



From Skyrim to Morrowind,



and everything in between



» **Platform**

PC

» **Style**

Massively Multiplayer Online
Role-Playing Game

» **Publisher**

Bethesda Softworks

» **Developer**

Zenimax Online Studios

» **Release**

2013



War has raged across the continent of Tamriel since time immemorial. We've experienced epochal conflicts from several perspectives: the Nerevarine's fierce battle against Dagoth Ur in Morrowind, fractious lords desperately fighting against an otherworldly invasion from Oblivion, and a bloody civil war in Skyrim. The Elder Scrolls Online unifies Tamriel's many provinces and sets players loose to experience the story of their own faction's struggle for dominance. This time, saving the world from the awakening of ancient evil is only the beginning. What happens when hundreds or thousands of prophesied heroes all think that they should be Emperor?

by Adam Biessener



Despite cleaving to genre standards with classes, experience points, and progression, much of the leveling experience is based around the core fantasy presented by traditional Elder Scrolls games. Players travel the land as an itinerant adventurer righting wrongs, seeking riches, or simply seeing the sights. The structure is instantly familiar to any Elder Scrolls player, with a compass pointing toward points of interest and hundreds of things to stumble across along the way. You may be doing it from a third-person perspective and using a hotbar to activate skills, but the basic idea is the same.

Remember that time you were hoofing it to Whiterun to talk to the Jarl and you came across a group of bandits accosting an elderly couple? Perhaps you waited until the bandits were occupied with their victims, then took advantage of the chaos

to kill them all and help yourself to everyone's former possessions. This kind of minor event is critical to the Elder Scrolls experience, and it exists in the MMO alongside more involved quests, unmarked caves to explore, and larger conflicts between armies.

Unfortunately, the constraints inherent to online gaming preclude some designs that put Elder Scrolls on the map. Players can't master every discipline or own every mansion, though you absolutely can join every guild and build a pool of skills far broader than ever before. Almost anything you see off in the distance can be explored, but you may have to level up a bit before you can survive the dangers that live there. The sheer size of the game world, though, dwarfs the single province of Skyrim that we know and love.

The Elder Scrolls Online is set approximately



1,000 years before the events of Skyrim, well before the ascendancy of the Septim dynasty in the Third Era. During this era, the land of Tamriel has no clear ruler. The Imperials are weakened from previous wars, and the central province of Cyrodiil is marked by constant warfare. Three distinct alliances, each consisting of three of the playable races, maintain huge standing armies to defend their holdings and expand their territory. Each fights continual battles against the hated Imperials and their other neighbors. However, the noble Tharn family (whose descendant Jagar you may remember from Arena) is hatching a plot to bring Tamriel back under the Imperial heel. They've forged a dark pact with the King of Worms, Mannimarco, an altmer necromancer who promises to fuel the flagging Imperial war machine by reanimating the bodies of fallen soldiers. Unknown to the Imperials he supposedly serves, however, Mannimarco is scheming with the Daedric prince of domination, Molag Bal, to bring the mortal realm under that dark lord's dominion. The heroic fantasy story explores these world-threatening events from the point of view of an adventurer whose soul has already been stolen by Molag Bal. This provides a convenient in-fiction rationale for being able to come back from death over and over again. To get your soul back, you must save Tamriel as well.



The game world features most of the continent of Tamriel, from Skyrim to Morrowind in the north to the Altmer home on the Summerset Isle and the mysterious Khajiit ancestral homeland of Elsweyr. Not all provinces are included in their entirety; Zenimax Online is keeping large areas inaccessible to save them for use as expansion content. Nonetheless, every major area is represented to some extent. For instance, the nord stronghold at Windhelm is fully implemented, but Winterhold and the mages' college won't be in at launch.

The three player factions each hail from distinct regions. To the north and east of Cyrodiil, the nords, dunmer (dark elves), and argonians have forged the Ebonheart Pact out of necessity. Their ancestral hatreds still burn – particularly in the oppressed argonians – but each warlike race recognizes the threats posed by their unified enemies. The altmer (high elves), bosmer (wood elves), and khajiit form the Aldmeri Dominion in the south and southwest, a nascent empire that rules its holdings with an iron fist. The Daggerfall Covenant, an egalitarian democratic association between bretons, redguard, and orcs, uses its military might to secure lucrative trade routes to and from its northwestern dominions.

