On Mass Effect, Branching Narratives, and Industry Accountability

written by Emily Lee | November 11, 2014

It's already been over two years since *Mass Effect 3* dropped and I still haven't been able to completely forget about it. And while discussion and critique into the shit show surrounding both the game itself and the reaction to it from both the player base and so called professional journalists has been beaten into the ground, for whatever reason I recently found myself thinking about it again.

Whether the passage of time has allowed for deeper introspection or allowed for a less emotionally-charged reaction, I got to thinking on what exactly went wrong logistically and whether or not I could to some degree, redeem *Mass Effect 3* (in my own mind) despite its unbelievably bad conclusion. *Mass Effect* and *Mass Effect 2* still hold some of my most memorable experiences in gaming, and to this day I am in complete awe at what they were able to do.

And ignoring the informal promises of developers or writers aside, when one considers the logistical nightmare of taking two extremely complex titles and somehow transferring those into carefully crafted conclusions dependent on player choices, it becomes apparent quite quickly how difficult of a task Bioware had. This doesn't in anyway justify the end product that was delivered, rather acknowledges the simple fact that *Mass Effect 3* had an enormous level of expectation to live up to. It isn't surprising in the least that it simply didn't meet these expectations for many people, what is shocking is how far below that line they fell.

It wasn't merely a matter of not actually providing differentiated endings based on the choices made throughout the series, rather the illogical and absolutely idiotic explanations given within the last moments of the series; explanations that in many ways contradicted major points of its own lore and established canon, and was so inconsistent that it was actually jarringly immersion-breaking.

And while I could speak volumes on how the endings failed, it's already been done to death and isn't what I wish to focus on here. For those that have played through the series and have yet to see MrBtongue's [Tasteful Understated Nerdrage](#) series on *Mass Effect 3*'s ending, I highly recommend doing so for an insightful reasoning into why the ending was objectively terrible regardless of any claims of artistic expression by those responsible for its creation.

What does peak my interest however is in whether or not Bioware in regards to addressing the various narrative branches established in the preceding two titles, had somehow put themselves in an inescapable situation. One where thoughtfully addressing and consolidating the ever increasing number of choices, narrative lines, and other concerns was simply too massive to

realistically deal with. Or on the other hand, whether or not Bioware does in fact deserve a good deal of the hate and criticism they got from their very fanbase, and whether there was a drop in the level of sophistication in production from the previous titles to *Mass Effect 3*.

In addition, I also want to examine and compare other examples of narrative branches in other popular video games, and the different strategies utilized to stray away from simply crafting a linear narrative that shoots to the finish line. Ultimately, was what made *Mass Effect* and *Mass Effect 2* so memorable, what doomed *Mass Effect 3* to fail from the beginning? Or was it simply a matter of not properly strategizing the best way in consolidating these various threads, or simply a lack of effort on the part of Bioware?

On the standard approach to narrative branching

As an interactive medium, video games are unique in their ability to offer narratives that aren't concretely linear. Much like a *Choose Your Own Adventure* book, video games have the capacity to offer variable possibilities dependent on player input. While the notion of player choice or agency has become the "be all and end all" in recent years, the idea of a branching narrative is nothing new at least in regards to video games.

Most memorably, I can easily go back to the height of LucasArts games where titles like *Star Wars Jedi Knight: Dark Forces II* gave players the choice to go light side or dark side towards the end of the game. While this singular branching of the narrative is hardly call for any significant merit, it does point to the fact that the idea of injecting choice into the narrative isn't anything new.

For the sake of contemporary comparison however, it might be best to pull some titles that have had access to a similar level of production and financial support as the EA backed *Mass Effect 3*. Two titles come to mind, *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings* and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*.

Click chart for full-view.

As a disclaimer, the charts for both games have been drastically generalized in order to better create a visual image in regards to the manner in which narrative branches are structured. Every single choice or point of diversion isn't covered, rather a rough approximation simply for the sake of comparison.

Beginning again with *Star Wars Jedi Knight: Dark Forces II*, it is quite clear that aside from the endgame choice, the majority of the narrative is strictly linear. With the singular choice towards the end of the game, the narrative branches at the last moment resulting in two brief but different endings but with the preceding events remaining unchanged. From a production standpoint, this doesn't heavily impact the necessity for more resources given the miniscule amount of extra content that needs to be generated. In the large

scheme of things, it's but a small percent of the whole experience.

On the other hand, while *The Witcher 2* also relies on mostly a single choice, this choice happens earlier on in the narrative resulting in a massive amount of duplicate content that needs to be generated. While the tail-ends of the narrative are more or less similar, the bulk of the events in the middle are mutually exclusive. Players of *The Witcher 2* who side with Iorveth will be experiencing a completely different game then those that side with Roche.

