

Video Game Review: Spectacular ‘Mass Effect 3’ Provides Emotional End to Amazing Trilogy

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on April 3, 2012 - 9:35am

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CHICAGO – The highly-anticipated “Mass Effect 3” has been devastating and dividing fans for about a month now while we played through our copy of the title and tried to figure out how to fully capture it in a review. It’s difficult to address a title this complex, this emotional, this epic, and this popular. Most people know what they think of “Mass Effect 3” by now but there may be some of you out there who have waited for the first wave of popularity to subside. Let me speak to you — don’t let this game pass you by. Even with its controversial ending, it’s a landmark title in the history of the form.



Let me speak to the younger players for a minute. For decades, video games were about two things — memorization and hand-eye coordination. Memorize the order in which Donkey Kong is going to drop his barrels and use your hand-eye coordination to jump at the right time to avoid them. Even later hit games were essentially cut from the same cloth. When simple freedom of movement entered the world of gaming, even in as primitive a form as, say, “The Legend of Zelda,” it was remarkable. You didn’t have to memorize one path to the end, you could choose to go left or right. Still, games maintained a “predetermined nature” for years and many still operate from the same structure. There may be choices but there is a “best” (and least likely to kill you) way from point A to point B.



Mass Effect 3
Photo credit: EA

The most incredible modern games of the last few years have destroyed this sense of a predetermined path and given players a feeling of authorship over their experience. My “Bioshock,” my “Red Dead Redemption,” my “Mass Effect 2” — they were different than yours. I can guarantee it. Whether it is the degree of moral decisions required on the part of the player or the customization of items, weapons, and clothing, the best developers have been revolutionizing the individual experience of gaming to remarkable degrees. But none have had the personal depth of “Mass Effect 3,” a game that doesn’t just consistently demand decisions on the part of the player that have nothing to do with memorization but asks for an emotional connection to the final act of one of the most important trilogies of the last twenty years in any

form.



Mass Effect 3
Photo credit: EA

Those of you unfamiliar with the story of “Mass Effect” may think the word emotional to be hyperbolic. You clearly haven’t played these games (or at least haven’t played them with the affection that I have). The writers of “Mass Effect 3” are here to tug on your heartstrings and the degree to which it worked this cynical player was unexpected. I’ve spent time with these characters. I’m invested in not just their fate but — and this is the most remarkable part — their pasts. I have a history with these characters, memories that influence the way I interact with them in the most important chapters of their lives. That’s AMAZING. We’ve gone from memorization to memory. From hand-eye coordination to something that touches the heart.

And that’s the clear intention from the beginning of “Mass Effect 3,” which picks up some time after the events of “Mass Effect 2” and will be greatly shaped by your experience with that title and not just in memory. I can’t recommend enough playing through part 2 and importing your character to this title. Not only will skills and customizable options be imported but your history will be as well. Did everyone survive the end of “Mass Effect 2”? What alliances did you make along the way? What bridges did you burn?

It turns out stopping the Reapers at the end of the second game merely delayed the inevitable and the amazing opening act of “Mass Effect 3” starts with their attack on Earth. In the action’s most memorable moment, as he’s fleeing to a ship to get back to a place where he can come up with the strategy to save Earth, Commander Shepard encounters a young boy in a vent. He can’t reach him in time and has to flee. Moments later, he sees the boy’s ship blown up by the Reapers. The boy will haunt Shepard and anyone who’s emotionally committed to the experience.



Mass Effect 3
Photo credit: EA

The writers of "Mass Effect 3" brilliantly bring back characters from the history of "Mass Effect," allowing them to play major roles in the action of saving the universe from certain destruction. I have never before felt the feeling of "seeing an old friend" in a video game. When I was going through what I thought was just a basic mission early in the game and ran into former Normandy squad member Jack, it was like surprisingly running into someone on the street that you once felt close to. There was a moment in "Mass Effect 3" when I received an email that another former squad member was on the city base of Citadel and I dropped what I was doing to find them. That's the kind of personal connection in a video game that has never existed before on a console. And when these friends of mine began to sacrifice themselves for the greater good, I'd be lying if I didn't say there was an emotional response on my part.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. The core of "Mass Effect 3" is about building the alliances needed to save the universe. You will go through story and side missions designed to present you with what are basically political decisions. What species do you side with in a centuries-old debate? Which one will better serve the safety of the universe? What will angering the other do to your cause? Never before has a game blended shooter elements with strategic ones in such a successful way. And, once again, making "good" or "bad" decisions on a moral level will influence the options you get as the game progresses. Even the way you interact with the characters on your ship (and even try to romance a few) will change the game. I think it would be literally impossible to precisely recreate one playthrough of "Mass Effect 3" to another.



Mass Effect 3
Photo credit: EA

The writing on "Mass Effect 3" is some of the best in the history of gaming, but how does it play and look? The combat is very similar to part two with a better grenade system and stronger melee fighting. The basics are the same. Visually, it's similar as well but the shading is stronger. I'm still a little thrown off by some of the cartoonish character design but the human characters, especially Shepard and some of his human squad mates, look amazing. I must admit, while we're on a slightly negative tip, that some of the environments start to blend together, especially when it comes to fighting repetitive Cerberus enemies. I wanted a bit more variety in landscape and combatants. It's the only complaint.

"Mass Effect 3" also includes an accomplished multi-player portion although these games have never been about co-operative play for me. The fact is, however, that multiplayer has become an essential ingredient for a lot of players who won't buy a game without it. It's a familiar ingredient here with co-op play and an upgradeable system working with a streamlined version of game combat that allows for more limited weapons and powers.

"Mass Effect 3" came to stores with a heavy burden of expectations and has, not surprisingly, been greeted with a bit of backlash, particularly regarding the lack of closure in the ending. Show me your favorite game of all time and I'll show you someone who HATES it. Everything that reaches critical peaks has a legion of people salivating to rip it apart. Don't believe anyone who tells you that "Mass Effect 3" isn't a complete success. Even if you're one of those people who feels a little dissatisfied, ask yourself why — it's because a game trilogy became so important to you that there was no way to adequately end it given the heart and devotion that you had poured into the series. Isn't that an ambitious, amazing fact on its own?

"Mass Effect 3" was developed by BioWare and released by Electronic Arts for Xbox 360, PS3, and PC on March 6th, 2012.



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