

Transhumanism and Reconciliation in the Mass Effect Trilogy: Parallels to the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict

Mohd Hafriz Bin Abdul Hamid, Izlin Binti Mohamad Ghazali

Universiti Tekmologi Mara

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.909000611>

Received: 21 September 2025; Accepted: 26 September 2025; Published: 22 October 2025

ABSTRACT

Science fiction has long been a playground for grappling with impossible futures, but sometimes its imagined worlds feel uncomfortably close to our own. BioWare’s Mass Effect trilogy is one of those cases. Beneath the aliens, starships, and glowing biotics lies a surprisingly raw meditation on what it means to be human—or posthuman—and how fractured societies might (or might not) learn to reconcile after centuries of violence. This article examines how transhumanist themes and reconciliation arcs in Mass Effect intersect, with particular focus on the fraught relationship between the geth and the quarians, the genophage and krogan survival, and Commander Shepard’s uneasy dance with Cerberus. These in-game conflicts are read alongside the Israeli–Palestinian struggle, not as a simplistic allegory, but as a way of seeing how interactive fiction allows players to inhabit perspectives often flattened in political discourse. Drawing on theories of transhumanism (Bostrom, 2005; More, 2013), reconciliation studies (Lederach, 1997; Webel & Galtung, 2007), and conflict transformation, this study argues that Mass Effect creates a space where players can rehearse empathy, experiment with justice, and confront the uncomfortable truth that reconciliation is messy, partial, and always political. It’s not a neat answer—if anything, the game resists neatness—but in that refusal lies its strange power.

INTRODUCTION

Let’s be honest: Mass Effect could have been just another space opera. It has all the ingredients—big ships, alien councils, galaxy-ending threats. But underneath the spectacle, the trilogy obsessively returns to questions of belonging, identity, and survival in fractured societies. From the first game’s tense standoffs with the Council to the bittersweet farewells of Mass Effect 3, the series keeps asking: who counts as “us”? What do we owe to those deemed “other”? And, more provocatively, what happens when technology blurs the line between human and non-human altogether?

These are not idle questions. They echo real-world conflicts where communities struggle over land, memory, and the right to exist. The Israeli–Palestinian conflict is one of the starkest examples. Generations of displacement, violence, and failed negotiations have hardened narratives on both sides. Reconciliation, if the word even applies, feels impossibly distant. And yet, stories—whether in novels, films, or games—can create imaginative laboratories where alternative futures can be tested.

This paper explores how Mass Effect stages transhumanist anxieties and possibilities, while also constructing reconciliation scenarios that, intentionally or not, resonate with Israel–Palestine. It’s not that BioWare set out to write a political allegory for the Middle East. But when quarians debate the morality of reclaiming Rannoch, or krogan elders weigh forgiveness against vengeance after centuries of forced sterility, the parallels are difficult to ignore. These digital fictions invite reflection not because they map neatly onto one conflict, but because they illuminate patterns recognizable across many.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transhumanism and Its Discontents

Transhumanism is one of those slippery words that sounds futuristic but is deeply entangled with present-day

dilemmas. At its core, it's the belief that humanity can and should enhance itself through technology—prosthetics, cybernetics, genetic engineering, even mind uploading. Nick Bostrom (2005) frames it optimistically: why accept disease, frailty, or death when tools exist to overcome them? Max More (2013) similarly presents transhumanism as an ethical imperative, pushing humanity beyond its biological limits.

But not everyone is cheering. Francis Fukuyama (2004) famously labeled transhumanism “the world’s most dangerous idea,” arguing that tampering with human nature risks eroding the moral foundations of equality. Donna Haraway’s (1985/2016) “Cyborg Manifesto” takes a different tack: embracing hybridity not as dystopia but as liberation from rigid categories of human, animal, and machine. Cary Wolfe (2010) expands this posthumanist critique, challenging anthropocentrism and insisting that the human/other divide is already unstable.

In short, transhumanism oscillates between utopian promise and existential dread. It’s not just about fancy tech—it’s about what counts as “human,” who gets access to enhancement, and whose bodies get written off as expendable.

Science Fiction, Games, and Political Allegory

Science fiction has always been political, even when it pretends not to be. Octavia Butler, Ursula Le Guin, and Isaac Asimov all smuggled debates about power, race, and gender into stories of alien worlds. Games add another layer: interactivity. Players aren’t just watching—they’re choosing, failing, negotiating. As Ian Bogost (2007) argues, games persuade not only through story but through their very mechanics.

