

# Irony and the Afterlife of The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

Jelige: Tappancs

Lezárás dátuma: 2023.01.09.

## Table of Contents

|                                                                              |    |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Introduction .....                                                           | 3  |
| 1. Irony .....                                                               | 5  |
| 1.1. Procedural Irony .....                                                  | 6  |
| 1.2. Post-irony .....                                                        | 10 |
| 2. Ironic Aspects of Game Design in <i>Skyrim</i> .....                      | 11 |
| 2.1. Game Mechanics .....                                                    | 12 |
| 2.1.1. Notable Bugs and Glitches .....                                       | 12 |
| 2.1.2. Exploits.....                                                         | 14 |
| 2.1.3. Talents, Skills and Leveling .....                                    | 19 |
| 2.2. Narrative Mechanics .....                                               | 19 |
| 2.2.1. Ludonarrative Dissonance .....                                        | 20 |
| 2.2.2. Alduin's Fate and the Elder Scroll .....                              | 21 |
| 2.2.3. Faction Quests and Their (Lack of) Relationship with Each Other ..... | 21 |
| 3. A Single-Player Game as a Social Experience.....                          | 22 |
| 3.1. The Role of Nostalgia in Sustaining an Active Community .....           | 23 |
| 3.2. Procedural Irony in Service of Nostalgia .....                          | 24 |
| 3.3. Post-irony in Service of Nostalgia .....                                | 26 |
| 4. Conclusion.....                                                           | 28 |
| Works cited .....                                                            | 30 |

## Introduction

As I was browsing *Reddit*, I stumbled upon an old game's subreddit: the subcommunity of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, *r/skyrim*, which currently has around 1.4 million active users. It was nostalgic to see people still posting about the game and after I spent a few months browsing it; I realized that the eleven years old game's community was as active as ever with around 200 new posts created every day—according to the *Subreddit Stats* website (“R/Skyrim Stats”). Most of the daily content on the site is a mix of short gameplay videos, discussions about the game, character or game showcases, polls about almost anything related to game content, fan-made art and so on, while users must visit the *r/SkyrimMemes* subreddit to find memes about *Skyrim*, since those are excluded from the main site. Seeing the activity on the two *Reddit* sites and that on average around 3000 people play the game daily (*Steam Charts*) made me wonder: is there something special about *Skyrim* that people are still making content about it on social media platforms such as *Reddit*?

The aforementioned game was originally released by Bethesda Game Studios in 2011, five years after its predecessor *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*. The game has amassed quite a few editions throughout the years and was also awarded with 2011 Game of the Year award not long after its release (“The Elder Scrolls | *Skyrim*”). The game managed to retain its popularity, which is also illustrated well with what Todd Howard, *Skyrim*'s director commented regarding the multiple editions they made: “If you want us to stop releasing it, stop buying it” (Valentine).

The game itself is a vast open-world action-adventure single-player role playing game (RPG) and as Grant Tavinor put it, *Skyrim*

can be considered a beautiful representational artifact. The naturalism and rich detail of its environments, the evocative nature of its music, and the exploratory role of the player make playing this game a frequently aesthetically rewarding experience.

The first time the player enters the game, a cutscene shows their character travelling with other captured non-player characters (NPCs). After the player is prompted to customize and name their character, a dragon attacks the stronghold where the player's character is held captive, and therefore the player, the protagonist of *Skyrim*'s narrative, manages to escape in the midst of the chaos. After escaping, the long journey of uncovering truths begins: the player must find the reason behind the dragon's sudden appearance and the reason behind the dead dragons' resurrection—when all of them should have disappeared from the province of *Skyrim* more than two hundred years ago.

After completing the first quest *Unbound*, the player is greeted with the landscape of Skyrim with its “flowing rivers, epic natural vistas, weather patterns, and detailed flora and fauna”(Piero and Ouellette 1) which only help the player immerse themselves in the world. The terrain ranges from snowy mountains, sunny plains to foggy marshes offering a diverse environment to play in. The game is encouraging players to venture through the land of Skyrim with its tremendous amounts of quests, locations and secrets waiting to be discovered.

*Skyrim* offers the player a vast world: there are more than 2000 NPCs in the game (Talbot), and they may be friendly, neutral or hostile towards the player. These NPCs can be fought with in various ways using close-combat weapons (swords, maces, or spears), long-range weapons (bows), or magic (spells). The player is responsible for choosing their favored weapon, spells, armor and other items, which allows them to formulate their own playstyle in the game (Hodgson et al. 38).

To answer the question “Is there something special about *Skyrim*?” I propose a simple answer: yes, and it is connected to the concept of irony. Many of the posts that mention the game refer to it in a somewhat ironic tone, and I speculate that the reason behind this tone is rooted in the way the game was designed. I propose that the ironic occurrences in the game create the grounds for large numbers of discussions about *Skyrim* for many members of the online communities of *r/skyrim* and *r/SkyrimMemes*. In this paper I aim to examine *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*’s ironic instances and suggest that irony in videogames heavily depends on their procedural nature. I explore the way users engage with the ironic parts of the game, and whether users create ironic content from non-ironic parts of the game. I claim that the user-generated content—whether it was ironic originally or became ironic after being taken out of context—can evoke feelings of nostalgia in players who no longer play the game and can also encourage players to start or resume playing *Skyrim*.

Before delving into the game and its design aspects that could be considered ironic, however, I must make an attempt at explaining the rather ambiguous term of irony and what this paper considers as such. In addition to the most commonly acknowledged types of irony: *situational*, *dramatic* and *verbal* or *communicative* irony (MacDowell 4), I use Fest’s idea of *procedural irony* (22), which he based on Bogost’s concept of procedural rhetoric. I expand Fest’s description by grounding my definition on Hawreliak’s concept of modal irony (*Multimodal Semiotics* 151–71). I show how procedural irony can be created in two different ways in videogames, and also explain *post-irony* in the context of internet culture, since it is usually difficult to determine whether posts on the internet were intended as ironic works or not (Greene et al. 76).

By using the experiences gained through a *close playing* of the game (Aarseth 131), I explain several examples of design choices in *Skyrim* to illustrate the presence of procedural irony in the game and support my argument that the game is full of ironic instances that people can use as inspiration for their own ironic social media posts. I also aim to identify what makes these examples ironic, then I explore why the game was able to become a social experience despite being a single-player game thanks to its online community. I also investigate the role of nostalgia in sustaining an active online community, and the way procedural irony and post-irony may have contributed to the sense of nostalgia. By doing so I analyze memes that were posted on the *r/SkyrimMemes* site in a similar way I describe the in-game examples of irony while also taking their influence on players' attachment to *Skyrim* into account. I group these examples into two categories based on whether they are building on procedurally ironic or post-ironic instances.

## 1. Irony

In this section I would like to introduce the reader to the rather ambiguous concept of *irony*, and two of its subtypes: *procedural irony* and *post-irony*. In the case of the general concept of irony, it is something that has already been present at the time of Socrates, but the most often used definition "saying what is contrary to what is meant" is often ascribed to Quintilian (Colebrook 1). Even though this definition is quite simple and easy to understand, it fails to accurately describe the many faces irony can have. While it is true that saying one thing and meaning another is a form of irony that is still used to this day, there have been several other cases that could be interpreted as ironic which could not fall under this original definition. According to Muecke, "the concept of irony is vague, unstable and multi-form" (ch.1), and it changed its meaning many times since Quintilian's initial description.

To Linda Hutcheon for example, irony is not considered irony until it is interpreted as such, and her concept of irony heavily relies on what someone (either the ironist or the intended receiver) interprets as irony (6). Consequently, what one might perceive as ironic, someone else might not regard as such. "Attributing irony involves ... both semantic and evaluative inferences" in Hutcheon's case (12), and is usually triggered by conflicting clues about the information presented, be it textual or contextual (11). This conflict can take up many different forms, but it always has a sort of "evaluative edge" to it (Hutcheon 2).

In his book *Irony and the Ironic*, Muecke illustrates around fifteen different subtypes by providing one or two examples for each category, but does not give explicit definitions to either of them (ch.1). For our case, I would only like to briefly describe the three most common

types of irony: *situational*, *verbal* and *dramatic* irony (MacDowell 4). Situational irony is created when something that happens is contradictory to what one might expect to in that particular situation (Muecke qtd. in Lucariello 129). Therefore one of the key features of situational irony is unexpectedness, and another one lies in the idea that “ironic events “mock” the normal order of things” (Lucariello 129). Sentences starting with “It is ironic, that...” or “Ironically, ...” both fall under this category (MacDowell 4). Since utterances like these are quite rare in videogames, I will be referring to the events happening in the game’s world.

Verbal irony or communicative irony, as MacDowell renamed it taking the visual nature of movies into account (4), fits the previously mentioned definition of Quintilian. This type of irony implies an ironist—the one who creates irony in the first place, while situational irony has no need for one (Lucariello 129). This would mean that someone is telling something that is ironic, but in MacDowell’s concept of communicative irony, the ones creating irony are not necessarily characters in films (8), but the scenery, colors, captions, billboard advertisements can also become the creators of irony. Both labels are valid, but communicative irony fits the medium of videogames better due to its visual nature.

