Game Narrative Review

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Overview

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim is a sandbox-style action-adventure roleplaying game in which the highly customizable player character, the "Dragonborn," seeks to stop Alduin the world-eater with the magical power of the Voice. Like many sandbox games, *Skyrim* provides far more to do than just the main quest, and the game does not end with Alduin's defeat. In fact, in terms of total game play hours, the main quest accounts for only a small percentage of play and competes for attention with other large multi-stage quests, creating a narrative environment that is so highly differentiated among the player base that no save files between any two players on Earth are exactly identical.

Introducing new narrative material through downloadable content (DLC) is difficult because it requires a non-linear narrative that must integrate seamlessly with the greater non-linear narrative of *Skyrim*. But despite this difficult limitation, the *Dragonborn* DLC for *Skyrim* succeeds in both perfectly meshing with *Skyrim*'s storytelling style and game world and also providing content that stands alone as its own experience with its own narrative direction. The story of *Dragonborn* is laid out in a classical format but designed modularly so that it works particularly well in a sandbox storytelling environment, and it also benefits from smart choices of theme and visual style.

Characters

Considering only the main questline of *Dragonborn*, the notable characters are:
- **The Player Character** – The "original" Dragonborn, who is extensively customizable and may be any race, gender, age, or orientation; who may be good or evil, aligned with or hated by

certain Skyrim factions, and who may or may not already be known as the one who defeated Alduin, the World Eater, during *Skyrim*'s base game main questline.

- **Miraak** – the villain of *Dragonborn*, Miraak is an evil Dragonborn attempting to use his mastery of the Voice – and in particular those Shouts (spells) which enable him to control others – to conquer Skyrim. He is bolstered by the formidable power of:
- **Hermaeus Mora** – the Daedric Prince of Fate, Knowledge and Memory who is neither good nor evil but aligned with forbidden knowledge and mystery. He imparted some of this powerful knowledge onto Miraak in exchange for fealty, but Miraak, growing powerful on the knowledge and the way of the Voice, betrayed Hermaeus Mora for his own ambitions.
- **Frea** – a member of the Skaal and a helper to the Dragonborn in his or her quest to defeat Miraak. Frea acts as guide and follower and delivers part of the resolution of the narrative to the player character after the defeat of Miraak.
- **The Skaal** – a tribe of Nordic settlers in Solstheim with which the player must interact to gain the necessary tools (knowledge of the Voice) to defeat Miraak.
- **Neloth** – a Dunmer (race native to Morrowind) who has spent his life researching Miraak and the mysterious Black Books. Like Frea, Neloth acts as a guide and follower and helps advance the plot by helping the player character recover a Black Book and subsequently travel to Apocrypha.

Breakdown

Dragonborn's premise is that dangerous cultists following Miraak have come from the island of Solstheim to murder the player character who the cult views as a threat and a false Dragonborn, and the player must travel to this island and discover the mysteries of the cult and of Miraak. However, much like Skyrim itself, this main quest is not the only available on the island of Solstheim, so that when the player character arrives they may choose to pursue this original quest or to break off and explore the area, completing any other quests in any order and traveling between Skyrim and Solstheim at will.

Because *Dragonborn* gameplay is so non-linear, it is designed in quest-sized modules to accommodate different players' progress, playstyles, and roleplaying styles. *Dragonborn* is essentially a module for *Skyrim* that can be "plugged in" and played at any time for any play configuration. Similarly, the quests that comprise *Dragonborn*'s gameplay, both the main questline and other quests, are also modular and can be completed in any order for the most part without dependencies on one another. In this way *Dragonborn*, and essentially all sandbox DLCs that are progress-independent, represent a series of nested but independent modular narrative experiences.

However, this narrative review will focus on the main questline of finding and stopping Miraak and his cultists. The *Dragonborn* main plot utilizes a classic narrative structure with the following components:

- Triggering Event
- Exposition
- Rising Action
- Climax
- Falling Action
- Resolution

Organizing the main plotline in this way has a few key advantages: firstly, it creates a sense of urgency for the player, which is necessary in a sandbox environment where unlimited options can lead to directionless play and ultimately boredom.

