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HEIDELBERG JOURNAL OF RELIGIONS ON THE INTERNET



Simone Heidbrink, Tobias Knoll (Eds.)

# Religion in Digital Games

Multiperspective & Interdisciplinary Approaches

Volume 05 (2014)

Institute for  
Religious Studies

University  
of Heidelberg

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## The Lord is My Shepard

### Confronting Religion in the *Mass Effect* Trilogy

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#### Abstract

Many science-fiction universes present a “perfected” secular future where technological advances have replaced religion. In this context, characters ascribing to religious beliefs are seen as close-minded and flawed. While the same may be said of the *Mass Effect* video game universe, in this paper we argue that “religion” is actually an abstract character that is always present and active, largely introduced through non-player characters and the structure of the gameplay. Through these narrative devices, the player is subtly immersed in a religious conversation that they are likely not even aware is taking place, guiding them and shaping their perspectives on religion. However, in the trilogy’s controversial ending, players were vocally dissatisfied by the choice they were forced to make, and ultimately, the developers felt compelled to release a new ending for the game. What was it about the original ending that players found so distasteful? We argue that in the *Mass Effect* universe where religion is shown to be culturally and politically divisive and frequently racist, players were jarred that the final “confrontation” required them to make an overtly religious choice. Players were so emotionally affected that they took to the Internet to debate the ending, define themselves by the choice they made, and demand from the developers the ending they “imagined” they deserved. We will show how the *Mass Effect* trilogy, ostensibly a story about the struggle against religious hegemony, ultimately compels the player to confront their own beliefs about religion, and consequently about the nature of religious belief.

#### Keywords

religion, science fiction, video games, *Mass Effect*

*For those people who think they're the center of the universe: now you are.*

– Keith David, voice actor for Admiral David Anderson

## 1. Introduction

It might be observed that ‘modernity’ has never been particularly kind to religion. Indeed, much of social science over the past hundred and fifty years – and notably in sociology and anthropology – has tended to view religion as something of an unwelcome guest to the party: an inconvenient holdover of humankind’s humble origins, out of place in a time where humankind was coming to an acknowledgement of its future aspirations and potential.

Readers will likely be familiar that Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim, and Max Weber – the disciplinary progenitors of the social sciences, as well as being the “usual suspects” in discussions of secularization (Nelson 2012, p. 38) – each famously foretold of the necessary decline of religion and religiosity as a condition of the continued evolution of society. In his early writings, Marx observed that religion was a means of perpetuating social inequalities (the so-called ‘opiate of the people’), and like many of his contemporaries, envisioned a perfected world made free from the yoke of doctrine and belief. Marx would later revisit this idea in observing that ‘commodity fetishism’ (a choice phrasing intended to invoke the specter of religious idolatry) depended on the misrecognition of real human relations which enabled the worker to be exploited and alienated from the product of labor.

Durkheim and Weber similarly recognized that religion was losing traction as modernity took hold of the industrializing world. However, in acknowledging religion’s social utility, both were less sure than Marx of the benefits that society gained from its departure. For Durkheim, the weakening of religious bonds that accompanied the division of labor in an increasingly complex and urbanizing world fed a growing sense of alienation and despair at all levels of society, which he termed *anomie*. Weber, likewise, recognized that capitalist modernity had used religion to ensure its ascendancy. No longer needing to rely on the ideological justification that religion previously provided, the ‘iron cage’ that trapped the world in a capitalist prison could do away with religion entirely, thereby ‘disenchanted’ the world.

While themselves relics of different times and places, the theories of Marx, Durkheim and Weber contribute, often interchangeably, to a familiar narrative of modernity that has influenced social inquiry in somewhat predictable directions. Modernity is almost inextricably implicated in the processes of industrialization and capitalism, and particularly associated with exploration, colonialism, and humanity’s “triumph” over nature. It is a trope of progress, in the sense that

modern society brings technological benefits. But it is also a trope of loss, as modernity symbolizes a rupture from an imagined “traditional” life of the past. Modernity can be optimistic in its neo-liberal ideals of freedom, equality and cooperation, but is very often bleak in its realities of inequality, conflict, alienation and a disorienting sense of homelessness.

In many ways, modernity is a trope permeated and predicated on conflict, struggle, and anxiety. So conceived, modernity implies a Faustian alienation of humanity from nature, as the environment is exploited by industry. It is at first bright and shining, but soon revealed to be grey, dirty, and crowded. However, modernity also brings with it a hope that untouched and unspoiled nature is still “out there” to be discovered. Humanity’s original soul, likewise, must be rediscovered “elsewhere,” as it no longer exists “here.”

Modernity promises to free people from national and ethnic identities and concomitant conflicts by making them “global” and “cosmopolitan.” In reality, however, these freedoms are the purview of a tiny, privileged elite with a vested interest in maintaining unequal relations of power. This power can take many forms: modernity can appear to be unstable, chaotic, and out of control, characterized as a violent maelstrom (Berman 1983) or a runaway juggernaut (Giddens 1990). However, it is by the same token an unswerving homogenizing force, crushing everything in its path and rebuilding the world in its own hegemonic image.

If an aspect of the legacy of Marx, Durkheim and Weber is their contributions to a contemporary discourse about modernity generally, they were also heirs to an older, on-going conversation concerning the role of religion in modern society, much of which coalesced during the Protestant Reformation and the European Enlightenment (Taylor 2011). Under what would be labeled the ‘secularization thesis,’ the presence of religion should indirectly correlate with the progress of modernity: where it did not, its persistence required further explanation. Manifestations of religiosity were often judged to be a mark of cultural and technological backwardness, a relic of a past filled with ignorance, superstition, and irrationality. The “religious” – as well as its attendant terms “belief” and “traditions” – were essentially obstacles that modernity had to overcome in its inevitable forward march towards progress. Religion, where it remained, should be ultimately a private, personal affair: like politics and sexuality, not suitable for polite conversation or public display.

The genre of futurist science fiction is in many ways the logical extension of this narrative of the modern. Science fiction allows for authors to imagine nearly infinite possibilities – new technologies, new discoveries, new encounters, new planets, and new universes – while still staying largely true to the basic premises of modernity. Many science fiction universes present an ideal tomorrow, offering hope that we can escape our present state of dissatisfaction and alienation. It tempts us with exploration – both literal and figurative – so that we may rediscover our true home

and true selves. Science fiction offers us the promise of freedom and choice, so different from the inequalities and determinisms of our everyday lives. In this regard, science fiction can be considered a “fantasy” of the modern: it offers an escape from modernity at the same time that it reifies, replicates, and reinforces its ideological hegemony.

