

RAZING HELGEN

Story Exercise

IMAGINE: During the production of Bethesda Game Studios' *Skyrim*, unexpected needs arise for a story overhaul. My job is to help ideate a new golden path which will heighten the central player fantasy AND retain as many existing game assets as possible.

My approach includes the following:

1. **PITCH** - alternate story lines that require minimal interdepartmental effort to retrofit.
2. **MAP** - the existing gameplay of the intro scene in Helgen and flag opportunities to weave in the new narrative.
3. **WRITE** - a playable prototype of the new Helgen intro.

***NOTE:** The original story of *Skyrim* casts the player as a fantasy hero known as a Dragonborn, a mortal with the soul of a dragon. Under the tutelage of the wise Greybeards, they learn to use an ancient power called the Way of the Voice to defend Skyrim from dragons, defeat members of the evil Dragon Cult, and vanquish the First Dragon, Alduin, who intends to destroy the world.

1. PITCH

A. EVIL DRAGONBORN: The Dragonborn were a wicked sect of sorcerers that formed the Dragon Cult long ago during the Merethic Era. Contrary to legend, they actually preyed on dragons, perverting them from disinterested giants into destructive slaves. The Dragonborn nearly destroyed Tamriel back then, and they have returned to Skyrim with their dragon thralls and a hunger for total domination. The player discovers that they are a descendant of the sinister Dragonborn. They will either choose to embrace their evil legacy and dominate Skyrim OR use newfound powers to vanquish their foul Dragonborn ancestors and liberate the dragon slaves - OR they will find a grey area in-between.

B. DRAGON UNDERWORLD: In the First Era, the evil deity Alduin sought to obliterate the world of Nirn, but dragons defended it with their lives. They banished Alduin but were obliterated in the process. Now an evil order of ancients known as the Greybeards conspires to resurrect Alduin so he can finish his work and lay waste to Nirn - starting with Skyrim. Dragons are the only hope against Alduin, but they're all gone... Or are they? The player discovers a secret underworld of dragons, who are not extinct but merely in hiding. This shadow society consists of deep, interpersonal interactions with the dragons as NPCs instead of mere enemies. The player becomes their apprentice, a Dragonborn, and inherits their powers through training. They must navigate dragon society, solving their complex problems and unifying them in order to conquer Alduin once and for all.

C. THE LAST DRAGON (*Not the amazing Leroy Green movie): The player is the last dragon, hated and feared by the people of Skyrim, a region that roils with a civil war so deep that it threatens to tear apart Tamriel itself. Having lived so long in humanoid form, they have lost their ancient memory along with their abilities. The player must explore the world and find a way to retrieve their powers in order to engage in the growing threats that surround them. Imbuing the player with an avatar who is trying to tame a mythical beast lying dormant within them is a thrill as they unlock the economy of progressive skills that once made them legendary. Then as they engage in humanity's civil war, the player must choose whether to spare the fascinating but frustrating smallfolk, surreptitiously aid in their self-destruction, or eradicate the pestilence of their existence.

2. MAP

Let's suppose the first pitch, "Evil Dragonborn" is chosen to become the new narrative path for *Skyrim*.

RESEARCH: Time to playtest the original Helgen intro scene A WHOLE LOT and study the gameplay. I'm particularly focusing on the player experience and what adjustments I can make to the writing in order to incorporate the new storyline.



OBSERVATIONS: While the original Helgen scene is intense, immersive, and chock-full of information, I see subtle opportunities for deeper player engagement and integration of the "Evil Dragonborn" premise in the following ways:

Branching Narrative - A few choices could be implemented to bring tension to the player's dynamic with the prisoners, to foreshadow the sinister origins of our new Dragonborn concept, and to illustrate our uncanny bond with dragons.

Mechanics - By drawing upon existing gameplay, we can expose the player to a heightened sense of danger so they understand their lives are truly forfeit at the outset.

