

MY SUMMER TRAVELING THROUGH THE GALAXY

A REVIEW OF THE EVOLUTION OF THE MASS EFFECT FRANCHISE

BY CLAUDIO SCOLASTICI



The Mass Effect games are among those that I enjoyed most in the last years. High production values, great character and stories and a very good mix of action and RPG mechanics made me pretty happy with the purchase and willing to beat each one of them more than once.

So I spent last summer playing all three games in sequence, in order to come up with a compared analysis to underline how the franchise evolved along the years and to give my personal evaluations.

The aspect of the games that I particularly focused on is the squad management, considering all activities related with characters-leveling, their inventory management and issuing of orders and the use of powers during combat.

By comparing these game features and mechanics it is quite clear that each episode has its own distinctive 'taste'. I would like to share my thoughts with you.

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

In ME the management of your squad is performed in two main conditions:

- Non-Combat situations. They include both inside-Normandy and outside-Normandy game situations and mainly consist of leveling-up and equipment management activities.
- Combat conditions. They come into play when enemies approach and the characters rise their weapons. During combat the player can issue movement and attack orders, call for characters' powers, change characters' weapons and ammo and other things.

For the purposes of this analysis, the three chapters of the series have been played with the following gameplay settings:

- **automatic leveling is off**
- **squad members are only allowed to use their defensive powers during combat**

That said in general, each chapter of the series has its own peculiarities in the way the above tasks are performed. Some solutions are better than other, as it is natural as a franchise evolves: let's begin with our analysis!

PART 1

Non combat activities (Leveling, Inventory management, Looting)

Leveling

MASS EFFECT 1

Being the first chapter of the series, I expect this title to be the less polished from a squad management point of view. Feedback coming from players in large numbers is a key element of game refinement at any level, and the squad management mechanics of ME don't make exceptions.

The first ME is also the more RPG oriented of the three and this is particularly clear if we look at how leveling and inventory management is held.

All characters in ME 1 have a lot bunch of skills for the player to spend available developing points into. The leveling mechanic is also based on a system where each rank in a skill always cost 1 point regardless of how many ranks have already been acquired.

Lot of skills and constant unit cost per rank grant to the player a lot of flexibility when developing Shepard and his allies. With such a system is likely that different players come up with differently developed characters during the course of the game. It also mean that the same player can come up with different configuration should he replay the game, so adding spice to the re-playability factor of the game.

On the other hand, such a flexible mechanic also implies that the player can spend a lot of time dealing with leveling the characters. As any game design manual states, the more choices are

available to the player, the longer it takes for him to come up with a decision. If you are a RPG fan like I am, this is fine. But more action oriented players could find this so boring that they give up the game entirely.

MASS EFFECT 2

In the second installment of the series the leveling mechanics have been quite simplified.

The number of skills has been fairly reduced both for Shepard and his allies, so that now his team mates start with 3 available skills and one to be unlocked. So 4 skills in total for team mates and 6/7 for Shepard. If we compare the leveling screen of ME 1 and ME 2 you can understand what I mean.



To go along with this choice the ranking system has been changed as well, for now each new rank in a skill cost 1 unit more than the former: 1 point for the first rank and 4 points for the last.

To allow a minimal customization, once a character obtains the last rank in a skill the player is offered a binary choice on what to specifically achieve with that last rank: for example whether to get more inflicted damage or more duration for a power.

The obvious consequence is that there's not very much flexibility to deal with and in the end there will be no difference on the development of characters among different players or different walkthrough of the game.

MASS EFFECT 3

As it will occur often along this analysis, the third installment of the series stands in the middle between the extremes of the first two chapters.

In ME 3 the leveling mechanic has been refined so that it is less demanding than in ME 1 but still allows the player some customization, if compared to ME 2.

To achieve that the designer first added a couple more skills to each character, raising the number to 8/9 for Shepard and 5 for his team mates.

The number of ranks per skill has also been raised to 6, with each new rank costing more than the former, as it already was in ME 2.

Most important, depending on the skill, the last two or three ranks of each skill, once purchased,

offer a choice between two options that allow the player to get a specific bonus in that skill. The conversion of the system into a true development tree offers the player enough flexibility to experiment with skills, without burdening him with too many choices.

ME 3 also allows the player, for the first time in the series, to re-spec characters. That is a very smart option in the player's hand, something that once you try it, you wonder why they didn't do it from the beginning.



