displayed number of grenades in Shepard's possession, but this time, the change is purely cosmetic. In the first game, you could collect grenades as a regular type of ammo, and any class of Commander Shepard could use them. For **Mass Effect 2**, however, the ability to use grenades was redesigned as one of the «powers» that could be unlocked for a specific class of hero, and then you'd have yourself a technically unlimited supply of flashbangs, restricted only by the time period of the cooldown upon power usage. Although one should think that this, too, is a weird take on reality, it was actually retained in **Mass Effect 3**, where only soldier-class players can use grenades (other than enemies, of course — and grenades are a *huge* annoyance in this game, as they are not simple flashbangs that blind and disorient you, but genuine killing machines, capable of one-shot ripping your hide apart on higher difficulty levels).

Unlocking and upgrading of «powers» itself, too, has been somewhat redesigned. Shepard is now allowed to level up more frequently than in the second game, and the number of possible upgrades to each power is almost twice as high as in **Mass Effect 2**; moreover, for the first time in the series you actually have the choice between different types of upgrades for your powers — at a certain point, the tree begins to branch out and you can decide to yourself whether, for instance, you want to concentrate more on the defensive or offensive aspect of a certain biotic or tech ability, etc. Naturally, this provides the player

with more opportunities to lay down complex or unique strategies of combat, though I personally never spent too much time wrecking my brain over the right choice to make (I think paying too much attention to the defensive aspects is boring anyway; Commander Shepard should always go on the offensive, unless we're talking a pack of Banshees, of course). The resulting system is a classic compromise case between the «extremes» of **Mass Effect** (where the character build-up strategy still retained quite a few traces of the classic RPG spirit) and **Mass Effect 2** (where the build-up was reduced to an absolute minimum so as not to interfere with all the shooting), and I think it works reasonably well.

The basic design of the HUD which, as before, you can still bring up any time to pause combat, remains the same, and all the keyboard shortcuts have been retained, meaning that I almost never even have to bother with the HUD at all during combat sequences — all I have to do is map out my squadmates' most important powers to number keys, and then I can have fun with my enemies by comboing them into oblivion, what with the capacity of setting up cool biotic or tech explosions triggered by the joint actions of two squad members. Throw in those nifty rolling moves that Shepard can now make to dodge enemy fire or increase his speed; the enemies' new-found penchant for deadly grenades, meaning that it is no longer safe to continuously stay in the same cover spot; the overall increased potential of enemy AI, as teams now have genuine encircling strategies and stuff — and yes, **Mass Effect 3** does everything that **Mass Effect 2** did in the shoot-em-up department and more. No wonder its multiplayer feature turned out to be quite popular and endured for quite a long time (although in the end, as we all know, multiplayer modes come and go, while the single-player mode remains forever — an inescapable truth that was only too well confirmed by the removal of multiplayer mode in the *Legendary Edition*).

A lot of work was done to enhance the cinematic, visually-awesome aspects of combat; in addition to the aforementioned explosions, for instance, the Vanguard class gets the brand new «Nova» attack where you can literally trigger a brief biotic earthquake to devastate your enemies (a well-publicized way of winning almost every fight is a combination of Charge and Nova which literally turns Shepard into an unstoppable superforce of nature); and then there's the new Heavy Melee attack where you use your omni-tool in close combat with flashy time-dilating effects in badass close-ups. Sometimes the effects verge on looking ridiculous, but thankfully, they never cross over into completely outrageous territory à la *League Of Legends* or *Final Fantasy* or something; in most situations, **Mass Effect 3** preserves the flair of gritty realism, hard as it is to maintain it when your non-human opponents tend to morph further and further into fantastic creatures out of some Harry Potter-like universe. (The weirdest exception, as I already wrote, is the main quest in the *Citadel* DLC, where your biggest challenge is actually not to be overpowered by exceptionally strong enemies, but to avoid being distracted by the incessant jokes and taunts sputtered about by your squadmates.)