According to Wood, dramatic irony occurs “when [the spectators] know more than characters and are motivated to find out how they will reach a conclusion they already know but can do nothing to stop” (34), therefore it is often nicknamed as the irony of fate. The nature of dramatic irony is a bit different from the other two previously mentioned since it mostly relies on narrative tools to create irony. The audience, or the players in our case, must know more than the characters taking part in the story, be it a play, a novel or the story told by a videogame. I will mention dramatic irony rather sparingly in this paper, since it works on the notion of inevitable fate which would rob players of their ability to change said fate or outcome (Wood 34).

### 1.1. Procedural Irony

In this section I will describe what I mean when I use the term *procedural irony*, which might be one of the most relevant realizations of irony considering video game research. Procedural irony was mentioned by Fest who discusses it in connection with the game *The Stanley Parable* (3–4), however I wish to supplement his description with my own take on the term. I intend to position the term regarding the basic concept of irony and explain why it is necessary to introduce irony based on procedurality to video game studies. The connection between irony and videogames is yet to be researched extensively, however, Jason Hawreliak introduced the term modal irony regarding videogames (*Multimodal Semiotics*; “Incongruous

Modes”), and now, since I will be heavily relying on his concept to specify what procedural irony is, I ought to briefly explain what he considers as modal irony.

Modal irony relies on the way different elements of a game – modes – work together, such as text, speech, gesture, moving and still image, music, haptics, layout, etc. (Hawreliak, “Incongruous Modes” 83). Optimally, and in most cases, these modes are working together to support and enhance one certain meaning they are supposed to convey (Hawreliak, “Incongruous Modes” 82). However when “two or more modes within an ensemble do not align but instead contradict or work against each other” (Hawreliak, *Multimodal Semiotics* 151) they create modal dissonance, which in turn creates modal irony. For example if a game uses imagery that gives us the idea that our opponent is powerful because we can see that he is a giant wielding an enormous hammer that could crush our character with a single hit and supports that idea with ominous music, but every time when the hammer hits it gives off the silly *bonk* sound of a small hammer hitting metal, it completely destroys the tense atmosphere of the game.

It must be noted however, “not all incongruity is ironic, but all irony requires incongruity” (Hawreliak, “Incongruous Modes” 87), so it is advised to thread carefully and not view everything that contains any level of incongruity as ironic. Modal irony is applicable when

1. Mode 1 (M1) is incongruous with Mode 2 (M2),
  2. while the context of the semiotic event allows the audience to reconcile the incongruity,
  3. in a way that generates meaning which goes beyond the simple combination of the content in M1 and M2.
- (Hawreliak, “Incongruous Modes” 88)

With this definition in mind, I aim to illustrate two different ways of creating procedural irony in videogames. The first way relies quite heavily on the previously mentioned definition, but it is somewhat restricted version of it: it only covers the area of videogames. This limitation is based upon the idea that videogames are procedural in their nature: they are made up of computer ran processes, executed calculations and rule-based symbolic manipulations (Bogost ix). “Procedurality ... creates meaning through the interaction of algorithms” (Bogost 4), and making use of such algorithms is plays a key role in creating procedural irony. Since the example of the giant and its silly sounding hammer could exist in any other media (e.g. films, novels, etc.), I want to illustrate what our previous example looks like when procedurality is involved. It was already determined that it is modally ironic, and when it is planted into a videogame it does not stop being ironic, but now it becomes procedurally ironic thanks to the fact that videogames are programmed entities. The heavily simplified pseudo-code of the previous example could look something like this:

```

playMusic(ominous_music)

playerHealth=100
playerDamage=30

giantHealth=300
giantDamage=100
giantSize=playerSize*3
hammerSize=playerSize*2

giant.hitwithHammer()

if hammerCoordinates = playerCoordinates:
    playerHealth=playerHealth-giantDamage
    playSound(bonk)
else playSound(bonk)

```

In this case, the scenario is entirely the same as before, but now our character, the giant, its hammer, the music and all the sounds have been turned into code that needs the computer's procedurality to relay the message of how powerful the giant is, and the hammer also kept its ironic *bonk* sound. The `playMusic()` function (action) is responsible for playing ominous music, the variables (rules) `playerHealth` and `giantHealth` define the amount of damage the player and the giant can take, and the `playerDamage` and `giantDamage` determine how much damage they can inflict on each other. From their values it is obvious that the giant can essentially kill the player (reduce their health points to zero) with one hit, and that the giant is three times the player's size regarding both body size and health points, and its hammer is twice the size of the player. This means that the player is dwarfed by the giant and its hammer, and can take no hits before they die, but the giant can withstand multiple attacks from the player. The method (an action that something is able to do) connected to the giant (`giant.hitwithHammer()`) means that he hits with his hammer and if the hammer's coordinates (`hammerCoordinates`) are at the same place the player's coordinates (`playerCoordinates`) are, the hit lands and the game computes the player's remaining health points by subtracting the giant's damage from the player's original health points, essentially reducing the player's health points. At the same time the hammer's hit happens, the `playSound()` function it gives off the silly sound. Playing the silly sound after hitting with the hammer will happen even if the hit does not land on the player.

An explanation of the pseudo-code example was necessary to show how modal irony can be turned into procedural irony, since I have used the same elements that were considered modally ironic in the previous example and turned these incongruous modes into a programmed (procedural) part of a game. These elements retain their ironic nature thanks to the incongruity they represent when they are placed in the context of a videogame but take on more restricted forms.

Another form of procedural irony lies in the way the games' rules are determined and enforced, and not in the meaning different modes convey together. It is caused entirely by what Hawreliak called the *procedural mode*—which is made up of the “rules, systems, and parameters of a game” (*Multimodal Semiotics and Rhetoric in Videogames* 81). I will illustrate this with another example of pseudo-code which is based on the glitch of the “Giant Space Program” discussed in more detail under Section 2.1.1.1. In short, the glitch consists of a giant hitting the player's character who in turn is launched several hundred meters into the air. Although there are only speculations on the exact reason behind the occurrence, it likely has to do something with the damage dealt and excess damage converted into momentum (DivinePrince2, Gray\_wolf1119). The attack value, the stagger effect, the distance and the way they work in the example were taken from *The Unofficial Elder Scrolls Pages* website (“Skyrim:Giant”, “Skyrim:Combat”).

```
playerHealth=50
effect=none
distance=10

Giant.attack()

if distance>21:
    giantDamage=100
    effect=stagger

if Giant's attack lands:
    playerHealth = playerHealth-giantDamage
    if playerHealth<0:
        excessDamage=playerHealth

if effect=stagger:
    playerBody.throwInOppositeDirection(baseMomentum+excessDamage)

if playerHealth < 0:
    showKillCam()
```

It is not easy to replicate exactly what happens without knowing the exact details, but the pseudocode illustrates why the launch might happen. It uses several variables to illustrate different rules that the game consists of: `playerHealth` shows the amount of health points the player has, the `effect` variable will influence what the giant's attack can do besides dealing damage (`giantDamage`), a variable for measuring the distance in feet between the player and the giant, and an `excessDamage` variable that helps with calculating if any added momentum is needed to throw the player's body in the opposite direction besides the base value (`baseMomentum`). When the code is executed the player's health is 50, no effect is active and the player is within a 10 feet distance from the giant. Then the giant attacks with its club and slams it into the ground vertically (`Giant.attack()`). Before doing anything else the game checks if the player was in a 21 feet range (they were), and modifies the giant's damage to a

100 value and adds the stagger effect to it. Then if the attack lands, it reduces the player's health in the same way that is shown in the previous example, but checks if it became a negative value (it does, since the giant has larger damage than the player's health), and stores it in the `excessDamage` variable for later use. Now, since the giant's attack had the stagger effect, the player's body is thrown in the opposite direction compared to where the hit came from, the direction being upwards. This effect is then accelerated by the excess damage (whose value is added to the base momentum), and since the player dies from the hit, a third-person "KillCam" is shown where they can see their body flying high up into the air.

The instance of the space launch cannot be considered as modal irony in this case however, because it stems from the way the game's rules work. Irony created here is more likely to be situational irony instead since it operates on the unexpectedness of the situation, which is the upwards launch of the player's character. Therefore, in this case of procedural irony I propose that many other subtypes of irony can be created, which are not necessarily related to modal irony (e.g. the previously mentioned situational, communicative, or dramatic types).

## 1.2. Post-irony

Another concept related to irony worth mentioning because of its high relevance to the popularity of *Skyrim* is post-irony. Based on the previously mentioned procedural irony, one might think that this concept should also be strictly in connection with the game's design, but in the case, post-irony will be more relevant to the content created by its players *about* the game, be it memes, short videos, or genuine questions. Since "popular culture [is] drenched in irony" (Swearingen 147), I take a look at post-irony in the context of memes and internet culture instead of literary theory.

