

FALLOUT: NEW VEGAS, RECREATION OF EMPIRE IN THE POST-APOCALYPSE

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Fallout: New Vegas (2010) is chiefly concerned with the way that empire has played out in the American continent. After the slick talking antagonist Benny, voiced by Mathew Perry, tells the player, who is referred to as The Courier or later as Courier 6, that “the game was rigged from the start,” and shoots them in the head with his engraved pistol the player finds themselves in the care of a doctor.¹ After a short character creation and baseline introduction to the mechanics of the game, the player is pushed into the Mojave wasteland. The wasteland is a war-torn region that is the scene for the game’s contemplation of empire. The player is put in charge of the way that the game unfolds and is the deciding factor in the conflict over the region. In this way, the game puts the fate of three competing empires in the hands of the player. Through an examination of the narrative, mechanical, and aesthetic design choices made by the development team, this paper aims to showcase the way that empire is recreated, affirmed, and challenged in the game. This analysis will necessitate an examination of the major factions of the game which include: The New California Republic, Caesar’s Legion, and The Strip. Each of these factions seeks to assert control over the region and to expand their borders with little regard to the wishes of the local population. The analysis of empire will also require an examination of the game’s definition of indigeneity. Rather than being tied to the land in ways that are recognizable from the history of indigenous peoples in the Americas with strong ethnic, cultural, and spiritual reasoning, the game refers to several groups as “tribes.” Post-apocalyptic fiction often seeks to reconstruct society into “tribes” or “gangs” but a thoughtful examination of each of these terms along with the use of the “locals vs. citizens” dynamic which the game sets up will allow for a more robust understanding of the way the game showcases its own take on

¹ Sawyer, *Fallout: New Vegas*.

indigeneity. This alternate construction allows the game to convey messages which challenge the morality of the empire while still showcasing the ways that common citizens of the state instituting the empire view it as not only profitable to them personally, but morally necessary.

A Brief History of the Fallout World Its Aesthetics

The world of Fallout follows roughly the same timeline as our own until the 1950s. The Cold War develops differently than it did in our own history. The Soviet Union's powers waned quickly, and China became the dominant communist power in the world. As tensions rise over the limited resources of the world there is a series of wars known as the resource wars. The United States military fights back a Chinese invasion of Alaska, meant to seize the oil therein, and annexes Canada. After this invasion is pushed back the United States invades China and becomes bogged in a protracted war. Eventually in 2077 a nuclear exchange occurs between the United States and China. The opening narration of most games in the series points out that most of the survivors of this nuclear war survived in underground fallout shelters known as vaults. The result of this exchange practically ended the United States government, although a group known as The Enclave bills themselves as the continuation of the prewar government. This is all information that sets the stage for the series. *Fallout: New Vegas* is set in 2281, 204 years after the nuclear exchange.

Fallout, *Fallout 2*, and *Fallout: New Vegas* all utilize aesthetics associated with the Western but blend in science fiction to align more closely with the aesthetics of the “weird west,” a subgenre that blends elements of Westerns with science fiction, horror, or fantasy tropes. The tradition of video games that drew heavily on common cultural understandings created through

Western films stretched back into the early days of arcade game design,² and continues through today with popular games such as *Red Dead Redemption* and its sequel recreating Spaghetti Western aesthetics. While it may appear odd on the surface to have a recreation of the Western genre in a world with robots, lasers, and robots that shoot lasers, this alignment of genres serves to recreate the frontier. A post-apocalypse can help to recreate the mythic frontier by “resetting” society so to speak.³ By reconstructing the frontier of American mythos through atomic war, the designers of *Fallout* recreate the civilization/frontier dichotomy that is central to Western genre pieces.⁴ This allows *Fallout* to create a world where food, water, and resources are scarce and these mechanics reinforce the narrative of the Western where the struggle for survival is central to the story.⁵

The New California Republic and American Empire

The New California Republic (NCR) began in the town of Shady Sands with the survivors of Vault 15.⁶ In *Fallout* the player, whose character is referred to as The Vault Dweller, helps the inhabitants of Shady Sands fight back a group of raiders known as the Khans. In *Fallout 2*, the player again contends with The Khans who are ultimately pushed out of California and make a long trek to New Vegas,⁷ they will be analyzed in more depth in the section concerning indigeneity. The NCR developed a constitution and senate as well as a presidency. They took inspiration from “old world” governments to produce a system of governance. As they expanded, they integrated people from other settlements into their nation. Citizens were given

² Wills, “Pixel Cowboys and Silicon Gold Mines.”

