

# SECRET AGENT SHEPARD: AN EXAMINATION OF

## THE ROLE OF AGENCY IN THE *MASS EFFECT*

### FRANCHISE

Roger Ebert, the film critic for the *Chicago Sun-Times* once famously said “no video gamer now living will survive long enough to experience the medium as an art form.” (Ebert) This unsupported statement comes not from the *Donkey Kong* days of the 1980s when games were simplistic affairs where you ran, jumped, and saved the princess in an effort to type “ASS” into a high score screen, but from 2010 – three years after video gaming saw the largest single-day entertainment event ever with *Halo 3*’s \$170 million single-day gross and the release of two of gaming’s best arguments for artistic merit: *Bioshock* and *Mass Effect*. (AFTRA) Backing up Ebert’s criticism is the sentiment expressed by comedian Dara O’Briain: “you can be bad at playing a video game and the video game will punish you and deny you access to the rest of the video game.” (O’Briain) Video gaming is the only form of art that will deny access because of the ineptitude of the user. But beneath the complexity of game play and the arguments surrounding one’s inability to get to the castle, games contain a wealth of beautiful artwork, stellar scores, and beautifully moving narratives. While the releases of 2007 addressed many of the critics and created a better argument for gaming as art than probably any year previous, this paper is not here to debate video games’ place as an art form – this is a basic assumption for my argument. Nor is this paper here to debate the visual and aural artistic merits of video games: these have also been firmly established. Nor again is this paper here to discuss the impact that comes from the frustration of being bad at video games. This paper is here to set aside the visual, aural, and systemic arguments and focus mainly on the nature of narrative in modern video

games – specifically the *Mass Effect* franchise – and the uniquely agent role of the player in storytelling.

As the technology involved in making video games advances, the quality of stories told in these games advances as well. Modern games can have non-linear stories which lead to several different endings based on choices and conclusions drawn during the game, or they can be beautifully rendered linear stories that inevitably funnel you down one master narrative towards one colossal ending. The *Mass Effect* franchise supposes to be one of the former: a game where every decision supposedly leads to a different outcome, creating a personalized experience. This claim can be seen in advertising for *Mass Effect*: “How do you decide who to save? Who to let perish? Life and death decisions await at every stop.” (*Mass Effect*) Even in reviews hyping the game, choice is paramount: “You are the hero, and your choices dictate the way all key events play out.” (Villoria) Previews as early as two years before the release of *Mass Effect* were trumpeting the same feature: “your actions will shape the destiny of all life in the universe.” (Tuttle) Even after stripping away some hyperbole, it is quite obvious that the developer, BioWare, intended *Mass Effect* and its two sequels – *Mass Effect* was planned as a trilogy from the beginning – to give the player some amount of control over the nature of the story that would persist across all three games. This expanded role BioWare allows the player brings up some interesting questions when reading *Mass Effect* and its sequels, particularly with an eye for agency as *Mass Effect* dispenses with the traditional sense of agency as the domain of the character alone and invites the reader into the character’s agency. This invitation is accomplished by placing a greater than normal narrative burden on what James Paul Gee calls the “projected identity:” an identity formed through negotiation between the real identity – the player behind the controller – and the virtual identity – the character on the screen (Gee 49-51).

While all video games feature some element of these three identities, BioWare's embrace of the projected identity as a narrative force leads to different considerations of the nature of agency.

In *Mass Effect*, a game built and sold on grand assumptions of this fusion of character/player agency, how much agency does Shepard really have, or is Shepard's agency limited by real-world constraints, the negotiation between real and virtual identities in the projected identity, and developer manipulation?

In looking at agency, it would be useful to define what agency is. For this paper, two definitions of the idea of agency will be used: a broader definition of agency, and a narrower, discipline-specific definition within the broader context. An excellent definition of agency can be found in Donald Davidson's essay entitled "Agency" where Davidson claims that "a man is the agent of an act if what he does can be described under an aspect that makes it intentional... a person is the agent of an event if and only if there is a description of what he did that makes a true sentence that said he did it intentionally." (Davidson 46) For practical purposes, this means that agency is found in intentional actions. If one were to slip and fall, they might not be an agent in their action. But if a person slips and falls in an attempt to incur personal injury for a lawsuit, that person would be an agent in their own fate. Video games present two problems for this theory of agency: first, are all actions created equal in a video game, and if they are not, how do we separate types of actions? Second, how does one derive intentionality from the actions of a video game? The first question is resolved with a second theory of agency: local and global agency. In their essay "Writing *Façade*: A Case Study in Procedural Authorship," Michael Mateas and Andrew Stern put forward definitions of both local and global agency in the concept of video game development. According to Mateas and Stern, local agency is "actions [that] cause immediate, context-specific, meaningful actions from the system" and global agency is "when

the global shape of the experience is determined by player action.” (Mateas and Stern 203-204, 204) When combined with Davidson’s theory of agency, an example of local agency would be when the player performs an action that causes the system to react in a way more substantial than “I can’t let you do that, Dave,” such as pushing a button to open a door, or in a more complex example, setting off alarms to draw off enemies. In contrast, an example of global agency would be something like deciding whether or not to kill somebody or let the person live.