If the modern world has a complicated relationship with religion, how much more so would its future? As Mendelsohn (2003) shows, portrayals of religion in the many futures of science fiction stem directly from modernity’s prejudiced stance toward belief and religiosity. Religiosity does not preclude advances in technology; indeed, religions can spring up around technologies and can use technology productively, and even robots can have religion. However, religious practice and belief in the future is treated as an obstacle to scientific reasoning, “less as a mode of thought and more as a lack of thought” (Mendelsohn 2003, p. 266).

As modernity distances itself from the pre-modern, so too is religion frequently exoticized in science fiction: not something that “we” (advanced, enlightened humans) do, but something that “they” (primitive, superstitious aliens) do. In a future world where the “Other” no longer exists on Earth – due to a benevolent or totalitarian monolithic world government, for example – we must find it elsewhere, in species and cultures that are alien, and by their very definition, Other than human. Science fiction is fascinated with alien religious doctrines and practices, but frequently embarrassed when it finds those same traits in ourselves (265; 271).

In this paper, we will explore how players experience religion and religious ideas through the narrative and gameplay of the *Mass Effect* video game series. We argue that the games use the narrative as a mechanism to subtly engage players in conversations about ideology, faith, and free will, guiding and shaping their perspectives on religion. First, we will show how many players imposed their own views of religion on their hero and the game’s characters, adding a level of personalization beyond the narrative and dialogue options. Second, we will demonstrate how religion maintains an interactive presence in the futuristic science-fiction world of *Mass Effect*, not always immediately obvious, but nevertheless operating as a subtext throughout the gaming experience. Finally, we will suggest that the controversy surrounding the ending of the series may very well have been a consequence of this subtext suddenly coming to the fore, confronting players with an unexpected “moment of truth” that caused them to reconsider what they had been doing all along. In this light, we demonstrate that the *Mass Effect* trilogy, ostensibly an epic story about the struggle against ideological hegemony, ultimately compels the player to confront their own beliefs about religion, and consequently, about the nature of religious belief.



## 2. Finding One's Place in the *Mass Effect* Universe

First released for the Xbox 360 gaming console in 2007 by Canadian developer BioWare, the *Mass Effect* series quickly became one of the most iconic franchises in the recent history of video games. The *Mass Effect* games<sup>1</sup> are set in the late-22<sup>nd</sup> Century, thirty-five years after humanity first discovered artifacts left by an ancient civilization on Mars, which unlocked the secrets of faster-than-light travel throughout the galaxy. Humanity uses this new technology to explore outside of our solar system for the first time in its history and discovers not only the existence of extraterrestrial life, but the humbling fact that humans are both culturally and technologically millennia behind the alien species they encounter. Humans soon learn that the galaxy has been governed for nearly three thousand years by a council comprised of various space-faring races who rule from a central administrative and economic hub known as the Citadel. Despite humanity's demands for equal recognition and a voice in the council, humans are treated by the established council races as little more than children: brash, reckless, and quick to resort to violence if they do not get their way. As such, humans are often confronted with condescension and outward discrimination from the more established alien races.

In the *Mass Effect* games, the player is Commander Shepard, an elite marine of the Systems Alliance, the confederation of Earth and its human colonies. The first game opens with the player responding to a distress call from a human colony on the planet Eden Prime, where Shepard uncovers a plot orchestrated by a rogue council agent whose army of robotic soldiers has destroyed the colony. Humanity's ambassador appeals to the council for assistance, but the council remains suspicious of human motives. The council refuses to openly act in humanity's defense, but concedes in naming Shepard as the first human Spectre<sup>2</sup> agent, granting the freedom to investigate the situation on behalf of the council. In the course of the investigation, Shepard discovers that the rogue agent has been "indoctrinated" by a mysterious super-race known as the Reapers, colossal squid-like machines that are revealed to be the cause of galactic mass extinctions which occur every fifty thousand years.

Throughout the series, Shepard battles the Reapers' growing influence, but like the prophet Cassandra, is unable to convince the galactic council to prepare for the looming threat. The third game begins with Shepard's unheeded warnings coming to humanity's doorstep: Earth and every inhabited planet in the galaxy falls under massive genocidal attack by the Reapers. It falls to Shepard to organize the galaxy's alien races in an against-the-odds fight for survival against the Reapers and extinction.

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1 *Mass Effect Trilogy Official Trailer* <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PfHxkIxMhA4&oref=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.youtube.com%2Fwatch%3Fv%3DPfHxkIxMhA4&has\\_verified=1](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PfHxkIxMhA4&oref=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.youtube.com%2Fwatch%3Fv%3DPfHxkIxMhA4&has_verified=1)>.

2 An acronym for "Special Tactics and Reconnaissance."



In this journey, the player recruits the assistance of many non-player characters (NPCs) who represent a cross-section of the galaxy's diverse species, with their own backstories and motivations for helping Shepard. These characters each have different talents to assist Shepard during combat missions, and provide ambient conversation throughout the game. Between missions, however, the player is able to interact with these characters, and can learn more about them and potentially form deeper relationships with them.

Gameplay in the *Mass Effect* games is a combination of action, strategy, adventure, and role-playing. As a "squad-based shooter," the game is like many others on the market in which the player uses a variety of futuristic weapons and technology to kill enemies and pursue various combat objectives to complete a series of missions. Rather than being the sole focus of the gameplay, combat is most often employed as a means to progress through one of the games' many environments to reach a narrative moment.

As a genre, role-playing games often have a significant combat element in order to keep the player interested. In its role-playing aspects, the player can explore and engage with a fully-fleshed out universe of NPCs ranging from random passersby to influential characters. In the *Mass Effect* games, the player interacts with these NPCs through a transition to a cinematic camera perspective and the inclusion of a "dialogue wheel" which provides players with conversation options that represent sympathetic, neutral, or aggressive responses. Functioning like a decision tree, different conversation choices will open up (or close off) dialogue options: a sympathetic response from the player might cause a character to adopt a friendlier attitude toward Shepard, but it might also lead the NPC to take advantage of Shepard. In contrast, an aggressive response from the player likely will not win Shepard many friends, but might elicit important information out of a recalcitrant character. Once made, a dialogue option cannot be taken back, and a conversation can potentially have any number of results.

However, the *Mass Effect* series was conceived by BioWare to allow a player's choices and decisions to have significant impact in how the game narrative unfolds. The player's accumulated conversational choices may cost Shepard an ally's loyalty, or turn the attitude of major political factions towards Shepard's cause. At key junctures, the player is forced to make major decisions that dramatically shape the narrative direction of the game. Reflecting the difficult decisions that must be made during conflict, the player's choices are literally game-changers. Choosing one course of action can save a friend's life at the cost of a planet. Promoting humanity's interest at the expense of galactic harmony will potentially create a xenophobic dystopia where humans are seen to be a threat to galactic stability.