From this point of view post-irony is something that "refers to a style of humor where something is so extreme or absurd that it is unclear whether or not it is ironic" (Greene et al. 76). In a sense, this means that the lines blur between what is ironic and what is not, and it becomes even more difficult to determine whether something was intended as some form of irony. Lisovsky provided a great example on how to tell the difference between irony and post-irony: "regular irony is saying "I'm a fool" while not actually being one. Post-irony is saying "I'm a fool" and being one" ("On the Origin of Memes"); although based on this example one might be inclined to think that post-ironic instances are sincere, but the concept does not indicate a simple return to sincerity (Konstantinou 88). There will always be ones who "get" the irony and ones who do not (Hutcheon 10), but since the lines are already blurred in the concept of post-irony, the instance becomes ambiguous thanks to the fact that "it can be meant

ironic and not understood as such” or “it can ... be not meant ironic and nevertheless understood as ironic” (Hoffmann 41). This ambiguity is missing in the example provided by Lisovsky, but when the clarification part is taken away, it becomes ambiguous since now one cannot know if he actually considers themselves a fool or not. These twofold instances often occur in what Hutcheon coined as “discursive communities”—the members of these communities often share common attributes, such as “knowledge, beliefs, values, and communicative strategies” (87), and where “people use particular language or discourse, emerging from collective meaning and communal identity” (Greene et al. 77).

The two *Reddit* sites I mentioned in the Introduction (*r/skyrim*, *r/SkyrimMemes*) can be considered as discursive communities, but posts and videos under a “#skyrim” tag on the sites *Instagram*, *Twitter*, *TikTok* or other social media sites can also be viewed as such. What they have in common is that the topic of the posts revolves around the videogame *Skyrim*, and members of these communities share inside jokes that can be understood by them, but not by outsiders. Consequently, what might be considered ironic by a member of these communities, is likely to be not viewed as such by people not belonging to these groups. The opposite can happen when non-members post content in connection with the game and when group members see it, they cannot be sure if it was intended as irony, or just happened to be ironic because they have no knowledge of their community’s inside jokes. In Chapter 3, I will take a closer look at some instances that were created about *Skyrim*, dissect what allows them to be post-ironic and examine the way these memes, videos, mentions etc. can be used to lure players back into playing the game.

## 2. Ironic Aspects of Game Design in *Skyrim*

In this section, I will describe several examples of procedural irony that can be found in the video game *Skyrim* to support my argument that it is possible to procedurally create irony in videogames, but I also want to emphasize through my examples that this type of irony heavily relies on the player’s active engagement with the game’s world, sometimes by exploring and testing the boundaries of the (un)written rules in the game.

I have to point out, however, that most of the examples of procedural irony in the following sections I drew from *Skyrim* are heavily based on the distance between “said and unsaid meanings” (Hutcheon 85). In *Skyrim*’s case, these are not to be taken as literal utterances, rather as an ironic distance between *Skyrim*’s world as a self-contained and consistent universe and *Skyrim*’s world as a game. The distance is also noticeable in how the game presents the players with the typical Tolkienesque high fantasy as a playable, explorable, and interactable

world which likely differs from what the players expected to see in the game. The way this world is presented lets players immerse themselves in the fantasy world, but at the same time it can painfully remind them that they are playing a game with its immense number of bugs, glitches, exploits, other game and narrative mechanics all while creating ironic instances.

## 2.1. Game Mechanics

This section contains examples that are concerned with *Skyrim*'s mechanics and mechanics related design choices from an ironic perspective. It will mostly discuss rules set and enforced by the game, and how can players get around them while playing. I will mention a few bugs and glitches that are still present in the game, discuss what subversive play and exploits are and provide a non-exhaustive list of a selected few that can be considered ironic in some ways. I also explain the way followers can alter the game experience if they are present, and touch upon why the design of using and improving skills is relevant to irony.

### 2.1.1. Notable Bugs and Glitches

What are bugs and why do we need catch them? The term bug refers to anything that requires “corrective code maintenance” (Herzig et al. 392), but in colloquial language it also used to describe anything that does not work as it should or as it was originally intended in software. These are usually due to “errors and mistakes made by developers when constructing source code” (McFadden), and can have severe consequences if not found and corrected. Bugs can span from a few buttons not working to the entire software crashing, but catching bugs is no easy feat and there are numerous studies on how we should look for them (Ahumada and Bergel; Albaghajati and Ahmed; Ariyurek et al.) and stop them from ruining our gaming experience. However, for a scholar concerned with videogames, bugs are not necessarily viewed as entities that must be found and corrected, as they can represent the underlying procedural nature of videogames without a need to look at the source code itself. They are by-products of the procedural nature of videogames, but as we can see the two examples below, they are also invaluable resources that can create ironic instances just by being present in videogames.

#### 2.1.1.1. The Giant Space Program

*Skyrim* players refer to the scene where a giant hits and eventually launches the player's character several meters high into the air as “Giant Space Program”. This glitch has been around since the first release of the game in 2011 and was not patched later on because it was deemed

funny and entertaining by the player-base. This is one of the prime examples of a bug becoming a feature.

We can consider this instance ironic from two entirely different points of view. The first one is thanks to the game design itself: it is ironic because a giant (who is at least twice the character's size and is wielding a massive club) in an almost stone-age-like setting can send the player's character up as if it was launching a rocket into space: the slow motion and animation of the avatar's body flying up and then falling back down to earth in the cutscene clashes harshly with the game's previously established immersion and makes the player painfully aware that they are playing a game. The cutscene not only undermines immersion, but also denies any form of agency: the player can only watch their character take the giant's hit and die directly from that, or if that did not finish the character off, the fall damage the character takes after landing will. Even though cutscenes are "considered problematic because they prevent the player from doing anything"(Juul ch.4), in this particular case even if the cutscene would not be shown, the player's avatar would still die from the impact of the club but the player would be robbed of watching their avatar flying into orbit. However, thanks to the cutscene, the surprise of the ragged body animation and the inevitableness of death may seem ironic to the player.

From another point of view, the phrase "Skyrim Space Program" is also ironic. The glitch is often called this in online communities such as *Reddit* or *YouTube*: the oldest (still available) video referring to the glitch as a space program was uploaded to YouTube just a week after the release (*Skyrim's Space Program*). Interestingly, the name *space program* was used rather consistently throughout the years, and players nowadays still use it to refer to the event when a giant knocks up a character or another creature. This naming convention is also ironic because the mention of a space program sharply contrasts with the medieval fantasy theme of *Skyrim*, and the opposition of the sci-fi and medieval fantasy theme also creates a sense of irony.

#### 2.1.1.2. Physics-Related Bugs

Physics is something Bethesda notoriously fails to get right according to fan accounts, to such an extent that it even got its own Urban Dictionary entry (mkoas321). There are too many bugs to count in *Skyrim*, but these are usually ridiculous to some extent. There are several compilations of physics-related bugs in the game on video-sharing platforms which often include dragon bodies emerging randomly out of the earth, said bodies rolling down mountainsides as if they were paperweight, NPC bodies glitching and vibrating, items flying away, items disappearing or duplicating and so on. These might break the immersion, but also

create humor through modal irony (Hawreliak, “Incongruous Modes”). Under normal circumstances, players would expect the physics of the game to be somewhat similar to what they see and experience in real life, but the game’s prevalent bugs (with only a few mentioned above) completely oppose that expectation.

Even though some modifications (mods) aim to correct some of these discrepancies and aim to add more realistic physics, they are usually highly specific in nature (e.g. the Realistic Ragdolls and Force modification of the game), and therefore to catch and correct every physics related bug or glitch is outside of their scope. The game’s engine (the framework that is used to create the game) also affects the way *Skyrim* can deal with physics-related issues: it imposes limitations on both developers and community modders (the people who create modifications for the game), since sometimes the flaws lie within how the game’s engine works and therefore, they may become impossible to correct. The distance created between how certain things are supposed to work and the way these work in the game’s world is large enough to create procedurally ironic instances, since these glitches actively remind the player that they are playing a game and at the same time pull the player out of their immersion in the fantasy world.

### 2.1.2. Exploits

When players exploit a game, they usually follow the rules and mechanics set up by the developers down to the letter. Does this lead to players adhering to how the game was intended to play? Sometimes. But more often than not, the usage of exploits means deliberately using some mechanics, bugs or glitches to get advantage in a game, usually playing in a way that “undermines the designs of the game-maker” (Tanenbaum 3). Since exploits are usually not evident to most players, the discovery and usage of these requires some form of subversive play: this sort of trial and error is a “part of how players learn the rules of the game: not the “official” rules but the real rules” (Tanenbaum 11). Experimenting with the bounds of the system is not outright cheating, as that would require altering parts of the game to go against developer intent (Bycer). While exploiting players adhere to the rules, maybe in a bit more literally as one would originally expect.

