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Martin Pichlmair

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"War. War never changes." Prologue, Fallout 1-3

It was around 450 BCE when Leucippus and Democritus formulated the first theories about Atoms and Void. It took humanity 2400 years to turn those theories into weapons. At 5:29 a.m. on July 16, 1945, the United States conducted the world's first nuclear test explosion at Alamogordo, New Mexico¹. The nuclear age had begun. Fallout is a series of role-playing games set in a prolonged nuclear age that follows the fictional Great War of 2077. Its story follows an alternate history scenario that branches from our history at about 1950². Contrary to our history, an American is the first in space and the NASA continually sends astronauts to the moon until 2020. An energy crisis strikes the world around 2050 and especially the energy-hungry U.S.A. Due to the crisis, Europe invades the Middle East, the United States close their borders to Mexico, and China invades Alaska. At the same time a mysterious socially transmitted disease, the "New Plague" emerges. It kills hundreds of thousands worldwide. Fuelled by paranoia from the plague, and in order to satisfy its energy demands, the United States annex Canada in 2072 and regain Alaska in 2077. In this very year, an all-out atomic war between the United States of America and China burns the earth to ashes. Few humans survive. Most of the survivors endure years of isolation in shelters called Vaults. During the years following the nuclear fallout, the earth changes its face. Species mutate, some animals become sentient, and many humans lose their mind. All titles released in the main Fallout series start with the player assuming the role of a vault-dweller born and raised in a Vault.

Fat Men and Little Boys

"Since the dawn of human kind, when our ancestors first discovered the killing power of rock and bone, blood has been spilled in the name of everything, from God to justice to simple, psychotic rage." Prologue, Fallout 1

The invention of the atomic bomb was a striking international collaboration between science, the military, and politics. Its development is based on the work on numerous scientists, yet a number of names stand out. Leo Szilard, a Hungarian physicist, who acquired a patent on nuclear chain reaction that he later assigned to the British Admiralty. Lisa Meitner and Otto Frisch of Austria, who announced the theory of nuclear fission, Robert J. Oppenheimer, who was the scientific director of the Los Alamos National Laboratory that hosted the Manhattan Project. Enrico Fermi, who was forced to leave Italy under Mussolini. Fermi was the chief scientist of the team working on the first atomic bombs. Szilard laid the foundation for building devices that

could maintain nuclear fission - for productive as well as destructive purposes. The Manhattan Project succeeded in building a nuclear bomb after three quick years of research³. The United States rushed the program in order to get a lead on their competitors in this arms race. Germany was supposedly already close to building its own bomb. Yet even the inventors of the first atomic bomb were overwhelmed by its destructive power. J. Robert Oppenheimer cited verse 32 from Chapter 11 of the Bhagavad-Gita: "I am become death, the destroyer of worlds." upon witnessing the first test explosion (Hijiya 2000)⁴.

The bomb was the result of the work of individuals, each of them bringing his personal standpoint. Oppenheimer is supposed to have "believed that he had a job to do; that he should do it only because it was his job and not because he was intent on obtaining any particular result." (Hijiya 2000). Leo Szilard on the other hand was always a critic of the military use of nuclear fission. In July 1945 he issued a petition to the president of the United States, Harry S. Truman:

The development of atomic power will provide the nations with new means of destruction. The atomic bombs at our disposal represent only the first step in this direction, and there is almost no limit to the destructive power which will become available in the course of their future development. Thus a nation which sets the precedent of using these newly liberated forces of nature for purposes of destruction may have to bear the responsibility of opening the door to an era of devastation on an unimaginable scale. (Szilard 1945)

Truman still decided to authorise the use of atomic bombs in the war against Japan, after the Japanese denied to accept the Potsdam Declaration, the "Proclamation Defining Terms for Japanese Surrender". On August 5, 1945, the atomic bomb "Little Boy" was dropped on the city of Hiroshima. Three days later the "Fat Man" destroyed Nagasaki. Both bombs together killed estimably 220.000 people during the year 1945, and many would follow during the next years due to radiation-induced cancer. On the other hand, the bomb abruptly ended the Second World War.

Life in the Post-Apocalyptic Wastelands

"In the year 2077, after millennia of armed conflict, the destructive nature of man could sustain itself no longer. The world was plunged into an abyss of nuclear fire and radiation. But it was not, as some had predicted, the end of the world. Instead, the apocalypse was simply the prologue to another bloody chapter of human history. For man had succeeded in destroying the world - but war, war never changes." Prologue, Fallout 3

Fallout is a franchise of role-playing games invented, developed and published by Interplay. The original Fallout (Interplay 1997) was released in 1997 and is regarded as a spiritual successor of Interplay's 1987 post-nuclear role-playing game Wasteland (Interplay 1987). Fallout takes place in 2161 in Southern California and begins in Vault 13. Fallout 2 (Black Isle 1998) was created by Black Isle Studios, a branch of Interplay, in 1998. The game takes place in 2241 with the player assuming the role of a descendant of the hero of the first game. In 2003, Interplay cancelled the development of "Van Buren", the Fallout 3 that did not happen, and closed Black Isle

Studios due to financial troubles in the mother company. Instead, Interplay published two real-time strategy games taking place in the Fallout universe. Interplay sold the rights to the single-player Fallout franchise to Bethesda Softworks in 2004. Yet they announced in a press release⁵ that staff from the original Fallout team were working on a massive multiplayer title called "Project V13"⁶. Fallout 3 was released by Bethesda in 2008 (Bethesda 2008).

