TO LIVE AND DIE ON TRANQUILITY LANE:

THE PARTICIPATORY NARRATIVE AND SATIRE OF

FALLOUT 3

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Abstract

This article focuses on 1950's American iconography and the player's participation in *Fallout 3*'s central storyline to explore the satire of *Fallout 3*. My approach goes beyond Marcus Schulzke's argument that *Fallout 3* is a morality simulator, which falls into a tradition of non-narrative approaches to studying videogames. Rather than concede that all videogames are a pariah to a traditional media narrative ecology, consisting of novels, movies, and theatre, I claim that *Fallout 3* is both simulation and narrative. Under this framework, I investigate a critique on war, in relation to the game's ridicule of the idea of a 1950's American golden age. The central story episode, "Tranquility Lane," where the player is trapped in a simulation of a 1950's suburbia is the primary focus, and its Rockwellian imagery is explored in relation to the "Fallout universe's" post-apocalyptic setting to provide a commentary that works in opposition to the radio propaganda of the artificial intelligence John Henry Eden. In relation to this analysis, I consider Jean Baudrillard's notion of simulacra, Mary Caputi's analysis of neo-conservatism in America, and the idea of free will for the inhabitants of Tranquility Lane and the player. I show that the narrative requirements constrain the player's free will in the simulated open world environment and that the player is essentially in the same position as the inhabitants of Tranquility Lane. As such, I argue that behind the simulation of the "Fallout universe" is a critique of war in "our universe."

Introduction

In "Moral Decision Making in Fallout" Marcus Schulzke argues that *Fallout 3* provides "a promising look at how video games can serve as tools of moral education." Schulzke's argument is reliant on the open world environment of the game and its distribution of karma points to label a player as good, bad or neutral. A videogame labeled as "open world" is associated with the player's ability to navigate his or her character throughout the game's simulated environment, in this case the Capital Wasteland, with limited restrictions. The style allows the player to discover both prescribed and random scripted events generated by the game. *Fallout 3*, as such a game, not only allows the player to unravel the world of the game as he or she immediately experiences it, but awards the player good or bad karma points based on how he or she reacts to the simulated environment around them. Schulzke views the game's distribution of karma points, which affects the player character's reputation with non-playable characters (NPCs) around the Capital Wasteland, as a part of a larger experiment with phronesis: the Aristotelian idea that one can learn to be good through the strengthening of "one's practical wisdom to the point that [one] is capable of resolving moral dilemmas as they arise." Hence, for Schulzke, *Fallout 3* is a morality simulator that shows players who choose to be bad "a deeper understanding of immorality without causing real harm."

Schulzke's vision of *Fallout 3* as simulation, thus, falls in line with Gonzalo Frasca's non-narrative theory of videogames. For Frasca, a narrative is a fixed series of events about an isolated incident, while a simulation contains not only a series of events but manipulation rules (227). Three of Frasca's manipulation rules are particularly important for this paper: first, like a narrative, a simulation presents representation and

events; second, a simulation clearly defines what a player is able to do; and third, a simulation has a defined goal which the player must accomplish in order to win (Frasca 232). Schulzke's morality simulator falls under Frasca's model: the player, adhering to the game rules, solves moral problems through the means supplied by the game, which for *Fallout 3* is "speech" (accomplished through a multiple-choice prompt screen) or physical action (such as firing a gun), and gains karma points. However, while the player character's karma rating does affect how NPCs react to their presence, *Fallout 3* is not about earning a karma rating, as a player's karma rating has no effect on whether or not the player completes the game. In fact, the game is not so much about the player learning the consequences of his or her actions, as it is the player filling a role designed to complete the developer's message. Schulzke himself recognizes that "games should reflect the moral values of the developers because this makes the player struggle to understand what moral rules are in effect," and while he points out the player's role in this process, he fails to present the developer's message. Story driven games, such as *Fallout 3*, generally award the player with an open or closed ending that contribute to an overall message conveyed. I argue that *Fallout 3* functions similarly to narratives within the traditional media narrative ecology, which Jesper Juul defines as movies, novels or theatre.

Therefore, echoing Marie-Laure Ryan's definition of narrative representation as consisting of "a world (setting) situated in time, populated by individuals (characters), who participate in actions and happenings (events, plot) and undergo change," and siding with Jan Simon's assessment that "the plot versus [simulation] rules distinction is simply a non-starter," I propose that *Fallout 3* is both simulation and narrative. Rules and plot

co-exist to facilitate a satiric narrative. Hence, *Fallout 3* uses the player to fully realize a satirical vision of the logical conclusion to 1950's American values and society, if American culture, immersed in 1950's sci-fi inspired technology had continued unhindered from any of the counterculture movements of the 1960s and beyond. By extension of this cultural criticism is the game's message on the unchanging, yet persistent, nature of war. The moralizing judgments of the narrator at the beginning and end of the videogame, Galaxy News Radio's Three Dog's apparent social activist broadcasts, John Henry Eden's nostalgic radio broadcasts of a past long turned to dust, and the post-apocalyptic setting of the Capital Wasteland all provide commentary throughout the game that associates an idealistic vision of 1950's America with Jean Baudrillard's notion of the simulacrum: "a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (1). This message is never clearer than in the game episode entitled "Tranquility Lane," where the player is trapped in a simulated 1950's-like suburbia.