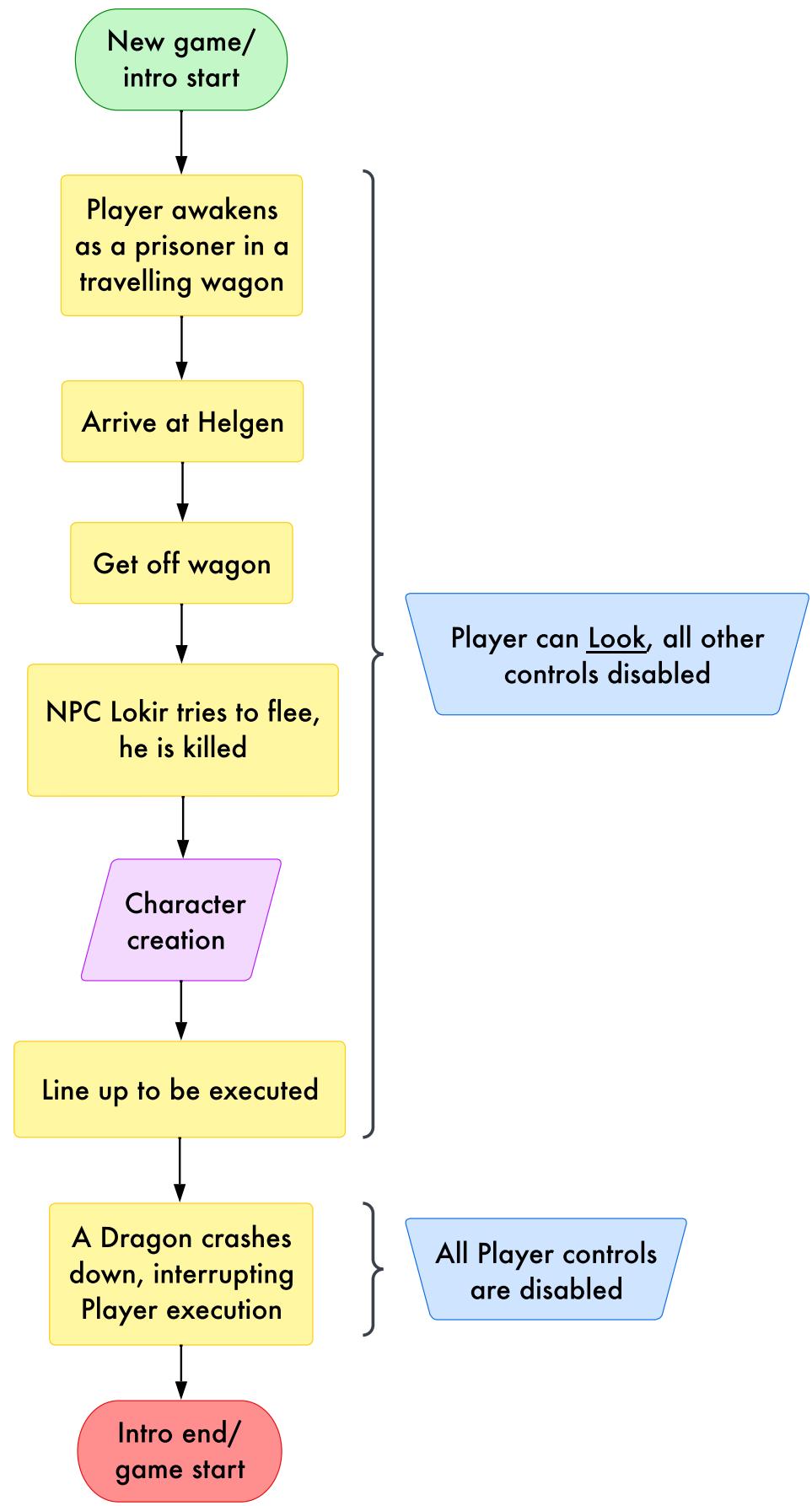
Dialogue - There is a lot of exposition introduced, so some emotional, character-based tweaks will help to integrate it.

NEXT: Before and After flowcharts help me form my plan...

