

EGSM – Mass Effect

Content Warnings

- Spoilers for all of the Mass Effect game series
- Innuendo & sexual references throughout
- Discussions of: war & death (inc. genocide, nuclear war), sexism, sci-fi racism & oppression
- Mentions of: slavery, body horror, police, transphobia

MIKE

Space!

(Group laughter)

MIKE

Game.

MICHELLE

That is a big part of it.

MIKE

But I feel that that kind of sums it up really...

[Show Theme - Intro]

HELEN

Hello friends and fans and welcome to Enthusigasm; the show where we talk about a few of our favourite things. I am your host, Helen Gould, one of the best Rusty Quillers and today we're talking about the Mass Effect video games, and I am simply overjoyed to be joined by James, Michelle and Mike. We are, as always going to introduce ourselves alphabetically. So James, what are your pronouns and what do you do?

JAMES

Hiya. I am James Ross, my pronouns are he/him. Listeners to this podcast will probably know me best from being in Rusty Quill Gaming, where I was in the top 5 of 6 cast members

[laughter]

JAMES

...sometime; and in the real world I am mostly a comedian and a comedy promotor and I run the multi award winning Quantum Leopard in London, which is a play as you like, no punching down comedy night, and we've just won best live comedy format, which is an exciting national award. Ooh go us. That's what I do.

HELEN

Yeah, woo go you indeed. Very, very big congrats to you, well done. Next up, Michelle, what are your pronouns and what do you do?

MICHELLE

Hello, my name's Michelle Snow. I am one of those she/her people, and I edit things; audio things for Rusty Quill and I also run a news outlet for trans people out of bedroom with some friends of mine, called What the Trans, which is a thing you could listen to. But you should probably listen to this first. Like, don't stop listening now and go look that up – do that later.

HELEN

That is extremely considerate of you, thank you. How many episodes of What the Trans are there now?

MICHELLE

We just put out the 72nd over four years, because we're not very good at keeping a schedule.

HELEN

But, you know what, that's not too intimidating of a backlog at least.

MICHELLE

Oh it absolutely is, because sometimes episodes can be two hours long. Like, it's a lot, but people do it. People are going through the backlog. And I know because Spotify is weird and doesn't show all the episodes, for reasons I don't understand. And I get emails about every three days saying, "Where's the rest of them? I'm going through them sequentially." And I'm like, "Why? All of that stuff is so out of date now." But people do; people do try to listen to it from the

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start, which is awesome. But also – I don't know – it wasn't what I was expecting. Because it's a news thing. News becomes old really quickly. So, why would they want to hear about the terrible things that were happening two years ago when they could hear about the terrible things happening now?

JAMES

I don't know, Michelle. I think you really get the best out of a long running podcast experience by listening to it right at the beginning and then stopping about 77 episodes in, so...

(Group laughter)

HELEN

That is a Rusty Quill Gaming joke. And finally Mike, what are your pronouns and what do you do?

MIKE

Hello everyone. My name's Mike LeBeau and I am the head of video for Rusty Quill. I am responsible for all of our video outlets. I currently run a show called NPC – New Player Challenges – which you may have seen on our brand new YouTube channel from Rusty Quill? I'm a streamer and voice actor. I played Tim in the Magnus Archives. I'm currently playing Paul and Richtor Collins in the Town Whispers; and possibly some other things to come as well because I've had a few casting calls recently and a couple of call backs.

HELEN

Ooh.

MIKE

So, good things to come. You might hear more of my voice in and around the digital universe.

HELEN

Wonderful. Okay. So, do you know what? For disclosure I am recording this right after I have finished streaming some Mass Effect 1. So, I am very much in the mood for this – for talking about this odd expansive and much beloved game about aliens and war and – as my friend Jamie put it, “Baby’s first politics”.

(Laughter)

MIKE

That’s really good.

HELEN

It’s very much at the level of – oh, slavery is bad but maybe, maybe the army can also be bad.

(Laughter)

JAMES

See it, it does add the moral choice thing of like paragon versus renegade rather than just like good versus evil, which is a very slight development. But like, what I'd really like to see at some point – if there are any games devs listening – then just, just go for this. Here's an idea for you. Just dispense – like just, just you know, cut the nonsense with the moral choice system and just have the options called left wing and right wing, you know? It will be easier.

(Laughter)

HELEN

Right. So, how would all of you describe Mass Effect to someone who hadn't played it? Assuming that someone is listening who doesn't know about the games.

MIKE

Space!

(Group laughter)

MIKE

Game.

MICHELLE

That is a big part of it.

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MIKE

But I feel that that kind of sums it up really. It's ...

JAMES

I mean, he's not wrong.

HELEN

Space – dot, dot, dot ! ?

MIKE

Yes.

HELEN

Excellent. I like, I like that. That's succinct and to the point.

MIKE

Well listen – I, I was going to call it a space opera, but there's an argument to be made that it's not necessarily a space opera because it, it covers a lot of different ground.

HELEN

Yeah.

JAMES

I've, I've got a point about that right. So, I mean so firstly, like it is, it is a grand epic spanning several games with threads that interlink them and you know, it is a masterful bit of storytelling – particularly branching storytelling – which is unbelievably complicated. And it does that really well. And the writing is surprisingly adequate for a video game, which is like it's genuinely surprising, to have something that where you're not like yanked out of the narrative immersion by going like, "That is a very bad sentence. That's a really horrifically written sentence. Why have then done that?" Every, every 30 to 60 seconds. But like I'm – so I would say you know, in terms of you know, the quadrilogy – the you know, what you basically have is, you start off with a space opera, which is potentially a grim dark space opera, depending how you play it; and that leads into like a sci-fi setting – what is essentially a heist movie, followed by a war film, followed by a crushing disappointment.

(Laughter)

HELEN

Mmm.

JAMES

That's, that's how I'd broadly structure it. But like if, you know, I'm reminded when I started playing Mass Effect and people were like, "Ooh" you know because I was, this is, I'm a few years behind the technology curve because harbour is expensive and I've got other things I need to spend money on. And...

