Network Apocalypse

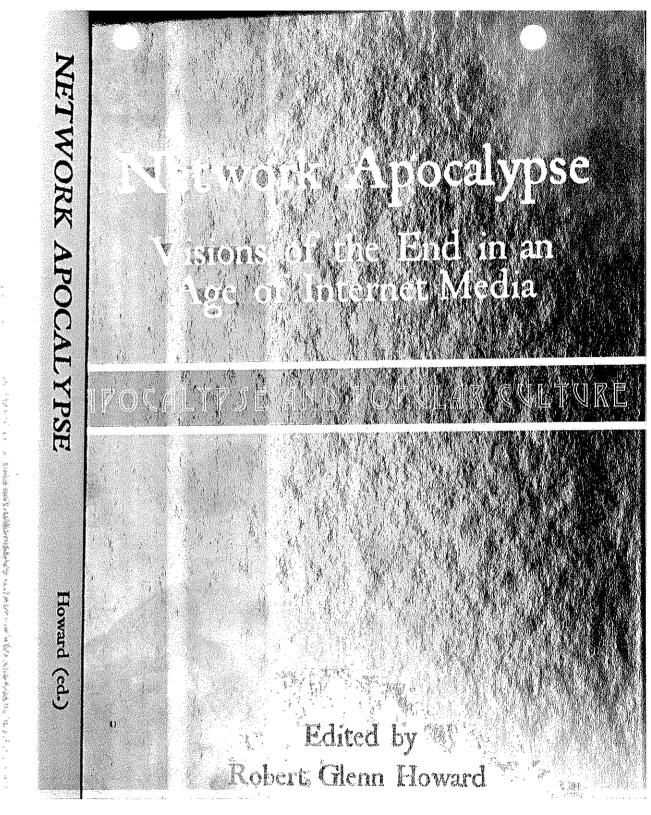## Visions of the End in an Age of Internet Media

Edited by Robert Glenn Howard

In the twenty-first century, religious belief is undergoing change, driven in part by new communication technologies. Such technologies have often given rise to notable changes in religion, some of the most revolutionary of them being apocalyptic in character. What, then, is the nature of the changes in religious belief created or enabled by the Internet?

In this collection, the first of its kind, nine scholars consider whether the empowerment offered by Internet communication generally encourages the exchange of ideas or whether, rather, it allows individuals to seal themselves off into ideological ghettos of the like-minded. These nine essays explore those possibilities by documenting and analysing the diversity of apocalyptic belief online.

Andrew Fergus Wilson looks at those using the Internet to explore the syncretism that lies at the heart of the 'cultic milieu'. William A. Stahl examines the online discourse about climate change to find the apocalyptic structures undergirding it. Dennis Beesley examines End Times discourse on the video-sharing Web site YouTube. J.L. Schatz explores how the apocalyptic imaginings of science fiction set the trajectory of our shared future. Amarnath Amarasingam documents how the Internet is encouraging the belief that President Barack Obama is the Antichrist. Salvador Jimenez Murguia analyses an Internet-based service offered to those wishing to communicate with their loved ones who might be 'left behind' after the anticipated 'Rapture'. David Drissel documents how social networking facilitates connections among Muslims who share a belief in a nearing apocalypse. James Schirmer examines an apocalyptic computer game individuals use to explore personal ethics. Robert Glenn Howard documents the first Internet-based new religious movement—reflected in the beliefs of the suicidal 1997 'Heaven's Gate' group, extant in their archived websites.

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8. 'WE ALL STRAY FROM OUR PATHS SOMETIMES': MORALITY AND SURVIVAL IN *FALLOUT 3*

James Schirmer

Abstract

This chapter observes the resurgence of post-apocalyptic themes
in popular media as evident in video games. *Fallout 3* is one such
game, offering a unique perspective on morality and survival in the
post-apocalypse. User modifications to *Fallout 3* add complexity
to this perspective. This chapter suggests not only the necessity
of ascribing to a moral code for survival in the post-apocalypse
but also the importance of video games as places of creativity and
experimentation among individuals empowered to connect through
the Internet.

'On this road there are no godspoke men. They are gone and I am
left and they have taken with them the world.'
                                              —Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*

Introduction

Evidenced by this collection as well as across multiple media, there is a
renewed appeal and interest in the post-apocalypse. Beyond the film adap-
tation of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* in November 2009 and the wide
release of *The Book of Eli* in early 2010, the resurgence of end-of-the-
world-and-after stories is perhaps most evident in the medium of video
games. The year 2010 will witness at least three releases featuring post-
apocalyptic settings and themes, including 4A Games' *Metro 2033*, Ninja
Theory's *Enslaved: Odyssey to the West* and Obsidian Entertainment's
Fallout: New Vegas. The previous year saw the pertinent release in

September of *Fallen Earth*, a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), and in October, *Borderlands*, a first-person shooter with role-playing elements. While these titles differ in approach and scope, they share characteristics explored nearly 30 years ago in Fantasy Games Unlimited's *Aftermath!* and Interplay's *Wasteland*, role-playing games that were among the first to place survival in a post-apocalyptic setting as a paramount objective.