But merely determining whether an action is global or local in scope is not enough if it is the intention only that makes agency. In literature, Davidson’s requirement for intentionality is much easier to see: the author will provide textual clues as to the intentionality of the action. The author knows he must because the text is the only thing we have in a book. But many video games will have very little text; the key to finding intentionality on a video game lies in the nature of the action undertaken. Some actions are simple: there is intentionality behind them because the player created intentionality for the character in the player’s action. But what about scripted events? The intentionality in scripted events lies in what is shown through the speech of the characters and their on-screen actions. As an example, most of the time the *Normandy* drops the *Mako* in *Mass Effect*, there is no evidence of any intentional decision-making in the choice of the particular drop zone. But on the Ilos mission, Shepard intentionally chooses where to drop the *Mako* (*Mass Effect*). The distinction between the two decisions is that on the Ilos mission, BioWare took the time to actively show Shepard exercising intentionality in his decision.

But now that we have our theories of agency, how do they work together? First, one must determine if any given action is local or global in scope, then one must determine whether or not an action was intentional. Intentionality determines agency and the scale of the reaction by the

system determines whether the agency is local or global. These ideas are again complicated by Gee's consideration of the seat of agency as well: which identity is agent in the action?

When this system is applied at a character level to *Mass Effect* and its sequels, it becomes apparent that Shepard – both the virtual Shepard written by BioWare and the projected identity – have a much smaller degree of agency than BioWare would lead the player to believe. As a person in the virtual identity, Shepard is not an effective agent because the actions Shepard undertakes are either reactionary or removed from Shepard. As a reactionary, Shepard undertakes many actions that illustrate a degree of global agency, but the problem lies in intentionality. Why does the virtual identity Shepard undertake these actions? In *Mass Effect*, the majority of quests available to you come from two places: personal requests and orders. As a soldier, Shepard's intentionality is heavily limited by his position as a taker of orders. When his superiors tell him to clear out a test field of haywire drones, Shepard does it (*Mass Effect*). When Shepard is asked by a crew member to help find some stolen armor, Shepard does it (*Mass Effect*). This system largely holds true through the second game as Shepard is given orders, such as finding where the aliens are taking all the humans, or personal requests, such as helping a team member kill the man who betrayed him (*Mass Effect 2*). However, these are the actions of the virtual identity before negotiation in the projected identity. In *Mass Effect*, the player, and by extension the projected identity, can choose not to undertake many of these quests, especially the personal requests, but in *Mass Effect 2*, the dialogue assumes you have undertaken the quests anyway, seen in references to the Moon AI you might have decided not to destroy, or most heinously in the major story thread of *Mass Effect 2* being derived heavily from optional quests in *Mass Effect* that one might have decided to skip. No matter Shepard's decision, the intentionality of the projected identity's agency is compromised in the game's insistence that the

projected identity was a good soldier and friend in the first game, in a way ignoring one of the major selling points of the game: the strong projected identity.

The final installment of the series attempts to rectify this problem through the introduction of War Assets (*Mass Effect 3*). Because the nature of the narrative has moved from a soldier taking orders within a machine to a hero attempting to save the galaxy, the War Assets reflect a new, more effective degree of intentionality in all three of Gee's identities. Designed as they are, the player has no compulsion to accumulate the majority of War Assets, so intentionality is inherent in their accumulation. For the virtual identity, the War Assets represent tangible, workable steps towards a solution to a galactic problem that everyone insists borders on the unsolvable: The Crucible and the repulsion of the Reapers (*Mass Effect 3*). For the projected identity, the War Assets become a real-time reflection of the decision-making processes and methodologies in play in the game, particularly in the hidden and mutable War Assets that directly reflect decisions made by the player, such as choosing between the Krogan and Salarian militaries or the various War Assets of the Citadel Defense Force. (*Mass Effect 3*) For the real identity, the War Assets allow for intentional decision-making in the meta-game: By tying the ending options to the War Assets system, the real identity must take into account their War Assets as they decide what decisions to make in the endgame. By giving the War Assets a real impact on a global scale, BioWare managed to expand the agency of Shepard closer to what the hype promised, and the previous two games never quite delivered. His agency is increased in efficacy in the third game, even though the problems of the first two games still exist: events and actions are assumed to have transpired or been taken, whether the player made any real decisions or not, and the source of the majority of the game's actions are still manufactured and deterministic.

