

The Making of *The Elder Scrolls II: Daggerfall*

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Chapter I: Inspiration and goals

In September 1993, Bethesda stated that Campaign-Mods for Arena were planned to be released in 1994.¹ While that never happened, the title of the game itself, “The Elder Scrolls Chapter I: The Arena”, pretty much implied that The Elder Scrolls was intended to be a series, instead of just a stand-alone game.

While Vijay Lakshman was Lead Designer for Arena, Ted Peterson, who worked since 1992 for Bethesda, assisted him as designer and gathered a lot of experience during that time. After Arena was published in February (or January) 1994, Vijay and his team (Jennifer Pratt and Foroozan Soltani?) worked on fixing bugs in Arena, until he joined Magnet Studios, while Ted worked on the story for the second Elder Scrolls game. Inspired only by The Elder Scrolls: Arena, he drew much more inspiration from a lot of English literature like Hamlet or for the Missing Prince Quest by The Man in the Iron Mask and developed a plot that would unfold more and more throughout the next two years. Additional inspiration, especially for quests, came from a Dungeons & Dragons campaign that they were playing around the time. The idea of Vampire clans were influenced from Vampire: The Masquerade. He aimed for a pen-and-paper like RPG experience with a story that wasn't determined from the beginning, but would change according to your decisions such like a complex series of adventures leading to multiple resolutions. While Arena paved the way for a generic fantasy world, Daggerfall should flesh out details in a more narrow geographic part of that world.² For his story he focused more on the history, characters and the politic and intrigues between them, than in high fantasy.³ There is no black-white drawing and first of all the task in Daggerfall is to find out what is happening at all in this world. After that it's up to the player to decided whether he want to change something in this state. There is no big showdown.⁴ The player should play and create the entwicklungstagebuch he ever wanted to play and to do what he wants, when he wants it. He read and listened during development process to all letters Fans of Arena wrote to him or he found on the internet.⁵

At the same time, Julian Lefay, the main programmer, and especially the Dane Kaare Siesing created the new XnGine for Bethesda's upcoming titles⁶, to have more up-to-date graphics, after players accused Arena's engine of being an Ultima Underworld rip-off. This engine would later

¹ Game Bytes

² <http://planetelderscrolls.gamespy.com/View.php?view=Articles.Detail&id=12>

³ <http://planetelderscrolls.gamespy.com/View.php?view=Articles.Detail&id=12>

⁴ Power Play, 11/95 S.112

⁵ Power Play, 11/95 S.112

⁶ Power Play, 11/95 S.115

be one of the first polygon engines in pc games. The game itself was programmed in Assembly and C++. ⁷ The other teams were also working on creating content for the game and already at Summer CES in July 1994, they could present first results:



The original title of Daggerfall was “Mournhold”, setting the game in the province of Morrowind. That idea didn’t last very long though and was discarded during the first week(s) of development.⁸

Chapter II: The first Wave

Daggerfall had no solid announcement as it is typical today, instead information were leaked every now and then until Bethesda decided that Daggerfall was showable enough to make more buzz around it. This point was reached in late 1994, and kicked off with the Computer Gaming World 1/95 cover story about Daggerfall. Shortly after the Article was published, Bethesda showed a trailer⁹ for Daggerfall at Winter CES in January 1995. The CES cinematic was long thought to be lost, but was rediscovered by Hallfiry in April 2012: A journalist from the French Gén4 magazine had filmed it from the screen at CES and they put it on their CD back then, that was luckily uploaded by abandonware-magazines.org.

The trailer explained parts of the story and showed Bethesda employees as well as staff of a local theatre group, supplemented with animated scenes. Rendering was done on Silicon Graphics Stations to reach sufficient quality. Publishers by that time were eager to have games in an Interactive-Movie style, with lots of cutscenes telling the story throughout the game. PC Games 04/95 pointed out that actually RPG fans weren’t looking for interactive-movies, but good gameplay, but publishers tried to be fashionable and implement this new technology that was shown off in Wing Commander games and would later become an integral part of the Command & Conquer series.

For the gameplay Julian and Ted decided to use a skill-based advancement system rather than Arenas kill-the-monster-and-advance system, so every class had different skill sets.

For the game controls there were actually just one principle, the cursor-based, planned. During the Beta-Test a lot of tester complained about the cursor-based control. Julien LeFay decided

⁷ Power Play, 11/95 S.115

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http://web.archive.org/web/20070609185131/http://www.elderscrolls.com/tenth_anniv/tenth_anniv-daggerfall.htm

⁹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Xh3IfMFO6o>

than to program a second way of controlling, the view-based, which has been previously used in Terminator. Even though Ted was against this, they implemented both ways of controlling the game, so the player could choose.

