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Stand Fast, Stand Strong, Stand Together
An Analysis of Significant Musical Character Themes
in BioWare's *Mass Effect* Series

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Introduction

The *Mass Effect* (*ME*) trilogy is futuristic third-person-shooter action/adventure RPG, often referred to as a “space opera” due to the scope and complexity of its universe and story.¹ Through three games, players follow the saga of Commander Shepard in his struggle to save the galaxy from the biggest threat it has ever faced. The series has been highly reviewed by players and experts alike—all three games rank in the top 300 on Metacritic’s list of “All Time Best Video Games of All Time,”² which orders games based on aggregate critic review scores.³

The critical and popular acclaim has extended to the evaluation of the music throughout the series, and the now-recognizable sound has spawned dozens of musical tributes and various knock-offs.⁴ The music has become so much a part of the series that many expressed anger over trailers for the upcoming *Mass Effect: Andromeda* game (which bears no plot continuity with the original series) when they used music *other* than that of the *Mass Effect* universe.^{5,6} The musical identity of the game has become inextricably linked with the franchise as a whole, even as it has changed and evolved through the three game installments.

Since the release of *ME 1* in 2007, the *Mass Effect* universe has rapidly expanded: two sequels, three mobile platform spin-off games, five graphic novels, ten comic books, two film adaptations, as well as the parallel *Andromeda* series. As such, the *Mass Effect* mythos is

¹ Howson, Greg. 2010. “Mass Effect 2 interview – Modern Warfare 2 among influences,” *Microsoft Games Blog*, January 18. <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamesblog/2010/jan/17/microsoft-games>

² Metacritic. 2016. “Game Releases by Score,” *Metacritic*. <http://www.metacritic.com/browse/games/score/metacritic/all/all/filtered>

³ As of January 2016, *Mass Effect 1* (Xbox360) has a score of 91 out of 100; *Mass Effect 2* (Xbox360) a score 96; *Mass Effect 3* (Xbox360) a score of 93. All three scores surpass Metacritic’s threshold for “universal acclaim.”

⁴ Hamilton, Kirk. 2013. “The Many Musical Tributes to Mass Effect,” *Kotaku*, April 12. <http://kotaku.com/the-many-musical-tributes-to-mass-effect-472686867>

⁵ Griner, David. 2015. “Why Johnny Cash Was a Terrible Choice for the New Mass Effect Trailer: This is an epic space opera, not Firefly,” *Adweek.com*, June 15. <http://www.adweek.com/adfreak/why-johnny-cash-was-terrible-choice-new-mass-effect-trailer-165359>

⁶ Hurley, Leon. 2015. “There are ‘good reasons’ Mass Effect *Andromeda* uses *Ghost Riders*, apparently,” *GamesRadar*, July 20. <http://www.gamesradar.com/mass-effect-4-andromeda-music/>

immense and highly refined; for readers unfamiliar with the series, a general summary of the storyline of each game can be found in Appendix A. This analysis will try to streamline all necessary story-related information in as straightforward a manner as possible, but the use of some story-specific terminology, however, is unavoidable. Moving forward, all underlined terms will be defined in greater detail in the Glossary of Terms found in Appendix B. While referring to the index is not necessary for general comprehension, it will enhance understanding of the plot for those unfamiliar with *Mass Effect*.

The Music of *Mass Effect*

The success of the music of the *Mass Effect* trilogy can be simplified down to a simple rule: placing the highest priority on telling the story, and letting all other considerations become secondary in importance. While this may not seem to be a particularly groundbreaking idea, the technical and conceptual considerations necessary to achieve this goal are staggering. From the unconventional hand-scripted implementation methodology⁷ to the layer-based compositional approach to gameplay music⁸, everyone on the audio team—from audio leads and supervisors to the composers and implementers—structured their work to put primary emphasis on the musical narrative. Most significantly, creating compelling and narrative-based music in the *Mass Effect* series required working in tandem with the incredibly rich and flexible choose-your-own-adventure element of the games.

⁷ Inglis, Sam. 2012. “Music & Sound Effects For Videogame Mass Effect 3 - Interview | Rob Blake (BioWare),” *Sound on Sound*, June 12. <http://www.soundonsound.com/sos/jun12/articles/mass-effect.htm>

⁸ Rougeau, Michael. 2012. “Interview: ‘Mass Effect 3’ Composers on Bringing the Music Back to Its Roots and More,” *Complex*, March 12. <http://uk.complex.com/pop-culture/2012/03/interview-mass-effect-3-composers-on-bringing-the-music-back-to-its-roots-and-more/page/3>

While the games have served as landmark products for a number of reasons, the series' most celebrated (and most frequently imitated)⁹ game mechanic is the so-called “conversation wheel” that appears during any user-generated dialogue. When players respond in conversation, they choose options representing varying degrees of friendliness or hostility that in turn influence how characters view the player. If a player consistently responds in a cold or unfriendly manner, the player will earn a “Renegade” reputation; in the same way, consistently noble or kind responses will spur a reputation as a “Paragon.” As a player responds more and more in one manner over the other, new conversation options (as well as their corresponding actions and decisions) become available. This choose-your-own-adventure mechanic extends to plot developments within the game:

if the player decides to spare the life of another character, that character will act toward the player with immense gratitude and deference in the future. Conversely, should a crew member die at any point during a playthrough, they



will remain dead for the remainder of the game series. Choices carry across all three games, as players import their save file from the previous game when starting subsequent ones; by the start of *Mass Effect 3*, players' decisions have shaped over one thousand plot outcome variables.^{10,11}

⁹ 2011. “Stop the Mass Effect style dialogue wheels,” *Grimly Enthusiastic*. January 7.

<https://grimlyenthusiastic.wordpress.com/2011/01/07/stop-the-mass-effect-style-dialogue-wheels/>

¹⁰ Nunneley, Stephany. 2010. “Mass Effect 3 story to be shaped by ‘over 1,000 variables’,” *VG24/7*, August 4.

<http://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamesblog/2010/jan/17/microsoft-games>

¹¹ Because of the strong emphasis on player decision-making, many plot developments detailed in the following analysis are not universal to all playthroughs (e.g. Shepard as a male character, the final ending, many DLC-specific elements and outcomes, etc.).

Sound Evolution

While the score remains consistent in its aim to enhance the narrative facets of the player experience, the sound of the music varies widely across the three games. The evolution of the so-called “Mass Effect Sound,” however, directly parallels the evolution of the story across the series, and it matches the tone of the narrative for each individual installment. Any casual listener should be able to detect the large differences between the specific game scores, and many have had no issue

“*Mass Effect 1* was very much focused on synth—70s, 80s, vintage electronic—sounds. And that was fun. *Mass Effect 2* had a more cinematic approach to it, and the third one was kind of a mix, actually. We went back to the sounds of *Mass Effect 1* and learned from that: had more synth stuff going on, and mixed in a lot of emotional strings and piano stuff. And I like that a lot; it’s really heavy stuff.”

Sam Hulick¹²

connecting the changing sound to the individual needs of the games. It was noted by David Griner in his article:

The Mass Effect series' cerebral tone and gravitas have largely been fueled by its music, from the original Vengelis-inspired score in 2007 to the more orchestral theme of the 2010 sequel to the Hans Zimmer-esque braaaaaaaaam of 2012's Mass Effect 3.¹³

as well as Margaret Fisher in her podcast episode:

The scores for each game reflect their changing nature. The first game’s music is mysterious with some classic epic moments, but it doesn’t take itself too seriously. As the series progresses and the games get darker, however, so does the music—allowing the story and characters to reflect a sense of growth.¹⁴

The diversity in sound, both across games as well as within each game, is also due in part to the team mechanics of the people who worked on each particular game. Jack Wall served as lead composer and team leader for both *Mass Effect 1* and *Mass Effect 2*. Sam Hulick contributed

¹² 2013. “Sam Hulick Talks Music and Mass Effect 3,” *TentOnHammer*, Jan 24.

<http://www.tentonhammer.com/me3/news/sam-hulick-talks-music-and-mass-effect-3>

¹³ Griner, David. 2015. “Why Johnny Cash Was a Terrible Choice for the New Mass Effect Trailer: This is an epic space opera, not Firefly,” *Adweek.com*, June 15. <http://www.adweek.com/adfreak/why-johnny-cash-was-terrible-choice-new-mass-effect-trailer-165359>

¹⁴ Fisher, Margaret. 2015. “Unmute Episode 5: The Music of Mass Effect,” *Classical 101 Podcasts*, October 21. <http://radio.wosu.org/post/unmute-episode-5-music-mass-effect#stream/0>

a sizeable portion of the score in *ME1* and *ME2*, and then took over Jack's role in *Mass Effect 3* following Jack's departure from the franchise due to unspecified reasons.

