

Old World Blues

How Fallout Communicates its Post-Nuclear Environment

Bachelor's Thesis

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract <p>Modernit videopelit välineenä tarjoavat mahdollisuuksia kokea interaktiivisesti aiemmin klassisemmissa taiteellisissa modalityteissa välitettyjä maailmoja, joita joskus määrittävät äärimmäiset olosuhteet ja synkkäsävytteinen vaihtoehtotodellisuus. Näistä vuonna 1997 julkaistu PC-peli <i>Fallout</i> esittelee ydinsodanjälkeisen maailman jossa ydintuhon aikaansaama muutos on mutaton paitsi peliympäristöä itseään, myös kieltä jolla kuvattu maailma esittelee itsensä genrelleen tyypillisten roolipelien tekstirikkein käytäntein.</p> <p>Tutkielman aiheena on tarkoituksellisesti erityisesti sopivaa valikoitua diskurssianalyysin teoriaa hyödyntäen pureutua selvittämään pelin keinoja kielen tasolla välittää oman maailmansa arkea, ja osoittaa pelin kielen merkityksien paitsi heijastavan ydintuho-kontekstiaan, myöskin rakentavan sitä samaan aikaan. Lisäksi analyysissä otettiin huomioon pelin interaktiivisuuden ja multimodaalisuuden rooli sen diskurssin muodostumisessa, lyhyesti käsitellen Falloutin graafisen ulkoasun mukautumista kielellisesti välitettyyn sisältöön. Materiaali analyysiin kerättiin peliä laajamittaisesti pelaamalla, tallentaen tyypillisiä pelitilanteita kuvallisesti ja taltioimalla pelin sisäistä tekstiä tutkielmassa esittelyä varten.</p> <p>Analyysin tulokset paljastivat konkreettisia kielellisiä elementtejä Falloutin käyttämästä pelimaailmansa kuvailuun valjastetusta kielestä, sekä osoittivat niiden semioottisen sisällön olevan kontekstiaan vahvasti riippuvainen, mutta samalla myös toimivan sitä rakentavana aineksena. Videopeliluontonsa vuoksi teoksen havaittiin myös täydentävän kielensä sisältöä interaktiivisuudellaan ja grafiikoillaan, muodostaen vasta kaikki modalityteetit yhdistettynä lopullisen visionsa ydintuhon jälkeisen maailman diskurssista.</p>	
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1. Introduction

Fallout (Interplay, 1997) tasks a player to explore and brave a world transformed by nuclear devastation. He or she gets to witness a vision of a bleak, broken future with ruptured governance and wretched terrain as the game presents life mutated (sometimes quite literally) by the new normal, rife with radiation, danger and scarcity. The cataclysm-rended United States is now a scattered population of survivors instead of citizens, and communities and factions prioritize negotiating the broken, hostile land above all. Resources and infrastructure are forever soiled, creating a scenario in the game that resembles an eerily similar vision Charles Bukowski spoke of in several sections of his 1992 poem “Dinosauria, We”:

“It will be guns and roving mobs
Land will be useless
Food will become a diminishing return
Nuclear power will be taken over by the many
Explosions will continually shake the earth
Radiated men will eat the flesh of radiated men.
The sea will be poisoned
The lakes and rivers will vanish
Rain will be the new gold “

As Bukowski wrote of a dilapidated world which its inhabitants are stuck with (one of the lines read “born like this, walking and living through this”), such is the reality of the denizens of the world of *Fallout* as well. However, it turns out that the experience of being imprisoned into this terrible alternate reality is quite exciting! This is of course due to the fact that we are thankfully not living it in real life (at the time of writing this thesis anyhow), but *Fallout* still gives us a chance to experience a fictional vision via its interactive presentation. Our experience as players is bolstered by the medium of video games, as we are not solely limited to receiving the language of prose or poetry, like we have to do with the world Bukowski was picturing. Instead,

we as players get to interact with Fallout's post-nuclear world and learn its own little language along the way.