Part of the reason for this resurgence has to do with immersive aspects of the post-apocalyptic that only increase in video game–oriented settings. With the game player at the centre of a post-nuclear narrative, there is a greater experiential immediacy to certain speculative events of how civilization and life in general continue afterward. In fact, a particular series of games has a history of utilizing aspects of various post-apocalyptic stories. Interplay's *Fallout* and *Fallout 2*, spiritual successors to *Wasteland*, and Bethesda's *Fallout 3*, present both an idealized past, one rife with technological advances from robots with fully functioning A.I. (artificial intelligence) to nuclear-powered vehicles, and a nullified future, one complete with roving bands of marauders and radioactive ruins.

While the player's perspective in *Fallout* and *Fallout 2* was more removed in an isometric, third-person perspective, *Fallout 3* presents player experiences in the first person, making every action more immediate and present. Instead of viewing a limited amount of squares of space featuring the desert wastes of what was once California, the setting for the first two *Fallout* games, *Fallout 3* allows the player to survey the bombed-out suburban areas of Washington, DC, capital buildings reduced to rubble by nuclear warfare and roads torn asunder by the passage of time. The atmosphere and visual aesthetic are not only reminiscent of post–World War II America and the prevalent nuclear paranoia present during that time, but *Fallout 3* also recalls prior descriptions of the post-nuclear world found in such classic science fiction as Poul Anderson's 'Tomorrow's Children' and Harlan Ellison's 'A Boy and his Dog'.

It is, in part, because of these recollections that *Fallout 3* is the focus of this particular chapter. Despite no longer being the most recent post-apocalyptic example in the medium of video games, *Fallout 3* stands as a better, clearer connection to past written works and the ideas expressed therein. Before moving deeper into this discussion, though, it should be noted that the greater attention given to the post-apocalyptic is not limited to video games or to film.

In the introduction to *Wastelands: Stories of the Apocalypse*, features editor John Joseph Adams reflects on the literary resurgence of post-apocalyptic allegories. Drawing a line from Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, published in 1826, to Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, published in 2006, Adams (2008: 1) identifies this subgenre's high point as coinciding with the height of the Cold War, 'when the threat of worldwide nuclear annihilation seemed a very real possibility', before its popularity fell with the Berlin Wall. In acknowledging a renewed interest in post-apocalyptic tales, though, Adams argues that it has less to do with endless war and environmental unease than with the fulfilment of desires for adventure, the discovery of new frontiers and the chance to begin anew. To scaffold this point, he quotes at length from John Varley's 'The Manhattan Phone Book (Abridged)', and I include part of that here as it fits the focus not only of this chapter but also of the overall collection:

> There's something attractive about all those people being gone, about wandering in a depopulated world, scrounging cans of Campbell's pork and beans, defending one's family from marauders. Sure, it's horrible, sure we weep for all those dead people. But some secret part of us thinks it would be good to survive, to start all over. Secretly, we know we'll survive. All those other folks will die (Varley).

It is this element of survival, and the morality (or lack thereof) accompanying it, that piques my own interest in portrayals of the post-apocalypse. It is also because I think that the post-apocalyptic subgenre, like that of science fiction in general, is often in a more unique position to explore what makes us human. Because a mere shred of civilization remains in many of these scenarios, humanity is distilled to its essence. What arguably makes for some of the best science fiction is such imaginings of the human condition and its possible outcome(s), whether it be a glorious humanistic paradise as a result of our bravery and intellect, or a drab dystopia reflecting the darkest side of our nature. A majority of post-apocalyptic stories are the latter, showing why humanity is wrong and perhaps even deserving of such an end. Rarely is this subgenre of science fiction about things done right.

It is because of this that in the 'Forewarning' to the earlier post-apocalyptic collection *Beyond Armageddon*, Walter Miller, Jr, observes the often-noticeable nostalgia and regret present in post-apocalyptic stories, how 'the underworld mood is there . . . because post-Megawar stories are about an afterlife' (1985: xv). And rather than make reference to this subgenre of science fiction as 'post-holocaust', a term that saw greater acceptance in years past, Miller introduces 'Megawar . . . another barbaric neologism' (1985: xiii) not only to identify war at the end of civilization but also to avoid diminishing the memory of the mass murder of Jews living in Europe during World War II. This different term adheres rather well to Miller's later layout of nuclear Armageddon, how often Megawar 'happens offstage, between stories, and the rest is about the survivors, the orphans of a psychopathic civilization' (1985: xiv). This is as much the case in *Fallout 3* as in other Megawar-type representations, but this video game also captures the morality and survival aspects of previous post-apocalyptic tales, building

on the kinds of ethical quandaries first presented there. Explicit reference to these past written works reveals potential inspirations for the design and development of *Fallout 3* as well as its morality and survival elements. I cite them here also because the authors of such important literature often impart particular aspects in words better than those I might have chosen myself.