	<i>Mass Effect 1</i>	<i>Mass Effect 2</i>	<i>Mass Effect 3</i>
Lead Composer	Jack Wall	Jack Wall	Sam Hulick
Other Composers	Sam Hulick	Sam Hulick	Sascha Dikiciyan Cris Velasco Christopher Lennertz
Additional Music	Richard Jacques David Kates	Brian DiDomenico David Kates Jimmy Hinson	Clint Mansell

The group beneath Wall (and Hulick) in *ME2* was perhaps the most productive and creative of the three games. This is in part thanks to the architecture of the narrative. Because the storyline follows Shepard expanding his team by adding new characters, it allowed for a great opportunity to invent new material and differentiate each character. With this in mind, Jack split up character themes and other material between the other composers (with him

“Since ME2 is largely based on squad acquisition, we created new themes for each character which is really a big part of the score. Also, the main story has new characters and situations which tell another part of the trilogy's story, so much of the music is new.”

Jack Wall¹⁵

remaining as the main collaborator and final executor for each piece), which allowed for much more diversity between characters and cohesion in sound within each character's sound palate.

Character Themes

The character themes developed in *Mass Effect 2* (along with the handful of themes that carried over from *ME1*) create the musical backbone of the entire series. This is largely due to the fact that the narrative causes players to develop such unique and deep connections to many of the primary and secondary characters in the series. However, as will be discussed later, they also


¹⁵ Damigella, Rick. 2010. “Jack Wall and the Music of Mass Effect 2,” *G4TV.com*, January 30. <http://www.g4tv.com/thefeed/blog/post/702223/jack-wall-and-the-music-of-mass-effect-2/>

present the greatest amount of challenge for a music team in creating a musical identity for a character that does not firmly lock them into being one thing or another when so much of their actions are the product of players' decisions.

The following section will examine a number of the recurring character themes throughout the *Mass Effect* series, for both primary characters and many secondary characters (*i.e.* members of Shepard's squad) as well. Some squad members' themes were not examined in this analysis, but the large majority of crew members should provide an accurate enough cross-section from which general conclusions may be drawn. By definition, primary characters appear more frequently; correspondingly, their themes tend to be more fully developed, and the number of variations and interpretations on that theme are far more abundant. For secondary characters, the use of the term "theme" will prove to be a bit of a misnomer: they have more of a "sound" (ambient pads, instrumental palates, melodic fragments, etc.) than an identifiable melodic/harmonic idea that a traditional musical analysis would consider to be a "theme" in the most strict sense. Finally, the following analysis is accompanied by a variety of score fragments, recordings, and video files. The videos that correspond to the analysis will be marked in-text with parentheses and given a numerical designation; videos of particular significance will be **bolded** [ex: **(Video x.y)**], though each of the videos serves a specific analytic function. Taken together, the following analysis will demonstrate the significance of character themes in the *Mass Effect* series, and the implications of that significance will be discussed later.

Character Theme Analysis

Main Characters

	Commander Shepard (Human)
	<i>“Now my purpose. To give the many hope for a future. To ensure that all have a voice in their future.”</i>
	Commander Shepard is an elite soldier with a reputation for skill, leadership, and bravery. Much of his backstory and expertise is a product of player decision-making, but it is certain that he was accepted by the Citadel Council as the first human Spectre in history. Depending on player action, his motivations are guided by a strong sense of honor, individualism, defiance, or a combination of all three. And while his actions are not always supported by the Council, he has slowly earned their respect because of his effectiveness.

Unsurprisingly, the main “Mass Effect Theme” is belongs to the main character, Commander Shepard. The theme is used frequently to underscore Shepard’s determination, to celebrate his victories, or to symbolically express his hope for a better future. The theme is simple, but it easily tackles complex moments and ideas throughout the course of the series. The theme is first introduced in the opening cutscene of *Mass Effect 1* to set up the emotional tone of the entire trilogy (**Video 1.1**). Its primary component is the iconic 3/4 melody:

Broadly (♩ = 120)



FIGURE 1: Shepard Main Theme, “Mass Effect Theme” (ME 1 OST)

The melody is scattered throughout almost every reprise, in a variety of different tones: as a regal march when Shepard is inducted as a Spectre (Video 1.2), as a heroic anthem when Shepard sees the newly rebuilt Normandy for the first time (Video 1.3), or as an understated but inspirational cue when Shepard delivers a motivational speech to his crew (Video 1.4).

The second prominent element of the theme is the arpeggiated synth pattern that serves as the countermelody texture and rhythmic motion of Shepard's sound:

Mysteriously (♩ = 120)



FIGURE 2: Arpeggiated synth theme, “Mass Effect Theme” (ME 1 OST)

This countermelody can be found embedded in the themes for The Citadel, The Presidium, and is also hidden in numerous other places throughout the score, often preceding or following a reprise of Shepard's main theme. Throughout the series, it comes to stand for forward motion and action, whether political or military.

The end of the theme also utilizes a scalar melody with a rising harmonic progression in that provides a sense of ascending toward a victorious end. In the Mass Effect theme, it's assembled using rising diatonic thirds (scale degrees 1 – 3 – 5) as the root for a minor triad built above it. Meanwhile, the melodic line ascends in a predictable pattern in four modal half or whole steps (depending on the harmonic situation), and a step down into the next chord:

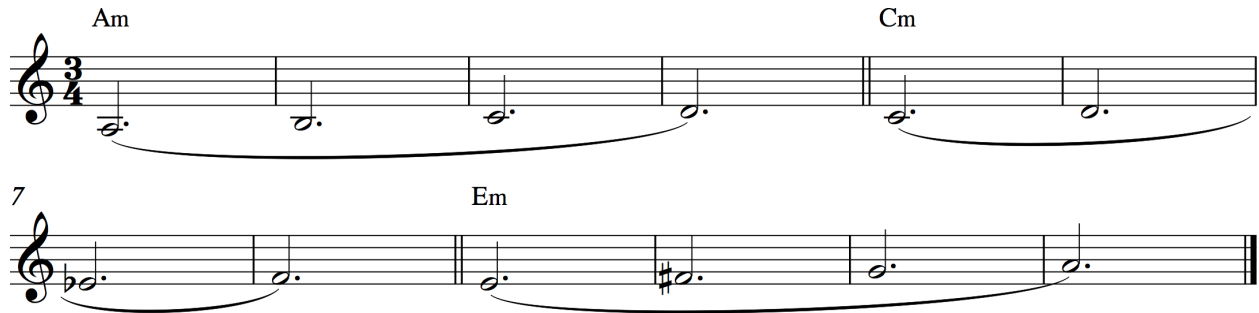


FIGURE 3: Ascending scalar theme “Mass Effect Theme” (ME 1 OST)

Most notably, the theme is used depict Shepard emerging triumphant from the wreckage after the assault on the Citadel in *Mass Effect 1* (Video 1.5). This particular reprise also introduces a secondary Shepard thematic sound for the first time in the series: a solo piano motif punctuated by extended silences. In the first *Mass Effect* game, the “theme” is more of just a general idea of solo piano, with the hints of what eventually becomes one of the most recognizable phrases in the entire series. In the *Mass Effect 2* OST album, the motif is strengthened, transformed, and titled “Humans Are Disappearing,” which is an accurate title for its usage—when Shepard feels alone or abandoned.

“[I] incorporated a solo piano and cello motif for ‘Humans are Disappearing’ that was reflective of Shepard’s loneliness in his quest to save the galaxy.”
 Jack Wall¹⁶

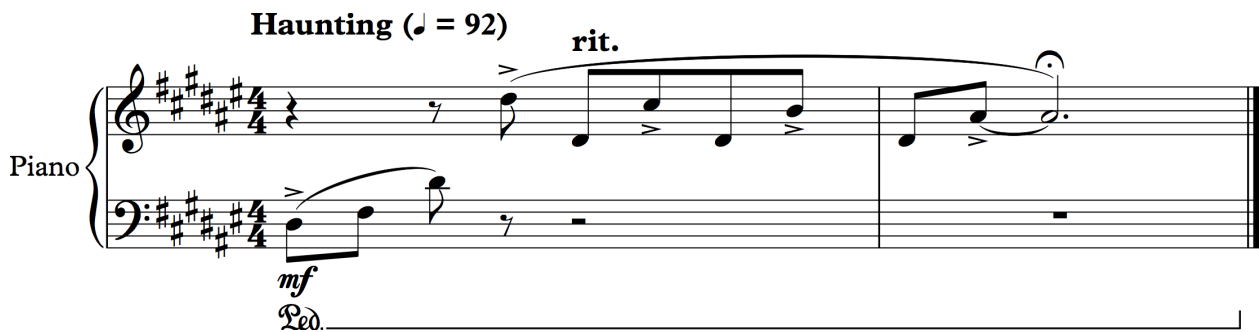


FIGURE 4: “Humans Are Disappearing” theme, “Humans Are Disappearing” (ME 2 OST)


¹⁶ Damigella, Rick. 2010. “Jack Wall and the Music of Mass Effect 2,” *G4TV.com*, January 30. <http://www.g4tv.com/thefeed/blog/post/702223/jack-wall-and-the-music-of-mass-effect-2/>

