"Humanity First": Performing Terror in Bioware's *Mass Effect*

M. Landon

Blood pounds in my ears as bullets whiz overhead. Civilians fall, their bodies riddled with holes. Screams only further my resolve. My heart thuds as I chase after an assassin hell-bent on killing the Council, the galaxy's government representatives. My legs ache but I will not be deterred. The elevator opens and I am face-to-face with Lieutenant-Commander Ashley Williams[1], a crewmate and—more importantly—a friend. She stands strong, her pistol an extension of her outstretched arm as she aims at my chest, daring me to take a single step. There is torment in her eyes – she is sworn to protect the Council but doing so would mean shooting her Commanding Officer. Time stands still. The Council watches with bated breath, unsure of what to do next. I struggle with the twisted events as Donnel Udina, humanity's councilor, condemns me as a terrorist sympathizer. As he threatens me, my pulse quickens and I plead for understanding: "You know me better than this, Ash."[2] I find, however, that this plea does not fall out of my mouth. I may be holding the controller, but these words and experiences are not mine—they belong to Shepard, the protagonist of BioWare's *Mass Effect* video game trilogy.

M. Landon is a PhD student in Theatre Studies and Game Studies & Design at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. As a dramaturg and game historian, they analyze gaming through a performance studies lens, arguing that contemporary games utilize theatrical methodologies to envision and enact the future.

Website: https://publish.illinois.edu/meghanlandon/.

[1] In *Mass Effect,* the player-character is forced to choose a squad mate to die in a nuclear explosion. I saved Ashley Williams, but other players often pick her counterpart, Kaidan Alenko, instead.

[2] Ed. note: links to game play footage in this text are also embedded for streaming at http://liminalities.net/19-1/masseffect.html

Game Studies & Performance

Over the past two decades, game studies have exploded in popularity, their inter-disciplinary nature bridging STEM and humanities fields. Observing video games through a performance studies lens 1) acknowledges game playing as an act of performance, 2) posits the player as performer and spectator, and 3) analyzes player reactions situated in wider cultural and political contexts. Additionally, video games can be used for educational purposes. In "The Ouroboros of Serious Game Design," Carrie Heeter theorizes that there are four major boxes a game must check to be useful when addressing and educating on serious issues: formal constraints, environmental constraints, goals, and gaming context. Within these four headings, there are myriad sub-headings that take plots, characters, mechanics, correlation to real life, and end states in consideration. Through this model, I demonstrate how *Mass Effect*'s game mechanics fits with Heeter's description of what makes a game educational through analyzing three scenes from *Mass Effect 2. Mass Effect's* player-first game design grants it a unique position from which its players can interrogate its profound moral influence.

Since Heeter considers narrative an integral part of the gaming whole, Philip McCoy easily connects game theory with performance. Using *King Lear* as an example, McCoy "reveals four separate 'games' woven into … the [overarching] Lear-game" (qtd. in Schechner 18). He describes a "game tree" in which the narrative structure of *King Lear* can be analyzed from a mathematical viewpoint. This game tree encompasses the "shifting combination" of players, narratives, movements, and choices (19). Like Schechner's emphasis on time, space, and rules in a performance context, McCoy demonstrates how games also contain these same characteristics. The game tree can be understood simply as the study of gameplay mechanics. In *Mass Effect,* mechanics are used to force players to introspection, as each game boils down to difficult choices between life and death for thousands of people. Furthermore, *Mass Effect 2*[3] specifically explores the player-character's experiences operating within a terrorist framework. The *Mass Effect* trilogy's gameplay mechanics compel its player-characters to negotiate their complicity in committing acts of terror and analyze their choice-making to call into being an ethical player. In this context, *Mass Effect* is more than a game—it is a tool to interrogate the ways in which player-characters performatively engage with terrorism.

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[3] This essay focuses on *Mass Effect 2,* but touches on *Mass Effect* and *Mass Effect 3* to establish context.

