

Game Narrative Review

Game Title: *Mass Effect*

Platform: PC/XBOX 360

Genre: 3rd Person Shooter/RPG

Release Date: November 11, 2007

Developer: BioWare

Publisher: Microsoft Game Studios

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Drew Karpyshyn

Author of this review: Gideon Shbeeb

School: The Guildhall at SMU Plano

Overview

Set in the 22nd century, across a vast selection of solar systems in our universe, *Mass Effect* places players in the role of Commander Shepard. As a soldier in the 2nd Fleet of the Human Systems Alliance, Commander Shepard encounters several races of aliens while exploring diverse planets in far off solar systems. A central government, known as The Council, rules over the majority of mapped interstellar space. The Council has ordered the humans to run a rather mundane mission. Unwittingly volunteered Commander Shepard undertakes this mission with orders from the highest branches of human government.

This mission goes from a game of political examination to galactic espionage in short order. The new developments from the initial mission cast Commander Shepard as the Captain of the SSV Normandy. Subsequent information leads into a string of escalating events that string him and his crew from one planet to the next to save the universe.

Characters

The *Mass Effect* universe is host to dozens of unique alien races, some of whom join Commander Shepard on his perilous mission.

Humans

Commander Shepard: Like many protagonists that BioWare designed, Commander Shepard is an avatar of unrivalled variability. The appearance of Commander Shepard changes at the onset of the game based on the player input, but it does not stop at visual presence. Class specializations help the player to customize gameplay experience as with most action RPG games. However, the most significant narrative element of Commander Shepard's customization comes from choosing a backstory from several variants that make the player characterized from the best last hope for humanity to the only person that is crazy enough for the job. Additionally, throughout the game following a moral alignment also modifies gameplay and enhances narrative.

Gunnery Chief Ashley Williams: Like many frontline soldiers for the HSA Chief Williams has mild discontentedness with anything non-human. She is a gruff cut soldier with an attitude aimed at authority. While she does carry out orders to a T, she does not easily comply with orders she does not like. Chief Williams' specialty lies in heavy weapons accenting her brute force strategies.

Lieutenant Engineer Kaiden Alenko: Lieutenant Alenko represents the forefront of human development. He is an L2 biotics and a master engineer. This renders him capable of using innate mass effect manipulation to assert his mental will onto the world. In addition to his biotics capabilities, Lieutenant Alenko also has a strategic mind that puts the newest technology to use on the frontlines. While typically quiet, Lieutenant Alenko voices his opinions when he feels questionable morals are at play.

Asari

A unisexual species, best described as blue skinned humanoids with strong biotic capabilities. These aliens enjoy a long life full of wisdom they are known for imparting to others. Asari hold a central role in Citadel space as they hold one of three seats on The Council.

Liara T'soni: Considered a child by her people, Liara enters the story at 106 years old. A researching archeologist by nature, Liara personifies cultural ineptitude when it comes to interacting with any species, let alone her own people. A practitioner of biotics, Liara comes as a disappointment to her mother Matriarch Benezia, a significant source of inspiration to all Asari.

Turian

The first race to "meet" the humans, the Turians started a war with the humans over an unspoken rule. They are visually interesting and identified by plated scales and tattoo like markings that cover their head and face. A general discontent for humans is not something most Turians try to hide.

Garrus Vakarian: He is more the exception than the rule. Garrus holds no ill temper towards the humans and occasionally speaks to their defense. This does not make him popular with his own people. Garrus is a true space cowboy. He tried to solve problems through official channels, but will do what it takes to stop those that would hurt innocent people.

A master tactician and an expert sniper, Garrus can hold his own on the battlefield

Krogan

A warring race, these creatures stand taller and heftier than almost any other race in the Mace Effect universe. A bioweapon used by another race almost completely wiped out the Krogans, and the remaining survivors have not been able to breed.

Urdnot Wrex: A Krogan Battle Master, Wrex is a bounty hunter with an adrenaline addiction. Jaded by his people, and bitter at the world for the near imminent extinction of his species, Wrex drives towards danger in reckless abandon hoping to go out in a blaze of glory. He cannot be easily swayed once provoked. As an ally this can make Wrex a powerful or dangerous companion.

Breakdown

Players engage nine required missions as well as a plethora of side quests along the way, and out of the way. First, the Commander is introduced on a mission, which offers to evaluate if humans are ready to join the Council's elite military unit, the Spectres. Players first explore the Normandy getting to know the crew and ship, and then are deployed planet side. Things go inevitably wrong as a character the player met on the ship die in combat right after getting a little back story about the character and leveling them up. This element breaks players into the reality of *Mass Effect's* grittiness. Shortly after this, players meet up with the true second human companion for the rest of the game, but players feel skepticism about the longevity of any of the characters at this point.