Satire on Tranquility Lane

In *Fallout 3* the Lone Wanderer, the player character, grows up in Vault 101, an elaborate fallout shelter. When James, the Lone Wanderer's father, leaves the vault, which is forbidden, the Vault Overseer suspects that the Lone Wanderer is working with James and orders the Lone Wanderer's death. The Lone Wanderer follows in his father's footsteps by escaping into the Capital Wasteland and joining the Brotherhood of Steel. The Brotherhood of Steel works with Galaxy News Radio's Three Dog to protect free speech, while also protecting the Capital Wasteland from Super Mutants, and John Henry Eden's Enclave, which, despite radio propaganda which aligns it with the "will of the

people," abducts and experiments on inhabitants of the wasteland and calls for the destruction of all of its mutations. As the "Enclave" name suggests, John Henry Eden is the advocate of a closed society, and one which harkens back to the suburban ideal, as shown on Tranquility Lane, a sort of isolated and peaceful neighborhood that on the surface embodies a Rockwellian ideal, which will be discussed later. Once the Lone Wanderer reunites with James, who is being held captive in Tranquility Lane, the narrative's focus changes from finding James to completing Project Purity, an experiment to purify the Potomac River and make clean drinking water available to all wastelanders. From here, the narrative can conclude with the Lone Wanderer either injecting a poison (obtained from John Henry Eden) to eliminate all mutated life forms which drink from the Potomac, or failing to inject the poison and allowing the mutations of the Capital Wasteland to survive. Whichever option the player chooses, the game's satire is always clear.

Dustin Griffin says that "the satirist always comes out biting" (95). Incidentally *Fallout 3* comes out biting in the instruction manual, entitled the *Vault Dweller's Survival Guide*. The manual states:

Imagine if after World War II, the timeline had split. Our world forked into one branch, the Fallout universe in the other. In that other branch, technology progressed at a much more impressive rate, while American society remained locked in the cultural norms of the 1950's. It was an idyllic "world of tomorrow," filled with servant robots, beehive hairdos, and fusion-powered cars. And then in the year 2077, at the climax of a long-running war with China, it all went to hell in a globe-shattering nuclear war. (5)

Notably, the addition of "beehive hairdos" with the "servant robots" and "fusion-powered cars" of this "idyllic world of tomorrow" associate a 1950's aesthetic with this idealism. Therefore the images associated with the 1950s not only refer back to this time frame in "our universe," but their demolished state in the "Fallout universe" is a part of a larger dismissal of the 1950s, which will be detailed later.

Even beyond the manual, however, the player can see the shadow of 1950's American culture across the Capital Wasteland. The introductory cut scene features what Leonard Feinberg recognizes as a significant tenet of satire: "a playfully critical distortion of the familiar" (qtd. in Petro 5). Here, 1950's iconography is placed on its head. Against the familiar setting of the Washington Monument and other DC sights, the player catches glimpses of flickering vacuum tubes in an old car radio, scattered Nuka Cola (Coca-Cola like) bottles, and an advertisement asking citizens to "lend a hand for Uncle Sam" in a gutted bus. In the husk of an "idyllic world of tomorrow," the game's satire begins to unfold: the materialism which defines America's Rockwellian existence is only a simulacrum, one which is associated with moral superiority over the communist other and a past perfect existence, as heralded by Eden, that never has nor will exist.

As mentioned, Jean Baudrillard defines *simulacrum* as "a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (1). As such, the simulacrum is imitation. Baudrillard continues: "when the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning" (6). Eden's vision of a past perfect existence and the Tranquility Lane experiment are maintained through such nostalgia. It is by witnessing the decay of the Capital Wasteland in combination with this nostalgia that the Fallout universe's past golden age, based upon the 1950's American aesthetic from "our" universe, is revealed to be fantasy. How the

1950's aesthetic survives the post apocalyptic Capital Wasteland is particularly important to the satire of the game.

While the 1950's aesthetic is mostly decimated in the Capital Wasteland, some items from the "idyllic past" are preserved. Two books, "You're Special," a children's book, and "Grognak the Barbarian," a parody of Robert E. Howard's Conan, are available to the player in Vault 101. Both work to define the player's position in the satire. "You're Special," while setting up the game's attribute system, clearly positions the player as the narrative's possible hero through a "Dick and Jane" aesthetic. Meanwhile, "Grognak the Barbarian" foreshadows the player's role as outsider and possible anti-hero to the foreign peoples of the wasteland (the Lone Wanderer did grow up in the secluded Vault 101, although he or she is born outside the vault). These examples, however, are just two of a cavalcade of simulacra that populate *Fallout 3* and are symptomatic of the problem of history: the past, and consequently its meaning, can only be reconstructed from its fragments.