Discovering exploits is quite tasking, and players who use them often metagame: “metagaming in roleplaying games ... usually refers to the use of out-of-character knowledge in order to make in-character decisions” (Boluk and Lemieux 14)—players visit websites, forums, guides, videos etc. to learn of exploits, since finding them by trial and error would otherwise take tremendous effort and creativity.

Since exploits are often mentioned together with cheating, they might have a pejorative undertone in multiplayer games. However, since *Skyrim* is a single-player game, it is much more difficult to view exploits as something negative: the exploits that will be shown in the following section do give players advantage, but not over other players—they can improve their own gameplay and have fun, but without ruining others' experience. The free use of exploits leads us to the next examples on procedural irony and ironic play: here, irony is created by players who are deliberately experimenting with what the game allows them to do, all while creating instances of procedural irony on their own.

#### 2.1.2.1. Carry-Weight Exploit with a Follower

This exploit works only if the player has a follower (often an NPC the player previously helped), which is already ironic, since they often hinder the player's progress through dungeons even though they are supposed to help. They can function well as meat-shields in fights, since they cannot die from monster attacks—they enter a stasis-like state until their health regenerates. The only one able to kill them is the player, therefore followers die from any little hit when they are down: stray hits, a random arrow, a careless shout or spells' collateral damage. Since they are usually used for the convenience of loot carrying this poses a huge disadvantage as players have to act as babysitters most of the time, so they do not get stuck, do not get lost, do not die from collateral damage and do not fall off of high places accidentally.

In *Skyrim*, every item the player can pick up has a certain weight number attached to it, and player's avatar has a weight limit on how much they can carry. Followers can help carry the player's loot by allowing them to exchange items with their followers, which gives room for improving the follower's weapons and armor. One drawback of using followers though is that they, just like the player's character, have a limit on how much they can carry.

The carry-weight exploit helps the player avoid being over-encumbered while they pick up stuff, be it weapons, armor, scrolls, foods, ingredients, etc. by having their follower pick up items instead of them. Players can ask their follower to do something for them and then point at certain items or containers and ask them to take those items into their inventory. This action bypasses the follower's weight-limit and allows the player to use them as infinite backpacks. This way of abusing the game's rule system is just as tedious as using other exploits, as it requires players to point at individual items they want to pick up. This is a quite convenient exploit for players that like to gather all the things they see but are forced to slowly drag themselves through dungeons and to one of their homes to get rid of what they gathered, since the game punishes players for being over-encumbered by cutting off the ability to run and fast

travel. This alone, however, might not be considered ironic. What—or rather who—creates irony with this exploit then? It is one of the first followers the player gets: Lydia. (It is worthy to note that followers talk, not a lot, but they do have limited options on what they say when talking to them.) When players talk to Lydia and choose the “I need to trade some things with you” option in the dialogue box that pops up, she replies “I am sworn to carry your burdens.” in a rather sarcastic tone, which is inherently ironic when the player is already using her and her inventory as a personal backpack to store all of their unused armor, weapons and dragon bones. Her utterance can have two entirely different meanings, as it can be understood both in the context of a helper in a fantasy world and as her comment on her in-game function. It bothered players to such an extent that even the mod “Respectful Lydia - Willing Burden Carrier” was created to let players avoid listening to her sarcastic tone (Man or Monster).

#### 2.1.2.2. Buckethead Exploit

The point of doing the buckethead exploit is to be able to steal any item you want from shops or houses without turning NPCs or guards hostile for thievery. The steps are simple: the player grabs a basket or bucket, places it on the head of the unsuspecting victim to block their line of sight, then starts grabbing essentially “anything that isn’t nailed down” (McMullen). This not only looks ridiculous, but it can also be considered as some sort of malicious compliance to the game’s set of rules: you can steal anything as long as no-one notices; the players figured out a way to obstruct vendors’ vision in a way they cannot get caught even with low levels in Stealth skill. If players already did at least a part of the Thieves Guild questline, they can sell their stolen items to any NPC who acts as a fence (they are merchants, who trade with stolen goods), or when the player reaches level 90 with their Speech skill, they can unlock the perk that allows them to sell whatever they stole to anyone. Ironically, when the players are able to sell items obtained with the “buckethead method,” it allows them to steal everything from a merchant and re-sell their own items to them all while they stand there and wait for the bucket or basket to fall off of their heads. They might ask you what you are doing on your first few tries to place the bucket, but it is as if they knew resistance is pointless.

#### 2.1.2.3. Alchemy/Enchanting Loop

This might be one of the best known and also the trickiest exploits in *Skyrim* among the other ones mentioned here, as it has been there since the release of the game. The point of this alchemy/enchanting loop is to create the strongest—usually near game breaking—potions, and consequently, enchantments. The foundation for this are items (e.g.: armor and accessories) and potions that enhance the player’s skills in Alchemy and Enchanting—which helps players in

creating stronger potions and item enchantments. Potions help players in a variety of ways: they can cure diseases, heal players, make them invisible or poison enemies, just to list a few. Enchantments work in the same way, but unlike potions, enchanted items are not consumable. They also give players different buffs when they are placed on armor or accessories and external abilities to weapons such as trapping the souls of creatures killed by such weapons. One can easily see why improving Alchemy and Enchanting skills is just as important as fight-related skills, however the loop essentially allows players to create almost infinite amounts of buffs. The logic behind the loop is simple: create potions that enhance the player character's Alchemy and Enchanting skills, drink them, create items that enhance the aforementioned skills, equip them, create even stronger potions, rinse and repeat. Using the loop can lead to the creation of potions or items with almost game-breaking buff numbers, such as the one seen in Fig. 1.



Fig. 1. WoWhead. Image of a Fortify Enchanting potion created by the alchemy/enchanting loop. *The Elder Scrolls Wiki*, [https://static.wikia.nocookie.net/elderscrolls/images/c/c6/Take\\_3\\_example.jpeg](https://static.wikia.nocookie.net/elderscrolls/images/c/c6/Take_3_example.jpeg). Image cropped by the author.

Since I keep mentioning that this exploit can break the game, I ought to explain the procedural part behind it: according to the “Skyrim:Glitches” site on *The Unofficial Elder Scrolls Pages*, the variable that contains the buff percentages for the items is an integer type, which means that it has a maximum value of 2 147 483 647. If the value it has to store exceeds that number, it will overflow and “start over” with the minimum value, resulting in a negative number on the item description, which will cause faulty calculations later on and will break the player's save file, so it is advised to use this exploit cautiously.

The numbers achieved through this loop may be unreal (the buffs potions give usually fall below 100%), but they are still valid and can be used to test out some of the game's unwritten rules, just like *Reddit* user u/Smol-Fur did in their post about foxes and deer not detecting their character when their Sneak ability is buffed by more than ten thousand percent. This can be considered as playing with numbers and figuring out the game's internal

mechanisms in order to break the game, but by doing so the game also allows users to test out more of the most unrealistic character builds and playstyles. Playing as a “Glass Nuclear Warhead,” as another user [u/Substantial-Cup6943](#) described their high damage but low health mage under the same post, can essentially be considered as an ironic way of playing the game, since they intentionally chose to do their playthrough like this. In this specialized case, the incongruity of different modes comes into play when the player essentially feels omnipotent thanks to their ability to kill enemies with a single spell, but this feeling is shattered by the character getting hit even by a low damage weapon or a stray arrow.

#### 2.1.2.4. Angry Birds

I should say angry chickens though, since this exploit involves casting the spell Fury on chickens. The effect that Fury has is that anyone or anything targeted by this spell will instantly become aggressive towards the player’s character and will start attacking them. Now, imagine casting Fury on a chicken and having it frantically run towards the player’s character, who should be scared for their dear life, because in reality, chickens can be scary and may hurt the avatar. They start running, only to have the chicken catch up to them. The reddish aura shows the player that Fury is still active... but instead of taking any damage, the player can see the chicken standing just a few inches away from the avatar’s face and doing absolutely nothing. Well, this is because these domestic birds have zero attack damage programmed for their models: all they can do is a stare down contest with the avatar until the spell’s power wears down. There is already a rift between player’s expectations versus the game’s reality, which becomes even greater when players find out that they can use the angry birds to infinitely level up their skills in the Illusion skill tree just by casting Fury over and over and over again. This is tedious work, but at least the avatar cannot die in the process. The chicken, on the other hand will die if the player practices this exploit near NPCs (followers included), since they will attack the hostile bird and kill it on sight.

What creates an ironic situation in the game though, that players can use the Fury spell to get revenge on the “Infamous Riverwood Chicken” ([u/deadlybacon7](#)) that caused the death of many players. This chicken can be found in the town of Riverwood, which is the first town new players usually get to after escaping the keep of Helgen in the opening sequence. The chickens are not the issue here though, the players are, since they often end up killing the chickens here thinking they might drop valuable loot, which in turn turns the entire town against the players—who are typically low level and are easily slaughtered by the guards and

townspeople. Imagine getting revenge on a chicken that cannot hurt the avatar, but still can get it killed.