This is not to say that the projected identity Shepard is completely without agency. Many decisions, such as the *Mass Effect* decisions to kill or spare the Rachni and the *Mass Effect 2* decision to restore or destroy the Heretic Geth illustrate a great deal of global agency: They are intentional actions with high-level (i.e. endgame) consequences and responses. In the context of the first two parts of the trilogy, there are no actions beyond small illustrations of local agency in lieu of the global reactions BioWare leads the player to expect, such as a brief cut scene in *Mass Effect* and a few lines of dialogue in *Mass Effect 2* that encapsulate the totality of the games' reactions to the Rachni decision. BioWare addresses this problem in *Mass Effect 3* by including many of the global decisions in major events in the third story, going so far as to make elements of the story inaccessible without having addressed them in the first two games. For example, the resolution of the Krogan Genophage plotline has multiple options, but the option that saves a particular character is unavailable unless the player made a specific decision in the first and second games. (*Mass Effect 3*) Other plotlines have similar restricted possibilities without the first two installments and the global agency require from Shepard. Unlike the previous two installments, *Mass Effect 3* is very good at taking prior choices into account, giving the real identity of the player a real sense that they actually has agency in this system through the projected identity.

But beyond the grand galactic decisions that are one of the franchise's selling points, the projected identity Shepard has an element of local agency that comes into its own in *Mass Effect 2* and continues into *Mass Effect 3*: The ability to make small-scale, intentional decisions that have no effect on Shepard and his life and role in the galaxy, but have an effect on some other character. These decisions can be as minor as a random dialogue option or a small item picked up by happenstance, but they contain the best examples of agency in the entire game at the

character level, local or global. In one example from *Mass Effect 2*, Shepard makes the intentional decision to pick up some fake IDs, and later makes an intentional decision to give the fake IDs to some well-intentioned but bureaucratically hassled people so they can go home. In another example from *Mass Effect*, Shepard, in the projected identity, can intentionally choose to push a woman for a greater reward for services provided and receive a greater reward in the form of sexual intimacy. In both of these cases, the actions are both intentional and elicit an immediate, context-specific, and meaningful response from the game. *Mass Effect 3* continues this trend through its system of side-quests connected to the War Assets system: The virtual identity Shepard picks up the quests organically, through overhearing people, and then makes the intentional decision in the projected identity to seek out their item and the intentional decision to return it. (*Mass Effect 3*) Local agency is again demonstrated strongly in the quicktime events introduced in *Mass Effect 2*, continuing through *Mass Effect 3*. The quicktime events are by their nature intentional action both in the virtual and projected identities, often showing the virtual Shepard contemplating the action to take before taking it, such as an example from *Mass Effect 2* where Shepard eyes an explosive pipeline before choosing to shoot it, or subtly making a fist before choosing to clobber a reporter. The agency in these actions is unique for a negotiated action as well, as the intentionality that is normally shared between the virtual and projected identities has its intentional genesis solely in the virtual identity, which presents an option to the projected identity, which must then take an intentional action. The quicktime actions are local agent actions on Shepard's part, both in the virtual and projected identities, because while they rarely have global impact, they always have a local impact that is significant and an intentional element, stemming from Shepard in the narrative and from the player controlling Shepard.

There is another set of actions that are important to note in any discussion of agency and *Mass Effect*, especially concerning the franchise's reception in the press: relationship and sexual questions of agency. One of the much-ballyhooed features of the game originally was the idea that Shepard would be able to have a graphic sex scene – in reality a scene far less graphic than the press was led to believe – with a female human or alien if playing as a male, or with a male human or female alien if playing as a female. (*Mass Effect*). In *Mass Effect 2*, BioWare provided more options for romantic partners, but limited Shepard's already limited sexual agency by removing any inkling of an option for a homosexual relationship, an issue rectified in *Mass Effect 3*. In looking at Shepard's relationships from a perspective concerned with agency, one immediately finds that while Shepard is free to select an acceptable partner, Shepard's agency in any given relationship ends there. Shepard, whether male or female, has no say in when sex is initiated in any *Mass Effect* game, or in very many aspects of the relationships seen. Every time sex is approached in the game, Shepard is the one being acted upon with intentionality, not the one acting intentionally. In the few instances in the franchise where Shepard intentionally attempts to take hold of a sexual component of a relationship – one example being when Shepard, confronted his/her two competing love interests, intentionally asks “Can't I have you both?” – one of the love interests will retake the intentionality present in the moment and reject Shepard. (*Mass Effect*) This lack of agency in romantic relationships is disguised in *Mass Effect 2* through smoke screening relationship issues behind personality conflicts, such as the arguments between Miranda and Jack. The entire nature of the romantic sub-plots in all three games serves to illustrate the key problem in reading Shepard as an agent in any *Mass Effect* game: Shepard's agency, when present, is either too high-level to affect Shepard in his world – the agency curtailed here is usually the agency of the projected identity – or is too oriented

towards other characters to affect Shepard, even with the expanded agent role the War Assets are allowed in *Mass Effect 3*. On the other hand, the virtual identity Shepard, through the course of the series, is acted upon by others taking hold of their agency as much as he acts upon others or even the galaxy as an agent.

