
FALLOUT BIBLE: GOSPEL & ACTS OF ANON

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Why does /v/ think Fallout 3 is bad?

<https://archive.is/NChKy>

The Bethesda Shallow Sandbox Experience

<https://archive.is/dgiDs>

GOSPEL OF ANON

I'd like to preface this by saying that I have zero doubts Fallout 4 will be a runaway mainstream success, selling 25+ million copies and being an Action RPG staple for most games in the years to come. If you enjoy the Bethesda Shallow Sandbox Experience first featured in Morrowind and perfected in Oblivion, then you will probably be happy with Fallout 4. Also, you probably think that the only real criticism that old Fallout fans have against Bethesda-Fallout is the change from turn based isometric gameplay to third person action based realtime gameplay, when that is more of a byproduct or a symptom of Bethesda-Fallout problems, rather than the cause of them.

To nip that particular argument in the bud, the reason turn based combat and an isometric perspective was so beloved by Fallout fans was because they were mechanisms that best helped to portray Fallout as the PnP campaign simulator in video game form that it was designed to be from the very beginning. Before Fallout became it's own distinct franchise, it was supposed to be a post-apocalyptic game based on Steve Jackson's PnP ruleset G.U.R.P.S¹.

This game had five key tenets and this is part of what I will focus on;

Rule #1: Multiple Decisions. We will always allow for multiple solutions to any obstacle.

Rule #2: No Useless Skills. The skills we allow you to take will have meaning in the game.

Rule #3: Dark humor was good. Slap-stick was not.

Rule #4: Let the player play how he wants to play.

Rule #5: Your actions have repercussions.

1. http://fallout.wikia.com/wiki/Vault_13:_A_GURPS_Post-Nuclear_Adventure

After licensing issues prevented the Vault 13 G.U.R.P.S game from eventuating, we got a homebrew system in its place that became known as S.P.E.C.I.A.L. However, these core design goals still permeate just about every aspect of Fallout's design. Removing key aspects from that framework without considering how it would affect everything else, like Bethesda did, greatly damages the game as a whole.

It should also be noted that the cancelled Black Isle Fallout 3 'Van Buren' project would've featured an adjustable 3D camera and optional real time combat in the vein of Arcanum anyway ². It's easier to blame nostalgia driven neckbeards and that's what the gaming community at large has generally put it down to, but it's not the truth at all. Rather than try and take into consideration what makes Fallout good and design around that, they (Bethesda) try to shoehorn their own features and design principles even if it directly contradicts central aspects of the Fallout franchise. This is why Bethesda is incapable of creating a good Fallout game.

"If you play Fallout 3, you know, Liam Neeson is the voice of your dad, and there are some good emotional beats there, but there's only so much you can do when you're clicking on a line of dialog and there's no spoken response. So the emotional depth that we got by having a voiced protagonist has actually [made the story] way more tense than I ever expected."³

Emil 'books don't have emotional depth' Pagliarulo

This speaks to a deeply flawed vision that Bethesda continues to push with their version of Fallout. Specifically, they attempt to build a connection between the player and the game by integrating the player's personal story into the main plot and making it the focus of the experience. In Fallout 3, your connection with a "middle aged guy" was put forth as your primary motivation for completing the game's main story. The likes of the radio jockey Three Dog, also emphasise the point. Three Dog is a character who, if listened to on the in-game radio, will extol the player's virtues if morally acceptable decisions are

2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1uuDKrY7eW0>

3. <https://archive.is/SOOvN>

made in quests, or the opposite and condemning you if the player engages in less than scrupulous actions. The player character is at the centre of the gameworld and should take centre stage in the narrative under this design philosophy. Bethesda sees this as 'emotional depth' because when the world looks to you to make a decision, presumably, you'd care more about it. Making conversations cinematic and giving the player character a voice is just another way to make the player character a stronger presence in the game world.

Black Isle's Fallout gives the player many, many forms of interaction with the gameworld as a way to become immersed in it. The West Coast is dirty, gritty, violent and it can showcase the best or worst of humanity depending on who you run into. You can seduce people, become a Porn Star (with the right stats), become a Heavyweight Boxing Champion (again with the right stats), or a Slaver or help Myron create addictive drugs. You can say and do all sorts of things if you are roleplaying that kind of character. And all these actions are optional side content that are structured around your skills and attributes.