Unlike most game franchises, the universe created by the player's choices can be imported into the next game of the series to continue Shepard's story. As a result, seemingly minor choices

made in one game often have major consequences in later games. By BioWare's own estimates, there are seven hundred variables that would follow a character between *Mass Effect 1* and 2; between the second and third games, there are over a thousand variables.<sup>3</sup> The result is that, for the most part, no two playthroughs of a *Mass Effect* game are the same, and the narrative differs dramatically from one player's game-world to another.

### 3. Your Personal Savior

Coming to an understanding of *their* Shepard is the first step in the player's unprecedented role in the shaping of their in-game universe. Starting a "New Game" gives you the option of using a default name and appearance Shepard: "John Shepard," whose likeness was based on Dutch fashion model Mark Vanderloo, or "Jane Shepard," a generic female character avatar. However, players have the option of customizing their Shepard's first name, gender, facial appearance, and backstory with a surprising number of variables. Gameplay statistics from BioWare reveal that 80% of players used the character customization options, making the player's version of Shepard overwhelmingly a matter of personal vision, preference, and choice.

This creates an interesting narrative opportunity for the player. Without a "canonical" Shepard, the gameplay of *Mass Effect* establishes from its first moments that, from the perspective of the player, no answer about Shepard can be wrong because whatever the player decides is right. This is in contrast to most video games, where the appearance, background, and motivations for the main character are provided to the player without any of their input: the player simply "picks up" the character's story when the gameplay begins and "puts it down" when the level or game ends. In the *Mass Effect* universe, Shepard *is* who the player decides she or he will be.<sup>4</sup> After deciding on an appearance, the player is able to select from three options for "pre-service history," and from another three for "psychological profile," for a total of nine possible backstory configurations. Once these biographical decisions have been made, they remain constant throughout the series, with different game events, story missions, and dialogue options becoming available depending on the initial choices the player makes.

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3 The official title of the first game in the trilogy is *Mass Effect*. However, to avoid confusion, we refer to this game as *Mass Effect 1*.

4 To avoid having to repeat "she or he" throughout the paper, we have chosen to refer to Shepard as "she," reflecting our own gameplay choices, our belief that Shepard is a strong female character in a medium overwhelmingly dominated by male characters, and our appreciation for the acting talent of Jennifer Hale, who provided the voice for the female Shepard. However, BioWare statistics show that the vast majority of players chose a male Shepard.

However, nowhere in the “creation” of the player’s personal Shepard is the question of religion raised. The game never asks the player to make a choice on what Shepard’s religion may be or if she even has one. Indeed, such a move would be virtually unprecedented in the history of video games. Save for games where the player’s religious identity in a fantasy pantheon serves as a device for offering various gameplay bonuses, we can think of no examples where the player is offered a choice of a “real world” religion in character creation. In this, *Mass Effect* is no exception.

This, of course, did not stop *Mass Effect* players and fans from actively speculating about Shepard’s religion. In researching this article, we found discussions of Shepard’s religion and her stance on religiosity continues to be active<sup>5</sup> topics on sites dedicated to the discussion of video games, usually appearing at least once, and sometimes across multiple threads on the same site. One 2010 conversation thread (hosted simultaneously by gaming sites GameSpot and GameFAQ) is titled “Does Commander Shepard have a religion?”<sup>6</sup>

Many commenters noted that it is during one of Shepard’s early conversations with NPC Ashley Williams where they could show *their* Shepard to be sympathetic or hostile to religion. Some went so far as to post their own Shepard’s religion, with examples ranging from Christian and Jewish to Hindu or generically “spiritual.” One player filled in biographical blanks in the narrative commenting, “Since she is American, I guess she is Catholic,” giving Shepard a nationality<sup>7</sup>, and with it, incorrectly assuming the predominance of Catholicism in America. Most often, players determined that *their* Shepard mirrored their own religious faith, and understood Shepard from this perspective. For example, one poster wrote, “As I am a Christian, I made my Shep one.” Other players chose to avoid revealing if their Shepard had a religion, with one speculating, “Well clearly Shepard is not Jewish due to his disliking and distrust of many volus<sup>8</sup>.” Others argued that Shepard had a “default” religion, claiming Shepard would be “agnostic.” However, a fairly large number of players felt Shepard would not have any religion. For example, one player insisted that Shepard is “pretty cool,” so she does not need religion, and an anonymous commenter stated that Shepard is “too smart to have a religion,” which led to a heated debate on how intelligent a person had to be before they gave up religion entirely.

This discussion moved on to religion as a whole. Players debated what constituted religion, whether agnosticism and atheism can be considered “religions,” and argued why Shepard and

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5 As of September 2013, six years after the first game’s launch and one year after the final game in the trilogy was released.

6 For improved readability, we have corrected any misspellings and grammatical errors that were contained in the original forum postings that would ordinarily be marked with a [sic]. The Internet can sometimes be a very scary place for spelling and grammar.

7 Both English-speaking voice actors for Commander Shepard are, in fact, Canadian.

8 The attribution of Judaism to the alien volus species in this context is highly derogatory, as volus are short, physically unimposing traders and merchants. There is no indication that BioWare intended this connection be made.

science fiction games did not emphasize religion more with comments like, “Wouldn’t having her as Christian be a more logical default, since the vast majority of people and thus players (in the Western world) are? ... Would be interesting to see how Christianity and Islam dealt with the discovery of aliens.” Still another poster wrote that “I think by the time you're in space and you realize that the majority of alien races have four appendages and stand on two, that the existence of a human god can be confirmed. I don't understand how Science Fiction fails so bad at this.”

Some players claimed that beyond interactions with NPC Ashley Williams, the player does not have any opportunity to “play” their views on religion, remarking that religion does not “come up anywhere” in *Mass Effect* and “Notice how [BioWare] took care not to ever tell what Shepard may or may not have experienced while she was dead.” One player echoed what so many other players felt when writing: “In all honesty, I really wish they did more with the idea of religious dialogue, I would love to see the [*Mass Effect*] version of a religious debate.”

This discussion thread illustrates how strongly players felt about their unique take on Shepard and *Mass Effect*. For many, Shepard was not just a character in a game, but a reflection of the player, themselves. Whether Shepard was deeply religious, agnostic, or thoroughly atheistic, this added personal detail, though not one of the game’s original backstory options, became a deciding factor in a player’s style of play throughout the games, influencing their understanding of Shepard’s values, in-game conversations, and decisions.

#### 4. Encoding Religion

BioWare’s writers included in the narrative many references easily familiar to the average gamer, such as references to classical mythology, the Old and New Testaments, Asian religions, and a myriad of others. However, it should be stated that we are not arguing that a video game’s inclusion of these elements is enough to make it “religious.” We believe what makes *Mass Effect* unique is its ability to appear to the player as a secular future, with characters who seem firmly rooted in the trappings of modernity, while the aspects of religiosity are cleverly interwoven into the game, subtly immersing the player in a world of religious dogma, moral ambiguity, and crises of faith. As *Mass Effect* game director Casey Hudson explains, “there can be a message in [video games] without making a statement... a player can explore their thoughts on the issue, interactively.”<sup>9</sup> And it is in the superficial nature of this image of secularism that actually highlights how steeped in religion the games truly are.

