

# “KEELAH SE’LAI”: EMBODYING MINDFUL GAMING WITHIN THE MASS EFFECT WORLD

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## Abstract:

Video games have begun to offer more to their fan base and active players than escapism. Within role-playing formats, they provide in depth stories, and simulations of real world issues that force their players to confront their own comfort levels and hold a mirror to their inner selves. The ideas of growth and fixed mindsets, martial arts of awareness, and mindfulness training have begun to have more in common with gendered role-playing-game choices than one might originally assume; and it's these actions that have been the catalyst for a re-conception of the power and potential of the gaming experience. This reflective essay offers a closer look at one deeply prayerful and powerful gaming world to explore

the surprising interplay of virtual causes and body-anchored effects, individual choices and social mores, as well as figurative and literal departures with returns.

“After time adrift among open stars, among tides of light and to shoals of dust, I will return to where I began” (*Mass Effect 2*). So states Tali Zhorah Vas Normandy, an integral character to the massively interactive and vastly immersive *Mass Effect* video game series, at the beginning of the player's journey and personal storyline. The player, as the protagonist Commander Shepard, must escort Tali back to the migrant fleet of her species, the Quarians, and in order to pass through the front lines of the fleet without being shot down, she must respond with that line as a



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password. Tali, in this moment, is returning to where she began, after spending her days lost among the vast catalogs of planets and stars, and so must the player when logging out of their final run through the *Mass Effect* universe. As only one line, among many, that forces the player to think, to really feel the world they are exploring through the controls of a gaming console, this one stands out as the most comprehensive to the experience of the meditative, and rejuvenating, qualities of video games.

Gaming has long been the symbol of the 'lazy' generation. It has been the hallmark of assumptions about the 'troubled teen' – the kid who played too much *Grand Theft Auto* was the kid who would enact violence without a second thought. The child who grew up watching their parents become consumed by social media and games was the child who would be neglected and turn to violence as a method of gaining the attention they desperately sought. For many within the modern world of consumer media, a distinction has arisen between 'the good video game' and 'the bad video game.' Good games are those that teach the child something through puzzles and not simply killing – *PacMan*, *Starfleet*, or *Mario Kart*. These are all games that don't require the player to immerse themselves fully into the game, to lose hours upon hours of their free time puzzling their way through, what ultimately can be described as a shooter game. These are the bad games – games that require the protagonist to walk through an unfamiliar territory with a gun and to shoot to kill to protect themselves. What is lost however in the naming of these games as 'bad' is the lessons that are learned both internally (what the player recognizes about themselves) and externally (how the player goes about relating to the world), through the immersive experience of these games. Beyond such dichotomous labeling or biased binaries, exists another way to examine the physical-mental connections present in the process of gaming. Gaming can instead be viewed as a way for a modern generation to center themselves, to find the balance within their bodies and minds that allows them to relate to the world around them in a more positive way. Gaming, viewed through this lens, may be understood as a mindfulness practice that allows the player to escape from the problems they face

(or at least 'step back' to gain some perspective), even as they meet them head on.

Immersive video games, also allow the player to step back from the reality of the challenges they face every day. Through these games, the player views matters of life and death or the end of the world through the framework of a game where one can learn from their mistakes by being 'reborn' after death to try again and again. This learning practice, this 'arm's length' re-embodiment allows the player to view more than just their singular reality and experience, rather, a multi-dimensional reality. Much like the decisions they make in their gaming world affect their playthrough, so too do the decisions they make in the real world affect their life. The way the gamer begins to see themselves within the game allows for a consciousness of self that may well seep into their real-world understanding of self. Gaming might, in this sense, endorse a conscious and perpetually informative self-care – a method of reflection on (and of) self that allows for a virtual world to have body-anchored effects on the way gamers see themselves and act mindfully in the world around them. Gaming is a purposeful act of self-improvement, a new movement toward mindful growth that allows for exploration of consequences and awareness.

The single player, open-world, roleplaying game trilogy *Mass Effect* best exemplifies this idea of gaming as a conscious practice – one that develops mindfulness or awareness of ones own awareness – through its dedication to guiding the player to confront difficult decisions that will affect their gameplay in the future head-on, while still allowing the player a 'space' in which to relax, a respite amidst the pressures and delusions of the 'real world.' As Tali Zhorah states, it is only through journeys away, only after journeys through space and stars and the voidless, universe that a return to where life began is possible. Only by venturing away can home truly become *home*.