The most prominent implementation occurs at the very beginning of *Mass Effect 2* as the Normandy is attacked, Shepard is blasted into space, and his suit springs a leak (**Video 1.6**). As the universe spirals out of Shepard's reach, the theme recurs more and more, in moments like:

- If a crew member should die during the Suicide Run in the Collector Base
- Shepard paying tribute to fallen comrades
- If all crew members perish during the Suicide Run, Shepard dies falling from a transport (in a clear mirroring of the opening of *ME 2*)

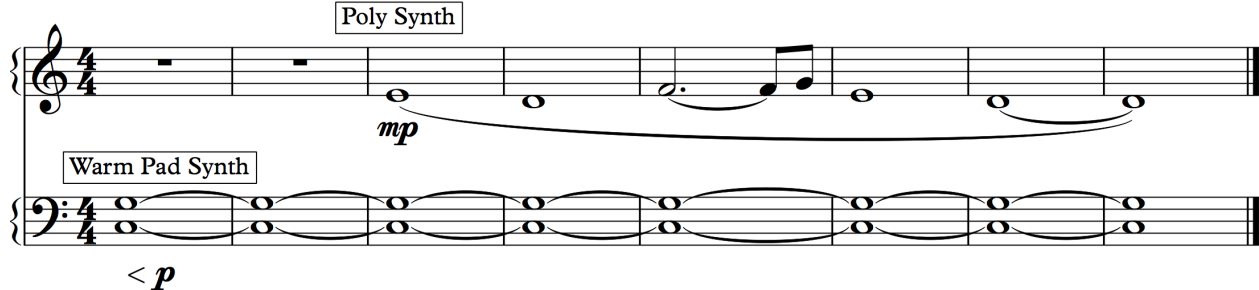
The theme is loosely interpreted in a variety of situations across a number of different harmonic/melodic situations. But while the strict thematic nature is rather flexible, its intended narrative purpose remains the same across all its appearances. In *Mass Effect 3*, the piano line changes with the heavier mood of the game, but the intention and impact of the motif remain the same. It adds emotional weight to Shepard watching a transport being destroyed by the Reapers (Video 1.7) or Shepard realizing he is alone after Anderson's death (Video 1.8).

The final cutscene of *ME 3* cleverly weaves together both the heroic Main Theme and the emotional Secondary Theme into a satisfying musical conclusion of the series (**Video 1.9**). Shepard is alone in his final decision, bearing the weight of the entire galaxy's fate on his shoulders. Following his momentous choice, the music in the ensuing scene ebbs and flows, but returns to the solo piano as the crew memorializes their Commander with his name on the wall of fallen heroes. A melancholy restatement of the Main Theme references the original hope and determination of the series, but makes it clear that the new future of the galaxy embarks on a new path forever changed by Shepard's sacrifice. Both simple elements work together in tandem to provide a complex and emotionally-charged musical closing to the trilogy.

	Vigil (Virtual Intelligence)
	<i>“You must break a cycle that has continued for millions of years. But to stop it, you must understand, or you will make the same mistakes.”</i>
	Vigil is a virtual intelligence set up by the <u>Protheans</u> to guard their secret research facility on the planet Ilos. A stand-in for the Protheans and their collective knowledge, it was set up as a warning for future civilizations against the Reapers. Shepard and his crew learn the secret to stopping Saren in <i>Mass Effect 1</i> thanks to the information it provides.

Though not a “character theme” in the strictest sense of the term, the Vigil Theme still serves a wide variety of narrative functions over the course of the series—despite the fact that the Vigil character appears in only one scene. The theme begins not unlike many other tracks from the *Mass Effect* soundtrack; the warm synth pad opening is more or less unremarkable in the context of other cues, except for the fact that it has less rhythmic motion than most other pieces:

Freely, gently (♩ = 60)



Poly Synth

Warm Pad Synth

mp

< p

FIGURE 5: Opening synth pad, “Vigil” (ME 1 OST)

Vigil’s signature sound, however, arises with the introduction of the duduk melody as the cue continues. While the casual listener likely won’t be able to exactly pinpoint the duduk’s Armenian origins, the melodic line also reinforces its near-Middle Eastern roots:

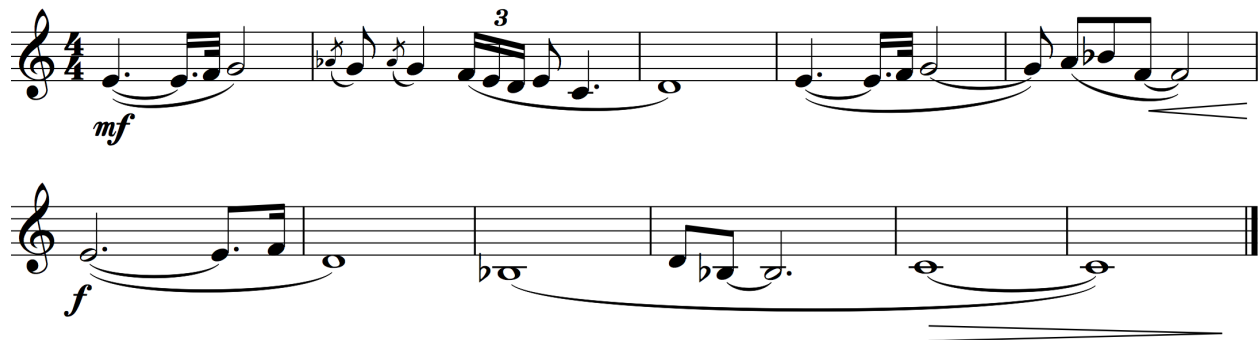


FIGURE 6: Duduk melody, “Vigil” (ME 1 OST)

The combination of the warm synth pads and the duduk melody line makes for a very interesting piece of music. It simultaneously evokes a sense of exoticism and comfort; it conjures up past and future into a sort of timeless, hopeful nostalgia. The seemingly illogical sonic juxtapositions actually open up a lot of possibilities for implementation. The sound is so nebulous and multifaceted, so it can be used to augment a huge array of dramatic or emotional situations.

The theme is first introduced in *ME1* when Shepard and his team discover the chamber in which the Vigil virtual intelligence program is being housed (**Video 2.1**). Not long after, the cue reappears (though embellished a bit) to underscore the Council paying tribute to those who lost their lives in the struggle to save the Citadel (**Video 2.2**). Following the transition from a character theme to more of an ideological one, its usage explodes; the cue is used dozens of times thereafter to represent a “call to the past” of some variety (a strong memory, overwhelming nostalgia, the righting of historical wrongs, etc.). Some of the more prominent uses include:

- Shepard being reunited with Ashley Williams after she presumed him to be dead (*ME2*)
- Shepard visiting the crash site of the Normandy (*ME2*)
- Curing the centuries-old Krogan genophage (*ME3*)
- Tali’s first time setting foot on her home world (*ME3*)
- The Stargazer ending cutscene (*ME3*) (**Video 2.3**)

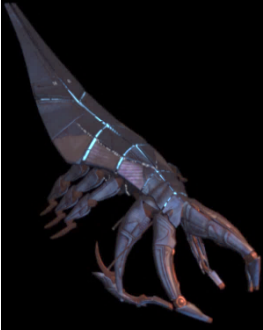
Interestingly, the Vigil Theme was also used as the music for the *Mass Effect 1* menu screen when the game first opens. During the first playthrough of *ME1*, this reality didn't carry any particular significance for me (the introduction of the Vigil Theme doesn't occur in the game until near the end of the storyline). However, when returning to the screen after completing the second and third installments



of the series (after which the theme has been in used over two dozen individual instances), the music suddenly produces a profound impact. Because players develop such a strong association of the theme with memory and nostalgia, it becomes almost impossible not to draw a mental connection to even something as simple as the menu screen. It hearkens back to a simpler, more peaceful time—before the events of the *Mass Effect* series unfold. All of a sudden, it becomes completely natural to look at a simple loading screen and anticipate the emotional ride awaiting another playthrough. In his article “Mass Effect 3’s Musical Secret,” Kirk Hamilton confirms the psychological effect of the Vigil Theme’s use in the menu screen:

For me, and I suspect for a lot of other longtime Mass Effect fans, the most emotional musical theme of Mass Effect 3 is [Vigil’s Theme.] Jack Wall's menu music of the first Mass Effect wound up being the most emotionally resonant music of the entire series. Every time it would kick in in the third game, I'd feel a stirring inside me.¹⁷

¹⁷ Hamilton, Kirk. 2012. “Mass Effect 3’s Musical Secret,” *Kotaku.com*, March 22. <http://kotaku.com/5895616/mass-effect-3s-musical-secret>

	Sovereign (Reaper)
	<i>“We impose order on the chaos of organic evolution. You exist because we allow it, and you will end because we demand it.”</i>
	Sovereign is the gigantic flagship used by Saren, and is capable of indoctrinating organic life on or near it. Shepard originally thought Sovereign was a Reaper vessel that Saren had reactivated, but learns that Sovereign is a Reaper— run by a sentient and extremely powerful artificial intelligence. It has served as the vanguard for the periodic destruction of all organic life once it reaches a threshold of discovery and sophistication.