Fallout 3 takes place in the year 2277. The world is slowly awakening after a devastating nuclear war that took place 200 years ago. The protagonist of the game grows up in Vault 101. The introduction of the game is one of the first highlights, blending in-game cut-scenes with short tutorial segments in the best tradition of Half-Life. It also easily introduces the three things you are going to do most in this game: walk around, talk, and fight. And it already shows that a lot of fights can be circumvented by careful negotiation. It takes a full hour of playtime, a ridiculous aptitude test (the G.O.A.T.), and the killing of the father of your best friend⁷, until you are released into the wilderness of the wastelands, finally on your own. Blinking into the sun, most players will instantly find their way into one of the biggest settlements in the area: Megaton. The town is a cluster of wooden sheds thrown into a crater left by an atomic bomb that failed to detonate. The bomb forms the centre of the village and is prayed at by the followers of the Church of the Atom. Given sufficient skill, the player can choose to either disarm or detonate the bomb. Ethics are a rare commodity in the wastelands.

Ludwig Wittgenstein famously expressed that "Ethics and Aesthetics are one and the same" (Wittgenstein 1990, 6.421) in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. While the interpretation of this contradictory remark is left to the reader (see Lewis 2004), it is astounding how closely the psychological state of the citizens of the wasteland mirrors the landscape, and vice versa. "The world of the happy man is a different one from that of the unhappy man" (Wittgenstein 1990, 6.43). Settlements are battered ruins and sheds scattered over the place, embattled by fences and piled-up car wrecks. Their inhabitants are mutually hostile and even more so towards strangers. Factions fight over dominance. The few resources left are a constant source of conflict. Once a group gets into possession of a resource, it is not likely to move out again. So it builds a settlement around or even in it. The atomic bomb is such a resource - it emits fear and awe - as well as the aircraft carrier that houses Rivet City. Another settlement is found in a solitary and well-guarded skyscraper. The ghouls took refuge in the Museum of American History in a show appropriately called *Underworld*. The super mutants, a dangerous and, as it turns out, intentional mutation of humans, simply took over all open areas of the city. The wastelands are a hostile environment.

Divergence during the Atomic Age

"In the early days, thousands were spared the horrors of the holocaust by taking refuge in enormous underground shelters, known as vaults. But when they emerged, they had only the hell of the wasted to greet them - all except those in Vault 101." Prologue, *Fallout 3*

The world in which *Fallout* plays is not a distant future of ours. The setting is a

parallel timeline, a future that developed differently than ours after a certain point in the past. The point in time when the Fallout universe branched from ours is called "divergence":

"The exact historical details of the divergence and even the exact moment when it occurred are unknown, but it is known that it happened at some point after World War 2. The sparse evidence scattered throughout the games suggests that the break occurred between 1947 and 1955, although this remains speculative."⁸

From that point on the world developed into a completely different direction than our own. At some crossroads, history took a different turn. Semiconductors were developed much later in that universe, obviating the miniaturisation of our computers and electronic devices. Instead of going for computers, the scientists of Fallout concentrated their efforts on harnessing atomic power. Seen from a different angle, the Fallout universe can be described as "what the people of the 1950s thought things would be like in 2077, a future as envisioned through the lens of the Atomic Age and Jet Age."⁹

In the context of the game, this setting gets another twist. Since the Vaults were closed before the war they maintain a conserved view of the world before the bombs dropped, which again is a projection of the social norms and customs of the 1950s into the future. The Vaults are in-game museums; places where the laws from before the world ended still apply. They are cosy and comfortable prisons, forcing their inhabitants to follow rules grounded on circumstances that are no longer given. The chain of events that leads to the flight of the player character from Vault 101 has its roots in a collision between the inward facing interest of the Vault's leader (aptly named The Overseer) and the broader issues put forward by the chief scientist and doctor. It turns out that the doctor, your father, fled the Vault in order to pursue an important scientific project in the interest of a wider population than the Vault's, leaving you behind. The game proper starts off with you following in the footsteps of your father, trading the safe haven of the Vault for the freedom of the Capitol Wasteland.

