

Mass Effect 3 and Uniting the Galaxy in the Face of Total Destruction

ENGL 199 Research Report

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Abstract—Video games are often blamed for many social problems, from laziness and lack of motivation to accomplish anything, to pent up aggression that gets released as acts of violence in the real world. Although the gameplay in the Mass Effect Series contains violence, by allowing the player to develop his/her own character, the narrative of the game causes players to think about social issues such as inter-alien racism, and to resolve these issues in a civil manner.

Index Terms—mass effect, video game, race, racism

I. INTRODUCTION

Although video games are commonly criticized for promoting aggression and desensitising individuals, Mass Effect 3 touches on some very important social issues today by making the player think about political views, and what stances they should pick. One of the prevalent issues in the world today is racism. In Mass Effect 3, the issue of racism is portrayed through alien characters, and tensions between them. The narrative takes place in the future, where humans are no longer concerned about racism amongst themselves. The ultimate goal of the game is to make (sometimes difficult) decisions as a representative for humanity, resolve diplomatic tensions, and unite the races against a common threat -the Reapers.

The Reapers are advanced synthetic life forms, which perform a purge of all intelligent organic life every 50,000 years in the Milky Way, known as a ‘harvest’. They were made to preserve organic life, since (within the Mass Effect universe), intelligent lifeforms, once advanced enough to develop technological advancements ultimately make synthetic lifeforms which rebel and destroy their organic creators. Ironically, the solution to this problem in the Reapers’ view is to harvest the genetic makeup of the galaxy, and allow new civilizations to grow and be harvested in a continuous cycle. The ultimate goal of the game is to unite the intelligent races in the Milky Way Galaxy against the Reapers, and break the cycle. However, the races must work together to do so, and history tells that every previous cycle was unsuccessful due to unresolved conflicts between the intelligent races, resulting in a lack of cooperation. The game puts the player in the position of Commander Shepard (male or female), who is tasked with making important decisions as a leader to unite the races using diplomacy, and to ultimately be the saviour of all organic life in the Milky Way Galaxy.

II. EXTREMIST VIEWS - CERBERUS TERRORIST ORGANIZATION

Although the primary goal in Mass Effect 3 is to unite the alien races, some extremist views are presented, which the

player can choose to side with ideologically to some extent. Cerberus, led by the Illusive Man is a xenophobic prohuman paramilitary group [1][2] who believe that earth’s government, the Systems Alliance is too worried about law, and public opinion to stand up to other Citadel races. The Citadel is a United Nations like coalition of the intelligent races in the Milky Way. Cerberus believes that “any methods of advancing humanity’s ascension are entirely justified, including illegal or dangerous experimentation, terrorist activities, sabotage and assassination.”[2] Cerberus’s claim that it promotes the rights of humans, despite being essentially a hate group for other aliens is strikingly similar to extremists today, who also engage in illegal activities to promote their agendas. One of Cerberus’s main goals is to control Reaper technology to gain a technological advantage for humans. However, the means for doing so are widely regarded as unacceptable. At one point in the narrative, it is found that Cerberus had been running a “Sanctuary”, wherein people seeking shelter from the Reapers were taken in and used as human test subjects subject to torture and premature death. Commander Shepard is given the opportunity to agree with the Illusive Man that the Reapers should be controlled, but if the player so chooses, the Illusive Man denies. It can be noted that the wrecklessness of the experiments run by Cerberus appear to be analogous the type of human experimentation run in Nazi Germany, having to do with amputations, physical and mental trauma, and mutations.

Although the player is given the option to agree with the Illusive Man that Reapers should be controlled instead of destroyed, Commander Shepard does not join sides with Cerberus, since his goal is to save life. Therefore, while the player is exposed to extremist views in the game, it is made abundantly clear through storytelling and causing the player to feel emotions such as disgust, and sympathy for the victims that the actions taken by Cerberus are morally wrong. The game shows that the end does not necessarily justify the means, even if the player goes with the Renegade, or ruthless playing style as a leader.

III. RENEGADE AND PARAGON PLAYING STYLES

Throughout Mass Effect 3, the choices given to the player often fall into one of two categories: Renegade and Paragon. The Renegade and Paragon system in Mass Effect allows players to choose from one of two main playing styles. The Paragon options typically have to do with showing compassion, or charming someone while Renegade choices are typically used for intimidation or coercion. In this way, the

game differentiates good choices of “good” and “bad”, with both options having positive and/or negative consequences. Some would argue that the system, which allows players to choose Renegade options reinforces negative behaviours such as insulting people and/or intimidation. The game, in this regard allows the player to define their political views with regard to religion, views on other alien races and sexuality, with Renegade options tending to be less tolerant of some alien races, religion, or extraterrestrial sexuality for example. In contrast, players who choose Paragon options tend to solve issues by being more open and friendly to non playable characters, doing heroic actions, and persuing justice for victims. Fortunately, according to statistics for Mass Effect 3 compiled in 2013 [3], most players choose to be a kind leader by making Paragon choices, which shows that the emotions developed in the narrative generally make the player feel like they should do the right thing.



Fig. 1. Most players choose on their own accord to be a kind leader as opposed to a ruthless one who gets the job done. [3]

As for the 35.5% who chose the Renegade playing style, it should be noted that even if the player chooses to be a ruthless leader, the result of the player’s actions are still for the greater good of the universe, which is saving all life in the Milky Way from the threat of reapers. Furthermore, when choosing Renegade options, the player often sees the results of their actions, which in some cases results in emotional responses from players who may even regret their actions, in spite of these events happening in a virtual world.