Indeed, it is the way Fallout explains its world which is the concern of this thesis. What language items have been selected to communicate and augment the graphically static world of a role-playing game with such arresting and provocative subject matter, and how do they function? As the game presents itself with a level of narrative texture rich in textual description and dialogue, it becomes an attractive candidate for discourse analysis. The aforementioned elements are not only expository tools for the game to color in its world, but rather critical gameplay elements as well, and an analysis of Fallout's language will shed light on what the game requires of the player in order to understand its discourse.

2. Background

During the several hours of gameplay it takes to experience Fallout, the player is not only exposed to a wealth of text but also required to process a great deal of information in order to understand the game world and progress regarding ludic (meaning gameplay-related) goals. As Fallout presents a realistic, multimodal depiction of a land transformed by nuclear devastation, the mode of written text is particularly prominent as a channel to explain this alternative world to the player in-game, as a strong supplement to the graphical representation of gameplay events.

With regards to analysis of discourse and language, it is thus necessary to specify ways to approach the game as a "screen-based text" (Jewitt 2005) and outline a particular manner of digesting the material with discourse analysis, while also considering the particulars of the medium. This section will feature an overview of discourse analysis as a theoretical approach, and then proceed to illustrate specific tools within it that are most relevant for analyzing this particular game as a text. I will also reference relevant research in the field of language use in video games to help focus its character as a medium, and the final section of this chapter will describe approaching video games as a research subject with special regard to their multimodal and interactive nature.

2.1 Discourse Analysis and Video Games

Discourse analysis is an amorphous field that studies language use in a manner that Johnstone (2017) describes as “outward from texts to an understanding of their contexts”. Her work offers a compact definition of discourse as “communicative action in the medium of language” and cites Blommaert (2005: 2) when expanding the definition to include “meaningful symbolic behavior in any mode”. Gee (2014) further details discourse analysis as a collection of a number of specific approaches to analyzing different phenomena in texts or talk in order to understand the reasons behind their shape and form. This is a goal echoed by Johnstone (2017: 2) as well, and her notions on the heuristic behind robust discourse analysis also recognize that discourse and the world shape and influence each other constantly. Since this happens in several domains of language use in varying contexts (Johnstone 2017: 6) all at once, it is this characteristic of discourse which prompts Gee’s (2014: 2) description of discourse analysis as querying from a wealth of angles, some of which yield better results than others, depending on the material.

When looking to use discourse analysis as an approach in analyzing a screen-based text (Jewitt 2005) such as a video game, it is necessary to provide focus as to what it is about language and the communicative actions animating it (Johnstone 2017: 2) we are actually interested in.

Johnstone (2017: 33) calls attention to the plural noun *discourses* as describing the “conventional ways of talking” in effect that functionally “create and perpetuate systems of ideology, sets of beliefs about how the world works and what is natural”. This is attractive when approaching a game as a subject during discourse analysis that presents a clear theme and milieu throughout, as *Fallout* does.

One especially fitting example of research into discourses in a video game is the work of Machin and Van Leeuwen (2005) concerning the “special operations discourse of war” of soldiers depicted in the video game *Black Hawk Down* (Novalogic 2003). Though their work utilizes analytical tools associated more with *critical discourse analysis*¹, it does highlight the influence of linguistic acts themselves as creators of context, and also the identities operating as agents

¹ utilizing “social actor” analysis (Van Leeuwen 1996, 2000) and “recontextualization of social practice” method of examining discourse (Van Leeuwen & Wodak 1999).

within it (ibid: pg. 138). The framework used by Machin and Van Leeuwen provides a utility to notate how a “special operations discourse of war” is represented in the game. This means that it is possible to keep track of identities and factions which are granted different attributes depending on their role in the storyline of *Black Hawk Down* by analytical cognizance of *choices* made with regards to their linguistic assembly.

Here, it is useful to again refer to Johnstone’s (2017) notion of these linguistic *choices* as shaping the language acts in discourse that, in turn, shape the discourse itself. She notes that in “carefully planned, highly edited literature” the choice to dress an expression a certain way and not some other way also, in turn, reflects the “narrator’s world” one way and not some other. Gee (2014: 56-60) describes this activity happening on the level of grammar as “building”, which then enables one to make “design choices” which go on to then determine meaning and construct its context. In fiction, this can “create fictional worlds – which, to various extents, may be meant to mirror one or more non-fictional worlds” (Johnstone 2017: 46). This is a particularly interesting point with regards to the world *Fallout* is communicating to the player with its discourse, and the rest of this chapter will explain specific theoretical tools for describing the discourse depicted in such a video game with respect to its multimodality and scope.

