

# Elder Scrolls Online: Cooperative & Social Aspects of Game-play

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## Introduction

Elder Scrolls Online (ESO) transforms the single-player worlds expressed in Bethesda Softworks' series of five games about the land of Tamriel into a Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG or hereafter, MMO). These games, especially *Oblivion* (fourth in series) and *Skyrim* (fifth in series) culminated in a rich narrative that includes religion, culture, lore, stunning environments, good vs. evil, and most importantly, the option to run free, following a mostly non-linear path and choosing quests that follow the main storyline or side-quests. "The development of this game [ESO] was going on parallel to the development of *Skyrim*. We always knew that when *Skyrim* came out, that it was going to have a massive impact on how people perceived the Elder Scrolls game ... and we had to adapt our game," (Knonkle, 2013). The ESO narrative includes elements from all the former games, referencing and building upon the four Eras and is set in the Second Era while *Skyrim* is set in the Fourth Era, and *Oblivion* the Third Era. Consequently, you will find no dragons in ESO. I think we are not alone when we say that most players would love to have a dragon and fly to our destinations instead of a horse that we ride to our destinations.



In ESO, the environment is wonderfully 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, including a night and day cycle, as well as being populated with creatures that make it feel full and alive. A generation ago, the immersive experience of exploring fantastical worlds was accomplished through the playing any number of imagination-based or tabletop games, most notably *Dungeons and Dragons*. These games share a lot with modern MMOs, including cooperative gameplay, character creation, and random encounters. ESO is compelling on many levels and, as an MMO, appeals to game players who desire social game play and group challenges.

## A few basics of the game and its location

When beginning the game, players go through a rich character creation process that involves choosing race, gender, character class, and physical appearance. The choice of one's race (think species, not ethnicity here) determines which of the three alliances your character belongs to and, hence, which surrounding environment the player will spend the majority of the initial game exploring. ESO provides options to play solo, duo, in groups of four, and in Craglorn, there are dungeons specifically designed for four and twelve person groups who are at Veteran Level 10 or higher. Playing PvP (Player vs. Player) one can wage medieval siege warfare in the region of Cyrodil. The PvP areas becomes available at level 10 while reaching the maximum level of 50 cycles the player to the other alliance areas so that each character may play through all of the quests.

In addition, there is Coldharbour, home to the game's antagonist, Molog Bal, a Daedric Prince who harvests the souls of mortals. In fact, like all of the games in this franchise, the player starts in prison and this time Molog Bal has taken your soul! Of course, you must fight to get it back, and during your escape from prison, you grab your weapon of choice (being able to select only one weapon is a subtle clue that focusing on one weapon skill line will benefit you in the early stages). Here, you begin the process of learning the game mechanics that allow you to control your character and the game interface that helps you interact with everything and everyone. After your prison break, you appear in a town associated with your alliance: Ebonheart Pact, Daggerfall Covenant, and Aldmeri

Dominion (Please see Figure 1 above). (See more at: <http://www.uesp.net/wiki/Online:Online.>)



**Figure 1.** The map illustrates the three PvE areas around the perimeter and the central province of Cyrodiil, the PvP area. The unmarked spaces are places to be added as the game grows. For example, Craglorn was added in May, but is not pictured on the map. Map from: (<http://tamrielfoundry.com/2014/02/interactive-map/>), used with permission.

## ESO, Skyrim & Game Narrative

When playing games, some players like to read the story as it is presented from NPCs and then layer on how their participation and interaction in the world matters, creating their own hero story, and others read little or skim the dialogs, picking up on themes without getting the details. Aubrecht and Eames approached their single-player interaction with Skyrim differently because of this difference. Aubrecht found that in Skyrim, she could display the dialogs and quickly skim through, click a choice and still know what to do to complete quests and level up. However, Oblivion required more attention to the NPC dialogs in order to know where to go next, because it lacked the feature of linking the desired destination from the journal of quests to the game map.