However, as readers of post-apocalyptic tales, we can only accept their traumatic events; as players of post-apocalyptic games, we have a more active role in causing or preventing trauma. In the online column '*Fallout 3*: The Challenge of a Gaming Morality', Alan Noble acknowledges that other media, books, films and television often involve some judgment on characters' actions, thereby constituting a limited morality system, but he emphasizes that video games are unique 'in that they invite the player to engage and act out the plot in a way that differs from other storytelling mediums' (Noble 2009). That players with the technical knowledge to make significant user modifications to the game itself are able to do so with *Fallout 3* is of additional note and importance. Such elements of engagement not only separate *Fallout 3* from the stories that perhaps inspired it but should also draw our interest in the game and what it offers in terms of post-apocalyptic commentary.

By providing an overview of the game's karma system, an analysis of select side quests and observations on the influence of user modifications to the actual game, this chapter endeavors to show not only how morality and survival are intertwined all the more in the post-apocalypse but also how neutrality is a more troublesome approach—that even a strongly secular interpretation of the post-apocalypse yields discussion of the religious. *Fallout 3* is a video game that offers a provocative perspective on a particular post-apocalyptic scenario. Though on a scale more personal than political and more intimate than global, *Fallout 3* possesses an almost singular focus on simple survival and the moral choices associated with it. With individual morality and survival at the forefront, *Fallout 3* provides perhaps a more honest view of humanity at the end of history, one to be amended and augmented by the players.

Overview of Karma in Fallout 3

The actual narrative of *Fallout 3* places the player two hundred years after nuclear war has devastated the planet in an alternate, post–World War II time line. The player begins as an inhabitant of a survival shelter designed to protect humans from nuclear radiation, but when the player's father leaves the shelter without prior notice, the player does as well, traversing the Capital Wasteland that was once Washington, DC. In this environment,

there is little more than 'empty corpses of blasted buildings', as observed by Vic in Harlan Ellison's 'A Boy and his Dog' (1985: 342).

While the most evident similarities between *Fallout 3* and 'A Boy and his Dog' concern visual aesthetics, that is, references to the 1975 movie starring Don Johnson, many of the ideas first appeared in Ellison's original story. No matter the path taken through *Fallout 3*, the player is almost certain to encounter the canine companion nicknamed Dogmeat as well as survivors locked away in underground vaults. Furthermore, Ellison's tale and *Fallout 3* both feature a blending of 1950s Americana and futuristic horror: mutants green with nuclear radiation and 'roverpaks', nihilistic bands of nameless individuals bent on little more than destruction. Also similar to 'A Boy and his Dog', evil as well as good deeds in *Fallout 3* can garner positive rewards for the player, but excessive evil or goodness prompts Regulators to exact vigilante justice upon the player or Talon Company Mercenaries to put down 'another holier-than-thou white-knight'. Such in-game judgment of the player's actions is revealing of the dominant function of *Fallout 3*'s karma system, which involves the maintenance and record of the player's moral actions and consequences, thereby representing inclination toward a good, neutral or evil overall in-game status.

Fallout 3 measures karma via a point system, but only a particular karmic title, not a numerical value, is available and visible to the player. Despite the very term 'karma' having roots in Hinduism, in-game imagery associated with these titles is Christian in nature. The five icons indicative of the player's karma level feature Vault Boy, a cartoonish blond-haired young male wearing a vault jumpsuit. On either end of the karmic spectrum are the most extreme icons, with a variation on Satan for Very Evil and a variation on Jesus Christ for Very Good. For the Evil and Good representations, Vault Boy sports devil horns, crossed arms and a scowl or a halo, prayer hands and white wings. The lone Neutral representation has Vault Boy in perhaps his most recognizable pose, with hands on hips and a broad, toothy smile.

Related to this are the additional karmic titles in place for the player at every experience level. This is important to note because certain *Fallout 3* achievements, which constitute a form of bragging rights as well as an additional record of the player's progress, are tied to particular titles. The majority of these hold no particular religious connotation until later levels of experience, and, again, the images accompanying the achievements themselves can be revealing. For example, while reaching experience level 8 with good karma unlocks the Protector achievement with an icon reminiscent of Batman, earning the Ambassador of Peace achievement at level 14 reveals a haloed Vault Boy with a dove perched on his hand. Even further than this are the Last, Best Hope of Humanity and Messiah achievements available at levels 20 and 30; the former features Vault Boy with prayer hands and the latter as a Christ-like figure, complete with a beard and a

crown of thorns. In contrast, the evil karma achievements at those same two levels, Scourge of Humanity and Devil, feature Vault Boy as just that, a devil. However, the Pinnacle of Survival achievement for neutral karma at level 14 implies a willingness to do what one must to survive in the Capital Wasteland, and the Paradigm of Humanity (level 20) and True Mortal (level 30) achievements mark a clear absence of religious overtones.

