

Synthesize, Control, Destroy: *Mass Effect 3* and the Ephemerality of Player Response

Caren Pagel, Georgia State University

The explosion of player-shared gameplay on sites such as YouTube and Twitch has created an extensive database of in-game player experiences, but the player experience rarely ends with the credits. Instead, many players continue their engagement into collaborative online spaces such as forums, walkthroughs and social media where they share their impressions of games, theorize on content, assist struggling players, and sometimes even organize to challenge industrial power. For the researcher concerned with video games and the culture around them, online player writings are vital because they provide firsthand accounts of player experiences and interpretations, but also because these forums are spaces of conflict and potential change between the player and the industry. Unfortunately for researchers, preservation of these writings does not come without its challenges. The process of downloading websites—especially forum topics that may consist of several thousand pages—is slow, laborious, often unreliable and made even more frustrating by the capricious whims of the domain's corporate overlord who may delete the pages with little or no notice. In order to explore the preservation values and challenges of player writings, this paper will briefly examine the *Mass Effect 3* ending controversy and the player response on the official BioWare forums as an example of online player experiences and the ephemerality of this type of content.

In 2012, Canadian studio BioWare released the highly-anticipated final installment of its beloved sci-fi series, *Mass Effect 3*, to a fanbase that swiftly and energetically expressed their response to the game's ending. In short, they hated it. They *really* hated it. The general player consensus as to why the ending was so terrible fell along the lines of "it sucked," "it's just a meaningless choice between three colors," "it cruelly revokes player agency at the last minute," and, of course, "it sucked." The reason we know they hated it and why they hated it is because they publically swarmed to social media, blog comments, and the BioWare forums to share their reactions on the ending and why many of them believed it destroyed their experience rather than synthesize it into something satisfying or offer player control over the ending. While the feedback documents experiences, it also represents a dramatic shift in gaming culture and the relationship between players and industry. After players expressed their initial feelings on the game in the BioWare forums, their rage transformed into action as they collectively organized on the forums to "Take back *Mass Effect 3*" and force BioWare to change the ending. This challenge to BioWare's control as producer of the text played out in the forums through player discussion, campaigns for change, collaboration on theories, and even player feedback solicited from the developers on how to change the ending. It would be entirely reasonable to assume nothing came of the campaign, but something remarkable happened. BioWare relented and created a new ending for the game thus providing a victory for *Mass Effect 3* players and arguably inspiring future

confidence to challenge the industry in subsequent incidents such as the *No Man's Sky* pushback and the revolt against loot boxes in *Star Wars: The Old Republic*.

The forum that changed a game no longer exists. Four years after the campaign to change the ending of *Mass Effect 3*, the BioWare forums—perhaps on the behest of their no-so-beloved parent company Electronic Arts—were removed from the BioWare website in their entirety. The biggest challenge to and reminder of the ephemerality of these artifacts of player experience are the companies like Electronic Arts, Twitter and Reddit that ultimately own these player writings and whose mandates rarely align with the interests of players or researchers. How do we as players and scholars overcome the fickle nature of this arrangement? The most realistic though unsatisfying answer to this question is for the researcher to save the material before it's gone. Ideally, websites downloaded for offline storage should preserve the site's HTML code to ensure highest fidelity in the document. There are two common methods available. First, is to employ an open source application like HTTrack that can be programmed to download websites and save them to the user's computer for archiving. The second is to utilize a web browser such as Firefox to manually save each webpage through the browser's built-in save function. For a website with only a few pages, either option should work without issue, but sites that contain thousands of pages—for instance, the BioWare forum thread on the so-called "Indoctrination Theory" was approximately 7,000 pages long—the website copier will challenge the researcher's computer with tens of gigabytes of data and days of runtime while the manual method will challenge the researcher's sanity. Ultimately, once the documents have been saved the most suitable place to preserve them would likely be various university library digital archives that have the experience to index and share them with the public.