2.2 Reflexivity, Situated Meanings and Context

In discussing the *close reading* (detailed analysis of “a media text”) of video games, Bizzochi & Tanenbaum (2011) recognize that analyzing (as texts) engrossing, open-ended video games requiring tens of hours of gameplay can be time consuming. To mitigate this, they suggest focusing on specific points of interest by utilizing a suitable “analytical lens” to help frame the work and compact the material as a theatre for specific phenomena. Though their observation concerns close reading, the same approach is still useful in applying the tools of discourse analysis to a game as large in scope and demanding in playtime hours as *Fallout*.

One useful tool for focusing the analysis is analyzing the way the *context* within a game world dictates its language. Different contexts can designate new meanings onto words that one likely

already is familiar with, and Gee (2014) shows how these *situated meanings* have an impact on text or talk. A straightforward example to illustrate this is noting that a phrase such as “the cat is floating away” illustrates the need for ascribing a situated meaning to the word “cat” that matches its context, in order to understand what is happening. In this case, the “cat” in question is a cloud shaped like a feline, instead of an animal with supernatural powers (Gee 2014: 159). This concrete example underscores the *reflexivity of context*, by which I mean the property of context which enables it to shape what is being said (Gee 2014). As discourses are “built” repeatedly in order to maintain their integrity, within the realm of video games this can be realized by the interactive environment influencing the meanings of the language items featured. If we think of the grand context for language in video games as a combination of narrative and gameplay (Arjoranta 2015: 700), this enables both of them to ascribe situated meanings to words and phrases featured in them. This is important to note in order to show why discourse analysis regarding language in video games benefits greatly from cognizance of the medium being different from literature or film due to its ludic elements.

In a similar way, Jørgensen (2012) points out during an analysis on the origin of depicted talk in the role-playing video game *Diablo 2* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2000) where the player is able to witness the character they are controlling in the game saying “I am overburdened!”; the meaning of this phrase has to be understood within the context of the video game, where it is intended as a notification for the player to remove items from their inventory that their character does not have enough strength to carry. As Johnstone (2017) provided a close examination of fiction writers making discursive choices starting from the level of syntax in constructing their worlds, Gee (2014) shows the process the recipient engages in when parsing the message. He points out that in the real world, one would reach for an entirely different cleaning tool depending on whether the phrase “the coffee spilled” was referring to a spill of beans or an amount of liquid, where the situated meaning would hint at the more suitable course of action. In Jørgensen’s example, the situated meaning of being “overburdened” in the context of *Diablo 2* is a signal to the player, expressing a need for them to navigate to the inventory screen by operating the interface of the game, a process which Jørgensen (2012) describes as the user interface of the game and the game world working in concert to teach the player about the mechanics of the game. This brings us to the interface of a video game as a tool enabling multimodal meaning-making by the mechanics of a video game, which Bizzochi &

Tanenbaum describe as “a critical nexus for the suture of gameplay activity and narrative identification.” (2011: 464).

2.3 Considering Game Interfaces and Multimodality

Jewitt’s (2005) notion of video games presenting as *multimodal ensembles* becomes useful in describing their content: a video game can be approached as a “screen-based text” with a number of different modes that combine to create meaning. Indeed, research into the semiotic dimensions of computer games show that their meaning-making ability does not reside strictly in their text-based content of notifying the player of in-game key events or displaying dialogue: Pérez-Latorre et al. (2017) recognize in their application of social semiotics to analyzing video games that they have made strides to be seen as an “expressive medium”. They explain how games combine their outwardly visible multimodal expression with their inner workings at code level, their gameplay mechanics, in order to communicate meaning and engage with the player (see also Sicart 2013). Jørgensen (2012) further elucidates this by characterizing video game interfaces as having the capacity to feature information by using means such as color-coding objects or displaying certain character animations (as part of the multimodal ensemble described by Jewitt (2005)), at times bypassing language entirely as means of semiosis.