SKILL DEV-TREE EXAMPLE FROM MASS EFFECT 3

Inventory management

Inventory and its management are crucial aspects in many games in general in any worthy RPG in particular. Some approaches are more 'real life' like, taking into account weight and encumbrance of items, while others are more 'have fun' like, with no consideration on where a character is supposed to pack its stuff.

How did they deal with inventory at Bioware?

MASS EFFECT 1

'A small torture' could answer some. 'A pain in the ass!' could state a less polite other. They'd be both right, for actually I think that the inventory management in ME 1 is probably the more convoluted system of the kind I've ever had experience of!

Let's begin saying that in the ME franchise weapons are divided into classes: pistols, assault rifles, shotguns, sniper rifles and light machine guns, the last introduced in the last two episodes.

In ME 1 each character carries one weapon for each class, even if he\she cannot effectively wield it. Great start, isn't it!

Each weapon can equip 2 or 3 upgrades depending on the model, the first one or two to improve the capabilities of the weapon, the last to set a specific ammo type.

For each weapon class there are many models provided by different developers that the player can find and pick up or buy while playing.

Last, each weapon model comes in version numbered from I to IX, the higher number meaning a better and improved version of the model.

It means that, when updating the inventory of his squad, the player needs to:

- select a character's locker (in the Normandy)
- select a weapon class (which is relevant for that character)
- select a weapon model and a model version, picking from a list of available weapons
- set one or two weapon upgrades for that weapon, picking from a list of weapon upgrades
- set one ammo upgrade, picking from a list of ammo upgrades
- repeat the cycle for all characters in the team

Done? Now do the same for Armors, Omni-tools, Biotic amplifiers and Grenade launchers, if applicable.



PLAYING ME 1 YOU WILL LEARN TO HATE THIS SCREEN!

The result is a tiresome, time-consuming activity that can discourage even a fanatic RPG player born under the sign of Virgo, as I am!

I could go much more into details, telling you that, for example, armors are divided by race, or that if the player doesn't systematically dedicate some time to get rid of non-wanted items, he quickly gets overwhelmed with any sort of thrash, but I think you got the point!

MASS EFFECT 2

Inventory management in ME 2 can be considered as a hysterical reaction to the complaints coming from those who played the first chapter! I can't find a better definition, and I am going to tell you why.

In ME 2 the characters are only allowed to carry weapons they can effectively wield, depending on their character class. This is an improvement, to me.

Weapon classes are still there, but now there are only 2 models for each class, the basic one and its improved version.

Weapon versions numbered from I to IX have disappeared.

Upgrades on individual weapons have been removed as well and exchanged with research options that, once obtained (paying a price), automatically apply to the entire weapon class. For example if the player researches the 'improved damage' upgrade for the assault rifle, the upgrade apply to all assault rifles and any character wielding the rifle benefits from the upgrade. No more scrolling lists of weapons upgrades individually for each character.

Ammo upgrades have moved in the list of powers that can be available to a character depending on his/her class. It means that the player can select a specific ammo to use against a target on the fly during a combat, without need to access the inventory screen to change the setup of the weapon (this choice also has other consequence, but I like to focus on the more important things!).

Armor customization is available no more for team members, only for Shepard. The player has now the possibility to define each single piece of Shepard's armor setting helmet, shoulders, chest, gloves and boots in order to obtain specific bonuses, though the options are very few, so it happens quite often that the player overlooks the option entirely.

With regard to the other characters, there's no armor option to deal with. Simple!

Finally, grenade launchers, omni-tools and biotic amplifiers have been entirely removed.

The result of these choices, in my opinion, is that they simplified too much. I put in the improvements list the reduction of the number of weapons characters can carry to those they can wield, the moving of ammo upgrades in the list of powers and the generalization of weapon upgrades to the entire weapon classes. They are not all 'realistic' choices, but they work fine from a player's point of view.

On the other hand, I totally missed the availability of different weapon models to customize the weapon setup of my squad and the lack of any choice with regard with armors. Isn't ME 2 a RPG, still?

I guess you can start understanding why, in my opinion, ME 2 is the more action-oriented title of the three!

MASS EFFECT 3

Again, the third chapter adopts solutions that stand in the middle between the first two.

They kept the option to have characters only carry weapons they can wield.

Most important, the designers introduced a weight factor for weapons with regard to Shepard: the

more weapons (and thus weight) he/she carries, the longer it takes for powers to cool-down. I think this is a meaningful choice.

Weapons stats are back, as well as different weapon models for each class, that can also be upgraded, paying a price.

Weapons stats are a most welcome, in my opinion, because allow the player to experiment with models that actually express different behaviors, making the weapon choice for each class a significant one.