MIKE

True.

JAMES

...so when somebody found out I was playing the Mass Effect series, there were several people that were like, “Wow, ooh you’re starting”. It reminded me of somebody who told me they were once – they were on a train and they were starting to read War and Peace – and you know, sort of an old gentleman walked up to them and said, “Ah, you’re beginning the journey.”

(Laughter)

HELEN

Michelle though, how would you describe Mass Effect to someone who had no idea what it was?

MICHELLE

They would have to understand like the story of Cassandra. But it’s basically – the Cassandra myth in space...

HELEN

Mmm, interesting.

MICHELLE

...because all the way through your shepherd is just like, “Oh no, it’s all horrible” and something terrible’s coming. And people are like “pff, whatever.”

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HELEN

Mmm.

MICHELLE

And in the end it's just like, the third game should have been – just Shepherd going, "I was right" for 30 hours straight.

(Laughter)

HELEN

Yes, yes, it was great.

JAMES

Yeah, it's simply I told you so DLC.

MICHELLE

Yes, yes. That is...

(Laughter)

MIKE

Man, yeah. I mean the ending of the third one fundamentally should have just been like Shepherd stood there, arms folded. Like that Easter egg from Jeff Goldblum in the Jurassic Park game where if you complete all of the objectives that are set for you in the game and do all the extra stuff, you just get Jeff

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Goldblum going, “Well done. Now go outside.” And that’s, and that’s the Easter egg.

(Laughter)

JAMES

I’d love to have like a sort of a custom character designer thing and it’s just the shepherd’s hand; and you get to like customise it like you know? Are there rings, is there nail varnish, nail length, knuckles, proportions, blah blah blah?

HELEN

(Laughs)

JAMES

And then just right at the end of Mass Effect 3 where he/she can just go “nnnnnnn” flick the bean and....

MICHELLE?

Yeah.

JAMES

...all the way through.

MICHELLE

Can, can I just say now that the only correct way to play Mass Effect is with a female character?

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JAMES

I agree. I 100% agree with that.

HELEN

I am of that opinion as well.

JAMES

Yeah.

MIKE

Really?

JAMES

Yeah!

MIKE

That's very interesting.

HELEN

I've been told that the voice acting is a lot better...

JAMES

Yeah.

HELEN

...with female shepherds as well.

MIKE

Yeah, no that's, that is very true yeah. Because when you play as the male commander Shepherd it's all, it basically is just metal gets solid in space. Like you've got some, some bloke who's just got a very deep basey voice who is like, "Mmm yeah, let's action." Whereas you're right – there, there seems to be a lot more – there does seem to be a lot more character depth with the female Shepherd. That is true.

MICHELLE

And it all accidentally becomes the most like feminist video game of its time by mistake.

HELEN

Mmm.

MICHELLE

Because they didn't put any effort into like making the character – the female character like have female specific responses from other MPC's. It happens, but not that often.

MICHELLE?

No.

MICHELLE

The model, the walking and animations and everything is the same. So, what could – it's a lazy choice for them to do that, but what that means is that the character is basically just like everyone else, and the future is portrayed as far more feminist utopia than you would expect for a game made between 2000 and – for a series made between 2007 and 2012. Which were not the most – looking back now – there was a lot of weird clangers going around intellectually around that time, when it comes to gender politics.

JAMES

I, I'd like, I absolutely agree with what Michelle's saying there. Like, I mean I, I started off playing – I've only really been playing it as – to be fair Michelle I've never really bothered with the male Shep run; partly because like it just, I think it really changes how you view the story?

HELEN

Yeah.

JAMES

So when I first started playing Mass Effect 1, I played it as a fem Shep and I customised the model and just on a whim, just because like the preset looked a bit more interesting, I played it as a black female Shepherd all the way through. And it really – like playing it as that character – really changes how you view the dialogue. Because when you've got – like the difference between playing like you know, a hyper masculine like you know, super aggro like marine type action hero, and playing it as a black woman going through in it; particularly in Mass

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Effect 1, when you're talking about like themes like you know slavery, collaboration, struggle, all of this sort of stuff like – that, it's a very different script, right? If you're talking about like resisting slavery and you're a black woman, that, that rings very differently than if you are somebody who's got like you know, this you know, a knee for a jaw you know, something like that...

(Laughter)

JAMES

Like, if you've got that and you've got that character and he's talking about slavery, it's like "Well okay, well where's your MAGAcap?" Are you complaining about like you know, the face nappy that you've got to wear? Like, is it about political correctness gone mad? Is it the fact that you can't say anything anymore? Is that the kind of slavery that you know, that Sarun is going to inflict on the galaxy, right? Like, it rings very very differently and it plays very differently, and I think it, it's a much more interesting game if you play it that way with that character.

HELEN

I'm really – I was really struck actually Michelle, by your, your comparison of like Shepherd as Cassandra because that really is, yeah. And, and the idea of Shepherd as being cursed as well, cursed with like horrific knowledge, and like the whole universe – the whole is, is like Troy. And – spoilers – and the reapers are like the Greek soldiers and like their Trojan horse in the first one is, is Sovereign.

MICHELLE

Yeah. I think that was intentional of them. I mean, if you really look at...

HELEN

Yeah!

MICHELLE

...all the parts that make up the Mass Effect universe, they stole a lot of things. Like the Geth...

HELEN

Oh yeah.

MICHELLE

The kind, it's kind of Battlestar Galactica what the Geth is about, like that whole story, up to a point.

HELEN

Ooooh. Yes. Okay, so the Geth are a, a robot species that were created by another alien species called the Quarians and the Geth started to become self-aware and this freaked the Quarians out so much that they waged war on the Geth.

MICHELLE

They outlawed them totally.

HELEN

Yeah, but the Geth are actually quite good at fighting, and sort of won...

MIKE

As it turns out.

MICHELLE

And they were an oppressed people too. That's the part that you don't really find out about until like two games in. The Geth are...

