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### Fallout: New Vegas and Liberatory Imagination through Neo-Western RPG

The Western as a concept has really horrific origins and connotations, taking the aesthetics of working class chicanx people and using it to create pro border control, pro western expansion, pro manifest destiny storytelling. While the Western proper has gotten less popular, Western inspired science fiction is more popular than ever. I think one really interesting work in this genre is the game Fallout: New Vegas. This game takes place in a postapocalyptic Nevada, and takes a lot of aesthetic influence from the western genre. The Science fiction mixed with western works in conjunction with the RPG genre where you create your own character to roleplay as. The game explores ideas of imperialism, with the faction called the New California Republic, which tries to recreate the United States and has a neoliberal imperialist ideology. The game explores the ramifications of the NCR's westward expansion on the region and how the people living in the Mojave wasteland before the NCR invaded are unhappy with them. I argue that the player option of going against the NCR and forming an independent Mojave is a critique of the problematic glorification of Western Expansion in the US by Westerns while using Western aesthetics. Is this a strong enough critique of the US's manifest destiny, or does it actually play into the White Supremacist tropes of the Western Itself? By constantly presenting critiques of imperialism through dialogue throughout the game and making the independent New Vegas option the path with the most player freedom, in addition to other themes and characters in

the game, *Fallout: New Vegas* is able to use the Western aesthetic to show a critique of neoliberalism, neo imperialism, and the fetishization of the frontier myth.

The player begins the story by getting shot by the gangster Benny. They are revived in a town outside of New Vegas, where they set out on a quest to find out who shot them and get revenge. The games take place in an alternate universe where 1950's culture persisted until a war between the United States and China resulted in mutually assured destruction with all of humanity dying, being irradiated into immortal ghouls, or hiding in underground vaults made by a corporation known as Vault Tec. At the time this game takes place, people have emerged from the vaults and have had time to form new civilizations, often mirroring the civilizations of the past.

Aesthetically, the connections between the game and the fiction of the old west are clear. According to Casey Ratto, "The world of *Fallout: New Vegas* is filled with robots, sheriffs, cowboys with laser pistols, and soldiers wearing power armor. The setting of *Fallout: New Vegas* is the mixture of new world with the old, the past with the future, and the Western with Science Fiction." (Ratto 115) Many characters wear outfits that would fit right in with an old western, and the player can choose to wear these outfits themselves. The first quest of the game is you choosing to defend or abandon a small town that looks like it was ripped out of a classic spaghetti western. It is clear that the game is meant to be a sort of Western fantasy, where you can self insert yourself as the hero.

The role playing game genre that *Fallout: New Vegas* is a part of uses an aspect of games called "ethical game play." According to gaming scholar Miguel Sicart in his book *Beyond Choices : The Design of Ethical Gameplay*, "In ethical gameplay, players need to face situations in which their choices matter or face worlds and narratives in which their presence invokes moral

dilemmas.” For example, *Fallout: New Vegas*’ quests all have a major choice you have to make. Should you cover up a murder if it means a community can not go hungry? Should you kill a tyrant if the person replacing him could be worse? The overall game gives you one huge ethical choice, which major faction will you support in the Battle of Hoover Dam and in controlling the Mojave desert region.

There are three major factions in the game. The New California Republic, or NCR, is a recreation of the ideas and politics of a contemporary United States. Caesar’s Legion is a group of Misogynistic Fascists who dress in Roman attire and want to force local groups into their monoculture. Then, there is Mr. House, a billionaire from before the war that preserved himself and speaks through a computer screen, who maintains a class hierarchy in New Vegas and seeks to strengthen his control over the region. As an alternative to these options, the player can work towards fighting all the factions and creating an independent New Vegas.

The main conflict of the story between the two factions of the NCR and the legion works to create a new, post apocalyptic frontier, where the Eastward expansion of the NCR clashes with the Westward expansion of the Legion. This serves to appease the desire for a new frontier presented by Frederick Jackson Turner in his infamous text “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” which argued that Manifest Destiny and the genocide of indigenous people was actually necessary for American ingenuity and the end of manifest destiny and the end of the “frontier” would be bad for America. The game creates a fictional new frontier, a reflection of the glorified fiction of the western, and thus seems to satisfy the racist desires of Frederick Jackson Turner.

However, I think *Fallout: New Vegas* does more than supply a new western fantasy of the frontier. By having four main paths to go in the story and four different Factions with different

political beliefs to support, the game not only offers but encourages a path of liberatory fantasy and freedom from colonial expansion and Manifest destiny.

Let us start by examining the stand in for America in the game, the New California republic, or NCR. After emerging from the vaults, a society developed in California that sought to recreate the aesthetic and ideologies of pre war America. It has a similar representative democracy with a president and a senate. In a bit of a twist on the westward expansion of America's Manifest destiny, the NCR is expanding Eastward. They specifically want to use the energy generated by Hoover Dam to power their new Empire, sending the electricity back to power the cities in California.

