

TOM BISSELL

*Extra Lives:  
Why Video Games Matter*

SOMEDAY MY CHILDREN WILL ASK ME where I was and what I was doing when the United States elected its first black president. I could tell my children—who are entirely hypothetical; call them Kermit and Hussein<sup>1</sup>—that I was home at the time and, like hundreds of millions of other Americans, watching television. This would be a politician's answer, which is to say, factual but inaccurate in every important detail. Because Kermit and Hussein deserve an honestly itemized answer, I will tell them that, on November 4, 2008, their father was living in Tallinn, Estonia, where the American Election Day's waning hours were a cold, salmon-skied November 5 morning. My intention that day was to watch CNN International until the race was called. I will then be forced to tell Kermit and Hussein about what else happened on November 4, 2008.

The postapocalyptic video game *Fallout 3* had been officially released to the European market on October 30, but in Estonia it was nowhere to be found. For several weeks, Bethesda Softworks, *Fallout 3*'s developer, had been posting online a series of promotional gameplay videos, which I had been watching and rewatching with fetish-porn avidity. I left word with Tallinn's best game store: *Call me the moment Fallout 3 arrives*. In the late afternoon of November 4, they finally rang. When I slipped the game into the tray of my Xbox 360, the first polls were due to close in America in two hours. One hour of *Fallout 3*, I told myself. Maybe two. Absolutely no more than three. Seven hours later, blinking and dazed, I turned off my Xbox 360, checked in with CNN, and discovered that the acceptance speech had already been given.

And so, my beloved Kermit, my dear little Hussein, at the moment America changed forever, your father was wandering an ICBM<sup>2</sup>-denuded wasteland, nervously monitoring his radiation level, armed only with a baseball bat, a 10mm pistol, and six rounds of ammunition, in search of a vicious gang of mohawked marauders who were 100 percent bad news and totally had to be dealt with. Trust Daddy on this one.

*This essay is taken from a chapter of Tom Bissell's book Extra Lives: Why Video Games Matter (2010). In addition to being an author and journalist, Bissell is an avid gamer who has written scripts for several video games.*

1. Kermit, name of a son, grandson, and great-grandson of President Theodore Roosevelt (1858–1919), now associated with Kermit the Frog, a puppet created by Jim Henson (1936–1990); Hussein, name that recalls Saddam Hussein (1937–2006), the president of Iraq who was deposed near the beginning of the Iraq War (2003–2011) and subsequently executed; also the middle name of Barack Hussein Obama (b. 1961), forty-fourth president of the United States.

2. Intercontinental Ballistic Missile.



*Fallout 3* poster promoting the game's release.

*Fallout 3* was Bethesda's first release since 2006's *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*. Both games fall within a genre known by various names: the open-world or sandbox or free-roaming game. This genre is superintended by a few general conventions, which include the sensation of being inside a large and disinterestedly functioning world, a main story line that can be abandoned for subordinate story lines (or for no purpose at all), large numbers of supporting characters with whom meaningful interaction is possible, and the ability to customize (or pimp, in the parlance of our time) the game's player-controlled central character. The pleasures of the open-world game are ample, complicated, and intensely private; their potency is difficult to explain, sort of like religion, of which these games become, for many, an aspartame form. Because of the freedom they grant gamers, the narrative- and mission-generating manner in which they reward exploration, and their convincing illusion of endlessness, the best open-world games tend to become leisure-time-eating viruses. As incomprehensible as it may seem, I have somehow spent more than two hundred hours playing *Oblivion*. I know this because the game keeps a running tally of the total time one has spent with it.

It is difficult to describe *Oblivion* without atavistic fears of being savaged by the same jean-jacketed dullards who in 1985 threw my *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Monster Manual II* into Lake Michigan (That I did not even play D&D, and only had the book because I liked to look at the pictures, left my assailants unmoved.) As to what *Oblivion* is about, I note the involvement of orcs and a "summon skeleton" spell and leave it at that. So: two hundred hours playing *Oblivion*? How is that even possible? I am not actually sure. Completing the game's narrative missions took a fraction of that time, but in the world of

*Oblivion* you can also pick flowers, explore caves, dive for treasure, buy houses, bet on gladiatorial arena fights, hunt bear, and read books. *Oblivion* is less a game than a world that best rewards full citizenship, and for a while I lived there and claimed it. At the time I was residing in Rome on a highly coveted literary fellowship, surrounded by interesting and brilliant people, and quite naturally mired in a lagoon of depression more dreadfully lush than any before or since. I would be lying if I said *Oblivion* did not, in some ways, aggravate my depression, but it also gave me something with which to fill my days other than piranhic self-hatred. It was an extra life; I am grateful to have had it.