HELEN & MIKE

Yeah.

MICHELLE

The Geth are an oppressed people that were attacked. Yeah, and they defended themselves.

HELEN

Yeah. It really – because I'm, because I'm playing Mass Effect 1 through at the moment and I'm just completely indiscriminately mowing down every Geth I see – it really does, it really does, literally makes you think.

(Laughter)

JAMES

Yeah, I mean you find out in Mass Effect 2 I mean, again spoilers – but I mean like, spoilers? You know, that they are you know, it's all a distant faction within who's been manipulated by the reapers, and also that you've...

HELEN

Yeah.

JAMES

...you've also got – there's a sense in which like, although you're mowing down individual drones you know, because they're consciousness is collective, it's *quote/unquote* not really killing.

HELEN

Mmm.

JAMES

So, I mean a whole thing about this is like okay, do you see the Geths – do you see the Geth as being you know, analogues for people or are they you know, obviously you know we are mammals, we think that everything is people; we anthropomise everything you know. If you watch that video of a little girl feeding rubbish to a rhumba like you know, will...

HELEN

Aah.

JAMES

It's, it's adorable but like I mean, that's going to, that's going to destroy our species, right? Because we'll create the seeds of our own destruction and go like, "This, this hunter-killer drone that's entirely autonomous, aah it's adorable, it's got googley eyes on it. I'll love it."

MICHELLE

Yeah but that's like the one thing about our species I like.

(Group laughter)

MICHELLE

We can occasionally be nice to things. That, that's like our best quality.

JAMES

But I mean I suppose in terms of that it's like well I mean, do you view the Geth as being an oppressed species which you are obviously invited to do by the game, or do you view them as being a, a tool – a program like you know? Do you, is, is artificial intelligence you know, like that is worthy of protection which is you know, a grand sci-fi theme that will become relevant at some point, as of a live human political concern?

HELEN

I mean yeah, I absolutely do view – I am absolutely of the belief that AI can develop enough to become a people. And so I have a lot of sympathy for the Geth. And yeah – let's, let's talk about Legion a bit? So...

MIKE

Yes.

HELEN

I think...

MIKE

This is, this is where I was hoping to step in. Because Legion's storyline I actually one of my favourites in the entire Mass Effect trilogy.

HELEN

Go for it.

MIKE

Well I mean, just because like Legion had got so much depth as a character. Because like you said, in Mass Effect 1 you're introduced to this enemy *quote/unquote* called the Geth, and it's your job to destroy as many as you can so you can uncover the mystery, work out what's really going on and who the Reapers are, eventually spoilers? and then you know, you've got – there's a lot – there's not really that much development in Mass Effect 1. Then as we've said, you hit Mass Effect 2 and you're suddenly introduced to this character who's part of the enemy. You learn a lot more about the Quarians and what actually happened during the Quarian/Geth war. You learn the turning point. Which for me, as kind of similar to James' and Michelle's points, sort of pokes a little bit into the uncanny valley, fearing AI, creating something that is superior to humanity or you know, another species and then turning on it as a way of being able to cope with that, and obviously you have many, many other

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themes there as well. But there, like I say, you're introduced to Legion, who brings all of that story home by talking about the, the collective consciousness by having the interactions between Tary and Legion. Like, they are some of my favourite interactions and I would regularly choose Tary and Legion as my two squad mates in a lot of the stuff that I did. Because I loved listening to the conversations that they would have, given that it's sort of like – they're on two totally different sides of opposing, opposing forces is the word I'm going to choose. But really it's just, they're worlds apart in a war that started over, fundamentally a big misunderstanding; boiling it all down to one core element, in my opinion. And Legion – as I say – you start to develop – or I did at least when I was playing through – you start to develop feelings for Legion, like as a, as a, as an entity – no Helen, no get your mind out the gutter. Goodness me! We haven't got to space dildos yet in this conversation. Keep it in your pants.

(Laughter)

HELEN

We will get there. On that, we're going to take a little break and we'll be back in a second.

[BREAK]

HELEN

And welcome back. Okay, so we started to touch on this and now that we've talked so much about the general things I definitely want to talk about the squad mates. They're a lot of them, this may well take the entire rest of the

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episode, but that's okay, because you spend a lot of time with these people, and they are all wonderful and unique in their own special ways.

MIKE

Helen, I have a question.

HELEN

Oh yes?

MIKE

Are we going to cover Andromeda or are we just ignoring that that exists?

(Group laughter)

HELEN

We...

MIKE

I'm happy to ignore it.

HELEN

My impression, my impression of Andromeda is that it shouldn't really count.

(Laughter)

JAMES

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Yeah it's sort of, it's sort of a Mass Effect themed game, you know what I mean?

MIKE

Yeah.

JAMES

But like, whereas the others are like generally, to varying degrees you know, RPG first person shooters with a strong story line. Mass Effect Andromeda is sort of a vaguely Mass Effect themed puzzle platformer?

MIKE

Yes.

JAMES

And just because it looks a bit like a thing I like. I mean you know, if my 5 year old son – I love my 5 year old son, he's great. If there was another child that came up to me wearing his skin, I would not love it the same.

(Group laughter)

JAMES

It's a very different experience.

(Group laughter)

HELEN

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Okay. Do you know what? From what I've heard, that sounds like an apt metaphor.

MIKE

Man, I've played Andromeda and I'm laughing because you're not wrong.

JAMES

I, I like to paint a picture with my words.

HELEN

You do.

JAMES

It's, it's a Hieronymus Bosch painting but it's, it's there.

MICHELLE

Why did it have to be so bad? It didn't have to be. So much potential.

HELEN

It didn't have to be.

MIKE

Michelle, I paid £79.99 for the early access deluxe edition.

HELEN

No!

MICHELLE

Oh, you never do that. You never get it deluxe.

MIKE

I got it a week before everyone else, with all of the bugs...

HELEN

Noooooooooooooooooooo.

MIKE

...and I played it and I was like, why did I pay for this game?