It is important to keep these fragments in mind, however, when the narrator declares at the beginning of game that "war never changes," as a bridge between the ideology of cold war America and the nuclear devastation of the Capital Wasteland is established. Such devastation is prominently featured in the decimated town of Springvale immediately following the Lone Wanderer's escape from Vault 101. The town primarily contains the shells of former houses and Studebaker-like rocket cars, while an Enclave Eye Bot patrols the tattered remains broadcasting John Henry Eden's propaganda, which will be detailed later. If Springvale is an image of the tattered 1950's aesthetic following nuclear war, then Tranquility Lane is the image of the 1950's

aesthetic present in the futuristic "Fallout universe" before nuclear war, and, as such, represents a culture that leads to nuclear devastation. If "war never changes," then there is something in that past that leads to the game's post-apocalyptic present.

Zoja Pavlovskis-Petit states that the "classic professed aim of satire is to improve the world by revealing what is wrong with it and convincing it to better its ways" (511). *Fallout 3* uses an alternate universe, steeped in 1950's iconography, to criticize war, and to criticize a time that Margot A. Henriksen says television depicted as "consistent and unchanging":

> fathers... returned home from their jobs at regular times, and mothers ceaselessly nurtured the family, contentedly inhabiting their modern, appliance-filled kitchens at all hours of the day. With little more than the harmless troublemaking of the Beaver to shatter the serenity of family life. (90)

A more apt description, in fact, could not be more suitable for the *Fallout 3* episode, "Tranquility Lane," where a sort of suburban utopia is disassembled with the assistance of the player.

Tranquility Lane is a simulated world within the simulated word of the Capital Wasteland, a place not unlike Disneyland for Baudrillard, who defined the amusement park as a "social microcosm," and a place where "all [of America's] values are exalted by the miniature. …Embalmed and pacified" (12). In the search for James, the game guides the player to Vault 112 where the remaining vault inhabitants are connected to Tranquility Loungers that keep them immersed in virtual reality, in an idealized 1950's middle-class suburbia simulation, not unlike the 1950's television visualization discussed by Henriksen. The simulation replaces the burnt out remains of homes, scorched earth,

and the dreary environments like Springvale with a pristine black and white homage to suburbia as depicted by 1950's television sitcoms such as *Leave it to Beaver*. In a typical episode of *Leave it to Beaver*, Theodore "Beaver" Cleaver gets into trouble around his suburban neighbourhood and is disciplined by his parents. When the player enters the simulation, he or she is placed into the avatar of a child, not unlike the Beaver. According to Henriksen, "the Cleavers were cold war paradigms of propriety and satisfaction; the children accepted their parents' values and seemed destined to grow up using their parents as secure models for their own future patterns of behavior" (90). While the outer aesthetic of Tranquility Lane maintains this sort of sitcom veneer, the truth is much more sinister, and dampens the notion of the adults as exemplars.

Behind the white picket fences, rocket Studebakers and lemonade stands is a malevolent little girl named Betty. Betty's innocent appearance is a simulacrum like all the other images in Tranquility Lane. This little girl, found in the Tranquility Lane playground, is actually the avatar of Dr. Stanislaus Braun, who for the past two hundred years has been running this simulation, among others, on the inhabitants of Vault 112. The simulation persists, according to Dr. Braun's journal on the lane's auxiliary command terminal, because "the residents here are naturally at home, naturally safe. When I toy with them, when their suburban illusion is suddenly broken, it's that much more satisfying." Not all the residents are blind to Dr. Braun's vicious experiments, which, according to the auxiliary command terminal, have included killing the inhabitants in a variety of creative ways. Old Lady Dithers warns the Lone Wanderer of Braun's intentions, and points the player to the abandoned house where the auxiliary command terminal is located. Through the auxiliary command terminal, the player has

the option of running the fail safe and ending the simulation, which will be discussed later. With the exception of Old Lady Dithers, the remaining Tranquility Lane inhabitants are stuck in a trance. Braun takes great pleasure in shattering the tranquility of his captives, and enlists the player to carry on in exchange for James who is also trapped in the simulation as a dog, unless the player chooses to access the terminal in the abandoned house.

A discussion of the effects of the player's actions in Tranquility Lane on the player's karma rating will occur later; for the time being the discussion will remain on representation. As noted, satire reveals wrongs, in this case the norms and values of 1950's America. While television sitcoms from that period reflected an idealized life in the suburbs, Mary Caputi notes that a neoconservative movement influenced by the presidency of Ronald Reagan in the 1980s insisted that "the 1950s… were an innocent, simple, straightforward time, a time of obvious truths and well-honed rights and wrongs, a decade characterized by American wholeness and spiritual integration" (98). As such, Caputi's analysis of Reagan in the neoconservative movement is analogous to *Fallout 3*'s depiction of the "voice" of the Enclave, John Henry Eden: a leader who laments a lost golden age that can somehow be reclaimed.

