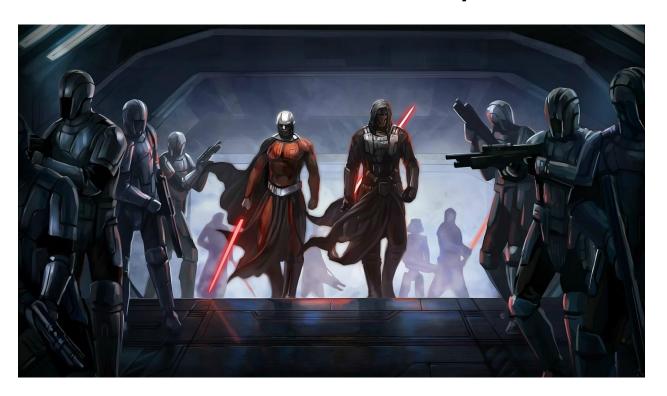# STAR WARS:

KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC, I AND II

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GAME ANALYSIS ESSAY

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Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic, I and II

The influence of the *Star Wars* saga on modern culture and the evolution of media can't

be understated. As video games made their way into popular society, it was inevitable that the

multigenerational space opera would make at least a few appearances. In the early 2000's,

gaming was taking long strides away from its original niche among tech and fantasy lovers. The

massive success of the Xbox in 2001 brought gaming into most living rooms, and early console

titles such as *Halo* commercialized science fiction as a gaming genre. Another fascinating

innovation of gaming was the explosion in popularity of role-playing games, or RPGs, which

began as dice-rolling tabletop games using the style started by *Dungeons and Dragons*. One

title that popularized this style was Bethesda's *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* – or

Kotor, for those in a hurry. The game used *D&D* rules to create tactical, real-time combat that

drew on classes, attributes, and dice rolls; in addition to gameplay, *Kotor* mastered the art of

immersing one into another universe in order to tell them a story that enthralls and inspires

them. *Knights of the Old Republic* and its sequel, *The Sith Lords*, provide a glimpse into the

early rise of RPGs and together serve as a fascinating meta-analysis of *Star Wars* and the space

opera as a genre.

In an era where computer and console games had only recently incorporated 3D

graphics and complex commands, there was much room to innovate. *Knights of the Old*

Republic's gameplay is adapted from Bethesda's preceding game series, *Baldur's Gate*, which

was in turn based on rules of the much earlier *Dungeons and Dragons*. As such, *Kotor* operated

on diceroll combat and a diverse class system. Players enter a state of "flow" here by learning

new tactics with their available powers and understanding how different characters can work

together on the battlefield – the player tends to become more immersed in the combat the more seamless they can make it. Satisfaction is earned through surviving difficult battles and leveling up, as well as skill checks (persuade and awareness in conversation, security and demolitions in the world, etc.) that can unlock previously hidden options. Earning story progress and trust with party members can also provide personal fulfillment for those who choose to invest in the story. The game is, in fact, heavily story and dialogue oriented; in the true style of RPGs, players can affect their interactions with other characters and their own Light Side/Dark Side leaning by choosing from a multitude of dialogue options. *Kotor* reinvented this aspect of gameplay in that it was one of the first fully-voiced RPGs, containing over fifteen thousand recorded lines of dialogue. The human (or alien) factor that this added to the game helped to generate personal connections between players and their party members. These further immersed players into the world it established, adding further weight to their decisions and even bringing cathartic moments to the plot.

