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## Injustice in the Ruins and a Disordered Post-Apocalypse: Gothic Ideology in the Digital Game World of *Fallout 3*

by Sari Piittinen

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### ABSTRACT

The Gothic is an influential source for storytelling in a wide range of digital games. Thus far, interpreting it in games and how they are informed by Gothic ideology has been little studied. This study seeks to address this gap in research by investigating these issues in the narrative of the action role-playing game, *Fallout 3*. More specifically, through a close reading of the game narrative and by drawing on theories of the Gothic, ideological aspects of the Gothic are analyzed in detail with specific reference to non-player characters and their actions and dialogue along with elements of the *mise-en-scène*, style, and simulation. Results show how classic Gothic ideology is reproduced in games by multimodal means and how, as in Gothic novels, their production and interpretation is linked to real-life contexts. The involvement of the player in these games means that a Gothic hero is not of necessity helpless, but instead bears a responsibility to make decisions in ideologically complex and ambivalent situations.

### KEYWORDS:

Gothic; digital games; ideology; role-playing games; close reading; *Fallout 3*

It is arguable that, since their inception, Gothic narratives of darkness, with images of disorder, alienation, and monstrosity, have been employed “for the purposes of both entertainment and ideological reflection” (Cavallaro 8). In digital games that have been influenced by the Gothic, players are typically invited to explore, challenge, or otherwise participate in mysterious, eerie spaces and experience stories of madness, monsters, injustice, and continuous violence. Despite the pervasiveness of these influences, the Gothic aspects of the game world and its narratives are not often recognized as drawing on the Gothic tradition (Teofilo 46–47). The capacity to construct ideologies in games has also gone unrecognized, although specific types of behavior may be demonized in contexts that we associate with real life events, thereby rendering visible “the covert political views of a text” (Smith 3). As the popularity of games and gaming as a hobby or a profession increases, so, too, does the importance of studying digital game storytelling and the construction of meaningful stories by taking advantage of the means afforded by digital game design. Studying the Gothic furthers understanding of digital games that aim to simultaneously entertain and disturb or horrify players. To contribute to remedying the lack of previous research interest in the functions and meanings of the Gothic in games, this study investigates the ideological aspects of the Gothic in the game discourse and how such meanings are constructed in multimodal ways in games.

This study is an interpretative analysis of the action role-playing game *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios). This is implemented by drawing on the method of close reading digital games and combining it with Gothic theory by drawing on the work of other authors (for example, Cavallaro; Crow; Punter; Smith; Spooner) and on conceptualizations of ideology (Blommaert; Freedon; van Dijk) to provide a framework for analyzing Gothic ideology. The development of tools for the critical, textual analysis of games has been an important undertaking (see e.g. Consalvo and Dutton), and close reading as one such tool is a useful method of game analysis for focusing the reading and interpretation of the game discourse in a rigorous, systematic way (e.g. Fernández-Vara; Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum, “Well Read”). Close reading in this context involves oscillation between immersion in and objectification of the experience of the game to “see more clearly the design decisions that support the experience” (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum, “Mass Effect” 396). In this study, this means that the analysis of the game begins with two immersive plays of the game that are then followed by a detailed coding of the data – screenshots and notes – based on theorizations of the Gothic. The coding aims at identifying and categorizing the various representational Gothic features of the game, whether to do with spatial design or narration by characters.

Thanks to its complex handling of the Gothic in its representational elements, the game in focus in this investigation,

## Articles

*Fallout 3*, is fertile ground for studying the ideological aspects of Gothic horror. It is a game that allows the player the freedom to set the player character's (PC hereafter) gender as male or female, to customize his/her appearance, and to select skills and attributes that influence the play experience. It is the first game in the *Fallout* game series played from a first-person perspective, allowing seeing the world through the character's eyes and free movement across an open world map. It is set in a post-apocalyptic United States of an alternative timeline in which nuclear bombing has destroyed the surface of the earth two-hundred years before the game's events begin. Ideologically, because of this destruction, a distinction can be made between the time prior to the nuclear destruction – to be learned about in the ruins of the game world – and the post-apocalyptic, largely anarchist world that replaced it.

Gothic influences are abundant in the *Fallout* games' world, which is filled with violence, injustice, unethical science, and animals, insects, and people horribly mutated by radiation. However, although the *Fallout* universe has some unique features, similar game design decisions can also be found in other games. For instance, while these games feature new character types that are treated as "other" – Ghouls and Super Mutants – in several role-playing games, character races function in a similar way. For example, this is the case of the Elves in the *Dragon Age* series (BioWare) and the cat-like Khajit in *The Elder Scrolls* series (Bethesda Game Studios). Similarly, post-apocalyptic, dystopian settings can also be found in action-heavy survival horror games, such as the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* series (GSC Game World), the *Metro* series (4A Games), and in *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog).

This paper begins with a discussion of ideology as a concept and how it is used here as a conceptual frame to discuss the Gothic features of the game. This is followed by a brief discussion of previous studies on the Gothic in games, and finally the analysis of the Gothic ideological aspects in *Fallout 3*.