When Bethesda announced that it had purchased the rights to develop *Fallout 3* from the defunct studio Interplay, the creators of the first two *Fallout* games, many were doubtful. How would the elvish imaginations behind *Oblivion* manage with the rather different milieu of an annihilated twenty-third-century America? The first *Fallout* games, which were exclusive to the personal computer, were celebrated for their clever satire and often freakishly exaggerated violence. *Oblivion* is about as satirical as a colonoscopy, and the fighting in the game, while not unviolent, is often weirdly inert.

Bethesda released *Fallout 3*'s first gameplay video in the summer of 2008. In it, Todd Howard, the game's producer, guides the player-controlled character into a disorientingly nuked Washington, D.C., graced with just enough ravaged familiarities—among which a pummeled Washington Monument stands out—to be powerfully unsettling. Based on these few minutes, *Fallout 3* appeared guaranteed to take its place among the most visually impressive games ever made. When Bethesda posted a video showcasing *Fallout 3*'s in-game combat—a brilliant synthesis of trigger-happy first-person-style shooting and the more deliberative, turn-based tactics of the traditional role-playing video game, wherein you attack, suffer your enemy's counterattack, counterattack yourself, and so on, until one of you is dead—many could not believe the audacity of its cartoon-Peckinpah<sup>3</sup> violence. Much of it was rendered in a slo-mo as disgusting as it was oddly beautiful: skulls exploding into the distinct flotsam of eyeballs, gray matter, and upper vertebrae; limbs liquefying into constellations of red pearls; torsos somersaulting through the air. The consensus was a bonfire of the skepticisms:<sup>4</sup> *Fallout 3* was going to be fucking awesome.

Needless to say, the first seven hours I spent with the game were distinguished by a bounty of salutary things. Foremost among them was how the world of *Fallout 3* looked. The art direction in a good number of contemporary big-budget video games has the cheerful parasitism of a tribute band. Visual inspirations are perilously few: Forests will be Tolkienishly<sup>5</sup> enchanted; futuristic industrial zones will be mazes of predictably grated metal catwalks; gun-fights will erupt amid rubble- and car-strewn boulevards on loan from a thousand

3. Sam Peckinpah (1925–1984), American film director and screenwriter known for his violent Westerns.

4. Allusion to “bonfire of the vanities,” a term for the burning of items deemed sinful by religious authorities.

5. Allusion to J. R. R. Tolkien (1892–1973), British philologist and fantasy writer.



The player-controlled character of *Fallout 3* in a futuristic Washington, D.C.

war-movie sieges. Once video games shed their distinctive vector-graphic and primary-color 8-bit origins, a commercially ascendant subset of game slowly but surely matured into what might well be the most visually derivative popular art form in history. *Fallout 3* is the rare big-budget game to begin rather than end with its derivativeness.

It opens in 2277, two centuries after a nuclear conflagration between the United States and China. Chronologically speaking, the world this Sino-American war destroyed was of late-twenty-first-century vintage, and yet its ruins are those of the gee-whiz futurism popular during the Cold War. *Fallout 3*'s Slinky-armed sentry Protectrons, for instance, are knowing plagiarisms of *Forbidden Planet*'s Robby the Robot,<sup>6</sup> and the game's many specimens of faded prewar advertising mimic the nascent slickness of 1950s-era graphic design. *Fallout 3* bravely takes as its aesthetic foundation a future that is both six decades old and one of the least convincing ever conceptualized. The result is a fascinating past-future never-never-land weirdness that infects the game's every corner: *George Jetson Beyond Thunderdome*.<sup>7</sup>

What also impressed me about *Fallout 3* was the buffet of choices set out by its early stages. The first settlement one happens upon, Megaton, has been built around an undetonated nuclear warhead, which a strange religious cult