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 done when creating one's character. If I choose to be Argonian, then I'm automatically in the Ebonheart Pact and the quests I receive once I get through the initial training area of the game are tied to that specific faction. A breakdown of the factions is here: <http://elderscrollsonline.info/races>.

In ESO, the narrative may be more important than in former Elder Scrolls games because we are all thrown into a war and players are given different scenarios about why they are at war with one another for the PvP aspect. At the same time, the game sets must set up why we all are united against Molog Bal. On the other hand, the repetitive nature of the quests and seemingly inconsequential nature of the player dialog response choices may negate the value of the narrative.

## Undermining cooperative play by creating an unbalanced game economy

The way ESO has been sold, which is very similar to how Wildstar is being marketed, may contribute to undermining cooperative play by creating an imbalance in player's resources. It interferes with social hierarchy and player advancement within the game. Players can opt to spend more real money to buy a horse or purchase the Imperial Edition that has other perks as well, including the rings of Mara and the option to craft Imperial armor. Having a horse gives the player several advantages, for example, more storage space. While a horse can be purchased with game gold, it is very expensive. The rings of Mara are available only as a purchase and are then worn by two players who have committed to play together; when so doing, they receive a 10% experience bonus upon completing quests. Having to pay real money for these advantages means that they are not accessible to all players and, thus, creates two tiers of players: those who bought the Imperial Edition or the stand alone horse add on, and those who did not. In addition, the option to pre-purchase the game or opt for the Imperial Edition gives players the option to create a character in any Alliance; that, in turn, undermines the narrative. As Bateluer (2014) states,

“players are being hit with MicroTransactions, Pay Gates, IAPs (In-App Purchases), exclusive preorder content, and constant nickel and diming of the players. This is a cancer that’s rapidly spreading across every genre.” See [Josh’s rant from ShoddyCast](#), (2014) who argues that there is a battle going on for the very soul of the game and has implications for all MMOs. If nothing else, the cited comments point to player’s dissatisfaction with how these marketing strategies identify how players like to play and use that to increase revenue.

In-game incentives to play ESO seem similar to Facebook games, games that make you want to buy something or come back regularly. Recall Tamagotchi, where you had to care for your digital pet? In ESO, every 20 hours, I can feed my horse — each feeding gives me the option to increase the horse’s speed, stamina, or carrying capacity — allowing for upwards of 300 selections total. Playing every day, it will take me nearly a year to maximize all of these areas. In addition, the blacksmithing, clothing, and woodworking crafting skill lines all have the option to do “research” that takes anywhere from 6 hours to a month of real time. Placing an item in the research slot begins the timer and when the time is up you have “learned” how a particular trait such as durability or precision can be added to your crafting of clothing or weapons.

A discussion with Lucas Gillispie (personal communication, 2014), a long-time MMO player and the founder of Harbingers of Light (guild) 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 “his day,” 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. He lamented the loss of downtime: Time spent on guild business out of game allows time for reflection and that reflection can translate into solid guild cultivation and growth. In essence, this is about forced interactions that result from a game support-driven environment vs. one that is player-driven. In ESO there are trading stores and guilds as well. 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. Dikkers 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:

End game play in early MMO’s rewarded guild participation through game design elements. Primarily high-end gear required guild coordination to conquer greater challenges that required groups of players. This, in my opinion, incidentally encouraged positive social play. If personal goals were met in and through guilds, negative play didn’t add up for many. Tools that made solo style play were incidentally the same tools that lessened the need for guilds. Some tools that have made solo play easier and guild cohesion more elusive are in-game random queues, lower charter requirements, automated LFG (look for group), scenarios (and faster dungeon runs), smaller raid length, in-game calendaring (good add-on, but removed the need for external organization), and lower cost to server jumping (Dikkers, 2014, personal communication).

