

ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE: HOW ESO ENCOURAGES GROUP FORMATION AND COOPERATIVE PLAY

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Introduction

Elder Scrolls Online (*ESO*) transforms the single-player worlds expressed in Bethesda Softworks' series of five games into a Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG, or hereafter, MMO). It draws much from *Oblivion* (fourth in series) and *Skyrim* (fifth in series); however, the *ESO* narrative includes elements from all the former games, referencing and building upon the four Eras. *ESO* is set in the Second Era while *Skyrim* is set in the Fourth Era, and *Oblivion* the Third Era. The game provides a rich narrative that weaves together Tamriel religion, lore, and culture to tell the story of why the three alliances are

at war, alongside a narrative for the solo hero's quest to defeat Molag Bal, the enemy of all factions. The game has separate areas for the Player vs. Environment (PvE) and Player vs. Player (PvP) (please reference Figure 1). The PvE areas are: Ebonheart Pact – red, Daggerfalls Covenant – blue, and Aldmeri Dominion – yellow; each Alliance has five areas. Playing PvE leads one through all 15 areas, providing hundreds of non-person player (NPC) quests including the hero's quest line that culminates in Cold Harbor (not pictured in Figure 1). The PvP area, Cyrodill, shaded green, also has NPC quests but is primarily a massive game of Capture the Flag with several servers running multiple Alliance Wars in Cyrodill. The battle for Cyrodill is fought among three alliances. When one's faction dominates an Alliance War map (Figure 2), players receive a weapon damage bonus for their characters. Quests can be completed individually or in a group. Typically, people form groups of four for dungeons (i.e. an contained area where players cooperatively defeat various formations of "bad guys"); groups of 12 for timed trial runs (explained below); the largest group option is 20 and is commonly formed to run PvP campaigns in Cyrodill.

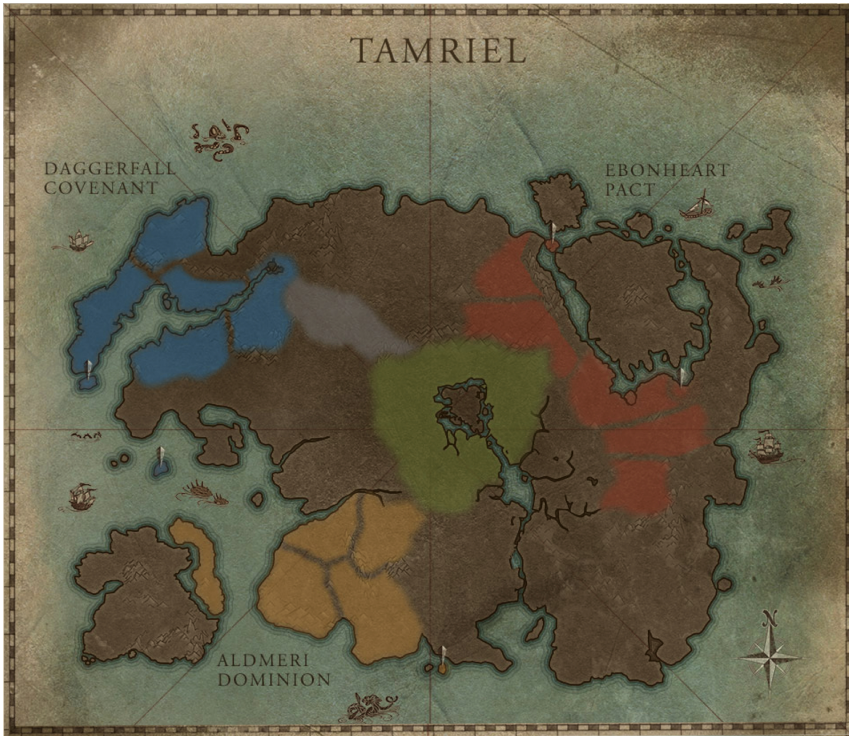


Figure 1. The map illustrates the three PvE areas around the perimeter and the central province of Cyrodiil, the PvP area. To the north west of Cyrodiil is Craglorn, an area dedicated to four person group dungeons and 12 person timed trials in dungeons. Online interactive map from: (<http://www.elderscrollsonline.com/en-gb/map/tamriel>).



Figure 2. Cyrodill, Alliance War: Azura's Star, dominated by Aldmeri Dominion (note the yellow).

One caveat regarding the information related herein is that what might be true today, might not be true tomorrow. Frequent updates continually strive to expand player options and respond to player feedback. As a result, some bosses have been “nerfed” – made easier to defeat. For example, Molog Bal is now one of the easiest bosses to defeat when originally it was wicked difficult! Additionally, the Developers are continually adding new content, fixing bugs, and changing the balance of skill sets for the four classes of characters: Sorcerers, Dragon Knights, Templars, and Night Blades; and working towards improving the PvP experience.



Figure 3. New skill trees are displayed as constellations, similar to *Skyrim*.

