SquaredCast: Episode 5 (SPECIAL)

“Bethesda: Broken Games, Broken Dreams (Todd’s Sweet Little Lies)”

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Intro

Welcome back to SquaredCast! This is a special episode, recorded on April 10, 2026.

This week: A special deep-dive episode dedicated entirely to Bethesda Game Studios. We trace the full arc from the golden age of Morrowind through Skyrim, into the catastrophic Fallout 76 launch and its parade of controversies, and through Starfield's 97% Steam player decline and belated PS5 relaunch with the Free Lanes update that should have shipped in 2023. We dig into the Creation Engine debate, Todd Howard's long pattern of overpromising, Microsoft's layoffs gutting ZeniMax, and TES VI sitting at 14 years post-Skyrim with no release date. Meanwhile, Elden Ring and Baldur's Gate 3 have proven the audience Bethesda built isn't gone... It just has better options now.

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Let's get into it…

The Deep Dive ("Bethesda: A Studio in Denial")

SEGMENT 1: The golden age

Before we talk about what went wrong, we need to talk about what went right. Because a lot went right for a very long time.

Bethesda Softworks started in 1986, founded by Christopher Weaver in Bethesda, Maryland. He built it on a kitchen table with about $100,000 of his own money. The first game was a physics-based football sim called Gridiron!, and for the next several years the company bounced between sports games and licensed tie-ins. Then in 1994 came The Elder Scrolls: Arena, a first-person RPG that let players roam the entire continent of Tamriel. It nearly flopped — selling only about 3,000 copies at launch — but word of mouth turned it into a cult hit that eventually moved around 120,000 units and won RPG of the Year from Computer Gaming World.

Two years later, Bethesda doubled down with The Elder Scrolls II: Daggerfall. Released in September 1996, Daggerfall was staggeringly ambitious — a procedurally generated world roughly the size of Great Britain, with over 15,000 towns, a deep class creation system, and six distinct endings. It sold over 100,000 copies in its first two days and eventually moved around 700,000 units. It also won multiple Game of the Year awards. But Daggerfall shipped notoriously buggy, a pattern that would follow Bethesda for decades. Still, it proved that there was a real audience for massive open-world RPGs, and it laid the mechanical groundwork for everything the series would become.

By 1999, Weaver partnered with Robert Altman to form ZeniMax Media as a parent company, and in 2001, ZeniMax split the development team into its own entity: Bethesda Game Studios. Todd Howard, who had joined the company in 1994 and worked as a producer and designer on The Terminator: Future Shock before contributing to Daggerfall's design, became the studio's project lead. The dev team at the time was tiny. When work on their next game began, there were only six people left on the development staff.

That next game was *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, and it changed everything. Released May 1, 2002 on PC, with an Xbox version following in June, Morrowind scored an 89 on Metacritic and sold over four million copies by 2005. It won more than 60 awards. The game dropped players into Vvardenfell, a volcanic island with alien mushroom forests, cliff-strider nests, and political intrigue between warring Great Houses. Nothing else looked or felt like it. As one of the earliest major RPGs on the original Xbox, it proved the console could handle a sprawling open-world experience, and it put Bethesda on the map in a way their earlier games never had.

Four years later, *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (March 20, 2006) pushed the formula further. It scored a 94 on Metacritic, shipped 1.7 million copies in its first three weeks, and reached roughly 9.5 million lifetime sales according to market research firm EEDAR. Oblivion was a graphical showcase for the Xbox 360. It also gave the industry its original microtransaction controversy: the Horse Armor DLC, released April 3, 2006, which charged $2.50 on Xbox 360 for two cosmetic horse skins. The backlash was immediate. Oblivion designer Bruce Nesmith later reflected: "Only in hindsight could it be seen that that's not what people wanted and that we basically thumbed our nose at them without realizing it." The punchline? It still sold millions of copies. Cosmetic microtransactions are now a multi-billion-dollar industry. Horse armor won.

Then came *Fallout 3* in October 2008. Bethesda had licensed the Fallout rights from Interplay Entertainment in 2004, then purchased the full IP outright in 2007 for $5.75 million. Howard pushed hard for the deal. He wanted to do for Fallout what Christopher Nolan did for Batman: "I want to bring that to Fallout, I want to make it real again, and come alive like it's the first time you've ever seen it." The gamble paid off. Fallout 3 scored a 91 on PC and 93 on Xbox 360, shipped 4.7 million copies in its first week, representing over $300 million in revenue, and won dozens of Game of the Year awards. The studio had proven it could take someone else's beloved franchise and do it justice.

And then there's *Skyrim*. Released November 11, 2011 (11/11/11, because Todd Howard thought the date "looked cool"), The Elder Scrolls V became a cultural phenomenon on a scale the studio could not have anticipated. The numbers are staggering: 3.4 million physical copies sold in two days. Seven million copies and $450 million in revenue in the first week. Over 60 million copies sold in its lifetime as of 2023, making it one of the ten best-selling games ever made. It scored a 96 on Metacritic for Xbox 360, received over 200 perfect review scores worldwide, and won more than two dozen Game of the Year awards from major outlets. It turned "I used to be an adventurer like you, then I took an arrow in the knee" into a phrase your mom probably heard at some point.