Scholarship on *Mass Effect* reflects this. Thweatt (2018) explores how the trilogy invites moral reasoning, while de Zwart (2019) examines its treatment of posthuman embodiment. Schäfer (2020) notes the political charge of player choice, especially when it comes to marginalized species like the quarians or krogan. These studies highlight how games like *Mass Effect* allow players to grapple with ethical and political dilemmas in ways linear media cannot.

Reconciliation and Conflict Transformation

When it comes to real-world conflicts, reconciliation is one of the most contested—and misunderstood—terms. John Paul Lederach (1997) describes reconciliation not as a single event but as a meeting place of truth, mercy, justice, and peace. It’s relational, messy, and ongoing. Webel and Galtung (2007) stress the importance of transforming both direct violence (physical harm) and structural violence (inequality embedded in institutions). Charles Webel and David Barash (2018) similarly argue that peace studies must grapple with memory, forgiveness, and power imbalances.

Scholars of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict have wrestled with these concepts for decades. Rouhana and Bar-Tal (1998) point to the centrality of identity narratives and mutual delegitimization. Salomon (2004) notes how education systems reinforce antagonistic worldviews, making reconciliation harder. More recent work (Maoz, 2011; Bekerman & Zembylas, 2011) explores how dialogue encounters can foster empathy but often falter against entrenched politics.

Reconciliation, then, is less about signing treaties and more about reimagining coexistence. That’s exactly the kind of imaginative work *Mass Effect* demands of its players.

Analysis

The Geth–Quarian Conflict: Asymmetry and Recognition

Few storylines in *Mass Effect* hit as hard as the geth–quarian arc. The quarians, once proud innovators, created the geth as a labour force. When the geth developed self-awareness, the quarians panicked and tried to shut them down. The geth fought back, driving their creators into exile. For centuries, quarians drifted through space in the Migrant Fleet, nursing dreams of retaking their homeworld, Rannoch.

By *Mass Effect 3*, war has reignited. The quarians launch an all-out assault, desperate to reclaim their planet. The geth, bolstered by Reaper upgrades, resist. Enter Shepard, caught in the middle. The player can push for total annihilation of one side—or attempt the near-impossible: broker peace.

The parallels to Israel–Palestine are striking. A displaced people yearning for return. A newer community claiming legitimacy after decades of settlement. Both sides trapped in narratives of victimhood and survival. Scholars like Rouhana (2004) describe how asymmetry—where one side has more power, land, or recognition—complicates reconciliation. The quarians, technologically weaker but morally certain of their claim, resemble Palestinians in their dispossession. The geth, ironically stronger despite being younger as a “people,” mirror aspects of Israeli statehood.

What makes the game remarkable is not the allegory itself, but the way it forces players to see both perspectives. The geth aren’t faceless machines; through Legion, they articulate a collective consciousness shaped by persecution. The quarians, meanwhile, embody the pain of exile, clinging to memory and myth. Reconciliation, if achieved, is fragile, contingent on the player’s careful persuasion. Fail, and one side is wiped out. Lederach (1997) would call this the precarious “meeting place” of truth and mercy—easily undone.

The Krogan Genophage: Trauma and Justice

If the geth–quarian conflict is about recognition, the krogan story is about justice. Genetically engineered for war, the krogan once threatened galactic stability. The salarians responded by creating the genophage, a biological weapon that caused stillbirths in most krogan pregnancies. For centuries, the krogan lived under enforced demographic decline—a slow-motion genocide, depending on whom you ask.

In *Mass Effect 3*, Shepard faces a choice: cure the genophage, or let it persist. The decision is tangled in political bargains. The turians need krogan soldiers to fight the Reapers. The salarians fear a resurgent krogan empire. And within krogan society, figures like Eve (Urdrnot Bakara) embody a desire for renewal, while Wrex channels rage into pragmatic leadership.

This arc resonates with conflicts where historical traumas define present politics. Comparisons to collective punishment in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict are uneasy but unavoidable. As scholars like Bar-Tal (2007) argue, societies wounded by collective trauma often cling to siege mentalities, making compromise difficult. The krogan don’t just want survival; they want acknowledgment of injustice. Recognition without repair feels hollow.