The player is first introduced to John Henry Eden through the Enclave radio station. Nova, a prostitute at Moriarty's saloon in Megaton, a town settled around an active nuclear warhead, is convinced that the signal is a "prewar broadcast on a loop." The assessment is important. John Henry Eden does not represent the voice of the current peoples (and mutations) of the Capital Wasteland. As such, John Henry Eden, itself an artificial intelligence created through a prewar supercomputer, and modeled on a

compendium of past American presidents, utters the very discourse that is ridiculed in *Fallout 3*. As a compendium of past presidents, John Henry Eden utters over the radio that the "values of our past shall be the foundation of our future." Not only does this quotation glorify the 1950's moral values that the videogame critiques, but it is also eerily reminiscent of President Ronald Regan's second inaugural address which told the American people that "our future shall be worthy of our past." Thus, the past glorified by Eden is a construct and a simulacrum. It is fitting that such a representation is championed by a being which is itself a simulacrum: John Henry Eden is an artificial intelligence acting as an unelected president and voice of the people.

As an embodiment of a pre-war ideal, John Henry Eden, and the Enclave which it leads, is propagated as America itself over the Enclave radio waves. "One Enclave. One America," says Eden, "Now and Forever. But only together. Together can we hope to reach our full potential. What we were before the war: full, beautiful, powerful." Eden assures listeners that the pre-war period was "the perfect existence," and as the "voice, heart, and soul of America," Eden projects itself as being the very embodiment of this perfection. John Henry Eden, as an advocate for "perfection," condemns many of the factions that transverse the wasteland, and are as byproducts of the nuclear war with China "un-American." Eden warns listeners not to be fooled by the Brotherhood of Steel's "pseudo-knightly nonsense, or supposed connections to the United States army;" it abhors the genetic obscenities that are the Super Mutants that have overrun the downtown DC area, and the zombie-like ghouls of the DC underworld. When the player finally meets John Henry Eden, he or she is given a poison intended to wipe out these

abnormalities to restore its picture of a past perfect America. But what does Eden's vision leave behind, and is this past actually perfect?

The episode on Tranquility Lane clearly highlights the imperfections of the past. According to Griffin,

> Juvenal characteristically calls up a virtuous Republican past when men were courageous and civic-minded and women were chaste. Against such a world and its standards, Rome under Nero and Domitian is the sinkhole of the Mediterranean. But Juvenal and his readers know all too well that the Roman Republic is long past; neither its political structures nor its cultural fabric will ever be restored. (60)

In the case of *Fallout 3*, rather than reveling in a past golden age, the developers show that a vision of 1950's America associated with superior virtue is a simulacrum. In the Fallout universe, where the moral values of this so called virtuous past failed to progress, the very traits which some praise the era for are shown to be destructive. According to M.D. Fletcher,

> what is different about contemporary responses to the political is not a sense of crisis or of extreme deviation from some presumed norm, but rather the conviction that the emperor has never had clothes, and that even the great political theories have always simply emphasized some values at the expense of others. (xi)

The Rockwells, a married couple who live on the simulated lane, embody the cracks in the exemplary past envisioned by Eden.

Roger and Janet Rockwell's surname is a clear reference to Norman Rockwell. Mary Caputi notes that "many argue that the Norman Rockwell vision of American life for the most part records life as it was illustrating the paradisiacal attributes of our political, cultural mission" (6). Caputi continues: "the happy families and safe neighborhoods, the home spun quality of simple American virtues, the innocence and predictability of it all: the minutest detail of Rockwell's charmed vision reaffirms America's greater purpose" (6). Rockwell himself created a series of paintings that emphasized America's freedoms: *Freedom from Want* depicts a family gathering around the dining room table for Thanksgiving; *Freedom to Worship* depicts a crowd of white Americans praying, with the caption "each according to the dictates of his own conscience"; *Freedom from Fear* depicts parents tucking their children into bed; and *Freedom of Speech* depicts a man speaking up at town hall meeting. The very concept of freedom, however, is compromised on Tranquility Lane, as the inhabitants are at the mercy of Braun.

The Rockwellian images to which Eden alludes were important in maintaining a sense of American superiority to what was the classic cold war villain, Communists, or, more specifically, in this case, the Chinese. In response to criticism that the 1950s were not as perfect as he depicted it in art, Rockwell stated that "even if it wasn't an ideal world, it should be" (qtd. in Caputi 6). Rockwell also claimed that it was not is intent to "disturb [his] audience" (qtd. in Caputi 6). Again going back to the neoconservative movement that Caputi associates with visualizing the 1950s as a moral golden age for America, Caputi argues that "they wish to see an idealized 1950s environment as America's true environment while lamenting the violence and uncertainties of the present

as aberrations" (6). This stance is obvious in Eden's ideology, and important to the "us versus them" mentality present not only in cold war ideology, but Eden's vision of the future. Caputi notes that in order for America to be in a "state of grace," the Soviets first needed to have a fall from grace. Having an enemy clarified America's state of grace "by allowing purity to stand out in relief: the more demonic our adversary appeared, the closer we seemed to Eden" (Caputi 13). Hence, if the moral superiority that separated America from its enemies is precarious, then perhaps so too is the reason for war between the two.

