

Past Stories and Future Worlds: History and Popular Imagination in *Fallout 4*

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INTRODUCTION

Writing in *Digital Games as History*, Adam Chapman remarks that, “digital games, in a way quite unlike conventional historical forms, open up the story space to shared authorship... the historical narrative produced in these games is always produced by the actions of both the developer-historian and the player” (Chapman 2016, 34). This framing of the historical video game as distinct from other historical forms, in that it necessitates intervention and action on the part of the player, is helpful in beginning to explore the terrain of this genre and its possibilities for the discipline. In light of this, the purpose of this analysis of the videogame *Fallout 4* is twofold. First, I am interested in the ways that *Fallout 4* employs history and the genre of the counterfactual in the production of a compelling narrative that not only invites but also compels the player into action to chart a new course for this devastated virtual landscape. And second, I am interested in the possibilities for *learning* that may unfold through user interaction with this story. This is not simply a question of what *Fallout 4* can teach a user about American history or Cold War sentimentality; but rather, how, through interactive gameplay, *Fallout 4* challenges the player’s assumption of what history is, how it is told, who tells it, and for what purpose. Or, more simply put, what I refer to broadly as historical knowledge production, and its ideological implications. Set in the post-apocalyptic landscape of Massachusetts, *Fallout 4* unfolds in a variety of historical sites in Massachusetts (Concord, Lexington, Boston), which serve to anchor the main story while simultaneously grounding a sense of optimism for the future in the tradition of ‘the American spirit.’ At the same time, these virtual-historical landmarks and storylines reveal the major tension at work in the game, one between the hopeful optimism associated with forging a new path forward and utter despair at the state this future world. That is, between a belief in the power of American tradition weighted against the reality of death, destruction and loss that constantly bombard the screen from every angle. At one and the same time then, the game combines real historical elements with a fictionalized reimagining of the outcome of the Cold War (the ‘Cold’ War goes hot) to present a critical rereading of Cold War experiences. The power of counterfactual history lies in its capacity to unravel assumptions about the static nature of historical events, and in its denial of a linear trajectory of history broadly. In essence, the counterfactual upends conventional and popular presentations of history and problematizes attempts to establish

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a ‘narrative neatness’ in representations of past events. In *Fallout 4*, counterfactual storytelling is used to throw out novel assumptions about mid-twentieth century culture and look instead at other possible outcomes, had history unfolded in a different way. Admittedly, the game does this by remaining broad in its treatment of mid-century panic and optimism, though this renders the presentation no less effective to the player, for whom it becomes evident early that *both* optimism and fear are what form the sentiment in this moment. Outside of the game world, in the post Cold War era, the narrative that popular history latched onto quickly became one of capitalist (and American) domination over Communism, where the outcome was always clear and a dominant culture emerged on the basis of the supremacy of that unique brand of American consumerism. In providing an alternative future landscape, *Fallout 4* throws into sharp relief the reality of the anxieties that are true to this time, and denies the revision of history (in popular imagination) to suit capitalist economic and geopolitical interests. This conflicting presentation of histories both real and imagined provides an opportunity for the player to experience and interact with the game critically as a counterfactual reimagining of the Cold War era. The player traverses a virtual space in *Fallout 4* that is freighted with arguments about capitalist excess, the doctrine of militarism, the uses of violence and the place of historical narrative, all complicated through the lens of the counterfactual. A future world is constructed out of a popular historical consciousness regarding what the future might have looked like (both if the Cold War went hot, and in terms of technological innovations like servant robots and nuclear powered cars). As a consequence, this game challenges conventional historical narratives about the Cold War by providing a space for the player to reassess their own understanding of the period, and the nature of historical knowledge production more broadly.

OPTIONAL BIO

I am a PhD candidate in the Communication and Culture program at York University in Toronto, Canada. My research looks at digital historical games and their potential uses in education. In particular, I am interested in those games that provide their players with an opportunity to ask and address critical questions about the formal styles of historical representation, historical legitimacy, authorship, positionality and ideology. My research aims to bring together work done on digital historical games as well as hands-on studies done on game-based learning to investigate questions posed by digital historical games scholars by conducting participant-based research.

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