6. Multilingual robotic hero first introduced in the science-fiction film *Forbidden Planet* (1956).

7. Never-never-land, allusion to Neverland, island home of the fictional character Peter Pan; George Jetson, allusion to Neverland, island home of the fictional character Peter Pan; George Jetson, father of a futuristic family in the cartoon *The Jetsons* (1962–1963); *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome* (1985), sequel to the postapocalyptic Australian film *Mad Max* (1979).

native to the town actually worships. Megaton can serve as base of operations or be wiped off the face of the map shortly after one's arrival there by detonating its nuke in exchange for a handsome payment. I spent quite a while poking around Megaton and getting to know its many citizens. What this means is that the first several hours I spent inside *Fallout 3* were, in essence, optional. Even for an open-world game, this suggests an awesome range of narrative variability. (Eventually, of course, I made the time to go back and nuke the place.)

*Fallout 3*, finally, looks beautiful. Most modern games—even shitty ones—look beautiful. Taking note of this is akin to telling the chef of a Michelin-starred restaurant that the tablecloths were lovely. Nonetheless, at one point in *Fallout 3* I was running up the stairs of what used to be the Dupont Circle Metro station and, as I turned to bash in the brainpan of a radioactive ghoul, noticed the playful, lifelike way in which the high-noon sunlight streaked along the grain of my sledgehammer's wooden handle. During such moments, it is hard not to be startled—even moved—by the care poured into the game's smallest atmospheric details.

Despite all this, I had problems with *Fallout 3*, and a number of these problems seem to me emblematic of the intersection at which games in general currently find themselves stalled. Take, for instance, *Fallout 3*'s tutorial. One feels for game designers: It would be hard to imagine a formal convention more inherently bizarre than the video-game tutorial. Imagine that, every time you open a novel, you are forced to suffer through a chapter in which the characters do nothing but talk to one another about the physical mechanics of how one goes about reading a book. Unfortunately, game designers do not really have a choice. Controller schemas change, sometimes drastically, from game to game, and designers cannot simply banish a game's relevant instructions to a directional booklet: That would be a violation of the interactive pact between game and gamer. Many games thus have to come up with a narratively plausible way in which one's controlled character engages in activity comprehensive enough to be instructive but not so intense as to involve a lot of failure. Games with a strong element of combat almost always solve this dilemma by opening with some sort of indifferently conceived boot-camp exercise or training round.

*Fallout 3*'s tutorial opens, rather more ambitiously, with your character's birth, during which you pick your race and gender (if given the choice, I always opt for a woman, for whatever reason) and design your eventual appearance (probably this is the reason). The character who pulls you from your mother's birth canal is your father, whose voice is provided by Liam Neeson.<sup>8</sup> (Many games attempt to class themselves up with early appearances by accomplished actors; Patrick Stewart's<sup>9</sup> platinum larynx served this purpose in *Oblivion*.) Now, aspects of *Fallout 3*'s tutorial are brilliant: When you learn to walk as a baby, you are actually learning how to move within the game; you decide

8. Irish film actor (b. 1952).

9. English stage, TV, and film actor (b. 1940).

whether you want your character to be primarily strong, intelligent, or charismatic by reading a children's book; and, when the tutorial flashes forward to your tenth birthday party, you learn to fire weapons when you receive a BB gun as a gift. The tutorial flashes forward again, this time to a high school classroom, where you further define your character by answering ten aptitude-test-style questions. What is interesting about this is that it allows you to customize your character *indirectly* rather than directly, and many of the questions (one asks what you would do if your grandmother ordered you to kill someone) are morbidly amusing. While using an in-game aptitude test as a character-design aid is not exactly a new innovation, *Fallout 3* provides the most streamlined, narratively economical, and interactively inventive go at it yet.