These kinds of "down to earth" interactions already weren't part of Fallout 3 but Fallout 4 with its voiced protagonist compounds the issue. The overwhelming majority of voiced dialog would be tone neutral conversation progression. Because all interactions are cinematic and voiced, there's less room for non-conventional interactions covering controversial subjects. With changes to the skill system, all special dialog might be loaded onto a Speech skill like in Skyrim. This links back to Rule #1 mentioned above. By offering less ways to interact and navigate through dialog situations, you are offering the player less and less ways to overcome obstacles and challenges in the game. While the game is set in an open world, the quest design becomes more linear. The end result is an experience where the player doesn't feel as connected to the player character. This is because the player character can no longer express themselves through any nuance that relates to their skillsets or non-binary morality. This isn't that much of an issue if the game is filled with well written dialog sequences that allows the player to express a complex range of emotions, motivations and skills. However this is Bethesda we're talking about.

“One of the things we really tried to avoid is surprising the player with whether they've been good or bad. We wanted to be clear to you that you're making a conscious choice to be one or the other. I've played games where I made a choice and I thought I was being the nice guy, and then it's, "Wait, wait, why is he upset?" We didn't want it to be a surprise. Sometimes it's a surprise in terms of how a person reacts if you are being a jerk, but it's not a surprise as to whether you're good or bad.”⁴

Pete *'I need to be told when I'm a bad boy'* **Hines**

The lack of character depth for the protagonist becomes all the more apparent when you look at the Karma system from Fallout 3. Karma in Fallout 1 and 2 are minor systems that can be summed up as a "moral reputation". They have specific titles for levels of Karma and consequences that relate mostly to interactions with potential companions. But as a whole, it's not very relevant. Unless you cross certain lines (like killing children), the Wasteland in general isn't going to care about your morality. Why would the people of the Den or the gangsters of New Reno care if you've eaten your vegetables and been a good boy? The people in the game care about the tangibles. And it's this dilemma that provides much of the fodder for the moral quandaries you'll face if you wish to play as a virtuous or selfless character. The role of morality in a post-apocalyptic Wasteland that's so far removed from what we are familiar with, is absolutely central to how the Fallout games are put together because Fallout deals with how society rebuilds from the brink of destruction. It asks 'how do we rebuild in a way that this will never happen again?' As such, many of the situations you encounter are coloured in shades of grey as opposed to strict black and white. Power struggles by forces in a conflict of ideology⁵, instead of clearly defined perfect good and satanic evil. Granted, the original two Fallout games had plenty of situations where you choose between an asshole and a non-asshole, as well as featuring many broadly good v evil decision points. But in the ending slides, no significant consideration is given to your morality. The games don't assume your motivations and judge you for them, it just lets you navigate the setting and push the changes you want onto the gameworld through your choices.

4. <https://archive.is/lITZz>

5. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Cp44Pr5b30>

Your character is defined by your personal moral code, your narrative choices, your skillset and your physical attributes. That's why moral dilemmas are a staple of Fallout games, it's a game predicated on challenging the player, to see if it's possible to change the human nature that got the world to this point, and show the player the results of their choices. "War never changes".

By forcing the player into strict moral guidelines that the game hammers in at every opportune moment, the player loses a real connection with the world that they're exploring. The player is forced to see everything in a lens of good and evil, and this harms any potential nuance that the game could display when it comes to morality and characters. Everything is either 'good' or 'bad'. This absolutely destroys the protagonist as a well rounded character, because they're ultimately defined by what the game can allow you to do. In other Fallouts, you can define your character by your skillset, which informs your playstyle, as well as your narrative choices. But in Bethesda's Fallout, your range of potential actions to define yourself is more limited, your interaction with the skill system for roleplaying purposes is much more narrow because it can't fit into the mold of 'good or evil'. The range of actions you can take in the game are boiled down to 'I am good' and 'I am bad'. You are shoehorned into certain character archetypes that are shallow in nature and the game works so hard to define your experience using those archetypes and nothing else.