In tandem with their multimodal nature, the effect of the interactivity of video games on the experience of being exposed to their semantic content must also be considered. Bizzochi & Tanenbaum (2011) recognized that the narrative composition of vast role-playing games (such as Fallout) is sometimes affected by exercises of player agency. Arjoranta (2015) notes this also, saying that “it is important to acknowledge the limits player freedom sets to narration”. To further add to this, I return one final time in this chapter to Machin & Van Leeuwen’s (2005) work on *Black Hawk Down*. The pair’s analysis characterizes the game as having the player “enacting the discourse” rather than simply observing it as melded into a noninteractive narrative unfolding as a film would (Machin & Van Leeuwen 2005, citing Van Leeuwen 1993). Rather, the player becomes a storyteller in his/her own right, which is similar to how *Fallout* depicts a world which requires player agency (movement, at the very minimum) to fully trigger

the revelation of post-nuclear environment. This is put succinctly by Pérez-Latorre et al. (2013): players are active participants in the meaning-making aspects of a video game by playing it.

3. The Present Study

This study aims to identify the central building blocks of the discourse in Fallout and explain how they function in building the post-nuclear game world. Thus, the primary research question is as follows:

In Fallout, what mechanisms are used in its *post-nuclear language* to explain the *post-nuclear world* to the player?

A secondary research question relates more to the fact that the subject of this thesis is a *game*, but due to the influence of the medium of Fallout on its content, this secondary question must be considered also:

In Fallout, what is the role of the interactive interface of the game in building and shaping the discourse?

3.1 Data and Methods

I have collected examples of language use from screen-captures of typical gameplay moments, featuring the interface of Fallout textually describing the world and the actions of characters within it, while the rest of the game screen naturally also displays the graphical gameplay itself. This way I have amassed a representative collection of events of language use in Fallout, all captured in their multimodal context during my own gameplay. Since my research questions concern the general milieu of Fallout at a grand scale, my thesis will analyze a collated representation of language use throughout, instead of focusing on longer singular passages (such as dialogue or lengthy sequences of plot exposition).

In the following chapter, the resulting data will be analyzed using the theoretical framework of discourse analysis as outlined in the previous chapter, with special regard to *situated meanings* as described by Gee (2014), and general linguistic choices as highlighted by Johnstone (2017) made in the assembly of the edited digital text that is Fallout. These tools have been selected to best explain the channeling of the meanings in the language items used in Fallout's discourse from game-to-player, with regards to the limitations and scope of this thesis.

4. Data and Analysis

This chapter will show the results of the analysis in three parts: the first section will focus on the language the game uses when describing its world to the player, and the second section applies the same analytical focus to the characters of Fallout and to their speech about the world they are living in. This is to highlight the slight differences in the game's use of language in object descriptions and character descriptions.

The third and final section will discuss the multimodal presentation of Fallout, and the connection of the visual mode to the textual with regards to selections made in Fallout to depict post-nuclear war life. In short, I will provide basis for considering the design of the interface of the game as not only a collection of buttons and menus for ludic means, but as a component contributing to the discourse as the object descriptions and character dialogue do.

4.1 Discursive Features of Descriptions in Fallout

First, I will present a sample of the text Fallout produces as a result of the player operating the interface of the game, or by selecting scenery and objects of interest with the mouse in order to either examine them or attempt to use them in some way. This produces short messages in the bottom left corner of the main game window, introducing and explaining the examined item or piece of the game world to the player, such as:

“A functional wood-burning stove.”

“A simple rug. The weaver was obviously very talented.”

“A finely crafted wooden bowl. This looks like it was designed to crush and separate grains.”

“It looks like mutated cabbage to you. It seems to be thriving in the warm weather.”

“A stack of ancient rubber tires. They have been vulcanized and hardened, probably due to the heat.”

“Some broken pieces of glass and other ruined pieces of junk.”

“A lamp post. It looks like it is in good working order.”