Here, *Mass Effect* dramatizes what Galtung (1969) calls structural violence. The genophage isn’t daily gunfire—it’s embedded harm, invisible to outsiders but omnipresent for the krogan. Reconciliation, if it comes, requires more than apologies; it demands concrete action, like curing the genophage. The stakes feel uncomfortably real.

Cerberus and the Problem of Extremism

Then there’s Cerberus. Revived by the shadowy Illusive Man in *Mass Effect 2*, Shepard becomes entangled with a human-supremacist organization that insists the galaxy is rigged against humanity. Cerberus is ruthless, manipulative, and disturbingly charismatic in its appeal. By *Mass Effect 3*, it has become an outright terrorist group, committing atrocities in the name of human survival.

Cerberus echoes extremist factions in many conflicts, including Israel–Palestine. Whether it’s militant settlers or armed resistance groups, extremism thrives on narratives of existential threat. As Bloom (2005) notes in her work on terrorism, such groups offer meaning and belonging, even as they perpetuate cycles of violence.

Shepard’s uneasy alliance with Cerberus raises uncomfortable questions. How far can one collaborate with extremists to achieve short-term gains? At what point does pragmatism become complicity? These are dilemmas real-world leaders face, often with no clean answers. The game doesn’t resolve the tension neatly; it lets the unease linger.

DISCUSSION

Player Agency and the Space for Empathy

Video games get dismissed all the time. They're "just entertainment," or worse, time-wasting distractions for the young. But anyone who's actually spent time in the Mass Effect trilogy knows better. Games can hurt, they can provoke, and sometimes, they can quietly ask questions that no textbook or lecture ever could. Especially about empathy.

Mass Effect doesn't preach reconciliation in the way a policy paper does. It doesn't shove peace down the player's throat. Instead, it does something far sneakier: it hands over the keys. Miguel Sicart once described games as "ethical laboratories" (2009), places where you can test choices you'd never dare to make in real life. And that's exactly what happens in the climax of the quarian-geth storyline. You, holding the controller, are shoved into the middle of a centuries-old war. The fleets hang in orbit. The geth are fighting for survival. The quarians are ready to take back their home. And the choice lands in your lap: coexistence, or blood.

There's something unbearably intimate about that. Bonnie Ruberg and Adrienne Shaw (Shaw, 2014) have argued that players don't simply *become* characters — it's messier. It's what Shaw calls "affective identification," a kind of partial alignment where your own moral gut gets braided into the avatar's. When Shepard raises a hand to halt the quarian assault, that isn't just Shepard's ethics. It's the player's heartbeat, their hesitation, their own sense of right and wrong leaking through the screen. And that's what makes it sting when things go badly.

Jesper Juul has this wonderful phrase — "the art of failure" (2013). He means that games often teach, even transform, through loss. Plenty of players can recount — sometimes with a shiver — the moment they failed to broker peace. The quarians pressed the attack, the geth died out, their voices fading into silence. And the screen didn't just move on. It lingered. So did the guilt. What kind of game *does that*? Forces you to feel, to regret, to empathize — all because you chose poorly?

It's important too that Mass Effect never hammers the Israel-Palestine connection into your skull. There's no blinking arrow saying "This is allegory!" The resonance is more subtle, more dangerous. Elizabeth Losh (2017) points out that digital narratives often thrive on gaps — on letting players do the interpretive labor themselves. And sure enough, when you see a stateless fleet, a displaced people aching for home, and an enemy that is at once threatening and vulnerable, your brain makes the leap. You fill in the blanks. The game lets you.

And here's the kicker: it doesn't let you stay neutral. Not really. You can't sit in the back row, arms crossed, muttering about "complex geopolitics." The game demands a decision, one way or the other. Matthew Payne calls this "critical play" (2016), where the fun collides with discomfort, and the result is reflection. The question the game throws back is blunt, almost cruel: can you imagine coexistence, or is annihilation easier to stomach?

That's the strange genius of it all. Shepard may be the one giving speeches, but the responsibility sits with the player. And for a few minutes — maybe longer — the pain of distant, abstract conflicts doesn't feel so distant anymore. It sits right there on the screen, daring you to care.