I think that the game's use of race and gender is really interesting. There is no explicit mention of racism in the game, but the game isn't entirely race blind. The NCR has a lot of diversity in its ranks with generals and high ranking officials and ambassadors of color while the Legion is almost entirely white. However, the game is very explicit about misogyny. with the NCR having its first president be a woman and having several prominent NCR leaders be women. For example the leader of the Crimson Caravan, several NCR military people, and your supervising officer if you pursue the NCR path are all women. On the other hand, the Legion very explicitly is a heavily misogynistic faction with women being enslaved and deprived of all rights. One quest has you explaining to a smaller group considering allying with the legion that the women in their group would be enslaved, causing them to abandon their decision.

A lesser game would leave this as a simplistic conflict where the NCR are the good guys and Caesar's Legion are the bad guys, but the game does not frame it this way. Almost every non player character, or npc that is a resident of the region before the NCR showed up sees them as a nuisance, or the lesser of two evils. They express resentment and anger towards them, but

often say that they would pick them over the legion. I think that this positions the NCR as a strong critique of the modern American Democratic party. In *Empire* by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, the authors argue that modern neo imperialism is more similar to the roman strategy of incorporating and forcing cultures into a conglomerated Roman culture and stripping them of national autonomy that way, rather than by the imperialism of Europe that had a more overt and visible control. While the accuracy of this statement is hotly debated, as Ania Loomba discusses in the conclusion to her book *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, this connection of the current hegemony of the United States to Ancient Rome, which the United States drew heavily from culturally in its founding, is ripe for being used to critique Neocolonialism. With this connection, the NCR as a reflection of the ideology of the modern United States and its neo imperialism serves as a great foil to the Legion, an overt reflection of the Roman empire itself. The NCR's support by the people is solely based on the threat of the legion, but the NCR itself is exploiting the legion in a similar way. The Legion is what the NCR pretends it isn't, its over the top violence a contrast to the NCR's slightly more subtle violence.

One example of the NCR's oppression is the massacre at Bitter Springs, an event that took place before the game started that is referenced by several characters. In a conflict with a local group called the Great Khans, the NCR massacred innocent civilians. This event is referenced throughout the game, and is thus very difficult to not find out about in any playthrough of the game. It shows very clearly the violence that comes with manifest destiny, and plants in every player the idea that the NCR is not necessarily a force for good. Compare this to a Legion massacre of a town called Nipton which occurs early in the game. The player walks into a town on the way to New Vegas and sees everything burned down. A Legion soldier tells the player that they massacred the town because of its debauchery, and tells the player to spread

news of this event to the NCR. These two massacres are similar in terms of violence, but the Legion one is not hidden, while the Bitter Springs massacre is something that the NCR does not want to talk about. It is a rather strong showcase of how the two opposing factions are not as different as they may seem, with both being reflections of the fascism<sup>1</sup> that the United States was built on.

In addition to critiquing neo-imperialism through both the NCR and the Legion, the game offers examples of alternative systems. One interesting area of the game is a commune called Westside. Located on the outskirts of New Vegas, this town is filled with people in poverty who have been ignored by the NCR and the upper class of new vegas and have formed a community garden and shared resources. They are only able to survive by diverting water from the NCR farms to their community gardens, and the player has the choice to either tell the NCR and stop the water or let the commune continue. Beyond the implication that the people of the Mojave desert would be better off without the NCR controlling their resources, this quest also shows an alternative system of living that is able to keep people fed and sheltered in a way that the neoliberalism of the NCR cannot. One other example of an alternate system are the followers of the apocalypse. They are a group of scientists that seek to offer free healthcare and resources to disenfranchised people in New Vegas. The existence of these groups showcases that the NCR is failing to keep the residents of the Mojave healthy and that the people need to work towards this on their own.

All of this setup for the flaws of the NCR leads to the fourth possible path you can take in the game, the independent New Vegas ending. After you deal with the person that shot you at the beginning of the game, Benny, you discover that he was working on reprogramming a robot

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<sup>1</sup> A term literally derived from the Roman symbol of power, the Fasces, which also adorns DC architecture like Congress and the Oval Office.

owned by billionaire ruler of New Vegas Mr. House. This robot, now called Yes-Man, says that he can take control of Mr. House's robot army, upgrade them, and use them to control New Vegas and drive out the NCR and the Legion. Yes-Man says that you should go talk to all the various small groups in the region and see if they are worth ignoring, taking down, or allying with. This ending results in you and whatever people you decided to bring with you to the final battle taking down both the legion and the NCR, and letting the people of New Vegas and the Mojave live on their own. While this ending is one of four major ones, I argue that the game incentivises you to pick this ending. For one, as mentioned earlier, you get a first hand look throughout the game of the oppression enacted by the NCR, Legion, and Mr House. Second, this route gives the player the most control over how the game ends and how the game is played. For example, the Legion or the NCR or Mr. House will specifically ask you to deal with a faction a certain way, either destroying it or allying with it, while with the Yes-Man route you get the ability to deal with each faction in whatever way you please.