All of this is not meant to say that the *Mass Effect* franchise to date has dealt poorly with the actualization of agency. On the contrary, they have created a world where women and men are equally ineffective agents in their own fates. And maybe ineffective is too strong a word, and possibly even an incorrect reading. Shepard's intentional actions do often have effects, just not on Shepard and his life. When looking back at the game as a whole from a perspective dealing with agency, one sees a good deal of global agency in Shepard's actions at the global level and a good deal of agency in the actions of supporting characters on Shepard's life at the local level. Many of the things that happen in the *Mass Effect* games happen because of the agency of characters in Shepard's inner circle. BioWare has developed in the *Mass Effect* franchise games with a major theme of interconnectedness where everyone has a hand in everyone else's agency. To amend my previous statement, Shepard is not quite ineffective, but merely forced to focus elsewhere than on his own life.

It is also important to note that there are two major questions that are important to answer in connection to questions of agency that cannot be fully answered here. First, how much of Shepard's lack of agency in the projected identity and the lack of agency in the real identity comes from genre limitations? Greg Costikyan provides some perspective on the nature of digital RPGs when he says that digital RPGs allow "more options at each point, and quite often there is a choice of which path to take next, reducing the degree of linearity. They are still intimately tied to a story – the story progresses during the game and reaches some eventual dénouement – but

there is more freedom on a moment-to-moment basis. Digital RPGs however have limited playability because they are tied to an ultimately linear storyline.” (Costikyan 9) Costikyan touches on the *Mass Effect* franchise’s chief limitation and its attempt to solve this limitation: The structure of the genre and franchise dictates that the character must arrive at a certain place at a certain time, a game design that Costikyan describes as “Beads-on-a-string.” (Costikyan 8) The idea of the beads on a string is that games open up into areas of freedom, and then narrow down into forced transition points where certain events must happen for the game to move forward. BioWare has been attempting to break this system with branching dialogue, persistent choices, and all the other trimmings of the *Mass Effect* franchise, but so far, they are stuck in the same genre limitations. How much of Shepard’s agency was planned, but hamstrung by genre and technical limitations is a question that cannot be answered except by the developers and writers.

This leads to the second major question: was this lack of personal agency intentional? BioWare might have limited the agency of Shepard for thematic reasons: To help develop the theme of inevitability which is subtly developed through the course of the series, coming to a head in the *Extended Cut* of *Mass Effect 3* and the *Leviathan* DLC. Inevitability is naturally at odds with concepts of agency, and as BioWare develops a theme of inevitability juxtaposed against the more obvious theme of personal freedom and choice – albeit through clumsy storytelling in the *Extended Cut* – it is a limit that makes sense. In his article for *Pop Bioethics*, Kyle Munkittrick examines the thematics of *Mass Effect*, observing the extrapolation of the ideas of inevitability into Lovcraftian Cosmicism:

The flaw [in most science fiction] is a simple one: The assumption that life has meaning, that intelligent life has a purpose, and that humanity contributes anything to the universe. H.P. Lovecraft, a man “against the world, against life,” refused to assume the

universe was good. Out of that refusal crawled the sublime philosophy of Cosmicism... Cosmicism is not merely the idea that there is no meaning in the universe. It's far worse. Instead, the argument is that there is meaning, but it is so far above and beyond human understanding that we can never attain meaningful existence. (Munkittrick)

Through *Leviathan* and the ending, both in its original and in the *Extended Cut*, BioWare expands these concepts of Cosmicism – ideas which appeared as early as the first game in Sovereign's conversations with Shepard and were reinforced in the second game through Harbinger (*Mass Effect*, *Mass Effect 2*, *Mass Effect 3*). Yet in the third game, this theme is turned on its head as well as reinforced: Much of the final game is about developing the strength to cast off the inevitability of such a cosmic force. This development in theme parallels the growth of agency in the arc of the game: As the Cosmicist conflict moves from inevitability to confrontability to victory, Shepard's agency grows as well, from the circumscribed agency to choosing the fate of the entire galaxy.

As gamers speculate and BioWare teases about the next *Mass Effect* game, little is known for certain. What is known for sure is that, no matter what BioWare produces, it will inevitably be compared to the high standards set by the original trilogy, including the way in which the trilogy promised to allow the player into the narrative in a meaningful way. While clumsy at times, in the end BioWare delivered something close to what the hype promised: an undeniable triumph of storytelling, and a beautiful exploration of the potential of intentionality in all three seats of identity, even if that potential was not always within reach.

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