Recreating the freedom Elder Scrolls players expect within the World of Warcraft-style mechanics Zenimax Online is using for this MMO would be impossible without changing the way that players interact with the world. The studio came up with something it calls “hubless” design to combat this problem. Instead of the typical questing design that MMO players intuitively recognize – go to town, pick up quests, complete quests, return to town for reward – The Elder Scrolls Online aims to allow players to enjoy whatever piques their interest as they wander the world, so long as you are appropriately leveled.

The examples Zenimax Online showed us focus on making each point of interest a self-contained module, not unlike a Dungeons & Dragons adventure designed for a single evening's tabletop role-playing. A simple example is [REDACTED] have a quest to clear out the undead-infested barrow you stumble across in your travels, but perhaps the shade you free by killing the necromancer at the bottom rewards you for your trouble.

Townfolk naturally point players toward some adventures, like a wounded soldier seeking help for his ambushed patrol who conveniently puts a marker on your map noting their location, but not all content will be flagged thusly. Some fraction of the caves, ruins, dungeons, et cetera have nothing marking their existence until you personally come across them. Strategy and spoiler sites will inevitably have guides listing everything within weeks of release, but the studio hopes players who value that sort of free-form experience will find it in The Elder Scrolls Online.

Where is Bethesda in all this?

Zenimax Online is its own studio under the larger corporate umbrella of Zenimax Media, which owns the publisher Bethesda Softworks as well as the development house Todd Howard calls home, Bethesda Game Studios. The two development studios have a tight working relationship when it comes to keeping the Elder Scrolls franchise recognizable in a different genre, meaning they collaborate extensively on lore and geography. “[Howard] checks in every once in a while to make sure that we’re keeping the war real, but the creative team has a very strong link to the loremasters over there,” says game director Matt Firor. Bethesda Game Studios is working on its own projects, though, with everything from high-level design decisions to the content creation on the MMO being done at Zenimax Online.

The studio expects reaching the level cap to take 120 or so hours (varying wildly on individual playstyle, of course) and each of the three factions has its own set of leveling content, so dozens if not hundreds of different solutions to this problem should be present in the final game. Some scenarios are significantly more complex, with interlocking pieces coming together to tell a larger story without forcing players to fully clear out entire zones to get the whole plotline. For instance, the saga of Camlorn that Zenimax demonstrated in great detail plays out across multiple adventures and involves ancient battles, time travel, werewolves, ghosts, and undead werewolves.

STOPPING A WEREWOLF PLAGUE

Zenimax Online showed one extended example that illustrates how The Elder Scrolls Online handles multiple world-saving heroes, player choice, epic storylines, and iconic franchise touchstones. The story of Camlorn is tragic, but a hero's intervention can undo much of the evil plaguing the once-bustling city.



NPC refugees in neighboring cities tell the player an unusual werewolf epidemic has taken over Camlorn and the surrounding area. Most werewolf problems are self-contained in The Elder Scrolls, beast-men causing trouble around their isolated lairs or occasionally banding together to form guilds

and manage their curse for the greater good. In Camlorn, however, these werewolves are working toward conquest in large groups under a leader named Faolchu.

On the way to Camlorn, the player's compass alerts him to the presence of a military encampment some distance from the road. A detachment of mages and soldiers is under attack by ghosts, but nobody has any idea why. After recovering artifacts from the battlefield and ghostly ectoplasm from the hostile spirits for the embattled mages in standard MMO kill and collection quest fashion, the player learns that the ghosts are eternally reliving an ancient battle that has something to do with Faolchu. Sent into the nearby ruins to summon the shade of an army commander who can explain the mystery, the player's quest takes a left turn.

The ghost of a lieutenant of the long-deceased army tells the player that donning her husband's armor and experiencing the battle through his eyes is the only way to truly understand the battle. Clad in a dead man's equipment, the player is transported hundreds of years into the past. Now present in a battle long since decided, the player has a chance to make a real difference in the world.



Officers bark out commands, and the player leads his forces to small victories across the battlefield as the larger conflict rages on. Soon, we learn that the entire assault is a trap: the enemy commander, Faolchu, is merely trying to get his foes gathered together so he can transform and shred them all in one decisive blow. At this point, a choice presents itself: save the wife of the man whose body the player is possessing, or pursue Faolchu. The Zenimax Online designer running the demo cuts through more enemies and saves the lady lieutenant, who tells us that Faolchu's only weakness is fire.

