

Quantity Over Quality: “The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim”

Written by Grant Williams

Saturday, 31 December 2011 11:16

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Reviewing *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, the latest open-world role-playing game from Bethesda Game Studios, seems like a foolish project. It gives players the freedom to roam across almost 15 square miles of a densely populated fantasy world of elves, orcs, giants, and dragons. It allows players to create characters *à la carte* from a broad pool of abilities, rather than using restrictive “classes” like most role-playing games. And it offers six major narratives, each the equivalent of a smaller game. On the surface, *Skyrim* appears to be too vast for a short evaluation; but this is a lake a mile wide and a foot deep.

The experience of playing *Skyrim*, for all its breadth, boils down to one gameplay sequence, repeated over and over. The player speaks to a non-player character; that character gives the player a quest, or something to do; and nine out of 10 times, this ultimately involves the player traveling to a distant location, killing everything in the area, and retrieving some specific item. Meanwhile, the player’s numerically rated skills improve, granting access to new abilities and allowing the player to take on more difficult quests.

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This structure is not a failing in itself, and is of course the basis of many video games, some highly successful – from previous *Elder Scrolls* games to *World of Warcraft* to *Grand Theft Auto*. But those games usually succeed because some element of the loop is fundamentally enjoyable – talking to characters, defeating enemies, developing the player character’s abilities, or simply traveling through the world. In

The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind

– the first

Elder Scrolls

game to achieve popular success – the fascinatingly alien world made exploring worthwhile in spite of the weak combat and stuffy narrative. In

The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion

, on the other hand, streamlined combat was the only bright light against the aggressively mediocre and conventional world and narrative.



In *Skyrim*, as in many other games of this type, combat represents the majority of the loop. *Skyrim*'s

combat adds a few new options to

Oblivion

's aging system, including the ability to wield two weapons or spells at once, but these do not fix the essential weakness: the lack of grounding. Enemies never seem like real creatures moving in the world, instead feeling like identical floating blobs in different guises. The best additions to combat are the ability to hire companions to fight for you and improvements to the stealth system, both of which are attractive because they obviate combat rather than enhance it.

Many players are driven instead by the experience of being at the center of an exciting story. *Skyrim*

's narratives are wildly uneven, and the writing and voice-acting are almost universally bland.

The “main quest,” involving the player saving the world (as always) from dragons, feels perfunctory; it moves through all the necessary steps but offers few surprises or attempts to exceed expectations. Some of the other “quest lines” are more interesting, especially the Thieves’ Guild and the Dark Brotherhood – two criminal organizations whose quests often take place in cities rather than wilderness dungeons and thus introduce more complex gameplay scenarios than killing everything that moves, as well as more complex motivations than selfless heroism.

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One of the key stated aims of *The Elder Scrolls* series is allowing players to carve their own paths, and here *Skyrim* fails most. To be sure,

you can combine weapons, magic, and stealth tactics in ways that most role-playing games never allow you to consider, and there is some pleasure and pride in building a character into your ideal combination of abilities. But the characters and world of

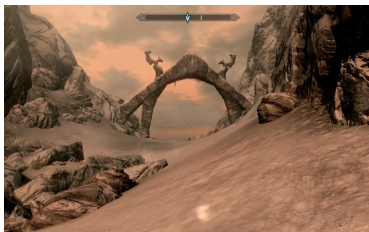
Skyrim

never recognize this. Quests are linear, tightly authored affairs, constantly dictating your responses and options. Nothing you do, in a quest or elsewhere, causes drastic changes to the world of

Skyrim

. Even ending the ongoing civil war changes a few flags and not much else.

Ultimately, *Skyrim* is best considered as a diorama, a box of scenes you can move through and observe but never change. The freedom to move about the box and peer behind the scenes makes your inability to change anything more acute and painful than in many straightforwardly linear games with no pretensions of freedom or agency.



This leaves only the world itself as a source of enjoyment. *Skyrim*'s world is vast and undeniably, sometimes breathtakingly, beautiful. It is not the astonishing alien world of *Morrowind*

, but neither is it the generic world of

Oblivion

, which seemed deliberately stripped of anything outside the tritest conventions of high fantasy.

Skyrim

's world is classical: It calls to mind not the past few decades' increasingly bland derivations of Tolkien but Tolkien's own inspirations in

Beowulf

, the Norse Eddas, and other ancient European mythology.

Skyrim can be an overwhelming game, one in which you could lose yourself for hundreds of

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hours. Its power, though, lies not in gameplay or narrative or freedom afforded to players, but in sheer mass. It is the epitome of quantity over quality, but quantity can be its own quality. If you are looking to escape into a fantasy world and never see the boundaries of the box, *Skyrim* can provide. If you are looking to make your mark on that world, look elsewhere.

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