³ Peterson, “The Significance of the Wasteland in American Culture.”

⁴ Ratto, “From the Gunslinger to the Road Warrior.”

⁵ Arjoranta, “Narrative Tools for Games.”

⁶ Cain, *Fallout: A Post Nuclear Role Playing Game*.

⁷ Sawyer, *Fallout: New Vegas*.

the right to vote for representatives. Citizenship spread only when an area was incorporated into the nation, however.

When the player awakes from their gunshot wound in Fallout New Vegas the NCR is occupying the Mojave Wasteland, but has not fully annexed and incorporated its inhabitants into the nation.⁸ As the player explores the wasteland, they will come across the NCR's military outposts throughout the region. Several of these are in dire straits because the war with Caesar's Legion has led to strained resources and manpower. Often the player will be asked to complete quests offered by military officers from the NCR to help restore these outposts to working order, shore up defenses, or clear out enemies that the outpost cannot spare men for. These quests serve as a mechanical and narrative way for the character to reenact the spread of empire through the Americas.

In the quest King's Gambit, the player is tasked by an ambassador to The Strip, a free state being run by a wealthy businessman which will be discussed further in its own section, to solve an issue in the slums surrounding The Strip, an area known as Freeside. Ambassador Crocker describes that there is intense violence directed at NCR citizens in Freeside and the gang known as The Kings, a group which are based out of a school for Elvis impersonators, is responsible. The ambassador tasks the player with solving this issue. The player is given two options, to solve this problem diplomatically, which results in the Kings maintaining sovereignty over Freeside or to kill one of the Kings' leaders, Pacer. The player is able to frame another group of locals, the Van Graffs, for the murder of Pacer which will lead to a conflict between Kings and Van Graffs. This tactic of pitting local groups against each other was used by various

⁸ Ibid.

groups in the conquest of the Americas, from enlisting locals who were displeased with the Aztecs to help overthrow them, to allying with tribes in order to conquer their neighbors in the colonial United States, this method of divide and conquer is part and parcel to the construction and expansion of empire in the Americas and it is not surprising that the NCR would suggest this as an option given the inspiration they took from the “old world” U.S. government. Violent assimilation is another tactic that is not typically associated with the NCR because it is more visible with Caesar’s Legion, but when describing the creation of American identity scholar Ari Kelman wrote “out of shared memory... Americans have formed a common identity.”⁹ This conception of American, and later NCR cultural hegemony will be useful when comparing the methods and results of empire between them and Caesar’s Legion.

Another way the game reconstructs American empire is the stressed nature of citizenship. In the quest G.I. Blues, the player is tasked by The King, the leader of the Kings, with solving multiple problems in Freeside, the part of the quest most applicable to this analysis of the game is when the player is instructed to investigate violent clashes between NCR citizens and Freeside locals. When the player questions some locals, who are recovering from a violent attack, they find out that they were assaulted by NCR soldiers disguised as civilians. After gaining entry to a secret relief supply center in Freeside for NCR citizens, the player is shown that a group of soldiers is guarding an area where food is distributed to NCR citizens, but that the relief effort has not been extended to locals. This is explained by the woman in charge of the operation, Elizabeth, who tells the player that an envoy was sent to the Kings to discuss relieving NCR citizens, but was beaten within an inch of his life. This is where the situation stands without

⁹ Kelman, *A Misplaced Massacre*.

player intervention. A line has been drawn over who gets fed at the soup kitchen, and who starves in the streets of Freeside, and that line is citizenship. There is precedent for this in American policies. The dispossession of Mexican landowners in lands ceded by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in the following years by American judicial systems demonstrates the same level of citizen favoritism.¹⁰ Until the player intervenes and either diplomatically solves the situation by reestablishing communication between the relief effort and the NCR or instigates violence between the Kings and NCR relief force there is a similar approach to that of the U.S. court system in the late 19th century. This favoritism which leads to the suffering of an outgroup, while citizens of the empire reap the benefits, is another way in which the designers of the game showcase a challenge to the righteousness of American empire. However, even in the face of these realities, many people who played the game sided with the NCR and there are more than enough arguments on forums to illustrate that some of these people are very passionate about their decision to do so. To understand this, we must pull back from this close examination of the realities of NCR imperial rule and look at the promises made by agents of the state and the understanding several non-player characters (NPCs) impart to the player.

