

# The Elder Scrolls: Daggerfall

Studio: **Bethesda Softworks**

Designer(s): **Julian Lefay; Bruce Nesmith; Ted Peterson**

Part of series: **The Elder Scrolls**

Release: September 20, 1996

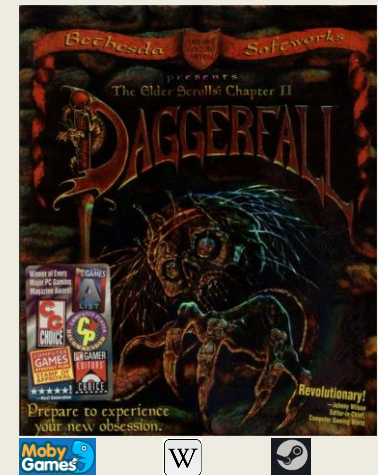
Main credits: Programmers: **Hal Bouma, Julian Lefay**  
 Artists: **Mark K. Jones, Hoang Nguyen, Louise Sandoval**  
 Music: **Eric Heberling**

Useful links: [Complete playthrough, parts 1-20](#) (19 hours 46 mins.)

## Basic Overview

Most of my readers already know that I strongly dislike throwing around controversial «hot takes» for the sheer sake of starting a fight or making myself look different from mindless sheep herds. It's a hell more of an achievement to try and open up new insightful passages inside the boring truth than forcefully turn it into an exciting lie — or something like that. But every now and then, there happens to be a «hot take» which does actually come straight from the heart, and that's probably the most fun for an honest reviewer: try and make a convincing case for what might seem like a hopeless situation to the majority. So, without further ado — I think that **The Elder Scrolls: Daggerfall**, a much-

admired cult classic and, according to many, the *true* beginning of the epic majesty that is **The Elder Scrolls**, is actually inferior to **The Elder Scrolls: Arena**, the first game in the series. While unquestionably presenting many important steps forward in the evolution of the **Elder Scrolls** universe, I come to view **Daggerfall** — in *retrospect* — as a monumental failure, more of a lesson on how *not* to do an open-world RPG than anything else. The reasons why some of **Daggerfall's** aspects remain unique (and thus, somewhat fascinating to certain types of players) are simple: they were *bad* aspects, soon to



be jettisoned even by the Bethesda people themselves. I would not dare to go as far as call the entire game bad — it does have a life of its own — but I cannot share the enthusiasm of its veteran fans, and I certainly cannot lie that I had a lot of fun playing it (well, I did have *some*, but it is unlikely I shall ever return to the game after beating it of my own desire).

First things first, though: my first experience with **Daggerfall** was utterly dreadful. Having just completed **Arena** (about twenty years late to the party), I was excited to see how far Bethesda could push the same formula just two years later. It took a bit of a struggle to get the old DOS version to work, but that kind of a struggle was nothing new to me after a decade of playing my old favorites on Windows XP. The major problem, however, was not that the game croaked and groaned as I was testing its limits; the major problem was that I couldn't really *get* anywhere. It took what seemed like years even to get out of the initial dungeon — at the cost of being humiliated by enemy after enemy. It took another year to bring my character to the nearest village — where nobody wanted to talk to me or give me a job because I did not have any reputation with them. Finally, after an eternity spent mucking around, I got my first fetch quest, which required visiting a faraway dungeon represented by a 3D map that I could not properly interpret. And in that dungeon... I got lost. I ended up roaming an endless series of similar-looking corridors, battling tough-as-nails enemies and *perhaps* even finding the object I was looking for, except that I could not get out. It looked like that one single dungeon was more huge and intricate than all of **Arena**'s main dungeons put together — and that was just a minor fetch quest. Once I realized that, my enthusiasm died, and I buried it by deleting the game from my hard drive, weeping over all the wasted time, and moving on.

Fast forward another ten years or so, and one sunny day a piece of interesting news reached me: apparently, there was a fan-funded project of remaking **Daggerfall** completely in [the Unity engine](#), claiming to have preserved the graphic style, quest system, and overall atmosphere of the original game but fully reprogramming it so that it could run smoothly on modern computers. I was skeptical at first, but decided to check out the details — and the one that managed to seduce me was the fact that the new version of the game had a «Smaller Dungeons» tweak, where you could modify the parameters so that the procedurally generated dungeons would shrink in size (from, say, 16 or so story levels to about 3–4). This most gracious offer on the part of the modders convinced me to give the game another try — and although it was still tough, this time around I at least managed to beat its main quest, which, I guess, does give me the right to produce a general assessment of **Daggerfall**'s strengths and weaknesses. After all, the difference between the original **Daggerfall** and **Daggerfall Unity** is not so much in style or substance as it is in who plays them and when — experiencing this game back in 1996 was a completely different feeling from trying to submit to its charms in the post-**Skyrim** age. Personally, I do not regret not belonging to the former group, as this gives me a less nostalgically biased perspective on things.

I will eagerly admit, though, that my personal feelings for **Daggerfall** are the feelings of an adventure game lover, not a die-hard RPG veteran — and it was precisely that latter category to whom the **Daggerfall** team was pandering. The team in question was led by two of the original creators of **Arena**, Ted Peterson and Julian Le Fay, with newcomer Bruce Nesmith completing the designer trio in the place of **Arena**'s Vijay Lakshman, whose own contributions to **Daggerfall** seem to have been marginal (he would quit Bethesda at the end of 1994). Overall, Peterson and Le Fay are responsible for the lion's share of creative decisions on the nature and structure of **Daggerfall** — which, by all accounts, they wanted to emerge as the most monumental, open-ended, and entertaining RPG that one might even imagine in the mid-Nineties.

By any kind of objective measure, their enthusiasm on the issue paid off well. After a couple of false starts (the original version of the game was provisionally titled **Mornhold** and was set to take place in the province of Morrowind — a decision to be later honored in the third installment of The Elder Scrolls, of course), the game hit store shelves in the fall of 1996 and quickly became both a commercial hit, selling hundreds of thousands of copies, and a critical darling, winning a boatload of awards and triggering rave reviews in almost every magazine that mattered. Not even the staggeringly massive amounts of bugs (many of them game-breaking) could turn the tide — with a universe of such a magnitude, programming lapses were viewed as inevitable and excusable. The game could tax the player's PC to the max, could take ages to boot, could place you in an unwinnable situation every step of the way, could commit tons of technical crimes for which any modern product would be review-bombed into oblivion (remember **Cyberpunk 2077**?), and yet, cursing and swearing under their breath for having to re-roll their character for the tenth time in a row, players would still embrace it — because back in 1996, it offered them something they had never been properly offered before.

In this review, I shall try to lay out, as clearly as possible, what exactly it was that we were offered in 1996; whether it was really worth it back in 1996; and whether it still *remains* worth it almost 30 years later. The evaluation will, of course, have to be comparative — by its very nature, **Daggerfall** remains wedged between **The Elder Scrolls Arena** (on the qualities of which it seeks to expand but whose virtues and flaws it continues to share to a large degree) and **The Elder Scrolls Morrowind**, which represents a major point of departure from the ideology of its two predecessors, be it for better or worse, but which also happens to inherit some crucial features of **Daggerfall**. Therefore, I ask forgiveness beforehand for the many references that will be made to both of these games throughout the review — I do assume, though, that most people who had the pleasure of immersing themselves in the world of **Daggerfall** are to at least *some* degree acquainted with **Morrowind** as well; and if they are not acquainted with **Arena** — well, this review shall do its Machiavellian best to convince them to give the first game in the series an honest try.

## Content evaluation

### Plotline

For all the progress that the designers of **Daggerfall** rolled out on us in the measly two years that separate the second game in the *Elder Scrolls* series from the first one, I would dare say that in no particular respect do the two products differ from each other so much as they do in terms of their Main Quests and everything that pertains to them, one way or another. If ever you hear an old school *Elder Scrolls* fan grumble about how «**Arena** is not too bad, but it isn't *really* a proper *Elder Scrolls* game...», know immediately that they are referring to the fact that **Arena** plays out like an exercise in ancient mythology; **Daggerfall**, by sheer contrast, introduces us to the *Realpolitik* of Tamriel's fictional universe.



