

DECISION-MAKING, EMERGENCE AND NARRATIVE IN  
*DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS, MASS EFFECT AND*  
*MASS EFFECT 2*

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By

Jordan Rudek

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Head of the Department of English  
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OR

Dean  
College of Graduate Studies and Research  
University of Saskatchewan  
107 Administration Place  
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 5A2  
Canada

## Abstract

This article focuses on digital role-playing games produced by BioWare in which the decisions made by players can have a profound impact on the narrative of each game. My approach relies heavily upon the dissection of examples from *Dragon Age: Origins*, *Mass Effect*, and *Mass Effect 2* as I found that scholarship about video games focused heavily on theory rather than analysis of in-game content, at least compared to the size and popularity of the genre. I work with key concepts such as narrative, simulation, and sideshadowing in order to analyse the dialogue options and scenarios presented to the player in these games. I claim that we can compare decision-making in real life and decision-making in role-playing games in order to examine the emotions and thoughts that go into the decision-making process. I task myself with discussing the implications of choosing one's own narrative and analysing the mechanics of these games that urge players to make morality-based choices. I consider the ideas of Gary Saul Morson and Mikhail Bakhtin as a way of using literary theory to deconstruct the complexities of navigating through these unique game worlds. My aim is to show that the multi-linear structures of modern, digital role-playing games represent simulators through which players can explore their own decision-making processes. BioWare constructs emotional and intellectual decision-making opportunities that entice players to consider their own morality in the face of life or death decisions. I argue that these role-playing games urge us to consider the ways we make decisions in our everyday lives and allow us to simulate how we might act given the chance to play hero or villain.

## I: Introduction

*It is the mark of a good fairy-story, of the higher or more complete kind, that however wild its events, however fantastic or terrible the adventures, it can give to child or man that hears it, when the “turn” comes, a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or indeed accompanied by) tears, as keen as that given by any form of literary art, and having a peculiar quality.* (“On Fairy Stories” 23)

In “On Fairy Stories,” J. R. R. Tolkien examines the various ways by which people perceive and understand the fictional worlds in novels such as *The Hobbit*. He coins the term “Faerie” to refer to the mythical and fantastic universe where humans, elves, dwarves, and other creatures co-exist. His spelling of the word both signals a departure from the specific mythical creature (fairy) and alludes to the Old French “faerie” which refers to a land of folklore and romance. Throughout the essay, Tolkien gives meaning to the term “Faerie.” He states that “the primal desire at the heart of Faerie . . . [is] the realisation, independent of the conceiving mind, of imagined wonder” (5). In other words, upon entering this world of “Faerie,” the reader or viewer ideally conceives of a magical realm without being mentally aware that the world is not real. Later, Tolkien continues: “That state of mind has been called ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ [but] what really happens is that the story-maker proves a successful ‘sub-creator.’ He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is ‘true:’ it accords with the laws of the [real] world” (12). For example, a sword through the chest proves just as fatal in the Secondary World as it would in the reader’s own reality. In other words, Tolkien emphasises the concept of believing in this “Secondary World.” By superimposing the concept of belief, or even faith, over the notion of suspending disbelief, Tolkien argues for the conception of an entirely new world where the person experiencing the world takes literally what they see, feel, and do within that world. I feel that this idea of a second world applies to video games, specifically role-playing video games or RPGs.<sup>1</sup> Many popular RPGs transport the player to a new realm--a realm based on the Faerie world of *The Lord of the Rings*, an imagined future

world, or a distorted present. RPGs encourage the player to think of the simulated world as a real world; the choices players make within this world, while playing the game, engage players emotionally and intellectually. In addition, more recent games in this genre challenge players to navigate through game worlds in ways that are not entirely linear. Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of “emergence” and Gary Saul Morson’s concept of “sideshadowing” help me make connections between RPGs, game studies, and literary theory. Nick Montfort and Gonzalo Frasca’s research on narrative and video games foregrounds my discussion of BioWare’s most recent RPGs. Most importantly, I want to explore this comparison: decision-making in RPGs versus decision-making in the real world. How do the process and consequences of making a choice in an RPG differ from those of making a choice in the real world? Do we develop as human beings as a result of creating narratives in video games? I begin with a discussion of *Dragon Age: Origins* and move to an analysis of *Mass Effect* and *Mass Effect 2* because the former uses more basic narrative building elements, while the latter requires a more in-depth inspection of specific in-game events to tease out, among other things its heavy investment in a morality scale.

*Dragon Age: Origins*, an RPG produced by BioWare, situates players within a medieval fantasy world teeming with both mythical creatures and humans. The player or interactor first chooses a gender (male or female), then a race (human, elf, or dwarf), and finally a class (warrior, mage, or rogue). This initial customisation sets up many of the dialogue options and events available to the player during their playthrough of the game. For example, non-player characters will converse differently with females and elves than they would with males or humans, which makes the simulated world more dynamic and realistic. The game follows the story of a powerful lord, Loghain, who seizes control of the throne of Ferelden, the name of the country where the game takes place. The king of Ferelden, Cailan, is betrayed by Loghain and

killed during a battle with the principal antagonists of the game, grotesque “orc-like” monsters known as “darkspawn.” Before saving Ferelden from the darkspawn, which is the ultimate goal of the game, the player, who is blamed for Cailan’s death, must clear his or her name by progressing through the game and proving and bringing to light Loghain’s treachery. Thus, from very early on in the narrative of the game, the player is given one main goal that is dependent on the completion of a secondary goal. Customarily, RPGs feature a main quest that is completed in steps, through secondary goals or side quests. In *Dragon Age: Origins*, the player must stop Loghain, and thereby gain allies for the main quest, before he or she can destroy the darkspawn hordes.

