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“Direct intervention is necessary”

Interesting character creation through narrative elements in *Mass Effect*

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ABSTRACT:

Digitaaliset roolipelit ovat kehittyneet viimeisen vuosikymmenen aikana huomattavasti. Pelien visuaaliset ja graafiset ominaisuudet ovat parantuneet ja näiden kautta yhä näyttävämpien pelimaailmojen rakentaminen on mahdollista. Roolipelit ovat siirtyneet vanhoista tekstipohjaisista sovelluksista tähän rikkaaseen visuaaliseen näyttötapaan. Tämän tutkimuksen aineistoksi on valittu Biowaren julkaisema roolipelitriologia *Mass Effect*, jota on kehitetty yhdeksi parhaimmista narratiivisista roolipeleistä. Tarkempaan tarkasteluun on valittu kolme pelihahmoa, joiden yksilöllisiä narratiiveja tutkimuksessa käydään tarkemmin läpi.

Tutkimuksessa tarkastellaan, miten pelihahmoista tulee mielenkiintoisia narratiivisten elementtien avulla. Tutkimuksen menetelmä perustuu narratiiviseen analyysiin, jota on sovellettu roolipelien narratiivin tutkimukseen. Erityistä huomiota on kiinnitetty yksittäisten hahmojen narratiiviin ja siihen, kuinka syvällisiä ne ovat sekä miten ne kehittyvät pelin aikana. Tehty tutkimus on laadullista, koska se keskittyy narratiivisten elementtien käyttöön mielenkiintoisten pelihahmojen luomisessa.

Tutkimus osoitti, että mielenkiintoisten pelihahmojen luominen on pelin narratiivin kannalta tärkeää. Mielenkiintoiset yksilölliset hahmonarratiivit antavat pelin hahmoille syvyyttä ja hahmojen kehittyessä pelin aikana ne vaikuttavat myös itse pelin narratiiviin. Pelaajien on näiden syvällisten hahmojen ansiosta helpompaa samaistua niihin ja samalla uppoutua pelin tarinamaailmaan syvemmin. Interaktiivisten roolipelien narratiivin tutkiminen pelihahmojen kautta on hyödyllistä, koska narratiiviset roolipelit ovat suosioltaan kasvussa ja pelien narratiivista tutkimusta ei ole tehty tarpeeksi.

KEYWORDS: Interactive, Narrative, Character, Mass Effect, Emotion, Role-Playing

1 INTRODUCTION

Escaping the everyday life and responsibilities that people have can prove as a relaxing form of leisure. Digital role-playing games offer a way of doing this, by giving people the option to be someone else, who is disconnected from their own life. Taking the role of a commander of an interracial group of aliens in a familiar galaxy, but with a small twist, can be a rewarding experience. You control the commander, who is sent on a journey to save the galaxy from certain doom and throughout the journey, your choices are reflected in the progression of the game. The game requires direct action and intervention from the player to progress, thus the game is an interactive experience.

The characters that you meet as a player during the progress of the digital game, or game as I will refer to them in this thesis, respond to your dialogue and you get a deeper understanding about them. With the deepened bond that is created with these characters, it is not absurd to assume that you create an emotional bond with them. The role-playing game can be said to have succeeded in its narrative, when the player feels responsible for the actions that are presented (Jørgensen 2010: 323).

The role-playing games of today have their roots in the Multi User Dungeons, or MUDs, which were popular at the end of the 1970s, especially through the *Dungeons and Dragons* (1974) tabletop role-playing game. This was before the comprehensive graphics, which we see in the role-playing games of today.

Role-playing games have grown in both scope and popularity over the past decade. This new form of digital storytelling is receiving attention from both media and scholarly sources. In terms of narrative research digital storytelling is especially interesting, since role-playing games offer a new way to form narrative and tell stories. (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum 2012: 393) The growth that can be seen in the field of games, not only in the role-playing game genre, is predominantly due to the technological advancements of computers and the tools that game designers have at their disposal.

In the United States alone, the video game industry reached a revenue of about 36 billion dollars in 2017, which is a growth of around 18 percent from 2016 (Entertainment Software Association 2018). There has been debate over this new

medium of storytelling, especially in regards of how they can tell stories or if they can contain narratives or narrative aspects within them. Debates on the matter of game narrative contain arguments for and against. Some researchers view games as having rules by which the player can complete the game and others take another view, seeing the development of games as a new medium of telling stories, but being separate from the traditional storytelling methods. (Frasca 2003; Schut 2003) Role-playing games, as the ones that I analyze in this thesis, contain narrative that is an integral part of the game progression and requires action from the player in the form of interactivity.

The games that have been chosen for this thesis are made by Bioware, which was founded in 1995 and has since produced several critically acclaimed titles, which include the games discussed in this thesis: *Mass Effect* (2007), *Mass Effect 2* (2010) and *Mass Effect 3* (2012). In 2008, Bioware was acquired by Electronic Arts, which is a global publisher of interactive entertainment. In addition to these titles mentioned here, Bioware has released other major titles, which will not be discussed in this thesis. The company is known for the rich storylines and narratives that they employ in their games and their focus is in role-playing games that contain the aforementioned aspects.

The *Mass Effect* games have been studied before as well. Kristine Jørgensen (2010) has studied the characters and their use as narrative vessels. Jim Bizzocchi and Joshua Tanenbaum (2012) have studied *Mass Effect 2* (2010) and the narrative design in that game. Hanna-Riikka Roine (2016) studied the *Mass Effect* games and their role-playing aspects from the player's point-of-view. Other studies to narrative and narratology in games has been done by Juho-Kustaa Kuorikoski (2012) and Tuomo Nyrhilä (2014). Kuorikoski (2012) studied the use of dialog in digital role-playing games and how it was used to carry the narrative forward. Nyrhilä (2014) concentrated on the plot and the immersion of game narrative in horror games.

This thesis concentrates on the creation of immersive character narratives in role-playing games and can prove as valuable information for game designers. In addition, the thesis can give ideas for further research on the field of game narratives, especially through the use of interesting and immersive characters.

1.1 Objective

The aim of this thesis is to determine how different narrative elements are used in the creation of interesting character storylines in the *Mass Effect* games. My research questions are:

1. How are narrative elements used in creating interesting and believable characters in the *Mass Effect* series?
2. How do these characters and their narratives work within the storyworld of the games?

The narrative elements I refer to here are the narrative arc, storyworld, character, emotion and the narrativized interface (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum 2012). The narrative arc refers to the progression of the story within the storyworld, which is the place where the story is taking place. Character refers to the different characters present in the storyworld and emotion represents the identification that the player has towards these characters (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum 2012). The narrativized interface is the way the player interacts with the characters that are present in the storyworld (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum 2012). I will further develop all of these elements in chapter 3, when I discuss the traditional narrative of written texts and the narrative in games.

As previous studies have suggested (Jørgensen 2010; Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum 2012), the characters are an important part of the narrative in the game series. For this reason, the character element will be further emphasized with the elements Lee Sheldon (2004) outlined in his work. He views the characters in games as being three-dimensional, with different physical, sociological and psychological aspects. The physical aspects are the visual representations of the character, the sociological aspects refer to the background of the character and the psychological aspects are the characters attitudes and views of the world (Sheldon 2004: 37–40). These aspects will be further discussed in chapter 3.

The term player in this thesis is used to represent the person who is playing the games and the role-playing games discussed are seen as single-player role-playing games, where only one player is present. Since the material of this thesis was gathered by the close-reading method, the player is myself. The method of close-reading is executed by meticulously gathering information about the narrative while playing the game

(Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum 2011; 2012). I will continue further with the close-reading of games at the end of chapter 3. The material that was gathered with this method will be discussed and analyzed in chapter 4, where I concentrate on three characters from the games that have their own narrative progression throughout the *Mass Effect* games.

The theoretical framework in the thesis relies heavily on narratology and game studies. Through the use of games research that has been done previously (Sheldon 2004; Jørgensen 2010; Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum 2012) within games, I will draw from them and use the established terminology. The narrative in this thesis is seen as the progression paths of the characters that these games have, and the progression of the narrative is dependent on the actions of players. The plot is the beginning and the end of these games, through which the narrative progresses. The plot is seen as a fixed element that cannot be affected by the player. Only the path that is taken during the narrative progression can be changed, but the beginning and the end are seen as fixed points.

Narrative heavy games are an important study subject, because making a digital narrative is not a straight forward process, as I will argue. The traditional film and novel narratives are mostly linear, movement from one point to another, (Todorov 1975: 163–4; Wei, Bizzocchi & Calvert 2010: 5; Ryan 2003: 142–3), whereas role-playing games can have one narrative that is not linear, but gives the player the option to complete it in a non-linear fashion (Veale 2015: 152). Role-playing games rely heavily on their story and narrative, where player decisions have consequences (Donovan 2011: 284). Games also present the possibility to have multiple smaller narratives, which are not necessarily tied to the main narrative or story of the game (Jenkins 2004). These aspects are further discussed in chapter 3.

Making a coherent narrative that is plausible and gripping for the player of games is thus a process that needs to be studied. This thesis can help game designers and writers of digital narratives to understand how to design a digital narrative that is plausible and believable, while keeping all the parts of the narrative elements together.

1.2 Material

The material used in this thesis comprises of the role-playing game series called *Mass Effect*, which includes three games, *Mass Effect* (2007), *Mass Effect 2* (2010) and *Mass Effect 3* (2012). The material has been gone through and collected with the process of playing these games alone on a PC desktop. The playthroughs have been done over the course of several years, and I estimate that around 600 hours has been spent playing the three games combined.

Three individual character narratives will be studied in this thesis to determine how interesting characters are created through the use of the narrative elements. These characters are Commander Shepard, who is the playable human character that the player controls during the game. The second character, Urdnot Wrex, is an alien from another planet who is a very deep character regarding his narrative, as the playthrough progresses. The third character selected for this thesis is Tali'Zorah nar Rayaa, who is another alien character from another planet. She is one of the characters that the player, if playing a male Commander Shepard, can pursue a romantic relationship with in *Mass Effect 2* (2010) and *Mass Effect 3* (2012). She is a troubled young alien, who also has a deep character narrative throughout the games. Chapter 4 will include a deeper analysis of these characters.

Reasons for selecting these three characters for the analysis in this thesis is due to their personal narrative progression. Commander Shepard is the player-controlled character, through which all the actions are taken within the narrative progression. These actions further influence the storyworld and the respective narrative arcs of the characters. The choices the player makes as Shepard influence heavily these two characters throughout the games, as they are an integral part of the narrative. The two characters, Wrex and Tali, are both available as companions for the player and they present throughout the narrative progression of the games.

In addition to the material that I have gathered through personal playthroughs, I will supplement the material with 'Let's Play' videos that are available on the YouTube platform. As playing can be a very subjective experience, especially with interactive digital role-playing games, there are some aspects that a single player can overlook.

Using the Let's Play -videos as a supplement material in the thesis, I can effectively view the different paths that the narrative progression of a character can take during the game.

While the *Mass Effect* series does offer a multiplayer function in addition to the main storyline in one of their games (*Mass Effect 3* (2012)), the multiplayer aspects of these games will not be discussed in this thesis in depth. The focus of this thesis is in the narrative elements and how these are used in the creation of interesting characters that these games contain. While the multiplayer aspect does have an impact in single-player as well, they will only be mentioned briefly where appropriate. The reason for this is the fact that their impact to the narrative development of characters is not significant, which is the focus of this thesis.

Let's Play -videos are a playthrough video done by an individual, or in some cases, several individuals. They record their gameplay and upload it to the YouTube platform for others to view and comment on. I will only focus on the gameplay aspects that are relevant for this thesis, them being the characters and the several different progression paths they can take. The comments of the players in the videos or the comments from other viewers will not be considered in the thesis, as they are outside the aim of the thesis.

The videos used as supplementary material to the personal playthrough materials were published on the Youtube video platform by several authors. These authors were MashalMeLee (2010), Varibash (2012), DandelionVolta (2012), Salt Repository (2012) and Mel (2016). One video from every author was used for a total of 6 videos. These videos were gathered during January and February 2018 using keywords '*Mass Effect*', '*Mass Effect 2*', '*Mass Effect 3*', 'Legion', 'Wrex', 'Tuchanka', 'Mordin dies', 'Ending' and 'Tali', along with combinations of these keywords.

When gathering material from games through personal playthroughs, there are some aspects that need to be considered when proceeding with the method. There can be some form of pleasure involved in playing a game, which is to be expected. Games are meant to be enjoyed and a familiar game can bring a feeling of joy among other feelings for the player. Distancing yourself from this, especially in the case of a game that is

familiar one for the player, can sometimes prove difficult. (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum 2011: 275) This does not necessarily mean that the material gathered with this method is faulty or corrupted. There is always a personal aspect when it comes to playing games and when using the close-reading method, there is bound to be some personal touches to the research material.

Reason behind selecting the *Mass Effect* series as the material for this thesis was the fact that the games contain a substantial amount of narrative and that especially the character narratives are an important part of the games in question (Jørgensen 2010; Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum 2012). While some games can do without narrative, the *Mass Effect* series is heavy in narrative. The games give the player a space where they can tell a story of the character, or characters, that are involved in the series. Having played these games before on many occasions and playthroughs, I am also familiar with the story before the writing of this thesis. This, in addition, helps me gather the essential parts of the narrative elements and give insight into the narrative elements and how they are presented in the games.

1.3 Method

The research I will do here is qualitative research, since I am studying the narrative elements and their use in the creation of interesting characters in role-playing game narrative of the *Mass Effect* games. The material collected through close-reading the games are analyzed using game narrative analysis, which was introduced by Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum (2011; 2012) in their studies. The study of narrative in games is still a process that is being developed, as game narratives differ from the traditional written narrative in many ways. As Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum (2012: 393) state, the development of games and their narratives has been significant during the past decades, but their research is still an ongoing effort in scholarly and vernacular circles alike. The issue has been identified by other researchers as well, who note the problem of defining interactivity in digital narrative and the lack of proper terminology and methods of study to go with it (Apperley 2010; Arjoranta & Karhulahti 2014).

The narrative structure in games will be further complemented with the character aspects that Lee Sheldon (2004) describes in his work. Though his work is quite old, it still holds a valid point in the creation of immersive characters. In combination with the game narrative analysis by Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum (2011; 2012) and the immersive character creations aspects by Lee Sheldon (2004), I will analyze three characters from the *Mass Effect* games in the analysis section, which will be done in chapter 4.

In addition to the narrative analysis, I will view the character narratives in the light of the expectations and wants of the players, as Richard Rouse (2005) has listed them in his work. Rouse (2005) identifies aspects that game designers should consider when making a successful game. Of these aspects, emotion will be taken into closer account, as it is an important factor in the other studies done into game narratives (Sheldon 2004; Jørgensen 2010; Bizzochi & Tanenbaum 2011; 2012) As the *Mass Effect* series is celebrated as being well designed in several narrative aspects, looking at how the expectations and wants of the players have been fulfilled can prove fruitful for future game development in the genre of digital role-playing games.

The reason for using these methods in my thesis is the qualitative nature of the thesis. By using the game narrative study method by Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum (2012) and the immersive character aspects by Lee Sheldon (2004) I can identify the narrative elements used in creating immersive and realistic character progression arcs in the game series and by also looking at the findings in the light of the work done by Rouse (2005), I can establish how well the elements in the character creation are in line with his findings.

2 MASS EFFECT AS A ROLE-PLAYING GAME

In this chapter I will discuss role-playing. The starting point can be seen from the traditional Multi User Dungeon games to the more graphically advanced games, such as the *Mass Effect* series I discuss in this thesis. The first portion of this chapter will give a short introduction to the role-playing games around the time of the said Multi User Dungeons and I will give a few examples of said role-playing games. In the last portion of the chapter, the *Mass Effect* series will be discussed in further detail and how the development of role-playing games can be seen in them.

2.1 Single player role-playing games

Role-playing games have a long history in the games industry and the first one, *Dungeons and Dragons* (1974), is still being played by gamers. While *Dungeons and Dragons* (1974) is a table-top role-playing game, the role-playing game scene has moved over to the digital game market as well. The first installments of these digital role-playing games were Multi User Dungeons, which started to become available in mid-to-late 1970s. (Stern 2002; Dormans 2006)

With the shift from table-top games towards the digital realm, role-playing games began evolving in their visual representation from pure text to fixed perspective scrolling games. The single-player oriented role-playing games began the transformation and the Multi User Dungeon based games followed in suit. In 1996, the first three dimensional massively multiplayer online role-playing games, or MMORPG, were released. Today, the massively multiplayer digital role-playing game scene is heated in competition for subscribers and providing support for these games is a tremendous undertaking for game companies across all platforms. (Stern 2002; Dormans 2006)

Digital role-playing games have been under study by digital game scholars as well. One of these popular research subjects seems to be *World of Warcraft* (2004), which has been studied extensively by digital game scholars (Ruch 2009; Karlsen 2008; Targett, Verlysdonk, Hamilton & Hepting 2012). With the advancement of digital games, the medium has gained more attention and as such the research in the field changes with it.

(Digra Nordic 2018) Digital role-playing games are one of the most major genres in the digital game field.

The current MMORPGs combine state-of-the-art graphics and visuals with the latest technology that is available to bring together millions of players across the globe. (Stern 2002) Since the new computer based role-playing games rely on stats and character development through them, some role-players do not appreciate this development and favor the conventional pen-and-paper -style games (Dormans 2006).

The massively multiplayer online role-playing games are somewhat different from the games that I study here. As Stern (2002) and Karlsen (2008) point out, an MMORPG cannot be finished, unlike the *Mass Effect* games, for example. The developers of these games are constantly working on updating the elements in the games to keep players interested in the games. While *World of Warcraft* (2004) offers quests that contain narrative, they are only an occupation for the player, since they are commonly used to advance character statistics within the game (Karlsen 2008). These quests can be completed multiple times, unlike in role-playing games which are more narrative focused. In the *Mass Effect* games for example, the player cannot replay missions or quests, but offer the possibility to continue playing after the main storyline has been completed. This is to allow the players to complete possible sidequests that they might have not completed.