The first wave of reports in magazines covered almost everything that would ever be said about Daggerfall in previews, showing how Daggerfall's development was a lot more straight forward than Arena's. These reports were all put together into the unofficial Daggerfall FAQ by fans of the Elder Scrolls.

These Features included:

- A complex character, more complex than DSA 2, to stop the creation system that allows you to
 - 18 premade classes and the possibility to create your own classes
 - pick from various advantages and disadvantages like phobias, illnesses (Interactive Entertainment even mentions having no legs) and popularity among certain factions
 - select skills for three categories (Primary, Major, Minor), where skills are easier to skill, but more expensive to buy on startup, depending on their grade. Typical minor skills would be the popularity among factions or language skills.
 - become a Vampire, that can't act at daylight, but has improved stats at night
- A more interactive world, where everything that you do influences how NPCs interact with you. Also, being a vampire will make people react to you correspondingly. Even clothing should influence how people talk to you. If NPCs don't want to answer your question they might even insult you and drift off into their local language.
- More creative and thought-out quests that won't make you feel like a UPS man in Arena.
- A total of more than 80 different basic spells including:
 - Polymorph (transforming yourself into a different creature)
 - Shadow (a variant of invisibility)
 - Water Breathing
 - Water Walking
 - Identify (so you don't have to go to a mages guild for item identification)
 - Slowfall
 - Telekinesis
 - Teleport
- Buying and furnishing houses and even castles
- More items, including the 15 artifacts from Arena plus new ones.
- An option to import Arena characters
- A bestiary where you can look up monsters before you encounter them
- A potion maker to create with ingredients own potions.
- There are notification icons ingame which show if you are using a spell
- Underwater levels
- Ted added in one of his interviews¹⁰ that there was even more planned
 - Conflicts between different factions were meant to have real world impact

¹⁰ <http://planetelderscrolls.gamespy.com/View.php?view=Articles.Detail&id=12>

- Cities could be under siege
- All the important NPCs shouldn't just be sprites, but feel like living characters and develop a relationship with the player
- The endings as they turned out in the final game weren't as rich as originally intended. So consequences for the Iliac-Bay were planned after you gave the Totem to one of the factions.
- After his statement and after the unused texture in the game files there were also dragons planned.

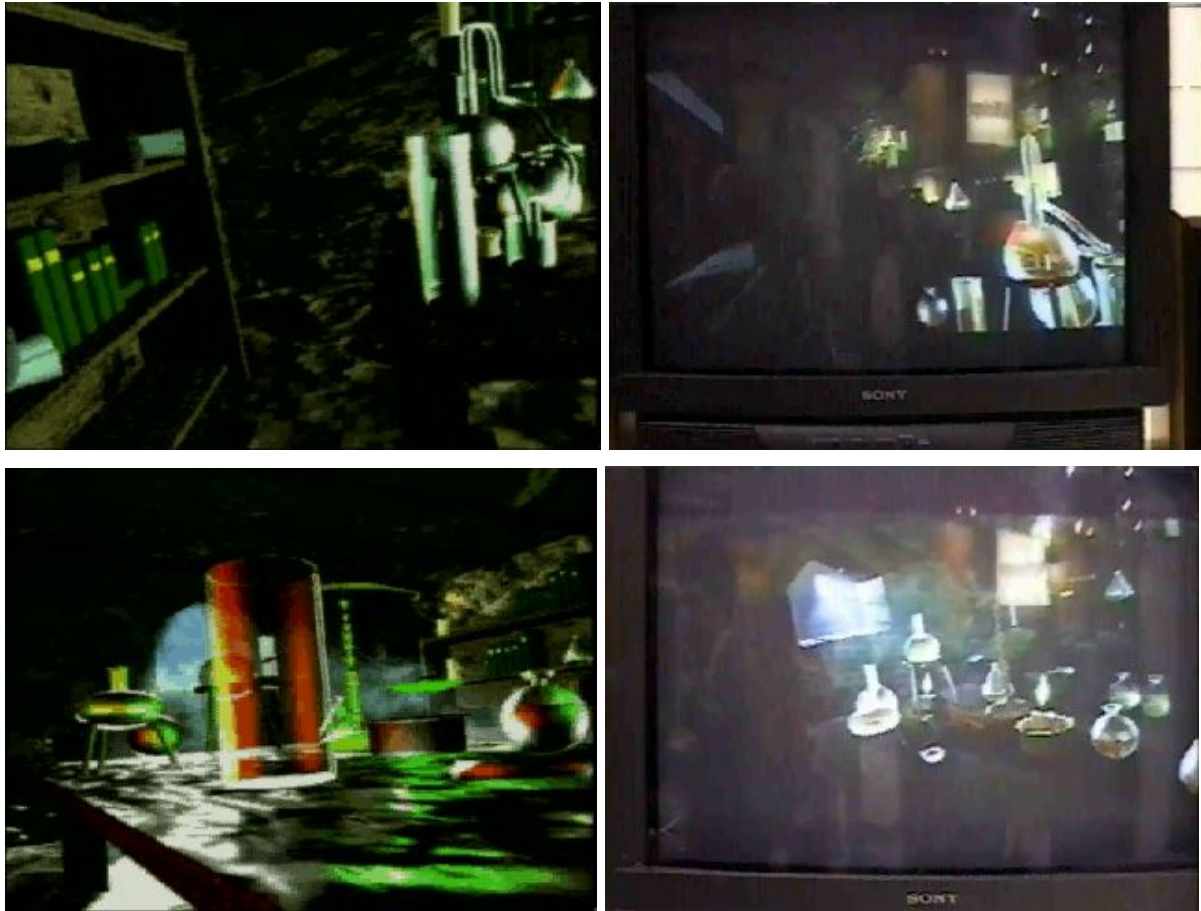
Chapter III: Test levels, cinematics and some graphics