### IDEOLOGY AND GOTHIC IDEOLOGY

In this paper, ideology refers to forms of thought and behavior that are inherent in our political and social worlds and offer means for making sense of the worlds that we inhabit (Freeden 2). As such, they also guide our interpretations of what is Gothic, i.e., what arouses terror, horror, discomfort. As Jan Blommaert suggests, ideology has a dual nature ("State Ideology" 18). On the one hand, ideology can refer to partisan views and opinions that represent bias and characterize specific social formations with their specific interests. This aspect of the concept includes the political "-isms" by which specific groups and their ideologies, via a specific set of symbolic representations that serve a specific purpose, become recognizable (Blommaert, "Discourse" 158). On

the other hand, ideology can be defined as a general phenomenon: something that is present in every member of a social or political system. On this view, ideology "penetrates the whole fabric of societies or communities and results in normalised, naturalised patterns of thought and behaviour" (Blommaert, "Discourse" 159). For example, Barthes suggests that ideology as naturalized forms of thought and behavior can become dangerous when it is taken so much for granted that it becomes invisible and unrecognizable as an ideology (Blommaert, "Discourse" 160). Ideology can, thus, function as a Gothic, invisible "trap." Often, a negative meaning is also attributed to ideology, such as when it is perceived as something wrong, false or misguided, or as something that belongs to someone who is an opponent or "other" (van Dijk 2).

In line with Blommaert's suggestion, ideologies are understood here as materially mediated ideational phenomena ("Discourse" 164). For the Gothic, this view of ideology means that a range of ideas, features, and connotations that are traditionally associated with the Gothic as a mode of creating cultural phenomena are mediated in a range of practices, such as fiction, art, fan cultures, and, as discussed in this paper, digital games.

Gothic ideology has been investigated in various contexts. For instance, Dani Cavallaro has focused on the British/European Gothic in her discussion of its "ideological connotations" (8-9). According to her, Gothic connotations include archaic disorder versus modern discipline; medieval darkness versus enlightenment; anti-classical leanings versus (neo)classical ethos; crudeness versus elegance; savage paganism versus refined morality; aristocracy/feudalism versus bourgeoisie/capitalism; and landed classes versus cosmopolitan gentry. Interestingly, for Cavallaro, the ideology of the Gothic manifests as binary conflicts, implying a constant ideological rivalry in Gothic works. This view of the Gothic as a set of competing or contradictory ideologies at work in a cultural product is also a key aspect focused on here. Although Cavallaro focuses on the era in which the Gothic mode emerged, it has also managed to remain culturally relevant by adapting to different cultural and temporal contexts. This is exemplified by Justin D. Edwards's study on racial ambiguity in nineteenth-century American Gothic, which was influenced by "scientific" attempts to prove that African Americans are an inferior race, aiming to dehumanize them and discourage racial mixture (112–113). On the topic of gender ideology, Kim Ian Michasiw argues that the late 1980s and early-to-mid-1990s antifeminist Hollywood films like *Fatal Attraction* (Lyne) represent the "faux oppositionality" of the Gothic, as some of its viewership believes that the film reveals women's weaponized use of sex as evidence of the non-credibility of feminist issues like sexual harassment (240–241). Ideologies are thus shaped and reflected through time in complex ways in Gothic

## Articles

storytelling.

The present study discusses modern digital games, while it also indicates how “later use of Gothicism will necessarily bear a significant relationship to the original generic ideology” of the historical period from 1764 to 1820, “whether through duplication or inversion” (Bernstein 5). An example of this is the dominant ideological positioning of the Catholic as “other” during the Enlightenment period, which is echoed in Gothic games in how they depict specific groups or belief-systems as “other” by representing them as somehow negative (Hoeveler 13). Diane Long Hoeveler has also argued that Gothicism takes “ideologically contradictory positions ... on all issues, sometimes appearing conservative and sometimes liberal” (10). This suggests that, ideologically speaking, Gothicism can reproduce and support currently dominant beliefs, values, and systems of power, as well as challenge them. Such a view is also supported by Kate Ferguson Ellis: in her feminist analysis of Gothic novels, she demonstrates how “popular literature can be a site of resistance to ideological positions as well as means of propagating them” (xii). It has been argued that the Gothic is “deeply skeptical that either individuals or societies can be perfected”; this explains why cultural criticism is typical of Gothic fiction (Crow 2). These views are also in line with theorizations of Gothic fiction as a genre that thrives on the transgression of boundaries, specifically the crossing of socially acceptable limits (Smith 3; Taylor).

As ideology is a complex concept, it also constitutes an analytical challenge. In line with critical approaches to investigating ideologies as materially mediated ideational phenomena, and within the framework provided by a characterization of typical ideological aspects of the Gothic, the purpose of this study is to conduct a detailed analysis – a close reading – of the game discourse and the game world, for identifying and evaluating ways in which the ideology of the Gothic is taken up and used in a game like *Fallout 3*.

