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Histories of *Fallout*: Competing Pasts and Brand Identities

Abstract

The *Fallout* franchise has a long and storied history. Brand rights have changed hands several times since the late 1990s and now sit with Bethesda Softworks who developed and published *Fallout 3* (2008), *Fallout 4* (2015), and *Fallout 76* (2018) to critical and commercial success. Based on analysis of paratextual materials, this article examines the ways that Bethesda used history to stake a claim for their vision for *Fallout*, utilising the studio's considerable marketing power to (re)write the history of *Fallout* over the last two decades. It charts how Bethesda's company history, the history of the *Fallout* brand, and American mid-century imaginaries were interwoven into a promotional discourse underscoring Bethesda's position as gatekeeper: a trusted pair of hands to both curate the history of *Fallout* and guide the development of the franchise in the present and future.

Keywords: Fallout, history, marketing, branding

History is vitally important to *Fallout* (1997-): 'a vast imaginary world' spanning major video games and spin-off media products, and the work of multiple developers over more than 25 years (Howard, 2024, p. 98). But crucially, it is a complex and multifaceted world 'haunted by the specter of the past, with various factions trying to remake the world based on approaches steeped in American history' (Howard, 2024, p. 5). *Fallout*'s retro-futuristic, counterfactual world and aesthetics are deeply embedded in historical realities, a simulacra of ideas and processes that marked mid-Twentieth century America (McClancy, 2018). Atomic Age anxieties, the global Cold War, the proliferation of 'American Dream' capitalist

consumerism, and wider historical discourses of militarism and imperialism are woven into ‘a profound, multi-dimensional narrative’ set hundreds of years in the future to create a *uchronia* that overlays a fictional story on top of a known past world (Denizel, 2021, p. 87). They are games which have been understood to embody a particular ‘historical consciousness’ (Cutterham, 2013), and as attempts to satirise and/or parody aspects of American political, cultural and social history (November, 2013), often by incorporating branding and advertising for commodities like food (Stang, 2021) and material culture that reflects post-World War 2/Cold War propaganda (Aleksić et al., 2025).

Fallout also has its own long and complicated history as a brand. As Kenton Taylor Howard summarises, ‘the world of *Fallout* has been managed by various creators over the years, making it challenging to provide an overarching summary of the games since each of those creators has approached the world quite differently’ (2024, p. 1). Compounding this, what ‘counts’ as a ‘canonical’ part of the franchise and its wider worldbuilding has been debated (Howard, 2024, pp. 3; ch. 3). *Fallout 1* (1997) and *Fallout 2* (1998) were developed by Interplay Entertainment and Black Isle Studios respectively. Both have a cult following as role-playing games (RPG) and established the series’ touchstone design and narrative elements. Bethesda Game Studios have developed all major releases in the franchise since *Fallout 3* (2008), aside from *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010; by Obsidian Entertainment, but published by Bethesda Softworks, the company’s publishing wing). There have also been a range of spin-off (video, board, and tabletop roleplaying) *Fallout* games, including the popular *Fallout Shelter* (2015) resource/vault management game. The aesthetics associated with Bethesda’s *Fallout* games now have significant currency in the popular (and gaming) imagination, used as a guiding light to develop Amazon Prime Video’s *Fallout* television series (2024-).

Yet despite multiple forms, creative teams and development contexts, all major games in the series have maintained ‘a remarkably consistent imaginary world’ and thematic engagements, testament to the role of worldbuilding across the franchise (Howard, 2024, p. 16). As Wendi Sierra observes, ‘since the first game, the *Fallout* series has juxtaposed a bright, cheery Fifties aesthetic against the grim reality of a post-nuclear apocalypse America’ (2021, p. 101). Likewise, Howard identifies significant ‘hallmarks’ of the series. *Fallout*’s postapocalyptic setting – an alternative history timeline diverging after the Second World War – is vital. The series’ alternate-1950s iconographies and aesthetics have become so ‘iconic’ that even ‘casual fans would immediately recognize’ them (Howard, 2024, pp. 1–3; 97). The repetition of certain iconic elements from the games (e.g., the Pip-Boy wearable device; 1950s crooner music) have been noted as crucial for the effective adaptation of *Fallout* from game-to-television screen (Freire-Sánchez et al., 2024, pp.10–13). Likewise, Erwan Lafleuriel argues that the series’ ‘explosive mix of post-apocalyptic setting and the retro style of 1950s America’ has ‘elevate[d] *Fallout* above other sci-fi media products (2018, p. 26). Howard also notes that ‘a long running theme of [*Fallout*’s] world is critiquing American politics and history while also serving as a world ripe for expansion by various video game developers, media creators, and even fans, many of whom engage with the same themes that the canonical *Fallout* media does’ (2024, pp. 1–3; see also Freire-Sánchez et al., 2024, p.11). Thus, despite significant ‘reinventions’ of the series’ play style over the last three decades (Howard, 2024, pp. 5–56), these aesthetics have persisted and calcified around a core of mid-Century Americana.

Both the *history of Fallout*, and the *use of history in Fallout*, has been written, revised and negotiated by different people at different points over almost-three decades. In marketing discourses, the supposed quality and authenticity of any new game is constructed through product positioning: the extent to which it remains faithful to both the established brand, and

the way that the franchise has already represented elements of real-world American history. There is, therefore, a complex layering of ‘historical’ discourses at play at any given moment, as Wright has elsewhere explored regarding the promotion of other contemporary historical games (2024). But while the series has been academically dissected for its (re)mediation of specific elements of America’s past (e.g., Austin, 2021; Burgess, 2018; Ivănescu, 2019; McClancy, 2018; Pichlmair, 2009), less attention has been paid to the role these historical themes and ideas have played in Bethesda’s attempts to brand both themselves and their ownership of *Fallout*. Here, I expand Wright’s argument that promotional materials for historical video games are crucially important sources for understanding the way games (and their creators) negotiate historical meaning (2023). Moreover, I extend Wright’s argument that developer brand management strategies are significant paratextual sites of negotiation that historical game studies researchers should attend to (2022, pp. 11–18).