While digital role-playing games can be celebrated for their immersive narrative, there are some that take a different approach. One example is *Tom Clancy's: The Division* (2016), which is a massively multiplayer online role-playing game. The game does not rely as much on the background narrative, but instead is more reliant on the levelling and gearing of the playable character that the player controls. Considering these aspects, the game is much in line with the way *World of Warcraft* (2004) is developed, as according to Karlsen's (2008) research.

The interest in digital role-playing games can be justified with the amount of interaction, immersive storylines and character creation that they offer for the player. While there are some differences with the digital role-playing games, the main focus in all of them seems to be in character immersion and how the characters are able to grow

during the narrative progress. (Drachen, Copier, Hitchens, Montola, Eladhari & Stenros 2009)

Digital games that contain immersive narrative, according to Lee Sheldon (2004: 31), are not only reliant on the immersive story, but also to the characters that are within the narrative. The character can be either player controlled or non-playable, but they need to have a meaning to drive the narrative forward and for it to be immersive. Characters need to have meaning, their own personalities, to be able to tell a story (Sheldon 2004: 37).

In respect to characters in narrative oriented digital role-playing games, such as the *Mass Effect* series, characters can be the driving force within the narrative progression. In this regard, the characters also have their own narrative, which can change as much as the main narrative that the story follows. Kristine Jørgensen (2010) agrees with the importance of character oriented narrative progression and also states that the companions or non-playable characters can be even more important for the narrative progression than the main protagonist.

The importance of these characters rises through the emotional aspects. These emotional aspects can come through the visual representation of the characters, or even more through the way they are represented within their narrative. With the narrative I refer to the story they are able to tell, as Sheldon (2004: 37) points out. These characters then offer a meaningful experience for the player through the use of emotions and these emotions are deepened the further the player explores these character narratives (Elson, Breuer, Ivory & Quandt 2014: 524). I will pursue the emotional aspects of game characters further in chapter 3.

Here I have established a brief outline of role-playing games and how narrative is an important factor in many of these games, especially in the case of the *Mass Effect* series. In the next portion of this chapter, I will discuss the *Mass Effect* games in further detail and present the main aspects of the plot these games have. To understand the individual characters that are further analyzed in chapter 4, an understanding of the plot and storyworld evolving through these games has to be established.

2.2 The world of *Mass Effect*

In this chapter I will present the plot that is central to the *Mass Effect* games. The plot is closely connected to the way characters are made in games (Sheldon 2004: 31, 37; Elson et al. 2014: 524) and to understand the individual character narratives that I will discuss in chapter 4, an understanding of the plot needs to be established.

The *Mass Effect* series is a science fiction role-playing game series, which is played from the third person perspective. The player controls the character of Commander Shepard, who unlike in some other role-playing games, is not an empty vessel with no set characteristics. With characteristics I mean that he has a personality and the player responds to dialogue and events with reactions. To some extent, the player can control the way the character develops, through morality options, but the overall personality of the character is preset by the developers of the games.

The game is played from the third-person perspective and the player has two non-playable companions with them on missions. While the player cannot control these companions, they can order them to move, use different skills that they have and take cover. The companions will also voice their own opinions on different situations during missions. Depending on the companions that the player has with them on missions, the dialogue changes.

The player is able to use a galactic map to travel around in the Milky Way galaxy, which works effectively as a point-and-click style map. Some areas of the map are not instantly available for the player and revealing these travel points require narrative progression. The galaxy is essentially the same in all three games, where some areas can be visited but also new ones are made available for the player.

The games' plotline concentrates around a new unknown enemy that threatens the races that inhabit the Milky Way galaxy. The new threat is an ancient machine race, identified as the Reapers, which is responsible for the extinction of all organic life in the galaxy 50,000 years ago. The extinction is an endless cycle, where every 50,000 years the Reapers (Image 1) emerge from the galactic void to harvest all organic life. The Reapers are visualized as large insect looking starships, which have a red colored electricity around them, as seen on image 1.

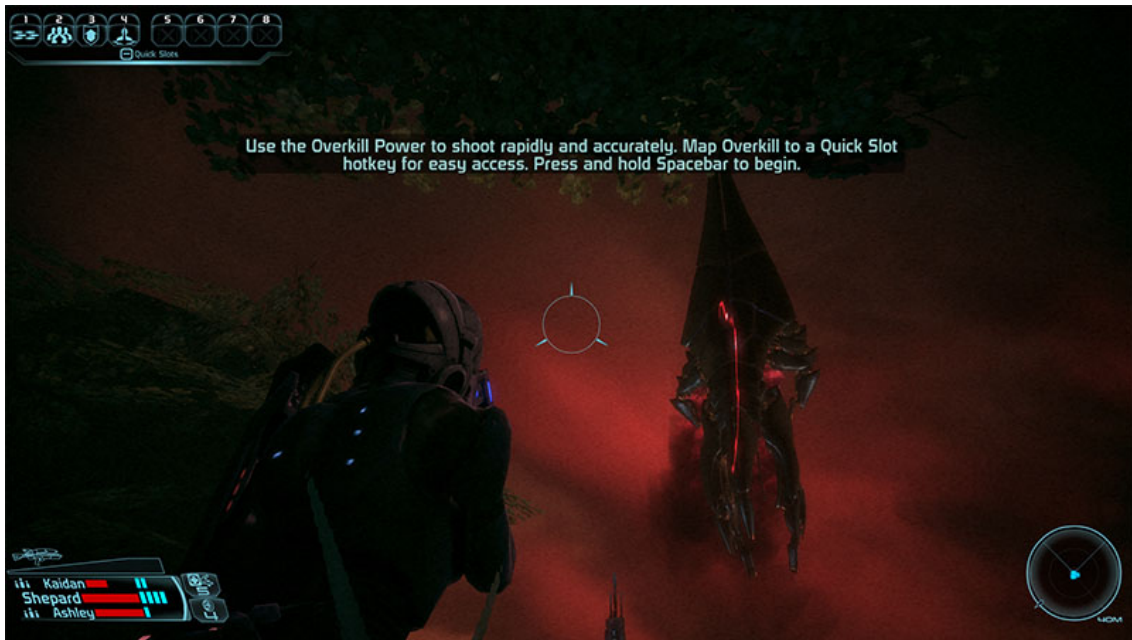


Image 1. First encounter with the ancient Reaper machines in *Mass Effect* (2007).

The first game, *Mass Effect* (2007), begins in year 2183, 35 years after humanity discovered the Prothean ruins on Mars. The ruins contained a small data cache, which advanced humanity forward technologically several hundred years. The Protheans were an ancient spacefaring race, which is believed to be the source of the technology to which all technology utilized by the races inhabiting the Milky Way galaxy is based on. The most notable technological marvels of the Protheans is believed to be the Mass Relays and The Citadel.

The Mass Relays provide a network for galactic travel. They can transport starships from one point of the galaxy to another in mere minutes, making them even more effective in star travel than FTL, faster than light, drives, which are also used by the races. The Citadel is a large space station, which is used by the Milky Way races as a kind of a United Nations, where all races are represented and can have their say in galactic matters. Still, only few races hold a seat in the Council, which decides on all galactic matters collectively.

During the narrative of *Mass Effect* (2007), Commander Shepard, the character controlled by the player, progresses through the narrative to reveal exactly who the

ancient Reapers are and what their purpose is. He and his crew on the SSV Normandy SR-1 space vessel are among the only ones who believe that the Reapers are the actual threat to the galaxy and not the machine race Geth, which was created by the Quarians. After the first mission, the player is granted Spectre status, which gives Commander Shepard the ability to pursue the incoming threat as seen fit.

The Spectre agents in *Mass Effect* games are the trusted authority of the Citadel Council, who are above the galactic law governed by the Citadel Council. The primary mission of all Spectre agents is to uphold galactic law and order by any means necessary. Though they are considered to have dictator-like statuses within the galaxy, their Spectre status can be revoked by the Council if they see fit.

A rogue Spectre (Special Tactics and Reconnaissance) agent of the Citadel, Saren, is under influence from a Reaper called Sovereign, which is also controlling a large army of Geth troopers. Though the Reaper Sovereign attacks the Citadel in the final mission of *Mass Effect* (2007), Saren and the accompanying Geth soldiers are blamed for the attack and the Reapers or Sovereign are not mentioned.

At the beginning of *Mass Effect 2* (2010), Commander Shepard awakens at a facility controlled by a pro-human organization, called Cerberus. Cerberus' only task is to lift humanity above all the other races in the galaxy, by any means necessary. During the opening interactive cutscene in *Mass Effect 2* (2010), Commander Shepard is killed after the Normandy space vessel is ambushed by an unknown enemy. The ambush forces the Normandy to begin evading incoming fire from the unknown vessel, but eventually the Normandy receives a fatal blow and explodes, as we see in image 2. The destruction of the Normandy leads to the death of the crew members who were unable to get to the escape pods in time.



Image 2. Normandy ambushed by an unknown enemy in *Mass Effect 2* (2010).

After the destruction of the Normandy, Commander Shepard is plunged out into space and experiences a suit integrity failure. The Commander is pulled by the gravitational forces of the nearby planet towards the surface and air begins to leak out of his suit, as we see in image 3. The cutscene fades to black and the final scene the player sees is the Commander burning in the atmosphere of the planet he is being pulled towards. Without any doubt, Commander Shepard dies during this interactive opening cutscene. The opening sequence caused discussion, because of the death of the main character in the trailer for *Mass Effect 2* (2010). The lead designer for the game, Casey Hudson, was interviewed at E3 2009, where the trailer was released, and he acknowledged only that the sequel could have dire consequences in character narrative progression (Totilo 2009).



Image 3. Commander Shepard floating in space, with air coming out of the suit in *Mass Effect 2* (2010).

During the *Mass Effect 2* (2010) narrative, however, the player as the reincarnated Commander Shepard makes an unwilling agreement with Cerberus to find out why human colonists from various colonies have disappeared mysteriously. As the narrative progresses, the culprits behind these mass-disappearances are found out to be Collectors, who are working for the Reapers. Another Reaper, called Harbinger, is the main antagonist subjugating the Collectors to do as it needs them.

The reason for Harbinger and the Collector's interest in human colonies is revealed during the narrative and the final reveal of Harbinger's plan comes to light when Commander Shepard travels through the Omega 4 relay, which takes the new Normandy SR-2 vessel to the center of the galaxy, where the Collectors have their base.

An important note about the final mission of *Mass Effect 2* (2010) has to be noted. The mission can be completed with several outcomes. Even if the Collector base is destroyed and the main objectives completed, depending on the choices that the player makes during the progression of the game narrative can even end the mission in Commander Shepard's death.

Before going through the Omega 4 relay, several actions taken during the final mission can decide the fate and outcome of the mission, which is eloquently dubbed ‘the Suicide Mission’. If Commander Shepard dies in the mission, the player is unable to import the savegame file from *Mass Effect 2* (2010) into *Mass Effect 3* (2012). If Commander Shepard dies on the last mission of *Mass Effect 2* (2010), *Mass Effect 3* (2012) has to be started with a fresh character, as the game will not accept a savegame where Commander Shepard has been killed.

Mass Effect 3 (2012) begins the same way, if a savegame was imported or if the Commander was killed during the previous game. The difference between the fresh character and the imported one is the choices that the player has made so far during the games. All the choices that have an effect, if savegame files were imported from previous games, will be present in the imported save file and will impact future events in *Mass Effect 3* (2012).

The third game begins with the Commander being relieved of his status in the Alliance Military and is detained in the city of Vancouver. During the opening interactive cutscene, human outposts outside the Sol system begin to go silent and Reapers start descending upon the city the Commander is at, as we see in image 4. The sequence shows the situation as a dire one, with the Alliance military unable to stop the Reaper invasion. The visual representation of the scene makes for a dark opening mood for the third game, which begins with the destruction of the Alliance military headquarters. After the first encounter with the attacking Reapers, the Commander escapes in the Normandy space vessel.



Image 4. Reapers shown ascending upon the city of Vancouver (*Mass Effect 3* 2012).

Once Commander Shepard gets to the Normandy, his first task is to travel to the Luna base, where the only way to permanently stop the Reapers is located. After the mission, Commander Shepard's main mission is to unite the different races in the galaxy to delay the Reaper invasion long enough, so that there is time to build the only weapon possible stopping them.

Since the series relies on previous games and how the players acted upon certain actions, there are some differences in *Mass Effect 3* (2012) that are presented differently for the player. This naturally means that the player has used the savegame import feature for the games and thus continues the story of the same Commander Shepard throughout the series. The changes in the narrative can be quite influential in the third game, for example choices done in *Mass Effect 1* (2007) can have an impact on the readiness level of the galaxy and the effectiveness of the defenses they are utilizing against the Reaper invasion.

The same goes for the non-playable characters, or companions, that Commander Shepard has recruited or can recruit. One of the most notable occurrences is the death of companions in previous games. Since these carry over to the last game, it is quite

possible to only have a few companions remaining from the previous games. The last mission in *Mass Effect 2* (2010) can be especially brutal towards the Commander, as most of the companions on the mission can actually die, because of the choices the player has made.

Since the narrative in the *Mass Effect* series relies heavily in the companions and other non-playable characters that are present in the game, the removal of these characters due to player actions has an impact on the overall narrative experience as well. Future chapters will go more in depth with the narrative elements and the importance of characters as narrative carriers in the *Mass Effect* games.

The *Mass Effect* games have been critically acclaimed by game critics since the release of the first game in 2007, *Mass Effect*. Even before the release of the game, it received praise and won the Best Role-Playing Game award. (Blevins 2006) The game was celebrated for having a rich storyline, impressive visuals and comprehensive character customization, to name a few, and won the Role-Playing Game of the Year award (IMDb 2018). Within three months of its release, the game had reached over a million in sales worldwide (Sliwinski 2007). The game was developed by Bioware and published by Microsoft Game Studios for the Xbox 360 platform. In 2008, Demiurge Studios ported *Mass Effect* (2007) over to Microsoft Windows.

In similar fashion to its predecessor, *Mass Effect 2* (2010) was seen as a candidate for the Game of the Year Award, even due to the fact that it was released during the first quarter of the year. (Community Voices 2010) In addition to this, the first week sales since release for the game reached two million copies (Reilly 2010). The game was published by Electronic Arts, and developed by Bioware, for Microsoft Windows and Xbox One.

The third release of the series, *Mass Effect 3* (2012), received a similarly enthusiastic response from the gaming community, receiving over 3.5 million copies sold during the first week of its release (Thier 2012). Later during the spring, Electronic Arts, the publisher of the game, announced that the game had made over 200 million dollars in sales (Sterling 2012b). At the same time, however, the game received a plea from the community regarding the narrative and plot coherence, which was not pleasing to the

fans of the series. Players felt that the actions they have made during the series do not matter in shaping the ending. The discussion heated to the point where pleas, forms and campaigns were made in an effort to change the ending. (Sterling 2012a)

Considering these numbers and reviews that the *Mass Effect* series has, it can be safely said that the receiving of the series has been overly positive. The games have been celebrated for the rich narrative and gripping story that they offer. When looking at game narrative analysis, these games are an excellent research subject for narrative analysis.

The rich narrative that these games have also makes the reason of using other supplementary material in the analysis portion of this thesis important. While I have many hours of gameplay in these games, there are still some narrative options that the games offer that I have not been able to explore. The Let's Play videos were selected for further reference material for this reason.

In this chapter, I have outlined the development of role-playing games and given a closer understanding of the narrative in the single-player role-playing games that I study in this thesis. The following chapter will concentrate on the study of narrative and how it is implemented to the study of role-playing narratives in single-player role-playing games.

3 NARRATOLOGY IN GAME STUDIES

In this chapter I will discuss in detail the various aspects of narrative theory and outline the theory I will use to analyze the *Mass Effect* games. To understand the narrative, or the different forms of narrative, in games, I will first discuss traditional narrative theory. Here traditional narrative means the way it is perceived in traditional media, be it literature or film. The changes that have happened in the narrative we experience in games in comparison to the one we experience in traditional literature or cinema is a distinction that needs to be made.

The first section of the chapter will contain a brief history of narratology, or the study of narrative, as it is. From this point, I will develop to the narrative theory in games and how effective narratives can be in role-playing games. I will draw examples from the *Mass Effect* games throughout this chapter, where appropriate, to move towards chapter 4 where the analysis of individual character storylines is done.

There has been a debate among ludologists and narratologists about games and narrative for quite some time. Gonzalo Frasca (2003) tackles this in his paper and points out that during the debate, an idea was expressed, that ludologists should focus on game mechanics and reject any notion on studying the narrative aspects of games. Narratologists on the other hand, argued that games are closely connected to stories.

I use the term narratology here to refer to the study of narrative in the traditional sense, as in film and prose. Narratologists have been cited to view novels and films as the prime examples of narrative fiction (Simons 2007) and they refer to the narrative as a sequence of events, which create a coherent story.

The debate has continued from the time that Frasca (2003) released his paper. Kevin Schut (2003) argues that games are not narratives, but they require a different approach than the traditional narrative forms. He argues that games are transforming the culture of narrative and what our culture understands as a story. Jenkins (2004) has also argued that games, or game designers, do not tell stories. Instead they sculpt spaces that can tell a multitude of various kinds of stories and that the discussion of narratives in games

needs to broaden its view of the narrative possibilities in games, as the narrative model used now is too narrow.