### THE GOTHIC IDEOLOGY AND GAMES

It is only recently that the Gothic in games has become a research topic, although horror, a key aspect of the Gothic, has received a great deal of prior attention (Habel and Kooyman; Krzywinska; Perron). Nevertheless, the Gothic has been an explicit focus in a few studies. From the perspective of ideology as a materially mediated ideational phenomenon, these studies also show how Gothic ideologies are mediated in games. One such study is T. S. Teofilo’s textual analysis of *Super Paper Mario*, which investigates how the modalities of the female Gothic function in the game, showing, for instance, that the Gothic heroine is eventually rewarded for making a virtuous choice that puts her in danger. An-

other study is Tanya Krzywinska’s investigation of the grammar of the Gothic game, in which she identifies the game mechanics, i.e., concrete means of interacting with the game, and rules that are well-suited to the adaptation of the American Gothic to game form. For instance, in her view, a conspiracy-style approach to reading a game that focuses on the close reading and decoding of signs in the game space to make progress or to discover the back stories of a specific game world functions effectively in American Gothic games (Krzywinska, “Digital Games” 305). I would add that if players must question the truthfulness of the information that they discover, this kind of approach produces an especially Gothic, unnerving play experience.

In another study, Krzywinska further develops the theorization of the Gothic in games (“The Gamification”). According to her, Gothic games are characterized by five coordinates that can be used as a framework for an evaluation of the uses of the Gothic in games: these are the false hero, *mise-en-scène*, affect, style, and function. Of these, perhaps the most central is function, as it concerns the reasons why the Gothic is used in games: Krzywinska is interested in it as central to the overall concept of the game in question – the story, game mechanics, and representational style – rather than merely drawing on Gothic elements in a game’s representation and iconography. Krzywinska’s study is an important contribution to the field, although as a general mapping of the Gothic in games, it excludes discussion of specific key concepts such as monsters, the uncanny, tyranny, and othering. Those aiming to study this phenomenon thus cannot merely rely on these coordinates to contribute to a deeper understanding of Gothic games.

The analysis of the Gothic ideology in *Fallout 3* comprised two phases. The first phase was an immersive observation of the game and the gaming experience, during which I made systematic notes on my gaming experience and collected screenshots of key episodes in the game. I then proceeded, in phase two, to identify recurrent ways in which the game discourse mobilizes ideological resources of the Gothic and to discuss the effects and meanings that are created with the help of these resources.

### THE PAST AND THE PRESENT

The temporal setting of *Fallout 3* is important in constructing its world and ideology. The game’s world geographically and culturally resembles that of a Western society, specifically the Washington DC area of the United States. It features real locations such as the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial, which appear uncanny, simultaneously strange and familiar, in their partially crumbled form in the game. However, with its alternative timeline, it is, like many Gothic novels, temporally situated at

## Articles

a distance that makes the horrors of the game comfortable for a contemporary player to witness. Gothic tales have often been set in the past so that we can “indulge our passion for pleasurable tyrannies while safe in the knowledge of our present enlightenment” (Punter, Vol. 1 7, Spooner 19). Instead of the past, *Fallout 3* is temporally set in the future, the year 2277, yet the ruins left behind by nuclear destruction two hundred years earlier reveal an aesthetic and ideology similar to those of United States in the 1940s, suggesting that – aside from some technological innovations, such as robots and laser weapons – society had in some ways stagnated in comparison to our present timeline. This means that, to a present-day player, the game world can appear to be simultaneously set in the past and in the future. Therefore, it is also temporally uncanny via its retro-futuristic design and appears impossible because of this ambiguousness. Dystopian alternate futures must typically retain some level of plausibility to convey a cautionary message; instead, the game’s timeline appears distancing in the way described by Spooner above, since players are aware that the pre-apocalyptic society described in the game does not match contemporary America.

Examples of “stagnation” are to be found in the *mise-en-scène*: advertisement posters among the ruins that appear to feature only Caucasian Americans, nuclear families, and representations of stereotypical gender roles. One such advertisement for underground security bunkers, branded Vaults, designed to provide shelter during the already expected nuclear war, is shown in Figure 1. The billboard poster depicts a long line of people, primarily white-skinned, heading to a Vault. On the left, a family comprising a happily smiling father, mother, and son are placed in the front, suggesting that they constitute the main target audience for the advertisement. Their clothing and the style of the poster mimic the painted advertisements of the 1940s United States and is a style used in posters throughout the game world. These advertisements can be perceived doubly as relics of the past, as they are stylistically old-fashioned and represent the bygone, pre-apocalyptic game world.



Figure 1: A billboard poster advertising a Vault, targeting white nuclear families.

It has also been argued that in Gothic texts, the past “chokes the present, prevents progress and the march towards personal or social enlightenment” (Spooner 18–19). In *Fallout 3*, this is very concretely the case, since the nuclear destruction has resulted in the dissolution of governments and societies and has made it impossible to return to the way things were. Nevertheless, in contrast to the pre-apocalyptic white, patriarchal ideals, the post-apocalyptic world affords an equality and freedom that did not previously exist. Anyone with luck, skill, and perseverance can survive and gain personal momentum. This becomes apparent when the player meets non-player characters (NPCs hereafter) in the game world who have become store owners, radio disc jockeys, commanding officers, and leading scientists regardless of race or gender. Since the world is dangerous and unstopably violent, this freedom comes at a high price, but it produces a tension between the past and the present in which the game world’s present is, in some ways, arguably more progressive than its past. Any progress, however, exists only on an individual level – for every successful NPC encountered, the player also encounters NPCs struggling to survive and vulnerable communities. In a wider societal sense, the past has truly choked the present by destroying social structures and thus preventing the unification of the survivors.