In any case, each goal positions the player as a “righter of wrongs.” BioWare, as is the case with many video game developers, installs the player as a heroic figure within the game. Where BioWare differs, however, is in the way in which the hero narrative is both a given but can also be shaped and modified by the player. One can choose to gravitate away from the moral path of the hero by choosing particularly immoral dialogue options presented throughout the game. Many of these dialogue options, where the player is given a list of between two and five possible responses from which to choose, are pedestrian and affect only the player’s enjoyment of the game, as opposed to the world of the game. Conversely, the game crafts some of these dialogue choices with much more significant consequences. I break down the different types of dialogue choices presented to the player into two categories: world-altering decisions and conversation pieces. Dialogue choices represent the primary method through which a player crafts narratives in the world of *Dragon Age: Origins*, but not all dialogue choices impact the player’s experience equally. I feel that distinguishing between different decision-making opportunities allows me to focus on specific situations in the game that carry more narrative

weight. World-altering decisions reverberate with players in the process of and after having finished creating their own personal narratives, while conversation pieces are so common that they are quickly forgotten. *Dragon Age: Origins* enables players to make emotionally-taxing, life or death decisions within the world of the game that they do not have the opportunity to make in their own lives. These choices simulate, or take to their logical conclusions, the commonplace decisions players face every day, and BioWare makes this simulation more effective and more immediate through the complexity and importance of these choices. Because of the multitude of choices to be made in a game like *Dragon Age: Origins*, the player will likely finish the main narrative of the game feeling unfulfilled. A single playthrough of the game fails to reveal all of the potential dialogues and interactions possible in the game world. Is the game ever truly “finished?” I want to apply definitions of immersion, simulation, and narrative so as to illuminate the methods through which *Dragon Age: Origins* creates meaning for itself and its audience. Before proceeding to a few specific examples within the game, I must define and explicate these key terms that will be used in my analysis.

First, *The Oxford English Dictionary* provides helpful ways of looking at the term “immersion.” For the root “immerse,” the *OED* states: “To plunge or sink into a (particular) state of body or mind; to involve deeply, to steep, absorb, in some action or activity.” Etymologically, we can also make the connection to the word “merge” which is defined as follows: “to be absorbed and disappear, to lose character or identity by absorption into something else; to join or blend, esp. gradually; to combine, amalgamate.” Applied to video games, these ideas suggest a transformation that occurs in people while playing. The more players identify with a character, and therefore lose (temporarily) their own identities, the more they will be immersed in the world of the game and the greater the amount of satisfaction they will derive from their experience.

The etymology of a term like “immersion” suggests that when players are immersed in a game such as *Dragon Age: Origins*, the boundaries between the simulated world and the real world will be blurred.

To recapitulate on Tolkien’s ideas about secondary worlds, players may start to believe in the game world and think of it as living and breathing. Such problematisation stems from BioWare’s ability to create an environment or world that absorbs the player in its “action or activity,” in this case, the narrative, events, and dialogue options of the game. I maintain that video games create enjoyable and memorable experiences by blurring the distinction between reality and fantasy so that the player can simulate or determine his or her reactions to different situations. Put another way, the more hazy the line between Ferelden and one’s own country, the greater the sense of immersion. Immersion allows a player to enjoy the game world differently compared to the way they might enjoy an activity in reality because the consequences of his or her actions in the game are dramatic and immediate but have no impact on the real world. Without the visceral constraints of the real world, players have both the mental and physical freedom to express their desires and experiment in the simulated world. This experimentation, I suspect, has the potential to yield results that assist players with making decisions in real life. Video games can give valuable insight into human interaction and experience by immersing players in an environment where their decision-making abilities can be tested through simulation.

Second, the *OED* contains two definitions of the word “simulate” which require critical explication. The first definition states: “To assume falsely the appearance or signs of (anything); to feign, pretend, counterfeit, imitate; to profess or suggest (anything) falsely.” The strong negative connotation of the first definition is followed by a more neutral second definition: “to



have the external features of, to present a strong resemblance to (something).” Each definition creates a specific relationship between an object to be simulated and the simulation of that object. For example, imagine a ripe, yellow banana. The banana to be simulated is shaped like a crescent, has a firm outer peel, and grows on a tree. The simulated banana will be very much like the real banana, but it will also be different. It might not taste or smell the same as a real banana. The number and sharpness of these differences indicate how successful the “fake” banana is at simulating a real banana.

In “Simulation versus Narrative,” Gonzalo Frasca teases out further the definition and meaning of “simulation” as it applies to video games. Frasca foregrounds his argument by pointing out that “unlike traditional media, video games are not just based on representation but on an alternative semiotical structure known as simulation” (222). He makes this distinction before also connecting narrative to representation, so as to suggest that video games and narratives are mutually exclusive. I do not agree with this aspect of his paper (I think that video games *do* have narratives), but his notion of video games as simulation is useful. The following is his definition of simulation: ““To simulate is to model a (source) system through a different system, which maintains (for somebody) some of the behaviors of the original system.’ . . . Simulation does not simply retain the generally-audiovisual-characteristics of the object, but it also includes a model of its behaviors” (223). From this passage, we can extract the key notion of behaviours and apply it to video games. In *Dragon Age: Origins*, when NPCs beg for their lives at the end of a battle, they express panic and obsequiousness in their tone of voice and their diction. One might expect to hear similarly voiced and worded sentiments from a man or woman facing such jeopardy in real life. Moving forward, although Frasca makes this connection to advertising in video games, I think he states quite aptly that “the potential of video games is not

to tell a story but to simulate: to create an environment for experimentation” (225). I contend that the experiment itself is the creation of individual narratives by players as they progress through these simulated video game worlds. On the other hand, Frasca reiterates his feelings about the separation between video games and narrative, but more importantly he posits the capability of video games to experiment with different situations. Sharply put, he foregrounds the concept of using video games to test or gauge our reactions to certain stimuli. Finally, Frasca observes that “video games imply an enormous paradigm shift for our culture because they represent the first complex simulational media for the masses” (224). This shift underpins and emphasises the difficulty in theorising about video games; however, by augmenting the definitions we have used to look at other texts, such as novels and film, can find meaning in the pop culture phenomenon that is gaming.

