

# **Close Reading**

Of

## **Star Wars Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast**

Level 7.1 – Doomgiver Communications Array

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## Star Wars Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast – Game

Jedi Knight 2: Jedi Outcast is the third game in the Dark Forces (now Jedi Knight) series. It follows the adventures of Kyle Katarn as he investigates an Imperial Remnant plot to create an army of Dark Jedi.



Jedi Knight II box.  
(wikipedia)

JK2 is a first-/third-person action game where the player can shoot a wide array of guns, wield a lightsaber, and manipulate the Force to make their way through the game. It combines elements of shooters, hack-and-slash and even platformers.

Genre-wise, like other Star Wars games, it is a science fiction game. However, by using the Jedi's mystical Force abilities, it combines elements of fantasy (Co, 54).

### Familiar Franchise – Transmedia Entity

JK2 is a transmedia extension of the original Star Wars films. It occurs approximately ten years after the events of Star Wars VI: Return of the Jedi and features characters and locales visited in the films and expanded upon in the Star Wars Expanded Universe (EU). The Expanded Universe is the entire transmedia entity that extends beyond the films and encompasses novels, comics, games and more.

As a transmedia entity, it can draw upon the existing fan base of Star Wars fans. In fact, for the most part, the game expects that most players will already be familiar with the Star Wars

universe. It's taken for granted that most players will be familiar with the concepts of the Force, Jedi, stormtroopers, blasters, hyperspace, lightsabers, etc.

The advantage of having licensed Star Wars is immense. As Dominick Diamond said in an article on CVG, "If a license is in the right hands, then we're treated to a far more authentic experience." As a licensed property, JK2 draws on the entire Star Wars Expanded Universe (a vast transmedia entity that extends beyond the original movies). So you don't have to explain the Force, or lightsabers or Jedi. One assumes that the player is already at least vaguely familiar with the concept.

More avid fans that are extremely familiar with Star Wars will find immersion easier in some ways as they have a complete understanding of where they are and what they are doing. However they may also find it harder to become immersed because they will more readily see logical flaws in the game's assumptions.

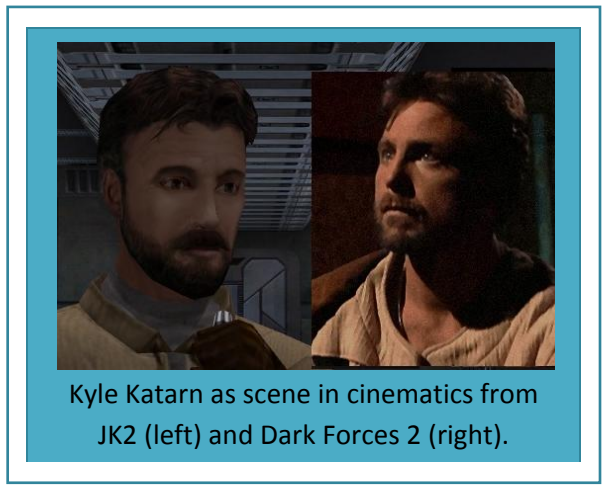
In any case, the richness of the universe, in general, allows for greater immersion. Seeing familiar sights such as Rodians, probe droids, X-wings, and familiar faces like Luke Skywalker and Lando Calrissian let the player get a real sense of being there. And minor details, like overheard conversations about Thernbees and lanvarocks (relatively obscure references to EU) give more hardcore fans a thrilling sense of immersion (Jenkins, Immersive Story Worlds). In fact, this sense of immersion is one of the main reasons people find this game fun. It has an element of fantasy fulfillment, placing the player in the Star Wars universe and having them a lightsaber and Force powers to play with (Crawford).

### **Main Character – Kyle Katarn**

The player plays from Katarn's perspective but he's not exactly easy to transform into.

Kyle Katarn's past was mostly revealed in previous games. Beyond the fact that he is a smuggler/commando/soldier and is force sensitive, his past has little impact on the plot of Jedi Outcast.

