

## THE SF LOVER'S ENDINGS TO MASS EFFECT 3

by  
R P Bird  
rpbird.com

THOSE OF YOU who are reading this already know what it's about, the atrocious endings to the Mass Effect 3 video game from Bioware/EA. They fubared the ending so badly, it may have destroyed the entire Mass Effect franchise. This a fail of epic, apocalyptic proportions. I won't give background, because only a fellow fan of the series would be reading this, someone who has played the game, someone who has experienced the failure of the ending. I will only remind the reader that the ME series was designed to be an RPG shooter, not an action game. Role-playing games have multiple outcomes dependent on the decisions of the player during the course of the game. ME 3 betrayed even the concept of the RPG in the ending. Though claiming there were multiple endings, there was, as those who played the game can attest, really only one ending: a literal "god-in-the-machine" pops up to ask Shepard how he wants to end the game, but it's a trick, the hero dies in all three and the galaxy is destroyed. Were the writers trying for a dark ending – but why just one ending? Were they trying to create an "Oedipus and the Sphinx" vibe? They certainly failed at that, since Oedipus solved that riddle. The

more one contemplates the ending, the worse it gets. There's the clichéd "Eden" imagery. Central characters act in nonsensical ways, out of character with their past actions, almost like a bad movie where the actors wink at the camera. I'm reminded of Fry's line in *Futurama*: "...a story riddled with plot holes and spelling errors..."

So...to emulate what most other players have said were the first words out of their mouths after watching this abomination: WTF?! What were the writers thinking? Were they thinking? Were they stoned? Is that their excuse? No one will know, but in my humble opinion, the story went upside down when the Citadel was taken and transferred to Earth, or maybe even before, with the Catalyst. It was all designed to lead us to Earth, and to the last boss fight with the Illusive Man. Then someone realized, holy crap, this is exactly the same ending as ME 1! Of course, that meant they were doomed, because they had started production before they nailed the story down!! So delay six months or a year, re-do a bunch of stuff, maybe all the way back to the Geth-Quarian mission, all that to get a proper ending – or cobble anything together just to get it out the door, and if anyone complains, yell, "It's art! It's fine! You're stupid if you can't see that!" and ignore them and hope they forget about it. Too bad. There are a bunch of cool outcomes and story twists they could have used, I should know, I've been in love with hard science fiction since I was five. Aren't you glad I'm around to fix things?

How to get to the end of it all? That's the trick. I write character-based fiction, so forced plot-points have no meaning for me. You have the reapers, vast ships governed by sentient collectives, enslaved minds in service to a cause, and one woman on the other side, one individual, Shepard. She can only defeat the reapers by uniting all sentient life in the galaxy behind her.

That sounds easy. Not so easy, it turns out. Her missions are centered around settling old animosities, bringing peace and concord to her allies, or liberating them to fight beside her. Early on, the plans for a mysterious weapon, the Crucible, fall into her hands. Heh, I've seen this before. Who hasn't? If played straight it's a little boring, so almost every SF writer I've ever read puts a kink in it. I liken such macguffins to the promises a used-car dealer makes to you. Too good to be true, and yep, as soon as the tranny falls out, you know you've been deceived. There is one way a story-telling gimmick like this will work, if assembling it and protecting it becomes the core of the story. No, the ME 3 writers didn't do that. They threw it into the background. De-emphasizing the dingus, the Crucible, implies that it's a red-herring. By making it a real part of the solution to the reaper threat only to put it in the background, the writers made their first mistake. Solution: make the Crucible another trap. They couldn't do that, the Crucible was necessary to get everyone to the appointed place for the big boss battle, they were locked in by this point.

Then there's Cerberus, the shadowy terrorist organization featured in ME 2. The conflict between Shepard and the reapers is actually undermined by the Cerberus storyline in ME 3. TIM (the Illusive Man) is the leader of Cerberus. He and his entire organization are a bridge story to link up the beginning and the end. Cerberus needed to be dealt with in a decisive manner by the end of the first act, about a third of the way through. Shepard should have finished them off. Think on Saruman in *Lord of the Rings*. Why keep them around? The writers had to, they needed the Illusive Man because their ending depended upon it. You see, for a reason I don't understand, they thought it was the best thing in the world to exactly replicate the ending of the first Mass Effect game in the last Mass Effect game. Then they got to the point in

the game's development when the artists and coders started work on the ending. Everyone took a look at the endings again...collective freak-out. It wasn't evocative of the ending to ME 1, it was a dead-on direct copy! Gotta do something, anything! The money's gone and time's up. So they pulled this atrocity of an ending out of their asses. Wonderful. Let's not be too hard on them, it happens in Hollywood every day. Oh, hell, let's be hard on them. As Comic Book Guy would say: "Oldest Writing Mistake Ever!"

