

# Game Narrative Review

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**Game Title:** Mass Effect

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**Genre:** RPG / Third Person Shooter

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**Developer:** BioWare

**Publisher:** Electronic Arts

**Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer:** Drew Karpysyn

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## Overview

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*In the year 2148, explorers on Mars discovered the remains of an ancient spacefaring civilization. In the decades that followed, these mysterious artifacts revealed startling new technologies, enabling travel to the furthest stars. The basis for this incredible technology was a force that controlled the very fabric of space and time.*

*They called it the greatest discovery in human history.*

*The civilizations of the galaxy call it...*

**Mass Effect.** What could be more familiar than an intergalactic space opera spanning a legendary trilogy – an interstellar adventure across the stars to save a galaxy from an unsurmountable evil, framed by an opening crawl to induct the audience into its story?

Perfunctory allusions to related media of the genre aside, there isn't much that's actually *familiar* about Mass Effect. This introductory monologue barely scratches the surface of what players are blindsided with as they begin their journey into the saga: space travel, ancient artifacts, telekinetic powers, and alien races are just the start of what this game series submerges its players in – not to mention the extra half century of wars and politics contextualizing humanity's induction into the galactic community, all of which is completely overlooked by this short primer.

By all accounts, such an orientation into worlds literal light-years from our own should alienate its players – or at the very least, require a history lesson before expecting them to pick up and play along. Especially when the original Mass Effect first released over 15 years ago, in 2007, less than a month following another legendary space shooter with a far more popular and easier to grasp premise: Halo 3.

Despite this, Mass Effect would go on to receive incredible commercial success, its first game launching to a million sales in less than 3 weeks, while being touted by some game reviewers as the “most immersive and innovative RPG” they'd ever played (GIF, 2008). Such opinions seem credible, supported by the fact that Mass Effect continues to be profitable today, in the form of its most recent remaster and compilation title, Mass Effect Legendary Edition.

The continued success and fanfare for this game is astounding, not in the least for its ability to fully immerse players like myself in its world and story nearly a decade and a half after its release. The inevitable aging of gameplay aside, the title can still be viewed as one of the most immersive and innovative RPGs in gaming history, an achievement it holds by conquering the innate challenge facing Mass Effect's narrative design: how to make an intergalactic adventure seem boundless despite a budget that is not.

## Characters

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**Alliance** – The representative body of Earth and humanity in space, featured as the military, political, and economic force working for humans across the galaxy.

- **Commander Shepard** – The player character and an executive officer in the Alliance Navy, the military branch of human affairs in the Milky Way. Shepard has a customizable appearance, combat class, and can even be assigned different origin stories and service histories. Despite being fully voice acted, the personality of Shepard is malleable to player choice in any number of scenarios, allowing them to interact with the world through a consistent set of Renegade, Paragon, and Neutral options.
- **Ashley Williams** – One of the human members of the crew who has trouble working alongside and trusting aliens. Her family service record, and specifically the actions of her grandfather, explores the realities of first interspecies contact, when humanity became embroiled in the First Contact War.
- **Kaiden Alenko** – Another human member of the crew whose backstory explores the telekinetic powers some of humanity has become imbued with due to exposure to the radioactive substance, element zero. His history with aliens explores the lingering resentment some races feel towards humanity following their confrontational induction to the galaxy.

**Council** – The preemptive authority and governing body across Citadel space. Intergalactic laws and interspecies disputes are settled by the council composed of one member of each of the galaxy's most prominent races: the asari, the turians, and the salarians.

- **Saren Arterius** – A turian who works for the Council as a Spectre, an elite agent that operates outside the law to protect Citadel space and serve the Council. Indoctrinated by an advanced synthetic species known only as Reapers, a brainwashed Saren has begun to enact a plan according to their bidding to return the Reapers from deep space and wipe out all spacefaring, organic life from the galaxy. At his disposal is an army of Geth, a race of machines that rebelled against their quarian creators and expelled them from their home planet.

**Alien Crew** – Beyond Alliance crew, Shepard assembles an interspecies ensemble to aid in the mission to take down Saren, each character with their own strengths, weaknesses, backstories, cultures, and motivations.