What is a player? Simply, the player is the person who picks up the controller, however, their role within the game tree must be established. In *The Ethics of Computer Games,* Miguel Sicart writes that a player is the "subject that comes into being" in the game world (71). Although his analysis depends on philosophy and ethics, the idea of calling into being is distinctly performative. To call into being the "intended aesthetic experience of the piece, one has to perform, become an actor" (Hoover, et. al 13). Drawing on Foucault's theory of subjects under power, Sicart refers to the newly created actor/player as "player-subject." Unlike Sicart, who views the player through a computer science lens and as part of a process, I see the player as an actor putting on a role. The player comes alive and performs for their actual audience of one and their virtual audience of many. Audience in this context does not solely mean streaming a video game for live audiences. This virtual audience refers to non-player characters (NPCs) and other sentient beings in the game world. I use the term "player-character" to refer to the joint unit which encompasses the combined, embodied experiences of Shepard and the player. Player-character, in gaming, refers to the character the player controls, but the term contains a duality wherein player-character, in a theatrical sense, means both actor and character. By framing the player-character as an actor rather than simply a subject, they can be seen as a person with agency in the game world, not as a bystander who lets the game happen to them. The creation of the ethical player-character is an act of praxis. Sicart describes it as an "act of choices and decisions, a voluntary self-evaluation and creation of a subject" (89). This praxis drives the player-character towards being an ethical player—one who utilizes the "practical wisdom acquired by playing that game" in order to "make the most ethically informed choice" (92).

Mass Effect: The World & its People

Mass Effect's universe is vast and detailed.[4] In 2148, humanity discovers a mass relay: a transport system capable of faster-than-light (FTL) travel to other star systems. Upon learning that humanity is not alone in space, they spend the next thirty-five years struggling to earn their place within the galactic community. The *Mass Effect* series begins in 2183 with Commander Shepard, a Systems Alliance

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[4] A complete timeline of the *Mass Effect* universe can be found here: https://masseffect.fandom.com/wiki/Timeline.

Navy officer serving on the SSV Normandy SR-1.[5] Under orders from the Council[6] to apprehend a fugitive, Shepard uncovers a plot to bring back the Reapers, a race of sentient machines who wipe out technologically advanced species every 50,000 years. She manages to kill the fugitive and delay the Reapers' return by coordinating an airstrike against [Sovereign, a Reaper](#) vanguard. Shepard argues that this is not the last time the Reapers will pose a threat, but the Council—terrified of what they witnessed—dismisses Shepard's claim. They make an announcement that Sovereign was merely an anomaly and assign Shepard to busy work to keep her quiet.

Mass Effect is classified as a third person role-playing shooter—a genre created by blending tropes from military shooters and both Western and Japanese role-playing games (RPGs). As the name indicates, these games are in third person point-of-view, allowing the player to see their avatar on screen and demonstrating how the player-character exists in the game space. The camera is placed over the protagonist's shoulder during combat and face-on during cutscenes and conversations. The shooter aspect is simple: pick an enemy and shoot. Although these games are at risk of becoming monotonous due to their repetitive levels, they offer customized armor, weapons, and special powers to keep the player experience engaging and fresh. *Mass Effect* additionally allows the player to customize Shepard's appearance, background, and class.[7]

BioWare's games (including the trilogy's successor, *Mass Effect: Andromeda* and the lauded *Dragon Age* series) also rely on the controversial "dialogue wheel" which further contributed to the subjective nature of these RPGs. During a conversation, there are at least two options of dialogue for Shepard which correspond to the game's morality scale[8]—the top right option distributes points to your Paragon score whereas the bottom right option boosts your Renegade score. Often there is a neutral text option in the middle which assigns no points to either side.

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[5] SSV stands for "Systems Alliance Space Vehicle." The abbreviations were inspired by acronyms used by the United States Navy. SR-1 means Series 1. The ship is named after the Battle of Normandy during World War 2. For further reading, see: https://masseffect.fandom.com/wiki/SSV_Normandy.

[6] The Council is comprised of four members of different races and functions as the galactic government. They reside in the Citadel, a massive space station that serves as the capital of Council-governed space.

[7] Class meaning "class specialization." Shepard can be played as a soldier, vanguard, adept, sentinel, engineer, or infiltrator. Each class dictates Shepard's proficiency with various weapons, biotics, and technical skills.

[8] See: https://masseffect.fandom.com/wiki/Morality.

This essay assumes a mostly paragon Shepard. Other players may have a radically different view on the games' choices due to preferring a renegade Shepard. Because of BioWare's emphasis on a personalized gaming experience through character creation and dialogue wheels, many players refer to the protagonist as *their* Shepard. This causes each playthrough of *Mass Effect* to feel unique and subjective as opposed to games that rely on objective experiences[9] to win.