This work contributes to developing scholarship on historical game paratexts (e.g., Apperley, 2018; Cole, 2021; Seiwald & Vollans, 2023; Van Den Heede, 2020; Wright, 2018), unpicking the historical meaning-making these physical and/or born-digital materials allow game makers and players to do. It speaks to established work on media paratexts more broadly, particularly viewing them as attempts by marketers to ‘ensure something occurs by dint of announcing it’ (Barker, 2004). But paying attention to brand management complicates traditional understandings of paratexts as merely ‘thresholds of interpretation,’ borrowed from Genette (1997) and commonly used in game (Seiwald, 2023) and media studies (Gray, 2010). As Melissa Aronczyk argues, the work of brand managers, and management,

is not ultimately about expanding the terrain on which meanings can be made; it is about closing off interpretive agency [...] A brand is not (only) a portal through which we gain understanding of how a text or product is made to mean. It is a

powerful authority, policing, and in many cases articulating the boundaries according to which its objects acquire meaning (2017, p. 112).

Bethesda, as current manager of *Fallout's* (now-transmedia) brand, made numerous attempts over the last two decades to 'police' its boundaries. And, as I here argue, they used various paratextual forms to argue that *their Fallout is Fallout*. Deploying promotional materials to emphasise *Fallout's* particular 'brand pillars' and overlaying them onto their own style of game development, Bethesda have been keen to adopt what Leora Hadas terms a 'studio authorship model' – a signature identity and 'vision' established and communicated as much through promotional materials as the games themselves (2020, pp. 153–154; 156–160). It sets the limits on what Bethesda's *Fallout* is, and its authenticity.

Through close analysis of a selected range of promotional materials for *Fallout*, produced by Bethesda between the late 2000s and 2025, this article demonstrates how the studio, as the current custodians of the *Fallout* brand, have been rewriting of the history of the franchise. Their involvement in curating and producing the legacy of *Fallout's* worldbuilding and design – arguably, one of the series' most marketable features, is repeatedly emphasised by both academics and Bethesda's senior creative and executive staff alike (e.g., Howard, 2024; Sierra, 2021, pp. 2–3). This article also illuminates how Bethesda have simultaneously engaged with and deployed American mid-century history in the process, making reference to popular imaginaries about the period to prove their worthiness and authority to make *Fallout* their own.

It is worth noting that some sources discussed below have already been considered by game researchers. Existing work has used e.g., developer interviews to construct a canonical history of *Fallout*, as told by a small selection of creative executives and developers (e.g., Howard, 2024; Sierra, 2021). However, what is distinct about my interpretation is that I use such sources to critically explore the positioning of *Fallout*, its history, and the histories that

intersect with it as an active process that has been shaped and controlled by Bethesda's marketing discourses over the last almost-three decades, rather than merely as sources offering an unproblematic window into the series' production history. That is, I interrogate these 'behind the scenes' insights to analyse *what* is being said, *why*, and *how* Bethesda used promotional discourses to write a new narrative of *Fallout*'s past and present, in anticipation of the brand's futures. That is: how, at significant milestones, has the company constructed a sense of consistency, forged order from this unwieldy and far-ranging transmedia franchise, marketed a Bethesda-branded vision for *Fallout*, and asserted ownership over this series?

This article is, therefore, not an attempt to craft another history of the *Fallout* franchise, and how vital aspects of its worldbuilding, gameplay options and themes have developed (Howard, 2024; Lafleur, 2018; Sierra, 2021). It does not attempt to offer close analysis of specific elements of the various games in the franchise, or analyse the various transmedia adaptations of the *Fallout* brand (e.g., Freire-Sánchez et al., 2024). Rather, I examine how the complex histories within and around the franchise have been woven into Bethesda's brand management strategies over time: how Bethesda spoke about their process, in what context, and to what end.

I focus on three key milestones where this *history of the Fallout franchise* has been negotiated paratextually—by whom, and for what purpose—since the early 2000s, and how the representation of *American history in Fallout* has been interwoven into a consumable brand image. These are: 1) the release of *Fallout 3* (2008), the first Bethesda-produced instalment; 2) *Fallout*'s 25th anniversary celebrations in 2022; and 3) the transmedia expansion of *Fallout* onto television (2024-). How Bethesda used these significant milestones to brand *Fallout* as something distinct, their own, and informed by both the history of the franchise and a wider alternative history of America, is a significant, complex, and layered use of historical

discourses, and gives new meaning to the notion that ‘developer-historians’ (Chapman, 2016) are doing historical work: with their games, and their own brand image.

This article develops Adam Chapman’s position that scholarly interest in the histories *of* games and the representation of history *in* games ‘will inevitably sometimes converge’ (2019). Indeed, I go further to argue that these interests *often* converge. Historical game studies needs to attend to both *of* and *in* because, as Chapman notes, ‘historical themes having now been used in games for decades, it is important for us to begin to explore the history of history in games’ (2019). Franchises like *Fallout* are now almost three decades old, and their managing agents have sought to do their own complex historiographical work during this time. We, as historians of games, can now attend to this work (albeit not without difficulty), which ‘demand[s] nuanced understandings of both the complex histories, and historiographical functions, of games’ (Chapman, 2019).