### 2.1.3. Talents, Skills and Leveling

Skyrim has multiple smaller skill trees in three main “classes” that can be improved. They are color coded, and the skills they contain are mostly one of the 3 main “classes” a player can choose at the first Standing Stones: mage skills that consist of casting different spell types and enchanting are colored in blue, thief skills that have to do with lockpicking, speech, sneaking and alchemy are green and warrior skills like heavy armor, blocking, one- and two-handed weapons are marked with a reddish color. “If you use a skill, it will improve” (Simkins et al. 23). Now this seems logical and lifelike today, but in 2011, when the game came out it was viewed as a new approach considering in most role-playing games you mostly got experience from fighting and killing enemies (Simkins et al. 24). As the player gathers experience by using a certain skill, they may level up that skill and in turn, they add experience to their character level: if they improve enough skills, they can level up their character.

Every time the player uses their character’s skills, it improves regardless of how they performed: they can improve their Speech skills even if they fail at persuading someone and in earlier versions of the game the player could go to the location Black-Briar Meadery near the city Riften and talk to the man who is standing at the counter. Then, the player is presented with the option to make him tell them the truth about Maven Black-Briar, one of the game’s NPCs. Then they can persuade him as many times as needed to level up their Speech skill using this glitch, since the dialogue option never disappeared before version 1.9 of the game (“Ungrien”).

Another nurturing ground for irony is the Stealth skill: if it is leveled high enough, players can sneak anywhere and won’t be noticed even if they stand crouched right in front of guards or other hostile entities, which in turn creates situational irony. The procedural side here is especially entertaining for players since the NPCs looking for them will often not notice the players, but in narrow spaces will still bump into them and slightly move their character aside because their hitboxes collide with each other.

## 2.2. Narrative Mechanics

This section provides examples that are concerned with *Skyrim*’s narrative and narrative related game design choices from an ironic perspective. It will discuss ludonarrative dissonance as a prime example for modal irony in *Skyrim* and how the procedural mode causes dissonance. I also provide an example of dramatic irony in the game to show that it is possible to create

dramatic irony in *Skyrim* and also describe the way procedurality can throw players off of the narrative that was previously presented by the game.

### 2.2.1. Ludonarrative Dissonance

Ludonarrative dissonance, an initially non-academic term, was first used by Clint Hocking in one of his blog posts about the game *Bioshock*, where he argued that the game suffers “from a powerful dissonance between what it is about as a game, and what it is about as a story.” In this sense, as Makedonski put it, “ludonarrative dissonance is the idea that when a game tells the player one thing through its story and environment, and then contradicts [this story] through gameplay,” which is likely to make the player “unimmersed” and “disconnected” from the experience that the game provides. Seraphine argues that “ludonarrative dissonance could be a state of emersion that is triggered by a semiotic mismatch between play and narration” (3). The player might even stop the playing activity and think *Wait, what? That does not make any sense!* when realizing that there is a dissonance between the narrative and how the game can be played.

In Hawreliak’s *Multimodal Semiotics and Rhetoric in Videogames* the game *Skyrim* was already analyzed as one of the prime examples of multimodal incongruity which results in modal irony. In that case, the ludonarrative dissonance in the ending of the main storyline was criticized, as the procedurality undermined the player’s expectations of the greatest battle at the end of the questline (157–58). Additionally, I would like to provide another example of the ironic appearance of ludonarrative dissonance. The issue here is rooted in the dual nature of the game: firstly, the main questline creates a sense of “narrative urgency”(Gjøl et al.) through dialogues with NPCs, having them running around panicking and with dragon attacks reinforcing the idea that the player must hurry and continue the storyline, otherwise the world will be destroyed. At the same time, *Skyrim* is an open-world game which allows players the exploration of the whole Province of Skyrim, and actively encourages it by showering the player with several side quests. The first aspect expresses the sense of urgency through different semiotic modes, but the “exploratory style of play” (Hawreliak, *Multimodal Semiotics* 158) that is conveyed through the procedural mode completely undermines urgency. Consequently, if the player does not complete the main questline, the world is not going to be destroyed, as that would severely hinder the player’s exploration and immersion in the game’s fantasy world. It is ironic that the world is supposed to end but players are allowed to waste time by going on a hunt after lost family heirlooms and collecting grapes for a farmer lady.

### 2.2.2. Alduin's Fate and the Elder Scroll

The following ironic instance is the only one that could be considered as dramatic irony from all the examples of irony we have seen so far. The story is part of the main questline and takes place right before the player's character must fight the dragon Alduin for the first time. The players had to find the Elder Scroll of Time that was used previously to defeat the evil dragon and bring it back to the Throat of the World, which is essentially the highest point in the Province of Skyrim. This scroll and the location give the power to the player's character to peer through the fabric of time and witness how three ancient heroes defeated the dragon previously. The player and their character know roughly the same amount information: the big bad old dragon was not defeated "properly" because it returned in the gameworld's present days, however the three heroes are not aware of this. As we see them "defeat" the dragon Alduin, and use the very same scroll our character uses to peek back in time, supplemented with another dragon, Paarthurnax's confirmation that the heroes only sent Alduin forward in time, the player and their character can come to the conclusion that the three heroes stood no chance in defeating Alduin during their battle. It is somewhat ironic that we can see the last hero celebrate their victory over something they essentially never defeated. In this case dramatic irony serves in the same way as in any other medium: the player and their character act as the ones witnessing what is about to unfold while holding more information on the event and its outcome than the ones partaking in it. This 'discrepant awareness' (Evans qtd. in MacDowell 4) is a key to dramatic irony in this scene, as both the player and their characters know the fate bestowed upon the heroes and the dragon too, but neither of them is capable of changing their fate, as players are robbed of their agency during the cutscene and can only look around. If they were allowed to help the heroes, that would not only shatter the illusion that we cannot change the past but would likely short-circuit the main storyline as well.

### 2.2.3. Faction Quests and Their (Lack of) Relationship with Each Other

The faction quests in *Skyrim* deal with the story quests of four factions: the Companions, the Thieves Guild, the College of Winterhold and the Dark Brotherhood. The storylines for these factions are separate, and usually end with the player becoming the leader of the faction the quests belonged to. The factions' stories do not intertwine with each other, but what is even more interesting is the fact that once the player became a leader of one faction it will not influence the other three's story at all. As it was mentioned in Mooney and Allbeck's research, *Skyrim* uses a single-value reputation system, which means that "a community of NPCs all share the same 'likeness' value for the player" (56). Consequently, NPCs staying in one location

will share the exact same attitude towards the player's character, which can make NPCs either become friendly, neutral or hostile towards the player, but a reputation system like this will never be able to follow up on what the player is doing while wandering in other locations. This leads to NPCs belonging to one faction act as if they have never heard of the player's character becoming the leader of another faction. While playing one might expect that the completion status of the different faction questlines will influence NPCs' perception of the player's character, but it is as if they do not even notice that the player's character that turned up at the Thieves Guild's headquarters is wearing the robes of the Arch-Mage from the College of Winterhold. They seem to accept without question that the leader of the College could stoop so low, that they must join the Thieves Guild, but the same happens when joining other factions after completing one's story quests.

Irony originates from the lack of reactions from the NPCs towards the player's reputation in-game, and it might feel surreal that the player can become the leader of several factions at the same time. The player can become leader, but in most cases, this will feel like they are only there for show, since they can never add input on how the organization runs despite being able to recruit a few members or improving the headquarters of their faction. The player's expectations are also subverted as they advance through the quests, since they usually save the faction from a catastrophe by using their skills, but the faction members rarely change their behavior and offer the same amount of respect they had for the player as they had before. The only group of NPCs that somewhat change their dialogue are the town or city guards. Sometimes they will comment on the current weapon drawn, the items the character wears, or the faction affiliation of the character, but they never comment anything in connection with more than one faction at the same time, which makes the game a bit more realistic, but shows the player that if the guards can comment on these things, it would not have been impossible to create a more realistic reputation system and this is also proven by the existence of the mod "Skyrim Reputation" (dcyren).

