y Jeff Eaton

Boy and his Dog

There's something romantic about standing in the middle of a windswept desert, a leather jacket on your shoulders and a rifle in your hands, with your trusty wolf at your side. Perhaps that's what has me enjoying Fallout, MacPlay's much-anticipated post-nuclear adventure. It combines a rich, detailed environment, gorgeous graphics, an engaging plot, and polished gameplay to produce a groundbreaking RPG experience. RPG fans have been waiting with eager anticipation for the game's release; happily, they won't be disappointed.

First, the story. It's the twenty-first century, and nuclear war has turned happy California into a charred wasteland overrun with giant scorpions, killer raiders, and deranged mutants. What's the good news? You're a descendent of the lucky few who made it to the shelter of an underground vault when the bombs started falling. Hidden deep in the mountains, you and a thousand other residents of Vault 13 live a happy if sheltered life. All that's about to change, though: Vault 13's water purification chip has given up the ghost, leaving only a few months of drinking water. As the game begins, you're selected to journey into the great unknown, find a replacement chip, and save the Vault.

How I Learned to Stop Worrying And Love The Character Editor

From the moment you double-click the Fallout icon, it's hard to miss the work that's gone into the game. From the moody black and white movie that introduces the game's grim

setting, to the gritty, rusted interface screens and detailed artwork, every pixel screams quality. An astonishing amount of artwork fills the CD, and original plans to include even /more/ graphics (additional character animations, body types, and races) were axed when it became clear they simply didn't have enough disk space...

Even still, there are over a dozen detailed cities to explore, each with a unique look and distinctive background music. A seemingly endless mix of characters are encountered in the game, with their own personalities and appearances. Shuffling peasants, Paladins in body armor, leather clad toughs, and jumpsuited vault dwellers are all present. Change armor or weapons, and the graphic of your character changes appropriately. Carrying a rocket launcher or a flame thrower is, as one would expect, far more impressive than tossing a knife from hand to hand.

tarting a game involves picking from three 'pre-rolled' characters, each offering different specialities, or rolling your own in the Character Editor. There, basic character traits like strength, agility, perception, intelligence and charisma can be balanced and tweaked. A number of experience points can also be distributed between skills like weapons proficiency, first aid, lock picking and bartering. As the game progresses, you'll build up these skills, likely specializing your character in a particular area of expertise.

Fallout deserves praise for providing interesting options beyond combat-soaked gunfights. While the game's combat is great, creative distribution of skills and perks can produce charismatic sharpshooters, brilliant scientists, fast-talking con men, and other varied characters. Almost every quest or obstacle has multiple solutions, and different character types will find a 'best way' that suits their skills. Weaker characters have to use their wits to

avoid many conflicts, while characters with below-average intelligence will struggle through many of the trickier puzzles.

Beyond Thunderd— er, the Vault

Once you've set up your identity and learned of the shelter's impending doom, you're locked outside the vault, left to fend for yourself in the big bad world with a handful of equipment and your wits. Fallout's interface is straightforward, giving an isometric top-down-from-an-angle view of the world. Routine tasks like resting, travelling from one location to another, and reading information purchased from helpful NPCs is done via your 'PIPBoy 3000' PDA. Utilizing special skills or talking to NPCs is as simple as an option-click on the NPC or object.

The game's designers are all old-school RPG lovers, and even in a graphic-rich game like this one, small touches offer reminders of old text-based games. A status window in one corner of the screen lets you inspect almost any object up-close, viewing its textual description. During combat, the window gives updates on who's hitting whom, what damage is being done, and occasional humorous comments. It's also a good way to find out more about the environment — often, these descriptions give you hints about an object's potential uses, observations on an NPC's mood, and other tidbits.

Dozens of side-branching plots are available as you explore; rescuing kidnapped children, hunts for killer animals loose in the desert, and busts of cutthroat criminals. Most of these side-plots are discovered when chatting with NPCs; communication consists of scripted dialogue options, with complex trees of conversation following each decision. Your charisma and speech skills, intelligence, and general reputation all affect the NPC's responses. In many cases, NPCs will offer valuable information in your quest to save the Vault as well. The dialogue for these sessions is witty and well-written; a handful of important NPCs are fully animated and rendered, with voice actors reading their lines.

