

Bethesda has released many different critically acclaimed titles, Fallout 3, the Wolfenstein remakes, DOOM. Their most popular franchise has been the elder scrolls series, from arena to oblivion and even a spin off MMO, this series has been the backbone behind much of the technology and design of games built into the creation engine. One entry has stuck out, a game that's been re-released with plenty of DLC content and memorable moments, The Elder Scrolls 5: Skyrim. Its an unique entry, and its prioritisation of a simpler navigation, questing and progression system have been generally positive changes introduced to TES. However, it has introduced a few problems with its combat: power creep, inflation, unresponsive interactions, fixation on first person combat, procedural enemies, and poor level design have made the games combat unenjoyable compared to its predecessors and many hack and slash titles. The game provides too many options to the player to approach combat at any time. You can level forever and max out every skill tree and stat, take on god-like enemies regularly and transform into different monsters at a press of a button at any time at the start of the game. A lot of these aren't intentionally designed either but exist as exploits that were never patched out during playtesting or its release. There's no reason to commit to any build, and the games designers didn't remove this but built the game around it. Stat inflation was their response, and a horrible one too. Every actor including the player can regenerate health and mana out and in combat as much as they like without punishment, many creatures are capable of the same thing. Often these enemies have way too many spells and perks assigned to them because the game's map isn't designed to section off enemies in specific locations. Thus the developers scale the enemies with the players level without consideration of how those enemies fight. What we get are the bizarre fights with badly scaled enemies we see in-game that can last several dozen minutes. Unresponsiveness adds to this bizarre feeling of combat in the form of hitstun and hit boxes; hitstun isn't based off the collision between your weapon and the enemies hit box like in many fighters, nor is it based on a calculation of how much an actor should stagger based off their interaction with another hit box like dark souls, hitstun is based on chance. This type opportunity to follow up an attack is why the combat can feel completely unresponsive, random and janky. The games camera work plays into this; what it failed to introduce is a proper shift towards third person hack and slash combat. Most veterans play the game in third person and for a very important reason, visibility. The problem with first person modes in hack and slash titles are interactions with fast enemies or fighting foes in groups, because video game cameras typically have a limited fov and turning distance relative to a real person's vision. This can make trying to see an opponent right behind beside you, directly above you or underneath you impossible. A problem that's made obvious when fighting dragons, draugr, and or really enemy that's agile, in groups, or placed irregularly. Visibility also affects how players understand the games hit boxes, and they're bad. It's hit boxes aren't based on the mesh of the actual weapon, or limb in the case of creatures, but a ray vector and a cylinder surrounding it whose length is affected by an in-game stat. This makes many attacks that have absolutely no right to hit the player stick randomly, switching to third person can make it a lot clearer to players why some attacks are hitting them in places they shouldn't, or feel completely unavoidable. Inescapable attacks aren't just fueled by hit boxes, enemies themselves by design also contain unavoidable attacks. Defence is a joke in Skyrim, many spells, perks and effects force the player to take chip damage. Many enemies also use a lot of the same attacks and spells. To compensate for

how easy and flawed core components of the games combat are, the team introduced gimmicks into it. Unusually fast projectiles, casting while running, insta-kill aoe attacks, status effects enabled even if they're blocked, and instant health regeneration are added as extra components of scaling to the games enemies to artificially raise its difficulty. Thus many deaths are related more closely to the player's build, not their understanding of when to block, attack, cast heal and run. TESVs combat struggles with scaling, progression and responsiveness that add to a horrible feeling of jankiness during play sessions. What it needs is a complete reconstruction, many have been provided by modders but fail to understand what it needs as an Elder Scrolls title.

