



INSTITUTIONEN FÖR SPRÅK OCH LITTERATURER

## ***WHY DO WE GAME?***

*A Socio-Anthropological Analysis of Fallout 3 and the Role of Role-Playing Video Games in Society*

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# Abstract

**Title:** *Why Do We Game?: A Socio-Anthropological Analysis of Fallout 3 and the Role of Role-Playing Video Games in Society*

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**Abstract:** In this essay, the overt ideological message and the internal system for structuring gameplay in *Fallout 3* (2008) have been analyzed from a socio-anthropological perspective developed by sociologist Anthony Giddens. The analysis concludes that the enjoyability of digital RPGs derives in part from the way their gameplay provides escapism from modern society's socially alienating qualities, and indulgence in its socioeconomic motivational basis. This offers a new approach to both the study of game addiction and the broader question of why we play games. Furthermore, these conclusions contradict the socio-ideological predisposition expressed in *Fallout 3*'s storyline, giving support to the critical claims of several Marxist and cultural study theorists who view games and the video game industry as having a negative effect on both the critical capacity of the individual and that of society as a whole.

**Keywords:** *Fallout 3*, Anthony Giddens, Sociology, Social anthropology, Role-playing games, Enjoyability, Addiction, Escapism, Popular culture, Critical cultural studies.

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# 1. Introduction

The video game industry has grown rapidly over the past few decades to become one of the largest and most influential forms of entertainment in Western popular culture (Lizardi 33). Saleswise, it now surpasses the book publishing industry, having generated some \$25 billion in sales in 2011 and averaged an annual growth rate five times that of the US economy in the period between 2005 and 2009 (Hilgard et al. 1). For this reason, video games have also sparked great interest among academics and researchers. Some choose to treat them as just another form of text, providing the usual psychological interpretations and asking familiar questions about ideological leanings and how social norms and stereotypes are perpetuated through themes and storylines.<sup>1</sup> Others however, pay special attention to the fact that playing games is not only about the receiving of structured information, but also about the performing of structured behaviors. Many have raised concerns about the possible negative effects of repeatedly performing violent acts in video games (Amini n. pg.), or their potential for causing behavioral and psychological addiction (Hilgard et al. 1). There is a broader question, however, that has become uniquely associated with the study of games. Whereas film or literature studies do not often engage in broad, meta-textual questions such as “why do we read?”, or “what is it about films that make them enjoyable to watch?”, this has become a central topic in the game studies community, attracting researchers from diverse theoretical backgrounds including behavioral psychology and neurology, as well as the common “in-house” game designers and developers seeking to improve the quality of the games they put out.<sup>2</sup> Due to their different aims and theoretical starting points, many diverse suggestions have been put forth. Behavioral psychologists have made a large presence by comparing B. F. Skinner’s different reward schemas to the ways games structure and balance challenge with reward (Game Reward Systems n. pg.). Neurological and cognitive psychologists have also

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<sup>1</sup> Some well-known examples include N’Gai Croal’s analysis of racism in Capcom’s 2008 zombie slasher *Resident Evil 5*, and Anita Sarkeesian’s feminist analysis of prevalent sexist stereotyping in video games (Kemmer 100-101). There have also been some noteworthy psychoanalytical readings, especially of the earlier *Resident Evil* series (Santos and White 2007).

<sup>2</sup> One example is game designer Marc LeBlanc’s taxonomic categorization of game enjoyability, which includes a Fantasy (game as make-believe), Narrative (game as drama), Challenge (game as obstacle course), Fellowship (game as social framework), Discovery (game as uncharted territory) and Expression (game as self-discovery) aspect (LeBlanc 2).

been able to demonstrate games' increasingly effective triggering of our brain's natural dopamine response systems, and this is knowledge that game designers have since been able to use to further improve their entertainment products (n. pg.).

There is, however, one theoretical perspective that has been somewhat neglected in the study of video game enjoyability: the perspective of social anthropology. In an article titled "Why Game?: An Anthropological, Sociological and Psychological Approach", archaeology graduate Andrew Hiscock observes the lack of sociological and anthropological approaches to the study of games. Although his article is rudimentary in nature, being described as "merely a thought experiment" by its author (Hiscock n. pg.), it nonetheless represents a sound approach to the analysis of game enjoyability that simultaneously acts as an intriguing form of societal critique. It takes the stance that although our societies and cultures have developed immeasurably since we humans wandered out of the African continent some 200,000 years ago, our psychological and physiological makeup has remained largely the same (n. pg.). From that premise, Hiscock's article proposes that modern video games are, at least in part, enjoyable because they close the gap between our primitive socio-psychological needs and the alienating sociocultural environment we live in in modern societies (n. pg.). Of course, not all games have a strong emphasis on this function; some, such as puzzle games, focus almost entirely on abstract challenge and problem-solving. It is, however, largely true of modern, digital role-playing games (RPGs) that they have a strong emphasis on replicating the social functions that Hiscock names, such as shared group problem solving that benefits the group at large, clearly defined hierarchical roles and clearly defined boundaries for intergroup activity (n. pg.).

Digital role-playing games thus provide a form of *escape* from the alienating social aspects of modern society, but there is also a particular kind of *indulgence* inherent in these sorts of games that has often and readily been associated with the inherent socioeconomic basis of modern society. Marxist scholars and critical cultural study theorists alike have found much to scrutinize in games, their gameplay, and the video game industry as a whole (Simon n. pg.).<sup>3</sup> It is not hard to see how a pervasive corporate ideology motivates many forms of

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<sup>3</sup> Simon's article is a review of Dyer-Witheford's and de Peuter's *Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*, a critique of the gaming industry that also critically reflects upon academic game studies. Simon describes their use of the word "empire" as meaning "a form of social-economic life under late capitalism that reaches beyond economic exchange" (n. pg.).

gameplay, as game scholar Scott Rettberg points out using arguably the quintessential digital RPG, *World of Warcraft*:

While it's certainly true that some students are failing out of college, some marriages are falling apart, and some bodies are slipping into flabby obesity as a direct result of *World of Warcraft* addiction, in a larger sense the game is training a generation of good corporate citizens not only to consume well and to pay their dues, but also to climb the corporate ladder, to lead projects, to achieve sales goals, to earn and save, to work hard for better possessions, to play the markets, to win respect from their peers and their customers, to direct and encourage and cajole their underlings to outperform, and to become better employees and perhaps, eventually, effective CEOs. Playing *World of Warcraft* serves as a form of corporate training. (Rettberg qtd in Torner 4)

The comparison between daily life and the game world made by game scholars Evan Torner and William J. White also reveals the similarity of their respective motivating ideologies; “[o]ne plays a quick round of *Battleheart* on a tablet computer, only to exit out to do one’s homework for the score-like reward of a grade, so that then one can make progress toward one’s chosen career with its own systems of punishment and reward” (Torner 4).

A socio-anthropological study of digital RPGs can provide new and useful insights into the question of why we play games by focusing on how they can provide both escape from modern society’s alienating qualities, and indulgence in its socioeconomic motivational basis. Yet, to conduct such a study we would need a consolidated theoretical model that addresses both these aspects while limiting the historical period being analyzed from 200,000 years down to a more manageable timespan, such as the last century. These requirements are met by a societal model developed by sociologist Anthony Giddens in the 1990s to describe the shift in Western societies from traditional to post-traditional social orders. In his chapter titled “Living in a Post-Traditional Society”, which is part of the 1994 collaborative work *Reflexive Modernities: Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*, Giddens describes the challenges of the high-risk, high-reward society that has emerged largely in the second half of the 20th century. Increased freedoms and opportunities, he argues, have come at the cost of new psychosocial difficulties, especially regarding the establishment of stable

notions of identity, morality and social meaning. At the same time, Giddens relies on Weber's analysis of the capitalist spirit and the pursuit of the entrepreneur to describe this new, post-traditional motivational basis.<sup>4</sup> In this way, Giddens' model offers us a stable and unified theoretical ground from which both the escapism and the indulgence aspects of digital RPGs' enjoyability can be analyzed.

