



**STAR WARS**  
**THE**  
**OLD REPUBLIC**

**BEHIND THE CURTAIN**  
**USING MMO SYSTEMS TO TELL BIOWARE-  
QUALITY STORIES**

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# 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

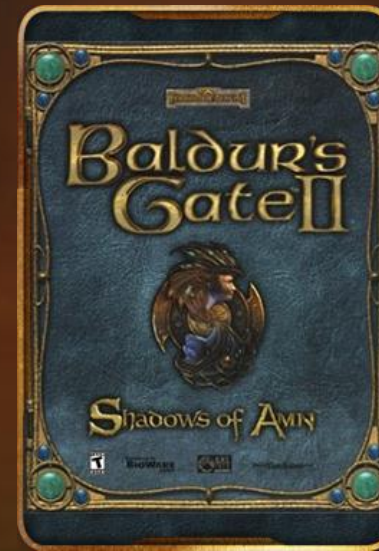
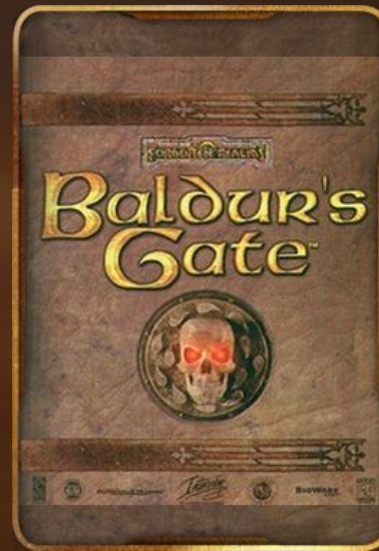
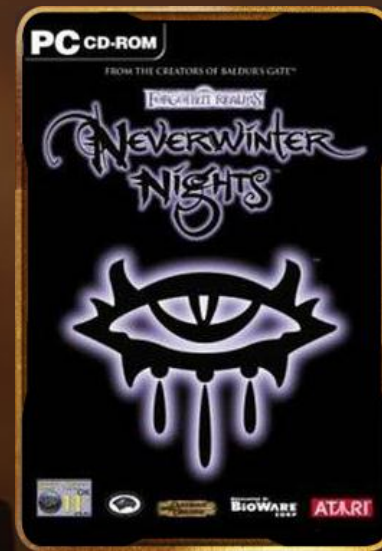
# MMOS ARE HARD

- 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

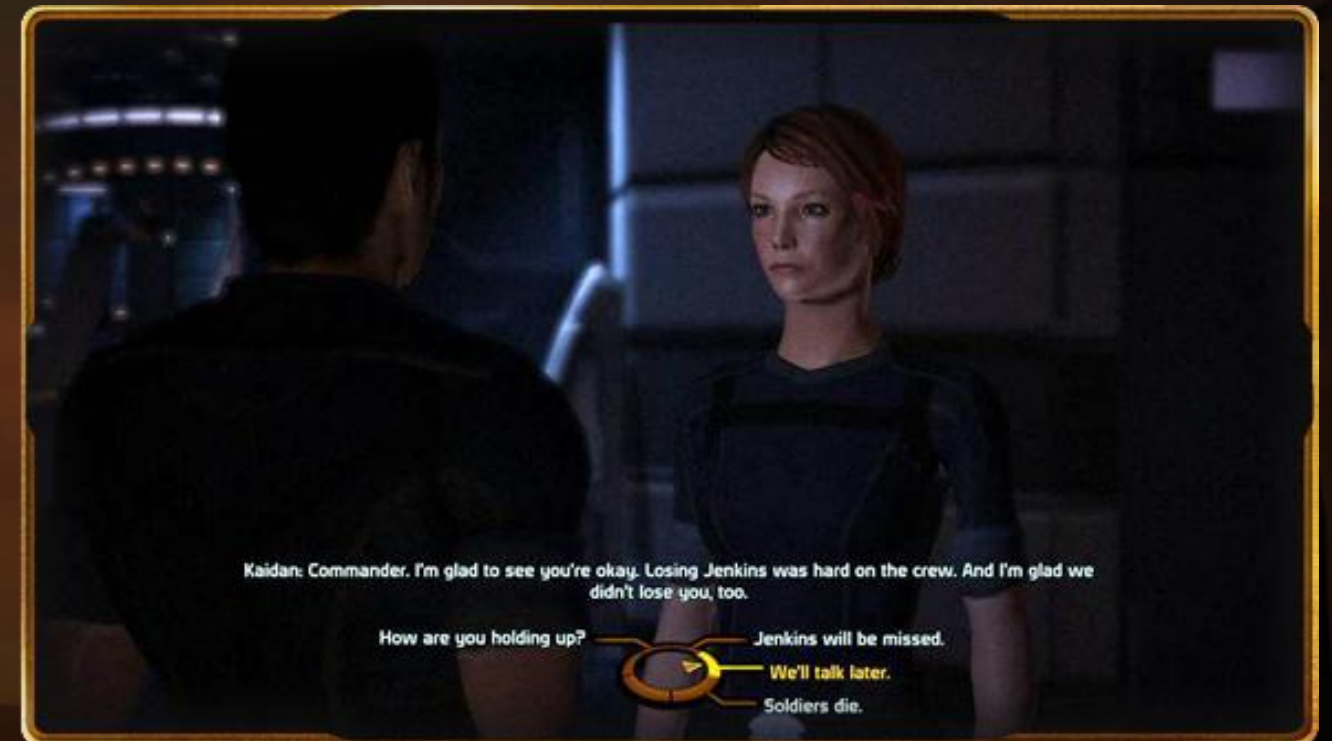
- BioWare has one of the most impressive resumes in the games industry



