



The Stickiness of Skyrim: A Medieval Fantasy for the Ages

By Kira Fountain

Catch up for those not familiar:

- The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim is an open-world RPG developed by Bethesda Game Studios and released in 2011
- In the game, players take on the role of the "Dragonborn," a prophesied hero with the ability to absorb the souls of slain dragons and take on their powers
- Skyrim is known for its high immersion, character customization, freedom of gameplay and lore
- Go where you want, be who you want in medieval fantasy context
- Some relation to Middle High German sagas and romances, and dragon myths
- One of the first games thought of today when you mention medieval fantasy games

Catch up for those not familiar:



3 parts

- Neo-medievalism
- Identity and control
- Nostalgia

Neo-medievalism

- A term first used by Italian semiotician Umberto Eco in 1984 out of a reaction to the growing trend of people showing interest in the Middle Ages
- He claims the motivation is a quest to find our roots, looking for a “true” Middle Ages
- This wish is often “misunderstood” and we indulge in a sort of escapism Tolkien-style
- Neo-medievalism keeps being redefined, a book from 2010 was still trying to define a 30 year old term

Neo-medievalism: what is it really?

- Think of it like this:
- Medievalism is what Tolkien is all about: a scholar of medieval literature himself, he was an expert on its texts, often creating stories and languages that could have been part of that time period or adapted from its fiction
 - Leading to *The Lord of the Rings*, *A Song of Ice and Fire* etc.
- Neo-medievalism then, are essentially works that for the most part build on a Tolkien version of the Middle Ages, most often with fantasy elements

Neo-medievalism in games

“Electronic games, and particularly the virtual universes of Massive Multi-player Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) – seem to be the quintessential instantiations of neo medievalism. Such worlds liberally employ medieval tropes and images with very little, if any concern for the actual, historical Middle Ages. Rather than re-imagining the Middle Ages per se, fantasy MMORPGs tend to re-imagine previous medievalist re-creations, invoking, for instance, the medievalism of J. R. R. Tolkien.”

Identity and control: Donna Haraway

- Roleplaying games allow for an experimentation of personal identities in a safe and contained environment free of judgement
- In A Cyborg Manifesto, Donna Haraway argues that categories like “human” and “machine” are no longer adequate
- Cyborg: blurs the boundaries between human and machine, challenges notions of gender and identity

Identity and control: Donna Haraway -> Games

- Idea of cyborg -> applied to the creation of characters and exploration of self that challenge traditional notions of identity
- Can create characters that are not limited by biological constraints
- Various fantasy races & extensive character customization



Identity and control: Cyborg

- Excellent tool for players to experiment with different genders and forms of self-expression in a safe play space
- Treated the same by non-player characters without prejudice
- No traditional class system (like wizard, ranger) allowing for a truly customizable gameplay
- Very mod friendly, players can add whatever they want to make it truly an exploration of identity

Identity and control: Sherry Turkle

- In the 90s, Sherry Turkle spent time talking to players about this topic of identity and motivation for roleplaying games, tending to be medieval fantasy games like Skyrim but on MUDs (multi-user dungeons)
- MUDs were the precursor to MMORPGs but that's not important
- She found that players use these games to work out identity issues that center around control and mastery
- For others, these games work as a form of psychotherapy

Identity and control: Sherry Turkle cont'd

- 1st example:
- One player had been using the MUDs to play as a very relaxed character, when they had a realization:
 - “My mother controlled my whole family, well certainly me. So I grew up thinking ‘never again’. On MUDs I do something else, I didn’t even realize this connection to my mother until something happened in the game and somebody tried to boss my pretty laid-back character around and I went crazy. And then I saw what I was doing.”