Asking the leader of one desert community about the village's problems, for example, leads to a job wiping the a pack of giant radiated scorpions. The man-sized mutant scorpions have plagued the village for months, and if you wipe them out, the villagers would be quite thankful... Other jobs are less savory — killing a powerful leader's chief rival, for example. Almost every one has multiple solutions; talking your way past guards to rescue a kidnapped child will work well if you've developed your wheeling and dealing skills, though running in with guns blazing will be the method of choice for gunslingers. Stealing a town's backup pump may work for some characters, while others may prefer to repair the ailing main pump — and win the favor of the town along with the needed parts.

n route to the cities that litter the radioactive wastes, you'll also encounter other travellers. Desert raiders, wandering traders, and the odd caravan are all there. Even rarer events include the discovery of Area51 — complete with a crashed Alien ship and a photo of Elvis. It's hard to deny the game's creators have a sense of humor after /that/ event... These random events scattered throughout the game add variety to the desert treks.

All these sub-plots eventually weave together to form a sinister mystery, and discovering how to save the day is the game's greatest challenge. The fate of the Vault, and the cities you visit, is up in the air, and several possible endings reflect the choices you make in your journeys.

This is My Boom-Stick

Game combat centers around careful management of 'action points' — how many tasks you can perform in a given round of the game's turn-based combat system. You're character's stats determine how many are available, and each weapon takes a different number of points to use. Carefully aimed shots, like a sniper hit to a gang leader's leg, take more action points but can be worth the extra effort. If you and your NPCs survive through a fight, looting commences and you can strip your fallen foes for ammo, armor, and other goodies.

A wide variety of weapons are available, from crowbars and brass knuckles to throwing knives, grenades, automatic weapons, handguns, sniper rifles, plasma pistols, rocket launchers, rocks, sharp sticks, and... well, you get the picture. Some weapons are rare, available only from high priced arms dealers in shady cities, while a handful are found during special quests. Even drugs are available — intelligence-enhancing caplets, physical stimulants, and psychotic combat injections are all in your grab bag of tricks. Be careful, though; if your character gets hooked, they'll face withdrawl symptoms after the shooting is over.

Animation in combat is graphic and can be gruesome. Firing a rocket launcher at a gang member sends his parts — and the parts of those standing nearby — flying in a bloody heap. Other weapons, like the exotic Plasma Rifle or the Flamethrower, leave melted puddles or charred ashes where enemies once stood. For the squeamish, a special option can disable the violent character deaths.

lies in the Ointment

A few glitches and oversights mar the game, though they're hardly show-stoppers. In particular, NPCs in several locations refused to realize changes that are made to the world. For example, one NPC advised I talk to the casino owner when I arrived in town. A confrontation a few days later resulted in the owner's death at my hand, but when I visited the town again several months later, the NPC from the first visit still suggested a trip to the casino owner's office — to talk to the deceased man.

The game's only serious flaw — and it is a serious one — is the time needed to load and save games. Almost any action that involves accessing information on the CD is abysmally slow. Even when the entire 500 meg game is installed onto the hard disk, saving your position can take as long as three minutes, and loading is just as painful. Moving from one portion of a city to another means a similar delay. Though it isn't bad when you're exploring a new area, staying in the same city for quite a while, it can be painfully tedious later in the game. When difficult areas are encountered, and you're experimenting with different approaches to a problem, the save-travel-restore cycle can easily eat up 15-20 minutes. Admittedly, each saved game is dealing with huge amounts of information; the state of every NPC and object that you've encountered. Late in the game, a save file can be as large as 4 megs.

When all is said and done...

Despite these problems, Fallout remains a ground breaking, absorbing game. It combines a slick RPG engine with gorgeous art, rich environments, and an ever-present sense of humor. Fans of Mad Max, The Postman, and the RPG classic Wastelands will all love the gritty post-apocalypse world, and the well-orchestrated plot will hold players' interest. Replayability is high thanks to the wide variety of possible characters, and the Macintosh version of the game is a model for how ports should be done. Not only is the game stable on my extension-loaded system, it includes a selection of Fallout themed desktop pictures and Kaleidoscope themes! If you enjoy RPGs and have a hankering for some action, check it out.

Now, if only I can bluff my way past those guards with my new diplomat character...

Pros:
• Rich, detailed environment
• Intuitive interface and gorgeous artwork
• Offers options for those who prefer puzzles to combat
• Bloody combat!

Cons:
• Obscenely slow saving and loading
• A few in-game quirks with NPCs
• Bloody combat!

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