

## **Unbroken Immersion: The Skyrim Experience**

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Bethesda Softworks prides itself on creating compelling gameplay by offering massive, open world role playing games. While many other games boast ten or twenty hours of game play, Bethesda's role playing games offer more than a hundred hours of game play, several hundred hours if one wants to experience all of the content offered. Skyrim is the most recent open world RPG created by Bethesda, and it offers a world even more beautiful, complete, and complex than any of their previous creations. It is truly epic in the scale of the world, in its expansive appearance, and in the scope of the game play and story.

Skyrim is winning game of the year accolades from several publishers in 2011, just as Fallout 3 did in 2008 and Oblivion in 2006. The success of the genre lies not only in quests, interesting characters, and endless opportunities for adventure, but also in simply allowing you to feel like you are in the world. Whether you wish to wander varied terrain, lounging in a tavern, hunt deer, sit by a waterfall, or pick flowers, you are provided compelling opportunities to do so. All of this is potentially overwhelming, not only to the casual gamer, but even to role playing veterans. Fortunately, Skyrim manages to ease the player into the immersive world, coaxing play along until the player understands the basics, without ever requiring an in-depth and non-immersive tutorial. This introduction is the focus of our discussion here – the way Skyrim offers itself to the player, entices the player to not only experience the story, the world, the rules, the game, but also to play with those elements and become a full participant and co-creator in the game.

Initially we will introduce the game itself, including some history of the series. Then we'll use some of the initial game sequences to show how the game is designed to introduce the narrative and teach the player basic components of play, encourage sandbox style exploration, foreshadow and deepen the world mythos, allow for player and story impact on the environment, and do all of this while keeping a sense of consistency and discovery throughout play.

Skyrim is the fifth of the Elder Scrolls games, each an open world, single player role playing game. The first two games, Arena and Daggerfall, were inspired experiments, but struggled with cataclysmic bugs that made game play difficult. The third in the series, Morrowind, was a masterpiece of open world play. With Morrowind, Bethesda Softworks brought its experimentation into the mainstream, and excited the research community interested in the value of gaming media (Gee, 2003; Kadakia, 2005). Oblivion, the fourth installment, made its mark as well, and has been heavily modded by an amazingly active community of player-designers (see <http://planetelderscrolls.ign.com/> or [tes.nexusmods.com/](http://tes.nexusmods.com/)). These communities maintained an active interest in Oblivion ever since the game was released in 2006, long past the shelf life of most other computer games. As profound as the interest in previous Elder Scrolls titles has been, it is dwarfed in comparison with the interest generated by Skyrim.

The interest is not just hype. Morrowind provided wide-open game play but little sense that the world reflected the player's character. Oblivion rectified some of that, but at the cost of a main quest line that shoe-horned characters through a series of pre-scripted quests in order to save the world. While motivating, saving the world also constrains freedom or strains immersion. Why bother exploring when the world needs to be saved? Skyrim manages to combine the open ended play of Morrowind while placing the player at the center of the action, as it did with Oblivion. It does so not by ending the world, but by

giving the player significant choices that affect the world, and by mirroring the choices the player makes through the quests and the NPC interactions that surround the player character. The result is a much more compelling, immersive role playing experience than achieved by any of the previous Elder Scrolls titles, and arguably more than any other computer game to date.

The advance in design is not only evident in scale and subject, it is evident even in the very first moments of gameplay. In each of *Morrowind* and *Oblivion*, and in *Fallout 3* also by Bethesda, the player was introduced to the world through a story driven opening sequence. In *Morrowind* it was little more than a brief tutorial, teaching how to move, attack, etc. In *Oblivion* and even more so in *Fallout 3*, the opening integrated well into the player-focused storyline. More than any other, *Skyrim* offers a tutorial imbedded in story, often so cleverly that it is not even readily apparent that one is being taught how to play. This revelation of new mechanics through game play occurs elsewhere, but it is best exemplified by the first few minutes of play – ten for an experienced Elder Scrolls player, though a new player to the genre or one who likes to take their time may take an hour or more to complete this first section.

## **Heading for the Chopping Block**

Boot:

*Skyrim* starts when the player's character wakes up on the back of a lolling wagon with other hand-bound prisoners. Credits roll. While listening to the other prisoners, you are able to look around with the mouse. Bethesda shows off their new engine's graphics a bit. The sound is thick with creaking wheels, griping prisoners, and the wind that makes you wish for hot cocoa. Settle in, this may be a bumpy ride.