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9 Interviews From the Final Hours of *Mass Effect 3*, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=16AHDT4POZc>>.

It is easy to see the very straightforward ways the games handle religion, and how the player may understand the galaxy's many races and characters incorporate religion in their lives. In an interview, Hudson comments that Commander Shepard is, "... the first human Spectre and there is a shepherding of humanity quality to that."<sup>10</sup> However, players did not need Hudson to clarify this point. Beyond BioWare's tribute to Alan Shepard, the first American in space, players were likely aware of the religious implication of calling the hero of this story "Shepard." Early concept designs of the male Shepard in *Mass Effect 2* following his resurrection by the not-so subtly-named Lazarus Project, reveals a man with long hair and beard, to which one player sarcastically commented, "Thank god they didn't go with the obvious Christ-esque world savior design" (Plunkett 2013).

The *Mass Effect* trilogy also lends itself to the image of a religious triptych wherein the player recognizes Shepard as the savior of the galaxy in *Mass Effect 1*, her willing sacrifice and resurrection in *Mass Effect 2*, and her ascension and apotheosis in *Mass Effect 3*. *Mass Effect 2* drives this message home by allowing the player to choose from twelve "apostles" in the form of Shepard's squadmates, whom the player must redeem during the course of the game to ensure their survival in the final mission.

So too in-game dialogue with NPCs shows the player what a perfected world of *Mass Effect* truly means. To the player, the games reveal a future in which humans and alien races live, work, and love together. However, the games also show the player a world that may be less tolerant of the cultures of different species as they intermingle. For example, when first exploring the Citadel during *Mass Effect 1*, the player encounters a situation that gives them a clear idea of how religion is viewed and dealt with in the *Mass Effect* universe. The player overhears two aliens arguing, one a security officer and the other a street preacher. The player has the opportunity to stop and offer assistance to resolve the situation. The officer explains that open proselytizing is illegal on the Citadel, which has defined spaces for proselytization by permit only. He complains that the preacher "refuses to listen to reason," and wants to continue to "spew its nonsense" without purchasing a permit. If the player chooses to press the officer for more information about Citadel regulations, they learn that such permits are required in order to "weed out undesirables" and "keep the area safe," because "the Citadel is too important to become a battleground for a religious war."<sup>11</sup> When speaking with the preacher, the player can determine the Citadel should be free of religion by either choosing to appeal to the preacher's logic, using Shepard's own knowledge of its beliefs to convince it to stop illegal proselytization, or choose to accuse the preacher of being a "troublemaking zealot,"<sup>12</sup> although the preacher hints that the officer may be prejudiced. Or, the player can decide the preacher should be able to remain and proselytize. Depending on the choice

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10 Casey Hudson Interview – How Mass Effect Began, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zi0EvhIDPUQ>>.

11 *Mass Effect Walkthrough - Citadel Presidium Prophet*, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OSTgBC5r-lc>>.

12 *Mass Effect: Presidium Prophet*, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ngPGLswpndE>>.

the player makes during this seemingly inconsequential interaction, they can experience a religious-friendly Citadel, or a Citadel without an obvious religious presence. It is nuances such as this incorporated into the game world that almost imperceptibly shape how the player understands *their* galaxy.

Beyond direct interaction with NPCs, the majority of information and intelligence the player gathers about the races and planets of the galaxy come from the in-game “encyclopedia” of the game universe known as the Codex.<sup>13</sup> These entries contain a wealth of information for the player and provide the cultural, religious, political, and economic histories of all the alien races in *Mass Effect*. In fact, it is from the Codex that the player can see that the game does not ignore religion, it simply does not address human religions or the value religion has for humanity.

The Codex’s descriptions of the different alien races and cultures in *Mass Effect* indicate that most aliens put little emphasis on religion, ostensibly in line with the futuristic worlds of science fiction. Although there are a few alien races with organized religions, the majority of them are described as “spiritual” or actively putting their race’s religion aside as they interact with and experience the different cultures of the galaxy.

Drew Karpyshyn, lead writer for *Mass Effect 1* and co-lead writer for *Mass Effect 2*, pointed out that this abundance of information was intentionally placed in the Codex. In an interview he explained, “We knew we had it if we needed it, we just weren’t sure if fans were going to want it. That’s when we decided, let’s put it in the Codex ... and make sure people can appreciate the depth that we’ve put in there.”<sup>14</sup>

In the game narrative, however, religion is so subtly included that the player may not even realize they are involved in what would otherwise be considered significant religious events. For example, in *Mass Effect 3*, ancient religious artifacts important to various alien races can be recovered in the course of the player’s exploration of the galaxy. Like Moses, the player brings the holy books and artifacts down “from the heavens” as it were, restoring in turn each race’s faith in their own religion and increasing their willingness to fight for the survival of their culture and the galaxy. The significance of these “religious moments” is telling, but subtly communicated. There are many missions the player can complete to strengthen the Citadel, with each “war asset” adding a boost of no more than ten points. Recovering the religious artifacts, however, are worth four times that amount: in the quest to achieve “galactic readiness,” the power of religion is more important than technological upgrades, or military materiel and supplies. Still, the player has to dig for this

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13 Collecting this information, and certainly reading it, is not required of the player, although discovering all entries of the Codex is necessary to achieve full completion of *Mass Effect 1*.

14 *June 9th E3 Round Up and Drew Karpyshyn talks Mass Effect Themes, Characters and Endings!*, <<https://soundcloud.com/am640/vgs-june-9th-e3-round-up-and>>.



information. While the game will not require that the player search for these religious items, it will also not overtly reveal how valuable they are.

It is worth noting that Shepard never discovers any items of religious significance to human religions or, in fact, anything specific to human cultures, in general. The diverse alien races are given their holy texts (and a new messenger) as an impetus to fight for survival; humans must find their inspiration from Shepard alone.