The designers themselves went on record saying that they were more inspired by historical fiction when making **Daggerfall** than by other RPG games, and it shows: for all the supernatural paraphernalia, the game plays out much more like a classic historical-adventure novel, by the likes of Alexandre Dumas or Maurice Druon (or George R. R. Martin, to use a more recent analogy) than *The Twelve Labors Of Hercules*, which was more of a model for **Arena**. **Daggerfall** prays at the altar of realism, and its Tamriel is now much less of a generic fantasy idyll threatened by a supervillain and much more of a complex, intertwined web of political and financial interests, whose many rulers are all on non-stop power trips and eat, drink, and shit Machiavellian intrigue for breakfast, dinner, and supper. The game does not even *have* a supervillain: instead, pretty much all of its characters show various shades of grey, and your final actions will depend exclusively on whose particular lust for power you find the least harmful and most morally acceptable of all (or the reverse, if you prefer to «evil-play» your character).

Not being a major expert on the history of CRPGs prior to the *Elder Scrolls*, I am in no position to say exactly how innovative was that one decision to make the universe more «realistic» and less «classical» — but at the very least, it was unquestionably the first CRPG of such a *massive* scope to achieve that goal; and it is not just the later titles in the series, but pretty much every ambitious RPG in the «realistic medieval fantasy» genre, from BioWare's **Dragon Age** to CD Projekt Red's **The Witcher**, that owes its dues to **Daggerfall** — at least, from a formally chronological point of view.



Importantly, the «realism» is not merely restricted to the main backbone of the storyline. The main purpose of **Daggerfall**, in the mind of its creators, was to succeed in the area in which, it was felt, **Arena** had largely failed: build a large, detailed world in which the players could simply *live* their lives without being strictly bound to one particular linear course of activities. In pure theory, **Arena** was structured that way, too, but technical (and probably strategic) limitations made it so that the divide between the Main Quest — mapping out thrillingly hand-crafted, unique dungeons packed with challenging packs of tough enemies — and everything else (mainly running boring generic side quests for boring generic NPCs in boring generic procedurally generated dungeons) made the idea of living your other secret life in Tamriel into quite a boring chore. And what good is building up an alternate secret life for yourself if it's even more boring than your real one?

As the designers realized that the most, if not only, appealing part of **Arena** was its main storyline, they made a strong and conscious effort to bring more balance to **Daggerfall**, so that, essentially, you could just lose yourself in the game without even remembering that it *had* a Main Quest in the first place. The central trick employed here was related to the system of leveling up. **Arena** used a very simple mechanic where you leveled up as you gained more XP, and you gained more XP from killing monsters, and the places where you could get the most monsters to kill were, of course, the huge dungeons of the Main Quest. So you could easily and efficiently beat the game just by visiting and revisiting the major hand-crafted dungeons, gradually collecting the necessary pieces of the puzzle, and almost completely ignoring the rest of your surroundings, except to return to a big city from time to time to sell your loot, stock up on gear, potions, and new spells, and then safely proceed to the next dungeon.

In **Daggerfall**, however, leveling up became a much more tricky affair: to become more powerful on the whole, you had to train your major and minor skills (more on that whole system later), and many of the subplots in the Main Quest would not even become available until you reached a certain level by grinding up — and the obvious way to grind was to embark on series of side quests that you could get from various guilds, temples, orders, factions, and random commoners in the streets. This way, the game subtly, but firmly pressed you to actually live out a «working life» in Hammerfell, and since all the side activities — upon first sight, at least — were more varied and less predictable than in **Arena**, you could indeed get caught up in them so much that you'd forget all about the Main Quest entirely.

Not that the Main Quest itself offered any flaming incentive to be remembered. While the game starts out quite similarly to **Arena** — your main character finds himself/herself inside a starting dungeon, where you need to find some equipment and make your way through a bunch of enemies before getting yourself thrown out into the wide open world — the preamble is, in fact, seriously different: you are *merely* sent out on what looks like a couple of minor routine errands (understand what

troubles the restless spirit of a recently deceased ruler and investigate the fate of an Imperial letter that never reached its intended addressee). Over time, the first plot gradually expands into a torrid tale of personal conflicts and betrayals, while the second one turns into a search for an all-powerful artefact with the potential of changing the course of history — but the burn is slow, and the technical and creative limitations on making it truly exciting are too strong.

In theory, things could have been great. Over the course of the game, «The Agent» (you) finds him/herself coursing between the main seats of power in the High Rock and Hammerfell provinces of the Empire of Tamriel — Daggerfall itself, ruled by the Breton King Gothryd (son of the murdered Lysandus); Wayrest, ruled by King Eadwyre and his wife, the ruthless and depraved Queen Barenziah; and the somewhat Africanesque Sentinel, ruled by the equally treacherous, but a little less whacky Queen Akorithi. In between these colorful characters and all sorts of additional rogue-like barbarian or undead rulers (Orcs, Undead, etc.) whose friendship you need to obtain to pass the Main Quest, the game's main plot holds plenty of *Game Of Thrones*-like potential. Unfortunately, most of that potential remains unrealized — or, at best, potentially realizable inside the mind of *you*, the seasoned roleplaying expert.

The problem is that even the different sub-scenarios of the Main Quest, when you actually get around to them, mainly follow the same mechanics as the side quests. After you reach a certain level, you receive a letter that summons you to one of the courts. There, you receive an errand — usually a fetch quest — to accomplish which you have to perform a lengthy dungeon crawl, fighting off enemies and occasionally solving platform-style puzzles to get from one place to another. The only two differences from the even more generic side quests is that you get more unique quest-opening and quest-closing blocks of text from the immovable mouths of your employers, and that the castles, palaces, and dungeons you explore during the Main Quest are designed manually rather than procedurally, which at least ensures a *bit* of aesthetic and atmospheric specificity for each of them (but not too much). This is not enough to raise an eyebrow.

By the end of the game the situation was worse for me than in the middle of a classic Chinese novel: too many characters with too many complex agendas and way too little by way of distinct personality to make them stand out from one another. It does not help matters that the NPCs in **Daggerfall** are basically cardboard models which never move or properly react to your actions (more on that in the *Atmosphere* section below), or that your own character is basically a mute whose interaction is reduced to fighting, or that the chunky dialog tossed out by all those political figures is poorly readable and stylistically dry (not a single character in the game has *any* traces of verbal individuality, with maybe the sole exception of Mad Nulfaga, the babbling dervish-like mother of Lysandus). Admittedly, **Arena** suffered from the same problem, but **Arena** did not even try to go for the same level of «sophisticated political realism» as is implied by **Daggerfall**'s main quest — its encounters with

powerful figures were nothing but formal set-ups for the hunt for the next McGuffin. You do not expect a striking personality from «Queen Blubamka of Hammerfell», but you *do* expect one from the legendary Queen Barenziah of Morrowind (she does have a three-volume biography as a bestseller in so many book stores around Tamriel), and the game does nothing to justify those expectations. Perhaps hiring voice actors (at least for the main NPCs) might have helped.

All of this leads to the sad fact that when I am presented with the unexpected and innovative final twist — being able to choose for myself the final destination of the game's super-gizmo-thingie, the Mantella — I find myself not caring in the slightest who gets it: Wayrest, Sentinel, Daggerfall, the Empire, the Orcs, the Necromancers, or the Undead. Usually, I find myself choosing the Empire, simply because Emperor Uriel Septim VII (a) was the only character in the game kind enough to show his face and address me with *actual speech* in the introduction and (b) seems to be the most preferable version for those who do not want to choose, crushing all the rebellious factions and restoring a unified balance in the same way across all territories of the Empire. (Not that I'm an imperialist at heart — unless I'm playing **Civilization**, where you literally have no choice — but all those other guys are so annoyingly boring, I feel like they all deserve to be ground into submission).