Some of the early screenshots showed the town of Anticlere and the dungeon Citainth. The same dungeon and town, but with different textures was also used for the game play scenes in the Winter CES 95 trailer:



Like these ingame models could be recycled throughout the development, the room from the beginning of the trailer was used two years later for Redguard's trailer (and later intro):





According to Mark Jones' website, his and Louise Sandoval's artworks and renders were used for the official Daggerfall website. Mark Jones himself created the Daggerfall logo and together with Mark Jackson¹¹ ingame characters and textures. Louise worked a lot on characters and created the cover artwork.

Mark proposed to create sprites from 3D models, but Ted and Julian were sceptical and wanted them to be handdrawn, because they feared them to look origami-like. Not giving up, Mark secretly prepared some rendered sprites. When he showed them to Julian and Ted, they were amazed and allowed him to proceed with his renderings. A great deal of sprites were already done by hand, resulting in Daggerfall having a mix of rendered and handdrawn graphics.

Mark Jones described his impression of Daggerfall's art style as mixed, but not surprising due to the fact that over the 2.5 years of development, only about 3 artists stayed, while the majority were only there for short times, leading to a total of about 20 different artists working on Daggerfall. Mark also explains that the room shown in Daggerfall's intro is supposed to be the

¹¹ Computer Gaming World, #1/1995, S. 34

interior of a mage's tower, containing "The Elder Scrolls" themselves:



Every now and then, Bethesda presented a new promotional box cover for Daggerfall, starting with the artwork given to CGW for their 1/95 issue, followed a cover art in the CES cinematic (and IE#11), a cover for IE#19, as well as a cover used in the interactive demo (discussed later), then changing away from “the blue” cover, to “the black” cover, that itself had a variant where the underking had full hair and one where is hair was more wretched, last one then getting a new border and becoming the final cover, while the UK got its own cover. But because this isn't complicated enough, the order of publishing does not seem to be the order of creation. Long things short, these are all the known Daggerfall covers:



Chapter IV: E3 and beyond

1996 was defined by steady screenshot releases, feeding the fans and the press. Like like most other companies, Bethesda attended the first E3 1995 to show off Daggerfall.

Chapter V: Finishing it

As far as we know was a lot of pressure on the development team. Ted Peterson left already as only the beta tester tried to find bugs. As they were already late on their shedule it was the release of ... that gave them their final argument to release Daggerfall even though it wasn't finished at all.

Chapter VI: The initial release

As an anecdote, Ted Peterson mentioned the rating system that the United States Congress decided to require in computer games in order “to save the kids”. “I got a questionnaire for Daggerfall which was obviously made for much simpler games. It asked questions like ‘Is there nudity in this game?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘Is there bloodshed?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘Can an innocent person be killed?’ ‘Yes.’ ‘Can there be a reward for killing an innocent person?’ ‘Yes.’ We got slapped with the worst rating for a game, needless to say. And later, Lieberman listed us as being one of the top ten worst corrupters of children ... Of course, I’m sure that sold a few units.”, Ted said.

Next to the game Ted Peterson says in PC Player 5/96 that they were already talking with publishers about a novelization of Daggerfall. It never happened though.