But here we're inside a thought experiment. We can do anything we want here! So let's smoke TIM, have Shep use her big boots on him. God, I love women with big feet. Oh, and if we keep that sorry-ass excuse for a ninja, Mr. Leng, he gets sliced up by Shep right along with his boss. "Leng, save me!" Vuwooap! "I don't think he's going to be saving you today." He loses his head over the deadly Miss Shepard.

We're a third of the way in, the Cerberus guys are worm food, and the decks are cleared for building up to the big battle. We don't need the Crucible anymore, and since this is character-driven fiction, screw all macguffins. "It's a trap!" That's the turning point, halfway into the story. Nothing is easy in life. Everyone realizes this when the Crucible is exposed, they're gonna have to do it the hard way.

Shep's depressed, hounded by thoughts of failure. Her friends are supportive, but there's not much to be done. She even entertains thoughts of a Plan B, a way to warn the next cycle of what's to come, a way to preserve something of what was. Do you know who Leo Szilard was? He discovered how nuclear chain reactions work. If Oppenheimer was the father of the atomic bomb, then Szilard could be considered the grandfather. Here's the moment Szilard changed the world.

In London, where Southampton Row passes Russell Square, across from the British Museum in Bloomsbury, Leo Szilárd waited irritably one gray Depression morning for the stoplight to change. A trace of rain had fallen during the night; Tuesday, September 12, 1933, dawned cool, humid and dull. Drizzling rain would begin again in early afternoon. When Szilárd told the story later he never mentioned his destination that morning. He may have had none; he often walked to think. In any case another destination intervened. The stoplight changed to green. Szilárd stepped off the curb. As he crossed the street time cracked open before him and he saw a way to the future, death into the world and all our woes, the shape of things to come.

Shepard has a moment of epiphany. Defeat Indoctrination and you defeat the reapers. This is the game-changing moment. A new research project is started while Shep continues to recruit allies. And as she builds allies, she builds on her knowledge of military tactics. The reapers are strong in space, their immense shipbodies make them hard to beat, and they can only be beaten by concentrated fleet firepower. But they are weak when it comes to small-scale combat. They have no armies, they rely on husks and other creations, built on the bodies of their captives.

Shep and her allies struggle to keep as many organics out of the hands of the reapers as possible. At the same time, the indoctrination research has created protections against indoctrination, and maybe they've even created a mindbomb to liberate imprisoned minds. Now Shep has a new arrow in her quiver, one very ancient one, from the first days of naval combat: the boarding party. Yes, I realize I'm cobbing a little from the old E E Doc Smith stories I read as a child. The tactic is even featured in *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic 2, the Sith Lords*. Only

borrow from the best. The boarding parties won't be indoctrinated when they enter the reaper shipbodies. They can gut the monsters from the inside, no matter how long it takes.

What about the Citadel? The only reason it was taken to Earth by the reapers/Cerberus in the original ending (Exactly *how* did it get there? I don't remember from my playthrough.), they needed a platform for the final boss battle. In my rewrite, every resource is put into the fleet. New ships are built, and because it is always good to evoke the elements of the beginning in the end, Shepard reminds everyone that the Citadel is itself a mass relay. They hack the Citadel's control systems, turning it into a mobile battle station.

SORRY, A QUICK ASIDE. Given that fan versions of the ending are better than what the "pros" at Bioware could do. Given that there is a small army of writers out in the world, why don't game companies take advantage of this talent? Why don't they do rewrites? Everyone else does. A production company in Hollywood will hire multiple writers to do independent takes on an idea. What would it hurt during the design phase if, after the outline's done, the idea is sent out to another author for a rewrite or to a bunch of fans for a "pre-alpha test." Since it's work-for-hire, the company isn't obligated to go with it, any more than they are obligated to go with what their own writing team has come up with. It's a way to check six on the story.

I CAN'T HELP IT, I have to list a few of the things I would like to have seen in the final battle. Shep stays on the *Normandy*, she's the fleet admiral, that's her post, in the war room. She gets to

control the fleet a bit, either with a minigame or dialog choices...flanking maneuvers, concentrating fire on specific reapers, saving a squadron in trouble...

Part of the attack is to open a hole in the reaper blockade of Earth. Scores of troopships pour through the opening. Down on the surface in London, the last of the resistance are cornered, Anderson among them. Suddenly, biotic attacks cripple the husk army. Jack and her students are there with Asari commandos. An Asari commando runs up to Anderson, "Shepard sent us."