“The mechanism to open and close the heavy vault door is broken and beyond repair.”

The object/scenery descriptions in this sample selection feature the results of choices in the construction of the language as alluded to by Johnstone (2017:9), as adjectives and nouns *build* the world depicted (Gee, 2014:90), the former often detailing the latter. Rather immediately apparent is the repeated preoccupation of the descriptions to point out the *working condition* of things, which repeats throughout the game as the player travels within the game world and investigates its locales. The importance of mentioning the quality and integrity of objects, machines and appliances would then seem to build the discourse of post-nuclear life as featuring talk of scavenging, or constant evaluation of resources throughout one’s journey within it.

Naturally, such language connects to the gameplay of Fallout as well, as the player investigates the game world and attempts to determine what they can use or manipulate within it with ludic means. But this is a characteristic of the language that serves both narrative and gameplay, as they entwine to create the experience which enables exposure to the discourse (Bizzochi & Tanenbaum 2011: 464). Thus, these mechanical components of the messaging of the game shape its discourse: Pérez-Latorre et al. (2017: 9) characterize game design as having the power to substantially affect the language used in the game, which they illustrate using an example from previous research (Atkins 2003: 129) from a city-building and managing simulator game (“SimCity”, Maxis 1989) where comparative adjectives describing size and novelty of objects and enterprise are directly linked with positive progress.

Likewise, in *Fallout*, the design and aforementioned descriptions of objects harness the semiotic resources of language in order to make the scenery and items the player encounters seem to:

1) *belong* to the world depicted, creating cohesion in the mixed visual and textual modes (Johnstone 2017: 249).

2) define their usefulness to the inhabitants surviving in the world, realized by the descriptions: objects and machines can be, for example, “broken” or “functional”, or terrain may be described as “hazardous” or “impassable”. Their repeated use also contributes to the cohesion noted in the previous point.

However, at times the game presents items and concepts which require further understanding to interpret within their context, instead of simply recognizing the words used for them by themselves. Here, it is useful to refer to *situated meanings* again (Gee 2014: 157), as the player is introduced to nouns with specific meanings in the context of the game world. I will present a sample of commonly repeated ones here, grouping tangible items in the game world to the left column and larger concepts typical to *Fallout* to the right column for clarity:

“Caps” (or “bottle caps”)
 “Brahmin”
 “Raider”
 “Stimpak”
 “Mutant”

“Wastes” (or “the wasteland”)
 “Trade”
 “Water”
 “The War”
 “Vault”

Repeated usage of common words like “water” or “trade” with their own reference points and specific meanings in the game world build the context in which they work, their situated meanings realizing their function (Gee 2014: 91). This, in turn, reflects the infrastructure and socio-political landscape of the post-nuclear world in the game, as the player is presented with a world where “caps” correspond to currency, having “brahmins” means owning mutated cows as farm animals, “stimpaks” refer to general-purpose medical supplies and a “Vault” is one of

several communal bomb shelters with their own miniature ecosystems detached from the challenges of the wasteland terrain.

Finally, a phrase often repeated in the game, “The War”, also functions in building the temporal context of the post-nuclear life depicted, as both descriptions of objects and lines in dialogue often refer to things either originating from or having been a certain way *before* the nuclear cataclysm which transformed the world in the game. Thus, framing of the events in a grander timeline is also something that the textual feedback of the game achieves: for example, some objects are tagged with the description “Pre-War”, such as a “a movie poster from the Pre-War days”.

A final detail to be pointed out here is yet again a result of choices in the construction of the language in Fallout, as the “War” (as well as the “Pre-War” referring to a past era in the game world) is capitalized. This is worthy to note because it is also imbued with a situated meaning (Gee 2014: 157), which combines with its grammatical highlighting and catching the player’s eye as something noteworthy. As Gee (2015: 41-44) points out, games have a tendency of demarcating meaning-making resources (ranging from language to other modes as well) into ones that merely decorate the world and others that are also tied to the ludic progression within it. With regards to Fallout, it is observed in this analysis that object descriptions within the game seem to exhibit the latter by capitalizing and repeating items in appropriate gameplay contexts, such as “Stimpak”, “Raider” or “Vault” in order to categorize them as important for ludic reasons as well as narrative ones. However, they are still very much melded with the descriptions produced by the game detailing its world, embedding such highlighted (for gameplay aims) language items with ludic utility into their narrative context.