As discussed above, it is with Ashley Williams that the player engages in explicit discussions of religion. In Ashley, the game introduces one of the most openly religious characters in the entire trilogy. Ashley has strong religious beliefs and shares them with Shepard, although she admits to being unsure how the other squadmates would react to the topic. In a revealing conversation, Ashley shares that her father is dead and “with God now,” but asks Shepard, “That’s not a problem with you, is it, that I believe in God?” If the player chooses to support Ashley’s faith, Shepard responds, “You know that old saw, ‘There’s never an atheist in a foxhole?’ I’ve been in a lot of foxholes.” If the player chooses this dialogue option, Ashley appears relieved and replies, “I’ve met a few people who were really weirded out by my faith. Because I work in space, I can’t believe in a higher power? ... How can you look at this galaxy and not believe in something?”<sup>15</sup>

At a crucial juncture of *Mass Effect 1*, the player is forced to decide whether to sacrifice Ashley or squadmate Kaidan Alenko. For many players, conversations like this one between Ashley and Shepard became influencing factors in their decision. The BioWare forums host a discussion thread asking players “*Your honest reason for saving Ashley or Kaidan?*” This thread was sparked by the player’s decision and is so contentious that it is still active on the forum today. Player comments about Ashley reveal that many believe her to represent the persistence of religion in the science fiction future, welcome or not. Although many players made comments like, “I find Ash irritating” and “I find Ash can be really rigid,” some flatly stated that Ashley’s emphasis on her faith was enough for them to choose for her to die. Some players admitted, “To me, the most annoying thing about Ash was the religious crap” and “I hated Ashley. I wanted her gone.” Still, others identified with Ashley’s religious nature and believed her to be more complex compared to other characters in the game, divulging that “I really like how she is a little xenophobic and a Christian,”<sup>16</sup> and “I definitely like Ash; I think that her more ‘controversial’ opinions ... make her a fleshed out character, rather than just another ‘chick with a gun’ type that we seem to see everywhere these days.” Overall, when players are required to make the choice between Ashley and Kaidan, Ashley is much more likely to survive, however she ranks as one of the least popular characters in the entire *Mass Effect* trilogy.

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15 *Mass Effect: God and Foxholes* <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aBJG2Ud\\_0SA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aBJG2Ud_0SA)>.

16 This player assumes Ashley Williams is Christian, but at no point is the character’s religion specified.



Oddly enough, players did not seem to have a similar reaction to another openly religious character, the alien Thane Krios, an NPC who Shepard meets literally in the act of prayer. Thane prays before each mission and asks forgiveness after each kill, and the player can engage in long conversations with him about his beliefs. In fact, it is during one of Shepard's final moments with Thane that the player is invited to pray with him. Nowhere else in *Mass Effect*, and by no other NPC, is the player offered an opportunity to pray. As opposed to many players' negative reactions to Ashley's faith and their positive reactions to her possible death, Thane was a fan favorite, and his death in *Mass Effect 3* upset so many players that a "Save Thane" social media campaign was started.

Comparing player responses to Ashley and Thane may reveal a stark truth about how the player views the "Other." Although these characters are different in many ways, their assertions that their faith plays a major role in who they are illustrates that on this point they are very much alike. However, in general, players did not react to Thane's character with the broad negativity that they did to Ashley. Perhaps it is because these moments with Thane never prompt the player to consider their (or Shepard's) views about religion. Or, it may, simply, be that Thane is an alien and players saw his religious faith *as* something alien, without it being a comment on themselves and humans, whereas, Ashley's religiosity may have been seen as a reflection of the player, individually, and humanity as a whole.

## 5. Shepard the Redeemer

Even if the player resists commiserating with NPCs about their personal ideologies, and chooses not to engage in possible religious dialogue options, the game's narrative is not so flexible. Written into the storyline and missions, the player must consistently confront those who stand against everything for which Shepard defends.

As a Spectre, Shepard is "an ideal, a symbol, the embodiment of courage, determination, and self-reliance, authorized to use any means necessary" to maintain galactic safety. As such, the player also acts as an agent of free will. Shepard is the foil to all those who seek to subjugate free will and impose their will on others. Each of the plot-driving missions in the games presents the player with an opportunity to use Shepard's authority and charisma to destroy any who would choose to oppress others and to liberate those being oppressed. In each of these missions, the player as Shepard is compelled to resist the physical or mental enslavement of others.

One of the main missions the player faces in *Mass Effect 1* brings Shepard against the Thorian, an ancient and mysterious creature which uses its mind-controlling abilities to manipulate

biological life forms. It has been systematically enthralling the planet's inhabitants, forcing them to even work with the player in an attempt to manipulate Shepard towards its own ends. Although the Thorian's ability to enthrall creatures ultimately gives Shepard the key to understanding the Reaper threat, the player does not have the ability to choose to let the creature survive. The creature's death is a scripted event, underscoring the message that Thorian is a threat to free will and too dangerous to be allowed to live.

It is when facing one of Shepard's chief enemies in *Mass Effect 1* that the player first hears the term "indoctrination," a powerful form of mental control that is one of the Reapers' key weapons against the species of the galaxy. Indoctrination is not a single event, but rather a slow and subtle conversion that compels the subject to conform to the Reapers' demands as their own, while believing that they are acting out of free will. Those indoctrinated come to "idolize" and "worship" their masters, "becoming a willing tool, eager to serve," ultimately creating a subservient army of worshippers who at first willingly, and later mindlessly, give their lives in the pursuit of their masters' bidding. While the Reapers remain a hidden threat for most of the series, the player regularly confronts the effects of indoctrination throughout the *Mass Effect* trilogy in the form of the countless innocent beings who have had their free will taken from them. More so than the Reapers themselves, it is their power of indoctrination that Shepard must constantly confront and defeat.

It is telling that while Shepard tirelessly battles indoctrinated enemies, she too is becoming a figure worthy of adoration. In *Mass Effect 2*, much of the narrative concerns the Shepard helping her squadmates confront their own personal demons. Unlike other NPCs in the games, each of Shepard's squadmates in the second game is burdened by their own psychological and emotional captivity, which the player must help them overcome. It is only when the player assists their squadmates in confronting the sources of their trauma and redeeming them from their past sins and regrets that they can be wholly loyal to Shepard and willing to unquestionably follow her against the Reaper threat. Driving the point home, these "loyalty missions" are largely Biblical references – for example "The Prodigal," "Eye for an Eye," "Sins of the Father," and "A House Divided." We believe that while making a statement about religion may not have been one of BioWare's obvious goals, adding such labels to missions of redemption is a subtle reinforcement to the player that they are acting as an agent of deliverance for their team and the galaxy.

In their efforts as a redeemer, the player is often given the opportunity to converse with a variety of oppressors, ranging from bullies to petty tyrants to the heads of galactic conspiracies. Common to each of these encounters is the oppressor's attempts to justify their actions: as being necessary for the greater good, or that it was not their fault, as they had to ensure their own survival

in chaotic situations. As one overthrown tyrant rationalizes his actions to Shepard, “Some [people] even seemed happier. Ignorance is bliss ... they were grateful for guidance, like an instinct.”<sup>17</sup>

One of the groups the player regularly engages throughout the *Mass Effect* trilogy is the geth, an artificial intelligence. In conversations with geth NPC Legion, the player has the opportunity to learn about the geth, as well as their culture and history. The player discovers that the geth’s war with their creators ultimately flared over the nature of free will and self-determination: as the geth gained sentience and began to question who they were, many of their creators felt the need to suppress and control them. As Legion reveals, a geth questioned its overseer, “Do these units have a soul?,” explaining the geth learned the word “soul” themselves from reading their creators’ religious documents.<sup>18</sup>

After the war, a faction of geth split from the main group in order to support the Reapers in their galactic conquest and worship them as gods, believing them to be the pinnacle of their future evolution. The geth named this faction the “heretics” and agreed they could worship as they wish, without interfering in their plans with the Reapers. However, Legion seeks the player’s help after the geth learned the heretics intended to convert the entire species by uploading a virus into the geth collective intelligence, essentially re-writing “non-believers” to follow and worship the Reapers.