Secondly, it helps pace the experience: since the sandbox style of Skyrim allows for quests to be short-cutted, abandoned, or even failed, pacing can be difficult to control and a story can fall flat. Giving a clear, enforced structure to *Dragonborn*'s main quest and initiating that quest first for the player via a triggering event also enforces some pacing, even for side quests, since by the time the player is free to roam Solstheim the triggering event and some exposition has already set the scene.

Thirdly, this classic narrative structure maximizes the emotional and psychological impact of the climax sequence by building anticipation and quickening pacing before finally delivering satisfaction with the narrative resolution. And this narrative satisfaction is matched with the gameplay satisfaction of success in combat against a powerful foe and the reward to the player in the form of both powerful loot and new abilities.

Finally, and most importantly for a sandbox game, *Dragonborn*'s narrative structure provides logical and natural bottlenecks to control player choice. Players are free to roam, leave Solstheim, and complete other quests indefinitely between these narrative "checkpoints" but the classic narrative structure ensures that the player experience during the main quest is relatively controlled and cohesive while still maintaining maximum player control and accommodating any play build or roleplaying choice.

Triggering Event
The event which triggers the *Dragonborn* main questline is the player character being attacked by the cultists of Miraak in one of a number of commonly traveled locations and the subsequent discovery of a note on one of the bodies that leads the player to Solstheim. The note also sets up the central plot point that Miraak, like the player character, is Dragonborn – of the blood of dragons, which grants access to the incredibly powerful magic of the Voice. Solstheim is an island that once belonged to the neighboring land of Morrowind, home of the Dark Elves, but which now belongs to Skyrim, despite its geology (volcanic) and flora and fauna (alien and threatening) seeming to belong to a different world entirely.

Designing the triggering event to occur through combat and the discovery of a note (pseudo-dialogue) at multiple locations makes it independent of player progress or play style. And the premise itself – a powerful wizard trying to kill the player – is designed to be universally appealing regardless of whether the player is a sinister, conniving magic user or a heroic Nordic tank.

Exposition
Upon arriving in Solstheim, the player character is confronted with a world of bizarre imagery and deep mystery. When questioning non-player characters (NPCs) about Miraak, everyone has a vague, unsettling familiarly with Miraak but cannot place the name or face – it becomes clear quickly that dark magic is afoot and Miraak's ability to control and obfuscate the minds of others is incredibly powerful. Finally the Dragonborn locates a wizard, Neloth, who knows of Miraak, and follows his direction to Miraak's temple. At this point a second narrative thread is introduced via the character Frea and her

village of Nordic settlers, the Skaal. This secondary thread supports the main quest plot and serves to emotionally reinforce the main narrative by providing additional complexity and depth.

The Exposition ends with the Dragonborn's discovery of a Black Book (not dissimilar to the Lovecraftian *Necronomicon*) in Miraak's temple, the reading of which transports the player into the dark and horrifying realm of Apocrypha – only to see Miraak himself and hear his megalomaniacal plans of conquering Skyrim using his Dragonborn powers for evil. This sequence also connects Miraak to an even more fearful foe: the Daedric Prince Hermaeus Mora, horrifically bodiless, a powerful force seemingly connected to Miraak.

Rising Action
The rising action of the Dragonborn main questline sees the player character continue to hunt Miraak and discover more Black Books, making increasingly frequent and lengthy visits to Apocrypha, a game location with fantastically dark, Lovecraftian art direction. It is an environment filled with whipping and curling tentacles, dark sour greens and browns, pools of tarry acid, walls which bend and flex like the bowels of a giant creature, and stacks of books spiraling into abstract landscapes in the distance. This visual design of Apocrypha emphasizes the horror elements of the narrative and works well as a punctuating motif during the rising action since it develops the idea of darkness and danger around Miraak and Hermaeus Mora while also acting as a pacing control. In this way, the art design can be considered a major narrative element.

During this portion of the plot the player also seeks to expand their power of the Voice and learn a Shout that might defeat Miraak, a plot device familiar to the hero's journey format and well at home here in the rising action. The Dragonborn also continues to interact with the helpful if reserved Skaal tribesman, ultimately persuading a Skaal shaman to reveal Hermaeus Mora's secrets (the final word of the Shout needed to defeat Miraak) at the cost of his own life. His death marks the end of the Rising Action.

