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## Returning to My Appalachia. The Resurgence of *Fallout 76*.

### A Game Review

Nicholas David Bowman

#### Abstract

Released in Fall 2018, *Fallout 76* was an ambitious project to expand the popular *Fallout* universe in several ways – backfilling the narrative for *the first survivors* of the Great War and introducing a massively multiplayer online format. Along with this expansion was the anchoring of the game within a cultural and geographic location in Appalachia. Unlike common pejorative portrayals of Appalachia, *Fallout 76* authentically and meaningfully engaged the region, in particular the US state of West Virginia. Although the game was considered a failure by many, subsequent expansions of the game have been popular. This essay probes at least one reflective reason for the game’s endurance: the unique sense of place that it provides for players foraging, crafting, and exploring the West Virginia backcountry.

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**Keywords:** Appalachia, *Fallout 76*, Sense of Place, West Virginia, First-Person Shooter gameenvironments

**To cite this article:** Bowman, N. D., 2023. Returning to My Appalachia. The Resurgence of *Fallout 76*. A Game Review. *gameenvironments* 18, 110-121. Available at <https://journals.suub.uni-bremen.de/>.

I’m not from West Virginia, but it very quickly became home for me in Fall 2011. As one of the only US states wholly located in a mountain range, a walk or a drive around the state reveals a deceptively peaceful terrain. Rolling hills turned into deep valleys, revealing moss-strewn boulders and around those creeks and hollers, more of the same. After a few weeks, the names became less about marking the geographic location of spaces and more about an increasingly interpersonal understanding of



the crash of that game, and a rediscovery of that game – and of a bygone West Virginia – that continues into the present day.

**The Build-Up**

The first few notes of the trailer cause our hairs to stand on end. A familiar tune in a deep and echoing voice, and then a camera panning through Appalachia. As noted, there's not a Mountaineer anywhere who doesn't come to attention when they hear *Almost Heaven...* and those first few notes. *Fallout* fans were excited at the latest entry into the series, as they were set to learn the backstories of so much of the game's lore.

For a West Virginian, there was more to it than this. While the game trailers and other paratexts (see Dunne 2016) showcased cutting-edge graphics and a sprawling and mountainous terrain, there was something so familiar about the content. The larger cities such as Clarksburg (the state capital) and Morgantown (home to the largest state university) were present, as were more known-to-locals places such as Beckley, Lewisburg, and the Swiss settlement of Helvetia (see Bowman et al. 2020 for an interactive map pairing the game's locations to their real-world counterparts). Looking even closer, several cultural artifacts of the state were embedded in the video game, from our many cryptozoological creatures (Mothman being the most well-known, but players were also introduced to the Grafton Monster and the Flatwoods Monster, among others), to our landmarks and tourists attractions (such as The World's Largest Teapot in Chester, Snowshoe Mountain resort, and Camden Park), to an underlying struggle of labor and management represented in the increased automation of mining in the video game universe – sharing a striking similarity to ongoing labor and workforce struggles for a state with a decreasingly

sustainable coal-based energy economy (McCormick 2021). It was clear that game designers and developers had done their homework to represent a rugged and determined place and peoples, who would unsurprisingly be among the first Americans to emerge from nuclear war: literally, given the infamous Congressional nuclear bunker at the Greenbrier Resort (in-game as Whitespring Resort, West Virginia Department of Tourism 2022); and figuratively, given stereotypes of Appalachians as rugged survivors (Denham 2016). Local tourism boards built programs around the game's launch, including an official campaign from the West Virginia Department of Tourism (Griffith 2018). As noted by Good:

“The hardest people on earth are the hillbillies of Appalachia, and now my favorite video game franchise is giving them the center stage. We get to find out if we have what it takes to be one.” (Good 2018, para. 13)

## The Crash

There is one more element of *Fallout 76* that was especially anticipated: the game was moving away from its traditional single-player format and instead moving towards a massively multiplayer online format. The move was partly an attempt to lean into the storyline of *Fallout 76* insofar as players were encouraged to survive together, and partly motivated to give Bethesda a blockbuster MMO at a time where gamer tastes had shifted towards massively multiplayer online gaming. From a narrative and realism perspective, the sparse number of other humans we met online was copacetic with the hard scramble for survival after nuclear war. There were few survivors and, thus, few survivors were found in the game. Playing without other humans was a lonely existence, as there were few to no non-human characters to interaction with – discussions with on-screen characters were replaced with scraps of paper, hacked computer terminals, and holotapes (audio recordings left behind by

