

The Wasteland in *Fallout 4*: Space, Nature and Society in a Post-Apocalyptic Video Game

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Abstract: *Fallout 4*, a post-apocalyptic role-playing video game developed by Bethesda Game Studios and released in 2015, presents the player an elaborate and complex wasteland. Set in the region of New England in the United States of America, in the year 2287, *Fallout 4* tells the story of a survivor of a nuclear war in search for their son in a territory severely damaged by radiation and a shattered social order, who sets forth on an arduous journey through a barren wasteland inhabited by mutated wildlife and violent factions which stand against each other. To progress in the video game's narrative arc, the player is required to solve several ethical and moral dilemmas in order to determine the future of the region. Furthermore, the gameplay presents the option, in the form of side quests, to build and organise settlements, which offer shelter to other survivors. In this post-apocalyptic wasteland, the survivor must abide by the newly established social and economic laws (or shrewdly transgress them), as well as facing new ways of discrimination, segregation and surveillance, with different factions opposing each other over conflicting ideologies and proposing distinct ways to govern and repopulate the barren land. This article aims to analyse and characterise *Fallout 4*'s wasteland: how the American population organised itself in distinct communities over the regions; the climate change which followed the nuclear war; the previously mentioned factions and respective ideologies; and the different spaces and borders within the wasteland that define the new sociocultural standards and the potential for subverting them.

Keywords: Video Game, Wasteland, Space, Nature, Society

Sumario: 1.Introduction. 2.Representing the Wasteland in *Fallout 4*. 3.Concluding note. 4. Acknowledgements. Bibliography.

1. Introduction

The wasteland as a barren, arid, devastated or barely inhabitable place, physically or metaphorically, finds itself remarkably represented in *Fallout 4*, a video game developed by Bethesda Game Studios and released in 2015. The videoludic narrative pertaining to this video game takes place in the region of New England in the United States of America, in the year 2287. Players are able to customize the Sole Survivor, *Fallout 4*'s main character, and set forth in an adventure in search for his son. I will, in this article, identify the Sole Survivor as a male character, in accordance with the canon conveyed by the media responsible for the official promotion of the video game. The official announcement portrays this character as a male, similar to what is implied by the opening cinematics of the game. However, the Sole Survivor's gender and attributes can vary according to the will of the player ("*Fallout 4* – Announcement Trailer" 2015: n/p).

The Sole Survivor's story is set in a technologically advanced America, which, in stark contrast with a number of innovations that potentiated a much more tranquil and effortless daily life, is riddled with internal and external political conflict, on the brink of a war. As a salesman convinces the Survivor to purchase a room in one of the several American vaults – survival shelters built in geologically stable areas and able to withstand the effects of a nuclear blast – nuclear bombs can be heard being detonated in the distance. As the Survivor finds shelter in the vault, the outside world is reduced to a massive wasteland, followed by an unprecedented exposure to radiation and the collapse of social order.

By focusing on the narrative arc of *Fallout 4*, this article aims at analysing the wasteland in which the Sole Survivor finds himself in, after awakening from a long cryosleep of 210 years, unbeknownst to him. It will begin by characterising *Fallout 4*'s wasteland with regard to its geographic location and landscape, the now-mutated creatures inhabiting it, the food available and the new economic system. Then, a number of details pertaining to the two major settlements which were established in this post-nuclear war wasteland will be addressed, as well as the presence of synths (manufactured bio-synthetic beings which simulate human behaviour) and religion (in particular, the Church of the Children of Atom).

