

Review: *Bioware's Mass Effect*, by Jerome Winter. 2022. Palgrave Macmillan Cham. 96 pp.

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The *Mass Effect* series (2007–2021) was a landmark addition by BioWare to the science fiction (SF) genre of video games. This series has continued to influence the video game landscape since the release of its first entry in 2007 and has received many spin-off titles and adaptations. Jerome Winter's (2022) recently released book *BioWare's Mass Effect* is the new "go-to resource" on the series for undergraduate classroom use, fans looking for a deeper discussion of the franchise, and SF aficionados alike. With a solid foundation in SF history and critical approaches to the series, Winter provides an engaging, concise, and insightful look at the major scholarly approaches to the text. The five chapters of the book are scaffolded in such a way that those unfamiliar with *Mass Effect* at the outset will, by the end, have a strong understanding of the series and will have no difficulty with the terminology or references that appear throughout. Each chapter also stands on its own, functioning as an individual essay that could be easily covered in a classroom discussion or seminar.

The first of such essays provides a thorough introduction to both the game series as well as the book itself. This outline gives a broad overview of the popularity of the franchise, its origins, how it contributes to the SF genre, and the main mechanics and draws of the games. It gives the reader a basic understanding of the relevance of the series, its overall tone and feel, and enough background knowledge to make sense of the content while setting the stage for the chapters to come.

The book's second chapter provides an overview of the series' morality system and the ways in which the player can customize the player character through narrative choices. Providing clear examples, Winter focuses specifically on the moral grey areas that the series explores and the conflicts the player must navigate. As Winter notes, players are not allowed to simply pat themselves on the back for their positive actions: The complexity of the morality system defies both "didactic altruism" and "cynical nihilism" (p. 27). In this discussion of the moral conflicts of

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the series, Winter effectively interfaces with anti-colonialist work, as well as how the series uses its narrative to criticize xenocidal, xenophobic, and colonialist perspectives featured in older space operas and SF. While Winter's discussions of colonialist rhetoric are limited in this book, the level of attention is appropriate for the type of work Winter is aiming to create, introducing the topic without belabouring any single point.

In the third chapter, Winter positions the *Mass Effect* series as a satire of modern war. He explores how the game stresses diplomacy in almost every context and avoids the glorification of martial combat. While combat is a major feature of all three games in the series and is a key draw for many players, Winter argues that combat is not presented as morally justifiable in most instances. The characters the player is fighting against usually have some justification for their actions, however questionable. One of the main villains of the first game, Saren, is presented with nuance and sympathy, preventing the player from ever feeling totally comfortable with the violence they inflict. Overall, Winter explains that the *Mass Effect* series emphasizes "the need for nuanced deliberation in a fashion quite opposed to the standard untroubled applauding of militarized violence popular in jingoistic wargames" (p. 42). While Winter effectively addresses the intent of the series, he does not point out the elements within the games where this intent does not carry through into execution. The extensive fetishization of military technology through character, weapon, and armour upgrades is one example that is absent from Winter's analysis. Even though Winter presents a strong case for *Mass Effect*'s narrative criticism of martial combat and military violence, this argument could have been made stronger by considering some of the ways in which the series fails to live up to its lofty ideals.

The fourth chapter investigates the role women and queer characters play in the *Mass Effect* series. Winter opens with an overview of how the series has increased its diversity over time, before focusing on "FemShep" (the female version of the series' protagonist) and how her nuanced portrayal as an athletic woman, on the same level as her male counterpart, was groundbreaking at the time of the first game's release. Winter engages with previous explorations of FemShep within game studies as a powerful role model and subversion of antifeminist tropes while at the same time acknowledging that many academic critics do not believe the series goes far enough in its portrayals of diverse perspectives. He builds upon these discussions of FemShep, focusing on the role of women and diverse expressions of sexuality present in the games through a deep and nuanced look at one of the series' major queer relationships, that between FemShep and Liara, a feminine Asari humanoid. While the Asari race does not perceive gender in the same way as humans, Asari are portrayed primarily as feminine characters, and the relationship between the two characters is visibly queer. Winter presents the relationship as a breakthrough in representation of queer romance in video games, particularly due to the complexity of Liara as a

character and the depth of the relationship portrayed as the series progresses. Further situating *Mass Effect* as a series that champions progressive depictions of gender, Winter discusses two of the major tie-in novels associated with the series: N. K. Jemisin's (2017) *Mass Effect: Initiation* and Catherynne M. Valente's (2018) *Mass Effect: Annihilation*, which both feature prominent feminist narratives. These examples help to further his argument that the *Mass Effect* series has been a major force for "diverse representations of women in the male-dominated video games industry" (p. 69).

The fifth chapter of the book, "Science Fun Today," centres around the pedagogical benefits of the series' inclusion of real science. Winter uses interviews with scientists to highlight the ways in which the series promotes scientific learning and exploration, broadening the idea of what can serve as educational content in games. He also shows how *Mass Effect* promotes and highlights scientific advancements by bringing contemporary research to the forefront, and how it encourages players to participate in the construction of scientific knowledge in a positive and uplifting fashion. The book closes with a summary of each section, neatly wrapping up any loose ends and providing clarity for readers who may desire a simplified discussion of each chapter.

While *Bioware's Mass Effect* provides a thorough overview of the series, the book is not as critical of the games as it ought to be. Although Winter includes a few paragraphs that examine some critiques of the series, particularly in Chapter 3 when discussing the controversial finale of *Mass Effect 3*, these critiques mainly come from outside sources and not the author himself. Focusing solely on the positive aspects of the franchise leaves much of the scholarly work that has been written on the games uninvestigated (e.g., Lavigne, 2015; Snyder, 2015; Youngblood, 2018). In addition, the lack of critiques makes the work appear biased at times, especially with regards to the diversity of the series discussed in Chapter 4. Winter discusses player modifications that intend to create a more diverse and varied experience of sexuality within the games but unfortunately fails to discuss why some players felt compelled to do so. One such reason is the unbalanced nature of romance options: While each *Mass Effect* game includes multiple heterosexual exclusive relationships, there are only two exclusively homosexual romance options for the player in the series, both of which are limited to side characters.

Regarding audience, this book meets its stated goals well: It is a solid and thorough primer for undergraduate students, and a fantastic way for fans to engage with scholarly work on the series in an accessible manner. Winter's writing style is clear, concise, and uses concrete examples, allowing those who are new to game studies to understand some of the critical theory that underpins the series without becoming overwhelmed with jargon. If used in the classroom, however, it would benefit from being paired with more critical work on the series to

provide a more holistic view. Overall, Winter's work is an incredibly useful undertaking and provides a solid background to a highly culturally significant videogame series.

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