

STAR WARS

KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC

T H E S I T H L O R D S

Revealed: the sequel to the best Star Wars game ever. No Bothan spies died to bring you this information.

By **MARK SUTHERNS**

A SPACE ODYSSEY

Bioware's Odyssey engine is again powering the action, so the overall look will be very similar to the original game, with Obsidian looking to optimise rather than revolutionise. We're promised more ambient effects to bring each level to life with more diversity in the characters also noticeable. The enhancements will also allow for larger maps with more geometry. On the interface side they've also made some subtle changes and are promising that the interface will scale to high resolutions – so there'll be no eyestrain this time.

Light or dark. Which did you choose? Yes, you could have stayed true to the Jedi Order and accepted the role as the Republic's saviour – but surely you were tempted to cut the small talk (and Sand People) down to size? PC gaming in 2003 presented fewer choices of significance than that served up by *Knights of the Old Republic*, an RPG that saw Bioware creep into Skywalker ranch, steal George Lucas' pixie dust and add it to their coders' morning coffee. They went on to create a game that simply exuded the indescribable Star Wars magic we've hankered for since the credits rolled on the classic trilogy in 1983. It was like Jar Jar never happened.

If George can be bothered to spike Episode Three with that misplaced magic ingredient, he'll need to pay a visit to Orange County, California to get it back: the home of Obsidian Entertainment, the new masters of the *KOTOR* series. For some, this baton pass will ring alarm bells. Bioware may have become the ultimate RPG dreamweavers, but those in the know will tell you that the fate of *Knights of the Old Republic 2* is in the safest and most artful of hands. Formed from the remnants of Black Isle Studios, Obsidian can be credited with



New planets and settings await.

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Even tough-looking droids like this one are no match for a skilled Jedi with a saber or two.



Again, it's three of you at a time against the galaxy.



MINI ADVENTURE

Still a card short on the killer Pazaak deck? Worry not; there's a chance to keep your hand in with *KOTOR 2* as the gamblers' card game returns as part of the mini-game line-up. Tweaked versions of all three distractions from the first game return, including swoop racing, and we saw a preview of a turret game where you blast your way out of the hangar of the mining facility in true Millennium Falcon tradition. We're also promised a more dynamic asteroid belt star fight, although Obsidian are keen to ensure that none of these sideshows will be critical to the continuation of the plot.



some of the RPG greats. Their CV lists the *Fallout* series and *Icewind Dale*, while Producer Chris Parker, who's showing *KOTOR 2* off to us today, was also Producer for the entire *Baldur's Gate* series, and beside him is Chris Avellone, the Lead Designer behind *Planescape: Torment* – possibly the finest tale ever told in PC

the next level. It's a huge task, of course, but as Luke said; it's not impossible.

The familiar theme bellows out and the neck hairs stand obediently to attention. The obligatory scrolling intro begins – a placeholder sufficient to reveal the plot, but it's quickly pre-empted by Avellone. “*KOTOR 2* is staged five years

trouble is, so do the Sith. With the Republic decimated by the second Sith War, the Dark Lords are looming large. As the last unaccounted Jedi you are a potential thorn in their side. You're the hunted. Parker takes up the story. “It becomes very apparent to you that the Sith want to find out what you're doing as the last Jedi and it's immediately made clear that your presence isn't welcome, not just by the Sith but also by other factions.”

There's no turning to the Jedi Order for help either. As a disgraced army leader in the Mandalorian war that preceded *KOTOR*, you fought alongside Revan and Malak but were exiled from the Jedi Order and robbed of your connection to the Force – and your powers. Once again you'll piece together this backstory as the game progresses and Obsidian are keen at this early stage to keep tight-lipped. You

“You're cast as the last known Jedi in the galaxy.”

gaming. Make no mistake: Obsidian are no mere Padawans.

We, their small, privileged audience, sit fidgeting expectantly like orange-dad X-Wing pilots. Thankfully, what they are about to demonstrate aren't plans for destruction but the beginnings of a new chapter that promises to take our *KOTOR* experience to

after the first game,” he begins. “Revan has vanished to an unknown region of the galaxy, and after Malak's defeat the Republic is on its last legs. The game starts with you cast as the last known Jedi in the galaxy.”

The first revelation, then: there's no journey of discovery this time. You're Force-sensitive and you know it. The



Expect animation improvements even over the excellent stuff seen in the original.

ELEGANT WEAPONS

It's not all about the lightsabers. This time out you'll spend more time with your non-Jedi characters, which means you'll need to master a wide range of weaponry. Obsidian are adding new variations to those featured in *KOTOR*, plus they're adding two hotkeys to the action menu so you can change between melee and ranged double quick.



Typical Sith, letting the droids do their dirty work.

know that the Sith are closing in, though. En route to the war-ravaged planet of Telos aboard your ship, the Ebon Hawk, you were ambushed and wounded. The Hawk drifted into space and mysteriously you wake from your slumber in a regeneration pod aboard the Peragus Mining Facility – the starting point for your experience.