Even those karmic titles unassociated with *Fallout 3* achievements hold similar connotations. For example, the player acquires the title of Saint or Evil Incarnate at experience level 19, Restorer of Faith or Architect of Doom at level 21, Shepherd or Deceiver at level 23 and Earthly Angel or Demon's Spawn at level 29. In sharp contrast, many of the neutral-karma titles are positive and negative, such as Beholder at level 17, Super-Human at level 19, and Person of Refinement at level 27, as well as Egocentric at level 23, Model of Apathy at level 26, and Moneygrubber at level 28. Perhaps the most accurate neutral-karma title is Gray Stranger at level 29, revealing not only the cloudy karmic area the neutral player inhabits but also the lack of NPC interaction that might be necessary for charting such a trajectory through the Capital Wasteland.

For instance, if a player has very good karma, an NPC in the town of Megaton will talk to the player every day and provide free items, such as ammunition, food and/or medicine. A player with evil karma, though, has an opportunity for the same benefits in Paradise Falls, a former shopping mall converted into an enslavement camp. Karma limits which NPCs may join the player as a valuable companion in combat. Clover, a slave, and Jericho, a mercenary, are most loyal to the player with evil karma and will express boredom should the player perform too many good actions. Butch, a Vault 101 dweller, and Sergeant RL-3, a military robot, can be recruited by the player with neutral karma but will not leave should the player perform too many evil or good actions. Fawkes, a friendly Super Mutant, and Star Paladin Cross, a Brotherhood of Steel member, will follow the player with good karma of their own free will and without cost, but both will leave and refuse to follow again should the player develop evil karma. However, Charon, a ghoul, and Dogmeat, a dog, are the two lone NPCs who will join the player regardless of karma.

The player's karmic status is never fixed, though; it is always in flux and dependent on particular actions taken by the player. In addition to killing evil characters and performing good quest actions, positive karma choices include donating caps to any church, selling the fingers of evil characters to the Regulators, providing scrap metal toward the repair of Megaton's water purifier and offering purified water to beggars outside settlement limits. In addition to killing non-evil characters and performing evil quest actions, negative karma choices include stealing items from NPCs, selling the ears of non-evil characters to Daniel Littlehorn, providing the drug psycho to

Paulie Cantelli in Rivet City (which results in his death), hacking locked computer terminals and enslaving NPCs. Of course, the player can perform a mixture of these actions to maintain neutrality, but an arguably more authentic and interesting experience awaits the player determined to earn as little good and evil karma as possible. As explained later, *Fallout 3*'s karma system reveals much about a particular definition of morality and how survival can become more or less likely as a result.

Analysis of Karma and Side Quests in Fallout 3

Striking a balance between good and evil actions can be a point of emphasis and exploitation in *Fallout 3,* as the player is able to steal from NPCs, gain evil karma and yet still be greeted warmly by those same NPCs. Only those negative actions occurring in full view of NPCs, such as the enslavement of a certain munitions dealer in the larger settlement of Rivet City, garner significant in-game backlash. Then again, the player need only wait a set period of time before being able to re-enter a town without the threat of violence. Still, true neutrality is often the most difficult path to take, given the absence of in-game rewards. Simply to eke out an existence in a post-apocalyptic wasteland is often more challenging than choosing good or evil actions. While both have drawbacks, the benefits of being good or evil are significant.

This is perhaps most evident not in the main quest, which involves following in the father's footsteps and deciding the fate of the Capital Wasteland and its inhabitants, but in the great variety of side quests available to the player. There are numerous possibilities for earning both beneficial items and karma in such tasks, and the next section of this chapter explores three such side quests, 'Oasis', 'Power of the Atom' and 'Tenpenny Tower', each of which offers interesting moral quandaries to the player of *Fallout 3*.

In 'Oasis', Harold is a unique NPC, not only because he appears throughout the *Fallout* series but also because he has a tree growing from his head that has rooted him to the ground in the northern region of the Capital Wasteland. The immediate area surrounding Harold is green with plant life, a stark contrast to the outer wasteland, and those who discovered him began to worship him, calling themselves Treeminders. In this particular instance, religion functions as a way to explain science that is otherwise incomprehensible. After being stuck in the same spot for decades, though, Harold is eager for death, imploring that the player destroy his heart. Certain Treeminders have other wishes, asking that the player either suppress or expand Harold's fertility. What is interesting about these three options for completing the 'Oasis' side quest is that none of them garners a karmic reward. Only a fourth option, burning Harold down with a fire-based weapon, earns the player evil karma.