2. Representing the Wasteland in *Fallout 4*

The Commonwealth is the region in which *Fallout 4*'s narrative is spatially set, a landmass which encompasses the former state of Massachusetts in the United States of America. It now features severely damaged buildings, and landmarks such

as the Boston Public Garden or the Boston Common are in ruins, or serve as the dwelling place of hulking humanoid mutants with limited critical thinking and exceptional endurance and resistance to radiation damage; such is the case with the iconic Swan's Pond, based on the real-world Public Garden's lake in which the Swan Boats operate. This location is presented in the video game as a small body of irradiated water and toxic waste inhabited by a grotesque being, named Swan, which threatens the Sole Survivor if he wanders too close. This inevitable encounter between the player and the mutated behemoth in this particular pond is easily recognized by *Fallout*'s fandom, and delving into the symbolic meaning of Swan considering the American grotesque sheds some light on the corruption affecting the Commonwealth and the repression of newly established minorities after the nuclear war, some of which will be mentioned later in the article. In a chapter of *The Grotesque*, edited by Harold Bloom, James Schevill reflects on the concept of the grotesque taking into account the American sociocultural panorama:

While traveling across the United States (...), I asked many people of widely differing backgrounds and occupations their immediate reactions to grotesque. The great majority of answers emphasized three elements – *distorted, fantastic, ugly*.

The problem remains that *grotesque* is essentially something we distrust, the hidden demonic fantasy that still torments and attracts us, the shadow we repress because we don't want to confront this central problem in our society (2009:2).

The association between the grotesque and repressed fantasies and social issues explains Swan's presence in *Fallout 4*, especially in such a historical and easily recognizable landmark. This can also be connected to the origin of these gigantic mutated beasts and other wildlife which was left to roam free after the nuclear detonations but were not necessarily created in their aftermath, such as the super mutants and the deathclaws, which the Sole Survivor must face in his journey through the wasteland. The American "hidden demonic fantasies", as Schevill refers, include the creation of an artificial virus named FEV (Forced Evolutionary Virus), which changed the human genotype and phenotype and produced the mutants, being constantly harnessed by distinct factions before and after the nuclear war, to satisfy numerous, often selfish, goals. They also comprise the creation of deathclaws, genetically-engineered creatures developed by the American army in order to replace humans during military missions, and which evolve to become one of the most feared creatures in the Commonwealth.

However, not only aggressive beings are found throughout the land and a utopian ideal which still drives not only the Sole Survivor but other settlers as well,

results in the successful reproduction of pacific beings which help with daily tasks and provide nourishment: brahmin, descended from the pre-war cows, preserve some of the behavioural traits of their ancestors; however, they possess two heads, a reddish and often scarred skin, enormous udders and eight stomachs. These beings are crucial to merchants, who roam the Commonwealth and employ them to carry a myriad of different products. Brahmin also provide hide, meat and milk. The food available in *Fallout 4*'s virtual world directly alludes to the idea of a contaminated wasteland. There is a scarce variety of resources and the ones available are often repulsive. This is a trope usually found in well-known literary dystopias. In Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), for instance, the narrator Offred reflects about the impact of climate change on oceans and the extinction of species, stating that

(...) [t]he sea fisheries were defunct several years ago; the few fish they have now are from fish farms, and taste muddy. The news says the coastal areas are being 'rested'. Sole, I remember, and haddock, swordfish, scallops, tuna; lobsters, stuffed and baked, salmon, pink and fat, grilled in steaks. Could they all be extinct, like the whales? I've heard that rumour (...). (2010:173)

Similarly, *Splinterlands* (2016) by John Feffer, which imagines the world in 2050 with a non-existent European Union, a deeply fragmented American society and a catastrophic environmental crisis, also denotes the lack of food diversity: the diet of mankind consists of processed seaweed but even this species faces possible extinction (2016:99). Even George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) hints at the nauseating flavour of dark-coloured bread and the pools of stew that are served to the citizens of the Party, and which have the appearance of vomit (2013:7, 58).

In *Fallout 4*, distaste for the available food and its lack of quality is a relevant issue. Vegetables and fruits bear non traditional names, as a result of mutations. Tatos, a cross-pollination between tomatos and potatos produced after the extinction of the latter, are presented as the most common food resource in the Commonwealth. However, a terminal entry which the Sole Survivor can find in an aircraft named *The Prydwen* states that tatos taste absolutely disgusting, despite providing nourishment. Mutfruit is another prominent example of the renaming of food resources post-nuclear war, as this is a new mutated species of an unknown fruit which no longer exists. The fact that the Sole Survivor receives radiation damage when ingesting these vegetables and fruits without cooking them, thus affecting his vitality, alludes to the climate changes which took place after the war, and are recurrent in dystopian imagery. By incorporating food scarcity and these new mutations, *Fallout 4* indulges in an exercise of anticipatory imagination of risk, promoting the scrutiny of present public debate questions; by extrapolating from