Third, while Frasca disconnects narrative from video games, Nick Montfort discusses the way in which digital media, specifically computer games, have combined the two with interesting results. In “Narrative and Digital Media,” Montfort writes, “In narrating, computers represent events either by directly outputting narrative text, graphics, and sound or by generating this from some underlying representation of what has happened. In simulating, computers determine what happens in some model world, using a system of rules” (172). This quotation is the extent to which Montfort defines the term “narrative;” however, Marie-Laure Ryan provides a number of apt descriptions, one of which states that “[a] narrative is a sign with a signifier (discourse) and a signified (story, mental image, semantic representation). The signifier can have many different semiotic manifestations. It can consist for instance of a verbal act of storytelling (diegetic narration), or of gestures and dialogue performed by actors (mimetic, or dramatic narration” (Ryan 2001). Ryan foregrounds the dichotomy of signifier and signified that

plays a key role in the reception of narrative within video games. Players are aware of how they are receiving the story, be it through an omniscient narrator doing voiceover or through the combination of dialogue read by players and spoken by characters. I want to add to these definitions of narrative by also thinking of it as a sequence of events that are designed around one or a number of changes either in the world of the narrative, such as character changes, or of the world, such as the destruction of a city or village.

Montfort stresses that we cannot simply scrutinise the narrative of a video game without considering why we play the game in the first place. His example of *Ms. Pac-Man* explains this point:

People do not appreciate *Ms. Pac-Man* simply as a reading or viewing experience. They enjoy playing it – or, to use terms that are not restricted to games, they enjoy interacting with it and operating it. At the same time, even *Ms. Pac-Man* is an expressive digital system which suggests a narrative (however unimportant this narrative might be to the player's experience of this particular game) through its system of rules, through the signs that are associated with different elements of the game, and through cut scenes – the three animated mini-movies that appear between levels, and that portray some romantic encounters between Pac-Man and Ms. Pac-Man. (Montfort 175)

This passage demonstrates that we cannot focus all of our attention on the narrative of a video game without considering how and to what degree the narrative affects the playing of the game. As Montfort admits, the narrative of a game like *Ms. Pac-Man* is incredibly insignificant to the enjoyment of the game, but the producers of the game did still incorporate narrative elements

that add cohesion and depth to the game, and that will be appreciated by some players more than others.

As video game players, or gamers, have become more sophisticated and experienced with the medium, they have demanded that narrative become more prevalent in genres that placed little focus on narrative in the past. First-person shooter games such as *Halo 3* or *Bioshock* have much more of a narrative element than their predecessors *Doom* and *Wolfenstein 3D*. This shift has occurred partly because of advances in technology that have allowed programmers to construct games with more of a narrative element; however, some genres have always relied upon strong and engaging narratives. RPGs such as *Final Fantasy VII* or *Chrono Trigger* have very strong and engaging narratives that become the focus of those games. Rather than being action-oriented or incredibly fast-paced, RPGs are produced with the intention of telling memorable stories that are pieced together by the player. Each of the aforementioned games is fairly linear in its construction, which means that the player does not have much choice in narrative when progressing from the beginning of the game to the end. Fortunately, BioWare started producing RPGs that granted an increasing amount of freedom to the player in terms of how to navigate through the story of the game and, in some cases, how to affect the story itself.

Returning to my division of dialogue choices, conversation pieces function as a fun and interesting way of interacting with the game world, non-player characters, and companions in the player's party. I maintain that these less consequential decisions, such as whether to politely introduce one's Elf warrior to another character or to call them "human scum," may reveal new dialogues or information about the world of the game; however, they do not significantly alter the story. By the phrase "significantly alter," I am referring to events such as characters being killed off, removed from the game, joining a player's party, or other repercussions of similar

consequence. I concede that some of the conversation pieces serve as a way of improving the relationship between the player and his or her companions in that each companion has an approval rating that fluctuates based on the player's dialogue choices and other events. Because conversation pieces are only one way of changing approval ratings--statistics that gauge how characters in the player's party feel about the player and lead to additional dialogue options between the player and his or her party members--and because not all conversation pieces alter approval rating, I prefer to leave them in an inferior position to world-altering decisions.<sup>2</sup>

World-altering decisions are scattered throughout *Dragon Age: Origins* and are limited enough in number to underscore their significance. Naturally, if world-altering decisions were as common as conversation pieces, players would initially be overwhelmed, and eventually less deliberate with each choice. In other words, the game presents the player with enough world-altering decisions to keep the game engaging and interesting, but not too many to weigh down the value of each. I believe that BioWare crafted each of these events to simulate the types of choices we can only imagine that we would make in our own lives. The function of placing the player within a life or death situation is to create a world with gravity and weight. BioWare entices the player to foster an empathetic relationship with the world of the game by leading the player down forked paths that lead to different narrative outcomes. Again, the distinction between world-altering events and conversation pieces is critical as the former urge the player to experience more complex feelings and perhaps allow for soul-searching and moral introspection. I look at world-altering decision in greater detail in the second section of this paper.

In games where players are given choices and options by the developers, they piece together an individual sequence of events and changes that has meaning; it is their version of the story. In discussing textual studies, Joseph Grigely examines the concept of iterability, or

repeatability, and this term can be applied to narrative creation in video games as well. He suggests that “although language . . . is iterable, this iterability begins to rupture when applied to utterances . . . even when those utterances are written. We move further and further from the moment of inscription and are attached to that moment by a small thread of words that are at once both the residue of that moment and our bond to it” (Grigely 202). In this way, although a game such as *Dragon Age: Origins* can be replayed, each individual playthrough is noniterable; it is unique to the player at the specific time of its inception. Grigely uses the term “polytext” as a way of describing, for example, *The Tempest*: “It is defined by the manifestations of texts, in which case we can say there is no ‘text’ of the *The Tempest*, but only a series of texts that comprise *The Tempest’s* polytext” (Grigely 205). We can think of BioWare RPGs as polytexts insofar as they are comprised of an infinite number of playthroughs, possibilities, and narratives. I believe that immersion derives from the ability to create narrative within a story. Furthermore, BioWare allows the player to experiment with complicated moral decisions in the simulated world of Ferelden. The concepts of immersion, simulation, and narrative culminate in a satisfying and thought-provoking finished product, but the experience of playing *Dragon Age: Origins* eschews the finality of ever being “finished.”