### DISORDER AND DISCIPLINE

In *Fallout 3*, disorder and discipline emerge as binary Gothic ideological contrasts, both of which are portrayed as horrific from the perspective of the game world’s inhabitants. For instance, the Raiders, the game world’s version of bandits, represent disorder, crudeness, and immorality, which shows in their simulated actions, the stylistic design of their bases, and stories told about them by other NPCs. More specifically, Raiders attack anyone on sight and cannot be reasoned with. In addition to threats yelled out during combat and simulated acts of violence, the Raider ideology is produced nonverbally in the *mise-en-scène* of their bases, which are decorated with graffiti, mutilated corpses, drugs, and discarded alcohol bottles. Figure 2 features a dimly lit room in Raider territory that showcases their exaggeratedly grotesque aesthetic typical of the Gothic. The depicted gore, bloodstains, and hanging corpses are disturbing, yet their placement and posing also seem creative, since the bodies have been deliberately hung with hooks and chains in certain positions and have not simply been abandoned in a pile in a corner. This aspect of crude creativity is also visible in the messy graffiti painted on the walls. Arguably, the Raiders are re-producing an ideology of terrorism with their grotesquely ornamented territory and acts of violence that are intended to horrify others. For the Raiders, the disordered, post-apocalyptic world filled with violence represents their ideal

## Articles

and their reputation as merciless increases their power over ordinary Wastelanders, since few will have the courage or means to challenge them. Thus, their ideology being oppositional to others is beneficial to them. The disordered Raider ideology is a Gothic one, since it is founded on terror and tyranny and positions the Raiders as a dangerous “other” in the Wasteland.



Figure 2: A Raider base with hanging corpses, graffiti and gore.

In contrast, the Enclave is a disciplined, tyrannical military force with advanced technology, but is, in its desire for control, as ruthless and merciless as the Raiders. The Enclave claims to represent the government of the United States and broadcasts propaganda messages on the radio from their leader, President Eden. The player may also listen to these lengthy messages that verbally reproduce the Enclave's ideology; one such message is shown in Figure 3. In it, President Eden addresses those who might question his presidency without providing real answers to who has elected him. For example, he says he is the President because “the appropriate people of this great nation” decided so. In a contradictory manner, he reveals he was chosen by non-democratic means, since it was the decision of a few selected, “appropriate” people, yet claims this was indeed a democratic election: “Of course I was elected, sweet America! Isn't the right to vote the very foundation of a democracy?”. By addressing his listeners as “sweet” and “dear” America, he is also arguably attempting to gain favor with them. In the late stages of the game's main storyline, it is revealed to the player that Eden is an Artificial Intelligence (AI). His personality is a fusion of previous US presidents, explaining the uncanny quality to his speeches. However, he is no puppet of the Enclave: he has elected himself as their leader and betrays them by attempting to recruit the PC on his side. He represents the tradition of Gothic AI in film, such as HAL 9000 in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Kubrick), and in games, such as GLaDOS in the *Portal* games (Valve Corporation) and SHODAN in *System Shock* (Looking Glass Technologies). Like previous Gothic AIs, he has not chosen his existence, but has agency in convincing the Enclave of his leadership.

"It's time we discussed something rather important. The issue at hand is, well, my presidency. The question has been raised, I know, as to just how I came to be elected to this most illustrious office. Or, whether or not I had been elected at all! To that I must answer: Of course! Of course I was elected, sweet America! Isn't the right to vote the very foundation of a democracy? Unfortunately, in the interest of national security, I'm not at liberty to discuss the details of the election. You understand. But rest assured, I AM your President because the appropriate people of this great nation decided I should be! I AM your duly elected representative. Of course, when the time comes, when my term is up, America will be free to elect a new President. And that person will have our full faith and confidence, and carry our collective values forward, into the future. Democracy, dear America. Democracy, now... and forever."

- President Eden on the Enclave Radio

Figure 3: Transcription of President Eden's message on the Enclave Radio, from Fallout wiki Nukapedia.