Last note, weapon upgrades are back too, in the form of slots (up to 2 for each weapon) that can be equipped with gadgets to improve specific stats of that weapon.

The player has now the possibility to create different customizations for each weapon and for each character in the party, thus giving flexibility to the capabilities of a team, in a way that doesn't overwhelms the player with too many choices or extremely long list of items which are different to differentiate from one another. Well done!

As for the armor, they kept the same policy shown in ME 2, but more refined. Shepard's armor set can be customized with pieces found along the missions or bought in shops, and the number of options has increased, so that the player is offered with meaningful choices when dealing with Shepard's armor. Again, the word is flexibility!

My overall opinion on inventory management in ME 3 is that thanks to the experience of the extremes represented by the first two titles, the designer achieved an optimal solution with the third installment, allowing the player to make meaningful choices with regard to inventory management, without burdening him. Bravo!

This completes our review of the non-Combat options available to players and the first part of this survey.

In the second part we are going to analyze the mechanics that come into play during a fight. Thanks for your time.

Looting

There is another activity I would like to discuss in this survey, related to squad management: the unmistakable, inevitable and most rewarding action of looting crates, safes and any other equipment that can be found scattered in the game levels. No RPG can't help but have such option!

Each of the games of the series approach this activity in a peculiar way, and I'm going to explain each of them.

MASS EFFECT 1

To loot crates and safes in ME 1 two factors are involved: a condition to be satisfied and a task to be accomplished (well there can also be a 'bribe' to be paid, as we'll see...).

The condition is that at least one member of the team, Shepard included, has a requested amount of ranks in skills like Electronics or Decryption, depending on the case.

The task is a mini-game, some sort of QTE with pad buttons (on PC it is a different type of ability game) that the player is asked to accomplish to obtain final access to the loot. Should he fail the mini-game, the player can still pay an amount on omni-gel (the game currency) to open the crate\safe: the bribe!

So the most important thing is that the first factor, the condition, is satisfied. And that brings a hard consequence: when the player goes into mission, he must put in the team at least one member with the skills mentioned above. Or choose, at the beginning of the game, for a Shepard-class that allows him to develop those skills (Engineer or Infiltrator, likely). A Soldier-Shepard with Wrex and Ashley in the party is not likely to collect much while on mission!

Well, there is another option: the player can go back to the Normandy after a mission is completed to pick different team members (Tali and Liara, for example) and then backtrack and search the place again. But damn, it is a hell of an option!

This choice is completely reasonable from a RPG point of view: if you don't have someone in your party who can pick locks, you cannot pick locks! But what actually happens is that the game punishes the players who don't like tech skills, denying them the option to loot. So it's been wise from the designer to change this with the second chapter of the series.

MASS EFFECT 2

In ME 2 they removed the skill-related condition required for looting, and now every time the player steps into a safe or a crate or a system to hack, he is only challenged with a mini-game.

This way the player is not forced to put specific characters in the shore party to be able to loot around and can always build the squad he likes most.



MINIGAMES TO CRACK SYSTEMS AND CRATES FROM ME 2

I guess it's not by chance that the designer entirely removed Electronics and Decryption from the list of powers available in ME 2 and 3 and I feel that, even if I am an old school RPG player, this way is better.

The fact that there is a mini-game to be accomplished is something that some may like and some may not.

The repeated mini-games can be both a welcomed, quick distraction to get a pause from the fighting, as well an annoying and repetitive activity, depending on the conditions and players' attitude.

But the player has also the option to pay to avoid the mini-game, so I think that they did good in this aspect, after all.

MASS EFFECT 3

With the last chapter the designer decided to get rid of the mini-games, too.

Things to be looted are scattered around instead of being hidden in crates or safes. As a result the player is only asked to find them and collect them. No other ability is needed to loot.

And in my opinion...well, I used to enjoy the mini-games, and I must say I quite missed them in ME 3. I feel like they just decided to make the game as straight and low-demanding as possible for the biggest possible audience.

As a hardcore gamer who went into the entire series multiple times, I cannot be happy with such decisions! Sorry...

PART 2

Combat activities (Orders, Powers, Weapon selection, Shields and Health)

It's now time to jump into the real action and check how to dealt with fighting. Chaaaaarge!

Orders

Orders are issued during a fight with the cross button. There are two types of orders: moving orders and attack orders.

The mechanics for issuing orders changed much from the first to the last episode of the series. Let's see how.

Mass Effect 1

The main difference between the first chapter and the following installments is that in ME 1 both team members act as a single unit when ordered to do something. It means that they both move to a position or both attack a designated target.