What made these games work was a design philosophy Howard articulated during Skyrim's development: "See that mountain? You can walk all the way to the top of it." The promise of genuine, unscripted exploration. Handcrafted environments full of environmental storytelling. The feeling that the world existed before you got there and would keep going after you left. And it worked. One Metacritic review called Skyrim "the deepest, loveliest world ever created for a single player to explore." The modding community extended its life for well over a decade; Skyrim has generated over 130,000 mods on Nexus Mods with 6.1 billion downloads. Some modders parlayed their Skyrim work into industry careers at Bethesda and other studios. One mod, *The Forgotten City*, became a standalone commercial game.

Four consecutive hits across nine years. Morrowind, Oblivion, Fallout 3, Skyrim. Each one bigger and more acclaimed than the last. That kind of run earns you a lot of goodwill. A lot of trust. And a lot of patience when things start going sideways.

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SEGMENT 2: The cracks appear

After Skyrim, Bethesda Game Studios entered a strange period. They kept making money. They kept shipping products. But something shifted in the relationship between the studio and its audience, and the cracks showed up in two places: an endless parade of Skyrim re-releases, and a sequel that sold enormously well while quietly undermining everything the studio was known for.

The Skyrim re-release timeline is genuinely funny until you realize it represents nearly a decade of a studio coasting on a single game. The Legendary Edition dropped in June 2013, bundling the DLCs. The Special Edition came October 2016 with a 64-bit engine upgrade and graphical improvements. Skyrim VR hit PSVR in November 2017 and PC VR in April 2018. The Nintendo Switch version launched November 2017. At E3 2018, Bethesda announced a "Very Special Edition" for Amazon Alexa as a self-deprecating joke, except it was actually playable. They also showed mock versions for Etch A Sketch, Motorola pagers, and Samsung refrigerators. The Anniversary Edition came out exactly ten years after the original, on 11/11/21, with 74 Creation Club items bundled in. Then a Switch 2 version in December 2025. TweakTown counted seven distinct releases in ten years as of 2021, and the number kept climbing. Todd Howard has been self-aware about it, joking in a December 2025 interview that the game had been released "for the 117th time on Switch 2." But self-awareness and changed behavior are two different things. There's a version of this story where the re-releases are savvy business. There's another version where a studio that once shipped a new masterpiece every three to four years spent a decade repackaging its greatest hit instead of making the next one.

Then there's *Fallout 4*. Released November 10, 2015, it shipped 12 million copies on day one, generating over $750 million in revenue. It broke Steam's record for most concurrent non-Valve players at 470,000+. By commercial measures, it was a monster. The Metacritic scores were solid: 87 to 88 on Xbox One, 84 on PS4 and PC. Polygon gave it a 9.5. GameSpot called it "an argument for substance over style."

But the user scores told a different story. Metacritic user ratings settled significantly lower than critic scores across all platforms, with PC users rating it harshest. That gap between critics and players became a recurring theme in Bethesda's future. And the specific criticisms were damning for a studio built on RPG depth. PC Gamer's Andy Kelly wrote what became the definitive mixed review in a piece titled "Fallout 4: good game, bad RPG": "An open-world action game with role-playing elements would be a more accurate description." He continued: "After 30 hours of play, I can't think of a single quest that offered me the option to avoid, charm, or otherwise think my way out of combat."

The dialogue system caught the worst of it. Fallout 3 and New Vegas let players read the full text of every dialogue option before choosing. Fallout 4 replaced that with a four-option wheel showing vague one-word summaries. The community shorthand became: "Yes / Sarcastic Yes / Question Then Yes / No But Actually Yes." A mod called "Full Dialogue Interface" that replaced the vague prompts with the actual lines became one of the game's most popular downloads almost overnight.

It took Howard a decade to publicly acknowledge the failure. In a November 2025 GQ interview, he admitted: "We spent forever on the dialogue system in Fallout 4. How do we do an interactive conversation in an interesting way? But it really did not resonate." He added: "Players want to role-play more and we had a voiced protagonist. The actors were phenomenal, but a lot of players were like, 'That's not the voice I hear in my head.'" Earlier, at E3 2016, he

had offered a milder concession: the system "didn't work as well."

The phrase that crystallized the Bethesda critique was "wide as an ocean, deep as a puddle." The saying predates Fallout 4; forum threads applied it to Skyrim as early as 2012. But Fallout 4 made it stick. Kelly's PC Gamer review drove it home: "Bethesda games are often described as being as broad as an ocean and as deep as a puddle. But Fallout 4 feels like their most restrictive game yet." And hanging over all of it was the comparison to *Fallout: New Vegas*, made by Obsidian Entertainment in 2010 on an 18-month development timeline using Fallout 3's existing engine and assets, which delivered the player choice and narrative depth that Bethesda's own sequel lacked.