If, then, even the wheels and cogs of the Main Quest feel bland and mechanistic, the game's superficially impressive array of side quests predictably suffers the same fate. Once we scrutinize all those hundreds of possibilities and weed out the generic fetch quests that differ only through their variables (*who* needs *what* to be retrieved from *where* in exchange for a gift of *what else*), we are left with, at best, slightly over a dozen or so mini-stories with their own twists (e.g. «Former Student», where you can team up with a rogue Mage to perform some shenanigans, or «Lord K'avar», a multi-part where you have to track down a particularly squiggly noble and deliver him to the court of Sentinel), which feature slightly more engaging dialog than the rest but usually *still* boil down to yet another round of dungeon-crawling and monster-fighting. *Very* rarely, you get to perform a moral choice (as in, kill somebody or let them go), but their consequences rarely matter to anything but your conscience, and since I, personally, do not feel any close rapport with any of these characters, my conscience couldn't care less if I simply decided to murder every man and woman in sight (although it *does* work hell on your Reputation, so I wouldn't recommend it — *The Elder Scrolls* are not *Grand Theft Auto*, and the penalties for overkilling are quite extreme).

In short, the attempt to make **Daggerfall** into a sprawling, dazzling network of shocking political intrigue, thrilling tales of betrayal and salvation, and diverse characters oozing charisma and/or repulsion, was noble, but never went far beyond the basic framework — much as it happens in tabletop RPGs, of course, but I am *not* exactly sure that Peterson and LeFay's goals included imitating the dynamics of a tabletop RPG. Back in 1996, few people knew such kind of sprawl could exist within the confines of a CRPG, so the novel effect alone was sufficient for quite a few fans to develop a childhood crush on Queen Aubk-i

(or King Gothryd, for that matter). In retrospect, though, it is hard for me to imagine any new fan — even those playing the shiny modernized Unity version of the game — developing a genuine fondness for the intricacies of **Daggerfall**'s main plot or «manually designed» side missions. Perhaps it was simply a general lack of experience in the field: while adventure games, with years and years of trial-and-error behind them, had already managed to work out ways of making their characters memorable and their plots involving, western RPGs were only beginning to slightly tip the balance from their purely mechanistic aspect to story-related attractions. (Given the giant, if not quite revolutionary, leap in quality from **Daggerfall** to **Morrowind** six years later, I do say this with relative confidence).

Whatever be the real reason, as a «story-driven game» I find **Daggerfall** to be more of a failure than **Arena**, whose straightforward epicness feels more balanced and adequate than **Daggerfall**'s half-assed lesson in «magical realism». Let us see now how it fares as an «action-packed game» instead.

### *Action*

Superficially, **Daggerfall** is not much of a departure from **Arena** if your basic question is *what do I need to do to beat this game?* If you are a hardcore RPG warrior, the answer would probably be — divide your time between 60-70% dungeon crawling / monster slaying, 10-20% bartering with NPCs in the towns and villages, and 10-30% figuring out the algorithmically proper way to level up your character.

The latter part is arguably *the* one major departure from the mechanics of **Arena**, and the tightest link between **Daggerfall** and its successors, starting from **Morrowind**. In **Arena**, your task was to nurse your character by harvesting progressively larger and larger amounts of XP, which could be harvested in one way only — killing bandits and monsters. Leveling up was gruelling and grindy, but easy. In fact, you could level up simply by following the Main Quest: having entered one of the principal (hand-crafted) dungeons, all you had to do was meticulously explore it and wipe out all the inhabitants, which almost certainly netted you enough XP to move on to the next level, which was sufficient to mop up the next principal dungeon, rinse and repeat. All the game demanded of you was kill, kill, kill, and with each dungeon respawning its monsters in between your leaving and coming back, nothing was easier.





**Daggerfall** worked differently. In addition to the simple basic Attribute system, which still operated more or less the same way as in **Arena** (Strength, Intelligence, etc., increasing as you level up), the game also introduced a much more detailed set of Skills — 35 abilities that could be trained on a level from 1 to 100 and included military talents (Archery, Long Blade, Critical Strike, etc.), magic proficiencies, physical virtues and personality quirks (there were even such Skills as *Orcish*, *Nymphish*, *Impish*, *Dragonish*, etc., which supposedly increased your knowledge of the respective hostile race's language and culture so that the monsters would not be hostile upon encounter — a pretty useless set of skills, since by the time you'd master it to a decent level, you were probably already such a strong warrior that there was absolutely no need for you to «pacify» a hostile creature anyway, well, unless you were actually trying to play a pacifist in **Daggerfall**).

With this system, leveling up was no longer tied to the general harvesting of XP (in fact, **Daggerfall** does not even *have* XP as a viable parameter), but only to performing various actions that would raise your Major and Minor Skills — and you would have to do quite *a lot* of those to become eligible for leveling up. At the same time, you *had* to level up in order to be able to proceed with the Main Quest: certain parts of it would only trigger upon reaching a certain level. Essentially, this meant that staying away from side quests was now a no-no: every once in a while, you could simply not progress in the game without beefing up your numbers, and the only way to beef them up was to take on a bunch of jobs. Which, in turn, means that quite a bit of time will be spent simply looking for work — although this is made easy if, early in the game, you join a number of Guilds and Fractions, whose Masters are always happy to send you on another dungeon crawl.

I mean, *some* of the minor quests might be free of dungeon crawling — for instance, simple delivery quests ("*I need you to take this gadget to somebody else in town over the next 7 days*", etc.). These present simple and efficient ways of making a little bit of money, although every once in a while there will be an annoying catch: you might not be entirely sure of your destination, e.g., you are told to deliver this-and-that to «Bamboozle Mansion» in Daggerfall, and Daggerfall has about 5,000 houses each of which could be «Bamboozle Mansion». To find the proper house, you have to question people on the street — and this is where one of the worst elements of the game comes into play: Reputation.

Your reputation at the start of the game is very low, it takes *months* of playing to significantly raise it, it's very easy to lose it, and unless it's pretty high up there, most of the townspeople will treat you with hostility and refuse to answer your questions. To make matters worse, you are given the choice to address your collocutors in three different voice tones — Polite, Normal, and Blunt — and it is always difficult, if not impossible, to tell which NPCs prefer to be addressed in which way (typically, you would think that it depends on class distinctions, from the aristocracy to the common folk, but I am still not sure it *really* works that way all the time). Every once in a while I happened to notice that it actually takes me more game-playing time to

get a proper set of directions to someone's home than to thoroughly explore and map out an entire dungeon. (**Morrowind** would generally preserve this system, but alleviate things for the player by taking away the stupid Tone distinctions and giving you the opportunity to bribe most of the unhelpful NPCs into quickly changing their disposition).

This is just one — though very telling — example of how the quest of making the game more sophisticated and realistic can result in unwarranted grievances for the player. Most of the other «realistic» elements introduced in town areas are nowhere near as harmful, but, in retrospect, aren't exactly all that great to write home about. You now have a much bigger variety of types of stores (weaponry, armor, alchemy, jewelry, outfits, books, etc.), which makes it a somewhat larger hassle to sell your loot but compensates for it with differentiated atmosphere. You have banks where you can store your money (useful because carrying around bags of money actually adds to your weight problem) and you can buy horses (*very* useful for travel purposes), carts (*very* useful for storing extra loot purposes), houses (completely useless), and even ships (never really tried, too expensive, but I suppose it makes long-distance traveling a little cheaper in the end). These are fun things to do at first, but they get pretty boring and repetitive a couple hours into the game.

The main field of activity, just like in **Arena**, remains dungeon-crawling. On lower levels, it is significantly more challenging than in **Arena** — for instance, already in the opening dungeon you are bound to run into several types of enemies, such as Imps and Skeletal Warriors, that are *tremendously* above your level, and are probably not even supposed to be fought at this time, unless you have a nifty starting bonus or cheat. (For comparison, the opening dungeon in **Arena** only had Rats and Goblins — relatively easy enemies for a beginning player). The enemies themselves seem to move and hit somewhat faster than they used to, and healing stuff is not as easy to come by as it was before — many healers, for instance, will not do business with you until you increase your rank in their respective guild/faction. (In **Arena**, it was somehow not a problem for me to pack a solid supply of healing potions before diving into the next big dungeon; in **Daggerfall**, I find myself in need of risky rest and recuperation nearly *all* the time spent in said dungeon).