*Dragon Age: Origins* alludes to a process known as “sideshadowing” that allows the player to carry out a decision he or she has made while seeing the consequences of having not chosen alternate paths. Although much more apparent in *Mass Effect 2*, sideshadowing makes the player feel the emotion of having created multiple outcomes despite having taken only one action. Is not every decision both the choosing of one path and the failure to choose others? In *Narrative and Freedom*, Gary Saul Morson discusses the concept of “sideshadowing,” an idea that underpins the multi-linearity of recent BioWare RPGs. He writes:

In an open universe, the illusion is inevitably itself. Alternatives always abound, and, more often than not, what exists need not have existed. *Something else* was possible, and sideshadowing is used to create a sense of that “something else.” Instead of casting a foreshadow from the future, it casts a shadow “from the side,” that is, from the other possibilities. (118)

In *Dragon Age: Origins*, world-altering decisions represent narrative possibilities. Alternatives *do* abound, and characters in the game generally signal their arrival. Often before a world-altering decision takes place, one or more NPCs will briefly explain the consequences of each particular option available to the player. These explanations are succinct enough that the player will understand the moral impact of his or her decision but lack depth to the point that the dialogue options presented to the player still arouse feelings of curiosity. Interestingly, NPCs typically reveal their own personal feelings and biases while trying to guide the player to make a certain choice over others. For example, Cullen, one of the Templar knights who protect Ferelden from mages, maintains that all of the mages in the Circle of Magi scenario should be destroyed because they might be evil blood mages in disguise. He warns the player of the perils associated with allowing these practitioners of forbidden magic to escape into the world. As a victim of imprisonment and torture at the hands of a blood mage, Cullen understandably speaks with anger and conviction, but he only hints at the ramifications of cleansing the tower of mages. Two such ramifications become clear after agreeing to Cullen’s plan: the player would have to destroy Wynne, a potential character in the player’s party, and the player would not be able to recruit mages for the final battle with the darkspawn at the end of the game. Sideshadowing comes into play after the player has decided to either support Cullen or the surviving mages in the tower because the player has potentially chosen to eliminate certain characters from the

game, and this consequence is felt during the remainder of one's playthrough. However, the game does promote experimentation with narrative by frequently auto-saving the player's progress which allows the player to retrace his or her steps after seeing the outcome of a particular decision. Therefore, like turning back the pages of a book from the *Choose Your Own Adventure* series, the player is constantly stalked by the shadows of decisions made and unmade. *Dragon Age: Origins* introduces the idea of personal narrative building, but *Mass Effect* and *Mass Effect 2* expand and complicate the decision-making processes of RPGs.

## II: Decision-making and the morality system of *Mass Effect* and *Mass Effect 2*

*Mass Effect* and *Mass Effect 2* (from this point abbreviated as *ME* and *ME2*) are BioWare role-playing games set in a futuristic universe meant to reflect the real world. Aside from being set in outer space, one key way in which they differ from *Dragon Age: Origins* is that they represent instalments in a trilogy where decisions made by the player in earlier entries can carry forward into the latter parts of the series. For example, the player can choose to have the main character, Shepard, kill a particular teammate, and this teammate will no longer be a part of the *Mass Effect* universe. Certainly, decisions that reverberate from one game to the next should be considered world-altering, but more importantly they carry momentous weight for the experience of the player. In many instances, one cannot know how or if a particular choice from *ME* will affect the narrative of *ME2*.<sup>3</sup> These two games represent the final objects of my study as their moral choices and divergence from linearity yield interesting results against the backdrop of Mikhail Bakhtin's literary concepts. I provide examples of the decisions that players have to make in these games and conclude with the concepts of ethical thought, sideshadowing, and emergence. My hope is to use these concepts as a way of studying video games as texts with literary value. The framework I have laid out in the beginning of this paper will allow me to spend more time



dissecting the traits and mechanics of *ME* and *ME2* so as to better understand the situation of the player in relation to the narratives of these games and the development of the protagonist, Shepard.

More specifically, three methods of inquiry frame my initial discussion of the first two games of the Mass Effect trilogy. First, the player has the power to determine who the character becomes. In other words, the player chooses the protagonist's sex, attributes, actions, and player dialogue responses, and these distinctions create a unique narrative experience for the player.<sup>4</sup> Second, BioWare enforces limitations and parameters on the player through the text and design of the game. Put another way, the illusion of freedom is strengthened by the fact that players have more control over the game's narrative, but they must still play by the rules set forth by the designers of each game. Third, the player ultimately shapes both the narrative and the universe of the games through his or her particular playthrough. I intend to illustrate that, as Shepard develops as a character, so too will the player experience these changes through contemplation of the morality behind certain decisions or actions. There are countless moments created by BioWare and navigated by the player in which Shepard will make a crucial decision that will inalterably change a moment in the narrative's future. This section of the paper examines a number of these moments in detail.

As I have touched on character customisation earlier, I will only briefly recapitulate some of its implications. In *ME*, a female Shepard will have different opportunities than if the player were to have chosen a male character. A female Shepard might be able to engage in romantic or intimate dialogue with a male NPC, whereas a male Shepard would not. Without expanding on the subject too heavily, BioWare does allow for same sex relationships while imposing certain limitations, such as the one mentioned above, so as to suggest both hetero- and homosexual roles

for the protagonist. More important than the biological gender of the protagonist, as far as this paper is concerned, is the selection of the character's background. In *ME*, the player chooses from one of three predetermined histories and one of three predetermined psychological profiles for his or her character to begin the narrative. These primary character constructions underpin the morality system used throughout the game to gauge, judge, and record the player's decisions. Moreover, they are frequently alluded to in dialogues with NPCs. Knowing that choosing an "Earthborn" history (One of isolation from other planets and galaxies) yields Renegade points and a "Spacer" history (One of exploration, entitlement, and inter-species interactions) yields Paragon points, I observe the two definitions side by side and in order:

"You were an orphan raised on the streets of the great megatropolises covering earth. You escaped a life of petty crime and underworld gangs by enlisting with the Alliance military when you turned 18."

"Both of your parents were in the Alliance military. Your childhood was spent on ships and stations as they transferred from posting to posting, never staying in one location for more than a few years. Following in your parents' footsteps, you enlisted at the age of 18."