Identity and control: Sherry Turkle cont'd

- The player didn't realize this need to not be controlled was an issue for him until he was able to work it through in a safe, closed environment where his actions could not be traced back to his real self
- In Skyrim, what you say to non-player characters and your actions can portray a certain personality, allowing for much experimentation of the self

Identity and control: Sherry Turkle cont'd

- Example 2:
- A player created his character 'Achilles' who reflects his ideal self physically and personality-wise
- Familiar to most, rarely do you create a character with all imperfections of reality

Identity and control: Sherry Turkle cont'd

- Turkle suggests several factors of working through these identity issues:
- 1. Ongoing: the player can play as this identity as much as they want, every day if they want
- 2. Anonymous: once the player creates that character, that is the only way they are perceived – the player doesn't take with them into the game world their gender or any recognizable features if they wish
- 3. Invisibility: The player can possess physical traits in-game and will be associated with those traits without repercussions based on their real life traits

Identity and control: Sherry Turkle cont'd

- Turkle describes this invisibility like: "The plain can experience the self-presentation of great beauty; the nerdy can be elegant; the obese can be slender."
- 4. Multiplicity: the player can create several characters, expressing different aspects of the self, allows the player to explore what feels right to them in multiple instances
- In Skyrim, all available through the extensive character customization and you can also create different characters and come back to each whenever

Identity and control: Sherry Turkle cont'd

- In both examples, players were using these games to work out internal issues without judgement in a safe environment they felt comfortable, much like the space ideally created for psychotherapy sessions
- Without a doubt part of why Skyrim is sticky

Identity and control: Sherry Turkle cont'd

- Final example:
- Robert who in the months before beginning college, had to cope with his father's loss of job and disgrace of the family due to alcoholism
- For several months, now at college, he was playing the game over 80 hours a week, when a fire broke out in his dormitory which destroyed all his possessions
- He was then playing over 120 hours per week, sleeping 4 hours per night and only taking quick breaks for food which he ate while playing

Identity and control: Sherry Turkle cont'd

- Near the end of the school year however, he had gotten his own apartment, a job as a salesman, even formed a rock band with friends
- He said he thought the game had served its purpose: "It kept him from what he called his 'suicidal thoughts' by keeping him too busy to have them; it kept him from drinking: 'I have something more fun and safe to do'"
- This game, for Robert, served its purpose as an emotional container to keep him going during a time when he really couldn't do anything else

Identity and control: Sherry Turkle cont'd

- Usually gamers receive a bad reputation for his kind of escapism
- Escapism is bad if permanent, but in this case was used as a tool to get Robert through a difficult period in his life
- One of the things psychotherapists recommend for people who struggle with depression is to get them up and doing at the very least something, anything other than lying in bed all day
- This was a tool for getting through a low period, and without it, Robert might have fallen to alcoholism or drug addiction, or might not have been able to get out of bed

Nostalgia

- Another theory suggests that the popularity of medieval fantasy games reflects a broader cultural trend towards nostalgia and a longing for simpler times
- For some, it's cultural nostalgia and a longing to explore one's heritage or remember the past as it was

Nostalgia

- In Assassin's Creed, set in medieval Jerusalem, Acre and Damascus, several players resonate with it:
- "For a Middle-Easterner, 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. [...] The attention to detail brings nostalgic feelings especially for Maha and Magy, who are from Saudi Arabia and Egypt, respectively, and have been away from home. The game-play experience was a transportation to their homeland. Every corner, every shadow, every detail in the environment carried with it many nostalgic feelings."

Nostalgia

- As another example of this kind of nostalgia:
- A journalist's father grew up in 1940s LA 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