Outside of combat, the game's mechanics have undergone even fewer changes. Regarding Shepard's dialog interactions with the people around him, the biggest and most important of these is the removal of the middle («neutral») option on the click wheel — in the first two games, you nearly always had the option of a Paragon (top right), Renegade (bottom right) or Neutral (middle right) response, but the latter is no longer a valid choice. This was a reasonable decision, probably based on the observation that players rarely, if ever, chose the Neutral option in the first place — because it neither gave you any boost in reputation nor resulted in any alternate / additional interesting dialog; it was, more or less, simply *there* so as to attenuate more sharply the two opposite ends of the morality pole. I do have to say, though, that the click wheel looks kinda lonely with that big gaping hole in the right half. Perhaps a better — though admittedly more challenging — alternative would have been to come up with some potential «rewards» for choosing the Neutral answer, for instance, the ability to gain more information on the subject from an occasional character who would otherwise be too sensitive to either the goody-two-shoes or dirty-bastard approaches. But I guess they had to cut down on *something* for a game as massive as this one — and don't voice actors get their salaries on a pay-per-line basis?

Speaking of Paragon and Renegade, the morality system of the game has also been slightly revised with an extra parameter; now, in addition to the usual old mechanism of scoring additional Paragon or Renegade points upon performing certain actions, there is a new general Reputation bar filling up upon performing certain *other* actions and directly responsible for the availability of additional options in your future interactions with important characters. I am not entirely sure that this extra complexity was necessary; the difference between Reputation and Morality confuses some players, and ultimately, I guess, the whole thing was added so as not to lock you out too often out of the luxury of additional choices — in the first two games, if you wobbled between Paragon and Renegade decisions too often, you could have a poorly-filled bar for each by the time you reached the appropriate checkpoint and thus, for instance, would be unable to stimulate poor Saren into committing suicide. «Reputation» sort of solves that problem (roughly speaking, to force Saren to kill himself you either had to complete 20 Paragon activities *or* 20 Renegade activities, but now you could gain enough Reputation by completing 10 Paragon *and* 10 Renegade activities). But some might object, stating that you *do* have to work quite specifically on either your Paragon or Renegade skills/image in order to unlock Paragon / Renegade options, and that the whole Reputation thing is just an easy cop-out for players who don't like to strategize their actions. Anyway, it's hardly a big deal.

Navigation between the different star systems in the Milky Way largely remains the same as it used to — and a big thanks to BioWare for keeping their planetary system fully consistent across all three parts of the trilogy — but in light of the Reaper invasion, there is now an additional catch where you have to probe various star systems for hidden goodies (such as fuel,

which you now need for navigation, or war assets, which you need to raise your chances of success) at the risk of being spotted by Reapers, whereupon you should quickly evacuate the premises; this turns into an additional mini-game of cat-and-mouse which, like most of **Mass Effect**'s mini-games, is fun for the first two or three times you try it and then becomes annoying for the rest of the experience. As for the actual planets, fortunately, you no longer have to scan them for resources — the stupid turn-the-ball-around-and-fire mechanics that took away so much precious time in **Mass Effect 2** — but unfortunately, you *do* have to scan them for occasional goodies, which is even worse, because the goodies are hidden away in some unnamed and unmarked sector of the scanned planet and you cannot get to them other than by pure chance. Thus, you do not have to grind your way through this nearly as much as you did in the previous game, but there *will* still be grinding. This is something that could have been handled more intelligently — for instance, by actually solving some planet-related puzzle — but, again, the studio could not afford a more intelligent solution in this case.

Probably the most welcome application of the less-is-more principle, though, came in the form of the complete removal of the «decrypting» mini-games you had to go through to pick up resources in the first two games. Somebody at BioWare finally got it that these things were okay the first few times around, but ultimately you got sick as heck from guiding your cursor through the same moving circles of red bricks or from connecting the same pairs of circuits over and over and over. In **Mass Effect 3**, when you want to pick up loot, you just pick it up, and when you want to open a door with your omni-tool, you just open it. Two biggest human inventions since fire!! Thank you, BioWare, for saving our brains the time and energy so much better spent on more important tasks, like solving the three-body problem or bringing peace to the Middle East.

