



Nuclear Blast



Interplay's New RPG Is A Post-Apocalyptic Dream

by Jeff Green

In the world according to FALLOUT, Los Angeles is going to be an even more hellish place to live in the year 2161 than it is right now. And there will be far worse problems than morons talking on their cell phones while driving. Try nuclear radiation. And giant scorpions. And human mutants—big, mean ones with rocket launchers.

This is the setting for Interplay's edgy, highly entertaining new role-playing game, a game that emerges—after a long, often torturous three-year development—as, quite surprisingly, just about the best RPG to be released in years. With a compelling plot, challenging and original quests, and, most importantly, a rich emphasis on character development, FALLOUT is the payoff for long-suffering RPG fans who have seen the genre diluted in recent times by an endless stream of half-baked, buggy, uninspired duds.

GLOW TIME

The game's outstandingly evocative opening cut-scene sets up the story. In the year 2077, with the earth's supply of petroleum and uranium running low, a devastating world war breaks out, wiping out most of civilization in just two hours. The story picks up about 80 years later, as the focus shifts to you, a lifelong resident of an underground nuclear shelter

housing hundreds of people. You are told by the vault's overseer that the controller chip for the vault's water purification system has died. He gives you just 150 days to leave the shelter and find a new chip before the water supply runs out.

This is FALLOUT's first, main quest, and it will take gamers quite a while to solve it, but it is far from the end of the story. You'll find yourself getting mixed up in the various exploits of those living above-ground—including raiders, gangsters, religious cults, and radioactive mutants—while fighting critters (of course) and avoiding nuclear radiation.

The water-chip quest is timed—if you don't find it in 150 days, you lose—but after that the game is non-linear. You can embark on any sub-quests at any time, but as you keep playing you begin to learn that there is a larger uberplot at work that's a clever, creepy amalgamation of *Mad Max*, *Dawn of the Dead*, and *The X-Files*.

PARTY OF ONE

FALLOUT's greatest asset is that it is truly character-based, with every decision you make affecting the world around you—and affecting the endgame as well. As such, the game rewards multiple play and experimentation.

You begin the game by creating your character to your own specifications (see sidebar), and from then on, every decision you make will have far-reaching repercussions. Throughout the game, as various NPCs try to enlist your help, you'll be forced into moral dilemmas—you'll have to choose between peacemaker or assassin, team player or lone wolf, altruistic do-gooder or selfish bastard. Your choices will determine how the game plays out.

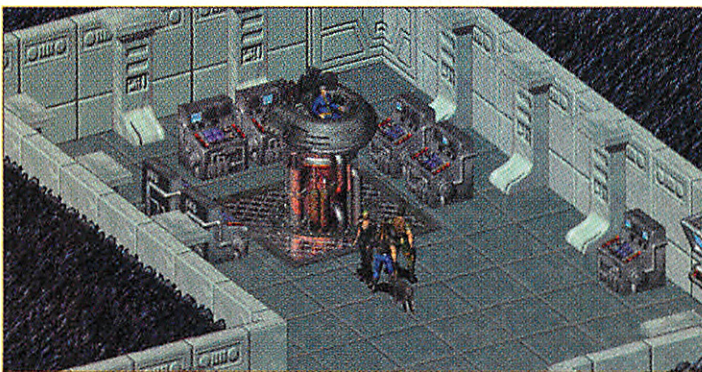
If you walk into a store with guns blazing, killing everyone and stealing everything, don't expect to be very popular. But, on the other hand, you'll walk away with a lot more loot at a much cheaper price. In the tradition of the greatest RPGs, no two people will have exactly the same experience with FALLOUT, because every player will follow his own agenda. In the two times I played through, once as a good guy and once as a heartless murderer, it felt as if I had played two different games. As a bad guy, it was me against the world, destroying everything in my way. As a good guy, I was a beloved champion, with a party of four faithful NPCs on my quest to save humanity.

SHOOT ME, SHOOT YOU

FALLOUT uses a third-person isometric view, à la DIABLO (the only feature these two games share), and the overall graphic design, which evokes the kitschy feel of 1950s' Cold War Americana, is richly inspired. Everything in the game—from the load screens to the interface to the truly brilliant manual (a spiral-bound "Vault Dweller's Survival Guide," complete with recipes)—contributes to create a consistent atmosphere and mood.



BABYFACE Mutant boy here is just one of the surprises awaiting you in FALLOUT.