From the time of release in March 2014, there have been five major updates in addition to the minor patches. The sixth update is expected in March 2015, which introduces the Justice System, iterating on Thieves Guild from *Skyrim* and *Oblivion*, and the Champion System, an account-wide character progression, which is the last phase of the veteran rank redesign. Player's options for skill choice will be displayed on Skyrimesque constellation skill trees (Figure 3, above). In addition, after finishing the initial quest line within one's alliance's region, players will be free to explore all of the areas in any order. All dungeons will scale to the player's ability level rather than the former loose linear progression through the various areas; it is expected that this will give players more of the open world feeling of earlier *Elder Scrolls* games. In this respect *ESO* appears to be the victim of Bethesda's own success. Updates to *ESO* appear to be moving the game closer to the single-player experience of *Skyrim* a design-scheme not opposed by players. In our initial play through of *ESO* in spring 2014, Eames seemed to signal the feeling of many players.

Maybe my interest in *ESO* was doomed from the start. After all, I was hoping to extract a single-player experience from a massively

multiplayer game... I found the presence of so many other players pulled me out of the immersive experience, especially when I had to wait for a computer-controlled adversary to come back to life because another player beat me to it... I was hoping my experience was going to open my eyes to the joys of gaming online with new friends, but so far, that has not been the case. The overriding emotion I feel when playing *ESO* is a strong desire to return to my old stomping grounds in *Skyrim*. (Eames)

Bethesda appears to be responding to player desires to explore *ESO* in the ways they did in earlier Elder Scrolls games. Both in design and economics Bethesda is responding to player feedback. On January 21, 2015 Bethesda Online Studios announced that on March 17, 2015 *ESO* will become free-to-play, rebranded under the title *ESO: Tamriel Unlimited*, however, a monthly subscription option will still be offered. *ESO* has been in constant flux since its release in spring 2014, thus in this article, we have focused primarily on the game in it's current iteration between updates five and six. We have refrained from addressing changes that are playable only through the Public Test Server (PTS) where current subscribers have been playing (and earnestly discussing) various iterations of the forthcoming March Update.

A few basics of the game

ESO may serve as a bridge from the single-player experience of the Bethesda series to those new to MMOs, as are authors Aubrecht and Eames. The multitude of character build, play and play-style options offer newbie MMO players an easy-on-ramp to the MMO experience.

Initially, *ESO* adheres closely to the Elder Scroll games; only when the tutorial level is complete do MMO mechanics begin to surface. As in all Elder Scrolls games, players go through a rich character- creation process. The process is another step forward in detail than the earlier games, such as *Skyrim*, and considerably more detailed than seen in most MMOs. Players choose race,

gender, character class, voice, and physical appearance. The choice of one's race (think species, not ethnicity here) determines which of the three alliances one's character belongs to and, hence, which regional area the player will begin the initial game: Ebonheart Pact, Daggerfall Covenant, or Aldmeri Dominion.

Once this process is complete, players begin as always, imprisoned¹, trading on player's familiarity with the single player franchise. This time Molag Bal has taken your soul and you must fight to get it back. During your escape from prison, you grab your weapon of choice. This choice of weapon is an interesting break from MMO conventions: therein, one's class often determines one's weapon. In ESO players are empowered to choose what they like, find their own play-style, and build their characters from a large variety of options. The prison break serves as a tutorial on questing, loot, narrative, and combat. Aside from the multitude of players running about, the prison break is comfortably similar to the openings of every Elder Scrolls game. It balances well the need for tutorial while being short enough that players experienced in both MMOs and Elder Scrolls games can finish quickly. After your prison break and the initiating "tutorial," you are transported to the starter town associated with your alliance. At this stage, typical MMO conventions begin.

Player options include questing, fishing, crafting, gathering materials, seeking treasure, defeating world bosses and Daedric demons, joining various NPC factions such as the Undaunted, Fighters, and Mages guilds, dungeon running, and buying horses. Players gain experience points by completing quests and killing enemies of various sorts and are rewarded with gold and various items. Players level up to 50 by gaining the required number of experience points (XP), then continue earning XP through 14 veteran rank levels. For those who reach Veteran Ranks, there is Craglorn with several repeatable four-person dungeons and

1. The Elder Scrolls games all begin with the player escaping imprisonment of some form.

end-game content for Vet 14s: two 12-person timed trials, and the four-person Dragon Star Arena (a series of mob and boss challenges). Since the current Veteran Rank system will be replaced with the Champion System, we offer this explanation of what is to come: Dimillian (2014) states that the Championship system includes some game mechanics similar to other MMOs such as Diablo's paragon system for leveling and World of Warcraft's experience bonus for players. This is example of how the developers are continually redesigning the player experience in response to player feedback.

No matter which alliance one is in, all PvE players go to Cold Harbour, the final area for the hero's quest line and home to the game's antagonist, Molag Bal, a Daedric Prince who harvests the souls of mortals. Like all of the other 15 regional areas that comprise Ebonheart Pact, Daggerfall Covenant, or Aldmeri Dominion, the area of Cold Harbour, has world bosses, dolmans (portal tombs or "dark anchors" that release Molog Bal's servants), one public dungeon, one four-person group dungeon, as well as solo dungeons and myriad NPC quests.