## **The authors are noob MMO players who first played Skyrim**

In *Lord of the Rings*, (LOTR) Tolkien populated Middle Earth with believable characters and fantastical creatures, each embodying particular skills and all focused on the battle of good vs. evil — a compelling and profound narrative. When Aubrecht began playing ESO, that sense of battling good vs. evil and being immersed in a world similar to Middle Earth came alive for her. In a profound way, ESO appeals to Aubrecht’s childhood imaginings of what Middle Earth was like, brining them to life, and contributes to her appreciation for this game. She explains that, unlike in the LOTR movies, all characters in the book agreed that defeating Saruman was paramount and agreed to do anything they could to bring that about. For this reason, it is not a stretch for her to accept and imagine that there can be more than one hero in Tamriel (see Eames discussion of playing the hero below). In addition, the MMO experience opens up a wide range of questions that appeal to her research interests and ideas of how people can work cooperatively within a created system and also, individually or collectively, disrupt that system. And, when thinking of disruption, she often thinks of how to improve the educational system (1). In addition, when engaged socially, cooperation is an option; it can shift the player’s thinking from us vs. them to how to best to support one another in order to solve problems.

## **Eames’ Experience - Skyrim vs. Elder Scrolls**

Unlike Michelle, I haven’t enjoyed my time with ESO as much as I expected. As a long-time fan of the Elder Scrolls single-player games and with practically no experience with MMOs, I went into my time with ESO expecting a very similar experience. While there are obvious similarities, I feel the defining traits of these two games are worlds apart.

Marc LeBlanc (2014) theorizes that there are at least eight types of fun associated with playing games. Personally,

I identify most strongly with the narrative, fantasy, and discovery aspects of gaming. With this in mind, Skyrim was a great fit for me. I spent dozens of hours exploring the beautiful tundra of the province of Skyrim, enjoying the wildlife and marveling at the spectacular aurora borealis effects. When I came in from the wilderness, the game provided a rich fantasy narrative, upon which I had a direct impact.

The world of Skyrim always felt vibrant and rich to me and the quests--both main and side--developed my sense of wonder. On the other hand, the first thing one notices when entering the world of ESO the first time are the hundreds of other players inhabiting the space with you. In highly populated areas, such as cities, there are dozens of players in your line of sight at all times. If you visit a local merchant or bank, there are often twenty other players interacting with the NPC simultaneously. When you begin initial side quests, you complete the tasks assigned to you while several other people do the same. 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.

The side quests that make up the majority of the time I spent in the game are uninteresting and add very little to the overall narrative. Within a couple of hours, I was no longer even bothering to read the accompanying dialogue from the quest-giver. The details never mattered and anything I could say or ask would have no bearing on the quest. The only real choice offered during quests was whether to kill or spare an NPC guilty of some crime. Once again, the decision never matters, as the outcome remains the same. So, after clicking through the dialogue, I would simply look to my map and see where I was being directed by a waypoint on the map. Usually, the quests followed the same pattern: go there, kill a certain number of those, come back here. The main quests are not much better, and it was not very long before I was also clicking past the details of those, as well.

In hindsight, the lack of quality material is not so surprising. The scope of the world necessary to sustain ESO is staggering. The sheer volume of content necessary to keep players engaged for hundreds of hours would almost necessitate a lowered standard of quality.

So far, I have overlooked the social aspect of ESO, which is obviously the hallmark of an MMO. I must admit to never caring much for social gaming. With the exception of all-night GoldenEye/Mario Kart split-screen binges with high school buddies, gaming has typically been a solitary exercise. I cut my digital teeth wandering the fields of Hyrule as Link and exploring the mysterious ring-world in Halo: Combat Evolved. Aside from possibly having someone in the room, I went on these adventures solo, and I was okay with that. After all, there can be only one Hero of Time, and it might as well be me.

So, although it seems counterintuitive, I entered the ESO world mostly uninterested in the multiplayer aspects of the game, but hoping that the game would naturally change my mind. So far, it has not. Like many of the game mechanics in ESO, grouping with others serves the function of making yourself a bigger threat in order to tackle bigger challenges and gain more experience points. When I did group with others, I was often worried that my inexperience would hold the group back. I failed to form any meaningful relationships that went above the simple need to have someone else in the group to blast away at the super-repetitive enemies. Should I have tried harder? Absolutely. Did the game make me want to? Absolutely not.