- Average Metacritic Score: 91.8

# THE BIG IDEA

- Add BioWare-Quality story to the MMO experience



# + 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*<sup>™</sup>: Knights of the Old Republic <sup>™</sup>





SO WAIT.... WHAT IS THE BIOWARE STORY?



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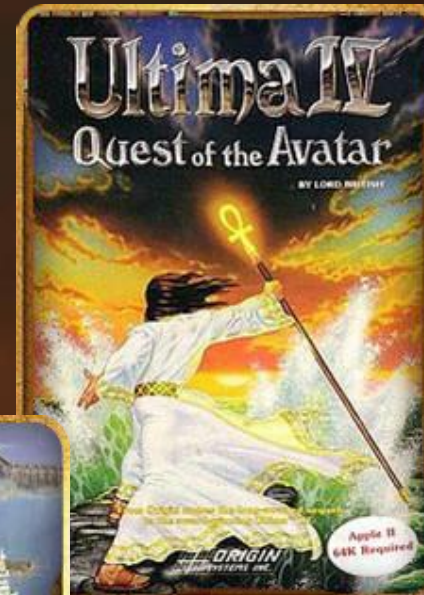
# STORY MEANS DIFFERENT THINGS IN DIFFERENT GAMES

- Backstory vs. Player Involvement vs. Player Directed



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- 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

