

In late January of 2012 my classmate, Andy McColgin, mentioned that he wanted to develop a mod for Bethesda Game Studios' *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* with the soon-to-be-released Creation Kit modding tool. I had played *Fallout 3*, but not *Skyrim*. The prospect of working with a game editor tool made me curious enough to approach Andy after class to offer my assistance.

Andy explained to me that he had browsed through the *Skyrim* mods that were available on major mod distribution sites. He had found that the vast majority of the mods available at that time were item sets or graphical improvements. He proposed that we could make a large impact on the *Skyrim* modding scene if we could be one of the first, if not the first, to make a miniature story-based add-on to game. I pointed out that we ran the risk of interfering with other mods or even official downloadable content if we built the mod in an area of the *Skyrim* map that was already accessible. We decided to bypass this problem by developing an area of the game world that is outside the normally playable area. We used a gate-like arch in the southeastern part of the world map that appeared to lead outside of *Skyrim*'s world map.

The goal of what would become *Beyond Skyrim: A Quest* was to give the player a little bit of everything. It would provide a new quest, a new dungeon, and a new weapon. We were eventually given permission by our professor to do whatever project we wanted, granted we finished it by the end of the semester.

# What Went Right

## 1. There was an incredibly helpful wiki.

The developers at Bethesda Game Studios were kind enough to provide a documentation wiki that contained the vast majority of information needed to make the most out of Creation Kit as well as a basic tutorial. This made it easy for me to pick up the skills I needed as I worked on the mod. Whenever I needed to implement an unfamiliar feature I would first search for it in the wiki, look for a tutorial related to the task at hand, and adapt its instructions. If I could not find a way to create an asset or mechanic directly through the editor, I would create a script using Creation Kit's Papyrus scripting language. This top-down approach to learning how to use the Creation Kit editor allowed me to work on *BS:AQ* while allowing me a wider view of how the Creation Engine works over time.

## 2. Every planned feature was implemented.

I was not sure how much of the project we would be able to complete. Andy and I had two months to work, but an indeterminate amount of work-hours to accomplish it. We overcame this problem by adopting a series of vertically-sliced milestones with which to gauge the project's progress. It worked well, and we acquired a better idea of the time required per task with each milestone passed. I found out early on that indeed a huge amount of dedication was necessary to push *BS:AQ* to completion by the class deadline. Andy and I were in constant contact via text messaging and phone calls to make sure that *Skyrim* lore was intact, that everything was going smoothly, and that we both had the same idea of what kind of mod we were trying to make. This back-and-forth complemented the tight development schedule nicely.

The push was worth it. The mod was published on the Steam Workshop on the last night of the semester.

### 3. All the necessary tools were available.

It would be an exaggeration to say that *BS:AQ* was purely the result of hard work. We were fortunate enough to have access to tools created by the Elder Scrolls modding community. For example, *Skyrim* mod files are in large part a list of changes to the main game. Any changes made are normally unable to be removed from this list. Creation Kit's built-in version control system was more trouble than it was worth for such a small project. There would have been no way to fix errors and combine Andy's and my work without the TES5Edit trimming tool. I was also lucky to have a friend, Eric, who knew how to set up the audio studio on campus to record *BS:AQ*'s voice acting. I also used the simply-named *Skyrim Audio Converter*, another third-party application, to compress voice recordings into the file format optimized for the game.

### 4. Players enjoyed it and gave great feedback.

There was no way for me to predict how players would receive the mod. I was certainly optimistic, but I had such an intimate knowledge of its every nook and cranny that it was impossible for me to perceive the experience of playing it as an outsider. The player and modder communities in the Steam Workshop and *Skyrim Nexus* were both supportive and helpful. Reading the positive reactions of the people who played the mod made (and makes!) all the effort worthwhile.

# What Went Wrong

## 1. My computer loaded Creation Kit slowly.

The computer I used to develop my portion of *BS:AQ* was a studio laptop with a decent graphics card, but it lacked memory, hard drive read speed, and processor power. This meant that Creation Kit froze when enumerating assets and even crashed if I pushed it too hard, losing all unsaved data. Starting up Creation Kit took several minutes, so closing and reopening the editor for testing ate up a lot of valuable time.

## 2. Bugs – Quickly fixed, they still weakened the initial reception.

*BS:AQ* was released with bugs and unanticipated critiques in spite of considerable effort to the contrary. I closely monitored the comments section of the Steam Workshop to fix them as they were brought up, but the mod's hype was definitely hampered. The mod stayed in the top ten most popular *Skyrim* mods on the Steam Workshop for an entire week, but I suspect it could have made the top three with a bug-free release.

## 3. The area outside the border gate required a complete overhaul.

I spent a large portion of development time on making the outside areas in the mod presentable and playable. The terrain, trees, and mountains outside of the areas included in *Skyrim* were automatically generated, but were otherwise unfinished. Mountains would pop in and out of view based as the player approached them. Trees were floating off the ground. The ground textures were ugly and out of place. The weather was always sunny. There was no

navmesh for non-player characters to walk on. I had to address all of this in order to make the mod presentable. This was an invisible effort of sorts, since players more or less assumed that the exterior environment had always been that way.

#### 4. Voice Acting – Most of the voice actors dropped out.

BS:AQ needed five uniquely-voiced characters in it that speak to the player. I already had Eric and myself, but I still needed a few more people with vocal cords willing to lend their talents. It did not take very long to round up the extra three. Unfortunately, all three of them became antsy when the microphone setup took too long, and they left the studio, leaving only Eric and I to record all the voices. The publishing deadline for the mod was soon enough that there was no opportunity to rent out the studio again, so we made do with what we had. This inconvenience did not affect the mod's popularity one way or the other, but it would have been nice to have one-to-one ratio of voice actors to voiced characters.

## Conclusion

There are some things about *BS:AQ* that I would have definitely done differently had I known what I know today, but it goes without saying that I would have never have learned those lessons if I had not worked on the mod in the first place. The foremost lesson is that testing is incredibly important, even when I think that I have accounted for every possibility.

All-in-all, I am proud of what Andy, Eric and I accomplished. Larger and more impressive *Skyrim* voice acted quest-based mods have been published since its release, but they

did not make the mark of being the first. Many of them were able to learn from our mistakes.

We were Creation Kit pioneers.