- **Garrus Vakarian** – An ex-Citadel Security turian tired of working inside the confines of the law to take down criminals and with the ire of his frustration squarely aimed at Saren for his betrayal of the turian race. Garrus' character explores the legitimacy of Spectre's power to serve justice at any cost.
- **Urdnot Wrex** – A krogan bounty hunter spoiling for a good fight, Wrex offers insight into some of the uglier aspects of galactic history, including the

Genophage, a forced sterilization and slow extinction of his people, a war-hungry race that once threatened the safety of the galaxy.

- **Tali'Zorah nar Rayya** – A quarian searching for information about the Geth, Tali's story explores the relationship between synthetic and organic life, including how her race has become a people without a home due to their handling of the Geth crisis, now traveling the galaxy aboard the ever-moving Migrant Fleet.
- **Liara T'Soni** – An asari archeologist studying the Protheans, the ancient race that vanished from the universe, leaving only their technology for humanity and the other races to follow in their footsteps. Her journey coincides with the player's discovery of the Reapers and the truth behind the Prothean extinction at the hands of these synthetic machines.

## Strongest Element

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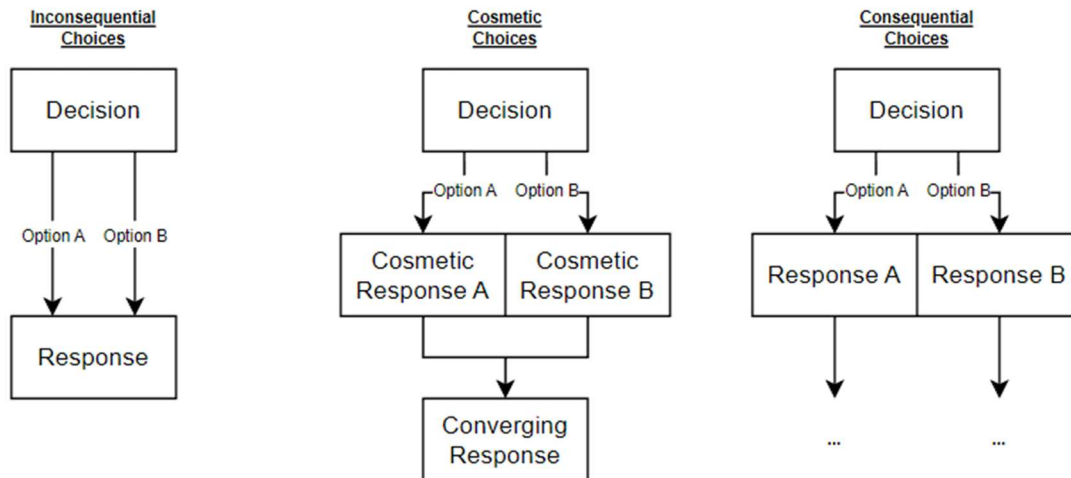
Before breaking down the story of Mass Effect, it's essential to understand the central mechanism through which it's told, as well as how that contributes to the game's promise of a large-scale galactic adventure with far-reaching consequences. I'm talking of course about the *dialogue wheel*: the tool most consistently empowering the player narrative through choice.

For context, Mass Effect's dialogue system is controlled by a central wheel, providing up to six options to the players. This dialogue wheel enables investigation, elaboration, and any manner of exploring a conversation with the game's many NPCs. But when it comes time to act – to make decisions and advance the conversation and game – most choices can be split into one of three paths: Renegade, Paragon, or Neutral. These commands determine the tone and actions of the player character. Acting as a Renegade often means acting cruelly and efficiently, completing the mission at any cost, ethics be damned; inversely, Paragon options might mean players going out of their way to make a more moral choice, sometimes at the expense of convenience or winning. Neutral options always fall somewhere in between these extremes. It isn't too hard to exemplify this: a Paragon choice might let enemies go without a fight, a Renegade option might shoot them on sight, and a Neutral selection might get them moving with a warning shot.

While this idea of different options prompting distinct responses is quite simple to grasp, there's one problem with such an implementation: *scope*. Navigating dialogues with this mechanism is often composed of making numerous back-to-back choices of what to say in every situation – even trivial dialogues make use of plentiful dialogue wheels that provide a variety of options to the player. If every interaction produced a unique response in a branching dialogue, it's not hard to see how the amount of work necessary to make a game like Mass Effect balloons exponentially.

Thus, we are brought to the central design choice that single-handedly makes the scope of Mass Effect's adventure feel boundless despite hardly being so. While player choices between these Renegade, Paragon, and Neutral paths may be numerous, with the wheel providing alternate options as part of almost every conversation, alternate consequences for those choices are not.