Climax
With the knowledge of Miraak and Hermaeus Mora and the power of the Shout the player character re-enters Apocrypha to defeat the evil Dragonborn rival. The climax here is in two parts: first, the player gets to use their powerful ability, the Shout, to control a dragon and ride it to the confrontation with Miraak; second, the combat comes to a head during the faceoff with Miraak during a challenging and lengthy "boss fight" style battle.

In terms of the combat and game mechanics, this sequence combines new abilities (the Shout, riding a dragon) with a battle against Miraak which proceeds in stages and incorporates interesting abilities and tactics that Miraak uses against the player such as temporary invincibility, invisibility, novel attacks, quick movement, and combat support in the form of two airborne dragons. The player's combat victory over Miraak can be considered the climax of the main plotline.

Falling Action
Unlike most classical narrative structures, Dragonborn does not provide much in the way of explicit falling action, as the climax of combat with Miraak and narrative resolution of the plot are shown in close sequence during a cut scene. However, we can consider the falling action for this plot to be the feeling of satisfaction and relief the player feels upon the moment of victory in combat against Miraak,

before the resolution has been revealed. Thought short, this moment is critical for a successful play experience and should not be discounted.

Resolution
Once the player has defeated all stages of the boss battle with Miraak, the narrative thread of the questline resolves: Miraak, defeated and disgraced, is killed in dramatic fashion by Hermaeus Mora for his betrayal, and Skyrim (and all the world) is saved from his evil. This resolution provides a satisfying end to the narrative because even though it is Hermaeus Mora that kills Miraak in the end, the player still feels satisfaction and victory at having decisively bested him in battle. Furthermore, the choice to have Hermaeus Mora kill Miraak adds the classic aspect of the shamed apprentice and the wrathful master to the narrative that would not be present if Miraak died at the player's hands. In a final twist, Hermaeus Mora declares the player character his new champion in place of the defeated Miraak.

After the resolution, the player character is rewarded handsomely with items, perks and a short sequence with Frea in which the player is made a friend of the Skaal but given a warning to uphold their duty as Dragonborn even in the face of terrible evil. Once this sequence ends, the player is free to continue their adventures on Solstheim or return to Skyrim.

Strongest Element

From the standpoint of balancing the design considerations of modular narrative with a well-implemented classical plot structure, *Dragonborn* is a wild success. Because *Skryim*'s narrative is non-linear, the designers of *Dragonborn* had to design a package of narrative content that was well-integrated into *Skryim*'s storytelling environment but simultaneously able to stand alone and be injected into any player's game, regardless of their progress, play style, character age or gender or race, or any of dozens of other customizable play elements. And in addition to these practical considerations, the narrative of *Dragonborn* also had to be universal enough to appeal to players of any style, good or evil, heroic or chaotic or indifferent, and had to appeal universally at any point in progress through the game. In other words, *Dragonborn* had to stand alone as its own universally appealing narrative experience while at the same time feeling inextricably part of *Skyrim*'s already complex narrative.

Providing this experience was *Dragonborn*'s principle success as a narrative vehicle.

In order to achieve this notable narrative, *Dragonborn* relies on the same narrative and gameplay design principles that the rest of the major *Skyrim* questlines use: modular storytelling.

Unsuccessful Element

Because *Dragonborn* is a modular addition to *Skyrim*, the effects of its narrative on the greater *Skyrim* narrative are difficult to convey during play, and this is one place that Bethesda falls down. Although the narrative of *Dragonborn* does have implications for the plot of *Skyrim* – the player wasn't the only living Dragonborn, as was believed, and now the island of Solstheim is involved in the success of the player against Alduin as much as Skyrim proper since it has been beset by dragon attacks – these narrative impacts remain only implied, and once the Dragonborn plot is resolved the world of Skyrim never acknowledges your travails or success against such a powerful foe. Furthermore, the interactions

that the player has with NPCs in Solstheim never acknowledge or incorporate participation from player followers, an arguably large part of the Skyrim play experience, especially since the player can have followers who are narratively critical to major quests in the *Skyrim* base game.