The cross button is used to issue orders, in the following way:

- **Up**: team moves to destination
- **Right**: team attacks target
- **Down**: team holds position
- **Left**: team rallies

The most important consequence of having both team members act as a single unit is that it forces

the player to adopt one of two tactics:

1. Build up a squad with members that share the same 'combat attitude', for example two first liners like Wrex and Ashley or two second liners like Liara and Tali. Any non-homogeneous choice won't work very much, for Liara is likely to be killed if sent forward and you don't want Wrex to stand behind you as well!
In other words, the player loses freedom when building the team.
2. Decide not to make use of moving orders to deploy your team, so to be free to build a squad with the character he prefers.
In other words, the player is encouraged to ignore an option offered by the game.

Whichever the choice, it turns out that better design choices could be made, here.

I also don't quite like that both characters must attack the same target. It actually reduces the available tactical options, but this aspect of the game is kept throughout the entire series, so better get used to it!

Mass Effect 2

As already stated, the mechanic has been refined with the following chapters of the series. Team members in ME 2 no longer act as a single unit and can be ordered to move to separate destinations. It could seem not very much, but I assure you that having the option to effectively deploy your squad members on the battlefield adds enough depth to combat tactics.

A subtle different is also introduced in the way the cross button is used to issue orders: one power for each team member can be assigned to Left and Right directions for quick access during combat. The new configuration of orders on the cross button adopts the following scheme:

- **Up**: both characters attack the same target
- **Left**: left character uses assigned power on target or moves to position
- **Right**: right character uses assigned power on target or moves to position
- **Down**: rally both team members

My opinion, in the end, is that the second chapter improves the order issuing mechanic, allowing players to better and more efficiently approach combat sequences.

If one issue is to be found, I would say that it lacks the clear feedback, provided by the HUD in ME 1, on what was the last issued order the team was following. But it's not very much of a problem.

Mass Effect 3

No change has been made on the third installment when compared to ME 2 with regard to orders mechanics. They probably thought they had reached a perfect balance with the second game and simply kept it.

End of paragraph!

POWERS

Calling for powers is probably the most important activity the player is involved into when fighting. Though the general mechanic for using powers doesn't change very much with each chapter, there are some crucial details that change with any new installment of the series. Let's check them.

Mass Effect 1

Powers available to party members are managed through a command wheel that appears on screen when the player holds the right bumper on the pad, thus pausing the game action.



POWERS INTERFACE

Each character has his\her own set of powers related to his\her class and the skills he\she developed. To use them, the player holds the right bumper, selects a power to be used and a target to direct it to.

Each power has its own cool-down period, so that once a power is used it takes some time before that power is available again. But this means that while one power is recovering, others are still available. So the character can keep using his\her powers, as long as he\she has one not in cool-down, yet.

The system works fine and allows the player to make an intelligent use of powers and to effectively manage cool-downs for the sake of tactics.

The only issue I found is that the interface doesn't help the player to understand if the power he is going to use will be effective against the designated target (because some targets cannot be affected by specific powers).

Mass Effect 2

With the second chapter of the series they kept the interface to use powers (the wheel that appears pressing the right bumper and pauses the action) but changed the rules of cool-down.

When a power is used, the characters of ME 2 cannot use another one until cool-down has expired. In other words, if Samara (taken as an example) uses **Pull**, she cannot use **Throw** until cool-down has expired. This rule also applies to Shepard.

I could not come with an explanation for this choice and I don't think it is related to the reduced number of powers the characters have, when compared to ME 1. I can only imagine that they decided this way due to playtesting, so I go along with it.

On the other hand I appreciate that in ME 2 the player gets a feedback whether the power he is going to use against a designated target will be effective or not, a feature that I missed in the first episode.

A last important aspect to underline is that from ME 2 and on, ammo types have been moved in the list of powers (for the class that can use such powers, like Soldier). As stated in the first part of this survey (about Inventory management in ME 2), ammo types can be changed on the fly during a combat with the same interface to manage powers: actually changing ammo type is considered as using any other power, and the action is subjected to cool-down as well.

It's a smart choice that allows players to quickly switch to the best ammo for any given target, making every bullet fired in the game worth its cost, for it will always deliver the maximum possible damage to targets!

This design choice is further supported in the ME 3.

Mass Effect 3

With the third episode of the series the rules for powers cool-down undergo another process of refinement (improvement, if you ask me).

Powers in ME 3 are used in the usual way, but are also divided in 2 categories: ammo powers and offensive\defensive powers.