Despite this major divergence however, *The Witcher 2* reconsolidates with its last act in order to provide a more cohesive conclusion and most likely a cleaner lead-up into the upcoming *The Witcher 3*. While there are a few endgame decisions that can be made, none of them significantly influence the substance of Geralt's personal resolution.

Lastly in regards to *Skyrim*, while at first glance it may seem exponentially more complex, *Skyrim* is rather simplistic in its approach. While there is an abundance of distinct narrative threads, there isn't a high degree of cross contamination or interlinking. Most threads are fairly linear and stand by themselves, as opposed to relying on other choices or decisions made prior.

For example, all the faction questlines can be completed independent of each other and almost nothing in the game is mutually exclusive. A player can easily and somewhat contradictorily become the leader of the heroic Companions while also becoming the head of the sinister Dark Brotherhood. Questlines can be completed in any order or ignored altogether including the main narratives of the Civil War and defeating Alduin.

Ultimately what *Skyrim* lacks for in complex narratives, it makes up for in an abundance of content. There is nearly an infinite number of quests available to the player, and some that literally auto-generate forever. It is honestly a bit difficult to even consider *Skyrim* as a game with branching narratives, more an open world title where the focus is on emergent narratives rather then those pre-written.

And it has to be said that while *Skyrim* is a game worthy of many merits, it does lack the polish and gloss of narrative-driven experiences like seen in *Mass Effect 2*. While the experiences that can be had in *Skyrim* have the potential to be incredibly immersive, players likely won't ever connect deeply with its characters or struggles. Instead a game like *Skyrim* is more a giant playground with minimalistic yet plentiful narratives merely providing another tool-set to frame the roleplaying motivations of those engaging with it.

In the case of *Mass Effect*, the manner in which it handled its various narrative threads and the nature of how it influenced proceeding events is altogether more complex. Unlike the previously mentioned titles, *Mass Effect* takes into account choices made across three games with a unique save transfer system where players are required to hold on to their save files from the first *Mass Effect*, all the way to *Mass Effect 3*.

Not doing so in many ways penalizes the player by not offering certain

quantitative bonuses, but more importantly not having any say in a multitude of important decisions. And regardless of whether or not I come off as critical or *Mass Effect*, I want to stress the absolutely ludicrous nature of *Mass Effect*'s narrative branches. Regardless of whether *Mass Effect 3* was a complete disaster, Bioware definitely deserves some credit for the sheer ambition of what they were attempting to achieve.

Click chart for full-view.

Establishing narrative threads in *Mass Effect*

When considering this article, my first thought in how to approach an examination into the branching narratives of *Mass Effect* was to create a chart in order to better visualize what was occurring. While the chart I've put together isn't exactly what I would consider simple, it does whittle down the series to what I consider the bare essentials. The chart more or less tracks key narrative lines, choices, and significant character relationships. While some sidequests and its ilk are covered, the chart does leave out more then it includes for the sake of retaining order. If I had included every single player choice and questline, the chart would simply be unreadable.

As a general overview, the chart is broken down into three divisions representing each of the games. Different outcomes branch out going right, and often overlap into multiple other outcomes. Visually it's fairly apparent and expected that as the chart goes right, the complexity of branches grows with one single choice often being linked to the outcomes of multiple other ones.

In comparing them visually, I find that it is fairly clear that *Mass Effect* isn't anywhere as clean-cut or structured as the previously mentioned titles. With the exception of *Mass Effect 3*, the first two titles are a complete cluster fuck of interconnections and overlap.

Examining it in chunks and considering the first *Mass Effect*, there are a few things that become quite apparent. The bulk of what carries over into *Mass Effect 2* and ultimately into the final outcome in *Mass Effect 3* is largely in sidequests where Shepard is essentially drumming up support from various factions, groups, and individuals. This is typically done by simply completing optional quests, killing things, or through diplomatic negotiation.

In regards to primary narrative concerns, *Mass Effect* is more focused on introducing players to certain conflicts within its world then directly making decisions on how to handle them. Through squad mates like Ashley, the player is introduced to aspects of racism and general ignorance towards an understanding of other species. The conflict on Virmire and in discussions with Wrex, players learn about the moral dilemma of the Krogan Genophage and

the hostilities between the species involved. And lastly from the presence of the Geth and characters like Tali, the conflict between the Geth and Quarians serves as an intriguing allegory to both the conflict in the Middle East, as well as the potential emergence of AI or a technological singularity.