To further explain, we will simplify the dialogue system and look at the response of dialogue wheel choices in Mass Effect as one of three categories: inconsequential, cosmetic, and consequential choices.



*Inconsequential choices* are used so commonly throughout Mass Effect because they're the cheapest: no matter what dialogue option the player selects, the same response is provoked from NPCs involved in the conversation. There is no branching dialogue, no variation in response, no changes whatsoever. How is this possible without breaking character immersion? For the simple reason that first-time players don't have anything to compare these responses against. When each of the player character's options are written and delivered in such a way that the same response makes sense from the conversing NPC, there's nothing suspect about the exchange. In fact, using inconsequential choices often inspires the belief that conversations are more complex and branching than they really are. This strategy goes a long way towards expanding the game boundaries without needing to write and record additional lines.

*Cosmetic choices* are also prevalent across Mass Effect, employed whenever the player's dialogue options differ too strongly for a single, ambiguous response to be used, but the overall direction of conversation hasn't changed. This is when a surface-level acknowledgement of choice is necessary, allowing for the conversing NPC to respond with a unique series of dialogues before eventually reaching a converging response that puts the conversation back on the same path, regardless of whether the player selected Option A or B. This sort of dialogue tree makes a lot of sense in any number of scenarios: for one, being a rude, anti-alien jerk or a kind, intergalactic citizen to the characters you meet should result in immediate reactions fitting to your behavior – even if we need to eventually get the plot back on track.

And finally, there are the *consequential choices*, those that feature distinct, non-converging responses which oftentimes have direct results to gameplay. Were it that Mass Effect actually was developed with boundless time and budget, perhaps we'd have a game where every choice truly matters; as it stands, game developers can only hope that players perceive each decision as a consequential one.

By scattering the responses to these choices across the short or long-term, Mass Effect is able to muddy the waters of what player may perceive as mattering or not. Seamlessly blending all three types of choice into conversation shows the strength of the game's dialogue system, lending credibility to the belief that decisions may be impactful even when we can't immediately tell why.

Because sure – letting a horde of enemies surrender or gunning them down without remorse is a decision with immediate feedback that gamers are trained to recognize... but will declining a mission to help recollect your krogan crewmember's family armor *really* matter to you down the line?

I suppose only time will tell...

## Breakdown

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### Introduction

In a story of intergalactic relations, political conspiracy, and the cyclical extinction of all organic life, Mass Effect's most critical component is *you*. A role-playing game is only as successful as its ability to place the player into the protagonist's shoes, and occupying the role of Commander Shepard on the story's onset seems like a particularly daunting task – after all, how can the player place themselves into the part of a battle-hardened officer of the Alliance Navy? Those opening minutes are the first-time players have even heard about this Alliance – how exactly are they to assume the place of a commanding officer while they're still assuming the game's controls?

The fact that this is no ordinary mission would seemingly only serve to exacerbate this. Your first day on the job as Commander Shepard starts with the chaos of a surprise invasion of Geth – synthetic lifeforms that haven't been seen outside their home star system in centuries – interrupting what was supposed to be a simple cargo run; it ends with mysterious Prothean technology implanting images of the galaxy's destruction in your mind, the death of a newly assumed alien mentor, and only the name of his murderer to follow: Saren.

The story builds from this first mission by dropping Commander Shepard into the Citadel, the heart of the galactic community and melting pot of strange alien races and technology. From here, the character transitions from the role of Executive Officer to the Commanding Officer of their own ship and crew. Likewise, they are thrust into the limelight of an intergalactic manhunt as the first human Spectre, an officer operating outside the confines of the law, instructed to take down Saren by any means necessary.

Simply by setting up the story's opening act does Mass Effect accomplish the impossible and makes Commander Shepard's position consistent with the player's own; by removing Shepard from their previous post and elevating them to the level of Spectre, both the player and the player character are left occupying a position hitherto inaccessible to humanity, one where they must work directly alongside unfamiliar aliens in order to accomplish an objective that'll take them across an unknown universe. By doing so, the game also makes one important distinction: just as the player is getting familiar with working within the rules and law of this unfamiliar civilization, it removes them. The player spends one mission gunning down an invasion and another navigating political conspiracy aboard the Citadel before being cut free. Suddenly, it would seem the whole galaxy is splayed wide open to you and your crew – and it's up to you to find the answers you're looking for.