Flowchart Key

- Start
- Process
- Gameplay
- Input
- End

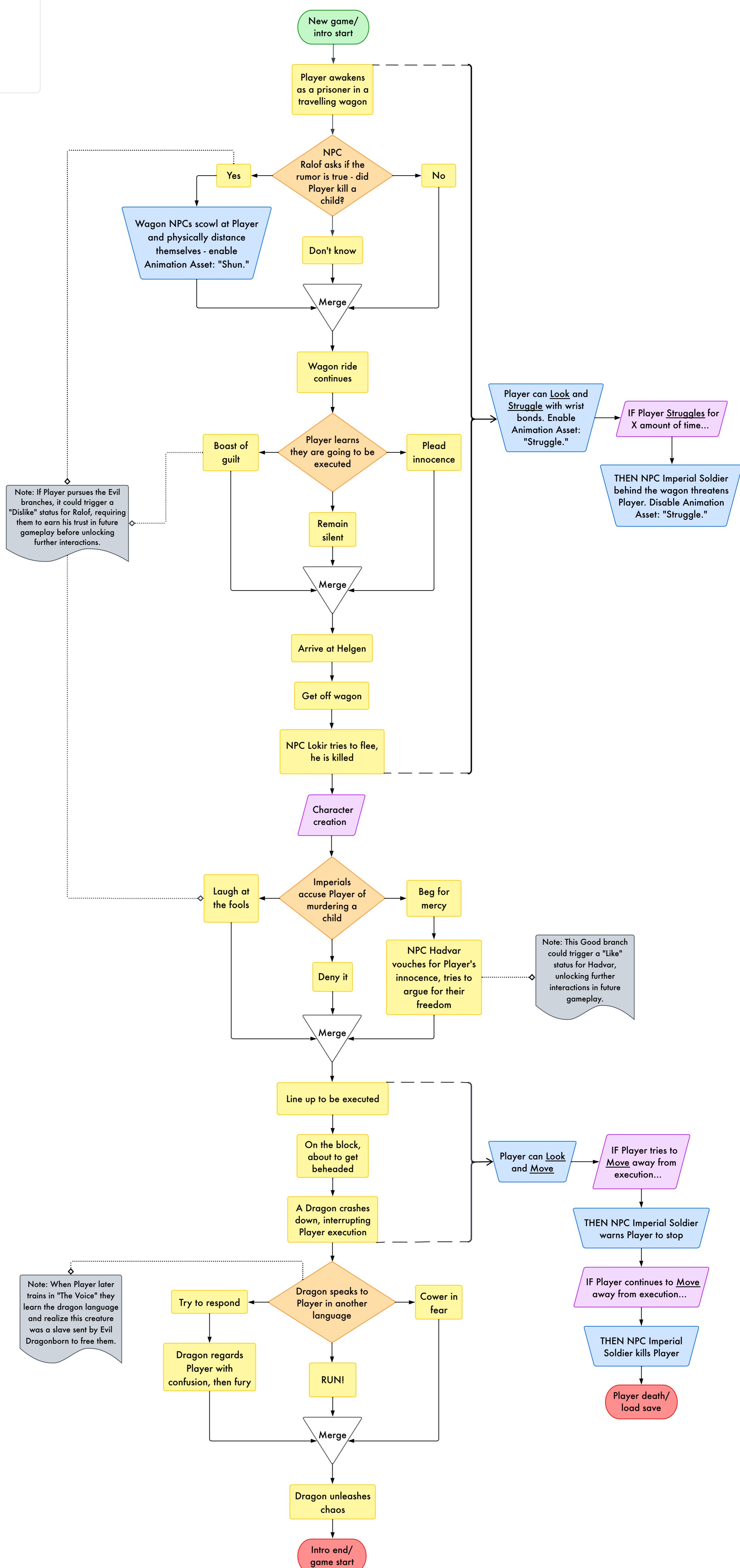
SEVIRIM Original Intro Scene



Flowchart Key

- Start
- Process
- Decision
- Gameplay
- Note
- Merge
- Input
- End

SKYRIM "Razing Helgen" New Intro Scene Concept



RAZING HELGEN

Story Exercise

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Based on *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* by Bethesda Game Studios

FADE IN:

BEGIN INTRO

EXT. SKYRIM - DAY

We (THE PLAYER) are jostled awake. Our hands are bound. We find ourselves held captive in a wagon with three men: shifty LORIK and grim RALOF, who sits protectively beside ULFRIC, a stoic figure wearing a gag over his mouth.

With an oaken groan, the wagon bears us through an arctic, fog-haunted forest in a military convoy.

TITLE SCREEN

GAMEPLAY NOTE: Player can take the LOOK and STRUGGLE Actions. If we STRUGGLE too much, then it triggers SCENARIO A:

START SCENARIO A

An IMPERIAL SOLDIER follows behind the wagon on horseback. He spurs his mount forward and points his sword at us.