JAMES

I mean it's, it's one of these things that you have the right to do as a consumer of culture, right? Is you get to decide where within a series you get to cut it off. You can make your own cannon. You can say that Mass Effect ends at the end of Mass Effect 3, or maybe even Mass Effect 2?

MIKE

Yeah.

JAMES

Like, I was a teenager – I was a massive fan of Red Dwarf. For me Red Dwarf ends at the end of season 6, that's it. None of it, the rest of it happens, and that's fine. And it's better as a result.

MIKE

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Yeah.

HELEN

Yeah. Like for me, Community ends after season 3.

MICHELLE

Yeah, for me Shameless ends after season 1. Because it ended so nice there I was just like, “You know what, I don’t want to watch the next 25 seasons of this.” Let’s end it at a place that’s satisfactory for me. And I’m going to leave it there.

MIKE

T-w-e-n-t-y f-i-v-e?

MICHELLE

And it was good.

JAMES

25 is a lot of seasons.

MICHELLE

I don’t think it was that much really...

HELEN

Yeah.

MICHELLE

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...but it was a absurd amount of seasons in the end, where it had that thing where they've been through like three whole casts...

MIKE

Wow.

HELEN

Wow.

MICHELLE

...except for one guy. And I was just like, "Well I've seen the James McAvoy season." He's a beautiful man that I enjoy watching for reasons that are probably quite shitty to him, to be fair, but he, I like watching him move. And he was done at that point.

(Laughter)

MICHELLE

So I was like, well I've come here and I've got the best part for me. And that's fine.

HELEN

Speaking of people that we like to watch move, Garrus...

JAMES

Ha ha ha.

MICHELLE

Oh, right. Garrus was, my Shepherd's always, always gets with Garrus every time.

HELEN

Same. Okay. Again, just because I know how complex this game is, so in Mass Effect you gather up friends along the way. You meet people and you say, "Do you want to join me on my spaceship?" and they will usually say yes. And you start off with a couple of human mates. They're called Cayden and Ashley and then as time goes on you collect Garrus, Tali, Liara, Wrex – and they are all aliens and then in Mass Effect 2 you get even more in, and in Mass Effect 3 you get a couple more there as well. So all of these people that we're about to talk about are non-player characters who spend a lot of hours with you in the game, and have their own little unique dialogues; their own little opinions about things; and in the DLC – one of the DLC's in Mass Effect 3 called the Citadel DLC, you can get them all drunk and have a party, and...

(Laughter)

MIKE

I regret not buying that DLC. I really, really do. I have to be, after you and me talked about it the other week Helen...

HELEN

Yes.

MIKE

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...I genuinely want to go out, I want to get the new, the new updated Mass Effect just so I can have all the DLC's.

HELEN

Yeah, honestly yes. The Citadel DLC is absolutely worth it. Anyway yes. So my favourite, one of my favourite is Garrus. He is romanceable in Mass Effect 2, and my Shepherd always ends up in love with him. And Garrus...

(Laughter)

JAMES

Sorry I, I don't know why I did that then at that particular romance point, when we've discussed several other romances, and we will again. I can't do that for every single one of them.

HELEN

He he he he he.

MIKE

That's alright, I'll fill in the next one James.

JAMES

Alright, yeah thanks.

MIKE

I've got the next one.

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JAMES

Yeah, do the next one Mike. And Michelle, if you could be ready for number three, that would be great.

MICHELLE

Okay. I feel a bit on the spot now.

JAMES

That's fine.

HELEN

That's okay. Don't worry. But yes, Garrus is a, is a ex-cop turned vigilante who turns out to be a bit of a dork and loves to look at weapons.

MIKE

Calibrate things. Oh sorry yeah, look at weapons, yeah sorry.

HELEN

Yeah.

MIKE

Yeah, that's what I was going to say too. Look at weapons. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

HELEN

He does calibrate a lot of things.

(Laughter)

MIKE

Specifically that one thing in Mass Effect 2 for about 40% of the game.

HELEN

Yeah.

JAMES

Is that – maybe it's like the, it's the, the far future equivalent of a fidget spinner? And that's just what he's doing for like the whole thing.

(Group laughter)

JAMES

Like it's, it's compulsive. Like it's actually an issue. Like this is, it's an issue of – and Garrus in many ways is a better character for knowing that he represents a degree of neuro divergent representation, right? Because he's just fiddling with this one little thing for the whole thing? Maybe that's...

HELEN

Aaah.

MIKE

Oh my god. I would love that. That's going to be in my new cannon now. Every time he turns back around after Habir saying, "Ah, can it wait? I've got to do these calibrations." And he just turns around and plays with a fidget spinner...

HELEN

He he he he.

MIKE

...for the next like four hours.

MICHELLE

Yeah, so Garrus has a-d, ADHD. I'm pretty sure that Liara is autistic?

HELEN

Ooooh.

JAMES

I, I think you can certainly put that interpretation on, on her behaviour, yeah.

HELEN

Yeah. What do...

MICHELLE

Yeah, I mean I'm not autistic so I'm not sure if it's my place to do that, but when I was playing the character I was – well playing with the character I should say – I was just like, "Ah, okay I know people like Liara and they happen to be autistic. This, this makes sense."

MIKE

Interesting.

HELEN

Do you want to tell us a bit more about Liara, Michelle?

MICHELLE

Ah well, for people that don't know, Liara is an Asari which – and I'm going to explain this and people are going to think this is a, a very, very different kind of game that we've been talking about. They are an all-female race that reproduce via brain sex things that i don't understand, and they don't really go into as much detail as you would think on that point, of how that works. They live like a thousand years and they're very advanced and very, very cool. And Liara is basically an archaeology nerd turned like crime boss/information broker?

JAMES

Private spy, like private intelligence agency?

MICHELLE

Yeah. She deals in information. Kind of like a Game of Thrones character, only she's got computers and stuff.

HELEN

Yeah.

MICHELLE

And eventually she becomes like, I don't know, like a hacker crime god, by the third game?

