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Capital Sandbox: Fantasy and the Mechanics of Form in Fallout 3

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CAPITAL SANDBOX: FANTASY AND THE MECHANICS OF FORM IN *FALLOUT 3*

by

CHRIS SEIDL

Under the Direction of Chris Kocela, PhD

ABSTRACT

The “sandbox” video game is typically defined, with reference to its childhood namesake, in terms of non-linearity and freedom of choice. However, in *Fallout 3*, the “free-form” quality of gameplay is compromised in advance by the very mechanics that are supposed to enable the sandbox in the first place. While the player may choose a variety of playstyles and outcomes, the selection of choices is nevertheless limited. Likewise, the leveling and quest forms of play, together with the narrative resurgence of capitalism within a supposedly post-apocalyptic universe, stage the return of linearity and of filmic logic. This return, anticipated by analyses of ideological interpellation put forth by Barthes, Lacan, Baudrillard, and Žižek, is accompanied by a radical alienation of the player’s agency, which, once ejected into the computer simulation, lives on in an uncanny, autonomous universe that does not even need the player’s active input in order to continue running.

INDEX WORDS: Video game, RPG, Sandbox, Fallout, Psychoanalysis, Ideology

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2015

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1 INTRODUCTION

The 2008 role-playing video game, *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios 2008), advertises “limitless freedom” for the prospective player to enjoy. Indeed, the player may freely travel throughout the spaces of the game without regard to completing “quests” or missions that advance the plot. A linear sequence of levels or stages within the game is abandoned for a non-linear approach in which the player navigates and interacts with a simulation of post-apocalyptic Washington D.C. Set 200 years after a nuclear war between the United States and Communist China, the game contains numerous settlements of survivors that dot the map, complete not only with ethical codes, means of trade and socialization, and a number of subplots (for example, the tragedy of a runaway android), but also with schedules to which all of the inhabitants adhere: characters get up in the morning, go to work or to the bar, go to bed at night, take walks, and so forth. The player’s “freedom” is a function of this simulated universe in which the player’s character, or player-character, may wander across the gameworld, for the most part uninhibited by physical limitation except at the edges of the map itself.

However, gameplay first unfolds in a linear, filmic sequence of events that establish the player-character’s identity, and later in a series of narrative and formal dilemmas that oscillate between film and video game logic. The game mechanics, meanwhile, place a continual barrage of demands on the player, who must generally obey them, identifying less and less with the player-character, and more with the formal codes of the game. Indeed, as the player-character accrues experience, equipment, and so forth, the player must decide how to complete quests, negotiating ethics and playstyles alike, which are formally expressed within the rules and rewards of the game. In contrast to the prospect of “limitless freedom,” the choices available to

the player are quite limited, continually resurrecting the specter of linearity; the post-apocalyptic universe of the game likewise promises the retreat of “normal” society, and yet the “Pre-War” 1950s culture of the gameworld resurfaces, again and again, in the attitudes and artifacts of its inhabitants. This interpenetration of “free” form and a more rigid text ultimately yields a Freudian “return of the repressed” in which film and linearity once again exert control over and within video game space; what occurs is not the abolition of choice, or of subjectivity, but the displacement of the role of the subject onto the video game simulation itself.

Some historical context will help clarify the relationship between linear and non-linear play, as well as between film and gaming. In contrast to the free-form gameplay of *Fallout 3*, early video games like *Pong* (Atari Inc.), released in 1972, merely provided a mechanical exercise for the player to carry out—a rudimentary abstraction of table tennis. As gaming developed, the simplicity of *Pong*, which simulates its original with two bars representing paddles and a line representing the net, gave way to video games that began to simulate their objects in more recognizably mimetic terms. *Defender* (Williams Electronics), released in 1980, treats space as a corridor through which the player flies a small ship, combating enemy spacecraft to clear “levels” and advance through the game. Released only a year later, *Donkey Kong* (Nintendo R&D4 1981) confronts the player not with a corridor or narrow tunnel on the screen but with an obstacle course in which the player must direct the small player-character (or avatar) up a series of ladders and platforms (hence the name given to this genre, “platformers”) while avoiding barrels thrown from above by the persistent villain, Donkey Kong. The iconic

Super Mario Brothers (Nintendo R&D4 1985) situates the player-character in a much larger world containing an unprecedented variety of environments, characters, and obstacles, prefiguring the profound growth in video game complexity that would take place in the following decades.

When early arcade and console games like *Defender* and *Super Mario Bros.* propelled the player's avatar through a narrow tunnel, following a straight shot through virtual spaces that threatened to close off the player's advancement, the medium staged a struggle against its own gameplay-defining boundaries. In these early linear games, the player's avatar moved across spaces whose edges continually receded out of view of the screen much like the passage of a film slide, concluding when the player reached the end of each level. The player thus developed a claustrophobic antagonism to the encroaching spaces of the game, spaces which at the same time represented connecting spaces in the backgrounds, which were as inaccessible to the player as the societies and stories suggested by these same spaces. In *Super Mario Bros.*, the player's avatar moves across backgrounds that imply spatial depth as well as the beginnings of "social" depth, evident in the structures in view—pipes, castles, dungeons, and so forth, all architectural components of a broader world. The game extends the representation of socio-spatial depth, however subtly, through the mere existence of Mario, Bowser, Princess Peach, and the other characters of the game, all of whom belong to the same society within the gameworld. However, a more developed interaction with this society remained beyond the reach of the player until the release of *Super Mario 64* 11 years later (Nintendo EAD 1996).

In the interim, the suggestive limitation of video game space created a demand for increasingly complex technology and new sets of mechanics to negotiate its spatialized potentials. Such mechanics began to appear at least as early as *The Legend of Zelda*, released only a year after *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo R&D4 1986). In this open-world adventure role-playing game, the player directs the player-character, Link, across the gameworld to complete nine dungeons, several of which may be completed in any order. *The Legend of Zelda* thus lent non-linear gameplay a credible model that would later be adapted to more process-intensive games, including *Fallout 3*, released 22 years later. However, subsequent to *The Legend of Zelda*, the limitation of two-dimensional space would continue to restrain the player-character's movement until the transition to 3D, initiated by the 1992 release of the first three-dimensional game, *Wolfenstein 3D* (id Software).

With the development of complex three-dimensional spaces navigated in the first-person perspective, alongside successful precedents for an open-world model, the stage was set for the arrival of the “sandbox” video game, so named for the quality of formlessness expressed by play. Rather than a radically reductive abstract simulation, obstacle course, narrow tunnel, or maze, the “gameworld” of the sandbox offers only a simulation that may be explored and shaped by the player, abolishing the formal restrictions that define its precedents, including the prohibition of the third dimension. Thus, just two years after the release of *Wolfenstein 3D*, Bethesda Softworks released the first installment of the popular *Elder Scrolls* series, *Arena* (1994). Randomly generated, the gameworld of *Arena* contains hundreds of dungeons, cities, and non-

player characters (NPC's). The player can equip armor and weapons, create spells, and travel the "open world" at will; "quests," or tasks given to the player to complete, are entirely optional, hence the non-linear quality of gameplay. The player's inclination to explore, rather than an obstacle course or "stage," shapes and drives the experience of play. "Levels" are no longer cleared, since they are no longer spaces as such. Instead, levels designate the player-character's accumulation of experience points (XP); a player-character is Level 10, or Level 20, and so on. However, the older concept of the spatial "level" is retained, in distorted form, through the game's dungeons, self-contained spaces that the player may enter, explore, clear of enemies, and ultimately loot, a form of play very much like the levels of *Wolfenstein 3D*, in which the player defeats Nazi soldiers and obtains new weapons in order to advance the game.

With the supersession of 2D linear space by three-dimensional, non-linear simulation, the video game thus bears out Walter Benjamin's observation, "The history of every art form shows critical epochs in which a certain art form aspires to effects which could be fully obtained only with a changed technical standard, that is to say, in a new art form" (1245-46). Indeed, game studies scholars often note that games "expand the horizons of art" (Tavinor 2). Hence, the film, by preparing the passive spectator for "reception in a state of distraction" (Benjamin 1247), one that granted all of the imaginary access of video without the ability to manipulate it as the end-user, created a demand for the video game, which followed the emergence of mass cinema by a mere five decades; the subsequent transition from two to three dimensions took only about twenty years from *Pong*'s release. With such a rapid pace of development, games published

only a few decades ago appear primitive by current standards.

Still, in more recent years, the old “sidescroller” and “platformer” genres have made a resurgence amid a fervent nostalgia for the pioneering days of the industry, most notably *Braid* (Number None Inc.) and *Limbo* (Playdead). After all, the rigid structures of rules define the game and its constitutive play, from overall objectives down to its very physics, what Ian Bogost (2010) identifies as the “possibility space” or network of choices available to the player (42). As Bogost notes, “This is really what we do when we *play* video games: we explore the possibility space its rules afford by manipulating the game’s controls” (43). *Minecraft*, in contrast, if not completely formless, offers a rather convincing substitute—but like all substitutes for a fundamental lack, it carries with it the prohibition of the object of desire itself, freedom from form (Mojang). The player must of course abide by the rules of the game, which include combat mechanics, physics, cycles of day and night, and so forth. Nevertheless, the apparent formal relaxation of the game is constitutive of its non-linear “sandbox” environment: the spaces of *Minecraft* expand algorithmically without end, constituted by discrete materials and objects that can be extracted, refined, and re-combined much the same way as their simulated counterparts in the “real” world. This form of play reflects the namesake activity of such games, the shaping of sand into meaningful structures within the confines of a box.

Fallout 3 thus promises, on the back of its retail box, “Limitless freedom!” The claim is marketing hyperbole, of course, since the rulesets and boundaries of video games always impose limits. The gamer then approaches the sandbox role-playing game (RPG) according to the logic of the Freudian fetishist: “I know very well that it is not formless, but I will behave as if it is.” Indeed, in contrast to the Marxian fetish, which appears to the fetishist as a “mysterious thing” whose fantasmatic content takes on an “objective character,” its “true nature” hidden from view,

the Freudian fetish is openly “recognized by its adherents as an abnormality” (Marx 83; Freud, “Fetishism” 152). The Freudian fetishist relishes in the full knowledge of his fantasy-object, such that he is “quite satisfied with it.” Like the child who manipulates sand in order to form signifying structures, overcoming the limits of the medium to construct castles, the fetishistic gamer “plays with” a malleable but limited medium, “quite satisfied” in its artifice; indeed, this pliability is the pre-condition for the player’s enjoyment. Thus, video game scholars often describe this “sandbox” interaction in terms of the freedom that it affords: Grant Tavinor, for example, defines the sandbox as a representation of “an open fictional environment in which the player has a great deal of choice over exactly what they do,” an observation echoed by Evan Watts (Tavinor 2; Watts 159). Describing what the player can do with these choices, Jeff Ferzoco locates the “free-form play space” of the sandbox in simulated “childhood play space. What happens there is both play and game, freedom and goal, all done at your leisure. Fundamentally, it is a simulation of life” (1). Numerous studies emphasize not simply the wide array of choices available to the player, but especially *moral* choices, and their capacity for instruction (Grey; Jagoda; Schulzke; Švelch). Ian Bogost (2008) likewise notes that, in addition to allowing for free movement and multiple styles of play, the sandbox even enables players to “exercise freedom [. . .] to orient one’s conception of right and wrong” (156). However, in contrast to a more general tendency among scholars to emphasize uncontested freedom, Bogost emphasizes its limitations: “Those who argue that one can ‘do anything’ [. . .] are mistaken: the [sandbox] game constantly structures freeform experience” according to a particular ruleset and narrative universe (157). The sandbox imposes limits, however scarcely: even the most generous analysis of the sandbox must still view it as content that approaches infinity within a finite container, as in the procedurally generated spaces of *Minecraft*, which expand without end while

remaining subject to the player's point of view and to the ruleset of the gameworld.

