

The Fallout Bible

Gospel of Anon

I'd like to preface this by saying that I have zero doubts that Fallout 4 will be a runaway mainstream success, selling 25+ million copies and being an Action RPG staple for most gamers 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 real-time gameplay, when that is more of a by-product, 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 videogame form that it was designed to be from the very beginning. Before Fallout became its own distinct franchise, it was supposed to be a post-apocalyptic game based on Steve Jackson's PnP ruleset G.U.R.P.S.¹. 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 humour was good. Slapstick was not.

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

Rule #5: Your actions have repercussions.

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 anyway². 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 to 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 dialogue 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 of 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 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 a way to give the player character a stronger presence in the game world.

However, this is in vast contrast to what Fallout has been

doing from the very beginning. In Fallout 1 and 2, the player character has a backstory and a story arc, but the protagonist is ultimately used as a window into the world. Fallout is a series about society and human nature, not the player character. The character's personal story arc merely places them in convenient circumstances in which they're able to explore the world and see first hand how their actions can affect it. This is different to what Bethesda does in at least one crucial way.

The player character in Black Isle's Fallout games is presented as the agent of change, whereas in Bethesda games the player character is presented as a literal messiah. Simply put, in Black Isle's Fallout, the protagonist's story arc is important because it gives the player an opportunity to explore the world around you through your interactions. In Bethesda's Fallout, the protagonist's story arc is important because the world revolves around your character and progressing with the story allows you to define your character as "good" or "bad."

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 dialogue 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 dialogue 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 dialogue situations, you are offering the player fewer and fewer 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 dialogue sequences that allow 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." There are 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, as 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 versus 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. 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."

Bethesda's Fallout, however, turns this concept on its head. Just about every action you are able to undertake is given a moral value through the Karma system and through characters like Three Dog and your Father. The game constantly reminds you of your character's morality. Your decisions throughout the game are categorised neatly into "good" and "evil." This is also reinforced through the endings. Unlike the other Fallout games, where huge variance is given based on your decisions in each of the communities you encounter with some level of overlap, the Fallout 3 endings emphasise the player's morality in each of their decisions. The effect you had on society is second to whether the player character was naughty or nice. 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, the range of potential actions to define yourself with is more limited. Your interaction with the skill system for roleplaying purposes is much more narrow because it can't fit into the mould of "good or evil." The range of actions you can take in the game are boiled down to "I am good" or "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. GTAV 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's 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 require 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. 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 gameworld 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. Somewhere 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 its 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 "Komedy 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 violence, selfishness 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.

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, Fallout: New Vegas (not made by Bethesda)*

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 its humour isn't backed 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 centred 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 theme 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 for 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 player character 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). 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 City there really is no sense of society in Fallout 3, and because the quests arcs and endings for each locale stay strictly self-contained, it's clear that Bethesda did not understand that Fallout is about rebuilding society. This also speaks of 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. 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 of 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, core literary devices that Black Isle's Fallout uses to drive home its message (like challenging gameplay situations and good level design) and discarding allowing the player to properly roleplay in favour of just playing pretend, Bethesda has demonstrated that they will never get a Fallout game right. It doesn't matter if they went turn-based isometric or not.

Index:

1. http://fallout.wikia.com/wiki/Vault_13:_A_GURPS_Post-Nuclear_Adventure
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1uuDKrY7eW0>
3. <https://archive.is/S00vN>
4. <https://archive.is/IiTZz>
5. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Cp44Pr5b30>
6. <https://archive.is/BdaLs>
7. <http://www.rpgcodex.net/forums/index.php?threads/larping-and-crpg-mechanics-discuss.78412/#post-2389938>
8. <https://archive.is/g1PIu>
9. <https://archive.is/cDK0E>
10. <https://books.google.com.au/books?id=VPFTAAAAMAAJ> (Page 61)