By considering the overlaying of the *history of Fallout* and *history in Fallout* for the purposes of crafting a saleable, branded image of what *Fallout* is, this article begins to propose how and why we might do this. At the same time, this article underscores the usefulness of the past to commercial game developers and marketers, to sell both their products and themselves. That is, certain historical ideas and imagery are being used to navigate a crowded (historical) video game marketplace, and to convince both fans and potential new consumers of the value of the games they are trying to sell. These historical reference points have been deliberately woven into Bethesda’s company history in a range of different paratextual content over the years, starting with *Fallout 3*’s release. At this pivotal moment, Bethesda curated a narrative that intertwined the ‘real’ history players would find referenced *in Fallout*, the *history of Fallout*, and the history of Bethesda, to construct expectations for the forthcoming game.

The ‘Making of’ *Fallout 3*

The collector’s edition of *Fallout 3* (*FO3*) included a bonus DVD containing ‘The Making of *Fallout 3*’ (‘The Making of *Fallout 3*’, N.D.). This 40-minute featurette included interviews with key creative executives involved in the game’s development, overlaid with gameplay and behind-the-scenes footage. This bonus content functions as a means of framing and justifying Bethesda’s approach to *FO3*, as a significant departure (in gameplay and design) from *Fallout 1* (*FO1*) and *Fallout 2* (*FO2*).

René Glas argues that the way ‘making-of’ material ‘presents the creative process is not necessarily exemplary of the actual creative process, but [...] it helps shape the way its target audience, game aficionados, thinks about games and game development’ (2016, p. 5). In this sense, Glas echoes wider work on media paratexts: both their intrinsically ‘performative’ nature (Barker, 2004), and their attempt to tell audiences ‘what to think about, and how to think about it’ when consuming media (Gray 2010, p. 3). In this case, when the franchise was changing owners and dramatically changing gameplay style, this documentary speaks to both existing *Fallout* fans and a potentially new audience, to convince them of Bethesda’s authority to craft a new instalment. In doing so, these interviews emphasised three interconnected kinds of historical narratives: Bethesda’s experience making games; the history of *Fallout* as a franchise; and the recognisable, Twentieth-Century historical references that have always been core to the franchise’s identity and featured in the games themselves. Many of these clips overlay voiceovers onto gameplay footage from the first two *Fallout* games and *FO3*, blending the series’ history (to that point) together harmoniously to create brand consistency.

Game Director Todd Howard opens the first segment of the documentary, titled ‘Fallout 101.’ Howard is a noteworthy figure: widely recognised as a gaming auteur in fan cultures and popular and academic criticism of their games alike, he is a mainstay of Bethesda’s marketing and public communications. For example, in Sierra’s book on Howard for the ‘Influential Video Game Designers’ series, the very first page mythologises both his Bethesda career and his contribution to games *en masse*: ‘Howard’s worldbuilding design perspective has shaped not only Bethesda Game Studios, but the gaming industry itself’ (2021, pp. 1–3). While Bethesda’s ‘studio authorship’ image is consistently important here – the ‘we’, rather than ‘I’ (Hadas, 2020, p. 163)– Howard is nonetheless a significant creative figure speaking for the company, and his team.

Howard begins by contextualising Bethesda’s motives for acquiring the IP: to diversify their portfolio beyond the *Elder Scrolls* franchise, for which they are equally well-known, having released *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (2006) to critical and commercial success two years earlier. Bethesda wanted to continue creating games ‘in a similar vein’ of open world RPGs that they had already successfully sold, with *Fallout* ‘at the top of the list’ of things they wanted to do. Emil Pagliarulo (Lead Designer and Writer) refers to *FOI* as ‘the pinnacle of [...] postapocalyptic gameplay’, before the video returns to Howard, who outlines Bethesda’s ambition: ‘We felt in that world, and the systems they have in [*FOI*], coupled with the way we put things together, we sort of became obsessed, like, this is the game, we have to make this game.’ Howard then describes how Bethesda executives were able to broker the deal because Interplay ‘weren’t doing anything with [the IP],’ admitting that ‘we pestered them and pestered them’ for it (‘The Making of Fallout 3’).

The documentary thus begins with this acknowledgement of *Fallout*’s history, and by portraying key members of the development team as already keen fans and appreciators of the franchise. As Anastasia Salter and Mel Stanfil observed, in recent years the trope of

‘Fanboy to the Rescue’ has persisted in media marketing discourse: ‘have no fear, it says, this revered franchise is being taken over by a writer, director, or producer who is a “fanboy”’ (2020, p. ix). The fanboy image of particular (male) members of the production team is used precisely as the sort of ‘guarantee of quality’ that Salter and Stanfil have identified for wider transmedia franchises (2020, p. ix).

The interviews then pivot to snippets that intertwine Bethesda’s development process with *Fallout*’s established brand, and what it would become. Pete Hines –then Product Manager– is regularly featured throughout the documentary. His first contribution positions *Fallout* squarely as Bethesda’s, and as a vehicle for future innovation:

[Fallout’s] now ours, and we have always taken the approach that [*FO3*] is being made as if we made the first two [games]. Well, that means we do what we do, which means we reinvent, we look at what works, what didn’t. We’re not afraid to make changes. We’re not afraid to try new things. And we’re gonna try and sort of move the genre forward and move gaming forward (‘The Making of *Fallout 3*’).