The first description portrays the Renegade character as abandoned and self-reliant. Throughout the game, this character (or player) will make choices that benefit himself or herself first and foremost. BioWare associates a character who has grown up without guidance or support with the immoral or evil Renegade status. On the other hand, the second description highlights the connection between family and morality. The Spacer Shepard lives with his or her parents and promptly follows their career path after becoming of age. We can recognise the relationship

between being an upstanding and righteous character and being raised in a guarded and fostering environment. Before turning to a more thorough examination of the morality system in *ME*, I want to point out the two psychological profiles associated with Renegade and Paragon that seem even more obvious:

“Throughout your military career, you have held fast to one basic rule: Get the job done. You’ve been called cold, calculating, and brutal. Your reputation for ruthless efficiency makes your fellow soldiers wary of you. But when failure is not an option, the military always goes to you first.”

“Early in your military career you found yourself facing an overwhelming enemy force. You risked your own life to save your fellow soldiers and defeat the enemy despite the impossible odds. Your bravery and heroism have earned you medals and recognition from the Alliance fleet.” (*ME*)

Again, the first description, entitled “Ruthless,” paints the character as one who will make sacrifices in order to meet his or her goals. A Shepard with this profile fits the Renegade mould because he or she eschews friendship or camaraderie in favour of success. In juxtaposition to the first description, the second, “War Hero,” uses the trope of the underdog in order to persuade the player to build a moral Paragon character. Each description uses the phrase “fellow soldiers” to emphasise the personal nature of the gameplay in *ME*. The cardinal rule of role-playing games is to talk to everyone, and whether Renegade or Paragon, Shepard will talk to, but not necessarily help, many NPCs.

To expand on the morality system used in *ME*, I begin with a concise summary from the *Mass Effect Prima Official Strategy Guide*. Writers Brad Anthony, Bryan Stratton, and Stephen

Stratton suggest that “the morality system of Paragon and Renegade is the evolution of the typical good versus evil alignment spectrum into two independent scales” (13). During gameplay, the player is awarded Renegade or Paragon points for making certain decisions. If the player chooses to rescue a trapped laboratory worker, he or she will likely receive Paragon points. On the other hand, if the player opts instead to kill or abandon the laboratory worker, he or she will receive Renegade points. These morality points are not awarded in all situations; however, I believe that the game does encourage players to construct a narrative playthrough that incorporates more, rather than fewer, decisions carrying moral weight. BioWare wants players to experience the anxiety and intrigue of being able to make life or death choices on their own and uses Paragon and Renegade points to judge these narrative paths created by individual players. Like *Dragon Age: Origins* and certain types of fiction, *ME* purports to simulate scenarios that players would be unlikely to encounter in reality. As much as players might fantasise or dream about being a hero or villain like their characters in the game, the exact scenarios and opportunities of the game are not possible in real life. *ME* leads players towards these decisions through the use of a mini-map at the bottom right corner of the screen. This map is used to locate the player while both indoors and outdoors, and it also shows the location of elevators, stores, vehicles, and most importantly, plot points. Plot points are designated on the map by an orange exclamation point. Interestingly, however, plot points are not necessarily crucial to advancing the main narrative of the game. Rather, they push the player towards more advanced conflicts of morality.

For example, on the planet Noveria, the player needs to obtain a key to unlock the Mako vehicle, Shepard’s method of on-planet transportation, from a holding garage. After speaking to an NPC, Lorik, and obtaining the datapad he requires, the player can simply return to Lorik with

the item, receive the garage key, and continue playing through the narrative of the game.<sup>5</sup> This storyline must be played through by every player in order to see the game's conclusion. If the player decides first to inform an undercover agent playing the role of ambassador about the information on the datapad, then an exclamation point will be created on the mini-map that highlights Lorik's position. Following the plot point and speaking to Lorik after speaking to the agent Parasini advances the story and awards the player Renegade points by allowing the player to use leverage against Lorik to secure a sum of credits (the monetary unit of *ME* and *ME2*) in addition to the garage key. More specifically, during the scene where Shepard leverages Parasini against Lorik, the background music of the game becomes faster and more intense compared to the simpler route of speaking to Lorik without the plot point. The dialogue is more heated, and drums play amidst a much angrier tone in Lorik's voice. The game reinforces the morality of the double-cross through auditory and visual cues, but the fact that BioWare pushes the player towards these situations indicates a desire to test just how far a player will go during a simulation, perhaps making decisions he or she might not if they were available choices in reality.

The decision making of role-playing games like *ME* is complicated by a feature that I call "compromising dialogue." Often, when the game presents a dialogue option, generally regarded as having a tree or web shape, the option can be very different from what the character actually says and does. I see this discrepancy as being both a comment on the nature of decision-making and a limitation of the video game medium. In terms of the former, one cannot always know or anticipate the consequences of one's choices. For example, when a person asks a question, the response he or she receives can vary based on whom he or she asked, the words he or she used, and other factors. More specifically, if I were to ask an elderly man his feelings about Rap

music, I would likely get a different response than if I were to ask a teenaged boy. For the latter, it would not be feasible to accommodate large blocks of texts on the player's screen for the various dialogue options because as many as six options might be available consisting of more than twenty words each. Put sharply, video games can be forgiven for abbreviating dialogue options in order to conserve space. To give an example from the game, during the prologue of *ME*, Shepard is sent to a world called Eden Prime to accompany a special agent, Saren (who turns out to be one of the main antagonists of the game). After the player makes his or her way through most of the level, he or she finds an ally's corpse and a man, Powell, hiding behind a stack of crates. Powell stumbles over his dialogue and one of Shepard's responses is "Other one?" which if selected leads Shepard to say "What the hell are you talking about?" Certainly in this instance the actual spoken dialogue of the character is different than the dialogue option selected by the player, but this difference can at times be startling. I suggest that the game compromises, belittles the authority of, the player in an effort to be economical but also mysterious. This compromise represents a lack of control or an unbalancing that keeps the player guessing. At times it can be obvious which dialogue options will lead to Paragon or Renegade points, but when a player chooses the dialogue option "Other one?" and ends up swearing at the NPC in conversation, there is a knowledge gap created between freedom and limitation that further complicates the morality decisions of the game. How can the player know how his or her dialogue choices will be carried out by Shepard? In short, the player can usually choose in which direction the conversation will lead, but not the words (or their tone) coming out of Shepard's mouth. Compromising dialogue further complicates the role-playing genre of video games by (necessarily) taking full control out of the player's hands.

