

Surviving *Fallout 4*: A Design Fiction

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ABSTRACT

For many people in the so-called developed (industrial) world, it's hard to imagine a world of true scarcity within our present context of relative abundance. The fundamental assumptions of neoliberalism and late-stage capitalism require continuous economic growth, and continuous resource consumption at the industrial scale. This same need to consume is mirrored in America's "consumer culture" at the household and individual scales. This behavior is unsustainable, but it is implicated within massive socio-political structures that rob individuals of any meaningful agency while eliding the real and impending consequences of human activity on our climate, food networks, and water supply (IPCC 2014). Looking into the potential future that arises from our continued inability to check our own expansion and consumption of resources, we can imagine a world with limited food supplies, unpredictable and extreme weather, mass extinctions, and the collapse of global infrastructures. In such a world, people might band together within factional and nomadic pseudo-tribal social structures, or take up arms to prey upon the unwary, all while eking out survival as parasites and scavengers, reappropriating the technological remnants of industrial society. Such is the case in the simulated post-apocalyptic wasteland of *Fallout 4* (Bethesda Game Studios 2015). In this talk we present an analysis of *Fallout 4* from the perspective of real-world survivalist practices. We argue that *Fallout 4* can be seen as a compelling vision for a likely and proximal future, and that the activities that it supports have implications for how we understand sustainable practices and emergency preparedness in the face of our current environmental crisis.

Engagement with game worlds can produce complex player engagements that often extend beyond the boundaries of the simulation. We see this in fan-production practices such as cosplay, fanfiction, role playing, and game-"modding" (Jenkins 2012). These worlds are compelling, so what can we do with them?

Fallout 4 is set in an alternative-future version of Boston, Massachusetts in the years following 2077. The world is much akin to our own, save for a historical and technological development timeline that begins to diverge sometime around 1945.

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Namely, breakthroughs in miniaturization of nuclear reactor technology lead to pervasive utilization in a variety of common products (cars, radios, firearms) in spite of the lack of miniaturized electronics through advanced transistors. The cultural ethos of the world is characterized by widespread faith in the relentless pursuit of technological progress as the only means to a better future. However, this ideology leads to rapid depletion of natural resources resulting in geopolitical tensions that culminate in total destruction of contemporary civilization through nuclear war.

The world of *Fallout 4* is believable and plausible (in spite of the presence of functioning anthropomorphic robots built before the war engaged in autonomous tasks). The developers achieved this partially through a detail oriented design process in which they explored what it would truly take to produce each product/artifact/structure (Bethesda Softworks 2015). Concrete examples of the results include: shacks with rain barrels and realistic water pumping mechanisms; a settlement system that is consistent across NPCs and the player character including temporal aspects of food, water, shelter, defense, social communities, and especially reappropriation and crafting practices. All of this falls under a general banner of realistic survivalist practice. Therefore within *Fallout 4*, we may speculate through play what it might mean to survive in a world of scarcity and the implications of such a reality. Inhabitants are faced with chaotic political structures, ambient radiation with limited medication and aid, scarcity of information infrastructures, the troubling role of children, and reappropriating the ideas, histories, and artifacts from the decontextualized remains of the previous civilizational epoch. These dimensions form the components for a rich, believable, complex world that can serve as a “rehearsal space” for survivalist practices and sustainable behaviors.

In this sense, *Fallout 4* acts as a form of *design fiction*, by articulating a vision of a compelling proximate future that makes an argument through simulated techno-social infrastructures. Design fiction is a term initially coined by Bruce Sterling, and more recently adopted within the HCI community as a strategy for more explicitly attending to the feedback loop between fictional imagined futures and actual technology design (Bosch and Sterling 2012; Linehan et al. 2014; Tanenbaum 2014). As a design fiction, *Fallout 4* creates an opportunity for players to experience the potential – apocalyptic – consequences of current unsustainable human activity in a context that isn’t moralistic, or pedantic. In this talk we will present several examples of our own attempts at embodying sustainable practices and survivalist ethos within the world of *Fallout 4* to explore how it embodies dystopian and apocalyptic rhetorics.

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