As a person he is cynical and taciturn. During game play, he only speaks to tell the player information such as "its offline." While you play as him, it's difficult to transform into him as a character. Playing as Kyle feels like playing as a mindless robot for all the emotion he shows. Perhaps it's because of his brush with the dark side in the previous game.



Maybe I find him hard to swallow as a character because I am such an avid fan of the Star Wars Expanded Universe. There are flaws in the overall plot and Kyle's motivations as a character including, as pointed out by Thomas MacGuire in TechSpot's review of the game, "returning to being a Jedi is that of revenge, not exactly a Jedi trait."

### **Game Play**

In the game, the player has access to several guns, each with two modes of fire, various mines and grenades, as well as a lightsaber and a set of Force powers. The control system for switching around all these abilities may seem a bit clumsy but, as with many games, you can customize controls to suit you.

Like many PC games, JK2 uses the mouse to look and the WASD keys to move. Whether the player is in first or third person, wielding a blaster or the light saber, this method of control is familiar and intuitive. Players will fight through swarms of enemies using their weapons. They can use the Force to throw people around, sweep the room with laser fire, hide behind crates and pick off enemies one by one or burst in flailing their saber wildly to hack enemies to pieces.

Having all these different options to deal with the same scenarios means that the same scene "kill all the baddies in this room" can be repeated because the player has a variety of ways to deal with it.

### **Perspective – First/Third person**

One way that JK2 was praised by UGO in their feature "Star Wars: A Video Game Saga" was the way the perspective "seamlessly switched between first and third person perspectives to allow for some true Jedi swashbuckling".

The ability to play in both first and third person makes a big impact on the way the game is played. Toby Gard's article on character building divides games into two broad types: first and third person and states that "psychology of the two POVs is drastically different". According to Gard, the first person is more immersive and allows for greater transformation as the player sees through the character's eyes and views it less like something happening to the character and more like something happening to them.

This is true of the switch between first and third person when wielding a gun but when wielding a saber, this is less the case. By default, when the player switches to the saber, the perspective will switch to third person. They are not limited to being in this perspective but saber combat is better handled in third person. When holding a gun, the weapon is held stationary, but when wielding the saber, it has a wide range of motion, all around the player (I, Jedi) which requires greater awareness of the entire body. Additionally, the player has more acrobatic abilities (such as rolling) that can only be performed in third person holding the lightsaber.

While Gard's claim about the third person perspective creating a less sense of transformative is weaker in regards to JK2, its still not entirely untrue. While its easier to player from the third person when in saber combat or performing various jumping puzzles, it does create a sense of being removed from the character. Because the player has the option to toggle back and forth between the first and third person perspectives, they can have the control of the external camera when needed, and the transformation allowed by the first person camera when desired.

### **Story up to this point**

Kyle and Jan are investigating an Imperial outpost that has a link to the Valley of the Jedi, a site of intense force energy visited in the previous game (Dark Forces II: Jedi Knight). They learn that the Imperial Remnant, under the command of Galak Fyarr has teamed up with the dark Jedi Desann and his sidekick Tavion.

As they continue their investigation, Jan gets killed by Tavion and Kyle decides to reconnect with the Force which he had been shying away from since his brush with the dark side in the previous game. After regaining some of his powers, he continued to track Desann and the Remnant's operations to Bespin where Kyle learns from Tavion that Jan is alive and a prisoner aboard Galak's ship, the Doomgiver.

Kyle follows the trail to Cairn where he meets more of the dark Jedi being trained by Desann and hooks up with Luke Skywalker. Kyle sneaks aboard the Doomgiver right before the ship departs into hyperspace.

Level 7.1 opens up with Luke speaking to Kyle on the commlink. He tells Kyle that he must find a way to get a message to Rogue Squadron.

