

Game Narrative Review

Game Title: Knights of the Old Republic

Platform: Xbox, Microsoft Windows, Mac OS X

Genre: Role-playing game with D&D-based mechanics

Release Date: July 15, 2003 (North American Xbox release)

Developer: BioWare

Publisher: LucasArts

Game Writer/Creative Director/Narrative Designer: Drew Karpysyn

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Overview

Knights of the Old Republic is set approximately 4,000 years before the events of the *Star Wars* movies. The Republic is under attack by Sith forces led by Darth Malak, the former apprentice of Darth Revan. The player's character starts the game aboard the *Endar Spire*, a Republic ship that is under attack by Malak's forces. One of the Jedi also aboard, Bastila Shan, is key to the Republic's war effort, so when the *Endar Spire* is destroyed, scattering escape pods onto the planet Taris, the player attempts to locate and rescue Bastila. Gathering companions along the way, the player locates Bastila and escapes Taris, heading to Dantooine to meet with the Jedi Council.

On Dantooine, the Jedi Council trains the player to be a Jedi, and then tasks the player with searching for a series of Star Maps, which they believe will point the way to the Star Forge, the source of Malak's seemingly inexhaustible supply of ships and weapons. The player encounters Malak during this journey, and Malak reveals that the player was actually Darth Revan, before being captured and brainwashed by the Jedi Council. Eventually, the player locates the Star Forge and confronts Malak there. Depending on the player's alignment, he or she either defeats Malak and destroys the Star Forge, ending the Sith threat (this is the canonical Light Side ending), or usurps control of the Sith and the Star Forge from Malak, reclaiming the mantle of Darth Revan (this is the non-canonical Dark Side ending).

Characters

- **Player character:** As a D&D-inspired game, the player chooses nearly every aspect of his or her avatar, including name, gender, appearance, and background. Additionally, over the course of the game, the player can choose what skills and abilities he or she develops, and whether to follow the Light Side path of altruism and self-sacrifice, or the Dark Side path of greed and lust for power. The player character begins the game as a non-descript member of the Republic forces, but soon learns that he or she is no ordinary soldier. The player is a gifted combatant

and a natural leader, gathering companions with widely varying skills, backgrounds, and principles. The player is also an extremely gifted Force-sensitive, and begins Jedi training after arriving on Dantooine.

- **Darth Malak:** The game's antagonist, Darth Malak rose to his position as Dark Lord of the Sith by attacking the flagship of his former master, Darth Revan, while Revan was attempting to fight off an invading Jedi strike force, apparently killing Revan in the process. Malak is brutal and merciless in his war against the Republic; just as the player escapes Taris, Malak orders the entire planet destroyed by fleet bombardment in an effort to prevent the player and Bastila from escaping. Unlike his former master, Malak is characterized by his brute force approach, with little concern for cunning or subtlety in his tactics. His jaw was destroyed in an unspecified incident, and replaced with an immobile mechanical voice box. This gives him a creepy robotic voice and an obviously villainous look reminiscent of Darth Vader.
- **Darth Revan:** The former Dark Lord of the Sith and master of Darth Malak. Revan and Malak were once promising young Jedi, but broke with the Jedi Council during the Mandalorian Wars. The Council forbade any Jedi from fighting in the conflict, but Revan and Malak believed the threat was too great to ignore. A powerful warrior, dynamic leader, and brilliant tactician, Revan took command of the forces fighting the Mandalorians and eventually defeated them. However, Revan then turned on the Republic, taking the title of Darth Revan and (along with Darth Malak) beginning a new war with the Republic. Later in the game, the player discovers that Revan did not die during Malak's attack, but was captured by the Jedi strike team and brainwashed by the Jedi Council, and that he or she is actually the brainwashed Revan. This explains the player's abilities, leadership qualities, and Force sensitivity, as well as why the Jedi Council would choose a Jedi neophyte for such a critical mission. Revan is always shown in a black cloak and red mask, giving his appearance a sense of both power and mystery.
- **Bastila Shan:** An inexperienced Jedi Knight, Bastila is nonetheless critical to the Republic's war effort because of her Battle Meditation skill. When the player locates Bastila on Taris, they discover that they have a Force bond that enables them to share visions, most significantly of the locations of Star Maps. Bastila was part of the Jedi strike team that captured Revan, and was able to preserve Revan's life in the wake of Malak's attack, which causes the bond. Bastila is naturally stubborn and impulsive, but has also been taught by the Jedi to be patient and open-minded. This often leaves her conflicted, particularly when she observes recklessness in the player. This is especially pronounced if the player is male, as Bastila is the romantic option for male player characters, and she is attracted to the recklessness that her training has taught her to suppress. Bastila is eventually captured by Malak and turned to the Dark Side. Light Side players restore her to the Light Side before finally confronting Malak, while Dark Side

players take her as a new apprentice before usurping control of the Sith from Malak.