     Knights of the Old Republic II: The Sith Lords revamped the gameplay of its predecessor in a few important ways. In combat, characters could now be equipped with two sets of weapons, and a new button empowered the player to immediately switch between these. This much-needed feature allowed for deeper character customization and more complex battle strategies. The level cap was also (thankfully) removed, which made every point of experience usable and thereby gave an extra incentive to complete all possible quests. Character interaction was also strongly improved by the inclusion of influence points with the main party members, which could be won or lost through dialogue options. These allowed the player to unlock new dialogue and backstory, and even gave the ability to train certain party members to

become Jedi. However, these influence points also showed the impact of player choices

throughout the game in a way that *Kotor I* never did. For one, each character is very different

and may gain or lose influence depending on their personal reaction to a story choice. This

sacrificed the player's ability to both role-play and win influence over every party member,

which limited the game in a very realistic way. Another result of this system is that higher

influence over a party member would force their Light or Dark Side leaning towards that of the

player. While many may not take issue with this, I was struck with doubt after seeing my

adorable astromech droid, T3-M4, begin to turn dark side – the sudden realization of this game

function made me reconsider exactly how far "Sith" I wanted to go.

The setting of the first *Knights of the Old Republic* is at the same time both reminiscent

and completely alien from the universe of the original *Star Wars* trilogy. The story occurs

almost 4,000 years prior to the events of the Original Trilogy, so there are no familiar faces to

be found. Nevertheless, *Kotor* manages to emulate the tone of Star Wars flawlessly; its story of

galactic war between the Jedi-led Republic and the Sith has all the wonder and intensity of Luke

learning the ways of the Force and leading the charge against the Galactic Empire. The first

game starts the player on the side of the Republic, which is engaged in a fierce – and losing –

battle against the forces of the Sith Empire. The player must learn the ways of the Jedi and

defeat Darth Malak, Dark Lord of the Sith, before he uses the Star Forge to conquer the

Republic and eventually the galaxy. They must finally choose to either win the war for the

Republic and be recognized as hero and savior of the galaxy, or betray the Republic and take up

the vacant mantle of Lord of the Sith. The first game's plot borrows heavily from *A New Hope*,

as they are both retellings of The Hero's Journey – a narrative pattern popular in the fantasy

and space opera genres. The second game begins years later, and introduces the player to a

much darker *Star Wars* than most are used to. There are no real "good guys" or "bad guys";

instead much of the story emphasizes the moral and intellectual flaws in each faction. The Jedi

have been almost entirely eradicated, and though the Republic won the war against the Sith, it

is crumbling under the costs of repairing itself. The player character is a Jedi Exile, banned from

the order for going to war. The goal of this game is much less straightforward; the player is

being hunted relentlessly by the remnants of the Sith, and must find and kill their leader. But

the plot also includes quests to rebuild the Jedi Order, restore a destroyed planet, and help the

Republic's efforts at recovering. Of course, the player can also take the opposite path and

watch the galaxy far, far away crumble beneath their boot. The plots of these games both

contrast and complement each other; this allows for them to analyze and critique the core

themes of the *Star Wars* universe.

A literary theme common across both games is the loss of self. This both serves as a

basis for each game's story and enables the gameplay mechanic of "starting from the bottom"

despite playing a character with a rich backstory. In the first *Knights of the Old Republic* the

player begins as a Republic army recruit and is quickly (in retrospect, suspiciously quickly)

chosen to become a Jedi and fight Darth Malak. When the player character eventually

confronts the Dark Lord, it is revealed that they are actually Darth Revan – Malak's former

master – whose memory has been erased by the Jedi after being betrayed and captured. The

twist brings back the character's true self, but also gives the new perspective of having fought

as a Republic soldier and Jedi Knight. Were players given this information from the beginning,

they may have been more inclined towards the Dark Side – to stay "true" to their real backstory

– or towards the Light, for the purpose of knowingly rebelling against their origins. But players

are kept in the dark and instead make choices as *they* would make them – not as Revan or anti-

Revan. This increases the players' emotional investment in their own characters and makes the

reveal that much more shocking. Regarding gameplay mechanics, the memory wipe and cover

as a military recruit allows the player to start at Level 1, in spite of having recently been a Sith

Lord (no big deal). In *Kotor II*, the player character is established as a former Jedi and war

veteran who has lost their connection to the Force, and must work to slowly rebuild it. This

sets the Level 1 starting point and immediately establishes a tone of recovery to former

greatness, as opposed to beginning as a fresh recruit. The loss of the Force also lends to the

second game's darker tone, as most fellow Force users describe the Exile as "hollow" and

scarred from war; in fact, the damage is akin to real-world symptoms of post-traumatic stress

disorder. And as he or she begins to face the truth of their war crimes and come to terms with

them, the Exile regains their connection to the Force and restores their former "self".

