STAR WARS THE OLD REPUBLIC

# Behind the Curtain

## Using MMO Systems to tell BioWare-quality Stories

Damion Schubert
damion@zenofdesign.com

# Who am I?

- Currently:
  - Lead Systems Designer on *Star Wars™: The Old Republic*
- Formerly:
  - Senior Designer/Lead Designer/Producer, *Shadowbane*
  - Lead Designer, *Meridian 59*
  - Columnist for *Game Developer* magazine
  - Frequent GDC speaker

NOT a writer

# This Talk

- Not about
  - Narrative
  - Character development
  - Leveraging a license
  - Other writer stuff
- Is About
  - Player experience
  - Gameplay flow of story
  - Social flow of story in MMO
  - Interaction with game systems

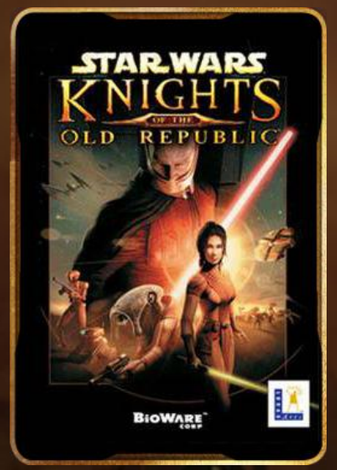
How game systems interact and support MMO storytelling

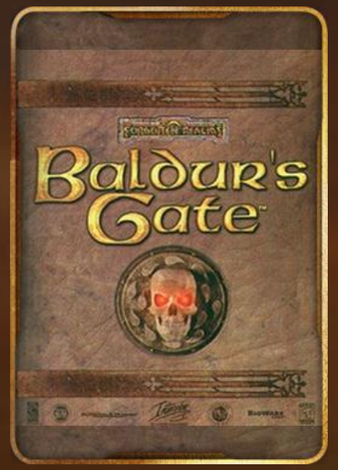
# MMOs are Hard

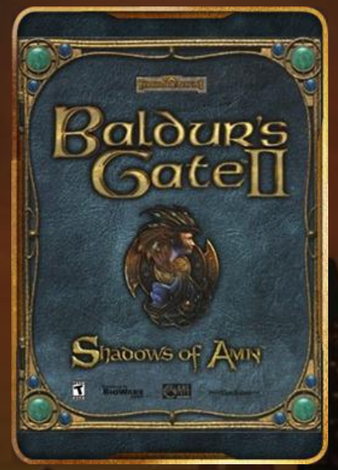
- Client-server architecture
- MASSIVE amounts of content –
  - Most MMOs required 250 hours to get to max level at ship
  - Factional split can increase further
- Class balance becomes crucial
- Social gameplay and social issues
- Billing, Security, Credit Card Fraud, etc

# BioWare Wants to Enter the Fray

- BioWare has one of the most impressive pedigrees in the games industry





- Average Metacritic Score: 91.8

# The Big Idea

- Add BioWare-Quality story to the MMO experience

+

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# + Star Wars

- One of the best global licenses of all time!
- Plus uniquely suited to an MMO
  - Human and non-human enemies
  - Strong visual combat
  - Strong heroic arc
  - Casual friendly and hardcore deep
- Also, BioWare has experience from developing *Star Wars*™: Knights of the Old Republic ™

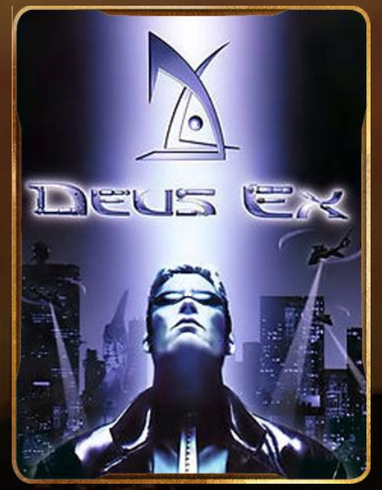
# So Wait.... What Is the BioWare Story?

# Story means different things in different games

- Backstory vs. Player Involvement vs. Player Directed

# Story means different things in different games

- Linear vs. Branching vs. Freeform vs. Generative vs. Emergent



# Story means different things in different games

- Narrative vs. Mechanical vs. Social

*(MMOs have all of these)*

# Story means different things in different games

- Traditional BioWare games focus on:
  - Backstory vs. Player Involvement vs. Player Directed
  - Narrative vs. Mechanical vs. Social
  - Linear vs. Branching vs. Freeform vs. Generative vs. Emergent

# BioWare Pillars

# Choice

Join my crew. We'll find it.
You feel nothing for Okeer?
My command is your reason.
Stand down or else.
I released you. You owe me.