Legion gives Shepard a unique choice: to preemptively rewrite the heretics’ programming and force them to reintegrate with the geth collective, turning the tables on them but similarly overriding their free will, or deleting the heretics completely. However, it is during a revealing conversation between Legion and Shepard’s squadmates at the moment the player must make this decision, that the player is confronted with what may be the core message of the *Mass Effect* trilogy. Legion states, “Every sapient has the right to make their own decisions.” A squadmate questions Legion, “If they ‘have the right to make their own decisions,’ how can you suggest brainwashing them to accept your way?” Legion responds, “We stated the option exists. We did not endorse it. It is Shepard-Commander’s decision.”<sup>19</sup>

In *Mass Effect 3*, as Shepard’s reputation as a liberator and redeemer grows, requests for the player to provide redemption occurs on a galactic scale, not focusing on individual characters, but on entire planets. Only when the player visits each planet is salvation ensured for it, and the alien races which inhabit it.

The irony throughout *Mass Effect* is that, while Shepard emancipates NPCs, squadmates and alien homeworlds, saving them from themselves, each other, and the Reapers, the player as Shepard is simultaneously enforcing their own will upon the galaxy and those who live in it. Shepard

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17 *Mass Effect 2: Jacob’s Father* <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CSBx59BWQbY>>.

18 *Mass Effect 2: Legion on the Soul* <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wGwuhtGIQOg>>.

19 *Mass Effect 2 – Rewrite or Genocide (Legion’s Loyalty)* <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ydzOjpQ1Lxw>>.

opposes all forms of ideological authoritarianism, with its potential to create brainwashed, blind followers. But through the player's mission to inspire the galaxy to support Shepard and eradicate imposed order, in favor of unpredictable free will, they actually replicate what they seek to destroy. Like the oppressors she has overthrown, Shepard uses her almost-supernatural charisma (and a gun) to create a loyal band of followers who are dependent on her for advice and assistance and unquestioningly follow her into danger. In one instance, Shepard actually lectures an NPC, "Your superiors are sending you to certain death for no good reason. You have a right to disobey." A squadmate will sarcastically remark on Shepard's own proclivity for putting her team's lives in jeopardy, to which Shepard responds, "Most of the time, I'm not being stupid about it."<sup>20</sup>

It is clear from these examples that BioWare is making a comment on charismatic leadership: namely that dogmatic or ideological acceptance of authority is Shepard's natural enemy. The player is given the message that unquestioning obedience is dangerous and, whenever encountered, must be destroyed. However, what the game ultimately demands of the player is to accept the paradox that, as Shepard, they must compel others to do the same.

In the *Mass Effect* series, BioWare creates situations in which the player is given repeated examples of how powerful sources of authority can manipulate and exploit blind faith, and they are given missions to stop these abuses of power. Yet, in so doing, the player is subtly encouraged to replicate the authoritarian behavior they seek to overthrow. Through Shepard's influence and magnetism, NPCs, squadmates, and alien races band together in an attempt to save the galaxy, not because they face their own extinction, but because the redeemer has called upon them, and they will follow her, because they must. This generates a climactic confrontation that pits Shepard and her flock against the Reapers and their indoctrinated masses: two gods and their factions, battling for galactic supremacy.

## 6. Ascension, Apotheosis...or Indoctrination?

Assuming that a player began with the first *Mass Effect* game and played through the series, by the time the player reaches the finale of *Mass Effect 3*, they will likely have invested more than a hundred hours into the franchise, and potentially much more if they purchased optional downloadable content or completed multiple playthroughs. Long-time fans of the series have an emotional stake not only in the fate of their personal Shepard and the worlds their choices created,

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20 *Mass Effect 2 – You telling me we can question Suicide Orders?* <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7LmsWqERHkg>>.

but also in the culmination of the many hours spent in the *Mass Effect* universe. Before the final game in the trilogy was released, fans throughout the world wondered: how would it all end?

For approximately the last hour of *Mass Effect 3*, Shepard leads a final desperate resistance against the Reapers on Earth through what has become the urban wasteland of London. To have any chance of winning against the Reapers, Shepard and her squad must reach a heavily guarded transport beam leading to a station orbiting above the planet. After suffering heavy casualties and moments before reaching the objective, Shepard's squad is forced to abandon their transport vehicle and run on foot through open and exposed terrain towards the beam. As the surviving resistance forces run, the soldiers alongside Shepard are systematically vaporized with every blast of the Reaper's energy weapon. As the player gets tantalizingly close to the beam, the Reaper slowly focuses its aim on Shepard. No matter what the player does, Shepard is hit and the screen goes white.

Shepard regains consciousness to find that she has been critically wounded. Far from the familiar gameplay mechanics to which the player is accustomed, the interface after this point has an ethereal, otherworldly feel. Visually, the screen has become blurry, while the game speed has reduced dramatically. In a similar fashion, the audio is muffled with ringing, a familiar effect used in movies to simulate a close-call with artillery. The difference, however, is the howling sounds that surround the player, less the sound of wind than the sound of the damned.<sup>21</sup>

Shepard slowly limps to the beam and is transported to the station, where she hopes to rendezvous with any surviving members of the strike team. Reaching a control room, Shepard is forced into the middle of a tense standoff between her mentor and her patron, resulting in all three being mortally wounded. Shepard loses consciousness again, presumably dying from her wounds. The platform Shepard collapses on begins to rise on a beam of light, and the screen goes white again.

Shepard awakes on the surface of the station, as a ghostly child approaches her and tells her to "wake up."<sup>22</sup> The child explains that the Reaper's cycle of extinction is actually a strategy to preserve life: the Reapers were created to harvest advanced species before those species sow their own destruction by creating artificial intelligences that will inevitably rebel against their creators. However, the child explains that Shepard's efforts to unite the galaxy and resist the Reapers prove that this strategy will no longer work: Shepard must choose a "new solution" from options the child offers.

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21 *Mass Effect 3: Running to the Beam*, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R35CMVQP0I4>>.

22 *Mass Effect 3: Full Catalyst Conversation*, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J6kZuSHpWwo>>.