When asked about what the NCR is Lieutenant Hayes, likely the first if not one of the first NCR affiliated characters the player will meet, says “The NCR is the greatest nation currently functioning.” Throughout the game the player will encounter people like the residents of Freeside who are suspicious or hostile toward NCR authority, but the player will also encounter others who desire the protection that the military force offers. In the town of Primm the sheriff has been killed by a gang of escaped convicts and a local merchant implores the

¹⁰ Sánchez, “Dismantling the Colossus.”

character to restore order to the town. One option of doing so sees the NCR take an active role in patrolling the town and instituting martial law. Lieutenant Hayes who is stationed near Primm tells the player that Primm will become an NCR territory and that the citizens will have to become registered NCR citizens and pay the appropriate taxes. Some residents of town “chafe under the new taxes” as described in the ending narration if the player chooses this action, it also describes that the residents “benefit greatly from the increased protection and merchant traffic.” This along with other examples the order associated with NCR rule provide a way for players to weigh the freedom granted under sovereignty with the “order” offered by the NCR. Since the main opposing force to the NCR is Caesar’s Legion, a group of slavers who crucify drug dealers and slaughter those who fail to kneel to their authority they are a better alternative. However, those who champion the NCR must also reconcile with the fact that they committed a massacre against the Great Khans, who are analogous to indigenous people in the story.

Tribes, Indigeneity, and Violence

The Great Khans are only one of several factions referred to as tribes by NPCs. After the events of *Fallout 2* they were driven to the Mojave to escape the wrath of the NCR. An important distinction is made after the second culling of the Khans in *Fallout 2*. Papa Khan, who introduces himself as the chief of the Great Khans in *Fallout: New Vegas*, fled with the remnants of his groups to the Mojave where they clashed with Mr. House and the “tribes” of the strip.¹¹ They lost these battles due to Mr. House’s supply of resources he used to bolster the strength of the tribes who pledged loyalty to him.¹² After this clash they fled once more to Bitter Springs.

¹¹ The factions of The Strip are referred to as tribes by Mr. House, Papa Khan, and several other NPCs throughout the game.

¹² Mr. House’s construction of empire is reminiscent of neoliberal capitalist colonialism and will be expanded on in the section on The Strip.

Bitter Springs is a canyon site that the player can visit in game. However, in the place of Great Khans there is an NCR refugee camp located there. This is because the Great Khans were forced once again to abandon their home and take shelter in Red Rock Canyon. The event that led to this final move is referred to by some as the Massacre of Bitter Springs.

After being forced to move multiple times by the NCR and the tribes of The Strip the Khans found themselves using Bitter Springs as a base of operations. It is important to point out that in all of the games they were featured in they are raiders, people who subsist not from growing crops, raising livestock, or selling goods, but from pillaging the goods of others. In *Fallout: New Vegas*, the Great Khans have begun to do traffic drugs. There seems to have been a transition away from some of the more morally repugnant practices like slavery that the Khans practiced in California,¹³ but the use of pillage as a means of substance remained.

Prior to the events of the game, while the Khans were based out of Bitter Springs, they witnessed the expansion of their longtime rivals, the NCR, into the Mojave Wasteland. The Great Khans began to pillage supply caravans in order to both weaken the NCR presence and to subsist. This led to a retaliation from the NCR that came in the form of an assault on Bitter Springs. During the quest “I Forgot to Remember to Forget” a former NCR sniper and possible traveling companion to the player will reluctantly reveal his role in the assault on Bitter Springs. He tells the player that the NCR had tracked the Khans back to Bitter Springs, but due to “bad intel” they failed to notice that the Khan raiding parties were not in the camp. When the assault began Boone and his fellow snipers were placed on a ridge overlooking a back entrance to the

