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At and Through Mass Effect

Mass Effect is a computer roleplaying game (CRPG) that is available for both the PC and the X-Box. The game is set within the space opera genre and it focuses on a character named Commander Shepherd, who can be played as either a male or a female. All video games must deal with a certain level of AT by making an interface that is both useful and intuitive, but CRPGs bear an additional burden of having players who demand a superior THROUGH experience. Mass Effect is an excellent way to study the concepts of AT and THROUGH because of the fact that it is an RPG and it goes to great lengths to make the AT as invisible as possible, allowing the player to focus on the THROUGH.

Most people are aware of computer CRPGs these days, or massively multiplayer online roleplaying games (MMORPGs) due to the popularity of games such as the World of Warcraft, Diablo, or Everquest, but these games are all derived from the original roleplaying game, Dungeons and Dragons, which was created in 1974 by E. Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson. The original idea behind the game was to move the strategy game concept (historical warfare with miniatures) into something that was more based on the free-form exploration of characters and the fantastic worlds in which they lived. In a sense, the rulebooks were the original AT while the experience of playing was THROUGH.

The marriage of the RPG to the computer was a natural and logical progression, although the first attempts eliminated the social dynamic of the RPG. Computer technology was in its

commercial infancy when it was first attempted. Text-based games like Zork and Bard's Tale made up the initial push, and it was somewhat of a chore for players to look beyond the text and imagine the world they interacted with. As time went on, two-dimensional graphical interfaces were attempted, such as with games like Pool of Radiance and the first six Ultima games. These made looking THROUGH the interface far easier because the imaginary world the characters adventured in were somewhat represented. Advanced computing, new graphics technology, and the internet transformed the markets for both the RPG and the CRPG. As players could more easily get together online and play more visually dynamic games, it was becoming easier to capture the social aspect of the activity while being able to avoid the majority of the AT that traditional tabletop players were forced to deal with. As a result, although the tabletop RPG remains alive and well, the majority of the RPG players in the world are now playing CRPGs and MMOs.

It is important to keep the history of the CRPG in mind, because Mass Effect takes the CRPG idea and combines it with the first person shooter (FPS) engine. Although far from the first game to do this, Mass Effect is noteworthy because of the way that it manages AT and THROUGH. The level of immersion in this game is astounding. Not only is the game set in the first or third person (player's choice), but all of the characters that you can interact with has been animated along with voiceover work. While the player still reads his own responses and then chooses the one he would like to go with, Shepherd speaks the response. In addition to this, the spoken response never matches the written responses verbatim, instead Shepherd captures the overall meaning that the player selected but says it in his own words. This makes conversations seem more natural and increases the overall immersion.

This is important on a rhetorical level. While most people these days prefer the MMO to the CRPG because they have the ability to go online and interact with other people, Mass Effect goes to extra lengths to make the interface as unobtrusive as possible so-as to provide the most enjoyable single-player experience possible. In other words, it's good advertising and convinces PC and console owners to spend their money on this game because the character interactions are so realistic.

The only time the player needs to worry about the AT is when he switches out of the live game mode and makes adjustments to his characters or equipment. However, Shepherd is a completely customizable character, allowing the player's choices to influence the way Shepherd functions. As the character goes through the game, he earns experience, and as the experience increases, the player is given points that he can invest in whatever skills he would like Shepherd to be competent at. A large part of the game is shooting at enemies, so the best places to put a lot of skill points are in the various guns and armor skills. Regardless, it up to the player to decide how to spend these points and it is entirely possible to build a sub-optimal Shepherd by spending most skill points on social skills instead of combat skills. In this way, even the character interface allows the player to look THROUGH the interface and visualize his customized version of Shepherd.

The concepts of AT and THROUGH are important to Mass Effect because they deal with how well the player is able to look past the computer game interface and experience the action and the story firsthand. While it does not do anything that had never been done before, it does take the transparency, the THROUGH, to a new level, providing the player with an experience that is one of the most immersive ever produced in a CRPG. Through these methods, it engages

the player in a non-linear, customizable story that has proven to be one of the most memorable CRPG experiences in recent years.