1 minute:

The wagon stops at an executioner's block and you are asked who you are, and sent to a character creation screen. After picking an identity, which could take the 30 seconds we have offered here or could take hours of game time for some players, the NPC responds to the choices you just made, encouraging the player to see themselves in their new role. You are then pointed toward the chopping block – able to witness one execution before it is your turn. Before your untimely end however, a dragon attacks, throwing the camp into chaos and providing you a means of escape. In a spectacular chase sequence, triggered events provide the illusion of urgency while allowing the player time to learn the basic movement controls. By running from the dragon's destruction, the player learns to run, jump, and navigate the 3D environment guided by diageitic encouragement from your fellow survivors.

5 minutes:

After just a few minutes of game play you are confronted with your first real choice - either follow the Nord rebel who was prisoner with you in the cart or follow the kindly Imperial soldier who sought to protect you from the dragon. The choice does deceptively little to game play, simply switching your guide for the rest of the tutorial to be either the Imperial or the Nord, but this small change has enormous implications. You run into a keep and down into the dungeons, where Imperial torturers are fending off escaped prisoners. If guided by the Nord, he complains bitterly about the Empire's excesses. If guided by the Imperial, he bemoans the need for such horrible methods and clearly dislikes the torturer. In the first five minutes, Skyrim has used NPC interactions, environmental effects, and a savage dragon attack to encourage the player to care about two of the main story threads - the return of the dragons and the civil war between the Stormcloaks, who fight for an independent Skyrim, and the loyalist Nords who support the Empire.

10 minutes:

Guided either by your Stormcloak or your Imperial, you spend another five minutes crawling through caves and learning by doing. You encounter reasons to open doors with levers, pick locks, attack and block, pick up items, loot containers, equip items, use potions, cast spells, and read books. At the end of ten minutes you are deeply embroiled in the land of Skyrim and have at least initially allied yourself with one of two warring factions, and other than the first few moments before the dragon attack, the player never lost control of their character due to a cut-scene or a dialog tree.

By both introducing story, and teaching the player basic controls, Skyrim presents a powerful narrative to a first person adventure and does a great deal to introduce the player to the game's complex controls. As you leave the cave, your guide calls you aside and for a brief moment you lose control, just long enough to watch the dragon fly away. Up to this point the game has been "on rails", but no longer. Having learned the basic mechanics and having been introduced to the core story, the game will never again force the player to do anything. Skyrim stands out in its efficiency, teaching the player the basic tools they'll need for the next 100-300 hours. In a short and active initial minutes of play both the character and the player have fully gained their freedom, and are now 'on the run'.

### **Non-Linear Narratives**

Though you are now free to roam, the game does not merely leave you to your own devices if you still wish guidance, exposition, or even just company. Your guide, Nord or Imperial, thanks you for your help getting out of the town alive. He mentions that he is heading to a relative in a nearby village and offers that it might be best if you split up. Then he starts moving down a nearby path. If you go your own way, you are free to begin your exploration of the massive world. If you choose to follow, however, he will thank you for accompanying him and will lead you down the mountain. If you follow, he points out three

standing stones - powerful magical sites that can attune your character to constellations in the game world, providing the character a small but significant benefit, depending on the player's choice of stone. The three stones are "Mage", "Thief", and "Warrior". Each represents an iconic fantasy archetype, and choosing one of these stones is as close to choosing a character class one will find in Skyrim. It also offers the player the possibility of deciding exactly what kind of skills they will seek to advance, and therefore what their character might be able to eventually do to effect his or her world. Whether one chooses a stone or simply travels on, they will reach the town and meet the guide's relatives. Through conversation, not dialogue tree but overheard conversation which nevertheless invites you to participate, the player is provided a more detailed perspective on the civil war and its warring factions. You are given insight into some of your guide's motivations, and how you could join that side, if you wished. At this point, they open the first dialogue tree of the game, assuming one did not divert from this path up to this point. The player makes choices of what their character will say from a menu of options, though like everywhere else, the game will not insist that you choose. You may at any point exit out of a conversation and your interlocutor will react as if you simply stopped talking. Some will become angry, but most will simply go back to their business. In this case, through the dialogue tree, your guide's family offers the first truly free quest - go to the nearby city and ask the Jarl (the local lord) for send guards to the small town the family lives in, in case the dragon returns.

At this point you may wander around town, run to the city, or explore the wilderness. Skyrim is dotted with dungeons, keeps, caves, ruins, and camps. The player will find these through walking around, accepting quests, or occasionally through reading books or engaging in conversation. The map is rendered in a zoomable 3D, and serves as a key game asset for the player, showing each new place as it is discovered and allowing for quick travel to locations previously visited. Some

locations take only a few minutes to explore while others have the potential to be an entire evening of play. For example, one underground system covers roughly 20% of the entire map. While these unexpected adventures are an earmark of the Elder Scrolls series, we'll show how *Skyrim* uses these opportunities to effectively offer a wide diversity of game play.