The fated confrontation is now upon the player. He charges into Faolchu's cave and engages him in bloody battle, luring the enemy through bonfires to counter his wolf transformation and render him vulnerable to cold steel. The mission complete, the player returns to his own time to a peaceful, ghost-free battlefield and a grateful group of mages.

This use of "phasing," where players see different worlds dependent on their quest progress and can't interact with others in different phases, is technically

very similar to how Blizzard implements it in World of Warcraft. "Every time I come back to Camlorn after [defeating Faolchu], it's the hero of Kvatch moment from Oblivion," says game director Matt Firor. "They recognize you as the hero that killed the guy who was oppressing them." The difference in this game, according to Zenimax Online, is in the quest design. The studio believes that the self-contained nature of The Elder Scrolls Online's quests – plus the fact that a player who has already completed a stage can join a party member in an earlier stage's phase – will help to avoid the worst pitfalls of segregating players away from each other that have cropped up in similar systems.

If the player decides not to save the lieutenant, one quest NPC whose lineage will have never existed is not present during the resolution. This kind of choice is unlikely to affect the larger than individual quest decisions altered Skyrim's overall plotline, though their consequences do sometimes extend beyond single adventures.

Firor chuckles as he tells us of one example where a noble's servant is constantly put in harm's way throughout one faction's storyline. Though he can die at any one of those inflection points, the story chugs along. It's hard to believe that the game won't acknowledge keeping his ill-fated soul in his body through a unique achievement or other recognition.

The dialogues, enemies, and lore contained in this quest could have been ripped in their entirety from a single-player Elder Scrolls game. The real differences are in the intermediate quest stages, the combat mechanics, and the players around you. The single-player RPGs don't have a lot of "kill six of these" or "bring me ten of those" objectives, though what we've seen here is not excessive by MMO standards. The overall experience and flow of the content, though, is very much in line with what

Public dungeons

The Elder Scrolls Online is bringing back a much-beloved feature that has largely disappeared from modern MMOs: public dungeons. These caves, ruins, and such are designed in much the same way as the private instanced dungeons in recent MMOs like World of Warcraft and Star Wars: The Old Republic. The difference is that they're not segregated from the regular world like those areas; the entire point is to create spaces that encourage players to organically group up and work together.

"What [public dungeons] really did by allowing players to explore the same space together without knowing each other is let people meet each other organically," Firor says. "That's what's been lost. Meeting people while you're actually doing similar things."

Talk to just about any EverQuest or Dark Age of Camelot veteran and you'll get a similar answer. More recent games like Rift have tried to accomplish similar goals through dynamic outdoor content that players can group up and engage in without going to an instance, and whether this older design will resonate with modern MMO players' expectations remains to be seen. Even the worst-case scenario, though, is mitigated by The Elder Scrolls Online's inclusion of standard instanced dungeons as well.





This entire quest is incidental to the larger werewolf problem in Camlorn. Learning that the boss is vulnerable to fire is useful, but completing this is not required to progress in the overarching story. Anyone who has ever been stuck in an MMO questline because they failed to stumble across one lone quest-giver in the middle of the woods can appreciate what Zenimax Online is attempting to accomplish here.

Werewolves and guilds are only a few of the Elder Scrolls touchstones that are present in the game in one form or another (see the Elder Scrolls Touchstones sidebar). As much as the developers are trying to include everything they possibly can to make sure that the world feels like the Tamriel we've been exploring for over a decade, they have little choice but to diverge dramatically from the combat system we loved in Skyrim.



AN ELDER SCROLLS TWIST ON MMO COMBAT

The reality of network latency and massively multiplayer games prevents The Elder Scrolls Online from following the real-time combat model that has driven the series since its inception, but the developers are trying to bring over a few of the concepts that define the franchise's combat. The stamina bar is the fulcrum around which the entire combat design revolves.