This, however, is not a big complaint. The designers thought that fighting in **Arena**'s dungeons was too easy, so they went ahead and threw more of a challenge at us with **Daggerfall**. That's understandable (at least if you manage to forget that actual combat still consists of the same old mechanic of frantically thrashing around the mouse as your character swings his sword / axe / mace at the enemy, praying for a high roll to come along). What is NOT understandable or forgivable, in my opinion, is the utterly and utmost HIDEOUS design of the actual dungeons — the single major decision that, at times, threatens to suck all the fun out of the game, turning it into an undeservedly tedious chore; the single reason why I, a pretty patient person when it comes to video games, ended up jumping ship with the original, non-Unity **Daggerfall**.

In **Arena**, there were two types of dungeons. For the Main Quest, the designers prepared a set of sprawling, (usually) multi-level, hand-designed maps which were fun to explore because almost each one had its own atmosphere (medieval castles, fantasy towers, abandoned mines, foggy gardens, volcano pits, etc.) and its specific types of enemies. By contrast, the side assignments usually had generic, procedurally generated dungeons, relatively small in size and usually consisting of the same three or four-level rectangular areas with randomly spawning enemies — boring, but quick to complete and, most importantly, completely and utterly optional (as I said earlier, it was perfectly easy to just level up and beat the game staying exclusively on the Main Quest without wasting your time on anything else). The dungeons themselves were isometric and easy to navigate with a gradually self-filling map, the only problem being an occasional movement issue where you could get stuck in a tunnel or waterway if a monster happened to hover above your head. Secret doors in the walls, barely visible to the naked eye, could be identified by being automatically marked on the map; and if you got too hopelessly lost or did not want to backtrack through a lengthy maze, the game offered a nifty Passwall spell with which you could temporarily remove any stone block in your path and make all sorts of shortcuts. It was a good experience.

Forward on to **Daggerfall**, though, and in their attempt to make things more visually stimulating *and* technically challenging at the same time, Peterson and LeFay commit a gaming crime if there ever was one. First, there is the ridiculous decision to make every single dungeon huge as heck. Even when you are sent out on an easy-peasy starting mission — say, find and bring back some long-lost potion recipe — the location you have to explore for this will literally spread out *kilometers* in all three directions; at a certain point, you begin to wonder whether all the good people of Hammerfell ever had any other purpose in their lives than to dig, dig, dig endless tunnels joining empty rooms and hallways all through their land, so that they could be populated with monsters and bandits later on. Naturally, all of this dungeon-sprawl will be procedurally generated, meaning that most dungeons will consist of pretty much the same types of building blocks, crammed together into the same types of mega-building blocks. In a perverse way, *eventually* this will begin to help you with orientation, because after a while you shall get used to instantly recognizing the type of dungeon you find yourself in, including all of its secret doors and levers. But it will take plenty of time, toil, and tears to become an expert in Daggerfall Dungeon Engineering — an expertise that, unlike one's progression in the ways of, say, **Minecraft**, is purely a goal in itself and won't do much for your overall skill level.

As I said before, the Unity re-write of the game potentially solves that problem if you set a special filter that reduces the average dungeon size for all the procedurally generated maps. Unfortunately, while this at least gives me a chance to beat the game properly, it does not make the dungeon-crawling experience any more fun. After a while, the exact same building blocks get boring — and another big flaw of **Daggerfall** is that, this time around, pretty much the *same* building blocks constitute

both the randomly generated maps and the hand-crafted dungeons of the Main Quest, with but a few embellishments every now and then in the latter case. Worse, the accompanying self-filling 3D map, while I imagine the designers must have been very proud of it back in 1996, is awfully disorienting — it keeps twisting and twirling, expanding and shrinking, it confuses me about my own location on it, and overall, I believe, is a nightmare for any player who happens to be, er, uh, stereometrically challenged (like myself, I'm ashamed to say). In **Arena**, secret doors leading to extra parts of the dungeon that you could not discern normally were marked with a plain old red dot on the map, like any other door. In **Daggerfall**, they are represented as minor doorsill indentations on the 3D map that you can only discern while holding it under a certain angle — this is the single factor that could increase the time I spent in a single dungeon from, say, ten minutes to frickin' *thirty*, most of them frantically spent alternating between normal game mode and scrutinizing every nook and cranny on the goddamn twirling 3D map. There are few things of which I hold worse memories in my gaming experience than those maps.

As for the creatures that populate those dungeons, well, on one hand, **Daggerfall** does a good job balancing them in relative accordance with your level — although the game still features a sharper and harsher learning curve than **Arena**, because even when you are at your weakest, any random dungeon will still throw on an occasional Orc or Centaur or Skeleton at you, prompting you to run for your life, cheat with the console, or prepare for a long and difficult encounter with plenty of save-scumming. As you toughen up, most of these enemies quickly become nuisances rather than threats (the game does not make weaker enemies scale up to your level), generally just making you wonder about what on Earth are they actually doing here, and how is it exactly that a bunch of rogue Archers and Battlemages is able to share common space with Imps, Ghosts, and Ancient Vampires in the exact same underground. (*Not* peacefully, mind you: the game's AI is trained to make all these guys recognize each other as threats, which often works to your advantage as you can lure two particularly tough enemies next to each other and then just stand and watch them hack each other to pieces).

The bottomline is that, while I did enjoy quite a bit of dungeon-crawling in **Arena**, my reaction to the same activity in **Daggerfall** was fifty percent hatred (first half of the game — while leveling up and getting familiarized with the building blocks) and fifty percent boredom (second half of the game, with all the blocks figured out and most of the monsters becoming automatic fodder for my blades and spells). It is not until the very last quests in the game that the designers' fantasy slowly starts climbing out of its permanent state of slumber and they begin to come up with slightly more inventive puzzles and settings for those dungeons — particularly the very last quest, 'Journey To Aetherius', where your hero has to navigate the surrealist, *Space Odyssey*-like sacred geometry of the Mantellan Crux to get to the ultimate prize. Here is where you get to be more creative than before, figuring out novel ways of getting to your destination while staying under constant fire barrage of



the toughest Daedric enemies in the game. Why the designers could not come up with comparable challenges throughout the earlier parts of the Main Quest is beyond me — probably too busy setting up the World-At-Large to get properly invested in all those minor details like, uh, you know, actually making the gameplay process *interesting* for a change.

As in the previous game, to alleviate the boredom you are welcome to experiment with a large variety of ways to best your cartoonish enemies. **Daggerfall** features a similar arsenal of weapons, randomly empowered with various special effects, and an even larger arsenal of spells, including your own spell generator where, like in **Arena**, you can concoct super-powerful magic blasts that are vastly superior to ready-made stuff. Unfortunately, to do that you have to get in the good graces of the Mages' Guild, not to mention earn boatloads of money — and by the time you are ready, you will probably already be so powerful that even the simple ready-made spells will already make mincemeat of all but the most powerful of your enemies (like Ancient Vampires, etc.), so in the end I found myself using the game's spellmaker even less frequently than I did in **Arena** (and, of course, it is only available to Mages' classes).

Overall, I would say that it is far more difficult to survive in **Daggerfall** than in **Arena**. Enemies, even relatively weak ones, generally hit harder for larger chunks of damage; casting spells, particularly offensive ones, costs a ton of mana; healing and mana-regenerating potions are harder to get and more expensive; and random dungeon loot appears slightly less frequently than it did before. The only saving grace is that there seems to be a higher chance of falling upon useful magical artifacts (e.g. *Expensive Shirt of Lightning Bolt*, that sort of thing) which I found to be far more practical than regular spells — they usually have a large number of charges that you can throw at enemies without wasting any of your own precious mana. With a steady supply of such artifacts, combat becomes significantly easier; so much easier, in fact, that this is a clear sign of imbalanced game design (I would personally make the artifacts less powerful while at the same time being a little more gracious with the player's health and mana bars, but that's just me).

Yet the difficulty would be tolerable if it were properly compensated with fun and excitement; as it is, in the action department **Daggerfall** suffers in exactly the same ways as it does concerning its plot and general setting — the *make everything as big as possible* ideology sets out to overwhelm, and then, once the overwhelming is done with, leaves you in the middle of a grueling and exhausting experience. Even if you discount all the bugs and crashes (which would eventually be overcome with lots of patching and are no longer a threat at all with the console-controlled Unity version), it is *still* a grueling and exhausting experience that, in my personal opinion, does not significantly improve on the humbler scale of **Arena** in quality. The only way I could forgive this disaster would be for it to offer extra «immersion» — but here, too, I see trouble ahead...