At the end of Shepard's mission on Noveria, there are a number of similar situations to the one that I discussed from *Dragon Age: Origins* where the player chooses to sacrifice either Isolde or her son, Connor. The first involves whether to destroy or release a giant alien creature known as the Rachni Queen. I want to look closely at the dialogue of the scene to determine how the game sets up the player's ultimate decision and the effect of the actions of the NPCs in the scenario. This particular decision is interesting in that after the player makes his or her initial choice, he or she is given an opportunity to reconsider. Each of Shepard's teammates makes a suggestion before the player takes an action. For this playthrough, my teammates were Williams, an alien-hating human female, and Liara, a serene and contemplative Asari. Williams states, "Commander, I don't trust this thing. We know its kind are killers. The tank is rigged with acid. I recommend using it." She appeals to his sense of pathos by pointing out her own distrust in the creature. Liara, on the other hand, pleads, "they made a mistake. They let the krogan go too far. This is a chance for us to atone. She has done nothing to us." Liara uses a blend of ethos and pathos to try to convince the player to free the creature. The Rachni Queen opens the dialogue tree by stating, "You have the power to free us, or return our people to the silence of memory." Here are the following dialogue options:

1. I won't kill you.
2. I'll free you.
3. You die here, by my hand.

Both of the first two options prompt Shepard to say "I won't destroy your entire race. You'll go free." Choosing to release the Rachni Queen encourages Williams to voice her displeasure: "There's a reason their kind were hunted to extinction. It's better to be safe than let a dangerous

race loose.” This interjection is critical as it allows the player one more chance to make a decision:

1. You’re right. She dies.
2. I can’t accept that.
3. Not all rachni are killers.
4. They could be a powerful ally.

The analysis at this point is simple. The first two options award Renegade points as Shepard allows himself or herself to be persuaded to kill the creature by a teammate. The latter two options award Paragon points as Shepard follows through with the initial decision to not kill the creature and makes the moral choice (according to BioWare), to live and let live.

If the player chooses option 3 from the first set of dialogue options (“You die here, by my hand”) Shepard says, “Make your peace with the galaxy. The rachni are a dead race. At this point, the compassionate teammate, Liara, objects, “No! Stop feeling and think. Even if you disagree with Asari morals, you must see she could be an ally.” This time, the player is only presented with two options:

1. I can’t do this.
2. Shut up and die.

Liara has appealed to the player’s logic and reason, and ironically option 4, “They could be a powerful ally,” is not present because Liara has already arrived at that conclusion for us. Now, choosing option 1 “I can’t do this” releases the Rachni Queen and awards Paragon points, while choosing option 2 leads Shepard to say “This time, stay dead” (*ME*). If the final decision ends up awarding Paragon points, Shepard has a slight grin on his face and a look of determination.



On the other hand, the Renegade option results in a scowl and a narrowing of Shepard's eyes. Each of these subtle gestures perhaps mirrors the heart of the player, if not only the heart of Shepard. In short, NPCs play a crucial role in allowing players to rethink their initial choice by appealing to reason, emotion, and ethics, thus urging reconsideration.

These examples from the Noveria episode of *ME* demonstrate that the morality system awards points in different situations, but why does BioWare employ it in their game? First, the player has the ability to determine whether they play as a wholly good character, an evil character, or a neutral one. It might be that an individual player wants or leans towards a particular decision, such as releasing the Rachni Queen, but for the purpose of exploring a new narrative path, he or she chooses to kill the creature to see Shepard's actions, hear the dialogue of surrounding NPCs, and feel his or her own internal reaction to the event. The player, however, is limited by the mechanics put in place by the developer of the game. One cannot follow the Rachni Queen as it leaves the facility so as to track whether the decision to grant the creature freedom was a good one. Instead, the player might hope that the consequences of this decision will be learned in *ME2* or the yet-unreleased *Mass Effect 3*. The player's own decisions are hindered by the lack of knowledge of the weight of each decision, but certainly some choices are intended to be weighted more heavily through their complexity, the number of morality points awarded, or their depth. When recalling one's own narrative of the game, or responding to questions about one's opinion of the game, inevitably one discusses the key decisions they made during the playthrough. Choosing to destroy the Rachni Queen becomes a symbol for the unique narrative created by a player. Paragon and Renegade points represent lights along divergent pathways that run out from the beginning of the game to the end. These morality markers inform a player's travels through the game and assist in clarifying one perspective on how choices will

be judged: BioWare's. In other words, one can use the game as a way of understanding how BioWare defines morality. Ultimately, the Paragon figure follows a path that can be regarded as less mentally taxing, but more physically taxing whereas the journey of the Renegade is generally more mentally taxing, while involving less physical exertion on the part of the player. Why do we have this paradigm?

Looking past the tropes of good and evil where villainy seems easy compared to the tumultuous endeavours of the hero, BioWare's RPGs allow the player to alternate between these two extremes in order to experience the thought-processes behind each role. I posit that having the ability to act as Paragon in one scenario and Renegade in the next opens up a player's emotional and mental acumen. This aspect of *ME 2* engages the minds of players in thoughts of human nature, social behaviour, and morality in the same way that literature does. Like readers of a novel, players think of the characters in this game as real people. The player may not have the desire or opportunity to do both good and evil deeds in his or her daily life, and thus the simulation aspect of the role-playing genre is highlighted while making dialogue choices and constructing a personal narrative. It can be easy for a player to feel remorse for an NPC or a group of NPCs after watching them perish at the hands of a deadly virus, especially when altering their fate was as simple as flicking a joystick.