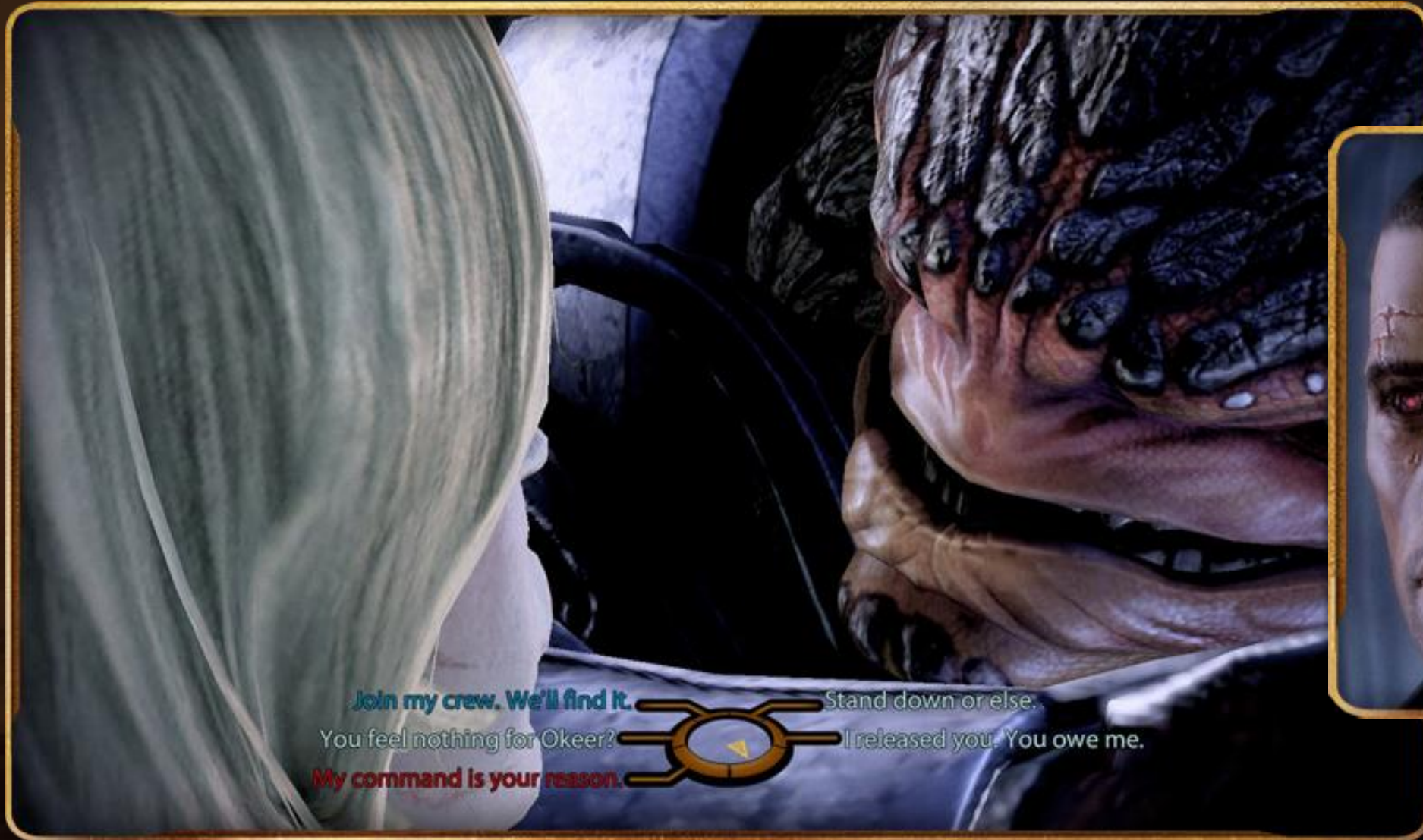


# BIOWARE PILLARS



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# 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



Ashley vs Kaiden

Wrex and the Genophage



# COMPANIONS





# CINEMATIC PRESENTATION



# CONTENT QUALITY



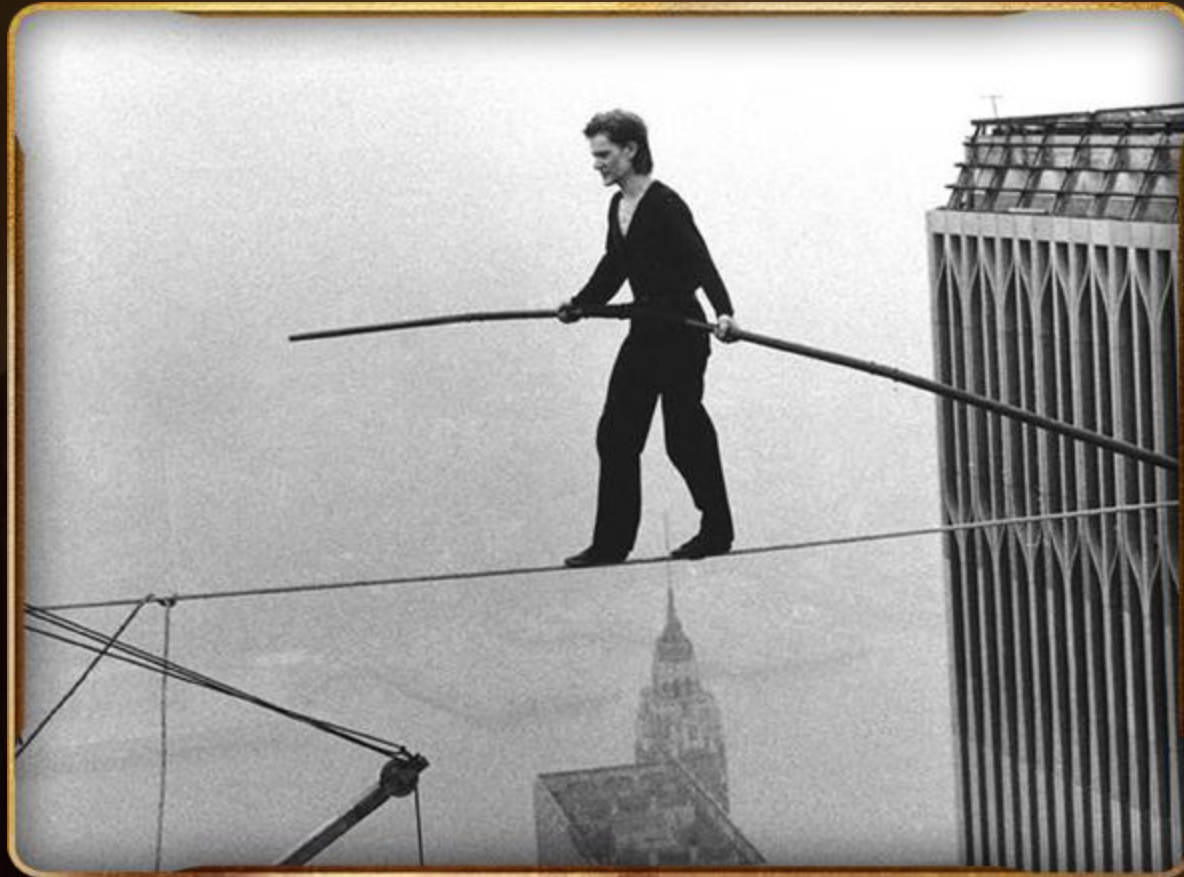
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# OK