Firstly, the progression system needs a full revamp from Oblivions. Skill progression shouldn't be tied to level progression either, in fact it's better that levels for any actor are completely removed. Because so many encounters in-game are influenced by the players level, having skill progression tied to it can often scale the difficulty of the game dramatically even if the player hasn't done anything noteworthy to deserve any of it. This same issue occurred in oblivion to a much worse level where simply walking could see a player start fighting high level enemies in the early game. Removing character levels and making all progression skill based would permanently prevent level scaling from affecting combat, loot, npc encounters and anything else that may alter the difficulty of the game. Skill progression should also receive a nerf: skills should all start out at level 1 - not 15 - and have a cap implemented at 30, every 5 levels in a skill corresponds to a single perk point that can be applied to any skill, all levels relating to armour are only awarded by crafting it, skill progression in weaponry and magic is only seen once an enemy is taken down using spells, blades, bows or blunts, and skill trees may not be reset. Changes like these do a lot to change the meta of the game: they prevent the players base stats from ever changing dramatically from the moment they create a character, they cut the amount of perks the player can spend by 50%, they prevent skills from levelling passively, and they prevent the player from ever getting unreasonably powerful late game. It's especially great that the base stats of the player aren't changing, because now the players overall stats are based off their gear and buffs applied to them and not off a permanent status they gain keeping the difficulty of the base game consistent. It helps justify the drastic reduction in enemy health as now that the players status in game doesn't increase, neither should the power of common enemies. Thus many encounters are between enemies with balanced stats speeding up the game's pacing, it's difficulty a lot more fair and it's combat realistic. Outside of stats, build commitment is encouraged; with the amount of perks the player can spend points in reduced, they're encouraged to build each character around their desired play style and stick to it than play trying to build the most powerful character imaginable through maxing out every skill they can even if they don't care for it, nor find it fun simply to progress through the game. Simplifying the progression process to focus specifically on skills would do a lot to make the game feel more like a role playing experience, encourage build commitment, reduce power creep substantially and make the game a lot more accessible to its audience by not having them constantly manage between a slough of numbers and stats that converge in how meaningless they become once any player reaches a point in-game of god-like power. But

that's only one major change in the design of Skyrim's combat, there's also another problem, inflation.

Scaling by itself with the removal of levels is made substantially less bad but part of why it's so awful in-game isn't just the stats of enemies changing, it's the fact that the enemies themselves that're placed aren't. The game isn't designed like a traditional single player title, enemies aren't designed with different body types, move sets, speeds, weights etc to clarify what makes one different from another. It's actors all use the same template model for their spells, perks, abilities and weapons used similar to how Dark Souls 2s phantoms exist as templates of the player character to serve as seemingly diverse enemies, therefore many encounters with hostile NPCs feel the same despite how many types of them exist. Most creatures have only 1-3 attack animations including bosses and plenty also use the same spells and perks as the player, thus many feel boring and bland to fight against. When accounting for how many assets are being recycled into combat, it should serve as no surprise to the player for why it can often get repetitive and boring rather quickly mid-game. Skyrim's enemy scaling exacerbates these problems by making high level enemies recycle more assets than introduce new mechanics and attacks to the player, thus as the game progresses it gets naturally less fun from it's design. Bethesda can't cut corners with the game like this, it needs commonly used elements of 3d enemy design baked into its NPCs and creatures for its combat to feel complete: enemy specific animations and weapons, attack patterns, and telegraphing are just a few ways to start. Section off enemies into distinct zones so the player knows what to expect at every stage in their journey towards the end. Create height and weight differences between NPCs and creatures to signify what opponents are harder to kill than others. What matters is making enemies feel unique, but increasingly challenging at a static rate. There's not much more to say about Skyrim's enemy design, they're all horribly developed and lack anything that makes an enemy and enemy.

Weight and responsiveness adds to a feeling of distinction between enemies. Skyrim's combat is anything but responsive, and that problem stems from its hit boxes. Skyrim's hit boxes aren't boundaries attached to the geometry of the weapons and limbs used to produce attacks, but ray vectors with a cylinder to define their bounds. This often results in many attacks that shouldn't have any business in confirming a hit land even if an actor or creature is completely clear of the attack. Outside of bad hit boxes they last for unreasonably long periods of time, active frame duration on most attacks can last upwards of half a second for a single swing meaning it's possible to take full damage off being a single frame into an attack. Stagger plays into this feeling of unfairness and uncertainty as to how any entity reacts to getting hit. In normal games, stagger is based on a calculated amount of stun the player is locked in based on what they're hit by. In-game it's purely based on RNG regardless of context and it shows. Beyond feeling inconsistent it means every interaction the player has with any opponent will feel the same no matter what. Add the fact that enemies and the player don't move at all in response to stagger makes attacking enemies often feel like hitting a wall rather than a living entity. What it needs is simple: make stagger guaranteed for all enemies that take damage off all direct hits with blades and blunts, calculated hitstun and knock-back based off the actors stamina, attack used, if they're blocking and their armour,