The question becomes, then, where does one find the stars to escape to? Where, within the reality of daily life, within the routine of waking up to go to work, to go to class, to come home, to go to bed, only to begin it all over



again, does one find the means to be – to live. Many turn to compartmentalization, turn to placing one part of their life in a certain area of their mental musings while leaving the rest in another. They seek to separate the things that give them joy from the things that allow them to maintain a daily life. This is a separation of the body from the mind, a separation of the full being from the world around them. It can be argued that the person who does this, is seeing the routine parts of their life as a challenge they cannot overcome, as a block to the happier dimensions of their life. Many fix themselves to a belief that their ‘regular’ life cannot be enjoyable, is not sufficient, and so they must find that happiness elsewhere. In such divided mental constructs there seems to be no *median*, no middle. How then can they find the neutral? How might modern generations deal with this existential dilemma?

People have explored the concept of happiness and contentment through a myriad of lenses – and wisdom traditions around the world have offered paths toward mindful study to make sense of the human condition, our sufferings, the illusions and delusions we confront. They have proffered that to study mindfulness is to devote the self to a lifelong art, a dedication to (a commitment) to a process that may never end – indeed that the student should never want to end, for it is in the process that true wisdom is achieved. Of the many paths available for scrutiny, this reflection brings in an innovative practice: one that revolves around an integrated mind-body art specifically, the martial art of *I Liq Chuan: The Martial Art of Awareness* and its approach to learning known as *Zhong Xin Dao* – the neutral center pathway. Describing itself as “an art of cultivating consciousness based on Tai Chi and Chan (Zen) principles of non-assertion, nonresistance, harmony of yin and yang, oneness and the present moment,” *I Liq Chuan* is an integrative and interdisciplinary study of the mind and the body working as one to promote in the practitioner a truly centered existence (Chin, 8). The act of mindfulness, trained through attention on the mental-physical dimensions, is at the heart of this art: the ability to see all without actively seeking to see. This viewpoint can be applied in fresh and informative ways to all aspects of life, including the experience of gaming.

In order to showcase its relevance to understanding *Mass Effect*, I will first sketch a bit about the art itself.

The true key of the *Zhong Xin Dao* / *I Liq Chuan* study lies within recognizing the difference: understanding one’s center reference (both physical and mental) and being aware of when one is off it – and how to come back to that space. Awareness is simply knowing and being with and in the moment. By being aware of the room one can see all that is happening within the room, whereas by focusing on the separate components – such as only seeing the walls and the floor and labeling them as that – obscures the bigger, complete picture. As Master Sam F.S. Chin states in his book *I Liq Chuan: Martial Art of Awareness*, “The awareness developed reveals the nature of everything” (Chin, 8). *Zhong Xin Dao* embodies a philosophy that takes hold of all walks of one’s life. The practice does not stop as the practice doors are closed; it moves into the ride home and the next day. As Chin states later, “Mindfulness is the cause, and awareness is the effect” (Chin, 11).

Master Sam Chin defines unification as consciousness. Stepping back from the focus and the distractions of everyday life that keep one from truly seeing what is already there allows one to unify with the conditions: to maintain a reference, a stillness point, even amidst the changing nature of things. Put differently, unifying the mental is to bring various extremes – also known as the Yin and the Yan – to balance by recognizing the neutral point that both separates and unifies complementaries. Recognizing the neutral point from a physical standpoint allows for the martial arts practitioner to realize the relaxation needed within the mind to discover where the opponent’s force is coming from. “Relaxation,” Master Chin explains, “is an essential component of the art. Relaxation contains harmony of yin and yang and the process of looseness, softness, elasticity, and fa-jing [issuing power]” (Chin, 12). Mental clarity – and knowing how to return to the center as a reference point or ‘home base’ is where unifying the physical comes into play. As the mind calms enough to recognize it is unified and relaxed, the body can relax with the force field of gravity as well and the two play off each other. If one is busy with thoughts of



judging and compartmentalizing, one is never truly seeing the world as what it is; nature itself. In such cases all one sees is a narrow pattern or scripted viewpoint that seems as if it has always been there – there is no shift recognized, no change perceived. The viewpoint is *fixed*.