Arguably the most morally vague quest in the game, 'Oasis' presents a variety of choices that, save for burning Harold, have positive outcomes. Following through on Harold's wish to die means also destroying the lives not only of his followers but also of the plants blooming around him. Stopping Harold's growth means protecting the oasis from outsiders but betraying Harold's trust. Speeding Harold's growth means putting the betterment of the Capital Wasteland above Harold's desire for death.

The morality of this particular quest is muddled, to say the least, which is a problem Nick Dinicola identifies in his *PopMatters* column 'Morality and Karma Systems' (2009). Dinicola thinks that 'Oasis' reveals the limitations of a black-and-white karma system like the one present in *Fallout 3*; even with the addition of a neutral stance, morality must be assigned. And when the choice, writes Dinicola, 'is as nuanced as putting the needs of many above the needs of one, assigning any kind of morality defeats the purpose of having such a complex choice to begin with'. I am not sure I agree with Dinicola, though, for no good karma is possible as a reward in this quest. With positives and negatives to each choice, save for burning Harold, the player is better able to choose to their own personal satisfaction. In turn, the item rewards associated with a particular chosen outcome reveal something deeper about the content of the player's character, perhaps showing how the player might best survive in future situations.

In contrast, the available choices in the side quest 'Power of the Atom' are quite stark in their differences. The player's arrival in Megaton often marks the first encounter with civilization in the Capital Wasteland as well as the first truly significant karmic opportunity. Lucas Simms, sheriff of Megaton, requests the disarmament of the unexploded nuclear bomb in the middle of the settlement, while Mr Burke, who considers Megaton a blight on the landscape, wants the player's help in the bomb's detonation. Disarming the bomb garners a variety of rewards, including caps, the deed and key to a house in Megaton, experience points and good karma (if the player disarms the bomb for free). A 'contract for extermination' will also be placed upon the player, thereby incurring the wrath of Talon Company mercenaries who will ambush the player at various times throughout the course of the game. In what is not a great contrast, detonating the bomb also garners sundry compensatory measures, including caps, the deed and key to a suite in Tenpenny Tower, experience points and evil karma. The Regulators, a vigilante-justice group, will place a similar contract on the player, ambushing at random like Talon Company; former citizens of Megaton might also ambush the player.

This side quest has some similarities to *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, by Walter Miller, Jr, particularly the portrayal of the relationship between religion and science. These two often-disparate elements of society are fused together in *Fallout 3*. The Church of the Children of the Atom, while per- haps an intended nod to *Beyond the Planet of the Apes*, which also featured worship of an unexploded atomic bomb, shows sustained interest in the preservation of artifacts (namely the bomb), though not with as grand an aim as that of the Albertian Order of Leibowitz. Whereas the latter was concerned with 'saving a small remnant of human culture from the remnant of humanity who wanted it destroyed' (Miller 1959: 64), the former wanted the unexploded nuclear warhead for the purposes of worship.

Such worship is dependent on the belief that each atomic mass contains a universe entire, that the splitting of an atomic mass creates many universes. Therefore, the Church of the Children of the Atom views the use of atomic warfare not as destructive but as a creative and unifying holy event. Should the player choose to send the Children to their destiny by detonating the Megaton bomb, though, evil karma remains the lone result, perhaps because of the non-cult members residing in the settlement. Furthermore, if the player's karma level was neutral or evil prior to this event, accepting Mr Burke's offer and pushing the button that detonates the Megaton bomb cause the player to have the lowest possible karma in the game. Being witness to and causing such an in-game event makes for one of the most disturbing and significant moments in *Fallout 3*.

However, an equally troublesome situation is available for the player in 'Tenpenny Tower'. Ghouls, individuals who have been horribly disfigured by nuclear radiation yet still retain some degree of humanity, desire to live in the luxurious hotel and suites of Tenpenny Tower, but none of the present residents, including owner/landlord Allistair Tenpenny, are willing to let them in. The first option available to the player involves murdering Roy Phillips, leader of the Ghouls, which is a direct request made to the player by Mr Tenpenny. A second option, coming from Roy this time, concerns helping the Ghouls into Tenpenny Tower and slaughtering its human population. A third option, and the only one by which the player might earn good karma, engages the player's sense of diplomacy through the discovery of a harmonious, nonviolent solution to the conflict. As in the cases of 'Oasis' and 'Power of the Atom', the player's decisions in 'Tenpenny Power' have a permanent effect on the fate of another human settlement in the Capital Wasteland.