The resistance of the finite thus calls into question the "freedom" of the sandbox, defining the gameplay experience as one that ceaselessly probes for breaches in the environment and its laws. Consequently, the player has nowhere in particular to go after completing the opening "tutorial" sequence of gameplay, but nevertheless immediately steps forward into the gameworld, completing the dissolution of the linear structuration of play. Hence, sandbox games tend to entail a great deal of wandering, usually unfolding out of an explicit interplay between strictly linear game openings followed by "free-form," nonlinear play (Tavinor 3). All of Bethesda's *Elder Scrolls* games, for example, begin with the player-character's escape or release from prison, following a scripted, linear progression of events, walking the player through the process of character creation, and terminating in the newly formed player-character's expulsion into the open world, which the player must discover and explore, one step at a time, in order to play the game.

In *Fallout 3*, the player flees "Vault 101," an underground bomb shelter ruled by a tyrannical Overseer. The stark transition from Vault 101's narrow, steel hallways to the non-linear sandbox takes place precisely when the player-character passes through an opening (quite literally the opening of a door) in the walls of linearity. The passage leading out of this opening deposits the player-character into a desolate landscape known as the "Capital Wasteland," a name that registers both the fall of capitalism in a Cold War apocalypse as well as the destroyed capital city of Washington, D.C. Before gaining access to this open world, however, the player must obey a series of commands—*Exit the crib, pick up the book, leave the home, search for Father*—experiencing pleasure with the fantasy-fulfillment of each demand as the narrative drives the player toward exiting the Vault. Its walls close in tightly, beginning with the crib that

the player-character must escape, and continuing in a series of short, filmic vignettes until the gameworld expands beyond the Vault and the reach of its mountains.

2 NARRATIVE AND CHARACTER LEVELING

Set to the melodious vocals of the Ink Spots', "I Don't Want to Set the World on Fire," *Fallout 3* begins with a cinematic view inside of a public transportation bus. The camera recedes away from an exposed set of flickering, golden vacuum tubes inside of a "Radiation King" dashboard radio, panning across the grimy detritus in the driver's and passenger seats—a hoola girl, a doctor's bag, a teddy bear, a Nuka-Cola bottle, printed ads on the walls, and so forth. As the camera pulls out of the blown open rear of the bus, the downtown rubble of Washington, D.C. comes into view, whole chunks of concrete torn from the streets and piled high, the scarred obelisk of the Washington Monument piercing the sky, its skeletal rebar showing through missing sections of stone. The Ink Spots fade to a discordant bellowing of brass horns, and the camera retreats past a steel-clad soldier, cutting to a horizonless graveyard and a series of apocalyptic images (Figure 1). A narrator explains that a nuclear war between Communist China and the U.S. brought on the apocalypse, when Vault 101 sealed its doors. The narration concludes in second person, "It is here you were born. It is here you will die, because in Vault 101 no one ever enters, and *no one* ever leaves." Seconds later, following a bright flash, the player-character emerges from her mother's womb in a brightly lit hospital room, gazing upon the masked face of her father through a blood-spattered lens, suggesting that the player-character exists only as a point view, a pane of glass separating the player from the internal world of the hospital room (Figure 2). The player-character's father then announces the character's sex, name, race, and appearance; the player, however, "fills in the blank," as it were, for each of his

choices and observations, which pause and give way to an interface with the player, followed by the father's remarks on each selection, exactly the same as the character creation process established in *The Elder Scrolls* (Tavinor 2-3). However, unlike the magical world of *The Elder Scrolls*, the science fiction universe of *Fallout 3* more readily appropriates filmic technique; whereas the introduction sequences of *The Elder Scrolls* games are contiguous, that of *Fallout 3* skips ahead like a film. In the generic transition from fantasy to science fiction, *Fallout 3* breaks up the initial moments of linear congruity into fragments, no longer subject to the authority of unbroken linearity, but to that of an editorial process. Thus, when the player-character's mother enters cardiac arrest, a second bright flash consumes the screen; when the whiteout on screen resolves into an image, the player-character stands before the father in a small room, two years later.



Figure 1 - Near the end of the first scene, the bus remains visible in the middleground.

The tight, photographic control exerted first in the cinematic sequence and second in the birth scene continues to operate at the level of form as the player acts out a linear series of

vignettes from the early stages of the player-character's life, beginning in this steel-walled room. Here, the quest form begins to impose itself, quite literally grafting demands onto the screen, which appear in small text on the left side of the player's view, offering instructions to open the playpen gate, exit the playpen, and look at a, "You're Special," book. As it turns out, "S.P.E.C.I.A.L." is the first of many acronyms within the game, standing for Strength, Perception, Endurance, Charisma, Intelligence, Agility, and Luck, the seven primary Attributes that regulate the player-character's mastery over dependent subsets of Skills as well as interactions with other characters and quests within the game. Within the narrative space of the game, "You're Special" is simply a children's book with simplistic rhymes to describe each attribute; in the course of opening the book, however, the player assigns between 1 and 10 points to each attribute, which the book then retroactively records in a coupling of choice and narrative, player and player-character.

With the fulfillment of this short series of tasks, another bright, photographic flash overtakes the screen, cutting to a moment nine years later, pushing the player-character along in a narrative that "skips ahead," prefiguring the non-linear logic that will take hold over gameplay as the player exits Vault 101. Here, the camera leaps forward into the player-character's birthday scene, just as she receives a "Pip-Boy," a "Personal Information Processor" device that once again couples the player and character. Within the narrative, the Pip-Boy is simply an arm-held device worn by the character used for consulting a map of the gameworld, managing inventory, and other banal tasks. Extra-diegetically, the Pip-Boy provides the heads-up display (HUD) for the player to read information like health, experience, and ammunition, as well as the functions that remain grounded in narrative—a map, a journal, an archive of voice recordings, and so forth. Thus, even the player's interactions with the gameworld fall within the scope of the

narrative, just as gameplay in turn falls within the broader narrative that lies “behind the camera,” interposing gameplay with leaps in time and space. The HUD no longer breaks with the narrative as in countless other titles that simply graft it onto the screen without explanation, or at least, this is not all that the HUD does; instead, the HUD emerges as part of the gameworld itself, lubricating the “escapist” function of gameplay that transports the player’s attention from the “outer world” (*Umwelt*) of everyday reality onto the “inner world” (*Innenwelt*) of gameplay and the player-character. As if looking into a mirror, the player identifies with the image on the screen—that of the player-character—which the game holds up as if to say, “This is you,” while also soliciting the player’s identification, “I am that.”

This process echoes Lacan’s account of the mirror stage, the moment in which the child witnesses the figure in the mirror and, assisted by a parental figure—“There’s my good girl,” pointing to the mirror—assumes the specular image before her. The mirror stage in its most fundamental aspect facilitates “*an identification*, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image” (Lacan, *Écrits* 76, emphasis in original). In contrast with the infant’s own experience of motor incapacity, the image in the mirror assumes the form of a *Gestalt*, the Ideal-I or *imago*, which “situates the ego [. . .] in a fictional direction,” initiating the process of “homogenesis” or socialization (76, 79). This image appears “above all in a contrasting size that fixes it and in a symmetry that inverts it, in contrast with the turbulent movements that the subject feels are animating him,” thus always achieving, in the field of perception, a greater level of development than of the interpellated subject (76).



Figure 2 - The player-character's birth is shown in the first-person perspective.

Lacan's analysis of homogenesis describes precisely the experience of the player-character, the idealized avatar of the video game, which attempts to render a virtual homogenesis. The miniscule, awkward movements of the controller or, in the computer version, the mouse and keyboard, propel the player-character through virtual space in a manner that is wholly alien to the bodily experience of the player, whose relation to the character's movements is symbolic, abstracted, and thus necessarily mediated by the controls of the gaming machine (whether computer or console). In a "flutter of jubilant activity," the player, like the infant, undergoes a virtual and thus narrativized homogenesis that situates the player-character in the social environment of the gameworld, which will henceforth solicit the identification of the player.

Yet, gameplay is not homogeneous for the player base of *Fallout 3*. Inevitably most players will have had experience in previous titles, just as a reader of any book will likely have read many before that. Nevertheless, those with little gameplay experience bear a striking

resemblance to the infant who undergoes the *Aha-Erlebnis* of the mirror. On the computer version of the game, the player must strike the W, A, S, and D keys to move in four lateral directions, the Space Bar to leap, and the Left Mouse Button to fire a weapon (when one is acquired later in the game). Still another key must be pressed to view the player-character from a third-person perspective, since the player's gaze defaults to a voyeuristic first-person viewpoint that follows the movements of the mouse. On console versions of the game, handheld controllers indicate the same actions with a pair of joysticks and a series of buttons.

New players may thus find themselves, while navigating towards the children's book, staring chaotically at the floor, or moving in short, jittery movements that double themselves with each mistake and corresponding course correction. Keys that normally signify letters become motor apparatuses; the meaning of the letter gives way to movement (to non-meaning, to virtual being), and the gliding of the hand on the mouse becomes associated by sheer muscular habit with looking. This association takes hold most easily in the fertile ground of experience, yet even the most unskilled player knows to identify with the character in the game, a primary identification that triggers the player's learning process, which is only a series of narrative and mechanical expectations placed by the game onto the player coupled with the player's attempts to meet these expectations (to grasp the narrative and its component quests, and to navigate the spaces of the gameworld). As the difficulties of movement, sight, and merely existing in virtual space recede before a plethora of undiscovered objects and surfaces, the pleasure of gameplay flows outward from the virtual world's inner circuits. Narrative arrives, reflecting the child's entrance into the socio-symbolic order subsequent to identification with the image in the mirror, whose structure the video game simulates.

In film, the immediate predecessor of video games, the text arrives in a series of

disjointed images, one after the other, assembled under the law of an association dictated by the editorial process. Walter Benjamin describes the film effect as one that strikes “the spectator like a bullet, it happen[s] to him, thus acquiring a tactile quality” (1246). In a stage play, the narrative predecessor of the film (which locates its mimetic basis in still photography, and earlier in painting), the audience watches each scene unfold free of any constraint on perspective. Yet, in the case of the film,

changes of place and focus [. . .] periodically assail the spectator. [. . .] No sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is already changed. It cannot be arrested. [. . .] The spectator’s process of association in view of these images is indeed interrupted by their constant, sudden change. This constitutes the shock effect of the film, which, like all shocks, should be cushioned by heightened presence of mind. (1246)

In contrast to the film, the video game does not simply happen to the player, nor is it merely deciphered by a reading or interpretive process as in written texts or even a stage play, which allow for some contemplative distance owing to the form in which they interact with their audiences. Instead, gameplay abolishes the spectator as such, or rather relegates this role to periodic “cutscenes” that interrupt gameplay as film sequences in order to establish narrative context. To represent a broader historical context through recourse to a cutscene, rather than allowing the player to experience this context through play, reflects the manner in which sidescrollers represent rich backgrounds that imply broader worlds beyond their two-dimensional trajectories. However, in *Fallout 3*, the necessity imposed by technological limits does not apply to the cutscene; hence, the presence of the cutscene points to a function or a symptom beyond mere exposition.

The content of the narration itself is quite clichéd and awkward, beginning with the sentimental and crude line, “War, war never changes.” Speaking in earnest, over-dramatic tones, the narrator describes a generic apocalypse: bombs were detonated, people perished, and so forth. The apocalypse, the narrator explains,

was not, as some had predicted, the end of the world. Instead, the apocalypse was simply the prologue to another bloody chapter of human history. For man had succeeded in destroying the world—but war, war never changes.