ESO features three types of dungeons – solo, public, and group. Except for the solo quests in the main quest line, all activities can be done while grouped. To run a group dungeon, groups are formed before entering and game play is instanced² as in most MMOs. In a public dungeon it helps considerably to have more than one person and it is nearly impossible to solo if you are playing at a level commensurate with the dungeon. Solo dungeons are not instanced and often many people are running it at the same time, although some quests are phased.³ If two people run a quest together it could include solo dungeons. Certain

2. Instanced dungeons are where the game creates a unique, closed copy of the dungeon for each group running the dungeon.

3. When a quest has multiple parts, the NPCs must respond according to the progression of the narrative, so two people might be in different "phases" of the quest and thus not able to see one another until they get to the same point in the progression of the quest.

quests have difficult bosses and mobs that make duo questing more efficient and quick. Dungeons are best defeated with a group that has a healer, tank (one who keeps the boss focused on them while others attack), and two damage-dealers. This same group dynamic is used for the 12-person timed trials and the four-person Dragon Star Arena area.

An interesting design aspect of *ESO* is in the ability to play PvP. The ability to play PvP is not dependent on the server of the player but instead PvP is withheld until a player reaches level 10. The authors had differing opinions on if this is well-played by the developers. Aubrecht felt this gave new players time to develop the necessary agency to play *ESO* and give PvP players an opportunity to experience the PvE aspects. Kuhn, however, felt this a removal of choice for more experienced MMO players. Updates to the game have provided PvE leveling content within the PvP area (Cyrodill) so that players may gain skill points necessary for character building and avoid the PvE area almost entirely if they choose to (that is – after they reach level 10).

Once past level 10, PvP players can travel to Cyrodill to join a tumultuous battle for the heart of Tamriel. Many who play PvP form groups and employ military style tactics for siege and defense. Players may purchase medieval siege warfare equipment and kits for repairing the holds. This opens up a new skill line, achievements, and point system for advancement. Some are in pursuit of the Emperorship. One becomes Emperor by having the most alliance points within your alliance and when that alliance controls all six keeps around the Imperial City.

Even though all players are choosing from among the same skills, potions, and armor and character-build options, one is playing against other players who are also calculating how to create the best character build. Unlike NPC characters, characters controlled by players can be calculating and unpredictable. It requires a more concerted effort to monitor how other players

are building their characters. This sets up a cycle for people to develop and try new character builds and strategies in order to be competitive in an evolving game, especially as new game updates influence how specific skills function. Many people have armor sets and skill sets they use for specific kinds of game play such as PvP or filling the roles in a four-person dungeon, (please see discussion of dungeons below). Some people build more than one character in order to better facilitate specific game play.

Players can create up to eight characters and join up to five player-directed guilds. These guilds are an example of what Gee (2012) refers to as “Big G” – player activities outside and surrounding the game. ESO makes this activity easier by supporting guild activity in game. All guilds and trading guilds (where one uses game gold to purchase game items sold by players to players) are supported in game with a guild user interface (see Figure 4) with submenus providing access to messages, member rosters and information, Alliance War activity, and listings of items sold by and to members (see Figure 5), and more. (See below for a more detailed discussion of player guilds.) In addition, many players have their own websites and you tube channels, some individual and some connected to guilds, where they explain how they build their characters and give advice on how to play the game most effectively. Furthermore, some players form role-playing guilds for an immersive experience. Often these stories are communicated to other players through the in-game chat box. For a list of forthcoming events scheduled to take place within ESO see: <http://www.teso-rp.com/>. Here is an example: “Tuesday, February 17th [NA] – 9 PM: Ebony Flask Boxing Match: Bare knuckles & bare chested!”

NEON GRIND HOME

UserID: @Meash Guildmaster: @pandelement179
Members Online: 4/301 Founded: 3/30/2014

ALLIANCE WAR OWNERSHIP
Nothing Owned

GUILD TRADER
None Hired

UPDATES
Message of the Day
"TRIALS TONIGHT!!!! 8PM !!!!!!!"

BACKGROUND INFORMATION
About Us
"A strong community with constant interaction by members from all over the globe. and from many different games.
Day, night, rain, snow, sleet, meteor shower... NEON has members online nearly 24/7. Stop by our teamspeak to see for yourself."

Figure 4. Neon Grind's home page. From here, players can see all of the member's names, ranks, when they last played and basic character information as well as guild activity (see Figure 5).



Figure 5. Two guilds activity logs. Neon Grind's activity log shows who sold what to whom and for how much. Epic Synergy's shows the guild's Alliance War activity.