A general overview of Giddens' societal theory will be provided. First however, the choice of which video game to analyze must be justified and explained.

### *Fallout 3: Meaning among the Ruins*

Released in 2008 by Bethesda Softworks LLC, *Fallout 3* is a single-player, action, role-playing video game, and occupies a central place within the digital RPG genre. Many of its structural and thematic characteristics derive from standard tabletop RPG predecessors such as *Dungeons & Dragons*: The game focuses on a central character designed and tailored by the player and whose positive attributes increase as the game progresses. It features a central story arc within a Science Fiction/Fantasy setting, a gameplay largely based on exploring and questing within an expansive geographical world, and an in-game system of items and currency. Although some features first seen in this third installment of the *Fallout* series such as its real-time combat mechanics and first-person player perspective do not follow the traditional mould, they have become common as the RPG has emigrated into the virtual environment. However, these features are of lesser consequence due to the particular focus of this study, and this allows us to speak in broader terms regarding the analysis of *Fallout 3* since many observations are not game-specific, but rather apply to the dominant tropes of the genre as a whole.

There is, however, another reason why *Fallout 3* is uniquely suited for a socio-anthropological analysis of digital RPGs: its retro-futuristic, post-apocalyptic setting. Ruins and their portrayal in art and popular culture have often been associated with societal critique, where the physical destruction of a society's buildings and infrastructure is at the same time a

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<sup>4</sup> Giddens does not primarily use the term "motivational basis" however; this is a term established to create clarity and uniformity within this essay in the light of multiple sources who often use different terminologies to refer to similar, intersecting ideas.

deconstruction of its fundamental values and ideologies (Watts 247). With the unique affordances of their virtual media, game developers can set up what is essentially an interactive model of a failed society, and as a result there is a plethora of game titles demonstrating failed societal scenarios. The *Bioshock* series, for instance, is a catastrophic vision of Randian objectivism, the *Deus Ex* series portrays a nightmarish future where corporations have become more powerful than governments, and the *Watch\_Dogs* series allows its players to explore the worst-case scenario of unbound freedom of information; rampant media manipulation, constant surveillance and a total lack of privacy (Shoemaker n. pg.). In *Fallout 3*, the failed prewar society is modeled to resemble a retro-futuristic version of the “Golden Age” of 1950s America (Watts 275). The naive vision of a capitalist utopia based upon materialist and consumerist affluence soon gives way to a global nuclear war brought on by the tensions of dwindling natural resources. While all three major installments of the series contain this same overt critique of Western capitalism, *Fallout 3* takes place in the devastated remains of Washington, D.C., providing an especially dense landscape for symbolic meaning. As literary scholar Matthew Wolf-Meyer has pointed out, one of the central functions of post-apocalyptic fiction is to establish a “dialogue of ideologies”, where one ideology is portrayed favorably through its ability to survive (Wolf-Meyer n. pg.). While the dialogue of ideologies within *Fallout 3* is overtly critical of the materialism and consumerism of the capitalist socioeconomic system, it also harbors an ideological predisposition to favor the values and logics of post-traditional society. This can be seen by applying Giddens’ societal model to the conflict at the heart of the game’s main storyline, where the story’s protagonist faction clearly reflects post-traditional values, and its antagonist faction reflects those of traditional societies.

The reason to include *Fallout 3*’s dialogue of ideologies in this study is that when both the ideology and enjoyability aspects of *Fallout 3* are analyzed from a socio-anthropological perspective using Giddens’ societal model and compared, two distinct paradoxes become apparent: While the game provides escape from the alienating nature of post-traditional society, it also celebrates post-traditional values. At the same time, while it overtly criticizes the capitalist socioeconomic system, it also indulges players in capitalist behavioral pursuits. In short, if we analyze *Fallout 3* as a conventional text bearing ideological meaning, we get one set of results, but when *Fallout 3* is analyzed as a system or model that structures performance, we get another, contradictory set of results. This claim can be demonstrated



quite convincingly in regard to *Fallout 3*, yet *Fallout 3* is not an isolated case, but rather a fairly representative example of what a large body of Marxists and critical cultural study scholars point to as being a fundamental misdiagnosis of the causes of societal problems, and a misunderstanding by individuals of their conditions of existence in society. Examples of these critical perspectives include, without being limited to, those based on “Althusserian notions of ideology and interpellation, Foucauldian biopower and governmentality, Deleuze and Guattari on machinic subjectivity and an overall Frankfurt School perspective on video games as ‘culture industry’” (Simon n. pg.).

Before any such broader discussion can be had, however, there are several claims that must be expanded upon and supported with sufficient evidence. For instance, the thought experiment started by Hiscock, which has now been expanded to posit that digital RPGs are enjoyable in part because they provide an escape from the socially alienating nature of modern society and indulgence in its motivational pursuits, must be properly investigated. Furthermore, the way in which *Fallout 3*’s main storyline and post-apocalyptic setting ideologically favors post-traditional values must be demonstrated. First, however, Giddens’ theoretical model of post-traditional society must be properly presented, and then a few preliminary words are in order regarding debates and disagreements over methodology in the study of games.

## Anthony Giddens: Living in a Compulsive, High-Risk Society

In his aforementioned chapter of *Reflexive Modernities* titled “Living in a Post-Traditional Society” (Giddens 56-109), Giddens explains that over the course of the 20th century, Western societies began abandoning their roots in traditional modes of thought and instead began consolidating along the values and philosophy of the Enlightenment.<sup>5</sup> This philosophy involved a belief in the scientific pursuit of knowledge about the material world and its effectiveness in shaping nature toward a human ideal. While acknowledging the material benefits and freedoms it affords us, Giddens suggests that for many, modern life poses new

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<sup>5</sup> Enlightenment philosophy had obviously been gaining influence in the West ever since the eponymous historical period, but here we are referring to specific changes in the fundamental structure of Western societies that were specific to the 20th century.

and increasingly virulent sets of psychological challenges that come hand in hand with these newfound freedoms. For instance, as a direct result of the discoveries of science we now live with the impending threats of environmental crisis and nuclear apocalypse, not to mention the recent memory of two horrifying world wars and constant sporadic outbreaks of conflict across the globe. We are no longer convinced, neither in public nor private, of Marx's "Prometheanism"; that we humans will create for ourselves only "such problems as [we] can resolve" (Marx qtd in Giddens 59).

Furthermore, traditions acted as stabilizing frameworks of a collective continuity, and thus provided stable construction and maintenance of individual identity within clearly defined confines of morality and societal norms (Giddens 63-64). Enlightenment philosophy, on the other hand, has both undermined these stabilizing frameworks and led to the formation of a society far more alien to a stable sense of identity and fixed moral and societal norms, where "anxiety [and] socially created uncertainties loom large" and social bonding is a "fraught and difficult enterprise" (107). This is firstly because, while identity used to be a largely collective responsibility, it has increasingly become the responsibility of the individual who – and this is especially true in the digital age – must manage it in the light of a potentially endless incursion of knowledge and information about the world into the daily decision-making process (58-59). Secondly, the centrality of the motive of progress in the logic of Enlightenment philosophy, which today forms the motivational basis of nearly every aspect of society, from the economy to individual self-improvement, stands in direct opposition to the very notion of repetition, and of continuity over time. The problem according to Giddens is that repetition and continuity are a psychological necessity (75). They are ways of "staying in 'the only world we know', a means of avoiding exposure to 'alien' values or ways of life" (73). But due to its perceived irrationality in the face of a progressive societal logic, we tend to repress the true cause of our behaviors (70).