Furthermore in the debate about narrative elements in games, Eskelinen (2001) points out that in contrast to cinema or literature, games are a configurative process, whereas cinema and literature are interpretative processes. Frasca (2003) draws from this and notes that it can be understood as if Eskelinen (2001) would rather leave out all narrative elements from games, but as Frasca also states, that is not the point of the article Eskelinen wrote. Eskelinen was making a point about the emphasis on game studies within the context of elements of game analysis and within that context he saw the narrative study as being not that important.

3.1 Traditional narratology

When talking about, and especially analyzing, narratives, stories and storytelling, one of the key texts about narrative and their structure was written by Roland Barthes (1975) in “An introduction to the structural analysis of Narrative”. According to Barthes (1975: 237), there are several different forms of narrative. Narrative is found in the spoken and written language and it can be depicted as, for example, text, images and gestures. Even before the time of games, Barthes (1975: 273) identified that narratives can be told in many forms of media.

Barthes (1975: 241) describes narrative as a sentence. If you remove the sentence from the main narrative, you are left with an incomplete narrative. This is the same as removing a word from a sentence that is part of the narrative. The meaningfulness of the sentence disappears and leaves the reader guessing. This can be introduced in games as well, as I will point out later in this chapter.

Todorov (1975: 163–4) explained the narrative as being movement between two points, as figure 1 illustrates. The narrative moves from one of these equilibriums towards the other. The beginning of the narrative is a stable equilibrium, from which the narrative begins to move towards an unstable equilibrium. The turning point is where the narrative is in disequilibrium and begins moving towards a new equilibrium, or stable

position. The stable position it reaches is not the same as the beginning, but the narrative reaches a similar state of stableness in the end. According to Todorov (1975: 164), all narratives follow this same arc of development. The same form of narrative arc was also identified by Aristotle, but he named the movements of the narrative progression as beginning, middle and end.

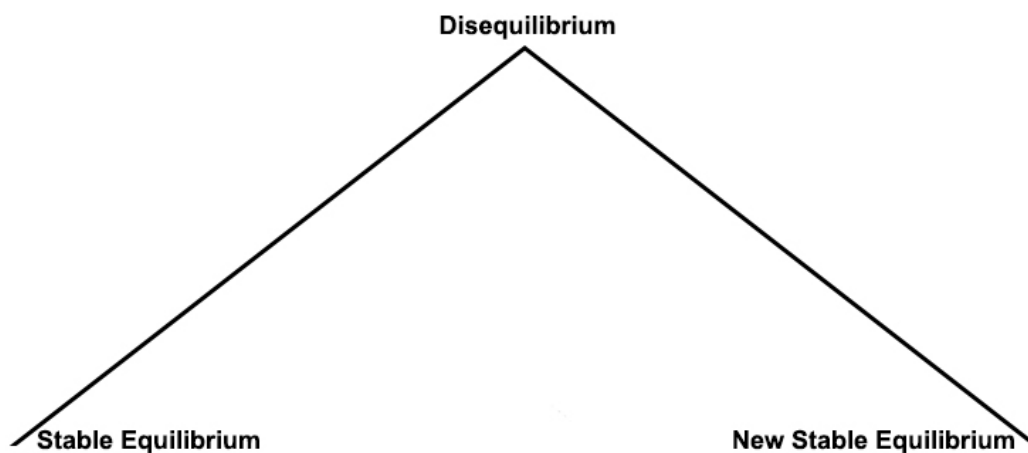


Figure 1. The narrative arc in its traditional form, according to Todorov (1975).

As narratives are meant to be immersive and coherent, an incomplete narrative can break an immersion. This can happen with the removal of a word or a whole sentence. Texts need to be descriptive about the storyworld they are attempting to create for the reader and at the same time be coherent in the movement of the narrative. A broken narrative, either linguistically or by not following the expected movement from one point to another, can confuse the reader. According to Wei, Bizzocchi and Calvert (2010: 5), the order of events in the narrative is key for a textual narrative. The chronological order that is in the story has to be constructed in this manner. Using this method in traditional linear narrative is meant to construct a cohesive and informative narrative (Wei et al. 2010: 5).

Ryan (2003: 90–91) points out that the functions of the text need to be within the rules of the language and be comprehensible for the reader. Since the text attempts to immerse the reader into the world of the narrative, using words that utilize the reader's imagination, certain precision is needed. Nevertheless, as I will point out, text is sometimes fallible in creating immersion. Imagination of a storyworld that is presented in a textual form for the reader is usually not a very effective way to describe or produce detailed images of the characters or anything in the storyworld (Ryan 2003: 120).

Narrative is the art of telling stories and narrative is an integral part of our lives. Narrative has been described as being a distinctive human trait that is next to language and our ability to use it. (Abbot 2008: 1) In a more vernacular sense, narrative is the description or representation of an event or series of events, that has taken place. The narrative has elements that make it a real narrative, and these consist of the story and narrative discourse. The story is the event itself or the sequence of events and the narrative discourse is the aforementioned event or sequence of events described. (Abbot 2008: 19)

The narrative discourse can be subdivided into plot or *sjuzet*, or *syuzhet* as Bordwell (1985: 50) writes the term, which is the order of the events. In addition to the plot, it can have a style or discourse. The story can further be divided into events, entities and it can also contain a setting. The entities described here are characters in the described events, while the setting is the storyworld where the events take place. (Abbot 2008: 20) Before in this thesis I described the storyworld in games as being the visual representation of the spatial space of the game. This is the 3-dimensional world where the player traverses.

Abbot (2008) does not mention the *fabula*, which can be called the raw material of a story. (Bordwell 1985: 49) These two terms combined, the *sjuzet* and *fabula*, create the narrative element, which is the plot. The *fabula* is the events that take place and the *sjuzet* is the order in which these events take place. In traditional narrative, like in film or novels, this order is commonly linear. In games, as I will argue, the events are not necessarily linear.

Traditional narrative relies heavily on the temporal instead of the spatial and the former has been the topic of discussion in traditional narrative theory. As I said before, narrative is the description of events or series of events, using language, to tell stories of these events that have taken place. Stories are primarily seen as a sequence of events, which again emphasizes the temporal structure I mentioned (Wei et al. 2010: 2). Space has been discussed in early narrative theory, but it was mainly seen as an added part inside the narrative, that was not meaningful. Space, or the storyworld which I defined in the first chapter, was not seen as an integral part of the narration. The comprehension of the storyworld is, however, an important part in traditional narrative as well. While the storyworld was not as easily depicted in the traditional narrative such as books, the reader could still read and imagine the world that was described with the words written on the pages. As Bakhtin (1981: 425) states, time and space are dependent on each other.

To be able to comprehend a narrative, through both time and space, the space, or storyworld, needs to be constructed. In games the storyworld is presented to the player through, for example, visual images, audio and graphics that the game designers have implemented into the game. In traditional text, the imagination of the reader is required to create the storyworld. As Ryan (2003: 11) states, “language does not input to the senses” and that the reader’s imagination is the one that has to do all the work involved in creating the storyworld that is presented to the reader in a text. Furthermore, the imagination created storyworld, from the text that the reader has comprehended, is always incomplete and might not be the one the writer has envisioned. This is especially true with storyworlds that are unnatural and strange to the reader (Alber 2009). The incomplete and unnatural creations prove difficult, because a reader’s imagination is always altered by previous experiences. These experiences can be cultural or previous imaginary worlds that the reader has imagined from reading previous texts. (Ryan 2003: 91)

The storyworld is not the same for every reader, even if they read the same book. Previous experiences add certain aspects to the imagined storyworld. This is to be expected, since individual reader experiences are different. For example, imagining a planet that is described in a book will look different for every reader. Depending on the

choice of words and the preconceptions of the reader, the text can give a very different picture of the storyworld for readers.

Ryan (2003: 120) explores the notion of creating photographic images for readers by words and drawing from her own experiences argues that everything is dependent on the reader. This can include the cultural and previous experiences of the reader, as well as the readers mental standing. While keeping this in mind, she also notes that it is possible for certain readers to create a rather clear image of the storyworld that is represented in the text (Ryan 2003: 120). The transportation to the storyworld is acknowledge by more recent research as well by Green and Clark (2012), where they state that while coherence in the text is important, the individual reader's mindset is a crucial factor. This is influenced by the situation the reader is in, the mindset they have and also the genre they are reading. For example, and interesting genre can prove more effective in transporting the reader to the storyworld. (Green & Clark 2012)

According to Ryan (2003: 121) there are three different textual and mental aspects that make a reader immersed in the narrative of a written text. These are the spatial, temporal and emotional immersions. The spatial immersion is the ability of the text to create a space for the narrative. The creation of space in the imagination of the reader can include personal spaces from their lives, which help in creating an effective immersion. (Ryan 2003: 122–123) Alber (2009), who discusses unnatural storyworlds and their creation, states that while creating an unnatural storyworld is difficult, it is possible through comprehensive textual description.

This creation of space is primarily the same as the creation of a space in a game. The difference is that games do not rely on the textual aspects of creating immersion, but rather the visual aspects. Due to the development of computer technology, game developers can create more immersive worlds in games (Wei et al. 2010: 1). These worlds do not rely on the imagination of the player but can represent the visual world in the same way for every player.

Textual references to familiar places can be effective as well. Ryan (2003: 128) uses the example of a familiar place, which the reader might be accustomed with. If a text begins to describe a certain planet, for example, Earth, the reader has some knowledge about

the object that is being described and can imagine a basic picture of it. Even if a text is describing a planet that is not familiar to the reader or is fictional, using the word planet can still give the reader the basic idea of what the writer is attempting to convey to readers (Alber, Iversen, Nielsen & Richardson 2010).

The spatial immersion also includes the temporal immersion, which refers to the transportation of the reader to the scene where the plot is taking place. In textual narrative, different scenes need to be described separately, if the plot moves from one place to another. (Ryan 2003: 130–131). Nevertheless, the plot always takes place at a certain space, or storyworld. While in games, the storyworld is the space where the player moves around and is able to traverse, in a textual narrative this transportation is done using descriptive words. Ryan (2003: 133) refers these as narrative strategies that the writer can use to create a space to which the reader can imagine themselves. Even this can fail, as Bride Mallon and Brian Webb (2005: 3) point out, the image of the author creating a text might not correspond to the imaginative product of the reader.

In another article, Ryan (2002: 583) refers to the plot and events as the actions which the characters are doing within the text. In a textual narrative, these actions are described using verbs, in contrast to games, where the actions are performed. The player can perform actions, the non-playable characters can perform actions and, in some cases, the player can even tell the non-playable characters to do certain actions. In the *Mass Effect* games, the player can order the two companions that they have with certain actions during combat sequences. This is not possible in textual narrative and it emphasizes the participatory and performative aspects of interactive digital narrative.

The temporal immersion is the involvement of the reader in the narrative that is taking place in the text. Textual narrative is mostly linear, and the reader is influenced by the choices that are already made, as in, the text is moving into a certain direction. (Ryan 2003: 142–3) There is no interaction happening between the reader and the text. The reader is unable to change the outcome of the narrative. This is an aspect that sets interactive digital narrative apart from the traditional textual narrative. The player is able to produce different results according to the actions they take within the narrative process (Veale 2015: 152)

Temporal immersion in textual narrative is closely tied to the amount of information and suspense that is present in the story. The suspense needs to establish a certain level of focus to keep the reader within the suspense that is created. The suspense needs to be continuous but at the same time there needs to be a certain level of diminishing suspense towards the end of the textual narrative. (Ryan 2003: 147) As textual narrative is linear and there is no chance of changing the outcome, reading the same textual narrative again after some time may not create the same suspense as the first reading did (Ryan 2003: 148).

Bringing the suspense over to interactive digital narrative is a different matter. Interactive digital narrative, as the *Mass Effect* games, offer a certain level of re-playability for the player. The narrative can be changed by the actions that the player takes, and the outcome that was experienced during the first playthrough is not experienced again. Since the player, as is the case with the *Mass Effect* games, can change their behavior from the previous playthrough to change the reactions and events that take place within the narrative, the suspense and emotions that were experienced before are not the same as the new ones. As Veale (2015: 130) points out, games could make players consider their actions in advance. If the player knows that certain actions can lead to the same outcome as before, doing the opposite can yield different results.

Third aspect that Ryan (2003: 148) mentions is the emotional immersion of the narrative. Reflecting on the work of Aristotle, who defined catharsis, a purifying effect that the tragedy can cause in people (Herman, Jahn & Ryan 2005: 47). Textual narrative can have the same effect on a reader, if the elements of the narrative are used correctly. In addition to the narrative elements, the wording of a text can influence the reader. Depending on the reader's mindset and imagination, a reader can feel genuine fear or be moved to tears by the events of the narrative. This is especially true if the reader can relate to the narrative, or character, in a personal way, which amplifies the feelings rising from the narrative (van Laer, Ruyter, Visconti, Wetzels 2014: 802). This can be viewed as the melding of the fictional world with the real world. (Ryan 2003: 152)

The emotional immersion of a textual narrative also depends on the context, or the period the narrative was written. As Ryan (2003: 159) also points out, every decade has

their own context of realism to which the stories relate to. For example, reading a novel about werewolves today, when we can be certain that there are no werewolves, the thought of encountering one after reading a text with them in it is unlikely. We can relate to the text as being fiction and while being immersed into the text and possibly feeling fear, the reaction might not be the same as it was for the people during the decade that novel was written. Emotions and feelings are personal, of course, so depending on the reader the effect of the emotion can differ.

Considering that textual narrative can have such an effect on a reader, a movie can do the same in many ways and be even more powerful. Looking at interactive games, however, the effect can be even more powerful. A movie can engage the viewer, but only on an emotional level. Acting on the events is not possible when watching a movie. An interactive game narrative, however, engages the player to take action in the narrative sequences. (Veale 2015: 130)

The next portion will provide more insight into the game narratives and how they can be studied. I will begin with a brief look on the development of game narrative studies and also reflect back to what was discussed before about traditional narrative theory. Afterwards I will continue to some of the challenges that studying game narrative can have.

3.2 Studying game narratives

Where previously films and books have told stories in a dominantly linear fashion to viewers and readers, games are offering way of non-linear storytelling. Studying this form is not as straight forward with the methods that have been used for cinema or written stories, since their aspects are not the same. Employing the same methods does not work, as previous studies have pointed out. Nevertheless, the methods that have been previously used for non-interactive media are needed but they need to be modified to better understand the nature of the new narrative and storytelling forms of games. (Elson et al. 2014; Mallon & Webb 2005)

The changes that the digital medium has brought to storytelling, are described by Schut (2003) as a cultural change, which is brought forward by the communicative environment and the change in the way we communicate narratives in the digital world. He goes on to argue that the digital medium has acted as a catalyst to bring change to the traditional narrative and it has been changing the notion of stories in our culture. (Schut 2003)

Games have brought a change in the way narratives are looked upon. This is not the first instance of change in the way narratives are studied and comprehended, as literary texts became under criticism as well (Lyons 2016: 183). As Frasca (2003) points out, the field needs a set of tools to study the narrative structures in games, in ways that narratology was used to study the narratives in literature and film. He also mentions, that he used to attempt and use narratology in study of games, without much success. Schut (2003) points out that the argument should not be about whether there are stories or narrative in games, but rather trying to understand the change that is happening with the coming of the new digital medium. He points out the importance of understanding the nature of the new powerful communication medium.

To further validate his point about the cultural change in the new digital medium, Schut (2003) points out previous changes in the cultural mediums that have taken place. He discusses about the changes in radio and print media and that these mediums influence how a society conceives their culture. He argues that cultural categories change along with the changes that happen in these mediums. With these changes in media, the media encourages “re-structuring of cultural cognition” (Schut 2003). Rather than saying that narratives are not present in games, he argues that the new medium we are experiencing and talking about in this thesis is “transforming what a story is.” (Schut 2003) Games are not, according to Schut (2003), narratives or stories by themselves but they are changing the form of them.

In more recent research Hanna-Riikka Roine (2016: 106) points out that changes in the storytelling can be called as a transmedial phenomenon, which means that telling of a single story is possible through multiple platforms. She points to games in particular and notes that games actively engage the recipient, or player, whereas texts require the

reader to passively receive what is being told in the text. The adaptation of stories across multiple platforms is also noted by Ryan (2015), when she notes the transformation of literature to both films and games. She refrains from using the word adaptation, but rather views the re-telling of these as a response to their popularity. Changing the form of telling a story to a new medium can, naturally, change the story and the way it is perceived. How it changes, depends on the recipient and the interpretation.

These forms of narrative media are seen as interpretative narratives, where the reader or viewer makes sense of what they are reading or viewing. (Schut 2003). Aarseth (1997: 1–2) coined the word ergodic literature, which means texts that require nontrivial effort from the reader. This kind of literature requires the reader to interpret the text but what makes it different from other texts are the configurative functions it requires from the reader. Schut (2003) points out that ludologists have been using the term ergodic literature to describe games. He goes further by saying that applying and identifying the configurative function to games is the main thing that sets them apart from traditional narrative texts.

While there has been discussion about the separation of traditional narrative and the ergodic literature, Frasca (2003) cites Jesper Juul (2001) about narrative, pointing out that there is overlap, according to Juul, within traditional narrative and game narrative. In the article, Juul (2001) discusses the different narratives from packages of the games that set the game to a larger background story to the more narrative form of action games at the time of the writing of his article. Juul (2001) also states that games and narratives do have some connection with each other, so they are not completely different from each other.

Another point that Juul (2001) makes in his article is the translation of narratives from one medium to another and makes a point by saying “...computer games contain narrative elements...” (Juul 2001). This can be true and Jenkins (2004) also points out that games should not be viewed as stories, but as spaces which can contain narrative possibilities.

The aspect of space in games and how these spaces are used to create stories reflect closely to this thesis. To define this space, I would like to point out Janet Murray’s

(1997: 71) four properties of digital environments. She argues that digital environments are procedural, participatory, spatial and encyclopedic. With procedural she means that they are governed by rules. The computer is not designed as a pathway per se, but as an embodiment of complex behavior. There might not be a single action or response to the command, for example in a high paced action portion in *Mass Effect* or the response to a narrativized wheel selection in the game. Past choices can influence the way the game responds.