Largely *Mass Effect* is an experience about how to approach other life forms. Whether or not dangerous beings should simply be extinguished like with the Rachni Queen, or have a degree of natural rights wherein they have the opportunity to coexist despite the dangers posed by their past generations. Whether or not it is acceptable to perform population control on a threatening species with biological weapons, and whether a sentient intelligence can demand equal standing with those that created them.

In regards to narrative, *Mass Effect* unsurprisingly does more in establishing narratives then it does it creating branches. Despite this the game still has several distinctly significant decisions that impact the rest of the series. For example, players as Shepard must decide whether to save Ashley or Kaiden. The choice made conversely dooms the other to death and their absence in the rest of the series. However, as Bioware intentionally put this choice into the game and both characters play a key role, future development of the series had to take into account either character being alive or dead.

From a purely practical standpoint this meant that Bioware and its financial backers had to invest capital and time into writing material and paying a voice actor for content that half of its playing audience would likely not experience across two proceeding titles.

In addition and still just considering the first *Mass Effect*, future development also had to take into consideration whether Wrex could be talked down or was killed on Virmire potentially crippling future diplomacy with the Krogans, if the Rachni Queen was spared or killed costing a potential ally, and whether Shepard chose to direct the Alliance Fleet to protect the Council over the lives of countless millions.

In the larger scheme of things, *Mass Effect* past merely looking at its narrative structures is a game that deserves merit for being an experience largely dictated by actually talking to people. While players will still often find themselves shooting their way to the objective, the large bulk of content consists of Shepard diplomatically talking through conflicts in order to gain a better understanding of varying sides.

The comparison has often been made that *Mass Effect* owes more to *Star Trek* then *Star Wars*, and this is definitely an accurate assessment. While *Mass Effect* definitely does have its fair share of overblown space-operatic action and drama, the focus is primarily on a more mundane level. Much like *Star Trek* with the emphasis upon politics instead of fighting things out on the battlefield, *Mass Effect* tends to focus its efforts on resolving differences through actually learning about the varying histories, cultures, and motivations of those concerned.

And without the benefit of foresight or knowing what Bioware had planned for future installments, many of the choices forced onto players were not an easy set of interactions to overcome. While *Mass Effect* did have a somewhat simplistic morality system of Paragon vs. Renegade, many of the decisions that had to be made could not simply be forced into this binary mold. Whether players should save Ashley or Kaiden for example, seems like a decision that was purely down to who characters favored. But then again from the standpoint of someone actually trying to make decisions as "Shepard" or even from a metagaming standpoint, the decision is somewhat perplexing. Who would Shepard doom given both soldiers are of equal value? Does Shepard save the one he/she might potentially have romantic feelings for? Or do players choose the character that is more beneficial from a metagaming standpoint, and more complementary to that specific character's build?

Lastly, while *Mass Effect* is strong on character relationships much of it is admittedly self-contained. So while players can talk at length with a character like Tali, none of the information learned directly carries over into *Mass Effect 2*. What does carry over aside from Wrex's survival which hinges on whether he opened up to Shepard before hand, is whether or not players initiated a romantic relationship.

On *Mass Effect 2* and priming the end-game

Mass Effect 2 is exponentially more complex given the addition of the variable aspects of its larger pool of squad mates. With *Mass Effect 2* being an experience focused more on its characters then the actual narrative, it is understandably more convoluted in regards to the conditions going into *Mass Effect 3*. Out of the twelve squadmates, all of them have the chance of being killed off or surviving the suicide mission at the end of the game. Several other key characters aboard the Normandy also have variable fates such as Kelly Chambers who can also impact the outcomes in *Mass Effect 3*.

Aside from their own personal deaths, each unique squad member can also influence other narrative threads dependent on if they live or die, and whether Shepard completed their loyalty missions and to what outcome. All in all, the number of possible permutations of who lives or dies and in what state, are somewhat astronomical.

With that said, simply achieving the best possible outcome isn't simply a matter of mindlessly doing all the available quests. Given the varied nature of the characters, many of them simply don't get along with each other. While Shepard given the right qualifications can resolve confrontations, it is just as likely that he won't be able to gain the full loyalty of his entire crew. Also, the motivations and desires of some of his squad mates will conflict with his/her own code of morals or ethics.

Thus players are forced into acting against their own nature, or going against the wishes of an individual they are attempting to gain favor with. For example, whether to let a refinery full of innocents perish so Zaeed can get his revenge, or letting Garrus assassinate Sidonus against his better

judgment. Also players have to be attentive in actually getting to know the various characters. Players as Shepard must assign specific roles and divide up the squad with strategic calculation, where a bad decision regardless of having full loyalty or not will result in lost lives.

