

# Bow, Nigger

always\_black

## Context

*I wrote "Bow, Nigger" as an experimental piece for the now-defunct games webzine State Magazine. It was spotted, bought and published by the UK edition of PC Gamer (2004) and subsequently held up as an example of less conventional (but importantly still commercially viable) games journalism by Kieron Gillen in his "New Games Journalism" manifesto. It's a true account of one night's play at multiplayer Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast, although thought by many to be fictional. To those people I would say: if I could make this stuff up, I'd be rich by now.*

## Player and Character

## Cultural Representation

"always\_black" is British writer and amateur games journalist Ian Shanahan, published sometimes by the UK edition of PC Gamer and on his own website at [www.alwaysblack.com](http://www.alwaysblack.com).

*"Bow, nigger." he typed.*

I kind of hunched uncomfortably over the keyboard at that point. Not that I should've taken offence, really.

For one thing, my screen name has nothing to do with my ethnicity and for another, it's only a game and the fascist doing the typing is probably hundreds of miles away and far beyond anything you could call an actual influence on my life.

But still... It's not very nice is it?

What to do?

I circled around him warily.

JKII: Jedi Outcast does one thing very, very well, and that's lightsabres. In fact, it's probably more accurate to say George Lucas et al did lightsabres very well in the *Star Wars* films and Outcast does a good job of recalling the memory of those flashing contests. The emulation is near perfect, from the initial hiss as it slowly rises from the handle, the sweeping motion-blurred visuals to the pitch-shifting, threatening hum.

Throughout the game you can choose which perspective you choose to view the action from. The game defaults to first-person for projectile weapons but drawing your lightsabre switches to third-person ass-cam and this is by far the best configuration. Leave it alone.

Third-person allows you to fully-appreciate the acrobatics of the sabre fighting animations. You can swing away in one of three "styles," fast, medium and heavy, all of which allow you wrestle mouse movement and direction key presses to produce jaw-dropping combinations of slashes, chops and stabs that risks you forgetting any question of your actual opponent as you stare in disbelief and whisper "Did I just do that?".

*"Bow," he types.*

Hmm. Problem. For all of the excellent sword-play animations, Raven seems to have omitted any of the more mundane actions you could envisage your avatar performing. There is no "bow" button.

What my socially retarded friend is being so insistent about is something else, and that's a form of "physical" expression that grew up out of the enthusiasm of some of the more ardent *Star Wars* fans who play JKII online. Some people take their fiction VERY seriously and wannabe Jedi Knights are among the most serious. The faithful, in order to be more true to the "Jedi Code of Honour," crouch before each other and duck their "heads" down as a mark of respect before enjoining battle. Some people think that's silly.

I thought it was silly, the first time I saw it. Then I saw everybody was doing it. And then I felt silly not doing it. It's strange how much weight the actions of your peers can bring to bear, even when your social medium is only a bunch of really fast maths on a German server.

I'm currently in "heavy" style. This affords me the most damaging attacks at the expense of much slower swings. When you're not attacking it also provides the best defence, parrying is handled automatically. The best defence is wise while I'm facing off with this wanker. We've been engaged in our duel for two or three minutes and neither of us has come close enough to hit each other yet. This is a period of "sizing up".

Sometimes rash, headlong attacks can be exploited by a player of a reasonable skill level and you'll find yourself ghosting and waiting for another turn before you know what hit you. If you've never played a particular opponent before it pays to feel him out a bit.

First, though, there are the formalities. I crouch and duck my head, a "bow". Vulnerable. Stupid? Yeah.

But you know what? I entered in to it willingly and "Why?" is a very interesting question.

I'm a big boy now and I don't want to be a Jedi Knight when I grow up. The *Star Wars* films are great, but they're also just that, films, a form of entertainment to be enjoyed during breaks from my very real and financially challenging life (mortgage, two cats, a broken gutter and a car that needs some attention. Cheers.)

So I didn't bow because I wanted to "role-play" the Jedi of the game. It was an act of defiance.

Dueling is not new. Any multiplayer game can leave you with one opponent on either side and I've played that scenario out in many games. The difference with lightsabre dueling, Outcast-style, is that it's so very personal. These aren't detached sniping matches across the width of the map or rocket-spamming blast-fests to see who can respawn the least. JKII duel is "winner-stays-on" and you can be floating around for anything up to half-an-hour on a busy server waiting for a game. This makes your game "life" actually worth something and it makes it worth fighting for.

Into this potent mix you can toss in the fact that while you're a ghosting spectator you have time to chat and actually get to know the people you're playing, even on that usually most impersonal of beasts, the public server. Even during actual fights, play can swing from bouts of thrust, slash and parry to more distanced, wary sizing-up, searching for an opening that will allow you to get a sucker-hit in before your opponent can counter, time to talk and taunt.

But perhaps most personal of all is the close proximity you have to come to damage your opponent. I'm an avoidant player at the best of times, but JKII lightsabre duels just don't allow you to hit and fade from range. You have to be right in there trying to give the other guy a laser enema if you're going to avoid watching the show for another six games.

So I bowed. Not because I was naive enough to think he'd give any significance to the gesture. Not because he was commanding me to from his pillar of arrogance. I bowed *despite* his taunts. For all his goading I did "the right thing", to show him I wasn't going to come and meet him down on his level.

Blammo.

SONOFABITCH! Jesus, all my shields and forty health from one big heavy-stance overhead chop before he spun away, back to the other side of the map.