Ammo powers don't need cool down, so that for example, Soldier-Shepard can change ammo type at will without need to wait for cool-down in between.

Offensive and defensive powers, on the other hand, are subjected to cool-down as they used to be in ME 2: once any offensive\defensive power is used, it takes some time before another (or the same power) is available again.

I guess the removal of cool-down for ammo comes from the fact that waiting to be able to change ammo type is very annoying when dealing with enemies that use shields. In fact there are 2 main ammo types worth using in Mass Effect: Incendiary and Disruptor. The first works against armors and health, while the second against barriers and shields. The fact is that any enemy with shields or barriers, will also have an amount of health, if not armor, also. It means that the professional player will first use Disruptor ammo to crack the shields\barriers, and then switch to Incendiary ammo to quickly drain health\armor. So it makes complete sense not to have to wait to be able to switch ammo!

Everything else works the same as it used to: up to 3 powers can be mapped for Shepard for quick use, and one for each squad member (and then called with the cross directional button).

WEAPONS WIELDING

Mass Effect 1

During a combat the player can force team members to change the weapon he\she is wielding. To do that hold the left bumper on the pad, making the weapon wheel appear on screen (and pausing the action) and then select the weapon to be wielded by the desired character.

The character wields the requested weapon with the configuration (previously) set in the Inventory, so that the player must remember which kind of ammo equipped on which weapon, in order to know if that weapon will be effective against a given target. No option to change ammo type on the fly, if needed.

This is not a very good choice, with enemies that require different ammo type to be effectively damaged. It can happen, for example, that the player forces his characters to wield a shotgun at long range because he equipped it, before entering the fight, with the optimal ammo type for the actual target.

In other words, the best thing a player can do in ME 1 is to equip each character with at least two weapons with different ammo type, one for organics and one for synthetics, and then switch weapons accordingly. Too bad if he is getting to use pistols at long range! For characters that can only effectively wield one weapon like Liara, the choice is to equip the pistol with a 'four seasons' ammo type, and get rid of the problem from the beginning.

It doesn't look to me a very flexible approach!

Finally, weapons in ME 1 doesn't consume ammo, but heats on as they fire. Should the player fire too long, they overheat and a given amount of time must pass before they can fire again. Since weapons don't consume ammo, there's no need to reload them.

I would also like to mention that there's no point in my opinion in having characters being able to equip weapons they can't fire with skill. But this is an issue more related with the weapon system in general, than the actual mechanic to switch them during a combat.

The mechanic works just fine and in fact it won't change along the series.

Mass Effect 2

Weapon selection uses the same command wheel as ME1. The main difference is that in ME2 characters only carry weapons they can wield.

Special ammo for weapons are no longer set in the Inventory as an upgrade of individual weapons. Instead, they have been moved into the list of powers that can be available to a character, depending on his\her class, so that now the player can change ammo on the fly during a fight.

No need to remember which weapon was set with the proper ammo type for any given target anymore, as said when referring to ME 1.

In ME2 weapons don't heat (or overheat!) anymore when firing, they consume bullets that come in mags and that the player needs to pick up from the ground, as some enemies, once killed, drop

them.

Since they now consume bullets, weapons need to be reloaded like any other FPS you may think of. Both changes that have been made in ME 2 are to be considered like improvements to me: good to be able to switch ammo on the fly regardless of the weapon wielded, and good not to have characters encumbered with weapons they aren't familiar with. Good!



WEAPONS WHEEL ME 1 WEAPONS WHEEL ME 2

Mass Effect 3

Basically nothing changes from the second to the third game with regard to weapon handling and firing. Team members carry up to 2 weapons each (while the number of weapons available to Shepard depends on his\her class), firing consumes ammo and ammo type can be changed on the fly.

I guess there was no need to adopt other changes to a system that was already perfected with ME 2!

SHIELDS AND HEALTH

When a game gives you a squad to manage, it is very important that the player can monitor his team mates status in order to prevent them from dying during a fight. How is this task achieved by the ME games?

Mass Effect 1

In the bottom left corner of the screen the player of ME 1 can constantly monitor the state of shields and health of all team members.



The info provided is very clear and useful, and the way they changed it in the following chapters doesn't look as an improvement to me.

In ME 1 characters don't (in general) automatically recover health when injured. So it's important for the player to have the info provided clearly, in order to easily monitor the conditions of party members between fights.

Mass Effect 2

In the second chapter of the franchise the way the info about team members shields and health is showed has been deeply changed. The result is not as good as it was, to me, in ME 1.