In general, the one conclusion I feel inclined to make about **Mass Effect 3**'s general interface and mechanics is that the third game is not *at all* about true creative thinking and daring innovation. More accurately, it is about looking back on the creative and daring experience of the first two parts and applying rational critical analysis of what was good and what was bad about them — with the ultimate goal of pleasing as many different groups of fans as possible. This is a reasonable enough approach, but the result is that the game offers few genuine surprises as far as the actual gaming process is concerned — which is not so much of a criticism as merely a statement of fact. It *might*, however, be one of several subtle reasons for **Mass Effect 3** not getting as much credit as its predecessors — after all, game critics do like their *games* to offer significant jolts in the, you know, *gaming* aspect, rather than merely wooing them with cinematic cutscenes and intricate plots. Personally, I can forgive the stupid planet scanning system for an emotional experience like being a witness to Thane's passing — but a lot of other people probably cannot, and might even reasonably point out that if you want those kinds of emotional experiences, read some Dickens or Dostoyevsky instead (and save yourself the trouble of probing planetary surface as an added bonus). On the

other hand, who has ever seen an RPG without at least *some* annoyingly tedious challenges? Getting through them is the proverbial Test of Patience in the initiation rite of any wannabe gaming warrior.

One last remark about the general visual style of the interface: it marks a decisive return to the blue-dominant palette of the first game (as opposed to the somewhat more earthy-than-clinical browns-and-greens of **Mass Effect 2**), but, for some reason, also with an emphasis on size — everything is quite a bit bigger here, with big fat icons and click boxes and large, oversized fonts. Somehow my mind keeps jumping back to the older days of BioWare — the busy isometric clutter of **Baldur's Gate**, for instance, with its tiny icons and loads and loads of text in minuscule letters — and reminding me just how much has changed in the meantime: truly and verily, each new **Mass Effect** game was poised more and more for «mass effect», i.e. oriented at being user-friendly for as many users as possible, including those who have, like, problems finding all those little things and boxes on their screen. I do believe they went a little overboard here, as sometimes the way the game almost literally takes your hand and walks you through its logistic challenges could almost feel offensive to the veterans; yet on the other hand, I *am* glad that each part of the trilogy gets its own visual and mechanical aesthetics — although, to be fair, only the original **Mass Effect** feels like it is fully committed to the technophile-futuristic angle. But hey, that's fine. For a real Commander Shepard, the once exotic and unfamiliar Galaxy would start to feel more and more like his ordinary home as time went by, and so does it happen for us lowly players just as well.

Verdict: *"If you're hearing this... then there is still hope".*

Finally, it's time to bring this long-winded discussion to an end — but it's pretty hard, if not downright impossible, to separate the concluding thoughts on **Mass Effect 3** from the concluding thoughts on the trilogy in general. To stop myself from too much rambling, I'll try to stratify and formulate them as answers to three separate questions: (a) *why does **Mass Effect 3** get objectively less critical respect than **Mass Effect 2**?*; (b) *is there an actual basis for calling **Mass Effect** the greatest video game franchise of all time, or is it merely a marketing ploy?*; (c) *is there an actual future for **Mass Effect**, or should it be relegated to museum status?*



[A] The most obvious answer would be — why, because of the ending, of course. No matter how much effort somebody like me could waste on justifying the ending and even admiring the stubbornness of BioWare designers in defending it, it is clear that general gamer consensus will never accept this monumental profanation of their efforts, and that the battle cry of *OUR CHOICES DID NOT MATTER!!* will continue to ring over the battlefield even after the last veteran who had the (mis)fortune to play **Mass Effect 3** over those fateful few early March weeks of 2012 has his ashes scattered in the wind, no longer capable of grumbling to his grandsons about how badly this game sucked even after the Extended Cut came out.

But the main mistake of the designers, in my mind, was not so much the ending as such (which, I reiterate, constitutes more of a flawed execution of a daring idea than a massive fuck-up in and out of itself) as the fact that they failed to properly prepare their customers for this kind of ending. Too much, *way* too much of **Mass Effect 3** gets people into a triumphant gung-ho kind of mood — time and time again, Shepard and his brute force inflict so much pain on the Reapers and their involuntary Cerberus allies that the player becomes 100% convinced that simple, steady, assured victory is just around the corner and that the credits will gloriously play over family pictures of the Commander with Liara and their blue kids and a picket fence (and *you forgot the dog*, as **Broken Sword**'s Charles Cecil would say). Even the original [Take Earth Back](#) cinematic trailer left not a shred of doubt about how it would all end — Shepard pirouettes down on a Brute, smashes his ugly mug in with his mighty omni-tool, and the world at large finally takes five.