## Main Story

We'll focus first on the main story and revisit some of the side content later on, though it's important to understand that the two being experienced interspersed amongst one another is a critical component of the game's storytelling.

Mass Effect keeps its adventure open-ended and responsive to player choice by packaging the bulk of its main story into four missions that can be played in a variable order. Whereas other games might make these missions follow a linear structure, forcing the player to complete them sequentially, the added choice of where to go and when empowers players and keeps them in the role of Commander Shepard, truly allowing them to feel like the Commanding Officer of their own ship and crew, able to go where they chose to in an attempt to resolve their objective.

The added benefit of missions that can be played interchangeably is that the story unfolds differently depending on how you play them. Presenting player with different plot points and world-building for each mission means their understanding of the universe and Saren's plan builds steadily, piece by piece, and allows players to begin asking questions that the rest of the game will answer.

On Therum, the player gets a deeper glimpse into Prothean history and the Geth, rescuing the Asari archeologist, Dr. Liara T'Soni, when she is attacked by the same group of synthetic invaders from the game's first mission.

At Feros, Commander Shepard fights off the Geth invasion of a human colony, only to discover a previously undisclosed alien organism capable of mind control and possessing knowledge in the form of an ancient cipher invaluable to Saren's final plan.

Noveria explores the effects of corporate research gone wrong, tracking down Saren's second-in-command to a remote research facility under siege by an alien race thought to be extinct: the Rachni.

And Virmire presents the player with some inconvenient truths, putting the forced sterilization of an entire alien race front and center, revealing that Saren is being brainwashed by an older race of synthetic machines called the Reapers, and demanding that the player chose between one of their two human crewmates to save in the final minutes before blowing an enemy base sky-high.

What this cursory summary of each mission doesn't show you is how the interaction between them and their order of completion impacts the player's experience with each: Liara, the Asari from Therum, is the daughter of Saren's second-in-command on Noveria, and bringing her from the first planet to the latter forces her to confront the death of her own mother. Securing the cipher from Feros first furthers the player's understanding of the ancient Prothean images before meeting Liara, accelerating the crew's theories on what these messages may mean. Completing Virmire recontextualizes the entirety of Saren's actions elsewhere as a slave to the Reaper's plan to destroy organic life across the galaxy.

Why does this variability in order matter? Because it plays into Mass Effect's strongest and most impactful narrative device, that same secret kept at the core of its dialogue system. In a game with limited budget and ability to realize consequences to their fullest, oftentimes, just the acknowledgement of player choice is more than enough to make them *believe* their choices are more impactful than they actually are.

Cosmetic choices in the dialogue system are just as important as those surface-level conversations characters can have regarding the player's previous actions. For the most part, there's little to no tangible gameplay differences depending on which order of the missions you do – at most, your options are only limited by removing characters that don't survive on Virmire. But the fact that the characters respond to information they've learned or missions they've completed – sometimes in as little a capacity as a post-mission debriefing – is enough. The story feels like it's developing based on your choices and what you've done, even if it's as little as a change in text.

Why does this work? Because once again, first-time players don't recognize how much of the game *isn't* responding to their choices. When the path you chose throughout the story feels natural and responsive, players tend to assume a larger, more involved and branching story than there really is.

And nowhere is that more apparent than in the game's side content.

### Side Content

All those little bits of world-building in the main story are put to good use in Mass Effect's side content, which expand upon different elements of its world and characters. Player immersion is compounded through these optional side stories players may complete alongside their primary goal – stories that can be categorized into one of three groups.

*Loyalty missions* are special tasks for each member of your crew. Such as that thousand-year-old krogan, Urdnot Wrex, looking to reclaim his family armor from a bandit gang – or the ex-space cop turian, Garrus Vakarian, who requires your aid in bringing one of his old suspects to justice. These missions give the player closer insight into the personal motivations driving each of their crew members, unlocking unique dialogue and altering their disposition toward Commander Shepard as they become grateful of the player's assistance.

*Alliance missions* are assigned to you from Alliance Command – a preeminent reminder that you're charged with upholding humanity's intergalactic interests. These missions can pop-up on your radar as you explore the galaxy, traveling between star systems. Oftentimes, these stories end up tying into some of the player's own backstories or give the player better insight into the history of humanity's time in the 22<sup>nd</sup> century.

And then there are the *other missions* – those tasks discovered by pure chance, stumbled upon by accident in your exploration of the galaxy and completion of the main story.