Avellone sketches the scene. "When you first arrive, there don't seem to be any

Ebon Hawk and escape the facility."

Luckily you're not alone. The first addition to your party is standing over you when you wake, only unlike Trask in *KOTOR*, they'll be sticking around. The enigmatic Kreia is your mentor throughout. Think Obi Wan with pigtails and you're pretty close. As you progress you'll discover that a telepathic link, similar to that you experienced with Bastila in *KOTOR*,

"The enigmatic Kreia is your mentor throughout."

miners and you can't find any trace of what's happened. So your first mission is to explore the facility and see what's going on. Then you have to find and recover the

exists between you and is the key to rediscovering your connection with the Force and unlocking your powers. Before long you meet the second key character

THE JEDI KIND TRICK

Your powers might initially be weaker than Jawa-ak but you'll be starting out with a Jedi and the choice of three base Jedi classes – Crusader, Guardian and Sentinel – as featured in the original. Once you're powerful enough you'll reach a quest that will give you a choice of three further prestige classes depending on your alignment. Based on classes found in the D20 rule-set, you'll have the choice of Sith Lord, Marauder and Assassin on the dark side, while your light side ambitions can be realised as Jedi Master, Watchman and Weapon Master. Each class comes equipped with its own specific Force powers.



The Ebon Hawk makes a welcome return.

and he proves to be as important as your first. Atton Rand plays the mandatory scoundrel role in *KOTOR 2* and is a vital cog in the game's composition.

"One of the first design challenges we had was how to accommodate both players of the first game and newcomers," explains LucasArts Producer Mike Gallo. "We wanted to respect whatever choices you'd made in the first game and whichever path you'd chosen it would be reflected in the second chapter," adds Avellone.

Cleverly, your conversations with Rand provide Obsidian with the information they need to do just that. Rand will question you about the fate of Revan, thus deducing your chosen path in the original game. Your answers will trigger dialogues and situations later in the game and decide the NPCs you will meet along the way.

Rand also has the lowdown on events at the mysterious facility. "The droids in the facility began going rogue and attacking the



Kids! Hanging from neon strip-lights is very dangerous.



Going it alone is perilous but sometimes necessary.



"...and we thought we'd have some decking over /here..."



Punching toads is a major space-sport.



The poor spaceship would soon be freed from captivity.

PARTY POLITICS

As in *KOTOR* you can choose three characters for your party, but this time you have a pool of ten to choose from. The selection you have will be influenced by the decisions you make as you play.



KREIA Don't expect too much conversation from your mentor. Kreia won't be revealing too much about her background until you've proved your worth.



T3-M4 Complete with some pretty handy upgrades, T3 makes a timely return from the original game (pictured) to help you off the Mining Facility in the opening chapter.



MIRA This bounty hunter will be your fourth party member. Armed with Boba Fett-style wrist rockets and a unique feat to put them to use, she's a useful ally in combat.

miners. Following a series of fuel detonations, explosions and poison gas leaks, they've been wiped out," says Avellone. That's the cue for some fireworks as Rand and our hero blast their way through rooms of droids, with metal flying like a Meccano rainstorm. The character we're shown is at level 12, complete with lightsaber and a heap of Force powers. You'll have no such luxuries when you fight these early robot wars. You'll begin with nothing, collecting salvage from the facility and relying on your companions for protection. You'll need it. Obsidian are working hard on enemy AI in order to make every skirmish more of a challenge.

"When you're fighting opponents you'll have to consider them more closely and select who you want to take out first – because if you ignore certain droids they'll support those around them, healing them and repairing their shields," explains Parker.

STAY ON THE LEADER

Your party in *KOTOR 2* will have even greater links with your main character. For one thing your companions' side quests can be used to change their opinion of you. This can have a marked effect on how the game pans out as your own dark or light points gained are reflected in those of your party. If you have an objector in the ranks he'll gain dark side points to counter your growing allegiance to the light, and the only way of turning him around is to change his attitude to you as leader via his individual quests.

With Kreia's help, the Force will soon be flowing through you once more and eventually you'll be given an opportunity to grasp a lightsaber. You'll also be able to call upon Force powers with a vast number of new abilities on the menu. There'll be new light and dark powers and new feats for all, with over 60 added in total. On cue, Avellone fired up Force Sight, allowing our character to see a couple of enemies behind a doorway, and explained the further use of this new power. "All living creatures give off a certain amount of Force energy and you'll be able to detect this. You'll also be able to detect those who are strong in the Force and see their alignment. Light side characters will glow blue while if you meet a dark side character they'll glow a deep red." Force Confusion meanwhile will feed on the weak-minded and convince them to turn their fire on their own ranks. Intriguingly, the fabled power

of Battle Meditation will also be available, enabling you to bestow considerable bonuses on your party in combat.

Your rediscovered power will also be reflected in what you see during combat, with new animations becoming available as flurry and power attacks are added to your armoury. "We felt that this was one of the key areas that we could make an improvement over the first game – to show the transformation of your character and show that your character is becoming more powerful," adds Gallo.