## Atmosphere

Nothing is as important to me in a video game as its ability to transport and immerse me in an alternate reality, and in my review of **Arena** I tried to show exactly how it did happen with the first entry in the Elder Scrolls series. With **Daggerfall** being so much larger and more sophisticated than its predecessor, you'd think that it, at the very least, should fully match all of its atmospheric properties. With all the due disclaimers about subjective taste and all that, though, I must sincerely say that on most counts, **Daggerfall** let me down in terms of any emotional involvement. In their relentless focus on such parameters as *SIZE* and (*PSEUDO-*)*REALISM*, the designers lost much of **Arena**'s magic, replacing it with fairly lifeless mechanicity.



Let us start from the very beginning. Once you have generated your character (in total silence, as opposed to the haunting musical background of **Arena**), you are taken to your first cinematic — a memorable FMV sequence featuring little-known theater actor John Gilbert as Emperor Uriel Septim VII. It is suitably impressive, sinister and gloomy, seemingly setting up the stage for a world of secret underground meetings, conspiracies, treacheries, and, hopefully, medieval torture. Alas, it is the *ONLY* cinematic sequence; the only other cutscenes shall be some miserably short animated sequences that highlight 3–4 particularly important events, usually at the very end of the game. Hardcore RPG fans might shrug and note that cutscenes are for pussies and that they did nothing but cheapen, trivialize, and ruin the RPG experience. That may be so. But in **Arena**, the simple cutscenes with voiceovers that followed you throughout the game — dream visions of Ria Silmane and Jagar Tharn — were tremendously effective. Not only did they inject a «human» element into the game, but the contrast between the demonic, threatening appearance of Tharn and the angelic, hope-giving reflection of Ria truly reinforced your belief in that you were *really* engaged in an epic battle between Good and Evil. **Daggerfall** pushes things one step further by pretty much rejecting this contrast — «good» and «evil» are not just blurred in the game, they are practically non-existent — and as sophisticated as that approach is, it doesn't do any good as far as one's gut reactions are concerned.

After the opening cinematic, you awaken to find yourself, once again, inside a dungeon, armless and underleveled, fighting for

your life and freedom. In this situation, **Arena** welcomed you with a creepy, claustrophobic environment of low stone ceilings, iron grates and chains, total darkness outside of a very narrow field of vision, and an occasional monster emerging out of that darkness — one that you could spot from far away only by its sounds (squealing rats and grunting goblins). It was tense, unnerving, and pretty scary at times. It wasn't too difficult to beat the opening dungeon once you'd gotten the hang of it, but even on subsequent playthroughs I still kept feeling like I was *really* fighting for my life in one of the toughest, creepiest environments ever created by the sick minds of human (humanoid) beings.

By contrast, the opening dungeon — and, for that matter, most of the other dungeons — in **Daggerfall** never gives me any kind of comparable feeling. The rooms and corridors are far more spacious, never feeling as if the ceiling is just one step away from caving in on your head. There is almost always ample light, produced by constantly burning torches, which also means that, unless a particular enemy is waiting in ambush right around the corner, you can see most of the threats from many meters away, not needing to be on your guard 100% of the time. The sounds produced by the enemies are usually not as spooky as in **Arena** (more on that below), and the relatively loud, martial dungeon music is more about a general sense of hostility and aggression than about suspense and hidden threat, like the spooky tracks of **Arena**. Overall, there is much more of a purely pragmatic than aesthetic feel about these dungeons — they are here to present a challenge to be beaten, not so much to generate an emotional overload on your senses.

This does not mean that **Daggerfall**'s dungeons are entirely free of heart-bursting events. Each time you meet a new type of enemy, like the Skeletal Warrior with his horrendous scream, or the Giant Scorpion with his massive and disgusting bulk, or the Wraiths swooping upon you out of nowhere on the night streets of the haunted city of Daggerfall (not really a dungeon, though), you might die a little inside, yearning for the relative safety and coziness of one of the game's innumerable taverns much in the same way as you got that urge with **Arena**. But pretty soon you find yourself running out of those fresh impressions, and this is where one of **Daggerfall**'s biggest flaws steps in: *monotonousness*. The exact same types of caverns, corridors, halls, and shrines that you meet in your opening dungeon are going to pursue you for the entirety of the game. With the sole exception of the last challenges of the Main Quest, *everything* consists of the same building blocks. At least in **Arena**, you had different settings — «true» dungeons of the grate-and-chain variety, medieval castle interiors, sterile glass towers, etc. etc.; **Daggerfall** has approximately 2–3 different types of patterns (stone walls, brick walls, earthen walls) that are not very different from each other in aesthetics, as if all that unimaginably expensive digging work had been commissioned from the exact same architect all through the realm. And considering that the game *forces* you to do all those generic side quests while patiently waiting to level up so you can advance the Main one, there's no getting away from that monotonousness.

So much for the interiors (where you are going to spend at least 85-90% of actual playing time); what about the outdoors, then? Well, the outdoor space works more or less the same way as in **Arena**, perhaps with a little more diversity of the natural habitats (forests, mountains, swamps, deserts, etc.) and a few gracious touches to make certain towns and cities less of a carbon copy of each other — Sentinel, for instance, has a distinctly more «North African» vibe to it than Daggerfall or Wayrest. That said, every single shop in every single city looks absolutely the same, as does every single tavern, Guild, Temple, or even royal castle. As much as I try to think of *something*, it is hard for me to come up with even a single example of atmospheric build-up in this mighty big world that **Daggerfall** does better than **Arena**. Maybe the fact that there are farm animals scattered around and they make occasional animal noises when you brush past them?

The «mechanical» rather than «humanistic» nature of the game even seeps through in minor details of the character's interaction with random NPCs. In **Arena**, each person you encountered was happy to give you some personal information (generic, but reasonably well-written), then provide you with some local rumors and — potentially — job offers, if not much else. In **Daggerfall**, characters do not give out anything but their name, and rumors / job offers are only possible to come by if you are lucky enough to please them, which does not really happen until you've worked on your Personality for what might be ages and ages of gameplay. This would be remedied by the time of **Morrowind**, which would reinstate the overall «chattiness» of **Arena** and seriously alleviate the issue of hostile disposition (more people would be relatively friendly to you at the outset, and the non-friendly ones could always be buttered up with bribes); but in **Daggerfall**, stopping random Joes and Janes on the street is almost never fun (and can, in fact, turn into a veritable nightmare if you are in desperate need for some directions). Honestly, I don't mind that all the citizens of Tamriel have somehow turned from cheerful and helpful *bonhommes* into haughty arrogant assholes in between the events of the two games; I *do* mind that they have turned into procedurally generated haughty arrogant assholes, though.

Arguably the best chance the game had at *seriously* raising the immersion level was in the designers' bold and near-genius decision to open up paths where your character could succumb to lycanthropy or vampirism — becoming a werewolf or a blood-hungry undead creature while still being able to carry on with the usual quests, for as long as the player wanted (there are ways of removing the curses, though they are complicated and sometimes dependent on random factors). It is pretty spooky, for the first time at least, to open up your character screen and see the results of the transformation — though with the game always played in first person perspective, you don't get to admire your new personality all that much (apart from some growling sounds). Unfortunately, other than your being hunted down much more frequently by the town guards or specially hired bounty hunters, the change brings on very little difference. You become stronger, you have to kill innocent people to



survive in the wilderness, but the people themselves rarely show any passionate reaction to your appearance change (other than hiding and staying off the streets if you decide to go on a bloodthirsty rampage). Very soon, you just get used to your new nature and start to view it from a purely pragmatic angle of gains-and-losses.

It goes without saying that, when taken *completely* out of context, **Daggerfall** can still come across as quite a striking game in terms of potentially impressive world-building (as can nearly everything). But while most players do prefer it over **Arena**, they seem to usually do so because of its relative hugeness (so many more things to do!) or because of all the changes in gaming mechanics that bring it closer to the standards of 21st century *Elder Scrolls*; assessments like «**Arena** is so much more dull» or «**Arena** is so lifeless in comparison» almost never seem to crop up in any comparative discussions, and for a good reason. With **Daggerfall**, designers ended trading in a solid chunk of Tamriel's living soul for extra size, sophistication, and complexity, and to me, that is never a good thing.