Yet despite *FO3*’s commercial success upon release, Bethesda initially had much to prove. In their books on the history of *Fallout*, Howard and Lafleuriel summarise the prevalent, distrustful ‘Oblivion with Guns’ discourse that circulated among fans of the original *Fallout* games during *FO3*’s development (and in some quarters, has continued ever since) (Howard, 2024, pp. 44–45; Lafleuriel, 2018, p. 40). Fans and critics alike were keen to denigrate *FO3* as opposed to *Fallout*’s original spirit: something Bethesda had bastardised by making it their own. Overlaying a *Fallout* skin onto *Oblivion* made the former, it was claimed, a mere expansion to the latter (Howard, 2024, p. 44), rather than artistically and creatively reinventing the franchise as an open world RPG in its own right. This sentiment was reflected in anticipatory magazine coverage of *FO3*: for example, a 2004 PC Gamer article charted the

franchise's tempestuous history since *FO2*, and the 'considerable adversity' that the series faced under Interplay and Black Isle. The writer described fans' 'ire' that the rights hadn't been acquired by either Troika Games or Obsidian Entertainment (founded by former Black Isle staff), before giving his own opinion: 'Bethesda is well-respected for its acclaimed *Elder Scrolls* RPGs [...] those games are first-person-perspective, single-character RPGs with real-time combat and cardboard NPCs. In short, they're not *Fallout*' (Desslock, 2004).

Yet rather than shying away from discussing *Oblivion*, throughout the documentary consistent comparisons and contrasts are made between Bethesda's development process for both *Oblivion* and *FO3*, and their respective gameplay. For example, during Howard's interview segments, the poster for *FO3* behind him in the shot includes the words 'Developers behind Oblivion [re]invent the Role-Playing Classic.' He also declares that *FO3*'s scale and ambition far outstrip *Oblivion*, while Pagliarulo contrasts *FO3*'s gameplay dependence on guns with *Oblivion*'s melee focused combat style. Production Director Ashley Cheng describes *FO3*'s 'big open world,' replete with places to explore and things to do, as the 'signature of a 'Bethesda Game Studios game,' describing the game's graphics, NPCs, animation, and more as 'leagues above what it was in *Oblivion*' ('The Making of Fallout 3').

That direct comparisons to *Oblivion* became a core feature of the Making Of video suggests an attempt by Bethesda to control the 'Oblivion with Guns' narrative and spin the comparisons to their advantage – proving that they can be trusted with *Fallout*, rather than condemned for adapting it to the style of RPGs that they were otherwise known for making. Hines, for example, expressed his 'hope that eventually, someday, maybe many years from now, that we are just as well known for *Fallout* as *The Elder Scrolls*, because right now they are both our children' ('The Making of Fallout 3').

But a different kind of historical narrative was also key to the discussion of *FO3*'s development: both the in-world history of the *Fallout* universe, and the American mid-

century touchstones it has always referenced and incorporated. Howard describes the central vault-dweller-to-wasteland-saviour narrative of *Fallout*, referencing particular perceptions of the American mid-century:

You emerge from these vaults, and you don't know what's happened, so it's the optimism of this retro 50's world, and it's all destroyed. The people are still getting on, they're still trying to do their hair right, and if they have hair spray, they use it, and it's like you know what? Don't look at the destroyed crater and the smoking thing behind me, it's all cool! We're cool, we'll have some cigars and martinis later ('The Making of Fallout 3').

The second documentary segment, 'Retro Futurism,' historicises *FO3*'s incorporation of pseudo-1950s stylistic elements more explicitly. Concept Artist Adam Adamowicz describes his

interest in all things 50s, because I think there's a certain charisma with the music, with the automobiles, with the clothing style, the sort of Jet Set Frank Sinatra Rat Pack in a flying car with a martini in one hand and he's going to a big band concert. There's something that's always fun about that. And so designing any of these characters and then throwing them into the Wasteland, the dark humour kicked in for me when I imagined Ward Cleaver [the father of the titular character in the American sitcom *Leave it to Beaver* (1957-1963)] being pushed out of his bunker and now he's in the Wasteland and he's looking for fresh tobacco for his pipe, and here comes a Raider over the top of the horizon. What better thing to draw do you have? ('The Making of Fallout 3')

Lead artist Istvan Pely describes wanting to 'remain true' to and draw inspiration from the original games, but 'inject a lot more realism and detail that you expect in a primarily first-person game.' This included the creation of material culture and objects that players could

encounter and interact with the game world, that felt era-appropriate as postapocalyptic remnants of their imagined 1950s. For example, Pely mentions Adamowicz's design of a coin-operated fallout shelter, which appears in a number of the settlements across *FO3*:

a little steel tube that you put 50 cents in [...] you're in a little one-person fallout shelter in case the bombs happen to drop when you're out shopping downtown or something like that. And it's a ridiculous idea, but it's thematically very appropriate for [...] the culture of the time period, the 1950s kind of naivety that we were trying to achieve ('The Making of Fallout 3').

Moreover, the third segment of the documentary is titled 'duck and cover.' While this section discusses the design of *FO3*'s combat style, the title itself references the real Cold War instructional videos that so much of the in-game and paratextual content parodies, often featuring the Vault Boy character (Burgess 2018, pp.83–87).

Within the first half of the documentary, then, different layers of history (company and real-world) are used to negotiate potential player reception of *FO3*: its quality, Bethesda's craftsmanship and vision, and ultimately, the game's status and value as a legitimate instalment in the *Fallout* franchise. It is noteworthy that on one level, key creatives position these design choices as an attempt to critique technological determinist attitudes that marked the mid-twentieth century, mirroring academic assessment that *Fallout* offers a 'darker representation of the technological dominance described by [Marshall] McLuhan' in *The Medium is the Message* (Denizel 2021, p.88). Yet paradoxically, Bethesda's promotion of *FO3* here also follows a similar pattern of technological determinism: that their use of next-generation technology has made *Fallout* both theirs, and an upgrade on the franchise's past instalments: a similar sort of tension between critique and affirmation of the 'progress' of 'civilisation' visible in the marketing of other commercial historical games (e.g., Wright, 2021). The documentary's tone consistently constructs this claim, performing that Bethesda

are breaking new ground and making the best game possible. But all the while, they are remaining true to the essence that is ‘*Fallout*,’ as established in *FOI/FO2*, but that their decisions to radically change the gameplay style to first-person RPG were valid, and should be considered so by fans, old and new. Histories of the company, *Fallout* as a franchise with a recognisable brand, and real perceptions of the history of mid-century American culture and geography, are interwoven to do so.