For partly this reason, Giddens uses terms such as "compulsion", "obsession" and "addiction" to describe our relationship to the daily routines, habits and customs we engage in (70). They are no longer conscious, socially agreed-upon behaviors that serve collective functions,<sup>6</sup> but have become unconscious, repetitive acts for maintaining a fragile semblance of continuity. His understanding of post-traditional society is one where "we can become

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<sup>6</sup> Giddens emphasizes that tradition was in no way mechanical or "unthinking"; the social function of their rituals and practices was well understood by the practitioners themselves (61-62).

addicted to anything – any aspect of lifestyle” such as “drugs, alcohol, coffee, but also work, exercise, sport, cinema-going, sex or love” (71). Another reason is that, given the sheer volume of obligatory, daily decision-making in modern life, where each choice involves the sifting-through of overwhelming amounts of information, these addictions are themselves ways of coping with this “multiplicity of possibilities” (75). It would seem that while the abundance of individual choice has led to greater individual freedom and control, it has also led to a greater feeling of powerlessness. Sociologist Felix Geyer provides a useful additional perspective that explains this phenomenon. He argues that “the core problem is no longer being unfree but rather being unable to select from among an overchoice of alternatives for action, whose consequences one often cannot even fathom” (Geyer *xxiii*). Similarly, the availability of information in this “age of information” has empowered individuals, but has also contributed to a societal alienation and a sense of overall meaninglessness. “With the accelerating throughput of information [...] meaningless [*sic*] is not a matter anymore of whether one can assign meaning to incoming information, but of whether one can develop adequate new scanning mechanisms to gather the goal-relevant information one needs, as well as more efficient selection procedures to prevent being overburdened by the information one does not need, but is bombarded with on a regular basis” (*xxiii*).

Regarding the progressive motivational basis in modern society, Giddens bases his understanding of its origins upon Max Weber’s notion of the protestant ethic and the “entrepreneurial spirit”. This describes a new social mentality that started to take hold as a result of the protestant reformation, and which places moral and ethical importance around material wealth and a vocational calling. The protestant ethic infused modern societies with a “motivational urgency” that went beyond the mere religious asceticism and self-denial that were common features of other religious practices such as puritanism and buddhism (Giddens 70). It was no longer enough to merely go to church or perform occasional rituals; salvation now needed to be pursued actively. Furthermore, in traditional protestant societies there was always a clear and observable connection between striving and morality. Even the Puritan work ethic – closely tied to economic productivity and accumulation of wealth – incorporated the pursuit of material wealth within the bigger picture of God’s plan in what Weber termed “economic traditionalism” (69). However, this connection is largely absent in the social ethic of capitalism; once the traditional religious ethic had been discarded, Giddens states, the

capitalist was “primed to repetition without [...] having much sense of why he, or others, had to run this endless treadmill” (70).

Generally speaking, the implications of Giddens’ theory for the motivational basis underlying post-traditional society are both complex and far-reaching. For the purposes of this analysis however, the focus will lie on the three central characteristics that have thus far been mentioned, namely an individual responsibility to construct identity, social meaning and societal norms that were once provided by traditional societies, an ethic of progress and productivity that translates into a specific type of work ethic and corporate ideology, and lastly, a conspicuous absence of a connection between striving and morality. The study of the enjoyability of *Fallout 3* will focus on analyzing how the game is shaped in response to a motivational societal basis with these three characteristics. Furthermore, in order to explain the conditions of living in a post-traditional society, Giddens also goes to some length in describing the differences between traditional and post-traditional societies. These differences will be discussed in more detail as they become relevant for the discussion on *Fallout 3*’s “dialogue of ideologies” further on. First however, some issues of methodology must be discussed, particularly a debate within game studies known as the “Ludology vs. Narratology” debate, to which the results of this analysis has much to contribute.

## Plotting a Methodology for “Virgin Soil”

In the introduction of a 2005 collection of scholarly essays titled *Digital Gameplay*, game scholar and editor Nate Garrelts describes the video game industry as a rapidly developing medium with highly dynamic content that the emergent scholarly field lacks a theoretical framework for studying (Garrelts 3). The approach of using pre-existing theoretical approaches from cultural studies entails both problems and benefits; while it grants video games academic legitimacy, it also “entails making choices about what content to discuss and what content to ignore” and has unfortunately led to “studies that pervert the medium” (8). This disagreement over theoretical approaches in digital game studies has blossomed into a full-fledged debate between narratologists, who view digital games as

approachable from the perspectives of cultural studies, and ludologists, who seek to cordon it off as a separate field of study.

Ludologist Espen Aarseth has become a central proponent of the ludological stance in digital game studies. His 1997 book *Cybertext* is considered a seminal work in that area, where he seeks to challenge “the recurrent practice of applying the theories of literary criticism to a new empirical field, seemingly without any reassessment of the terms and concepts involved” (Aarseth qtd in Simpson 1).<sup>7</sup> This has led to a focus on the internal systems of rules and the algorithmic structures of gameplay, rather than exogenic aspects of culture, ideology, narrative or story. Though the debate has increasingly led to a view of ludology and narratology as oppositional rather than potentially co-operative approaches (Schweighauser qtd in Simpson 2), there are also reconciliatory stances. One example is the stance taken by ludologist Gonzalo Frasca, who describes the central goal of his work as showing “how basic concepts of ludology could be used *along with* narratology to better understand video games” (Frasca n. pg., my emphasis). Another reconciliatory stance is that of renowned game designer and theorist Ian Bogost, whose 2006 *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism* proposes a new method of game analysis (Bogost qtd in Simpson 8), which is in part a response to Aarseth’s dogmatic insistence that the complex, contingent nature of digital games limits them to strictly whole-systems analyses.

It goes without saying that a study’s methodological approach must reflect the type of questions it seeks to answer, and since this essay deals with issues of both behavior structuring and ideological message, its theoretical approach will need to adopt perspectives from both sides in this debate. On the ludological side, the concerns of ludologists such as Aarseth must be taken seriously; digital games must be treated as unique structures and systems that are interacted with, rather than as texts that are decoded. This is because it is their unique structural and algorithmic qualities that make many aspects of their enjoyability different from that of reading a book or watching a film. A good case in point is a comparative study conducted by game design researcher Michael Wellenreiter, where he concludes that the fundamental structure of digital RPGs is geared to a different type of interactive gameplay

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<sup>7</sup> In a 2004 essay, he lamentably describes digital game studies as “virgin soil, ready to be plotted and plowed by the machineries of cultural and textual studies” (Aarseth qtd in Simpson 2). His colorful language demonstrates a strong sense among researchers of wanting to abandon some of the tired old conventions within cultural studies that threaten only to bring more of the same, and instead explore the aspects of digital games that make them unique.

than in more linear game genres. He argues in favor of viewing RPGs not as texts or scripts, but rather as “models” or “systems” because in his view they invite the player to co-author their own character and story meanings, which as he points out, is equally reflected in the expectations the players have, even before picking up the game (Wellenreiter 347, 352).

Another good example is what game designers often call the “challenge” aspect of a game. This aspect is central to ludological approaches to studying enjoyability, and ludologist Greg Costikyan points out that without a challenge towards some sort of goal, there would hardly be a game at all. He goes on to show how effective balancing of a game’s challenge – which he calls “struggle” – is central to its enjoyability, so that players feel they have “a reasonable shot at winning” without getting bored (Costikyan 17).

Computer and console game developers are constantly grappling with the notion of struggle; they know that if the game is too hard, players will find it frustrating. Contrariwise, if it is too easy, they will find it dull. Developers take considerable care – and spend quite a lot of time testing – to try to ensure that the game is reasonably balanced. When feasible, they include a way for players to alter the difficulty to suit – if it’s too easy, turn the difficulty up; if it’s too hard, turn it down. (16)

Many more studies, especially in behavioral psychology, have approached this underlying issue by studying the addictiveness of reward systems in games and how they are optimized to trigger the brain’s natural reward responses (Garrelts 10-11). B. F. Skinner’s seminal study on pigeons found that a variable ratio schedule (where reward is randomized) set at 50% reward rate yielded the highest response of lever-pulling from his pigeons, and many games employ exactly this reward schedule. More complex games even combine and overlap numerous reward schedules to provide the most engaging (and behaviorally addicting) experiences (Game Reward Systems n. pg.).