Fallout 4 sold spectacularly. It also taught a generation of players to expect less from Bethesda RPGs. That lesson would matter a lot when Starfield showed up eight years later.

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SEGMENT 3: The dumpster fire

If Fallout 4 was a warning sign, Fallout 76 was the five-alarm fire. Released November 14, 2018, the game was Bethesda's first attempt at an always-online multiplayer title, and it went about as well as you'd expect from a studio that had never made one.

The Metacritic scores were brutal. A 52 on PC. A 53 on PS4. A 49 on Xbox One. User scores cratered into the 2s. The game launched with no human NPCs. All quest-giving came from holotapes, computer terminals, and robots. At E3 2018, Todd Howard had framed this as a bold creative choice: "We have always wanted to tell that story of what it would be like for you and the other characters who were first to leave the vaults. But there is one big difference with this game: each of those characters is a real person." What that actually meant, as Forbes' Paul Tassi pointed out, was that Bethesda had removed human NPCs from the game entirely.

Howard also made the claim that would follow him for years. Onstage at that same E3, he described the new engine work as delivering "sixteen times the detail." Post-launch, Tassi fact-checked it: "I'm not sure I've seen anything that looks sixteen times more detailed than past Bethesda games, and many times, it feels like it might even be a step back visually."

But the game itself was only the beginning of the disaster. The real damage came from a cascading series of off-game controversies that turned Fallout 76 into a case study in how to destroy consumer trust.

The $200 Power Armor Edition had promised a "West Tek Canvas Duffel Bag." Buyers received a cheap nylon bag instead. Bethesda's initial response offered 500 Atoms of in-game currency, worth roughly five dollars, as compensation. Then it surfaced that Bethesda had given canvas bags to influencers at a promotional event at The Greenbrier in October 2018. These weren't identical to the Power Armor Edition bag, but the optics were devastating: Bethesda had told paying customers that canvas was "unavailable" while handing out canvas bags to content creators for free. Pete Hines, Bethesda's head of marketing, later admitted: "My first reaction was, 'When the f**k did we add a canvas bag to this collector's edition?' Because the version I approved did not have one." He called it "probably the dumbest thing I ever did at Bethesda." A class-action investigation followed. Australia's consumer protection commission, the ACCC, forced ZeniMax to offer refunds, with Commissioner Sarah Court stating ZeniMax "likely misled certain Australian consumers about their rights to a refund." Bethesda eventually shipped replacement canvas bags. Seven months later.

There was more. An $80 branded Nuka Dark rum product had been marketed with what appeared to be a molded glass rocket-shaped bottle. What arrived was a standard glass bottle shoved inside an oversized plastic shell. Shipping was delayed over a month, with Bethesda emailing buyers that "the product was not up to Fallout standards." And in December 2018, a bug on Bethesda's support website allowed users to view other customers' open support tickets, exposing names, home addresses, email addresses, phone numbers, and partial credit card information. The exposure window lasted about 45 minutes, affecting up to 65 tickets.

The sales numbers told their own story. The game sold 1.4 million copies by the end of 2018. For context, Fallout 4 shipped 12 million on day one. Retailers couldn't move the thing. The $60 game dropped to $35 on Amazon less than two weeks after launch. Two significant price cuts in less than a month. It eventually hit bargain bin territory, reportedly selling for as low as $12. When's that ever happened to a major Bethesda release?

NOTE: The $12 figure comes from Amazon listings observed shortly after launch.

And Bethesda's response to unhappy customers made things worse. PC players who tried to get refunds were told flat-out: "Customers who have downloaded the game are not eligible for a refund. We apologize for the inconvenience." You bought a broken game through their launcher, you downloaded it (as required to play it), and now you can't return it. Washington D.C. law firm Migliaccio & Rathod launched a deceptive trade practices investigation, received over 200 phone calls and emails, and began soliciting clients for a class-action lawsuit. Partner Jason Rathod summarized the calls: "The vast majority of them are, 'I sought a refund and they're not issuing one to me.'"

Piled together, it was a PR catastrophe unlike anything the gaming industry had seen from a

studio of Bethesda's stature. And the internet let them have it. YouTuber AngryJoe's "Fallout 76 Angry Review" became the definitive public autopsy, scoring the game a 3 out of 10 and cross-cutting Howard's onstage E3 promises directly against the actual gameplay footage that contradicted them. He tore into the $18 blue paint job microtransaction, the empty world, the broken VATS system, the whole thing. Joe said afterward that "many have said I was actually being generous with our rating." The video racked up millions of views and became one of the most-watched gaming reviews of 2018. It crystallized what a lot of players were feeling: Todd Howard had looked them in the eye at E3, made promises he couldn't keep, and shipped a product that wasn't remotely ready.

For the first time, the goodwill that Bethesda had banked over two decades of beloved games started to drain in a meaningful way.