¹³ It is also important to note that in both *Fallout* and *Fallout 2* the Khans kidnapped and enslaved people, especially women. This past violence leads many people to argue in online forums that the tribe is simply another group of raiders that prey on innocent people, however their depiction in *Fallout: New Vegas* paints them in a more sympathetic light than in previous titles.

canyon. As NCR troops pushed into the canyon an evacuation began. He tells the player that he had orders to shoot Khans on sight. When probing him for more details he recounts that “It was all wrong, though. Women, kids, elderly. Wounded started coming through, too,” and “We radioed to confirm our orders but command didn't get what we were seeing. They told us to shoot till we were out of ammo. So that's what we did.” This depiction of events falls in line with the story of Bitter Springs the player can get from talking to Papa Khan or other NCR soldiers. While the quest revolves around helping Boone overcome his PTSD, the story of the Bitter Springs Massacre is central to understanding the Khans as an indigenous group. The Great Khan's history is marked by armed conflict with the existing power structure, forced relocation, and this massacre. If the player travels to Red Rock Canyon to meet with the Great Khans while Boone is accompanying them the Khans will not shoot him on sight even though he still wears his military beret, but random Khans will ask the player “You know you're traveling with a fucking murderer?”

In the wake of all of this violence at the hands of the NCR, the Khans agree to join Caesar's Legion and help them drive the NCR from the Mojave. The Legion has an emissary in Papa Khan's Longhouse (a building which is actually a prairie home, but the name showcases another way that the designers were intending to draw parallels with indigenous people) which serves to maintain this alliance. The player can break the pact between the Legion and the Great Khans by showcasing to a number of Khans that the alliance is not in their best interests. The post-game narration describes seven different outcomes for the Khans based on their allegiance during the final battle of the game and the faction the player decides to fight for. Of these seven endings, multiple involve the eradication of the tribe as it stands through either integration in the

Legion, or extermination at the hands of the player or NCR. Another post-game narration showcases that even if the Khans ally with the NCR and help them gain victory during the final battle, “The NCR's pressing need to expand proved greater than its promise of amnesty, and before long the government decided the Khans had to go. The surviving Great Khans were relocated to an isolated, barren reservation, well north of NCR trade routes.” This is another way that they are constructed to reflect indigenous peoples in the Americas. Like many treaties between various tribes and the United States government were broken, so too does the NCR break its deals.

The ending which many people, myself included, regard as best includes the Khans fleeing Red Rock Canyon during the climactic battle and heading North the Wyoming. This ending can be accomplished by retrieving a history book about the Mongol Empire and showing Papa Khan that this cultural legacy is his. He will take his people away from the conflicts of the NCR and Legion to reassert themselves as a people with a unique history and culture. This ending is telling of the way that the designers either consciously or unconsciously chose to portray natives.¹⁴ This ending suggests that the best way for a group on the periphery to avoid conquest at the hands of empire is to flee. In the post-apocalypse where unclaimed and uninhabited land is plentiful, this is more of a reality than the one that faced natives during colonial expansion throughout the Americas. There are representations of native peoples, meaning people who were present prior to imperial expansion, in the game that rely less on the aesthetics of indigeneity from our history.

¹⁴ It is important to note here that while there are strong parallels between the history of the Khans and that of indigenous peoples in the Americas, the Khans do not constitute a racial group since they are racially heterogenous, but their strong sense of distinct cultural heritage qualifies them to be understood through the lens of an ethnic group.

The Strip and Tribes

While Khans serve as the closest parallels to indigenous peoples in *Fallout: New Vegas*, the use of the word “tribes” to describe the inhabitants of The Strip by Mr. House, members of the NCR, and other NPCs is telling. In the wake of nuclear Armageddon, the *Fallout* series showcases people banding together in groups that are largely racially diverse. These groups work together to survive and face down threats such as rival groups or radiation mutated monstrosities like the “radscorpions” who are larger than a car in some cases. Some of these groups are referred to as tribes by others. While the NCR and Caesar’s Legion are both nation-states who consolidate populations and power under a central authority, the tribes have degrees of autonomy. In *Fallout: New Vegas* the inhabitants of The Strip serve as a case study for how a power that is not a nation state can co-opt these groups in much the same way that formal states can.