others), all while collecting and studying artifacts to try to piece together what had happened to the gameworld. The MacGuffin driving the player through this experience was an attempt to find *The Overseer of Vault 76*, a native West Virginian who'd already left the security of the vault to scout ahead, never to return. Overseer caches litter the landscape, conveniently found at inflection points in the game's increasingly sophisticated mystery. Just as my time in West Virginia was often marked by finding solace in the landscape, my time in-game was often marked by solo adventuring – although I might argue that my relationship with my avatar was marked by a form of social interaction, as she had her own agency and relevance in the gameworld unique from mine that we negotiated together (and thus, my task was to help her get to her own end goals; see Banks 2015 for player-avatar relation typologies). That said, we adventured together, and I was reminded of my sense of place the entire time.

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Unfortunately for so many other players – such as the many non-native to or familiar with West Virginia – the loneliness and vastness of Appalachia was not an attractive experience. Players lamented the lack of non-player characters (Tassi 2018), and the game was poorly rated for being lonely and boring. By the 2018 holiday shopping season, copies of *Fallout 76* could be found in discount bins, digitally and physically. That the flop took place in West Virginia was not lost on critics, who turned their vitriol towards Appalachians and thus, reminded us that we too were failures. Indeed, even as I moved from the state by 2019, I'd also logged out without plans to revisit. The experiment was over, and the game was being scorched by critics for various failed and divisive monetization strategies, suggesting that “rebuilding Appalachia after the bombs fell was never going to be easy” (Gach 2019, para. 43).





experiences. Put simply, players wanted a sense of social presence in the spatially vast gameworld, and those cries were reworked through several overhauls to the game - starting with the Wastelanders patch that retconned and explained the sudden emergence of NPCs, stating simply that "people are now coming back to West Virginia" (Bethesda 2020). It turns out I represented one of 13.5 million players who had since visited Appalachia via *Fallout 76* as of December 2022 (Wilhelm 2023), and the influence of those new visits was immediate. The game was still desolate and Appalachian, but not quite so lonely. From Level 1 players who just emerged from the vault to players leveled in the 800s and beyond, there was a communal and social spirit among those surviving and thriving in the game.

I was unsure about these changes. There were so many players running around, wanting to stop and talk (via microphone or emojis) and forming raid parties to engage daily and legendary missions. A few naturally wanted to troll and grief, surely enjoying themselves at the expense of my own gameplay (Cook et al. 2019), writing it off as *part of survival* or otherwise flexing their own autonomy and competence in the experience (Paul et al. 2015). In some ways, it was similar to so many other MMOs that I'd played and generally not liked as, for me, the appeal of *Fallout 76* was that the environment was my NPC – Appalachia had become a self-relevant place to visit and engage with, physically and digitally. Especially jarring was that I met *The Overseer* in her cabin outside the Sutton railway station. The mystery of her existence had gone from ephemeral to embodied in a vault suit, as a silver-haired older woman who surely represented some of the best qualities of a survivor (and represented one of the few positive portrayals of older adults in video games that I can recall) but which, nonetheless, was a lot of change to take in.

Four months into this new Appalachia, and it's going strong. As much as I enjoyed

the cerebral nature of piecing together scraps of information to explore the world, NPCs brought a level of social demand to the experience that brought balance to the cognitive demands of the gameworld, all while boosting my emotional connection to the experience (Bowman 2021). Those familiar notions of sense of place were likewise augmented, between my own bygone connections to the place (Bowman et al. 2020) but also the newfound social presence I was experiencing through the combination of lively NPCs and engaged human coplayers (see similar research in *World of Warcraft Classic* (2019) from Robinson and Bowman 2022).

### Conclusion

Years later, and I'm living in Central New York. I've still got a few gold and blue sweaters to wear around the house, and nary a day goes by that I don't revisit West Virginia. *bowmanspartan* has a camp just outside the Top of the World, overlooking Helvetia to the west and Morgantown to the north, and plotting another journey. Mirroring my own time in West Virginia, I'd left before I had the chance to play much down in the cranberry bogs of Watoga, and it's been a rediscovery. If you're one of the 13.5 million logging in to *Fallout 76* now, keep a lookout for an ammo vendor offering discounts on low caliber ballistics (I'm more of a heavy, loaded down with rockets, grenades, a sniper rifle, and a Deathclaw razor if I absolutely need it). Just mind the tato plants and appreciate the view from my patio. It won't be long before you feel like seeing the real thing, and it will be a familiar – and possibly, self-relevant and restorative – sight when you do.

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