As political tensions wind up in front of the player with dialogue interactions about how they tried their best, but still failed, omniscient cut-scenes give players a clear enemy and help to reveal ideal quest choices. After the failed planet side mission, a test of the players exploratory nature comes into play. The player must acquire new team members, but information on the how of this objective is scarce. The scripted events the introduce Wrex and Garrus are rather difficult to miss, but players could not engage in conversation at this point, thinking that the game will always present information this way.

Once off the citadel, four major missions are labeled for players, but no other attention is drawn to them on the universe map. Each of these quests allows for development of the players character in both statistics and demeanor. Since all of these quests are essentially isolated skirmishes, the more powerful narrative element of these quests sits on their ability to humanize NPCs that are suffering, and thereby vilify the main foe in the game, the Geth. Each of these situations offers little in the way of long term gains, save the mission where players free Liara to join the party.

Traversing the galaxy in pursuit of a mastermind villain, players find themselves one step behind the whole game. This daunting carrot in front of the player becomes exemplified again by omniscient cut-scenes showing exactly how close the players where to catching the bad guys.

The final battle carries the player to find revenge for the honor of the humans and to place the seed of a larger enemy to be aware of and plan against. This sets the backdrop for the sequel and leaves the player feeling accomplished, but not quite content since there is no closure.

Strongest Element

The strongest narrative element in this game certainly comes from the connection it draws from players to characters that are taken out of story in abrupt and dramatic fashions. Matriarch Benezia, for example, presents one of the more challenging boss battles in the game and is eventually brought down by exhaustion. This leads players to believe that capturing the enemy is possible, as was the mission plan. However, a huge plot spike occurs when a, previously thought to be mindless, race of aliens introduces themselves as a moral dilemma to the player. Potential encounters with Saren, the semi-final boss, a sacrifice of one of your own crew, and the potential to kill one of your own crew to save the rest all lead up to potentially abrupt and unexpected character developments that the player has emotional attachment to.

Unsuccessful Element

Due to the nature of the game, exploration, there are many areas that can be explored, but should not be explored. A large portion of the planets the player could visit for story purposes are barren and desolate. No NPCs, no unique structures, and no reason to travel there. The story elements that happen on these planets could have been consolidated into three to four mildly populated areas. When a player has to trek ten minutes across barren landscapes to reach a single enemy and have one conversation, it completely breaks immersion and leaves the players in the doldrums of narrative.

Highlight

The mission on Vormire by far sits above the rest of the game in regards to player agency and an implied sense of urgency. The mission starts under the pretense of a bad transmitter, and quickly develops into an assault against the enemy stronghold. This mission give players a great conflict with Wrex as he finds out Saren, the enemy they have been chasing all game, has cured the disease that plagues his race with infertility. Players also for the first time really get a feeling of what the real enemy in the game plans on doing. This well-paced level takes players across vast exterior landscapes as well as substantial interior complex. The terrain on Vormire sets the mood for an evil genius's base and is completely different than the rest of the game.

Critical Reception

Mass Effect received a 91 on Metacritic, an A+ on 1up.com, and a 9.4 from IGN. These scores stand to the fact that the game received a lot of acclaim for being an OIP in the shooter genre.

Lessons

Players begin this game by creating a character. There is no narrative lead up to the creation. There is no listing of expectations for the game. What players are given is the inklings of what their character may be motivated by. The backstories available during character creation are certainly full enough to get someone started on the game, but by no means are they complete. This is by design and fully intentional. Players see the backstory provided and choose one that they find interesting to them.

Immediately the player creates sub plots and trivial facts about their character. These self-imposed traits their character now has in their mind will manifest during gameplay when given moral and strategic decisions.

Since plot points are non-linear, players have less of a penalty for choosing to progress the adventure in a direction that sounds exciting to them. Progressing one plot point may encourage the player to pursue another major plot, or potentially open up a related event for the player. Additionally, the side quests in *Mass Effect* allow players to pursue micro plots as well as fill in holes in backstories of the entire cast of characters.

- Variable backstories create variable expectations
- Free form plot progression encourages experimentation
- Plot driven side quests encourage exploration

Summation

While many games flood the action RPG market *Mass Effect* outshines the lot of them. The game maintains the core of BioWare's design standards in depth of story and immersive environments. The plot the player experiences varies between each play through, but there are some repetitive elements in non-unique side quests.