

Mass Effect 2 (Hudson, 2010) is a game which utilizes a number of distinctive design features to provide players with an immersive and adaptive narrative experience. The developers utilized a number of techniques to create not just a game setting but rather a continuum that extended its presence well and truly beyond the boundaries of the set of events the player generates their narrative from. Versatility of play styles and replayability, heavy emphasis on diegetic methods to communicate narrative information, combined with detailed characterisation, and streamlined interfaces work together to create an immersive environment which provides ample opportunities for players to experience 'flow', a psychological state postulated by Mihály Csíkszentmihályi wherein perceived player skills are sufficient to overcome any perceived challenges in the game, but not to the point where there is no longer a challenge (Csíkszentmihályi, 1996). When in 'flow', a player may experience, amongst other things, a diminishing sense of self and lose track of time, both common elements of role-playing game experiences; they are certainly sensations which Mass Effect 2 encourages through its high level of immersion, encouraging the player to feel as though they have the skills and subjectivity of their character and are therefore lethally competent to handle anything the game throws at them.

The role-playing element of the game manifests itself in the form of multiple character classes, each with varying skills, and the heavy emphasis the game places on story-telling. These different character classes and their corresponding class skills allow ME2 to cater to a number of different play styles. The implication for the narrative of the game, and the consequent potential flow state, is that by allowing people to choose the mechanics they want based on character class, the game enhances its ability to draw players in and create or increase their empathy and projection for the main character. Furthermore, players are more likely to perceive their skills as sufficient for their in-game task if permitted to play a character they see as being complementary to their ability.

Many players already empathised with the main character, a fact that Bioware attempted to exploit with the pre-release trailer for the game depicting the fate of the main character and their implied 'death' (EA, 2009). Because of their existing empathy, players were predisposed to enter a

flow state through their high levels of projection onto their avatar, and their consequent subconscious bidirectional linking of their skills with those of their character.

Another key feature of the game design which both creates this continuum of the game environment and simulates it adapting to player behaviour is narrative causality. ME2 can import savegames from its predecessor Mass Effect, with key data from the save game helping to determine elements of the ME2 storyline as a continuation of player behaviour from the original game (EA, 2010). ME2 operates on a model of causality which presents the player with consequences of their decisions; however it does this in an indirect manner which avoids pure exposition, which would create a disjuncture which threatens the formation of flow states. Rather than present players with a non-interactive cutscene explaining what has taken place between the two games, the player actually participates in the destruction of the Normandy, arguably the most significant interstitial event taking place between the games (Hudson, 2010).

Furthermore, characters reunite with the main character and comment on past events; varying quest lines open or close depending on player decisions, both from this game and the previous one and radio and news broadcasts all combine to provide diegetic feedback on player actions both past and present. By enhancing the continuum of experience between the two games, players are encouraged to project themselves even further into the subjectivity of their main character, and are given feedback for their decisions in a manner which reinforces this projection and presents the character and player as one individual.

What makes this non-diegetic communication encourage the development of 'flow' states even more, however, is the sense of a persistent world provided by this continuum of causality from the previous game carrying forward to the next one. It is this sense of narrative continuity that does far more to contextualize the player actions as taking place in a complete world than cutscenes could ever do. Furthermore, it also makes players more conscious of their decisions and the fact that they do not occur in isolation, providing further disincentive to meta-game, or behave out-of-character simply to receive superior in-game benefits. By actively discouraging thinking 'outside the

game' the player is encouraged to treat their agency within the game mechanics as real, disregarding the context outside the game and making equivalent their physical self with the on-screen representation.

This adaptive nature of the narrative also enhances replayability of the game - an incentive for a player to replay this game is to judge the effects that different decisions have on the narrative. While key storyline missions appear in a particular order, the events that are interspersed with them are totally user defined; this allows users to construct their own narrative on each play through. By selecting the quantity and order of side missions a player gains a fine degree of control over game difficulty, allowing them to tailor the experience to that 'sweet spot' where flow is derived. The goals of these areas are the same regardless of the order in which they are accomplished, further enhancing the flow state on successive playthroughs due to the player's foreknowledge of the tasks to be performed.

The third mechanism employed by Bioware to emphasize narrative and player projection, and therefore foster an environment conducive to flow states, was the interface. Deliberately designed to feel as 'tight' as possible, the interface functions as a thin layer sitting between the player and his or her character which retreats into the background when not being utilised (EA, 2010). Gone are the confusing and often misremembered squad order controls from ME1. They have now been replaced with a simple key to position each squad member who will take cover or perform a contextually appropriate action. This allows the game to be played without having to remove either hand from their customary resting position - it means that the player does not have to look away from their screen at all. To enhance this further, extended squad commands are only visible when a hotkey is held down and the game paused to let the player make effective choices. Skills have been streamlined in conjunction with this interface overhaul and this ensures that the skill selection interface is uncluttered, minimising the disjunctive effects of a non-diegetic interface on the player's narrative experience, which would otherwise threaten to jolt the player out of their flow state.



Figure 1. Comparison of normal UI (top) and HUD (bottom)

With this distinct lack of distraction and a greater degree of coupling between player thought and in-game agent action, coupled with the aforementioned responsive narrative, comes a sensation of player skills having their most direct expression possible, providing happiness through use; players truly become their avatar through controlling it. As a consequence the player feels as skilled as their digital representation. This is particularly apparent during combat, where the over the shoulder perspective and minimalistic interface synergise to induce a flow state where the player is not thinking about *how* they do an action, but simply performing it. Character movement and interaction with cover give combat such as that in the Baria Frontiers warehouse in *ME2: The Lair of the Shadow Broker* a seamless quality where the player physically navigates their space, crouching, ducking, and sliding into position in order to get around enemies.

In utilising these techniques Bioware have tried to minimise the abstraction between players and events, facilitating their construction of narrative from those events and creating a universe which will persist in the minds of players long after the game is concluded, not least because for the duration of their interaction the player could truly become their character and revel in their transplanted yet unified subjectivity.

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