There are six crafting skill lines that require collecting, sorting, and storing of materials which supports developing those skills, some of which are very complex: provisioning, enchanting, alchemy, woodworking, blacksmithing, and clothing (Figure 6 below). To gain experience (up to level 50) one either breaks down items or crafts them. For crafting items in the Woodworking, Clothing, and Blacksmith skill lines one must research traits such as durability or increased armor that can be added to crafted items. Placing an item in a research slot begins

a timer and when the research is complete up you have learned how a particular trait. These traits can then be added to your crafting of clothing or weapons. It takes anywhere from six hours to a month of real time for an item to be researched.

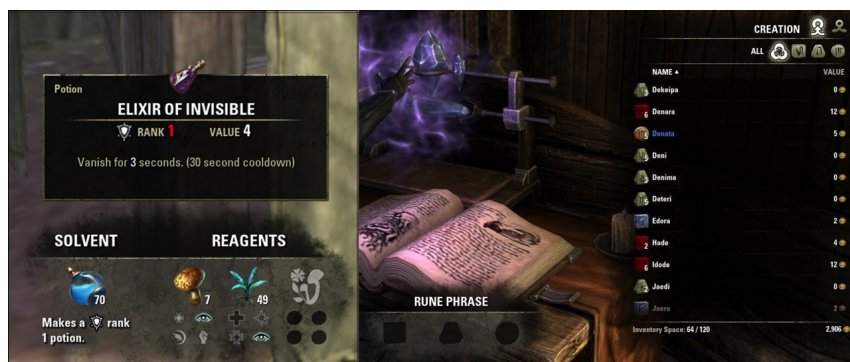


Figure 6. Crafting in the Alchemy skill line (pictured left) and the Enchanting skill line (pictured right). Each offers the player several options to discover different potions. With alchemy and enchanting, one must make something to determine the properties and then try various combinations.

The game environment ranges from deserts and volcanoes to lush jungles with tigers to fantastical mushroom houses and unusual flora (Figure 7 below). There are waterfalls and beaches that, with the right graphics card, look surprisingly real. The environment is crafted with rich details in architecture, furniture, books, flora, fauna, NPCs (non-player characters), and exquisitely designed weapons and armor. The world is home to realistic weather effects like fog, snow and rain, a night and day cycle, as well as being populated with creatures such as frogs, snakes, squirrels, and deer, that make it feel full and alive. The other Bethesda games also have rich environments, especially Skyrim (the most recent release). “For me, this stunningly beautiful environment makes the game more engaging and enjoyable than games that have very cartoony environments and characters” (Aubrecht). Many players have commented to Aubrecht that there seem to be more women in ESO than other

MOOS they've played. It is difficult to say why that is, but Aubrecht suggests it could be the variety of gaming options, realistic environments, character creation, and a complex narrative. For fans of the Elder Scrolls series, ESO is a well-played game that brings a generous helping of the series' lore that provides it a much richer narrative than other MMOs.



Figure 7. ESO game environment (left) and Aubrecht's Khajiit character (right).

Facilitating Cooperation

Cooperation is a player choice, since there is much that can be done individually. *ESO* has created a system for player interactions that encourage players to communicate, including in-game email, zone and guild chat, and a system for creating a contact list which lets you know who's online, where they are and which character they are playing. *ESO*, as in most MMOs, sends a message letting your contacts know you are there when you log on. This communication supports players forming communities and playing together. By providing multiple ways for people to play together and tools for in-game communication, *ESO* has provided an easy-on ramp for cooperative play for those playing an MMO for the first time.

Boss difficulty is a primary way the game encourages player cooperation. As players find themselves in situations where they die frequently, they are more likely to group with others who

are in the same space, attempting the same goals. For example, every area has a few world bosses and dolmans, both of which are meant to be fought with a group. In addition, each area has a public dungeon with a group challenge boss. In these spaces, people are more likely to cooperate or form pick-up-groups because they are designed for players cooperating to defeat various mobs and bosses.

Grouping can lead to joining player-guilds (described below) which leads to having more options for dungeon running and PvP events such as siege and defense of keeps and “ganking,” (i.e., using a small group to take out lone players unawares). Group dungeons are places for small groups to work together. In running dungeons, *ESO* sticks to convention with all the expected roles: healer, tank, and Damage Per Second (DPS). By questing together and running group dungeons, players learn how to fight together. Grouping can lead to extended play and to in-game friendships. This often formalizes in players adding one another to their contact list, joining guilds and talking in real time with headsets (using out of game communication programs such as Mumble or Team Speak) or typing messages in the in-game chat window.