The options that Shepard will be given is determined by how the player has played the game: players that rushed through to the ending will be given only one option, while players who have invested many hours into the series are given up to three.

At all levels of preparation, players are given the option to destroy the Reapers (colored red), at the cost of all the advanced technology the galaxy relies upon: all communication relays, all means of transportation, and all machines will be destroyed, leaving the galaxy alive, but no longer living in a technological “future.” More prepared players are offered the option to control the Reapers (colored blue): here, Shepard loses her corporeal body to become the collective intelligence of the Reapers, able to command their overwhelming power to shape the future of the galaxy as she sees fit. The most prepared players are offered a third option: the ability to synthesize biological life with machine technology (colored green), and creating a harmonious galaxy where all life becomes a fusion of biology and technology without further need for evolution.

Once the player makes their decision, it is irrevocable. In the ending cinematic, a beam of energy of the color corresponding to the player’s choice bursts forth from the satellite. The effects of the choice are immediately visible on Earth, but the energy rapidly spreads throughout the galaxy, destroying the transportation hubs that the galaxy relies on for interstellar travel. Shepard’s ship and crew desperately try to outrun the beam and make it to safety, but the beam overtakes them and forces the ship to crash land on a forested planet. The game ends with Shepard’s crew emerging from the wreckage into the sunlight of an idyllic alien world upon which they are now marooned.

The fanbase’s vocal reaction against the series’ ending began mere days after *Mass Effect 3*’s release, growing louder as more and more players finished the game. Players noted that, except for a twenty-second scene showing the effects of the player’s choice on the battle in London, the ending cinematic sequences of the game were virtually identical, with only the color of the energy beam differing between the three. None of the previous choices that the player made throughout the series were represented. In fact, there was little indication that the player’s choice at the end made any difference at all to the fate of the universe.

Thousands of angry fans posted scathing reviews of *Mass Effect 3* on retail sites such as Amazon.com, warning potential buyers about the ending, and calling for a boycott of BioWare and Electronic Arts, the game’s publisher. BioWare’s own forums exploded in rage, with players demanding that the company design and publish a new ending that met fan expectations.

This was only the beginning. Over the next several weeks, over a hundred thousand players joined together through various social media sites to launch an international “Retake *Mass Effect 3*” campaign, using language inspired by the American Tea Party and the Occupy political movement. The group organized petition, letter, and e-mail campaigns, urging fans to “hold the line” in their mission to “demand a better ending.” The most visible stunt by this group was to deliver to



BioWare employees over four hundred vanilla cupcakes, decorated with red, blue, and green frosting. The stunt was intended to mock the ending of the game, and the delivery included messages from fans such as “no matter what color you choose, they all taste the same.” One inconsolable player even filed a formal fraud complaint with the US Federal Trade Commission, claiming the game’s ending did not meet BioWare’s advertising and marketing promises, and urged other players to do the same.

As the initial furor died down (not the least because BioWare announced that they would consider revising the ending), fans’ forum signatures began to reveal a deepening understanding of the ending. While many fans still identified themselves with a “demand a better ending” tag, other fans began to use color-coded signatures to ideologically identify themselves with their preferred ending: a red tag might read “I chose Destroy,” while a green tag would read “I chose Synthesis.” Turning away from their anger at the game’s designers, fans began to debate amongst themselves as to the philosophical reasons why their Shepard made the particular choice she did.

Perhaps the most significant attempt to reevaluate the ending became known as the “Indoctrination Theory.” The idea began in fits and starts, but as players forensically reevaluated the ending in light of the voluminous data contained in the three games, a startling possible scenario began to emerge: was the entire ending actually the player “playing out” Shepard’s indoctrination at the hands of the Reapers? Rather than providing a generic ending, did BioWare succeed in pulling off one of the most brilliant narrative coups of all time?

An exhaustive four hour YouTube video documentary on the Indoctrination Theory posted by gaming site CleverNoob laid out the case for Shepard’s indoctrination in painstaking detail.<sup>23</sup> According to the theory, everything that the player witnessed following Shepard being struck by the Reaper’s blast was taking place in Shepard’s mind: there was no trip to the orbiting station, no confrontation or gunfight, and no ethereal child. The player, instead, was seeing the world through Shepard’s weakened and vulnerable mental state; the players themselves were experiencing indoctrination.

Rather than being a “vanilla” ending, this could arguably be the moment to which the entire series – an epic struggle between maintaining one’s free will and self-determination, or being coerced into accepting the ideology and demands of a dominating authority – had been leading. The evidence for the Indoctrination Theory required the player to piece together the subtle narrative points about the dangers of charismatic authority, dogmatic thinking, and religious fervor that had always been present in the series, as well as visual and gameplay nuances being used to communicate to the player that something was “amiss” during the ending.

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23 *The Indoctrination Theory – A Documentary*, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2CKHLDgz2zE>>.



According to the Indoctrination Theory, two out of the three choices presented to Shepard by the ghostly child led to outcomes where the player actually allowed the Reapers to win. To choose to either Control or Synthesize with the Reapers meant that the player had been seduced by their promises of power or harmony: in the first instance, Shepard's control of the Reapers gives her absolute power over the fate of the galaxy, to use as she pleases, either as a benevolent protector, or an angry avenger. In the second instance, synthesizing with the Reapers would impose their own version of harmony, a world free from the conflicts caused by free will or disorder caused by biological evolution.<sup>24</sup> Like the testing of Jesus in the desert, Shepard is being tempted with the idea that imposing her will on the trillions of beings in the galaxy would be a suitable replacement for the Reapers doing the same.

The only correct option, according to this theory, is to destroy the Reapers. This choice was presented to the player first but unlike the others, is presented in a wholly negative light by the child. In explaining the option to destroy the Reapers, the ghostly child threatens that not only will the galaxy suffer even more through the loss of their advanced technology and the immediate extinction of artificial intelligences, but Shepard herself – brought back to life through the extensive use of cybernetics – will likely die as well. If our personal experiences are any indication – and evidence from the many game forums suggest that we are not alone – our emotional response to this choice was to think of the relationships that our Shepards had formed with the characters whose survival relied on this technology. For us, “Destroy” was not an option.

However, the Indoctrination Theory points out that there is no evidence ever presented to the player that anything that the child is saying is true. In order to make the correct decision to destroy the Reapers, the player must actively and purposefully *reject* their instinct to blindly accept the truth of what the child is saying. To choose either of the other options means that the player – and by extension, Shepard – has succumbed to indoctrination. Their thoughts, their beliefs, and even their ability to influence the world they themselves have created are no longer their own.