While *Mass Effect* had its fair share of choices, the decisions made in *Mass Effect 2* are comparatively more impactful on the ultimate fates of many of the grander conflicts going into the final game. And the majority of these decisions center specifically on how players interact with those closest to them. Whether or not they obtain the correct outcome or relationship with individuals like Tali or Legion for example, play a drastic role in the final outcome of their two species.

In many ways, Shepard's squad aboard the Normandy serves as a microcosm for the universe in conflict with representatives from essentially every competing side. Miranda as an employee of Cerberus is in direct odds with Jack who was imprisoned and experimented on by Cerberus. Mordin as one of the main proponents behind the Krogan Genophage is resented by Krogans like Grunt or Wrex who blame him for their species declining population. In turn, Mordin being onboard the Normandy beings to question the validity of the Genophage and may or may not work to cure it in *Mass Effect 3*.

With players controlling Shepard, *Mass Effect 2* can accurately be described as a game that sees these individuals working through their differences and ultimately taking their new understanding as "stand-in" diplomats to their larger groups or species to end ongoing conflicts and join forces against the even bigger threat of the Reapers.

Because of this, it is of paramount importance that players in *Mass Effect 2* ensure that their squadmates make it through and with the correct relationship statuses. Not doing so greatly cripples the chance for various conflicts to resolve peacefully and the overall strength of any proposed galactic alliance going into the end-game.

In terms of what carries over from *Mass Effect* into future installments, the majority of choices seemingly skip over *Mass Effect 2* and directly into end-game calculations. However a significant number of choices do at the very least get acknowledged within the events of *Mass Effect 2*.

For example if Shiala survived the events on Feros in the first game, players will see her in *Mass Effect 2* and once again have the option to offer help to the surviving colonists. Doing so will have an effect on whether this particular group offers support in the coming battle against the Reapers. Many other sidequests or unmarked quests make a return as well such as delusional fanboy Conrad Verner and the aggravating reporter Khalisah al-Jilani who Shepard can choose to punch in the face or ignore.

However the large majority of new branches introduced in *Mass Effect 2* and even some that return from the first game are not included within the base game. Somewhat controversially, *Mass Effect 2* had a rather heavy DLC cycle

that included everything from insignificant weapon and armor packs to sizable new chunks of narrative development. While many of these were somewhat standalone, others were equally relevant to returning players and those priming themselves for *Mass Effect 3*.

While it's difficult to argue whether some of these packs should have been included in the basegame, it does bear mentioning that the large majority of players consider the narrative DLC packs like the additional squadmates of Zaeed and Kasumi as essential proponents of the core *Mass Effect* experience. But then again, this might also be indicative of the high quality of the DLC produced given Bethesda titles like *Skyrim* or *Fallout: New Vegas* also are largely considered with their DLC in mind as required play, but neither of those are hardly ever criticized for their practices.

Ultimately *Mass Effect 2* has be considered with its DLC included. Primarily packs like *Lair of the Shadow Broker* which continues arguably the central romantic and character thread across all three titles, that of Liara T'Soni. While it is certainly debatable that there isn't a so called "central" romantic path, there is enough evidence out there to suggest that when considering a proposed canon for a series revolving around player choice, that the developers do have a certain narrative in mind. In which case Shepard is male and looks like he does in promotional materials, Ashley lived, and Liara is in an ongoing romantic relationship with Shepard.

This context is important since one of the primary questions players had going into *Mass Effect 2* and afterwards was what had happened to Liara in the preceding events and why she was largely absent from the game. *Lair of the Shadow Broker* ultimately addressed those questions, established Liara's new role and her departure from the playable events of *Mass Effect 2*, a great deal of which plays a significant impact in *Mass Effect 3*.

The question remains then whether or not *Mass Effect 2*'s DLC practices were completely acceptable given that people who opted out of purchasing or playing them were effectively penalized in *Mass Effect 3*. This penalization while possibly not intended, was hard to digest as completely fair given Bioware typically coded in the least desirable outcomes as defaults. Furthermore while this practice could to some degree be justified as also rewarding those that did play the DLCs, these defaults seem problematic as they were not simply the worst outcomes, but often times ones that made the least sense narratively speaking.

And while even *Lair of the Shadow Broker* could arguably be explained away as not central to the main narrative going into *Mass Effect 3*, other packs such as Arrival were pivotal in setting up the beginning events of the next game.

Overall however the number of branches going into *Mass Effect 3* exponentially increased from the first game to the second. With the countless outcomes of squadmates, various side missions from both games, and a large list of DLC packs that players may or may not have played, the last game in the series had quite the mess to sort through.