Participatory means that the digital environment is receptive and acts according to the input of the player. Just like in games, where the interaction between characters are coded into the game. These characters are the embodiment of complex behavioral patterns, to which they react according to the commands the player gives them. In *Mass Effect* games, the narrativized interface is how players interact with these characters and their pre-coded behavior. The reaction of these characters depends entirely on the player's input. (Murray 1997: 74)

Ryan (2005) also talks about the participatory aspects in her article, where she describes different modes that the narrative can have in her view. One of these modes is the participatory mode, which is the creation of a story inside the storyworld through a character that you can control. In a more recent article, Ryan (2016: 31) describes the storyworld as being a space that evolves according to the events that take place. This definition of participatory and the evolving storyworld goes well with the digital role-playing games like the *Mass Effect* series. In these games, you assume the role of a character, whose actions you can choose, which in turn affect the narrative. Ryan (2005) also describes the narrative as being a use of signs or a medium (like a game, for example), where events unfold due to circumstances and actions taken by the characters inside the storyworld.

The spatial means that there is a navigable space. In traditional narrative or media, it was most commonly linear. In the case of the *Mass Effect* series, this navigable space is a 3-dimensional storyworld, where the player can traverse non-linearly. There are several different narrative arcs, which all offer their own narrative options for the player to explore. (Murray 1997: 79)

The encyclopedic function means that computers can hold substantial amounts of information. In games, just like in the *Mass Effect* games, there are often different means of holding information. In *Mass Effect* the encyclopedic function is presented in the form of a galactic codex, which holds information about the narrative that is inside the game. For the most part, this information is purely additive and does not necessarily need to be read by the player. Nevertheless, it does hold a function and provides in-depth information about the storyworld the player is in. (Murray 1997: 83)

Kücklich (2003) criticizes the approach of Murray (1997) to the game operation, which defines them as a two-level medium of immediate and mediated. The player cannot interact with the mediated level, which is the code inside the game. The immediate level is the interface for the game, by which the player can take action with. The code never changes, since it is governed by a set of rules, which the player needs to understand. These rules are made clear to the player through the use of the interface, which bring forth changes in the storyworld of the game.

Though some time has passed between these articles that I discuss here, they still hold a valid point. The narrative studies of cinema and literature do not necessarily go together with the studies of narrative in digital games. But neither does it mean that they need to be disposed of altogether. While the narrative forms of cinema, literature and games have changed, so have digital games during these decades. Even more comprehensive digital role-playing games are being released, such as the *Mass Effect* series. Further research into these new forms of narrative storytelling is needed.

Regarding the study of narratives in games, Hatavara, Hyvärinen, Mäkelä and Mäyrä (2016: 20–21) suggest a position of leaving some games out of the study focus of narrative or interactive fiction, as they call it. As an example, *Tetris* (1984) is used, as the game is not reliant on a narrative, but rather can be called an abstract game (Eskelinen 2001).

The more recent research into game narratives has been done by Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum (2012), whom which I reference in this study as well. Other studies have noted the importance of narrative as well, stating that as the games got visually more comprehensive an appealing, more emphasis was placed on the stories and narratives

(Wei et al. 2010: 1–2; Cutumisu, Szafron, Schaeffer, McNaughton, Roy, Onuczko & Carbonaro 2005: 19).

The storytelling form that is used in games is said to be the most comprehensive of all interactive media today (Wei et al. 2010: 2). This is seen in the popularity of games and studying the narrative aspects of these games is a prominent issue that needs to be addressed by the game studies scholars. And since games cannot be seen as ordinary texts, the methods used to study game narratives needs to be refined in ways that enable researchers to study the potential of game narratives to their full extent. (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum 2011: 262)

One of the ways where the digital narrative differs from textual narrative is, for example, when reading a book, the reader is constantly aware how much of the book is left. This is even when the reader has not read the book before. When playing a game, the player is usually not aware as to how much of the narrative is left. (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum 2011: 262) The player can guess about the progression of the narrative by reading subtle cues that the game gives, for example the hint of an upcoming fight. Some games even let the player know that continuing past a certain point will begin a final sequence from which they cannot turn back. This is the case in the *Mass Effect* games as well. In *Mass Effect 2* (2010), before continuing to the last mission, the game warns the player about the action they are about to take. Continuing with the mission will trigger the final sequence of the game.

Further problems that arise when analyzing or reading game narrative are the multiple different modes of communication that games use. A traditional text is basically words on a paper, while a game uses multiple different modalities to communicate to the player (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum 2011: 268; 272). There are three scopes that have been identified as adding to the difficulty of games. These are the indeterminacy of the outcome of a reading or playthrough, the scope and the difficulty. (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum 2011: 272)

The indeterminacy reflects to the interactive nature of game narratives, especially interactive game narratives. It is almost impossible in complex interactive narratives to be sure that two players will have the same outcome with their playthrough (Bizzocchi

& Tanenbaum 2011: 272). Traditional text, as I mentioned before, is words on a page and is in that sense in a fixed form. It stays the same, though readers can, depending on their preconceptions, give different meanings to events. Considering the multiple modalities that games use to communicate with the player also means that two players might not pay attention to the same aspects, thus the analysis of these communications can have different outcomes.

As technology advances, game developers can create even more complex and imaginative storyworlds for players to explore. When doing a close-reading of a game, the sheer size of the game can be overwhelming. It is usually countered with multiple playthroughs, which in turn take many hours to complete. (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum 2011: 273) Even with multiple playthroughs it is not necessarily possible to find all the possibilities in a game or observe all the intricate details that they have.

Reading traditional texts is usually taken for granted for everyone, since children learn to read at an early age in modern western societies. Now that computers are becoming more common in households, using them is an everyday action for people as well. Still, games require a certain level of skill to complete. To analyze a game, you first need to learn how to play it. (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum 2011: 274) To emphasize this, it can be considered that you would need to learn how to read before you can analyze a text.

Next, I will go further with the narratives of games and especially the narratives that are found in role-playing games. The effectiveness of these narratives in creating a story will be discussed further, before I continue with the actual reading of these narratives in the last portion of this chapter.

3.2.1 Narrative in role-playing games

The narrative arc that Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum (2012) are referring to is the plot or the logical sequence that a game follows. This includes the narrative events that take place during the game. In traditional cinema, this follows a certain tradition but within the medium of games, the narrative arc is different and does not follow the same logical principles that it does within cinema. The narrative arc in digital games is present in

different ways, like the player progressing through a certain level inside the game. This version of the narrative arc is not necessarily linear. This means the different paths that the player can take while progressing. (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum 2012: 395–396)

The digital game narrative is often seen as having a similar construct to hypertext. Both are cited as being interactive narrative (Kücklich 2003). The game narrative, when present, can contain the same elements that hypertext does. In the *Mass Effect* series, the different narrative arcs can be considered as the branching parts of the main narrative. In hypertext, like websites, for example, the branching parts are links which take the user to a different part of the website. This is a crude example, as websites do not contain a narrative, but the use of links can be seen as the same form of branching as in the selection of a dialogue option inside a digital role-playing game.

Nevertheless, there are differences between hypertext websites and digital role-playing games, as I illustrate in figure 2. Websites offer the possibility for the user to return easily to the previous part, or page. The interactive digital narrative in games, however, does not offer the same ease of returning after a choice has been made. Of course, players have the option to save their progression before undertaking any actions in digital games, but this is not the same as pressing the back button on a web browser. The choices made in interactive games might not manifest any seeable consequences until much later, which makes returning back to the point where the choice was made difficult.

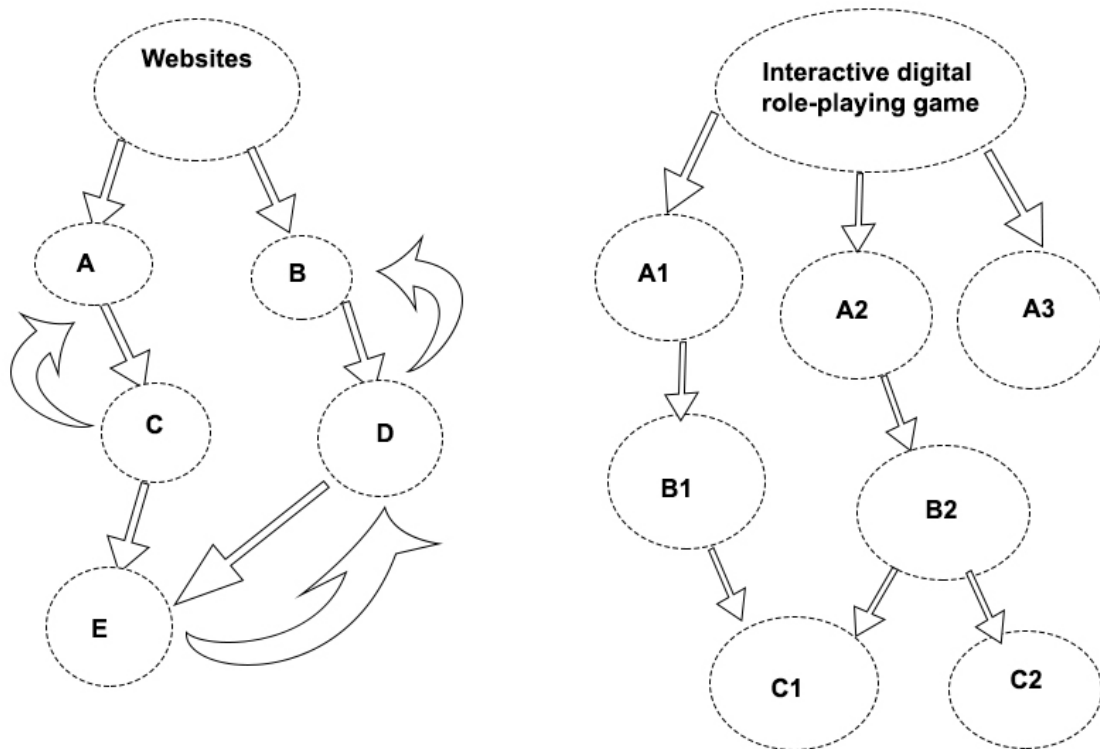


Figure 2. Websites and interactive games and their forms as I view them in this thesis.

Kücklich (2003) points out the problematic nature of referring to games as hypertexts and purely seeing games as a form of hypertext should be avoided. The two might have some similarities, but they are still different. As I pointed out, the returning to a previous point in the narrative might not be as simple.

In games, the branches, or branching arcs, are called micro-narratives, which all have their own narrative progression. Jenkins (2004) refers to these micronarratives as localized events. In games these micro-narratives can have their own narrative arc, that is not necessarily tied to the main narrative arc within the game. Jenkins (2004) further describes these micro-narratives as emotional experiences that players can have during a game. In the case of *Mass Effect* games, these micro-narratives can be seen as sidequests that the player can discover during their travels. They are not necessarily dependent on the main narrative arc, but they can add to it. Jenkins (2004) describes this as a storyworld that is active and has several narrative artifacts and processes.

The narrative artifacts are described as information distributors, that the player can find during their journey in the game. They need to be, however, distributed in a manner which the player can locate them. As Jenkins (2004) notes, even in Hollywood films there is the rule of three, which means that relevant points that are important to the plot need to be shown in at least three diverse ways.

The storyworld is the active space in which the player can traverse during the game. As I mentioned before, Jenkins (2004) describes the storyworld as a narrative process that can contain multiple narrative artifacts that are not necessarily dependent on each other. A space in this thesis and what Jenkins (2004) describes as the storyworld means the navigable space that the player can traverse during the game. The storyworld reacts to the events and the actions that the player takes during the game, and changes accordingly (Ryan 2016: 31). Nitsche (2008: 6–7) describes the spaces in video games as adding a new mean to express the visual aspects of the game and at the same time it moves away from the textual representation and places more emphasis on the visual, or 3-dimensional, space. For the remainder of this thesis, the space discussed and defined here will be referred to as the storyworld, as it is the term used by Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum (2012).

Characters refer to the entities that the player interacts within the game. Characters can be the playable character which the player controls or the characters that the player encounters within the storyworld. In the case of *Mass Effect* games, Kristine Jørgensen (2010) points out that the non-playable characters, or NPCs, are important in the narrative progression. As Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum (2012: 396), the depth and consistency of characters are an important aspect within the narrative.

As characters carry the brunt of the narrative progression in the *Mass Effect* series, the characters need a more in-depth examination. Lee Sheldon (2004) describes some important factors that are needed in the creation of immersive characters. He (Sheldon 2004: 38) describes immersive characters as being three dimensional and they are physical, sociological and psychological in nature.

The physical refers to the visual representation on the character in question. The visual representation of the character needs to be up to par with the other two factors as well.

For example, creating a brutal looking character who behaves in a manner not representing his visual characteristic can be difficult to convince to the player. (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum 2012: 396; Sheldon 2004: 38)

The sociological features of a character include the background that the character has and how that is represented in the game. With characters that have a background, like in the *Mass Effect* games, the representation of this history helps the building of the characters personality and justify their actions and thoughts. (Sheldon 2004: 38–39) This also ties to the psychological factors of characters. In *Mass Effect* games, meeting the companions that you travel with does not give you the full information about them right away. Taking moments to talk to your companions will reveal more about them and through that you are able to deepen the bond that you have with them. This includes the attitudes, views and other psychological aspects that the character has and are important with immersive and believable characters (Sheldon 2004: 39–40).

The deeper the bond you create with your companions in *Mass Effect* games, the more options you have with the interaction you can do with them. For example, some characters are a possible love interests, with whom you can share even deeper emotions with than other characters. The more these characters get to speak with you, or rather the more you interact with them, the more they will reveal about themselves to you.

With especially the sociological and psychological factors that Sheldon (2004: 38–40) describes in his work, the growth and development of these characters come into play. The growth and development of a character determines the changes that they go through with the narrative progression and also signifies that the narrative is moving forward (Sheldon 2004: 41). In many ways, the growth and development of characters is important in *Mass Effect 2* (2010), when they travel to the last mission. The amount of interaction, and thus the amount of knowledge and the strength of bond you have with them, determines if characters survive from the mission.

The character that is controlled by the player in games is not less important, even though it has been stated (Jørgensen 2010) that in the *Mass Effect* series the companions and other non-playable characters carry the narrative forward. In order to create believable immersion within the storyworld, Sheldon (2004: 44–45) argues that placing

the player in control of a character who is not an empty vessel is the most effective solution. This is true in *Mass Effect* games, since you assume the role of a preset character, but you are still able to control the physical attributes of the character through character customization and you can also define the sociological factors through background selection from preset options and the psychological factors by the actions you take within the narrative progression.

The emotional aspect of the narrative ties closely to the previous term, character. The player needs to identify with the characters they meet inside the storyworld, and the more consistent and believable these characters are, the stronger the emotional tie can be. The visual design of these characters is also paramount, as is the use of sound and music during scenes, where appropriate. (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum 2012: 396; Sheldon 2004: 38; Rusch 2009)

The study of emotions in games is something that at least Elson et al. (2014: 521) have studied and they point out, that games possess unique attributions that distinguish them from the noninteractive media. They argue that interplay between context, narrative and mechanics play an important part in making emotional experiences in games and that they can be completely unique to what viewers experience in cinemas or readers when reading novels. As an example and drawing from Elson et al. (2014: 521), people are actively seeking out content that makes them sad. In *Mass Effect I* (2007) the player can experience the loss of companions and even someone they have engaged in a romantic relationship with. The loss of this companion depends entirely on the players decision to send them in harms way. Elson et al. (2014: 522) continue on the same subject by pointing out that the mortality salience induced by these kinds of emotional effects can make people appreciate the meaning of life.

The narrativized interface is the focus that is put on the narrative aspects of a game and it supports the interactive decision making within the game. With the help of this interface, the player is able to communicate with the storyworld and perform different actions. In the case of *Mass Effect* games, the narrativized interface is manifested in the narrative wheel. The narrative wheel is an integral part of the game and it allows the player to select from different dialogue options.

To sum this all up, the elements for the analysis used in this thesis will be the character, which has sociological, psychological and physical aspects. The storyworld is affected by the actions of the characters, especially through the character that the player controls, and this control is enacted through the narrativized interface. These changes in the storyworld also change the individual character narrative arcs, as the characters react to these changes and thus change their sociological and psychological aspects. Through these, the emotional aspect comes into effect as well. This can be seen through the development of an emotional bond between the player character and the characters that are not controlled by the player directly. It can be argued, that an efficient role-playing game narrative does not remain constant but evolves.

3.2.2 The narrative appeal of *Mass Effect* games

Since role-playing games often rely heavily on narrative, it needs to remain persuasive and transporting enough to keep the player interested. The persuasion of a player depends on the narrative quality (Green & Clark 2012: 479), which contains the creation of interesting characters and their individual character narratives. The transportation is the way the player is immersed to the storyworld. The more immersive the storyworld is in a game, the easier it is to become immersed in it (van Laer et al. 2014: 800). In the case of *Mass Effect* games, the immersion is done through the creation of interesting characters that the player can feel emotions towards (Jørgensen 2010), as I will argue further through my analysis in chapter 4.

Game designers concern themselves immensely in the question what players actually expect from a game. Popular method is to recycle previous ideas that have already been used many times but might not necessarily work or cause enjoyment for the players. The first question that designers should ask, according to Rouse (2005: 2), is “why do players play games?”

Rouse (2005: xx) describes gameplay as the level of interaction that games give for the player. The interaction encompasses the player’s interaction with the game-world, which includes choices made during the game’s course and the effects these have within the game. In *Mass Effect* games, interaction is an integral part of the game and choices

made can have a massive impact on the game further on, which I will discuss more about later.