### **Level 7.1 – The Doomgiver's communications array**

This is a great level because it shows a variety of game aspects, showcases the kinds of puzzles and patterns one encounters throughout the game, and how the game combines three different play styles. The best way to see all these is to go through the level step-by-step.

### **Clear the rooms – JK2 as an FPS**

First the player must clear some rooms full of stormtroopers. Clearing rooms of baddies like this shows how the game is similar to many FPSs.

JK2 is definitely part FPS. It is structurally arranged like a FPS: linear plot, distinct levels that have clear times and settings. The player's main resources are a vast array of weapons. A good percentage of the

gameplay is simply clearing rooms full of enemies which shoot back at you. The items are picked up by collision and consist of health, shields, and ammo. On the whole, JK2 follows the same gameplay *gestalt* as any other FPS (Lindley).

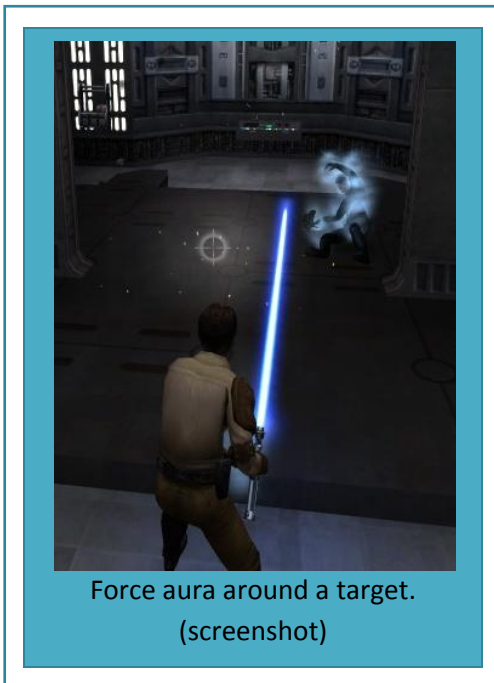
### **Ceiling Turrets – pattern recognition**

After clearing those rooms the player will come face to face with a pair of the familiar ceiling mounted gun turrets. Having seen these before, the player recognizes the pattern, selects their preferred method of dealing with them, and carries it out.

Finding patterns is another of the game's fun features, "Once [you] see a pattern, [you] delight in tracing it, and in seeing it reoccur." Every time you face these ceiling turrets, you already know how to deal with them. (A theory of fun)

### **Clearing out more baddies – Using the force**

If the player tires of using guns to take out baddies, he can fall back on the Force. Force pull and push are the main telekinetic abilities which, depending on rank (ranks increase automatically as you progress; in this level, most powers are maxed out), can yank weapons out of one or more hands, and even throw foes around. Once disarmed, most foes will run around like fools rather than keep shooting.



Force aura around a target.  
(screenshot)

In addition to push and pull, the player can draw upon heal, jump, mind trick, lightning, grip, saber throw, and speed. In the average fight, there is no set way to use these powers, but it's fun to subjugate enemies using the fantastical Force amidst the classic technology laden shoot-em-ups.

Pushing and pulling shows a visible aura around the targets so even if your telekinetics aren't successful, you can still see that you tried. This is a useful feedback on a power which would be otherwise invisible. Essentially, the player visualizes the invisible tendrils of the Force around their target as they assert their will.

### **Saber Duel – Epic movie feel, controls, feedback**

Throughout the game, the player encounters foes that must be faced saber to saber. These duels, certainly attempt to invoke the sensation of being involved in an epic battle of good versus evil, but they fall far short of it.

The saber itself is a clumsy weapon; Obi-wan Kenobi describes it as "the weapon of a Jedi Knight. Not as clumsy or random as a blaster; an elegant weapon for a more civilized age." (ANH), but it's anything but. The saber is difficult to control and often frustrating as you use the same controls to move yourself and control the direction of your swing. Duels themselves provide little feedback, making it difficult to determine if you are making progress or not. The final blow, win or lose, seems almost accidental at times.