The words sound out with arresting stupidity, which Sarah Iversen describes as a “pompous [. . .] failed attempt to be philosophical” that “effectively undoes” the otherwise ambiguous quality of gameplay (N. pag.). Indeed, the restrictive, “authoritative” character of the opening narration contrasts starkly not only with the otherwise “open” quality of play, but even with the opening menu and loading screens, which contrast “urban wonder” advertisements like Vault-Tech bomb shelters with a “menacing score.”

Perhaps, however, the opening cutscene simply operates as a mode of historical pastiche, the representation of an old, quaint medium (film), which is inadequate for expressing the open-ended quality of gameplay. As Jaroslav Švelch argues, video games possess a “vividness and immediacy unprecedented by other media,” which makes them particularly powerful engines for expressing moral dilemmas (66). Grant Tavinor even claims that video games will soon “eclipse” other art forms, as they “demand more than mere interpretation of this work world, as most traditional fictions do. They necessitate that the player adopt a role in that fictional world, or at the very least manipulate the fictional world so as to achieve the goals of the game” (7, 58). Janet Murray more fully defines the unique properties of video games, which, she argues, are “procedural,” in that they “execute a series of rules” (71). They are “participatory [. . .] not just

because they exhibit rule-generated behavior but because we can induce the behavior. They are responsive to our input” (74). Likewise, video games are especially “spatial,” characterized by “their power to represent navigable space. Linear media such as books and films can portray space, either by verbal description or image, but only digital environments can present space that we can move through” (79). Finally, video games are “encyclopedic” because they promise nearly “infinite resources” that “have extended human memory,” enabling video game developers to “represent enormous quantities of information [. . .] to offer a wealth of detail, to represent the world with both scope and particularity” (84). Hence, for Tavinor, “the fictive practice involved in videogames potentially involves a broader array of our cognitive capacities than is seen in many other cases of fictive engagement” (100). The video game thus exceeds the scope and capacities of other media because it adds something to them, and combines them, in the same way that film added both sound and motion to the still photograph, leading to the deployment of Benjamin’s “shock effect,” which has become magnified in the procedural expressions of the video game.

Fallout 3 therefore poses the problem of the cutscene—awkwardly appearing as a prop in a totalizing medium that wraps around it without fully absorbing it—immediately follows the cutscene with a filmic series of vignettes, and finally imposes a fantasmatic narrative for the player to *act out*: the game does not merely ask for the player’s attention, but commands the player’s participation in carrying out the game as a process, contingent like all games on the choices of the player (Murray’s “responsive” interactivity). This process begins in the first instance with an identification precisely on the order of Lacan’s mirror stage, that of a symbolic relationship mediating the thinking subject’s contact with a material practice, or as Louis Althusser describes, an ideological representation of “the imaginary relationship of individuals to

their real conditions of existence” (162). The video game executes ideological speech above all else, because it demands that the subject carry out an act that externalizes an ideological proposition; Blaise Pascal traces the act of obedience in terms of this externalization of belief:

we must go down on our knees, pray with our lips, etc. [. . .] For we must make no mistake about ourselves: we are as much automaton as mind. As a result, demonstration is not the only instrument for convincing us. [. . .] Proofs only convince the mind; habit provides the strongest proofs and those that are most believed. It inclines the automaton, which leads the mind unconsciously along with it. (300, 247)

For Althusser, Pascal “scandalously inverts [. . .] the order of the notional schema of ideology” by positing the externalization of belief prior to its internalization in the subject (168). Ideology, moreover, “recruits subjects” among individuals, whom it at the same time transforms into subjects of the ideology by means of “*interpellation* or hailing,” as in “the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: ‘Hey, you there!’ (174). In this scenario, the individual turns around, and by “this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a *subject*. Why? Because he has recognized that the hail was ‘really’ addressed to him.” The video game likewise interpellates the player as a subject of, and subject to, the game’s ruleset and assumptions, in the same way that any text posits an audience, to whom it addresses itself in the inescapable discourses of ideology.

Like Althusser’s policeman (pointing at the subject, “Hey you!”), the game hails the ideological subject not as a mere spectator to ideological gameplay but as an actor within it. This “transformation,” both in terms of psychoanalytical identification and of ideological interpellation, begins the moment that the hyphenated conjunction of player and character is

understood by the player. During the disjointed, film-like episodes that establish the early childhood alibi for the narrative of the game, cut up and re-formed like so much film into a continuous experience, the player-subject is interpellated by gameplay, from as early as birth itself.

Simultaneous to the “hailing” of the player, the infantilization of the player-character sets the stage for the mechanics of empowerment that characterize the leveling process in its entirety. First, however, the player must exit Vault 101, a space charged with an elementary symbolism that is literally stamped onto the backs of its occupants’ jumpsuits—“101” in utilitarian yellow on a blue background. At the close of the birthday sequence, the player-character poses with her father for a photograph; the white flash of the camera fills the screen once again, and with the next scene the player-character stands before the father once again, six years later. It is now time for the player-character to take the playfully named G.O.A.T., the General Occupational Aptitude Test (Figure 3). Similar to numerous insipid “personality tests” that many workplaces administer to prospective employees, expecting to supplant human experience with a bare collection of sterile numbers, the G.O.A.T. begins with the question, “You are approached by a frenzied Vault scientist, who yells, ‘I’m going to put my quantum harmonizer in your photonic resonance chamber!’ What’s your response?” A similar series of comedic questions follows, the answers to which irrevocably determine the player-character’s lifetime occupation. As Mr. Broatch reveals, “Just between you and me, the whole test is a joke. I can make the G.O.A.T. come out any way you want.” Thus, Amata, the Overseer’s daughter, receives a glowing response from Mr. Broatch: “Very well done! Looks like it’s the supervisory track for you.” Vault 101 is, it seems, a hereditary dictatorship; like its formal introductory scenes, the narrative content of Vault 101 arrives before the player with only limited choices—selecting from a set of

givens, not a choice but an ultimatum, “happening” to the player as a film would.



Figure 3 - The tenth and final question asks, "Who is, indisputably, the most important person in Vault 101, he who shelters us from the harshness of the atomic Wasteland, and to whom we owe everything we have, including our lives?"

When a fifth flash follows, the player-character awakens to a violent reality: her father has committed a taboo by exiting the Vault, recalling the narrator’s ominous warning during the opening sequence, “No one enters, and no one leaves.” The tyrannical Overseer consequently targets the player-character for retaliatory killing. The player-character must escape into the “Capital Wasteland” that lies beyond the underground bunker, with a sixth and final flash that, instead of cutting to another scene, appears to be the result of exiting a dark tunnel into a brightly lit landscape, positioning the remaining events of gameplay as merely another sequence in the film that has been determined in advance by the “man behind the curtain,” the formal power that stands behind the camera, positioning it, cutting the scenes that it captures and arranging them through an editorial process.

Subsequently, the expansive world beyond Vault 101 overflows with lethal creatures and

malcontents, nearly all more powerful than the player-character, whose abilities are measured by her “level.” The linear shot through space that characterizes the spatial level or stage in tightly controlled video games, and in the early sequences of this game in particular, recedes before the sandbox environment of *Fallout 3*: the level, rather than existing merely as a space, is displaced onto the character, still measured in sequential numbers. Each kill, quest completion, picked lock, hacked computer, and discovered location awards experience points (XP) to the player; enough points unlock the next level, when the player can distribute points toward Skills, like Medicine, Science, Energy Weapons, and so forth. Likewise, a “Perk” is chosen with each level, offering unique bonuses and abilities. One Perk, “Bloody Mess,” adds 5% damage to the player-character’s attacks and causes felled enemies to explode in an ecstatic rush of gore; another charming variant, “Cannibal,” enables the player to consume human flesh in order to replenish health. With each level, the player-character’s health and stamina also increase, enabling combat with higher-level (and more difficult) enemies. This leveling process ends when the maximum level has been reached so that the player must select only a small portion of the available Skills and Perks, which encourages the player to complete subsequent iterations of the game, “playthroughs,” in which players can consume all of the remaining content within the game, creating a new play style with each new set of Attributes, Skills, and Perks. In the meantime, each Skill and Perk, all dependent on the primary S.P.E.C.I.A.L. Attributes, is likewise quantified on a scale from 1-100, turning the player-character into a repository for, and not merely a traveler through, the level.

Neither does the player simply pass ethics by; as part of the social simulation of the *Fallout 3* universe, the player’s actions literally alter the ethical status of the player-character. Each action bears with it a series of consequences: saving one group of people from another will

draw the respect of the former and the ire of the latter; making a series of “Good” or “Evil” decisions (measured quantitatively in Karma points) attracts periodic attacks from principled lawbringers or villainous assassins. Continuing, as the player resolves one of the many dozens of available quests, some spaces open up—for example, player-owned housing—and others close, as in the case of some Vaults and fortresses that collapse or explode upon the completion of a quest. Although a great number of quests exist in the game (94 total), most can be completed in any order without any regard to the player’s level or progress through the principle plotline (“Fallout 3 quests”). Likewise, the player-character, known as the Lone Wanderer, may encounter any number of randomly generated events, such as clashes between bands of warriors in the rubble of downtown D.C., or patrols of soldiers wandering the Wasteland. Thus, the game combines player choice with randomized content to produce a unique experience for each iteration of the game, making every attempt to fulfill its promise of “limitless freedom”: the borders of the sandbox do not simply fall flatly on the edge of the map or cohere within the confines of narrative, but expand outward into multiple gameplay experiences, reaching their limit when every aspect of the game has at last been experienced by the player.

The organization of space itself, and not merely its components, corroborates the choice-driven quality of sandbox gameplay. While some spaces exist in *Fallout 3* disconnected from the rest of the gameworld—for example, virtual reality environments, games within the game—they do not constitute gameplay on the whole as in linear counterparts where spaces arrive on the screen disjointed and without any continuity apart from the logic of the sequence itself, announcing, “Level 1,” or “Level 2,” and so forth; instead, gameplay in *Fallout 3* unfolds within the world map and its variety of constituent locations, virtually all of which can be visited at any given moment. As Martin Pichlmair describes,

Those places that are not inhabited by wildlife are home to wastelanders, raiders, and hermits. By the river you might stumble over a trading post inhabited by an old lady. To the north, there is Dave's Republic, a settlement that proclaims its own state. In the west, there are caverns populated by a tribe of children. All creatures living in the Capital Wasteland are reacting to each other. Some cooperate, others fiercely fight each other. The same is true for sentient beings.

(110-11)

The sandbox is thus constituted not only by space that may be freely navigated, but especially space that is inhabited by creatures who realistically simulate complex behaviors, movement patterns, dispositions, and schedules.

Precisely because of such an over-abundance of life in the Wasteland, the player must direct the Lone Wanderer to hide, ambush unsuspecting enemies, evade more powerful foes, ingest food, apply any number of medical supplies, and acquire better equipment. As David Wong writes,

For hours you scurry around in fear, powerless. You die, you hide, you scrape for every little upgrade. And then, finally, you get the Game-Changing Weapon.

Depending on the game, it might be a gun, or a spell, or a special ability.

Whatever it is, it's laughably overpowered, beautiful to watch in action and incredibly satisfying when you unleash it on the same bad guys who tormented you in the early days. (N. pag.)

Other genres confront the player with puzzles, obstacle courses, or pure challenges of hand-eye coordination. Sandbox role-playing games (RPG's) confront the player not only with all of these, but most especially with impossibly difficult enemies whose powers enfeeble the Lone

Wanderer. No “solution” avails itself to the player except in the form of leveling, both in terms of the Lone Wanderer’s level and of the equipment that she uses. When faced with a foe or a quest that cannot be completed, the player must accrue superior Skills and equipment in order to return at a later point; the player must labor or “grind” by performing repetitive tasks or quests in order to earn XP and attain higher levels.