The opportunity to sprint, block, interrupt, and break incapacitating effects by using the stamina resource lends a new dimension to the decisions you make in combat. Blocking is by far the most central of these abilities. The exact mechanic varies slightly by class and weapon – parrying with a two-hander, raising a shield, or projecting a magical force field – but the gameplay effect is similar. Blocking a special attack might not stop all the damage, but mitigating the pain and perhaps stopping a secondary effect like the movement impairment of an

Joining the Fighters Guild

This wouldn't be an Elder Scrolls game without guilds to join. The primary method of increasing your reputation with the Fighters Guild is by destroying Dark Anchors. These devilish devices are enormous hooks sent by Molag Bal from his Daedric plane of Coldharbour to drag Tamriel into his realm and subjugate it once and for all. Dark Anchors pseudo-randomly spawn and plummet from the sky, attaching enormous chains to the earth itself. Defeating their Daedric guardians and casting the cruel hooks back to Coldharbour is intended to be possible but difficult for appropriately leveled solo characters, so meeting up with nearby strangers to take them on helps. Each anchor destroyed grants everyone who contributed a reputation boost with the Fighters Guild, which leads to all kinds of rewards down the line – including new skills and abilities.

ice bolt can make a huge difference. Blocking a charged-up heavy swing could stagger the attacker off balance, opening them up to retaliation.

Imagine a PvP battle where a line of fighters charges a group of foes with shields raised. In a traditional MMO, they'd be slowed, frozen, stunned, and torn apart by enemy mages en route. Here, they

may be out of stamina from blocking when they finally close the distance, but a full-health melee specialist in the middle of archers and wizards is going to cause trouble no matter what – even if that's distracting ranged enemies while allied casters take advantage of the confusion.

On the flip side, consider a duel between skilled players. Firing off every crowd control effect in the book may not do much to lock down someone with a full stamina bar, but it could be advantageous to deplete an enemy's stamina so they can't interrupt a big follow-up attack. Stamina management will be a key component of player skill when the fighting gets intense.

Another facet of giving players universal access to these powerful defensive capabilities is a moderate break from the traditional tank/healer/damage “holy trinity” of MMOs. Zenimax Online intends for any five reasonably skilled players to be able to form a group capable of clearing most content. In the absence of traditional “aggro” mechanics, where players directly manipulate a target-priority system for the AI, every player has an increased responsibility for their own well-being. Healing is still a big part of the game, and defensively focused characters like shield-wielding fighters have more options to protect their allies than others, but the studio's goal is to have everything work in a more naturalistic fashion instead of relying on explicit game mechanics like aggro.



Players have a small standard MMO hotbar on which they slot a handful of skills freely outside of combat. The limitation on the number of skills available at one time mostly does away with the concept of skill “rotations” that much of the class design of an MMO like World of Warcraft is built on. “Now every ability can be awesome,” says lead game-play designer Nick Konkle. “If you have 20 abilities, at some point I can’t let every one be a stun. We can just make every ability really cool, and how you build your ‘hand’ in advance is what defines you.”

Zenimax Online declined to share details on individual classes, though the studio confirmed that the game is class-based instead of using the free-form character progression of Skyrim. The currently equipped weapon determines the light and heavy attacks that take up the first two slots, players choose another few class abilities they’ve unlocked, and the final slot is taken up by an ultimate ability that can be activated only after building up “finesse.” This is earned by performing well in battle.

Finesse is intended to be an obvious carrot that encourages players to develop skillful tactics. The idea is that taking advantage of your special abilities and playing smart, for instance by interrupting

bus blow,

is rewarded. Maxing your finesse rating while soloing currently gives a bonus loot chest in addition to charging your ultimate attack, so hopefully using intermediate tactics such as those will become second nature after a bit of questing.

A more dramatic way to build finesse is to combo your skills with yourself or friendly players. One example Zenimax Online shared is a rogue-type character dropping an oil slick on the ground to slow enemies, which can then be set ablaze with fire magic for serious damage potential. Another combo the studio showed off has a fighter running into a firestorm dropped by a friendly mage and

activating his spinning whirlwind attack, which turns into an inferno cyclone shooting deadly fireballs in all directions. Mutual enemies can’t combo off of each others’ skills, though, so you can’t drag your foes into an oil slick left by their rogue and then light the lot of them on fire.

All of these decisions have obvious ramifications for PvP tactics. Elder Scrolls fans who have no intention of partaking in the larger battle for the Imperial City (more on that later) will be happy to learn, however, that NPC enemies are more than happy to use them against players in everything from solo questing to heroic-level dungeon runs.

Joining the Mages Guild

Getting in with Tamriel’s mages in the Second Era is a matter of scouring the world for lore books hidden everywhere from bustling cities to the dark depths of forgotten caverns. Whether that means dynamic, pseudo-random spawn or hand-placed locations for each collectible is unknown at this time. Discovering these lost bits of knowledge is a reward in and of itself for explorer types and lore hounds, but building your Mages Guild reputation is yet another way to earn new perks, skills, and abilities.