This is all highly symbolic of the single largest problem that has existed with artistic creativity since the dawn of time but has arguably never been blown so much out of proportion as it is today — the never-ending battle of compromises between popular formula and individual innovation. Of the three games in the series, the original **Mass Effect** was still more about the latter than the former, but by the time **Mass Effect 3** came along, the franchise's immense popularity necessitated that it adopt the blockbuster paradigm, whether the designers liked it or not. And more than any other part of the game, **Mass Effect 3** wobbles between the, let's say, «organic BioWare spirit» and «synthetic Electronic Arts algorithm». It wants to be this awesome, jaw-dropping epic kick-ass spectacle one minute and a philosophical treatise on the depths of human vanity the next one, to swamp you with completely straightforward cinematic clichés over the course of one mission and to try and invert them in bizarre ways in the very next one. It's confused and conflicted, and I love and hate it for it — but still, love more often than hate, because it's far better to experience artistic confusion than steady, self-assured anti-artistic formula.

In the end, though, I think that the *principal* reason why **Mass Effect 3** always gets overridden by **Mass Effect 2** on those best-of lists is because it does not succeed in once more re-inventing the **Mass Effect** gameplay formula. The simplest, and ultimately truest, answer is that people liked the original **Mass Effect**, but it was quite clunky for them to play. Then **Mass**

Effect 2 came along, with its improved HUD and its thermal clips and its re-branded AI and its generally more linear approach, and the world (all except for grumpy old-school isometric RPG veterans) rejoiced because the new and improved formula worked so damn well. Then **Mass Effect 3** came along and all it could do was fix and tighten things up without introducing any truly major changes — basically, people just got a red-on-blue installment instead of a green-on-brown one, with a few tiny bones thrown to veteran fans in the form of more weapon choices and stuff. And without *that* particular incentive — living out your sci-fi experience in a manner quite radically different from the previous one — the game found itself more vulnerable on all the other accounts as well.

Even so, there are things that **Mass Effect 3** does better than any other part of the trilogy, and I don't just mean the ability to explode all your enemies in a shattering blast of blue energy rocking the very foundations of the earth your biotic terror of a Vanguard stamps upon. For one thing, no other **Mass Effect** game brings you so many tears — as you witness digital characters that have become your closest friends sacrifice their lives for you — *or* so many laughs, courtesy of its *Citadel* DLC but also many other small things in the base game itself. No other **Mass Effect** game makes you feel so empowered or morally conflicted when resolving the crucial conflicts of the first two Acts. And no other **Mass Effect** game makes you ponder your own place in the universe as frequently as this one, provided you can occasionally detach yourself from all the adrenaline and immerse yourself more in the quiet, solitary moments of the game, most of which, I think, are actually written more carefully and thoughtfully than anything of the sort in the first two parts. For those reasons and more, I am willing to allocate exactly 33.333% of the love reserved for **Mass Effect** to its third instalment, without trying to set up a complicated scale to measure the correlation between its own good / bad points and those of its predecessors.

[B] Now for some famous last words. I realize I am nowhere near close to the biggest expert on video games (particularly if we mean *any* types of video games rather than just plot-driven ones), and even if I were, comparing **Mass Effect** with the likes of **Super Mario Bros.** would be a prime exercise in futility. But I do know a few things both about lengthy, sprawling gaming franchises, stretching all the way from *King's Quest* to *Assassin's Creed* and beyond — and about games whose creators took their efforts seriously, trying to elevate the medium toward heights previously occupied by literature and cinema, from the mysteries of *Gabriel Knight* to the satire of *Grand Theft Auto* — and I can honestly say that never in my sweet short life have I encountered a video game project with a better balance between AMBITION and REALIZATION than the **Mass Effect** trilogy. Not «perfect» — no video game that harbors even an ounce of artistic ambition will ever be perfect, for reasons that are always beyond the designers' control — but «best possible under the circumstances».