"That's what we try to create, that sense of going anywhere and doing anything. GTA V does it so well. It puts you in its world and it makes you its director. It says yes to the player a lot, and that's what we try to do. It's just a phenomenal game."⁶

Todd *'don't believe his lies'* **Howard**

Bethesda have long stated that a major goal in their games is that the player should be able to 'go anywhere' and 'do anything'. This central tenet of Bethesda design is at the core of why Bethesda's Fallout is so obsessed with the player character (and moralising him/her). The player is at the centre of the experience, and the player should be in control of their own destiny. As an ideal, this isn't necessarily bad. In fact, it fits in nicely with Rule #4, however, Rule #4 and #5 work in concert for a roleplaying experience. You should offer the player freedom, but you need to have consequences for their actions too. The problem is that Bethesda chooses to understand this idea as 'nothing should overpower the player, the player should be allowed to do anything they want'. We've seen this manifest in the Elder Scrolls games in the form Quest Compasses, Zero Barriers to Guild Progression and Level Scaling. Removing repercussions and meaningful barriers for players in the name of player freedom.

Bethesda games are designed to be a sandbox to be played with at will. The settlement building features being advertised as 'optional' content for Fallout 4 seems to support this idea even more. Modular features over an interconnected, reactive roleplaying experience. Nobody wants their WRPGs as an 'on the rails' linear experience. The problem is that player freedom and player agency requires proper context. The context being the ruleset, the game mechanics and the laws of the setting for internal consistency have to take precedent. Roleplaying needs to be structured around those things, otherwise you end up playing pretend instead of actually roleplaying. The difference between roleplaying and playing pretend is whether the game acknowledges what you do within the confines of the ruleset and acts accordingly⁷.

6. <https://archive.is/BdaLs>

7. <http://www.rpgcodex.net/forums/index.php?threads/larping-and-crpg-mechanics-discuss.78412/#post-2389938>

But it's that reactivity and design which Bethesda has been actively fighting against since Oblivion, because the Bethesda Shallow Sandbox Experience is against inconveniencing players with things like 'internally consistent game logic' or 'mutually exclusive content'. They encourage you to play pretend and call it 'roleplaying choices'. What happens in the end, is a game where the player is a 'tourist' and the internal rules/logic of the setting are more like suggestions. But the reason for it in the first place is that it allows players to create a character concept, and identify with that concept if they want to succeed at the various challenges the game throws at you. Rather than spending millions of dollars on voice acting and limiting what the player character can say, simple lines of text that relate back to a player's build can allow the player to have a profound emotional connection with their characters through roleplaying. That is the reason for Rule #2, all skills will be meaningful throughout the course of the game. It doesn't mean to say that any kind of build should be able to overcome every challenge. Indeed, certain skills in Fallout 1 and Fallout 2 only had limited usefulness. But it means that skills shouldn't be trivial or disposable, all skills should offer something important to the experience so that any kind of character concept based around a certain skillset can find something to hang their hat on.

By having a sanitised game world that gates off risk from players and insulates them from the challenges that the setting provides, for the sake of gameplay convenience, Bethesda shows explicitly that they do not care about the core tenets of Fallout.

Designing an easily navigable and sterile environment that poses few risks for the player can also close off ways in which developers are able to reinforce narrative tones or themes through difficulty and gameplay situations. Something as simple as 'The Glow' from Fallout 1 would not exist in Bethesda's Fallout. Unless the player has the right build and items, it's completely impossible to fully explore the entire location before dying. The player in most cases has to sacrifice blind exploration and focus on what their goals are, constantly going out of their way to manage their radiation levels. Limiting the player using the game mechanics like that is complete anathema to the Bethesda Shallow Sandbox Experience. However by doing so, Black Isle designers are able to hammer home the idea

of The Glow as a literal treasure trove of the Old World. It makes you want to explore it. The risk/reward at play makes the player more invested in the location and it's story than any kind of cinematic or high fidelity texture.

“Violence is funny! Lets all just own up to it! Violence done well is fucking hilarious. It’s like Itchy and Scratchy or Jackass – Now that’s funny!”⁸

Todd 'Komedij Klub Kustodian' Howard

As funny as childish violence might be, the humour of the Fallout setting is mostly grounded in irony and juxtaposition as a means of telling the player a chilling message about the society they are exploring. This goes back to one of Fallout's central themes. "War never changes". Many people (including Bethesda themselves) have taken that to mean that 'history repeats itself'. However, the main takeaway from the quote isn't about history repeating itself, it's about why history repeats itself. War never changes because people never change. The opening statement of Fallout is an indictment of human nature and informs the player that Fallout is a dark and cynical setting.