SMARTER ENEMIES, BETTER TACTICS

Illustrating an example of PvP combat in The Elder Scrolls Online is simple. Charging a group of enemy players might go something like this: The fighter stuns you with a shield bash while the rogue circles around behind and the mage drops a slowing ice patch on the ground and sprints out to create some distance. Burning some stamina and unleashing a few long-cooldown attacks to quickly dispatch the rogue helps even the odds, particularly if you can time a block to stagger the fighter and keep moving to avoid being splattered across the landscape by the mage.

That's exactly the kind of encounter you can expect when fighting NPCs. "The first and foremost important thing about creatures is that they are not speedbumps," says gameplay designer Maria Aliprando. "You will encounter the same mechanics from monsters that you will from players." Enemies work together with general behavior, trying to tie foes up in melee while mages shoot from a distance. They also combine their abilities when the opportunity presents itself; the fire mage is only too happy to turn an oil patch his rogue buddy dropped into a deadly blaze.

The same concept holds true in dungeons and other group content. The developers intend for NPCs to react to players in ways that make sense, rather than standing around waiting to be pulled. "The room is an encounter," Aliprando says. "You must manage all of these guys, and they are managing you at the same time." The idea is for enemies to react in a way that makes intuitive sense – archers taking defensive positions, healers and other support classes trying to cover groups of allies, and heavy melee types

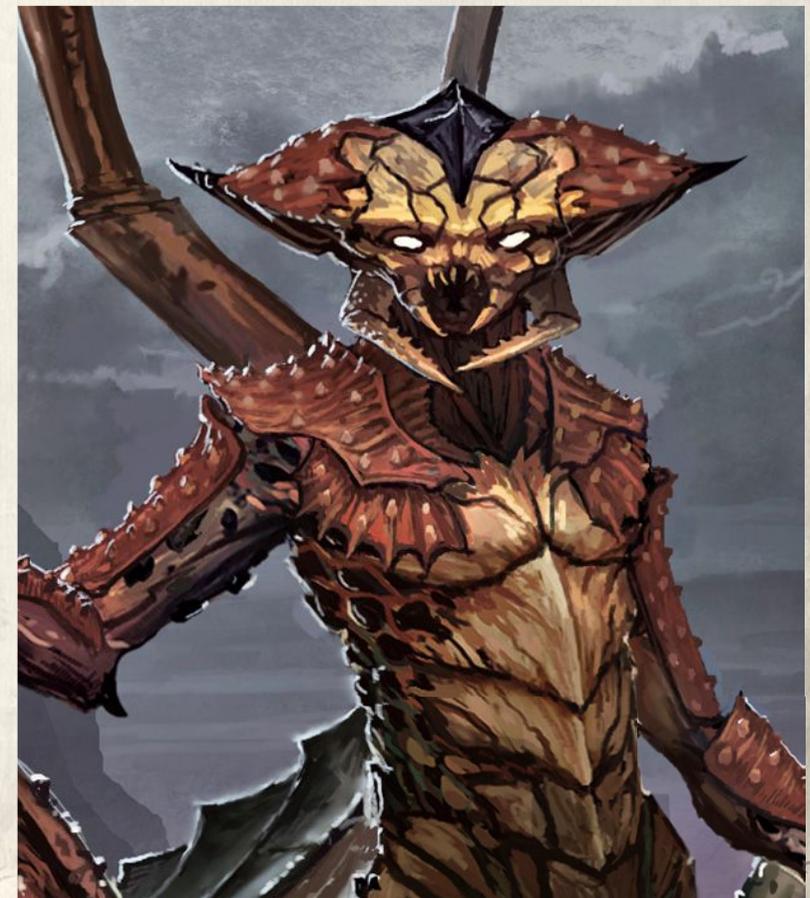


Joining the Thieves Guild

Zenimax Online confirmed the existence of the Thieves Guild (and the Dark Brotherhood) in The Elder Scrolls Online, but stopped short of detailing how players interact with these iconic organizations. Both of these factions have traditionally relied primarily on heavily scripted, meticulously crafted set pieces – one of the most difficult types of content to produce in an MMO. The studio is well aware that Elder Scrolls fans expect these beloved guilds and their associated gameplay to make an appearance in this game, but we'll have to wait and see what ultimate form they take.

charging up front to protect their friends.