Most interesting for the purposes of this chapter, though, is the third option, which involves talking to all interested parties about the possibility of a peaceful negotiation and then convincing Tenpenny Tower tenants that having Ghouls as neighbors is not something to dread. The player might feel that this is the best course of action to take, if only because, as Pat Frank observes in *Alas, Babylon*, 'the economics of disaster placed a penalty upon prejudice' (1959: 190). A more idealistic player might find resonance, as I did, with the main character in Poul Anderson's 'Tomorrow's Children', who declared, '[O]ur problem is to learn to live with the mutants, to accept

anyone . . . no matter how he looks, to quit thinking anything was ever settled by violence or connivance, to build a culture of individual sanity' (1985: 170). However, such a culture is not to be had at Tenpenny Tower. Ghouls and humans initially do live together and get along well at the completion of this third option, garnering the player caps, experience points and a very useful item in the form of a Ghoul Mask, which makes the player friendly with all feral Ghouls. However, a subsequent return to Tenpenny Tower will see all human residents gone. Further investigation by the player reveals that the tenants had a disagreement that caused Roy Phillips to decide to 'take out the trash', that is, slaughter the humans and loot, strip and dump their bodies in the basement of the hotel.

With no way to prevent this from happening, the player may find the good karma earned from this side quest cheapened, as was the case in 'The Situation at Tenpenny Tower', by D. Riley: 'The "good karma" reward tastes a little acrid in your mouth. You drove out the bigots, you paved the way for acceptance, you did everything right, but somehow you managed to let a group of innocent people die' (2008). With every solution to this particular side quest ending in murder, Riley observes that all that is left for the player to decide is 'how many people have to be killed'. In lacking a true good answer to the situation at Tenpenny Tower, *Fallout 3* made Riley uncomfortable with his agency as a player, leaving part of him wishing he had 'left well enough alone'. It is possible, then, to view the Tenpenny Tower side quest as an argument for post-apocalyptic neutrality. In such a situation where one's own survival should be paramount, perhaps it would be better not to become involved in the affairs of others.

Any player of *Fallout 3* has just as much freedom to leave certain quests and tasks incomplete. The agency and immediacy that *Fallout 3* provides in terms of morality and survival and just how meaningful it can be to be good or evil in this particular post-apocalyptic environment are characteristics noted by Allen Cook, video game critic for the community blog *Gamers with Jobs*. In 'Hero of the Wastes', Cook observes how the player 'can truly revel in the epic nature of [their] betrayal of humanity' or feel as though they have 'contributed substantially to the well-being of mankind by simply handing some guy a cheap bottle of water'. Although Egocentric is a karmic title that the game reserves for the player marking a neutral path through the Capital Wasteland, Cook implies that the entire experience is about ego: 'I'm the hero because I'm the one with the tools, the knowledge. . . . I am the arbiter of history because I'm the only one who knows it. . . . I'm the only one who can write it.' *Fallout 3* provides this greater agency and influence from the very beginning, and the question of what the player will do is ever-present.

This is also a point on which Duncan Fyfe explains in the blog post 'Escape from Vault 101' observing that 'making moral decisions isn't a

feature designed to encourage replayability, it's arguably the entire point [of playing the game]'. All falls upon the quality of the character being developed by the player, and if they 'try and approximate the moral and legal standards of today, then that's a statement in itself'. In a way, the player becomes similar not only to Ellison's Vic but also to J.G. Ballard's Traven in 'The Terminal Beach', in that the player's time in the Capital Wasteland becomes 'completely existential, an absolute break separating one moment from the next like two quantal events' (1985: 131). Furthermore, the player's actions come to mirror those taken by Randy Bragg in Pat Frank's *Alas, Babylon*, for 'in everything he did, now, he found he looked into the needs of the future' (1959: 173). Such characteristics compose the essence of survival in a post-apocalyptic scenario.

Fallout 3 is similar to previous takes on the post-apocalypse because it is just as revealing of how the survival choices made in such a setting can influence an individual's particular character. Dale Bailey, in his referential and self-aware 'The End of the World as We Know It', identifies three varieties of main characters typical of post-apocalyptic tales: the individualist whose self-reliance and knowledge of firearms puts that one on the 'way to Re-Establishing Western Civilization' (2008: 287), the bandit who is not 'displeased by the expanded opportunities to rape and pillage' (2008: 287) and the world-weary sophisticate, who needs no further description. Using elements of choice and freedom coupled with a simple but effective system of morality, *Fallout 3* allows, and perhaps even encourages, the player to be each of these characters.

User Modifications in Fallout 3

Numerous user modifications to the already extensive experience provided by Bethesda further emphasize ethical in-game actions on the part of the player. This is almost despite the fact that player expertise will tend 'towards the ultraviolent' (Langan 2008: 311), no matter one's particular karmic bent. Given the potentially violent outcomes of assisting those met in the Capital Wasteland, it might be more worthwhile simply to move along. Then again, there is a chance that completing a certain quest or engaging in a particular task could be all the more necessary if the player has made modifications.