It's that cynicism that drives Fallout's dark humour, it's why Fallout has a clean retro 50s future aesthetic, one that evokes optimism and a golden era, yet juxtaposes it with the terrible atrocities and violence of Fallout's broken and messed up world. It's a big statement to the player, that humanity is a tainted species and that no one can escape the violent, selfish and barbarism of human nature. The player character in each of the Fallout games exists to challenge that idea and break it, or confirm it, based on their actions.

8. <https://archive.is/g1Plu>

"If war doesn't change, men must change, and so must their symbols. Even if it is nothing at all, know what you follow, Courier..."

...just as I followed you, to the end. Whatever your symbol...

...carry it on your back, and wear it proudly when you stand at Hoover Dam."

Ulysses

Bethesda's Fallout fails to understand this. Their idea of humour lies in using the juxtaposition as a means displaying absurdity. Little Lamplight and Big Town, The Superhuman Gambit where a former Mechanic and AntAgonizer villain fight over the town for no real reason because it's "funny". To be fair, Fallout 2 shows off a lot of absurd humour too, it's actually fucking awful at times, but what makes Fallout 3 different is that it's humour isn't baked into the setting. Fallout 3's ridiculousness isn't anchored to the setting via some sort of logic or in-universe purpose.

Being self contained, Fallout 3's humour isn't necessary for the narrative or themes to function and they don't serve any dramatic, thematic or comedic effect through the use of contrast and juxtaposition like Mr. Fantastic from New Vegas who combines witty lines with the realisation that the NCR really is so incompetent that they'd hire him. Dukov as a counter example from Fallout 3, doesn't really serve a purpose outside of 'lolrandumxD'. This causes issues because a lot of Fallout 3's locales are centered around such 'absurdities', meaning that in effect, what you have is a disjointed landmass with self contained communities that are nothing more than cheap, disposable jokes that add nothing to any greater narrative or themes of the game. I don't even have to go into further detail as to why Bethesda fails at Rule #3 and why it's just bad world-building.

“There are no regional dialects, so sense of unified culture or society. And that's really the problem, isn't it? The Capital Wasteland is a mess. You've got all these these little isolationist factions, but there's no unification, no centralized government. As you play the game and listen to President Eden's speeches on the Enclave radio station, you quickly realize that that's sort of his platform – when and if he shows up in the Capital Wasteland, he'll make everything right again. He'll return America to the land of the free and the home of the brave, replete with white picket fences and apple pies.”⁹

Emil 'so close...' Pagliarulo

The main story arcs for the main series of Fallout games (except for 3 funnily enough) all deal specifically with society. The problem of survival in the Wasteland is central and the largest factions that vie for power in the course of the series all claim to have the answer to that problem. Fallout 1 has the Unity, in which The Master saw the future of humankind in (forced) evolution. Super Mutants being "best equipped to deal with the world today". On the other hand, Fallout 2's Enclave operated differently. Seeing themselves as the legitimate successors of the Old World, they found their answer in the total extinction of what they considered mutants. The Brotherhood of Steel meanwhile, saw the dangers that people could do to the world if potent technology was in the wrong hands, deciding to dedicate themselves to preserving technology instead. The NCR saw the answer in Old World American democratic values. That it was possible to create a New America from the ashes of the Old. Caesar's Legion also found the answer in Old World values too, but looked to the Ancient Roman Empire as their solution. A totalitarian, monolithic culture sustained through conquest and slavery.

And in one way or another, you tackle these factions and agree or reject the answer that is presented to you. But many of the side quests follow the same vein of thinking. There are towns, villages and settlements at a fracture point, often because of the greater conflict (but not always). And the PC is in a position to influence the direction of the locale. The player can side with leaders and characters that they most empathise with or agree with ideologically. Or maybe one NPC will offer you money to kill their rival. That works too.

9. <https://archive.is/cDK0E>

But these locales and these situations don't exist in a vacuum, and your actions in one area or with one character could impact how you deal with others. Fallout is about society after all.

Unfortunately, Fallout 3 and Bethesda's design mentality in general ensures that there is almost zero cohesion amongst the pockets of civilisation and small settlements that populate the map. Many of these settlements are given some sort of a theme to distinguish themselves from one another. This is essentially what can be described as a themepark design. The player, acting as a tourist, can visit these themed, segregated locations and interact or spectate the events happening at their leisure, before leaving without consequence. There's no attempt for social or thematic cohesion with the greater whole. Outside of Megaton and Rivet, there really is no sense of society in Fallout 3, and because the quests arcs and endings for each locale stay strictly self contained, then it's clear that Bethesda did not understand that Fallout is about rebuilding society.