In the context of the post-apocalyptic world, Eden's messages seem greatly out of touch, since most NPCs that the player can talk to either do not mention the Enclave at all or ridicule the broadcasts. Only one NPC, an old man called Nathan, has become obsessed with them and believes that the Enclave will bring salvation to the Wasteland and restore order. In Figure 4, a screenshot of part of the conversation with Nathan shows how the game uses dialogue with NPCs to convey narration as well as ideological messages; Nathan believes that “any day now” the Enclave will come and end the “nightmare.” The shack city of Megaton can be seen in the background; the aesthetic details of this backdrop will change depending on where in Megaton and during what time of the day the player initiates conversation with Nathan. Further extracts from Nathan's speech can be seen in Figure 5. They reproduce a strongly patriotic and nationalist ideology along with the use of specific symbols, such as the repeated naming of the country, the American eagle, and the use of the term “patriot.” As in President Eden's speech in Figure 3, elections are mentioned in Extract II. However, neither Nathan nor anyone else the player meets in the Wasteland has participated in an election. Extract IV, which concerns the Enclave's patrolling robots, is perhaps intended as comforting by Nathan, but instead paints them as an Orwellian “Big Brother” keeping a close watch on the Wasteland and possibly planning an invasion.

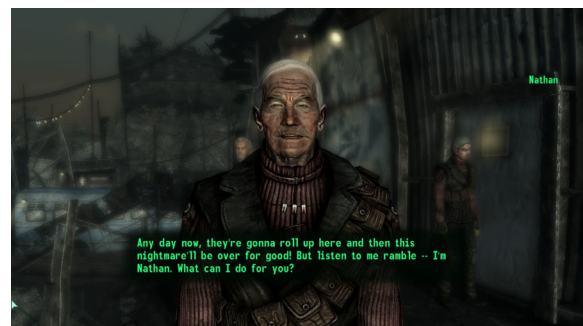


Figure 4: Nathan introduces himself by talking about the Enclave.



## Articles

I. Ha! Look at this! New Blood! Tell me boy, you ever hear of the Enclave? The last remnant of the good ol' USA, they are!"

II. Now there's a proud patriot. After all, if they could do us wrong, we wouldn't have elected them in the first place, right?"

III. Yessir, trust in the judgement of other people to know what's best for me. It's the American way!"

IV. "They got flyin' robots all around, watching everything so they know what to do when they finally swoop in and clean this place up."

V. "They're the American government! The eagle! People comma we the! The more perfect union!"

- Excerpts from dialogue with Nathan

Figure 5: Selected samples of the dialogue with Nathan, cited from text on screen.

Nathan's language, with its references to "America" and the iconic line "We, the people" in Extract V, is exaggeratedly patriotic in comparison to the language used by the other NPCs in the Wasteland. The reason is that no wider sense of a unified country is left among the ruins; other NPCs speak more locally of "Capital Wasteland." Consequently, Nathan's language portrays him as naïve for buying into and reproducing the Enclave's propagandic messages and as comedic for his misplaced, even absurd, optimism. This is particularly the case as, to the people of the Wasteland who are critical and skeptical of the Enclave's messages, the ideology promoted by the Enclave is outdated. As the game progresses, the Enclave becomes the tyrannical "other" that poses a threat to the Wasteland by attempting to seize control over the sole reliable source of pure water in the game's world. Thus, the Enclave's disciplined patriotic and nationalist ideology is rendered Gothic by its untruthfulness: the Enclave is not interested in the good of the Wasteland and its inhabitants as it claims, but rather seeks tyrannical control over those aspects of it that it finds useful and to destroy the rest. The latter objective becomes materially observable in the later stages of the game when Enclave patrols begin to appear in the game world and attack anyone on sight.

Conforming and non-conforming to established ideals also receives a complex treatment in the game. The exclusive nature of different settlements reinforces a strong ideological message of the necessity of conformity in the Wasteland. The case of the Brotherhood Outcasts is rather interesting, since they are non-conforming by conforming. The Brotherhood of Steel branch represented in *Fallout 3* departs from the overall goal of this military force to collect and preserve pre-war technology, science, and knowledge to protect humanity's progress. They do this by also having become the only protective force in the Wasteland. This ideological departure, and hence non-conformity, has resulted in the branch of the Brotherhood in Capital Wasteland becoming cut off from the main faction in the west, despite their heroic actions. Non-conforming and questioning normalized patterns of thought, thus, receive a Gothic flair in the game, since instead of respect, acting selflessly earns this branch punishments in the form of exclusion and the loss of some of its members. The Outcasts mentioned above are ex-members of this branch who disagreed with

the decision to protect locals and now independently gather old technology from ruins. In Figure 6, their leader, wearing the signature black and red armor of the Outcasts, is seen describing the locals as "savages," implying that the Outcasts do not believe the locals to be worthy of protection. Their stance is cruelly elitist, lacking sympathy for those without access to their level of education and technology. Noting their perception of outsiders as almost subhuman, it is questionable whether they would ever share their findings with the rest of society, despite their reasoning that their actions could help everyone. Therefore, while conforming to the original ideals of the Brotherhood of Steel, they take pride in their decision to reject the policy of the local branch, although, conflictingly, their goal to preserve humanity's progress appears to isolate them from humanity itself and positions them as complex Gothic villains.



Figure 6: The leader of the Outcasts talks about his disagreement with the Brotherhood of Steel.