(Laughter)

HELEN

Yeah, she's very cool.

MICHELLE

Called the Shadow broker in the game, but that's basically what it is. Just someone who sits in the sky and knows what's going on everywhere and moves chess pieces around. But she starts off as someone who is just a bit socially awkward and strange. And in the first game you can find her on like multiple parts. So you can, you have like three planets that you can go to, and she's on one of them. So you can find her in your own time. But if you leave her to last, when you find her she's been trapped in this cave for weeks...

HELEN

Oh my God.

MICHELLE

...and she doesn't believe that you're real. She believes that you are an hallucination. And that only happens if you choose to go and meet her last, out of the three choices.

HELEN

That's so interesting.

MIKE

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Interesting.

MICHELLE

Yeah, I didn't...

JAMES

I had no idea. I mean this is...

MICHELLE

I didn't know that until like I played through maybe three years ago, I didn't. It was just like Jesus, this game is the gift that keeps on giving, with little things like that.

HELEN

Yeah! Wow!

MIKE

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Damn.

HELEN

How about you James, who's your favourite? Oh wait, oh Michelle is Liara one of your favourites or do you have another favourite?

MICHELLE

I love Garrus. I do quite like Liara I think my absolute favourite though has got to be – I, I guess kind of Thane – Thane Krios.

HELEN

[Gasps]

MIKE

Yeah, I was waiting for the Thane yeah 100%, 100%, has to be.

MICHELLE

Because he's the other person my character has relations with most of the time. Because it starts off like gunning for Garrus, not getting in on the first game; then falls for Thane, but a spoiler alert – he dies. And then she falls into the arms of Garrus, that's my Shepherd's romantic journey.

HELEN

I am always so tempted by Thane.

MICHELLE

Yeah because you, you can't help but love him. He's got a good heart and he does terrible things, but he means well, and you kind of feel sorry for him and you get into that weird space where it's like – is this pity or is this because he's hot? Like, you know what I mean?

JAMES

[whispering] But you could fix him...

MICHELLE

Yeah, oh my god that's it. That's what it is.

(Group laughter)

MIKE

Do you know what? I genuinely, I genuinely hope that Thane Krios was actually like the template that they used for Krombopulos Michael in Rick and Morty. I didn't, I – whenever I see that character I just really hope that they're Mass Effect fans as well. And that was the foundation that they used for that character.

(Laughter)

HELEN

The other cool thing about Thane is that he has perfect recall, and so if he, if you, he can like experience a memory like its in real time. And it's like, like an actual like flashback for him.

MICHELLE

Which is a horrible way to live. Imagine if you remembered everything? You would lose it, right? You would lose it.

HELEN

Yeah.

MICHELLE

If you could remember absolutely everything.

JAMES

I wouldn't. Every single one of my actions has been purposeful and morally valid throughout my entire life. I don't know about...

(Group laughter)

JAMES

...you amoral losers. But, I look back on every single thing. If I could do that I'd just be glowing with pride the whole time. That's how you could tell that I was doing it right then. No you're right, it would be horrific.

(Laughter)

JAMES

Particularly if you were an assassin. Like I just...

HELEN

Yeah.

MIKE

Yes.

JAMES

That is pretty bad. I would, I would argue that is one of the worst things you could have.

HELEN

Thane is a very sad...

JAMES

Yeah.

HELEN

...he's a very sad frogman.

JAMES

But I mean like I, I thought that the back story with his species, the Hanar, was again a really nice bit of world building. Because it's like you know what, what do societies – what do civilisations do under particular material pressures? What then becomes right and reasonable, and like a good thing to do for you collectively, and also for you know, specifically your children, right? And you know, the position that his species is in, he's like that is the least worst option given the material circumstances, which I think is you know, a very nice way of, of framing...

MICHELLE

I like how you're giving very, very in depth and intelligent answers and mine are basically, I like to bang this alien in game.

(Laughter)

JAMES

Alright well if you want to know, if you want to know who I would bang right, I think the – if we, if that's, if that's where we're going Michelle?

MICHELLE

It's where I'm taking this clearly.

JAMES

...then, well if then, strap in.

(Laughter)

HELEN

You know who I'd like to – I will strap in to...

JAMES

Wait a second...

HELEN

I would like to take us to...

JAMES

Yes, let's go to bang town shall we? Discursively....

(Group laughter)

JAMES

But, so – I mean for me, obviously like – obviously, obviously for me it has been Miranda because you know a, a high cheek boned, dark-haired omnicompetent Australian is not just my type, but my wife. So that makes it quite an easy choice for me. But obviously I play this fem Shep and she's only, she's not a romanceable option, certainly in the first two if you're playing a female Shepherd character. But, yeah I'd, I think that she's quite interesting, as somebody who is significantly over-educated. I find she's quite identifiable from that point of view. But yeah, I mean the other character I think is particularly interesting is Mordin Solus. I have a lot of time for Mordin.

HELEN

Mmmmmmmmmmm.

JAMES

And you know, I like the bit of him doing the, the nice, the Gilbert and Sullivan I think in Mass Effect 2...

MIKE

Yes.

JAMES

...that's a nice little...

MIKE

Yeah.

Rusty Quill Enthusiasgasm – Mass Effect

HELEN

I am the very model of a... oh

JAMES

Scientist Salarian.

HELEN

Yeah that's the one.

JAMES

I won't be able to remember the rest of it. I could do it, I could do it, yeah. But I, again that's a really, really nice touch. And again, it's a nice way of adjusting like, okay well you've got this species that only lives for 40 years, what do they do? Well they operate at twice the speed. You know what I mean? If you're going to have a reasonably accomplished species. So I think that's pretty interesting. So, I think Miranda and Mordin are probably my favourites there. And I've got a lot of time for Talia as well, because she just...

HELEN

Yeah.

JAMES

...just seems nice.

HELEN

She's very sweet, yeah.

JAMES

Yeah. She did genuinely seems to be like the kindest one...

HELEN

Yeah.