Mr. House is the ruler of The Strip. He was born before the nuclear war that ravaged the world. He built a business empire by investing in technologies such as the burgeoning robotics business and fulfilling research contracts with the United States military before the war. He sequestered himself in his casino, The Lucky 38, and set up a complex missile defense system which was able to weather the brunt of the nuclear attack that was aimed at the Las Vegas strip. He is heavily inspired by Howard Hughes which is evidenced by his sometimes-eccentric actions, his general aesthetic of a 19th century playboy capitalist, and most tellingly in his appearance which is nearly identical to that of Howard Hughes from the hairstyle to the iconic mustache. Mr. House was able to extend his life using advanced technology and utilizes a fleet of robotic police to patrol The Strip. In the same way that he uses his robots to maintain order, Mr.

House uses his capital to influence the tribes of The Strip. He fancies himself a civilizing force, he tells the player as much when he explains that the three groups which now hold power on The Strip (The Omertas, The White Glove Society, and The Chairmen) were only squabbling tribes before he supplied them with weapons and shelter and nurtured them into their role.¹⁵ Mr. House's use of material wealth to co-opt groups that serve his interests showcases a post-apocalyptic neoliberalism. By utilizing his capital, he gained control over the "tribes" of The Strip.

This use of capital rather than violence creates a difference between Mr. House's empire and that of the NCR or Legion. Rather than pointing a gun at someone and forcing them to join or flee, Mr. House extends a palm full of bottle caps (the post-apocalyptic currency). This is not to say that Mr. House does not utilize violence. He supplied weapons to the tribes of The Strip when they clashed with the Great Khans. In the post-game narration, it mentions that "Mr. House continued to run New Vegas his way, a despotic vision of pre-War glory. The streets were orderly, efficient, and cold." This level of brutal efficiency and the way that all the capital from the strip flows up to Mr. House showcase his expression of empire. Rather than own all of the parts of the Mojave Wasteland as the NCR and Legion aim to do, Mr. House is content with owning the parts that make money and making sure that money made near his property finds its way into his pockets. This represents a less visible form of violence, rather than the clearly brutal and visceral violence of the Legion, it is reminiscent of the structural violence of the NCR. In the same way that relief was only given to citizens, Mr. House ensures that those with the means to provide money to him have a safe place to do so, but that those who do not are pushed away. He

¹⁵ Sawyer, *Fallout: New Vegas*.

upholds the same status quo that modern capitalists seek to do under the implementation of neoliberalism. This slow, structural violence serves as a stark contrast to the first time the player encounters the Legion, surrounded by people they have crucified.

Caesar's Legion and Violent Integration

As the Courier walks down the streets of the Nipton they are greeted by the sight of crucifixes lining the road. As they draw closer to the town hall they notice two fires flanking a group of men clad in sports gear that has been modified to look like armor of Roman Legionaries. When the player approaches these men, one emerges from the town hall with a wolf's head hat over his head. Vulpes Inculta tells the player that the town of Nipton has fallen to its own vices. He describes it as a "town of whores" who sold their allegiances to the highest bidder. He then tells the player to spread word of what the Legion did in Nipton, to let others know the fate that awaited them.

This shocking and violent introduction sets the tone for the way *Fallout: New Vegas* demonstrates another interpretation of empire. The Legion, led by Caesar, seeks to unite warring tribes and factions under their banner and to subjugate or exterminate those that do not conform to their belief system. Those who abuse technology, drugs, or engage in "degenerate" activities are doomed to the same fate as the inhabitants of Nipton. Despite the sheer brutality and cruelty demonstrated here, the player can choose to join the Legion. After a trip across the Colorado River into Caesar's war camp the player can choose to join forces with them and help them impose their rule on the Mojave.