There are eight wants that Rouse (2005) describes in his book. In his view, the players want a challenge, socializing, dynamic solitary experience, bragging rights, emotional experience, exploration, fantasy and interaction. In regard to the expectations of the players, Rouse (2005) mentions consistent world, understanding the game world and its limitations, reasonable solutions for problems, direction, the feeling of being on the right track, immersion, setbacks, fair chance, fresh content, not to get stuck, doing instead of watching and not to feel that something is missing.

It is obvious that the success of games sets them apart from other media in some ways and looking at what the players are expecting and wanting from games can help especially game developers to understand the players better. This in turn can aid in creating immersive and gripping stories, to which the players can relate to and enjoy playing.

Games are meant to challenge the player to a certain degree, not only by creating difficult challenges and action portions that make the player frustrated, but the challenge needs to be rewarding as well. (Rouse 2005: 2) The reward does not necessarily be in the form of giving the player something within the game. If the player feels they have learned something concrete that can be related to real life can be even more rewarding than the reward within the game. As Rouse (2005: 2) points out, learning skills that can help players visualize their own real-world issues better can be a rewarding experience.

Another view of challenge is the way games require a certain level of skill to be completed (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum 2011: 274). Players who do not have the necessary skills to actually play a game, they are less likely to enjoy the game or they might pay attention to something that was not intended by the game designers.

The challenge in *Mass Effect* is not necessarily tied to the difficulty of the game but can also be seen in the way the player needs to build their team of companions. These companions will travel with the player for the durations of the series, apart from some companions who choose not to do so due to personal reasons. Choosing the correct companions for a mission in *Mass Effect* can add new narrative options or other aspects

to the game. For example, if the player character is more aimed towards armed combat, choosing companions that complement other skillsets is preferred. If the player encounters a locked door, they might not be able to open that door because the skillset of the squad they selected does not have the required skills to do so.

The socializing aspect of games goes together with the dynamic solitary experience, both of which Rouse (2005: 3–5) discusses. While socializing is an important aspect in some games, it is not in an important part in others. In *Mass Effect* games, socializing does not necessarily mean the direct interaction with other players. While playing *Mass Effect* in particular, the player can sometimes feel that the socializing aspect comes with the discussions that they have with the non-playable characters, or NPCs. While playing the games myself, I occasionally found myself thinking that I have not talked with certain characters for a while and decide to do so. As Rouse (2005: 5) also points out, games and the characters in them have the ability to mimic human reactions to some extent. In *Mass Effect*, using the narrativized interface to communicate with NPCs makes them react to your questions. The player is interacting with the characters, which is also an important part of the gameplay experience for many players (Rouse 2005: 8; Jørgensen 2010: 316).

While playing a narrative game like *Mass Effect* is a solitary experience, the socializing aspect is also present. The word dynamic can be used to describe this pseudo-human reaction that the NPCs can give to the player. As Rouse (2005: 5) explains it, games offer the interaction and socializing part, but the player is able to stop playing at any given time. In interactive games, the interaction is usually an important part of the game, as is the case in *Mass Effect* games. The dynamics of the interaction depend on the game and do vary. Here I use the word dynamic to describe the different aspects that the player is able to control inside the game, as Arsenault (2005) describes the word in his research.

Elson et al. (2014: 521) state, that games and their advancement have made it possible to have social interaction with characters that are part of the narrative. Depending on the game and the interactive narrative they offer, the reactions can be changed by the player and the decisions that are made during the narrative progress. Furthermore, the game is

making these interactions meaningful, like in *Mass Effect*. The interactions are depended on the narrative and vice versa. (Elson et al. 2014: 521)

Defeating a particularly difficult part in a game can bring the player a sense of satisfaction and self-respect. These bragging rights, as Rouse (2005: 5) explains them, can also come from completing a game in a certain way or finding some secrets from it that others have not found yet. Often these secrets are called easter eggs in games, as they do not necessarily add anything to the narrative of the game, but they are a small bonus and a challenge for the player to discover. Being the first person to discover these easter eggs can bring real self-satisfaction for the player.

Mass Effect games have easter eggs in them, which occasionally give the player some insight into the characters of the narrative as well. One example is the Geth companion that the player can recruit in *Mass Effect 2* (2010). While the player is able to talk to the companion as is the case with all the companions in the game, doing the opposite yields interesting results. When the player goes to the Geth companion's quarters and does not talk to it for a while, it will begin a robotic dance. These kinds of small events in the game, when found, can provide small feelings of emotion in the player.

Emotions are part of our lives and we seek to feel when we interact with media. It is not unusual to feel emotion when interacting with media and to an extent, media can be seen as having succeeded when it gives us emotion. (Rouse 2005: 6) In *Mass Effect* games, the feeling of emotion is present in many situations. Emotions are used in narratives to immerse the player into them and the building of the emotions is a natural consequence within the progression of the narrative. In essence, these role-playing games offer the player a way to feel and express emotions with technology (Tettegah & Huang 2016: xiv), which in this case are the characters of a game.

This building of the emotional arc is an Aristotelian model that has been used in narratives even before games. This arc follows the same procedure as the narrative arc in many ways, of which I will discuss more about in chapter 4. The emotional arc consists of the rising of action, where the emotion is constantly built up, the climax, where something happens to release the emotion and the reduction of emotion, where we recover from the emotions we have felt. (Wei et al. 2010: 13)

Exploration has been an integral part of the *Mass Effect* series from the beginning. Flying around in a galaxy exploring planets has personally been a real draw for me into the series, in addition to the gripping narrative and storyline. As Rouse (2005: 6) points out, players enjoy moving into new areas in games and taking a moment to explore before moving on with whatever mission they are doing at the time. When the first *Mass Effect* game was released, it had planetary exploration with a vehicle called the Mako. The player could travel the planetary surfaces with the vehicle and dismount when they so desired. While the planetary landscape was lacking in props and objects, players did complain when this form of exploration was missing in *Mass Effect 2* (2010) and *Mass Effect 3* (2012). The plain planetary landscape could have been lacking in detail in the first game, but as Rouse (2005: 18) points out, "...gamers may not really know what they want. But, as I say, they will be sure to tell you when it is missing from the final product." Vehicular planetary exploration was one of the things that the developers brought back in *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017), due to player requests.

Another aspect of exploration is the exploration of different gameplay strategies the player can take. (Rouse III 2005: 6) In *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017) the player has choices that they need to make to further the storyline, but there may be more than one option. One case is a choice between two non-playable characters and which one of these two characters should have control over a planet that will house a colony for the player's ark. There is no right or wrong answer, but the choice affects the available resources and the ending of the game in some way. The affects are not known to the player and they need to try choices out for themselves.

As many games that include role-playing and rich narrative, fantasy is often an important part which ties to the narrative that is present in the games (Jørgensen 2010: 316). The successfulness of games that include a gripping narrative is often the fantasy that goes along with it. This is true for other forms of narrative as well, be it the textual narrative or movie narrative. The fantasy includes the believable characters, interesting conversations and engaging activities that the player can encounter in the game. (Rouse 2005: 7)

Believable characters, in this case the NPCs that the player can encounter, are made easily believable using scripts, which the developers code into the game. These characters add flavor to the storyworld, especially when the player travels to new locations. The development in NPC scripting has made it possible for game developers to generate behavior of certain characters, that are not necessarily an integral part of the main narrative. When graphics got better and the creation of immersive visual representations of fantasy locations became possible, the scripting of NPCs became more important. (Cutumisu et al.2005: 19)

In this chapter I have outlined different aspects that define the appeal of games and their narrative, with examples from the *Mass Effect* games to further emphasize some points that are important. Narrative plays an important part in narrative rich role-playing games and the narrative is complemented by other elements that add flavor. The most interesting aspects of narrative in role-playing games is the interaction. Interaction is something that sets games apart from other forms of media, which are yet to be able to offer the same amount of interaction. (Wei et al. 2010: 1) The reading of this interactive narrative can prove difficult, but through a meticulous process and with help from Let's Play videos available, it is possible to analyze individual character narratives and their creation within the larger narrative arc.

3.3 Close-reading game narratives

In this portion of the chapter, I will discuss the method of close-reading in detail from the standpoint of applying it to games and narrative role-playing games in particular. In essence, close-reading is the way of identifying implicit elements that are present in a text, in this particular instance, a game. (Elder & Paul 2004) In the case of this thesis, these implicit elements are the narrative elements, which are used in the creation of interesting characters. The effectiveness of close-reading in games is noted by Fernández-Vara (2014: 5–7), by stating that games are a cultural product in the same essence that traditional texts are, and that games can be understood and analyzed through the traditional methods of literary theory.

Diane Carr (2009) approaches her material through the use of structural analysis in her work, stating that using literary theory models can prove useful in separating the narrative from the game structure. She further acknowledges that using these methodologies in game studies can help in addressing problems in the interpretation of games. Interpretation is an individual process, and players can still have a different interpretation of a situation. Interpretation is linked to the player and how they play the game (Jørgensen 2010: 327).

A close-reading of a game depends on that particular instance where it is done. This means that other players using the same method of close-reading on the same game might not yield the same results than the previous research. This is particularly true with story driven and narrative rich games, such as the *Mass Effect* series, since there are multiple ways the story and narrative can change, depending on the choices of the player. This is acknowledged by Bizzocchi and Tannenbaum (2011: 272–275) as well. The choices made by the player are affected by the different player modalities. The player modalities were first coined by Richard Bartle (Bartle 1996; 2005), who studied players of Multi User Dungeons. Bizzocchi and Tannenbaum (2011: 277) also refer to Bartle (1996) in their work. They do not mention the updated version of the theory, however, which Bartle (2005) later released.

The process of close-reading a game is an individual one, that is both interactive and complex. The difficulties are summarized by Bizzocchi and Tannenbaum (2011: 272) as three distinct aspects, that make game close-reading a challenging and interactive process, that can yield different results from the standpoint of the player.

The indeterminacy points to the fact that two different players can have a unique experience when playing a game (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum 2011: 272; Chapman 2016: 32). The various branching paths that the narrative can move towards can produce two or more different outcomes, which in turn can have different impact on the research results. These different outcomes are partly due to the choices of the player, as well as the design choices of the developers (Chapman 2016: 32). Some players might choose not to complete certain quests that are available, and this can influence the narrative.

The scope of the game, in turn, can have the same effect. As is the case with the *Mass Effect* games, the sheer size of the gameworld, or the storyworld, can force the player to do several different playthroughs before the desired material or result can be produced (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum 2011: 273). This is dependent on the research aim and might not be needed for every research.

The third aspect is the difficulty of the game. Depending on the game, the player is expected to have skills to play and complete the game. (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum 2011: 274) Games usually have different levels of difficulty, which modify the playing experience for the player. Depending on the research that is being done, the difficulty can provide different results if it is raised or lowered. The difficulty can also be seen in the skills of the player, as mentioned before. For example, playing a game on your personal computer requires hand and eye coordination when moving your character and aiming.

Close-reading a game can be an effective way to discover and analyze faults that are present in them. The two stances that the player must take when doing a close reading, particularly in narrative study, can yield results that can be used in comprehending the problems that might be in the narrative process of the game. (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum 2011: 262) As Kevin Veale (2015: 129) points out, games require certain modes of engagement, through the decision making and taking action when it is required. As I mentioned earlier, this emphasizes the performative process that is required when close-reading a game. Games involve the player more than, for example, reading a book does. This feeling of agency can make players feel stronger emotions and responsibility in a game, which is not necessarily the same with books (Veale 2015: 152).

It can be argued that games lack the affective mediation that is present on movies. As Veale (2015: 144) points out, games require the player to respond to the action. The protagonist of a game, especially narrative rich ones, is unable to respond effectively to the narrative without the player. The lack of affective mediation can thus be seen as a powerful instrument in narrative heavy and story driven games, because of the feelings it can produce for the player (Veale 2015: 145). This is acknowledged by other scholars as well, such as Espen Aarseth (1997: 1), who refers to cybertexts, are more bound to

integrate the reader than traditional texts. With cybertexts, Aarseth (1997) is also referring to games. Chapman (2016: 32) expands this in arguing that games, or rather the playing of games, is a process that involves both reading and doing.

The process of developing a game narrative is an ongoing process. With this I mean that the process of playing carries the narrative forward, but at the same time the paths that the narrative can take are dependent on the choices and creative decisions that the developers have made. The doing and reading that I mentioned before (Aarseth 1997; Chapman 2016: 32) are part of the ergodic process that playing a game can be seen as (Apperley 2010: 13). A game is a product of the ergodic process that the player goes through when traversing the storyworld of a game. Ergodic refers to the process of interaction and through that, a product is produced, which is the game itself. (Apperley 2010: 13) As mentioned before, games require participation and interaction from the player, making analyzing the game a performative process. At the same time, the player doing a close reading of a game, keeping a critical stance towards the game is needed to maintain critical distance.

As the focus of this thesis is in the narrative elements and their use in the creation of character narratives in games, individual experiences are not an issue, as the focus is on facts and details. In addition, as close-reading is dependent on personal observations, a personal voice is to be expected within the analysis (Bizzochi & Tanenbaum 2011: 262; Bizzochi & Tanenbaum 2012).

While close-reading is commonly applied in the humanities to literary texts, it can also be applied to digital media, as is the case in this thesis. I have played the games in question personally and done observations from them with the process of close-reading. The gathering of material been done specifically for this thesis and as well from previous playthroughs of the *Mass Effect* games.

In this chapter I have discussed the close-reading method and how it can be applied to games. The games I have chosen for this thesis are rich in narrative and analyzing these narratives, as we are looking at three games, with the close-reading method provides the material I have used to analyze the different character narratives that are present in these games. In the following chapter, I will look at three different characters from the *Mass*

Effect games and analyze their individual narratives through theories I outlined in previous chapters.

4 CHARACTER NARRATIVES IN THE *MASS EFFECT* SERIES

In this chapter, the narrative aspects of the *Mass Effect* series will be examined more closely. Certain characters will be analyzed and this will be done with the method that was introduced by Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum (2012). The characters and their aspects will be emphasized more according to Lee Sheldon (2004), as the *Mass Effect* series carries its narrative through the development of the characters. I will further analyze the findings according to the expectations of players, as they were outlined before, according to Rouse (2005).

In the analysis, I will first go through the selected character with the ‘character’ narrative element, as it was defined by Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum (2012). I will then continue with the narrative arc, where I will examine the development of these characters throughout the *Mass Effect* series. I will visualize this with pictures and diagrams for easier understanding. The storyworld aspect of these characters will be examined not only in the relation to each other, but also in the relation to the overall narrative. With this I mean the possible outcomes or changes that can happen in the narrative, depending on the development of these characters. Emotion comes into consideration where appropriate. For example, if the characters have the option to engage in a romantic relationship, this will be mentioned in the analysis. The effects of this romance to the overall narrative will naturally be documented as well. Lastly, the plot coherence will be considered in relation to the narrative possibilities that are available.

The narrativized interface will be looked at more closely in the first portion of this chapter. Since the first character that I will be looking at is the playable character and the narrativized interface is controlled by the player, it is logical to examine the narrativized interface at the beginning.

The effectiveness of the narrative from the point of view of the players will be considered in the final portion of this chapter. The main points that come up during the analysis will be brought together and looked at more closely. These points will be further looked at from the aspect of narrative effectiveness and how these narratives complement the expectations of the players.

The characters that will be more closely examined are the character that the player is in control of, Commander Shepard, the Krogan companion Urdnot Wrex and the Quarian companion Tali'Zorah nar Rayya. These three characters are involved in the *Mass Effect* games and depending on choices that are done by the player during the narrative progress, can either survive the whole narrative progression of the three games, or die during the process. These possibilities are all discussed here and analyzed in order to see how these impacts the main narrative.

The character analysis will begin with Commander Shepard, as that character is the character whose role the player assumes. The reason for selecting this character for the basis of the narrative analysis is because he is the constant within the *Mass Effect* series. With this I mean he is always present, through the actions of the player who is in control. While the character cannot be built upon different personality traits, but rather only through different emotions that the player can choose during narrative progression in conversations, the player controls the narrative progression through Shepard.

The narrative progression in the *Mass Effect* series will be viewed in this thesis as being chronological, continuing where the last game in the trilogy ended. As the games offer an import feature for save game files for returning players, the overall continuity and plot coherence is more logical and comprehensive to view as a chronological continuity. I will outline the way of the overall narrative progression of the games in figure 3, before continuing to the analysis of the three characters, Commander Shepard, Urdnot Wrex and Tali'Zorah nar Rayaa.

The linear line in figure 3 represents the overall story of the three games, which are represented by the pentagons, through which the linear plotline progresses. The story is linear, with a clear beginning and an end. The beginning is considered to be the first game, *Mass Effect 1* (2007) and the end is represented by the circle at the end of the linear line. This is the plot, through which all the players playing the games need to progress through. The plot stays the same, which means that players are unable side with the antagonists in the game and change the overall progress of the intended story that the developers have outlined. It is a one-way street, but you can take turns to change the way it progresses.

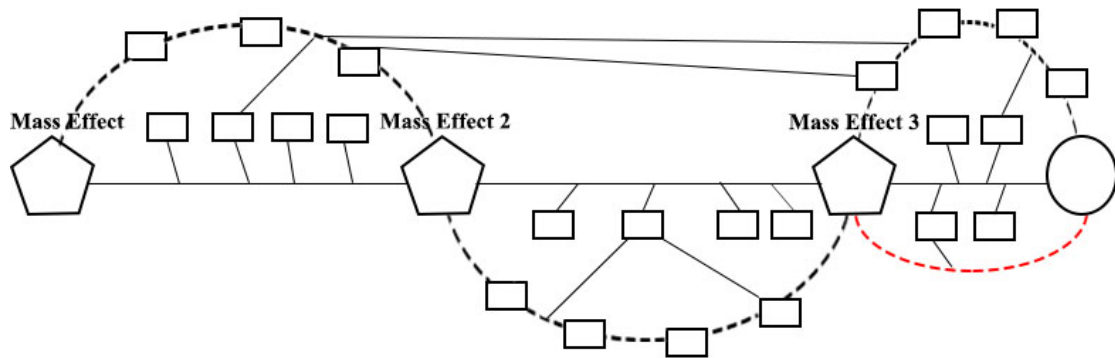


Figure 3. The narrative progression of the *Mass Effect* series, as I view it in this thesis.