By the time I was taking this aptitude test, however, I was a dissident citizen of Vault 101, the isolated underground society in which *Fallout 3* proper begins. My revolt was directed at a few things. The first was *Fallout 3*'s dialogue, some of it so appalling ("Oh, James, we did it. A daughter. Our beautiful daughter") as to make Stephenie Meyer look like Ibsen.<sup>10</sup> The second was *Fallout 3*'s addiction to trust-shattering storytelling redundancy, such as when your father announces, "I can't believe you're already ten," at what is clearly established as your tenth birthday party. The third, and least forgivable, was *Fallout 3*'s Jell-O-mold characterization: In the game's first ten minutes you exchange gossip with the spunky best friend, cower beneath the megalomaniacal leader, and gain the trust of the goodhearted cop. Vault 101 even has a resident cadre of hoodlums, the Tunnel Snakes, whose capo resembles a malevolent Fonz.<sup>11</sup> Even with its backdrop of realized Cold War futurism, a greaser-style youth gang in an underground vault society in the year 2277 is the working definition of a dumb idea. During the tutorial's final sequence, the Tunnel Snakes' leader, your tormentor since childhood, requests your help in saving his mother from radioactive cockroaches (long story), a reversal of such tofu drama that, in my annoyance, I killed him, his mother, and then everyone else I could find in Vault 101, with the most perversely satisfying weapon I had on hand: a baseball bat. Allowing your decisions to establish for your character an in-game identity as a skull-crushing monster, a saint of patience, or some mixture thereof is another attractive feature of *Fallout 3*. These pretensions to morality, though, suddenly bored me, because they were occurring in a universe that had been designed by geniuses and written by Ed Wood Jr.<sup>12</sup>

Had I really waited a year for this? And was I really missing a cardinal event in American history to keep playing it? I had, and I was, and I could not really explain why.

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10. Meyer (b. 1973), young-adult fiction writer and author of the *Twilight* series of vampire romance novels (2005–2008); Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906), Norwegian playwright, considered by many to have revolutionized modern drama.

11. Nickname of Arthur Fonzarelli, a character in the TV sitcom *Happy Days* (1974–1984).

12. American director (1924–1978) of "B" movies such as *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (1958) and known among his cult following as the "worst director of all time."

What I know is this: If I were reading a book or watching a film that, every ten minutes, had me gulping a gallon of aesthetic Pepto, I would stop reading or watching. Games, for some reason, do not have this problem. Or rather, their problem is not having this problem. I routinely tolerate in games crudities I would never tolerate in any other form of art or entertainment. For a long time my rationalization was that, provided a game was fun to play, certain failures could be overlooked. I came to accept that games were generally incompetent with almost every aspect of what I would call traditional narrative. In the last few years, however, a dilemma has become obvious. Games have grown immensely sophisticated in any number of ways while at the same time remaining stubbornly attached to aspects of traditional narrative for which they have shown little feeling. Too many games insist on telling stories in a manner in which some facility with plot and character is fundamental to—and often even determinative of—successful storytelling.

The counterargument to all this is that games such as *Fallout 3* are more about the world in which the game takes place than the story concocted to govern one's progress through it. It is a fair point, especially given how beautifully devastated and hypnotically lonely the world of *Fallout 3* is. But if the world is paramount, why bother with a story at all? Why not simply cut the ribbon on the invented world and let gamers explore it? The answer is that such a game would probably not be very involving. Traps, after all, need bait. In a narrative game, story and world combine to create an experience. As the game designer Jesse Schell writes in *The Art of Game Design*, "The game is not the experience. The game enables the experience, but it is not the experience." In a world as large as that of *Fallout 3*, which allows for an experience framed in terms of wandering and lonesomeness, story provides, if nothing else, badly needed direction and purpose. Unless some narrative game comes along that radically changes gamer expectation, stories, with or without Super Mutants, will continue to be what many games will use to harness their uniquely extravagant brand of fictional absorption.

I say this in full disclosure: The games that interest me the most are the games that choose to tell stories. Yes, video games have always told some form of story. *PLUMBER'S GIRLFRIEND CAPTURED BY APE!*<sup>13</sup> is a story, but it is a rudimentary fairytale story without any of the proper fairytale's evocative nuances and dreads. Games are often compared to films, which would seem to make sense, given their many apparent similarities (both are scored, both have actors, both are cinematographical, and so on). Upon close inspection comparison falls leprously apart. In terms of storytelling, they could not be more different. Films favor a compressed type of storytelling and are able to do this because they have someone deciding where to point the camera. Games, on the other hand, contain more than most gamers can ever hope to see, and the person deciding where to point the camera is, in many cases, you—and you might never even see the "best part." The best part of looking up at a night sky, after all, is not

13. Allusion to *Donkey Kong*, an arcade game introduced in 1981 that is credited with introducing storytelling to video games.

any one star but the infinite possibility of what is between stars. Games often provide an approximation of this feeling, with the difference that you can find out what is out there. Teeming with secrets, hidden areas, and surprises that may pounce only on the second or third (or fourth) playthrough—I still laugh to think of the time I made it to an isolated, hard-to-find corner of *Fallout 3*'s Wasteland and was greeted by the words FUCK YOU spray-painted on a rock—video games favor a form of storytelling that is, in many ways, completely unprecedented. The conventions of this form of storytelling are only a few decades old and were created in a formal vacuum by men and women who still walk among us. There are not many mediums whose Dantes and Homers one can ring up and talk to.<sup>14</sup> With games, one can.