JAMES

...of, of all of them. Like everyone else has gone. You know, I don't know. I say more of an agenda – they've all got an agenda. That, that's, and that's good writing, is that all of your characters...

HELEN

Yes.

JAMES

...have got an agenda...

MIKE

Yeah, yeah.

JAMES

...things they want to do. And critically things that they won't do, and things that will you know, and how they interact with other motives and things that the whole series does so well is you know, you choose option A therefore that closes off option B.

HELEN

Yeah.

JAMES

If you choose option B that means that option C cannot happen, things like that, which is yeah really nice. And I think that they, they, they demonstrate that particularly well with the relationships. Like if you've made certain moral choices there are certain moral relationships that you cannot have, right? If you, if you go down the renegade route you cannot have a romantic interaction with Samara you know. It just, these are you know things that happen within it. And you know, I think it's, its good because it means that you've got, you've got these characters and you've got these characters who are romanceable options but like in the real world, if you've done horrible things in front of them, some of them aren't going to be on board with that.

(Group laughter)

JAMES

Which I think is you know, that's, it is, it is you know, the closest I think that you know, video games have come to having well drawn characters and like a reasonably realistic though obviously stylised model of relationships. And you can have people that you like you know, capital r Romance, and you can have people that you have a capital f, Fling with...

(Laughter)

MIKE

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Nice. Good cover, good cover.

JAMES

...value, oh yeah. If fiddlestick it right up... more or less a family podcast. I'm trying to keep it PG. So you know, but again, you've got that sort of you know, diversity of relationships. And you know again, there are characters who, if you romance them you cannot romance others and you know, at a certain point some of them will ask you to choose, you know?

HELEN

Yeah.

JAMES

And if you've perceived some options...

MICHELLE

That happened to my character. And I wasn't trying for that. Because I, it was the first time I played Mass Effect 1 I didn't know that that was possible. Then out of nowhere Liara and – oh, what's his name – Kayden? Came up to me and was just like, "Look, you've been messing us around. You've got to pick." And I'm like, I didn't know...

MIKE

Yes.

MICHELLE

...that we were courting. I was just talking to my friends.

(Laughter)

MIKE

Yes.

HELEN

It's really easy to do with both of them, especially Kayden. You have to basically be a complete dick to Kayden to get him to not think you're flirting with him.

JAMES

Oh wow.

MICHELLE

Yeah he's, he's, he's hungry; he's thirsty that Kayden.

MIKE

But like just on that point, just on that point Michelle. Like I genuinely thought that was a really, really nice touch. I can remember when I played Mass Effect 2 for the first time, and you had that moment where you're saved file copies over and you forget who you romanced in the first game. And suddenly out of nowhere they're like, "Well who's this then?" You know, arms on hips. And you're like, "Err, err, err, no one." Yeah. Oh my god. It was, it was so cool to have a game with the foresight to sort of put that sort of a plot mine/a plot line in. Oh my god, yeah. Excellent, excellent writing.

HELEN

Rusty Quill Enthusigasm – Mass Effect

So, who's your favourite then Mike?

MIKE

Well character wise or characters you want to Ffffffffffffffffff – have a fling with?

MICHELLE

Is there a difference?

HELEN

Either, and/or both.

MIKE

Because I, one of my favourite characters that I always loved playing with was Tarly. Like I, I, I just have a, I had a lot of respect for Tarly and I was like, "Hey, by the way, shall we just hang out a lot more?" And like when you're chatting and all that kind of stuff I, it kind of gave me the same sort of vibe that I got when I was playing the Outer Worlds – not to be confused with the Outer Wilds. Because there's the engineer that you meet in the Outer Worlds, whose name eludes me right now, and you just meet this pure soul, and you're like "I'm, going to keep you safe by keeping you close to me. Don't go off and die somewhere else in the B plot, please. Just stay here with me in the A plot. We'll wear our plot armour together and nothing bad will ever happen to you." So yeah, there was, there was Tarly. I enjoyed playing, I enjoyed playing with a, like characters like Liara and all that sort of stuff because they, because as you've said Michelle, they were really interesting and like their story arc through the three games changes so much. For me that was actually slightly off-putting, that they started as like this sort of socially awkward kind of like

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you know, archaeologist. And then they end up being this crime god who like is constantly in the shadows watching every move that you make. For me, I thought that was a little too much. I thought they drove that character a little too far, maybe that's a hot take, I don't know.

MICHELLE

I can, I can understand that. But I mean that made sense to me because in the second game – I mean at the start of it Shepherd dies – horribly...

HELEN

Yeah.

MICHELLE

...and then it's two years later and Shepherd's been brought back from the dead. And in that two years it sounds like shit got dark for Liara...

MIKE

Yeah.

HELEN

Yeah.

MICHELLE

...like some horrible things happened in between. Like, well one of her best friends died and she's the only one...

HELEN

Yeah.

MICHELLE

...she's trying to tell everyone about the reapers and people are like, "No, go away, you're weird." So then she just ends up selling secrets to random wealthy people.

MIKE

Yeah. Yeah, fair. Very fair. And actually, speaking of selling secrets, that brings me on to my second favourite character, which is a little bit of a left field entry. And that is good old Doctor Chakwas. I love Doctor Chakwas.

HELEN

No, she's great!

MIKE

She is legitimately one of the people who I would always go back to on the Normandy, even if she had no dialogue...

HELEN

Yeah.

MIKE

I would just go back to have a little chat with the good old doctor who sits down in medical and has like this sort of pseudo-cynical view of the world, but eventually in Mass Effect 2 will join you for a drink and you know, you cheers over like not being dead. You know like...

HELEN

Yeah.

MIKE

I have got so much enthusiasm for Doctor Chakwas. And they're one of the characters that I wish the Mass Effect team would have driven further, because there's so much for that, potential for that character to grow. And whether you know, whether they go through the romanceable route and they you know, you have like a fling with the doctor, or whether you go through the other route, where they become pivotal to the story in some way, and actually end up having like a bigger role. Which is where I was hoping they would go in Mass Effect 3 but never did. Like Doctor Chakwas for me sort of represents the underdog of writing. Where you have a character with enormous potential but doesn't actually go anywhere and then nothing ever happens to necessarily. Apart from getting a much better job. So, good for her.