### 3. A Single-Player Game as a Social Experience

My original assumption was that the presence of irony in *Skyrim* is the reason why its community is still active online; I already examined the way the game creates ironic instances. In the following section I would like to explore how the game's ironic instances are presented outside of *Skyrim*. Even though it is originally a single-player game, there are multiple online communities that can be seen as substitutes for the lack of multiplayer aspect in the game. Since *Skyrim* provides no in-game tools for sharing one's experiences that occur while playing, this

factor is likely to have led to the creation of communities outside of the game, such as the *r/skyrim* and *r/SkyrimMemes* sites. In online communities, users can share their experiences that often revolve around the ironic instances of the game. These ironic examples are then converted into a suitable format for said communities: they are turned into memes, videos, descriptions, walkthroughs etc., but this is not only true for instances that are ironic originally: even ones that were not inherently ironic are turned into ironic or post-ironic content. Sharing content about the game makes it possible to turn the single-player game into something that can be experienced together. It is worthy to note, however, that content creation does not only happen on the two *Reddit* sites mentioned above: they also occur on other video sharing platforms such as *YouTube* or *TikTok*, on forums like *GameFAQs*, on meme sharing sites like *9gag* and on many others, but what allows the sense of community to foster is “the sense of belonging ... from having played the game and having developed an attachment to it” (Puente and Tosca 3). *Skyrim* becomes a social experience thanks to turning bugs, glitches, exploits and users’ overall gameplay experiences into memes, videos and discussions about the game. Memes could range from mentioning the “Hey, you! You are finally awake...” sentence said by the NPC Ralof, some variation of the comment of the cities’ guards’ saying that “[they] used to be an adventurer like [the player], but then [they] took an arrow in the knee”, but even mods of the game can create ironic instances that are later shared on social media platforms, such as the Really Useful Dragons mod that turns dragons into trains from *Thomas the Tank Engine* (Trainwiz and friends) or the Loading Screens With Extra Sarcasm mod which, well, adds extra sarcasm to the game’s loading screen texts (demonjanitor).

### 3.1. The Role of Nostalgia in Sustaining an Active Community

As it is supported by Bergstrom and Poor’s research, nostalgia about a videogame can be viewed as one of the core elements that sustains an active online community, since they saw “people staying with and returning to the communities for older games” when a new release came out in a franchise (10). Nostalgia concerning videogames is made possible by the fact that “they are the newest medium of storytelling, but also the quickest to become obsolete” (Makai 1). Players are able to choose from a large pool of newly released videogames every year, but there are many players that will choose to play an older game they already played with. The nostalgic feeling and familiarity of the game certainly become factors when players choose to replay a videogame, and in the case of *Skyrim* I propose the following “nostalgia circle” (Fig. 2) that takes the posts created in online communities into account.

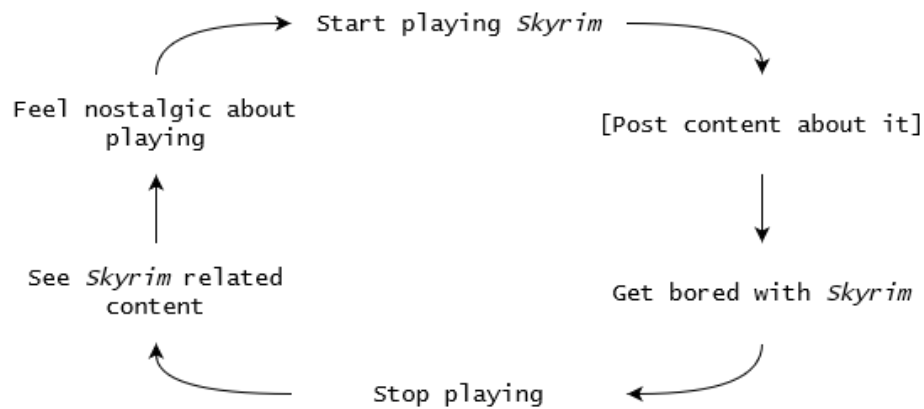


Fig. 2. The Nostalgia Circle. Image created by the author.

This form of nostalgia circle does not represent all the players that have ever played with *Skyrim*, I merely illustrated my own experience with how I was drawn back into the world of *Skyrim* over and over again. Some players might jump a few stages (not everyone likes to post content about the game), or they might never get back to the game even though a sense of nostalgia was evoked by the content about *Skyrim*. Due to the nature of memes and videos, even new players of the game can experience a sense of nostalgia, because quite a lot of *Skyrim* connected memes made it into the mainstream (e.g. the “ability 100” memes, or the opening sequence of the game). In their case the nostalgia is more about finally seeing the origins of memes, videos, and misconceptions and getting in on the “inside jokes” of the community.

### 3.2. Procedural Irony in Service of Nostalgia

In this section I will examine examples of procedural irony outside of the game with the help of three posts and how they prompt the player to return to playing *Skyrim*. The memes were posted in the *r/SkyrimMemes* subreddit and show examples of how the community’s members adapted procedural irony from the game in their posts. The first example (Fig. 3) is the odd one out, as it is more closely tied to the main quest’s narrative than it is to procedural irony. It uses a template that was based on a scene from the movie *Despicable Me* where the main character Gru uses a presentation board to explain his plan. According to the *Know Your Meme* website, “edits of the comic typically feature an unexpected third presentation page, followed by a panel of Gru looking back at the board in confusion” (“Gru’s Plan”).



Fig. 3. u/bubbly\_Hazza. “Alduin Really Screwed Himself Over.” *R/SkyrimMemes*, 1 Jan. 2023, [www.reddit.com/r/SkyrimMemes/comments/100h3bw/alduin\\_really\\_screwed\\_himself\\_over/](https://www.reddit.com/r/SkyrimMemes/comments/100h3bw/alduin_really_screwed_himself_over/). Reposted image.

In this meme we can see that Gru’s head was switched to Alduin, the main story’s antagonist, and he is the one pointing at the presentation board which ironically refers to the fact that he unintentionally brought his own demise by allowing the Dragonborn (the player’s character) to live: if he waited even a few more minutes before his attack, the Dragonborn would have been beheaded and there would have been no one to stop him from ruling the world.

The following two examples (Fig. 4, Fig. 5) build more on procedural irony, as they are both about *how* the game allows players to play.



Fig. 4. u/7th-blade. “A Yes.” *R/SkyrimMemes*, 11 June 2020, [www.reddit.com/r/SkyrimMemes/comments/h0v19t/a\\_yes/](https://www.reddit.com/r/SkyrimMemes/comments/h0v19t/a_yes/). Reposted image.

The text “You know, I’m something of a mage myself” and William Defoe’s face cut and pasted on the Dragonborn’s face on Fig. 4 is a reference to a scene in *Spider-Man* (“I’m Something of a Scientist Myself”). This meme refers to the fact that *Skyrim*’s procedural mode

allows players to complete the College of Winterhold faction questline without using any spells, which creates quite an ironic distance from one would expect in a mage-related narrative.

Fig. 5's original version is taken from the Japanese TV series *The Brave Fighter of Sun Fighbird* where the character mistakenly identifies a butterfly as a pigeon ("Is This a Pigeon?"). The idea behind this modification of the original meme format comes from the opportunity created by *Skyrim*'s procedurality. The horses in the game can walk upwards on steep mountainsides where the player's character would seriously struggle—it is not impossible to climb those surfaces with the avatar, but horses make it considerably faster ("Skyrim:Mountain Climbing")—hence the meme.



Fig. 5. u/Gladamas. "Whatever Works Right?" *R/SkyrimMemes*, 2 Jan. 2023, [www.reddit.com/r/SkyrimMemes/comments/1014niz/whatever\\_works\\_right/](https://www.reddit.com/r/SkyrimMemes/comments/1014niz/whatever_works_right/).

The reason behind choosing memes as examples of ironic instances created by players of the game is the fact that "with internet memes, we have an opportunity to view discourse(s) in action"(Wiggins 24). We can see how players think about certain aspects of the game: what they find ironic, humorous, or even both and they allow the creation of ironic instances from items that were clearly not meant in an ironic way in the first place. They can be used in many ways, and one of them is to evoke feelings of nostalgia and to remind the players of *Skyrim* that the game is fun to play; memes might even inspire them to try ironic playthroughs of the game.

### 3.3. Post-irony in Service of Nostalgia

Post-irony is just as important in creating nostalgia as procedural irony is, since post-ironic creations have the power to deceive their viewers into believing that they present something genuine. Memes and short videoclips are often deemed post-ironic, since they heavily rely on the background knowledge of the ones viewing them: let us put ourselves into the shoes of someone who played with the game long enough to recognize its soundtrack. As

they scroll through the videos on *TikTok*, they stumble upon videos that use the soundtrack of the game, and as avid players, they immediately recognize it. These videos however leave the player utterly confused, as the videos they see have absolutely no connection to *Skyrim*. Did the creators use the soundtrack to create something ironic? Did they use it only because they found the music calming and genuinely thought it fits their video? The player can never be sure. They can be considered as post-ironic instances, because for the player it is so absurd to use the sound of *Skyrim* for something so unrelated to the game that it feels ironic.

Post-ironic examples of content created in connection with *Skyrim* are numerous, but I would like to highlight one that reminds the players of *Skyrim*'s influence: the existence of the "Sneak 100" achievement in another game, *Minecraft* ("Sneak 100 Achievement in Minecraft"). The achievement rewards players for successfully sneaking past a specific trap, so in essence it has the same principles that were already presented in *Skyrim*, but the existence of the achievement feels more like a testament to the numerous memes created about the ironic in-game behaviors around maximum level skills (such as Speech, Destruction, Illusion and Sneak) than it is to the game itself. The "Speech 100" and "Sneak 100" memes are so popular that they even got their Urban Dictionary entries (Speech 100 man, a pankek). These references and memes can remind players of their own ridiculous adventures in the game and might invoke further feelings of longing and the desire to experience using these skills to get into or out of tough, serious or outright ridiculous situations in *Skyrim*.