When analyzing the Rockwells on Tranquility Lane, it is clear that their problems are not immediately apparent on the surface. They might as well be representatives of a Rockwell painting. The inhabitants of Tranquility Lane are certainly content with the simulation provided by Braun. Braun's notes on the auxiliary command terminal suggest as much. In fact, trying to convince the residents of Tranquility Lane that their lives are a lie is fruitless. The Rockwells are not the only inhabitants who feign happiness in the simulated suburbia. Martha Simpson tells the player that she is "not in the mood for jokes," while Bill Foster affirms that Tranquility Lane is a "nice place," where "everyone's friendly and always happy to lend a hand," and that because he feels the pain of his stubbed big toe the simulation must be real. Of course it is not. Just as Americans are blindly engaged with a world of simulacra (Baudrillard 12), so too are the inhabitants of Tranquility Lane.

If the player cooperates with Braun to escape the simulation with James, he or she has to break up the marriage of the Rockwells. This can be accomplished by reading Janet Rockwell's dairy. Janet suspects that Roger is having an affair with Martha

Simpson. In order to break up the Rockwells' marriage, the player can steal underwear from Martha's home and place it on Roger's desk in the Rockwell basement. Persuading Janet to look into the basement, the player can either explain to Janet that Roger is a cross dresser or that he is having an affair with Martha. Whatever the player tells Martha, through a list of options on a screen prompt, the objective to break up the Rockwells will be considered completed. The ease with which Janet's mistrust of Roger is released reveals the deeply troubled nature of their apparently happy marriage. Janet quickly declares that she has "had enough of Roger's lies and bullshit," and approaches a seemingly clueless Roger, who swears that whoever said that he is having an affair is a "liar." The real lies exposed by this marriage, however, undermine the message presented by Eden, and are a clear reminder of the paranoia that runs parallel with golden age representations of the 1950s. While Frank Conroy noted that America was in a trance during the "sleepy Eisenhower years," the paranoia in the Rockwell marriage is emblematic of the paranoia of a communist invasion, or as has been argued, the fear of the imperfect other (qtd. in Henriksen 90).

Mary Claire Rudolph notes, however, that all satire consists of two parts: first, "the satirist lashes a vice"; and second, the satirist "commends the opposite virtue" (qtd. in Griffin 28). If John Henry Eden represents the voice of the satire's target, then Three Dog, the DJ for Galaxy News Radio (GNR), like the narrator at the beginning and end of the game, heralds the opposite virtues. Just as the Enclave works for Eden, the Brotherhood of Steel protects GNR. While Eden declares that the Brotherhood of Steel is full of "pseudo-knightly nonsense," the knights of the brotherhood are quick to dismiss Eden's radio broadcasts as "a bunch of nonsense and propaganda." According to Knight

Finley, Galaxy News Radio is "the last free voice of the people of the Wasteland." Three

Dog himself claims that he "has to counter that bullshit on the Enclave station," and

requests the player to be a "doer" for Galaxy News Radio and "fight the Good Fight."

Three Dog's "Good Fight" is the opposite of Eden's vision for a mutation free Capital

Wasteland based upon a false perception of the past. In fact, Three Dog even petitions for

ghouls' rights, calling for Alistair Tenpenny to let the non-feral ghouls live at Tenpenny

Tower. Three Dog, if the player does not kill him after the "Galaxy News Radio"

episode, will continue to report on the Lone Wanderer's actions in the Capital Wasteland.

It is important to note that the player can participate in actions deemed either good

or evil. There are support systems available for whatever the position the player chooses,

and the main plot is not altered regardless of how the player acts in the simulated

environment. Three Dog, however, will condemn the player if he or she acts badly. While

Schulzke sees more value in decisions the player has to make in *Fallout 3* that are close

to "everyday life," and condemns scenarios such as the choice to detonate a nuclear

warhead in Megaton during "The Power of the Atom" side episode as representing

decisions that are too distant from everyday life to effectively allow *Fallout 3* to operate

as a "moral choice engine," such scenarios play into the satire of *Fallout 3*. As Fletcher

notes, satire often deals with the grotesque or a "transformed world structure" (7). The

decision to allow the player to detonate a nuclear warhead may be absurd, but this works

with the satire of *Fallout 3*, which, in a way, condemns many facets of fifties culture as

absurd. The absurdity of the player's decision to press a button and eradicate a people is

certainly not any more absurd than a president's ability to do the same, political power

aside. As such, if the player chooses to destroy Megaton, Three Dog declares:

Word is that twisted old land grabber Allistair Tenpenny, founder of the posh

Tenpenny Tower, has been looking to secure that spot for years. But just who did

the dirty deed? Ask yourself this -- why has the kid from Vault 101 been sighted

hanging around Tenpenny Tower?

Furthermore, if the Lone Wanderer has negative karma, Three Dog will call the character

a "creepy opportunist," a "capital crime lord," and "wasteland destroyer." And while

John Henry Eden represents a sort of neoconservative position, Three Dog is clearly

entrenched in counterculture. His references to drug use and howls over the radio are

reminiscent of Wolfman Jack. Regardless of the player's actions, or even how the player

decides to end the game, the player will either represent the virtues that the game's satire

professes or will represent the position ridiculed. Like the inhabitants of Tranquility

Lane, the player is subordinate to the simulacrum of free choice. The player ultimately

must take either Eden's or Three Dog's ideological side.