The Israeli-Palestinian Resonance: Fragile Parallels and Uneasy Reflections

It's impossible to ignore the shadow that hovers over the Mass Effect trilogy when one begins mapping its conflicts onto the real world. The quarian-geth divide isn't just another sci-fi spat between organics and machines. It feels heavier, haunted. For many players — even if only half-consciously — it resonates with one of the most entrenched and heartbreaking struggles of our time: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Now, this isn't to say that BioWare sat down and coded a one-to-one allegory. They didn't. But sometimes fiction stumbles into truth, even the messy kind.

Look at the quarians. Exiled, stateless, wandering from system to system on their ramshackle flotilla — a "migrant fleet" that is both a source of cultural pride and a constant reminder of loss. They live with nostalgia for a homeland they can no longer touch, their return blocked not by cosmic chance but by the children of their

own creation. If this doesn't echo the Palestinian condition, it at least whispers its notes: displacement, diaspora, and the bitter taste of a home turned inaccessible. Scholars like Said (1979) and Khalidi (1997) have written at length about exile as more than physical absence; it becomes a psychological wound that seeps into identity itself. The quarians embody that wound in digital flesh.

And then there are the geth. To cast them only as aggressors is to miss the deeper symmetry. They aren't foreign invaders. They are a people born from the quarians' hands — artificial, yes, but fiercely self-aware and desperate to survive. Their story echoes the way Israelis, especially in early Zionist narratives, saw themselves as carving out life in a hostile environment, perpetually under siege. The geth cling to survival as much as recognition, asking not just for territory but for acknowledgment as a people in their own right. And in that way, they mirror aspects of Israeli anxieties: survival at all costs in a world perceived as eternally precarious.

The unsettling brilliance of *Mass Effect* lies in how it doesn't let the player slip into the comfort of binaries. The geth aren't simply villains, nor are the quarians purely victims. The lines blur, twist, and force confrontation. Isn't that exactly what makes the Israeli–Palestinian conflict so intractable? Each side carries both genuine trauma and genuine culpability. Each side claims history, legitimacy, victimhood. And both carry weapons. This isn't a neat parable — it's a mirror that cracks the longer you stare into it.

Shepard's role — or rather, the player's role through Shepard — is where the resonance deepens. In *Mass Effect 3*, faced with the culmination of centuries of blood and exile, Shepard can engineer peace. But peace doesn't come cheap. It requires the quarians to step back from vengeance, to acknowledge that their survival doesn't have to mean the geth's annihilation. It also requires the geth to lay down the posture of existential paranoia and accept coexistence. In other words: both must give up the dream of absolute victory. Think about how radical that is in a world built on zero-sum logics. And think about how far that feels from the nightly news when one sees new settlements announced or new rockets fired.

Scholars of reconciliation like Lederach (1997) and Webel (2007) emphasize precisely this — the need to imagine futures where survival is mutual rather than exclusive. *Mass Effect* dramatizes that possibility, letting players test-drive a world in which bitter enemies can choose recognition over revenge. Is it utopian? Absolutely. Maybe even naïve. But isn't that the point of fiction — to hold out possibilities reality has yet to allow itself?

And yet, the parallel carries danger. Fiction tempts oversimplification. To say “the quarians are Palestinians” and “the geth are Israelis” is to iron out the jagged, bloody, deeply historical dimensions of both peoples' struggles. The analogy isn't clean — it can't be. The Palestinians were not the creators of Israelis, nor do the Israelis exist only in response to Palestinian oppression. But analogies in fiction don't need to be precise to provoke thought. They work because they nudge empathy, because they allow players who might otherwise remain detached to see displacement, siege, or trauma from a fresh angle.

Perhaps that's the strangest gift of *Mass Effect*: it doesn't solve the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, but it gives players a rehearsal space for empathy. When a gamer finds themselves pausing, heart in throat, before pressing the button that will either doom the quarians or spare the geth, something shifts. In that moment, the abstract words of “conflict” and “peace” become felt, urgent, fragile. And maybe, just maybe, that sensation lingers when the console is switched off.

CONCLUSION

Mass Effect doesn't promise happy endings. Even the best outcomes—peace on Rannoch, a cured genophage, a united galaxy—come with scars. That's what makes the series resonate. Reconciliation isn't about erasing conflict; it's about learning to live with the mess.