The broken lines that make archs between the games represent the narrative arcs that are in the individual games. These lines have a beginning and an end, as does the linear plotline that travels through the games. The broken lines have boxes, which represent the main missions that the players must complete to progress in the individual game narrative and, naturally, with the overall plot of the trilogy. Some of these boxes, as is seen with the *Mass Effect 1* (2007) narrative arc, are connected to other narrative arcs and their boxes in later games. These lines represent the choices that players do in these missions. These choices affect the narratives in the upcoming games in various ways, depending on the choices.

Other changes and choices that can happen are represented with the boxes that are connected to the main linear plot. These boxes are the side quests that the players can play through during the games. These side quests can change the way the narrative in the plot progresses. These changes are represented by lines which connect to the individual game narratives and to the main linear plotline. These side quests can bring changes to the individual game they are played in, or the overall narrative in the main plotline. They can also influence other side quests that happen later in the trilogy.

The red broken line that is between *Mass Effect 3* (2012) and the end of the plotline represents the possibility of Commander Shepard being killed in the last mission in *Mass Effect 2* (2010). Depending on the choices that he player makes during the game, there is a possibility that every character that participates in the last mission are killed. If this happens, players that are returning to the games and attempt to import their save

game files, will be unable to do so. This was intended by the developers, as they wanted to be serious with the last mission in *Mass Effect 2* (2010) being labeled as a ‘suicide mission’. As I mentioned before, the plotline is linear, and it is the story of Commander Shepard. The player makes the choices regarding the progression and that progression can end with the death of the character. (Kollar 2010)

Though the overall progression of the main linear plotline can be broken by the death of the Commander Shepard character in *Mass Effect 2* (2010), the player can still continue playing *Mass Effect 3* (2012). They will not be able to use the same character they have used during the previous games but need to create a new character from scratch.

In the next portions of this chapter, I will take a closer look at the three characters I have chosen for the analysis in this thesis. As the characters in the *Mass Effect* series are the narrative vessels for the progression of the main plot, I will argue that making their individual character narratives interesting complements the main narrative. These three characters will be analyzed individually and afterwards the findings will be brought together and the main findings of the analysis will be discussed in the final portion of this chapter.

4.1 Commander Shepard

Commander Shepard, or Shepard as I will call the character, is the player character the player who is playing the game is controlling in the *Mass Effect* games. The characters gender can be changed according to the preference of the player. For the narrative progression, the gender of the character does not provide other changes, other than the romance options that are available in the game. The gender of Shepard specifies which of the companions the player can romance, if they choose to do so. Same gender romances are also possible in some cases, but only in *Mass Effect 3* (2012), where the male Shepard was given the option to romance Kaidan Alenko. Previously, Kaidan Alenko was only available as a romance option for the female Shepard in *Mass Effect 1* (2007).

Since the gender selection of the character defines which of the companions can be pursued in a romantic sense during the course of the narrative, it subtly changes the psychological attributes of the companion characters, as well as the psychological attributes of Shepard. While the player is in control of Shepard, the way the player is allowed to advance in the narrative dialogue with other characters is determined by the gender selection. While the main dialogue options and other actions are the same for both genders, the romance options are mostly different for both and due to this, the dialogue options with other companions are changed by this in a subtle way. For example, the male Shepard is not going to be able to romance Garrus Vakarian, a Turian companion that the player can recruit. The female gendered Shepard is allowed to do this, however. This changes the dialogue in a small way for the player, depending on the gender selection.

In essence, both genders that are available for Shepard are, ultimately, the same. They both have the same options for customization and background, which I will discuss next. This means that their core essence, who they are and what they do, is the same. The main plot will progress the same for both characters and only the smaller micro-narratives, like romance, are different depending on the gender. The storyworld does not change, it stays the same. Both genders have their own voice actors, of course. Some changes are present for the narrativized interface, due to the changes in dialogue options in romance situations, as I mentioned.

The player can choose the name of the Shepard character and change their appearance, as we can see in image 5, or they can choose to use the default appearance that is offered to both genders, along with the default names, either Jane or John. Only the first name can be customized by the player, since all the NPCs that are in the games refer to the character as 'Shepard'.

Next I will discuss the different options that define the sociological and psychological factors of Shepard. I will describe their different effects and afterwards continue on how their effect is seen in the two different aspects of the character in terms of character narrative.



Image 5. Appearance options for Shepard, as seen in *Mass Effect 2* (2010).

The playable character will also have the two selectable options, pre-service history and psychological profile, selected for the player. These are preset as 'earthborn' and 'sole survivor'. The player class will further be preset as 'soldier'. I will discuss these customizable aspects next. For simplicity, I will refer to the character of Shepard as either Shepard or with 'their', because of the gender selection that is in the game.

The customization options, pre-service history and psychological profile, have three different options that add a special part to the narrative of the game, that are shown in image 6. The 'spacer' pre-service history offers a special dialogue option for the player with the mother of Shepard. The assignment becomes available through an encounter with an NPC inside the Citadel. This encounter gives Shepard the information about the location of their mother and Shepard is able to call her from the Normandy. This encounter has lasting consequences for the main game narrative as well. If the player does decide to contact the mother, she will send a message in *Mass Effect 2* (2010) about the NPC that the player encountered at the citadel.



Image 6. Pre-service history selection in *Mass Effect 1* (2007).

Second option for the pre-service history is ‘colonist’. This triggers an encounter with an NPC who requests help to free a survivor, who was taken by slavers when Shepard was sixteen. This was also when Shepards family was killed. Depending on the outcome of this assignment, the person Shepard is sent to rescue, will contact him again in *Mass Effect 2* (2010) thanking him for what he did for her.

The ‘earthborn’ history, if selected, will trigger an encounter with an NPC that is part of a gang that Shepard used to belong to in their youth. The NPC asks Shepard to help free a member of the same gang from a Turian who is holding him inside a bar at the Citadel. Depending on the outcome of the assignment that is given to Shepard, late in *Mass Effect 2* (2010) the same NPC, if the player did not kill him, will contact him again.

These different histories determine the sociological attributes that Shepard has, and they have an affect to the narrative progression as well. The changes to main narrative are dialogue oriented, where some interactions with non-playable characters and companions change depending on the selected pre-service history. These small changes

are visible throughout the series, where the different history options give more depth to the Shepard character.

Micro-narrative oriented changes are more profound, as all three selectable histories have their own micron-narrative within the storyworld that the player can explore. In a way, the player has to confront their past in these micro-narratives, and that way the character grows in different ways, depending on the history. By facing the past, Shepard has to move forward and in essence also help the non-playable characters that are met during these micro-narratives move forward as well. They also provide a deeper understanding and knowing of Shepard, through action rather than reading, which is the essential part in digital role-playing games.

These selections also have an emotional aspect, which connects to the sociological and somewhat with the psychological aspects of Shepard. Since Shepard is not just an empty vessel that the player can force their own personality to, the understanding of his past creates a more elaborate emotional bond between the player and Shepard. In a way, the game makes the player identify more with Shepard. Through the use of the narrativized interface, the player is able to respond to the depth of character with their own feelings, as the is the case with other dialogue options during the game. The player is presented with options of responses, through which the player determines how Shepard feels about the situation.

The psychological profile options also affect the narrative, in addition to giving the player either paragon points or renegade points. The 'sole survivor' profile grants Shepard both paragon and renegade points, including special dialogue options during an assignment in *Mass Effect 1* (2007). The 'war hero' option grants paragon points and special dialogue during the same game. Lastly, the 'ruthless' option grants renegade points and again, special dialogue during a specific mission.

The special dialogue options that are available during these missions are, as the psychological profile in the game suggest, tied to the psychological aspects of Shepard. The psychological aspects that the player is able to select here, reveal themselves subtly during the micro-narratives of sidequests. As the paragon and renegade point distribution and the names of the psychological profile options suggest, depending on

the choice the psychological aspects of Shepard are determined by these selections. The sole survivor aspect places Shepard at the middle-ground of the psychological factor. The description for the sole survivor profile in *Mass Effect 1* (2007) says:

During your service, a mission you were on went horribly wrong. Trapped in an extreme survival situation, you had to overcome physical torments and psychological stresses that would have broken most people. You survived while all those around you fell, and now you alone are left to tell the tale. The Sole Survivor's unit was slaughtered in a thresher maw attack on Akuze.

The divided amount of paragon and renegade points for this class are justified with the selection that is offered for the player during the sidequest which this background offers. The player knows what Shepard has gone through, and during the progression of the narrative, the player can influence the development of these points through actions they take. The micro-narrative in the sidequest offers the player a choice, where they can decide whether Shepard as dealt with the psychological impacts of surviving the thresher maw attack, or if they still hold someone accountable for it. Depending on the choice the player makes, Shepard grows as a character towards a certain path, to which the player decides.

The sole survivor option is the only one which offers a choice towards, to put it plainly, good or bad. Since the player cannot change the sociological aspects of Shepard but only the psychological aspects, or impact, of the history the character has. With this I mean that the player controls the direction and feeling Shepard takes during the progression of the narrative. The other two profile options, war hero and ruthless, are both either good or bad, which makes changing direction of Shepard's feelings a little more difficult. The sole survivor offers an even ground for the Shepard character, from which the player can move towards which ever direction they want.

Other options that the player can choose for Shepard are the class, which is more tied to the gameplay than the narrative. Choosing any of the classes here will not change the story, but can offer minor changes to narrative, depending on the class. If the player is using the same character they created in *Mass Effect 1* (2007) for the duration of the trilogy, they can still change the class of the character at the start of every game, if they so choose.

While Shepard does have some options for the player to choose from, the character is still inevitably a preset person who has a certain personality. The choices made by the player slightly affect the overall progression of the narratives of the games and the overall plotline, but they do not have a significant impact on the progression. Shepard has an instilled personality that is set by the game developers and the player only chooses the attitude in which Shepard responds to different situations. These attitudes are selected with the narrativized interface, which is shown in image 7, that the game offers. Depending on the choices, the character receives paragon or renegade points, which affect the morality of the character. Instead of concentrating on the characters personality, I argue that the morality is more of an aspect that needs to be considered in Shepards regard.



Image 7. The narrativized interface, as seen in *Mass Effect 1* (2007).

The left hand side of the wheel is reserved for inquiries and morality affecting choices. The morality choices are colored with blue and red, where the blue represents the paragon option, charming the other speaker, and the red indicates renegade choices, intimidating the other speaker. Choosing one or the other, they add to Shepard's morality accordingly. The options that are on the left also depend the conversation that is had even further. The right side of the wheel is reserved for reactions. Three possible

reactions are offered for the player. The top one is the friendly, or paragon, option, the middle is neutral and the bottom choice is negative response. These options can also affect the paragon and renegade points, depending on the situation.

Depending on how much paragon or renegade morality points Shepard has, the player has the option to choose either one during a conversation as is shown in image 8. If the player does not have enough paragon points, for example, the blue text will be greyed and it cannot be selected. These choices can significantly affect the conversation and how the situation concludes after the conversation. One example is Urdnot Wrex, who we will be looking at in depth later in this chapter, where not having enough paragon points can lead to his death in *Mass Effect 1* (2007). The charm and intimidate options and their required skill on Shepard's regard depend on the other character. Still on the case of Wrex, convincing him to agree with Shepard during the mission will require almost full charm abilities, which means the player needs a good amount of paragon points. This is only possible by doing side quests in addition to the main missions before heading on to the mission in question.



Image 8. The morality choices, seen here as blue and red, that add to the morality of Shepard.

The morality works in different ways in all of the three games. The basic idea is the same, but there are some differences. In *Mass Effect 1* (2007), the morality is judged by

the paragon and renegade points, which are gained by either compassionate or ruthless actions, respectively. They are both measure on a separate scale and do not make up for each other. Depending on the action the player takes, either one will raise, but will not lower the other. *Mass Effect 2* (2010) has a slightly different system, where the paragon and renegade points are gained through ‘interruptions’ in cinematics, which have a high output of said points, depending on the action taken. In *Mass Effect 3* (2012), the morality is replaced with reputation. This system uses both the paragon and renegade points on the same meter. The ending in *Mass Effect 3* (2012) is influenced by this meter, depending on the ending the player chooses.

The narrativized interface is the control method the player has over the growth of the character. Since the narrative wheel responds to the different paths that Shepard can be guided on, be it paragon or renegade, his psychological aspects can be changed. His view of the world and the way he feels about certain situations. Since Shepard has a fixed sociological aspect, the history which is selected in the beginning, the ability to guide the feeling and responses of the character are a good way to allow the player control over the character. While the player has limited power over the sociological aspects, they have more control over the psychological aspects. The narrative options that become available are dependent on the past choices of Shepard. Depending on these choices, there can be different levels of blue and red options. These levels are shown in figure 4.

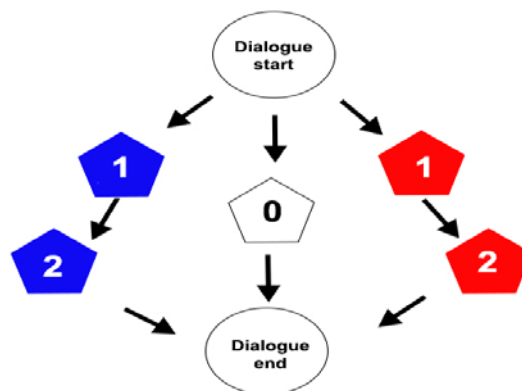


Figure 4. Representation of the different morality levels the narrativized interface can offer.

These different levels are dependent on the morality, which in turn is a part of the sociological aspects that Shepard has. Depending on the level of depth that Shepard has in morality, presented by the blue and red polygons, the player can control the dialogue and how Shepard evolves as a sociological character. Shepard may be able to progress through some parts of, for example, the red options, but can run out of morality points for that particular aspect during the narrative. There is always the option to take the neutral way that requires no morality points, as is represented by the white polygon. This option does not usually affect morality and thus does not provide sociological growth for the character. All the possible options lead to the same conclusion, only through different paths. These choices that are made available also represent the reaction with which Shepard interacts with the other character.

The reactions that the narrativized interface offers can also be positive or negative. Depending on the choice, the participant to the conversation reacts differently. The narrativized interface in the game is simple and does not offer the full length of the conversation line that Shepard speaks when the player selects one of the options, as image 9 shows.



Image 9. Reactions that are available in the narrativized interface, depending on the situation.

The morality that Shepard has, depending on the choices that the player has made, changes in the game endings. In *Mass Effect 1* (2007), if the player has predominantly paragon points, the ending cutscene will show the player standing affront a blue colored planet, which has a space station in orbit. If the character is predominantly renegade, the character is shown in front of a red star system, with an assault rifle in hand. The overall atmosphere of the ending cutscene is also affected by these points. A paragon character will receive a more lightly colored cutscene, with the overall ambience being glad and bright. A renegade character, on the other hand, will receive a darkly lit image with the ambience being more solemn, compared to the paragon option.

In *Mass Effect 2* (2010), the ending is even more influenced by the morality of Shepard and how the player has grown the psychological aspects. The final mission can end in death for everyone that partake on the mission and Shepard's survival relies on the survival of the companions. To survive the mission, Shepard needs to have at least two companions left after the mission, one of them will pull Shepard to the Normandy as he leaps for it. Otherwise, Joker, the pilot of the Normandy, will try in vain to help Shepard, who instead falls to death into the void.

The endings in *Mass Effect 3* (2012) are varied through the effective military strength that the player has accumulated through the narrative progression of the game, but certain aspects are also determined by the morality gained during the game. The ending where Shepard chooses to control the Reapers is different depending on which side of the moral scale the player has decided to grow Shepard. The narrative of the final cutscene is determined whether the player has grown the psychological aspects of Shepard in a paragon or renegade path.

While the overall plot of the games is the same, the narrative consequences of the morality choices that the player makes during the course of the game are quite significant. The player has control over the narrative, which I see as being separate from the overall plot. The plot is the way the developers want the game to progress through, with a clear beginning and an end, while the narrative can be changed by the player, to a certain extent. These changes affect the way the narrative is represented in the games. As I mentioned, the cutscenes that the games offer will play out differently and project a

different ambience and overall feeling depending on the choices of the player. The dialogue between Shepard and the companions are also different and some choices are only available for certain ‘types’ of Shepard characters.

4.2 Urdnot Wrex

The Krogan companion, Urdnot Wrex, is a Krogan battlemaster, who combines powerful biotic skills and strength in combat. The Krogan as fearsome warriors in the *Mass Effect* games’ storyworld and feared opponents. They are known for their lust for battle, and even due to the genophage their race is experiencing, they continued to battle against each other. Wrex’s father, Jarrod, was one of the strongest voices in favor of the continuation of rivalry between the Krogan clans. Wrex saw things differently and this led to him and his father against each other, which ended with Wrex killing Jarrod.

Over the course of the narrative, Wrex expresses strong commitment in finding a cure for the genophage, which would effectively allow the Krogan races to reproduce and built their society back to its former glory. Shepard first meets Wrex at the Citadel, where both of them are looking for Fist, who is a minor character in the game. Wrex joins Shepard in his quest and later joins him as a companion.