## Technical features

### Graphics

By any objective account, the two years that separate 1994's **Arena** from 1996's **Daggerfall** should have resulted in some serious improvement on the visual front — and the above-mentioned opening FMV cinematics, with the «Emperor's» grim face staring at you out of the gloom as torches flicker around, was a promising enough start... except that it did not lead anywhere. FMV was a well-established standard by 1996, but **Daggerfall** was not about luring the player in with realistic cutscenes, nor was it about stunning the player with beautiful, otherworldly landscapes or character portraits. Instead, it focused on one thing only when it came to graphics: improving and refining its 3D capacities so that the players, even much more so than in **Arena**, would be able to realistically transport themselves into Tamriel. To do that, Bethesda designed its own brand new game engine, XnGine, first tested on the 1995 1st person shooter **Terminator: Future Shock**, but only reaching full capacity with the release of **Daggerfall**. Said engine kept the studio going all the way through the late 1990s, with the **Battlespire** and **Redguard** *Elder Scrolls* spin-offs all based on it, but would be retired for **Morrowind**.



Unquestionably, XnGine was a big technical improvement over the graphic properties of **Arena**. It gave you almost full control over the camera, which you could pan around in almost any direction — this made it possible, for instance, to install trapdoors or vents in the ceiling which you could only see from a certain angle (hardly ever accessible in **Arena**) and then levitate upwards if you needed to. You could zoom in on any object or character with far more precision and detail than before, and you had a much improved field of view in the wide open spaces around you. The world felt a little less claustrophobic and stilted than it did before, helping the designers with their quest to make the player truly get lost in a realistic alternate universe that stretched out as far as the eye could see in any given direction.

However, even those improvements had their unpredictable drawbacks. Perhaps the most bizarre of the graphic decisions was to make all the NPCs in the game into fullblown 3D shapes... by actually making them *bi-dimensional*. Namely, you can try to walk around any character you meet and he/she will respectively turn around and follow you, in the process of which you realize that they have height and width, but no *depth* — basically a set of cardboard cutouts that are either chained and locked to their original position or randomly move around. Paradoxically, NPCs in **Arena** end up looking more realistic: while you never get a chance to turn them around or take a proper glance from the sides, they're alright as long as it's just the front — meanwhile, **Daggerfall** characters *always* look like cardboard dolls, even after you kill them (then they just look like *dead* cardboard dolls, huddled on the floor). This is also a major reason why it is hard for me to perceive any of the game's enemies as genuinely creepy — as long as you're fairly sure that Ancient Vampire is made out of cardboard, who even gives a damn if the guy is able to bring you down in two quick sweeps of his claws? He's still a bit of a joke.

The environmental graphics occasionally improve on **Arena** — particularly in the portrayal of procedurally generated landscapes — and occasionally don't, as it happens with the dungeons: as I already mentioned above, I find the drawing style of **Daggerfall**'s dungeons fairly bland and pragmatic. Occasional randomized details thrown in here and there — torches, tapestries, skull candles, mutilated bodies sticking out of suspended cages, etc. etc. — add a little bit of atmosphere but can be just as confusing as they are embellishing, particularly when you want to click on something hoping that it would be a pile of loot, and it turns out to be just a bunch of unclickable pixels. It's OK, but I think that the designers, by this time, were so amazed at the power of procedural generation from building blocks that they were just too happy to let the machine take over and craft all of that huge universe for them while they just sat around twiddling their thumbs — minimalizing human input and ultimately making the world of **Daggerfall** look and feel more flat and boring than that of its predecessor (something that modern day AI art proponents should seriously keep in mind).

One thing **Daggerfall** did really well compared to **Arena**, though, was the lighting and its shift across the day-night cycle;

there are four or five different settings from early morning to late night, coupled with additional effects like rain, snow, and fog, and all of them are handled much better than before — so much so that it can be a bit of a poetic experience to cast Levitate on yourself at dusk and fly over the hills, forests, and towns to watch the scenery (admittedly, I mostly used to do that in the reworked Unity version, but I'm pretty sure the original impact on the player back in 1996 was comparable).

But for all the gorgeousness of the scenery at particular times of day (which would be completely overshadowed by the same effects in **Morrowind**, anyway), it cannot fully erase the rather painful memory of the strangeness and, fairly often, relative inappropriateness of **Daggerfall's** NPC sprites. It is not merely the cardboard cutout factor: most of the enemy sprites encountered around the dungeons just aren't particularly distinctive / impressive on their own. Humanoid enemies tend to look the same — Burglars, Assassins, and Battlemages all wear similar capes and are basically clones of each other. Vampires, even Ancient ones, look suspiciously similar to the same humanoid Battlemages as well — looking far less drastic than their counterparts in **Arena**, with their sinister monastic black cloaks and toothy grins. Liches, the most dangerous enemies of them all, are basically made to look like slightly more sophisticated modifications of regular Skeletal Warriors, instead of their distinctive screechy red-haired ancestors in **Arena**. Spiders have mutated from the nasty dirt-brown colors of **Arena** to a more squid-like shape of grayish and green, looking more like some puzzled alien plushy than a genuine menace. Again, I feel as if it was only diversity for diversity's sake that interested the designers: while there are significantly more different types of enemies than there used to be, hardly any one of them — maybe with the exception of Giant Scorpions, ugh — truly fits the definition of proper «Nightmare Fodder».

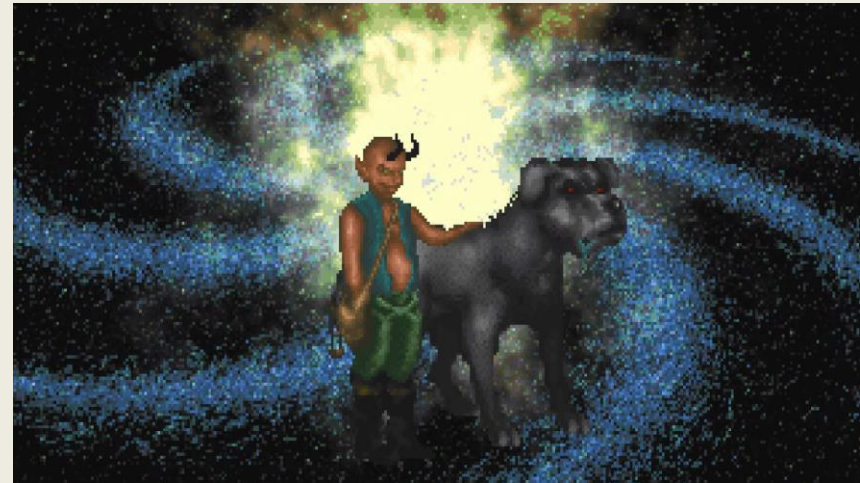
Actual diversity in the portrayal of friendly NPCs is commendable (though way below the future standard of **Morrowind**), but there are very few unique portraits — apart from maybe a tiny bunch of Kings and Queens, most of the named characters are represented by the same sprites that you also encounter on various side assignments, which hardly helps the player to memorize the principal *dramatis personae* of the game, already not very memorable because of the generic and similar nature of their respective dialogs. Perhaps the inclusion of at least a handful of cutscenes at key moments in the game might have helped, but the designers did not want to waste their money on *that* — at best, all they could do was provide a few full-screen portraits of the game's Daedric (divine) characters after you earn enough gold to secure an audience with one of them, and a few ultra-short, barely comprehensible animations for several major events close to the end of the game. These are all nicely done, but for a game that can stretch out to hours and hours and hours of gameplay, it's like 3–4 crystals of salt in a mammoth pot of boiling broth — pretty much nothing to write home about. All in all, **Daggerfall's** visuals end up feeling uninspired and perfunctory in between the crude freshness of **Arena** and the psychedelic inspiration of **Morrowind**.