While Eden is calling for a return to a more perfect time, Three Dog is not calling

for the continuation of the present. Gigantic, yellow, and heavily armed Super Mutants

terrorize the Capital Wasteland, particularly downtown Washington D.C.; feral ghouls eat

those still living, raiders invade and ravish settlements across the wasteland; self-

proclaimed vampires drink the blood of their abductees; slavers enslave men, women and

children at a former strip mall; robots kill anything that moves; and mutated rats,

crustaceans, roaches, scorpions, and other beasts traverse a landscape that is highly

radiated, and where purified drinking water is at a premium. The Capital Wasteland has

its problems, but Eden's call to "purge" the wasteland of mutations, which would

essentially mean the destruction of most of humanity, is not the answer. Three Dog

praises the player for making the Capital Wasteland safer, not void of life. Such a sentiment is echoed by the narrator at the end of the main story if the player chooses not to administer the poison provided by Eden to sabotage Project Purity's efforts to purify the Potomac River: "Humanity with all its flaws was deemed worthy of preservation. The waters of life flowed at last – free and pure, for any and all. The Capital Wasteland at long last was saved." The choice, again, allows the player to side with the satire's vice or virtue. The intent is not to develop a player's phronesis, as Schulzke states, but rather to fit the player into the needs of the game.

Whatever choices the player makes, the game makes it clear that annihilation is not the answer, although the player can choose this option. Three Dog and the narrator's sentiments about saving humanity, rather than annihilating it under the vain notions of restoring an idealized past, underscore the need to carry on with the present and not a fantasized past. Eden's desire to eradicate those dangerous others, even those of his own Enclave, should remind us of the narrator's assertion that "war never changes," and Eden's own mimicry that "America will never be destroyed from the outside. If we falter and lose our freedoms, it will be because we destroyed ourselves." The Vaults are an example of America destroying itself. An advertisement for Vault-tec's vaults on a loading screen claims, "Don't kill your family! Reserve your space in Vault 101 today." This is cleverly deceptive. Every vault is an experiment. People were not allowed to leave Vault 101 because it was an experiment on how people reacted to living in containment. As I have discussed, Vault 112 is home to the Tranquility Lane experiment. The other four vaults in the game also ran experiments. Vault 87 is actually the origin point of the Super Mutants. Meanwhile, Vault 92 gathered the world's best musicians and subjected

them to subliminal messages through white noise generators to create super soldiers,

Vault 106 had psychoactive drugs released into the air filtration system and the remaining

inhabitants are crazy, and Vault 108 is full of psychotic clones all named Gary who have

killed all the other inhabitants in the vault. Clearly the pre-war Fallout universe was far

from idealistic.

Maintaining Authorial Control in *Fallout's* Open World

　　Rudy McDaniel, Erik Henry Vick and Peter Telep are critical of *Fallout 3*'s

central story. In their article on cardboard semiotics they argue that *Fallout 3* "has a

relatively bland high-level story and numerous problems in its immediate-level stories"

(87). One of the most pressing issues noted by the trio is that Fawkes, an intelligent super

mutant that may join a "good" player, is able to freely accompany the Lone Wanderer

without opposition from the Brotherhood of Steel, a group dedicated to eliminating the

Super Mutant threat from the Capital. While Fawkes is different than the other Super

Mutants, the Brotherhood does not immediately know this. As McDaniel, Vick and Telep

note, the failure of the NPCs to acknowledge Fawkes is a failure in the developers not

realizing the "dramatic implications" of the moment. It is also failure of interactive

storytelling. McDaniel, Vick and Telep stress that "the fundamental quest in interactive

storytelling is not the development of a central storyline, but rather the creation of a

suitable storyworld in which dramatic action can unfold" (88). While this is certainly a

failure of the developers in terms of maintaining a cohesive "storyworld," it is but one

example of how the greater simulation is subordinate to the needs of the central storyline

which unfolds within it.

While the *Vault Dweller's Survival Guide* claims that "there is no "right way to play," because "each challenge the game gives you has multiple ways of solving it," and that the end is up to the player (5), this choice is only between a preset "good" option and a preset "bad" option. Outside of the objectives of episodes, the player has limited options for what he or she can do. For example, the player can generally kill indiscriminately, but if the target of the player's weapon is a character necessary to the central storyline that character cannot be killed. The player cannot kill James: even a rocket launcher will not do the job. "What in God's name is wrong with you," and "Son, I brought you into this world… I think you know the rest," are the two typical responses by James when he is attacked. James does have a health bar, but once this bar is depleted he is only knocked out. He awakens with his health bar refreshed and continues on his way to Project Purity to continue his mission. In terms of the central storyline, James returns to Project Purity but sacrifices himself when the Enclave invades the Jefferson Memorial (the project site) so that the Lone Wanderer can escape to continue on his dream. The narrator mentions this example in the closing montage, and judges the player on whether or not he or she lived up to this example. Yet while the player is judged in the end, this judgment does not validate Schulzke's view of the game as a morality simulator. In the end the karma rating does not matter to the central storyline. The player character can go out a hero (or anti-hero) as long as the player decides not to insert the poison at Project Purity.