As the Krogan’s are warriors and from a planet that is barren due to nuclear war and centuries of warfare, the physical attributes that Wrex has are respectful for this as image 10 represents. He is a large, brutal looking individual, with a deep voice. He is not much for words but relies more on his fists and shotgun to get his point across. Throughout the narrative, his sociological aspects are further revealed to the player through interaction with the said companion. While Wrex’s physical appearance shows him as a warrior, he still seems to have an intellectual mind, to some extent. His sociological factors are governed by his history of warfare and the feeling of betrayal for the Salarrians, since they were the ones who orchestrated the genophage, and hate for the Turians, since they were the ones who deployed it.



Image 10. Wrex, standing on the right, as shown in *Mass Effect 2* (2012). (DandelionVolta 2012)

Throughout the narrative progress in the storyworld, Wrex's actions and reactions to situations are reflected upon his race and the wishes to uplift the Krogans from the inner fighting they have been doing, even though they are suffering from the genophage. This is the most important sociological feature that Wrex has and the way he represents himself in the storyworld and narrative are true to this.

In *Mass Effect 1* (2007), Shepard confronts Wrex about the genophage issue during a mission, which is part of the plot and an important part of the main narrative. During their exchange, which the player is able to control through the narrativized interface, the psychological factors of Shepard come into action as well. Depending on how the player has developed Shepard over the course which has led to this point, Wrex can either die and be removed from the narrative altogether. If the player has gone with the route that gives the most paragon points, Wrex can be persuaded to follow Shepard's lead and destroy the possible cure for the genophage. This is done through the narrativized interface and it requires a good amount of paragon points that Shepard must have in order to succeed.

The situation is a pivotal point in terms of narrative progression. If the player has traversed through the storyworld in extent up until this point, it is very possible to convince Wrex to follow Shepard's lead. If the player has chosen the quick option by not completing sidequests that provide paragon or renegade points, it is unlikely that they will be able to convince Wrex and either Shepard or Ashley, one of the companions who follows Shepard, has to shoot Wrex.

The psychological aspects of Shepard determine the way the player is able to convince Wrex that destroying the genophage is the right thing to do. In terms of narrative progression, it does not matter which path Shepard has grown on, paragon or renegade. The result is the same, and only if Shepard does not have enough points on neither of these psychological aspects, is Wrex removed from the narrative altogether. The lack of psychological development is shown in image 11, where both the paragon and renegade options are greyed out in the narrativized interface.

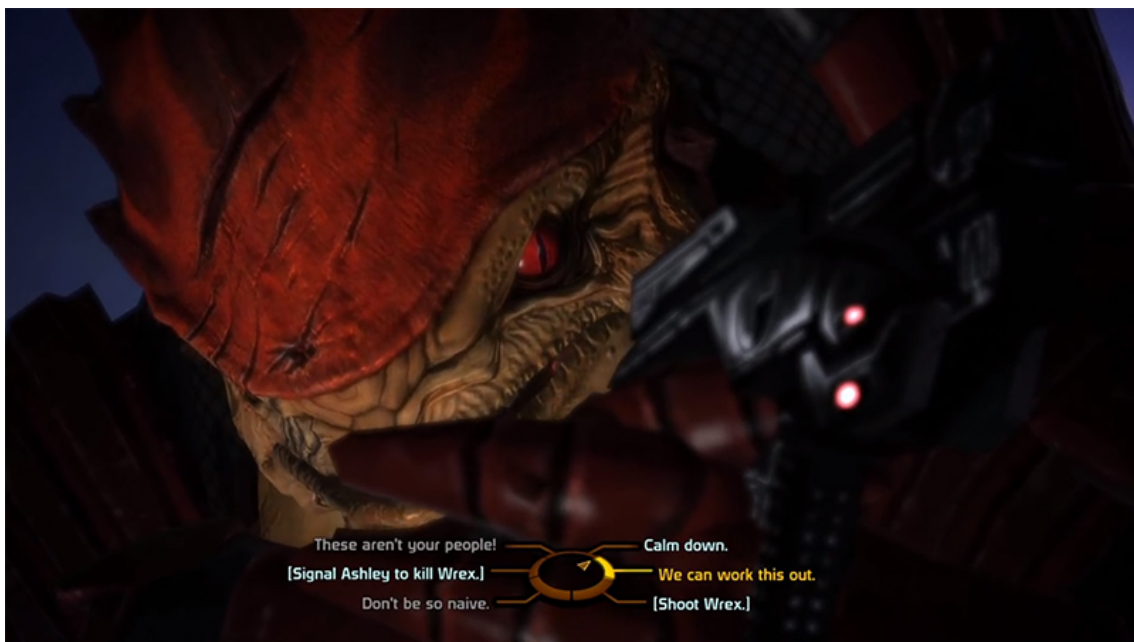


Image 11. Insufficient psychological aspect points block the player from saving Wrex. (MashalMeLee 2010)

Another possible way to convince Wrex to accept Shepard's lead is tied to the progression of the player inside the storyworld. The storyworld contains micro-narratives, and each of the companions that follow Shepard during the game have their

own personal micro-narrative, much like the ones Shepard has of the past that the player chose at the beginning of the game. These companion micro-narratives tie to the sociological factors of the companions in the same way as is the case with Shepard. For Wrex, it involves acquiring the ceremonial armor that was taken from them. Acquiring this sidequest is dependant on the players advancement and exploration of the storyworld.

If the player has explored the storyworld enough and talked with Wrex aboard the Normandy space vessel enough times, it is possible to convince Wrex about the destruction of the genophage even without sufficient psychological growth from Shepard. Here is where the emotions between the characters come into effect in addition to the psychological aspect of trust between characters. The companion micro-narratives can be dubbed as 'loyalty missions' from which Shepard receives the loyalty of said companions and they trust the leadership and choices that Shepard makes.

I mentioned before that the mission where Wrex can be eliminated from the narrative is a pivotal point in the overall narrative in the *Mass Effect* games. This means that the future storyworld in the games changes quite significantly from a narrative standpoint. If Wrex dies, he will not be present in the future games and in *Mass Effect 2* (2010), when Shepard travels to the Krogan home world of Tuchanka, he is received by Wrex's broodbrother Wreav, who had the same mother as Wrex. Wreav is traditional in the Krogan ways and does not share the same hopes for the future as Wrex does. Wreav places his own clan first and does not care much for uniting the Krogan as a whole.

Wrex's demise in *Mass Effect 1* (2007) also has an impact to *Mass Effect 3* (2012), where Shepard is tasked with curing the genophage. Wreav is present once again and shows the traditional ways of Krogan with aggression and possession, especially towards Eve, who is a fertile Krogan female. In the final mission during the third game, Wreav also signifies that the Krogan might have intentions of subjugating the other races in the galaxy after the Reapers have been dealt with.

In contrast to Wreav, if Wrex survives in *Mass Effect 1* (2007) and is the leader of Clan Urdnot, most of the Krogan clans have been united under Clan Urdnot and Wrex has put forward several modernizing acts, which are aimed at battling the genophage and

strengthening the Krogan race as a whole. Wrex also sees the mission where he could have died as a turning point for the Krogan unity.

Further in *Mass Effect 3* (2012), if Wrex is present, he will speak to Shepard if the player so chooses, congratulating him in uniting the entire galaxy against a common enemy. Later, depending on the previous choices the player has made during the narrative progression, Wrex will return to Tuchanka to lead the Krogan.

As was the case with *Mass Effect 1* (2007), Wrex can also die in *Mass Effect 3* (2012). Previously Wrex could be talked down if the psychological aspects of Shepard had been grown to a certain extent but this time they do not hold any value. The sociological factors that Wrex as a character beholds in the narrative take prominence and Wrex will die, either by the hand of Shepard or non-playable characters that have arrived on the scene with them.

This is also a narrative changing effect in *Mass Effect 3* (2012), which will manifest itself through the actions that the player can take as Shepard. Since Wrex's sociological aspects rely heavily on the Krogan race and the cure of the genophage, the character will feel betrayed if these founding aspects are threatened. If Shepard did not do anything to actually cure the genophage previously in *Mass Effect 3* (2012) and releases a fake cure above Tuchanka, Wrex will find out and the scene I described above will come into effect after one of the main narrative missions.

The changes that this change in narrative has is the withdrawal of Krogan support from Clan Urdnot against the Reaper invasion. They will not be present during the final mission on Earth. However, if the more traditional Wreav is present and not Wrex, the Krogan race will still be present, but with the same attitude as I described before.

Wrex is a complex character who experiences significant growth during the series. His sociological aspects rely on the Krogan race and the cure for the genophage they are experiencing. The deeper sociological aspects come to light through interaction with the character through the narrativized interface. The psychological aspects of the character are as well brought to light through interaction and they allow the chance of growth within the character. Loyalty is an important factor, especially in *Mass Effect 1* (2007), where Shepard is able to convince Wrex to trust him, even if the psychological aspects

of the playable character have not been grown enough. By interacting with Wrex, the emotional bond with the character grows and the immersion within the storyworld that the character has is revealed in depth to the player.

The Wrex character also has a strong impact on the main plot and narrative arcs that the games have. The overall narrative that follows through the games is dependent on the individual narrative arcs of each game, for if Wrex is not present in the narrative, the main narrative arc changes quite significantly. The character grows, if it is allowed to by the player, throughout the game from a mercenary to a leader who eventually unites the Krogan race and shares an emotional bond of trust and loyalty for the playable character, Shepard. The psychological aspects, Wrex's view of the storyworld and actions, are in many ways dependent of Shepard and thus the choices of the player.

4.3 Tali'Zorah nar Rayaa

Tali'Zorah nar Rayaa, or Tali as I will call her, is a Quarian who Shepard meets during *Mass Effect 1* (2007) at the Citadel, while she is on her Pilgrimage. The Pilgrimage is the coming-of-age for young Quarians, during which they need to leave the Quarian Migrant Fleet and return with something that can help the entire race. The Quarians were forced to leave their planet behind after the Geth rebelled against them, making the Quarians effectively the nomads of space.

The physical attributes that Tali possesses are somewhat in resemblance to humans in many ways, but the most notable distinguishing factor, as seen in image 12, is the mask and the suit that she wears. Quarians are forced to wear these due to the poor immune system they possess, which is caused by the sterile living environments of the Migrant Fleet they are accustomed to. During the game, the faces of Quarians are not shown, since they wear their masks all the time. Tali is an exception, since she gives Shepard an image of herself during one possible narrative progression arc.



Image 12. Tali during the final cutscene of *Mass Effect 3* (2012). (Mel 2016).

The physical attributes that the character has correspond to the overall character. The sociological aspects of Tali further give meaning to the way she is represented visually in the games. The dialogue is often very timid, and she has the demeanor of a shy young girl, which she effectively is in the first game. Tali's main concern is to recover something to take back to the Migrant Fleet from her Pilgrimage. Taking into account the historical background of the Quarians as a whole and the fact that Tali's father is a leader within the Quarians, she feels the pressure of bringing back something of significant value.

The sociological aspects of Tali are deepened and in many ways also complemented by Shepard through the loyalty mission that Tali's character has. During a sidequest that the player can partake on, Shepard receives some encrypted information about the Geth that Tali is interested in obtaining, telling that the information would be significant for the Migrant Fleet. The reasons behind the interest for the encrypted information are supported by the sociological aspects that Tali has. Since the Quarians on their Pilgrimage are required to bring something back to the fleet upon their return and the fact that there are high hopes for Tali due to her father's position, the information Shepard has is important to her. If Shepard chooses to hand the information to Tali, she

will become loyal to Shepard and during their first encounter in *Mass Effect 2* (2010), Shepard can convince Tali that it is really him by referring to the information he passed to her about the Geth.

By completing the loyalty mission for Tali in *Mass Effect 1* (2007), Shepard complements the sociological aspects of Tali. This ties the sociological aspects of the two characters together, as is the case with other companions whose loyalty missions Shepard can complete. In future games, the sociological aspects of returning characters are thus tied together in some level due to these loyalty missions that have been done.

Tali is one of the romance options for male gendered Shepard during *Mass Effect 2* (2010) and *Mass Effect 3* (2012). It is apparent from the narrative progression and especially through dialogue with Tali and other companions, that Tali has had emotional feelings towards Shepard since they first met at the Citadel during *Mass Effect 1* (2007), but she was afraid to act on these feelings due to the fact that Shepard would not see Tali for what she really was.

The reference to the appearance of Tali is a physical attribute factor, how the character is represented in the games. Since Quarians need to live their lives inside the suit and any contact with the outside, without the suit, is dangerous, she feared that Shepard could not comprehend this limiting feature she has. If the player chooses to pursue a romantic relationship with Tali, she needs to be loyal to Shepard. This requires the loyalty mission for Tali to be completed in *Mass Effect 2* (2010) after which she reveals her true feeling towards Shepard.

The emotional aspects of Tali and Shepard tie together during the romance option and it further deepens the sociological aspects of both characters. Tali also demonstrates growth on the psychological aspects. She shows growth on the emotional level, where she was first afraid to show her feelings and trust someone completely. Shepard, through the actions of the player, has shown her that trust and loyalty are something she can expect from him. The psychological growth that Tali expresses in *Mass Effect 2* (2010) is also seen the way she carries herself, so to speak, during the game narrative.

When Shepard first meets Tali during the first main narrative mission of *Mass Effect 2* (2010), she is leading a group of Quarians on a mission to find out what exactly

happened to a Quarian at the human colony at Freedom's Progress. She also is seen with a different suit, which resembles her coming-of-age as an adult Quarian. The growth of the character is thus also visually represented and not just by the psychological and sociological aspects, which are not necessarily visible at first. After Tali's loyalty mission, she is even given the name Tali'Zorah vas Normandy by the Migrant Fleet Admiralty Board, to show that she is aligned with Shepard.

There is also a chance that Shepard loses Tali's loyalty during a dialogue played out with the narrativized interface. The dialogue also includes Legion, a Geth, who Tali catches sending sensitive information to the Geth. Depending on the choices that the player makes here through Shepard, it is possible to lose the loyalty of one of these companions. Tali's and Legion's loyalty can be won back later on through a dialogue with her, however.

Regaining the loyalty of Tali is dependent on the percentage of morality points that *Mass Effect 2* (2010) utilizes. The same goes for Legion as well. Depending on the success of regaining loyalty of Tali, Shepard will still lose the possibility to pursue the romance option with her. This is a move that is justified with the sociological aspects that the character has. Loyalty is gained, and as immersive characters should be true to their own history and views, losing that loyalty will come with a punishment.

While the character will still have all the other perks of loyalty, the romance option is not anymore viable. This is again justified with emotions as well. The feeling of betrayal is present with Tali, as she feels that you should have sided with her on the matter. This signifies character growth and development as well, since her trust in Shepard has been broken. The mission to destroy the Reaper threat, which is the main plot of the series, is still there, so loyalty to the mission is not lost.

As the games progress through the narrative, the immersion that the Tali character shows are deepened through the narrative progression. She grows as a character, through the player's actions. She is consistent in the growth of her character and the actions taken by the player can change the course of which the growth proceeds. In Tali's case, gaining her loyalty and pursuing her as a romance interest is the ultimate growth that the player can attain with her.

As the storyworld progresses through the game narratives and if the player uses the import feature of savegames throughout the series, there is also the possibility of Tali committing suicide. Since the sociological and psychological aspects, namely the paragon and renegade choices as well as character specific choices, carry over between the games, Shepard might lose Tali. Loosing Tali depends on the morality of the character from previous games as well as the choice of siding with the Geth or the Quarians. A middle-ground can be achieved, if Shepard has enough psychological aspect points, but otherwise the choice has to be made.

Losing a game character, as can be the case with Wrex, is a strong emotional moment. With Wrex, Shepard had to either do it himself or signal a companion to do it. In Tali's case, she throws herself off a cliff under her own accord, apologizing to Shepard before doing it. Considering the sociological aspects that Tali has as a character as well as the psychological aspects she has gained during the series, committing to an act as desperate as this can be understood. Her loyalty has been to Shepard, but her heart has always been with the Migrant Fleet, which is so important to her. Her skepticism towards the Geth and other artificial intelligences is part of the foundation of the characters sociological aspects. Since *Mass Effect 2* (2010) began with Shepard reluctantly joining the pro-human Cerberus organization and having an artificial intelligence inside the new Normandy, Tali expressed her concern for both of these issues.

The Quarian history with artificial intelligences, namely their own creations, make them extremely suspicious of them. Shepard's choice of siding with the Geth, with whom the Quarians are at war with, battles the very foundation of what Tali's sociological aspects are based on. While her psychological growth can be seen through trust towards Shepard and his choices, the accumulation of so called bad psychological choices that Shepard can make during the games accumulates to this one scene. Trusting the Geth above the Quarians is the final grain of sand which pushes her off the edge as a character, as is shown in image 13.



Image 13. Tali falling to her death by her own accord in *Mass Effect 3* (2012) (Salt Repository 2012).

The storyworld also responds to the sociological and psychological aspects that grow in Tali's character. During the final cutscene in *Mass Effect 3* (2012), if Tali was the romance interest and a loyal companion of Shepard's, she is shown standing before a memorial wall with Shepard's plate in her hands. Hesitating to place the plate on the wall, we are shown the Commander gasping for air amidst rubble, if the Reapers were destroyed and the effective military strength is high enough.

Tali's possible suicide is an excellent example of building momentum through various game narratives, which then leads to a final decision. It is an emotional moment, which the player cannot control anymore and can only watch as she falls off the cliff. The decisions that the player as Shepard made over the course of the narrative which all led to this point come to a closure, and Shepard has lost a dear friend.

The suit that Tali wears throughout the games can also be seen as a way to represent the psychological and sociological aspects of her character. The suit is what is keeping her alive, and it is as fragile as her psychological aspects. Tali develops her psychological factors during the game and her fragility is not as present through the development of the games, as she becomes an individual who is respected by the Quarian society. Still,

her sociological factors that make her past are still there, and while she develops her psychological aspects, she is still that same fragile little girl that she was in *Mass Effect 1* (2007). Her suicide is a reminder of this, as she is thrown over the edge by the feeling of betrayal which Shepard does by choosing the Geth over her own people.