These are the missions that make the galaxy feel alive. Discovering a distress signal being ignored by the corporate offices in Noveria may expand into uncovering a history of Rachni shipments to remote parts of the galaxy; looking into the disappearance of an admiral's crew might wind up revealing an Alliance black ops program responsible for a number of intergalactic crimes; stumbling upon a desolate ship could reveal a story of tragic love and mutiny when a soldier's lover was meant to be pulled from life support.

Truthfully, these self-contained stories aren't much: each has maybe a couple lines of unique dialogue, taking place in some copy-paste planet or ship to serve as a simple level with recycled enemies from other missions. Yet still, each job builds on Mass Effect's world and characters, playing into your own personal narrative of Commander Shepard. And because there's no way of knowing how many or how few of these missions there are, the game's scope once again seems a lot bigger than it really is.

Your relationship with your crew, your place within the Alliance, and knowledge of the world and its many secrets, are defined by how you approach these purely optionally missions. Stories sequestered to the furthest reaches of the galaxy can be resolved differently depending on your play style and character, all of which continue to empower your own personal narrative – and further build the illusion of a boundless galaxy to explore.

### Conclusion

The culmination of the story, and the conclusion of your intergalactic space romp, comes in the form of a two-part mission: first following Saren to the planet Ilos, which houses the secret weapon central to the Reaper's plan, before a final showdown with him and a Reaper at the Citadel.

In a game that has been cultivating feelings of immersion and impactful choice throughout, how is this preserved in the very last mission, when the narrative demands the player follow a one-way track towards the story's conclusion?

For Mass Effect, the answer comes by flooding its final mission with tangential choice, things that influence the world around the player in meaningful ways without upsetting the game's climax. Millions of human lives or the survival of the Council must be weighed against each other in one of Commander Shepard's final choices; the ability to talk the final boss into shooting themselves, skipping the first stage of the fight, means that even at the game's end, dialogue is more important than ever.

Though how is it still possible for players to fear the impact of their choices even *after* the final boss? When there's quite literally no time for consequence in the closing minutes of Mass Effect's narrative, a final dialogue and more choices to be made seems unwise on the designers' part. After all, they won – why should players still care?

It's here when Mass Effect's most innovative feature, and the central gimmick to the trilogy, shines front and center – a system which works to empower every choice the

player makes, from the game's start to the very last minutes of its completion: it's the unique ability to carry over save data between games in the series. Across the Mass Effect trilogy, players can transfer and continue saves. Picking up Mass Effect 2, players can import their completed game of Mass Effect 1, and playing Mass Effect 3 means continuing the experience of its two predecessors.

What does this imply for Mass Effect 1? Well for a start... suddenly everything's important – including the epilogue of its last five minutes. Players made readily aware of this system have no idea what the lasting consequences of their choices may be, even across games. It's possible to give weight to decisions that would otherwise feel meaningless due to limitations of consequence in the first game's final moments by holding over the player's head two more games worth of follow-up.

Because players have already been having their choices acknowledged throughout the entirety of the first game, they have no reason to expect anything less in the future. There's an unspoken expectation that their choices will continue to matter in the long run. When Mass Effect 2 picks up right where this game leaves off, it's able to employ the series' favorite habit: it becomes possible to acknowledge player choice, across entirety separate games, and even without altering gameplay, preserve an illusion of consequence.

## Unsuccessful Element

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There's a crack in this game's otherwise solid dialogue – a piece which breaks the immersion of a lively and interactive world of characters. It's what happens when it runs out.

One part of gameplay that I haven't fully addressed is the downtime between missions, spending time aboard your starship, the Normandy, to converse with and learn about your crew. As a role-playing mechanic, it's one of the most immersive parts of the game, granting the player better insight into the stories of its most important character, but in its implementation, it is *flawed*.

Running out of dialogue is inevitable – were writers to write more, all that would mean is that role-playing minded players would have more conversations to experience before once again running out. But when players invariably do exhaust the dialogue, a problem in design is made clear.

Repeating the last conversation whenever players go to check characters for new dialogue is immersion breaking, and unfortunately, that's exactly what much of the crew aboard the Normandy will do. Upon completing his loyalty mission storyline, Garrus will initiate every conversation with thanking you for helping him, allowing you to experience the full dialogue of his post-mission completion once again. Now don't get me wrong – it's a great conversation. Just not one myself nor many other players want to have every time we're making rounds aboard the ship, scouring our crew for fresh dialogue.