Credit where it's due: Bethesda didn't abandon the game. The Wastelanders update in April 2020 added human NPCs with full dialogue trees, two new factions, a new main questline with skill checks, and roughly 1,000 bug fixes. The game relaunched on Steam alongside the update and climbed to a 63 on Metacritic for PS4 (68 on PC). It wasn't a full redemption, but it was a genuine effort. Howard acknowledged the rocky road in a 2021 Reddit AMA: "We let people down and were able to learn and be better from it." By 2021, the game had reached 11 million players. Updates continued through 2025 and into 2026.

But the goodwill rebuilding took a hit in October 2019 when Bethesda launched Fallout 1st, a premium subscription service at $12.99 per month or $99.99 per year. It promised private servers, a scrap box for unlimited crafting material storage, and a "survival tent" fast-travel point. What players got was worse than what was advertised. The "private" servers turned out to be recycled instances: players loaded in to find dead NPCs and already-looted areas, proving the servers weren't freshly generated at all. The scrap box, the feature most subscribers were paying for, had a bug that deleted stored items. And the "invisible" mode that was supposed to restrict private servers to select friends didn't work. Anyone on your friends list could see and join the server. For a studio that had just spent a year trying to rebuild trust, charging $100 a year for features that didn't function as described was a staggering misread of the room.

Fallout 76 proved something important: Bethesda could fix a broken game over time. The question was whether "ship it broken, fix it later" had become the plan.

Meanwhile, the studio's corporate structure was about to change. On September 21, 2020, Microsoft announced it would acquire ZeniMax Media for $7.5 billion. The deal closed March 9, 2021. Phil Spencer said on closing day that Xbox, PC, and Game Pass would be "the best place to experience new Bethesda games, including some new titles in the future that will be exclusive to Xbox and PC players." Todd Howard told Game Informer: "I grossly underestimated the impact in the larger gaming community." He also revealed he'd called Spencer during the Fallout 76 crisis for advice, and Spencer connected him with Xbox support staff. "That kind of advice really, really helped us."

Microsoft was buying the studio that made Skyrim. What they got was the studio that shipped Fallout 76. The $7.5 billion question was which version of Bethesda would show up for the next game.

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SEGMENT 4: Starfield

Todd Howard had been thinking about making a space RPG since 1997, when he wrote on an internet forum as a 27-year-old: "Now a space RPG...that would be something." He later described the concept as "NASA meets Indiana Jones." In a June 2021 interview with The Washington Post, he gave the game its tagline and its albatross: "It's like Skyrim in space."

At the Xbox/Bethesda Showcase in June 2022, Howard presented over 15 minutes of gameplay. He revealed over 1,000 explorable planets and promised players could "land anywhere on any planet." He described the game as having more handcrafted content "than Skyrim and Fallout 4 combined." He wanted it to give "the feeling of unlimited possibilities." The hype was enormous. This was Microsoft's flagship exclusive after the $7.5 billion acquisition. It was Bethesda's first new IP in 25 years. The expectations were, in hindsight, probably impossible to meet.

Starfield launched with early access on September 1, 2023, and general release on September 6. It was available on Game Pass from day one. Bethesda announced six million players within two days, one million concurrent players on launch day, and ten million players by September 19, calling it "the biggest launch in Bethesda history." It reached 13 million by December 2023 and 15 million by November 2024. It was the 11th best-selling game in the US that year. By any raw engagement metric, the launch was massive. But those numbers included every Game Pass subscriber who downloaded it for free and tried it for an hour. Sales figures were never

disclosed separately.

The Metacritic scores landed in a strange middle ground. An 83 on Xbox Series X. An 85 on PC. Respectable, maybe, for most studios. For the people who made Skyrim (96) and Fallout 3 (93), it was a significant step down. More telling was the user score gap. Xbox users gave it a 6.8 against the critics' 83. PC users gave it roughly a 5.6 against the critics' 85. That roughly 29-point spread on PC was among the larger critic-to-user gaps seen in recent AAA releases. On Steam, the game sits at a "Mixed" 57% positive from over 170,000 reviews.

The structural criticisms hit at the thing Bethesda is supposed to do better than anyone: exploration. The 1,000 planets mostly felt procedurally generated and empty. Former Bethesda designer Bruce Nesmith put it plainly on the FRVR Podcast: "I don't think it's in the same calibre as the other two, Fallout or Elder Scrolls. When the planets start to feel very samey and you don't start to feel the excitement on the planets, that's to me where it falls apart." He added an observation that was hard to argue with: "Space is inherently boring. It's literally described as nothingness."

The exploration loop was broken by constant loading screens and menu-driven fast travel. There were no seamless planetary landings. You couldn't fly your ship from one planet's surface to another. Everything went through menus. One widely shared player description captured the frustration: open your menu, select a star system, load, open your menu again, select a planet, load, talk to the same NPC, load again, finally land. PC Gamer wrote: "It's impossible not to compare Starfield to the way you freely enter and exit planets' atmosphere in No Man's Sky, so it's a bit of a letdown every time you see a planet and remember it's just a picture of a planet you'll never be able to reach by flying toward it."