Caesar can detail his rise to power to the player. He tells the courier that he was kidnapped by a tribe while working for The Followers of the Apocalypse, a humanitarian

organization, and during his time in captivity he noticed the tribe was fighting a losing war. He taught the tribe's warriors fighting tactics that he had learned while reading about the history of Rome. With these tactics the tribe was able to win the war and he took control of it. He continued his conquest by defeating and subjugating 86 other tribes before arriving in the Mojave Wasteland. He explains his view of the world, and the hope he has for humanity. He seeks to create a "nationalist, imperialist, totalitarian, homogenous culture that obliterates the identity of every group it conquers." His time spent observing the tribal conflicts of Arizona pushed him to believe that these conflicts all arose from cultural differences between the tribes and that he could use Rome as a model for a civilization that could "society that could prevent mankind from fracturing and destroying itself in this new world by establishing a new Pax Romana." One academic analysis of the game states that "Caesar's Legion is the antithesis of the New California Republic. The New California Republic values the individual while Caesar's Legion sees the individual as an instrument of the state."¹⁶ This analysis is a good way to capture how each group portrays themselves, but when held against the treatment of the Great Khans, the NCR appears to have a different means of destroying opposing cultures. Caesar's Legion admits that they perpetrated the massacre in Nipton to stifle the corruption of the city, but members of the NCR will portray the massacre at Bitter Springs as a case of bad intelligence or failure of communication. These opposing factions are presented to the player as diametrically opposed because one values democracy, and freedom while the other offers autocracy, order, and cruelty, but when viewed through the lens of empire, power projection, and subjugation of peoples on the periphery it appears that they are much closer than they are presented to the player.

¹⁶ Ratto, "From the Gunslinger to the Road Warrior," 119-20

Conclusion

As the different powers in the Mojave Wasteland vie for power in the region the player is left to decide which faction to support. The fact that the player is in control of the decision is central to an analysis of video games as a medium, by creating an interactive story where the player is an agent “videogames, however, seem to be active pursuits in a more robust sense.”¹⁷ All of them practice empire in one way or another. Whether the player decides to help the autocratic and brutal regime of Caesar in a hope to unite all the people under his banner and avoid ideological and cultural difference in the name of safety, they support the bloated bureaucracy of the NCR that cares more for its own citizens, and the wealth they can extract from the region, or Mr. House’s neoliberal capitalist regime all of these groups represent the interests of empire. Power is taken away from those around them in order to benefit the state and/or the interests of capital. The only way that this can be avoided is if the player decides to become the leader of New Vegas themselves. In the ultimate power fantasy, the player can kill Mr. House and install an agreeable artificial intelligence called “Yes Man” to his network. This gives Yes Man the control of Mr. House’s robotic policemen. These along with the aid of several factions which can include the Great Khans allow the player to secure the Mojave Wasteland as a free state that can continue self-governance. This ending still has issues of power, however.

The NCR citizens who came East to seek wealth in the area are now left without the infrastructure of their state to keep them fed and safe. With Yes Man and the Courier possibly representing a way for the distinct peoples of the Mojave to avoid colonization, violent assimilation, or capitalist exploitation the player is afforded a choice that showcases an

¹⁷ Grant, “Videogames and Interactive Fiction.”

alternative. The sovereignty afforded by maintaining the region as a free state allows for groups like the local chapter of the Followers of the Apocalypse, the Kings, and the tribes of The Strip to flourish. An independent New Vegas that is not under the rule of Mr. House serves as an example of a people that would not join either the 87 tribes of Caesar or the expansionist nation of the NCR.

While the situation in the Mojave Wasteland provides interesting parallels to U.S. empire, it is important to understand that the game does not advertise itself as a realistic depiction of this history. The fact that the NCR is not a hegemonic power in the region sets up a very different reality in the universe of *Fallout: New Vegas* than that experienced by the indigenous peoples of the Americas. While the game showcases the ways in which some citizens can benefit from the expansion of empire from material access to resources such as clean water, electricity, and money, the game does a good job of showcasing the ways in which empires destroy the culture, extract the resources from, and exploit the native inhabitants. The description of several groups as tribes is apt for this analysis of empire. Without the robust state of the NCR, the militaristic dictatorship of the Legion, or the autocratic rule of Mr. House the groups of the Mojave have much looser ties to each other and perhaps this best illustrates the dangers of empire. The fact that these groups had not violently consolidated power and capital made them vulnerable to influences both within, and without. The only way that this fate can be avoided in the game is through seizing the supplies of The Strip, and its mechanized army for the player's own interests. This does not provide a roadmap of combating empire, but instead illustrates a desire for both the power fantasy of running a region, and the wish that an individual might be able to stand up to

the powers in a region. Ultimately the game provides the player with a brutal experience of many types of political domination and empire with its interwoven narrative and mechanics.

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