"LOL! Nigger"

He goes into a "blender". Every style has a selection of "special moves" that can be activated by combination key presses, set pieces taken from notable moments of the films. Unfortunately, because JKII is based on the Quake III engine, the macro scripting of that seminal of all first-person shooters is easily migrated across. This means that all skill or effort can be eliminated from the execution of these moves by a few simple scripts that can be readily downloaded and bound to a key. A "blender" is the heavy-stance "backsweep" move, or several rather, chained together, causing the model to spin unrealistically like a top. Fatal if you get too near it, but very difficult to use in an actual fight, as you're unable to do anything until the animation has finished. It's a shame that exploits like this would eventually lead to the ultimate downfall of the multiplayer game.

He's showboating. He's demonstrating how 1337 he is.

"Are you really black nigger?," he types.

"Why?," I replied.

"Because it matter." he says.

I ignored that and edged closer by a circuitous route. Don't want to get caught out by one of his lame keybinds. I switched down to medium stance, my favourite and the best balance between speed and damage.

"I know I hurt you by the things I say," he says.

I hit "T" to talk and the chat icon appears above my head. But I hesitate. I wanted to say something, but with the little underscore blinking away there my fingers stopped over the

keys. Say what? "No, you don't," "No, you aren't," "How can you when your insults are meaningless?" "Fuck you, asshole?"

And SLASH. Bastard.

In chat mode you're powerless, like most other games, your typing fingers can't do much about an assault by a conscienceless typekiller. In all my years of twitch-gaming my fingers have never moved so fast across the keyboard, escaping the trap of chat mode and rallying my defences against his lightning fast slashes.

Almost too late I put distance between us. Almost too late but not quite. Five health points remain and I know I haven't even hit him yet. Five health means you're nearly dead. A brush from the tip of a sabre that is just held idly will remove five health points from you and take you out of the game. Shit.

It's really, really unfair. I mean, alright, I've asked for it, haven't I? I was aware from the outset what kind of player I am facing, and still I insisted on performing the ritual courtesies and still I fell for the oldest trick in the book, cut to ribbons while I answer a pointless taunt. I've only myself to blame.

But for the most part JKII multiplayer isn't like that. Mostly, JKII players are like players everywhere, they just want to have a blast and enjoy the competition. They'll show each other a degree of respect that is just absent from most other multiplayer games and they express that respect in a variety of ways, from the odd little emergent bow to ad hoc lessons from complete strangers to clans adopting the padawan/master relationship outlined in the films. Most of the players are good guys.

This is why it's unfair. The game allows "bad behaviour", this is a good thing. It means that by avoiding "bad" behaviour you can demonstrate how "good" you are. Virtuous. A lack of virtue is unfairness in the unofficial "rules" of the game but the only answer you have is to fight back. You too can be "unfair," but, um, some people don't like to play that way... They make a choice.

This one does. This one is a bad guy, and he isn't messing about anymore. I guess he must've run out of tricks, or perhaps he'd done a few quick mental calculations and realised that I'm probably on the ropes, because he starts spamming the heavy-stance finishing move informally termed "Death From Above". This begins with a long flat leap and ends with an overhead chop, get caught under it and it's fatal no matter how many shield or health points you have remaining.

Which is a mistake on his part. It's total overkill, even though he doesn't know I have only five points left, and I happen to know that the very end of the move leaves you very vulnerable indeed. He has underestimated me and who can blame him? I've hardly been the epitome of laser swordsmanship thus far. I'll rectify that impression just now.

A quick swap down to fast style and a crouch-forward-attack puts me into a lunge, catching him with the uppercut. By no means fatal, but I rocked his world there for a moment. He thought he was dominating and now he's lost a whole lot of health and he wasn't ready for that.

He actually "reeled". There's always scope for projecting a little extra personification onto a computer generated character, but I swear to god he had shock on his face. Entirely too rash for my current health level, I went into a little whirlwind of fast-style slashes and probably dinged him a little more in the process as he beat a hasty retreat.

No chatting now. No more insults. Collision detection in JKII is a little flaky. Sometimes hits do far more damage than you'd have thought. I can hope. He comes at me and we have at it.

The lightsabres hiss and fizz when they come into contact with each other. I rolled and dodged and parried for all I was worth. Five health only. Nearly dead.

A little something personal about myself: I don't sweat. Never have. Not under normal, sat-at-the-computer, circumstances anyway. Obviously, physical exertion makes me sweat, running, jumping, swimming etc. But not just sat in a chair.

We spun around each other, bouncing off the furniture of the map. My concentration was absolutely intense and never before have I tried so hard to "be the mouse". I felt a trickle of wet run down from under my right armpit.

You see what this has become? It's not just a trivial game to be played in an idle moment; this is a genuine battle of good versus evil. It has nothing to do with *Star Wars* or Jedi Knights or any of the fluff that surrounds the game's mechanics. I played by the "rules" and he didn't, that makes me the "good" guy and him the "baddie", but this is real, in the sense that there's no telling who's going to win out here. There's no script or plot to determine the eventual triumph of the good guy (that's me, five health), there's no "natural order" of a fictional universe or any question of an apocryphal ultimate "balance". There's just me and him, light and dark, in a genuine contest between the two.

And there it is. I don't even know what it was. Some chance slash or poke in all of the rolling and jumping around and his lifeless avatar, with all his racist stabs and underhand duplicity, goes tumbling to the floor vanquished by the guy who even in the face of all of that, played by the "rules". Only one health point remains but I win.

I'm a fucking hero. A real one.

A beep and a server message: Wanker has disconnected.

I can only dream of the howls of anguish so far away.

My next opponent spawns. And bows. A chat icon appears.

*"Awesome," he types.*