In fact, by all logical means, an enterprise as huge as this one should have collapsed under its own sophisticated framework.

After all, even if you design something genuinely monumental like the *Elder Scrolls* universe, there are very few things that hamper you as creator — as long as you set down the basic lore and swear a solemn oath to respect it, you're all set, and, indeed, everything within the world of *The Elder Scrolls* operates as a set of largely independent vignettes, whose quality and impact only depend on the talents of those particular writers and designers who are in charge at this particular moment. But **Mass Effect**, through its three huge installments, tells a single — a *singular* — story, one that ultimately decides the fate of the entire Universe as we (still don't) know it *and* has to dig a whole series of sometimes intersecting, sometimes mutually exclusive corridors to get you all the way to that decision. Not only that, but it also has to do that within the setting of a semi-realistic, semi-fantastic future that has the mind of a serious science-fiction novel and the heart of an epic big-hero-battles-dragon mythological narrative. You, the player, must *believe* that you find yourself at the heart of humanity's distant (or perhaps even not-so-distant) actual future and at the same time be capable of acting like a Hercules or a Siegfried rather than, God help us, a Jens Stoltenberg, or some random Eurocommissioner. And that's not to mention that you also must have *fun* all the way through. And shoot. And strategize. And enjoy the visuals and the music.

There are games that do all this on smaller scales, sure — *The Witcher* trilogy, for instance, which, as I already said, often finds itself compared to **Mass Effect** because (a) it is also a trilogy, (b) it is largely concurrent with **Mass Effect** chronologically, (c) some would say it does for the world of video game fantasy the same things that **Mass Effect** did for the world of video game sci-fi. But *The Witcher* is far more streamlined and limited: you do not get to create your own character, you do not get to be the middleman — more like a helpless observer — in actions that *truly* shift the balance of powers around you, and ultimately it's all about the little man (albeit quite a charismatic and talented little man) surviving and getting on in a mad, mad, mad world around him. This, along with a healthy dose of cynicism, actually helps *The Witcher* largely avoid all the ridiculous pitfalls of **Mass Effect** (nothing in *The Witcher* even begins approaching the cringe factor of *WE FIGHT OR WE DIE!!*), but the bigger the gamble, the higher the risks — and the potential profits. In its crucial moments, **Mass Effect** wins over my heart, and this means the gamble was a success after all.

As a *game*, first and foremost, **Mass Effect** will never be on the level of a top-notch shooter like **Half-Life**, and it does not even try to reach the level of classic RPG sophistication for which early BioWare was so famous. To excel at **Mass Effect**, you neither need the quickest of reflexes nor the sharpest of brains: its combat mechanics are easy to master and its puzzles are largely solvable by a 5-year old. Occasionally, when replaying certain missions, I find myself almost offended at how little actual challenge the game offers — surely a couple actual adventure game-style puzzles, or a couple bosses who fight on the level of **Dark Souls** enemies wouldn't hurt to raise the stakes a bit? But then I remind myself that everything ultimately

comes in the form of trade-offs: any extra efforts BioWare would have spent on making **Mass Effect** more of an actual game than an «immersive multimedia experience» would most likely lead to their cutting down on the story, the branching, the atmosphere, the characters, everything that makes this RPG universe so much more alive and vibrant than pretty much any other RPG universe that came before it.

Yes, many have criticized **Mass Effect** for dumbing down the CRPG aesthetics in the interests of the Average Joe, and they all have good reason and perfect justification to do that (heck, I have even read angry rants about how **Baldur's Gate 2** was already a disgusting commercial sellout after the designer perfection of the original **Baldur's Gate** — what's to be said of products from the 21st century, as we move into the world of high-end production and dazzling cinematics?). But the spirit of that criticism is the same one that lives in those who criticize people for preferring *Lord Of The Rings* to *Beowulf*, or the Beatles to Thelonious Monk — «challenge» and «sophistication» are admirable and respectable parameters, but far from the only ones that matter. **Mass Effect** intentionally lowers its difficulty — and in doing so, opens the «nerdy» universe of CRPGs for the mass consumer, but it does so with taste and respect, making the trilogy into a perfect compromise for everybody except for the most stubborn-headed snobs out there.