As most *Skyrim* players are aware, playing a stealth archer is one of the easiest character builds, and at one point everyone played as one for the sole advantage of killing enemies with one shot from a distance, and as the following meme (Fig. 6) illustrates, it is comically hard to avoid playing as a stealth archer.



Fig. 6. u/Copper\_Bronze\_Baron. "How We All End up Stealth Archers." *R/SkyrimMemes*, 4 Jan. 2023, [www.reddit.com/r/SkyrimMemes/comments/1036efi/how\\_we\\_all\\_end\\_up\\_stealth\\_archers/](https://www.reddit.com/r/SkyrimMemes/comments/1036efi/how_we_all_end_up_stealth_archers/).

The meme template illustrates a person putting on clown make-up step-by-step, and it is “usually used to illustrate a person making an increasingly larger fool of himself by providing arguments which are deemed increasingly weak or illogical” (“Putting on Clown Makeup”), in this case the text altered with arguments on how a person wants to avoid playing the stereotypical stealth archer build with their character. The meme template is ideal for self-mockery, but just like in the case of the example of post-irony in Section 1.2, we lack the context needed to be able to decide if the person posting it actually thinks of themselves as a clown for doing another stealth archer character. Nostalgia comes from trying different playthroughs only to end up with almost the same playstyle every time, because that is one of the most efficient ways to play the game.

In this chapter I provided several different examples and described ironic occurrences in online communities, bringing several recent examples mainly from the *r/SkyrimMemes* subreddit, since memes are banned from the site of *r/skyrim*—although many videos with similar essence are posted there daily. The content about *Skyrim* does not necessarily have to be ironic in nature, since every post that players see can evoke feelings of nostalgia based on the individual’s fond memories and attachment to the game.

## 4. Conclusion

In this paper I aimed to examine *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* to determine whether irony is present in the game, and if it can be one of the reasons behind the high activity rates in its related *Reddit* communities. I gave a detailed definition on what procedural irony is and described post-irony and how it related to my research. I provided an ample number of examples to support my argument that procedural irony is present in *Skyrim*, and notes that while irony stems from the procedural mode, the creators of irony are often the players themselves. Even though recognizing or creating irony can often destroy players’ immersion, it also encourages them to share their ironic (and often humorous) instances of gameplay. The content shared by the players does not necessarily contain irony and when it does, it is usually post-ironic, and hard to determine whether they were supposed to be ironic in any sense.

Since users in online communities are rather creative, they can create ironic posts about game elements that were never ironic in the game’s context, but the creativity of content creation and the strong sense of nostalgia towards their beloved game is what might keep these communities ever so active. Posts about the game invite players to try “irony-making” in the game for themselves and therefore draw back old players through a sense of nostalgia, or the

frequent content might be responsible for drawing in new players and encouraging them to recreate the ironic instances themselves.

## Works cited

- a pankek. “Sneak 100.” *Urban Dictionary*, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Sneak%20100>. Accessed 5 Jan. 2023.
- Aarseth, Espen. “I Fought the Law: Transgressive Play and the Implied Player.” *From Literature to Cultural Literacy*, edited by Naomi Segal and Daniela Koleva, Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014, pp. 180–88. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137429704\\_13](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137429704_13).
- Ahumada, Tomás, and Alexandre Bergel. “Reproducing Bugs in Video Games Using Genetic Algorithms.” *2020 IEEE Games, Multimedia, Animation and Multiple Realities Conference (GMAX)*, 2020, pp. 1–6. *IEEE Xplore*, <https://doi.org/10.1109/GMAX49668.2020.9256837>.
- Albaghajati, Aghyad, and Moataz Ahmed. “A Co-Evolutionary Genetic Algorithms Approach to Detect Video Game Bugs.” *Journal of Systems and Software*, vol. 188, June 2022. *ScienceDirect*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jss.2022.111261>.
- Ariyurek, Sinan, et al. “Automated Video Game Testing Using Synthetic and Humanlike Agents.” *IEEE Transactions on Games*, vol. 13, no. 1, Mar. 2021, pp. 50–67. *IEEE Xplore*, <https://doi.org/10.1109/TG.2019.2947597>.
- Bergstrom, Kelly, and Nathaniel Poor. “Reddit Gaming Communities During Times of Transition.” *Social Media + Society*, vol. 7, no. 2, Apr. 2021. *SAGE Journals*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211010167>.
- Bogost, Ian. *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*. The MIT Press, 2007.
- Boluk, Stephanie, and Patrick Lemieux. *Metagaming: Playing, Competing, Spectating, Cheating, Trading, Making, and Breaking Videogames*. University of Minnesota Press, 2017.
- Bycer, Josh. “Cheating vs. Exploiting in Game Design.” *Game Developer*, 14 Jan. 2015, <https://www.gamedeveloper.com/business/cheating-vs-exploiting-in-game-design>.
- Colebrook, Claire. *Irony (The New Critical Idiom)*. Routledge, 2003.
- dcyren. “Skyrim Reputation.” *Nexus Mods*, 5 Jan. 2019, <https://www.nexusmods.com/skyrim/specialedition/mods/22374>.
- dDefinder. “Realistic Ragdolls and Force.” *Nexus Mods*, 18 Nov. 2011, <https://www.nexusmods.com/skyrim/mods/601>.
- demonjanitor. “Loading Screens With Extra Sarcasm.” *Nexus Mods*, 8 Dec. 2015, <https://www.nexusmods.com/skyrim/mods/71838>.

- DivinePrince2. "Comment on u/Sixft7in's Post on 'What Are the Game Physics behind a Giant Launching Something into a Suborbital Trajectory?'" *R/Skyrim*, 18 Oct. 2015, [https://www.reddit.com/r/skyrim/comments/3p74i2/comment/cw3qn4w/?utm\\_source=reddit&utm\\_medium=web2x&context=3](https://www.reddit.com/r/skyrim/comments/3p74i2/comment/cw3qn4w/?utm_source=reddit&utm_medium=web2x&context=3).
- Fest, Bradley J. "METAPROCEDURALISM: THE STANLEY PARABLE AND THE LEGACIES OF POSTMODERN METAFICTION." *Wide Screen*, vol. 6, no. 1, Sept. 2016, pp. 1–23, <https://mla.hcommons.org/deposits/objects/mla:982/datastreams/CONTENT/content>.
- Gjøøl, Bjørn Anker, et al. "Narrative Urgency: Motivating Action in Interactive Digital Media." *Interactive Storytelling*, edited by Rogelio E. Cardona-Rivera et al., vol. 11869, Springer International Publishing, 2019, pp. 178–82, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-33894-7\\_19](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-33894-7_19).
- Gray\_wolf1119. "Comment on the Topic 'Why Do Giants Send You Skyward with a Single Hit?'" *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim – Message Board*, 19 Dec. 2011, <https://gamefaqs.gamespot.com/boards/615803-the-elder-scrolls-v-skyrim/61401859?page=1>.
- Greene, Viveca S., et al. "Memeology: Normalizing Hate Through Humour?" *The Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare*, vol. 4, no. 2, Nov. 2021, pp. 75–80, <https://doi.org/10.21810/jicw.v4i2.2962>.
- "Gru's Plan." *Know Your Meme*, 11 Mar. 2018, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/grus-plan>.
- Hawreliak, Jason. "Incongruous Modes: Modal Irony, Humor and Affect in Videogames." *Journal of Applied Psycholinguistics*, vol. XXI, no. 2, 2021, pp. 81–97.
- . *Multimodal Semiotics and Rhetoric in Videogames*. Routledge, 2018. [www.taylorfrancis.com](http://www.taylorfrancis.com), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315159492>.
- Herzig, Kim, et al. "It's Not a Bug, It's a Feature: How Misclassification Impacts Bug Prediction." *2013 35th International Conference on Software Engineering (ICSE)*, IEEE, 2013, pp. 392–401, <https://doi.org/10.1109/ICSE.2013.6606585>.
- Hocking, Clint. "Ludonarrative Dissonance in Bioshock." *Click Nothing*, 7 Oct. 2007, [https://clicknothing.typepad.com/click\\_nothing/2007/10/ludonarrative-d.html](https://clicknothing.typepad.com/click_nothing/2007/10/ludonarrative-d.html).
- Hodgson, David S. J., et al. *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim Legendary Standard Edition: Official Game Guide*. Prima Games, 2013.
- Hoffmann, Lukas. *Postirony: The Nonfictional Literature of David Foster Wallace and Dave Eggers*. transcript Verlag, 2016.