### RACE, HISTORY, CLASS, NATION, AND GENDER

Mutated people, Ghouls, in the game are treated as monsters despite their humanity: in various pieces of dialogue, Ghouls accuse healthy humans of treating them as subhuman and excluding them from society under false reasoning, producing an ideology of "anti-Ghoulism." Anti-Ghoulism can be interpreted as one of the socio-political ideologies in *Fallout 3* that are reproduced in human communities and are relevant to many Gothic texts: race, history, class, nation, and gender. Ghouls are fundamentally victims who are unjustly considered monstrous because of their physical appearance, a manifestation of the Gothic that has been popular since Frankenstein's creature. They become a sympathetic "other" to the player, who can interact with them in the same manner as with humans, while they are believed to be a dangerous and untrustworthy "other" by the game world's human NPCs.

While Ghouls are not a race, their treatment resembles racism, including the use of slurs like "zombies" and "shufflers" by humans. For example, in Figure 7, a rich and influential NPC, Allistair Tenpenny, expresses in dialogue his disappointment in discovering that a mercenary Ghoul that he hired years ago is still

## Articles

alive and refers to Ghouls as zombies. He goes as far as to suggest that, to kill Ghouls successfully, they should be shot in the head. The more privileged NPCs also claim that they have worked hard to earn their place in the world, whereas Ghouls are merely demanding handouts – an argument that typifies racist and classist thinking. This reconstructs the traditional use of the Gothic, especially in the American context, to resist slavery and racism, and on the side of the oppressors, to justify them (Edwards xxii). In the game, racist expressions are used to portray prejudice as condemnable and ignorant, although referring to Ghouls as zombies may also become normalized to players, showing a duality in employing racist ideology in games. However, like the Gothic use of time, games can draw on the Gothic horror of racism in an inoffensive, distanced manner by linking recognizable real-life injustice and prejudice to fictional minority groups like Ghouls who are interpretable by players from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds.



Figure 7: Allistair Tenpenny talks about a Ghoul that he believed to be dead.

Ghouls seem to have come to replace the anti-Chinese ideology of the *Fallout 3* universe prior to nuclear destruction, which was largely caused by the political tensions and war with China. This racist history is materially visible in several details of the game. For instance, some posters, such as the one depicted in Figure 8, feature the Chinese as monstrous enemies. In this poster, a giant Chinese soldier, whose exaggerated features underline the racism of the depiction, picks up white Americans with long, sharp nails. Nevertheless, since information about the war does not seem to be widely known by post-apocalyptic societies, they have largely left anti-Chinese ideologies behind and have established the Ghouls as the new Gothic “other” to be feared and hated. This produces a cyclical racism by suggesting that humankind will continue to find opponents in others. It also appears that, while the concept of nation as an aspect of ideology was of the utmost relevance to the pre-apocalyptic world, it has since been largely abandoned, except by the Enclave, as the Wasteland does not have a sense of a unified nation.



Figure 8: A poster in which a Chinese soldier is portrayed as a giant monster.

The people of Capital Wasteland have been split into several micro-communities, each of which has unique features. Thus, it cannot be said that there is an overarching class ideology in the game world. Still, in addition to Ghouls, the poor are generally excluded from communities, left begging for water outside settlement walls. The transformation of some Ghouls is also linked to class: a Ghoul named Carol says in dialogue that her family was too poor to get into a vault when the nuclear bombing took place, and therefore she was left exposed to radiation that changed her, also giving her an unnaturally long life. Gothic characters such as the vampiric Count Dracula and the damned scholar in Charles Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer* also obtain such an expanded lifespan, making this aspect monstrous from a human perspective. In contrast, they originate from a privileged class of people, whereas Carol must have submitted to class restrictions, her transformation, and now the healthy humans. Therefore, her experience is complex, at an intersection of inhabiting a Gothic body and racist and classist oppression.

With respect to classism in specific communities, inside the aircraft carrier that accommodates Rivet City, an NPC called Diego is worried about the tension brewing between the rich inhabitants, who live on the higher levels, and the poor, who live on the lower levels with unclean air. He says: “It’s not too bad now, but if it keeps going this way, in a few years they’ll start fighting in the streets” on the aircraft carrier. This kind of segregation appears to be the norm, however, in the eyes of the better-off NPCs. Figure 9 depicts Harkness, the security chief of Rivet City, belittling the issue as something that happens in “every place.”



Figure 9: Harkness talks about the class divide in Rivet City.



## Articles

This kind of class ideology, in a Gothic sense, is one that countenances injustice by claiming that some people are destined to suffer while others thrive.

Another aspect of ideology that has not yet been discussed is gender. In the post-apocalyptic game world, aside from the number of female sex workers in comparison to male ones – of which there are none – gender roles appear to have been greatly abolished. This naturally implies that gender roles existed prior to the nuclear war and traces of this can be found among the ruins. As discussed above, many of the poster advertisements among the ruins targeted stereotypical nuclear families. In an automated guided tour in the Museum of Technology of Vaults, women are addressed as cleaners and cooks. In war propaganda posters, as with their real-life American counterparts in both World Wars, men are encouraged to join the army and women to help in healthcare. An example of such a poster is shown in Figure 10, in which an attractive woman is holding up a piece of watermelon on a plate in one hand and a crutch in the other. The header says: “You don’t need a Howitzer to be a Hero!”. The poster also lists available jobs that sound absurd: “Candy Striper,” “Puppeteer,” “Interminable Blood Donor,” and “Bedpan Unsullification Technician.” These positions are an example of the game’s dark humor, but also highlight how little was expected of women during wartime in the game world. The posters reproduce the ideology of traditional gender roles which limit people’s opportunities and freedoms based on their gender. Although such portrayals are not invariably Gothic, they can reflect the traditional trapped and powerless heroines of Gothic fiction who must follow societal rules and expectations, as evident in works like Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*, Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, and Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk: A Romance*. These novels are also critical of gendered separated worlds, representing exiles from both as disempowered (Ellis xv). Interestingly, in *Fallout 3*, female NPCs become empowered after social structures are dismantled by nuclear destruction, making this empowerment Gothic.



