

MASS EFFECT

Narrative Review by Nicholas Frangie

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Overview

In the year 2007, developers at BioWare released the first installation in this critically acclaimed RPG franchise. In the decades that followed, this Sci-Fi epic revealed startling truths about interaction in games. The basis for this incredible trilogy was a force that controlled the very fabric of space and sales charts.

The original title in the Mass Effect series follows Commander Shepard, a newly promoted Alliance Commander, as they step onto the galactic stage and traverse the cosmos, pursuing an ancient threat.

The narrative's success stems neither from originality nor complexity, but rather from how the world and characters respond to player choice. In a world where it feels that even the slightest decisions might make all the difference, it's all too easy for players to be immersed... even when the game might not be so responsive as it may seem.

Lessons

Limited options can raise a narrative's stakes.

The illusion of choice works to raise player expectations.

Controlled interaction becomes a **boundless fantasy** through player extrapolation of world size, facilitated by Mass Effect's delicate balance of **superficial** and **authentic consequence**.

Simply acknowledging player decisions empowers the narrative.

Tangible changes to gameplay maintains honesty to role-playing.



Dialogue

More is more.

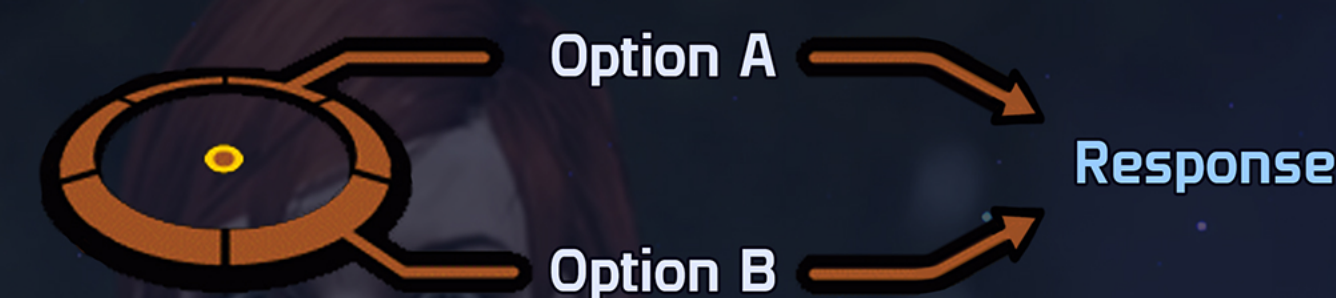
The dialogue wheel is an atypical example of how quantity of choice, rather than quality, can be used to create what appears to be a responsive and immersive world.

By treating **inconsequential**, **cosmetic**, and **consequential** choices as one in the same, it becomes difficult to predict possible effects for any decisions players may make.

The game inundates players with an excess of these choices each conversation, so as to mislead them into extrapolating that its world and narrative are bigger than they are.

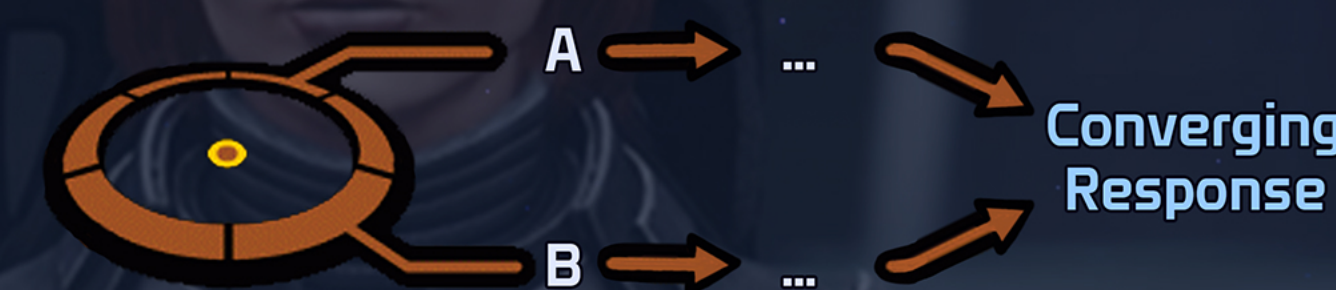
Inconsequential

Dialogue Changes ☐
Gameplay Changes ☐



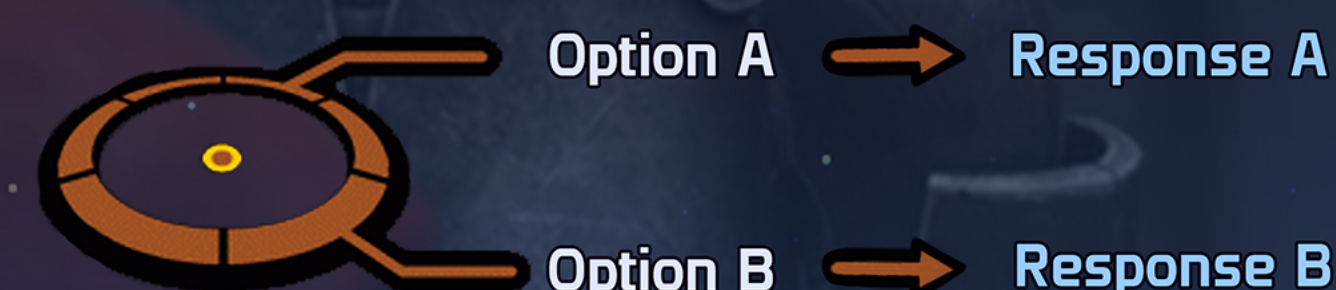
Cosmetic

Dialogue Changes ☒
Gameplay Changes ☐



Consequential

Dialogue Changes ☒
Gameplay Changes ☒



Where it's good...

The **paragon** and **renegade** system exists to blatantly affirm that choices matter, even when they have identical outcomes. By gamifying dialogue and role playing, the triviality of choice is further masked.

Where it's bad...

Repeating dialogue allows players to explore alternate options, exposing how little choices effects the trajectory of conversation. Peeling back this curtain shatters any illusion players may hold for the game's limitless potential.

This galaxy is as big as you believe it.