- **Carth Onasi:** A veteran Republic soldier, Carth commanded the *Endar Spire* before its destruction. Carth carries a very personal hatred for the Sith. In another instance of Malak's brutality, Carth's home planet of Telos was destroyed in a similar manner to that of Taris. Not only does Carth believe that his entire family was killed in the attack, but the attack was carried out by his former mentor, Saul Karath, a former Republic soldier who is now Malak's top admiral. As such, Carth is extremely suspicious of the player, as he is wary of being betrayed again. In the wake of the *Endar Spire's* destruction, Carth rescues the unconscious player from an escape pod, and then informs him or her that they will attempt to rescue Bastila. Oddly, despite his seniority, Carth then allows the player to effectively take command for the rest of the game (this can be attributed to Revan's exceptional leadership). Carth is the romantic option for female player characters. However, his loyalty to the Republic is unshakable, so a Dark Side player is forced to kill him at the end of the game, even if they have fallen in love.
- **Other characters:** *Knights of the Old Republic* has an enormous cast of characters, making it impossible to list them all here. Even merely detailing the other party members (only 2 of the 9 are listed above) would make for an extremely long list. Fortunately, while nearly all of the other party members, most of the secondary villains, and even many of the various characters that show up in the various side quests, are interesting in their own right, none of them are truly critical to understanding the game's central plot.

Breakdown

KOTOR is primarily an interactive story. The D&D-based combat system and the infrequent puzzles are not especially challenging, and it is the role-playing aspect of making decisions for the player character that makes the game so engaging. The player constantly faces decisions about what to say, where to go, who to help... or kill, what quests to do, and when to do them. This allows the player to play a critical role in creating the story as he or she plays, and also gives *KOTOR* extensive replay value, since there are many different versions of the story to pursue.

The primary option in the story is whether to follow the Light or Dark Side. Although this gives most of the decisions an unrealistically black-or-white nature (a problem that plagues the *Star Wars* universe in general), there is nonetheless a great deal of moral complexity to many of the player's choices. Many of the Dark Side choices can be justified as expedient—for example, the player can kill the duelist Bendak Starkiller in an illegal duel, or cheat at the card game Pazaak, in order to earn much needed credits while trying to escape Taris. Likewise, Light Side choices can often seem excessively risky or foolhardy, such as giving away those much needed credits to others in need.

In spite of the myriad branching, the core story of *KOTOR* is mostly static—which is just as well, because it is very compelling. It is, of course, an epic story of good and evil, the

basic formula which has made *Star Wars* so successful. And like the original *Star Wars*, it contains both the tragic fall of Revan, and (canonically) his ultimate redemption and return to the Light Side. The stunning revelation that the former hero turned villain, and the new hero determined to overthrow the evil of the former hero, are in fact one and the same, makes the story that much more potent and memorable, and arguably makes Revan's redemption more meaningful than Darth Vader's.

Redemption is a theme that can be found throughout the game, as the player (canonically) helps many characters redeem themselves en route to his or her own redemption.

Examples include:

- Bastila and the Cathar Jedi Juhani, who each fall to the Dark Side at different times and are restored to the Light Side through the player's efforts
- The Wookiee Zaalbar and his father Freyyr, who were exiled from their tribe through the machinations of Zaalbar's treacherous brother Chuundar, and have their honor restored when the player exposes Chuundar's treachery and restores Freyyr to his position as chieftain
- Carth's son Dustil, who joined with the Sith in the wake of the attack on Telos, and is convinced to return to the Light Side by the player while he or she is infiltrating the Sith Academy on Korriban
- Malak himself, who confesses to his crimes and lets go of his anger after being defeated at the end of the game, returning to the Light Side much like Darth Vader at the conclusion of *Return of the Jedi*

Strongest Element

The strongest narrative aspect of *KOTOR* is that the player's ability to make moral choices for his or her character immerses the player in the role and allows the player to influence the game's progression and outcome. While many RPGs had allowed players to customize their character's skills and abilities, and thus their functional role, *KOTOR* was one of the first to allow players to make choices that affect the story, not just the gameplay. Rather than simply telling the player that his or her character is making a difficult moral choice, *KOTOR* has the player make that choice him- or herself. This drives home the uncertainty that such decisions are fraught with, and allows the player to feel the real weight of the responsibility that his or her character is burdened with. Moreover, the control it gives the player over the progression of the story creates a method of storytelling that is unique to video games as a medium (aside from the much-maligned choose-your-own-adventure genre of books).

Unsuccessful Element

At the beginning of game, the player encounters fellow Republic soldier Trask Ulgo, whose primary purpose is to instruct the player in the game's controls and interface. After leading the player through the *Endar Spire* toward the escape pods, Trask sacrifices himself to intercept a Dark Jedi, allowing the player to get to the pods. Although the player doesn't know it at the time, this Dark Jedi turns out to be Darth Bandon, the apprentice of Darth Malak. Later in the game, the player again encounters Bandon, who has been sent by Malak to kill him or her. Before they fight, one of the player's dialogue

options is to accuse Bandon of killing Trask. This is likely intended to give the player more of an emotional stake in the confrontation with Bandon. However, many players report confusion upon seeing this dialogue option, as they do not recall Trask (by name, at least) by the time they fight Bandon, likely due to the fact that his name is only mentioned once in the game's dialogue. And even those who do remember his name tend not to consider his death at Bandon's hands to be significant.