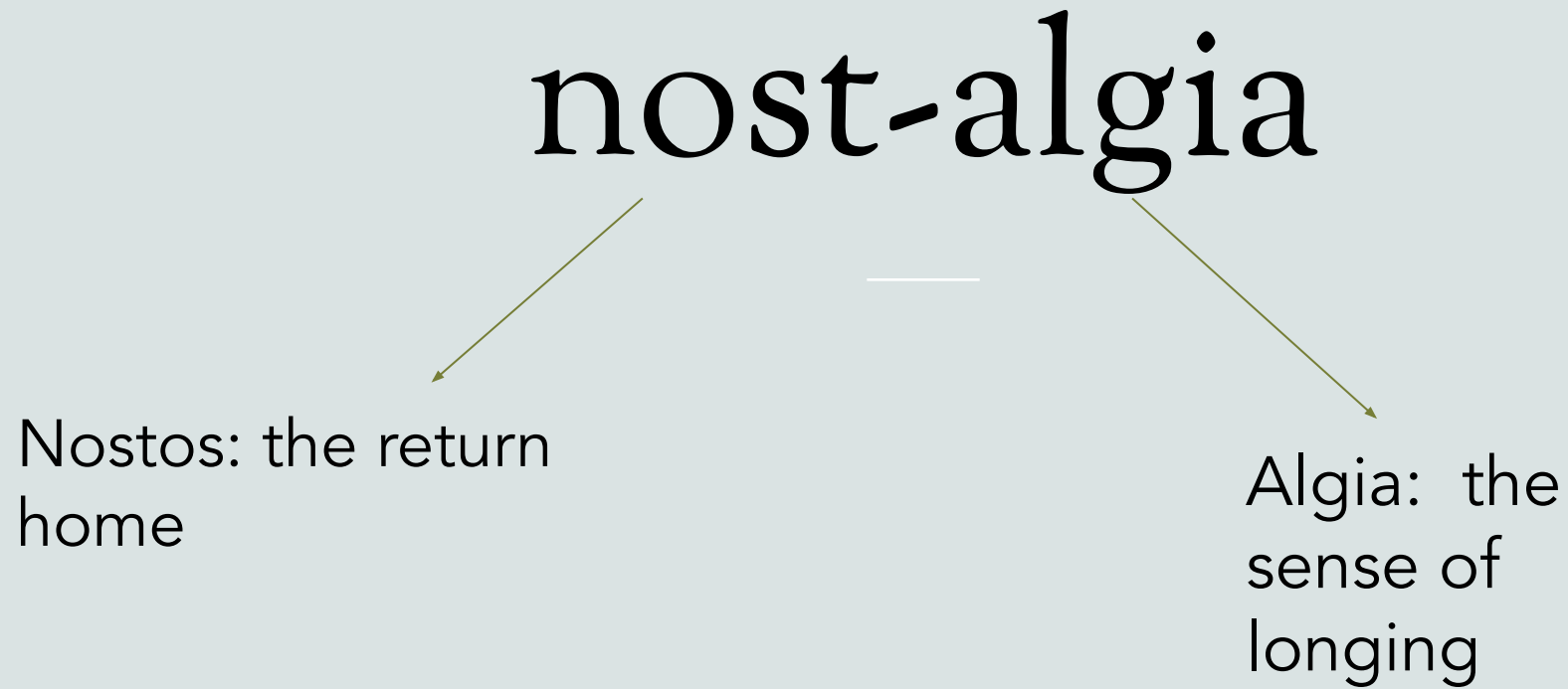
Nostalgia

- This kind of nostalgia is referred to as:
- *Restorative nostalgia*:
- 1. the retrospective desire to reconstitute a lost past
- 2. a process of looking back to an unattainable past and trying to bring that past into the present

Nostalgia

- Gamers today simply weren't around in 1940s however, so restorative nostalgia usually doesn't apply
- Instead:
- *Reflective nostalgia*: a mode of thinking that draws productively on the avowed sadness of loss, rather than a specific image of the past, to imagine new relations in the present and future

nost-algia



Nostos: the return
home

Algia: the
sense of
longing



Nostalgia

- Nostos, first half of the word -> restorative nostalgia
- Algia, second half of the word -> reflective nostalgia
- Connection to be drawn:
- Restorative nostalgia = Medievalism
- Reflective nostalgia = Neo-medievalism

Reflective nostalgia

- This kind of nostalgia is present in gaming today with these medieval fantasy games
- Less of a wish to return to a specific memory and instance of the past, high historical accuracy (restorative)
- More of a wish to return to a place or a conception of a place, regardless of the historical accuracy (reflective)



Reflective nostalgia

- Applying this to real game development, the historical environment in these games are above all designed to foster engaging gameplay
- But also, designed to match player's expectations
- In *Assassin's Creed Unity*, the Notre Dame spires were anachronistically placed because they are impressive and part of how people perceive Paris even though they weren't technically there at the time

Reflective nostalgia

- The game world ends up being more of a “romantic environment derived distantly from the historical reality”
- Ties into neo-medievalism
- Another reason why medieval fantasy games retain players for decades
- They see what they want to see, the game world is a mirror of their perception of the medieval ages, not what it actually was

Nostalgia and stickiness

- Not only is the player seeing what they want, but they can also participate in that world, take actions that have a lasting impact on the world
- A world unobtainable to them, which makes them want to play more, forever chasing a world they can never truly go to
- But games allow them to get pretty close
- This is seen with Skyrim, a lost world not quite situated in history, hanging in limbo between our fantasies and what we perceive the medieval ages to have been like

Thank you



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