This sounds like a tall order, and it is. Every MMO developer out there would love to have their monsters do something other than stand around and watch players slaughter their friends 20 yards away. Though we haven't seen it in action yet, the idea sounds fantastic.



As much work as it is to make AI behave in a more naturalistic fashion in an MMO, developers can largely assume that players will act in rational ways when fighting one another. This means they can instead spend their time and effort creating more, cooler toys for players to kill each other with.



CROWNING AN EMPEROR

You're level-capped. Molag Bal's nefarious plot to conquer Tamriel is thwarted, or at least stalled for the time being. What now?

As is expected of a modern MMORPG, The Elder Scrolls Online has heroic modes of its small-group instanced dungeons, as well as larger raids that have multiple groups of players working together to conquer terrible foes. High-end public dungeons pose unique challenges. You can always explore, tracking down more Dark Anchors and lore books to fluff your guild reputations. Instanced, balanced PvP arenas await players who prefer the e-sport side of MMOs. The most significant point of differentiation between this game and other modern MMOs, however, is the open world, free-form,

faction-versus-faction PvP.

The majority of the central province of Cyrodiil is the battleground for endgame PvP, with the eventual goal being conquering the Imperial City and crowning the most accomplished player in your faction emperor. Imagining a more fitting PvP endgame for an Elder Scrolls game is difficult.

Those hundreds of hours you spent playing Oblivion will serve you well, since Zenimax Online is using the same topography to build the Imperial City and the province it rules in the MMO. "Most of Cyrodiil is in The Elder Scrolls Online, but we had to make the playable area smaller to fit the requirements of the PvP system," Firor says. Dotted with forts, farms, mines, castles, and other valuable points to conquer, Cyrodiil burns with eternal conflict.





The bulk of Cyrodiil's gameplay depends on your fellow players. "It has this interesting dynamic where one side can go into ascendancy, but they're always going to be pushed back by the other ones," Firor says. "When there are three sides, there's always something happening. I always know there's a battle somewhere. I can always jump in and fight, because I know that somewhere, someone is weak." Allying with another faction – temporarily and locally, of course – to bring down the currently ascendant alliance is a simple thing, but it leads to political intrigue and a fascinating endgame more often than not. What happens when a prominent guild in your fac-

tion promises to show up in support of a Daggerfall assault, only to leave an allied keep undefended from Aldmeri retaliation? Is the mutual irritation from months of small-scale raids between the Covenant and the Dominion too much to overcome a proposed joint attack on a ripe target?

Zenimax Online intends for battles over control of the largest keeps to scale all the way up to the 100-versus-100 top-end that the game's engine is written to support. Players intimidated by the idea of charging into a furious melee can hang out in the back and fire siege weapons, which can smash the walls of a fortress into rubble. The defenders'

trebuchets are aiming for your allies and have the advantage of being mounted on those high walls, so taking a keep requires a lot more than plinking away with long-range siege weapons.

Smaller targets, like farms and mines, give smaller groups something to do beyond being part of a massive keep-assaulting horde. These more intimate points of interest have perhaps a single flag to conquer and a bare few NPC guards assisting any defenders. Nonetheless, any objective held by your team boosts your alliance's overall score, which gives faction-wide bonuses and determines who if anyone gets to take control of the Imperial City.

Elder Scrolls touchstones: What's in, what's out

and enslavement, is the primary antagonist of the game. Vaermina, whose sphere of influence extends to the dream world and the nightmares of mortals, features prominently in the overarching storyline of one zone. Other daedric princes are sure to appear in some form or another, but don't expect to become a demigod by collecting a set of daedric artifacts that break the rules of the game.

CRAFTING, ALCHEMY, SOUL STONES

Zenimax Online isn't sharing details on any of these yet, beyond confirming that they all will exist in some form or another.

VAMPIRES/WEREWOLVES

Vampires play their usual role as antagonists, and werewolves are central to the Camlorn storyline detailed earlier, but players are unfortunately barred from contracting porphyric hemophilia and lycanthropy themselves. The powerful abilities conferred by those iconic diseases are practically impossible to balance for a multi-player game without breaking lore,

CONSTELLATIONS & BIRTHSIGNS

Mundus stones function just like Skyrim's guardian stones, allowing players who seek them out to choose a powerful, permanent buff tied to a constellation like the Lady or the Serpent. The iconic constellations appear in several more forms throughout Tamriel. For example, some appear as clues to a puzzle room at the bottom of an ancient ruin that denote the sequence of a set of magical tiles must be activated in to free an imprisoned spirit.