While the game designed and developed by Bethesda is an offline gaming experience, much engaged discussion of the game occurs online, and user modifications, better known as 'mods', are a major aspect. In *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, Alexander Galloway notes the ways in which a video game may be modified:

> (1) at the level of its visual design, substituting new level maps, new artwork, new character models, and so on; (2) at the level of the rules of the game, changing how gameplay unfolds—who wins, who loses, and

what the repercussions of various gamic acts are; or (3) at the level of its software technology, changing character behavior, game physics, lighting techniques, and so on (2006: 107-108).

Jim Rossignol, author of *This Gaming Life*, simplifies the act of creating video game mods, or 'modding', as 'the process of taking an existing game and modifying it to create free variants. It's a kind of nonprofit amateur game design' (2008: 39). Both Galloway and Rossignol allude to how augmenting, continuing and even disrupting in-game experiences by way of mods is revealing of creativity and sophistication; Galloway even observes that modifying games is 'almost as natural as playing them' (2006: 112). Thus, the importance of mods to the sustained success of video games such as *Fallout 3* as well as Bethesda's previous releases, including *Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* and *Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, cannot be overstated.

By presenting the opportunity for players with the technical knowledge to modify the game world and the experiences to be had within it, game developers encourage fuller ownership of the game itself, making game play that much more of a personal investment. And while some mods might be seen as superficial, for example, those offering a greater variety of armor and weapons, other user creations have greater depth and potential impact for any player choosing to download and install them. Even those mods that provide little more than aesthetic changes can influence the player's perspective on the game world.

For instance, having become tired of 'the world that went to ruin . . . [and wanting] to see green occasionally', modder Khyrin created and uploaded files to the most comprehensive collection of *Fallout 3* mods, http://www.fallout3nexus.com/, a Web site that functions as much as a ranking system as it does as a repository. It is here that users post their own modding efforts and provide detailed explanations and screenshots of their modifications to the video game environment. Khyrin's mod, though, changes the Capital Wasteland in one significant way, by introducing lush greenery. Instead of burned-out, dark brown trees and soil devoid of life, the 'GreenWorld' mod induces a transformation; ferns sprawl across the landscape, growing in the gaps between buildings left half-standing, and trees with bright green leaves line the rubble of former roads. This particular modification to *Fallout 3* augments a sharper contrast between civilization and nature, how the former often has a greater struggle in returning to prior glory than the latter. On recommendation of in-game continuity, the creator of 'Green-World' also suggests installation of this mod after the completion of 'Oasis' or the main quest. Doing so gives greater credence and impact to both as the results of the player's in-game actions become more tangible.

Similar to 'GreenWorld' is 'Fellout', which, as modder Hattix explains, provides 'a harshly lit world more reminiscent of the Sahara Desert'. Gone are the washed out greens and browns so dominant throughout *Fallout 3*

replaced by a sharper integration of color. Bright sunlight and deep blue skies with puffy clouds replace the persistent, yellowish haze on the horizon; rust is redder on those buildings still standing. The changes brought about by 'Fellout' are perhaps most noticeable outside, but any player entering an in-game building should also notice a clearer, more fluorescent lighting arrangement. User-player modifications like 'GreenWorld' and 'Fellout' suggest a brighter, almost inviting post-apocalyptic scenario, though the core elements of the game itself make for an ever-increasing contrast. Roving packs of wild dogs will still run through the greenery to attack the player; raiders and Super Mutants remain threats to the player's survival, but not to that of the trees surrounding them.

Other *Fallout 3* mods go beyond aesthetic improvements, making for fundamental changes to the player's experience of the game. Boasting the addition of 120 new weapons along with many new types of ammunition, hundreds of retextured items, a more balanced system of armor and weapons, revised character leveling and strength and greater cost to all items— weapons and ammunition in particular—'FOOK 2' is an extensive community-created mod that, as observed by multi-format video game Web site Games Radar, 'makes [*Fallout 3*] feel more post-apocalyptic'.

The same could also be said for '*Fallout 3*—Wanderer's Edition' (FWE), which, as modder Mezmorki explains, concerns 'improving the challenge, sense of immersion, depth of gameplay and range of options' so that the player 'will find the wasteland to be a more dynamic, but far less forgiving place'. This particular mod enhances *Fallout 3*'s first-person shooter elements by giving a faster pace to combat with a greater foundation on the player's skill and also augments the game's role-playing elements by placing greater emphasis on choice and consequence. 'FWE' manages both by slowing player leveling, eliminating the possibility of the player having mastered every combat skill by level 20.

This makes the choice of particular perks and specific skills much more important, and perhaps more difficult, too, as the effects of many underpowered perks and skills present in the original game have been improved. Furthermore, 'FEW' increases the lethality of combat by having weapons and attacks perform significantly more damage to the player and to potential enemies. This, in turn, makes in-game injuries more severe, and healing is no longer the simple task it is in the original *Fallout 3*. 'FEW' even includes an optional 'primary needs' feature, requiring the player to eat, drink and sleep on a regular basis. This mod also offers less ammunition and other items needed for survival in the Capital Wasteland, thereby requiring the player to be more mindful of acquired expenditures.