I guess that it is a consequence of the fact that all characters now automatically recover health regardless of their class or skills, so the info it is not as much important as it used to be in ME 1.

Even more, they probably decided to remove this piece of information from the HUD to make room for weapons ammo count.

I think it could have been done in better ways. It's very easy, in the chaos of a fight, not to notice that one or both party members have lost their shields or that are sustaining damage. The player realizes what's happening only once one or both party members get killed. A bit too late, if you ask me!

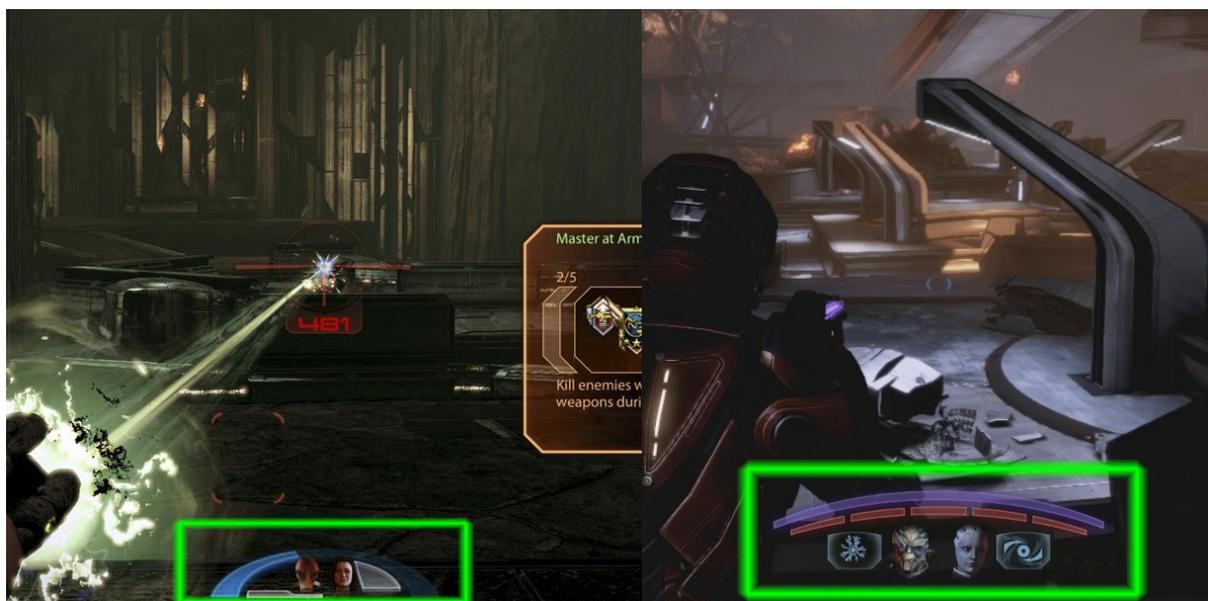
Mass Effect 3

I think that in ME 3 the designer wanted to challenge the players even more, with regard to health and shields monitoring, because the already minimal style adopted in ME 2 has been further stylized!

I personally didn't understand yet how the info is delivered in the HUD. Probably it is done through the small portraits of the two team members in the bottom part of the screen, but I'd rather say that it is not delivered, after all!

There could be some philosophical reason, I guess, something that has to do with Fate and Destiny. Like the designer wanted to tell the players "If the Fate of your team mates is that they are going to die in the next fight, they will, regardless you acknowledge it or not"!

Well, OK. I mean, not even Achilles could oppose his Fate, who am I to wish I could?



MASS EFFECT 2

MASS EFFECT 3

What we said doesn't apply to Shepard, anyway. For the player controlled character they made one really important change, in the third game of the series.

Shepard's health is divided in 5 segments. Once the shields are down, health begins to be drained with any new hit. And here comes the novelty: partially lost segment are automatically regenerated, but lost ones can be recovered only using medi-gel.

My opinion? That in ME 2, thanks to automatic health recovery, medi-gel was almost useless. Even if one of your team mates dies, the player is generally capable of ending the fight by himself. And once the fight ends, all dead team mates are automatically revived.

But they couldn't remove medi-gel from the game, as they did with looting skills, because you cannot prevent the player to be able to cure his character or team mates. It would have been a very very hardcore choice, nothing a wise producer would allow.

So I think that they started searching for a solution to make medi-gel worth its inclusion in the third game, and the health system of ME 3 is the result.

Well, with that ends the second part of this survey on Mass Effect. I will write a third one with my personal opinions conclusions to summarize all we discussed by now.