# Consequences

Wrex and the Genophage

Ashley vs Kaiden

# Companions

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# Cinematic Presentation

# Content Quality

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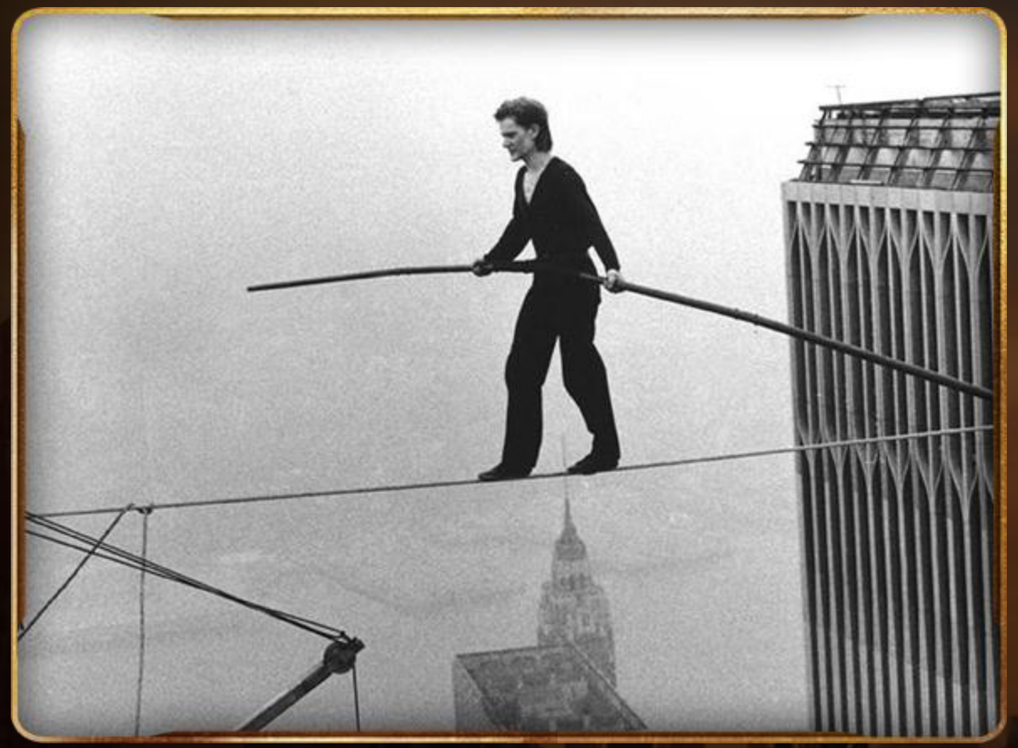
# OK

So we want to do this. What unique challenges does an MMO bring to the table when building BioWare content?

# Without A Net



Nature of MMOs means there is no save points or reloading story from past point

- All decisions are final
- No easy way to see ‘road not taken’
- Consequences really matter

This actually proved to be marketable

# Staggering Amount of Content

- Industry standard is a staggering number of gameplay hours to max level
  - Factionally unique content vastly increases effort required
- Our quest content is more expensive
  - Writing (which has to be done early)
  - Voice Over
  - Scripting (i.e. quest mechanics)
  - Chained quests
  - Forking

# Multiplayer is Tricky

- Group conversations playtested very well in the Neverwinter Nights model!
- Voting on conversation nodes a winner!
- Issues arose:
  - Gathering players together to start a conversation
  - Dealing with consequences of actions when you are outvoted

# Consequences

- Really hard to do stories that have BioWare impact in a shared space

# Class Stories

- We really wanted to deliver the Luke Skywalker experience!
- Wanted to tell stories that were true to the class – Smugglers shouldn't have the same stories as Jedi Knights
  - Means if people don't play multiple characters, players see 1/8 of our best content
- **Legacy System** was designed early on in order to encourage replay

# Challenges we Faced

# Incubation Time

- 8 unique class missions lines from levels 1 to 50
- Factionally unique missions on each side resulting in 160 hours targeted playtime
- Full VO for players and NPCs
  - Includes setting up infrastructure to find actors, manage scripts, track pronunciations, etc
- Many readthroughs and approvals (internal, Lucas, etc)
- Localization to French & German
  - Including VO!

"The equivalent of 24 KOTORs" is in the right ballpark

# Incubation Time

- Our writing department was the first fully staffed department at the company – 8 full-time writers
  - My previous project had two half-time writers
- They were all hired before we had:
  - Narrative writing tools
  - World builders to build what they wrote
  - Firm game mechanics

# Amount of Content

**AT LAUNCH**

- 260,000 lines of dialogue
- 321 Actors
- 4,094 Characters
- 17 Recording Studios
- 1,600 VO sessions
- Almost 275 hours of VO total
  - *Doesn't count aliens and other non-English speakers!*
  - *And we're still adding more stuff!*

# Too Many Quests

- Quest Hubs used to have 5-6 quests
- Turned out to be too much of a good thing – too much talking
  - Players had trouble tracking the various storylines
- Simplified some quests to use alternative quest delivery mechanisms
- Created new quest hubs without class quests
- Many were just thrown away