This issue runs deeper than minor annoyance: it's a flaw that exposes how the game pretends to respond to player choice. When the player is confronted with a dialogue they wouldn't expect according to the established rules of the game world – such as a repeated conversation referencing a mission they completed a dozen hours ago – it breaks them out of the immersion which Mass Effect works so hard to keep. It also allows them to select alternate options to a dialogue they've already experienced... alternate options that more often than not, do not lead to the unique responses and consequences they were expecting. The ability to repeat conversations while all other options have been exhausted means that Commander Shepard can choose to ask Ashley about her family when the discussion previously started with a question of where she grew up; the simple truth that each path prompts an identical response from the conversing NPC eliminates any illusion of how far branching choices in the dialogue system can be.

What happens coinciding with this exhaustion of dialogue is an element that would continue to adapt across the Mass Effect series. In Mass Effect 2, Garrus' depleted dialogue state would go on to be replaced with a special line indicating such – "I'm in the middle of some calibrations" – being only slightly less frustrating than the same mistimed conversation repeated ad nauseum. Mass Effect 3 would be the first to truly nail this element, giving characters a rotating pool of unique lines to inform players of their state. Each adaptation would do its part to preserve the illusion of characters' depth in

conversation – while also covering up that pesky little flaw that their reactions don't really matter as much as we perceive them to.

## Highlight

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There's no question to where the peak of Mass Effect's narrative resides: the mission on Vormire shines as a critical moment of consequence and growth for its characters.

Even before you undertake your primary objective on the planet, the stakes are made clear. Unless you have a high enough Paragon or Renegade score – the culmination of making the same type of choice consistently throughout the rest of the game – or you actually went out of your way to get that family armor for Wrex, you will be forced to kill off your krogan companion to prevent his mutiny.

(Seems like declining that mission really *was* a consequential decision).

When the mission starts, it doesn't pull any punches either, keeping you on edge as it forces you to separate your squad. As you lead one force to infiltrate and plant a bomb to destroy Saren's base, you must send one of your human crewmates, Ashley or Kaiden, to aid a group of salarians in a suicide charge that serves as your distraction.

In infiltrating the facility, Commander Shepard and the player learn the truth regarding Saren and the Reapers, that the very ship which the turian conspirator pilots *is* a Reaper – and it's controlling him through the power of indoctrination. After scouring the galaxy for Saren to unravel his master plan, it turns out he's not even the one in charge.

The final act of the mission is a decision: with limited time before the base's implosion, the player must choose whether to rescue Ashley or Kaiden. One is pinned down alongside the salarian forces; the other struggling to keep off enemy combatants attempting to seize the bomb. There's no way to save them both – no combination of choice and action to enable a perfect playthrough in this regard. Someone is dying on Vormire, permanently removing a member from your team.

Mass Effect finally reveals its hand here on Vormire, and it does so by reducing player agency and control to a binary choice. In a game which relies on barraging the player with seemingly boundless and overwhelming options, this is a moment of singular action. There's no illusion to the possibilities available here – no doubt to their consequence: Option A will save Kaiden at the cost of getting Ashley killed; Option B does just the opposite. No branching paths exist to fool the player with false hope that any other outcome could ever be possible.

The question must be asked – why is it that *this* is Mass Effect's shining moment? In a game built upon legitimizing the power of superficial decisions to create a boundless experience, why is a moment of clearly defined consequence and uncharacteristically restrictive options its crowning achievement?

In this instant, it is precisely because of the limitations on player control that makes Vormire stand out amidst a game rife with infinite action. Constraining player agency and betraying an expectation for omnipotence that's been trained into gamers from across an entire genre leaves them wanting more from the pivotal moment of control's absence.

You as a player are unhappy with the situation and the few options available to you, just as the player character is cornered into a position that leaves them feeling helpless.

Virmire is a chance to disappoint the player, to confront them with an atypical lack of control. For a game built on the freedom of boundless choice, Virmire is a reminder of rising narrative stakes and tension, wrapped in an instance of real and tangible consequence. It limits player control to the confines of the plot, putting us in the same position as Commander Shepard as we too feel powerless, only able to make do with the best of a bad situation. Total immersion is achieved with the reduction of our abilities, which coincides perfectly with the climax of Mass Effect's second act.