ESO, Skyrim & Game Narrative

Some players like to read the story as it is presented from NPCs and others read little or skim the dialogs, picking up on themes without getting the details. Players may layer on how their participation and interaction in the world matters, creating their own hero story. Some players even create and participate in roleplaying guilds that help them in creating an immersive experience. In *Skyrim*, one could play through the main quest line and never pick a side: Imperials vs. Stormcloaks. In *ESO*, choosing one of three alliances is required when creating one’s character. For example, if one chooses to be Argonian, then one is automatically in the Ebonheart Pact and the quests received

once completing the initial training area of the game are tied to that specific faction.⁴

These factions are an interesting design choice to rationalize the PvP in *ESO*. Players are all thrown into a war and are given different scenarios about why the alliances are at war with one another for the PvP aspect. At the same time, the game must set up the PvE narrative of why players all are united against Molag Bal. For novice players this could lead to some confusion as each thread is steeped in Elder Scrolls lore. In this sense, the developers perhaps extended the story too far. From conversations with players, the authors have found many who loved *Skyrim* and bring with them a rich sense of the story created there. For example, an *ESO* guild, the Stormcloak Rebellion, is referencing an alliance they chose when playing *Skyrim*. Also, some players who've played *Skyrim* have a dislike for the High Elves who, in *Skyrim* were Thalmor and in opposition to the Stormcloaks. On the other hand, High Elves make good healers, so are welcome despite any preconceived ideas about them from *Skyrim*. This presents another aspect of the game where Bethesda could be a victim of their own success as players have brought so much from previous Elder Scrolls games. These players have tried, unsuccessfully, to bring story and gameplay from *Skyrim* into *ESO*.

Each new patch in *ESO* appears to be moving the game closer to the conventions and design of the single player games in response to this player behavior. Bethesda has announced that in update 6 both the Thieves' Guild and Dark Brotherhood would be slowly introduced into the game as well as opening up the Imperial City (found in the heart of Cyrodiil, the PvP area). *ESO* it seems is attempting to be two genres of game at once: a single-player RPG and an MMORPG. Time will tell how the designers

4. Players who purchase the Imperial Edition may select from any of the nine races when creating their characters and join the Alliance of their choice.

attempt to balance this as ESO moves to a free-to-play model. Yet where the game may face challenges in the single-player experience as an MMO, it does make interesting choices in grouping.

LFG (looking for group) in ESO

The game does implement an informal grouping mechanic that serves to open more of the game to single-player cooperative play. Lone players working together can attack the same mob for experience (XP) and loot. Interestingly, the design of *ESO* heavily uses quest-completion dependent phasing that favors this informal grouping. If players join a formal group with a friend of a higher level, that friend may be unable to see, much less participate, in the quest objectives of the lower-level player. This informal grouping design choice opens up the game to a fluid group-on-the-fly play structure that can serve as an audition for formal groups and guilds. In other MMOs, such as *World of Warcraft*, a single player may run a quest line only to be stymied by a final quest that requires more players to complete. In *ESO* players can hedge their bets that others will be running the same quest. It's an effective design choice that helps lone players maintain momentum outside of formal group play. MMOs are by nature designed to play socially, yet there are times when friends are AFK (away from keyboard). It is a refreshing take on the together-alone style of play that has been underutilized in MMOs. Players have all been in a tight spot in an MMO where they have pulled a trash mob too big to tackle alone. The two options have been to run or hope an altruistic player would bail out the player. In *ESO* the altruism still exists yet the knowledge that helping other players gives XP and loot is a powerful incentive to pitch in and help. This together-alone style design approach also extends to all non-instanced quests and areas in *ESO*. Updates to *ESO* scale group dungeons to the group-leader's level.

Kuhn is a veteran MMO player who, perhaps against the trend, has never joined a guild in any MMO. This play style choice in previous MMOs has meant that most end-game content stays out of reach. Kuhn played solo in previous MMOs which often meant he lacked the guild support to run dungeons, which require a minimum of 5 players. In order to experience end-game content he would run dungeons only after the level cap had been raised through game expansion. For example, running *Wrath of the Lich King* dungeons in *World of Warcraft*, only after the *Mists of Pandaria* expansion had been released. The increased level cap meant Kuhn would have the damage capabilities to run older dungeons solo. While an unorthodox style of play, ESO takes the unusual design approach of accommodating it. The designers have included dungeon types to engage single players. The traditional group-centered dungeons adhere to standard MMO conventions, however the solo and public dungeons take a different tack. Public dungeons are more akin to adventure zones where all players can run the dungeon, choosing to group at on the fly. Personal dungeons allow individual players to solo level-appropriate dungeons as well. This design choice has allowed Kuhn to run instances in step with leveling in the game as opposed to a level-up then backtrack approach that he needed to implement in previous MMOs.

Economy of Participation

Players not in guilds are able to play all end-game and instance content in *ESO* but could find themselves marginalized in the economy. Individual players are able to buy and trade through chat window advertising or selling items to NPC vendors that function as gold sinks⁵, and interact with NPC guild traders. However, the economic engine of the game relies on player participation in trading guilds. One need not be in a trading guild

5. Gold sinks remove excess gold or rare items to keep value in the economy. Items of significant value or rarity may only be sold to vendors to remove them from the economy as opposed to being passed from player to player.

to buy, but must be to sell. The game actively encourages players to join multiple guilds, up to five, in order to maximize their trading profits and access to goods. Zenimax, the designers of ESO, has decided to eschew the standard auction house model of game economy, opting instead for guild stores. Each guild of fifty players or more can operate a guild store where members post items for direct sale; item bidding is not allowed. Should the number of guild members drop below fifty all current transactions will be honored but after that the guild store will be shuttered. As the game matures unique guilds could develop tremendous power via public trading akin to the Elder Scroll's series East Empire Trading Company.