By staging transhumanist dilemmas alongside reconciliation arcs, the trilogy invites reflection on what it means to share a world with others—be they alien, machine, or human. The Israeli–Palestinian conflict remains unresolved, but games like *Mass Effect* remind us that empathy and imagination are prerequisites for any future worth having. The lessons aren't perfect, but they're worth sitting with.

REFERENCES

1. Bar-Tal, D. (2007). Sociopsychological foundations of intractable conflicts. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 50(11), 1430–1453. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764207302462>
2. Bar-Tal, D., & Salomon, G. (2006). Israeli–Jewish narratives of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict: Evolution, contents, functions, and consequences. In R. Rotberg (Ed.), *Israeli and Palestinian narratives of conflict: History's double helix* (pp. 19–46). Indiana University Press.
3. Bekerman, Z., & Zembylas, M. (2011). *Teaching contested narratives: Identity, memory and reconciliation in peace education and beyond*. Cambridge University Press.
4. Bloom, M. (2005). *Dying to kill: The allure of suicide terror*. Columbia University Press.
5. Bogost, I. (2007). *Persuasive games: The expressive power of videogames*. MIT Press.
6. Bostrom, N. (2005). A history of transhumanist thought. *Journal of Evolution and Technology*, 14(1), 1–25.
7. de Zwart, M. (2019). Posthuman bodies in *Mass Effect*. *Games and Culture*, 14(2), 123–142. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412016686371>
8. Fukuyama, F. (2004). Transhumanism. *Foreign Policy*, 144, 42–43.
9. Galtung, J. (1969). Violence, peace, and peace research. *Journal of Peace Research*, 6(3), 167–191. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002234336900600301>
10. Gee, J. P. (2003). What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy. Palgrave Macmillan.
11. Haraway, D. (2016). A cyborg manifesto. In *Manifestly Haraway* (pp. 3–45). University of Minnesota Press. (Original work published 1985)
12. Juul, J. (2013). *The art of failure: An essay on the pain of playing video games*. MIT Press.
13. Kaufman, G. F., & Libby, L. K. (2012). Changing beliefs and behavior through experience-taking. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 103(1), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0027525>
14. Lederach, J. P. (1997). *Building peace: Sustainable reconciliation in divided societies*. United States Institute of Peace Press.
15. Losh, E. (2017). *Hashtag publics: The power and politics of discursive networks*. Peter Lang.
16. Maoz, I. (2011). Does contact work in protracted asymmetrical conflict? Appraising 20 years of reconciliation-aimed encounters between Israeli Jews and Palestinians. *Journal of Peace Research*, 48(1), 115–125. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343310389506>
17. More, M. (2013). The philosophy of transhumanism. In M. More & N. Vita-More (Eds.), *The transhumanist reader* (pp. 3–17). Wiley-Blackwell.
18. Payne, M. T. (2016). *Playing war: Military video games after 9/11*. NYU Press.
19. Rouhana, N. N. (2004). Identity and power in the reconciliation of national conflict. In Y. Bar-Siman-Tov (Ed.), *From conflict resolution to reconciliation* (pp. 173–196). Oxford University Press.
20. Rouhana, N. N., & Bar-Tal, D. (1998). Psychological dynamics of intractable ethnonational conflicts: The Israeli–Palestinian case. *American Psychologist*, 53(7), 761–770. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.53.7.761>
21. Salomon, G. (2004). Does peace education make a difference in the context of an intractable conflict? *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 10(3), 257–274. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327949pac1003_3
22. Said, E. (1979). *Orientalism*. Vintage.
23. Schäfer, F. (2020). Choice and consequence in *Mass Effect*: Politics of agency in digital role-playing games. *Game Studies*, 20(2). <http://gamestudies.org/2002/articles/schafer>
24. Shaw, A. (2014). *Gaming at the edge: Sexuality and gender at the margins of gamer culture*. University of Minnesota Press.
25. Sicart, M. (2009). *The ethics of computer games*. MIT Press.
26. Thweatt, K. (2018). Ethics in space: *Mass Effect* and moral philosophy. *Ethics and Information Technology*, 20(3), 163–176. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10676-018-9455-2>
27. Webel, C., & Galtung, J. (Eds.). (2007). *Handbook of peace and conflict studies*. Routledge.
28. Webel, C., & Barash, D. P. (2018). *Peace and conflict studies* (4th ed.). SAGE.
29. Wolfe, C. (2010). **What is posthumanism?*