This also speaks to Rule #5, by ensuring that almost all locales are wholly self contained, they allow the players to act inconsistently. Doing good in one place, and doing evil in another. The simplistic Karma system balancing things out and the game not acting on your decisions at all. An extreme example of this would be to blow up Megaton, and donate water to the homeless beggars until your Karma is positive once more, enabling you to access the morally acceptable ending slides.

As for another reason why I think Fallout 3's main story is bad and doesn't tackle the core themes of Fallout games; "Filtering through earth removes essentially all of the fallout particles and more of the dissolved radioactive material than does boiling-water distillation... In areas of heavy fallout, about 99% of the radioactivity in water could be removed by filtering it through ordinary earth."¹⁰ It is equivalent to dirt in the most literal way imaginable.

10. "Nuclear War Survival Skills", Page 61, Written by Cresson H. Kearny for NWS Research Bureau in 1979. Freely available at <https://books.google.com.au/books?id=VPFTAAAAMAAJ>

I could go on with the instances of Bethesda retconning prior lore, as well as document the simple, basic failures of logic contained within the game itself. From the awfully written lines, to the incredulous quest premises. I could blather on about the mediocre gameplay, the non-existent difficult curve and the bugs upon bugs upon bugs. I could talk about the advertised features of Fallout 4, and why creating your own settlement without significant story integration into the main narrative is something that pushes Fallout further away from 'tight and cohesive open world', and closer to 'shallow sandbox'. But the purpose of this isn't to show why Fallout 3 was a shit game and why Fallout 4 will be the same. Not necessarily, the goal is to demonstrate how Bethesda has shown fundamental failings and misunderstandings at what makes the Fallout setting tick. The 5 rules that were established since before Fallout became Fallout have driven the design of the entire series, none of which are rules that Bethesda truly pays any attention to. In addition, by ignoring the key themes, and core literary devices that Black Isle's Fallout uses to drive home it's message (like challenging gameplay situations and good level design) and allow the player to properly roleplay instead of just playing pretend, Bethesda has demonstrated that they will never get a Fallout game right. Doesn't matter if they went turn based isometric or not.

ACTS OF ANON

A while ago, I posted an essay that some have affectionately labelled 'The Gospel of Anon'. In that essay, I attempted to explain, from the perspective of a classic Fallout fan, why Bethesda will never create a satisfactory Fallout game. In that essay, I used the term 'Bethesda Shallow Sandbox Experience' more than once without defining it or going into detail as to why I feel that it is the design philosophy that cancerous to the RPG genre at the moment. While I am sure that many people are familiar with the concept, even if they are unable to articulate it, many people aren't. And many still are incapable of seeing why the 'Bethesda Shallow Sandbox Experience' is a design philosophy that is highly corrosive for the RPG genre.

Keep in mind that although there is some relevance in this piece to Fallout 3 and 4, as they too are designed along this mindset, this will focus more on the progression of the Elder Scrolls series, and how this mindset has affected the genre.

Abstraction. The process in which rules, and concepts are derived from the usage of literal, specific examples and events. They are the cornerstone of the RPG genre, because it is by abstraction that we define all interactions within an RPG. It's the ruleset, it's the character system, it's the skill system. It is the foundation upon which roleplaying games are built, because there is no other method upon which to enforce success and failure for actions outside of undertaking the specific action yourself and having an AI that acknowledges it.

A rough example, skill checks in dialogs are a form of abstraction. You aren't typing a Diplomatic argument yourself in hopes that the Bandit Leader will back down, you are choosing to utilise a pre-defined skill and the game will determine it's success or failure based on a set number that is checked against your skill number or compared via semi-random dice rolls. There is a layer of abstraction there that the player recognises is necessary for the game to function. And it is a combination of game content and underlying systems that you are able to make decisions and roleplay through those kinds of situations.