push back all actors a little in the direction the player or enemy is facing in. For particularly heavy opponents or objects, have the blade or blunt used knock back in response to the collision and apply zero damage; if the weapon itself used is heavy enough, have the actor get pushed a slight distance back with a different sound effect playing. Weight is just as important to communicating to the player how their character responds to different swings, alter movement speeds, fall damage, and swing speeds based off the equipment load and size of the player or enemy. For heavy attacks with heavy weapons striking the ground create a separate aoe hit box that slows down any opponents in it, or even stun lighter foes to suggest to the player the feeling of force felt near such tools even if they're not hit by them.

More animations and changes to animations should be provided to Skyrim's attacks. To start, none of Skyrim's attacks have any commitment. Unlike in real life your character can rotate a full 360 degrees and isn't locked into a specific motion relative to their position before throwing out an attack, this happens for common enemies and boss fights too. A fix for this basic behaviour is already provided by distar66 along with the addition of weapon based animations but that's only one potential fix, there's also the issue with momentum and impulse. Momentum is straight forwards, all attacks start off with the same momentum initiated by the same force vector, how long it takes for them to experience a change in their velocity to verify a hit is influenced by the mass of the weapon/limb used. The impulse the foe experiences is put into an equation with reference to their mass in order to determine how much they should stagger and what kind of animation to play after they do. If the impulse felt is high enough, the opponent may have their guard broken and be left vulnerable for a given period of time. But that's only for swings and thrusts with generic weapons, magic is another problem. Magic in-game, like swings has no commitment; many spells allow the npc/creature to move while casting it, use multiple spells at the same time, trigger spells instantly and fully turn. This is awful for the games sense of balance, makes magic a requirement pretty early in mid game because it's unpublishable and forces melee focused players to take unnecessary chip damage. Thus magic may encourage players to diverge from their play styles completely to stack themselves off whatever shouts and spells available to them to compensate for the issues it introduces. All spells should lock any character into frames: telegraphed spells, restrictions on rotation, zero allowance of movement during the period where active frames are enabled and the restriction on the number of spells that can be cast at a single time all would drastically reduce how powerful it is.

Nerfs to magic in that form would already be great, but it doesn't address how magic is scaled and functions. Magicka, much like the player's health, is constantly regenerating which makes it way too powerful. By having it regenerate, even if spells are telegraphed and have a lot of commitment any actors using it can always comfortably rely on simply running away and waiting for it to regenerate before spamming spells again. Thus, how combat is paced changes considerably, particularly for players that abuse magicka on top of other mechanics who're now encouraged to abuse this aspect of it. Health and Magicka shouldn't regenerate, in fact Magicka as a stat should be replaced with consumables and equipment like sheets, staffs, and enchantments. These resources are already present in abundance for the player at all times. Adding a regenerating resource which can be modified in-game to be so abundant

to the point where it becomes worthless only pushes more problems with power creep to the game's combat. Health regeneration plays into this, but to a lesser degree. It's a necessary resource, but like what spells are for mages, it only feels necessary when it's designed that way. It, like many other games, health infinitely regenerates out of combat, and like them, it feels completely worthless. Having infinite healing available breaks the pacing of the game, it enables players to constantly run away from conflict because they're never truly punished for poor performance, and encourages them to blast through the game's content than take moments to stop and rest, because they will always be ready for conflict no matter what. It's also why the game implements health regeneration for common enemies and bossfights or why it's so hyper inflated because outside of the fact that players stats are inflating with each level so is their regeneration rate meaning developers must add these aspects of healing to enemies to maintain any sense of difficulty. Thus many fights can last unreasonably long periods of time, often dozens of minutes for major fights, or even with standard enemies. It's not hard to fix this, just remove the feature and add potions to item drops for some enemies. It helps verify health as an important resource and it makes sure the player is given enough of it to progress through the game but never too much that potions become trivial. You can say the same thing for loot and item equipment load.