***Fallout*’s 25th Anniversary Celebrations**

October 2022 marked *FOI*’s 25th anniversary, commemorated with a variety of promotion and fan engagement content across Bethesda’s website and YouTube channel.

Simultaneously, this content was designed to rewrite the history of *Fallout* for their own branding purposes, actively engaging the fanbase in its construction. For example, A mid-October blog post drew attention to a newly created *Fallout* ‘timeline’:

The *Fallout* series builds upon a narrative spanning over 25 years in our world, with in-game events taking place across entire centuries in the franchise’s dark look at our Atomic-era retro future. With all that history, including major moments and decisions made by none other than the player themselves, one may think that getting into *Fallout* would require tons of background research, but fear not! The universe of *Fallout* is rich and rewarding for those who love to dig deep into the lore, but any *Fallout* game can be your first. For those curious to learn a little bit more about their *Fallout* history, however, here’s a quick ‘n’ dirty rundown of the series (and mainline games’) timeline. (Wilhelm, 2022)

The article puts all major game instalments in chronological (per the respective games’ temporal setting), rather than release order, beginning with *Fallout 76* and ending with *New Vegas*. Aside from providing brief attribution to the other companies involved in the

development of specific games (e.g., Interplay Entertainment; Obsidian Entertainment), the short paragraphs that describe the significance and in-world history of the games draw little attention to the vastly different playstyles and developers involved. This timeline collapses the complexities of *Fallout*'s history into a discrete narrative for the franchise, wherein all the different locations and time periods (spanning centuries) are drawn into a single, neat universe curated by Bethesda as custodians of its canon. It creates a simplified, Bethesda-authored narrative of *Fallout*, as curator of its (hi)story and what the company deems significant about it.

Another series of videos titled 'Dear Vault Boy' featured on Bethesda's YouTube channel around this time. In the animated videos, the iconic Vault Boy character relayed the stories of *Fallout* fans as though they had written letters to him. The short, animated videos make use of several brand hallmarks: tongue-in-cheek, monochrome, mid-century-esque, duck-and-cover stylisation. The videos begin with Vault Boy retrieving a physical letter from a classic mid-century American mailbox. In the first, 'Erinn' relates the story of finding love with a man that she met playing *Fallout 76* (Bethesda Softworks, 2022a). In another, a 'Fallout superfan' narrates their own history with the franchise over 25 years, spending 'thousands of hours doing everything [they] could' and completing 100% of achievements across the series (Bethesda Softworks, 2022b). The final video emphasises the 'camaraderie of a vibrant post-nuclear community' – especially, in this case, retelling the story of a modder who was able to leverage his modding experience to professional game design for Bethesda, his 'dream job'. The latter includes visuals of an archetypical 1950s home with a white picket fence around it. At the end of the video, Vault Boy throws the letter from the fan into a miniature bank vault, locking it up, while the narrator assures that 'your story is in safe hands' (Bethesda Softworks, 2022c). This image fades into the same interstitial that is featured at the end of all videos, branding them as part of the 25th anniversary celebrations

and inviting fans to ‘share [...] favorite memories with #Fallout25.’ Bethesda here symbolically collected fan memories, using them to construct their own history of *Fallout*, presenting the videos in the customary pseudo-1950s aesthetic with their version of Vault Boy the custodian of their stories about interacting with the brand.

One of the most significant means through which Bethesda sought to (re)write *Fallout*’s history was a series of thirteen ‘Fallout Retrospective’ videos also published on Bethesda’s YouTube channel. These short clips feature interviews and behind-the-scenes footage with key development staff of the course of the series’ history: akin to the ‘Making of *Fallout 3*’ but offering a wider retrospective look at the franchise’s history. The videos are, again, a means of creating order from this complexity, and presenting Bethesda as both curator and gatekeeper of *Fallout*’s past and future.

The first video, ‘Conceiving *Fallout*’, provides deep background on the series’ origins. Feargus Urquhart (Division Director at Black Isle Studios; *FOI*), discusses the original team’s process trying to find the ‘special sauce’ that would make *Fallout* unique and original. Tim Cain and Leonard Boyarsky are both introduced as ‘co-creator’ of the *Fallout* series and provide similar insight into its early development; discussing, as the video’s description overviews, ‘the unique blend of influences that would go on to inform *Fallout*’s dark and retro-inspired take on the future and the excitement of creating a new universe for players to explore.’ Cain emphasises the series’ inbuilt, ‘morbidly funny’ humour, while Boyarsky shares his inspiration for adopting an ‘idealised 1950s future’ as a guiding aesthetic and vision for the world (Bethesda Softworks, 2022a). Likewise, Brian Fargo (*FO1*’s executive producer), discusses ‘the juxtaposition of the innocence of the 50s with the violence that was going on’, creating what Urquhart refers to as ‘this sense of comedic irony.’ From the outset, then, an imaginary of the American mid-century, and that period’s own imagined projections of the future, are portrayed as fundamental to the game’s very conception, and many of the

things that make it quintessentially *Fallout*. A particular historical memory image of this period is intertwined with the history of the series' origins, used as a means to narrativise *Fallout's* origins.