These approaches to analyzing digital games are primarily ludological, but as mentioned, the ludological approach will not always suffice in and of itself. The analysis of *Fallout 3*’s overt ideological message will obviously be conducted more in the style of conventional literary theory since ludology does not typically address such issues, yet even regarding questions of enjoyability, the ludological approach has its limits. For example,

while Costikyan's ludological perspective on enjoyability in digital games is insightful, it misses important aspects due to its reliance upon exclusively endogenous sources of meaning in games. His definition of what constitutes a "game" places heavy emphasis on the endogenous source of meaning within the game's structure (Costikyan 24). To demonstrate this he uses the example of *Monopoly*:

Suppose you're walking down the street, and someone gives you a \$100 in *Monopoly* money. This means nothing to you; *Monopoly* money has no meaning in the real world. [...] Yet when you're playing *Monopoly*, *Monopoly* money has value; *Monopoly* is played until all players are bankrupt but one, who is the winner. (22)

While it is true that *Monopoly* money takes on new forms of meaning that stay within the game and are structured around its system of rules and algorithms, it is also submerged within a thematic motif, known in academic terms as its "conceit"<sup>8</sup>, which imports an entirely exogenic and pre-existing system of meanings and associations directly onto the game.<sup>9</sup> The player already knows about real money and its use in real financial transactions, and this is a large part (and for some players, an essential part) of their enjoyment of the game. *Monopoly's* conceit is what allows the player to role-play as a turn-of-the-century capitalist tycoon competing against rivals. The player who does well can enjoy imagining that they have skills analogous to socially and culturally prestigious endeavors in the real world. Although this role-play dimension may be less pronounced in the case of *Monopoly*, it is one of the central components of the RPG genre that this essay will exclusively be dealing with.

The point here is not to suggest that *Monopoly* lacks unique and endogenous sources of meaning vital to gratification. Rather, it must be recognized that the game is a veritable knot of criss-crossing and overlapping endogenous and exogenous sources of enjoyment. This is a vital distinction since the ultimate aim of this essay is to analyze the connection between game and society by showing that games can enact multiple, often contradictory messages and functions of both endogenous and exogenous natures. Furthermore, any analysis of

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<sup>8</sup> See page 212-213 in *Characteristics of Games* (2012) by George S. Elias, Richard Garfield, and K. Robert Gutschera.

<sup>9</sup> The game's conceit can in some cases even render the algorithmic, numerical structure more or less imperceptible to the player, such as in many triple-A digital game releases.

enjoyability in digital games from a one-sided approach will be reductive, and if claims of exclusivity are made from either side of this debate, it will only end up hurting the field by making it unable to analyze enjoyability from its various dimensions. The exclusivity that some hardline ludologists espouse also implies that games have nothing to say about the culture we live in, and considering the popularity and cultural impact of the game industry as a whole, ignoring video games would be a huge loss to the academic study of popular culture. Games shape, as they are shaped by, the culture in which they are created. For this reason, a reconciliatory methodological approach incorporating both ludological and narratological perspectives is not only fruitful but necessary.



## 2. Why Do We Game?

“The whites always want something. They are always uneasy and restless. We do not know what they want. We do not understand them. We think that they are all mad”.

- Chief Mountain Lake.<sup>10</sup>

Returning to the question of why we play games, the claim is that from a socio-anthropological perspective digital RPGs are enjoyable because they provide escape from the social alienation of modern society, while indulging players in its socioeconomic motivational basis. Again, social alienation is to be understood as a prevalent sense of powerlessness and meaninglessness in modern society arising from the difficulty of constructing identity, social meaning and societal norms in light of an overburden of information and “overchoice” of alternatives. The motivational basis of society is to be understood as an ethic of progress and productivity based upon the Weberian “capitalist spirit” that has since lost its connection to any sense of moral justification. What digital RPGs offer is a virtual model designed to allow players to creatively explore and perform identities, social situations and moral outcomes, while engaging in the simulated pursuits of the capitalist entrepreneur (again, in the Weberian sense) under the auspices of a virtual, teleologically progressive, moral imperative. This section will demonstrate this claim by first analyzing how *Fallout 3* simulates the construction of identity, social meaning and societal norms, then focusing on how progress, productivity and the entrepreneurial pursuit motivates gameplay, and lastly showing how the game reconnects striving with morality and a clear teleological progression. It will also make an attempt at showing how the balancing of “challenge” in these aspects is done through the unique affordances of the digital medium.

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<sup>10</sup> From Carl Jung’s *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1963).

## Escaping Powerlessness and Meaninglessness through Role-Play

Even if the role-playing game in question is strictly single-player, as is the case with *Fallout 3*, the importance of social performance and identity-shaping is profound in digital RPGs. As explained, they often begin with some sort of character creation system, where the player can choose their character's alignments along a list of traits. In nearly all RPGs, this involves selecting strengths and weaknesses in combat, but often this will branch out to social aspects of gameplay such as skills in speech, charisma, bartering, and so on. Michael Wellenreiter uses *Fallout 3*'s character creation system as an example when he proposes that RPGs invite players to co-author character and plot narrativization through their game structure. Right from the start it allows the player considerable control over physiological, psychological and sociological traits of their protagonist (347). In *Fallout 3*, the player can choose the gender and race of the character, as well as his or her physical appearance, which can be controlled to a high level of detail; "even the 'nose design' screen includes seven parameters, including bridge depth, nostril tilt and sellion height. [...] The options are so varied that a player may actually insert a likeness of himself or herself into the game world, rather than being limited to the designers' particular vision of the character" (347). Character creation in *Fallout 3* also involves choosing strengths and weaknesses from a list of attributes both physiological (strength, agility, endurance) and psychological (intelligence, charisma, perception) (347). The player similarly chooses the character's occupational, educational and sociological specializations by choosing skills to prioritize from a long list of options such as bartering, speech, lockpicking, medicine, computer hacking, guns, explosives, and more (347).

Wellenreiter shows how the game continues to offer opportunities for the player to shape their own emergent narratives. For instance, if the player should decide to play "as a serial killer that murders all of a town's inhabitants [...] the player could scavenge the Wasteland for the desired clothing and weapons to fully characterize the unique killer of his or her imagination" (351). This demonstrates not only the playing with identity, but also how that identity is brought into a greater context of social meaning and societal norms (in a gruesome way). It also demonstrates a peculiar capacity of the digital medium: to quantify and reduce highly-complex, real-life matters into algorithmic values that can be controlled and regulated.

In some RPGs, character creation may also branch into moral alignment between good and evil, although this more often emerges gradually based on the player's in-game decisions. *Fallout 3* uses a points system called the "Karma system", which keeps track of the player's choices and actions during the game and comes to have a direct impact on the options that are available to the player, especially later in the game. Different NPCs (Non-Player Characters) react differently depending on if the main character is classified as "Good" or "Evil" by the Karma system. The Karma system not only exemplifies how identity is both constructed and brought into a larger context of social meaning and societal norms (and how the game reconnects striving with a larger moral context, which will be discussed later on), but also how the digital medium can be used to reduce a frighteningly complex and contingent aspect of life into a more manageable simulation; The otherwise subjective and highly shifting issue of morality and social ties is reduced to a stable, objective, quantifiable and conveniently bipolar set of values. The player's moral actions and choices are immediately known to all, and can result in entire in-game factions becoming hostile or friendly. The algorithm removes impracticalities and impurities, such as unscripted social awkwardness, accidents, misunderstandings and the general, societal variations in the interpretation of moral standing. This systemic reduction of contingencies and removal of impurities is equally demonstrable in *Fallout 3*'s character creation feature, as we have seen, where an impossibly complex system of skills and strengths, ranging from the social to the physiological to the psychological, is reduced to a few basic spreadsheets.

