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Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture. 2008; 2; 2; 289-292

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In *Mass Effect*, humanity (called Systems Alliance) is a newcomer to the galactic community. In keeping with history, the humans of the future begin heavily colonizing space after discovering the Mass Relay system on Mars. A technological remnant from an earlier species known as the Protheans, the Mass Relay facilitates almost instantaneous travel across space. Human colonisation eventually leads to the First Contact War when an alien species, known as the Turian, occupy the human colony of Shanxi. Swift to respond, the humans delivered a stunning defeat. Attempting to avoid an all out war, the Citadel Council, the galaxy's governing body, brokered peace. As one of humanities leading figures, Commander Shepherd of the SSV Normandy, you are seen as an ambassador and the species future hope of attaining the highest honour of installing one of his or her own as a Spectre.

BioWare has given players the option of fully customizing their own Commander Shepherd. In addition to appearance, gender, abilities, and personal history, players can choose from six character classes including soldier, engineer, adept, infiltrator, sentinel, and vanguard. Unlike most games, all in-game decisions cause story to change, making players as much an author of the game as they are a player. Taking *Knights of the Old Republic's* morality system to a whole new level, *Mass Effect* forces you to choose your actions, whether Machiavellian (Renegade) or Boy Scout (Paragon), causing an immediate effect in the game world. The player interface to make these choices is a dialogue 'wheel' that allows the player to select emotional or tonal reply to the scenario presented, rather than pre-set text responses. This is aimed at deepening the connection between the character and player by creating a response derived from the player's personal emotions and reactions.

The non-player characters are believable and generally have interesting stories to tell for those who take the time to listen. Their stories can extend game play and increase understanding of personality traits, opinions, or beliefs that may otherwise seem perplexing or out of character. Many of these characters have traits that encourage us to identify with them, from a love affair gone badly, to a harried secretary, and a monotone direction-giving hologram. In addition to these familiar life situations, the BioWare team has made identification with these characters more realistic by employing careful motion capture of both bodily movements and facial expression. The face is a visible signal and is a critical variable in social interaction (Schmidt and Cohn 2001 p.4). Six basic expression categories have been shown to be recognisable across cultures, and while debate is ongoing regarding the range of facial expressions shared cross-culturally, experts tend to agree on: 'disgust', 'fear', 'joy', 'surprise', 'sadness', and 'anger' (Schmidt and Cohn 2001 p.5). These six expressions are recognized in individuals from a variety of backgrounds, as well as in the faces of those who are born deaf and blind. In addition to these six expressions, there are also other nonverbal displays including the eyebrow flash, yawning, startle,

coy display, and embarrassment/shame (Schmidt and Cohn 2001 p.5). Knowing the role of emotional expression, it is interesting to note that in *Mass Effect* regardless of the fact that it is an entirely new galaxy with a number of different species, almost all characters are capable of human-like facial expressions. In a telephone interview, Casey Hudson of BioWare (Schiesel 2007) said:

We wanted to create a video game that had the potential to rival live-action movies in terms of cinematic, dramatic power. We wanted our characters to be able to just raise an eyebrow and have it convey a thought or emotion just as it could in a film.... what makes the story exciting is emotion...We did a lot of research into the psychology of what creates and portrays a compelling emotion.

While not all species employ expressions ranging outside the realm of the original six, the more human the species, the more expression they employ. Human faces are much more believable than ever with visible pores, wrinkles, and scars and the Asari, a distinctly human-like alien, is capable of embodying all ranges of 'human' facial expression. This is in stark contrast with the Volus and Quarian species that may be more difficult to identify with because they wear masks. In these instances their vocal inflections and speech that illuminate their true sentiments, while their stories offer enough back context to make them likeable. Similarly, the Elcor do not have expressive faces, but instead indicate how they are feeling in statement form at the beginning of speech, a trait unique to their species. Speech is the most important manner in which the player interacts with the non-player characters and here too facial expression plays an important part of listener activity (Schmidt and Cohn 2001 p.15). Most characters do look like they are paying attention when you are speaking to them. Some of this is attributable to the game design showing characters up close to the screen, from the shoulders up so when you are conversing, so you can watch the reaction of your audience in a more realistic fashion. Here again the conversation wheel allows a more authentic feel to the conversation, encouraging the proper interjections and prompts for continued conversing.