The first video only features commentary from the original development team. It thus pays deference to the series' origins, and particularly, the significance of figures like Tim Cain. But the series ultimately allows Bethesda to begin drawing a line underneath *FO1* and *FO2* (which were not made by them), casting themselves as creative visionaries and curators of *Fallout's* brand for the remaining twelve videos in the series. Key figures involved in 'conceiving' *Fallout* are only strategically deployed in later videos to affirm something that Bethesda is assumed to have done successfully with *Fallout's* legacy.

The second video, 'A New Generation', emphatically reaffirms this creative ownership, and does so by invoking and featuring Cain. This video is a marker of a significant transition point: as the video's description states, 'how the torch was passed as Bethesda Game Studios takes command of one of gaming's most beloved franchises' (Bethesda Softworks, 2022b). The video features key members of the Bethesda team '[sharing] their story of showing *Fallout 3* to *Fallout* creator Tim Cain.' It begins with Todd Howard (identified as 'Game Director: *Fallout 3*') expressing his joy and celebration when told '*Fallout's* yours.' Istvan Pely (*FO3's* Lead Artist) continues by expressing that 'it was a pretty big responsibility taking on such a beloved franchise, something that belonged to a different creative group, and personally I was pretty shocked at how well it was received.' Pete Hines (Senior Vice President for Global Marketing and Communications) then tells the story of *FO3's* debut at E3 in Santa Monica, and Howard's expressed need to 'make sure the *Fallout* guy [Cain] likes the *Fallout* that we're making.' Once again, we see the 'fanboy' currency at work as part of this baton-passing (Salter & Stanfill, 2020), particularly here from Cain to Howard (and Bethesda).

Howard continues this train of thought by positioning FO1 and FO2 as part of a ‘previous generation’ of RPGs. While characterising them as ‘fantastic’ and ‘perfect’ for their time, this clearly marks FO3 as part of the video’s titular ‘New Generation.’ Cain himself then shares his thoughts:

I kind of felt like my baby had been adopted by another family. And [...] it wasn’t so much that I didn’t like the family, it’s just my baby was going to be raised differently than how I would raise this baby. [...] And I just watched entranced, because I got to watch the opening cinematic, and then some gameplay. And it was Fallout, in first person, and it was mesmerising. It was immersive. It was incredible. [...] even when I saw the V.A.T.S. system, I’m like, ‘That is what our called-shot system would be like if you converted it to a first-person role-playing game.’ And it was great. [...] I especially loved when you actually got to leave the vault, and the light came up and you saw the Wasteland. And I was like, ‘I’m seeing Fallout in 3D’ (Bethesda Softworks, 2022b).

The video ends with Howard’s affirmation of *FO3*’s success ‘finding a large audience’ upon release, and how it managed to ‘scratch the same itch’ for fans of the first game, despite its different gameplay style. The video serves precisely the purpose its description promises: to draw a line under a ‘previous generation’ of *Fallout*, and code ensuing success as something owing as much to Bethesda (and significant creative executives like Howard) as to the series’ original creators. Almost 15 years after ‘The Making of Fallout 3’, the same kind of historicising and brand management discourse was still being used to mythologise Bethesda’s custody of the series, and their success at transplanting the original essence into a new format in an authentic way that was true to *Fallout*, doing so for a new generation of players.

Subsequent videos in the series offer behind-the-scenes insight into key design choices: the specific shade of green that was used for the iconic Pip-Boy display (Bethesda

Softworks, 2022c), the V.A.T.S. combat system (Bethesda Softworks, 2022d), and the soundtrack (Bethesda Softworks, 2022e). In all videos, the team at Bethesda discuss their attempts to remain faithful to elements of the design of *FO1* and *FO2* and transpose the inherent ‘feel’ of them into their own first-person RPG. Other videos marked significant points in Bethesda’s development of the franchise: the development of *New Vegas* by Obsidian Entertainment, and featuring extended commentary from lead developer Josh Sawyer (who is, again, cast as an anointed *Fallout* fan who could be trusted to do so) (Bethesda Softworks, 2022f); the ‘passion’ and ‘love’ key members of the Bethesda team have for the franchise (Bethesda Softworks, 2022g); and Bethesda’s experiences debuting *Fallout 4*, *Fallout Shelter*, and *Fallout 76* (Bethesda Softworks, 2022h; 2022i; 2022j).

Simultaneously, two other videos concentrated on the series’ historical inspirations. In ‘The American Dream?’, Howard stated that a central preoccupation of the franchise is ‘What happens to the American Dream, and when it can go bad’ (Bethesda Softworks, 2022k). The video features clips of various members of the development team relating their research and design process for *FO3*’s version of Washington DC, echoing over a decade later the kind of description of this process found in ‘The Making of *Fallout 3*.’ In another video simply subtitled ‘Boston’, Emil Pagliarulo shares personal insights and inspirations drawn from his childhood in the city, and how this influenced the design of certain game elements (e.g., specific buildings included in the downtown area). Istvan Pely also discusses the ‘New England flavour’ and ‘vibe’ Boston brought to the franchise, encapsulating, in Howard’s words, ‘that Americana, right? It’s the history of America there, and there’s so many great landmarks that you can use [...] it was a really good backdrop for the kinda things we wanted to do’ (Bethesda Softworks, 2022l). The voiceover quote accompanies photographs of historically significant buildings in Boston, and their eventual representation in *FO4*. The discussion of historical inspirations is superficial, befitting the short, bite-sized videos which

include highlights of presumably much longer interviews with key staff. But at this key juncture, such historical reference points were still being threaded through the way Bethesda were negotiating perceptions of their work on the franchise, demonstrating the currency of American History – or perhaps, more specifically, of a particular notion of ‘Americana,’ and ironic, satirical engagements with American culture and history that *Fallout* has long engaged with (Cutterham, 2013; November, 2013; McClancy 2018; Stang, 2021).