Firstly, the effect of this is to bring the experience of the game more in tune with our psychological reality, rather than the alienating societal reality of the post-traditional world; the overburden of information and "overchoice" of alternatives that Geyer describes is reduced to manageable levels through the digital medium, enacting a relief of the resultant social alienation. This is further enacted in the way *Fallout 3*'s Karma system reintroduces clear distinctions between "us" and "them", and the "here" and "there" dividing the familiar from the unknown and "other". This is not only in the sense of the "here" of towns and settlements, counteracting the "there" of the foreboding Wasteland, but also in the in-game factions. Those that are not obviously "good" and "bad" from the start, such as the settlers and the raiders, become allies or adversaries through the player's choices. It seems that just as games calibrate the degree of challenge in their endogenous reward systems using the reward

schemas of behavioral psychology (or as Costikyan puts it: hitting the “sweet-spot” between frustration and boredom), digital RPGs have developed a similar model for calibrating the more exogenous aspects. The exceedingly frustrating challenge of constructing identity, social meaning and societal norms in a post-traditional society has been re-calibrated in the social performance of these simulated worlds.

Secondly, this reduction is also essentially a process of commodification, where friendships and alliances become commodities and good deeds (as well as bad ones) become points for exchange. Here is a small detail in the design of these algorithms that demonstrates the extent to which this moral points-system resembles a value exchange: Quite often it is decisions during quests that offer positive or negative Karma,<sup>11</sup> and interestingly, the choice that rewards positive Karma is often the poor economic choice. An example of this is the quest “Head of State”, featuring a Lincoln Memorial that has largely survived the nuclear bombs. The player can either choose to help a group of slavers dismantle the memorial to be sold as scrap metal, or help a group of slaves defend and restore it (Kemmer 111). The positive Karma option is obvious, and obviously stands against the monetary reward that the lucrative trade in scrap metal would offer (Hodgson 240). In another example, it is time not money that is the cost of positive Karma: The quest “Tenpenny Tower” features some friendly Ghouls who want access to a settlement inhabited by a rich and exclusionary group of humans. The quickest way to resolve the conflict is by siding with one group by killing the other, which yields negative Karma (Kemmer 110). Once again, the game commodifies exogenous aspects of the game into algorithms that can then be simplified, polarized and calibrated for optimal challenge.

The virtual model of the RPG thus provides players with an optimized model for exploring identities, social situations and moral outcomes, providing escapism from the socially alienating aspects of modern society. However, as will now be demonstrated, it also functions as an optimized simulation of the capitalist and corporate pursuits that form its motivational basis.

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<sup>11</sup> A quick glance at the main quest or side quest sections of Hodgson’s strategy guide confirms this.

## Simulating the Entrepreneurial Pursuit: “Training Good Corporate Citizens”

Although RPGs such as *World of Warcraft* and *Fallout 3* both take place in fantastical realms and settings, they nonetheless function on a motivational basis equally recognizable in the mundane and quotidian. In fact, Wellenreiter argues that *Fallout 3* can function as something akin to a daily life simulator, and demonstrates this in one of its side missions where the player must scavenge the wastes in search of scrap metal to help maintain a town’s aging water purification plant. The mission is endlessly repeatable, making it “possible to play *Fallout 3* solely as a character that wanders the Wasteland, scavenging for scrap metal on a daily basis, in order to simulate performing a real-life job” (Wellenreiter 351). With this kind of gameplay, where the sole purpose is the simulation of mundane busywork, the outside observer is certainly tempted to react as Weber’s pre-modern observer reacts to the outlook of the capitalist: deeming it “explicable only as the product of some perverse instinct” (Weber qtd in Giddens 69).

Furthermore, as opposed to other game types or forms of entertainment that create short-term episodes of challenge and excitement, the RPG is structured much more toward long-term play. The large geographical worlds, which have been the most recognizable feature of the RPG since its tabletop beginnings, and which have grown into entire, three-dimensional continents with the aid of Triple-A<sup>12</sup> budgets, encourage players to immerse themselves in hours of exploration. There is also the complexity of its gameplay and combat mechanics, its in-game terminology and language, and its several, often overlapping syntagmatic and paradigmatic, narratological and points-based contingencies that require a significant time investment to become familiar with. Yet it is this time investment that is part of its enjoyability, because it presents players with a demanding learning curve, and multiple indicators of progress. In *Fallout 3* as with many RPGs, as one explores the world the map becomes filled in as well, leaving less and less unknown. The player’s power within the world grows through accumulating points and wealth, and through developing skill specializations and recognition among various factions. A strong sense of familiarity, and eventually affinity, develops. In online RPGs such as *World of Warcraft*, a player’s character gradually achieves a

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<sup>12</sup> An industry classification for games of the highest development budgets and levels of marketing promotion.

prestigious, visual specificity with rare armor and weapon models, and the player can appreciate their familiarity with the game-specific language. Furthermore, while the early phases of the game mainly involve becoming adept at utilizing the game's systems and mechanics, experienced players (perhaps seeking 100% completion in single-player RPGs or participating in end-game dungeon raids in MMORPGs) become increasingly concerned with the mastering of efficiency. This is because some of the greater achievements, such as collecting a set of epic or legendary armor in *World of Warcraft* can be the fruit of years of labor, greatly compounding the negative effects of inefficiency.

The game simulates a process of making a world known and familiar, as well as the pursuit of progress and productivity inherent in both Weber's "entrepreneurial spirit" and Rettberg's corporate ideology. Yet just as with the Karma system, the digital medium allows this simulation to go even further than pursuits in real life can. Here as well, this is done through commodification, quantification and the removal of impurities. As a basic example, *Fallout 3*'s monetary system reduces each item to a set of values; the "10mm Pistol" for instance, is given a base monetary value of 225 caps (the game uses bottle caps as currency) and a weight value of 3 (Hodgson 119). This allows a player with average stats to run around the Wasteland with 67 such pistols in their inventory. Bottle caps and ammunition are also weightless in the game, and it is not uncommon for a player to be walking around with hundreds of thousands of caps and bullets on their person. These weight-to-value ratios make no realistic sense, but they make perfect sense from a mercantilist perspective, which reduces every item to a tradable, expendable, accumulable and investable commodity. The need to sleep or excrete waste is easily overlooked in the post-apocalyptic age, but a world without the convenience of digital credit would seem unimaginable. This is obviously an act of "purifying" the capitalist pursuit where various inconveniences are removed from the game to enhance the overall experience of trading, investing and accumulating wealth. Questing is similarly free of many mundane inconveniences, allowing the simulation of the typical corporate experience – exchanging services, performing contract work, etc. – to be artificially intensified for maximized enjoyability.