ESO drives active player cooperation by public trading; allowing Guild Stores to become Public Guild Stores that are accessible by any player in the game (Figure 8 below). These guild stores can be found throughout the various regions. In addition, the narrative device of the Alliance Wars has each faction fighting to take control of Keeps. When your faction controls a Keep, guilds aligned with the faction can convert Guild Stores to Public Stores. These shops remain open as long as dominance is maintained. Guilds with enough gold and influence could recruit player mercenaries to maintain long term holds on Keeps in order to keep business running smoothly. This economic structure balances *ESO's* economy between the controlled markets of *World of Warcraft* and the more player-manipulated economy of *EVE Online*.



Figure 8. In all guilds with 50 members or more, there is an option to buy and sell items to members and in some cases, through NPC guild traders. Filters displayed above allow one to search for desired items. One must set a price and pay a portion of the proceeds to the guild for using this mechanism to sell items.

Trading need not be only among guild members, but it might lead to creating a guild of one's own. Through questing, Aubrecht met another player with whom she began exchanging items crafted. Aubrecht collected materials and motif books that allowed her friend to learn new armor crafting styles. He made armor for her and she gave him crafted food items that he used to increase character health, stamina, and magicka. This allowed both players to gather materials and exchange them and then to craft items and exchange those. Together they started a small guild in order to have access to a guild bank (which opens when the guild reaches 10 members). Within this guild, she found another craft buddy with whom to make and exchange glyphs.

Glyphs made by others can be broken down to level up more quickly in the enchantment crafting skill line.

Other strategies for addressing storage issues include mailing items to a friend and leaving them in the email system for up to 30 days and creating a character dedicated to storage. For example, Aubrecht has a level three character that is never used for questing. When loaded in game, that character is always in the bank ready to carry out transactions. The bank is shared by all of one's characters; that makes it convenient to exchange materials, albeit time-consuming. Thus, crafted materials can be shared among all of one's characters, given to others, sold, or deposited in the guild bank to benefit members. Because Aubrecht chose to advance all of the crafting skill lines, she uses more than one character. To advance a crafting skill line, one must spend skill points, which are acquired by finding skyshards (3 skyshards = 1 skill point) (Figure 9 below and dungeons yield skill points), and through the PvP area. It requires about 15 skill points to develop a typical crafting skill line fully. The total number of skill points available to a character is about 300; however, the total number of skills one could choose from would cost 450 skill points. Players can opt to redistribute their skill points for a cost of about 50 gold per skill point.⁶

Table 1. Number and source for skill points. Source: Tamriel Foundry & reddit.com, adapted by Aubrecht.

6. Originally the cost was 100 gold, making it much more costly to rebuild one's character. The cost was reduced during one of the early updates.

Skill Point Source	# of Skill Points
Sky Shards (336)	112
Leveling	50
Alliance War Ranks	50
Zone Quest Lines	48
Group Dungeon Quests	16
Public Dungeons	16
Main Story Quests	10
Total	302



Figure 9. Gathering a Sky Shard.

Guilds in ESO

Guilds are the heart of an MMO because guild structures allow one to find like-minded players and reflect the player interests and focus for the guild. These range from highly structured to very loosely formed groups, all women guilds, or trading guilds. Guilds help one in trying out new things like the PvP area and finding people with whom to discuss strategies, builds as well as to go questing, running dungeons, or participate in timed

trials. This is the same as with World of Warcraft, Diablo, and other games where groups can play together online. Some guilds have a long history, dating back to games such as Everquest. These groups usually have guild websites and support members in multiple MMOs. Some guilds have websites, a process for joining, provide newsletters, and have team meetings. Guilds communicate in multiple ways, using out-of-game online talk channels such as TeamSpeak for discussions and coordinating group efforts and some just rely on in-game text chatting. Some guilds have been around for a long time and their members play other MMOs. Some guilds are specific to *ESO*.

Interestingly, the design of guilds in *ESO* encourages participation in multiple guilds. Being able to join up to five guilds allows for more fluidity in meeting people and finding groups that want to do the same kinds of things you do. In a sense, it's like going out into your neighborhood and finding a group to play with, except it doesn't matter what the weather is or what time it is; there's always someone online.

While allowing players to join more than one guild might seemingly divide a player's loyalty, it can instead provide more options for players to meet new people in game and find those who have different focuses such as singularly PvP or dungeon quest oriented, or a mix of both (see Figure 10). This feature is especially good for people who have never played an MMO before and are unfamiliar with guild conventions.