Likewise, Sentinel Lyons of the Brotherhood of Steel cannot be killed. Her presence is necessary in the last episode of the central storyline because the option to enter an overly radiated Project Purity chamber and activate the purifier must be done by

the Lone Wanderer or Lyons. The narrator chastises the Lone Wanderer for not

sacrificing him- or herself if Lyons activates the purifier (the poison the Lone Wanderer

receives can be inserted in a slot outside of the chamber). In fact, the player cannot

antagonize the Brotherhood of Steel in general because he or she has to be allied with

them in order to progress the central storyline. When the Lone Wanderer first runs into

Sentinel Lyons she says, "don't worry. We are on your side. At least I think so." The only

real opportunity the player has to betray the Brotherhood of Steel is if he or she inserts

Eden's poison into the purifying machine at the end of the game.

Looking back at the "Tranquility Lane" episode, it is apparent that Dr. Braun, on

a microcosmic level, represents the authorial figure of *Fallout 3*. Following Dr. Braun's

instructions will end the simulation and release the Lone Wanderer's father, but also

reward the Lone Wanderer with bad karma. Although Tranquility Lane is a simulation,

the player generates bad karma for hurting the avatars of the Vault 112 inhabitants.

Negotiating with Dr. Braun is not an option, nor is violence, as any attempt to kill the

Betty avatar is futile. Dr. Braun, with the disturbing voice of the little girl, Betty, informs

the player that "[y]ou can't do that here. And now, you have to pay." With the power of a

god, a bolt of lightning falls from the simulated sky and destroys the Lone Wanderer's

avatar, ending the game. As Dr. Braun makes clear, "you leave when I say so. This place

is under my control and I dictate the terms. If I decide to let you go, you may go." Roland

Barthes argues that imposing an author on a text confines meaning and overlooks the

ability of the reader (in this case the player) to provide multiple interpretations. *Fallout

3*'s storyline may be open to interpretation, but its gameplay is much more confined.

While Barthes argued that "[w]riting is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our

subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing" (185), in Tranquility Lane authorial control remains at the forefront, despite the "freedoms" of the open world genre.

Like the missions system of the game, Dr. Braun gives the player objectives. In order for the narrative to progress, the player must complete these objectives. The first objective that Dr. Braun gives the player is to make Betty's play companion Timmy cry. Like the other missions in the game, there are multiple ways to get to this end. One way is to beat up Timmy, while another method is to kill Timmy's mother, Pat. Once this task is completed, the next objective listed is to report back to Betty. The remaining objectives follow the same formula. Betty gives the player a mission, followed by the player completing the task, concluding with the player reporting back to Betty. Once the player has broken up the Rockwell's marriage, killed Mabel Henderson in a clever way (not using direct force), and massacred the entire block as the Pint-Sized Slasher (the player retrieves a clown mask and butcher knife from a dog house), Dr. Braun releases the Lone Wanderer and his or her father from the simulation and the narrative progresses.

Although following Braun's instructions generates bad karma for the Lone Wanderer, it makes a poignant statement about 1950s cold war America. The nostalgia of a 1950s golden era, and the image of American wholesomeness, is cracked. As argued, the Rockwells, whose family name, again, is clearly an allusion to American artist Norman Rockwell, are less than ideal. These representations undercut idealized binary relations and question the entire value system on which the entire game is based. In fact, what generates good karma or bad karma is not always clear. As each episode has a good karma or bad karma option, Tranquility Lane is no exception.

The good karma option in Tranquility Lane is no less destructive than the bad karma option, except that it is more efficient and results in the permanent deaths of the lane's inhabitants. If the player talks to Old Lady Dithers, she reveals that there is a fail-safe computer in the abandoned house on the block. Solving a musical puzzle within the house, which involves touching particular household objects to create the correct sequence of tones causes a computer station to materialize. On this console, the player will find the option to run the "Chinese Invasion" program. If selected, cold war fear of a communist invasion becomes reality on Tranquility Lane. The Chinese Red Army, with guns blazing, kill the entire neighbourhood, ending the simulation, while sparing the Lone Wanderer of any bad karma. By circumventing the objectives of Dr. Braun, the player earns good karma. Either way, the inhabitants on Tranquility Lane do not have a say in their ultimate fate. This option highlights the illusory nature of choice in *Fallout 3*, as player interactivity has the characteristic of generating unavoidable scenarios. As Dr. Braun reminds the player, "[Tranquility Lane] is more real than anything outside."

In terms of the player-game relationship outside of Vault 112, Tranquility Lane enforces the will of the author more directly. In the Capital Wasteland, the figure of Dr. Braun is faded into the background. In order to achieve any progress in the main or any of the side missions, the player must follow a set of objectives. Thus, on all levels of the gaming / narrative experience, appearances are deceiving. Although the player is free to roam the Capital Wasteland, in order to progress the narrative the player must complete the provided objectives / instructions. Tranquility Lane is "more real than anything outside" because it is more honest about the plight of the player character. As argued, free choice is as much a simulacrum for the inhabitants of Tranquility as it is for the

player acting in the Capital Wasteland. Interactivity is never separated from the will of the author.