## Sound

You might remember how, in my previous review of **Arena**, I was gushing all over the limited MIDI musical tracks and sound effects of the game — astonishingly impressive for all of their relative simplicity — so one might guess that at least in the audio department, **Daggerfall** would be able to expand on those achievements. Unfortunately... yes, you guessed right: it does not. In fact, it takes a step *back*.

For sure, Eric Heberling was retained as chief composer for the game, and this fact by itself was a guarantee that the musical soundtrack would not suck. But either they cut his salary or his working hours or something, because for about 50%, the soundtrack is *recycled* — yes, that's right, the same lovely, entrancing ditties of **Arena** have simply been carried over into **Daggerfall**, occasionally in inferior arrangements. By itself, this would not have been a significant crime, unless we introduce severe penalties for laziness. But the problem is that they are mixed in with *new* music, and this new music is largely *different*. By no means is it bad, but the newly written compositions usually have a much more dynamic, sometimes even martial or aggressive quality to them. Sometimes you enter a city and the music that plays feels fit to accompany a military parade, even if there is none in sight. Sometimes you enter a dungeon and the music gives you the atmosphere of troops marching out to war, even if the actual enemies are skulking solitarily or in very small groups, spread widely all over the place. It's not a tragedy, but it does not always feel *right*, if you know what I mean.

To use an analogy with a much more modern era, this jarring musical shift is somewhat similar to the one I experienced when playing **The Witcher 2** after the first part of the trilogy: the music there made a serious point of switching from the overall more pastoral, meditative, atmospheric tracks of the original to a generally more loud, bombastic, aggressive style, sometimes bordering on symphonic metal — which was not necessarily to my liking, but at least it did fit the shift in the game's overall atmosphere, as **The Witcher 2** focused far more on martial affairs and devastating battles than its predecessor. Returning to **Daggerfall**, I suppose that this emphasis on more dynamic, rhythmic, «pumping» music should be reflecting the Elder Scrolls' attempted transition to «Fantasy *Realpolitik*», as the world around you is now less of an «amazing new universe you have to take in with all your senses» and more of a «dangerous place where you have to build up alliances to survive». But I





am not sure that this shift adds to, rather than detracts from, the uniqueness of Tamriel — and all those tracks carried over from **Arena** only serve to remind me of the idealistic qualities of the first game.

That said, sound-wise my biggest gripe with **Daggerfall** is not the music (which may not be quite as magical as in **Arena**, but is never openly bad), but the game's sound effects. In **Arena**'s world of dungeon-crawling, those were absolutely essential: drenched in total darkness, the dungeons typically betrayed the nearby presence of the enemies only through the sounds they made, so it was essential to listen in all the time if you did not want to get ambushed. In **Daggerfall**, with much better lighting of the dungeons, you far more typically are able to see your enemy from far away, or catch a glimpse of him through the little slit opening of the dungeon doors, so the sounds they make more often have a purely aesthetic function — and, as a rule, they are either boring or just stupid.

For instance, in **Arena** the nasty brown spiders would issue a venomous hiss as they scurried along; in **Daggerfall**, the ridiculous-looking plushy octopus-like beasties are instead distinguished by... *purring* (why??). **Arena**'s Ghosts would emit sinister wails, mixing deadly menace with resigned melancholy; in **Daggerfall**, they just raise a gust of wind and put out an utterly generic roar. Skeletal Warriors, instead of rattling their bones, emit a blood-curdling banshee roar that does scare the pants off you when you first hear it, but later on mainly makes you wonder about what sort of vocal cords these guys have to make those sounds — and the only difference between *their* roar and that of the Liches is that the latter have it more low-pitched (boring). Vampires sound like wimps next to their **Arena** counterparts. Orcs growl and grumble okay (their effects seem to be just taken directly from **Arena**), but for some reason, the supposedly imposing Daedra — the demonic beings that replace the previous game's Fire Demons and suchlike — just growl and grumble in much the same way.

Overall, *much* less work has been put into making your enemies imposing through audio than there was in **Arena** — and even though, as a rule, they are tougher and present significantly more challenge (particularly when you are still underleveled and underequipped), they fail to generate as much terrified respect as their predecessors. Interestingly, for **Morrowind** the entire «identify your enemy through its typical sound» mechanic would be completely removed, as enemies would only emit specific battle grunts while fighting you, never before that — I wonder if that had anything to do with the overall disappointment at the use of pre-combat sound effects in **Daggerfall**, or merely with the technical aspects of redesigning the basic principles of the **Morrowind** universe as such?

Finally, there are the audio tracks attached to cinematics, but as the cinematics themselves are scarcer than hens' teeth, these deserve only a passing mention at best. The FMV actor playing «Uriel Septim VII» is passable; the brief voiceovers that

accompany the game's minimalistic cutscenes are not, as they are usually drenched in heavy reverb and are barely even comprehensible (without any subtitles, of course). At least Ria Silmane and Jagar Tharn in **Arena** had their own vocal personalities; in **Daggerfall**, nobody has any vocal personality except for the Emperor, who appears at the start of the game for exactly one minute and then never even returns. And this was 1996, for Christ's sake — how on Earth did these guys not think of allocating even a tiny portion of the budget to hire some voice actors? Voice acting would be the *only* possible way to bring all those non-procedurally generated characters like Mad Nulfaga, Queen Akorithi, the King Of Worms, etc., to life, and with the fairly small amount of lines allocated to each of them it wouldn't have cost them all that much. Even the economical approach of **Morrowind**, where important characters would only have a few lines of their entire output voiced, would go a pretty long way toward making them feel more alive — but **Daggerfall** remains as hardcore as they come in this respect, and I am not even sure I can bring myself to «respect», much less actually enjoy it.

## Interface

Oddly enough, the differences between **Arena** and **Daggerfall** seem to be at their lowest when it comes to basic interaction and general game mechanics — and most of them have to do with said mechanics becoming more complex and sophisticated in just about every respect. Thus, at the start of the game, you get the same choice as in **Arena** — forcibly select one of the many character classes or be assigned a particular class based on your answers to a lengthy morality test — but now, in addition to that, you are asked to fill in a few points of your Biography, which set up additional attributes and bonuses that may or may not turn out to be very useful at the start of the game. (Spoiler: *always* choose «ebony dagger» as your gift from the Emperor, this will make your life *much* easier in the opening dungeon where some enemies can only be harmed with high quality weapons — otherwise, you'll have to be constantly on the run). Then, when rolling your character, in addition to your main Attributes, you get an extra screen where you can allocate bonus points to your Primary, Major, and Minor Skills — the ones you shall have to try and excel in so as to level up properly throughout the game. Same principle, but with more layers.

I must state right away that I mainly played the remade Unity version, which (in its base form) introduces some reasonable



modifications to the original; for instance, the classic version of the game has a large control panel clogging about 1/3 of the screen (just as in **Arena**), while the Unity remake completely eliminates it, giving the player a much bigger field of view at the expense of having to rely on various keyboard shortcuts (totally fine by me). Overall, though, I think that the default Unity version, without additional mods or anything, mostly respects the original interface and all of its features, be they helpful or dreadful, exactly the way that a classy product should do.

The added complexity does take some getting used to after the relative simplicity of **Arena**. For instance, your clothing and appearance style now shares the same screen with your inventory, which, in turn, is divided into the inventory that you carry directly upon you (adding up to your maximum carried weight) and the much larger amounts of inventory you can lug around in your wagon (provided you buy one early in the game as soon as you can afford it, which is always recommendable). The controls used to swap between your carried and transported items are not very intuitive, as is the option to equip or unequip a certain weapon or piece of clothing, and it took me quite a while to train all that juggling to a more or less mechanistic state. There is also an option now to sort through your inventory, dividing it into subcategories ("Weapons & Armor", "Magic Items", "Clothing", "Ingredients") that are not entirely convenient since they occasionally overlap (e.g. "Weapons" and "Clothing" can include "Magic Items"), but it does make life a little easier when dealing with merchants.