It should be noted that, BioWare eventually gave in to their fans' demands for a “better ending.” In June 2012, BioWare released an Extended Cut of the ending that provided more detail

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24 The “Synthesis” option offered to Shepard in many ways resembles the futurist paradigm of ‘transhumanism’ (also known as ‘posthumanism’), in which technology evolves to a point in which humans become functionally “hybrid” biological and technological organisms. Examples of transhumanism range from the prosthetic (for example, a mechanical heart) to the cybernetic (implants which augment hearing or sight) to the “postbiological” (a human consciousness uploaded into a computer mainframe to achieve immortality).

While transhumanism is a fertile topic for discussions of religion generally, it also provides an interesting tangent to our discussion here. As Thacker (2003, 76) demonstrates, a key criticism of transhumanism lies in its difficulty to explain how an ontological existence which is entirely dependent upon on technology can still be called “human.” From a humanist perspective, for Shepard to choose “Synthesis” would be to arguably wipe out all “life” in the galaxy. Whatever hybrid existence takes its place would not be life as we know it, but something else entirely.

showing the player how their decisions affected the galaxy following Shepard's final confrontation. These new endings did not confirm the Indoctrination Theory, but neither did they disprove it: BioWare has remained silent on this matter, choosing to allow their passionate fan base to speculate freely and come to their own understandings of the worlds they have created.

It very well could be that the Indoctrination Theory revealed BioWare's "true" ending to the series. If the theorists are correct (and by now the evidence in support of the theory is nothing short of encyclopedic), then BioWare made good on their forcing the player to actively confront their own perspectives on the importance of choice, belief, charisma, and religion in their own lives. If the player gives in to the temptations of the ghostly child to impose their own order on the galaxy, they must reconcile for themselves the fact that all of their efforts and actions have led to the player identifying with the very thing they have hoped to destroy: as has occurred on a larger stage throughout history, the revolutionary has become the tyrant, the redeemer has become the oppressor.

If the Indoctrination Theory is false, however, then BioWare may be making an even more thought-provoking comment about the idea and experience of human free will and self-determination: that despite the appearance of actions and choices "mattering" in one's life, a single human life is a mere blip in the unfathomable scale of the universe. This is a depressing conclusion for certain, but a recognition that sometimes humans cannot change the outcome of history, no matter how much of a bang or a whimper they make in their lifetime. In this perspective, the fans who vocally protested their choices "not mattering" in the end were simply echoing the existential crisis of humanity at large, the Sartrean struggle of finding meaning in the face of overwhelming nothingness.

From an ethnographic perspective, one has to wonder how many players truly wanted a story with a deeper message. While the elements of the religious as we have described them here were certainly a part of the game, the very fact of the matter is that not many video games have dealt with such heavy philosophical issues, and *Mass Effect's* ending may have come as an unwelcome surprise to more recreational gamers who just wanted a good time with a good story.

Some players actively resented that BioWare denied them a "Hollywood happy ending" to instead give them an ending fraught with ambiguity and interpretive possibilities. Even after BioWare released the Extended Cut, a group of industrious PC gamers programmed an unofficial modification of the game to rewrite the ending. The result, the "*Mass Effect* Happy Ending Mod," completely overwrote the game's original ending, skipping over the confrontation with the ethereal child, and instead giving Shepard a reunion with her crew and her love interest – a "happily ever after" worthy of their hero.

Still others took the ending in stride, and watched with amusement at the anger that the game's ending provoked. As many commenters noted at the height of the public outcry against the ending, "some people need to lighten up - it's just a game!"

## 7. An End, Once and For All

In a retrospective interview about the *Mass Effect* series, former lead writer Drew Karpysyn explained that the game designers conceived of *Mass Effect* as "a way for [players] to explore deeper issues of good and evil – do the ends justify the means? – segregation versus integration, how we would react to different species, different threats. It was a very interesting direction it took, and looking at the forums, it's always fun to see people's comments, reactions to the game and to the various situations that came up." Over six years after the release of the first game of the trilogy, it is clear that what set the *Mass Effect* series apart from many other games of its kind is more than the emphasis on choice in allowing the player to personalize their gameplay experience. The series evokes powerful emotional responses in its fan base, which in turn has inspired years of exciting commentary and discussion. This alone is a significant accomplishment for a work in any medium.

As we have shown throughout this paper, *Mass Effect's* subtle use of religion as a narrative device pushed players to confront their feelings about the persistence of religion and religiosity in a future world largely of their own making. Ultimately, the game's controversial ending motivated players to discuss, analyze, compare, and evaluate their visions and worlds of *Mass Effect* in an attempt to understand what they had experienced.

As works of fiction, the *Mass Effect* series lends itself to any number of viable interpretations, all (or none) of which may be acknowledged by the player. As an extension of familiar narratives about "the modern," the *Mass Effect* series provides a venue for players to comment on – and perhaps critique – the extent and reach of "modernity" into the future. A player who believes that religion has no place in a technological future can make such a world; conversely, a player who places their own religious identity on their in-game character can use Shepard's considerable charisma to 'reenchant' the world (in the Weberian sense) through their in-game choices. In a similar vein, Shepard's struggle against the Reapers might be seen to represent the struggle of humanity against the powerful normalizing forces that shape life in the modern world. Shepard's resistance – or acquiescence – to these forces can similarly reveal a player's perspective on their own experiences of modernity.

Seen in this light, we believe that video games – and particularly the genre of role-playing games – provide an important medium for allowing a player to explore and interact with ideas,

practices, beliefs, and behaviors that are properly called “religious.” As a form of interactive storytelling, the relationship between author and consumer is blurred, and allow for a more dialectic relationship between the two than static media such as books or film may allow. BioWare did not simply create a work of fiction; without “canon,” and with so many options for customization, the players were in many senses collaborators in the creation of the *Mass Effect* universe. Indeed, one would be hard pressed to think of other examples where media consumers were able to demand of the author a new ending for the author’s work.

We continue to be interested in how discussions of religion can be productively explored in the genre of video games. Future possibilities include examining how the implicit inclusion of religion in *Mass Effect* compares to other science fiction games in which religion is more overtly portrayed – for example, the *Halo* series, in which humanity fights against the not-so-subtly named “Covenant,” whose ranks are filled with “prophets” and “zealots.” We also continue to consider ways in which “real world” religions and religious practices might be encountered in video games in a manner that makes productive use of the medium’s ability to tackle complex issues through its unique combination of narrative and interactivity. As a maturing medium, we are excited about future developments and discussions.

For the moment, the *Mass Effect* universe remains as both a landmark entry in the relatively brief history of video games, as well as a lucrative topic for speculation, discussion, and analysis. As a work of science fiction, the *Mass Effect* universe is more than a vision of humanity’s potential future, but also about the nature and dynamics of modern society. Through the choices of Commander Shepard, a player has the godlike ability to actively shape the game world to create *their* perfect future. Whether the player is empowered to ask these questions and make these choices in their own world is only a matter of perspective.

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