IT'S YOUR VAULT You have just 150 days to bring the water-purification chip back to Vault 13, shown here, or you and everyone you know dies.

Price: \$54.95
Minimum System Requirements: Pentium 90, Windows 95 or DOS 5.0, DirectX 3.0a (Windows 95) or 1MB VESA-compliant SVGA card (DOS), 16MB RAM (Win 95) or 32MB RAM (DOS), 2x CD-ROM drive, Microsoft-compatible mouse, Sound Blaster-compatible sound card (recommended).
Designers: Tim Cain, Chris Taylor, Chris Jones, Leonard Boyarsky
Publisher: Interplay Irvine, Calif.
 (714) 553-6655
www.interplay.com
Reader Service #: 329

The game's combat system is turn-based, which might bore or disappoint *DIABLO* fans, but will be welcome to most hard-core RPGers. Each turn you are allocated a number of "action points" (depending on your character's stats) which you can use to move, fire or reload a weapon, engage in a melee attack, or check inventory. Any action points not spent on a particular turn will roll over into your armor class, increasing your defensive capabilities for that turn.

The only real problem I had with combat involved a suspension of disbelief. You and most of your enemies are usually carrying some sort of high-powered weapon—ranging from small pistols to laser rifles to rocket launchers—and, given the close distance at which fighting occurs, many battles seem to go on for what often feels like a ludicrous amount of turns. One rocket down the throat ought to be enough.

ATOMIC WASTE

Although *FALLOUT*'s interface is excellent overall, the inventory system is way too cumbersome, forcing you to tediously scroll through a single-column vertical list every time you try to locate an item.

FALLOUT's quest log is also flawed. Although its purpose is admirable—to automatically keep track of your various quests—it doesn't do so consistently, failing to add some quests or clear them when you've finished.



OUTTA MY WAY! One of *FALLOUT*'s only real problems are the occasionally stupid NPCs. Here, I was completely boxed in on this plank, and was forced to either shoot my way out or restart the game.

Isn't that SPECIAL?

The heart of *FALLOUT* is the character generation system. As most readers probably know, *FALLOUT* began life as a GURPS game, the popular Generic Universal Role Playing System developed by Steve Jackson Games. "Creative differences" between the two companies, however, led Interplay to abandon GURPS and create its



own system well into the game's development. And what Interplay came up with is actually pretty good.

Dubbed SPECIAL, the level-based system works off seven primary statistics for your character: Strength, Perception, Endurance, Charisma, Intelligence, Agility, and Luck. When creating your character, you first have a few points to spend to increase any of these stats. Next, you pick

three "tag skills" in which to specialize, such as first aid or lockpicking, and finally, you can select up to two optional traits—which all have both positive and negative effects.

The choices you make here aren't frivolous, but will have a profound effect on how the game plays out. My character (shown here) was quite the hero, earning the mark of "champion" and having good karma to spare. But he couldn't hit the broad side of a barn with a rocket launcher.

The game's many dialog trees don't fully take into account the randomness of how you might play. Sometimes you can ask NPCs things you shouldn't know about yet. Characters you've encountered already will act like you've never met them every time you go back. For example, Killian, the store owner in Junktown, could never remember me, even after I rescued him from an assassin. Eventually I just shot the ingrate and looted his store.

If you play your cards right, a few NPCs will join your party, and while they're nice to have around, they can also be more trouble than they're worth. You don't control them—the CPU does—and many times, they'll get in the way, blocking your path or shooting you instead of the enemy. They also don't gain experience or pick up items. You can give them better items to use—but the method for doing so is a complete kludge. More player control over other party members would be a big improvement for the sequel.

GROUND ZERO

Don't mistake these glitches for big problems, however. *FALLOUT* is easily the best role-playing game released in the past year, and maybe longer. It's a game that clearly was a labor of love for the design team, with humor, style, and brains to spare, and with a wonderfully refreshing emphasis on character development and decision-making. For role-players it's a must have, but anyone with even passing interest in the genre should check it out as well. *FALLOUT* is—what do the kids say now?—da bomb. ☼

APPEAL: All role-playing fans, especially those who thought the genre was dead.

PROS: Compelling, original story rewards multiple play; strong emphasis on character development; tons of sub-quests; excellent graphic design.

CONS: A few aspects of the game—such as the NPCs, inventory system, quest log, and combat system—are a bit flawed and buggy.