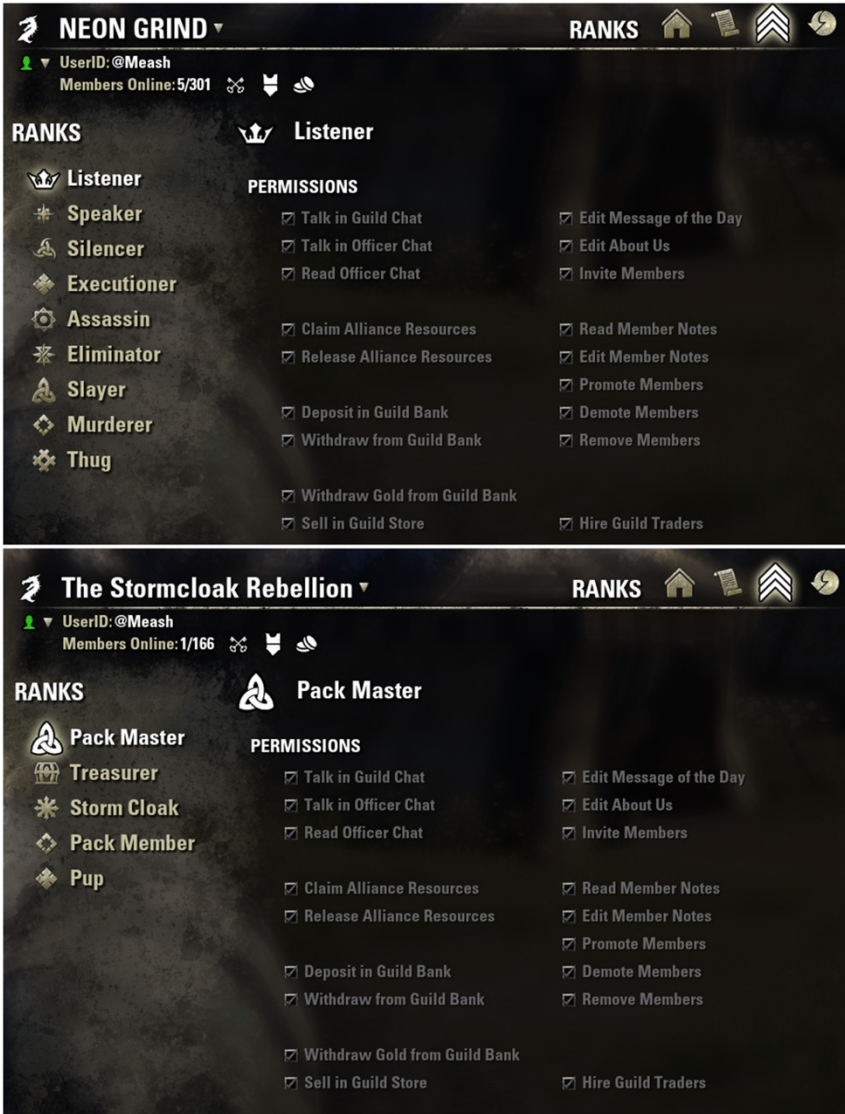


Figure 10. Player-directed guild ranks. Guilds choose the way to describe or identify the ranks of members. Stormcloak Rebellion is a werewolf-focused group, whereas Neon uses rank names that signify various sorts of killers reminiscent of Skyrim's Assassins Guild. Each rank is allotted permissions selected by the guild master.

Guild structures in game can be repurposed if the members agree. Because of the limited inventory space and large number

of materials required for crafting, Aubrecht views guilds as indispensable for crafters since guild banks can hold up to 500 materials, whereas individual banks hold only 60 items. However, additional space can be acquired by upgrading one's inventory space by spending in-game currency.

Aubrecht is new to MMOs and took this time in *ESO* to become involved with several guilds. For the most part, Aubrecht maintains membership within five guilds at all times. Since the game's release, guilds have come and gone or become dormant; this results when those who form a guild decide to disband it or leave the game. Guilds range in size from a minimum of 10 people to several hundred.

Crafting and sharing items is much easier when you join with others. Aubrecht regularly makes crafted items for people in her guilds. They help her by providing materials, or likewise crafting things she hasn't progressed far enough to make for herself. For example, one guild member gave her a Daedric Motif book that could be sold for up to 40,000 gold. Aubrecht regularly gives him fishing bait. While the exchange might not be financially equal, there are other economies at play such as time and in game play styles. Searching for items and finding rare things can be its own reward. For example, it is rare to find Columbine, an alchemy flower that is necessary for crafting a Panacea potion that supports health, magicka, and stamina. Likewise, food recipes for buffs in two or three areas (magicka and stamina, for example) always require one material that is hard to find, such as pepper. This game mechanic is a reward structure compellingly designed to keep players on the edge of searching without tipping them to despair so that they give up searching every nightstand, barrel, crate, and fishing hole (Chatfield, 2010)