# Conversation Challenges

- Took us a while to find the optimal conversation length
  - Early conversations needed to be rewritten or have VO thrown away
- Patience gets shorter the farther you get into the game, and more trivial the quest content
- Social aspect has really weird effects on patience with conversations

# Problem Quests

- Often, VO was recorded and localized before we found a problem with the quest
  - Often happened late enough that rewriting/rerecording were not viable solutions
- Solutions:
  - Cut the quest
  - Insertion of non-English speaking NPCs

# Group Missions

- Group conversations were awesome!
- Gathering a group on the other hand, was tedious and annoying
- Made worse when class quests would lead to different places
- Quest chaining and forking were made messier with group

# Holo

- “Holocom” technology was our solution – allowed you to join a party member’s conversation from wherever you were

# Forking

- Forking made joining and sharing quests difficult
- Forced us to simplify many quests

# Staying in Sync

- Writers originally wrote quests so that different classes went to different quest hubs at different times
- Playtesting showed that keeping player's quest destinations in sync became a high priority
- Subtle differences in mission length had huge social impacts
- Philosophy of 'class stories are done alone' had to change

# Ambushes

- Players ‘getting jumped’ when they hit certain story points resulted in many design adjustments
- Writers had to have clear rules of when ambushes could happen
- Ambushes limit ability to let players teleport around the world
- We abandoned the idea of ‘hidden ambushes’ – making them less ambushy

# Light Side/Dark Side

- Issues with group conversations
  - Solution: you get rewarded for your choice not the result
- Issues with choices being unexpectedly light side or dark side
  - Jedi romances was a key example
  - ESC was important here
- Issues with choice clarity due to paraphrasing
  - Had to add symbols to give away LS/DS

# Mission Consequences

- No saves means choices are permanent
- Many on the team (and many fans) saw this as evocative and compelling
- Still, ESC to leave any conversation was one of our first design decision
  - Once the conversation is concluded, responses are final
  - ESC was key for players to survive ambushes
  - ESC was less than optimal in group situations

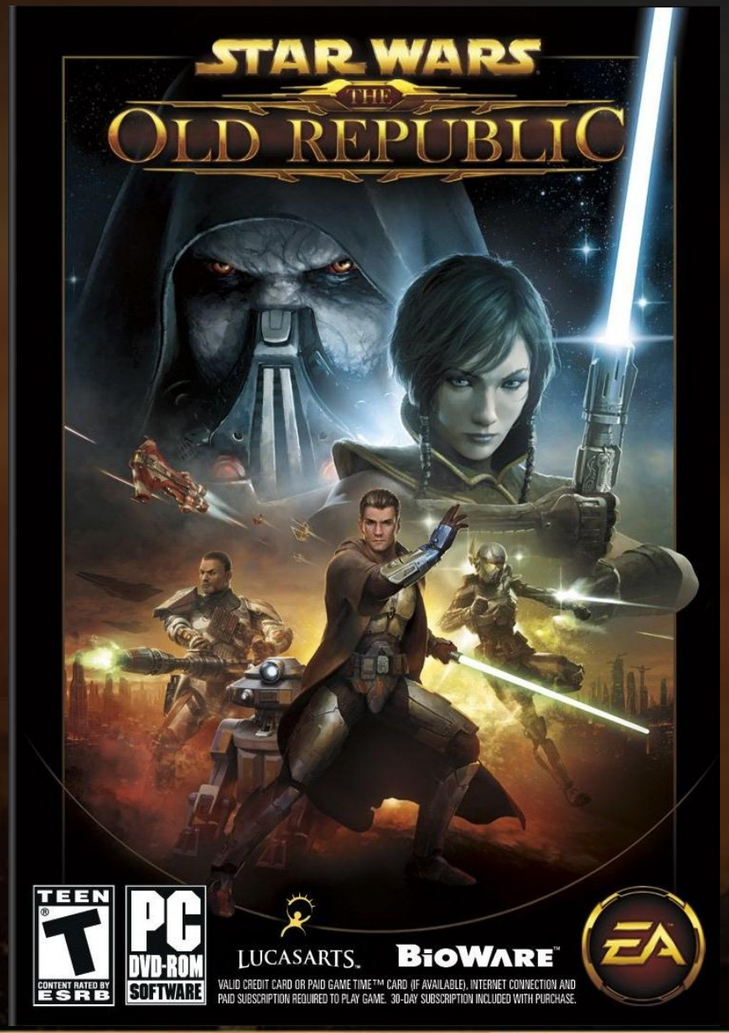
# Mission Consequences

- This companion character was always meant to die
- ...but doing so would cost you your healing companion

# Quality Assurance

- Our QA dept loved testing:
  - Forking Conversations
  - Gender and Species Variants
  - Complex scripting
- Class Quest Blockers were considered high priority must-fix, call-in-sleeping-designer level bugs

# So How'd We Do?




- 85% Metacritic
- Story was frequently cited as top strength of game

# Questions?

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