Some of these issues are already being addressed in contemporary Bethesda games: *Fallout 4* is careful to incorporate follower interjections and reactions into player dialogue with other NPCs and provides acknowledgments from NPCs to the player when the main questline is resolved, although it has yet to be seen how DLCs will be narratively incorporated into the game world.

Ideally, the narrative impact is a one-way street: before the DLC is played, the base game narrative should not impact the ability of the player to experience the DLC. But once the DLC is initiated it should react contextually to the player's persona and choices in the base game and feed back into the base game world after resolution. This would require a less compartmentalized design for modular narrative components and quite a bit of planning, especially around voiced dialogue. However, this type of narrative structure would deeply align the narrative content between a game and one or more DLCs in a way that would make players without DLCs feel as though nothing is missing while players with DLC content would feel as if those stories had always been an inextricable part of the world.

Highlight

The narrative highlight of *Dragonborn*, as with most applications of the classical narrative structure, is the climax sequence: the defeat of Miraak. However, the narrative takes a clever turn here by using the player's own satisfaction upon succeeding in combat as the point of falling action and chases this quickly with the narrative resolution of Miraak's death at the hands of Hermaeus Mora, which is both viscerally satisfying and narratively impactful. This sequence of quick pacing through the climax, falling action, and resolution effectively piggybacks the narrative elements of *Dragonborn* on the combat/game mechanic elements and the overall effect is a seemly combination of the gameplay and the narrative experience. This single sequence is the highlight of the *Dragonborn* narrative because of how well it implements game mechanics as a narrative vehicle and uses the impact of combat as an emphasis on the dramatic plot resolution.

Critical Reception

The *Skyrim* base game met with astounding commercial success upon its release in 2011, with 3.4 million units sold within two days of launch[1] and reaching 10 million units and about $650 million in retail sales over its first month.[2] Skyrim also found a great deal of critical acclaim, garnering both the IGN and GameSpot PC Game of the Year award and called "the best open world game I've ever played [and] the most liberating RPG I've ever played" by Tom Francis at PC Gamer[3]. However, the praise was

[1] Serrels, Mark. "Skyrim Sales Estimated At 3.4 Million In Two Days." *Kotaku*. November 15, 2011. Accessed December 7, 2014. http://www.kotaku.com.au/2011/11/skyrim-sales-estimated-at-3-4-million-in-two-days/.

[2] Yin-Poole, Wesley. "Valve: Skyrim fastest-selling game in Steam history." *Eurogamer.net*. December 17, 2011. Accessed December 7, 2014. http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2011-12-16-valve-skyrim-fastest-selling-game-in-steam-history.

[3] "The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim." November 9, 2011. Accessed December 7, 2014. http://www.pcgamer.com/the-elder-scrolls-v-skyrim-review/.

not universal, with high-visibility critics such as Gamasutra[4] and Edge Magazine[5] pointing out defects such as poor combat mechanics, poor UI design, and technical issues.

Even still, these are high bars to be met by *Dragonborn*, and indeed the DLC did approach the critical success as its base game but certainly did not surpass it. Although sales figures for *Dragonborn* were not published and it was never the recipient of an industry award, it earned solid positive ratings from most big-name critics. Joystiq called it "Miraak-culous" and praised its scope and climatic battle[6] while GamesRadar was similarly impressed with the breadth of the experience but felt that some mechanics such as the dragon riding were "gimmicky"[7]. In terms of narrative, most reviewers shied away from an analysis of the main questline story in favor of discussing gameplay mechanics, while some who did acknowledge the narrative found it lacking depth and being only secondary to the gameplay.[8]

Lessons

- *Dragonborn*'s main questline is an excellent use case for how the classical narrative structure should be implemented into video game storytelling to control urgency and pacing while still accommodating large-scale non-linear gameplay
- Modular storytelling accommodates the narrative requirements of adding expansion material to sandbox-type games either through DLC or in other expansion formats
- When designing modular narrative for an open-ended roleplaying game, it is important to include meaningful roleplaying content into the narrative to acknowledge and incorporate player's important customizations and roleplaying choices, the principle failure of *Dragonborn*