Against this backdrop of leveling mechanics, the Lone Wanderer departs Vault 101 armed with a pistol that scarcely kills roaches and a low-level melee weapon (a baton or baseball bat) that offers little protection against even mutant mole rats and scorpions. Instructed to find her father by the quest-giving Pip-Boy (a perpetually mute taskmaster), she must make her way to the nearest town, Megaton, and begin her search there. The narrative provides no information about the whereabouts of the Lone Wanderer’s father, but Colin Moriarty, one of the non-player characters (NPC’s) of Megaton, does—after, of course, the Lone Wanderer provides payment in the form of hard cash or a quest. Each quest given to the Lone Wanderer by NPC’s belongs to one of two categories, storyline quests and side quests. The former lead toward the father; the latter bear little or no relationship to the principle plot but provide valuable experience, knowledge about the gameworld, and equipment. Megaton’s citizenry, for example, require a number of tasks: an aspiring writer asks the Lone Wanderer to endure a number of absurd trials (among them, voluntary self-irradiation) for material in an upcoming “Wasteland Survival Guide”; the local repairman wants the town’s leaky water pipes fixed; the Sheriff seeks help disarming Megaton’s namesake un-exploded nuclear bomb, which occupies the center of town.

Thus, the gameplay of *Fallout 3* reveals the father’s traces (or not) through a series of Pascalian “kneel and pray” sequences, in which the player receives a command and obeys. Slavoj Žižek identifies a similar dynamic in his analysis of *Tamagotchi*, a hand-held electronic

children's toy that symbolizes an animal whose every need and desire the child must fulfill:

When it beeps, one has to look on the screen, where the object's demand can be read—for food, drink, or whatever—and push the proper buttons beneath the screen to satisfy these demands. The object can also demand that we play with it; if it is too wild, the proper thing to do is to punish it by, again, pressing the proper buttons. [. . .] The interesting thing here is that we are dealing with a toy, a mechanical object, that provides satisfaction precisely by behaving like a child bombarding us with demands. The satisfaction is provided by our being compelled to care for the object any time it wants—that is, by fulfilling its demands. (106-7)

For Žižek, *Tamagotchi* allows the player to externalize the fantasy of gameplay as desire imposed by an Other; unlike a doll, which the player may manipulate at its whim, the *Tamagotchi* is not a passive object but instead imposes demands on the player. This dynamic, propped up by the symbolic narrative of the desiring pet, reflects exactly the same structures in *Fallout 3*, which, although it represents an enormously complex game relative to the simple children's toy, nevertheless contains within it the same demands that it foists upon the player, issuing a challenge not for the player to complete, as in puzzle-oriented or competitive games, but to obey.

The enigma of the *Tamagotchi*, according to Žižek, lies in its capacity to induce feelings despite the fact that it does not even resemble an animal but merely symbolizes one, facilitating a “radical reduction of *imaginary* resemblance to the *symbolic* level,” such that “we feel fully the appropriate emotions, although we are well aware that there is nothing beyond the screen” (106-7, emphasis in original). Yet, perhaps the fully appropriate emotions never arrive, and instead

the opposite holds true: the player does not feel for either the pet or the Lone Wanderer with whom every gamer is supposed to identify, but instead with the logic of the machine and its demands, just as in the case of the obsessional object of the *Tamagotchi*. When the Lone Wanderer of *Fallout 3* is injured, she limps, yet this effect does not provoke feelings or identification with the plight of the character, but instead the slow limp of the character is reduced to the status of mere inconvenience, a signifier of a need that interrupts the fulfillment of the quest form. As Christopher Goetz articulates, “the protagonist’s body, rather than serving as the sole site of identification, becomes a vehicle for experiencing the bifurcating boundaries of play” (426). When the character’s “need” for aid is dire, signified by a certain number of hit points and corroborated by the limp, the player must cease combat and retreat for healing or equipment repairs, and it is this laborious task—what Bogost (2008) describes as “tedious, empty play,” which is paradoxically the source of pleasure in the text—that receives the identification of the player (125).

With a “modification” or “mod” known as the Wanderers Edition released by the player community that may be installed to supplement default gameplay, such needs become even more pronounced. The Lone Wanderer must drink, eat, and sleep in order to stay alive, just like any “real” person (and more like the *Tamagotchi*). The mod introduces hundreds of changes, making combat more difficult, slowing the passage of time, rendering enemies more intelligent and better-equipped, changing the manner in which the Lone Wanderer obtains healing, and so on. In *Fallout: New Vegas*, a subsequent installment in the franchise, many of these changes were incorporated into the structure of the game itself in a feature known as “Hardcore mode,” which the player may turn on or off.

Such stringent mechanics illustrate the fantasmatic potency of gameplay, which accounts

for why real-time combat in the game is supplemented by V.A.T.S., or the Vault-Tec Assisted Targeting System, which breaks the diegetic continuity of the gameworld by allowing the player to essentially pause combat and use a point-and-click interface to target an enemy's specific body parts (Figure 4). The player may even plan a series of attacks, one after the other, with the benefit of frozen time, which eases the frustration and difficulty of real-time combat at the same time that it recalls earlier, "turn-based" combat systems in which the player-character would exchange blows with foes in order, much like a game of chess. Of course, RPG's like *Fallout 3* ultimately trace their genesis to the "original" pen-and-paper RPG, *Dungeons & Dragons*, dating back to 1974. Its fundamental mechanics—attributes governing a set of skills that determine the effectiveness of certain actions taken by the player-character—continue to operate at the most fundamental levels in *Fallout 3*, and thus, like *Tamagotchi*, *Fallout 3*'s symbolic architecture continues to contest the primacy of its imaginary support, beginning with the dangers posed by foes and the limitations imposed by the leveling form.



Figure 4 - The player targets a Super Mutant Behemoth in V.A.T.S.

The problem of frequent injury so common in the earliest stages of the game is resolved, moreover, by the leveling process and the empowerment that it brings: injury seldom occurs at higher levels when the character has attained greater resistance to or capacity to evade damage as well as increasingly protective armor. Likewise, as the character increases in combative powers, an increasingly shrinking number of shots and blows are necessary to fell enemies, thus accelerating the process of acquiring greater equipment commonly known as “loot,” a term that underscores the hoarding behaviors characteristic of gameplay. As a result the player identifies, perversely, not with the character as the early vignettes of the game would have, but instead with the demands and rewards of the machine itself, with the formal authority lurking beneath the level of content. Meanwhile, narrative operates as an alibi to the leveling mechanics and the quest form by thrusting the player-character into the search for her father, initializing the operations of the mechanics themselves. Ultimately this search helps the Lone Wanderer to attain the status of a god relative to early childhood moments of vulnerability. The most banal leveling mechanics and hoarding patterns of gameplay at last displace character identification and, to a limited extent, even the narrative itself, as the driving fantasy of gameplay.

3 LAW AND JUDGMENT

If the quest form imposes demands on the player, and leveling offers rewards, then the Karma system of *Fallout 3* negotiates the player’s ethical engagement with both demand and reward alike. Nearly every choice that the player might make on the Lone Wanderer’s behalf straddles a binary of good and evil, awarding and subtracting the appropriate number of Karma points with each morally coded act, for example, stealing, burglary, murder, or cannibalism. In turn, the Lone Wanderer may receive one of several Karma ratings, depending on the point

range—Very Good (750 to 1000), Good (250 to 749), Neutral (-249 to 249), Evil (-250 to -749), and Very Evil (-750 to -1000). The point system acts as a currency in the same way that the leveling form reduces the player’s abilities to a set of attributes and skills measured in scales of 1 to 10 or 1 to 100; here, only the scale and the subject of measurement have changed, but the same logic remains in place. This logic performs a reduction from player choice to numerical score, a kind of moral general equivalent—and like the general equivalent of political economy, the player in a sense “purchases” certain goods with the resulting Karma rating, effectively abolishing the historical specificity of each morally encoded and karmically liquidated player choice through the form of quantitative reduction itself.

A “Good” character may, for example, recruit certain morally outstanding companions to follow the Lone Wanderer; likewise a Neutral or Evil character may do the same for similarly aligned companions. “Talon Company” assassins hunt down a Good Lone Wanderer, while lawful “Regulators” attack should the Lone Wanderer be Evil. Following suit, a similar trio of Perks accompany each third of the moral spectrum: Good or Evil characters may adopt Lawbringer or Contract Killer perks, respectively, to deliver the fingers or ears of felled moral antagonists. A Neutral Lone Wanderer, meanwhile, may select the Impartial Mediation perk, granting a +30 bonus to Speech, making conversations with NPC’s more persuasive. “The result,” argues Marcus Schulzke, “is a world governed by something akin to the hedonistic calculus in which the player receives immediate feedback about the effects of their actions based on the karma system. A quantifiable morality allows the game to apply a consistent standard for moral actions that the player can adjust to and use to inform their decisions” (N. pag.). Hence, for Švelch, *Fallout 3*’s Karma system treats the player to “moral education” (53). Yet, a single Karma point may make the difference between Neutrality and Evil; simply donating a bottle cap

to a church, or stealing a spoon, can tip the balance, underscoring the arbitrariness of the point system. Like all currency, Karma represents a general structural law of value (the equivalence of morally coded acts), not a concrete value from which the abstract value is reduced: one deed or another may be in a sense “exchanged” for a set of Karmic benefits that align less with a moral compass and more with the player’s preference for gameplay, and because these acts may be exchanged against the general equivalent of Karma points, they lose their specificity in the moral dimension, becoming only so many points to tip the scales this way or that.

The same aleatory sense of morality applies to NPC’s as well. When the Lone Wanderer first encounters Dean Moriarty in Megaton, the wily bar owner demands cash payment in exchange for information about her father’s whereabouts; as an alternative form of payment, the Lone Wanderer may intimidate or murder a local junkie who has indebted herself to Moriarty. Continuing, Moriarty owns a slave, Gob, a “ghoul” subject to racist abuse from the townspeople of Megaton, who shun and harass such heavily irradiated people whose flesh has begun to rot but who, in classic comic book logic, live for hundreds of years owing to their radiation-induced powers. Moriarty frequently beats Gob for as little as looking a customer in the eye. Nova, the local prostitute, indebted herself to Moriarty five years previous to the events of the game, and now sells her body to pay off her debt; Moriarty has even forbidden her from engaging in sex outside of work. There is little to admire in the moral quality of such a character; indeed, one might even kill him to improve the lives of others, and yet, killing Moriarty (presumably freeing Gob, Nova, and any other slaves or debtors he might be keeping) subtracts Karma points from the Lone Wanderer’s rating and draws the armed aggression of the locals. However, killing officially recognized Evil characters within the game—for example, slavers in Paradise Falls—rewards the Lone Wanderer with Karma. The choice between Good and Evil in *Fallout 3* is

therefore not one of moral distinction but of the Law itself, in its imposing, senseless character.

Of course, the ethics of *Fallout 3* cannot account for all of the player's choices. Should the player decide to take an Evil action, for example wiping out an entire town of people, and revert to an earlier save of the game, all record of that choice will have been lost as far as the game is concerned. Likewise, whether the player relishes in the astonishing brutality within the game is excluded, by definition, from the ethical system, from the marketplace of Karma points. Returning to the confines of the gameworld, should the player decide to verbally provoke an NPC into attacking the Lone Wanderer, killing that NPC subtracts no Karma, and nearby NPC's will refrain from intervening. Moreover, it does not even matter what the player ultimately decides to do as regards the Karma system, since paying coins to a Church may gain any lost Karma (at 1 point per bottle cap, a truly economical ethics), and stealing or cannibalizing corpses may subtract it; a single bottle cap can make the difference between a "Good" or "Evil" character and a merely "Neutral" one. Hence, the Karma system ultimately reduces to a play style—enabling access to this Perk or that, this fork in the plotline or that, and so on. Still, the player may choose to align with a Karmic path based on an identification with one or another ethical dilemmas within the text (for example, whether to save Vault 101 even after being banished twice, or to destroy it as punishment for its fascist character), a path that is more or less indifferent to the arbitrary judgment of the Karma system, and which may thus result in a diverse set of point ranges. Conversely, the player may choose "Good" or "Evil" on the basis of the mechanical rewards of either play style, creating a "Messiah" on the most beneficent end of the Karmic scale, a "Devil" as its obverse, and a "True Mortal" as the Neutral average of the two extremes.