present tendencies, it calls attention to the implications of food production and illustrates how foodways are used symbolically to represent loss or a threat to what is perceived to be the natural order, as well as to pinpoint challenges to human inventiveness in the wake of environmental crisis (Botelho 2019:33). As a means to explore creativity in this context, the video game's mechanics allow for the creation of settlements in which the Sole Survivor is able to cultivate the previously mentioned vegetables, fulfilling a number of requirements (such as having a water source nearby) while simultaneously having enough freedom to choose where to place them and in what quantity.

As for matters pertaining to the economy of the Commonwealth, money as it is known in contemporary Western society is referred to as pre-war money, and no longer bears any economic value, being replaced by bottle caps of a multitude of beverages, which serve as the most commonly used currency in the post-nuclear United States of America. Despite the loss of value of coins and money bills, commerce and trading remain, as well as private owners whose acquisition and security of their property is dependent on their military power and will to commit violent deeds, not only in order to defend themselves but also to expand their territory and/or investments. In the Commonwealth, a violent *Nineteen Eighty-Four* system reigns, with an unrestrained capitalism following the ethics of social darwinism, i.e. the fight for the survival of the fittest, and the triumph of the supposedly more cunning, intelligent and innately better humans. According to Allgayer and Hiller's reflections on Darwin's theory of evolution and its application in economics, namely through Herbert Spencer's theory of the *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, ferocious competition increases the individual's appreciation for obtaining profit, boosting the production of what is most coveted and allowing continuous commercial trades and, subsequently, the prosperity of the most skilled individuals (2015:180). This competition is presented, therefore, as justifiable and fair. Furthermore, it should operate with little to no regulation from the government, and possible social consequences, such as extreme poverty and an unyielding social hierarchy, are of no particular relevance (*Ibidem*).

This is precisely what occurs in the Commonwealth, with the Sole Survivor establishing settlements which are often subjected to raids, robbery, territorial disputes, treason and, ultimately, several casualties. Unlike British economist Adam Smith's thoughts on economy, when he states in his eighteenth-century work *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), that the individual who "(...) intends only his own gain (...)" and is "(...) led by an invisible hand (...)" (2007:349) ends up contributing to society as a whole, the post-war economic system represented in *Fallout 4* brings no prosperity or happiness for the majority of the population. In fact, it isolates the remaining people in settlements with exceptionally different

ideologies and ways of life, and which compete between them with such ferocity that persecution, torture and death are part of everyday life. Such is what happens in Diamond City and Goodneighbour, the Commonwealth's most prominent settlements.

Diamond City, frequently addressed as the "Great Green Jewel", is the largest and best fortified settlement in the Commonwealth, built within Boston's baseball stadium Fenway Park. It possesses a central market, more resources and establishments than the average settlements, but is also subjected to more surveillance, a rigid social hierarchy, more control over the citizens' conduct and behaviours and numerous restrictions. This is a result of the concentration of power in one single political office: the Mayor. During the events of *Fallout 4*, the Mayor in power is named McDonough, an individual who governs the city through a totalitarian form of government, installing fear regarding the synths and promoting distrust of the Institute, which employs people who presumably creates them. For Diamond City's population, the Institute acts as a kind of boogeyman, since its existence is not confirmed by anyone except the Sole Survivor himself later in the narrative arc. In an unexpected turn of events, the Survivor finds that McDonough is, himself, a synth, working as a secret agent for the Institute and who aims to dispell any suspicion as to its existence and whereabouts. At this stage, when the masses have no way of confirming their suspicions, the Institute produces a similar effect as both the Big Brother and The Brotherhood in Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The Institute perceived as the enemy justifies the need for surveillance and control and facilitates the detection of rebels, while simultaneously cementing the Mayor's position, since he takes the role of the one who guides and protects. However, the possibility that the Institute truly does exist offers people, paradoxically, a sense of hope and a chance for unveiling what is hidden, providing them with a fantasy of liberation and an alternative to the *status quo*.

