Evaluating the Narrative in Skyrim

Skyrim is the latest RPG in the Elder Scrolls series by Bethesda, a series well known for its emergent story experience. After thoroughly playing the game, I feel that Skyrim's narrative had a mix of strong and weak points. Its emergent nature offers the opportunity to craft a unique story, but many of the storylines offered limited and linear and the player's character ended up lacking an interesting identity.

One of the hallmarks of the Bethesda franchise is the hands-off nature of the story and the openness of the world. After 80 hours of game play, I still had not been to the town that Justus went to within the first hour or two of his game, yet we were both having fulfilling game experiences. Bethesda implemented an interesting way of guiding player exploration towards the beginning of the game, though. You start geographically in the center of the map, and the hardest challenges are in the mountains around the perimeter of the world. Although the player could make a beeline towards the edge of the map, they are likely going to encounter something interesting along the way and stop to complete some quests. Then, by the time they make it to the edge of the map, they will be a more appropriate level for those quests.

The nonlinearity of the story was appealing to me. There are a few major quest lines, but there is not a pressing need to complete them in a certain time frame. Therefore, you have the opportunity to make your story something other than the main quest line, so you could become the leader of a guild, become the Thane of a city, or participate in a rebellion. What would normally be side quests in the game have the opportunity to take the place as the prominent events in the player's play through.

Though the lack of ordering of the quests offers a lot of freedom for the player, the actual content of the quests is fairly linear. Often there is some great evil that the player needs to vanquish at the end of the dungeon. The most interesting quests are the deviations from this theme. In one such quest, the player goes on a field trip with some fellow mages. Another amusing quest has the player try to retrace his or her actions the previous quest, *Hangover* style. However, these are sadly the exceptions to the rule.

Additionally, I felt like the player's character has very little personality. The game is so open ended that there is no real restriction on the kind of ways the player can develop. For example,
a player can join both the Mage’ Guild and the Thieves’ Guild, even though it does not make sense for an adventurer to be talented in and have the time to do both. Also, the dialogue choices do not really lend towards expressivity of a particular character personality, and the way the character responds to the NPCs don't even seem to effect the story at all.

Skyrim offers an open and immersive world for players to explore. The freedom of the players to choose what content to experience and in what order is the real value of the game. Many of the actual quests offer less originality, however. Still, Skyrim offers enough interesting content and exploration to make it a must-play for RPG fans everywhere.