IMPERIAL SOLDIER #1
I'm watching you, Prisoner.

Result: The STRUGGLE Action is disabled.

END SCENARIO A

RALOF
(re: Player)
You. You're awake. Are the rumors true? Did you murder that child?

Our fellow prisoners look at us expectantly.

PLAYER DIALOGUE CHOICES:

A) "Never. I was framed!"

The three men relax.

RALOF (CONT'D)
<GRUNT> Guess we're all convinced of our own innocence, eh?

B) "I... I don't remember."

A tense silence lingers after our response.

C) "With pleasure."

LORIK
By the Eight...

RALOF
Only cowards and hagravens would
dare harm a child.

The three men scowl and distance themselves from us.

DIALOGUE MERGE POINT

RALOF (CONT'D)
You stumbled right into that
Imperial ambush. Same as us - and
this miserable wretch.

Ralof nods his head in Lorik's direction.

LORIK
Damn you, Stormcloaks. I had a good
thing going here in Skyrim before
your pesky riots. Empire had plenty
of fat to live off of. Now there's
taxes on everything, military
checkpoints everywhere you look -
impossible to do business!

RALOF
Is that what you thieves call it?

LORIK
If they hadn't been out hunting for
you traitors, I would have nabbed
that horse and been halfway to
Hammerfell by now.

RALOF
<SCOFF> At least something good has
come of all this then.

Lorik GRUMBLES and addresses us.

LORIK
You. I don't know what you did, and
I don't care. Let's help each
other, eh? Find a way out. It's
these Stormcloaks the Empire wants.

RALOF
We're brothers in binds now, thief.

LORIK
Why couldn't they have gagged you
like they did that lout?

Lorik indicates Ulfric.

RALOF

Watch your tongue, dog! You're addressing Ulfric Stormcloak, the true High King of Skyrim.

LORIK

Ulfric? Jarl of Windhelm? But you're the leader of the rebellion. If the Empire caught you... Gods, NO. Where are they taking us?

IMPERIAL WAGON DRIVER

Shut up back there.

Up ahead, dreary stone battlements emerge from the fog. IMPERIAL GUARDS open the heavy gates to admit our convoy.

IMPERIAL GUARD

The headsman is ready.

LORIK

Headsman? We're to be executed!?

PLAYER DIALOGUE CHOICES:

A) "But I've committed no crime!"

RALOF

Says everyone who's been caught.

B) Remain silent.

Ralof gives a knowing nod in your direction.

C) "Ha! My head won't bring that little girl back."

RALOF (CONT'D)

For you, monster, I pray the Empire shows no mercy.

DIALOGUE MERGE POINT

Ralof leans over to whisper something to Ulfric. The Stormcloak leader's hard eyes slide up to meet ours.

Our wagon continues into...

THE TOWN OF HELGEN

It's a bleak, frostbitten hamlet of muddy roads and squat stone buildings that huddle together against the bitter cold.

RALOF (CONT'D)
Sovengarde awaits.

LORIK
Shor, Mara, Dibella, Kynareth,
Akatosh. Divines, please spare me.

RALOF
Casting a wide net there, thief. Do
you think they'll hear your pleas?

An Imperial Soldier races across our path to address a magnificent figure decorated in the military ornament of a high station. This is GENERAL TULLIUS. He parleys with a delegation of ominous, black-robed THALMOR.

IMPERIAL SOLDIER #2
General Tullius! Ulfric is here.

GENERAL TULLIUS
Speak of the Daedra. See for
yourself, friends. The Bear of
Markath, Spear of the Stormcloak
rebellion... in all his glory.

General Tullius sweeps a hand toward us. He and the somber Thalmor watch derisively as our wagon passes them by.

RALOF
<SPITS> Golden swine!

GENERAL TULLIUS
Come. Let's get this over with.

Tullius and the Thalmor march away.

RALOF
Look at him, the invaders' own
military governor, groveling at the
feet of those butchers. I knew the
blasted elves were behind this.

The wagon rattles on. VILLAGERS watch the convoy in fear and awe. Ralof looks out at them.