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



- Competitors had a staggering amount of content
  - Factionally unique content vastly increases costs
- 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







# 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 read-throughs 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
- 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



# MISSION CONSEQUENCES

- ‘Rolling’ to win conversations was very popular
- Light Side/Dark Side system can’t penalize players for making a choice they don’t agree with
  - Choices were frequently ‘grey’ with arbitrary results
- Solution: you get rewarded for your choice not the result



# 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 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



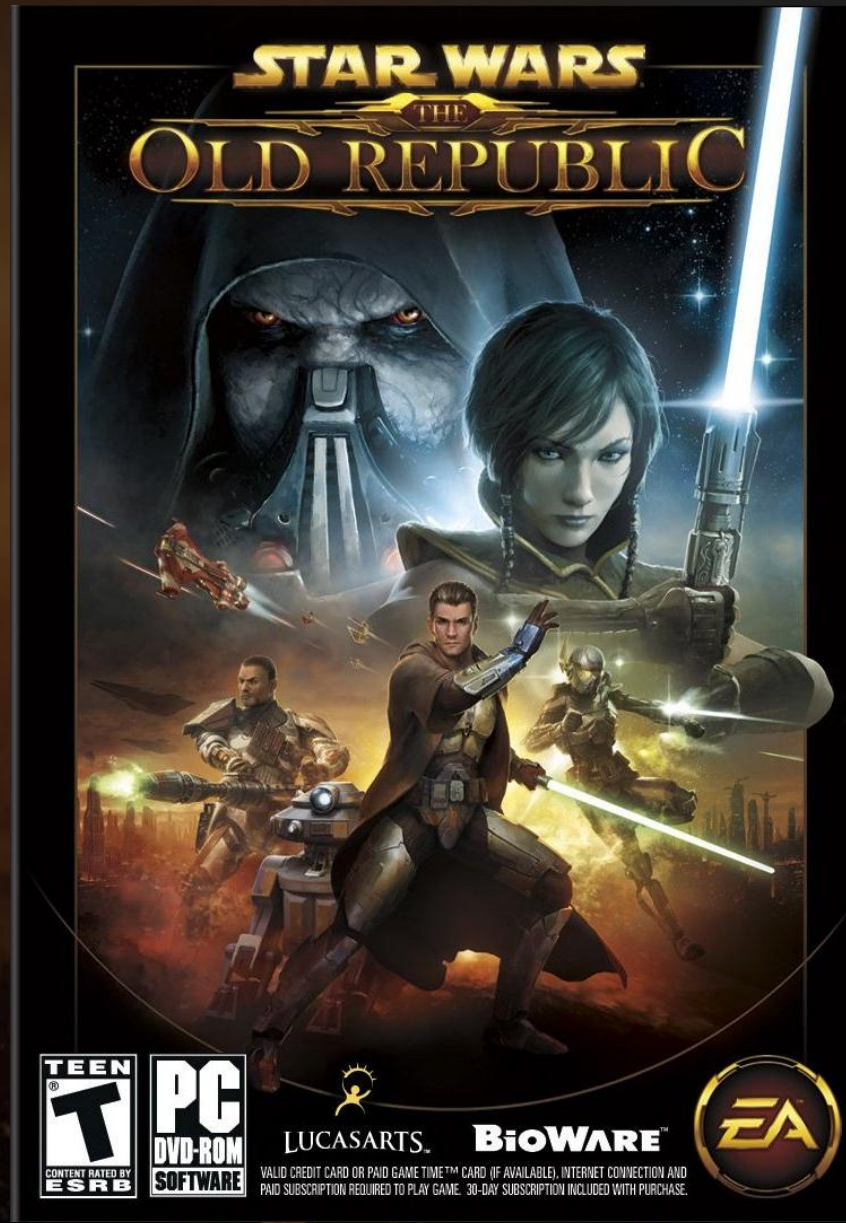
# QUALITY ASSURANCE



- 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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