However, the game is not entirely unsuccessful at making the duels fun. With much practice, a player will get better at it and become more comfortable controlling their saber. The whirling flashes of light,

the sounds of the saber slashing through the air are familiar. And if the player manages to find themselves in a saber lock, they can stare down their foe, rapidly pressing the button to press forward and win the lock.

### **All the doors are locked – environment agency, problem solving**

Continuing onward after the duel the player will find themselves in a room that appears to be a dead end. All the exits are locked. However this barrier has been mounted before and the player will remember that their environment is a 3d one: sometimes one must go up instead of forward. Looking up, the player will find ceiling grates that can be smashed open and a passageway which will get them beyond the locked doors.

Looking around for this sort of thing is something the player has already become accustomed to in earlier levels. Even if the player cannot find that familiar grate, they have learned that some walls, grates, screens, etc can be smashed to allow passage. Sometimes, the Force is required to move something around to solve a puzzle, but figuring out which objects you will need to interact with with the Force is made easier by a blue halo around the reticle whenever such an object is targeted.

Giving the player a sense of agency over their environment by letting them smash stuff up makes the environment seem more real.

### **Interrogation Droids – visual effects, more movie references, and panicking**

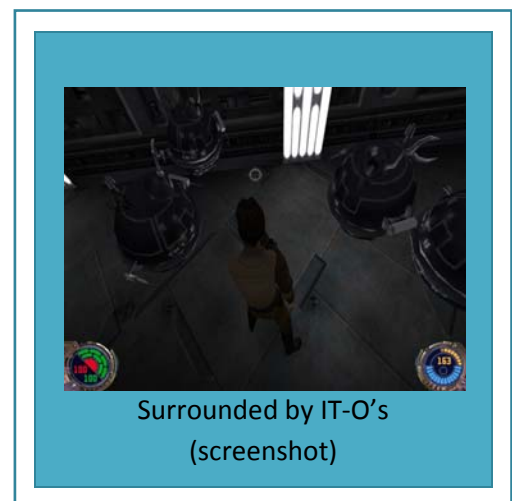
Up in the passage the player will see a familiar face: interrogation droids (IT-O) seen in *A New Hope*. In fact, more hardcore fans may even look up these droids in *The Essential Guide to Droids*. If the player recognizes them, they will know what to expect, but simply touching one will let you know what is going to happen:

The view blurs and becomes wavy and distorted. The character takes periodic losses of life and grunts in pain each time as red splashes appear on the sides of the screen. There are a lot of these droids and they are all swooping down at the player ominously. Their threatening beeps, the blurred vision, the grunts of pain—these all invoke a sense of anxiety bordering on panic as the player frantically retreats from the droids and tries to shoot them down. It's hard not to become emotionally connected with Katarn here.

### **Droid control – Vehicles, and new perspectives**

Escaping the interrogation droids and dropping into the next room, the player again finds themselves in a dead end. Accessing a console, however, will drop them into the body of a R5 unit (a droid similar to Artoo-Detoo).

Controlling the droid is actually vehicle control. The player uses the same controls as they would to move themselves to move something else. As with playing as Kyle, as the droid, the player can swap between first and third person. Another element of realism is added when the player realizes that they can no longer “strafe” (move left and right without turning) as the droid because of the way its wheels are aligned.





Droid's-eye-view  
(screenshot)

As the droid, the player can access places previously inaccessible and open locked doors from the other side. The droid can move unhindered until they start acting suspicious (opening the door) at which point it will start being shot at.

Controlling the droid is one of the fun things about this level. The limited motion, the lowered view angle, and the ability to sneak around all give the sense of playing the game as the droid. In fact, the droids beeps and whirrs are more poignant than any emotions Kyle conveys in the level.

#### **A room full of fire – choosing between a soldier and a Jedi**

When becoming a Jedi, a person has a new range of abilities to work with as they enter into various encounters.