While the Sovereign Theme is introduced in *Mass Effect 1* as a singular character theme, it expands over the course of the series into the primary sound for all Reapers. The ominous low brass introduction combined with the epic sound of impending doom when the choral voices enter allows the theme to be used for a variety of situations. As the Reapers are Shepard’s primary adversaries across all three games, the Sovereign Theme reflects the struggle between the two. The sound of the Reapers is a bastardized, sinister interpretation of the Shepard Theme:

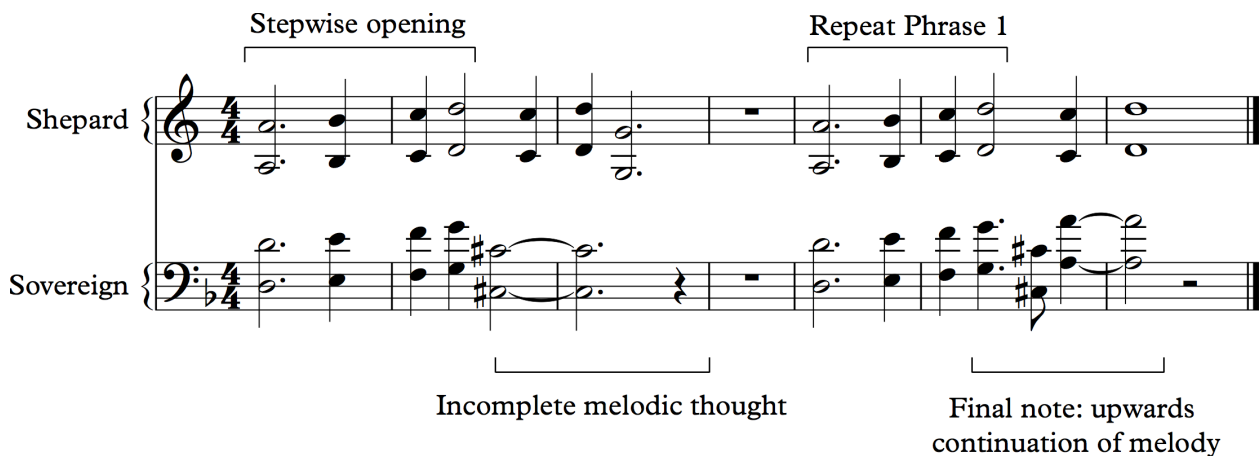


FIGURE 7: Comparison of Sovereign theme to Shepard, “Sovereign’s Theme” (ME 1 OST)

The theme makes its first appearance in fragments to underscore Shepard’s vision of future galactic destruction, which only becomes clear when he and his crew meet Sovereign for the first time (Video 3.1). It is restated in a military fashion when Sovereign attacks the Citadel

(Video 3.2), but is most fully realized when the team fights a transformed Saren after he has become fully possessed by Sovereign’s indoctrination power (**Video 3.3**). In *Mass Effect 2*, the theme reappears when Shepard discovers a partially-formed Human Reaper inside the Collector Base and it is reprised in perhaps the most frightening gameplay music as the team fights to destroy it (**Video 3.4**). The theme carries through the entire series, reappearing in *ME 3* when the crew discovers (and subsequently fights) a hidden Reaper on the planet Rannoch (Video 3.5).

Interestingly, the theme is not used at all during the final attack on the Reapers at the conclusion of the third game—perhaps symbolic of the impossible nature of Shepard’s task.



Jack “The Illusive Man” Harper (**Human**)

“My mission has always been to promote and secure humanity’s continued strength. Don’t let idealism blind you.”

The Illusive Man earned his nickname because of his ability to conceal his motives and goals from others. He firmly believes in human ascendance to the top of the galactic power pyramid, and is willing to exercise any means necessary to achieve it. His relationship with Shepard is continually strained, and he has no qualms about terminating it the moment Shepard ceases to be useful to his cause.

The musical arc of The Illusive Man across his appearances in *Mass Effect 2* and *3* is intriguing, both from a narrative and a musical perspective. It is likely that the metrical is the first element to jump out to listeners, as was the case for game blogger Kate Cox¹⁹, which she discusses in length²⁰.

“You never see the Illusive Man in an epic situation! He’s always sitting there talking to you, flicking his cigarette. So I wanted to create a more ethereal feeling to him, but still the chord changes denote that he is a man of action who is also reflective and has some sort of mysterious power that you really don’t yet understand. I think those were the core elements of how the music needed to work.”

Jack Wall¹⁸

¹⁸ 2010. “Composer Interview: Wall of Sound,” *OCReMix*, May 4. http://ocremix.org/info/Composer_Interview:_Wall_of_Sound

¹⁹ Cox, Kate. 2011. “The Music of Mass Effect: Part 2,” *Your Critic is in Another Castle*, June 8. <http://www.your-critic.com/2011/06/music-of-mass-effect-part-2.html>

With a certain mystery (♩ = 108)**FIGURE 8:** Main Illusive Man 7/8 arpeggio, “The Illusive Man” (ME 2 OST)

The 7/8 meter (2+2+3) theme is marks the *only* irregular time signature used throughout the entire series—one could surmise that this is because his philosophies and tactics continually leave the Shepard off-balance and uncertain of his future direction. It is neither a sinister nor foreboding theme; it simply pushes forward with a in its own meter with a slight tinge of unadulterated determination.

The much more subtle metrical quirk of the theme that most casual listeners might not be able to detect is that the opening texture (one that creates a sort of whirling technological sound) is actually in common time:

FIGURE 9: 4/4 textural opening, “The Illusive Man” (ME 2 OST)

When the 7/8 theme enters, the synth texture *continues* in its original 4/4 (i.e. 8/8) pattern, creating a functional polyrhythm between the two that shifts one eighth note every measure. While the texture is built in such a way that it becomes more of a pad than a rhythmic pulse,

²⁰ While the author disagrees with a number of Cox’s conclusions in her article, it is important to note that her thoughts were influential to the development of this section.

there's a slight sense of evolution in the sound because each measure is slightly different than the last in a very subtle way. Like *The Illusive Man*, each moment is a bit different than the last, and things never quite line up the way you expect them to, but it's carefully hidden in such a way that it creates the *illusion* of predictable coherence. And, like *The Illusive Man*, the theme's inconsistency is itself highly consistent: the theme is *identical* across every one of *The Illusive Man*'s hologram conferences with Shepard across both *ME 2* and *ME 3* (**Video 4.1**).

Over the course of *Mass Effect 2*, however, there is a very interesting development of his theme: *it merges with Shepard's main theme*. As Shepard and his team make their final push to the Collector Base, the heroism of Shepard's theme is superimposed onto *The Illusive Man*'s 7/8 rhythmic framework (and borrows some of the thematic material as a countermelody):



FIGURE 10: Shepard 7/8 Theme (compare to FIGURE 1), “The End Run” (ME 2 OST)

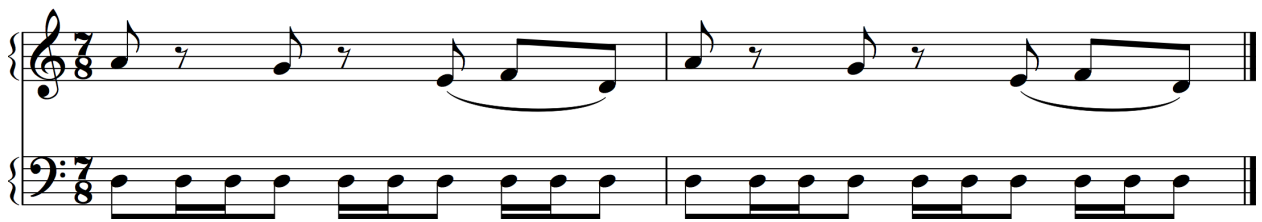


FIGURE 11: Illusive Man countermelody (compare to FIGURE 8), “The End Run” (ME 2 OST)

It takes various forms as Shepard fights through a swarm of Collectors (Video 4.2), delivers an inspirational speech before a final push (**Video 4.3**), or as he and his team escape the exploding

Collector Base (Video 4.4). This combination carries a tremendous symbolic weight to it: while the two *seem* to be working together, Shepard's heroism is merely a weapon wielded by The Illusive Man in his greater scheme to uplift humanity and control the Reapers. Following the events of *Mass Effect 2*, however, the two reluctant allies become determined enemies.

Correspondingly, the joint theme is never heard again.