Figure 10: A war propaganda poster calling for women to contribute to healthcare.

### DECEPTION LEADING TO MORAL DILEMMAS

Deceptiveness is present both in the game world’s past and in its current state, with the notable difference that the player cannot change the past but must personally face its existing manifestations. In the pre-apocalyptic world, capitalist ideology is portrayed as horrific, unjust, and deceptive in journal entries and messages preserved in computer terminals that can be found among the ruins of factories, office buildings and other places related to commerce. They reveal the mistreatment of employees, unethical product development and the design of untruthful advertisements, implying that those who owned the largest companies held great power and were not held accountable for their actions. The rise of tyrannical corporations enabled by capitalism is taken to extremes in the game, often humorously, and portrayed as an evil “other.” This commercial deceptiveness is strongly linked to misuses of power which also makes it Gothic.

At times in *Fallout 3*, NPCs take advantage of the player’s good will and manipulate the player to help them by underlining the injustice they are experiencing. Their lack of privileges is very real, but these NPCs use it to convince the player to help them without revealing their personal agenda behind the request or generally without telling the whole story. For example, Figure 11 depicts Mister Crowley, a Ghoul who is angry at their poor treatment. He hires the PC to kill a few specific anti-Ghoul bigots; however, if the player talks to other Ghouls in the area, or to the target NPCs in person, only one of them is shown to be bigoted. When confronted, Mister Crowley says that in all truth, he is after keys in the possession of these NPCs, keys that will grant access to great treasure. Mister Crowley has thus attempted to use anti-Ghoulist feeling to appeal to the PC’s sense of justice while seeking personal material gain. Secretiveness and deception of this kind is particularly Gothic, as it renders the seemingly innocent victims of injustice also capable of horrific acts and produces ambivalence. Hence, the Gothic ideology this reveals is one of uncertainty or even paranoia: the player can never be quite sure which NPCs to trust or which action is morally correct, if even the innocent can be revealed to be treacherous.



Figure 11: Mister Crowley accusing human NPCs of bigotry.

## Articles

Another example of deception is to be found in the Pitt, an area that is downloadable as additional content to the game. The player can follow a radio message in the game to meet with a representative of the slaves at the Pitt, Wernher: “To anyone who can hear me: my name is Wernher. I come from a settlement to the north. I have information of great value to anyone willing to help me free my people. Please... help us. This message repeats.”

Wernher describes the hopeless situation at the Pitt in Figure 12: the place is plagued by radiation, mutation, and disease. He asks the PC in dialogue to enter the Pitt and steal the cure that the tyrannical leaders are working on against the sicknesses that run rampant in the area. The slaves believe that this is their only way of gaining leverage before fully succumbing to the slavers who would also hold the power to decide who gets to be cured. Once the player painstakingly gains access to meet with the leader, it is revealed that the source of the potential cure is his baby daughter – a detail that Wernher failed to mention earlier. To help the slaves, the player would have to kidnap the baby for her to become a test subject, simultaneously condemning her parents to become victims of a rebellion. The slaves are clearly victims of cruelty and horrible living conditions; one of the first scenes that the player witnesses at the Pitt is a simulation of three slaves being executed for virtually no reason. Nevertheless, their increased leverage would also come at a high price.

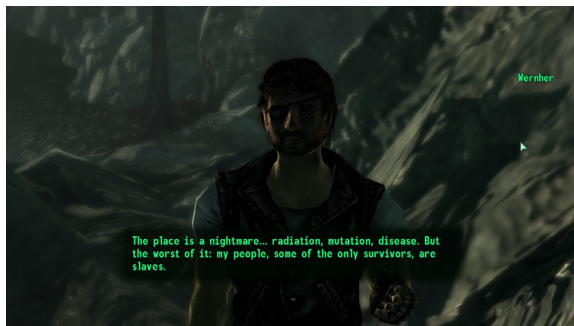


Figure 12: Wernher, a representative of slaves, describes the Pitt.