In fact, I like "Shepard sent us" so much, it would have been a constant refrain in the last half of the game.

"Deploy the mindbomb." It's an anti-indoctrination EMP weapon of some sort, developed after the Salarians come into the alliance, after their attempts to manipulate Shep have failed.

Every race Shep has recruited are in action. The mercs land on Earth and charge into the husk army, the Vorcha as their vanguard. The Batarian flotilla swarm a reaper and bring it down. The Elcor cannon troopers, protected by Volis infantry, attack. "Who knew those little guys could fight?" The Hanar and their SpecOps Drell teams take out husk tanks. We get to see just why the Asari are so proud of the *Destiny Ascension*. The ship upgraded its weps after the battle a few years ago at the Citadel, gigantic Thanx cannons rip a reaper wide open. Boarding parties of biotics and Turians smash up the insides of the biggest reapers, planting bombs and creating mayhem. Directed fire from interlinked ship fire control systems, turning the firepower of entire task forces in the fleet into one big gun, core out the heart of the reaper fleet.

In the middle of it all, when victory and defeat dance upon a hair – surprise! – the Citadel, transformed by the allies into an immense battle station, uses its own internal mass effect relay to bounce into the middle of the fight, "armed and powered as only a

planet can be armed and powered." "Say hello to my little friend!" Every resident inside is armed and ready to defend their home from husk boarding parties.

"It's a brawl now, people! Pick your partner and get it done!"

There is a Geth by the side of the Quarian admiral. Their fleets are a combined fighting force.

Joker's list of fleet elements reporting in goes on for a while longer, with mentions of the Batarians, the Volis, the Hanar, the Elcor, the merc flotilla, everyone's come to this party.

Strange shock troops crash through husk lines down in London to rescue trapped resistance fighters...someone recruited the Yahg.

"I'M READY FOR MY CLOSE-UP, Mr. DeMille." The endings.

The Happy Unicorn Ending. What's wrong with a happy ending? Nothing. Any RPG has to have a range of endings, from happy to bad. We all know how this one ends. Shep, through exceptional work, has managed to create, for the first time in a billion years, a fleet capable of ending the reaper threat. She is promoted to Admiral of the Fleet in a ceremony right before the final battle. The battle will be guided from the war room on the *Normandy*. It's on! An epic tale straight out of the Iliad, Shep guiding the fleet to victory, she even gets into a boss fight with Harbinger when he latches onto the *Normandy*. All of Shep's friends survive. She survives. The end cutscene shows Shep and Garrus sitting on the beach, watching kids throw rocks at the dead reapers out in the bay. If there's a romance, Shep's love interest comes up and bugs him. Cue epic music and the credits.

The Epic Failure Ending. Try as she might, Shepard can't get anyone to cooperate, the Crucible was a failure, and the fleet is

defeated. She is harvested. She wakes up as a run-time module inside Harbinger, surrounded forever by the screams of captive minds. But only here, in the fail ending, only here are the answers fans have wanted about the origins of the reapers and their intent. The Shepard-mind is playable as she seeks out answers to what the reapers are by talking to other minds and her friends. Everyone died. Everyone's in hell. Like a pagan hero in the ancient epics, she had to go to hell to find the answers, *for answers to everything only reside in hell.*

The Nelson-at-Trafalgar Ending. This is my personal favorite. Shepard dies while in combat on the *Normandy*, defending her crew from Harbinger's husk creatures. But not all is lost. The allied fleets and armies of the organics win. The *Normandy* docks at the Citadel. A long line of all her friends forms up outside the airlock. The airlock opens and Shepard's body is carried out, like a hero from the old stories, on the shoulders of her crew, all heads bowed solemnly as the procession passes slowly by. Fade to sad music and the credits....but after the credits...Shepard's standing at a bar in a hazy place, there are dancers in the background, it looks faintly like Afterlife on Omega. Mordin's at her side. He steps over to a small stage and begins to sing karaoke. She sips at a drink. Garrus comes up to the bar.

"SO WE FAILED," Shepard said to her old friend.

"Where did you get that idea? Leave you alone for a moment and you get all mopey." The Turian looked to someone standing on the other side of Shepard.

Tali laughed.

Shep turned to her and smiled. "You're here, too?"

"We won, my silly friend," Tali replied. She wasn't wearing a suit or a helmet. She smiled at Shepard. "Garrus returned with me to Rannoch. We adopted many children, even a few human ones, and we had a long, happy life."