The thematic restatement of the Illusive Man Theme used for the Suicide Run, however, is the source of the music for the menu screen for *Mass Effect 2*. Similar to Vigil's theme in *ME1*, players won't recognize the music until *after* the complete story mode playthrough, as the Suicide Run comes at the final climax of the second installment. The effect it has on listeners, however, is the exact opposite: instead of instilling a sense of calming nostalgia (as in *ME 1*), the use of The Illusive Man's theme indicates to players that though they have averted the current crisis by destroying the Collectors' base, the larger threat of the Reaper invasion still looms on the horizon. The Illusive Man is brooding, thinking up new ways to circumvent Shepard's will. The storyline of the entire game, in essence, is a Suicide Run—unpredictable, underhanded, and ultimately lethal. The use of The Illusive Man's iconic sound primes all of these emotions from just a static image of the Collector Base on the menu screen.

In his final scene in the series (*ME3*), the fully indoctrinated Illusive Man makes his first personal appearance to Shepard and Admiral Anderson. And to reinforce that his motives are no longer his own, The Illusive Man's theme is absent for the first—and only—time (**Video 4.5**). The effect is striking. By this point, players will have heard his theme dozens of times over the course of their playthrough; the repetition is more than sufficient enough for players to develop a strong expectation to hear his theme. When the theme is missing, it's hard not to notice.

Shepard's Crew



Garrus Vakarian (Turian)

"It's so much easier to see the world in black and white. Gray? I don't know what to do with gray."

Garrus is a sharpshooting combat veteran whose strong sense of justice has led him to do some wrong things for the right reasons, for the sake of getting the job done and bringing a just resolution. He encountered resistance in his previous work as a military investigator, preferring to do what he perceived as right rather than always working by-the-book.

Garrus' entrance in *Mass Effect 2* is perhaps most telling of both his character and his musical identity: following Shepard's apparent death, Garrus assumed a new identity and went off to make trouble for notoriously underhanded mercenary groups, to the point where they all temporarily joined forces to stop him (**Video 5.1**). This sense of lone-wolf vigilante justice is the hallmark of Garrus' personality, but he also possesses a charming charisma full of one-line punches and dry wit. Because Garrus is the longest-running member of Shepard's crew, players have a large amount of time to embrace the multifaceted elements of Garrus personality over the course of the series, and his musical theme perfectly captures those complexities.


Correspondingly, the range of moods expressed by his theme is perhaps the widest of any member of Shepard's crew. There are moments strongly evoking the sound of a Western outlaw gunslinger (à la "The Good, the Bad, the Ugly"), others of a precisely trained military force and a dutiful combatant, moments of a unshakable confidence and charisma, and others still of a conflicted man who deliberately weighs moral imperatives before he acts.

"For 'Garrus,' I chose to concentrate on a deep rooted emotional element that we're not used to seeing from him. His theme, even when combined with combat material, has a tinge of emotion, because at Garrus' core, he doesn't want to have to go to battle, he's fighting because of the injustice he is seeing."

David Kates²¹

²¹ 2010. "Composer Interview: Wall of Sound," *OCReMix*, May 4. http://ocremix.org/info/Composer_Interview:_Wall_of_Sound


There are moments with an undeniably strong drive; there are moments that lack almost any forward motion. Taken together, these moments encapsulate the complexity of Garrus' desires, motives, and psychological state.

	Tali'Zorah nar Rayya (Quarian)
	<i>"After time adrift among the stars, among tides of light and through shoals of dust, I will return to where I began."</i>
	Tali is an independent, resourceful engineering expert. Like all mature Quarians, she is currently on her pilgrimage to experience other cultures and bring something of value from the galaxy back to her people. She volunteers to serve on Shepard's crew because she is aware of the imminent threat the Reapers pose to the galaxy.

Interestingly, Tali's sound very noticeably lacks much melodic content at all. The majority of her theme comprises almost exclusively of quasi-melodic arpeggiated synths, countermelodic ostinati, and occasional hits. Her musical identity very closely demonstrates her character identity: a wanderer. The only constant in Tali's life is her technical/mechanical expertise, evidenced by the almost industrial sound of the synths in her theme. However, for much of the series, she spends uncertain of her place and of herself because of the Quarian cultural emphasis on pilgrimage. For Tali, the *Mass Effect* series is about finding her own identity. At one point in *ME2*, she is accused by her own people of treason; Shepard helps her complete a mission (**Video 6.1**) that restores her status among her people, and they willing allow her to complete her pilgrimage and venture on as part of Shepard's crew (even changing her name to Tali'Zorah vas Normandy to denote loyalty to her new crew). In *ME3*, she ventures back to the Quarian homeworld of Rannoch and finds a newfound sense of belonging to her people and her history, to the point that if she is unsuccessful in rebuilding a future that she considers to be in the best interest of the Quarian race, she chooses to take her own life rather than carry

forward through a bleak future. In these moments, players get a glimpse of the latter portion of her thematic sound—one that carries with it a sense of determination, belonging, and action.

Tali’s sound evolves through the series to accompany her personal growth and self-exploration.

	Samara (Asari)
	<i>“I answer to a code that is clearly defined. If my actions are true to that code, I am just. If they are not, I am unjust. I don’t pretend it is a simple matter, or that it seems right to everyone. But I sleep well at night, and that is more than most can say.”</i>
	Samara is a justicar – an Asari who has foresworn possessions in pursuit of traveling space, righting wrongs through the execution of the detailed morality instilled in them. The Justicar Code (similar to the samurai code, or that of Medieval Christendom) is composed of over 5,000 entries to judge almost every possible situation a Justicar may encounter.

More than any other character, Samara’s sound instantly places listeners in a specific geographical location—the unmistakable ethnic flare to her music is hard to miss (but it seems the exact location is difficult for some listeners to pinpoint).²³ There are very obvious references to her strict, monastic lifestyle among the distant voices and the gongs and other sonic iconography one might expect from a religious and honor-bound individual.

“Samara is almost like an Asari monk, so I thought an ethnic, Middle Eastern vibe would help accent that since she’s a very spiritually-driven character.”
 Jimmy Hinson²²

However, the Asari lifestyle is only a part of the complexity surrounding Samara’s character—perhaps even more significantly, she is a heartbroken mother.

Each of Samara’s three children carry the genetic disorder Ardat-Yakshi, which compels the afflicted to mate with others and kills their partner almost instantly as a result of their

²² 2010. “Composer Interview: Wall of Sound,” *OCReMix*, May 4. http://ocremix.org/info/Composer_Interview:_Wall_of_Sound

²³ The comments section of Samara’s theme on YouTube contained suggestions of the music sounding Greek, Japanese, “Oriental,” and even Amazonian.

neurological condition. Asari found to carry the disorder are given an option of lifelong seclusion (in a monastic lifestyle similar to Samara's) or to be executed. Over the course of the series, Samara must be responsible for the deaths of all three of her daughters: in *ME2*, she kills her daughter Morinth because she has become a sexual predator responsible for the death of dozens of mates; in *ME3*, her other two daughters (who have remained in seclusion) have become indoctrinated and cannot be saved, leaving Samara to make the difficult decision to destroy them and the entire compound of corrupted Asari Ardat-Yakshis.

It is this struggle that informs so much of Samara's decision-making and demeanor, and it can be heard clearly in her musical theme. Samara is a mother with overwhelming heartbreak, but seeking to find religious peace through her trials. The music often swings between the serene/spiritual and a sort of high-octane fury in the same way that Samara is prone to bouts of zealous (and almost always warranted) anger (**Video 7.1**), but she returns to her zen-like state when she reigns in her emotion. For this reason, the complexities of Samara's character are extremely intriguing, and one need not look very deeply to hear them in her musical theme.



Thane Drios (Drell)

"The measure of an individual can be difficult to discern by actions alone."

Thane is an assassin, trained since the age of six. He is a calm, collected warrior who spends much time in prayer and meditation, reconciling his violent profession through his deeply-rooted spiritual philosophy. He possesses an eidetic memory that allows him to recall every murder with perfect clarity; the weight of this guilt compels him to join Shepard as a gesture of cosmic penance.

Like Samara, much of Thane's character intricacies are closely intertwined with his familial relationships, but his pain manifests itself very differently. Thane was raised to be an assassin, and became incredibly successful because of his calculating methodology and his

dedication to precision and excellence. It was this skill, however, that cost him his family relationships—an angry associate of one of Thane’s targets killed his wife out of revenge. The guilt of her death, combined with an ability to perfectly recall each of his kills, weighs heavily on Thane. His only way of justifying his profession with his guilt is by separating his action from his soul; his killing ability is a conduit for others’ violence rather, similar to the impartial nature of a loaded gun. Even so, he prays for forgiveness after every death he causes (**Video 8.1**).

Thane’s musical sound strongly reflects the many aspects of his personality. Much of the sound is just made up of slow, swelling, exposed block chords—a simple, straightforward, no-nonsense approach to match Thane. When the sound does kick into an action mode, it is a much more calculated and focused sound than Samara’s, as he has much more success channeling his emotion than she does. When the dust settles and the sound returns to a relative calm, however, it never fully settles—Thane cannot find the same kind of inner peace that Samara’s Justicar code offers, and he often remains preoccupied by his guilt. He also knows that his time is limited: Thane suffers from Kepral Syndrome, a non-communicable affliction of the Drell that slowly causes their lungs to cease functioning. It is this sense of a ticking clock that drives him forward with a sense of urgency to find some kind of way to atone for his actions, both with regard to his family (players help him make amends with his son in *ME2*) and for his assassin career.