If Tali is romanced by Shepard, she instead reveals herself by removing the mask that is keeping her alive. This is not something that the Quarians do unless they are in a very sterile environment and have gone through rigorous preparations, but Tali feels she needs to do this for Shepard and she trusts him completely. She survives this, naturally, but the show of faith is the high-point of her psychological growth that her character can achieve.

These two points, the suicide and the removal of the mask, are two opposite ends of her psychological development. While she might have shown psychological growth as a character throughout the game, the decision to choose the Geth is an issue she cannot live with. This ties the psychological to the sociological, since the Quarians are very society based and they are brought up to always think the best of their people. The sociological and psychological also tie very closely to the physical aspects of Tali. The fragility of her suit represents her fragile character aspects and how both of them can be broken easily. Tali is a very emotional character, and sometimes does come through rather naïve, but shows growth from this as her character develops.

4.4 Emotional character narratives

The recurring aspect of all the character narratives I have discussed here is emotion, that is represented by the deaths of characters. The player is directly responsible for the emotional build-up in the games and, if the narrative of these character so progresses, the deaths of said characters. While the death of a character to which an emotional bond was created can be a saddening effect, at the same time it can be argued that the character narrative has succeeded in creating a transporting narrative, which transfers the player into an immersive storyworld (Rouse 2005: 6; Wei et al. 2010: 13). Emotion is not, however, present just for the characters that I have discussed here. The whole

narrative arc through which the games progress is created through the use of emotional individual character narratives.

One of the most emotional moments in games, and narratives in general, can be the sudden death of a character that we have grown to like. In *Mass Effect 3* (2012), one of the most memorable emotional moments was the death of Mordin Solus. Mordin was a Salarian scientist, who had participated in making the genophage, which made the Krogan race's birth rate significantly lower. During a mission in *Mass Effect 3* (2012), Mordin takes an elevator up to a tower where he disperses a cure for the said genophage. In previous narrative discussions with Mordin, the player has learned that Mordin feels responsible for his actions that he participated in with the genophage research. His actions are a last attempt to reconcile everything he has done wrong in the past.

While Mordin's death in *Mass Effect 3* (2012) is a strong emotional moment, it also possible, though the players previous actions, that he survives the mission. This goes on with the fact that interactive digital narrative can be, at the same time, linear and still allow the player to make certain decisions that can change outcomes within the game. The emotional effect is further emphasized with the dark background of the elevator, as image 14 shows, and the overall dark atmosphere of the cinematic mood that follows.



Image 14. Mordin Solus inside the elevator, just moments before his death.
(Varibash 2012)

This loss of a character that the player has attached to is also recognized by Rouse (2005: 6). At the time of the writing of his work, the *Mass Effect* series was not yet released, and he points out that the emotional feeling of losing a character had not yet been explored fully by games. When playing the *Mass Effect* games, the player will lose characters due to narrative progression or because of the choices that were made previously. The player even might need to kill one of the characters that are accompanying them themselves.

During a mission in *Mass Effect 1* (2007), the player is confronted with a plan to cure the genophage that I mentioned earlier. The cure would not be complete but would rather reduce the Krogan race to a mindless army of Saren, who is the main antagonist in *Mass Effect 1* (2007). The choices when confronting Wrex, a Krogan companion, about the destruction of the facility housing the cure, are determined on the persuasive power of the player. If the player has rushed through the main narrative, he might not have enough persuasive points available to persuade Wrex and keep him alive. The other two choices then left are that the player personally has to make the decision to

shoot Wrex, or signal another companion, Ashley, to shoot him for the player. The situation looks threatening from the point of view of the other companions, as Wrex pulls his weapon at the player, as shown in image 15.



Image 15. The moment of choice in *Mass Effect 1* (2007) for the player about the fate of their companion, Wrex. (MashalMeLee 2010)

Emotions have been studied in different media forms and it has been established, that people seek out media content that makes them feel. Whether these feelings are joy, sadness or anger, people tend to seek out these kinds of content that makes them feel. (Elson et al. 2014: 522) In the study of narrative rich games, emotion must be taken into consideration. While computer games have developed in many ways to give the characters good visual representation, they need to be believable as well (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum 2012: 396). For example, Wrex, whose motivations to cure the genophage to save his race is understandable, but his judgement is clouded by this strong urge to do so. He is unable to see that the cure would only reduce the Krogan race to a mindless army that the main antagonist in *Mass Effect 1* (2007) could control. It is up to the player, to control the narrative and the character, if able to, and more the narrative in a certain direction.

The action that is required from the player in these role-playing games places the player directly in control of the emotional arc, through which emotion is built throughout the character narrative. The use of this method of giving the player direct control of the emotional aspects of a game is something that is not present in traditional texts (Bown & Gackenbach 2016: 3). The individual character narratives in *Mass Effect* games require the interaction with the characters through the player-controlled character and this interaction can lead to very strong emotional moments with these characters. In essence, the character narratives in these games bind together.

4.5 The binding of character narratives

Throughout this chapter, I have gone through three separate characters and their attributions and contributions to the main narrative arc in the *Mass Effect* series. The characters in these games carry the narrative and complement it in many ways and at the same time they come together as well. Commander Shepard, who is the playable character in the series, is in effect an avatar, that the player controls. The player cannot instill a certain type of personality for the character, as the sociological aspects of this character are pre-determined through set variables. The character understanding deepens with the narrative and the character shows growth throughout the series. The psychological aspects, which are determined by the actions the player takes and manifested in good or bad determine the attitude with which Shepard confronts dialogue and other situations within the storyworld.

The same goes for the other two characters that I discussed here, Wrex and Tali. They are both significant within the narrative and storyworld and add their own contribution to it. Their actions are determined by the actions of the player, and the path they take is dependent on the player. Wrex can be grown from a lone mercenary to a leader of his race who unites the rivaling clans, through the actions of the player. Tali can be grown from a shy young Quarian on her Pilgrimage to a strong figure within the Quarian race, who is hailed for bringing peace and stability between the Quarians and the Geth, through the actions of the player.

The character growth shows the quality of character narratives and how they complement the main narrative. Sheldon (2004: 40–41) points out, that the growth of characters in any given narrative shows that the narrative has succeeded. While smaller characters do not need to show growth, the characters that play a large part in the narrative need growth. The characters I have analyzed here are the player character, Shepard, and two NPCs, who are major characters. These characters need to show growth and development for a successful narrative (Sheldon 2004: 41).

In *Mass Effect* games, the coherence of the narrative is supported mainly by these characters, as they can be called the narrative vessels (Jørgensen 2010: 315). These narrative vessels have their own sociological and psychological features, that develop during the narrative progression. To be able to develop, they require interaction from the player and through this interaction, emotional bonds are created with these characters (Jørgensen 2010: 316; Sheldon 2004: 38–39; Rouse 2005: 5)

All of the characters have their own sociological starting point at the beginning and as the narrative progresses, these sociological aspects begin to merge with one another. They still have their own history, which was before they all met, but throughout the narrative progression of the games, their stories begin to intertwine (Sheldon 2004: 39). Loyalties are gained, and romances are born between the characters (Jørgensen 2010: 316). They all show growth and their progression is coherent and their immersion to the storyworld and what is happening in it during the narrative is coherent as well.

As the sociological aspects of the characters become clearer through interaction with them with the narrativized interface, the psychological aspects of these characters develop (Sheldon 2004: 42). Emotions between Shepard and Tali, for example, begin to manifest themselves in *Mass Effect 2* (2010), where Tali finally confesses her feelings towards Shepard. Wrex, if he survives and the right choices are made, is shown in the ending scenes of *Mass Effect 3* (2012) leading his people in a new way that is different from the traditional war-oriented thinking the Krogan have been accustomed to. He is also seen with a baby Krogan, which signifies the survival and growth of the Krogan population as a whole.

The character narratives arcs, while complementing and also configuring the main narrative arcs, need to show the same kind of narrative cohesion throughout the plot development (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum 2012: 395–396). In the case of the characters I have discussed, their development and growth signify the cohesion of their individual narrative arcs. They also have the physical attributes, in addition to the psychological and sociological, that complement their growth during the progression of the games. Through this development, emotion comes into effect, and the player is able to identify with these characters in many levels, even personal. This would not be possible without understanding the sociological and psychological aspects of the characters. (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum 2012: 396; Sheldon 2004: 38–42)

The storyworld in role-playing games, especially in the *Mass Effect* games, is an interactive space, where player actions have lasting effects on the narrative. This is expected of a storyworld, especially for narrative role-playing games, as the storyworld is seen as a place for possibilities (Bizzocchi & Tanenbaum: 396). The storyworld does not end with the ending in *Mass Effect 3* (2012), no matter what the ending is. The final scenes show that life in the storyworld did indeed continue and that tales of ‘The Shepard’ are being told. Depending on the ending, the Reapers were destroyed by the time in which the storyworld is during the game series. Another option is that the storyworld time the games are set in and through the actions of the player controlling Shepard, races that came after the time were able to defeat the Reapers and end the cycle of extinction.

While the plot ends with the series and the individual game narrative arcs with the ending of each game, the storyworld time is given the notion of moving on. Time is not constrained to the narrative of the games but is given the possibility of continuing beyond what the player has experienced in the games. The narrative act, so to speak, ends with the games, but the narrative time continues.

In addition to the ending and illusion of continuing time after the games, one of the endings shows Shepard gasping for air amidst some rubble. Before that, we can see Shepard’s romance interest hesitating on placing his name plate on a memorial wall. While the feeling of winning brings emotion to the ending, the feeling of bonds that

Shepard had with the companions in the games is shown in this visual representation of these bonds. The visual is complemented with the narration of the cutscene, which changes tone depending on the ending that was achieved by the player, raising emotions that are relevant to the scene that is experienced.

Through this study into the *Mass Effect* -series, I have studied the narrative arc of characters within the games and how they tie together with the overall storyworld, plot, narrative arcs of the individual games and each other. I have also looked at how immersion is created through these characters by building coherent narrative arcs through sociological and psychological aspects that the characters have in relation to the storyworld and how these aspects relate to the storyworld of the games. In addition, the growth and development of these characters was studied and whether these were in relation to the storyworld, plot and the narrative arc of the games. The ability for the player to continue with the same Shepard character that they created in *Mass Effect 1* (2007) throughout the game series makes for a coherent experience throughout. The choices that the player has to make have strong consequences to the plot and narrative progression of these games in whole, which in turn create bonds and raise emotions, in addition to creating bonds with the characters that the player meets within the storyworld.

5 CONCLUSION

I have studied the interactive narratives of role-playing games in this thesis from the standpoint of character storylines and their impact on the plot and overall game narrative. The aim was to see how different narrative elements are used in the creation of interesting and believable characters as well as how these character narratives work within the storyworld of the *Mass Effect* games. The narrative elements used in the thesis were studied according to the research done by Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum (2011; 2012). Character analysis was further deepened with the character traits as Lee Sheldon (2004) described them in his work. In addition to this, the immersion of the character storylines was reviewed.

The characters studied here showed sociological and psychological growth throughout the game series and emotion played an important part in making these characters believable. The player is able to create deep bonds with these characters and losing one of these characters that the player has invested so much time on can be a very emotional moment. The characters also react to the changes in the storyworld and vice versa, making the choices of the player matter in the overall narrative progression. The player can be responsible for the deaths of companions and not being able to change the situation, because of the sociological aspects these characters had to begin with, can create a shift in the narrative and possibly in the way the player perceives their further actions.

As Kristine Jørgensen (2010) argued in her work, the characters are the driving and carrying force of narrative in the *Mass Effect* series. My study has proven that the characters in these games are the narrative force, which move the main plot forward. The playable character, Shepard, under the control and guidance of the player, decides the direction the narrative progresses and the non-playable characters respond to these actions, developing their own narratives in the process. The player character has a preset sociological aspect, which the player can determine from preset conditions, and the character's psychological aspects grow and develop according to the actions taken in the storyworld and its narrative.

The immersion the player experiences is dependent on the narrative and the realism of the characters, which in turn creates the sympathy and affection towards the characters that are in games. The narrative progression needs to be coherent and players need to feel that the choices they make matter. My study has shown that the narrative arc which is in the *Mass Effect* series follows the storyworld and the storyworld changes depending on the player choices. The choices made matter and they even have consequences that can create deep emotional feelings towards the characters within the storyworld. The characters are not just activity givers, who take the player through a series of micro-narratives within the game. They have their own sociological and psychological aspects, which change and develop depending on the choices of the player.

The interactive nature of the games is also emphasized in the games I have studied. The player is, plainly speaking, the master who controls the direction of the narrative. The storyworld reacts within the boundaries set by the developers in a way that gives the player a sense of presence in the storyworld. This sense of presence is a feature that games relying on narrative progression need. This presence is given through the emotions and feelings the narrative and characters within it raise in the player, as Rusch (2009) states. This fictional alignment in games means the player is feeling the same emotions that they would feel in real-life, though at the same time knowing that the characters are just fictional.

The use of the playable character as an avatar that has their own personality and history enforces the immersion as well. As Sheldon (2004: 45) points out, the most effective way to immerse the player into the storyworld is to give the character meaning, through the different sociological aspects that it has. The psychological ones can be grown during the progression of the narrative, as is the case with *Mass Effect* games. Adding the non-playable characters' aspects into this and combining them throughout the narrative immerses the player into the storyworld, making choices they need to make mean something. This level of identification through interaction is an effective method in digital role-playing games. Jørgensen (2010) agrees on this and states the psychological deepness of the characters is dependent on the growth they go through in games.

The progression of the narrative is dependent on the non-playable characters and their removal from the plot changes the narrative progression. Removing Wrex from the main plot changes the narrative arc significantly towards another path, but still leads to the same final ending in *Mass Effect 3* (2012). The important factor here is the loss of a character and how it affects the storyworld. The storyworld reacts to this through the change in the narrative and it is represented to the player through changes in dialogue and visual aspects.

While doing this thesis, I noticed how deep the narrative can go in the *Mass Effect* series. Having played the games before, I was familiar with them, but the deeper I went with the analysis of certain characters the more I noticed how much I did not know about them. As Bartle (1996; 2005) states, players are different and they change over time. Due to this, I used the Let's Play -videos as supplement material for the thesis to see more possibilities that the narrative could take. This showed just how deep the characters are and how much they can change depending on the choices of the players. The character narrative paths heavily influence the main narrative progression, which goes to show how effective interesting character narratives are in role-playing games. The deaths of characters especially seemed to have tremendous impact on the overall narrative. These deaths were mainly due to the players choice of choosing the easy way out, so to speak. The effortless way out usually was due to insufficient understanding of the sociological and psychological factors of the characters, which was due to the lack of exploration of the storyworld and from that the character narratives.

It is difficult to go through all the possibilities regarding the narrative paths the characters can take within the scope of this thesis. Further analysis to single characters and their narrative possibilities could be fruitful and to realize just how much these characters have received work from the developers.

The *Mass Effect* series has been celebrated as a narrative heavy role-playing game, where the player has to decide on several emotional and storyworld changing decisions along the trilogy. The game is cited to be what the player makes of it, within certain parameters that the designers have laid out. The choices made carry over to the next game if the player so choose, giving a coherent narrative experience throughout the

series. It was also stated that the games will be the topic of discussion for a long time to come. (Brudvig 2007; Reilly 2010; Moriarty 2012)

The game narrative did receive some criticism, namely due to the ending that was originally present in *Mass Effect 3* (2012). Players who had been progressing through the narrative for the whole series were not pleased of the different options that were given at the end, noting that the depth was not enough for the storyworld's depth. This was later changed by the developers to represent the game series better. (Clarkson 2013)

As the narrative of the game series is interactive and spans over several years between the releases of each game, there is the possibility of players changing over time. These player modalities, as coined by Richard Bartle (1996; 2005), would be interesting to study. Since Bartle (2005) argued in his later work that players go through changes during the process of playing, the changes in the players in interactive digital role-playing games would be an interesting aspect to consider in future studies. Do these changes in players change their way of looking at the storyworld, narrative and characters that are in the games? If so, do players regret choices that they made in the previous games, wanting to change them once they realize what they have done?

The changes can come forth in an emotional way, especially with the death of characters which are due to player actions. One example is the suicide that Tali falls to in *Mass Effect 3* (2012), which was directly caused by the actions of the player controlling Shepard.

While these player modalities are not discussed in depth in this study, it is an interesting aspect to consider, mainly because how players change over time. The experiences players have the first time playing a game and after developing new traits, how does their experience change? This would be an interesting standpoint to consider for future research.

The representation of different races in the game is done in a way that is closely reliant on real world problems, in some respects. For example, the arrival of the Milky Way races to Andromeda in Bioware's newest addition to the *Mass Effect* series, *Mass Effect: Andromeda* (2017), where they are greeted by a hostile race and later another race, who treat them with suspicion.

In addition, the sexual aspects of the games are another interesting aspect for future study. Many studies have studied the body and the representation of it in cinema, but it could prove fruitful to study these same issues in games as well. The *Mass Effect* series has interracial and same sex romances and the representation of these could be interesting to study further. One study was brought to my attention regarding the queer romances that the *Mass Effect* games offer (Sihvonen & Stenros forthcoming). The article tackles the less-studied functions of performative and pretend play aspects of solitary role-playing.

The study of role-playing narratives and building these narratives through interesting characters is an aspect that needs to be explored more in game studies. This thesis can be used to further expand the study of individual characters and how these characters can be made interesting in role-playing games through the inclusion of deep sociological and psychological aspects. These aspects need to be developed as well during the progression of the narrative and this thesis can give notions on how effective these aspects can be when developers grow and develop character narratives. Through these, an immersive storyworld can be created, where the player finds interesting and deep characters, which are able to respond in an emotional level to the player and the actions that are taken within the storyworld.

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