Furthermore, it is through the interplay of strong systems and content built around it all, that creates gameplay depth in RPGs. Not writing (content) on it's own, not gameplay mechanics (systems) on it's own, but the interplay of the two. Because it allows you to experience different things based on how you choose to interact with the game. The roleplaying aspect comes into it by allowing the player to form a consistent mental framework that they rely upon to make decisions in the game. This is true regardless of whether the game focuses on combat (different playstyles and builds), focuses on decision points (different skillsets and dialog options), or focuses on whatever. It's the combination of gameplay content (encounters, dialogs, quests, etc) and gameplay systems that creates depth. To that end, a focus on logical abstraction is absolutely critical in ensuring that the players are able to reconcile gameplay content and gameplay mechanics so that their suspension of disbelief isn't broken.

Bethesda hates abstraction that leads to complexity in game mechanics.

Sometimes, this can result in positive changes, removing To-Hit-Percentages in games that utilise real time action combat is such a change. Other times can demonstrate that the changes aren't so positive, like removing the entire skill system in the lead up to Fallout 4's release.

Why does Bethesda hate abstraction? Mainstream appeal. It simply comes down to the ability to move more copies and relate their marketing to the largest possible audience. Abstraction in RPGs appear in the form of numbers, mechanics and systems that remind the player that they are interacting with a game. We've all heard of the derogatory comments about "spreadsheet RPGs" and that's what it boils down to. Bethesda's entire marketing angle is hinged on the idea of selling an experience. It's not a "game", it's an "experience". The appeal of a fantasy spreadsheet game is somewhat limited, but the appeal of an open world fantasy "experience" where you can "do anything, go anywhere" is much larger. "See that mountain? You can climb it."

The roleplaying genre is merely an anchor upon which Bethesda can promise a unique experience. This is why Bethesda games feel less and less like RPGs to classic RPG fans when each instalment comes out. The systems (regardless of whether they were designed well or not) that underpin actual roleplaying are chipped away in every new release, to the point where they will soon become indistinguishable from decidedly non-RPGs like Far Cry.

Contrary to what some people say, it's not necessarily the wide mainstream appeal that makes the Bethesda Shallow Sandbox Experience a cancerous philosophy. It's how Bethesda chooses to go about achieving it.

“You can get married in the game, and I had decided to marry this one woman who was my friend. And I forgot that I had done this Radiant quest for this other guy, who it turns out had liked her... I turned around and as she was standing there, I saw another door open to another bedroom and the other guy walked out... If you make him like her, he then visits her every day, and doesn't care if she's married.”¹¹

Todd “Burch” Howard on Skyrim's unique storytelling

By removing abstraction systems and RPG mechanics from each iteration of their games, what needs to happen to keep the same level of quality is to then fill the game with handcrafted content that demonstrate an attention to detail. Daggerfall had a plethora of mechanics, factional gameplay, focus on randomness and a huge landmass that encouraged a genuine sandbox experience. This was scaled down immensely for the tightly designed and more reactive Morrowind. Morrowind is still enjoyable despite suffering many of the same issues that its successors have. Handcrafted content that reacts to player decisions, as a substitute for open, complex and interactive mechanics. This allows for genuine, interactive roleplaying to occur and is how you can meld gameplay mechanics with storytelling to produce a profound effect on players.

In the hands of a truly skilled developer, it is possible to leverage world design, content design (writing, etc) and atmosphere, along with game mechanics to portray an internally consistent universe. It doesn't necessarily have to simulate a fantasy world, but it is one that is able to uphold suspension of disbelief through compelling gameplay and narrative experiences.

However, what Bethesda does instead, is create a simulacrum of an immersive fantasy world. They do this through simulationist mechanics that operate only on the game's outer surface and modular design. The result is a world that, on first inspection, promises meaningful experiences, but delivers on little because there is no real depth to it. It's merely a shallow representation of an immersive fantasy world that requires the player to fill the logical gaps. It has neither the systems of abstraction that provide interactive roleplaying mechanics, nor the strongly designed content that takes advantage of said mechanics, to truly be a powerful roleplaying experience.

11. <https://archive.is/vL9a8>

This is why Bethesda games have breadth, but not depth. Bethesda games often feature impressive feature lists compared to their RPG competitors. In the overwhelming majority of cases, these features are advertised and even praised as “optional content”. They are made utterly unimportant to the experience as a whole. Basically, they feature zero inherent meaning or depth. Features like Marriage in Skyrim, ironically divorced from the rest of the game. The mechanic itself is also shallow, just wear a necklace and if they like you enough, off you go. It is a surface-deep system that is functionally equivalent to a mini-game. And Bethesda games are becoming increasingly filled with them.