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 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. Other than frustration at the lower quality of the experience, the only overriding emotion I feel when playing ESO is a strong desire to return to my old stomping grounds in Skyrim.

## **Why doesn't what we did as successful Skyrim players transfer to being successful ESO players?**

The authors, Eames and Aubrecht, coming from a single-player background, spent a lot of time trying to impose what they knew about how to play Skyrim and Oblivion to ESO ... most of which did not seem to translate to ESO ... because Skyrim isn't an MMO. To understand this, the authors made a list what they have identified as the similarities and differences.

### **Similarities**

1. The story is derived from the Bethesda narratives;
2. Probably what is most deceptive to those transitioning to MMOs ... there are solo quests;
3. Crafting your own gear is better than anything you can find or buy; however in ESO, it takes longer to level up the skills.

4. Loot obtained can be sold to NPC merchants;
5. The Lore Books in ESO are sometimes the same books that populated the bookshelves of Skyrim. Lore Books in ESO increase your mage skill line. Just as in Skyrim, "reading" lore books occasionally causes a particular skill to level up.
6. The economy in Skyrim is somewhat flawed because after a while, you amass an enormous amount of money and there is nothing to buy. Eames contends that this was addressed with the add-on, Hearthfire, which allows you to buy plots of land and develop your own estate.
7. The Collecting Habit. In Skyrim, one searches every dead body and urn. This habit will serve you well in ESO ... the crafting system is quite complex and will take days and days, months really, of collecting and advancing one's skills to master.

## Differences

1. Play daily to progress more quickly – for example by feeding your horse and crafting items.
2. Quests can be done with someone or in a group of up to 20 people, sharing resources with other players helps you tremendously (see below) and is also an incentive to join or form a guild.
3. Completing a quest rewards the player with game money.
4. There's no way to "stop" the action while you use a health potion.
5. Horses are hardy and never die, even if you jump off a cliff.
6. Food and beverages that you craft can substantially increase your attributes of Magica, Stamina, and Health.
7. In Skyrim, you wear the best, highest-ranked armor you can get your hands on; in ESO, everything has 5 levels from normal to legendary and is also leveled according to the character's leveling 1-50 and then veteran 1 to 12.
8. Skill Points that factor into one's character development come from multiple sources: skyshards (finding 3 = 1 skill point), completing certain quests, and leveling up, whereas in Skyrim you got skill points only from leveling up. In addition, each of the 9 character options has a skill tree tied to it. For example, Argonians have a lot of skill perks in healing. Several skill lines are common to all such as weapon and armor skills as well as class specific skills and race specific passive abilities.
9. Group Play – identifying one's play style and how you will contribute to the team effort – damage per second, tank, or healer. These roles form the unit of four people that team up to defeat difficult bosses and are a staple element in MMOs.
10. Storage is limited. Solutions: join a guild that will allow you can share the 500 bank slots to store crafting materials (or create one, but you'll need 10 people to activate the bank), feed your horse, pay to increase your backpack and bank size, and mail things to your friends and then ask them to return the email unopened ... then don't open it for a few days until you have space.
11. In Skyrim, you can buy a house and store everything. You never have to contend with what to do with all your stuff.
12. There are lots of things to spend money on such as redistributing your skill or attribute points, buying and feeding your horse, buying materials from other players, buying glyphs, and increasing your bank space.
13. Most importantly, there are several more ways to escape certain death than in Skyrim ... dodging, drinking potions on the fly, kiting (running backwards while firing a ranged attack), eating food ahead of time for buffs, skill point weapons or healings, plus your weapon of choice and a full set of armor.