Loot is a very interesting and badly implemented aspect of the game. It's completely random yet scales with the player. It's awarded by enemies, quests, dungeons and blacksmiths, not off chests or enemies exclusively and it often is available for players from sources that shouldn't have any access to certain kinds of loot regularly. For instance, a common bandit can often be seen with dragon scale armour and weapons late game due to procedural generation and how the game is scaled. This obviously is ridiculous lore-wise and on a conceptual levels, but common enemies like them on top of NPCs selling weapons, creatures with game breaking equipment, low level dungeons with high level loot, and quest rewards being completely disconnected from the situation of the player is seen regularly. It's rewarded algorithmically than existing as a manually predetermined gift to the player for completely specific actions like taking the time to fully explore the world, complete a difficult trial surrounding a specific element of gameplay or defeating a challenging foe. It's why its such a poorly implemented component of the game, it's completely random and exists purely to reward the player for doing effectively anything at all without consideration of what they've done. Part of these problems stem from how unfinished the game is at its basis. It's open world, but also openly paced, meaning the player is never at any point encouraged to follow a specific path of actions to complete that maintains any sense of pacing lore wise on top of having completely unrestricted movement to wherever they want on the map. Thus it's hard for developers to add any organic sense of progression or reward for the player. For combat, its difficulty will now fluctuate randomly because how the player is rewarded, and their performance are out of sync and the player can expect to find op gear early on or completely useless equipment late into game consistently that break the pacing of combat even more. This isn't a hard to fix issue, just keep npc inventories and chest items static, also keep their contents scaled based off the difficulty of the locations they're in. What's important isn't to take away here isn't just the fact that the problem is easy to solve, but why it's present; the developers took cuts to prevent working on such an important aspect

of gameplay and overall game design. If you've been paying attention there's one easy to point out flaw of the games combat that exists directly because of this, the camera.

Most players, old and new, play the game and other TES titles in third person, because of the visibility it offers. Being able to see your character is great, but having the option to see where others are is much more important. Hack and slash titles are rarely ever first person games for this reason. Many of Skyrim's encounters become substantially easier to put up with when you can clearly see what's going on, but the developers never designed the camera work to account for this. The camera is terrible, when you attack, sprint or get staggered the camera shakes violently to hide the bad sprinting animations and its nauseating. When you get hit there's no stagger animation or specialised body motion to signify the state your character is in. To compensate, the game attaches blur and blood effects to the screen whenever the player is hit, impairing the player's line of sight even more. There's more than just these issues, but it's important to recognize that having a game with so many mechanics played in first person is just bad design on Bethesda's end. The third person camera has a lot of missing components to it: there's no lock on to prioritise an enemy with, there's no smooth camera movement to keep the players synced with their character, there's no way to pickup items without constantly trying to centre the camera onto it, the problems go on. The game needs a full transition to third person combat with lock-on, enemy hp bars, smooth camera work and QoL features implemented for it. Attacks can play a role into how the camera may move during any fight.

Attacks in hack and slash titles in the form of aoe attacks, environmental hazards and leaping attacks are generally annoying. Fixes are simple. aoe attacks cover smaller areas, but in less time, or function as basic projectiles if they're not swings, environmental hazards are only active as aspects of a boss rooms design and not as an attack, and leaping attacks are replaced with a straightforward sprint. For Skyrim, fixes like these still apply, but too many of the game's spells. An update to the games animations should follow such kinds of rules. Such committal attacks make the game realistic, gritty and magic just that much less annoying to fight against.

As a whole, Skyrim's combat suffers from multifarious issues related to its underdevelopment, developers focusing on spectacle over substance in its mechanics, mixed with bad balance and progression. It needs more than just a few tweaks, but a full overhaul to add necessary features to its systems and reworks of the components that build it up to feel like a complete aspect of the game.