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Mass Effect

My group was responsible for looking at the structure of Mass Effect by Bioware. Like most role-playing games, Mass Effect is a beast when it comes to talking about the structure, rules and mechanics of the game, so while I will cover several aspects, the scope of this assignment will make it impossible to give a full and rich overview of the game that is Mass Effect.

The player is first tasked with creating a character, customizing their appearance and selecting between various backgrounds that changes other character options (for example the available choice of talents), choices which has a big influence at how the game plays at the character level, but also what dialogue and story patch that are available to the player. The dialogue in the game is of great importance in order to convey the story of the game. Depending on the player's chosen outlook at the world, shown through the gameplay and dialogue choices, paths in the game will open or close themselves accordingly, even resulting in different endings to the game. When interacting with non-player characters, the dialogue trees available will vary, both based on the mentioned outlook but also on the player's skills and various other factors. One of the innovations in the dialogue system is that the player instead of choosing what is being said, instead chooses the general tone of the message (e.g. nice, aggressive) and the character does the rest. This is in stark contrast to past games, where there usually were several long lines of dialogue the player would have to read through in order to select a line based on his approach to the non-player character and results in the game having a better and more flowing gameplay.

The game uses the fairly traditional mechanics of role-playing games where the player accumulates experience points, gains levels and assigns attribute points to various skills. Of special interest is the combat system, as it deviates from the more traditional formula of purely stats-based combat. The player is put in control of several characters, but can pause the game in order to get a moment to think and give orders to his squad. When combat is resumed, it plays more like a tactical shooter than a role-playing game, as the player is responsible for aiming and shooting during combat. The game can seem very comprehensive, as the amount of tutorial information present within the game doesn't fulfill the huge amount of information that the game contains and requires the player to have some knowledge of.

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Achievements in Mass Effect have a distinct effect on the game. Unlike the majority of other games, where achievements is meant as a badge to show off accomplishments, then gaining some achievements in Mass Effect enables the player to gain additional bonuses to current and future characters. While this would be of a concern balance-wise if the game was a multi-player game, the addition of these benefits only encourage for re-playing of the game (more so than if they hadn't given tangible benefits) and collection the achievements. The re-playability of the game is big. While there is a main progressions path in the story, there is a plethora of different side-missions and other content the player can explore. Furthermore these can also change based on character and story choices made in the game, making it almost guaranteed that a second play through the game will uncover missed content. Add onto this that Bioware is supporting the game with downloadable content, and there appears to be no end to the amount of hours one could invest into Mass Effect.

Situating the game in the genre of role-playing games, it is obvious to look towards Bioware's other titles, as Bioware has developed quite a few, including Knights of the Old Republic, Neverwinter Nights and Baldur's Gate. Mass Effect builds on these prior conventions, both in its use of the leveling system but also in the heavy use of various skills, abilities and classes, such as talents in different weapons (that can also unlock special weapon attacks), technological skills, the use of biotics and various character classes and specialization classes that can be obtained later. The use of specialization classes strongly resembles similar games like Neverwinter Nights and their prestige classes, where the player were able to branch off from their original class in order to specialize in another aspect.

While Bioware has promised more releases in the Mass Effect franchise, it's hard to imagine how they are going to improve upon the game, as the majority of the critique leveled at the game was responded to in the recent port to the PC.¹

¹ 2010 note: Mass Effect 2 was released, and everything was better (except the planet scanning "game"), so I am eagerly anticipating the third title, preferably with some form of multi-player - <http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/ea-hints-at-mass-effect-multiplayer>