RALOF (CONT'D)
Ah, Helgen. <CHUCKLES> Used to be
sweet on a girl from here. I wonder
if Vilod is still making that mead
with juniper berries --

LORIK
Don't you ever shut up? We're all
going to die!

A boy, HAMING, points at us from the safety of his porch.

HAMING
Papa, look. Soldiers!

His father, TOROLF, grabs the child and ushers him away.

TOROLF
Inside, little cub.

Our wagon pulls up beside another, filled with more STORMCLOAKS. An IMPERIAL CAPTAIN strides up with an outfit of Imperial Soldiers and HADVAR, a military administrator.

RALOF
End of the line.

IMPERIAL CAPTAIN
Get this rabble out of the carts.

LORIK
No, no, no...

RALOF
Shouldn't keep the gods waiting.

Ralof rises, as do the others, and everyone exits the wagon.

GAMEPLAY NOTE: Player is piloted to stand and follow, but we can still take the LOOK Action.

We line up with the other prisoners before the Imperials.

LORIK
Wait, no - we're not Stormcloaks!

RALOF
Face your death with some courage,
thief.

LORIK
We weren't even with you! Please,
you have to tell them. We have
nothing to do with their stupid
rebellion - I swear!

IMPERIAL CAPTAIN
Silence. Go to the block when your
name is called.

Hadvar reads from a heavy tome and takes notes with a quill.

HADVAR
 Ulfrik Stormcloak. Jarl of
 Windhelm. By decree of Emperor
 Titus Mede II, you are accused of
 high treason.

Without hesitation, Ulfic strides toward a gathered crowd.

RALOF
 May Talos embrace us, my king.

HADVAR
 Ralof of Riverwood. By decree of
 Emperor Titus Mede II, you are
 accused of armed insurrection.

Ralof marches after Ulfic.

HADVAR (CONT'D)
 Lokir of Rorikstead. By decree of --

LORIK
 Damn you! Damn you all to Oblivion!

Lokir races away from custody.

IMPERIAL CAPTAIN
 Archers!

An Imperial Soldier shoots Lokir in the back. The wounded man falls. Tries to crawl away. Another soldier hurries over. Plunges his sword into him. Once, then again.

IMPERIAL CAPTAIN (CONT'D)
 Anyone else want to run?

VILLAGER #1 (O.C.)
 Oh gods!

IMPERIAL CAPTAIN
 Proceed.

HADVAR
 (re: Player)
 Who... are you?

GAMEPLAY NOTE: Player enters the Character Creation menu to design their avatar.

HADVAR (CONT'D)
 By decree of Emperor Titus Mede II,
 you are accused of... pedicide.

PLAYER DIALOGUE CHOICES:

A) "Please! I beg you, have mercy on me! I was set up!"

HADVAR (CONT'D)
 Captain. I have it on good authority that the prisoner speaks the truth. Senica of the fourth legion reported that --

IMPERIAL CAPTAIN
 They go to the block.

HADVAR
 By your orders, Captain.
 (re: Player)
 I... I am sorry.

B) "I am innocent."

IMPERIAL CAPTAIN
 <CONDESCENDING LAUGH>

C) "She was the first of many. Your axe is but a reed against the coming storm of judgement. Fools, the lot of you!"

IMPERIAL CAPTAIN
 Get this worm out of my sight!

DIALOGUE MERGE POINT

GAMEPLAY NOTE: Imperial Soldiers roughly drag Player to...

THE HEADSMAN'S BLOCK

Prisoners, Soldiers, and a PRIESTESS OF ARKAY gather around General Tullius who squares off with Ulfric. Nearby, a hooded HEADSMAN stands beside a broad block and wields a greataxe.

GAMEPLAY NOTE: Player can take the LOOK and RUN Actions. If we try to RUN away, then it triggers SCENARIO B:

START SCENARIO B

Two Imperial Soldiers draw swords and block our escape.

IMPERIAL SOLDIER #3
 Try it again.

Result: Player is piloted back into position.

END SCENARIO B

GAMEPLAY NOTE: If Player attempts to RUN away a second time, then it triggers SCENARIO C:

START SCENARIO C

Two Imperial Soldiers brutally cut us down in our tracks.

Result: Player death. Load Save.

END SCENARIO C

GENERAL TULLIUS

(re: Ulfric)

Somehow I knew this was how we'd finally meet. Folks call you the "Hero of Skyrim."