The Steam player count data tells a story no amount of marketing can spin. At launch in September 2023, Starfield averaged 145,883 concurrent players with a peak of 330,723. One month later: 48,717 average, a 67% drop. Three months: 12,823 average, down 91%. Six months: 5,744, down 96%. By March 2026: roughly 3,500, a 97.6% decline from launch. For context, roughly three and a half times as many people were playing the 15-year-old Fallout: New Vegas on Steam as there were playing Starfield.

Bethesda's chance to course-correct was the Shattered Space DLC, released September 30, 2024 at $29.99. It scored a 54 on Metacritic for Xbox and 61 on OpenCritic, putting it in the bottom 19th percentile of all games tracked. Forbes' Paul Tassi was blunt: "To put it bluntly: Starfield: Shattered Space is not good. At all." Kotaku's summary: "Way too little, too late." The DLC offered a single hand-crafted planet, which partially addressed the empty planets criticism, but added no new gameplay systems and drew unfavorable comparisons to *Cyberpunk 2077: Phantom Liberty* at the same $30 price point.

In February 2026, Howard explicitly shut down hopes of a No Man's Sky-style reinvention: "It is not Starfield 2.0. If you like Starfield, we think you're going to love this. But if Starfield is something that didn't connect with you right away, or you bounced off it, or found it boring in

places, I don't think it's going to change that fundamentally."

Then, on April 7, 2026, Starfield launched on PlayStation 5 for the first time, nearly three years after its original Xbox and PC debut. The PS5 version arrived bundled with every post-launch update, a new paid story DLC called Terran Armada ($9.99), and the largest free content update in the game's history: Free Lanes.

Free Lanes is what the community had been asking for since day one. It adds a "cruise mode" that lets players manually fly between planets within a star system instead of relying entirely on fast travel and loading screens. This was arguably the single biggest criticism of Starfield at launch: a space exploration game where you couldn't actually fly through space. The update also includes dynamic combat encounters during travel, a new X-Tech weapon and gear evolution system, ship optimization tools, an asteroid base, overhauled point-of-interest generation for planet surfaces, a new Moon Jumper vehicle, and new outpost customization options including alien pets. Players can now leave the ship on autopilot during cruise mode and manage inventory, talk to companions, or handle ship business while in transit. It also lets players carry items into New Game+ using Quantum Essence, enhancing a feature that was already one of Starfield's most praised systems.

Reviews of the PS5 version have been mixed in a way that mirrors the original launch debate. The Outerhaven called it "the most polished version of Starfield yet" and noted how much the game has changed since 2023. PlayStation LifeStyle wrote that "there has never been a better time to jump into Starfield." Push Square's review was more measured, acknowledging that Free Lanes helps reduce menu dependency but noting the game still lacks the handcrafted density between objectives that makes Bethesda's best games sing. DualShockers praised the technical performance but called the planets "still hollow." Vice went the furthest, calling the updated Starfield "Bethesda's best RPG in years" after 120 hours with the PS5 version.

On the PlayStation Store, the reception has been warmer than many expected. As of April 9, over 2,200 PS5 user reviews had posted an average rating of 4.57 out of 5 (9.14 out of 10). On Steam, the Free Lanes update and PS5 hype pushed the concurrent player count back above 21,000, the highest it had been since the Shattered Space launch in September 2024. That's a meaningful bump from the roughly 3,500 average just weeks earlier, though still a fraction of the 330,000 who showed up on launch day.

The PS5 pricing tells its own story. Standard edition at $49.99. Premium edition at $69.99 including Shattered Space and Terran Armada. Not $69.99 for the base game, the way a confident new release would be priced. Bethesda and Microsoft know they're not selling a new game. They're selling a second chance. PS5 Pro gets dedicated visual and performance modes with PSSR upscaling, offering 30fps and 60fps targets, with a 40fps option also available.

The pattern is familiar. Ship it incomplete. Patch it over years. Relaunch it on a new platform and call it the definitive version. Fallout 76 got Wastelanders. Starfield got Free Lanes. The feature that should have been there at launch, two and a half years later, repackaged as

generosity. Bethesda has signaled further plans for Starfield beyond this update.

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SEGMENT 5: Let Creation Engine die... PLEASE

There's a technical argument at the center of the Starfield debate, and it comes down to one question: is Bethesda's game engine helping them or holding them back?

The lineage goes back over two decades. Bethesda used a licensed third-party engine called Gamebryo for Morrowind, Oblivion, Fallout 3, and Fallout: New Vegas. For Skyrim in 2011, they forked the Fallout 3 codebase, made significant modifications, and rebranded it the Creation Engine. It added Havok Behavior for animation blending, expanded upon the Radiant AI system from Oblivion, introduced Radiant Story quest generation, and brought new foliage and terrain rendering. Fallout 4 brought physically based rendering and volumetric lighting. For Starfield, Bethesda overhauled it again into Creation Engine 2, with real-time global illumination and more advanced lighting. Howard said in 2020: "We have more people doing engine work now by a factor of five probably than we've ever had."