Assembling a Mosaic

"For on the fateful day, when fire rained from the sky, the giant steel door of Vault 101 slid closed... and never reopened. It was here you were born. It is here you will die because, in Vault 101, no one ever enters and no one ever leaves." Prologue, Fallout 3

The outside world of Fallout is surprisingly alive for a post-nuclear wasteland. Every corner is inhabited, nearly every building that features walls, a door, and an upper level (roofs are definitely a rare commodity), houses someone. The creatures the player character encounters are diverse. From gigantic insects, crabs and scorpions to genetically engineered or altered species. Those places that are not inhabited by wildlife are home to wastelanders, raiders, and hermits. By the river you might stumble over a trading post inhabited by an old lady. To the north, there is Dave's Republic, a settlement that proclaims its own state. In the west, there are caverns populated by a tribe of children. Adults have to leave the place after they reach a

certain age¹⁰. When the player character initially leaves the Vault, she is overwhelmed by the vastness of the wasteland. Soon, those who live there might overpower her. All creatures living in the Capitol Wasteland are reacting to each other. Some co-operate, others fiercely fight each other. The same is true for sentient beings. Sometimes, one might stumble across a fight between a trading caravan and a company of raiders. These occasions add to the feeling of wandering through a living, breathing world. Yet complexity is also the cause of chaos, illogical plot developments, bugs, and inconsistencies. The more detailed the world, the more striking are those moments where the simulation cannot keep up the illusion.

Fallout is an enormously complex game. It does not take the player at the hand but much rather kicks him into its world. The freedom he gets brings great responsibility. Except for the main quest, all missions can be accomplished in manifold ways. You can kill quest givers or they can simply die on their own, even during quests. This should shock all World of Warcraft (Blizzard 2004) players. Dying quest givers and buggy quests increase the feeling of an unstable world. Strangely, this instability results in a beautiful fragility. The universe the player character dwells in is unpredictable, just like the shattered environment around her. In other words: many things that would be weird in our world feel entirely normal in a post-nuclear setting¹¹.

The post-nuclear world of Fallout is in a constant state of transition. Mankind turned nomadic again, and those who settle down immediately start to copy the rigid social structures of an abolished society. Humanity tries hard to remember former greatness. Yet the quest for the old paradise is futile. Moira Brown, witty quest giver and proprietor of the Craterside Supplies store in Megaton, metaphorically compares the post-nuclear world with broken glass. She maintains that most people are desperately trying to put it together as it was. Contrarily she herself is aiming for assembling something new and beautiful out of the shards: a mosaic. This is what she urges the player to do¹². In the wastelands, numerous factions are battling for their vision of the mosaic (or the reassembled glass). President Eden's Enclave tries to recreate a synthesized version of the United States of the past. The Brotherhood of Steel originally also strove for conservation, yet the local branch run by Elder Lyons is definitely on Moira Brown's course. Rivet City is an appendage to a science lab that could be the root of the next apocalypse. The Super Mutants and the Ghouls are setting up post-human societies. Fallout tells a story about the futility of armed conflict and about the inability to maintain social norms in times of crisis. It teaches that the apocalypse is striking at the heart, not the body. The game successfully denies resolution of any of these conflicts. Instead, it puts forward one of the most intelligent critiques of human behaviour ever found in a video game. War. War never changes...

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[Online] Available at: <http://www.dannen.com/decision/45-07-17.html>
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Notes

- ¹ At http://www.nuclearfiles.org/menu/timeline/html_index.htm (Accessed 01-23-2009) you can find a detailed timeline of all things atomic and nuclear.
- ² See <http://fallout.wikia.com/wiki/Timeline> (Accessed 01-23-2009) for a timeline of the history according to Fallout.
- ³ Upon visiting the Museum of Technology in Fallout 3, the player finds a poster of a lecture on "Oppenheimer's Folly", a popular name for the Trinity experiment. Trinity was the first nuclear test conducted by Oppenheimer's Manhattan Project on July 16, 1945. Fat Man, the bomb dropped over Nagasaki had the same technical layout as the one used in the Trinity test.
- ⁴ The Bhagavad-Gita is a Sanskrit Hindu scripture from about 500-200 B. C. E. Interestingly, Fallout incorporates a well known Hindu concept: Karma. The player character has Karma level that rises with good deeds and decreases if she acts evil. Reactions to the player character's Karma level are frequent and diverse. Some NPCs might not talk to the player or refuse to accompany her. Some quest givers might give withhold missions. At some point, good players are even hunted by bounty hunters because there is a price on their head.
- ⁵ See: <http://www.interplay.com/about/article.php?id=24> (Accessed 02-02-2009)
- ⁶ The player character of Fallout 1 comes from Vault 13.
- ⁷ Actually you can escape without killing the Overseer. But that means leaving him torturing his daughter, your best friend. You decide.

- ⁸ See also: <http://fallout.wikia.com/wiki/Divergence> (Accessed 01-23-2009)
- ⁹ See also: <http://fallout.wikia.com/wiki/Divergence> (Accessed 01-23-2009)
- ¹⁰ There is no explanation where the children come from.
- ¹¹ Many encounters are intentionally weird. E.g. a robot wearing a wig who is positive that he is Button Gwinnett, second signer on the United States Declaration of Independence. Or a battle between two would-be super heroes, the Mechanist and the AntAgonizer.
- ¹² It could be argued that this is what Bethesda did with the heritage of the Fallout franchise. The original creators, Black Isle Studios, wrote most of the history for earlier Fallout games. Bethesda treated the earlier games with caution and decency.