In sum, these commemorative promotional materials– spanning written and audiovisual formats– position Bethesda as the legitimate caretaker of this beloved brand, entrusted with its safekeeping and the development of worthy *Fallout* game experiences. Indeed, the final video in Bethesda’s anniversary series marked another franchise milestone: taking *Fallout* ‘Beyond the Game.’

Priming *Fallout* for Television

The *Fallout* brand was licensed to Amazon Studios in 2020, making way for the development of the television series that premiered on Prime Video in 2024 (Bethesda Softworks, 2020), to overwhelming critical acclaim and positive fan reception (Freire-Sánchez et al., 2024, p. 3). Bethesda’s ‘Beyond the Game’ Retrospective video was dedicated largely to *Fallout*’s televisual future, hinting at the work that was already happening to develop the series. This video represents a key point of departure wherein Bethesda sought to claim significant credit for the look and feel of *Fallout*, and how this was being honoured on television. Istvan Pely emphasised Bethesda’s work as the blueprint for the television production team:

I’ve actually been blown away by how much they’ve stuck with *our original visions* and design [...] *our worldbuilding in the games*, directly translating that to the screen [...] it’s reassuring that well, we got it right the first time. Like our

approach to *Fallout* was correct, and it is the way forward, even making the jump to another medium (Bethesda Softworks, 2022m; my emphasis).

Comments such as these seek to reaffirm that it is *Bethesda's* work on the series that has enabled *Fallout's* development in this way. Significantly, Tim Cain features in the video directly before Pely, noting 'I'm glad that something, an IP that I helped make has grown and has turned into this franchise.' But this quote merely serves as a necessary and brief hat-tip to the original creator, who is not given much airtime overall. Rather, the aesthetic and feel of Bethesda's design is centred.

Moreover, key figures like Todd Howard are afforded significant status as creative leads who have the power to dictate the series' future. For example, at the end of 'Beyond the Game,' Howard claims that one of the people that he'd always wanted to entrust with a *Fallout* series was writer-director-showrunner Jonathan Nolan, as a fan of his previous film and television work (including namechecking *Westworld* [2016-2022]). He describes a conversation in which he discovered that Nolan was also already 'a big fan' of the series, affording the same sort of 'fan' currency and status as Bethesda creatives attempted when they took over the franchise and discussed this process in both 'The Making of *Fallout 3*' and previous anniversary videos. The video ends after it cuts away to an interview with Nolan, and it becomes clear that he is on set with production underway:

Interviewer: Can you tell us a little bit about *Fallout*?

Nolan: *Fallout*?

Interviewer: *Fallout*, the video game.

Nolan: I love video games. I'm not familiar with the *Fallout*. Tell me a little bit about it. [*someone in a suit of Brotherhood of Steel Power Armour hands him a bottle of Nuka Cola from just out of shot*] Thanks, Adam.

Interviewer: it's a video game. The 25th anniversary is coming up in October.

Nolan: Fallout! Fallout, yes. The post-apocalyptic, humorous, dark, bleak, brilliantly written, annoyingly playable, video game franchise

Interviewer: Yeah, how did you get involved?

Nolan: Well, several years ago I decided I was going to write the next great American novel, and then a friend gave me a copy of Fallout 3. And now I'm working in television (Bethesda Softworks, 2022m).

In addition to showing the kind of work that had already been done to capture certain icons of the brand – the wasteland setting, the power armour, Nuka Cola – the video also casts Howard (gaming fanboy-auteur) against Jonathan Nolan (television fanboy-auteur), as the men who can be trusted to lead the franchise into its (televisual) future.

Social media was also a key site through which Bethesda constructed an image of the new *Fallout* show and what it would be relative to their own version of the franchise, and its history, with promotion ramping up in early 2024 ahead of the show's April 10th premiere. For example, on 5th April, a video called 'Fallout – From Console to Camera' was cross-posted to the Bethesda Instagram account and YouTube channel (Fallout, 2024; Bethesda Softworks, 2024). The behind-the-scenes style video intercuts commentary from key Bethesda staff and those involved in the television series, both in front of and behind the camera. Significantly, the video opens with a comment from Howard: 'In games we say, "try to sweat every pixel." They're sweating every pixel on this show. Like the games, the show is another instalment in the world of Fallout.' (Fallout, 2024). This is followed up by series executive producer James Altman's statement that 'For the fans, it's going to be about fidelity of Fallout,' before cutting back to Howard who affirms that '[e]verybody working on it, their attention to detail, and love of it, and wanting to get it right, it's authentic to the world of Fallout.' Short clips of the lead actors are featured next: Aaron Moten, who plays Brotherhood of Steel squire Maximus, references various creatures, weapons and machinery

that have made their way into the series, stating that ‘it really is the real-life version of *Fallout*.’ Ella Purnell, who plays former vault-dweller Lucy, claims that ‘[e]very detail, so precise, so well-thought out. Just like the game’ (Bethesda Softworks, 2024).

Every piece to camera within this short video illustrates the care and attention that has been taken to transpose the essence of *Fallout* from games to television, assuring fans that the show will share its fundamental quality. The transmedia brand image of *Fallout* is consciously stitched together. Howard is positioned to pass the torch (including in his role as Executive Producer on the series), explicitly affirming that what they have created is *authentic to Fallout*—and *Bethesda’s Fallout*, at that. Such is the success of this branding on Howard/Bethesda’s part that academic analyses of the adaption have affirmed the claim that the series should be seen as a new instalment of the franchise, but with its own independent narrative (Freire-Sánchez et al., 2024, p. 10).

Yet while these campaigns were designed to navigate *Fallout*’s (transmedia) present and future, Bethesda simultaneously curated a particular image of the franchise’s past. Around the same time, posts started appearing on their Instagram account foregrounding elements of the history of *Fallout*: brand new for the account and posted frequently over the next eighteen months. This represents a concerted campaign to retell the history of *Fallout* by Bethesda, as curators of the franchise’s past, present and future.