Mass Affect: Embodiment & Complicity

Mass Effect (2007-2013) famously creates a world in which the player's choices matter. A small decision in *Mass Effect* can have devastating ramifications in *Mass Effect 3.* Because of this emphasis on choice and player agency, *Mass Effect* offers its players an "embodied subjectivity," a term used by Stanton B. Garner in *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama.* Embodied subjectivity holds that every person has a distinct view of the world based on how they experience it in their bodies. Likewise, each player brings something different to a playthrough of *Mass Effect,* depending on their understanding of and positionality in the world. Philosopher and game theorist Miguel Sicart states that the "player is limited by the fact that she is a culturally embodied being, and her own ethical values and practices cannot be easily suspended" (76). Similarly, Commander Shepard cannot be separated from her past practices (even though her background is selected by the player). As players offer their lived experiences to the game, *Mass Effect* gifts a new perspective in return. You are no longer merely yourself. You are Commander Shepard[10]—will you make brand new choices due to Shepard's military expertise and experience? Or will your contemporary reality compel you to play Shepard as you would play yourself? These questions are further complicated by Shepard's tense employment with Cerberus, a pro-human terrorist group. She and the player are tasked with undertaking ethically ambiguous assignments in service of the so-called greater good.

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[9] Games such as *Mario Kart, the Legend of Zelda* series, and other non-role-playing games fit into this objective category.

[10] Shepard is never referred to by their first name. When creating the character, the game offers the names John and Jane for male and female Shepard, respectively. Players, however, often customize Shepard's appearance to fit their own view of the character. Due to this, the protagonist is only referred to as Shepard, Commander, or Commander Shepard. Commander Shepard is named after Alan Shepard, the first American in space.

Mass Effect 2 begins with an attack on the Normandy by an anonymous ship, killing Shepard and multiple crew members. The action jumps forward two years, and the player discovers that Cerberus recovered Shepard's body and rebuilt her. Upon meeting Cerberus' leader, the Illusive Man, Shepard is tasked with investigating the disappearance of multiple human colonies. When Shepard asks if she is volunteering or "being volunteered," the Illusive Man offers her an ultimatum: "You always have a choice, Shepard. If you don't find the information we're both looking for, we can part ways. But first, go to Freedom's Progress." Shepard and the player are backed into an uncomfortable position—the player (embodying both themselves and Shepard) is unable to deny the Illusive Man's request to investigate the latest colony to go missing. In *Towards a Theory of Choice Poetics,* Peter Mawhorter introduces the framework of choice poetics (taken from Aristotle's treatise) as "an attempt to formally understand how choices create meaning" (2). Shepard and the player are forced into what Mawhorter defines as an "unchoice" (4). Shepard cannot turn away because Cerberus resurrected her, and her honorable nature compels her to assist humanity. The player cannot refuse because the game will not allow them to walk away when Shepard chooses to stay. Mawhorter argues that this unchoice is used to signal "an important course of action… without giving the player an opportunity to alter the narrative flow" (4). The player is tentatively resigned to investigate the colony, albeit cautiously.

As the player leads Shepard towards the shuttle that awaits her, there's a tangible sinking, uncanny feeling. The player knows they're being manipulated, and they and Shepard share the same instinctual desire to flee. There is a sense of danger the player can feel innately. These uneasy feelings are explained by embodied role-play. In *Bodied Spaces,* Garner argues that performance is a "transformational act" (39). Theatre balances on the "partial occlusion of the presentational by the representational" and the "actual by the virtual" (39). In the case of video games, the actual versus the virtual becomes even more apparent. There is a transformation occurring—the player is replaced by Commander Shepard in this performance. Likewise, Shepard represents the player in another world, another realm of possibilities. Fascinatingly, the player is both performer and spectator in this exchange. Due to this duality, the player can fantasize about the choices they would make if they were not tied to this reality. As Garner discusses, theatre (and I extend his theory to include video games) contains an "ambiguity" wherein "space and object(s) oscillate between visual objectification and phenomenal embodiment" (4). The player is performing as Shepard and Shepard is performing

the player concurrently, but the player is also watching Shepard as she lives out the consequences of the player's choices.

