

Game Narrative Review

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Game Title: *Fallout: New Vegas*
Platform: PC/XBOX 360/Playstation 3
Genre: Role-Playing Game
Release Date: October 19, 2010
Developer: Obsidian Entertainment
Publisher: Bethesda Softworks
Game Writer: John Gonzalez (lead)/Creative Director: Chris Avellone

Overview

Fallout: New Vegas takes place in the Mojave Wasteland, a land rendered desolate as a result of nuclear holocaust in the year 2077. The world is a mixture of 1950's optimism towards the future (i.e. Robbie the Robot look-a-likes abound as does laser and plasma weaponry) and post-apocalyptic pessimism. One of the last bastions of the Old World, Las Vegas, or New Vegas as it is now called, is a veritable oasis, offering respite in the form of gambling, booze, and prostitutes to weary travellers.

Players assume the role of the Courier, the person who was tasked prior to the beginning of the game to deliver a package to Mr. House, the de facto leader of New Vegas. Before the player can make his or her appointed rounds, the Courier is intercepted by a small group of outlaws who tie this person up, shoots him or her in the head, and leaves the player for dead. Players wake up days later and begin a journey to track down the man who nearly killed him or her, and as the game progresses, either joins sides with one of three factions or strikes out on their own to determine the fate of the region. It is the Courier who decides if democracy, autocracy, or their own personal ambitions will rule the Southwest.

Characters

The Mojave Wasteland is home to a vast array of factions and groups that are vying for control of the region that either help or hinder as the Courier wanders post-Apocalyptia.

Independent Characters

- **The Courier** – The main character whose personality is wholly determined by the player. S/he can be driven to better humanity's chances of survival by their actions or fueled by a need for vengeance for their attempted murder. The Courier could be a computer

genius, a master thief, a crack shot, or a melee specialist. The Mojave Wasteland is the Courier's oyster.

- **Benny** – The man who left the Courier in a shallow grave with a hole in the head after stealing a seemingly minor package. Leader of a gang called “The Chairmen” who are modelled after the Rat Pack in terms of style and the manner in which they speak, he is charismatic and ambitious. He seeks to usurp the power of the mysterious Mr. House, but this power play is just the beginning of his overarching plan.
- **Mr. House** – The enigmatic leader of New Vegas. Rumors abound as to whether or not he is actually *the* Robert House, the founder of the pre-apocalypse technological juggernaut, RobCo Industries, but what is known is that he uses his multitude of securitron androids as a police force to maintain a semblance of order from his sealed tower. If the rumors are true, this allegedly 261 year old genius continues to exert control over the Strip and seeks to expand his influence.

New California Republic

From humble beginnings in a small hamlet to the west, the New California Republic (NCR) has done its best to grow and to promote democratic values throughout the territories it has claimed. The NCR, however, has not always been welcomed by the populations that live in these areas.

- **Gen. Lee Oliver** – The general is currently in charge of the NCR's operation in the Mojave Wasteland, overseeing everything from the tactically vital position of Hoover Dam. He was present during the First Battle of Hoover Dam, and he feels that the only way to rout the Legion from the area is to wait, build up his forces and resources, and fight one more epic battle. This time, the NCR will deliver a deathblow. This “wait and see” stance, however, has earned the disdain of his subordinates who feel it is high time to strike down Caesar.

Caesar's Legion

Caesar's Legion, or the Legion, arose from the ashes of the American Southwest and set up a capital in what was once Flagstaff, Arizona. Modelled after the ancient Roman empire, the Legion rapes, murders, pillages, and plunders anything in its path, and holds an unwavering loyalty to its totalitarian dictator, Caesar.

- **Caesar** – Formerly known as Edward Sallow, the man who would become Caesar used to be a man of letters. Well-versed in philosophy, war strategies, and ancient history, Sallow turned a fledgling tribe of raiders into a massive, autocratic empire sprawling over the remains of several states. Utilizing the example of ancient Rome as a template, Caesar constructed a monolithic culture that obliterates all others it comes across and forcibly assimilates survivors into its collective. With this unified society at his back,

Caesar has arrogantly proclaimed himself the very son of Mars and that his word is the law. He envisioned New Vegas as the crowning jewel for his upstart empire.