TOWNS

The Imperial City in Cyrodiil, Windhelm, Daggerfall, Sentinel, Mournhold, Ebonheart, Elden Root, Shornhelm, Evermore, Riften, and many more recognizable locations are all in the game. The studio is still building content and the complete play area of the game is still being determined, so this list is far from complete.

RADIANT AI

The nature of an MMO poses significant problems with the concept

they do in Oblivion and Skyrim, so The Elder Scrolls Online uses its own AI system. Nobody wants to be stuck adventuring through deserted nighttime streets because their playtime tends to fall later in the day.

MOUNTS

This is another question that the developers declined to give any detail on aside from confirming that they will be in the game and will make sense within the lore. This means no flying mounts.

FAST TRAVEL

Wayshrines enable the fast travel system and also serve as resurrection points. You can teleport from a wayshrine to any other wayshrine you've discovered, but you can't just open the map from anywhere and instantly travel to another point of interest.

DRAGONS

Though Zenimax Online stopped short of flat-out saying dragons aren't in the game, the team stressed that the time period this takes place in is one in which

h involved in

STEALTH

Sneaking is definitely part of the game, but the studio is still working on the exact form that it will take.

PETS

"We're not talking about this right now," says game director Matt Firor.

PLAYER HOUSING

Making player housing work the way fans expect is too hard to implement in an MMO, so Zenimax has no plans to let you accrue real estate.

NPC ROMANCES

The idea of an MMO is to form relationships with other players, so Zenimax is not adding NPC romances or marriage to the game.

FULL VOICE ACTING

Like Skyrim, the inhabitants of Tamriel are completely voiced.



Seizing the capital city once your faction takes a commanding lead in points gives your team the chance to ride into the Imperial City and sweep Molag Bal's daedra from the streets. "[The Imperial City] is in the game at launch, but not reachable by players," Firor says. "When it is, it won't be playable in the sense that all the other cities are – it'll be a dangerous play space (think Kvatch from Oblivion), not a friendly city."

The crowning of an emperor isn't through a vote

or other social mechanism. Once your faction has taken the Imperial City, the player with the highest contributions to the war will receive the title according to a calculation that is still being finalized. Ultimately, the point of being emperor is for bragging rights rather than special powers. "You're top of the leaderboard, think of it that way," Firor says.

Predicting the entertainment value or lack thereof in player-driven politics is difficult at best, but a significant portion of Zenimax Online's



development talent comes from encouraging backgrounds: Mythic (Dark Age of Camelot) and Origin Systems (Ultima Online), to name just a couple. The team doesn't have specific solutions to share quite yet, but they're well aware of the common pitfalls of these types of systems. Some kind of system will be in place to facilitate responding to your holdings being attacked, so players can organically defend their turf without the game enforcing scheduled assaults. Zenimax Online is currently testing what it promises is an innovative solution to the problem of overpopulation in hotly contested areas, but declined to describe it as it isn't a definite addition to the game yet.

The Elder Scrolls Online is going to face a lot of criticism from fans of the franchise who don't care for MMOs, and from MMO fans who see a hotbar and quests and dismiss it as World of Warcraft with nords. Speaking with the development team, though, it's obvious that the 250-person team is composed of equal parts MMO veterans and Elder Scrolls fans who have given deep consideration to everything from the nuts and bolts of the combat system to the players' expectations of an open world that reacts to their decisions. Some aspects are still in flux. The adaptation of the Elder Scrolls standby of being able to loot almost all objects you see in the world, how crafting will be implemented, the Thieves Guild, and much more are still undetermined. Nonetheless, the veteran talent at the studio seems well positioned to skillfully manage the MMO basics players expect, the ambitious PvP implementation looks ready to make a splash in a currently underserved niche, and the solo and small-group content we saw is ready for prime time.

The Elder Scrolls Online is pushing MMO boundaries as much as any project on the horizon, and doing so while maintaining a strong tie to the beloved world of The Elder Scrolls and projecting a strong identity of its own. MMOs are expensive bets for companies and consumers alike, but the odds are in Zenimax's favor at this point. ♦

Bonus Coverage

Our website is your source for buckets of exclusive content on The Elder Scrolls Online for the next month. Stop by gameinformer.com/elderscrollsonline for video interviews, in-depth exploration of various game mechanics, and more over the coming weeks.