Between 5th January 2024 and 17th June 2025, 136 Instagram posts chronicled key moments of *Fallout*’s history, representing approximately one-fifth of the total posts (749) that appeared during this period. There were three distinct discernible series. One celebrated anniversaries of significant franchise instalments (7). Another encompassed reels showcasing the change over time of specific in game elements (e.g., the design of the Vault Boy character; the inclusion of dogs as companions; 2). But the largest and most significant series of posts (127) was designed around screenshots of various instalments, memorialising notable

elements of the history of *Fallout*'s world. These posts included an illustrative screenshot from a given *Fallout* game, surrounded by a light blue border with the Vault-Tec logo below. The caption included a few lines of context interpreting the subject matter's significance to the franchise's history (figure 1).

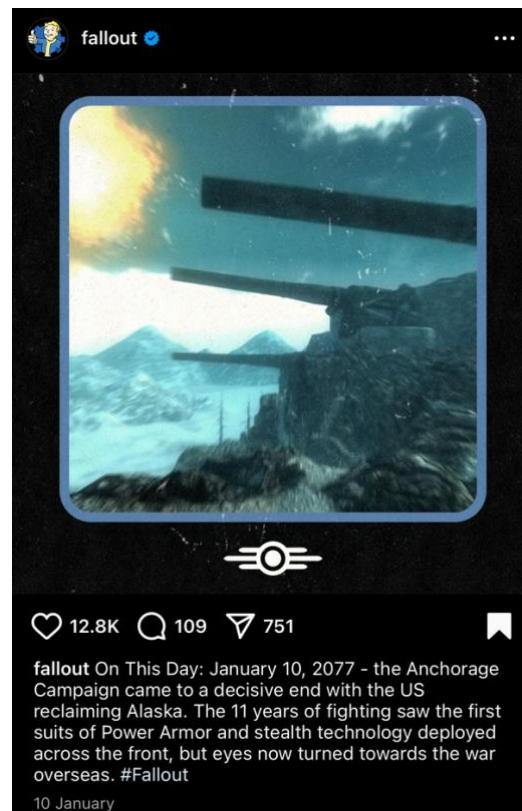


Figure 1. A post from 10 January 2025, with a caption identifying the significance of the Anchorage Campaign of 2077 to *Fallout*'s alternate history (Fallout, 2025).

The posts drew attention to alternate-historically-significant *locations* (41), *characters* (34), *factions, groups or communities* (25), numerous examples of a (fictional but in-world) *company or brand* (e.g., Vault-Tec or RobCo; 11), *events* of significance to *Fallout*'s overarching narrative (8), and *items* players may interact with (e.g., stimpacks; the Pip-Boy) (8). Most of the screenshots used to illustrate the posts were taken from games since *FO3*

(100), rather than *FO1* and *FO2* (27), even if the subject matter of the post spanned the franchise as a whole.

Ultimately, running alongside the promotion of the *Fallout* television show, and continuing after it aired, a significant number of Bethesda's social media posts leveraged a cohesive history of the franchise, and *Fallout's* world. Though it spans many creators, studios, and different styles of game, Bethesda chose to highlight elements that they deemed the most important, historicising *Fallout's* complex in-world narrative in a way that sets limits on this for existing and new players/viewers alike. It is an attempt to brand *Fallout's* lore as their own at this formative point, as custodians who can pay fan service to notable moments from *FO1* (externally developed) as much as they might *Fallout 76* (Bethesda-developed). The Instagram posts allowed the studio to tell a particular history of *Fallout*, authored by them. That is, Bethesda collapsed, repackaged and claimed the whole history of *Fallout*, so that their version of the brand is perceived as the authentic reference point for its future transmedia incarnations: on television or otherwise.

Conclusions: *Fallout's* Layered Histories

From the very earliest attempts to tell the story of *FO3's* development, through the 25th anniversary of the franchise and recent transmedia developments, the histories of Bethesda, of *Fallout*, and of mid-century America have been intertwined to manage expectations (and the reception) of the studio's contributions to the franchise. Key brand themes have echoed across decades, attempts to seamlessly graft Bethesda's interpretation of the franchise onto an established history of beloved games, despite its tumultuous development history. Here, the history of mid-century America becomes a throughline, allowing Bethesda to make claims that their own products are faithful not only to a particular imaginary of this period, but also

faithful to what the original *Fallout* games had already done to incorporate and remediate this imaginary in the initial instalments of the franchise.

As Sierra writes, ‘Bethesda took inspiration from many of the original game systems in the *Fallout* series, but moulded them to fit Bethesda’s vision of the series. While some of these changes were controversial, there can be no denying that *Fallout 3* was both a critical and a commercial success’ (2021, p. 23). This article has examined the ways Bethesda documented and negotiated this process paratextually, attempting to convince players that *their Fallout* was still authentically *Fallout*. Adopting a kind of ‘promotional authorship’ (Hadas, 2020) guided prospective players in navigating *Fallout*’s complexities and making sense of them in a way that Bethesda themselves designed and managed. These paratexts therefore operate both at ‘portals’ into *Fallout*’s world and allow Bethesda to ‘police’ the brand’s boundaries (Aronczyk, 2017).

Given the transmedia expansion of *Fallout* into television, and the way such promotional practices for the games have been used to sell the show too, these findings also have wider implications for the marketing of historical media beyond simply games. Using Bethesda and *Fallout* as a case study here helps us to see that the history of and in games (and other media forms) are intertwined. Accounting for the work of paratexts to (re)write and manage these branded (hi)stories requires thus significant further attention in future.

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