What Creation Engine does well is moddability, and this is a genuine competitive advantage no other studio has replicated at scale. The engine uses a plugin architecture with modular cells and accessible Papyrus scripting. The Creation Kit gives modders the same tools the developers use internally. Howard has called it essential: "We like our editor. It allows us to create worlds really fast and the modders know it really well." The numbers back him up. Skyrim has roughly 130,000 mods across both editions with over 6 billion downloads on Nexus Mods. Fallout 4 has over 48,000 mods with more than 1.4 billion downloads. Even New Vegas, built on

the old Gamebryo fork, has around 33,000 mods. Starfield, by contrast, has a few thousand mods with tens of millions of downloads. Healthy by normal standards. A fraction of its predecessors.

But what the engine can't do is painfully visible in Starfield. The core problem is the cell-based world system. The Creation Engine divides environments into discrete cells, and moving between cells requires a loading transition. This is fundamental to how the engine tracks persistent object states (every cheese wheel and potion bottle you've ever knocked off a shelf stays where you put it), but it means the engine cannot handle seamless transitions between large-scale environments. ScreenRant put it directly: "Starfield has an abundance of loading screens because of Creation Engine 2, which isn't designed for a completely open world of this scale with seamless exploration."

The Free Lanes update is worth examining through this lens. Bethesda's solution to the loading screen problem wasn't to rearchitect the engine's cell system. It was to add a cruise mode within star systems that keeps the player inside a single continuous environment, with encounters spawning around the ship during transit. It's a clever workaround, and it meaningfully reduces the menu-hopping that plagued the original experience. But it's still a workaround. You still can't fly from a planet's surface into orbit and on to the next world in one continuous shot the way you can in No Man's Sky. The cell boundaries are still there. Bethesda just found a way to make you feel them less.

Digital Foundry's technical analysis of Starfield found planets and outer space treated as separate objects divided by loading screens. On Xbox Series X at launch, internal resolution sat around 1296p to 1440p with FSR2 upscaling to 4K, capped at 30 FPS. Facial animations improved over previous Bethesda titles but still had a mannequin quality. The engine ties physics calculations to framerate, meaning that above 60 FPS, games can crash or speed up comically. NPC pathfinding exhibits the same issues it's had since Oblivion. Den of Geek summed up the animation problem: "The Creation Engine's sluggish movements and stiff animations are incapable of effectively conveying the proper sensations of your actions."

Former Bethesda lead artist Nate Purkeypile, who worked on Starfield, publicly argued the studio should switch to Unreal Engine 5. He described loading screens as a consequence of performance limitations in the engine and said that a switch would be worth the cost because "things would end up being better" and development would be more streamlined. CD Projekt Red made that exact move. After building two Witcher games and Cyberpunk 2077 on their in-house REDengine (the first Witcher used BioWare's Aurora Engine), they announced in March 2022 that the next Witcher would run on Unreal Engine 5. The reason wasn't that REDengine was bad. It was that for each new game, CDPR was essentially rewriting the engine from scratch, and UE5 would let them run multiple projects simultaneously without that overhead.

But there's a strong counterargument, and it comes from someone who knows the engine intimately. Skyrim's lead designer Bruce Nesmith estimated an engine switch would require "a

year or two of technical work" and warned it would seriously disrupt the modding ecosystem, invalidating much of the collective knowledge and skills the community has built over years of working with the Creation Engine. And he made a sharper point: "The game engine is not the point. You and I could both identify a hundred lousy games that used Unreal. Is it Unreal's fault? No."

Bethesda chose to iterate. In early 2026, Howard confirmed Creation Engine 3 for The Elder Scrolls VI: "With Starfield, it was made on Creation Engine 2, which was a big change from the original engine. We have Creation Engine 3 for Elder Scrolls 6." He added that the team has "handled" the engine "better than we ever have" thanks to lessons from Starfield. Whether that means Creation Engine 3 can actually deliver seamless open worlds at the level players now expect is the trillion-dollar question. Because the competition isn't waiting.

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SEGMENT 6: The culture problem

Engines can be upgraded. Design can be rethought. The harder question is whether the people running Bethesda Game Studios have accurately diagnosed what went wrong, or whether the institution itself has become too comfortable to change.

Start with Todd Howard. He is the face of Bethesda. He has directed every major BGS title since Morrowind. His E3 presentations are legendary. His promises are also legendary, but for different reasons. "It just works" became a meme after he said it at E3 2015 during a Fallout 4 settlement demo: "And one of the great things about having a fully dynamic game engine is all of it just works." Given Bethesda's long history of launch bugs, the irony was immediate and permanent. "Sixteen times the detail" for Fallout 76 didn't survive first contact with the actual game. "Fallout 3 will have over 200 endings" turned out to mean 200 permutations of a cinematic ending sequence. "Skyrim will have infinite quests" meant Radiant Quests, a system that generates the same handful of fetch tasks on repeat. Each individual overstatement is minor. The pattern is not.