HELEN

Yeah. I really like her as, she has a, she has kind of a, sort of a stern Judy Dench vibe.

MIKE

Yes. Yes, exactly. She's just...

HELEN

I just, I love that. I think she's so cool.

MIKE

She's got, without the sort of raw sexual energy, she's got that lady Demetress kind of like atmosphere going on, in my opinion. You know that, that commanding authoritative person who you know, takes a front seat when they need to and then is happy to sort of play with the team when they need to. Yeah, 100%.

HELEN

Yeah.

MICHELLE

It's, it's really bad that they didn't have a mission or something where you would take her with you really, right?

MIKE

Exactly.

MICHELLE

She would have been a very interesting squad mate, I would think.

MIKE

And the Star Trek like parallels that they could have drawn and all of that sort of stuff. There was so much there to be written and it just didn't happen.

HELEN

Yeah.

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MIKE

But yeah, there you go. Doctor Chakwas everyone.

HELEN

Lovely. I'm really glad that you said her, she's great. We're starting to come towards the end of the episode.

JAMES

Oh wow.

HELEN

I, I know.

MIKE

Wow. We haven't got through like half of the characters. We haven't even talked about Ashely Williams at all.

HELEN

We haven't talked about any of the Krogan...

MIKE

Oh yeah.

HELEN

...despite my enduring love for Wrex.

MICHELLE

Rusty Quill Enthusiasgasm – Mass Effect

There's just too much to cover in like an hour. There just really is.

HELEN

I know. We're going to have to do a part 2.

JAMES

I mean that, that explains to me Helen, why you put in the show notes this show is about Krogan erasure, which I thought was a peculiar thing to say in advance. But like, whatever you want to do with it, your show.

HELEN

The Krogans a bit, the Krogans are like a dinosaur alien species that really like to fight. They're also an oppressed species, very much an oppressed class.

MIKE

Yeah, they are.

HELEN

They, because they literally got genocided.

MIKE

And then made to not reproduce any more by another species who was like, "You shouldn't breed!" and that was it really.

JAMES

But, but that was after they were users of biological weapon against another sort of galactic threat.

HELEN

Yeah.

JAMES

So it's, yeah there's a lot of stuff going on. But I mean like also as part of the lore is that they, they have had several you know nuclear wars before they reached the space, before they're, they're Salarian spine that would uplift them. So...

HELEN

Yeah.

MIKE

Yes.

JAMES

Yeah. So it's, it is interesting. I mean that is one of the great questions of, one of the great sort of moral dilemmas within is, within the series, is what do you do about the genophage? And there's lots of sort of real world parallels to that. In like world politics, right and history? You know, you've got a defeated power that is enormously powerful, do you let them like run rampant again? What do you use them for? Do you let them determine your own destiny/their own destiny? What are the consequences of that? But like I mean if you, if you take it away from that and you just have the sort of the moral dimension and you assess it on your own terms without the analogies that you can put into it historically and politically. Like it's still you know, that is I mean it's one

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thing, the whole series I think does incredibly well, which is it does what all great Sci-fi does, which is you know, it gives, it allows you to explore sort of grand themes of...

MIKE

Yeah.

JAMES

...of morality and consequences in something that is a bit more like, a bit more like a sandbox that's got echoes of, of the human world; of human politics and human interaction from that point of view. But it, it doesn't, it's not always like that.

MIKE

I've, I actually, I think it's really interesting the, the point that you make because one of the big comparisons that I made was actually an in game comparison. Because in the first Mass Effect you play against a species called the Raknii and there's that whole mission of saving the Raknii mother and the queen. And then when you get to the queen she's like, "Man shit got real. I've been stuck here forever and it's not very good." I'm boiling this all the way down. It's, it's not very good so you know could you, can you give us like a place that we can go and be free and you know actually be able to live rather than being genocided. And like that, that in comparison to – is it Mass Effect 2 – where you have Grunt and then you learn more about Wrex and you learn more about the genophage and you speak to Mordin Solux and all that kind of stuff. Those two cross comparisons between those two species was always fascinating to me, especially when I went back through and played for the

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second time. So when I went back and did my, because my first was a male Shep run and then I did a fem Shep run.

HELEN

Yeah.

MIKE

And the second time around – like you said earlier James – like it changed a lot of the ways that I saw it, but also being able to play the full trilogy through rather than just going 1 wait, 2 wait, 3. Like yeah, like I say the, the differences between the Raknii and, and you know what Wrex talks about and what Grunt talks about and what the, what the Salarians talk about. Like all, all of that stuff is just – I don't know. It's like the game is almost trying to help you puzzle it out as to what actually is a moral choice, and what is a immoral choice.

HELEN

Yeah.

MIKE

It's like this one doesn't use nukes, but this one breeds ultra-quickly. They're basically like rabbits and they will destroy an entire planet. What do you prefer? Only you can choose. Here's two buttons. Good luck.

(Laughter)

MICHELLE

Rusty Quill Enthusiasgasm – Mass Effect

Yeah, Mass Effect definitely had a massive impact on my politics in a lot of ways.

HELEN

Really?

MICHELLE

Well it had a big impact on me in a number of ways. It was, it was playing them all through the five years before I came out as trans; which was a really strange time, and also massive, and also Mass Effect was a good one to have because it was like, “Ah, I can be a woman in this and it’s fine.” And if anybody asks I can just say, “Ah I like looking at her butt” or whatever. Because you know, minor misogyny is a cover for being in the closet. It’s a classic tradition that is thankfully dying, but yeah. Because I never felt good with the idea of genociding the, the Raknii, the bugs. I never felt good.

HELEN

Yeah, I always let them go free...

MICHELLE

I never, and I didn’t feel good to screw over the Krodan and allow the genophase to continue...