This not only fails to provide the intended emotional stake, but also has the potential to break immersion, as players stop to wonder who Trask is. The problem of recalling Trask could be fixed fairly simply by changing the player's dialogue option to include mention of the *Endar Spire*, which is referred to many times and isn't difficult to remember. However, the fundamental problem is that Trask's character is not well-developed—the player knows nothing about him beyond his status as a generic Republic soldier, and his sacrifice to save the player seems arbitrary, given that Trask had no way of knowing that the player was so important. While it isn't necessary for every character in a game of *KOTOR*'s scope to be fleshed out, in the case of a character that is meant to provoke an emotional reaction it does become necessary, making Trask a poor choice for the role.

Highlight

Without question, the biggest water cooler moment of *KOTOR* is when the player discovers that he or she is Revan. *KOTOR* delivers this twist superbly, and it is widely considered one of the best video game plot twists of all time¹. There are many elements that contribute to this twist, and to what makes it so effective. One example that illustrates its effectiveness is the reaction of the player's party members when they discover the truth. The party has a conference in which each member discusses his or her reaction to the news, and is given the option of leaving in disgust, or seeing the quest to find the Star Forge and defeat Malak through.

Many of the party members are extremely emotional and/or conflicted. Carth, who was so untrusting of the player at the beginning of the game, but has finally opened up, feels as if he has been betrayed all over again, just like his experience with Saul Karath. The young Twi'lek Mission Vao, who has seen the player as a friend and mentor, learns that the player was responsible for the emergence of Darth Malak, who destroyed her home planet of Taris. Zaalbar, who pledged a life debt to the player on Taris, learns that he is honor-bound to the former Dark Lord of the Sith. The Mandalorian mercenary Canderous Ordo learns that the great warrior he has grown to admire is actually the commander who defeated and destroyed his people in the Mandalorian Wars. Juhani, whom the player saved earlier from a fall to the Dark Side, learns that her savior is in far greater need of redemption than she is, and argues passionately that even someone guilty of as much evil as Revan deserves the chance that she got.

Through it all, the player must deal with being characterized by actions that he or she does not feel responsible for, since the player's past as Darth Revan took place before the beginning of the game. This mirrors the character of Revan him- or herself, since Revan

¹ In 2007, it was ranked number two in *Game Informer*'s list of top ten video game plot twists of all time.

is only just barely beginning to piece together flashbacks of his or her time as the Dark Lord. Eventually, all of the party members who were in doubt decide that Revan, in his or her current incarnation, is still the person that they have been following throughout this quest, but not before the player is left genuinely wondering whether various party members will abandon him or her. This emotional rollercoaster is not only powerful in its own right, giving additional depth and development to the characters of Revan and the various party members, but also gives additional impact to the discovery that the player is Revan.

Critical Reception

Knights of the Old Republic is very well regarded, receiving an aggregate score of 94 from both GameRankings and Metacritic, and is particularly acclaimed for its narrative elements. Gamespot's Greg Kasavin gave it a 9.1/10, saying that "character interaction really is the best thing about *KOTOR*". IGN's Aaron Boulding gave it a 9.5/10, calling the story "compelling" and "rock-solid". GameSpy's Raymond Padilla gave it 5/5, praising its "fantastic story and character writing". While reviews did note certain drawbacks to the game, including sometimes poor frame rate, excessive loading sequences during area transitions, and graphics that weren't quite top of the line, virtually no reviews criticized the narrative aspects of the game.

Lessons

- Giving players control over the way their characters behave is a powerful tool for engaging them in the story, as well as generating replay value.
- Well-defined characters are helpful for achieving emotional engagement. Trask Ulgo's lack of detail causes him to fail in this role, while the strong development of the various party members makes their reactions to the player's revelation as Revan that much more meaningful to the player.
- A story need not be original to be engaging or memorable. Many of the key elements, such as redemption, that comprise *KOTOR*'s story are found in literature in general, and in *Star Wars* in particular, but this does not detract from its power.
- Games can be successful by using story as a primary selling point. The non-narrative aspects of *KOTOR*'s gameplay are done well, but it is the story that transforms *KOTOR* into an engaging and memorable experience, and a successful and acclaimed game.

Summation

KOTOR is widely acclaimed for its excellent story and characters, making it a natural choice for study. As one of the first RPGs to allow players to choose whether to be a hero or a villain, it helped establish a style of storytelling in games that has been effective and successful, as evidenced by the success of later BioWare games built on the same basic storytelling model, such as *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age*. It is also a primary example of a game that is successfully driven by its story, making it a great resource for understanding how to create story-driven games.