Mass Effect is overflowing with choices and consequences. However, in *Mass Effect 2,* the player-character is limited in their options as they are forced to make choices within a framework of terror. In "Playing with Trauma: Interreactivity, Empathy, and Complicity in *The Walking Dead* Video Game," game theorist Tobi Smethurst claims that interreactivity drives players to take "responsibility for what happens on screen" and have a "vested interest in keeping the protagonist alive" (277). Furthermore, Smethurst asserts that the protagonist is the "vehicle or tool that permits the player to extend their bodily representation into the game world" (277). This reoccurring emphasis on embodiment demonstrates that there is an innate physical bond between protagonist and player. Because of that bond, Smethurst concludes that

> it is possible for games to exploit empathy in order to make the player to do things which they know are wrong from the beginning, but which they must go through with in order to successfully complete the game; to perform actions which they believe to be morally right, but which are later shown to be wrong; or to temporarily but completely sideline morality in pursuit of their goals and then face the stomach-churning realization afterward of what they have done (277-278).

Playing through *Mass Effect 2* encompasses all three possibilities. To successfully complete the game, the player must kill indiscriminately (regardless of whether they hesitate or not) in the name of Cerberus. This framework of terror is an unyielding shadow that follows Shepard throughout her journey. As any player of the trilogy will notice, Shepard arguably never commits a terrorist act. However, merely operating within this framework is enough to secure Shepard's standing as a terrorist sympathizer and the player as an accessory.

Mass Effect 2 requires players to "do things which they know are wrong from the beginning" (Smethurst 277). During the game's tutorial, Shepard wakes up and fights her way through an enemy-occupied Cerberus lab. She meets Jacob Taylor, a Cerberus officer, and Wilson, a scientist who assisted Shepard's revival. Confused and frustrated by her abrupt awakening while under attack, Shepard refuses to continue until someone explains to her what is happening at the facility. Jacob, ignoring Wilson's protests, informs Shepard that they [work for Cerberus](). He furtively attempts to spin the news in a positive light, but Shepard vehemently swears that she "won't work with terrorists." Despite her anger, Shepard willingly

accompanies Jacob to the shuttles where she is taken to the Illusive Man. An ethical player, as described by Miguel Sicart, could choose to make the decision for Shepard by putting down the controller and turning off the console, cementing the decision not to work for terrorists. However, if intent on completing the game, the player-character can act as "moral being" by both making the most ethical choices possible while simultaneously acknowledging that these choices are made within a framework of terror. Sicart concludes that "as a player, you want to win, but as a human being, you have to think about what winning means" (101). In this way, video games are uniquely equipped to force introspection on complex and difficult ideas.

  In one of *Mass Effect 2's* post-release DLC[11] quests, "The Lair of the Shadow Broker," the game forces the player-character to explicitly face their actions and examine their ethics. In "'We Put Our Hands on the Trigger with Him': Guilt and Perpetration in Spec OPS: The Line," Smethurst writes that

> there can come a point, however, when a line is crossed, and "our practical wisdom connects the player-subject with who we are as ethical beings out-side the game experience." That is, when the subjectivity created through engagement with the game jars too strongly with the extraludic morality of the agent playing the game, the player is shocked out of the game world and into a state of ethical reflection in which they reexamine the actions the game has invited them to perform" (207).

Arguably this is the moment when a "line is crossed." It is the first time in the game that a character explicitly articulates Cerberus' actions and condemns Shepard. Prior encounters with non-player characters (NPCs) and former squad mates merely chastise Shepard and move on (either by joining you or by returning to their duties). It is here that "subjectivity" bashes against "extraludic morality." The player must acknowledge difficult, perhaps unanswerable, questions: who am I truly working for? Is my intention to do good enough to offset the terror this organization causes?

  "The Lair of the Shadow Broker" centers around Dr. Liara T'Soni, a former squad mate. With Shepard's assistance (and intel from Cerberus), Liara tracks down the Shadow Broker, a faceless information broker with immense power and

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[11] DLC stands for "downloadable content." Months after base games are released, developers often release DLC for games that include new quests, squad mates, weapons, armor, and more. "The Lair of the Shadow Broker" was released on September 7th, 2010 – eight months after the original release of *Mass Effect 2.*

influence. Liara suspiciously goes missing, and Shepard teams up with Tela Vasir, a fellow Spectre[12], to locate her. After discovering clues regarding Liara's whereabouts, Shepard and Vasir investigate the Dracon Trade Center, a heavily trafficked area full of civilians. Upon their arrival, the bottom three floors of the building are bombed, presumably to ensure Liara's death. Shepard rushes into the building to hunt for Liara. When Vasir catches up, Liara emerges from the shadows, announcing that Vasir is an agent for the Shadow Broker, and that she was hired to halt Liara's investigation. Vasir flees, and the ensuing chase includes flying cars, a hostage situation, and a climactic boss battle at an erotic resort.