Again, as with the Karma system, this commodifying and purifying not only alters the entrepreneurial pursuit to make it more enjoyable in-game than in real life, but also reduces its overburden of information and overchoice of alternatives. This is true on a narratological

level as well; whenever a long series of events is organized into a teleological progression, total randomness is only ever ostensible. On a ludological level, the very act of reproducing something as a reductive algorithmic model will inevitably tend to favor meaning over randomness. The quest systems, monetary systems and points systems are all calibrated and synchronized to produce a stable and evenly partitioned learning curve, ensuring that the player will not receive too much or little information, or too great or small challenges at the wrong stages of progress. Nowhere is this more clear than in the combat system. Granted, the combat systems of most RPGs are fairly complex; in *Fallout 3* there are numerous ways of facing an enemy and each type of enemy has unique strengths, weaknesses and vulnerabilities, as does each weapon type, whose effectiveness also depends on the particular skill sets the player has chosen to develop. Nonetheless, the path to progress is clear. One must invest time, accumulate experience points, collect better armor and weapons, and research and practice the game systems and mechanics. This process is largely free of the uncertainties and unnerving contingencies of real life, which involve huge risks of injury during training, wounds becoming infected, progress being slow or uncomfortably sporadic, and the noticeable absence of a “load last save” function. There is also the possibility in real-life that, given the time investment necessary to achieve anything substantial, the individual will lose hope and give up along the way. Thus, the digital medium also increases the enjoyability of the simulation by reproducing it without some of the socially alienating characteristics of its real-world equivalent. While digital RPGs do base themselves on the sort of corporate ideology identified by Rettberg, the corporate structures of real-world capitalism has a hard time competing with the hyper-refined capitalist pursuit that these games are able to offer players through the affordances of their digital medium.

## Pursuit within a Framework of Morality

One difference that Giddens points out between traditional and post-traditional societies involves the relation of individuals to authority. The particularly indirect and impersonal way that figures of authority in post-traditional societies regard the issue of morality has led to social alienation in the form of moral incertitude. Felix Geyer’s notions of powerlessness and

meaninglessness built upon the earlier work of a sociologist named Melvin Seeman, whose original work also included the additional notion of “meaninglessness” to describe this particular dimension of modernity’s social alienation. His exact definition of the term, which he provided in his 1959 essay “The Meaning of Social Alienation”, is “the situation in which the social norms regulating individual conduct have broken down or are no longer effective as rules for behaviour”, and where there is “a high expectancy that socially unapproved behaviours are required to achieve given goals” (Seeman 788). This last part immediately calls to mind the academic attention directed at the aggressive competitiveness and violence that games require of their players in order to achieve their goals, whether it be slashing through zombies or defeating other players in a free-for-all deathmatch.<sup>13</sup> However, as with many other games, digital RPGs can be seen to also reconnect the player with a sense of moral imperative, which counteracts the social alienation of this normlessness.

In order to preempt confusion here, we must distinguish between the player and the character. The player is not motivated by any moral imperative to play games, which is typical in post-traditional society due to its disconnect between striving and morality. Nor is the thought of a moral justification for playing games even deemed necessary. While many useful and virtuous “real world” effects of playing games have been pointed out by researchers and experts,<sup>14</sup> these are just side effects, and do not constitute the moral basis for the playing of the games. (In fact, some of them rather act to reinforce Rettberg’s point about the corporate ideological indoctrination in video games. See page three).

Players cannot be said to be motivated to play games on the basis of some moral imperative, or even to have their decision over which game to play affected by such considerations to any meaningful degree. For the in-game character however, the matter is entirely different. The character’s behavior in the emerging stories of the RPG is entirely governed by moral imperatives of various sorts, and thus, a psychologically gratifying reconnect of striving with morality is experienced vicariously by the player through their role-play as the character. In *Fallout 3* this ranges from the game’s general *raison d’être* of finding the father and rebuilding society with him, to the smaller quests and chunks of structured narrative, even to the point where all the pursuits that have been discussed are subsumed

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<sup>13</sup> See Tina Amini’s article “25 Video Game Violence Studies, Summarized” on Kotaku.com.

<sup>14</sup> These beneficial effects range from overcoming traumatic experiences (Smethurst and Craps 2015), to curing depression and social anxiety (MacDonald 2016), to a wide range of diverse cognitive benefits (Gray 2015).



under at least one, but often many moral imperatives at a time. The previous quest example where the player is asked to continuously collect scrap metal to maintain a town's water purification plant is not only moralistic on the larger scale of helping out the community, it is also concretized in the immediate emotional gratification of seeing joy and appreciation in the verbal and facial reactions of the quest-giving NPC. Quest-giving NPCs are also usually ones that the player has gotten to know through backstory and dialogue, and is a part of a larger community that the player will have developed a strong affinity with throughout the course of playing the game.

The broader teleological morality that encapsulates the main quest line also performs this reconnection of striving with morality. During the pivotal initiation, the game kicks the player out into a seemingly meaningless and normless world. The infamous first step out of the vault, where the player catches a first glimpse of the vast, empty wastes, is meant to incur a sense of smallness and powerlessness. The character is burdened with questions: Why did my father leave? Where do I go from here? How will I survive? Is anyone even alive out there? What unfathomable hazards will I face? and so on. Of course, the *player* knows better: this is a game, and a sense of power, meaning and social normalization will eventually emerge from its narratives and pursuits. We are nonetheless moved to sympathize with our character's plight, and so the emotional effect is established regardless. As expected, the first few steps along the main storyline provide hints about the father's whereabouts, and infuse his disappearance with a strong moral dimension urging and motivating the player to continue with the pursuit. Often, the consecutive main quests will be foregrounded in verbal expositions provided by the quest-giving NPCs regarding the nature of moral necessity surrounding their respective completion, and how each one fits into the greater moral aim of saving lives, rebuilding society and dispensing moral justice.

To repeat, normlessness in part entails the "high expectancy that socially unapproved behaviours are required to achieve given goals" (Seeman 788). Indeed, *Fallout 3* follows the RPG convention of offering both moral and amoral solutions to completing quests. The game even rewards bad behavior with monetary and efficiency incentives, as we have shown in the previous section, and has created quests that cannot be solved with a positive outcome, such as the quest "Tenpenny Tower" (Kemmer 110). Yet studies have shown that most players of RPGs or simulation games tend to choose the virtuous path most of the time (Lange n. pg.),

and will typically follow social codes of behavior, even if they do not have to (Chess qtd in Garrelts 12). These findings suggest that there is a certain gratification in denying this high expectancy of socially unapproved behavior that Seeman describes, and instead reinstating social norms into the normlessness.

Finally, there is also something to be said about how the character in *Fallout 3*, during whatever quest, is constantly confronted with the ruins of a past society that, as will be shown more fully in the next section, has come to be a carrier of moral and ethical meaning. The antagonistic force must be stopped, not only for the sake of the present community of Wastelanders, but in order to prevent another cycle of an irresponsible society rising and bringing about yet another apocalypse. The game's central moral imperative not only regards rebuilding society, but doing so with a new societal ethic conscious of the unethical mistakes of the past, and is communicated to the player visually, in the exploratory downtime between narrative events and quest expositions.

### 3. *Fallout 3*'s Monologue of Ideologies

The previous section analyzed the enjoyability of *Fallout 3* and digital RPGs in general, showing how they offer escape from social alienation and indulgence in society's capitalist, corporate pursuits. This section will instead direct attention at the ideological message expressed through the game's story. As has been pointed out on page five, depictions of dystopian ruins often contain an implicit societal critique, while post-apocalyptic fiction tends to be the site of a "dialogue of ideologies", to quote Wolf-Meyer, where one ideology triumphs over all others by proving itself capable of surviving. In *Fallout 3*, it is impossible to ignore the subversive societal commentary taking place; the US capital is portrayed in ruins, while a continuation of the US government, the Enclave, has been made the primary antagonistic force. The prewar society, clearly modelled after America's nostalgic and much-coveted "Golden Age" (Watts 257), has been reduced to a nuclear wasteland by the fatal backfiring of its socioeconomic world-view, which can still be said to lie at the heart of the American way of life. In this way, capitalism and the naive societal complacency brought about by its materialism and consumerism is the subject of the societal critique of *Fallout 3*'s ruins.

Furthermore, when Giddens' societal model is applied to *Fallout 3*'s story, a clear dialogue of ideologies between traditional and post-traditional values becomes apparent, where the game clearly predisposes post-traditional societal values over traditional modes of relating to the world. The "Project Purity scientists" who make up the main protagonist faction of the storyline are strongly post-traditional in their values and logics, their structures of authority and their ways of relating to the past, while the Enclave is instead imbued with recognizably traditional traits. This conclusion will be reached through independent analyses of these two factions, but also through a comparison of their respective relations to the past, which in this essay will be limited to an analysis of a specific landmark featured in the game: the Jefferson Memorial. This is because it functions as a centralized and highly symbolic focal point in both the armed conflict between the factions, as well as their ideological contention.