4.2 Discursive Features of Characters and Dialogue in Fallout

As the world of Fallout is populated by a slew of characters with their own stories to tell as survivors and agents in the wasteland, it is necessary to take a look at instances of the game communicating their place in the post-nuclear milieu, and how the world is further communicated to the player in the process.

Similarly, to the previous example of objects, examining characters in the game also produces verbal feedback in the interface, creating text descriptions once again:

“You see: Ian.”
 “You see one of Shady Sands’ guards.”
 “You see Seth, leader of the guards at Shady Sands.”
 “You see a police officer of The Hub.”
 “You see a caravan driver.”
 “You see: Razlo’s Wife.”
 “You see a dog. He seems to be following you.”

Differing slightly from the condition-detailing object descriptions analyzed in the previous chapter, the character descriptions on the other hand tend to feature devices of *categorizing*, further communicating constituent parts of the game world to the player. Though grouping characters into factions in Fallout is also achieved with their visual representation (as members of a particular group may have similarly dressed character models for instance), their affiliations can also be represented *linguistically*. Often the game outright states their allegiances, as in many of the above examples, or the characters have lines of dialogue which end up exposing their affiliation(s). However, with regards to the verbal feedback in the game’s interface, it is these initial descriptions of characters that repeat the most during the game and work in tandem with the descriptions of objects and scenery in painting the world to the player. This linguistic grouping of *actors* in media texts was also observed by Machin and Van Leeuwen (2005) when describing the differences between the factions in the Black Hawk Down video game and film. Their analysis recognizes the patterns created by the linguistic categorization of participants by recognizing the suffixes denoting how they have been *functionalized* (Machin & Van Leeuwen 2005: 134), and some characters are indeed categorized in the game world in a similar way in Fallout as well (such is the case with an early bandit antagonist in Fallout, the “Raiders”, or “caravan drivers”, truckers of goods across the wasteland).

Though Machin & Van Leeuwen’s (2005) approach is in service of critical discourse analysis, its utility in recognizing group affiliations is also useful in the more straightforward matter of simply describing the text of Fallout. However, as the world depicted in Fallout encompasses a

world far larger than the contained military theatre of war in Machin & Van Leeuwen's subject, it is helpful to pay attention to how the characters in the game world of Fallout explain the post-nuclear world they live in. While analyzing Fallout's dialogue, it is useful to refer to situated meanings again (Gee 2014) to help explain a staple feature: a pattern repeated with great frequency in the game is characters mentioning cardinal directions when telling about the nuclear wasteland to the player character.

"The Hub is a big trading center *far south* of Shady Sands."

"...my other brother, Darrell, gathered together some things and *set off south* towards a mythical place called The Glow"

"Well, just over there to *the west of us* there's Gizmo's Casino."

"Junktown is *a little bit south of here*."

"I heard a tale from a traveler *up from the south*"

As characters explain to the player *where* everything is in the world, the cardinal directions of *north*, *south*, *east* and *west* take on situated meanings yet again (Gee 2014), as they reflect the infrastructure in the post-nuclear discourse of Fallout's world and function in a specific manner in its context. This is perhaps easier to spot when one considers what is missing when characters talk about their devastated surroundings: roads or interstates are not prominently mentioned at all. Settlements and other locations of interest are always said to be, for example, "north of" or "a little ways east of" some other place. This highlights one central way Fallout builds its context through language, and it is a fitting example of Gee's point of language slotting into a context it actually works to build at the same time (Gee 2014: 90).

4.3 Multimodally Reflecting the Post-Nuclear World

Lastly, the multimodality of Fallout as a visual text should be analyzed for its influence in building the game world and contributing to the nature of the presented *post-nuclear life discourse*. To accomplish this, I will briefly describe the working nature of the interface of the game and analyze the contribution of focalization in the graphics of the game with regards to its discourse.