Where does such a mentality come from? Why do so many human beings hold the idea that they can only be happy if their lives are apportioned with the things that make them happy on one side of the fence, and the things that they require to live on the other? One answer, according to renowned psychologist Dr. Carol S. Dweck lies within the fixed mindset we have grown up with and embraced as the only way to live. As Dweck states in her introduction to *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, “... these may be beliefs we’re unaware of, but they strongly affect what we want and whether we succeed in getting it. This tradition also shows how changing people’s beliefs – even the simplest beliefs – can have profound effects” (Dweck). From the earliest moments of existence, human beings are aculturated with beliefs, customs, and traditions. They are a product of environment, a product of past reference, that are part of a worldview that may seem as if it has always been as it is and will always be and thus stand as unquestioned beliefs. Until, that is, they are questioned.

What makes a fixed mindset so dangerous is its insidious ability to influence perceptions as Dweck explains, that all “human qualities [are] carved in stone. You were smart or you weren’t, and failure meant you weren’t” (Dweck). For those operating in this fixed mindset, attempting something without the reassurance of almost immediate success is to learn that one is not smart enough, not good enough. A balanced life, as conceived by some who hold this rather generic definition, becomes the epitome of success. “Balance” here is a business woman who can play in her own time and run her strong business during work time. This balancing act, done well, may earn the praise of some for being *professional* and *accomplished*. Within a fixed mindset, these goals are already laid out before each and every person. They are either smart and professional or not; there is nothing that can be done to change

that. The alternative, as Dweck seeks to show, lies in the shift from the dangerous and damning fixed mindset to the freeing and uplifting growth mindset – akin, in some ways, to the Taoist and Zen philosophies of constant change – and our abilities to ‘change with those changes,’ as Master Chin phrases the process.

Many of the examples in Dweck’s *Mindset* revolves around the shifting of academic focus from fixed to growth, but it can be argued that shifting from the former to the latter in every aspect of life can only lead to a healthier or more adaptable life. As she states:

If, like those with the growth mindset, you believe you can develop yourself, then you’re open to accurate information about your current abilities, even if its unflattering. What’s more, if you’re oriented towards learning, as they are, you need accurate information about your current abilities in order to learn effectively (Dweck).

To open oneself to failure as an option, as a learning tool, is to open oneself to a more intimate knowledge of the self as a whole – self-cultivation. When a person is fully aware of their shortcomings alongside their strong abilities they may be said to be centered within themselves, aware of the complementary components of – mind and body. They are able to observe or see who they are – in varied and changing moments – and rather than getting ‘stuck’ they embrace the yin and yang within themselves to discover the neutral. Through the martial art of awareness meditation, and simply living with a growth mindset as best as they can, people have found ways to live, not with blinders on, but with a deepened awareness of the world around them that allows them to be truly present – to see the world as it is and be content.

It is against this backdrop – of mindfulness, of physical and mental equanimity – that I now turn to examine gaming – and to do so with a growth mindset: one open to seeing video game playing not an *escape*, but as a way to *exist*, to be in the moment and feel completely and fully the world – the pathway that Zhong Xin Dao exemplifies and the





practice of I Liq Chuan helps to manifest. Through the lens of a positive growth mindset, individual role-playing games (rpgs) are seen as a tool: teaching how to connect to self, first, and by extension how to cultivate a relational approach: or a mindful awareness of others.