Todd's cuckoldry anecdote plays out entirely in his head, and although moments and experiences like that can be memorable, they are incidental, rather than intentional on the game's part. As a result, they ought to be supported by a foundation of strong gameplay mechanics and content. However, Bethesda isn't selling games, they're selling “experiences”, and little anecdotes can help to sell that image to players. In every new iteration of either Elder Scrolls or Fallout, the significant changes they make reflect this direction. Removing roleplaying mechanics and strongly designed handcrafted content, instead relying on (poor) dynamic simulation systems to create a simulacrum fantasy world. Bethesda are creating hollow worlds. Worlds that require the player to find meaning and depth of their own accord. Admittedly, there is a lot of interesting lore shown through text and notes in Bethesda games, but how relevant are they to the actual game? The Imperial Library makes for comfy reading on a Sunday afternoon, but when the lore is mostly ignored, irrelevant or even contradicted at times by what you do in the game, then you can't attribute that as a positive for the game's design.

Any “emergent” story exists to support and enhance what's already there, whether it is meaningful content design, or meaningful gameplay mechanics and design that lead to a variety of unique situations.

While all this might seem like a good thing, finding your own meaning, it actually encourages players (and the media) to view the games with an uncritical eye. It's this attitude that enables Bethesda to violate basic narrative principles in the way they create their worlds. It even allows them to push the responsibility onto the playerbase for things that they should do themselves, such as maintaining suspension of disbelief, as well as maintaining a logically coherent in-game universe.

“Just pick up the game and play... It's Elder Scrolls, be what you want, do what you want.”¹²

Craig “DIY fan” Lafferty

“One of the things we do, particularly given the success of Skyrim, is you get a lot more data on how people experience an open game, so we don't want to give that up. We will sacrifice certain things to make it completely open, and whereas in other games you can be on a quest or something, on our game, we can be on every quest at once.”¹³

Todd “Infinite Quests at the same time” Howard

Bethesda pride themselves on a design philosophy that emphasises player freedom. To this end, they have always stressed on removing barriers from the player's path and promoted the idea that the player is responsible for their own story. It's an empowering concept, but also a flawed one with how they design games.

They remove mechanical complexity in their games under the guise of streamlining and accessibility, while designing games that are modular in nature. Marriage is separate from guild progression is separate from faction progression is separate from house building is separate daedra artefacts is separate from the main quest. Supposedly to maximise the amount of activities a player can undertake. Do anything, be anything, avoid saying no to the player.

Rather than actually containing the properties of an immersive world, there is a significant level of cognitive dissonance necessary to suspend disbelief in Elder Scrolls games. And as a result of the Bethesda Shallow Sandbox Experience mindset, each instalment requires even more mental gymnastics to hold it together.

In post-Morrowind Elder Scrolls, this obsession with player freedom has meant that Bethesda actively shies away from designing mutually exclusive content in meaningful ways. In Morrowind, guild progression was gated via skill proficiencies. You couldn't advance in the Fighter's Guild unless you impressed key figures in the Guild (quests/tasks) and demonstrated skills relevant to being a Fighter. By the time Skyrim came around, these “restrictions” were removed for the sake of accessibility, leading to the potentially absurd situation of your Arch Mage not even knowing basic spells. Guild Questlines no longer offer

12. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BLZY82xSqfE> & <https://archive.is/k2NZQ>

13. <https://archive.is/9gNNR>

the player the feeling of progression and mastery. What they offer the player instead, is a linear narrative story that ends in the player advancing up the ranks for contrived reasons. The player feels like a tourist being led around, as opposed to feeling like a Guild Member.

In addition, the segmented design of these questlines ensure that there is no conflict between them, despite the clear enmity that they demonstrate for one another in the story. In *Morrowind*, choosing a Great House brought you into conflict with the others. Choosing the Fighter's Guild brought you into conflict with the Thieves Guild, and so on. You could play several sides, but there was always a breaking point where you were forced to choose. When combined with the advancement mechanics within these power structures, it allowed the player to invest in what they were doing emotionally, because it was underpinned by significant time and gameplay investment.

