Review: Fresh stories propel 'The Old Republic'

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In this video game image released by BioWare, a Sith warrior battles a team of Republic defenders in "Star Wars: The Old Republic." (AP Photo/BioWare)

(AP) -- How do you make that familiar galaxy far, far away fresh again? Take it back to an even longer time ago. Way back. Well before Vader, Luke, Leia, Yoda and especially Jar Jar. More than 3,000 years before, in fact. That's the setting for BioWare's engaging "Star Wars: The Old Republic," a multiplayer online game for PCs that debuted last month. (The standard version costs $59.99, with 30 days of game time; afterward, users are required to buy subscription plans.)

It's not quite alien territory for [BioWare](#), which created 2003's "[Star Wars](#): Knights of the Old Republic," a solo role-playing game that introduced gamers to the roots of the conflicts that explode in the "Star Wars" films. In this new-old universe, Jedi knights and Sith lords clash in the shadow of a looming intergalactic war between the Republic and

the Empire. And there are plenty of fresh storylines to keep it interesting.

"The Old Republic" lets players create avatars that correspond to eight character classes, such as Jedi knights, Sith warriors, smugglers and bounty hunters. You improve your character's skills and weapons by completing quests or battling other players.

That's all pretty standard. But four weeks in, I'm not suffering from the boredom that usually develops after grinding characters through level ranks.

"The Old Republic" gets just about everything right.

Most of all, it makes you feel like you're part of a huge narrative that's at once personal to your character's journey, but also part of a wider, unfolding epic between the Republic and the Empire. Quests and story arcs appear to end, but don't. Your character may finish a mission, only to get ambushed while strolling back to his ship hours later.

Even within the same quests, each character class experiences different story elements. Jedi knights start off on different planets than smugglers, and outside of separate player-versus-player zones, Republic-aligned characters don't share the same digital air as their Empire counterparts in characters' early levels.

So the payoff in trying different characters goes well beyond checking out other weapons and combat styles - though this is fun, too. While a standard gaming controller option would have been ideal, the combat system is lively enough to keep you engaged.

The world of "The Old Republic" has a slick, detailed look that, for the most part, echoes the design elements of the "Star Wars" prequels. Small

details play very big, like when you see your character receive orders from their superior officer via hand-held hologram.

But what really sets the game apart is its use of dialogue. It features more than 320 actors voicing all the interactions between a player's avatar and more than 4,000 characters. (That doesn't count the array of noises delivered by droids.) The spoken dialogue and musical cues from the "Star Wars" films help give the game a cinematic feel.

"The Old Republic" also gives players multiple options for how they want to respond when they interact with the characters they meet. You can choose to be antagonistic or friendly, even flirtatious. But how you communicate has consequences. You may provoke someone into attacking you, or intimidate them into giving up without a fight.

Given that this is a "Star Wars" game, the choices you make end up determining whether a character is on the path of the light or dark side of the Force. Go too far in either direction and certain weapons and other items become available even as you're blocked from using others.

As in "Knights of the Old Republic," player characters have companions who tag along. They assist in combat and craft items like weapons and armor. It's best to keep them happy, through gifts and the choices you make on quests, or they become moody and less effective.

You cannot rely exclusively on your virtual companions, however. "Hero"-level missions and "flashpoints" are designed for groups of players.

Some elements of "Old Republic" don't work so well.

If you played the long-running, recently shuttered "Star Wars: Galaxies," you'll miss that multiplayer game's wide-open sandbox feel. Especially at

the outset, when characters are still learning the ropes on their starter planets, "The Old Republic" feels a bit restrictive, mostly keeping you on designated paths.

You'll miss the freedom "Galaxies" gave players to jump on a speeder bike or hoof it in any direction across Tatooine's desert landscape. You can visit Tatooine (and Hoth and Alderaan, among other worlds) in "The Old Republic," but if you stroll too far outside the mapped-out territory, your character starts dying within a few steps.

Still, "The Old Republic" is hardly limited in scope. Level maps get more complex as you journey beyond the starter planets. And the galaxy opens up once you get a spaceship, which can be outfitted with upgraded shields, missiles, weapons and armor.

Space combat in "The Old Republic" is easily the game's weakest point. Your ship basically flies a fixed course and you're left to use the mouse to target enemy craft. It's pretty weak, especially in comparison with the dynamic, full-control maneuvering and ship customization options that "Galaxies" offered.

Apart from that less-than-stellar feature, "The Old Republic" delivers a virtual "[Star Wars](#)" universe that blunts the level-grinding drudgery that typically saps interest in MMOs with something seen in the best movies and video games - a narrative with genuinely dramatic moments. Three and a half stars out of four.