As the video game world has expanded, as more and more games have been released that can be defined as single player rpgs, the more the demand for them increased. Rather than saturating the market with a product that was undesirable, video game companies created a demand for a game that had become more than a fun diversion for people. Single player rpgs became life changing necessities to daily life. Bioware's *Mass Effect* trilogy is one such of these games – a game that more purely represents the ideals outlined above than any other. With a bent towards player customization that allows the player to pour their heart and soul into their protagonist, Commander Shepard, the choices made within the game become more than simply choice without consequences. *Mass Effect* focuses on long term consequences of actions taken, words spoken, and decisions made. Choosing not to speak to a character in *Mass Effect 1*, choosing to kill rather than save a sideline alien species, all have grave consequences in the third game when the fate of the galaxy rests in the player through Shepard's hands. Indeed, the customization goes so far as to allow the player to define their Shepard as a moral paragon or renegade – through conversation options that arise their Shepard can become a heroic example of moral kindness or a ruthless commander that will accomplish the mission at hand at any cost; both of which have consequence that the player must be aware of as they choose. Viewed thus, *Mass Effect* is an exercise in awareness, in mindfulness, and in cultivating a growth mindset. It can be simply used as an escape from reality, but for most players it might be more aptly viewed as a way of learning how to fully and truly exist within the neutral.

The neutral lies within an understanding of both the outside and the in, of both the body and the mind. It's a connection between the yin and yang that allows for a true peacefulness of the self. Rachel Naomi Remen writes on the

achievement of this type of balancing through becoming aware of the difference between service and help, between being an aide and fixing. "Helping," she writes, "is based on inequality; it is not a relationship between equals. When you help you use your own strength to help those of lesser strength" (Remen, 1). Helping is typically assumed to be selfless and kind, something that is only done by those who put others first, who care first. So the same with fixing – something is wrong and it is made better through the help of others. Placing the connotation of debt or brokenness on helping or fixing is to see them through the lens of a growth mindset. Both assume that something needs to be changed for the better based on our own personal views. However, the fixed mindset see's another's way of doing things that is different from what is known and judges it as wrong, as something to be fixed or helped. A growth mindset sees it simply as a new way of functioning and serving within that mindset – allowing the body and mind to grow and adapt while serving another.

As Remen writes, "... helping is an experience of strength, fixing is an experience of mastery and expertise. Service on the other hand is an experience of mystery, surrender, and awe" (Remen, 1). When this is all seen through that lens the concept of helping and fixing, while not inherently bad things becomes very different. Approached through this lens, service is a way of connecting not only to the truest form of the being we are attempting to aide, but also as a way of connecting to the unity of the universe. Service is selfless and whole – it's a way of ensuring we are seeing the fullest form of the being we are helping.

Throughout the *Mass Effect* series, the gamer plays as Shepard, a commander who can be described as selfless if played as paragon. A paragon Shepard will continue, throughout the game, to place others first. They see the world as a place for all beings to cohabitate and refuses to allow one viewpoint to skew the way she sees the world around her. When Shepard is faced with the choice to destroy the Rachni- or to save them, she sees them without the blinders of a fixed mindset. A fixed mindset would see the Rachni for what they have been – a race of insectoid aliens that sought to devour the universe centuries not



for what they desire to become – a new race that seeks to live in harmony with the universe, singing a new song of peace and creation. Either a paragon or renegade, Shepard can choose to save the Rachni, a decision that exemplifies the growth mindset of the game, as well as the option to play within a fixed mindset. A Shepard that chooses to save the Rachni, to give them a new chance, can be viewed to be thinking within the type of serving model that Remen details. That Shepard, and consequently that player, sees that serving is to step outside of self to become aware of the relationship with others first – that while helping and fixing may ultimately achieve the same goal, only one enables or guides the other person to live a fuller and more mindful life.

*Mass Effect*, with the Rachni choice, seeks to push the player to make mindful choices. If a player lives within a fixed mindset, and seeks to fix and help instead of serve, they will choose to exterminate the Rachni completely – a choice that will lead to the extinction of the human race and most of the player’s companions in the final game of the series. They see, inevitably, that the choice they made was limited and small minded – allowing the player, in their next play through, to make a different choice and see where a growth mindset leads.

Thus the gameplay of *Mass Effect* becomes almost ambiguous – it can be used to either enforce a growth mindset from the beginning or as a means of allowing the player to remain within their fixed mindsets to see, at an accelerated rate, the consequences of those choices made within that mindset. As Christopher B. Patterson states in his essay “Role-Playing the Multiculturalist Umpire: Loyalty and War in BioWare’s *Mass Effect* Series,” “...the game’s story is most often created simply to give the player incentive to complete levels, which must be won through the gameplay elements. For video game scholar Ian Bogost, the meanings made through the game’s dynamics are not merely meaningful, but persuasive, as they can convince the player to do or think differently” (Patterson, 210). The rpg game making juggernaut Bioware has been praised “for their focus on ethical decision making that requires players to consider complex moral situations,

often as a means of educating their audience in the values of diversity and multiculturalism” (Patterson, 208). Through their insistence that each and every protagonist be personalized, be created in either the player’s own image or the image the desire to be, the choice of Shepard’s background, physical makeup, and dialogue options becomes incredibly personal to the player – forcing the player to make their protagonist a self-insert either by design or accident.