What counts in the Karma system is not therefore whether the Lone Wanderer dispatches

“Evil” or spreads “Goodness,” or even whether the player identifies with her ethical choices, but instead that the player choose, resulting in the Lone Wanderer’s induction into the ethical dimension of *Fallout 3* regardless of player identification. As Žižek argues, belief, “far from being an ‘intimate,’ purely mental state, is always *materialized* in our effective social activity,” in this case the simulated social activity of *Fallout 3*’s environment (Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* 30). Continuing, “What we call ‘social reality’ is in the last resort an ethical construction; it is supported by a certain *as if* (we act *as if* we believe in the almightiness of bureaucracy, *as if* the President incarnates the Will of the People [. . .]). As soon as the belief [. . .] is lost, the very texture of the social field disintegrates.” Hence, social reality itself depends on Pascal’s prayerful automaton.

Indeed, within the universe of *Fallout 3*, a great many automatons exist in order to carry out the externalized ritual of belief on behalf of the player. Regardless of whether the player identifies with the Karma system and its code of ethics, the NPC’s of *Fallout 3* certainly do, and will kill (or aid) the player in accordance with this identification. As a result, the player must choose an ethical “style” to match the desired pattern of gameplay, reflecting Žižek’s observation, “It follows, from this constitutively senseless character of the Law, that we must obey it not because it is just, good or even beneficial, but simply *because it is the law*” (37, emphasis in original). Obedience is written into the very form of gameplay, not only for the player, but also for NPC’s, who adhere not simply to the letter of the Law, but also to sleep and work schedules, to the social norms of idle chatter and polite greetings, to sexual drives, to shopping habits, and even to vengeance (should the player raise their ire).

Should the NPC’s lack these qualities, the “social texture” of gameplay would disintegrate. They would become like the dolls of the *Grand Theft Auto* series, which, notes

Švelch, the player consequently massacres without moral consequence (52-53). Indeed, by subscribing to and enforcing the mechanics of the Law, NPC's establish a symbolic consistency that is necessary in order to impart a sense of social reality in a single-player experience. Here, in the space of the Capital Wasteland, the player encounters a sense of tangible social reality no less automated than the one found in our so-called familiar, everyday reality, dependent as it is on the "as if" logic of the ideological subject, and on the intervention of the authority of the father, in the psychoanalytical sense. For Lacan, in order for an ideological subject to be instantiated within the symbolic order, "the subject still has to acquire, conquer, the order of the signifier, be given his place in a relationship of implication that attains his being, which results in the formation of what in our language we call the superego" (Lacan, *Écrits* 190). The subject acquires this superego only through reference to the authority of the law:

there has to be a law, a chain, a symbolic order, the intervention of the order of speech, that is, of the father. Not the natural father, but what is called the father. The order that prevents the collision and explosion of the situation as a whole is founded on the existence of this name of the father. (96)

In contrast with so-called massively multiplayer online (MMO) games, *Fallout 3*, an entirely single-player experience, nevertheless *feels* like a social experience precisely through the deployment of the ethical automaton, with its basis in the "name of the father."

Hence, NPC's impose demands: they expect the Lone Wanderer to refrain from theft and murder, while others expect favors and payments in exchange for services and goods, doing their very best to simulate their human models. Should the Lone Wanderer attack any of the townspeople, they will retaliate. Likewise, holding a weapon during conversations antagonizes NPC's, who may even be taunted to the point of attacking the Lone Wanderer. Jericho, a retired

“Raider” (lawless bandits wandering the Wasteland in *Mad Max* style gear), will only become the Lone Wanderer’s Companion if she is “Evil”; Fawkes, on the other hand, will join only if she is “Good.” Even the robot, Sergeant RL-3, requires a “Neutral” Karma rating to become a Companion, demonstrating that Karma in *Fallout 3* is not simply a “moral” system, but a mechanical one. As a result, the NPC’s of *Fallout 3* are not simply dolls to be manipulated, but like the *Tamagotchi*, they impose demands and react to the Lone Wanderer on the basis of satisfying these demands, completing the “social texture” of the gameworld.

The same principle that animates such automatons keeps a watchful eye on the Lone Wanderer among the ruins and deserts of the Capital Wasteland. True to the model of social simulation that regulates the structure of society in *Fallout 3*, NPC’s bear witness to the Lone Wanderer’s acts and will respond accordingly. However, even when the player has hidden away in total isolation, a Good or Evil act rewards or subtracts Karma points. To paraphrase the line by Marx, a specter is haunting the Capital Wasteland—the specter of God, of Law itself. The moment in which the Lone Wanderer crouches in the darkest corner of a shed to steal a spoon or a heap of scrap metal, losing Karma while totally unobserved by NPC’s, recalls Michel Foucault’s observation that “one can speak of the formation of a disciplinary society in this movement that stretches from the enclosed disciplines, a sort of social ‘quarantine,’ to an indefinitely generalizable mechanism of ‘panopticism’” (*Discipline and Punish* 216). The ubiquitous presence of the Law, like the very camera lens that frames the player’s viewpoint into the world of *Fallout 3* (complete with blood spatters, scratches on the surface material, and the glare of light caught in the glass), indeed watches all and sits in judgment, perhaps from behind the camera itself.

Before the Lone Wanderer’s ejection from Vault 101, the “tight, photographic control” of

gameplay finds its alibi in the six bright flashes that in a sense *cover up* the cuts between scenes like a bright stageplay curtain. Each flash is accompanied during several seconds of whiteout by the voices of the Lone Wanderer's friends and family, representing catches of words and phrases uttered in the gaps of time that are announced when vision returns—measuring one year, nine years, and six years, followed by an indefinite span of time when the Lone Wanderer wakes to find that her father has left the Vault. As with the burning bush, God's likeness (the code that rushes between scenes, filling the gaps between them) cannot be seen; the bright flash appears as a substitute, as if marking the explosion of an atom bomb, the creative-destructive force that lent the Cold War its total-fear quality as well as *setting the stage*, as God-like director, for the apocalyptic environment of the Capital Wasteland, a kind of second flood. Lurking in the interstices of gameplay, the governing code of *Fallout 3*'s universe pushes the narrative along, accounting for the “magical,” filmic shifts and inscribing lengths of time onto the screen (“9 years later”) in place of the experiential (non-filmic) quality of gameplay that follows subsequent to the Lone Wanderer's exit from Vault 101.

It is precisely here, in the bright flashes between scenes, that the symbolic order can be said to lie, the Law itself, governing from its seat of power that blinds any who look upon it. The Law thus acts as “the form of the thought previous and external to the thought,” to borrow Žižek's definition of the unconscious; in this case, the Law emerges in the lines of machine code that are constitutive of the gameworld itself (*The Sublime Object of Ideology* 19). What Neal Stephenson identifies as “Flat Land” in his cyberpunk novel, *Snow Crash*, this space beyond space, the absence within the text that precedes it and surpasses it, rendering its sunlight, dust, and golden jazz repertoire for human interface, intercedes as the God principle. Likewise it is this principle that unifies the general equivalent of the marketplace with that of gameplay, the

totality of the market law of value (with equivalent goods that can be exchanged for one another on the basis of socially necessary labor time) with the experiential law of value, which renders every death, picked lock, hacked computer, and discovered location into currency (XP) for the player's use in climbing to the next level. "Be a good worker, be a good consumer," the logic of the marketplace tells its subjects; very well, the same message is transmitted to and received by the player within the quest and leveling forms of gameplay, regulated by a pseudo-divine Law.

It is no accident, of course, that the game begins with a quote from Revelations, during the crib escape scene one year after the Lone Wanderer's birth. The father beckons the infant closer to the printed verse, explaining, "This was your mother's favorite passage." He reads it aloud: "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely" (*King James Bible Rev. 21:6*). As the Lone Wanderer learns later in the development of the plot, this verse turns at the very center of *Fallout 3's* action, Project Purity, the program to purify the local water supply that the Lone Wanderer's father, James, was engaged in with his wife before arriving at Vault 101 to deliver their baby. This project itself recalls the previous verse in which God says to John, "Behold, I make all things new." Indeed, this is the purpose of Project Purity, to "make all things new," to restore to them a vitality that was irradiated by the atom bomb.

When the Lone Wanderer finally begins to work with her father on this project, in the latest stages of gameplay, the formal limits imposed by the mechanics have already begun to recede. The seemingly endless series of quests indeed come to a close and the Lone Wanderer reaches the maximum level allowed by the game, bringing to an end the demands placed on the player by the leveling and quest forms. As a corollary of this deepening silence on the part of the formal structures of the game, the Lone Wanderer likewise will have had occasion to acquire all

of the prized skills and equipment whose lack is so potently experienced at the earliest stages of the game. The Lone Wanderer obtains housing during this process, complete with infinite storage to hold equipment and other goods. Even the foes that once so frequently obstructed the Lone Wanderer's passage through the Wasteland and levels alike, threatening to kill the player-character at every turn, no longer pose a threat, and offer only the prospect of more loot. The Lone Wanderer thus becomes godlike—"made in His image," as it were, simply by following the strictures laid out by the mechanics of the game.

At this point, propelled by the quest form, the narrative at last brings the Lone Wanderer in contact with her father, who up to the very moment in which the Lone Wanderer encounters him outside of Vault 101 remains an enigma within the gameworld, a promise whose trail the player must follow through obedience to the game mechanics. The player thus uncovers the traces of the father by submitting to his formal manifestation within gameplay, the Law itself, the Father signified by the capital letter, imposing a ritualized series of demands. The father's formative presence in the establishing, filmic sequences of the game, followed finally by his formal return at the close of gameplay, likewise fulfills the promise of the prophetic verse, "I am the beginning and the end," which speaks with the godlike voice of the demand-forms of the game.

Thus, it is precisely at this moment—in a quest aptly named the Waters of Life, recalling the Biblical verse—when the Lone Wanderer is reunited with her father, that he dies in a Christ-like act of self-sacrifice: during the course of completing the project at the Jefferson Memorial, the villains of *Fallout 3*'s gameworld, the Enclave, seize the facility with James inside it, who exposes himself and the nearby soldiers to a lethal dose of radiation in order to prevent them from taking over the project and using the water supply to purge the Capital Wasteland of its

inhabitants. The formal relaxation of gameplay, a kind of Oedipal overthrow of the game's rules, achieves its climax in the father's self-sacrifice, guaranteeing his immortal martyrdom within the text. In the original, un-supplemented version of the game, play in fact stops when the Lone Wanderer completes the father's mission to purify the local water reservoir in his absence: the player's last act is a choice between entering the lethally irradiated chamber containing James' corpse in order to complete the purification process, or to demand that a nearby character do so in her stead. In either case, the game ends irrevocably and the narrator's voice returns with another cliché, filmic sequence of panning shots that recount the Lone Wanderer's exploits—ending, of course, with the final act. In the case of self-sacrifice, the narrator offers praise—in the case of self-preservation, condemnation. The player's final act within the game thus takes the form of an ethical test, all that remains of Father Law, enclosing the circle of authority that regulates gameplay. Perhaps it is the godlike narrator who after all occupies the place of Alpha and Omega within the text, the photographic flash of the atom bomb given a voice; he is hence enabled to speak to the Lone Wanderer in second person during the opening sequence of the game, and privy to all of her subsequent actions, complete with an entitled sense of godly judgment.