The Lone Wanderer, in terms of the main story, is ultimately serving as a conduit for the forces of good, or the forces of evil. While the Lone Wanderer's father, James, wants to purify the Capital Wasteland water supply, John Henry Eden wants the Lone Wanderer to place a virus into the purifier to literally purify the human race by "eliminat[ing] all mutations in the Wasteland." Bethesda Softworks is not entirely misleading in insisting that "how it ends is up to you" (*Vault Dweller's Survival Guide* 5). As the player faces the purifier, he or she has the option of inserting the virus and eliminating what Eden promises are "[m]utations like the "Super Mutants" and ghouls [which] must be purged," or purifying the water. The narrator makes it clear what the right option is. If the player character decides to insert Eden's virus into the purifier, the narrator during the final montage will state that

> sadly, when selected by [Eden] to be his instrument of annihilation, the Wanderer agreed. Humanity will be preserved, but only in its purest form. The waters of life flowed at last, but the virus contained within soon eradicated all those deemed unworthy of salvation.

Clearly, exclusive categorizations of good and evil are discarded in favour of preserving a very inclusive base of humanity. This, in fact, calls back to the polarizing political stances which created this post-apocalyptic setting in the first place. As the "Tranquility Lane" episode stresses, immediate assumptions of good and evil should not be defined by convincing simulacra.

In a simulated world where good and evil deeds are used to determine a karmic primer to classify the player character, visions of good are not so easily discernable by first impressions. The "Tranquility Lane" episode depicts the deceptions of outward appearances. Betty is not an innocent little girl, the Rockwells do not have the perfect marriage, and a dog is actually the Lone Wanderer's father. Likewise, monstrous Super Mutants and ghouls are not always enemies. Eden acknowledges that anybody who was born and raised in the wasteland probably suffers from a mutation of sort. But, as Eden says, their "[s]acrifices must be made for the greater good." The Eden machine has a limited view of what entails humanity. The Lone Wanderer, Eden claims, should survive because he or she was raised in Vault 101, removed from the world. Then again, continued exposure to radiation patches in the Capital Wasteland will cause the player character to mutate. Analogous to cold war hysteria, anybody could be a mutant, as anybody could be a communist.

Distance is provided between the player and the satire, even though the player is judged in the end, due to the condemnation of the 1950s in the "Fallout universe" setting. However, Pavlovskis-Petit asks, "is not the very undertaking of satire ironically subverted by putting readers in the ambiguous position of standing outside what is being criticized even while they do not cease to be members of categories victimized by the satirist" (511)? The narrator's insistence that "war never changes" serves as a life line to "our universe." Just as the aesthetic of Tranquility Lane removes its inhabitants from the faults of the Capital Wasteland, so too do the aesthetics of the Capital Wasteland remove the player from the messages in the game that are applicable to our world.

Conclusion

Schulzke's insistence to see *Fallout 3* as a practical tool for training the player in an Aristotelian theory of phronesis overlooks the videogame's satirical message. While Frasca separates narrative from simulation, in that a simulation contains manipulation rules that dictate what a player can do and must do to win, *Fallout 3* aligns the player's freedom in the Capital Wasteland with the freedom of the inhabitants of Tranquility Lane. Both are simulacra. Hence, regardless of the decisions that the player makes, and consequently the karma ranking he or she generates, he or she must follow the path presented by the developers. Ultimately there is only one binary choice: the player is complacent either with the vice or the virtue of the game's satire.

Broadly, *Fallout 3* is a critique of war. More specifically, *Fallout 3* is a critique of 1950's American nostalgia that perhaps fuels war. This message is executed through the ruined 1950's aesthetic of the Capital Wasteland, the competing ideologies of John Henry Eden and Three Dog, and the Tranquility Lane simulation. The nostalgic messages of the artificial president, John Henry Eden, are disassembled through the juxtaposition of the Capital Wasteland onto the pristine suburban simulation of Tranquility Lane. As such, there is a continuity between Tranquility Lane, a sort of Baudrillardian Disneyland, and the Capital Wasteland. In fact, images of innocence, such as the Betty avatar, quickly crumble to reveal a much more sinister truth. The Rockwellian images on Tranquility Lane are as much simulacrum as any notion of freedom the player, or any of the inhabitants on the lane, might possess. What the videogame stresses, particularly through Three Dog, is that the world is more complicated than these 1950's simulacra allow.

Consequently, there is a notion of destruction that is associated with Eden's nostalgia. As the decimated Capital Wasteland and the lies on Tranquility Lane expose, there is no basis for Eden's vision that the past is somehow better then the present. In fact, the past led to the present. As a result, Eden essentially represents everything that is wrong with the past of the "Fallout universe." To live and die on Tranquility Lane is to live and die in a world defined by simulacra. In fact, the Rockwellian simulacra from the "Fallout universe," coupled with the narrator's insistence that "war never changes," points to the same 1950's golden age iconography that persists in our world today. Beyond Schulzke's notion of *Fallout 3* as morality simulator, and even beyond its label as a videogame, *Fallout 3* presents both simulation and narrative in its execution of a cultural satire that goes beyond a criticism of the 1950s and the "Fallout universe" and into a broader criticism of war in that universe and in our own.

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