Mordin Solus (Salarian)

“Lots of ways to help people. Sometimes heal patients; sometimes execute dangerous people. Either way helps.”

Mordin is a quirky geneticist, physician, and professor. Like many Salarians, he operates under a consequentialistic, ends-justify-the-means type of mentality guided by an impersonal logic and a big-picture judgement paradigm. Still, he strongly dislikes taking life without a compelling reason.

Mordin’s theme is perhaps the most stereotypically “alien” sound in the entire franchise. This is likely due in large part to the fact that he embodies many characteristics that we have come to associate with intelligent alien life—a hyper-intelligent approach to both science and politics, a strange communication style, and even a “grey man” physiology resembling the famed alien sightings in Roswell, New Mexico. In keeping with his personality, Mordin’s theme is highly technological in nature. It heavily relies on a warbled lead synth, electronic sweeps and blips, and a myriad of other “futuristic” synthetic sounds. It is largely dispassionate when it comes to levels of intensity—when the action increases, the music reflects only the change in pace rather than trying to hit a deeper emotional attachment (as with Samara’s or Garrus’ respective themes, for instance) that might guide his actions (**Video 9.1**). Instead, it carries along in a methodical and organized fashion, much like Mordin. Even when Mordin recognizes that he has made an error (such as his contribution to the Krogan genophage), he seeks to remedy it not because of personal guilt or adherence to a moral code, but rather to change the outcome to be a more optimal solution than the one currently in place. The music for his theme reflects his arguably logical-to-a-fault approach to the world around him.

“Mordin is a quizzical fellow in a curious world, so even though the mission is serious, the theme and underscore is quirky and intellectual.”

David Kates²⁴

²⁴ 2010. “Composer Interview: Wall of Sound,” *OCReMix*, May 4.
http://ocremix.org/info/Composer_Interview:_Wall_of_Sound

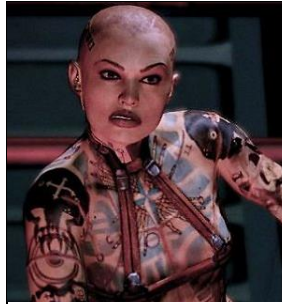


Legion (Geth)

“One ship. One will. Many minds. Like the Geth... We are a nation, but interdependent. Separation is our weakness.”

Legion is a mobile Geth platform specifically engineered to interact with organic life. It houses 1,183 Geth programs, enabling independent operation from the rest of the network. Because it is a conglomerate of programs in a single platform, crew members call it “Legion” as a reference to the Biblical passage “my name is Legion: for we are many.”

For a completely synthetic, sentient being that is the summation of over one thousand individual programs and processing units, Legion’s theme is exactly the *opposite* sound of what one might expect. Legion’s theme is made up of horn swells, percussion hits, and synth strings—hardly the bleeps and blips one would expect when thinking of what a “robot” musical theme might sound like (**Video 10.1**). However, this apparent discrepancy reveals so much of Legion’s character within the series. He is uniquely constructed among the Geth to be able to better interface with organic races—he can operate independently from the Geth collective, he is programmed to better read facial cues and other biometric data, and he even has superfluous physical features (such as eyebrow-like appendages) intended to make him seem more similar to organics. Legion goes out of his way to put others at ease—on more than one occasion, he voluntarily alters his communication method to better suit the people with whom he’s conversing. In short, Legion’s most defining attribute is that he makes a concerted effort to be “just like everybody else.” So when his musical theme is organic sounds rather than synthetic ones (and is arguably the most “human” of anyone’s), it’s extremely telling about what kind of being Legion strives to be.



Jack (Human)

“Turns out, mess with someone’s head enough, you can turn a scared little kid into an all-powerful bitch.”

Following her exposure to Element Zero in the womb, Jack was taken by Cerberus for analysis. For years, she and other mutagenetic children were inhumanely treated in a sterile test environment. Eventually, following a riotous attack on the researchers, she and the other children were freed. Following her release, she changed her name, severed all previous ties, and turned to a life of crime until recruited by Shepard for his crew.

Jack carries with her a large amount of psychological baggage from her past, and it’s very evident in her musical theme. The moments of low intensity are hollow synths and unsettling low rumble, which leave listeners on edge. The mid-intensity level almost always bears military-like snare drums and a slow, driving, forceful pulse. But then, in moments of high intensity, the entire orchestra breaks loose in chaotic hits and swells contrasted with out-of-control arpeggiated synths and lead synths playing what would probably be played by a horn in an orchestral setting as a call to battle. These three levels perfectly mirror Jack’s personality and demeanor—a hollowed-out shell of her former self, taught to be a military weapon, and a true force to be reckoned with when she lets herself loose (**Video 11.1**).

The Impact of Character Themes in *Mass Effect*

Of course, the use of character themes in the *Mass Effect* trilogy on its own does not hold any kind of special significance; plenty of other video game series utilize musical character themes in order to convey the narrative more effectively (e.g. *Final Fantasy*, *Kingdom Hearts*, *The Legend of Zelda*, and countless others). What sets *Mass Effect* apart as a series is incredible degree of variation between playthroughs as it relates to shaping the characters in the story. In most series, the identities and actions of any given character (primary, secondary, or tertiary) are more or less constant across every playthrough—there may be some variations here or there, but the plot unfolds in a consistent and predictable way, and the characters react similarly (or identically) every time. This makes for an easy time crafting musical character themes. For *Mass Effect*, however, because of vast number of choices that a player makes and the consequences that those decisions carry, the identities and actions of each character are never completely predictable. The themes of *Mass Effect* differ from most other character themes because of their design to be flexible enough to support any possible eventuality a player may encounter.

There remains one constant for each character in the series, however: it is impossible to consider individual themes in *Mass Effect* without also considering the character's species. If a character theme cannot depict what a character *does*, the alternative is to depict who the character *is*—and within the *Mass Effect* universe, a character's race (and corresponding cultural upbringing) strongly influences their personality and potential behavior. In order to fully understand the function of musical character themes within the series, it is important to examine the impact that race within the storyline itself.

Where Do We Fit In?

The first step to understanding the complexities of race in *Mass Effect* is understanding how humans fit in—or, perhaps more accurately, how humans *don't* fit in. One of the most pervasive narratives throughout the *Mass Effect* series is very accurately described by Kyle Munkittrick as simply this: *galactic civilization is unimpressed by Earthlings*.²⁵ *Mass Effect* begins only a few decades after humans discovered interstellar life at all, and unsurprisingly the aliens are unwilling to hand over everything to the new kids on the block. Other races may commend humans for their determination disparage them for being petulant power-grabbers in the same breath. This is where players enter the *Mass Effect* universe: as a people clearly out of their league in the context of intergalactic development. We are outsiders who have won a small amount of respect and admiration, but we are mostly victims of a refusal to be taken seriously.

All this boils down to the most important aspect of the *Mass Effect* storyline: “No problem, no matter how much the player may want it to be, will be solved unilaterally by human gumption and know-how.”²⁶ *Mass Effect* fosters an uncommon degree of identification between the player and his/her non-human crew because of this.

The impact of the message on the player's interactions with other species is that, after facing what feels like unwarranted treatment, the player is *forced* to recognize the perspective of any species one might encounter along the way. *Mass Effect* makes you view the reflection of humanity in a mirror darkly.²⁷

For Commander Shepard, the implication of this realization is simple: *if we're going to win this fight, we're going to need help*. Instead of other science-fiction game narratives where humans are clearly in the cockpit and other races are along for the ride as token pieces of the

²⁵ Munkittrick, Kyle. 2012. “Why *Mass Effect* is the Most Important Science Fiction Universe of Our Generation,” *i09.com*, February 17. <http://io9.gizmodo.com/5886178/why-mass-effect-is-the-most-important-science-fiction-universe-of-our-generation>

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

storytelling or a clumsy gesture toward diversity, *Mass Effect* does nothing short of *demand* players to reach out to other races for assistance. Some races are considered to be second-class or undesirable—but when humanity is not in the position of power, it can't afford to quibble over which people are most advantageous to the human brand. *No matter who you are or where you're from, if you've got skills to help us out, then welcome aboard.*

This reality is clearly demonstrated in the difference between two different scenes from the beginning and end of the trilogy series. At the start of *Mass Effect 1*, Shepard discusses galactic politics and the state of race relations with crewmember Ashley Williams:

Shepard: You don't trust the Alliance's allies?

Williams: I'm not sure I'd call the Council races "allies." We—humanity, I mean—have to learn to rely on ourselves.

Shepard: Standing up for ourselves doesn't mean standing alone.

Williams: I don't think we should turn down allies. I just think we shouldn't bet everything on them *staying* allies. As noble as the Council members seem now, if their backs are against the wall, they'll abandon us.