(re: town)

But tell me, good people of Helgen. Does a hero use vile sorcery like "The Voice" to murder his own king and steal the throne?

We hear a MURMUR from the Prisoners and Citizens. Ulfric takes a threatening step toward Tullis, but Soldiers restrain him. Tullius points a finger in Ulfric's face.

GENERAL TULLIUS (CONT'D)

You started this war, heathen. You plunged your own homeland into chaos. Now I will put you DOWN.

Tullius turns to face the town.

GENERAL TULLIUS (CONT'D)

Ulfric Stormcloak is a plague upon Skyrim. Today, we purge this land of his corrupt influence. This is how the Empire will return peace to you! This is how --

A BESTIAL ROAR echoes throughout the valley. Everyone looks up. The soldiers are on high alert.

HADVAR

What was that?

GENERAL TULLIUS

Carry on.

IMPERIAL CAPTAIN

(re: Priestess)

You heard him. Give these barbarians their last rites.

The Priestess lifts her open hands and raises her eyes aloft.

PRIESTESS OF ARKAY

As we free thy souls to return with
grace to Aetherius, blessing of the
Eight Divines be upon thee. For
thou art the salt and earth of
Nirn, our beloved --

A frustrated STORMCLOAK SOLDIER stomps toward the Headsman.

STORMCLOAK SOLDIER

Talos spare me your blatherings.

Everyone looks around in confusion as the Stormcloak Soldier gets down on his knees and exposes his neck on the block.

STORMCLOAK SOLDIER (CONT'D)

My life for High King Ulfric!

IMPERIAL CAPTAIN

Get on with it.

STORMCLOAK SOLDIER

My ancestors smile down upon me,
Imperials. Can you say the same?

CHOP! His boasting is cut short by the Headsman's axe. The man's head tumbles into the waiting basket with a geyser of blood. The Imperial Captain nudges his headless corpse aside.

RALOF

Imperial bastards!

A collective GASP ripples throughout Helgen.

VILLAGER #2 (O.C.)

Death to the Stormcloaks!

We hear a spattering of other SHOUTS of approval. Some of disdain. The Imperials glance around nervously.

IMPERIAL CAPTAIN

(re: Player)

Next! You - the murderer.

GAMEPLAY NOTE: We can take the LOOK and MOVE Actions, but again, if we MOVE anywhere but the Headsman's block, it triggers Scenario B and C.

Slowly, we approach our imminent death as the Headsman uses a rag to wipe the blade of his cruel axe clean. We hear our own HEARTBEAT thrum in our ears. Our vision BLURS and PULSES.

Glimpses of sprayed blood and the severed head overwhelm us as we fall to our knees. We TILT and lean over the block.

Look up at the executioner's silhouette. His blood-streaked blade glints in the frosty dawn light. Our end has come.

The Headsman hefts his greataxe overhead...

BOOM!!! A monstrous form slams down atop a nearby tower in a blast of dust and debris. The Headsman drops his axe, tumbles to the ground. We peer up at the abomination - a thing of horns and wings, of legends and nightmares. This is a DRAGON.

IMPERIAL CAPTAIN
What in Oblivion!?

GENERAL TULLIUS
Kill it! KILL IT!

Imperial Soldiers draw their weapons and charge.

DRAGON
KRUMAH!

Its voice is a peal of thunder. Blasts the attackers back.

The Dragon looks down at us. Time seems to slow. Its serpentine neck cranes down ten, twenty feet. Glittering, intelligent eyes survey us from atop a massacre of fangs.

DRAGON (CONT'D)
IN. AAV. BOVUL. BO.

PLAYER DIALOGUE CHOICES:

A) *Cower in dread.*

The Dragon's nostrils flare. It smells our fear.

B) *I... I don't understand.*

The Dragon narrows its baleful eyes suspiciously.

C) *In, av, bovul, bo?*

The Dragon cocks its head, unsure. Then, without warning, its maw unhinges and releases a deafening, saliva-spattered ROAR.

DIALOGUE MERGE POINT

The monster's neck recoils. Spreads its wings of doom. Unleashes a devastating SHOUT. Clouds swirl overhead. Fire rains down from the heavens. The apocalypse is upon us.

END INTRO

GAME START