Should the player choose to purchase Broken Steel, the third installment of additional, downloadable content (DLC) for the game, the character simply wakes up several weeks after the final events of the original, thus erasing the original "ending." A new series of quests, more equipment, undiscovered terrain, and new NPC's become available to the player; thanks to the logic of the marketplace and its injunction to continue the ceaseless production of commodities for its own sake, the death of gameplay that follows the death of the father now continues its ghostly existence. Yet, in the (new) end, the result is the same as before: the player consumes

the leveling and quest forms like so much fuel, until at last nothing remains but the prospect of the player-character's namesake aimless wandering. Although the ethical test of the original release no longer bears the weight of finality, it nevertheless punctuates the late stages of gameplay as other Karma-interlaced moments before and after it.

Three Dog, the disc jockey of Galaxy News Radio, provides narrative commentary on such moments during gameplay, between the narrator's opening and closing cutscenes. Like the Lone Wanderer, Three Dog in a sense serves the godly presence of the code, in his own words, "fighting the good fight," recalling the Biblical verse, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing" (*King James Bible* 2 Tim. 4:7-8). Aside from broadcasting music, radio dramas, news updates, and advice for Wasteland survival, Three Dog also narrates the Lone Wanderer's exploits (even inventing the romantic moniker, "Lone Wanderer"), offering praise or condemnation depending on whether the player has chosen "Good" or "Evil" outcomes for each quest. Thus, like the narrator, Three Dog sits in judgment, giving a name to the player-character and anticipating the "crown of righteousness" offered by God, in this case the God of the New Testament, the Christian God who demands obedience, belief, and sacrifice in return for a heavenly reward—reflecting the fundamental structure of *Fallout 3*'s quest, leveling, and ethical forms, which together form a tripartite amalgam (a trinity), completing the Lone Wanderer's engagement with the mechanical elements of gameplay.

4 CAPITALISM FAKES ITS DEATH

As a complement to gameplay mechanics, the narrative universe of *Fallout 3* confronts the player with a contradictory vision of the post-apocalypse that forecloses any possibility of an easy resolution—one in which a nuclear war with Communist China began to coalesce in the 1950s and consequently froze American culture in the familiar “Golden Age” of big band jazz, hard-sell advertisements, and jingoistic anti-communism. Indeed, the gameworld is “firmly entrenched in the stilted, cultural norms and proprieties of a *Leave It to Beaver* episode” (McEachern 7). Even the computers of the Capital Wasteland bear the mark of Art Deco aesthetics in their sleek modernist designs, illustrating how technology progressed so far that it created laser rifles and mass-produced artificial intelligence while maintaining the cultural assumptions of a more naive era.

Likewise, as all manner of villains and creatures haunt the Capital Wasteland—a range that includes irradiated zombies known as “ghouls” as well as gangs of cannibals and giant scorpions—the alluring vocals of Roy Brown, Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, and their like haunt the bomb-butchered landscape on the airwaves of Galaxy News Radio, the golden voices of the dead, confident and gleaming amongst the ruins of Washington, D.C. Disk jockey Three Dog complements his classical jazz repertoire with advice about avoiding radiation, eluding cannibals, and news about the Lone Wanderer, who must incidentally embark on a quest to repair the station’s broken transmitter in order to find her missing father. (Three Dog provides information but, like other NPC’s, only for a price.) The lingering effects of the atom bomb thus mingle across the airwaves with the undead culture that gave it birth, and which it defined in turn during the terrified decades of the Cold War, when the threat of nuclear apocalypse became the alibi for authoritarian capitalism.

As the obverse of Three Dog's cheerful and sympathetic transmissions, the fascistic Enclave have dispersed broadcasting robots across the wastes, emitting patriotic tunes, "The Stars and Stripes Forever," "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," and so forth. Called Eyebots, they also function as a pervasive multicellular surveillance apparatus, a diasporic panopticon. The President of the Enclave, itself a group descended from the battered survivors of the U.S. military, intersperses such patriotic monotony with propaganda about reclaiming the Wasteland, reviving baseball as the national pastime, and similar deluded fantasies that attempt to close the distance between the post-apocalypse of 2277 and its birth in the rationalistic over-confidence of the 20th century. Ultimately, as the player discovers, the Enclave's president, John Henry Eden, propels his army on a mission to cleanse the Wastes of their inhabitants and to establish a new, pure order—fundamentally the same totalitarian impulse that opposed itself to communism and brought about the apocalypse.

As it turns out, Eden is only a sadistic artificial intelligence, a "man behind the curtain" who is not a man at all but a machine that has plunged the Enclave into a struggle with the Brotherhood of Steel, a techno-fetishistic group of soldiers who help James purify the water supply (rather than the local population) with the aid of increasingly advanced technologies. Eden's eyebots, of course, disparage the Brotherhood at every opportunity. As Joel Stevenson notes, the naked satirical presence of the Enclave and their broadcasts solicit the player's derision at the same time that the historical pastiche of Galaxy News Radio invites nostalgic identification (11). This identification, moreover, takes shape precisely on the order of fantasy itself—that is, an identification maintained always at a minimal distance. The Enclave seek to directly eliminate that distance, bringing the Wasteland in direct contact with the fallen American empire, with the reversal of the present apocalypse, and yet in doing so expose the

horrifying quality of fulfilled desire, a libidinal apocalypse that murders the fantasy at the moment of its fulfillment just as the Enclave would murder the Lone Wanderer.

John Henry Eden, as Three Dog's counterpart, likewise manifests the authoritarian code that lurks beneath the surfaces of the game's universe, the ruthless mechanics that have the player carrying out a series of repetitive tasks for the sake of a quantified reward, measured in the universal equivalent of Experience Points. This masochistic currency finds its reflection, again, in the early stages of the game in which the player becomes acquainted with the totalitarian environment of Vault 101, which speaks in its primordial symbolism through the Overseer's ubiquitous propaganda on posters and marquees: "Remember—Vault 101 *is* America," "Hard work is happy work," and, "The Overseer's authority is absolute." Likewise, the socioeconomic hierarchy of Vault 101 depends on a highly reductive test administered in early adolescence, the G.O.A.T., which determines each resident's lifetime occupation. As the teacher, Mr. Brotch, warns, "You don't want to know what happens to the people who *fail* the G.O.A.T." He likewise adds that there are always openings for menial labor. Later, long after the Lone Wanderer's tumultuous ejection from the elementary core of Vault 101, the residents stage a predictable revolt against the Overseer, in large part due to such rigid rules.

The Overseer's gleeful authoritarianism is reduplicated in a plethora of cultural products that saturate the world of *Fallout 3*. Boxes of cereal, computers, soft drinks, cigarettes, and other detritus still exist near to their original condition, still usable, over 200 years after the objects were made. The prominent billboards scattered throughout the landscape likewise continue to proclaim the absent commercial forces that colluded to execute and profit from the apocalypse. One sign advertising the Vault-Tech system declares, "Enjoy a brighter future underground!" in ecstatic retro cursive. More signs depicting sleek sports cars cast shadows over fire-scorched

automobiles that sprawl immobile in the streets. Huge, bullet-riddled posters depict large crowds of smiling people that gather into the base of a shining mountain, the caption proclaiming, “Vault secure!” (Figure 5). The spaces of *Fallout 3* are thus charged with the wonder of archaeological discovery.



Figure 5 - As atom bombs explode in the background, the billboard declares, “Vault Secure!”

Yet, as the player discovers by exploring the various Vaults of the Capital Wasteland, and by reading through computer records, voice logs, and journals, the Vault program was actually a government experiment that either killed most of the residents, drove them mad, or transformed them into horrific Super Mutants in an attempt to find weapons both social and technological to combat communism. Even inside Vault 101, the wall posters and marquees equating happiness with hard labor provoke a response in kind from the residents who, for example, graffiti over a sign that reads, “Thank You, Overseer!” to produce, “Fuck You, Overseer!” This response reflects, of course, the satirical distance between player and game in *Fallout 3*. Indeed, outside Vault 101, the first scene that the player passes through upon leaving, dead skeletons litter the

entrance, carrying placards that read, “Help us,” “Let us in motherfuckers,” and, “We're dying assholes!” Quietest in the language of signs, *Fallout 3* contains many such small, personal cataclysms, particularly in homes and playgrounds, where the belongings and remains of the dead testify to their last moments, sitting down to dinner or soaking in a bath—but here, at the very door of safety, the player does not hear the voices of the dead, but those of their signs, silent words that failed to penetrate the bomb-proof doors of the Vault.

The world of objects and cultural products within the gameworld thus make a show of the end of capitalism. The struggle between Galaxy News Radio’s historical pastiche and the Enclave’s return to the totalitarian past likewise inscribes the epitaph of the “Pre-War” society across the airwaves, as if in a static, looping broadcast that does not change with time precisely because it exists in the quite dynamic afterlife of the culture that produced it. The Wastelanders, like Dante’s heretics, know the future—in fact, have propelled themselves into the future—but can say, with Farinata, “We see, even as men who are farsighted [. . .] But when events draw near [. . .] our minds / are useless” (X, 100-104a). Thus, in the climax of the game when the player leads an assault on the Enclave alongside a fifty-foot tall robot named Liberty Prime (a comedic synthesis of the *Transformers* hero Optimus Prime and the Statue of Liberty), the metal warrior bellows across the Wasteland, “Death is a preferable alternative to communism,” “Democracy is non-negotiable,” and other such slogans that arrive in their absurd lateness hundreds of years after the war has already ended (Figure 6). In doing so, the machine, originally designed to liberate Alaska from Chinese invaders, amplifies the residual traces of capitalism in its most grotesque ideological form. At first glance, this spectral hailing or interpellation of the player-subject appears to invite participation in poking fun at McCarthyism, the most naked, extreme aspect of capitalistic ideology, yet this playful act (like the G.O.A.T.)

covers up an even more obscene function: Liberty Prime provides the programmatic assurance to the player of capitalism's ancient passage, and of a post-Oedipal gaming universe in which not only has form been detonated by the arrival of unrestrained movement—"Limitless freedom!"—but even the social constraints of a capitalist world persist only as carnivalesque reminders that memorialize their death.



Figure 6 - Liberty Prime blows up an Enclave Vertibird while the Lone Wanderer follows.

Yet, Liberty Prime assures only the false modesty of capitalism within the text of the game, as if to say, "I am only a corpse, this is only a dream," in order to cover up the fantasmatic potency of the formal game mechanics that command the player's obedience, even spilling over onto the level of social simulation itself. For everywhere in the universe of *Fallout 3*, capitalism re-establishes itself: the most successful or prolific communities thrive on private property-based trade (complete with bosses and workers), slavery, and prostitution. Wastelanders survive not in the primitive condition promised by the *tabula rasa* introduced with the arrival of the apocalypse, but in the pioneering spirit of *Laissez-faire*, frontier capitalism, an unhinged brutality

unmediated by the social reforms won in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. What has been blown away by the apocalypse is not capitalism, but on the contrary, everything else.