It could be that the player who installs user-created modifications like 'FOOK 2' and 'FWE' will walk that truer neutral path, if only for the simple reason that involving oneself in the struggles of others increases the chances

of one's ultimate demise. Then again, given the substantial rewards of certain side quests, such mods may also prove a greater temptation to pursue a good karma or evil karma result, depending on which represents a better possibility for the player's continued existence in the Capital Wasteland.

By making for even greater challenges and arguably better immersion in a particular post-apocalyptic scenario, *Fallout 3* mods have the potential to cause many in-game decisions to carry more influence in terms of both morality and survival. For example, if the player has 'primary needs', how much more important does it become not to discourage an NPC's intentions to write a Capital Wasteland survival guide and instead provide assistance, given the range of helpful items available as rewards? Furthermore, if the player has little interest in the karma-neutral gifts in the Oasis quest, then why not be witness to the one-time event of Harold the man-tree mutant going up in flames? And if good and evil in-game rewards are comparable, then why not also be witness to the nuking of Megaton?

Conclusion

Given the myriad opportunities for damnation and salvation, maintaining neutrality in the Capital Wasteland can be a rather fruitless, if not futile, endeavor. Perhaps this is what the post-apocalyptic scenario offered by *Fallout 3* and a prolific modding community is most suggestive of, that ascribing to a moral code, be it harmful or helpful to those encountered, is most essential for survival. That this can be achieved as much through the original gaming space as through user modifications is of no small significance.

Without the Internet, this would be much more difficult to accomplish. There would be no *Fallout* wiki devoted to detailing every aspect of the game, from characters and plot to in-game items and locations. There would also be no online forums intended to provide step-by-step instruction in completing various parts of the game, including the exploitation of design weaknesses and the discovery of in-jokes hidden by the developers. Because these online spaces are available, the gaming enterprise overall is 'social since all players need to get and share information about the games in order to become adept at playing them . . . many games involve building, interacting with, and progressively shaping a simulated world' (Gee 2007: 91-92). This is rather analogous to Mitra and Watts's understanding of cyberspace as 'a discursive space produced by the creative work of people whose spatial locations are ambiguous and provisional' (2002: 485).

The modding community consists of additional discursive spaces, not only in the form of the *Fallout 3 Nexus* but also in the actual mods themselves. Players and modders are required to shift between online and offline

modes, logging on to upload/download mods, logging off to experience mods and then logging back on to acknowledge and provide feedback. In other words, players and modders are agents creating a variety of cyber- and game-spaces where they can 'comfortably dwell, and create their ethos or "dwelling space", which they inhabit and from where they can address the public sphere' (Mitra and Watts 2002: 486). This is possible because, just as 'virtually anyone with internet access can now be an agent' (Mitra and Watts 2002: 489-90), virtually anyone can now be a player and/or a modder. We then might see modders as taking advantage of the opportunity to 'voice themselves' (Mitra and Watts 2002: 488), not only responding to the discursive space provided by Bethesda but also revising it for a variety of purposes and reasons.

Much of this chapter has concerned itself with documenting the wide variety of actions available to the player and the modder in *Fallout 3*, showing how it is possible to view the Capital Wasteland as a sort of 'safe haven in which to enact the problem of being as it appears in gamespace, but without the oppressive stakes of one's own life on the line' (Wark 2007: 124). Of course, such a space is 'safe' only in the sense that it is not real, because 'games are playgrounds where players can experiment with doing things they . . . would not normally do' (Juul 2005: 193). *Fallout 3* functions as a kind of dual playground, allowing the player to engage in moral experiments and also encouraging modders to create their own.

In *Half-Real*, Jesper Juul explains that thematic complexity is something games resist because of the medium's rule-governed nature. Love, ambition and social conflict, not to mention the ethics of post-apocalyptic survival, are not 'easily implemented in rules' (2005: 189). The performable actions available to the player are, as a result, rather simple, but this does not wholly prohibit possibilities for making meaning.

As a popular culture medium, video games still manage to 'reflect back to us, in part, the basic themes and even prejudices of our own society' (Gee 2007: 20). Video games are frames 'in which we see things differently . . . we can seek the beauty of the activity itself' (Juul 2005: 201). Video games are 'our contemporaries, the form in which the present can be felt and, in being felt, thought through' (Wark 2007: 225). So, despite the imperfect complexity of the original game and its many user modifications, *Fallout 3* provides the player and the modder with the opportunity to experiment with freedom of choice in a frame of understanding that is both different from and similar to the real world. Video games like *Fallout 3* allow us the chance to think and feel our way through the post-apocalypse in ways as meaningful and unique as ourselves.

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