

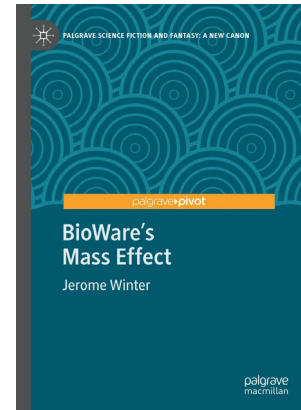
Bioware's Mass Effect, by Jerome Winter

Dominic J. Nardi



Jerome Winter. *Bioware's Mass Effect*. 1st ed. Palgrave Macmillan, 2023. Palgrave Science Fiction and Fantasy: A New Canon. Hardcover, Ebook. 96 pg. \$44.99. ISBN 9783031188756. eBook ISBN 9783031188763.

Bioware's Mass Effect is an unexpected but welcome entry in this Palgrave series on canonical texts in science fiction and fantasy. Jerome Winter's book achieves Palgrave's stated goal of "destabilizing" traditional notions of the canon by placing the videogame franchise alongside more traditional classics of the genre such as Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965). Winter focuses on the first three *Mass Effect* games—released between 2007 and 2012 (and remastered in 2021)—in which players control Commander Shepard using third-person shooter and roleplaying mechanics to rally the galaxy against Lovecraftian space monsters known as Reapers. Winter explores the thematic and narrative elements of this trilogy, but also focuses on how the unique interactivity of videogames enhances and complicates the storytelling.



Winter situates the *Mass Effect* trilogy within the "well-worn conventions of the SF genre, specifically the familiar subgenre of space opera" (2). Yet, while he notes that space opera has influenced videogames since at least 1962, the trilogy stands out as unique both for its embrace of genre tropes and its subversion of those tropes. *Mass Effect* echoes the pulp sensibilities of authors such as E.E. "Doc" Smith, and indeed contains direct allusions to those texts, but rejects their "cardboard characters, black-and-white morality, torturous plotting, and dated ideological baggage" (4). Instead of retreading the pulp-era trope of human colonization of exotic planets, humanity in *Mass Effect* is a junior partner in an established galactic civilization.

The first chapter of *BioWare's Mass Effect* focuses on the text's unique features as a videogame, combining analysis of the skill-driven shooting gameplay and narrative agency afforded by the player's ability to choose dialogue options. Indeed, the game's binary morality options—in which players can choose 'paragon' or "renegade" responses at critical points in the story—bestows meaningful agency on players by allowing them to exercise their unique political, social, and personal values. *Mass Effect* uses this mechanic to force players to engage with problematic space opera tropes, such as the implicit xenophobia in how these stories depict insectoid alien species.

Winter pushes back against the perennial moral panic about videogames by citing BioWare data showing that 92% of players chose paragon options (17).

Winter then examines the *Mass Effect* trilogy's treatment of politics, which he interprets as a "blistering satire of modern war" and "neo-missionary economic colonialism" (29-30). Unlike most military shooter videogames, *Mass Effect* does not glamorize violence as the only or necessary response to threats. Indeed, depending on the player's choices, some of the nonplayer characters' arcs undercut traditional justifications for vigilante justice. The story even underscores the importance of diplomacy, righting historical wrongs, and overcoming bigotry as the player must build an alliance of alien species against the Reaper threat. *Mass Effect* also points out the economic injustices caused by corporate exploitation in ways its pulp-era predecessors rarely did.

This chapter provides a helpful corrective to stereotypes about the politics of videogame storytelling, but perhaps overstates the extent to which *Mass Effect* subverts genre tropes. The Citadel Council, the story's equivalent to a galactic government, refuses to heed Shepard's warnings about the Reaper threat, leading the player character to join the human-supremacist militant group Cerberus in the second game to continue the fight. The final game clearly rejects Cerberus' worldview and requires the player to defeat the group, but continues to perpetuate genre tropes depicting soldiers as uniformly honorable and political institutions as untrustworthy or ineffectual. The human representative to the Council even ends up betraying the player character and the anti-Reaper alliance in the third game.

The third chapter of *BioWare's Mass Effect* covers one of the most celebrated aspects of the *Mass Effect* trilogy, namely its commitment to diversity and inclusion. Players can choose the gender of their character, with a female version of Commander Shepard that challenges the default straight white male option in military shooters. Winter situates this version of Shepard in the tradition of female science fiction action heroes such as Ellen Ripley in *Aliens* (1986). The game also has homosexual characters and LGBTQ-coded romance options, allowing players either to roleplay based on their own sexual identity or to explore sexualities different from their own. Importantly, Winter notes that players still confront story content dealing with sexuality and discrimination even if they choose to play as a straight white male Shepard.

The book concludes by showing how *Mass Effect* incorporated contemporary real-world extrasolar planetary science into its world-building, making it a vehicle to educate players about astronomy. The later games have options to scan planets for mineral resources, which provides scientifically plausible information about the planet's atmosphere and geology. The games leverage this scientific research to inform the evolution of the aliens that populate the galaxy. These exotic planets and species have the defamiliarizing effect typical in science fiction, while the scientific plausibility helps maintain the player's suspension of disbelief.

Other books in this Palgrave series typically start with biographical information about the author and historical context of the canonical text, but the *Mass Effect* trilogy is the product of a corporation with a team of writers and developers. Winter spends little time in chronicling the

history of the BioWare studio or its staff. This approach is probably necessary for analyzing a text with so many creators, especially as no single auteur had creative control over the whole story (the lead writer left midway through the series). *Bioware's Mass Effect* engages more with authorship in the chapter about representation, where Winter quotes several BioWare writers who defended the studio's commitment to LGBTQ representation against backlash.

Winter's decision to cover only the original *Mass Effect* trilogy is understandable for a Palgrave series focused on individual canonical texts, but it does have the effect of overlooking key texts in the franchise that would complicate his analysis. The fourth game, *Mass Effect: Andromeda*, revives the older colonialist and discovery genre tropes that Winter claims the trilogy eschewed. The player character goes to a new galaxy to terraform planets for human habitation while rescuing the Angara, an alien species coded as 'noble savages.' At the same time, the game also builds on the trilogy's then-groundbreaking LGBTQ representation with more options for same-sex romances, including five bisexual characters. Both the pulp-era tropes and LGBTQ representation were controversial with players at the time, albeit for different reasons. Winter's brief treatment of two tie-in novels to the game suggests fascinating possibilities to interrogate genre tropes and settings. A coda to *Bioware's Mass Effect* that engaged with *Andromeda* and other tie-in media would have been appreciated and helped clarify the extent to which Winter's analysis of the original trilogy applies to the rest of the franchise.

Bioware's Mass Effect is a concise and persuasive argument for treating the videogame trilogy as part of the science fiction canon—the only interactive media so far covered in this Palgrave series. Readers unfamiliar with *Mass Effect* might be surprised to learn about its thematic depth, subversion of genre tropes, and engagement with sexual identity. Those familiar with the games might learn how *Mass Effect* draws from and challenges a long tradition of space opera.

Dominic J. Nardi received his PhD in Political Science from the University of Michigan and teaches about human rights at George Washington University. He coedited *The Transmedia Franchise of Star Wars TV* (Palgrave, 2020), *Discovering Dune* (McFarland, 2022), and *Studio Ghibli Animation as Adaptations* (Bloomsbury, 2025). He has written academic articles about politics in *Blade Runner* and *Lord of the Rings*, and has been a guest on various podcasts to discuss science fiction. He has played through the *Mass Effect* trilogy twice.