Breakdown

You, as the Courier, are left for dead in the middle of nowhere, and after being discovered and having a chance to recover, you wake up in a small town's doctor's office. From there, you venture forth, either craving answers for your near-assassination or seeking vengeance for the act. This notion of revenge is a powerful emotion to play with, and it provides a strong impetus for a player to progress through the story. As you try to figure out why you were nearly killed, the plot delves deeper, and the world truly opens up.

By having your head nearly blown off in the beginning, you are given free license to craft the Courier as you see fit. This malicious bullet not only opens up a hole in your head, but a chance to develop the character as you wish. This deals with the issue of how to incorporate the "Create a Character" section of the game while simultaneously adding the emotional punch needed to connect the player to the Courier. You see through the Courier's eyes as the gun muzzle flashes, and then you piece the Courier's face back together. The player experiences what the Courier experiences from the moment the game begins, and the bond between gamer and avatar is strengthened as a result.

You encounter emissaries of both the NCR and the Legion as you make your way to settle your score with Benny, and you even meet the mysterious Mr. House himself, but it is not until after your fateful second meeting with him that you understand the stakes of the current political game. Benny found a way to upset the balance of power in the region, and that information was contained in your package. It is now up to you decide who rules the Southwest. This caveat adds an additional two choices as to how to play the game for the Courier. Do you side with NCR, the Legion, Mr. House, or do you try to grab power for yourself? This plethora of choices adds to the replayability of the game by tempting you with several "What if" scenarios.

The numerous side missions are not just placed in the game to increase the amount of time the player spends in the Mojave, but to further augment the story. These stories, including those surrounding the possible companions the Courier can encounter in the long run may aid in the climactic battle. For instance, you can help the seemingly frail Arcane Gannon find his place in the world. In return, he gives you an old squadron of high-tech warriors to swoop down in the middle of the fight, giving you a crucial edge.

Much of the backstory of the characters and places found in the game are found on holodisks and old computers. The Courier can choose to read through all of the text in order to have a greater understanding of not only the world s/he lives in, but also how people in the past lived both prior to and after the bombs fell. This exploration gives intriguing backstory to some characters who are briefly encountered. For instance, Tabitha, the Nightkin broadcasting from the top of Black Mountain, shows up and either is killed or leaves peacefully with her robot

companion, Rhonda, and that is the last the player ever sees of her. If the player, however decides to hack Tabitha's computer, s/he can learn that Tabitha came to the New Vegas area after the fall of the Master and decided to set up a haven for Super Mutants and Nightkin, such as herself. More interesting pieces of backstory about the characters are locked away in these devices and their journals, and if the players wish to learn more about the world they exist in, they can delve deeply into these artifacts.

Strongest Element

The single strongest point of this game is the multitude of endings and the varying shades of morality associated with them. In most role-playing games (RPGs) for computers and game consoles, there are usually only two endings: the good ending and the bad ending. The good ending is blatantly good and the bad ending is blatantly evil. What *New Vegas* does differently here is two-fold. First, it has four endings, offering more choices for the player to shape the world as s/he sees fit. Second, these endings are not an entirely black and white matter and have shades of gray to them. The "good" ending of having the NCR win brings democracy to New Vegas, but at the cost of reduced security and hampered progress. The "bad" ending of having the Legion march into town brings a ruthless totalitarian regime to power, but ensures towns and caravans will not be raided and there will be no splinter groups causing internal strife. Each has their pros and cons, and the Courier has to weigh their options carefully, which brings a long-neglected sense of reality and dimensionality to a crucial feature of RPGs.