Moreover, the inhabitants of *Fallout 3* resurrect the specter of a universal equivalent of exchange value in the form of bottle caps gleaned from *Nuka-Cola* beverages, whose logos are designed after that of Coca-Cola, which, at the time of the game's release, was the most valuable brand, and certainly one of the most recognizable, in the world (Interbrand 2008). The currency of *Fallout 3* is therefore not a precious metal, nor a paper note that represents a value abstracted from the production of concrete commodities, but a completely arbitrary value. The importance of the bottle cap lies precisely in this arbitrary structure: it does not matter what the currency represents, only that it exists as the alibi of capitalist market exchange. Likewise, settlements operate on an authoritarian basis, with hierarchical power structures—leadership and governing bodies—based in representative democracy (or dictatorship) and private property rights, even in the absence of a state to define and impose those rights as states have always done, beginning with the fencing of the commons and the consequent creation of a working class. As Henri Lefebvre observes of the formation of early capitalism, “the violence of the state must not be viewed in isolation: it cannot be separated either from the accumulation of capital or from the rational and political principle of unification, which subordinates and totalizes the various aspects of social practice—legislation, culture, knowledge, education—within a determinate space; namely, the space of the ruling class's hegemony over its people and over the nationhood that it has arrogated” (280-81). Nevertheless, centuries after the fall of capitalism, its most basic ideological assumptions—private property and state authority—persist in the world of *Fallout 3* even without the material props that continually reconstitute capitalist ideology in the “real” world, which has slipped into the text of the game beneath the promise of its own demise.

Recently, video game scholars have begun to trace this slippage within game mechanics, although such criticism tends to focus on content, not form. For example, in his discussion of *America's Army*, a U.S. Army propaganda video game that has been the subject of a great deal of criticism, Alexander Galloway describes the game as “a bold and brutal reinforcement of current American society and its positive moral perspective on military intervention, be it the war on terrorism or ‘shock and awe’ in Iraq” (79). Patrick Crogan likewise describes video games, owing to their historical development out of code-breaking and anti-aircraft targeting computation, as the “native environment” for military entertainment, and consequently relates the broad categories of “information processing, decision making, and problem solving” to the values of military cybernetics (3, 95). Galloway and Crogan may describe traits displayed by video games, but they are not unique to video games; numerous other media have served the purposes of military propaganda since time immemorial.

Much more is at stake in video games than simply content; indeed, the mechanics of play contain the greater part of meaning. Nick Robinson notes, for example, that there is no blood or dismemberment in *America's Army* because, as the game's designers quite freely admit, they want to make the game legally suitable for children, who they aim to recruit (512). Players shoot paintballs instead of bullets, and “both teams believe themselves to be the ‘good guys,’” as if to say, “Our perspective is not only right, but there is no explanation for the opposition's behavior save wickedness” (Bogost, *Persuasive Games* 78). In RPG's, a similar dynamic structures the relation of the other:

Unlike the player, enemies are generally following no quest and experiencing no gain of power themselves. They do not consume diminishing resources, get more powerful treasures and weapons, or auction wares for gold—they are simply

software subroutines that continually appear and reappear as the object of player quests. There can be little doubt that this objectifying view of the world connects directly with the lust for power enacted by the main game player—that not only must I be leveling up as a demonstration of my mastery over the world, but at the same time, the ‘bulk’ or cyber-biomass of the world must not be realizing the same goal. (Golumbia N. pag.)

While content may establish continuity with other media, as Galloway and Crogan account for in detail, content does not express the forms that are particular to the medium of the video game, much less the particularities of a given game, or of its genre.

Thus, the player of *Fallout 3* kills, dies, and so forth, but more fundamentally, the player acts as an agent of order within the game: regardless of whether the player chooses to side with “Good” or “Evil,” the Lone Wanderer invades the Wasteland, purging it of its irradiated natives, imperialistically consuming their virtual lives for the sake of a quantified award. Such creatures exist within a randomized, simulated environment in which they are free to attack one another, including NPC’s, who “enjoy” the same freedoms as simulated organisms within the gameworld. A number of plants likewise exist, along with natural formations and all of the concomitant structures that one might find in the “real” world—such is the complexity of the simulation at hand. Yet, despite “living” a simulated existence of their own, the symbolic consistency of *Fallout 3*’s plants, creatures, and NPC’s exists solely as a prop for the player’s enjoyment—only so much entertainment, material, and resources that can be exchanged according to the law of the leveling form, based in the universal equivalent of Experience Points, which reduce everything in the world to so much of an investment toward the Lone Wanderer’s next level. The hostile creatures and NPC’s therefore do not aggress against (or “aggro”) the player, but quite the

opposite: the player invades the Capital Wasteland, liquidating its inhabitants for their experiential value, and in this way the gameworld simulates “reality” in the double sense of physics and of capitalist society in which all labor and objects are exchangeable according to the law of a universal equivalent. Thus, in *Fallout 3*, capitalism fakes its own death, as it were, simply in order to re-establish itself simultaneously at the levels of form and of social content, a messianic return more potent than the “original” in the same way that the *imago* paradoxically renders the subject a mere shadow of its fantasy.

5 RETURN OF THE REPRESSED

Liberty Prime likewise operates as an *imago* within the gameworld, the ultimate expression of the Wasteland warrior. In his towering height, he dwarfs the Lone Wanderer and exceeds every other limit of destruction and spectacle afforded by gameplay, capable of annihilating his enemies in grand explosions, impervious to the feeble reply of their tiny weapons. Yet, when the player first encounters the robot, he lies unpowered and incomplete in an underground bunker. Like the player-character before birth, posited and addressed by the narrator in the opening cutscene, Liberty Prime exists only as the evidence of a fantasy, of an unrealized *raison d'être* slumbering in the dark. When the Lone Wanderer provides the necessary mechanical parts for his completion, he quite literally rises to the occasion, emerging erect from the silo to lead the assault against the Enclave. Moreover, Liberty Prime idealizes the ideological subject, dutifully repeating the proper slogans (“Democracy is non-negotiable”) as the answer to an injunction to repeat ideology for its own sake, a blind automatism devoted to the rule of Law, which could not have served any purpose other than propaganda, warfare in the symbolic order. Much like the player’s obedience to the quest form, which exists in advance of

gameplay and structures its flows, Liberty Prime's McCarthyism propels him into action; as far as he is concerned, the robot is killing Chinese Communists, not the Enclave.

For Jean Baudrillard, the robot as such, the principle of the subject as a rational unit of production occupying the gap between mere object and consciousness, enables what Marx describes in *Capital* as the reign of dead labor over living labor, of machines over their human creators. After all, "Men themselves only began to proliferate when, with the Industrial Revolution, they took on the status of machines [. . .] they grew increasingly similar to the system of production of which they were nothing more than the miniaturised equivalent" (54). The moment that labor became reduced to a mere resource for consumption by capitalism—and indeed, a resource itself produced by capitalism—it became inevitable that machines would replace humans on the factory floors, and later that human laborers would achieve their ideal form in those same machines. The robot does not need to merely imitate human activity, but takes up labor as a human equivalent, an *imago* principle lurking in the governing code of production itself.

Liberty Prime thus displaces the Lone Wanderer as the ideal subject of the gameworld in a double sense, first as the machine destiny of human activity under capitalism, and second as the Ideal-I. Even more than the player, he obeys without even the possibility of deviation from his purpose, from the governing code of the game, since he not only carries out his programmatic duty without flaw but also only within pre-scripted moments in the game, the carefully crafted final battle that redeploys the rigid formal consistency of the early childhood sequences. Unlike other moments in gameplay, this scene is definite; while the randomized permutations of the other NPC's, as well as the actions of the player, differ with each iteration, Liberty Prime executes the same movements and attacks, announces the same slogans, and arrives at the same

destination. His comedic anachronism likewise lubricates the flow of *Fallout 3*'s ideological code by attempting to conceal it through the very form of irony itself. Liberty Prime thus remains paradoxically “free” in his tightly controlled, almost cinematic sequence, since, without choice, he does not need to obey, only to reproduce the codes within him. The player, meanwhile, serves as the object and vessel of the Law, which requires a subjected will in which to install itself. Thus, while the player continues to ascend the stair of levels, the ritualistic adherence to the letter of the Law transforms the Lone Wanderer from a vulnerable sack of meat prone to frequent injury into an impenetrable machine coated in the armor famously displayed on the cover of the video game box, a “miniaturised equivalent” of Liberty Prime (Figure 7).

The faceless soldier on the cover of *Fallout 3* operates in precisely the same way as Roland Barthes' famous example of the Algerian soldier on the cover of *Paris-Match*:

a young Negro in a French uniform is saluting, with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on a fold of the tricolour. All this is the meaning of the picture. But, whether naively or not, I see very well what it signifies to me: that France is a great Empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors.

(115)

For Barthes, this act of signification instantiates the form of the myth, which “points out and [. . .] notifies, it makes us understand something and imposes it on us,” just as the Algerian soldier imposes French imperialism (115). For Barthes, the Algerian soldier possesses a meaning of his own, which his image signifies—a personal depth and history—and which is gathered under the relation of the signifier and the signified, the image and the individual behind it. In myth, this

signification undergoes a “deformation,” becoming the signifier in a new sign, that of French imperialism, which empties the Algerian soldier of human meaning: “the Negro who salutes is not the symbol of the French Empire: he has too much presence, he appears as a rich, fully experienced, spontaneous, innocent, indisputable image. But at the same time this presence is tamed, put at a distance, made almost transparent; it recedes a little, it becomes the accomplice of a concept which comes to it fully armed, French imperialism: once made use of, it becomes artificial” (116). In the voice of Althusser’s policeman, myth “hails” and “interpellates” the reader, just as French imperialism hails and “arrests” the reader through the vitrified gaze of the Algerian soldier.



Figure 7 - The Lone Wanderer is clad in Brotherhood of Steel Power Armor.

In the same way, the face on *Fallout 3*'s outer packaging has been stripped of its diegetic-historical context and now serves only to convey the superficial militarism of the game, as if to advertise, “Here is the techno-fantasy that you will act out,” presupposing and interpellating the player within an order that is dominated by the principle of the machine. Not by accident, the

human element has been covered over by a metal face, a gas mask, and dark pits for eyes. Far from simply obscuring a face, the mask divides the human form into its constitutive components—shoulders, head, eyes, mouth—and reproduces these elements in idealized machine form, disclosing an imminent identification between the player and the machine or robot. This identification, which begins the moment that the opening cutscene hails the player—“It is here you were born”—unfolds in the dialectic of the leveling and quest forms that constitute gameplay. The machine commands, and the player obeys, even as the promise of “limitless” freedom attempts to conceal this relationship, a concealment that finds its alibi in capitalism’s staged death and return.

In addition to the Lone Wanderer taking on the appearance of a machine, the player also shares the perspective of the code itself, which can shift its viewpoint from first-person to third-person with the push of a button, and which, on the PC version, can be totally detached from the Lone Wanderer and roam freely across the landscape simply by inputting the proper functions into the command line interface. The player may change the focal length of the virtual camera that penetrates into the universe of *Fallout 3*, expanding the view of the player to that of a wide-angle lens, or narrowing it to a telescopic shot; in either case, the player’s viewpoint coincides exactly with the gaze of the machine. Moreover, the player may input commands to resurrect dead NPC’s, summon materials, change the time or weather, instantly travel from one location in the gameworld to another, and add additional content to the game in the form of “mods,” of which there exist many thousands to alter even the textures of the gameworld itself as well as the soundtrack, game mechanics, and all spaces within the game. Players share such mods freely with one another in prolific modding communities: the interactivity between the player and the code thus takes on a social dimension at the same time that the leveling mechanics, complete

with their demands and promises of reward, spill over into familiar, “everyday” reality in which players may essentially produce content for the game *as a selling point* of the game itself and reap the rewards of doing so, knowing that many hundreds of thousands of unpaid labor hours will enhance and add content to the game. In this way, the consumer becomes a producer as well—a “prosumer” in industry terms, instantiating the Lacanian reign of Law (obeyed simply “because it is the law”) within the sphere of historical processes.