Ultimately expectations should have been that given the exponential increase that *Mass Effect 2* saw, that *Mass Effect 3* would be that much more complex. However this didn't turn out to be the case for better or worse.

Mass Effect 3 and Reconsolidation.

While *Mass Effect 3* is not the end of the franchise, it is most certainly the finale for a relatively self-contained trilogy chronicling Shepard's story and the threat of the Reapers. Given this context, it is no surprise that there should be a certain degree of consolidation rather then further branching amongst the various narrative threads in this last entry.

However the manner in which this consolidation occurs and ultimately influences the final conclusion is still an area that is largely dictated by the efforts of the developers and writers behind *Mass Effect 3*. While I want to preface once again that my chart is a drastic generalization, I found that the various unresolved threads and possibilities going into *Mass Effect 3* were easily funneled into a small set of groupings. Various character relationships more or less resolved on their own to varying degrees of depth. This is both inclusive of possible romantic relationships and the ultimate fates of where various squadmates end up.

And while I'm going to refrain from going into specific detail about their various fates, it is worth noting that while certain actions in *Mass Effect 2* do impact what is ultimately possible, other threads resolve in ways completely outside the scope of player input. For example if Morinth was chosen over Samara her resolution only has one outcome, much of which is only seen in background interactions such as reading e-mails or through computer terminals.

The fact that certain characters didn't get the same level of attention as others isn't all that surprising nor offensive given the large roster that had to be dealt with. But it doesn't seem completely justified given Bioware could have made the more logical decision of not introducing more characters going into *Mass Effect 3*, most of which failed to connect to players on any level and only served to potentially drain limited production resources away from areas that could have used them.

It is comparatively more unforgivable however that this certain disregard also occurred within the scope of the arguably more depthful romantic relationships. While certain characters like Liara or Garrus got their fair share of interactions, dialogue, and resolution, others were more or less ignored like with those who might have initiated a relationship with Jacob Taylor.

Those that did were sorely disappointed to find that Jacob was relegated to what amounts to a cameo appearance and while a past relationship will be acknowledged by the game, Jacob simply isn't a continuable thread. Players will not only find that a relationship cannot be continued, but that Jacob has apparently moved on because of all things he didn't want to wait for

Shepard due to her imprisonment.

What is striking about the context of Jacob's resolution isn't in the lack of a supposed amicable conclusion, rather one that felt absolutely hollow and unequal in comparison to the likes of someone like Liara who provides hours of meaningful interaction dependent on player choice.

While one can make the argument that it makes realistic sense that not all possible romantic threads end with the same level of satisfaction, from a mechanical standpoint it skews *Mass Effect* away from the notion of being a series about player choice, and more along the lines of making choices in the manner that Bioware wants you to. In other words, by scaling certain choices with more meaningful outcomes, *Mass Effect 3* ultimately sets a certain set of choices that can be seen as an unofficial canon, with the remaining choices as merely throwaway "what-ifs" more in line with tongue-in-cheek easter eggs, like with the UFO endings of *Silent Hill* or some of the more radical endings of *Chrono Trigger*.

And as a further comparison, this isn't to say that the quantifiable amount of content isn't what is at issue here nor the lack of a variable outcome. Thane Krios much like Jacob lacks a lengthy appearance within the events of *Mass Effect 3*, nor is it possible to continue a possible relationship with him to the same extent as other characters.

However where Thane differs is in the ultimate context of his role within the larger narrative of the game. While his fate is largely similar whether Shepard romanced him or not, the contextual flavoring differs in his last actions. So while Thane will ultimately die tragically, his final passing can either be read as the actions of a loyal friend or that of a lover. Because of this and while players who ultimately chose Thane weren't completely content, they were nowhere near as disappointed as by those who were in a relationship with Jacob.

Ultimately while there is plenty to criticize about the handling of squadmate fates within *Mass Effect 3*, it was still largely well done when considering the manner in which the more favored characters were handled. Characters like Garrus, Tali, Liara, and other members who have more or less played a central role across the whole series received plenty of attention and care. And this was certainly enough to satisfy the vast majority of players who likely chose one of them for a romance or simply as regular squad mates to backup Shepard in combat. But for the minority of players that didn't go the standard route, Bioware's lack of fulfillment across the roster is sorely disappointing and begs the question of why bother?

But what is vastly more disappointing is in how the rest of the so called variables that Bioware had left on their platter got dealt with. Such things as the fate of the Rachni Queen and various other side quests didn't get any sort of proper closure. Rather each of these choices ultimately got boiled down to a quantifiable value that got calculated into a somewhat meaningless sum. This sum otherwise labeled as "war assets" served as an indicator of strength before players initiated the last mission of the game.