In the end, if you have never played **Mass Effect** and are simply wondering what all the hype is about — *and* have followed my ramblings long enough to get to this point — let me confirm, cross-me-heart-and-hope-to-die, that not only is the hype all too well deserved, but you *can* actually play **Mass Effect** «beyond the hype». In other words, the game has plenty of unexpected twists for the player to admire without necessarily subscribing to herd mentality. Contrary to rumors, you are *not* forced to play your Shepard exclusively as a Paragon; you do *not* have to necessarily romance quirky aliens like Liara, Garrus, or Tali for the honorable sakes of interracial diversity; you do *not* have to be a master combatant; the only thing you *do* need is play all three games in their sequential order rather than going straight ahead for **Mass Effect 2** like all those damn best-of lists are telling you to. Sometimes, in fact, all I want to do is just stand next to an advertising pillar on the Citadel and listen to the Elcor actor reciting lines from *Hamlet* and think «yeah, this one might just be worth a happy ending after all». There are plenty of hidden layers in this game that I haven't even touched upon, despite being unable to stop myself from writing.

[C] As for the future... well, I do not know exactly how much future there is for **Mass Effect**, but it was nice to see, with the publishing of the *Legendary Edition* remasters, that it still has plenty of the present — young gamers continue to embrace the title whole-heartedly like it's 2007 all over again; a few graphics-related quibbles aside, the trilogy has not really aged a day in ten years, which is still a pretty solid test for this kind of medium. (The only Big Artistic Compromise that the designers had to make so as to survive in the New Progressive Era was to remove the infamous close-up shots of Miranda's buttcheeks during

her conversations with the Commander — a fairly small price to pay, I'd say, for the right to retain the crown, made even smaller by the fact that loyal traditionalists, so I have heard, have already come up with an efficient mod to restore those alluring curves right back where they belonged in **Mass Effect 2**. «*Perfect in every way*», right?). The availability of all three games joined together in a single, restored and remastered, digital package means that nobody will any longer be tempted to play the games in the wrong order; that everybody will have equal access to all the DLCs, recognizing them as legitimate parts of the gaming experience; that the Extended Cut to **Mass Effect 3**'s ending will preemptively soften the blow for those still unhappy with the ending; and that the removal of **Mass Effect 3**'s Multiplayer mode will influence people to remember the game more for its epic story than its beauty as a 3rd person shooter. So it's all good, except for the nasty EA app that goes along with the package and watches your every move (but I guess most modern gamers have already made peace with Big Brother anyway).

As for the more substantial things... well, I still have to force myself to play **Mass Effect Andromeda** one of these days, a game that, based on all the trailers, clips, and gameplay footage I have seen so far, feels more like a not-too-well-executed piece of second-rate fan fiction set in the **Mass Effect** universe. The best thing I can say about the whole thing, released back in 2017 and largely forgotten since then, is that it at least respected the ambiguous lack of a «canon ending» to Shepard's story enough to make its writers think of a twist that allowed to set the story in an «alternate» **Mass Effect** universe, so that we would be able to play out a different tale with all of our favorite races without having to know whether our Commander pressed the red, blue, or green button in the end. Other than that, it was just a different game — no better or worse than the majority of average titles coming out every year — but it could not add anything to the Tale of Commander Shepard, and it did not. It was meant as either a loving gift to those who could not get enough asari sex, or as a cash grab for those who were too alarmed at the drop-off rate on **Mass Effect 3**'s multiplayer servers, or both. It served its purpose and it went away.