Shepard: You've got a pessimistic view of the universe, Williams.

Williams: A pessimist is what an optimist calls a realist. Look, if you're fighting a bear, and the only way for you to survive is to sic your dog on it and run, you'll do it. As much as you love your dog, it isn't human. It's not racism. Not really. Members of their species will always be more important to them than humans are.

Shepard: [This] is a multilateral mission; you're going to have to work with aliens, like it or not.

In the beginning of the series, players are introduced to a universe full of inter-species distrust, self-serving motivations, centuries-old grudges, and widespread suspicion—encapsulated in the discussion between Williams and Shepard. The hallmark of the series is the inter-species conflict embedded deeply into the social architecture: Quarians hate the Geth, Krogans hate Salaris and Turians, the Drell passionately defend the Hanar, Asari and Turians and Salaris get along alright, and almost everyone dislikes non-Council races like the Vorcha and the Rachni. But over the course of the series, the galactic community comes to the realization that the only way to

survive the Reaper crisis is to work together, and to set their individual differences aside in pursuit of a greater goal. This can be seen in Admiral Hackett's inspirational speech to the unified galactic fleet before their final assault on the Reaper forces:

Admiral Hackett: Never before have so many come together from all quarters of the galaxy. But never before have we faced an enemy such as this. The Reapers will show us no mercy; we must give them no quarter. They will terrorize our populations; we must stand fast in the face of that terror. They will advance until our last city falls, but we will not fall. We will prevail. Each of us will be defined by our actions in the coming battle. *Stand fast. Stand strong. Stand together.*

Musical Implications

Whereas the typical function of individual themes is to show how each character is *different* from the next, one might argue that the function of the themes in *Mass Effect* are just the opposite: to show how each character is fundamentally *similar*. The overarching point of the series is to force players to accept help from non-humans and to unite the galaxy against a common enemy, and the music reinforces that goal. Each character's theme serves to highlight certain universals that are common across every race in the universe. Thane's theme, for instance, doesn't sound like music for a reptilian humanoid with an odd voice from an arid homeworld—it sounds like a calculated man with guilt weighing him down. Tali's theme doesn't sound like music for a neglected race of people who can't live outside the protection of a hazard suit on a galaxy-wide pilgrimage—it sounds like a wanderer trying to find her own identity.

When composing for a series like *Mass Effect*, a composer must search for the essence of the character's personality—the purest distillation of their goals, motivations, and desires. When a character's actions can vary so drastically across different playthroughs, the only solution is musically address the reasons why that character would behave in whatever way they end up behaving. Things such as “*is Garrus a love interest?*” or “*will Liara die in the Suicide Run?*” are the wrong kinds of questions for composers to be asking when approaching a game like *Mass*

Effect. Instead, questions that are more musically relevant would be things like “*does Garrus always act out of a firm sense of right and wrong?*” and “*is there a limit to Liara’s loyalty and desire to prove herself?*”

“I think it’s a visceral thing. You just sort of hear something based on who you think that person or creature or alien or whatever is. I try to steep myself in those types of thoughts about what they are or who they want to become before I write a note. It seems to flow better that way.”

Jack Wall²⁸

These kinds of considerations drive straight to the core of each character’s unique personality, and a theme written to match these motivational factors will likely be flexible enough to anticipate any eventuality for that character.

The Mass Effect character themes all drive straight through each character’s highly complex and nuanced personality in search of the one kernel of motivation that

“It’s really just about getting a feel for a particular character and their personality and motivations...and crafting something that conveys that feel to the player.”

Sam Hulick²⁹

directly influences everything else. As a result, each theme is distinctive and differentiated while remaining open-ended enough to allow for a nearly endless number of future possibilities.

This is where the interactive component of *Mass Effect* shines brightest—because each playthrough can yield drastically different results, very few assumptions about characters (and their relationship to the plot or other characters) can be made up front. At any given moment, a character’s disposition is a function of past events and potential future outcomes:

- **The past** (e.g. Do they like you? Have you earned their loyalty? Have you wronged them before? Have you accepted or refused an offer to complete a favor for them at some point? *etc.*)
- **The future** (e.g. Will they die? Do they plan to help in your cause? Do they expect to see you again? Are they a potential love interest? *etc.*)

²⁸ 2010. “Composer Interview: Wall of Sound,” *OCReMix*, May 4.
http://ocremix.org/info/Composer_Interview:_Wall_of_Sound

²⁹ *Ibid.*

In cinema (and even video games with more linear narratives), composers can exert tremendous influence in how audiences react to characters. Is this character a romantic interest? How does the character feel about the protagonist? Will they die in the future? Music can (and often does) reinforce these types of questions.

But with a game like *Mass Effect*, a similar approach is not an option. Is this character a romantic interest? *It depends on if you've given them signals!* How do they feel about us? *Have you done something to betray their trust?* Will they die in the future? *That depends on how you use them in battle!* In one game, Shepard may consistently offend or anger Liara, not complete the mission to earn her loyalty, and then lose her in the final battle of *ME2*. In another, Shepard may earn her loyalty, do her a favor (by means of purchasing and completing an additional DLC mission package), protect her from action in battle, and ultimately win her heart.

In such diametrically different outcomes, a composer cannot (and should not!) do much to lead audiences to feel a certain way—if a player may choose to be cold towards a character, the music must not be a love theme, and vice versa. For games with such a wide array of decision-making outcomes, composers must be willing to respect the gamer's chance to make choices on their own—free from conscious (or subconscious) clues from the score. This is what makes the character themes from *Mass Effect* so effective—they are flexible enough to be used in a wide variety of situations, because they probe the character on a deeper level than “he’s a Salarian” or “he’s good at fighting people” or “most people don’t really like her.” Instead, they drive straight toward what makes each character tick: their motivations, goals, and needs.

Conclusion

The success of the *Mass Effect* trilogy is partly a result of the masterful execution of music across the three games, with particular regard to the musical identities of both primary and secondary characters. Composing and implementing this thematic material, as has been shown, is no easy task. The entire music team must take into account the wide variety of outcome possibilities that exist for each character, create musical material that is flexible enough to apply in all these circumstances, and then implement it in such a way that each outcome feels like a logical, natural extension of the story. But beyond the technical aspect, the character themes across the *Mass Effect* series reflect a diverse and engaging group of characters, and each one's musical signature bears great significance to their personality and their history. The narrative influences the music from top to bottom, and in many cases the music helps support and shape the narrative in ways that the other storytelling mechanics simply cannot. All in all, the music of *Mass Effect* is an immense, captivating, and thoughtful body of work that is expertly tailored to the series, and it improves players' experiences at every turn as they navigate their own way through a space opera that is uniquely theirs.

Appendix A: Plot Synopsis

Pre-Series

In the year 2148, human explorers on Mars uncovered a small cache of information left behind by a long-extinct race of aliens known as Protheans. By studying and implementing the advanced technology, humans achieved unprecedented rate of intergalactic expansion and colonization. Through their voyages, they discovered a mass relay station leading them to The Citadel space port hub, where they encountered dozens of alien cultures and the governing body, the Citadel Council. Humanity's colonies unite under the Human Systems Alliance, and are granted an ambassadorship to the Council (though not given representation on the Council itself).

Mass Effect 1

Gamers play as a high-ranking soldier Commander Shepard, the first human candidate for the position of a Spectre. On his mission to prove himself—the recovery of the first major terrestrial Prothean artifact ever found—Shepard learns that a current Spectre named Saren may have gone rogue to retrieve the artifact for himself. Shepard relays this information to the Council members, who remain skeptical but conditionally promote him to Spectre status in order to quietly investigate his claims. Over the course of the game, Shepard learns that Saren is working with an ancient machine race known as Reapers to harvest (and subsequently destroy) all organic life in the galaxy using The Citadel as a huge mass relay station.

The last Reaper invasion led to the extinction of the Protheans 50,000 years ago, but not before they discovered a way to block the Reapers' ability to utilize The Citadel as their access point. Saren hopes to re-open this channel (the Conduit) to allow the Reapers to enter, and reveals that his Reaper flagship Sovereign possesses the ability to control the minds through Indoctrination. Shepard, believing Saren has become an indoctrinated pawn of the Reapers, races

toward the Conduit and shuts it down before the Reapers can enter. Shepard returns to the Citadel to find it under assault by Saren and Sovereign; after a showdown with Saren and a fatal blow on Sovereign, the crisis is averted and the Reaper invasion is forestalled.

Mass Effect 2

Weeks later, Shepard is killed when his ship, *The Normandy*, is attacked and destroyed. His body is recovered by the shadowy organization Cerberus and brought back to life through highly experimental methods. Cerberus' enigmatic leader, known only as "The Illusive Man," recruits the revived Shepard to investigate recent disappearances of entire human colonies across the galaxy, citing that he owes Cerberus for his second chance at life.