When this conclusion is reached it will be possible to discuss the series of contradictions that can be identified between the game's ideological message and the types of

structured behaviors that are encouraged through its gameplay. However, before the ideological analysis can begin, the respective characteristics of, and differences between, traditional and post-traditional societies that Giddens identifies must be spelled out.

In Giddens' model, frameworks of logic in traditional societies were based upon what he calls "formulaic truth", which was either recorded in writing or passed down orally (79). These "truths", which regarded everything from genesis myths to codes of moral behavior, were embedded in daily life through recurrent ritualistic practices, and these were in turn sanctified and interpreted by individuals that Giddens refers to as "guardians" (79). These guardians of formulaic truth – shamans, priests or imams, to give just a few examples – maintained their aura of authority through personal charisma and through claims to uncommunicable "wisdoms" or connections with higher powers (79). This system of structuring the present and future upon reconnecting with the past perpetuated a cyclical form of existence, and also kept firm boundaries in place between "insiders" and "outsiders", the "natural" and "human" realms, and the "known" and "unknown" (79-80).

The turn toward Enlightenment philosophy and the rational enquiry of science fatally undermined traditional societal frameworks in a number of ways, some of which have already been discussed, but bear repeating. Firstly, its uncommunicable nature made formulaic truth unable to endure scientific scrutiny. Gradually, faith in the personal wisdom and clairvoyance of guardians was replaced by impersonal, bureaucratic systems of expertise whose basis lay in communicable, demonstrable knowledge and competence. Secondly, the globalizing energies at the heart of science and capitalism also broke down the local barriers of exclusion that traditions depended on for survival (57, 79). Thirdly, as a result of its utilitarian moral logic that ultimate human happiness could be attained through the gathering of practical knowledge and information about the natural world (58), Enlightenment philosophy came to replace the cyclical existence of traditional societies with one of a perpetual striving toward material progress.

When entering into the post-traditional age of late modernity, some traditions hardened and became what we typically refer to as fundamentalism: defending their belief systems by refusing to open up to rational dialogue (100). The majority however gradually had their basis in formulaic truth hollowed out, turning them into what some have called "living museums"; their rituals become mere local customs or habits, and their monuments

and artifacts, mere “relics” (102-104). As relics, they are not simply remnants of past traditions, but take on a whole new meaning in post-traditional societies as “exemplars of a transcended past” and as “signifiers of difference” (102-104). However, Giddens explains that for a long time traditions flourished in the modern setting. Throughout much of the 20th century, the majority of Western populations still lived traditionally and had little contact with, or knowledge of, modern political and scientific institutions (92). During this time, many experts such as scientists often possessed the mystical aura of guardians of what appeared to most as a new formulaic truth (94). Nation-states also frequently utilized traditional means of establishing an aura of authority. As Giddens puts it, the “persistence and recreation of tradition was central to the legitimation of power, to the sense in which the state was able to impose itself upon relatively passive ‘subjects’” (56). To enact this end, they even recreated traditions or invented entirely new ones with the aim of galvanizing the population around nationalistic, religious or ideological collective identities (93-95).

The way the Project Purity scientists of *Fallout 3* reflect post-traditional values, while the Enclave instead possesses the characteristics associated with these traditional nation-states, becomes clear upon a closer look at the game’s main storyline, and the respective roles these factions play within it. We can begin with the Project Purity scientists, who are a small group headed by the main character’s father. Before the main character’s birth, the scientists had begun a project to make the water of the Potomac river drinkable, as clean water has become a major shortage. The project was aborted and the father and mother move into an underground vault where the main character is then born and subsequently raised, knowing nothing about the aborted project. One day when the main character is about 20 years old, the father mysteriously leaves the vault and the main character must go off into the unforgiving Wasteland in pursuit, eventually learning all about the project because as it turns out, the father left the vault in order to oversee its completion. This project, known as “Project Purity”, involved the laboratory development of a formula with the power to cleanse the Potomac of radiation. It also involved an extensive engineering project to convert the Jefferson Memorial into an enormous vat from which the formula would be dispensed into the river basin. The statue of Thomas Jefferson itself was encased in a steel and glass tank that would fill with water, and large pipes connected to a pump allowed water to enter and exit the tank.

As the mysterious, high-tech and militarized remains of the United States Government (Hodgson 41), the Enclave's diabolical scheme is to seize the Jefferson Memorial, figure out how it works and then dispense their own formula, a mutagen called the "modified Forced Evolutionary Virus", that will kill off all radioactively contaminated beings in the Wasteland (149-204). This includes hostile monsters, but also friendly mutants, as well as townspeople and ordinary Wastelanders as they have become contaminated by living all their lives out in the wastes (Kenner 112). This will allow the genetically pure Enclave to take over and shape society to their own ideals of genetic and ideological purity.

The Jefferson Memorial thus forms a focal point for the armed conflict between these two forces; the main character and some surviving scientists must first flee the facility as it is overtaken by the Enclave, whereupon the primary objective becomes the gathering of troops and resources for a grand recapture. As mentioned however, the memorial also symbolizes their conflict of ideologies, which is primarily a conflict over interpretations of the past. *Fallout 3* constantly situates the player in the act of traversing the storyworld's past as the ruins and remnants of the prewar society is strewn across the Capital Wasteland (Chandler 58). The player practically cannot avoid learning about the past through playing within the game's present. This relation to the past takes on a quasi-forensic nature; the underlying cause of the apocalypse becomes more and more clear as the player starts to gain a solid, critical understanding of the prewar society and its government. The prewar society is soon revealed to have been highly materialistic and politically naive. The militarist and authoritarian government relied on this naive complacency in order to continue the unsustainable spiral of global resource depletion, which eventually resulted in the apocalyptic nuclear war.

Since the Enclave is a self-proclaimed continuation of this prewar government (despite blaming the apocalypse on "incompetence at the highest echelons of power" (Fallout Wiki)), this forensic witnessing of the past itself becomes a big proponent of the way the game villain-ifies the Enclave. Idyllic claims about the past are made by the Enclave leader and spokesman, President John Henry Eden, on his Wasteland-wide radio broadcast. This includes, among other things, the promise to reinstate the all-American tradition of baseball, as well as schools, youth programs and adoption agencies for orphans in the Wasteland (Fallout Wiki). Yet these are immediately problematized by the player's own archaeological observations. The Enclave's propaganda, where the material affluence of the past is

repeatedly evoked in order to garner public support for its atavistic agenda, thus rings false in the player's mind. Accepting such propaganda would equate the player (or the character rather, since role-playing is taking place) with the naive and servile prewar society that remained complacent to the irresponsible Prometheanism of their government. In this way, the Jefferson Memorial focalizes an ideological struggle over the interpreting of history. The Enclave battles over maintaining the Jefferson Memorial as an artifact of a glorious past to strengthen its authenticity and legitimacy as a remnant of the former government, while the Project Purity scientists and their allies view it as a relic and an exemplar "of a transcended past" (Giddens 102).