All the new powers and feats being added stay true to the original *KOTOR* rule design, itself based on the D20 system. Obsidian have revisited the core eight skills of each character, however, and – more importantly – are devising new ways to utilise these skills.

"They aren't gigantic changes but they help to increase the value of the skills your

THAT'S NO MOON

Obsidian aren't coming clean with the list of planets you'll get to visit - although they did reveal that there will be seven distinct areas and that the middle section of the game will again be non-linear. Plenty of opportunity for space travel to old haunts like Tatooine and Korriban, then. You can also expect a variety of interior and exterior zones in each area, similar to that seen on Tatooine in *KOTOR*.

We did get a preview of one new locale: Dxun, a small moon that orbits the planet of Onderon. Mainly grassland, this planet served as a showpiece for Obsidian's work with the graphics engine, demonstrating the new weather effects, distance and particle fog. Host to a variety of savage beasts, this rock is known as 'Demon Moon' for good reason.



Dxun's grasslands hide some nasty surprises.



Each world will offer up a mix of environments.



Garth's old planet has seen better days.



Effects denoting special attacks are being souped up.

characters have," explains Parker. On the basic level, a high Treat Injury skill will result in improved healing from medpacks, which you'll also be able to use on members of your party. But there are further subtleties involved. "We're trying to introduce more dialogue options related to certain skills - so if you have a really high Treat Injury skill and you're speaking to a doctor, the game will take that into account and present you with more options."

We see a further example when Avelone hacks the medical logs in the mining facility with his Security skill to unlock a new side quest; an option that wouldn't have been available without a



Ignoring his foes, Dave was determined to zap that fly.

ORCHESTRAL MANOEUVRES

Music and cut scenes were major instruments in constructing the Star Wars illusion for *KOTOR* and once again they'll play a major role in the sequel. LucasArts are responsible for contributing the sound, music and voice and will be creating a brand new 60-minute live orchestra score. New voice talent is also being recruited for a script that will rival that of the original. Obsidian are working with Browne and their Odyssey engine to incorporate a series of movie-style cut-scenes to portray key events from their epic tale as the Sith Lords tighten the net on their prey.

high skill level. "We're also trying to award experience points differently. You'll get more experience for discovering information like this or accomplishing side quests, or even doing research on background stories," he adds.

Up on the communications deck of the facility and we catch sight of the Ebon Hawk, but to get access we need to call on an old friend. T3-M4, the chirpy utility droid from *KOTOR*, is locked in the Hawk's cargo hold and plays a pivotal role in this opening chapter. Avelone hacks the terminal once more and makes contact, launching the first of many companion-based quests that have been littered throughout the game. It's a ploy which harks back to the classic Death Star and Endor escapades, as Obsidian seek to add an enhanced Star Wars movie feel to the game.

"The other design goal for this is that it gives the player the chance to utilise characters that they wouldn't necessarily have in their party all the time," adds Parker. "This time around we're giving special abilities to each character which will ensure they'll be on a par with the Jedi in some fashion - or at least for a certain situations."

In this situation, T3's Demolition and Security skills unlock the emergency hatches in the facility which allow our party access to the mining tunnels and,

Poor little kitty. Looks like mange to us.



The lightsaber is the ultimate close-combat weapon, but is only available to Jedi. Or Sith...

eventually, after a short space walk across an asteroid, we aboard the Ebon Hawk once more. The ship that provided our base in the original game returns, an obvious reference to the Falcon, of course, and just one method of tapping into the classic Star Wars lore that resonates throughout the game. Indeed, Obsidian's first major challenge with *KOTOR 2* was to perpetuate this Star Wars atmosphere, something that coursed through the veins of the original.

Parker sums up the task. "It's a nebulous challenge. Our approved term for it is 'Star Warsy'. What defines that? I don't even know. But I can look at something like a droid and say nope, that's not Star Warsy or, yes, that fits. That for me has been the biggest test. But it's

Droids can pack nasty surprises.



"I'm really screwed because I now have to deliver the same experience as the first game, or even make it better," he jokes. "We have a very strong story

Dual-wielding is, clearly, the way forward.



companions and the player whilst telling another really great story."

He and Obsidian are saying no more than that right now. Our mind probes couldn't reveal the twists they have planned, the Sith Lords that we'll face, the Jedi's we'll discover and the planets we'll visit. But we've already seen enough to convince us that they will make all the right choices. For us, however, the big decisions lie ahead. Your destiny in the next epic Star Wars adventure is still undecided. The Jedi crossroads is a tantalising sight on the horizon once more.

"We need to call on an old friend: T3-M4, the droid."

enjoyable." Their second and most considerable task is, of course, to match the compelling, twisting story crafted by Bioware. Even Avellone was suitably daunted by the prospect.

foundation from the first game. Bioware left a lot of good characters that we could springboard off and make stronger. We know we have to get our characters right with some really strong links between the