But this figure served no purpose narratively speaking, and even its mechanical usage felt somewhat tedious. *Mass Effect* is a series that frequently pitted players into complex and morally ambiguous dilemmas, where decisions had to be carefully considered and often had players questioning their decisions well after they had been made.

The consolidation of all of these thoughtful decisions into a war assets figure ultimately strips any previous significance or emotion away, instead converting it into a raw number that tells players whether they can ultimately start the last act of the game, or grind some more in multiplayer to boost their ranking.

And in regards to the readiness rating gained through war assets, it is worth noting that the minimum amount required to experience the supposed best endings isn't possible to obtain for players who didn't import or those that don't forcibly play multiplayer. Given this, it's speculative whether or not this was merely a means to draw in a larger audience into the newly added multiplayer aspect of *Mass Effect 3*, but also an incentive for players to purchase future DLC which would also provide additional war assets for those that might need it.

In either case, it's a system that failed to add anything positive to the game's experience and should have been left out. It's not to say that the consolidation was directly a bad choice although I do believe there could have been a more elegant solution, rather the blatant effortlessness of simply shoehorning a variety of distinct narratives into one numerical end-game value.

And even those that have interactable segments such as with the Rachni Queen, the variability of it is questionable. If players saved the Rachni Queen, she makes an appearance. If they didn't, the game simply provides a cheap stand-in making the significance of that choice ultimately hollow. While the choice still plays a role in the amount of war assets gained, it's difficult to attach any sort of emotional attachment to a numerical addition.

…so about "The Ending" and its backlash

Finally for sake of context, the endings do need to be discussed and I should preface this that this does not take into consideration any of the DLCs nor the *Extended Cut* that came after. In previously discussing the significance of war assets and its applicability upon the variability of the ending, it should be noted that it is all ultimately meaningless given the endings are for the sake of a better word, a pile of shit.

Given that the main incentive of boosting one's readiness rating would be in order to obtain the best possible endings, the fact that the endings are largely not worth the effort means that everything that got funneled into that consolidated value is made further insignificant.

But moving past the applicability of the rating and its role on the endings, the ultimate insult is that player choice ultimately didn't matter in the final scheme of things. Regardless of previous player variability, Shepard will no doubt find himself before the spectre of a young boy that quickly throws the content of the whole series into the shitter to instead provide a completely new and largely contradictory explanation for the events of *Mass Effect*. Shepard is then provided with three different choices each leading to what Bioware at the time considered different endings as they had previously and explicitly advertised as a feature of their product.

For my own sanity, I won't bother explaining each one except to say that it really is basically a choice between the color red, green, or blue. And the supposed different endings are a brief montage of various explosions and unspecific shots providing absolutely no closure or proper resolution. These sequences are more or less identical regardless of which of the three possible choices players pick, the only decidedly differentiating factor at play is that if players chose the green ending, the sequence will have a green tint. For those unfamiliar with the game and might think this is an exaggeration, I suggest viewing [this edited video](#) that plays the endings side-by-side synced up together.

The initial release of *Mass Effect 3* understandably caused a good bit of outrage. I'd wager it might possibly be one of the largest if not the largest negative reactions the gaming industry has received. #gamergate had nothing on this, which despite its completely over-reported presence in mainstream media, has had little effect nor does it involved the proposed hordes of woman-hating basement dwellers that some would like to suggest. I'd wager the majority of those involved are few, with a good percentage of those simply trolling for a reaction.

The fallout from *Mass Effect 3* however resulted in a variety of unintended consequences, some of which might actually have had far-reaching implications for the industry as a whole. While relationships between so called mainstream gaming journalism and gamers themselves has never been healthy, *Mass Effect 3* seemed to have been the final nail in the coffin for many. Sites like IGN who reported on the disappointment surrounding the ending strangely took an extremely opinionated stance against gamers as a whole. Calling them whiners and defending questionable DLC practices.

While I don't want to get too deep into tinfoil hat territory, I found any sort of reaction from IGN at the time completely questionable given the heavy banner ads that ran across the top and down the sides of their site advertising the very game in question. Nor did their absolutely glowing review which failed to mention any of the absolutely blatant flaws (not including the ending) or did the presence that Jessica Chobot an employee of IGN at the time featured in *Mass Effect 3* as a prominent but overall pointless character.