Bizzochi & Tanenbaum (2011: 463) point out that game interfaces can be “narrativized”, meaning that the gameplay operations utilizing them, along with the “look and feel” of the interface itself contribute to the “pervasive “narrative texture” of the work” (ibid.). This is experienced in *Fallout* by using the buttons that the interface provides for standard gameplay functions and entering and exiting various menus. The interface is presented graphically as weathered and dilapidated in concert with the damaged and decaying game world in general, contributing to the nature of the discourse in the game by “reinforcing narrative themes, character information and storyworld details” (Bizzochi & Tanenbaum 2011: 465) as playing the game involves utilizing the interface frequently for ludic means.

During the analysis of gameplay, the presentation of *perspective* also became apparent as a salient component in the game presenting its discourse. With regards to this, Arjoranta (2015: 701) points out that a game able to present themselves itself ostensibly through a bird’s eye view perspective (like *Fallout* does) also can merge this with the limitations of a first-person perspective. This is realized in *Fallout* (as in Arjoranta’s own example, ibid.) by information being available to the character controlled by the player limited to what he or she is able to interact within the game world.

However, *Fallout* also achieves the reverse, due to its isometric perspective: in a great number of gameplay situations, the player is free to inspect and visually explore many parts of the scenery before their character is able to navigate close to it to interact with it. As the post-nuclear wasteland is presented to the player via the visual mode at first separately from its textual compliment, it contributes to the player’s “understanding and the narrative weight of the storyworld writ large” (Bizzochi & Tanenbaum 2011: 471). Put simply, the post-nuclear world is accessible via the visual mode as a kind of virtual diorama before the game colors it in with verbal feedback via the interface.

5. Conclusion

We can see that *Fallout* features a composite whole of language items corresponding to their graphical representations, which are not only understood with regards to their context but also

as builders of it by functioning as items of evidence as to how the depicted post-nuclear world is. These are presented in tandem with (or within) item and character descriptions that build the world in a narrative sense, while *Fallout* utilizes formatting and repetition of some of its textual content to highlight words and phrases that reference or have a particular ludic function. This way repeated and marked language presented to assist in completing gameplay-specific goals ends up continuously presenting signifiers of what the depicted post-nuclear world actually contains. As the player uses them as reference points to process the world, they can be used to piece a post-nuclear life discourse together: the player is making decisions during play by understanding the language of the game in context, and witnessing the context built by their meanings within it (Machin & Van Leeuwen 2005: 18-19, Gee 2014: 90). This means that the descriptions of the world also connect to the ludic means of playing the game, as opposed to merely decorating it, which adds weight to their significance, as success and progress in the game is partly predicated on understanding them (Pérez-Latorre et al. 2017: 592).

With regards to *Fallout*'s multimodal depiction of a post-nuclear wasteland, the analysis in this thesis shows that its audiovisual representation is an added utility in communicating meaning and contributing to the discourse (Gee 2006: 59) otherwise built in text form by the game. Arjoranta (2015: 701) points out that "choices in perspective have narrative consequences", and the analysis of this thesis notes that the graphical "look and feel" of *Fallout* presents *visually* (and in an interactive, ludic manner as well) the kind of disrepair and texture of the world of *Fallout*, otherwise described via text in the game, amplifying its message.

Finally, as this thesis has been limited to a qualitative study of *Fallout* as a communicator of its own world, it raises an interesting question regarding the other end of the exchange, the recipient(s) of the discourse. Further research could then perhaps focus on the more popular later games of the series and output of the players themselves, with an aim to ascertain how they experience such a grim, broken contemporary vision of a dystopian future. Having players produce texts of their own, describing what the game has shown them may highlight effect of the game's discourse.

Additionally, the substance of this thesis could be extended to approach these more intertextual later entries to the *Fallout* game series with special regard to the licensed recorded

music utilized within their presentations. The tension created by presenting appropriated elements of music lyrics of the real world against their new, post-nuclear backdrop would be a worthwhile topic of further study into the way a game depicting such extreme circumstances communicates its world with a mix of the familiar and the alien, all mutated from the world we once might have recognized as our own.

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