Howard deserves credit for eventually acknowledging failures. His comments on Fallout 4's dialogue system, on Fallout 76's troubled launch, and on Starfield's limitations show someone capable of self-reflection. But the acknowledgments always come years later, long after players have already moved on. And the pattern of promising more than the games deliver has persisted across three consecutive titles.

There may be a structural reason for that. Former Bethesda senior artist Dennis Mejillones, who spent 11 years at the studio working on Skyrim, Fallout 4, and Starfield, said in an interview with Kiwi Talkz that Howard is surrounded by people who won't push back. "A lot of people were afraid to say no to Todd, and I think that hurt him," Mejillones said. He drew a direct comparison to George Lucas: "I think George Lucas is a genius. I think geniuses come up with terrible ideas too. They're not all gonna be hits, but if you don't have somebody to help you filter through these things and give you an honest assessment because they're afraid to tell you what they really think, it actually does hurt you. And I think that kinda happens to Todd in some regards." Mejillones stressed that he personally would challenge Howard's ideas, but that the broader culture at the studio discouraged it. When the person steering the ship doesn't hear "no" often enough, the ship drifts. And three consecutive titles with the same recurring criticisms starts to look less like bad luck and more like a feedback loop that isn't functioning.

The other structural tension is Bethesda's relationship with its modding community. The studio has always benefited from modders fixing bugs, adding features, and extending the life of its games. The unspoken bargain was that Bethesda shipped ambitious-but-janky worlds, and the community polished them. In the Skyrim era, that bargain felt fair. Giants launching you into the sky was a funny YouTube clip. By the Fallout 76 and Starfield era, the same level of jank reads

as lack of quality control from a studio backed by a trillion-dollar parent company.

Bethesda has also tried to monetize the relationship directly. In April 2015, they partnered with Valve to launch paid mods on Steam Workshop for Skyrim, with a revenue split of 45% to Bethesda, 30% to Valve, and 25% to the modder. A Change.org petition gathered over 130,000 signatures. Four days later, Valve reversed course, saying: "We've done this because it's clear we didn't understand exactly what we were doing." Bethesda came back in 2017 with the Creation Club for Fallout 4 and Skyrim SE. Pete Hines insisted it was different: "Paid mods are when modders can charge for their mods. This simply isn't that." Players disagreed. When the system evolved into "Creations" for Starfield in June 2024, a $7 mission called "The Vulture" triggered another wave of backlash and Steam review bombing. The tension between empowering a creative community and treating it as a revenue pipeline has never been resolved.

Pete Hines himself is gone. After 24 years at Bethesda, he announced his retirement on October 16, 2023, roughly six weeks after Starfield's full launch: "After 24 years, I have decided my time at Bethesda Softworks has come to an end. I am retiring." No public replacement was named. His departure removed the only other public-facing voice besides Howard who shaped how Bethesda communicated with its audience.

And then there's The Elder Scrolls VI. On June 10, 2018, Bethesda showed a 36-second teaser: a landscape flyover and a logo. No gameplay, no platforms, no date. Pete Hines explained at the time: "We were honestly a little tired of being asked about Elder Scrolls VI." Since then, updates have been sparse and consistently distant. Howard said in 2021 it would arrive "fifteen to seventeen years after Skyrim," targeting 2026 to 2028. At an FTC hearing in June 2023, Phil Spencer testified the game was "likely five-plus years away." In August 2023, Howard was asked if he regretted the early announcement: "I don't know. I probably would've announced it more casually." By November 2025, he told GQ the wait has been "too long" but it's "still a long way off," while confirming the majority of the studio is working on it. In February 2026, he confirmed Creation Engine 3 and said the game has passed a "major internal milestone."

Howard has also framed the gap between Skyrim and TES6 in revealing terms. He called Fallout 76 and Starfield "creative detours" and said Bethesda is "coming back to that classic style that we've missed, that we know really, really well." The framing is telling. If your last two projects were detours, what does that say about 13 years of development priorities?

As of April 2026, it has been nearly eight years since announcement and over 14 years since Skyrim's release. No release date is in sight.

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SEGMENT 7: Can they come back?

The Fallout franchise has never been more culturally visible. Amazon's *Fallout* TV series premiered April 10, 2024, drew 65 million viewers in 16 days, and topped 100 million total by October. It scored a 93% on Rotten Tomatoes for Season 1, and Season 2 (which premiered December 2025) debuted to similar or better reviews, landing in the 96-97% range as scores settled. It earned 17 Emmy nominations and won two. Season 3 was renewed in May 2025. Howard served as executive producer. The show's impact on game player counts was extraordinary. Fallout 4 went from around 20,000 concurrent on Steam to a peak of 186,746. Fallout 76 set a new all-time Steam record at 39,455 concurrent, then kept climbing to over 73,000 later that same month. New Vegas hit an all-time high of over 43,000 concurrent, smashing its previous record from 2015. Season 2 doubled player counts again across all titles. Howard acknowledged the awkward irony: "Everybody will say to us, 'It's really disappointing you don't have a new game to take advantage of this.' And it's like, 'well, the show is excellent. It is what it is.'"