IV. TENSIONS BETWEEN THE KROGAN AND THE SALARIANS

Similar to today’s world, there are races in Mass Effect who have a long running grudge against each other for something done in the past. The Krogans, a race of extremely tough reptilian bipeds used to have a very high birth rates, and were colonising planets including those of other nations in the Council. In retaliation, a biological weapon called the Genophage, created by an amphibian race called the Salaris was unleashed on the Krogan. This virus significantly reduced the probability of viable pregnancies of the Krogan race to 1 in 2000 [2], which left the Krogan vulnerable to extinction. Understandably, the Krogans were upset about the genocide and demanded a cure. However, the Salaris generally believed that the Krogan race was irresponsible, and that they did not deserve a cure. As a leader whose goal is to unite the races and gain military support to fight the Reapers, difficult decisions must be made with what position to take. On a mission to deploy a cure for the Genophage, the Salaris political leader contacts Commander Shepard, offering military assets

if the cure is sabotaged. On the other hand, if the cure is administered, the Krogan offer their military support in the struggle against the Reapers. As an outsider, it is easy to see that while the Krogans did not have the right to conquer planets belonging to other races of the Council, the punishment (genocide) was too harsh and inhumane. In addition to facing extinction, younger Krogan are discriminated against by other races in the Council, due to the actions of their predecessors. In player statistics revealed by Electronic Arts in 2013, 92% of the players choose to cure the genophage [3], which may be a

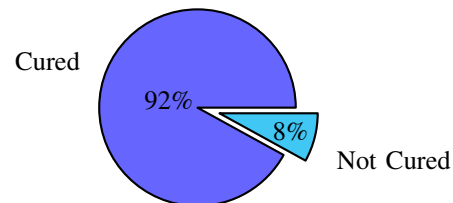


Fig. 2. Most players chose to cure the genophage [3], an important diplomatic step for righting the wrongs of the Salaris.

surprise to some, given that 35.5% of players chose Renegade decisions. This implies that even those who chose to play as a ruthless leader still found value in righting a wrong from the past, even though the humans were not responsible for the mistake made by the Salaris. Even though the Salaris initially disapprove the cure for the Genophage, the player can still gain the support of the Salaris later on. If the player chooses to sabotage the cure, however, the Krogans find out later, and military strength is reduced. Additionally, some would argue that it is heartbreaking to see a race facing extinction have hope for a cure to the disease killing them, only to have the cure sabotaged. In this way, the game reinforces the idea of “doing the right thing”, and shows how strong racial tensions can be resolved using diplomacy.

V. CONCLUSION

With over 88.3 million hours played in the single player campaign as of 2013 [3], some would argue that Mass Effect 3 as a waste of time which does not contribute to society in any meaningful way. However, through the use of storytelling, the game reinforces positive social behaviours and attitudes regarding social issues we experience today, such as racism. By allowing players to make decisions, and develop emotional responses from the consequences of their decisions, Mass Effect 3 not only encourages “good” choices made by the player, but also allows the player to develop conflict resolution skills and resolving high-stakes issues through the use of diplomacy rather than violence, which may be one step towards fixing the issue of racism in today’s society.

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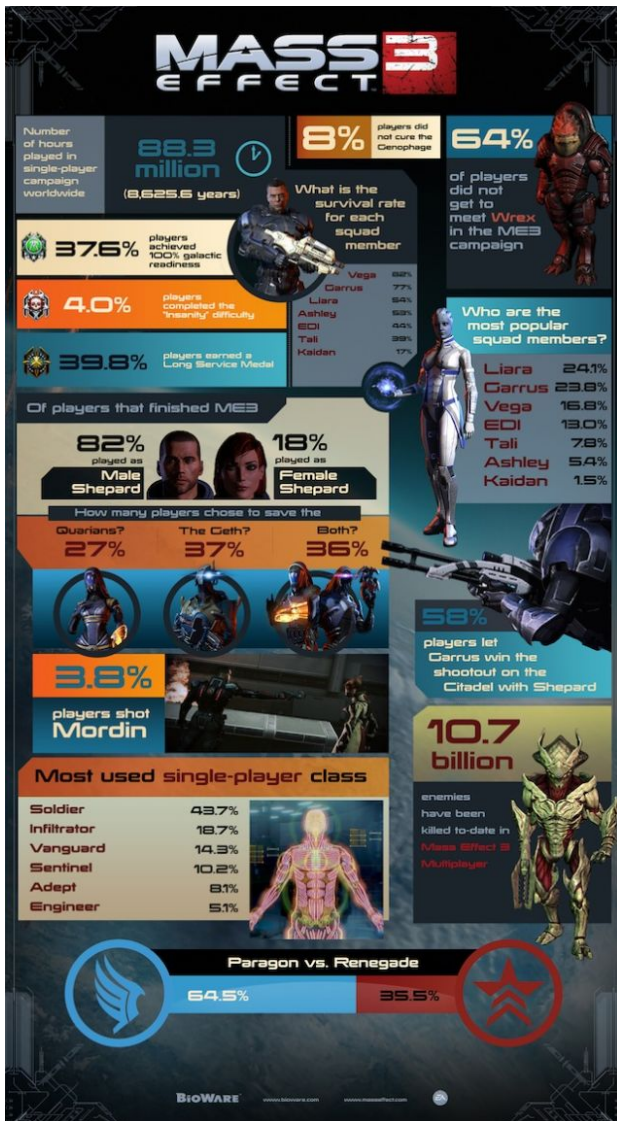


Fig. 3. Statistics referenced [3]