PART 3

CONCLUSIONS

We've come this far with such a detailed analysis, let's now try to come up with some conclusions on the series.

But before that, I would like to state some general considerations.

The Mass Effect series is a great collection of games. It is a complex combination of role playing and 3rd person shooter elements, with a great story built around interesting characters, in a fully developed world that shows beautiful environments and an encyclopedic background of knowledge. It's no surprise if not everything is perfect and that there are issues here and there. But the scope of the project is huge and I think it is one of the best franchises for the actual console generation.

Mass Effect 1

In my opinion, the first ME is a game that it's perfect in theory, but doesn't work as well in practice. Every design decision seems right, but once the player experiences it through gameplay, issues arise.

Let's make some examples with regard to squad management, as we discussed throughout this survey.

It is reasonable that you can loot crates and safes only if you have a squad mate able to perform this kind of action. Ask anyone who role-plays and he will agree.

But once you land on a planet with the Mako, climb an impossible mountain, find a probe and discover you cannot access its content because the team you assembled lacks a skill, will you still consider that reasonable?

The dedicated player could go back to the Normandy, pick another team member, climb back the mountain to get to the probe again and finally access the loot. But what about the normal (read: people who can't spend all day on games anymore) players?

Another case. You dock to the Citadel, enter a shop and find a very good Turian armor. Unfortunately you didn't bring Garrus with you, so there's no way to check if the armor you found is better than the one Garrus is already using. The armor costs a lot and it can only fit Garrus. Will you deplete your money on a bet?

The dedicated player could go back to the Normandy, pick Garrus and go back to the shop, check if the armor is worth its price and maybe buy it. But, again, what about the others?

Equipping the team with the lockers in the Normandy is a pain as well. Tons of numbered gun models that basically work all the same, infinite lists of weapon, ammo and armor upgrades that force the player to go back and forth with each team member locker to answer questions like "should I give Ablative Coating VII to Wrex and Energized Wave VI to Ashley so to keep Kinetic

Buffer VIII for Shepard?". Who, if not the most enthusiast players, would do that?

So, this is my opinion: the first ME main flaw is that it overwhelms players with too much information and too many choices that don't always repay with an evident advantage the time it took to get to those decisions.

The leveling system is flexible and allows different development paths, but it's not always clear how much difference those ranks make.

You can issue movement orders to team mates, but at the same time you are forced to sacrifice the freedom of assembling the squad as you please.

There are lots of weapons to equip, even if squad members aren't capable of effectively wield them.

It looks to me like a a clockwork with too many wheels: it works somehow, but the same result could be reached with less cogs.

Which is exactly what they did with ME 2!

Mass Effect 2

I wrote that ME 2 was some kind of hysterical reaction to ME 1. My opinion hasn't changed, but I also want to make it clear that I consider ME 2 the best game of the franchise and one of the best games for this console generation.

Yes, they maybe took away too much from the first episode and basically turned the game into a third person shooter with branched dialogs. Fighting apart, there is not very much else to do and you got minimal control over the the equipment and development of your characters.

Sure, I would have liked more weapons with different firing behaviors.

Sure, I would have liked to choose an armor for my squad members.

Sure, I would have liked more flexibility when leveling them.

But sure, I enjoyed this title as a whole more than any single feature I had to give up from the previous episode!

Fighting works better, because squad members can be effectively deployed on the battlefield and the cover system has improved.

Looting works better, because it is not subjected to characters' skills anymore, but only relies on the ability of the player to solve the mini-games.

Weapon upgrades are easily managed, because, once researched, they apply to all weapons in a category, for all team members.

Leveling takes no time, because the number of skills has been reduced to those really useful in combat, with a direct advantage in the use of powers during a fight.

And then comes a plethora of further improvements.

Better characters, with better stories, better developed. They are even more in number!

Better navigation inside the Normandy, without need to take the elevator back and forth from Engineering, to equip characters, to Command Deck, to jump into a mission.

Better ammo management, with the possibility to change ammo type on the fly during a combat, regardless of the weapon wielded.

Better, better, better.

Mass Effect 2 it's a must have, trilogy or not. Period.

Mass Effect 3

So we finally got to the third and last episode of the trilogy. I advise you: this is going to be a long chapter, for I need to explain how the best of three games from a technical point of view delivers the worst gameplay experience of the entire series. Let's begin.

To me, ME 3 is like an intruder between two brothers. The first episode is the diligent brother, who likes to study and learn. He can be boring sometimes, but he is definitely interesting due to his well developed knowledge that spans in many fields.

