



# The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

There be dragons here

**T**he last *Elder Scrolls* game, *Oblivion*, revolved around a civilized sort of fantasy world. It had big, bustling cities at the heart of a great empire. There were traces of improving technology. The Renaissance was on the horizon. *Skyrim* takes place 200 years later, but in spirit, it turns back the clock. This is a story about a dark age in a cold place. Not a whole lot of civilization in this one—like the old joke goes, it throws back to the days when the men were men and the sheep were nervous. Although the men are pretty nervous too—on account of the dragons.

It's a big part of what makes *Skyrim* fun: the chance to explore a real red-blooded, ice-and-fire fantasy. Conan the Cimmerian would feel right at home here, along with all the other great heroes of pulp fiction. The biggest part, though, is the engine underneath it, the game design keeping an amazing world in motion. Bethesda has outdone itself again; this could be the PS3's finest role-playing adventure.

## Hour of the Dragon

For maybe five or 10 minutes at the beginning of *Skyrim*, the story is in full control and the game runs along on rails. In that time, we discover the basics of the plot and meet a few key players: Tamriel's snowbound northern province is in the grip of a civil war as the remnants of the Empire fight a native rebellion. Then a whole a new force comes to upset the

**Short handed** *Skyrim* has a pretty strong voice cast, but it could use a bigger one. Even though it has more voice actors than *Oblivion* did, some actors got the duty for a lot of different characters. *Babylon 5* fans will get a kick out of hearing Claudia Christian. They just might get tired of hearing her a tad too often.

chessboard—the dragons that everyone thought were dead.

Once those 10 minutes are up, the handholding is over. Aside from a few minor exceptions, we're in control from then on out, free to take off across a massive game world and see what there is to see, from the snow-capped mountains to the deepest caverns and anywhere in between. Think the landscape in *Oblivion* was huge? *Skyrim*'s breadth of real estate leaves it in the shade, and thanks to a much-improved graphics engine, it all feels far more alive. Even little touches of animation do their part: townspeople pattering around shops and taverns, rivers that rush along as little fish leap upstream. Other moments honestly qualify as epic, especially when gigantic dragons soar down on the attack. The *Elder Scrolls* series has never had dragons before—at least not living ones, which ▶

**Info**  
 Format PS3 Pub Bethesda Softworks Dev Bethesda Game Studios Price \$59.99 ESRB Mature It's like real life with fewer laws and more dragons.

❑ We can dual-wield weapons and spells in *Skyrim*. Doubly nice.



once seemed a little odd considering that they're usually a fantasy staple. Now it makes more sense. Bethesda was waiting for a chance to do them right, and *Skyrim* does dragons the way they ought to be done.

Want to slay dragons? Then go forth and slay them. Aside from looking and sounding amazing, the dragon-slaying battles give up awesome loot and gradually unlock a collection of deadly special powers. Nowhere is it written that anyone has to go slay the mystical creatures, though, which is where the genius of *Skyrim's* scenario design lies. There's not a lot that we necessarily *have to do* at all. In an age of games that are happy to funnel us through a long chain of scripted events for 10 hours and be done with it, this is something special: a game where it's fun to go out and get lost. It isn't exactly unstructured—the central storyline and a boatload of side-quests provide all the structure and specific goals anyone could want. It's just that it's often just as interesting to pick a direction and say, "Today, I'm going thataway."

**Rule by Axe**

The folks at Bethesda have claimed

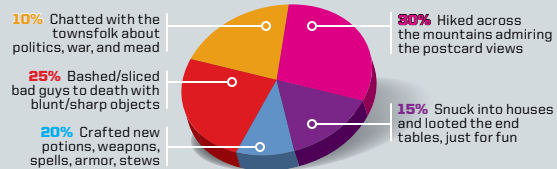
❑ It's almost always snowing in some parts of the world. Luckily, our hero doesn't mind the cold.



that it's possible to run through the principal story arc in about 30 hours. That would likely require an inhuman focus on clearing the key quests and doing absolutely nothing else. In practice, it's almost impossible to keep doing a single thing for very long. Soon

❑ Go ahead and snatch up whatever's not nailed down. Just keep an eye out in case the city guard's watching.

**What we did in... The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim**



enough, the average player's quest journal is going to stretch out into a long, long list of half-finished missions. Something else always seems to come up, whether it's a new quest, a new dungeon, or maybe just an addiction to roaming across the plains and hunting moose.

The way character development works in *Skyrim*, even wandering without a purpose can lead to some kind of tangible benefit. Doing almost anything leads to growth in



❑ Unlocking a special perk lets us combine two of the same spell into one powerful blast.



*Skyrim* does dragons the way they ought to be done.

one skill area or another, and building up any skill also builds up the character's overall experience level. It feels almost effortless sometimes: cast more spells and spells cast faster, keep swinging swords and swords deal more damage, pick lots of locks and chests will give up their contents with ease. Like busting heads with a warhammer? Pretty soon the bards will be spinning tales and songs about the meanest warhammer in the North.

Although *Skyrim's* 18 skill groups cluster roughly together into magic, thieving, and combat, there aren't any character classes as such and not many defining statistics either. It's a major shift from *Oblivion*, which had a complex system of classes and stat requirements that defined a hero's skill set. Instead, our characters organically evolve according to how we decide we want to play them. This may sound a little odd, but it turns into one of the game's most addictive qualities: watching heroes grow to reflect the way we like to experience their adventures.

**Perks of Power**

The game still features specific skills called "perks" that grant a unique ability or advantage—a sniping zoom-in effect is an Archery perk, a bonus to the power of magic weapons is an Enchanting perk, and so on. The hero gets to pick one with each experience level, but perks call for a minimum level of experience in their skill area. As a result, the chance to grab new perks provides a few milestones to shoot for so building up a skill doesn't always feel like one long, continuous process.

**Monster Mash**

**DRAGONS**



They're back and they're hungry. Luckily, they're easier to kill than you might think.

**FROSTBITE SPIDERS**



Creepy and ugly, but not very dangerous. Except for the really, really big ones.

**DRAUGR**



That's *Skyrim-ese* for "zombie," a common infestation in barrows, crypts, and caverns.

**GIANTS**



These guys won't start a fight, but they'll finish it for sure. Try to give their camps a wide berth.



❑ Tamriel's home to all kinds of big game, but real heroes hunt the biggest.

Altogether, the skill system's still deep enough. It's very user-friendly, and cutting down on some of the out-front number crunching has a useful side effect—it shifts a decent chunk of our focus back toward what actually makes the game fun: smashing things, zapping things, stealing things, *doing* things. The more time our hands spend engaged with the controls, the less time we're looking at a mess of statistics, and that's always a change for the better.

A game this ambitious is going to have some loose ends and frayed edges. It's been patched once already as we write this, clearing up glitches in quest progression and general stability problems. The load times

can be pretty stiff, especially at a few key transitions between different parts of the game world. Just as in *Fallout 3*, some pieces of cinematic animation don't always mesh together exactly right. Gamers who want pristine cutscenes should go replay something like *Metal Gear Solid 4*. For everyone else out there, Tamriel's waiting. *Skyrim* is a gorgeous production that truly does justice to the words "roleplaying game." It doesn't just tell us a story, it gives us the chance to tell a story of our own. At its best, that's what an interactive art form should be all about.

Bethesda just gave us a beautiful reminder of what a game can truly be.

DAVID F. SMITH