Chapter VII: Publishing in Europe

In addition to the US market Bethesda tried to leave footprints in Europe. To do so, they needed to find a European publisher which would distribute their games. For The Elder Scrolls: Arena they found Softgold Computerspiele GmbH in Germany and Ubi Soft in France.¹² For The Elder Scrolls: Daggerfall they signed a contract with Virgin Interactive in early 1996.¹³ They transferred the sales for Germany and other major European countries to Virgin Interactive Entertainment, with the exception of France, where publishing was in the hands of Ubi Soft. In German, Virgin handed the distribution to Avalon Vertriebs GmbH .¹⁴ Christoph Weaver, at that time president of Bethesda, commented on the contract: “Virgin is the right company to take us forward in the European market. Virgin’s experience and standing - not to mention their success - were the main reasons. Virgin is currently certainly the best distributor in Europe”¹⁵

¹² <http://www.mobygames.com/game/dos/elder-scrolls-arena/cover-art/gameCoverId,3146/>

¹³ MCV 2/96 p. 10

¹⁴ MCV 12/96 p. 54

¹⁵ MCV 2/96 p. 10

The German translation of the game was definitely (or at least officially claimed to be) planned¹⁶ for December 1997¹⁷, but later, and never officially, cancelled. An unreferenced rumor says that a translator came to visit Virgin Interactive in Hamburg and went straight away when he saw the sheer amount of text the game contained. There is a handful of references to the German version, ranging from preorder ads to official statements or even box covers:

- The so called German version of Daggerfall included the english version of the game, a German manual, German Boxart and German on-CD readme files.¹⁸ Among the book files (BOK1000.TXT) you can find a [German Version](#) of said book alongside the english version: [Ark'ay, the God of Birth and Death](#) . Though, the German Version never finds its way into the game itself. The German manual wasn't translated with much precision, leading to translations like "Raketenwaffen" (rocket weapons) for "Missile Weapons".
- There are other hints in the game files, such as sections in TEXT.RSC that say "do not translate". Also, the fonts contain some German umlauts and special characters required for other languages, such as French.
- There was a promotional ad in the German retailer magazine MCV which praised "The Elder Scrolls II: Daggerfall - Die Schriften der Weisen" as a "Realtime 3D-Fantasy-RPG with no boundaries, over 300 missions and over 2500 ingame locations." The German two-pages consumer ad promised a game entirely in German. So it's clear that it still was planned or at least the commercials were already printed.¹⁹ Furthermore a POS-package with demos, flyer and posters were planned.²⁰

¹⁶ MCV 12/96 p.54; MCV 9/96 p.38

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[https://groups.google.com/forum/#!search/daggerfall\\$20dezember\\$20deutsch/de.rec.games.computer/Ed6UjXvH9qY/WUpOEiD8FK8J](https://groups.google.com/forum/#!search/daggerfall$20dezember$20deutsch/de.rec.games.computer/Ed6UjXvH9qY/WUpOEiD8FK8J) and the following

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[https://groups.google.com/forum/#!search/daggerfall\\$20deutsch/de.rec.games.computer/xSB2nepK53Y/cXIYezOV3HsJ](https://groups.google.com/forum/#!search/daggerfall$20deutsch/de.rec.games.computer/xSB2nepK53Y/cXIYezOV3HsJ) and own ownership

¹⁹ MCV 10/96 p.5; MCV 11/96 p.7

²⁰ MCV 9/96 p. 38



We can only guess why the game wasn't translated in the end, but the amount of texts can't be the only reason, since Virgin managed to translate the 200.000 words big Shannara in 1996.²¹ Most likely technical issues prevented the translator(s) of translating Daggerfall. A lot of these issues could be solved since then, leading to fan translations in French, Spanish, Russian and German²² The possible problems (for the German translation) were:

1. **The umlauts:** In the development of the game Bethesda probably did not consider the fact that some characters on the keyboard are used in other languages. So "ö" leads to a pagebreak in ingame-books and an "ü" causes a line break instead of the character. To reverse these it would have meant a lot of effort and probably exceeded the technical knowledge of the translators.
2. **The variables:** Therefore Daggerfall is for the most part randomized, it requires a certain amount of content variety. That means that quest texts contain placeholders to allow an easy exchange of names and details. Using placeholders for single words in sentences doesn't work very well, since German tends to use suffixes to express cases, genders and count (singular/plural) of words that belong together.
3. **The graphics:** Daggerfall used for graphics not their own font, which means that the labels are included directly in the image file. Furthermore do some labels not fit in the space sufficient for English words, which led into less attractive alternatives or shortcuts.
4. **Null termination:** Strings have a fixed maximum length.

²¹ MCV 3/96

²² www.daggerfalldeutsch.de

Whatever reason you follow there is no official statement of a cancellation of a German Daggerfall. Virgin Interactive still was active for Bethesda Softworks after Daggerfall for example in An Elder Scrolls Legend: Battlespire or in The Elder Scrolls Adventure: Redguard. The last source about their partnership is found in February 2001.²³ The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind was in May 2002 already distributed by Ubisoft.

²³ <http://www.gameswelt.at/ufo-aftermath/news/bethesda-softworks-ist-keine-einstellung-bekannt,61705>