

# **The Stickiness of Skyrim: A Medieval Fantasy for the Ages**

**By Kira Fountain**

*The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* is a 2011 open-world RPG developed by Bethesda Game Studios. It takes place in the province of Skyrim, a cold and mountainous region of the fictional continent of Tamriel. Players take on the role of the "Dragonborn," with the ability to absorb the souls of slain dragons and take on their powers. The game features a vast and detailed world for players to explore with an extensive customizable character system. This allows players to create and play as a wide range of characters, with various races, appearances, voices and skills. The game has been highly praised by critics and recognized for its gameplay successes. I will discuss the theory of neo-medievalism, and how aspects of identity, control, and nostalgia contribute to the lasting success and popularity of Skyrim.

## **1. Neo medievalism**

In 1984, an Italian medievalist Umberto Eco, coined the term neo-medievalism in his lecture "Dreaming of the Middle Ages" in response to the increasing fascination of the general public with this historical period. Eco says that this popularity has always been the case, ever since immediately after the official ending of the Middle Ages, to which he places in 1492. According to him, examining the medieval ages means looking at where we come from, "in the same way that a doctor, to understand our present state of health, asks us about our childhood." He argues that for people at the time, "looking at the Middle Ages is a quest for our roots and, since we want to come back to the real roots, we are looking for 'reliable Middle Ages' not for romance

and fantasy, though frequently this wish is misunderstood and moved by a vague impulse, we indulge in a sort of escapism a la Tolkien.” (Eco and Weaver 1986) Over the span of thirty years, scholars have attempted to define the term *neo-medievalism*. One scholar, who was ahead of his time, noticed the rise of medieval fantasy games and saw them as the quintessential example of neo-medievalism. These games liberally use medieval imagery and tropes, but have little interest in faithfully portraying the medieval ages. Instead of reimagining the medieval ages themselves, fantasy MMORPGs tend to reimagine earlier recreations of the medieval period, drawing from sources like J. R. R. Tolkien. (Fugelso 2010)

## **2. Identity and control**

Roleplaying games provide a safe space for experimenting with personal identities. Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" proposes that traditional categories like "human" and "machine" are insufficient in today's world, where technology is increasingly intertwined with humanity. She introduces the "cyborg," a hybrid being that blurs the lines between human and machine and challenges gender and identity. In roleplaying games, the idea of the cyborg can be applied to creating and exploring characters that challenge traditional notions of identity and embodiment. (Haraway 1990) In Skyrim, players can choose from ten playable races, two body types, and further personalize their character with various features such as skin tone, weight, facial structure, hair style, etc. This inclusivity can create a safe space for players to experiment with different genders and forms of self-expression without prejudice.

Researcher Sherry Turkle investigated why some players spend so much time on text-based online multiplayer games known as MUDs (multi-user dungeons). She found that players use

these games to work out identity issues related to control and mastery or as a form of psychotherapy. (Turkle 1994) For example, one player discovered a connection between his mother's controlling behavior and his desire to play a relaxed character in the game. This suggests a connection to psychotherapeutic strategies, bringing out both the conscious and unconscious aspects of the self. In modern games like Skyrim, players can portray different personalities through their actions and choices, providing a similar space for exploration. Turkle suggests that in-game identities offer anonymity and the ability to explore different aspects of oneself. Players can create and play as many characters as they want, without fear of real-life consequences. In-game traits are not associated with real-life features, allowing players to experience self-presentation in a different way. This exploration of identity can be a driving motivation for roleplaying games, like Skyrim.

In both examples, the players were using these games whether intentionally or not, to work out internal issues without judgement in an environment they felt safe and comfortable in, much like the space ideally created for psychotherapy sessions. Roleplaying games as a medium for actively working through internalized issues is undoubtedly a significant factor in why certain games seem to stick.

### **3. Nostalgia**

Another theory suggests that the popularity of medieval fantasy video games reflects a broader cultural trend towards nostalgia and a longing for simpler times. As society becomes increasingly complex and technological, people may seek refuge in the imagined simplicity of a medieval fantasy world.

Some players see roleplaying games as a way to explore their heritage, enjoying a cultural nostalgia. In the case of *Assassin's Creed*, a game set in medieval Jerusalem, Acre and Damascus, several players from the Middle East resonate with the environment, saying: "Wandering through the original Assassin's Creed game world might be purely driven by nostalgia, in the hope of identifying with the elements of the past. I was in it to explore a heritage many, like me, have deemed lost." (El-Nasr et al. 2008) Evidently, playing games set in a medieval period brings up certain emotional reactions relating to tradition and personal lineage depending on where you grew up and how important that history was to your culture; as expressed in this quote, almost a longing for a lost past.

A similar example of this kind of nostalgia, a journalist's father grew up in 1940's Los Angeles where his father was a policeman. Upon showing him the game *L.A. Noire*, a detective thriller set during the same time he was growing up, he had a triggering experience, remembering days of his childhood due to the high level of immersion and detail throughout the world. (Donlan 2019) This kind of nostalgia is referred to as *restorative nostalgia*, "the retrospective desire to reconstitute a lost past". (Goetz 2018) However, gamers today simply weren't around in the 1940s, nor in the medieval ages, so the kind of nostalgia expressed today is what is called *reflective nostalgia*. While *restorative* nostalgia emphasizes the first half of the word, "nostos", or "the return home", *reflective* nostalgia emphasizes the latter half, "algia" the sense of longing. (Goetz 2018) Therefore today, the feeling of nostalgia in gaming today that is seen with these medieval fantasy games is less of a wish to return to a specific memory and instance of the past, and more of a wish to return to a place or a conception of a place. This is a place where one has never visited and could never visit. (Whalen and Taylor 2008) In practice, historical recreations of game environments are designed to foster engaging gameplay. These recreations may

sometimes stray from historical accuracy, but this can be intentional to fit with existing player expectations. This way, the game world becomes more of "a romantic environment derived distantly from the historical reality." (Whalen and Taylor 2008) This is another reason why medieval fantasy games retain players for decades, it's the gratification they provide by satisfying a yearning for a place that lives in the minds of the players. In these games, players not only get to be there, but also engage in activities, participate in society, and take actions that matter in a world forever unobtainable to them. Video games are the perfect medium to do this, and it contributes to the stickiness of a thriving world like *Skyrim*, a lost world not quite situated in history, hanging in limbo between our fantasies and our perception of the medieval ages.

In conclusion, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* has achieved lasting success and popularity due to its adherence to the theory of neo-medievalism, its inclusivity in terms of identity and control, and its appeal to nostalgia for simpler times. The game offers a vast and detailed world for players to explore, with customizable characters and no traditional class system, allowing for experimentation with different forms of self-expression without prejudice. It also provides a safe space for players to work through internalized issues and explore different aspects of themselves. Finally, its medieval fantasy setting and themes tap into a broader cultural trend towards nostalgia, as people seek refuge in imagined worlds that offer a simpler way of life. *Skyrim* has thus become a classic example of a game that has captured the imaginations of players and continues to do so, many years after its release.

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