One thing that I do actively dislike is the new dialog screen. Instead of the little window of **Arena**, initiating conversation with any random NPC now triggers an entire screen that is very poorly and confusingly organized. The generic dialog options are arranged in the upper left corner in such a way that swapping between general topics and specific questions about people or locations becomes non-intuitive, and the duplication of your questions (upper part of screen) in the general dialog window is disorienting. It does speed up the dialog process, making it a little quicker to select topics than before, but the problem is that the dialogs themselves are largely uninteresting — you get a real boatload of potential topics to discuss, but 99% of them produce utterly generic and uninformative answers anyway, so basically it's a whole lot of fuss for nothing. (The best aspects of this new dialog window would be preserved in **Morrowind**, which overall does a *much* better job with its conversation system than either of its two predecessors).

That said, all of this is really just nitpicking; on the whole, you really mainly play **Daggerfall** in the same way you played **Arena**, just with a bunch of added options that, for a while, shall make life more confusing and disorienting for a beginning player. A good example of this is the new structure of the Guilds and Temples: in **Arena**, you had a single Guildmaster providing all of the location's limited services, while in **Daggerfall**, Guilds are populated by a variety of specialized NPCs, randomly scattered around the rooms with their own perks — some give you quests, some sell you spells, potions, and

weapons, some train you, some offer teleportation services or even (very expensive) communication with the Daedra, making life more complicated and variegated; this principle would later be adopted full-scale into **Morrowind** as well. (Too bad I had fairly little interest in most of those services — by the time my character would be fully leveled up and have enough gold to afford all of them, I was already at the end of the Main Quest).

All in all, the playing interface of **Daggerfall** certainly makes that of **Arena** look like an early demo version in comparison, giving you, the wannabe champion of Tamriel, a seemingly unlimited variety of action. You can build your character up to the highest ranks of all the numerous Guilds and Factions, earn boatloads of cash and deposit them into banks with steady interest growth, think up the most appalling spells, befriend (or piss off) all the Daedra in the universe, purchase more property than the entire British Royal Family combined, and build up an arsenal of magic weapons and armor that shall defy the imagination of J. K. Rowling, with your Casual Pants Of Ice Bolt and Short Shirt Of Fire Storm annihilating dungeon enemies by the dozen. Too bad all this variety still feels boring and lifeless — although, of course, much depends on the strength of your imagination and the pull of your roleplaying instinct.

**Verdict:** *Arguably the ultimate showcase of what happens when one lets Unbridled Ambition be dominated by All-Powerful Algorithm.*

Most of this review has been nothing but criticism, so it is easy to form the impression that, overall, I plain-out hate **Daggerfall** as a whole. But I do not review games that I officially *hate*, as in, «dislike so much that I cannot bring myself to play them from beginning to end» (hello, just about any JRPG ever made). Back in 1996, **Daggerfall** was a labor of love, inspiration, and, above all, lovably arrogant, titanic ambition: «let us make the largest-scale game of them all, set up the basic rules, and let both the machine and the player have as much freedom as physically and logically possible». Once you realize that, it is difficult not to experience a certain aura of awe and respect as you wade through the game's innumerable scenarios. This is an ideology that has all but vanished from RPGs in the 21st century. Something like the open world of **The Witcher 3** may feel totally overwhelming





once you begin exploring it, but in the end it is still one large, sprawling, and very much finite adventure. You can certainly sink hundreds of hours of playtime into it, but you *will* end with all your possibilities exhausted, and once you do, the world around you will feel empty, deserted, and desperate, even if the game still formally allows you to walk around it, eat, sleep, and hunt the same respawning wolves or bandits within its fields and forests. By contrast, **Daggerfall** is infinite — you can conclude the Main Quest, or you can ignore the Main Quest, whatever you like, in either case the people of **Daggerfall** will still be happy to talk to you and give you an endless stream of job assignments.

The obvious problem is — but who really *needs* an infinite game, or, at least, an infinite game of that kind? At least strategy games, be it simple chess or **Civilization**, are endlessly replayable because they keep challenging you with new, sometimes totally unpredictable combinations of factors. Next to these, all the variety of **Daggerfall** offers fairly little by way of true intellectual challenge, unless you take fate into your own hands and begin setting up special challenges for yourself (e.g. finding the proper McGuffin inside a huge dungeon without killing any of its creatures, or defeating all of them bare-handed, or refusing to use up Magicka etc. etc.). All in all, **Daggerfall** is still very much of a «plot-oriented» game, and in any such game the transferral of plot construction to machine algorithm is not even something that a serious studio in the 2020s would entrust to any kind of advanced AI, let alone in the 1990s to a simple generative procedure.

The principal difference between **Arena** and **Daggerfall** is in focus: **Arena** was essentially a manually-designed game with a large additional — and, frankly speaking, totally optional — procedurally generated component; it is easy to guess that most players, like myself, were attracted to the manually-designed Main Quest and quickly got bored with all the robotic, repetitive side missions. The designers were not satisfied with this because it made **Arena** way too **Doom**-like, so with **Daggerfall** they *forced* you to actually live out a full, wholesome life in their sprawling universe, promising more variety and much more freedom of choice as compensation. For many people, this was quite an exciting deal back in 1996, and these people kept the legend of **Daggerfall** — the Epic To End All Epics — going strong for decades, even going all the way to remake the game in a modern engine for new generations of gamers (by contrast, the Open-Source **Arena** project, striving to do the same thing for **Daggerfall**'s big daddy, has not managed to properly get off the ground in almost ten years as of now — clearly, the enthusiasm is just not on the same level here).

Yet despite all the excitement, which could not even be quashed by the extremely unstable state in which the original game was released (earning it the ignominious nickname of *Buggerfall* among the cynical strata of the gamer population), it took but a couple of years for even the masterminds behind Bethesda to realize that the ideology behind **Daggerfall** was pretty much a dead end. In some ways, the revolutionary gap between **Daggerfall** and its spiritual, but not «constructional»

successor, **Morrowind**, reminds me of the transition from parser-based to point-and-click-style adventure games in the early 1990s — just as the parser-based ones were starting to reach a certain level of acceptability, the industry killed them off to alleviate the concerns of frustrated players in favor of a more comfortable approach. Likewise, the «let-the-RPG-build-itself-for-you» approach, with procedurally generated universes and quests, arguably reached its apex with **Daggerfall** — and then immediately crashed and burned, as there was seemingly nowhere left to go with it. Instead, **Morrowind** relied on a heavily expanded work team of flesh-and-bone humans to let you enjoy a very, very large and diverse world with a very, very large set of individually-tinged quests — very, very, *very* large... but not infinite, the way **Daggerfall** had been.

The difference, however, from the situation with parser-based games is that the former were actually salvageable: solid team efforts with a bit of a linguistic component behind them *could* have come up with ways of easing verbal communication between the gamer and the game — it was a purely managerial decision based on crude issues of cost efficiency. Whether, on the other hand, the «self-building» style of **Daggerfall** could really have been pushed further in the late Nineties — for that matter, whether it can really be pushed further even *today*, even with the help of all the advanced AI developments — remains a big question. Can procedural generation go as far as to have your newest RPG design an infinite series of individual, non-repeating game quests for you? Can it keep on self-designing, mapping, decorating an infinite series of diverse towns and villages with ever-shifting parameters and building blocks? More importantly, can it do all these things *smoothly*, without bugging down, hallucinating, and crashing? Possibly in some distant future — but it is quite telling that, as far as I can tell, there are virtually no signs of any such tendency at present, with game designers preferring to stick to the tried and true rather than placing the keys in the hands of some brand new «ChatRPG» engine.

As it happens, **Daggerfall** even today remains the unsurpassed apex of the self-building plot-based game approach, with all of its dubious virtues and obvious flaws. If you have never tried it and this review has not convinced you to give it a go so far, I can take on the responsibility of temporarily taking back all the criticisms and recommending that you *do* download the (totally free) Unity version and give it a spin for a couple of hours, just to see what all the hoopla was about — do not bother beating the Main Quest to the very end unless you happen to fall under the enchantment. It is truly one of the noblest, and most thought-provoking, failures in the history of gaming, and I sincerely wish I could feel for it so much more than I do. Fortunately, the best of what **Daggerfall** had to offer — namely, the completely restructured framework of Tamriel, the guilds and factions, the book lore, the skill system, etc. — passed on into **Morrowind**, so you could say that Bethesda threw out the baby, but at least it kept the bathing water: a surprisingly sweet deal for most of us.