I also argue that the Yes-Man ending of Fallout: New Vegas is a relatively liberatory version of the Western. Instead of positioning a white lawman as the hero and "lawless indigenous or indigenous coded groups as the villain, the lawmen are the villains that you fight in the end. You end both the eastward expansion of the NCR and the westward expansion of the legion. The specific tying of the NCR to America and the legion to the Rome that inspired it helps make the Yes Man ending somewhat against American imperialism, especially for a big budget video game. In addition, the create your own character aspect of the game lets people from groups that have been marginalized and demonized by the western become the hero of the story. This works better than representation in a television show or movie because the player is literally you, and acts based on your decisions and what you want.

While the Yes-Man ending is one of many, and you have the ability to play as the Legion or NCR, I do not think this hinders the liberatory potential of the game. On the contrary, giving you the option to actively decide what you want to do makes the Independent vegas ending even more satisfying. If you do the other endings, the game gives you negative consequences that make you want to try it again and do an independent run of the game. For example, doing the Legion path cuts off several companions, locations, and other characters from the game as they refuse to associate with you. Also, if you are a female character, the Legion will be condescending and Misogynistic to you the whole game. As another example, the NCR will ask you to commit increasingly unethical acts, including a coup and political assassinations. Giving you the ability to choose alternative paths that have negative effects makes the message of the Yes-Man ending even more compelling.

Another way the game subverts the problematic nature of the western is with a quest with a companion named Raul Tejada. Raul was a Chicano vaquero before the bombs dropped who was irradiated into an immoral ghoul. He wandered as a gunslinger for hundreds of years before retiring as a mechanic. Raul's story of wandering across the former border over and over again showcases the illogicality of the border itself. It is also notable that the only companion or major character that is an actual cowboy/gunslinger archetypal character is Raul. It is a bit of a statement on how the American White cowboy is a fiction and the real cowboy is the vaquero. For example, Americo Paredes in *With His Pistol In His Hand: A Border Ballad and Its Hero* discusses the ballad of Gregorio Cortez, which predates a lot of Westerns and has a lot of elements that were appropriated by Westerns. This is similar to how Raul, a remnant of before nuclear war, represents reality while the outfits and aesthetics of everyone else in the game are



appropriations and reflections of the Western, which is itself an appropriation and reflection of Corridos.

Raul Tejada also stands out in the larger video game genre, which generally shows negative depictions of Latinx characters. According to Frederick Adalma in a chapter of his book *Latinos and Narrative Media* about video games,

“when the negative representations of Latinos pile up, it is not surprising that there has been a critical response. For instance, David Leonard goes after the GTA series, sharply critiquing its “demonization of Latino immigrants as economic parasites” (Leonard, 93). Leonard identifies GTA as typical of video games that identify Latinos as the “evil” seed that has grown all the nation’s social ills... In the same critical vein, scholars have considered the sociological and even biological impact of negative racial stereotyping in video games...playing video games where Latinos are only represented as gangbangers or identified only as obstacles to be avoided, overcome, or destroyed can solidify exclusionary practices in the real world. (Adalma 256)

Raul is the only overtly racialized character in the game, and no faction or group in the game is specifically mainly of one race except for the Legion as discussed earlier. Having him be the only gunslinger figure and a potential companion is a definite improvement over the negative depictions discussed by Adalma.

I think that there is also some work done with the backstory of the player character themselves. Very little is known about the player’s backstory except for the fact that they were a courier who was unknowingly carrying an extremely valuable package for Mr. House, causing them to be shot by Benny. The only thing known about the character is that they were a working class person that was screwed over by the dealings of the rich and powerful. The rest of the

player's identity is made up by the player. This framing may not seem like it means much, but it really sets the stage for how the whole game is played.

While not perfect, *Fallout: New Vegas* has elements that showcase a potentiality for mainstream reinterpretations of the Western to make meaningful critiques and subversions of the oppressive colonial roots of the genre. The game showcases a message of rejecting neocolonialism and neoliberalism in favor of community organizing, as well as a subtle message about the illogicality of borders. However, it does this in the package of a game that seeks to give players the fantasy of being the archetypal cowboy character from the western, thus upholding its relevance as a genre. It also has this as one option of many in the game, allowing the player to support imperialism and fascism if they so choose. Despite this, I think the liberatory elements of the game are worth discussing and exploring, and I think the game is designed in a way that pushes these elements to the forefront. Perhaps this game could lay the groundwork for more radical subversions and critiques of the genre in future works of popular culture.

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