And from a purely financial context, there isn't anything more transparent then a site easily taking the side of the publishers over their entire

viewing audience, many of which pay for a membership. While this is admittedly just a guess, it does clearly lead us to believe that IGN receives more financial backing from their advertisers then they do from those that actually use their site. This is significant because it means that any sort of bias skew will always lean towards satisfying the under-the-table demands of those putting out games, then the informal standards of journalistic integrity by those that actually read or watch their reviews.

Regardless of whether there was a certain degree of corruption, players of *Mass Effect 3* definitely lost trust in mainstream outlets as a direct result of the way the backlash was handled. And given that *Mass Effect 3* was arguably the biggest release that year constituting a large percentage of gamers, its potential impact was enormous. And although I can't say for certain whether this might have indirectly helped the rise of game coverage through less centralized means such as Youtubers, I can speak personally that I immediately stopped frequenting sites like IGN or Gamespot, but also greatly refrained from the habit of pre-ordering games.

Most tragic however is ultimately what followed for Bioware in its wake. Both remaining founders shortly left both the company and the industry altogether. While officially neither stated *Mass Effect* had any role in their departure, the timing suggests something past mere coincidence. And with the more recent departure of director Casey Hudson, it's hard to ignore the possibility that the negative backlash had no effect. Ultimately Bioware went from being an absolutely beloved maker of classic RPGs like *Baldur's Gate* and *Knights of the Old Republic*, to quite possibly one of the most hated in the aftermath of *Mass Effect 3*, seen as a hollow shell of its former self under the tyranny of EA.

The negativity was so strong, that many have called for a lifelong boycott of future titles from Bioware. And while this might seem somewhat drastic, it will be interesting to see whether or not sales of the upcoming *Dragon Age: Inquisition* will be anywhere near as strong as titles in the past. While I fully expect it to sell a good number of copies, I also won't be surprised if numbers drastically drop especially in the PC market where users will be forced to purchase through EA's much maligned platform Origin as opposed to Steam.

Whether refusing to buy from a developer is seemingly childish or naive, I'll simply respond by stating I'm not planning on buy any future Bioware titles myself. But then again, I also haven't bought any EA published games post *Mass Effect 3* either. My experience dealing with Origin was troubling to say the least, and given EA's refusal to use Steam, I have yet buy any of their titles.

I do want to say however that gaming does present a troubling dilemma for consumers as opposed to other markets. In the realm of physical goods, it's not at all uncommon for people to choose to never do business again with a certain service based upon one bad incident. It's what one calls "voting with your wallet". In gaming however (and this is also true of other media), it's more difficult to call off a developer completely, and even harder of a publisher like EA who puts out the products of hundreds of development

houses.

For whatever reason, it's been labeled as childish for a gamer to say I won't buy X's games ever again, but it's never been challenged as odd for someone to say I won't buy Y's car again since the last one broke down within a few weeks. There is also the issue of false advertising with *Mass Effect 3* explicitly promoted with the inclusion of distinctly different endings completely influenced by player choice. It's hard to argue that this is what was actually delivered yet Bioware has been free of any lawsuit or legal challenge.

And while I can go off on a tangent and discuss this further at length, I do want to focus in on the content of *Mass Effect 3* specifically. And despite the heavy criticisms and the failure of *Mass Effect 3*, speaking in terms of what it did with its main narratives outside the scope of the primary conflict with the Reapers, we can see they did to some degree excel.

There is definitely things to criticize about how events wrapped up for both the Krogan Genophage and the Quarian/Geth conflict, but they also should be commended for delivering what the ending couldn't, that being absolutely divergent endings dependent on player choices across all three games. The manner in which the Quarians and Geth ultimately make peace or commit genocide upon each other is quite possibly the most tense moment in gaming I have ever had to experience and was likely what most players were expecting of the ending. The threat of complete disaster was completely real with the chances of apocalyptic destruction on a hair trigger. In this state, the actual success of making it out unscathed is absolutely unrivaled in player satisfaction.

But while these conclusions can also be similarly criticized of the same consolidation efforts of the war assets, here they never felt like a mere mathematical calculation. As Shepard, I didn't successfully get both races to a point of agreement because I had x amount of points, rather I was able to reach a point of understanding through my long history with Tali and Legion, and my previous engagements with both the Geth and Quarians. In other words, these events lacked the transparency that the consolidation of the war assets had.

Last thoughts…

In revisiting the *Mass Effect* series in a somewhat informal look into its narrative structure, my thoughts haven't really shifted at least in its concluding entry. I think if anything, my respect for the first two titles has been elevated further and was ultimately reminded of what I loved about them initially, which was something that had become clouded by my negative experiences with *Mass Effect 3*.