But even complex settlements like Diamond City produce subversive individuals, and offer the possibility of transgression to established rules and social standards. Piper Wright runs the newspaper *Publick Occurrences*, which, due to its controversial content, is received with contempt by McDonough, who, at some point, even prohibits Piper from entering the city. Piper's article titled "The Synthetic Truth" details the infiltration of a previous synth in Diamond City, named Carter, who started a killing spree which remained in the collective memory of the settlement's inhabitants for many years. Her article ends by questioning McDonough's nature, comparing his attitudes to those displayed by Carter:

Which brings us to noodles. Specifically, the noodles consumed by Mayor McDonough last Wednesday night, in the same spot that Mr. Carter the synth went haywire, and mercilessly killed several people – after spending

hours sharing an experience the people of Diamond City assumed was reserved for members of the human race. ("Story of the Century" Quest, *Fallout 4*)

Thus, a feeling of distrust towards the Mayor starts to arise and, as mentioned, Piper's suspicions turn out to be real.

Similarly, Nick Valentine is allowed to live within Diamond's City walls, though it is common knowledge that he is a synth, exhibiting a robotic set of eyes and displaying several mechanical parts through a severely torn skin. However, due to his sapient intelligence and lack of hostility towards mankind, which he believes is the consequence of him being a prototype between second-generation synths and the latest ones, he is rather accepted by the population. Valentine symbolises the non-alienated individual, which is reinforced by his occupation: he is a private detective and a skilled researcher, constantly seeking knowledge and solving enigmas. This synth also introduces some of the most complex moral dilemmas which the Survivor, and by extension the players, must face: Are synths merely machines? Is it possible for them to display free will? Can they truly have emotions or only purely imitate human feelings? These are questions which invoke dyads such as human/mechanical, or emotion/programmed behaviour and that, in the face of a catastrophic panorama, may influence players to guide their Survivor in an indulgence of a transhuman fantasy perpetuated by the Institute or, contrarily, in a rejection of any and all manifestations of artificial intelligence and its material realization. It is also this ambiguity that serves as the background for a number of choices the player must make when deciding their Survivor's allegiance. Whether to align him with the tolerant Railroad which fights for synth empowerment, or the bellicist Brotherhood of Steel whose main goal is to seize, regulate and destroy pre-war technology, or, lastly, the Institute which upholds an ideology that envisions an unbridled search for knowledge, to the detriment of empathy and altruism, is a choice that will inevitably depend on the player's reflections on these issues and, ultimately, impact the narrative's ending and the consequences for *Fallout 4*'s depicted society.

Besides the synth question, an anti-ghoul racism is advertised by McDonough as well. Ghouls are mutated humans who, through the action of chemicals and prolonged radiation due to the nuclear fallout, came to possess a zombie-like appearance, an extended lifespan and immunity to radiation damage. In spite of their looks, many ghouls can retain all their intellectual faculties. However, in certain regions and settlements, feelings of racism and disgust based solely on the different appearance have forced ghouls to build a settlement of their own, accepting also other outcasts. This social dynamic illustrates mankind's need to establish borders and a strict social order, to form an identity – individual and/or

collective – and identify a transgressive otherness which helps discerning what is normal and accepted and what should be punished and segregated. Even after such a tragedy as a nuclear war and a world reduced to a vast wasteland, the establishment of a bordered world remains a necessity since, as Alexander Diener and Joshua Hagen state, we are “‘geographic beings’ for whom the creation of places, and by consequence the process of bordering, seems natural”, despite being, in fact, a social construct (2012:1).

This inevitably prompts the existence of outsiders/deviants, feelings of displacement and, ultimately, their need to bond with each other and eventually oppose the system, such as what we witness in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* with Winston and Julia, *The Handmaid’s Tale* with the Handmaids and *Brave New World* with Bernard Marx and the people living in New Mexico’s Savage Reservation, namely John. In *Fallout 4*, this results in the creation of a settlement called Goodneighbor, founded by criminals who were exiled from Diamond City.