The Oblivion Remastered shadow drop on April 22, 2025 (built in Unreal Engine 5 by external studio Virtuous, not BGS) drew nine million players in three months. The demand for classic-style Bethesda RPGs is clearly enormous. People aren't tired of Bethesda's formula. They're tired of Bethesda not delivering it.

But the competitive landscape has changed. The RPG genre that Bethesda once dominated now includes competitors who have surpassed them on their own terms.

Elden Ring (February 2022) sold over 30 million copies, scored a 96 on Metacritic, and won over 300 Game of the Year awards. Its open-world design prioritized discovery and surprise over map markers and quest logs. Director Hidetaka Miyazaki put exploration at the center: "A feeling of exploration was the top priority above everything else." The Shadow of the Erdtree DLC sold five million copies in three days, scored a 94 on Metacritic, and became the highest-rated expansion in the site's history.

Baldur's Gate 3 (August 3, 2023, one month before Starfield) sold over 20 million copies, scored a 96 on Metacritic, and swept The Game Awards 2023 including Game of the Year. It peaked at 875,343 concurrent players on Steam, more than 2.5 times Starfield's peak. Larian Studios CEO Swen Vincke had moved the release date earlier partly to avoid overlapping with Starfield, explaining the deference to a bigger studio: "If you're at sea and a bigger boat passes by, the rule is that you go out of the way for the bigger boat. They were the bigger boat." The smaller boat won.

NOTE: The claim that BG3 had higher concurrent players than Starfield five months after both launched could not be independently verified at the specific timeframe. The general narrative of BG3 outperforming Starfield in player retention is widely reported.

Those two games delivered the sense of discovery and player agency that used to be Bethesda's signature. They proved the audience for deep, exploration-driven RPGs isn't shrinking. If anything, it's growing. But that audience now has options that didn't exist when Skyrim was the only game in town.

The Starfield PS5 launch on April 7, 2026 offers a complicated data point for the "can they come back" question. On one hand, the PS5 version is drawing genuine enthusiasm from players encountering Starfield for the first time. The PlayStation Store rating of 9.14 out of 10 from over 2,200 reviews suggests that new audiences, unburdened by two years of expectations and discourse, are finding a game they enjoy. Steam concurrent players surged to over 21,000 in the days following the Free Lanes update, the highest the game has been since September 2024. There's real life in this thing when the right update drops.

On the other hand, context matters. That 21,000-player spike is still just 6% of the 330,723 who showed up on launch day. The PS5 reviews that praised the game most highly were also the ones most willing to acknowledge the fundamentals haven't changed: the planets are still sparse, the exploration still lacks the density that defined Skyrim and Fallout 3, and the game's DNA is the same DNA Howard said wouldn't change. Push Square's headline captured the tension perfectly: "Better Than Ever, But Still No Space Skyrim." DualShockers praised the performance but called the planets "still hollow."

The pattern Bethesda has established with Starfield mirrors what happened with Fallout 76, just with higher production values. Ship it with structural problems. Fix the most visible issues over two years. Relaunch on a new platform with everything bundled. Call it the definitive version. It works as a business strategy. Whether it works as a creative identity for a studio that once defined the genre is a different question.

So can Bethesda actually make The Elder Scrolls VI the game it needs to be? The signals are mixed. On the positive side: Howard is explicitly framing it as a return to form. He's called the Starfield era a detour. Creation Engine 3 represents lessons learned. The entire studio is focused on it. The Fallout TV show proved the IPs are immortal. The Oblivion remaster proved the audience is there.

On the concerning side: the studio that made Skyrim with a small, tight-knit team now operates within Microsoft's corporate structure. Mass layoffs have swept through the organization. In May 2024, Microsoft shut down Arkane Austin and Tango Gameworks. In July 2025, 194 workers at ZeniMax Media's Rockville headquarters were let go, including 164 employees and 30 contractors. A ZeniMax union member called it "a betrayal of trust of the highest magnitude." Nate Purkeypile, who left Bethesda, described attending "upward of 20 meetings a week" during production and said he "enjoyed it a lot less" as the studio grew from the tight team that made Skyrim to the 500-person operation behind Starfield. There's also an expectations problem that may be unsolvable. Bruce Nesmith articulated it clearly: "Bethesda's in the bad position of having expectations being so high they cannot be met."

There's a version of this that goes beyond bugs and engines. PC Gamer drew a comparison to Cyberpunk 2077 that's hard to shake: "While Cyberpunk 2077 was a phenomenal game that was broken as hell, Starfield just isn't all that great. It's not awful, but that middling reputation is pretty much carved in stone." Cyberpunk's problems were execution. Starfield's problems were vision. You can patch bugs. You can even patch in interplanetary flight two and a half years late. Patching design philosophy is a different proposition entirely.

These are people who made some of the most important games ever created. The talent and the institutional knowledge are real. The question is whether they remember how to use it, whether Microsoft gives them the space to figure it out, and whether the industry has moved on while Bethesda was standing still. The mountain is still there. They told us we could climb it once. The question is whether they still can.

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