When you don't build on a strong foundation of investment and appropriate reactivity, questlines that otherwise emphasise choice result in meaningless choice. This is why one of the questlines that actually features mutually exclusive content in *Skyrim* (the Civil War) is so bland. It's toothless, Bethesda is so intent on not allowing players to miss out on meaningful content as a result of their choices, that they blunt any potential impact choices could have on their game. You can still shop and make small talk with the guards in Solitude dressed with Stormcloak garb after killing the Emperor and taking over several Imperial Fortresses in the area. If your decisions lack meaning, then how can you feel like you're playing your own story?

The focus on freedom to the detriment of reactivity and investment on part of the players is key to why Bethesda's games ironically have few real choices, why the games are shallow in nature and why they are poor as roleplaying games.

In response to these criticisms, people are told to “roleplay” and “set limits” without any real understanding of how roleplaying as a gaming genre and concept is distinct from a generic idea of “playing pretend”. *Super Mario Bros.* as a post-modern analysis on race relations, told through the fevered dream of an olympic high jumper desperate to liberate his gold princess from the clutches of a foreign rival; holds the same narrative weight as the idea that a Dragonborn became Arch Mage was because his political prowess and leadership overpowered the need to be a formidable wizard. Simply put, the developer shouldn't be given credit for depth and meaning that isn't actually in the game.

“However, with Morrowind I think we saw that our kind of game appeals to a wider audience, given the game's success among more casual gamers who are neither "hardcore" nor "RPG geeks." It turns out people like the kind of options and freedom we give them, and the pretty graphics don't hurt either.¹⁴”

Gavin “Believe his honesty” Carter

This, essentially, explains why Bethesda chooses to design their games the way they do, better than I could ever hope to explain. Games that appeal to wider audiences of casual gamers, not RPG fans, not core gamers. People who enjoy “options”, “freedom” and pretty graphics.

I wholeheartedly acknowledge that the many changes Bethesda has made over the years have made the games more palatable to a wider audience, the sales figures from Morrowind, to Oblivion and to Skyrim are proof of that. By removing abstraction and logical restrictions on the player, Bethesda sacrifices genuine roleplaying, worldbuilding and gameplay challenge for the sake of marketing their “open” “experiences” to a wider audience. But by chipping away at the foundations of their game's mechanics for faux simulation and relying on modular design, they've discouraged wholehearted investment into their games. Emphasising a “pick up and play” mentality, where nothing is meaningful, they're creating disposable games with little inherent worth. It's the anathema of immersion.

The deeply unfortunate aspect about all of this is that commercial success equals quality in the game industry. The Bethesda Shallow Sandbox Experience is essentially like junk food. There's no inherent wrong in enjoying junk food. It's cheap, quick, disposable, popular, and it's tasty. However, you wouldn't claim that you're gaining all the nutrition of fresh corn just because you've been pigging out on Doritos. Yet, this is what Bethesda games are to the roleplaying genre. The problem is that due to Bethesda's success, we have seen a generation of game designers and gamers who are hoodwinked into believing that the Bethesda Shallow Sandbox Experience is the only way to create immersive open world RPGs, based on the ways Bethesda presents an immersive open world RPG on the surface. When the truth is that they are so far removed from an immersive, roleplaying centric open world, that attempting to compare the two is almost insulting.

14. <https://archive.is/yT8dd>

For all those claiming that Bethesda games are still pure RPGs because of “stats”, every game can be boiled down to stats and numbers. That's just the nature of computer software. What makes a roleplaying game isn't necessarily stats, it's how they're used and what they represent. Basically, abstraction. Now, if you hate traditional RPGs, if you like the direction that Bethesda is going, then more power to you. They do what they do specifically to attract a mainstream audience. So the people who support what they do vastly outnumber those who don't. I just happen to be part of that minority, and I hope that developers, designers or gamers who read this can understand the perspective from which it is written before dismissing it as a whole.

Because at the rate that Bethesda are “streamlining” their games, Elder Scrolls VI and Fallout 5 will become functionally identical to game series like Far Cry, and Saints Row. When that happens, the only thing that makes Bethesda games RPGs is marketing. Empty words of PR spokesmen and their paid-for press. Nothing more.

While this is neither as good/focused/lengthy as my F4 essay, I'm just trying to do my part about the post quality on /v/ which has fallen off another cliff since moot sold 4chan. Let's just hope this thread doesn't devolve into Toddposting and literal shills trying to damage control some Anon's autism.