As of the events depicted in *Fallout 4*, Goodneighbor has a ghoul Mayor named John Hancock, who, unlike McDonough, is not power-driven and aims at creating a diverse and multicultural community. When dialoguing with the Sole Survivor, Hancock will utter: “Goodneighbor’s of the people, for the people, you feel me? Everyone’s welcome.” (“Dangerous Minds” Quest, *Fallout 4*). As years passed by since the nuclear war, Goodneighbor sheltered all kinds of drifters and rebels from the Commonwealth, including synths, but, despite their open-mindedness, the settlement is sustained mainly by crime and drug trafficking. However, in an attempt to keep the citizens with a minimal sense of security, Hancock establishes the Neighborhood Watch in order to defend the town from external attacks by rival settlements and keep the order within its borders. Unlike the vigilantism encouraged by the Mayor in Diamond City, which intends to generate fear, suspicion and propagate racist ideals, the Neighborhood Watch only punishes acts of violence, theft and illegal trade, and does not bother peaceful visitors. Forced to thrive on crime in order to provide sustenance for the population, Goodneighbor is still less controlled than Diamond City, and the free circulation of ideas and distinct people make it fairly more approachable for the Sole Survivor.

Finally, religion shall be briefly addressed, in particular the most prominent religious sect in the Commonwealth: the Church of the Children of Atom, a cult built around the worship of radiation and a deity named Atom, and centered around the myth of creation which explains that within every atomic mass exists a universe and, once that atomic mass is split, this universe is divided, becoming two; radiation and nuclear fission are, thus, revered as moments of divine creation and

transformation. As the evolutionary psychologist Robin Dunbar argues, most of human history religions practiced shamanic-like rituals and these date back 500,000 years (qtd. in Ambrosino 2019: n/p), demonstrating how important it was for our ancestors to find a religious way of being together. This is what prompts the creation of the Children of Atom, who make an appearance not only in *Fallout 4*, but also in *Fallout 3*, released in 2008. *Fallout 3* explains their creation: after the nuclear war, outcasts started converging in a crater left by an undetonated atomic bomb, since it offered protection from dust storms and raiders; soon, the bomb was elevated to a sacred status and the settlers devotedly worshipped it. Eventually, a community was born through what bonded the settlers together: a religious icon and a dedicated place to worship it.

The Children, thus, form yet another cultural and religious identity in the world of *Fallout 4*, and one which seeks to colonise and preserve its borders above all. By seeking out irradiated areas to set up shrines and organising crusades against the unfaithful – those who interfere with the spread of radiation, prevent its damage or attempt to destroy stockpiles of nuclear weapons – the Children are driven by a cult-like euphoria, displaying, according to Michał Gierycz, a fundamentalist attitude, characterised by a specific way of thinking and evaluating reality which differs from the “rest of the world” (2020:3). When the Sole Survivor visits the Crater of Atom, the Children’s main settlement in the video game, non-player characters (NPC’s) will evince their intention to spread the cult and indoctrinate the remaining population, stating: “The world will be shown Atom’s glory” or “...the faithless must be punished...Atom’s chosen must bring judgement to His enemies...” (“The Glowing Sea” Quest, *Fallout 4*). So, despite codes of conduct and moral values traditionally deriving from specific religious belief systems, which develop specific customs related to territory and borders (Diener & Hagen 2012:116-117), the Children pose a serious threat to other groups in the Commonwealth and, as such, they are usually found throughout the land murdering civilians, occupying spaces, spreading radiation through small-scale explosive devices and engaging the Survivor in combat immediately after spotting him.

3. Concluding note

In conclusion, this article’s approach to *Fallout 4* attempted to analyse the wasteland as presented in this video game, a concept so versatile and complex that acquires very interesting features in ludonarrative, benefitting from a visual representation and a virtual character that can travel within and through its many borders and spaces, enabling comparisons with many time periods and circumstances and our own contemporary context. Simultaneously, this wasteland retains some of the

most iconic motifs from literary dystopias and is, undoubtedly, a compelling concept susceptible of analysis from a multiplicity of fields of knowledge and distinct frameworks.

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