Furthermore, *Dragonborn* has some other notably successful narrative choices around theme and setting: it incorporates existing Elder Scrolls lore and non-Elder Scrolls mythology with newly added narrative content in order to appeal to a wide-ranging audience. By using a location – Solstheim – closely associated with the location of the previous franchise game *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, Bethesda was able to capitalize on the nostalgia of gamers who played *Morrowind*. And the choice to add aspects of Lovecraftian horror, both in the narrative and visual style, also serves to appeal to people who will recognize the themes and mood of *Dragonborn* by its association to the style of H.P. Lovecraft, right down to shout-outs to Cthulhu and the *Necronomicon*. Players unfamiliar with Skyrim but attracted to Lovecraftian horror narrative elements – strange worlds, monstrous evils, bizarre

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[4] Schwartz, Eric. "Skyrim, or How Not to Make a PC Game." *Gamasutra.* November 11, 2011. Accessed December 7, 2014. http://www.gamasutra.com/blogs/EricSchwarz/20111111/90590/Skyrim_or_How_Not_to_Make_a_PC_Game.php.

[5] Cowan, Danny. "Critical Reception: Bethesda's The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim." *Gamasutra.* November 16, 2011. Accessed December 7, 2014. http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/128230/Critical_Reception_Bethesdas_The_Elder_Scrolls_V_Skyrim.php.

[6] Martin, Garrett. "Skyrim - Dragonborn review: Miraak-ulous." *Joystiq* (now *Engaget*). December 12, 2012. Accessed December 7, 2014. http://www.engadget.com/2012/12/11/skyrim-dragonborn-review/.

[7] Learned, john. "The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim Dragonborn review." GamesRadar. December 6, 2012. Accessed December 7, 2014. http://www.gamesradar.com/elder-scrolls-v-skyrim-dragonborn-review/.

[8] Martin, Garrett. 2011.

happenings – are likely to be interested in *Dragonborn*. And not only does *Dragonborn* manages to evoke both of these mythologies but it also delivers a wealth of new and interesting narrative and gameplay material. In fact, the new and the old mesh so well here that players unfamiliar with H.P. Lovecraft or *Morrowind* will not feel like they are missing anything, which is an excellent way to approach DLC narrative since not every player will purchase the additional content. Therefore, we can say that additional lessons learned are:

- Situating DLC narrative in the context of existing franchise intellectual property but allowing it to exist independently of that property (i.e. not as a sequel or prequel) is an intelligent narrative choice commercially
- Incorporating other mythological references and imagery which is particularly well suited to the narrative premise and visual style of the modular narrative can enhance the plot and likely attracted more players
- A successful DLC/modular narrative must, like *Dragonborn*, make players without access feel as though they are missing nothing while players with access feel as though the new narrative content is an integral part of the game world

Summation

Dragonborn represents a very successful approach to providing downloadable narrative content for a massive sandbox-style game. It's no easy feat to provide a clear, well-structured and compelling narrative with the overarching requirement that it should be playable and interesting to any user, regardless of persona or play style or progress or roleplaying choices. This alone makes *Dragonborn* from a narrative standpoint a striking success and an example of how to handle sandbox narrative expansion in a natural and non-limiting way. Furthermore, *Dragonborn* situates its narrative in the context of other familiar mythologies and franchise lore, evoking nostalgia and leveraging the unique mood and visual flavor of Lovecraftian horror. And despite this narrative context, *Dragonborn* never smacks of a DLC money grab because the designers were careful to prevent the base *Skyrim* experience from relying on *Dragonborn* content in any way, so that players without the DLC don't feel cheated and players who play it feel as if it's a natural part of the game world. However, no game is perfect, and *Dragonborn* suffers from some issues, notably a poor integration with the narrative of *Skyrim*'s base experience after the main plot of *Dragonborn* is resolved. This is mostly due to the lack of feedback from the DLC back into the base game via dialogue with NPCs and other cues to the player. There is a great opportunity for future sandbox-style roleplaying games to provide modular narrative, DLC or otherwise, using *Dragonborn*'s winning formula while improving on how roleplaying aspects of the game are handled with the additional content and its relationship to the original narrative. Here's to hoping we'll see future modular content that is as sharply presented and flexibly implemented as *Dragonborn* was in the world of Skyrim.