More alarming are the news of an alleged «**Mass Effect 5**» in the works that have circulated since 2020 and still have not died down as of 2024, even though precious little has been leaked ever since the release of the official [teaser trailer](#). While a very small part of me aligns with the segment of the fanbase that is dying for a proper sequel, the *reasonable* part of me reminds that a proper sequel to **Mass Effect** would not only be impossible — the lack of a «canon» ending prevents such a possibility in the technical sense, unless a lot of the usual retconning is involved — but it would also be very, *very* undesirable. Much like with *Star Wars*, the story Has Been Told; it has been graced with a purpose, an inner logic, a resolution, a start, a middle, and an end. Trying to imagine another round of dark future for Commander Shepard would be even more of a retarded idea than imagining the same for Luke Skywalker. Who would we be fighting this time? The Arch-Reapers? The

Super Enhanced Collectors? The great-grandson of the Illusive Man who has managed to clone Kai Leng so as to take his revenge on the Alliance? The Leviathans coming to take back Earth? (hey, actually *that* might work for a minute or two).

Of course, there is no need to get panicky. It is perfectly possible that BioWare, or even Electronic Arts, will finally commit some kind of commercial suicide before the new game is finished; or, more likely, will just let it marinate in development hell for a couple more years before pulling the plug. Even if it *does* get finished, though, the release of a crappy, useless sequel will only go so far as to tarnish the reputation of the original — for a couple of years at most, before everybody forgets about it as they did with **Andromeda**. And in the best case scenario (which I would assess at about, say, 10% probability), if the game gets completed and turns out to be not a direct sequel, but something less predictable, more imaginative and purposeful, well, it'll simply be a separate story that will have to be evaluated on its own terms.

In all honesty, what I would *really* crave is not a sequel, or a prequel, but rather something like a revised and expanded version of the original trilogy — which is why the *Legendary Edition*, even if it never promised anything of the kind, has been a bit of a disappointment in the end. As far as we know, a lot of dialog for the games ended up on the cutting floor; a lot of ideas that could have made parts of the story make more sense were left out due to time and budget constraints; and most of the writers, artists, and voice actors working on the game are still alive and could reconvene aboard the Normandy on pretty short notice. From an artistic point, something like an *Expanded Ultra-Legendary Edition*, brushed up along those lines, would have been wonderful (the equivalent of a proper «director's cut» for a classic movie); unfortunately, this is never going to happen because modern video game studios, particularly big ones, simply do not work that way.

Even the way they remain, though — imperfect in so many ways, ridden with plotheoles, stuffed with tedious bits of grinding, occasionally clunky and glitchy — all three games, taken together, remain a monumental achievement that is highly unlikely to meet its match anytime soon, simply because that time window has closed (in fact, it is quite probable that, had Karpysyn and Co. pitched their proposal just a couple years later, it would have already been too late) and it would likely require a complete restructuring of the current big game industry to produce something that would combine the same kind of quality with the same insane amount of ambition. The last significant gaming franchise to try out something of the sort was probably the *Horizon* series, launched back in 2017 with **Horizon Zero Dawn**, but for all the gorgeous looks and pieces of actual soul (mostly courtesy of the super-talented Ashly Burch voicing the main character) in that series, it honestly does not even begin to approach the world-building breadth or the emotional depth of **Mass Effect**, focusing much more on visual flash, progressive values, and the same «algorithmic» approach that lies like a blight on 99% of today's popular artistry (as in, «people like dinosaurs» + «people like robots» + «people like blowing up stuff» > «make a game about hunting and blowing

up giant robotic dinosaur machines» > *PROFIT*). It's simply that games are no longer made today in the same spirit; like I already said, it's almost a miracle that the **Mass Effect** trilogy could even be completed with only some very mild betrayal of the principles it originally stood for back in 2007.

Maybe some day in the future, after the actual Reapers have arrived and properly cleared up all the mess we're so busy currently making for ourselves, what remains of humanity will be able to look back and take a proper lesson from the trilogy. In a perfect world, where depth and meaning come before flash and spectacle, where in-game dialog does not need to be dumbed down or whittled away for the mass consumer, where

writers and artists have the final word as opposed to marketing consultants and are encouraged to follow their own thoughts and visions rather than constantly look back on the proverbial «what the people want», I can definitely see an opening for an ambitious action-role-playing franchise that could dethrone **Mass Effect** and make it look, in retrospect, like merely a stepping stone to perfection. Unfortunately, I just as definitely cannot see myself living all the way up to that day — so, for my own satisfaction, **Mass Effect** will have to do. *It's been a damn good ride*, and I don't expect anybody offering a more fulfilling one any time soon.