For Foucault, “work possesses a constraining power superior to all forms of physical coercion in that the regularity of the hours, the requirements of attention, the obligation to produce a result detach the [subject] from a liberty of mind that would be fatal and engage him in a system of responsibilities” (*Madness and Civilization* 247). As in the Pascalian formula—knee and pray, and belief will follow—the prosumer does not even need to believe, only carry out the externalized act of belief: “The only real obedience, then, is an ‘external’ one: obedience out of our conviction is not real obedience because it is already ‘mediated’ through our subjectivity—that is, we are not really obeying the authority but simply following our judgment” (Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* 37). Again, this is precisely why Liberty Prime, the robot in whom agency is replaced by the spectacle of belief, functions as the ideal subject in *Fallout 3*. While the player chases after him, Foucault’s “physical coercion” of linear gameplay is for the most part diverted into the “busy work” imposed by the game mechanics as well as by the marketplace, which not only fends off the “fatal” threat of a player unbound by the rules but also burdens this one-time threat with the responsibility of producing value for the game, hence the continuity between player and prosumer. In both positions, the game resolves the contradictions of so-called “free” play simply by paving over them with a series of demands on players and modders—the general “community” that tests, repairs, and adds content to the game in huge

quantities.

Such communities complete the development cycles of most games today (especially for Bethesda's RPG's) so that publishers can increase their profit margins; the ritual of belief in this model, and in the game mechanics through which it finds expression, is not only external to the player, but even, through the activity of the prosumer, to the gameworld. Hence, the marketplace has seen the recent profusion of "Early Access" games for which players pay not only before the game is even finished, but *without the guarantee that it will ever be finished*. *DayZ*, for example, initially released as a zombie apocalypse survival mod for the first-person shooter *Arma III*, has been in "Early Access" since 2013 and has sold over three million copies (Bohemia Interactive; Moser N. pag.). All that is necessary is for the developers to offer up a compelling idea for a game, say that it will be finished, and that is enough to sell the product; modding functions in the same way, in that it supplements a fundamental lack of depth and richness in games, the most successful of which, like *Fallout 3*, cast the shadow of this lack in stark relief against an already remarkable text. Yet, some critics argue that mods display an inherently subversive potential, that they "fly in the face of the status quo of centralised, hegemonic, broadcast, and distribution models of media creation" (Pearce 19). Others call for "cyber-activism" in modding or happily declare that "once the game hits the shelves, it isn't done—it's just the beginning" (Robinson 515; Ferzoco 3). Such sentiments, exactly like the cries of "Freedom!" that one often finds in analyses of the sandbox, or in early romantic fantasies of the internet, echo the neoliberal attachment to "green" and "fair trade" economics, whose adherents often overlook the galling abuses that sustain such fantasies, for example, the revelation four years ago that "fair trade" Victoria's Secret cotton was picked by child slaves in Africa (Simpson N. pag.). Indeed, precisely because of the astonishing achievements of modders, the prosumer simply duplicates

the role of the player within the marketplace, that of an agent impressed into the service of a mythical engine whose very basis is the promise of freedom, in this case the freedom to obey.

This identification between the player and the machine, which is ubiquitous within the leveling and quest forms—*Produce efficiently according to the program laid out before you*—prepares the way for Liberty Prime’s prominent arrival at the climax of the plot, a walking signifier of the identification at hand. The player has, after all, been appropriated by a governing logic of gameplay as well of the marketplace. Indeed, the gameworld of *Fallout 3* is totalizing; it appropriates everything to itself, and in so doing exposes the very mechanisms of appropriation. All across the Capital Wasteland, settlements cohere around salvaged materials: an unexploded bomb becomes an altar for the Church of Atom (which in turn borrows from evangelical Christian traditions), crashed plane parts now form part of Megaton’s walls and gate, an old aircraft carrier hosts Rivet City, grocery stores house gangs of cannibals, and so forth. Even the bandits of the Wasteland wear the motley style of gear popularized in the *Mad Max* films, complete with football helmets, headdresses, hockey masks, and the like. An escaped android flees a bounty hunter, echoing Philip K. Dick’s *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, while this very same android bears the name, Armitage, the doomed personality-construct in William Gibson’s *Neuromancer*. These appropriations are quite transparent and well-known: in a press interview, lead artist Istvan Pely named not only *Waterworld* and *Mad Max* for inspiration, but also *A Boy and His Dog* and Frank Miller’s *Hard Boiled* (Xu N. pag.). Thus, the player’s appropriation by the game operates on the level of a structural principle in the same way that Liberty Prime’s function has been diverted away from liberating Alaska from Chinese invaders to smashing the post-apocalyptic shell of the U.S. military-industrial complex.

The Lone Wanderer is not alone in Liberty Prime’s long shadow: the principle of the

robot out of place re-duplicates itself across the Wasteland in the form of a robot citizenry that wanders its landscapes and factory floors, shooting at anything that moves. Created as household servants, laborers, soldiers, and police for a dead society, the robots manifest the interpellant logic of the code in physical form, which like all logics seeks to reproduce itself as the precondition for its continued existence. Not including Liberty Prime or those with proper names, six types of robots wander the Wastes—Enclave eyebots to broadcast propaganda, Mister Handy to provide maintenance, the aptly named Sentry bots and Protectrons, Robobrain to act as soldiers, and lastly Mister Gutsy, the heavily armed version of Mister Handy. As the Lone Wanderer encounters autonomous and character-“owned” robots alike, they hail the player, instructing them to stop, to flee, or simply, “Warning: use of lethal force is authorized!” Like his mammoth counterpart, the Mister Gutsy model likewise carries the McCarthyist kernel, declaring, “You better run, you commie-loving bastard!” with no knowledge at all, of course, of his opponents’ political orientations, only the blind and aggressive directives of a computer program. The Protectron model still retains its original directive, “Protect Nuka-Cola installation at all costs!” With the profusion of the postlapsarian robot, Althusser’s policeman has multiplied himself innumerable times and infested the Wasteland in a spectral afterlife reserved for machines. Capitalism has thus all but depleted itself of human subjects in order to install the supremacy of the robot: the nightmare of the Luddites has come true.

In Ray Bradbury’s, “There Will Come Soft Rains,” the household machine persists in the nuclear post-apocalypse much like the robots of *Fallout 3*. Each day the automated house continues to set alarms, play music, prepare dinner, clean the un-touched dishes, and so forth. Yet, when the family dog eventually perishes of starvation, the machine simply sweeps it into the incinerator, reducing the animal to its most fundamental component elements. In the presence of

humanity, the anthropomorphism of the machine *as tool* lends it a benevolent quality; in the absence of humanity, the machine proceduralizes the epitaph of its creators in every programmatic ritual at its disposal. In the universe of *Fallout 3*, the degenerate machines have likewise taken on monstrous dimensions: their vestigial code continues to run long after the “masters” have perished, yet they signal precisely the same fate as Bradbury’s house. In its drive to appropriate all of human labor for the purpose of its own mechanical reproduction, all that remains to capitalism is what Marx identified as “congealed labor,” commodities, in this case without even a market. The machines have at last supplanted the human “original” in a truly posthuman society that, by virtue of its lethal disposition, exists apart from and ambivalent to the human societies of the Wasteland, who enjoy the use of barely any machinery, if at all. Without a marketplace to serve, the autonomous robots’ programming has devolved into the apparent madness of machines without purpose.

Yet, it is not even clear how exactly such robotic neuroses developed, or how the apocalypse itself arrived. Certainly the player gleans a number of details from the gameworld—the Chinese invaded Alaska, there was a devastating exchange of nuclear bombs, the Vault program ran cruel and senseless experiments on its inhabitants for no apparent reason other than a pervasive sadism in the “Pre-War” ruling class—but the game offers no explanation for why the machines have “gone mad.” The player must simply accept their condition as a given in the nihilistic post-apocalypse of *Fallout 3*, for such also is the fate of the bloodthirsty cannibals who rove the Wasteland for food and loot alike. History has evaporated from the present, leaving only the pastiche remainders of Galaxy News Radio and the ubiquitous ad culture of the gameworld. Of course, innumerable historical artifacts remain, since their random generation and replenishment guarantees that they have no end. Yet, of the transition period, the causal

bridge between the Golden Age and its cataclysmic suicide, nothing remains. Only skeletons in the schoolyards, various notes and recordings, and placards at Vault 101's door testify to the very last remnants of the "Old World," or what those tumultuous final days of panic must have been like for those who saw their doom written across the sky in the searing language of atom bombs. For all of the narrative's attempt to frame the game in the confines of an historical origin story, it has only the myth of a depthless origin, gazing upon the player from the present of play.

The player, of course, does not escape the gaze of the machine, of the radically alienated other—evident in the panoply of radio broadcasts, ads, and comic books as much as in the inescapable watch of the Karma system, all converging on gameplay, interpellating the player-subject. The agency that lurks behind this gameworld, which is eerily responsive to the player's touch, and which indeed guides the player's actions from the very beginning of play, nevertheless obscures itself. Lacan describes the mechanism by which this gaze subjects the player to the will of the other:

I can feel myself under the gaze of someone whose eyes I do not even see, not even discern. All that is necessary is for something to signify to me that there may be others there. This window, if it gets a bit dark, and if I have reasons for thinking that there is someone behind it, is straightaway a gaze. From the moment that this gaze exists, I am already something other, in that I feel myself becoming an object for the gaze of others. (*The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I* 215)

For Lacan, this impalpable sensation of being watched—on the surface, so much like Foucault's panopticism—accounts for "the entire phenomenology of shame, of modesty, of prestige, of the specific fear engendered by the gaze," which is of course ratified by the leveling, quest, and

Karma systems of gameplay (215). However, whereas Foucault's panopticon dominates the subject through the powers of juridical and physical threat (enforced through the game's Karma system), the Lacanian gaze of the other initiates a markedly different transformation in which the subject becomes the fantasy-object for the other. Hence, "fantasy proper is not the scene itself that attracts our fascination, but the imagined/inexistent gaze observing it, like the impossible gaze from above for which old Aztecs created gigantic figures of birds and animals on the ground [. . .] In short, the most elementary fantasmatic scene is not that of a fascinating scene to be looked at, but the notion that 'there is someone out there looking at us'; it is not a dream, but the notion that 'we are the objects in someone else's dream'" (Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!* 229). The process of play is therefore one of becoming an object for an other (the governing Law of the code), assuming the image in the mirror in classic Bildungsroman fashion; gameplay is the incessant pursuit of this receding image, playing the role of the character who lives beyond the screen.

Thus, at the conclusion of play, the player is reduced, finally, to the status of a mere spectator. Liberty Prime's march against the Enclave does not need the input of the player, nor even the player's watchful eye; his attack unfolds as autonomously as the closing cutscene. Firing lasers, warheads, and trite slogans, he resurrects the filmic specter of play, previously banished from the game beginning the moment that the player-character flees Vault 101. In the gameworld, film occupies the space of the uncanny, which is "neither new nor alien, but something which is familiar and old-established [. . .] and which has become alienated [. . .] through the process of repression" (Freud, "The Uncanny" 526). Here, the repressed logic of film, which fades with the photographic flash that overtakes the screen when the player-character exits the Vault for the first time, makes its triumphant return. Characteristically distorted, this

return can only unfold within the player's gaze, through which the player takes on the role of the very camera whose constant shift in time and space assails the viewer of film. Artifacts of this transformation stain the surface of the game's interface in a spatter of blood and dirt on the lens, which accumulates scratches and captures light glare in its carefully engineered glass, supplementing virtual space with a representation of the very sensorial detritus that it excludes—the tactile realm—hence the profusion of tiny objects in the gameworld, objects that signify, at the same time, the pursuit of precise, miniaturized simulation within a technologically reproduced artifact, as well as the incapable supplement for the lack of a “real” knowledge about these objects that are being represented. Instead, the partialized objects of *Fallout 3* themselves come to signify the very lack that they exist to cover up, just as the player becomes a spectator to her own agency, ejected into orbit around the fantasy of a limitlessly free ideal player, signified by Liberty Prime.

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