As Vasir dies, [Shepard confronts her] about selling out the Council to work for the Shadow Broker. Vasir counters that working for the Shadow Broker provided valuable information, and that if she "needed to make a few people disappear" in return, so be it. Fascinatingly, Shepard accuses *her* of crossing the line: "Spectres don't blow up buildings filled with innocent people!" Vasir looks directly at Shepard—right at the player—and condemns them: "[…] you're with Cerberus. You have any idea what your terrorist friends have done?" Shepard tells her that she "knows who they are and what they've done" and that it "doesn't matter." Vasir presses on, saying, "You want to judge me? Look in a mirror. Kidnapping kids for biotic death camps! Killing Alliance admirals who ask questions! And you're with them. Don't you dare judge me!" The player witnesses Vasir take her last breaths as she studies you, her eyes glaring before she slumps to the ground. Shepard's eyes are downcast, and she slowly rises to her feet.

At this moment, the player is forced to confront their complicity. Vasir's eye contact is unrelenting, and the game gives the player ample time to reflect on her words. Although Shepard can be seen during the conversation, the game camera pivots so that Vasir's last moments are to the player-character alone. There is a disgusted feeling as you hold the controller, staring at your own reflection in the blackout after Vasir's death. The player is mentally transported back to *Mass Effect 1* where Shepard assisted Alliance Admiral Kahoku with tracking down Cerberus after the murder of his squad. It is easy for the player to recall their initial horror when it is revealed that Cerberus also killed Kahoku to keep him from asking questions. Your hand may not have been on the trigger, but your endorsement of Cerberus and use of their resources is terrorism, regardless of heroic intention.

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[12] Spectre is a nickname for members of the Citadel's Special Units and Reconnaissance Team. They are elite soldiers with near-infinite resources and the support of the Council. Shepard was made the first human Spectre in *Mass Effect 1.*

I lower my gun. It's a humble act of trust—one that doesn't go unnoticed by Lieutenant-Commander Williams. "There are Cerberus soldiers in the shaft behind us," I assert. "If you open that door, they'll kill you all." One of the other councilors attempts to stop Councilor Udina from overriding the elevator lockdown, and Udina pulls a gun on her. I don't hesitate—the bullet flies from my pistol and through Udina's chest before anyone else can respond. However, the elevator opens, and I turn, gun drawn, prepared for the worst. Commander Bailey, a Citadel Security officer, steps out, surprised by the quick end to the day's events. "I'll say it plain," he announces to the Council. "Shepard just saved the lot of you." The turian councilor thanks me for saving his life a second time. I give him a brief smile: "You don't owe me anything, Councilor. Times like this, we all stand together." I put my controller down as the mission ends. This isn't atonement for what I've done in the name of the greater good, but it's a start.

For Miguel Sicart, "the act of playing any computer game is a moral act" (102). This moral act calls into being (and calls for) an ethical player, one that embodies both their character's experience and their own. This ethical performance is not innate—it must be acted upon, practiced, and perfected. Luckily, *Mass Effect* is filled with opportunities to call an ethical player-character into being. A player-character's embodied subjectivity links the theatrical and the virtual, and uses both to explore complex conversations around terrorism, guilt, and complicity. Due to this, *Mass Effect* becomes a powerful statement piece that interrogates how we might engage with ethical decision-making and morally gray situations in gaming performance.

The embodied subjectivity of player-characters is how performance studies can offer a unique intervention in video game analysis. Where game studies scholars have historically been divided on analyzing games by either ludology (gameplay) or narratology (story),[13] performance studies emphasizes both with equal weight in the context of the player's personalized experience. For performance theorists, the dive into game studies can provide a brand-new landscape in which to explore how performance functions in radically different contexts. Scholars working in the intersection of performance and game studies have the potential to bring a heightened knowledge of storytelling to the virtual world and can bring innovative technological modalities back to the stage. Understanding the game

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[13] One of the most famous arguments comes from game scholar Frasca Gonzalo's "Ludologists love stories too: notes from a debate that never took place" (2003): http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/ludologists-love-stories-too-notes-from-a-debate-that-never-took-place/.

player can assist in a better understanding the audience, so that the ethical player might become the ethical participant on all stages—physical and virtual.

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