Where *Mass Effect* excels; however, is through its emphasis on “...the decision-making aspect of RPGs by placing the player on a developing and uncertain moral journey” (Patterson, 211). Every choice is meaningful, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant. In fact, even the players squad members – the companions that are supposed to follow Shepard through to the apocalypse in *Mass Effect 3* – can choose to leave the squad if they disagree too violently with Shepard’s choices. Every decision requires a mindful awareness of everything that is going on around that choice. One cannot have blinders on when playing *Mass Effect* – something that encourages the growth mindset, not the fixed. “In *Mass Effect*,” Patterson explains, “military battles become fields of competing ethical discourses, with the side of diversity and tolerance reigning supreme” (Patterson, 213).

Even choices made at the very beginning of the game, the choice to play male Shepard or female Shepard, forces the player to think consciously, to be aware of the mechanics of the game and the implications of playing a soldier Shepard as male or female. From the beginning Shepard is placed into one of three backstories: 1) she is a spacer, a human born to parents who are a part of the space based military called the Alliance who has never been on Earth; 2) a colonist, a victim of a massive genocide enacted on a human colony on the edge of the galaxy who joins the Alliance for revenge; or 3) earthborn, a human who was born and raised on earth who lived a hard life of gangs and the underbelly of the earth cities before joining the Alliance for a better life. With either of these backgrounds the choice to play female is a decision that creates a backstory that cannot be ignored. “By choosing



the female Shepard (or FemShep) rather than the male (or BroShep),” Patterson explains, “the player shifts the game’s attitude from one of multiculturalist umpire toward one of multiracial coalition by focusing on remaining structures of patriarchal power and reproductive control” (Patterson, 222).

Playing as female Shepard opens doors that are not necessarily there with the male Shepard. Male Shepard’s dialogue options are clipped and cold regardless of his actions, whereas FemShep’s dialogue options tend to open more of a compassionate view. The choice to play FemShep is the choice that exemplifies the growth mindset best, through the FemShep voice actor’s ability to allow for her dialogue options to connect with other species, rather than simply paint them in the most basic understandings of who that character, and what that species exemplifies. Consistently and throughout each installment, the *Mass Effect* trilogy forces the player to become aware of the choices they are making. “When played consciously, closely, and with an urge to explore less trodden routes (as FemShep),” Patterson states, “the series can indeed help formulate complex questions about how imperialism and tolerance are intertwined” (Patterson, 227).

The *Mass Effect* trilogy becomes, therefore, the basis for the argument that the neutral, the quest for mindfulness, the art of meditation upon true awareness can be found through a variety of means – video games being only one upon the many that a new generation will use. Through a focus on moral decision making, an awareness at all times of the far reaching consequences of the actions taken and decisions made, the player behind Commander Shepard cannot help but take the game with them when they turn off the console due to the exemplary experiential structuring of the game.

It is the narrative that makes this one game stand out beyond all the others in an examination of mindfulness within gaming. Even when BioWare has several other RPG single-player games that emphasize the effect of choice and teamwork, none of them renders embodiment

through the story in the way that *Mass Effect* does. Part of what forces the player to become utterly immersed in the game, allowing them to use mindfulness and or become aware of exercises in ‘right mindfulness’ while playing is that the story is fully immersive. As Jim Bizzochi and Joshua Tanenbaum assert in their article *Mass Effect 2: A Case Study in the Design of Game Narrative*, “...interactive narrative may well be the ‘holy grail’ of new media research and development” (Bizzochi and Tanenbaum, 394). Not only does the player create a Shepard that works with them, or even can go so far as to be a mirror replication of them, they are following a world that is steeped in tragedy, evoking the catharsis that Aristotle claims to be so integral to the mechanics of a ‘great’ story (Bizzochi and Tanenbaum, 399). As Bizzochi and Tanenbaum state at the end of their research:

By allowing players to provide expressive variations of a core and unchanging Commander Shepard, the designers are able to channel the pleasures of agency and self-expression along a path that reinforces the intended narrative rather than undermining it. The design and actions of the NPC characters in the game help to move the plot forward in a coherent fashion. The rich supporting cast also provides meaningful narrative context for the actions of Shepard—providing a wide range of emotional reactions to the events of the narrative and by deepening the details about the storyworld (Bizzochi and Tanenbaum, 410).

By creating a Shepard who is the protagonist through three indelibly linked games, the creators of *Mass Effect* have allowed a vehicle for the ultimate self-expression through gaming, and thus, the ultimate exercise in mindful gaming. By the third game the player is invested in their Shepard, not only through hours of gameplay, but through choices that they have made that have brought their squad close and their universe a little bit of happiness. The player wants to see the world more wholistically and not through a fixed mindset. They are experiencing the growth mindset, their mindfulness and service, paying off. The player understands that their neutral, their ability to occupy their center, is the way to interact with changing



conditions as they unfold in the world of the game. Such a mindset is essential to saving the universe.

Gaming, viewed through this approach, reconsiders typical mind-body dichotomies, as a way not simply to escape from the woes of reality, not simply a place where the player can become someone else and compartmentalize their day, but as a tool through which to practice skills adaptable into other dimensions of life allowing the player to experience a kind of clarity based on a mindful attention to their own attention. (Chin System Guide) As Tali Zhorah stated at the beginning of it all, “After time adrift among open stars, among tides of light and to shoals of dust, I will return to where I began” (*Mass Effect 2*). Through a journey we can truly know the meaning of home – both the literal translation and the figurative one – if we first recognize, realize, and know that ‘center.’

Home is within the body, as well as a place to live. Occupying ‘home’ within the body requires feeling the neutral place that exists between the yin and yang – that space characterize by present knowing and an awareness of the whole, not simply the parts. Recognizing the neutral, returning to the center view, requires a growth mindset that allows for a kinder life – a life of service and fuller acceptance of one’s abilities. Experiencing *Mass Effect’s* dedication to story customization, moral ambiguity, and consequences that shake the very fabric of the universe, the player senses their way to these values in ways that are unshakeable. After time adrift within the stars of the *Mass Effect* universe, after walking as Shepard does among tides of light and shoals of dust, the player returns home to where they began as someone entirely new, a being who has changed with the changes.

### About the Author

**Allison Clark** is an adjunct lecturer at Cabrini University. She received her Masters in Liberal Arts from the University of Pennsylvania. Her research interests include the intersections of the personal and the political, the virtual and technical futures of body imagery and body relationships, and pop culture.





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## NOTES

1. Keelah Se'lai is a statement in Quarian used by the character Tali Zhorah as a sort of blessing. It means, "By the home world I hope to see one day." Her people were driven from their home by the AI units they created long ago so Tali has never seen her home.
2. <https://iliqchuan.com>
3. Master Sam Chin is the founder of Zhong Xin Dao and the Gatekeeper, or lineage holder, of the family art of the Chin Family. (System Guide, 3rd edition; 2019).
4. Though the player can choose to play as either male Shepard or female Shepard, I use the female pronouns for Shepard throughout the course of my paper. I am more comfortable with a female Shepard for reasons that will be explained further later in the paper. Each Shepard is very personal, as well, and in each and every one of my play-throughs my own connection to a female Shepard has been integral to my own experience playing the game.
5. It is my own opinion that to relegate the title for MShep, as many of the fandom call him, to "BroShep," is to relegate the Male Shepard persona as silly, ambivalent, and thus disingenuous to the true experience of playing as Male Shepard. While FemShep is this author's personal preferred Shepard choice, the MShep option has its own merits, due to the MShep's inherent issues with stigma masculinity prescribes and with his own relationships with the interspecies crew members. MShep is not a 'bro,' MShep is a clipped, professional, stoic individual with a need to prove himself beyond that of FemShep that leads to varied and interesting dialogue choices.