Sometimes, a person has to decide between being a Jedi and being a soldier when they enter into a fight. Much in the way Corran Horn (who bares quite a resemblance to Katarn) has to choose between using his new abilities as a Jedi or his old abilities as a cop to save his wife (*I, Jedi*), Kyle will decide to enter each battle with guns blazing a soldier, or with saber flashing as a Jedi.

This is one of the main choices a player can make as they play. The player can choose from the huge array of weapons and force abilities. Its easiest to think of it as choosing between

The choice of how to handle each situation is how the player exerts control, makes choices and is engaged. The story, like a novel is largely linear, following a defined path. But the player can choose how to handle situations, they “feel that they have freedom of action” even though they are in fact “constrained to a linear path of events” ” (Costikyan, *Where Stories End...*).

#### **Contact Rogue Squadron – objective, cohesion between play and narrative**

Finally, you arrive at communications array itself. As you enter this room, text pops up to tell you that your objectives have been updated. And it's a good thing too because up until this point, there has been no real connection between the level being played and the narrative as a whole.

Objectives connect the narrative to the play. Why am I here? What's my goal? Its easy to forget this as you traverse the level, however. Then, once you get to the communications array, there's a complicated puzzle to be solved as the array isn't on. So in order to perform the simple act of turning on the array, the player must enter in a complex code.

#### **Entering the code – as a platformer, struggle, change of pace**

In a platformer, the primary mechanic is jumping on the platforms. Skills in navigation, timing and reflexes help a gamer get to their goal in this kind of game.

The next area in this level is essentially a platformer making it a sharp break from the shooting and slashing of the rest of the level. While not the first challenge that uses the mechanics of a platformer, this is certainly the most memorable.

The player enters a room with a three-by-three-by-three grid of chambers suspended over a deep pit. Each chamber has a console with a symbol on it. The goal is to activate the consoles with the correct symbols matching the code you are given. The symbols are red, green and blue corresponding to the levels in the room. There are walkways between many of the chambers but there is no easy or direct path to any of the chambers the player will need to visit. So the player will have to do a lot of jumping around the room to enter in the code.

The puzzle itself is easy to figure out: symbols are the same on all three levels. If you find the symbol for green on the red level, go down to the corresponding chamber on the green level to find it. No, the hard part is the jumping around. It can be extremely frustrating as such jumping puzzles are wont to be. However it stands out in the game. It removes one from the repetitive shooting or slashing and asks the player to wield a different set of tools

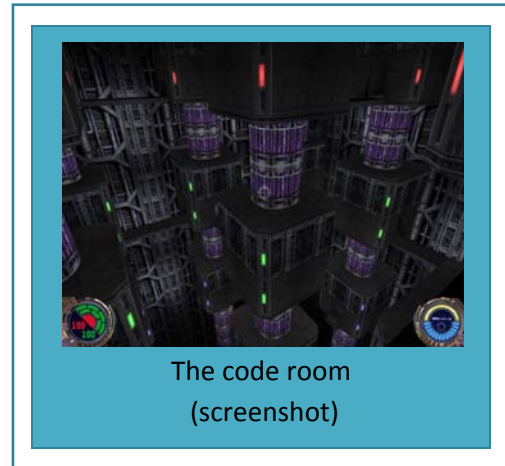
The level may be frustrating but it's far from impossible and seems to have found the necessary and correct balance between frustration and boredom (Costikyan, Game Design Theory).

### **Home Free – Level ending and conclusions**

After the player enters the code, they return to the communications array to make contact. During this cinematic the player gets a quick flash a locked door opening but it may take them a while to realize where it is. After finding it, however, they pass through and the level ends.

Levels end with level stats to let a player know what they did, how many guys they killed, how accurate they were, etc. This reflects on another reason people play games according to Crawford: the desire to prove oneself. By working to improve stats, a player can add further challenges imposed by themselves to the game.

On the whole, JK2 is a fun and challenging game.



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