In other situations, playing as Paragon can be extremely difficult and made even more so by one's own teammates. During the Feros scenario, Shepard is tasked with saving the colonists of the planet from a plant-like creature called the Thorian. This creature infects the colonists and turns them into zombies, but the fact that the infected colonists look identical to enemies called "creepers" compounds the situation. Near the end of this mission, a countdown meter appears on the screen that measures how many infected colonists are saved by the player. Saving the

colonists requires the use of special ammunition that cures them of the Thorian's poison. The game clearly implies that the Paragon path is the default or accepted way of playing the game as the meter on the screen records the number of people saved, rather than killed. The infected colonists do try to kill Shepard and his party, and because they do look identical to other enemies on the player's screen, Shepard's teammates do shoot (to kill) the infected colonists. When the "colonists rescued" tally begins, both of Shepard's teammates, Williams and Liara, urge Shepard to save the colonists. There is no moral ambiguity here. The colonists are human beings that can be saved by cleansing them of the Thorian's infection. The infected colonists can be distinguished from the creepers only by placing the player's crosshairs on top of the target, and revealing their identity at the top of the player's screen. As the pace of the music becomes faster, the player can choose to save the colonists, but one of the main obstacles remains the two teammates who will try to destroy anything hostile. Therefore, in one way the game prompts you to be "good," but the artificial intelligence of Williams and Liara is not programmed to make such a complicated distinction. Once all of the colonists and creepers are disinfected or killed, the player returns to the colony's base of operations and finds either a ghost town or the remaining colonists. Surviving colonists talk about those who did not make it, but it is entirely possible that the player cannot be blamed for their deaths. Again, a limitation in the game's development can derail the noblest of intentions, or aid the worst.

### III: Bakhtin, multi-linearity, and video games

As video games have gone from having limited, almost non-existent, narratives in the case of games like *Pong* and *Space Invaders* to being constructed with rich, engrossing plot lines, a number of them, the subjects of this paper for example, can be defined as multi-linear. In other words, the concept of unique beginnings and endings centred on a player's decision-

making underpins the concept of multi-linearity. In the case of a game like *Space Invaders*, the player inevitably has only two options: destroy all of the targets or be destroyed by said targets. The method through which either of those events comes to pass does not significantly alter the narrative of the game, or even the player's own personal narrative of playing the game. We can think of *Space Invaders* as being linear because there is really only one method for the player to achieve success. *Mass Effect*, on the other hand, has a variety of ways for the player to achieve objectives laid out by the game. The key is *how* the player chooses to play the game. A player's methodology, or contemplation of the choosing of a methodology, can reveal a great deal about the individual player. Does one easily commit genocide of an alien species without a second thought? Or does he or she replay scenarios over and over to ensure that justice is survived considering the implied morality of the situation? Again, does one play as Renegade or Paragon? Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson paraphrase Bakhtin: "if ethics is . . . a matter of particular, concrete cases, and not of rules to be instantiated, then novels may be the richest form of ethical thought—and, perhaps, the only one to retain to a significant degree the 'eventness' of events and the 'oughtness' of obligation" (*Creation of a Prosaics*, 366). I contend that role-playing games like *ME* also substantiate ethical thought in this way through their emphasis on both quotidian and complex decision-making. The next example from *ME* fully encapsulates Bakhtin's immediacy and pressure of events and obligation.

During one of the final scenarios of the game, the player must choose between saving the galactic council or preserving the Alliance fleet and allowing the council to be destroyed. When the pilot of Shepard's ship, Joker, relays the message about the council's distress signal, one of Shepard's teammates warns the player about the need to hold back ships in case the enemy strength has been underestimated. Ironically, the same teammate (in this playthrough, an alien

named Garrus) makes the following statement after the player chooses the Renegade path: “I hope you know what you’re doing, human. Don’t let the council die in vain” (*ME*). His words come after the decision has already been made, so BioWare indicates that this decision will carry forward into *ME2*. Sure enough, the first spoken lines by Miranda Lawson in the sequel question the decision made at the end of *ME*. The player is reminded of Garrus’ eerie warning, and the Mass Effect universe remains permanently altered by the pro-human decision to ignore the distress call of the all-alien council. Returning to the passage from Morson and Emerson, the *Mass Effect* games are built from concrete cases of dialogue and plot options that test a player’s ethical and moral compasses. The games themselves may not be suggesting highly sophisticated ideas about ethics and morality, but they do force players to make these considerations by simulating decisions of varying difficulty. Determining how to play through a game like *ME* requires that a player think about not only how they will play certain scenarios, but also which NPC(s) he or she will save, help, remove, or kill. Each event participated in by the player connotes “eventness” through the idea that they have implications for future events, particularly those located within separate texts. Moreover, through the dialogue of NPCs and the dialogue options presented by the game, the player feels the “oughtness” of being obligated to the paths of Paragon, Renegade, or perhaps one’s own entirely unique path. In any case, one must make a choice.

Sideshadowing takes place in *Mass Effect 2* in order to show the player what he or she has left behind or avoided in choosing one narrative path over another. It further confounds the player’s decision-making ability by hinting at possible futures (narratives) that could have been experienced. Therefore, the player begins to question his or her choice and might consider replaying the scenario to follow a different narrative trajectory. For example, after Shepard has

collected a particular number of NPC teammates, each of the teammates asks Shepard for help in completing what the game calls “a loyalty mission.” Enticing the player to complete these optional missions, the game’s loading screen displays the message “Build your team! Each loyal squad member increases your chances of surviving the mission.” Thus, although optional, the game encourages the player to indulge the wishes of his or her teammates in order to make the game easier to complete. One of these squad members, a mercenary named Zaeed, asks Shepard to help him exact revenge on a fellow mercenary, Vido, who betrayed him. This particular mission takes place at a chemical refinery where Zaeed has discovered his target is hiding out. The player must choose between rescuing the refinery workers from a fire started by Zaeed as a way of smoking out Vido and quickly following Vido in order to ensure that he does not escape. Essentially, the game implies that the player may be able to accomplish both goals, but as it turns out only one task can be completed. Zaeed states, “I came here to kill Vido Santiago. You want my help on your mission, you better make damn sure that man dies today.” Shepard can reply in one of three ways:

1. Keep to the mission, or else.
2. We’ll talk about this later.
3. If that’s what you need.

The first option yields “Stick to the mission, Zaeed, or else we’re going to have a problem.” To this option, Zaeed replies, “I think maybe we already do. I want Vido dead, Shepard. Whatever the cost.” The third option yields “You want him dead? Then he dies.” Zaeed remarks, “I don’t care what else happens. As long as Vido swallows a bullet.” The second option merely shirks the decision all together. Then, how does this scenario lend itself to the concept of sideshadowing? No matter which choice Shepard makes, minutes later a refinery worker rushes

out on to a ledge screaming “We can’t get to the gas valves to shut them off! The whole place is going to blow!” (*ME2*). Now the player makes his or her ultimate choice: save the workers or help Zaeed. Following the Renegade path and thus making Zaeed a loyal member by killing Vido positions the player so as to remind him or her of the dying refinery workers. Throughout the rest of the scenario, the screams of the trapped workers are heard as part of the game’s soundtrack. The possibility of rescuing these people is a shadow that follows the player until the end of the mission, a reminder of the good deed not done. On the other hand, following the Paragon path deceives the player into thinking that there is enough time to be the saviour and the murderer. After turning off the gas valves, the game’s pop-up objective screen indicates the next task, to stop Vido before he escapes; however, this goal cannot be accomplished. After destroying Vido’s final henchmen, the player walks outside of the refinery to a cut-scene of Vido escaping on a shuttle. Summarily, in order to make Zaeed a loyal member of the team, the player must don the mask of the Renegade, but choosing to play this part comes with the cost of listening to the echoes of the Paragon path left untraveled. Sideshadowing works against a player’s desire to see one particular narrative through to the end of the game. It promotes the contemplation of certain choices, and further complicates the decision-making of these RPGs. In short, players want to make decisions to see how they will turn out; they are experimenters within the world of the game. They demand the satisfaction of action and consequence. Therefore, a game like *ME2* incorporates sideshadowing to both slake the thirst of players, while whetting their appetites for replay and emotional investment in each decision.

#### IV: Conclusion

I conclude by suggesting a connection between Bakhtin’s concept of emergence and the

relationship of player to character in the aforementioned RPGs. Of man in the process of becoming, Bakhtin states:

Changes in the hero himself acquire *plot* significance, and thus the entire plot of the novel is reinterpreted and reconstructed. Time is introduced into man, enters into his very image, changing in a fundamental way the significance of all aspects of his destiny and life. This type of novel can be designated in the most general sense as the novel of human emergence. (Bakhtin 21)

Similarly, the plots in games like *Mass Effect* and *Mass Effect 2* revolve around a morality scale that constantly monitors the player's choices. In determining which missions to pursue, which NPCs to kill or save, and how to accomplish the important objectives of the game, BioWare constantly reminds the player of the moral judgement levied on or associated with each decision. Reinterpretations and reconstructions of plot lines in the game demonstrate the multi-linear nature of decision-based RPGs. Events can be replayed over and over again in order to create a specific narrative that suits the player's interests. More to the point, Shepard cannot emerge, or breakthrough in terms of perspective, insight, and personality, unless the player has undergone the trials associated with making complex decisions in the simulated world of these games. By having the player develop Shepard as a character, BioWare positions the player so as to imagine himself or herself as going through the similar forms of development. Furthermore, although player perception is subjective, the events and options of the game are meant to evoke particular responses. For example, in order to threaten a merchant to lower their prices, the player must have earned enough Renegade points to enable the "threat" dialogue option when conversing with the merchant. Consequently, a player will generally follow one path, either Renegade or Paragon, as it permits him or her to complete the objectives of the game more easily; however,



the concept of emergence comes into play during more complex decisions such as when Shepard has to choose whether to save the council or not. Of course, real time cannot be introduced into Shepard as he is merely a character within a simulated world, but game time does become a part of his or her destiny as the character's image and outlook carry forward from the beginning of the series to the end. Playing as a Renegade Shepard in *ME* results in a significant bonus to the character's Renegade score in *ME2*, but has the player not changed as well? Given the opportunity to make life or death choices, the game intends to make the player feel the emotional brunt of each and every decision. I contend that making these types of choices leads to the type of emergence suggested by Bakhtin. Certainly, the novel is a very different genre compared to the video game, but the narrative elements of both media can convey human development in such a way as to illustrate the possibility of critical shifts in being and thinking that are alluded to by Bakhtin. My aim is not to prove that a player "emerges" as a result of having played a video game. Instead, I argue that it might be possible to attain such a level of personal development through the strenuous exercise of crafting narratives in the Mass Effect universe. To an extent, *Dragon Age: Origins* allows for this same exercise, but its lack of a sophisticated morality system means that its universe does not permit more complicated experiments. However, in all of the aforementioned game worlds, one question remains: why do we want to make decisions in video games? Because we have *always* organised our lives around narratives, and this type of construction is intrinsic to human experience. How can we compare decisions in real life with decisions made in video games? The short answer is that the decisions of video games, recapitulating on Frasca, entertain through simulation, rather than representation. In other words, they may satisfy our curiosity and allow us to consider our decision-making thought processes, but I am not sure that they are meant to gauge how one would act in real life. Nonetheless,

BioWare is working towards total narrative freedom and the utopia of non-linearity in video games. The mass market appeal of video games cannot shroud their potential to challenge and provoke the mental and emotional capacities of players.

## Notes

1. For the purposes of this paper, RPGs will only refer to video games, in spite of the fact that there are a number of table-top and live role-playing games.

2. Before moving on, I will concede that it would be a difficult task to categorise every dialogue option in the game as either a conversation piece or a world-altering decision for two reasons. First, the player cannot always discern whether his or her choices of dialogue options are going to have a profound impact on the game or not. Second, a player might suggest that unrepeatable conversation pieces carry significance in that the player cannot go back and explore different dialogue options after having made particular choices.

3. *Dragon Age II* was released in North America on March 8, 2011. It features a system where key decisions made in *Dragon Age: Origins* also have an effect on its own story. However, the *Mass Effect* series actually advertises in-game how the consequences of actions taken in one game can reverberate forward into future entries in the series, while *Dragon Age: Origins* does not. At the time this paper was written, I did not have enough time to analyse and incorporate *Dragon Age II* into my research. It may be that the effects of a decision in *Dragon Age: Origins* are more pronounced in *Dragon Age II* than the effects of a decision in *Mass Effect* on *Mass Effect 2*.

4. Although *Dragon Age: Origins* contains a character customisation feature, it deviates significantly from *Mass Effect* and *Mass Effect 2* by its simplified morality scale. While most actions and dialogue choices yield morality points for one's character in each of the latter games, the former only measures the character's "likeability" in terms of each of the other characters in the player's party; therefore, the player's character is harder to define in terms of moral alignment in *Dragon Age: Origins*.

5. I should clarify that when I use the term, "narrative of the game," I am referring to the main storyline that leads Shepard from the beginning to the end of the game.

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