Shepard soon discovers that the Reapers are behind the vanishing human colonies, using Collectors as proxy agents. After recruiting a large team of specialists for the mission, Shepard ventures to an abandoned Collector ship to gather intel. He learns that the only way to reach the Collectors is to utilize the Omega-4 Relay, which requires a special piece of equipment to navigate safely. In search of this technology, the team locates and boards a derelict Reaper to recover the necessary equipment. With the technology on board, Shepard launches an attack through Omega-4 and fights his way toward the center of the ship to defeat the Collectors once and for all. Shepard and crew discover that the Collectors have been taking humans to build a new Reaper constructed from the genetic material of abducted colonists—the team destroys the central mechanism and the Collector base. In the final cutscene, an innumerable fleet of Reapers is shown amassing and preparing for what will be a final descent into the galaxy.

Mass Effect 3

Not long after the events of *ME2*, the massive Reaper fleet attacks and overwhelms Earth. Shepard discovers a plan for a Prothean super weapon capable of combatting the Reapers. As the super weapon, dubbed “The Crucible,” begins construction, Shepard sets out to form alliances with other races against the oncoming Reaper invasion. Reeling from the unsuccessful theft, Cerberus launches a surprise assassination of the representatives of the Council, which Shepard manages to prevent. It soon becomes clear that The Crucible needs an unknown piece of Prothean technology to be completed. Shepard finds a virtual intelligence program with information regarding this key piece, but the VI program is stolen by a Cerberus assassin before Shepard can gather the necessary information. Unwilling to accept the setback, Shepard tracks down and kills the Cerberus assassin. After recovering the VI program, Shepard learns that The Citadel is actually the key piece they have been searching for to complete The Crucible. Meanwhile, the Illusive Man—now fully indoctrinated by the Reapers— informs his new masters of the same information, and they capture The Citadel and leave a large portion of their fleet to guard it.

With the help of his recruited forces, Shepard leads a final push on the Reaper forces in hopes of retaking the Crucible. In the assault, the forces are decimated and all squadmates are injured and evacuated; Shepard continues forward. He encounters and kills the indoctrinated Illusive Man, and fights the effects of indoctrination on himself. Upon reaching the Crucible, Shepard has three options regarding its use: 1) control the Reapers; 2) destroy the Reapers, and all other synthetic life; and 3) synthesize all organic and synthetic life together. Each represents a compelling option, and Shepard’s choice directly affects the final outcome of the game.

Appendix B: Glossary of Terms

Asari: A long-lived race known for their wisdom, elegance, and skill in diplomacy. Their “long view” perspective is uncommon in other races with shorter lifespans, which is why their approaches and decisions may sometimes seem to be illogical.

Cerberus: A human paramilitary group. Believing that humans deserve a prominent role in the galactic community, the organization supports all methods intent on advancing humanity. The Citadel Council has declared Cerberus to be a terrorist organization.

The Citadel: A massive space station hub which houses, among other things, the Citadel Council. Commonly believed to have been constructed by the Protheans.

Citadel Council: The highest governing body of Citadel space. At the start of *ME1*, the Council consists of one representative from only the Turian, Asari, and Salarian races. While many other races have petitioned for a representative, longstanding tradition dictates that a race must first prove itself in some major way before being granted a seat.

Collectors: An insectoid race of alien known for suddenly appearing, offering a civilization highly advanced technology in exchange for a quantity living beings, and then vanishing. They bear identical gene sequences to the Prothean DNA, suggesting that the last of the Protheans were subjugated and genetically rewritten to serve the Reapers’ ends.

The Conduit: A miniature mass relay built by Protheans; works as a “back door” to The Citadel.

Drell: A reptilian race rescued from their dying homeworld by the Hanar race two centuries ago. Drell show their debt of gratitude by taking on tasks the Hanar find difficult, like combat.

Element Zero: A rare material that can alter objects’ mass when subjected to an electromagnetic current. The resulting energy field enables faster-than-light travel and can also allow organic beings to execute telekinesis or create energy barriers and warp effects.

Geth: A race of networked artificial intelligences created by the Quarians as a labor/combat force. They share processing power through a “neural network” that has allowed them to achieve sentience. Alone, a Geth has basic intelligence with an animal-like instinct; when networked, they can reason, analyze, and make tactical decisions.

Humans: The most recent race to enter the galactic community, and also the most ambitious. Many races view them as a precocious upstart of a civilization, as they have expanded and developed quickly and have sought to obtain more influence in Citadel politics.

Indoctrination: The term for the brainwashing effect that emanates from Reaper technology onto organic beings. An unknown energy field surrounds Reapers that subtly influences the minds of nearby organic minds, causing them to eventually come to accept and embrace the Reapers’ will and goals as their own. Over time, indoctrination destroys higher level cognitive function, until the subject is left as a mindless, unthinking shell.

Krogans: A species of large reptilian bipeds known for their strength and aggression. Some time ago, they were “uplifted” into galactic politics by the Salarrians as warriors, but soon overpopulated and turned on the rest of the galaxy. In response, the Salarrians and Turians unleashed a genetic infection into the Krogan population that caused a dramatic decrease in birth rate, a decimating effect that is still in effect in current times.

Mass Relays: A network of mass transit devices enabling instantaneous travel between one another. Commonly believed to have been constructed by the Protheans.

Omega-4 Relay: A unique transit relay utilized by the Collectors to enter Citadel space. Thousands of Citadel ships have attempted to use Omega-4 to locate the Collectors, but each one has been destroyed after being transported to the other end.

Protheans: An advanced, ancient race of aliens who mysteriously vanished long before the events of the *Mass Effect* series. While not much is known about the people, they are credited with building The Citadel and the mass relay system network—engineering marvels that have not been matched by any civilization since.

Reapers: Massive synthetic beings with origins stretching back at least one billion years. They hibernate for long stretches of time (tens of thousands of years) in dark space and return periodically to eradicate the advanced organic population of the galaxy—harvesting their genetic information and uploading it into their synthetic mainframe.

Salarrians: An amphibious race known for their keen observational skills and their quick thinking, talking, and acting. They see information-gathering and espionage as standard practice in dealing with other races, operating under the dictum “knowledge is power.” Often considered manipulative by other species, they are able to use their scientific prowess and information brokering to serve their own ends when necessary.

Spectres: An elite group of selected paramilitary agents whose primary responsibility is the preservation of galactic stability. An arm of the Citadel Council, they work with complete autonomy and are immune from any legal restrictions.

Turians: A disciplined reptilian race known for their honor code and strong work ethic. Turians are taught to set aside personal desires for the greater good, and have a strong sense of personal accountability. However, this code has been known to have devastating repercussions on the galactic stage; they abide only by the notion of “total war” in battle, and have all but decimated numerous colonies with whom they have engaged.

Quarians: A nomadic race known for their technological prowess. Long ago, they engineered the Geth as a synthetic labor force, but the sophisticated network design allowed their workers to achieve sentience. Fearful of their creation, the Quarians ordered the termination of all Geth, who fought back and ran the Quarians off their own planet. Since then, they have lived aboard a migrant fleet of starships, seeking refuge and gathering supplies for their own survival.

Appendix C: Index of Video Files

Video 1.1	Opening Cutscene	<i>Mass Effect 1</i> ³⁰	Cutscene	2:22
The opening scene of <i>ME1</i> ; officials discuss if Shepard is right for the job				
Video 1.2	Spectre Induction	<i>Mass Effect 1</i>	Dialogue	1:23
Shepard is inducted as a Spectre by the Citadel Council				
Video 1.3	Normandy Rebuilt	<i>Mass Effect 2</i> ³¹	Cutscene	0:52
Joker unveils the new Normandy to Shepard				
Video 1.4	Motivational Speech	<i>Mass Effect 1</i>	Dialogue	0:58
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Shepard experiences his vision of doom, then meets Sovereign				

³⁰ All *Mass Effect 1* gameplay footage taken from TheREKreational’s YouTube channel playlist (<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLE7F3DB6B76B6BA93>)

³¹ All *Mass Effect 2* gameplay footage taken from TheREKreational’s YouTube channel playlist (<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL0prl1B7cLfl1yfFm7OTr7YzmPUJPWsnx8>)

³² All *Mass Effect 3* gameplay footage taken from 7inful’s YouTube channel playlist (<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLsefMPn3-5utj5X1SgGQlxbDDtNNVQPEL>)

Video 3.2	Sovereign Attacks	<i>Mass Effect 1</i>	Cutscene	0:30
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Video 3.4	Unfinished Reaper	<i>Mass Effect 2</i>	Cut + Play	0:54
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Video 7.1	Samara	<i>Mass Effect 2</i>	Cut + Dlg	1:55
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Video 8.1	Thane	<i>Mass Effect 2</i>	Play + Cut + Dlg	1:44
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Video 10.1	Legion	<i>Mass Effect 2</i>	Cut + Dlg + Play	1:49
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Video 11.1	Jack	<i>Mass Effect 2</i>	Cut + Dlg + Play	1:48
Shepard releases Jack / Shepard and team attack a slave trader hunting for Jack				

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