"We named them all 'Shepard,'" Garrus said.

"We did not!" She leaned in close to whisper into Shep's ear. "He's lying. We only named three of them after you."

Legion was dancing with an Asari. "I didn't know they let robots in here."

"I am Geth," Legion replied. "Geth have a soul."

"Hey, Shepard!" Wrex yelled from down the bar. "Good fight! I had four sons and nine daughters by the time I died, and thirty-seven grandkids!" He glanced over at Mordin. "Can someone shut that Salarian up?"

They're all here, each coming to the big party after living out long lives, each with their own tale of rebuilding the galaxy, of prosperity and the birth of hope. Shep is reunited with her love interest. Cue end music.

THE GRAY ENDINGS. These are variations on the theme of partial victory. Shepard lives, but some of her friends die. Earth is destroyed. The galaxy's a mess. Each is a little different, each bittersweet in its own way. You want an "art" ending? The current endings aren't "art," they were a rushed mishmash of clichés and plot holes. Here's the "art ending" as one of the gray endings. In this ending, the key to victory for Shepard is overcoming Harbinger. If she orders a mindbomb set off, Harbinger responds by somehow linking his mind directly to hers. EDI is in the background shouting at her as she battles Harbinger in virtualspace. EDI "throws" her something, a killswitch subroutine.

Shep defeats Harbinger by inserting the killswitch into his primary run-time module. The battle's over, everyone's howling for joy...except in the medbay, where Shep is catatonic. The epilog for this one is poignant in the extreme. Tali and Garrus decide to take care of Shepard. Years later, the surviving teammates get together on Rannoch at Tali's house for a reunion. There are Quarian, Turian, and human children everywhere – Tali and Garrus are in the habit of adopting war orphans. Liara asks to see Shep. She's sitting out on the veranda with a Geth keeping an eye on her. Liara sits down and takes Shep's hand. Shep is gaunt, with haunted eyes. To her, the last inner battle with Harbinger never had an end, it just keeps going inside her head. "We won, didn't we?" Shepard asks Liara. "Yes, my love, we won," Liara replies. They sit together holding hands, watching the sunset. That's the "art" ending.

EVERYONE DOES REALIZE that Mass Effect 3 was doomed? I liked the "shadow war" aspect of ME1/2, which of course was taken off the table with the Arrival DLC. In Arrival, the reapers are close to a system on the rim of the galaxy, about to invade. The only way to stop them, destroy the mass relay, which will destroy the entire system in an explosion so epic as to rival a supernova. Things went sideways in the story just then. Why would Sovereign risk an invasion of the Citadel (the end event in ME 1) if the reapers could get back to the galaxy in just a couple years? Why try to build a human reaper in secret if they can be back in a couple years? Their agents would wait until the main force arrived. Why the hell even build the Citadel, which contains the means for the reapers to return? The view of the galaxy from the reaper POV shown in ME 1/2 seems to indicate great distance, upwards of 50,000 to a

100,000 ly away from the outer arms of the Milky Way. Even with an ftl drive, that's high mileage. This has been bugging me since I played Arrival. Up until Arrival, I thought we'd have another conspiracy, perhaps an indoctrinated TIM ordering Cerberus to rewire a relay to let them in. Now that I'm thinking about it, I can't stop thinking about it. What a mess!

Why such a mess? No one had an ending when they started production of ME 1. They hadn't given the characters and the story arc any thought at all! Were they just lazy, is that it? That's no way to run a circus.

HOW HARD IS THIS? The simple errors that ruined the Mass Effect franchise seem to imply it's not hard at all. I'd love to work on a game like this for real – such potential for seriously creative fun. If you're well-read and pay a little attention to the popular culture, if you know the genre you're writing in and you're not lazy, not so hard. The "not-lazy" part is probably the most important element in the bunch. Ideas and story outlines are a dime-a-dozen, any working professional writer will tell you the same. It's the work of creating a viable fictional universe, of the dialog choices, the sound, the taste, the smell of a place, the evocation of character, that's the hard part. I guess I'm saying, the ME 3 writers responsible for the ending failed at the easy part. Only one cure for that. Read a few books. Watch some good movies. Get a job at a mini-mart, watch the people, listen to them. Think in depth about the characters and the story. Reject laziness. Or switch jobs, because if you can't get the easy stuff, you're in the wrong line of work.

Copyright © 2012 by R P Bird. All rights reserved. Free for personal use or for posting or reproduction on non-profit or social networking web sites. For-profit web sites, please contact before reproduction, fees will apply. Do not alter.