- Hutcheon, Linda. *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*. 1st ed., Routledge, 1994, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203359259>.
- "I'm Something of a Scientist Myself." *Know Your Meme*, 2 Feb. 2018, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/im-something-of-a-scientist-myself>.
- "Is This a Pigeon?" *Know Your Meme*, 10 Feb. 2015, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/is-this-a-pigeon>.
- Juul, Jesper. *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*. MIT Press, 2011.
- Konstantinou, Lee. "Four Faces of Postirony." *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth after Postmodernism*, edited by Robin van den Akker et al., Rowman & Littlefield, 2017, pp. 87–102.
- Lisovsky, Dmitry. "On the Origin of Memes: Meme Scientist Explains Post-Irony and Future of Internet Culture." *ITMO.NEWS*, translated by Vadim Galimov, 3 Dec. 2018, <https://news.itmo.ru/en/news/8093/>.
- Lucariello, Joan. "Situational Irony: A Concept of Events Gone Awry." *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, vol. 123, no. 2, June 1994, pp. 129–45, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0096-3445.123.2.129>.
- MacDowell, James. *Irony in Film*. 1st ed., Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016.
- Makai, Péter Kristóf. "Video Games as Objects and Vehicles of Nostalgia." *Humanities*, vol. 7, no. 4, 4, Nov. 2018, p. 123, <https://doi.org/10.3390/h7040123>.
- Makedonski, Brett. "Ludonarrative Dissonance: The Roadblock to Realism." *Destructoid*, 26 Sept. 2012, <https://www.destructoid.com/ludonarrative-dissonance-the-roadblock-to-realism/>.
- Man or Monster. "Respectful Lydia - Willing Burden Carrier." *Nexus Mods*, 29 Dec. 2011, <https://www.nexusmods.com/skyrim/mods/4806>.
- McFadden, Christopher. *The Origin of the Term "Computer Bug."* 12 June 2020, <https://interestingengineering.com/innovation/the-origin-of-the-term-computer-bug>.
- McMullen, Chris. "Skyrim's Bucket Robbery Is a Testament to Player Creativity." *The Escapist*, 13 Apr. 2021, <https://www.escapistmagazine.com/skyrim-bucket-robbery-is-a-testament-to-player-creativity/>.
- mkoas321. "Bethesda Physics." *Urban Dictionary*, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=bethesda%20physics>. Accessed 31 Dec. 2022.

- Mooney, John, and Jan M. Allbeck. "Rethinking NPC Intelligence - A New Reputation System." *Proceedings of the Seventh International Conference on Motion in Games*, 2014, pp. 55–60, <https://doi.org/10.1145/2668084.2668091>.
- Muecke, D. C. *Irony and the Ironic*. Taylor & Francis, 2017.
- Piero, Mike, and Marc A. Ouellette, editors. *Being Dragonborn: Critical Essays on The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. McFarland, 2021.
- Puente, Héctor, and Susana Tosca. "The Social Dimension of Collective Storytelling in Skyrim." *DiGRA Conference*, 2013.
- "Putting on Clown Makeup." *Know Your Meme*, 4 Sept. 2019, <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/putting-on-clown-makeup>.
- "R/Skyrim." *Reddit*, 2010, <https://www.reddit.com/r/skyrim/>.
- "R/Skyrim Stats." *Subreddit Stats*, 7 Dec. 2022, <https://subredditstats.com/r/skyrim>.
- "R/SkyrimMemes." *Reddit*, 2011, <https://www.reddit.com/r/skyrimmemes/>.
- Seraphine, Frederic. *Ludonarrative Dissonance: Is Storytelling About Reaching Harmony?* Sept. 2016. *ResearchGate*, [www.researchgate.net/publication/307569310](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/307569310).
- Simkins, David, et al. "Unbroken Immersion: The Skyrim Experience." *Well Played*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2012, pp. 13–25, <https://kilthub.cmu.edu/ndownloader/files/12212930#page=21SLRBV4ZA#page=21>.
- "Skyrim:Combat." *The Unofficial Elder Scrolls Pages (UESP)*, 7 Apr. 2022, <https://en.uesp.net/wiki/Skyrim:Combat#Staggering>.
- "Skyrim:Giant." *The Unofficial Elder Scrolls Pages (UESP)*, 19 Dec. 2022, <https://en.uesp.net/wiki/Skyrim:Giant>.
- "Skyrim:Glitches." *The Unofficial Elder Scrolls Pages (UESP)*, 27 Dec. 2022, [https://en.uesp.net/wiki/Skyrim:Glitches#Infinitely\\_Powerful\\_Items](https://en.uesp.net/wiki/Skyrim:Glitches#Infinitely_Powerful_Items).
- "Skyrim:Mountain Climbing." *The Unofficial Elder Scrolls Pages (UESP)*, 22 Feb. 2020, [https://en.uesp.net/wiki/Skyrim:Mountain\\_Climbing](https://en.uesp.net/wiki/Skyrim:Mountain_Climbing).
- "Skyrim's Space Program." *YouTube*, Uploaded by Gyperx, 18 Nov. 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EWV9hSDXTkg>.
- "Sneak 100 Achievement in Minecraft." *TrueAchievements*, <https://www.trueachievements.com/a361590/sneak-100-achievement>. Accessed 5 Jan. 2023.
- Speech 100 man. "Speech 100." *Urban Dictionary*, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=speech%20100>. Accessed 5 Jan. 2023.

- Swearingen, C. Jan. "What Is the Text? Who Is the Reader? A Meditation on Meanderings of Meaning." *New Literary History*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2007, pp. 145–61. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20057993>.
- Talbot, Carrie. "A Skyrim Fan Has Killed Every Single NPC and Creature so Now Everywhere's Solitude." *PCGamesN*, 12 May 2021, <https://www.pcgamesn.com/the-elder-scrolls-v-skyrim/npcs-creatures-killed>.
- Tanenbaum, Theresa Jean. "How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Gamer: Reframing Subversive Play in Story-Based Games." *DiGRA Conference*, 2013, [http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/CPR18-Tanenbaum\\_DiGRA\\_2013\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/CPR18-Tanenbaum_DiGRA_2013_FINAL.pdf).
- Tavinor, Grant. "Art and Aesthetics." *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*, edited by Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron, Routledge, 2014, p. Chapter 8.
- "The Elder Scrolls | Skyrim." *Elder Scrolls*, <https://elderscrolls.bethesda.net/en/skyrim>. Accessed 7 Apr. 2022.
- "The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim." *Steam Charts*, <https://steamcharts.com/app/72850#All>. Accessed 23 Dec. 2022.
- The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim Anniversary Edition*. Bethesda Game Studios, 2021.
- Trainwiz and friends. "Really Useful Dragons." *Nexus Mods*, 8 Dec. 2013, <https://www.nexusmods.com/skyrim/mods/48593/>.
- u/deadlybacon7. "How to Kill the Infamous Riverwood Chicken." *R/Skyrim*, 31 Dec. 2014, [www.reddit.com/r/skyrim/comments/2qvafw/how\\_to\\_kill\\_the\\_infamous\\_riverwood\\_chicken/](http://www.reddit.com/r/skyrim/comments/2qvafw/how_to_kill_the_infamous_riverwood_chicken/).
- "Ungrien." *The Elder Scrolls Wiki*, <https://elderscrolls.fandom.com/wiki/Ungrien>. Accessed 16 Dec. 2022.
- u/Smol-Fur. "So If You Have above 10,000% Sneak Foxes and Deer No Longer Detect You." *R/Skyrim*, 15 Sept. 2022, [www.reddit.com/r/skyrim/comments/xexzwn/so\\_if\\_you\\_have\\_above\\_10000\\_sneak\\_foxes\\_and\\_deer/](http://www.reddit.com/r/skyrim/comments/xexzwn/so_if_you_have_above_10000_sneak_foxes_and_deer/).
- u/Substantial-Cup6943. "Comment on u/Smol-Fur's Post on 'So If You Have above 10,000% Sneak Foxes and Deer No Longer Detect You.'" *R/Skyrim*, 16 Sept. 2022, [https://www.reddit.com/r/skyrim/comments/xexzwn/comment/iolp6v6/?utm\\_source=reddit&utm\\_medium=web2x&context=3](https://www.reddit.com/r/skyrim/comments/xexzwn/comment/iolp6v6/?utm_source=reddit&utm_medium=web2x&context=3).
- Valentine, Rebekah. "'Millions of People' Are Still Playing Skyrim Every Month." *GamesIndustry.Biz*, 6 July 2018, <https://www.gamesindustry.biz/millions-of-people-are-still-playing-skyrim-every-month>.

- Wiggins, Bradley E. *The Discursive Power of Memes In Digital Culture: Ideology, Semiotics, And Intertextuality*. Routledge, 2019.
- Wood, Hannah. “Dynamic Syuzhets: Writing and Design Methods for Playable Stories.” *Interactive Storytelling*, edited by Nuno Nunes et al., Springer International Publishing, 2017, pp. 24–37. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-71027-3\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-71027-3_3).