Perhaps in an attempt to make the members of your crew easier to identify with, they are all capable of complex expression. The sole exception to this is the Quarian, Talia, whose face is hidden by a mask, as previously mentioned. Establishing a sympathetic relationship with this crew member is also complicated by her species' historic role in creating the Geth, a race of networked artificial intelligence that developed the ability to think for themselves. These Geth form one body of individuals that must be fought and defeated throughout the game. In addition to complex facial expressions, each crew member also has a personal narrative that develops with the game story. As the Commander interacting with each crew member separately, the story allows you to develop one of two romantic arcs. Far from detracting from the story, this human element is believable, particularly when one considers how much time is spent isolated within the *SSV Normandy* and how familiar one must become in such close quarters. The game can be wrought with emotion that can be upsetting when one realises the consequences of one's choices. For those who have had the experience of playing the game, they will know how difficult some of the choices players must make can be, but to avoid spoiling the plot, I will not discuss this further here. Suffice to say that those who allow themselves to be drawn into the story will have a deeper emotional connection to the characters in the game, most specifically the ones that make up the *SSV Normandy's* crew.

In *Mass Effect*, game story elements are interwoven with politics, intolerance, and complex economic systems. These combine with multiple languages, species, religious elements, and a long and complicated history to form a rich story-driven world. Characters sit on park benches, conduct business in the black market, and run scams through various middle-men. Back stories, biases, intolerance, and social history all affect the way game characters talk about and treat each other. Each character lends something to the creation of a living, breathing world. Much like other games of 2007, BioWare charts new territory by including social commentary and contentious subject matter in a mainstream game. The story reveals some of the secrets that explain humanity's 150-year lifespan and new abilities: the use of utero genetic screening and the elimination or reparation of congenital defects. Some of the biogenetic enhancements used in the game by those playing as 'biotic' classes are used to enhance physical abilities and mental acuity, in addition to increasing access to, and focusing of, biotic powers. The game also reveals that the Krogan, a species of warring reptilian bipeds were infected with a 'genophage'. This biological weapon has affected their ability to reproduce viable offspring, leading to their slow extinction. Mass extinction is revisited again later in the game with the discovery of the Reaper species that have previously wiped out the entire galaxy before retreating to Dark Space and waiting for the solar system to repopulate.

Once familiar with the game play mechanics (there is a learning curve, even for experienced gamers), the flow of intermingling game play and story is enthralling. The degree of control the player has over the game play is limited only by their preferences. Combat situations can be paused, allowing for calculated adjustments of non-player character combat tactics. For players who are not interested in that level of detail, choices are available that allow the other characters to be completely AI controlled.

Mass Effect is a game that forces you to make difficult decisions and causes you to think. The story is well written and carefully crafted, carrying you forward through combat scenes and cinematics. For this reason, I have avoided making many references to it, hoping to leave its discovery to those who have yet to play. At the time of writing, two fiction novels have been released to supplement the game story: *Mass Effect: Revelations*, the prequel to the game series, outlining the back story of Captain Anderson and Saren's relationship alluded to throughout the game. *Mass Effect: Ascensions* continues the story of the first game, though does not feature any major characters in the game directly.

Mass Effect plays heavily on the 'what ifs' of our society. What if there really is life out there? What if we stumbled upon some sort of technology that sped our development as a species that we had never before conceived of as possible? What if we were faced with the potential end of life in our entire galaxy? To what end would we go to prevent total annihilation and would we try even if we were told it was unlikely we would succeed? The *Mass Effect* series, promised by BioWare, offers one take on answering these questions. If the rest are anything like the first, it is going to be an interesting journey.

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