Illusion of Choice is a trope present in nearly every role-playing game. It results from

the constraints of having to give players a feeling of freedom while simultaneously writing a

story that can adapt to those choices. Illusion of choice in *Knights of the Old Republic* is

represented by story events that vary depending on the players' decisions until that point. The

odd thing is that they happen no matter which choices were made until that moment; they are

simply revised to appeal to the player and their variation of the story. An example from the

first *Kotor* is a plot twist towards the game's end in which the player is revealed to be Darth

Revan, and to have been used by the Jedi to further their own goals. Until that point, the player

had been tailoring their decisions to who they thought they were, just as their character would.

But the revelation removes any feeling of freedom in regards to identity or backstory. The intentional removal of player choice in this situation acts as a meta-analysis of such story devices in role-playing games. In *Kotor II*, a somewhat more direct illusion of choice is used towards the end of the game's story. As the Exile tracks down their old masters, they can either recruit them to rebuild the order or kill them to finish it once and for all. If the player chooses to spare the Jedi, the survivors are betrayed and killed via yet another plot twist. This leaves the Exile as the last of the Jedi and establishes them as the sole figure responsible for rebuilding the Order. The futility of the player's efforts serves to show that sometimes things happen outside of one's control, and that personal importance lies more in the decisions than the results.

A trope embraced by the first game is the Space Opera, which was popularized by the original *Star Wars* trilogy – and inspired by earlier works, such as *Dune*. The literary theme is based on the tactic of using fantasy tropes and archetypes in a science fiction setting. In the Original Trilogy, for example, Luke is the Poor Farm Boy taught to become a warrior by the Wise Old Master, who then meets the Dashing Scoundrel, Endangered Princess, etc. before confronting the Evil King. This Hero's Journey is a plot device commonly used in fantasy and space opera, and is embraced by the first *Knights of the Old Republic* – partially, I believe, to give its more devoted fans nostalgia for the movies they grew up on. It further shows that the developers of *Kotor* were huge fans of *Star Wars*, and decided to do it justice by helping fans play out the adventure that Luke and his friends had in the Original Trilogy. Another purpose for the use of Space Opera tropes is to give the game a more fun and lighthearted feeling; the

plot is somewhat easy to predict for those familiar with fantasy, so players feel "safe" despite facing danger at every turn.

An important part of *Kotor II*'s darker approach to *Star Wars* is its method of deconstructing and criticizing key points of the Space Opera genre, as well as the *Star Wars* universe as a whole. Characters throughout the game raise questions about the morality of the Jedi and the reasons for supporting the Republic. The Exile has several chances over the course of the game to debate his or her old masters, during which the Jedi express a denial about *why* Jedi fall to the Dark Side in the first place – blaming the students (such as Revan and Malak from *Kotor I*) but not the teachings. Kreia, another ex-Jedi who mentors the Exile throughout the game, teaches the player to *think* about how the Force should be used, rather than stick to a single set of ideals. She is the skeptic who questions a power unquestioningly embraced by everyone around her. This game doesn't make the Jedi out as benevolent monks, as opposed to the first in which there are definite good and bad paths. *Kotor II* analyzes the image of Jedi formed by an entire franchise of movies, books, and video games, and then shows the player why they are flawed – not the superheroes they're thought to be. This deconstruction of *Star Wars* serves as a foil to the first game's faithfulness to the original style, and along with it provides a contrasting analysis of the popular opinions on the franchise.