I am uninterested in whether games are better or worse than movies or novels or any other form of entertainment. More interesting to me is what games *can* do and how they make me feel while they are doing it. Comparing games to other forms of entertainment only serves as a reminder of what games are not. Storytelling, however, does not belong to film any more than it belongs to the novel. Film, novels, and video games are separate economies in which storytelling is the currency. The problem is that video-game storytelling, across a wide spectrum of games, too often feels counterfeit, and it is easy to tire of laundering the bills.

It should be said that *Fallout 3* gets much better as you play through it. A few of its set pieces (such as stealing the Declaration of Independence from a ruined National Archives, which is protected by a bewigged robot programmed to believe itself to be Button Gwinnett,<sup>15</sup> the Declaration's second signatory) are as gripping as any fiction I have come across. But it cannot be a coincidence that every scene involving human emotion (confronting a mind-wiped android who believes he is human, watching as a character close to you suffocates and dies) is at best unaffecting and at worst risible. Can it really be a surprise that deeper human motivations remain beyond the reach of something that regards character as the assignation of numerical values to hypothetical abilities and characteristics?

Viewed as a whole, *Fallout 3* is a game of profound stylishness, sophistication, and intelligence—so much so that every example of Etch A Sketch<sup>16</sup> characterization, every stone-shoed narrative pivot, pains me. When we say a game is sophisticated, are we grading on a distressingly steep curve? Or do we need a new curve altogether? Might we really mean that the game in question only occasionally insults one's intelligence? Or is this kind of intelligence, at least when it comes to playing games, beside the point? How is it, finally, that I keep returning to a form of entertainment that I find so uniquely frustrating? To what part of me do games speak, and on which frequency?

14. Dante Alighieri (1265–1321), Italian poet who wrote the *Divine Comedy*; Homer (unknown), ancient Greek poet to whom the epics the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are traditionally attributed.

15. Georgia delegate (1735–1777) to the Second Continental Congress in Philadelphia.

16. Iconic drawing toy.



## MLA CITATION

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## QUESTIONS

1. A common objection to video games is that they encourage violence. How do you think Tom Bissell would respond to this objection? How does he treat violence in his essay?
2. Bissell asserts, "The pleasures of the open-world game are ample, complicated, and intensely private; their potency is difficult to explain" (paragraph 4). What sorts of pleasures does Bissell find in games? How are these pleasures connected or in tension with each other? How, in his prose style and manner of arguing, does Bissell wrestle with the difficulty of explaining these pleasures?
3. In sharing his responses to *Fallout 3* and *Oblivion*, Bissell is also teaching us how to experience, interpret, and appreciate video games ourselves. Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics* (pp. 537–42) endeavors to do the same for the art form he cares about: comics. Compare and contrast his essay with Bissell's. How are they similar? How are they different?
4. Bissell concludes his essay with a series of questions. What is the effect of this gesture? Write an essay that responds to these questions. If you are a gamer, consider relating your own experiences to Bissell's. If not, consider interviewing a gamer or writing about an activity that is important to you.

BILL MCKIBBEN

*The Case for Single-Child Families*

THE BUILDING WAS NONDESCRIPT; four stories of modern concrete just down the street from Ottawa's Civic Hospital. The receptionist greeted me politely, told me the doctor was running a little late. And so I sat on the couch next to the old and dog-eared magazines and read one more time the list of questions Dr. Phil McGuire wanted his vasectomy patients to answer before he performed The Procedure:

"What would you and your partner feel if you were told tomorrow that she was pregnant? Joy? Despair? Resignation? What about in five years?"

*First published in the Christian Century (1998), a Protestant magazine with a stated mission to nurture faith and examine issues of politics, culture, and theology. This essay was also included in Maybe One: A Personal and Environmental Argument for Single-Child Families (1998), a book that extends Bill McKibben's work as an environmental writer.*