The relevance of this is that it directly associates the Enclave with traditional authority, especially with the institutions of early modern nation-states that have been described. It is portrayed as a largely atavistic and unprogressive institution, seeking to establish power by evoking nationalism and a collective myth of the past (62). However, the Enclave's ties to tradition and to Giddens' early modern nation-states are even more numerous. Firstly, the Enclave exhibits a "localizing" urge that attempts to establish "qualities of exclusion" (79) and clear "insider" and "outsider" boundaries through its nationalistic, xenophobic agenda. In a thesis on race studies and digital games, C. M. Simpson describes the Enclave's exclusionary plan as one of restoring "America upon the image of a pure humanity and the American family" (Simpson 45). Even its name, which the OED defines as "a portion of territory surrounded by a larger territory whose inhabitants are culturally or ethnically distinct" (Oxford Dictionaries 2016), demonstrates the intentional emphasis placed on localization and exclusion. Furthermore, it is clear that the Enclave attempts to establish their aura of authority by traditional means, and not through rational enquiry and dialogue. Personal loyalty is based upon the status and charisma of the individual, John Henry Eden, whose uncommunicable, personal wisdom rather than scientific, demonstrable expertise is expected to be bought at face value.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, on every count, the game uses the Project Purity scientists' role as champions of post-traditional Enlightenment values as the solution to the Enclave's frauds and vices. Their unprogressive atavism is contrasted by the scientific and progressive values espoused by the Project Purity scientists. The localizing urge of the Enclave is countered by a

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<sup>15</sup>A good example is the Enclave Radio broadcast where Eden discusses his nomination (*Fallout Wiki*).

“globalizing” ambition among the scientists, both in their willingness to allow ethnic diversity in the Wasteland, and in their willingness to rely on foreign forces such as a pseudo-knightly faction known as the “Brotherhood of Steel”, as well as using the Galaxy News Radio constituent to extend globalizing communication to the Wasteland’s inhabitants. Furthermore, whereas the Enclave relies on personal charisma and uncommunicable wisdom to establish the aura of authority, the Project Purity scientists rely on impersonal, abstract, bureaucratic systems of specialized expertise to collectively bear the aura of authority. Project Purity is contested between these two antagonistic forces and its name can just as easily refer to a project of ethnic cleansing as to one of water treatment. Yet we are assured through these diverging associations of the Enclave and the scientists of the latter’s inevitable triumph. This is because in the same way that the rational enquiry of Enlightenment philosophy sundered the formulaic truth that traditions rested upon, it is therefore expected that the Project Purity scientists will triumph over the Enclave and expose their methods and ambitions as fraudulent and ethically unsupportable.

Thus, the conflict between the Enclave and the Project Purity scientists is also an ideological contest. The distinction between “good” and “bad” is initially unclear, but becomes clearer as the player explores and interacts with the ruins of the wasteland, uncovering the causes of the nuclear apocalypse that ended the world. The traditional values of the Enclave are heavily implicated, while the Enlightenment values that the Project Purity scientists represent are proposed as the solution. The choice is offered to the player of which set of ideological values to back, but siding with the Enclave would align the player with the complacency and irresponsibility of the prewar society, a society that let unsustainable consumption and blind faith in authority lead them down the path of destruction. Siding with the Project Purity scientists represents the only rational, verifiable and survivable choice.



## 4. Conclusion: Stimulus Dependence and Lowered Societal Consciousness

The socio-anthropological perspective offers the field of game studies a new approach to understanding the enjoyability of digital RPGs, one that addresses the radical changes of the last century to account for its model for structuring performance. It addresses both its escapism from social alienation and its indulgence in an entrepreneurial pursuit to motivate its gameplay, demonstrating in both cases how the digital medium provides unique affordances in quantifying and re-calibrating the simulation of these societal aspects. Furthermore, when this perspective is used to analyze both the game's model of structuring performance as well as its internal ideological predilections comparatively, two clear discrepancies become evident.

The first discrepancy is neither surprising, nor particularly controversial; the game's storyline and storyworld mirrors the values of the current social order, while it is structured in a way that alleviates, and thus gives evidence for, the current social order's unique, socially alienating qualities. Certainly, there is a degree of hypocrisy in the way *Fallout 3* sets out to provide subversive critique of the current Western social order,<sup>16</sup> only to end up celebrating its values by re-enacting its triumph over its predecessor.<sup>17</sup> However, some have viewed the escapism and alleviation function of games from a rather more positive light. Game development consultant Nir Eyal has expressed that in his view the most fundamental role of product designers is to “alleviate human suffering” (Madigan 2016). Similarly, game designer Jane McGonigal argues that games today serve as virtual surrogates or balms to a reality that has become insufferable. In one of her two TED talks on the issue, she brings up a hospital study that investigates the most common regrets of the dying, which range from the regret of having worked too much, to having lost touch with friends, to having lived for others and negated one's true dreams (McGonigal 2012). She draws upon a range of studies from Stanford University and the University of Michigan, among others, showing that games can

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<sup>16</sup> See page 24.

<sup>17</sup> See the previous chapter.

provide solutions to these problems. In her other TED talk, she refers to reality itself as “broken”, and in need of becoming more like a game (McGonigal 2010).

Firstly, the analysis of *Fallout 3*'s models for structuring performance problematizes this latter point. While the process of modeling real-life pursuits on game structures – known as “gamification” – is already being applied to everything from marketing to pedagogy,<sup>18</sup> it has here been shown that the digital medium intensifies the enjoyability of video games in ways that go beyond what is possible in reality, suggesting there are limitations to the transferability of these qualities. Secondly, in light of Giddens' theory and its implications, the exaggerated optimism of McGonigal's first conclusion should be obvious. Games do not represent the solution to the “brokenness” of reality, but merely one example of the many coping mechanisms (“drugs, alcohol, coffee, [...] work, exercise, sport, cinema-going, sex [...] love” (Giddens 71)), upon which the post-traditional individual has become unwittingly, compulsively dependent for their psychological survival.

When the second discrepancy is considered, it is equally difficult to draw optimistic conclusions. *Fallout 3*'s denunciation of consumerist materialism contradicts its structural modeling of performance around a corporate ideology and the entrepreneurial pursuit in a way that appeals directly to the familiar claims of Marxists and critical cultural theorists. The discrepancy can be seen as evidence of a certain societal false consciousness, where individuals are lured by a game's ostensibly critical and subversive ideological theme, only to become more responsive towards, and dependent upon, indulgence in capitalist motivational pursuits. This resonates with Marxist cultural critic Fredric Jameson's well-known argument that the postmodern cultural sphere has lost its critical capacity as it has become subsumed under the greater economic sphere (Jameson 85-86). The implication is that even when popular culture seems to produce works with the power to subvert the socio-structural order, these have no chance of becoming more prevalent with time due to the unique process of selection in consumer societies. In such societies, only the works that will gain in popularity are those whose elements – subversive or otherwise – result in deeper, more consumptive habits. Ostensible subversiveness, however, has a certain marketing power, as this analysis of *Fallout 3*, and a quick glance at popular cultural works, shows.

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<sup>18</sup> Chris Hardwick's 2011 *The Nerdist Way: How To Reach The Next Level (In Real Life)*, and Steve Kamb's 2016 *Level Up your Life: How to Unlock Adventure and Happiness by Becoming the Hero of your Own Story* are two examples from the field of self-help. These guides simulate the algorithmic, quantitative methods of measuring and achieving progress that are common to digital games.

Even without going to such extremes, it is hard to ignore certain frightening prospects as the culture industry becomes increasingly adept at mapping our motivational triggers and learning to stimulate them through virtual surrogates capable of yielding artificially intensified levels of gratification. It suggests that the addictive compulsiveness of Giddens' societal reality is only going to become more addictive and compulsive, as desensitization to such stimulus makes "real" life less gratifying. Without this, it would have been possible to imagine modern games, digital media and popular culture as a legitimate replacement that provides both the psychological stability once offered by traditions, while also freeing up individual agency: the high-reward without the high-risk. Instead, while this may be happening to some degree, there are also real dangers of stimulus dependence and of a lowered societal consciousness as truly subversive material is more effectively filtered out and as the need for ever-higher degrees of stimulus grows. In the end, the beautiful, terrible irony of *Fallout 3* is that it seems to be telling the cautionary tale of an unsustainable and fatally complacent society that it is itself helping to bring about.

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