Unsuccessful Element

While almost all of the characters encountered in the game, including most of the minor ones, have intriguing and captivating stories to share with the Courier, the method of delivery of said stories leaves much to be desired. Similar to other games of the genre, the characters tend to stand right in front of the player and spew out their dialogue, often without the slightest hint of emotion shown on their faces. This lack of detail in their expressions and mannerisms removes a player from the immersive experience and reminds him or her that they are "only playing a game" instead of "engaging in an interactive movie".

Highlight

All of the endings in the game are well-crafted, but the best is the one which leads to an independent New Vegas with the Courier at the reigns. During the Second Battle of the Hoover Dam, you fight alongside the NCR troops until you come across the control room that operates the whole facility. Under the guidance of Yes-Man, a securitron that was taken from Mr. House and programmed to do what you tell it, the Courier reroutes power to his or her control. After this and the defeat of Caesar's greatest warrior, Legate Lanius, the Courier is greeted by Gen. Oliver. Initially friendly, Oliver realizes the Courier's treachery once a platoon of securitrons arrive under the player's command. He is eventually either forced out peaceably, killed outright, or, if the player is malevolently inclined, is thrown off the side of the dam. Watching this once powerful

man being cast down like a broken toy firmly implants the idea that what the player is now witnessing is the first breath of a new nation.

Critical Reception

Overall, *New Vegas* received favorable reviews, many of which cited how all of the quest seamlessly fit together in the overarching narrative. Mike Nelson of 1up.com makes this point by stating “sometimes I didn't even realize I had taken on a quest that didn't relate to the main plot. It just felt like the natural progression for my character to take.” The game provides the player with an immersive experience by effortlessly weaving these numerous narratives into one collective whole without restricting the player's freedom to move around and choose what to do. Overall, he gave *New Vegas* a rating of B.

Keza MacDonald of IGN UK gave *New Vegas* a 9 out of 10, praising this freedom to explore and how it affects a player's experience of a game. “New Vegas is a game to share stories about, one that lets you carve your own path through a beautifully constructed world. If you felt that there was just something missing from *Fallout 3* – some indefinable quality of soul – you may well find *New Vegas* especially satisfying.” The world is massive, and the choices you make, even in the beginning, dictate what happens next in the story. She goes on to describe how morally ambiguous the game's choices and factions are, even though it “seems like a black-and-white decision between well-meaning lawmakers and murderous, barbaric fiends, but neither of them is a force for good, and over the forty or fifty hours you can easily spend with the game you'll see the worst side of both of them.” The undefined moral character of the main groups found in *New Vegas* allow for more nuanced gameplay and enhances the narrative by making it unclear who are actually the heroes and villains. It's entirely up to the player.

Lessons

1. When making a somewhat realistic RPG, even if it takes place in a fanciful world, always make the moral decisions more complex than just choosing between the “good” and “bad” options. The technology of the medium has progressed from its primitive and humble beginnings, and it can now handle a more challenging narrative. This will make the choices of the player much more interesting, and it causes the user to be more involved in the story.
2. When characters on the screen interact with the player, it would behoove developers to make the encounters unique for each person. This is not to say that every single character needs to have carefully scripted and elaborate blocking such as what happens in the series *Mass Effect*, but there needs to be more variety in the motions and gestures made by these non-player characters (NPCs) to keep the immersive element of the experience alive.
3. Sometimes, to make a story that rings true with a player, a developer must be able to give up the reigns of the story and hand them over to the user. Allowing the player to craft the story makes the game a personal experience, as if s/he actually causes what is happening on screen, not the avatar. Also, railroading in games detracts from the sense

of freedom that many game developers seek to establish. Depending on what the project is, it might be best to just let the player roam free.

Summation

Fallout: New Vegas is a marvel of the sandbox/open-ended RPG genre. It adds in moral ambiguity to keep players coming back to replay from different sides of the conflict, and it provides richness in character development. The story shines through each time the player interacts with the characters and the world in which they exist. Although marred by glitches and bugs when it was originally released, the narrative of the game succeeds in overcoming these obstacles. The Mojave Wasteland is filled with unique people, quests, and most importantly, decisions to make, and as a result, it is truly a pleasure to walk the lonesome road of the Courier.

References

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