The second episode is the sporty brother who spends all his time training and getting ready for action. He maybe can't help you dealing with astrophysics, but at least he knows good stories and a lot of chicks.

The two brothers are quite different, still you can see they come from the same family: they resemble each other, even if they have different characters.

The third episode, on the other hand, looks like the impostor who tries to conceal in the family. Like the Carpenter's Thing, he can look like the others at a first sight, he is even better than his brothers in many ways. But as you get closer, he definitely doesn't smell like them.

I understand it is a hard metaphor, so I'll try to explain my point.

Let's pick weapons, to begin.

In ME 3 the player can choose among different types of weapons, each model with its distinctive behavior. This is a very good solution, the best achieved in the entire trilogy, if you ask me. Each weapon model can also be upgraded paying a price, so that players can choose which models to spend their money on to improve them. And that's good, too.

So, can someone explain me why if weapons are upgraded inside the Normandy, the shooting range to test them is located in the Spectre office on the Citadel? Does it seem reasonable to travel to the Citadel to test a weapon before deciding whether to upgrade it or not?

We mentioned the Normandy, so let's stick with it.

We all know that small enterprises tend to act smarter than larger organizations, mainly because it is easier, for a small company, to employ people on a meritocratic basis, rather than for bureaucratic reasons. When Cerberus built the Normandy for ME 2, its architects made a series of smart decisions about the disposition of the relevant locations (armory, research labs, rooms), in order to maximize efficiency (read: reduced backtracking and use of the elevator).

In ME 3 they changed this and opted for the former configuration, which forces the players to use the elevator again to move from the Armory to the Command Deck. My opinion is that the designer of ME 3 wanted to show players the drawbacks of having rejoined the Alliance. If you have other explanations, please email me!



SO MANY WELL DIFFERENTIATED WEAPONS...WHY IS THE SHOOTING RANGE LOCATED ON THE CITADEL AND NOT ON THE NORMANDY?

These are mere examples, but they are important to explain how a great potential went wasted with the last installment of the series. From a technical perspective, ME 3 improves much from its predecessors: better characters development system, better weapons and ammo management, better galactic map exploration, better enemy AI, etc etc.

Nonetheless, it lacks something on the soul side: it looks like they forced the game out of the necessity to develop it to complete the trilogy, rather than because they really wanted to make it!

As you play the game, you get the impression they didn't care to really involve players in the game world anymore, preferring to relegate them to the role of third-class observers, rather than the heroes. It's hard to explain, because, technically, all the features of the series are in place, and the players is offered the opportunity to achieve great goals with ME 3: curing the genophage, making peace between Turians and Krogans and between Quarians and Geth.

But, despite the achievements and the dramatic story, it seems the developers didn't expect very much from their players: important elements of the game are simply forced onto the player and, most of the time, success is achieved with minimal effort. The same can be said about lesser game elements.

Looting for example: in ME 1 to crack a safe there were both a requisite to be met and a skill test to be passed. In ME 2 they only kept the skill test. And ME 3? Well, in ME 3 things to be looted are simply left on the ground for the player to pick up. With no trial, what is the loot the reward for? For playing the game? For buying it?

There's more. I didn't take notice of time, but I'm pretty sure that ME 3 has the longest cut-scenes of the series. To not speak about auto-dialogues or the dreaming sessions.

Single planets like Tutchanka and Rannoch contain 3/4 missions in a row, like, all of a sudden, they became the center of the galaxy. I agree that important things happens there, but was there no room for other locations, too? Beloved characters from previous episodes that re-appear with apparently no reason, like Jacob or Miranda, or even Ashley. To not speak of the Journal, that does its best in not helping the player fulfilling the side missions...

Maybe this is exactly the meaning of the "BETTER WITH KINECT" writing on my X-Box 360 game box. ME 3 is designed having the average Kinect player in mind!

FINAL

So, to put and end to all this, I'd like to summarize the following way. To me ME 1 says to its players: "Look at me, I am Mass Effect, a game with a huge scope that will put you in a beautiful sci-fi environment with a great story".

ME 2 goes like "Welcome back! I am sorry for the mistakes I made, but I will show you I learned my lessons and now I am ready to involve you even more".

And what does ME 3 says? My opinion is that it is "Hi, you still there? You know, I was once a very good game, but now I am tired of all this, so let's try to make it quick! But in the meantime, let me indulge in celebrating myself and what I once was". Not a very good speech, isn't it?

Thanks for your time. Hope you enjoyed this survey and please, email me if you'd like to share your opinions on this great trilogy.

Ciao!