### **It's not the graphics, it's story telling**

*Skyrim* is a dangerous, troubled place with dragons, monsters, necromancers, and bandits marauding the countryside and taking residence in every keep and ruin not under constant guard, but that danger is easy to forget sometimes because the world of *Skyrim* is such a pleasure to live in. It is stunningly gorgeous, with everything one could hope for in a Nordic environment -- magnificent mountains and stunning snowscapes, oceans, fjords, quaint villages, and endless happy encounters with interactive flora and fauna. Even the ruins are beautiful. The game succeeds at displaying its spectacle without crashing the XBOX or any fairly recent PC by limiting the scope of view and creating a fog that limits vision somewhat. The limitation is fairly minimal, however, and the expansive views can still be breathtaking. Still, it is not so much the aesthetic design that matters as how the aesthetics are used to enhance the game experience.

The graphics play fair. They show amazing sights, but are also used to let you see telltale hints, scorch marks or animal remains, that might, upon careful investigation, reveal a tripwire or a beartrap. The audio is similarly helpful, with breezes that blow cold down the mountain valleys and howls that suggest a wolf is nearby. With a limited scope of view, it is sometimes difficult to look up and around, so the roar of a dragon behind you might be your first hint that you should find some fireproof cover - and your first taste of panic that you just might be outmatched. Most of the NPCs in your travels will introduce themselves simply by speaking when they pass you, and might invite further discussion.

## **Open Ended, but with Navigation**

Rewarding exploration is not limited to trap finding and pretty sights and sounds. The game is filled with locations that can be explored. Some take minutes to completely search, but others range from extensive to truly massive. One subterranean cavern complex extends underneath one fourth of the map. Fully exploring just this single cavern can take ten or more hours of play.

## **Tools**

Skyrim, though open ended, includes many game tools to direct play and help the player navigate the massive amount of content. As one example, many ruins and caves are marked “cleared” on your map once all enemies have been killed. The game keeps quest notes, and separates them into major and minor quests. This allows players a sense of the scope of the quest chain, and potentially allows a player to focus on ‘finishing’ one main plot if they so choose. More subtly, towns and factions have small details that accumulate over time. In some areas, trees will bloom as you complete quests to revitalize the area. Each major city has a home for sale, and a player may buy it and then choose upgrades and stash treasure or collections of goods in one of the house’s many containers. The shelves of the Thieves’ Guild fill with booty as you complete quests to raise the power of the guild throughout Skyrim. Soldiers and other passers by will sometimes comment on the player’s success in local quests, or on the player character’s appearance, mirroring the skills the player has raised, almost always through regular use. Not only does this provide intangible reward to players for their success, but in some cases encourages players to explore new areas as they pursue the main storyline – or to return to a storyline as they explore new areas.



## Main Narratives

Even with the map, it would be possible to get lost in the immense world and become a directionless wanderer. This was a pitfall of Morrowind, and even Oblivion, but every city you go to in Skyrim is carefully designed to offer a story and, if you take up the offer, the game guides you through interactions and quests that often make the experience seem as natural as if the player was following a linear plot. The difference? You can leave the path at any time, explore the rest of the world and, if you desire, return later to complete the city's story. The stories of the city are tied to the feel of the game - the tensions between Nords and Imperials, prejudice against non-humans and anyone who uses magic.

Let's take as an example the story of Riften. Before you reach Riften, you are likely to have heard a dozen people complain about its lawlessness. This is not exaggeration. It is a corrupt city dominated by a powerful businesswoman and her lackeys in the thieves' guild who manipulate the town's guards and the ruling Jarl. The guards on the gate are crooked and seek a bribe before they allow the character entrance. Once on the inside, a character will have interactions in quick succession with a brute threateningly inquiring what business you have in Riften, an enforcer extracting a late payment on a loan, and a pair of adventurers who are struggling, apparently hopelessly, to clean up the town. Then, you are approached by the guild and offered a job, and tested accordingly before you find the underground (figurative and literal) network and secret entrances to it. The story of Riften is the story of the guild, whether you side with or against it. Just completing all of the guild quests takes more than twenty hours of questing (the size of some smaller games!) and follows a convoluted story of love, devotion, and betrayal. Upon becoming the head of the guild, further renewable questing will allow you to improve the headquarters; and grind for trophies, talents, xp, and loot.