## Tips for success that MMO ESO players know that single player people don't.

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

There are players who mostly play solo, but playing cooperatively has benefits in terms access to more resources and quicker leveling. In Skyrim, the NPC merchant was your best friend. In ESO, other players are far more beneficial than the NPCs. The cost of buying a sword is over \$1000 gold and selling one obtained as loot yields only 12 gold. Better options are to learn to craft your own, get one from a guild member or friend, or buy a better one from another player. When questing with other players, one can trade items at no cost. For example, I may be in need of a better sword or some crafting materials and my friend is in need of some food for increased health and blacksmithing materials. While standing near one another, we can trade items for free or mail them in-game for a small fee.

## Aubrecht's reflection on Guilds in ESO

I've joined three guilds and have three primary characters, one in each alliance. First, I answered an in-game chat call for guild members and joined Hollow Lullaby in Aldmeri Dominion Alliance. I have no privileges in the guild bank and I haven't talked to anyone in the guild since the day I joined.

In Ebonheart Pact, I joined Harbingers of Light (pictured left) because someone I knew out of game invited me to join. They have a website, a process for joining, and members who play other MMOs. Many of the members have been playing together for a long time. They use Raid Call, an out-of-game online talk channel, for discussions and coordinating group efforts. I have talked with guild members, sought advice, have bank privileges, and a craft buddy. He and I craft and exchange daggers so we can gain experience by breaking down each other's items. When we met to do a group photo of the guild and used Raid Call, he found out I was a woman (2).



In the Daggerfalls Covenant, I am in the Lords of Tamriel. A fellow quester, Omega, and I (we are the Vampires, pictured right) decided to form a guild in order to more easily share and store materials. I met Omega when I inquired if he thought a particular puzzle was bugged and he told me how to solve it. We decided to quest together. I suggested that we exchange items we crafted—armor and food. I gave him materials and found motif books that allowed him to learn new armor crafting styles. I shared crafted food items that increase character health. As an experienced MMOs player, he shared ways to improve my character's success and helped me redistribute my skill points to make me stronger. Within this guild, I found another craft buddy and we make and exchange glyphs that we break down to increase our enchantment crafting experience and share runes that we use to create the glyphs.

## 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 meant to be enjoyed in a different way: socially. 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. It is interesting that Aubrecht and Eames, both fans of previous Elder Scrolls games approached the MMO experience in vastly different ways. In hoping to replicate the single-player experiences he so enjoys, Eames found that ESO fell flat. In the aspects of Elder Scrolls that he values most, ESO comes up a bit short. Aubrecht, in approaching ESO with the intent to engage the community, found much more to be enjoyed. The obvious conclusion is that ESO cannot and should not be approached as Elder Scrolls VI, rather as a completely different experience, which shares a lot in common with its predecessors.

## End Notes

### (1) 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” (Gillispie, 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>.

## **(2) Women and MMOs – Aubrecht’s perspective**

It seems that the assumption many players make is that everyone in game is male. Gender-bending is common — where men make women characters. My game name, Meash, could be considered gender-neutral so even though my character is female, I have yet to encounter someone who assumes I’m female. If they figure it out, they say it’s because I’m so nice. I usually take the position of don’t ask, don’t tell ... but will counter assumptions from time to time and let people know my gender. According to Nick Yee, (2014) 20% of MMO players are women (p. 96); however, some women don’t let the other players know their gender so that they won’t be treated differently. So even though MMOs provide an object-oriented play space where gender and age have no relevance to ability in game, it is played by people whose stereotypical assumptions insist that it does. Furthermore, Yee points out that when one considers gender similarities, the majority of male and female players in online games like the same kinds of play (p. 109).

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## **Caveat & Acknowledgements**

After the review process was concluded, the gag order from the Beta period was lifted and the accessibility of the game went up and consequently the majority of this paper was completed after the peer-review process due to the confluence/strange timing. Special thanks to Seann Dikkers and Lucas Gillispie, experienced MMO players who acted as post-deadline peer reviewers of this paper.