The moral dilemma that the player faces is particularly difficult because of the secretiveness of the slaves and their deceptive manipulation. It is further complicated by the fact that in the dialogue with the baby’s mother, who is gently studying the baby’s special immunity system, it is implied that the results will eventually help them all: “my little angel is going to save the city.” Thus, it becomes morally difficult to justify the decision to kidnap the baby to allow the slaves immediate power. In the game, the player can decide to join either side, but either way, the situation is ambivalent: slavery is portrayed as ideologically horrific, but so is the line of thought that experiencing injustice gives one the right to perpetrate unjust actions under a veil of secrecy. In a Gothic

sense, the situation at the Pitt blurs and transgresses the boundaries between good and evil, right and wrong, and innocence and guilt, with secretiveness as one of the vehicles of transgression. As in the case of the Ghouls, the innocent are also shown to be capable of treachery.

### GOthic UNCERTAINTY AND THE WEIGHT OF RESPONSIBILITY

This paper investigated the ideological resources of the Gothic and their (re)construction in game discourse. In *Fallout 3*, ideological aspects of the Gothic are employed to construct meanings that represent both the world prior to destruction and the one after it as dangerous and horrific. These meanings are communicated in a variety of ways: through signs left in the game world for the player to interpret, whether in verbal or visual form, or in written or audio form, through dialogue with NPCs and through simulation, most typically that of violence. *Mise-en-scène*, style, narration, and simulation work together to create ambivalent or horrific situations. This supports previous observations of the Gothic in games, such as Krzywinska’s five Gothic coordinates (the false hero, *mise-en-scène*, affect, style and function), showing that the Gothic in games is produced in multimodal ways (“The Gamification” 59-61). Of Krzywinska’s five Gothic coordinates, the “false hero” is absent in the game in the sense that the player is empowered to influence the game world and defeat those deemed as opponents. However, the player’s freedom to make choices in the game world also entails responsibility. I suggest that it is not only helplessness that contributes to a Gothic experience in a game, but also a responsibility to make decisions in ambivalent, morally complex situations, such as the one encountered in the Pitt in *Fallout 3*. What produces Gothic anxiety in these situations is the player’s uncertainty about what the “right” choice is, and what kinds of horrific consequences these possible choices might have. At times, the consequences are not revealed until the choice has been made, potentially producing emotions of regret, or even disappointment and anger, in addition to those of horror. Notwithstanding, as is typical of the Gothic consumer, the player is also drawn into these situations of play despite the difficulties that they may present.

The Gothic ideologies at play in the game largely duplicate classic Gothic narratives. Significantly, the game world treats certain types of people as “other.” At the same time, the player does not necessarily share the NPCs’ views as to what constitutes a dangerous “other,” as is the case with the Ghouls. This positions the PC as the participant who must remain vigilant and make his/her own interpretations and evaluations instead of taking things at face value. The uncertainty faced by the PC is further compli-

## Articles

cated in situations where seemingly innocent NPCs manipulate or deceive the player, and thus have a morally disorienting effect. Because of secretiveness and the unjust exclusion of “others” that the player witnesses, he or she may become increasingly distrustful of the NPCs, which further encourages a Gothic interpretation of the game discourse more generally, although the player may not recognize it as such. This invites a paranoid interpretation, with the player coming to expect betrayal, societies to have dark secrets, anything good to be tainted. At worst, players lose hope in the game world’s humanity, rather in the way of the solitary classic Gothic heroes whose morality does not match the world which they inhabit.

In the same way as Gothic texts can be ideologically contradictory, so, too, can the worlds represented in games. Here we have seen, for instance, how both disorder and organized discipline can take extreme, horrific forms and lead to tyranny; it is no less possible in a world lacking order to hold power over others by means of terror. This suggests that all absolutes, such as absolute order or disorder, are harmful to societies – a notion that, owing to the recognizable aspects of the context of the game world, may extend to the world outside the gaming experience. Thus, through the construction of Gothic ideologies, games can provide an implicit socio-political commentary that goes beyond the limits of the game, if the players, despite being at comfortable temporal distance from the game events, also find aspects of the game world familiar and comparable to their experience of the real world. This would also explain why ideologies informed by race, class, nation, or gender can be effective in constructing the Gothic in a game world, and why, in the present instance, the treatment of Ghouls may be perceived as racism, although the game never refers to Ghouls as a race or to bigotry as racism. However, the implicit resistance or support of ideological structures may become complicated in unexpected ways, as is the case when racist expressions are targeted at Ghouls; while the typical player response is to reject bigotry, it also provides them with insults to use if a Ghoul were to anger them during play. This hauntingly reflects how the use of offensive terminology can be harmful in any context for normalizing it.

These findings exemplify the importance of Gothic influences for constructing geographically, temporally, and socially uncanny game worlds that are haunted by their past. These game worlds are simultaneously relatable and impossibly strange, featuring communities whose attempts to gain control or merely survive are also eerily familiar, reflecting and recycling humanity’s errors. Future studies focusing on specific aspects of ideology, like race, gender, class, religion, nation and society, or their intersections, are of interest to produce a deeper understanding of the

Gothic and its challenges in games.

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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

SARI PIITTINEN  
sari.j.piittinen@jyu.fi

Sari Piittinen is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. Her current research interests involve using discourse analytic approaches to investigate gaming culture and gameplay video streams. Her PhD dissertation focused on Gothic elements in the story world and player experiences of the roleplaying game *Fallout 3*.