## **Side Narratives**

While each city has a main story, many quests do not align with these major stories. The world is filled with people who need things - things you could provide if you were so inclined. Unlike some games where completing the game seems to require finishing every quest and collecting every item, trying to do so in Skyrim would be an incomprehensible expenditure of time. There are incidental items everywhere, just as there are incidental quests everywhere. You can interact with all of the plates, cups, etc, on almost every table. You can open every book on every shelf. Quests come almost as quickly, and can be encountered as you listen to songs in the tavern, eavesdrop on gossiping soldiers, or open an apparently arbitrary book on the end table. Every step you take opens a new potential for adventure, but there are so many options that every player must choose which among the many options they will follow. One can simply complete every quest that comes along, the golden path in most RPGs, or one might choose to role play, following only those questlines the player believes their character would follow.

## **Player Choice and Role-Play**

Visiting every location or completing every quest is simply not feasible, and not because paths are closed off, there are a few choices that will permanently close off other options for the character. There is simply too much potential game available. The resulting effect on immersion is interesting. In many RPGs, the quests serve as a checklist - the list of things that must all be completed before you go on the final quest and end the game. This has the artificial effect of making a quest not a choice for most players, but a list of objectives. Essentially the game offers a choice: complete the quest or stop playing. In a game that overwhelms the players ability to follow all paths, the quest becomes a choice again. Choose one major path, following with thieves' guild questline, means not choosing another, at least not right now

and probably not for another forty hours of play. You are not missing out exactly, because if you were not interested in playing a thief, you could play a valorous member of the Companions, or become a member of the mage's college, or become an expert in all forms of dragon magic (shouting), or join the pro-Nord Stormcloaks, or defend the Empire's grasp on Skyrim by joining the Imperial army. It is really your choice which way you go and how you play, opening the door to a question deceptively missing from almost all computer RPGs. Who do you want your character to become?

### **Talents and Skills**

The choices open to your character are not just implemented in the quest system. They are also implemented in the character's skill development. Skyrim has a simple philosophy on skill improvement. If you use a skill, it will improve. A character's abilities are defined by 18 skills. The character begins with a few decent skills, depending entirely on the character's choice of race. Where the character goes from there will depend entirely on what they do. If a player fights with a one-handed sword, they will increase their one-handed combat skill and gain specific skills that amplify that style of play. If they use the sword to parry, they will increase their block skill. If they later pick up a better one-handed axe, they will already be more skilled in its use because it is also a one-handed weapon.

The complication that leads to a high level of character customization comes from perks. When a skill increases, your character will occasionally gain a level. A level bar is increased each time you gain a skill, the higher the skill's number the more you gain so there is more reason to increase the skills your are already good at. Leveling allows you to choose to increase one of health, mana, or stamina. It also gives you a point you can use for a perk. Perk points can be saved or used immediately, and they are used to improve the effectiveness of a skill. There is one "perk tree" associated with each skill. Any character with a skill of

80 in one-handed weapons will be a good swordsman. A person with a skill of 80 and ten perks in the one-handed weapons tree, specializing on the use of sword, will be an amazing swordsman with a few special moves unavailable to others.

Choosing your path through the perk tree allows for character customization and leveling, both common tropes in fantasy role play, without compromising the core idea that skills level with use. The best perks require the character to have a high skill rank, so perks cannot replace use. The effect can feel strange to RPG fans used to killing monsters to level their character's skills. However, in Skyrim, one becomes a better smith by practicing smithing, not by killing monsters. A smith will fashion countless daggers, swords, and helmets before achieving true expertise (hours of pleasant game-play and achievement). In other words, the point of fighting in Skyrim is to achieve victory and improve fighting skills. The point of crafting is to craft a quality item and learn crafting skills. The point of conversation is to achieve your conversational goal and learn to speak more eloquently. Compared with the traditional model of killing monsters or completing quests to level up and add skill points to skills, this is a fantastic representation of the learning process. This model of achievement reflects well onto real-life practice and expertise models. Embedded in the model is the truth that investing time on task will improve that specific skill. Practice makes perfect.

The word that we keep using in this discussion is "immersive". More than anything else, it is the sense of immersion that draws us into Skyrim. The point of immersion is not simply to be immersed, however, but to offer an opportunity for deep experiences through game play. Skyrim presents some pretty good moral choices, which become much more interesting because the characters and environments around the moral choices feel real to us - because we are immersed in them. Even incidental moments can be profound -- discovering that a cave is much deeper than you ever thought it would be or learning that

the people you were befriending are actually werewolves. Through its aesthetically interesting, deep, free and immersive game play, Skyrim is broad enough and beautiful enough to allow us to actually role play a character on and with our computer.

Through Skyrim, we get to live in another person's shoes, and we get to lead them through interesting times. We get to make hard decisions and live with the consequences, win great victories, and we might even manage to experience and survive some defeats. The game is not perfect, but it is excellent, and it points designers in the direction of how to engage, motivate, teach, and encourage creative play using primarily a rich, deep world creation and story. This is no small task for designers, but Skyrim exemplifies its importance and potency when done well.

## References

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