After playing *ESO* for nearly a year, I have found a few guilds that I enjoy. Within these guilds, I've met people who have given me great advice, helped me further my crafting, and with whom I've shared crafted items and armor. I currently have a small group which

whom I meet regularly and run dungeons. One friend, Razor and I have been playing together since the summer. The guild where we first started playing is mostly defunct, but we found new guilds to join. Initially, we did a lot of questing together. Because Razor and I have a similar attitude toward playing ESO, our playing together led me to realize what those who have played other MMOs have known for a long time, which is, when one is part of any group, success depends upon the character's class skills one can contribute in addition to the execution of those skills. As we quested together, we were able to essentially expand or double our skill sets. Meaning, each player has five skills to access, plus an ultimate ability. When one reaches level 15, a secondary skill bar is accessible giving players 10 slottable skills and 2 ultimates. At the time, Razor played his Night Blade and me, my Dragon Knight. Each has different class skills. Together we used those skills to the benefit of both. Since neither of us had played MMOs before, nor been part of a guild, we didn't realize that by supporting one another, we were really learning how to play roles necessary for group dungeons. (Aubrecht)

MMO Guild traditions

Longtime MMO players may find *ESO* undermines the traditional role of guilds. During a discussion with Lucas Gillispie (personal communication, 2014), a long-time MMO player and the founder of the Harbingers of Light guild, he said that in some ways as MMOs have matured as a game genre and as more in-game features have been added for player ease, it has actually undermined the guild community. In *ESO* this is most evident in the informal grouping tools and option to join multiple guilds. Harkening back to *EverQuest*, one had to have a website and systems for communicating with guild members to plan raids, have discussions, and provide a guild message board. The effort required resulted in stronger commitments to the guild by guild members. Time spent on guild business out of game allows time for reflection and that reflection can translate into solid guild cultivation and growth. It remains to be seen if this guild cultivation and growth can developed in an MMO that actively encourages multiple guild membership for both

character and economic development. In essence, this is about forced interactions that result from a game support-driven environment versus one that is player-driven. Gillispie explained further that in other MMOs, unlike *ESO*, an icon floated above player's heads that represented their guild. Guilds built recognized and valued reputations and letting people know about it was a source of pride. Seann Dikkers (personal communication, 2014) concurred with Gillispie's point that as solo play is made easier and there are fewer barriers to entry, aspects of cooperative play have changed. Dikkers argues that automated LFGs and pick-up groups have lessened the need for guild support. Meanwhile in-game scheduling, shorter raids, and the ability to server jump have reduced the need for out-of-game communication for MMOs. While these changes to the traditional mechanics of guilds have been found wanting by veteran MMO players, they have allowed for newer players to benefit from guild support faster and with a quicker learning curve.

Conclusion

Although it shares a rich mythology with previous Elder Scrolls titles, *ESO* must be analyzed, evaluated, and played as something different. Fans of *Skyrim* who played to experience the rich narrative and explore an engrossing world will find that *ESO* is primarily social, but social engagement is not required. In fact, you can hide your presence in game if so desired. The need to help one another to advance encourages conversations, selling items, trading items, and working cooperatively. Earlier Elder Scrolls games cast the players as mostly solitary heroes, uniquely equipped to fight the dark forces of Nirn. The solitary hero archetype came with a sense of isolation that meshed especially well with the frozen tundra of *Skyrim*. *ESO*, on the other hand, casts the player as one of thousands of questing heroes and encourages players to form community ties that keep them coming back and experiencing the expanding content of Tamriel.

The *ESO* community is in the process of defining and growing itself as players navigate the space, form communities, and find ways to do what they desire within the created system. The exact number of players is unknown; various estimates found online in August 2014 range from 800,000 to 3 million. Aubrecht's experience in game is that the user population is somewhat fluid ranging from people trying it and leaving and to those who stay and love it; and now, with the forthcoming update in March, returning to try it again. With the myriad MMOs available, people are able to find a game that appeals to their specific tastes for the overall scenario and player options. If you like medieval structures and a rich environment, *ESO* might be a good fit.

A few Tips for success

1. Strategic use of skills points – place as follows: an armor line, a weapon line, expand repertoire as skill points increase; assign at least one point for each of your class skill lines.
2. In the beginning ignore putting skill points into crafting and focus on skills that support questing.
3. Find crafting buddies to more quickly progress in a craft skill line.
4. We're all in this together...quest with a friend!

Classroom Applications

The Hero's Journey curriculum, while largely focused on *World of Warcraft*, provides learning quests that could be used with other MMOs. This curriculum has been tested with students and resulted in increasing student school attendance rates and advancing their academic skills. Student work is focused on game quests, journaling, group work, and machinima; however, students could potentially bring any number of reading skills/strategies to bear in regards to MMOs. Given that young people are bombarded with digital content and have access to staggering

amounts of information, using time-tested reading strategies to analyze and comprehend new types of media is especially important. “The same techniques we teach students to utilize when reading novels and informational texts can easily be applied, as they take notes, make connections, ask questions, and make predictions” (Gilliespie, 2014, personal communication). The MMO has the added benefit of being highly engaging for many students, especially those who already enjoy gaming as a hobby. In addition to the curriculum guide, they made teacher professional development movies. Please find resources and curriculum download of *WoW in School – A Hero’s Journey* here <http://wowinschool.pbworks.com/w/page/5268731/FrontPage>.

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