HELEN

No.

MICHELLE

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...and then I realised, “Ah the reason that isn’t good it because those are terrible things to do to a species and a whole people.” Maybe we should not, as a political idea, harm lots of people if we can help it. And that was the basis of my politics, which sounds very strange and simplistic, but it’s worked for me ever since. And I think before that I was like a teenager type who was just like, “Ah, I’m going to get all my politics from the West Wing” or something.

(Group laughter)

MICHELLE

And then I thought Mass Effect was like, Oh it could be simpler and more pure and less up it’s own butt. That’s what politics can be. Alright, that’s cool. And so I got, I got a philosophy out of Mass Effect, which was basically don’t be horrible to loads of people if you can avoid it.

HELEN

Honestly, that’s a, I think that’s a solid foundation.

MICHELLE

It never developed much further from that, but I’m, I, I’d said this about something else earlier but I have the political depth of a Blink 182 album, as a person. And I’m okay with that. I’m fine with that.

HELEN

Fair enough. Alright. I’m going to round us off with a final question. And that question is, if you were in the Mass Effect universe, what do you think your role would be? Like, do you think you’d be one of those bartenders; do you

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think you'd be a smuggler; do you think you'd be in one of the gangs? What do you reckon, because I feel like I would, I'd probably work for like the Asari Consort, if you remember her? And I would, I would just sit there and talk nicely to people until they felt better.

MICHELLE

Ah, very nice.

MIKE

Aaahh.

HELEN

I think that would be my job.

MIKE

Helen.

(Laughter)

HELEN

What about the rest of you, what do you reckon?

JAMES

I'm going to go first because my answer is probably the bleakest. So...

HELEN

Oh yeah.

JAMES

I mean it's one of these things, it's like you know, when you, when you talk to people who claim to have regressed through their past lives. They're always like, "Ah but of course, I was in Cleopatra's palace" and I'm like, "Na". For 95% of history you would have been a peasant farmer who died at the age of 40ish, if you made it past infancy. And it's like, so statistically that's, it's probably going to be something like that, right? And like within the Mass Effect universe – and I think again one of the things that makes it a bit more interesting – is that you've not got this sort of post-scarcity utopia in any of the games in any meaningful way. Like, even on the Citadel there are like you know, very conspicuous pockets of poverty and depravation that you are directly confronted with. You, in the, the kind of the fluff and the background, earth is reference is being like colossally over populated and polluted and all of this sort of stuff, right? And humanity is not spread out to the colonies enough to kind of relieve that pressure, right? You, you never visit a substantial human colony of, of any particular size. So, I suspect that I would probably be doing what I'm currently doing. Oh yeah, and this is another thing as well actually, sorry just to make it worse. Like there's no evidence within, within the series of any sort of like countervailing pressure or like resistance movement or progressive movement for social change or anything like that to any significant extent. So you know, if you're going to extrapolate from that information, you've got capital's tendency to accumulate in the hands of those who already possess it, and power follows that. So, what I probably would be doing is what I'm currently doing now but at a much higher rate of capitalist exploitation. But maybe I'd have a nicer phone, I think?

(Laughter)

JAMES

So that's what I'd be doing.

HELEN

Michelle, how about you?

MICHELLE

Probably a similar answer, because I fell into journalism by mistake about seven years ago. It was never the plan. So I think, and that, I don't really believe in callings, but I, it's pretty damn close for me. So I probably think I would, I would like to imagine that I would be a journalist, but the kind that doesn't get punched by Shepherd for being a bell end.

(Group laughter)

HELEN

I have never punched one of those journalists. I always try and help them do their jobs.

MICHELLE

I, in one playthrough I did punch that one journalist for being a racist jerk, and then it got the renegade points. I was like, "Ooh I don't like that." But yeah, I think that's what I would be. I would be one of those people running around the Citadel asking Shepherd to do things and hopefully not getting punched.

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HELEN

Mike, what about you, what do you think?

MIKE

Helen, I know exactly who I'd be.

HELEN

Oh yes?

MIKE

I'd be the shopkeeper who just stands there and goes, "Aaah, that's Commander Shepherd over there. Can you send this voice light into this, into this microphone please?"

(Laughter)

HELEN

Aaaaaahh.

MIKE

That, that would be me. And then I would just play it on a loop every single time someone walked into the shop, knowing that every single shop in the entire arcade was playing the same voice line.

(Laughter)

JAMES

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I think it's appropriate that you've chosen one of the few characters within Mass Effect that has got a lot of audio visual equipment. I think that's a very solid, solid choice.

HELEN

Yeah.

MIKE

That's exactly where I, where my head was at. I was like, "Man who vlogs in Mass Effect?"

(Laughter)

MICHELLE

The guy who sells the video games in the second one.

JAMES

Oh yeah.

MICHELLE

I thought that was going to be who you were going to pick, because that is I, you can imagine that that, if that Salarian is there streaming...

HELEN

Yeah.

MICHELLE

...even, you know that they're streaming somewhere on whatever they have.

MIKE

Yeah, yeah. Just out the back they've got their streaming rig, it's connected directly to Twitch and like all of the stuff that they do is just like a front to be able to sub the money to continue their massive Twitch viewership.

HELEN

That is a beautiful answer to end on. Thank you all so, so, so, so much for this. It is so, it's so nice to talk about Mass Effect with people who also love it. It's my, it's why I'm streaming it. I just, I, I love this series of games so much and am really glad that you all do too. Listener, I will see you on the next episode, but for now it's goodbye from me. Goodbye. And it's goodbye from all of them. Do you all want to say goodbye?

JAMES

Bye bye.

MIKE

Goodbye.

MICHELLE

Bye bye.

HELEN

Aah, this is my favourite podcast on the Citadel.

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(Group laughter)

JAMES

Aah, and the ad break ends and we cut to Drag Race Tuchanka.

(Group laughter)

[Show Theme - Outro]

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[Show Theme – Outro Ends]

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Rusty Quill Enthusigasm – Mass Effect