But ultimately I think I realized that while externally *Mass Effect* has been a series always acclaimed first for its injection of player choice and continuity across titles, that this was in fact the furthest thing from what

made *Mass Effect* so successful. Some of its greatest moments were points where player choice was not a variable. [Anderson's final death scene](#) for example stood out despite being closely followed by the travesty of an ending. Much of what made *Mass Effect* so memorable from a narrative context in other words, was in the strength of the writing outside the scope of player input.

In the weeks leading up to the release of *Mass Effect 2*, I remember Casey Hudson himself stating that *Mass Effect* wasn't so much a story that allowed players to direct the flow of the narrative, rather simulated the sense that players had control. Somewhere down the line, I think both the players and developers themselves forgot this and simply became disillusioned with properly addressing every variable they had created.

Because let's face it, regardless of whether *Mass Effect 3* was a good game, it was simply not a possibility to deliver on expectations of every player with the countless number of possible permutations getting their own distinct ending. Bioware is partially to blame for this expectation however, as they were the ones to explicitly advertise this as a feature leading up to the release of *Mass Effect 3*.

Past the variability of the series however and judging it on its written narrative, it is hard to redeem *Mass Effect 3* to any significant level. Nothing has changed from when it released til today to explain the absolutely idiocy that occurred following Anderson's death and into the color-tinted spectacle we received.

Quite possibly most telling is how fans theorized their own rather insane but ironically sensible theory of [Indoctrination](#) (also of note the [Marauder Shields meme](#)), wherein the ending was altogether an intentional mislead with a supposed follow-up to come in form of a free DLC. While this turned out not to be the case, the release of the *Extended Cut* did provide a certain "first" in terms of what player reaction could ultimately result in. Bioware shortly released an extended version of the endings that added a flipbook style addendum to the ending in the same format as *Fallout 3* or *New Vegas*. While this provided closure on many fronts, it still didn't rectify the core issue with the ending which was that it was logically nonsensical.

To this day, the whole ordeal is somewhat perplexing. If I had to make a guess at ultimately what went wrong, I lean towards the theory that Bioware rewrote the ending at the last minute. *Mass Effect 3* suffered a leak where much of the script was revealed months before the game launched. While no one aside from those that actually worked on the game knows for sure, it was revealed that a certain amount of rewrites occurred to mitigate the chance of players being spoiled of the events of the game before it released.

While there is much to criticize about *Mass Effect 3*, I would still argue that up to the last moments of the game, the writing was fairly solid and on a completely different level. The drop-off towards the end is absolutely staggering and it could be explained that Bioware could have simply panicked and rushed through a new idea that wasn't carefully thought through or peer-reviewed.

But ultimately if one takes a moment to evaluate *Mass Effect 3* comparatively speaking to the rest of the series, it is clear that it doesn't stand up. The complexity and sophistication of thought involved from a purely structural standpoint is absolutely telling. And while *Mass Effect 3* had every reason to consolidate and generalize threads going into the final act, they definitely could have afforded to open up allowing for a bit more fluidity.

In the end *Mass Effect 3*'s testament to time may not have anything to do with its own merit or lack thereof, but exposing the starkly different relationship between consumers and producers to other markets. In the aftermath of the player backlash, debates on games being "art" vs. merely a "product" were thrown around. Largely it was to justify the lack of response by developers and notions of false advertisement as merely open to interpretation.

However as someone who spends more money then he should in countless other hobbies, this type of self-justification never occurs in other markets, nor a lack of customer service accepted. One of the many hobbies I partake in is in the buying and collecting of knives. Manufacturers like Kershaw who mass produce knives also have stellar customer interaction. For example, if I break my newly bought Kershaw folder, I can mail it in and they will most likely fix it or replace it outright no questions asked and at no charge.

And to bring in the "art" portion of the equation, there is a massive market for custom-made knives direct from the artist themselves where customer satisfaction is paramount. Nearly all makers provide lifetime warranties and provide service and sharpening free of charge. And in terms of false expectations, if I order a custom wharncliffe and instead receive a tanto blade, it is completely acceptable for me to contact the maker and have him rectify the issue. It doesn't become an issue of me challenging his "[artistic integrity](#)."

I guess the question is, where does this level of mutual respect exist in the gaming industry? One that is frequently trying to take itself more seriously as a respectable medium, but is quick to respond to criticism by name-calling their very customers as juvenile children lacking the sophistication to appreciate their "art." I hate to break it to you, but all consumers are whiny. That's kind of how it works and what accelerates competition within the market. Why the gaming industry feels like they are owed some degree of special attention is beyond me and really, strikes me as sort of "childish."