## Critical Reception

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When Mass Effect first released fifteen years ago, the game – and especially its narrative – was met with widespread critical acclaim and success. The original wave of reviewers were quick to ladle on heavy praise.

Erik Brudvig, IGN, 9.4/10: “The cinematic design is nothing short of masterful. This is a game that takes the aspects of film that make cinema so compelling and crosses it with the interactivity of games with unprecedented success. Linear storytelling feels quaint by comparison... Simply put, Mass Effect is a game that must be played” (Brudvig, 2007).

Alex Donaldson, RPG Site, 9/10: “In true Bioware tradition the most important aspect of this game is the story, and front and center for this title is an epic space opera where you'll have to decide if characters and even entire species live and die and ultimately build your own unique persona within the Mass Effect universe... Bioware are truly dedicated to making you attached to this world - and they're damn good at it” (Donaldson, 2009).

And when Mass Effect was re-released as part of a remastered Legendary Edition just last year... its narrative continued to hold its ground in the eyes of reviewers, despite the obvious aging of its game mechanics.

Dan Stapleton, IGN, 8/10: “The story of Commander Shepard and the crew of the Normandy working to stop the rogue Specter Saren from jumpstarting an ancient cycle of galactic genocide hasn't missed a step in the past 14 years, and neither have its unforgettable alien companion characters... Revelations come at a pace that keeps the energy up, and I've rarely seen a universe feel so thoroughly fleshed out so quickly” (Stapleton, 2021).

Any sci-fi story that hasn't been aged into oblivion over the span of a decade and a half is something special. But in the duration of this essay, all I'll talked about is the game's ability to handle choice in a way that keeps players immersed and interested in its story. If Mass Effect didn't possess a world and narrative worthy of players' attention in the first place.... all that would be meaningless,

## Lessons

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Mass Effect teaches us four lessons about choice in role-playing gaming, all of which are instrumental in building player immersion within a narrative they can perceive as boundless despite the limitations of the medium.

- Illusion of choice works to raise player expectation.

When first-time players can't possibly predict which choices are consequential or not, the expectation that everything matters in some way means their perception of the different options and paths a narrative may provide expands exponentially beyond what the game actually does. Mass Effect's ability to maintain this illusion of choice even better than contemporary titles is due to its unique ability to follow-up on actions made across games – a feature which translates directly to mindful player's expectations of choice.

- Acknowledgement of choice empowers the player's narrative.

Cosmetic-only responses to dialogue options, the minor tweaks made to post-main story mission debriefings depending on their order of completion, and the changes in character disposition based on how players choose to complete missions all work together to empower the player's narrative by acknowledging their unique gameplay choices outside the context of meaningful consequence.

- Real consequences to choices keep players honest to role-playing.

Those who play a bit too loose with the rules – doubting the actual power of choice-based dialogue systems or the purpose of exploring side content – need to be reminded with actual consequences. Moments of real, tangible action and reaction are important, even when used sparingly, in keeping players honest to the rules of gameplay. Wrex's death shows us just as much, remaining easily avoidable with the proper preparation and caution paid while approaching the situation.

- Absence of or limitations to choices can raise the stakes of a narrative.

There are moments – *rare* moments – in the context of role-playing games and player-driven choice, when less is more; when an absence or limitation of choice can reinforce narrative themes and raise the tension of a scene. Virmire wouldn't be half as memorable were it that both Ashley and Kaiden could be saved, just as players wouldn't feel half as immersed in the role of Commander Shepard without those rare moments of helplessness.

## Summation

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Why does Mass Effect deserve this analysis? I could expound endlessly on its story and characters – on how BioWare managed to produce a new franchise with the staying power to guarantee a trilogy from its first game. I could argue that the practical lessons of choice we can take away from Mass Effect aren't taught better by any game since 2007.

Quite frankly though, the truth is I wanted to take apart Mass Effect because it was the only game to make me realize I was playing RPGs *wrong*. Being dropped into an unfamiliar world full of excellent adventures and charming characters isn't what makes Mass Effect great; it's that the world then asks you what your part in it will be. The game sets the player adrift amid a sea of seemingly endless choices, prompting them to decide how your character should react. And even when those actions don't matter in the context of its narrative and gameplay... they matter to you.

Before Mass Effect, I'd never honestly tried to assume the role of a character I was playing in a *role-playing* game.

No other game made it feel so obvious.

## Citations

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