

The Origins of Fallout - Part 1 (As best as I can remember it)

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When you are in the games industry, the first question you are always asked is, "What games have you worked on?" Although I've worked on plenty of games in the last 20 years, whenever I mention Fallout people always get excited. For over a decade-and-a-half now, I still get asked questions about the origins of Fallout. Where did the ideas come from? What was working on the game like? What things never made it in?

Over a year ago, I received an email, asking me questions about Fallout's history. As I began writing answers, I realized that my explanations led to much bigger questions... So, I decided to write this story as my account of how Fallout was born.

Just a little note before beginning: Much of this document is about Fallout and its predecessor, Wasteland. However, there is a bunch of stuff about my life at Interplay Productions at the time. I've highlighted those parts so you can skip over them if you want, but they do contain some funny stories about game development in the early nineties.

It all ties in, I promise!

Read on!

It began with Wasteland.

Ah, I remember 1988 well: I just turned 16 and like all computer nerds with a fistful of birthday cash, I journeyed to the mall with on my trusty beach cruiser. I went straight to the Software Etc., skirting their rows of Lotus 1-2-3, Word Perfect, and other business software, heading to the back of the store where the real treasures lay: the games.

As I rummaged through the shelves of Apple II, IBM PC, and Amiga games, a striking black and orange box caught my eye. The screenshots inside the front flap were in glorious 16-color EGA. I noticed the resemblance to the Bard's Tale immediately, but instead of knights, wizards and dragons, this game had guns, explosives, and radioactive mutants. With visions of The Road Warrior dancing in my head, I found the Commodore 64 version and raced home gleefully.

The original Wasteland was a masterpiece created by Interplay Productions and published by Electronic Arts. Everything from Bobby's Rabid Dog, to Harry the Bunny Master's mutant rabbits; the Scorpitron in downtown Vegas to the Meson Cannon in the Guardian Citadel. The memories are so vibrant; I still recall the "hold down ESC while in a hazardous space for unlimited experience" cheat.

Good times.

Then I Got A Dream Job.

I was just out of High School in 1991 and I working at the local Egghead Software. Because he knew my love for computer games – and the Bard's Tale in particular – my manager asked one of his friends to stop by and say hi. That befriend was "Burger" Bill Heineman – lead programmer of Bard's Tale 3, Dragon Wars, one of the founders of Interplay Productions, and heavily involved in the various ports of

Wasteland. Needless to say, he was a bit of a legend to me. We talked a bit about the various games I made in my spare time, the grand old times of the Atari 2600 days, and what it was like to actually make games professionally. He said that I should drop by Interplay's studios sometime.

As it turned out, my good school friend, Jeremy Barnes worked with Chris Taylor. Chris had just left the glorious life of retail software and landed a job at none-other-than Interplay Productions. The three of us were into all sorts of geekery: Dungeons and Dragons, board games, and especially Warhammer 40K. Not more than a few weeks on the job, Chris invited Jeremy and I over to interplay for a Warhammer game.

That Saturday, with a box-full of miniatures in tow, we arrived. It was the first time I saw what a creative studio was like – movie posters on the wall, a Mario Bros. arcade machine, floppy disks and hardware strewn about – it was like home. As we set up the game on the floor of a meeting room, I met the fourth player of the game – metal studded leather jacket, black-T, scruffy beard, black sunglasses, and a cigarette – the iconic image of Rusty Buchert.

I remember four things about that game: 1) Orks will do anything for Teef, 2) one hundred Gretchen with blunderbusses really can take down an imperial dreadnaught, 3) Squats run very, very slowly, 4) somehow it was possible to make computer games AND get paid for it. Soon after our game, Jeremy applied to Interplay and landed a job in playtest. As for me – I got a bit sidetracked. I spent the next several months writing a forensic signature analysis program and creating “flying logos” for video presentations. Neat stuff, but not what really called to me.

In early 1991, after giving my buddy Jeremy an earful of my contractor's woes, he simply said, “Dude. Get a job at Interplay.”

Although Design and Programming was my passion, I spent the next week brushing up on my pixel-pushing artistic skills. My thinking? Artists get paid more, of course! My interview was with the art director, Todd Camasta. Although I recalled the name, I didn't realize how prolific he was. He was responsible for much of the art for the Bard's Tale games, Battle Chess, and Wasteland, completely pushing the boundaries of the new palletized VGA graphics. So, Todd had me sit down in his office and “draw something” in 45 minutes, and then left. For the next hour I clicked that mouse like a telegraph, and DPaint struggled to keep up with my furious pixel hunting. I was about halfway done when Todd came back to his office. He glanced at the image I was working on, frowned, grabbed the mouse and said, “like this.” Suddenly there was a blur on the screen as paint blobs flew over my image. As I watched, the blobs became more and more defined, like a sculptor removing the unwanted stone. In mere moments on the screen was a fantastic image where my sad little picture had been built. As I sat gaping at the screen, he said, “practice more.”

Feeling a little crushed, I left the interview, head hung low. In the lobby, Jeremy was waiting for me. He asked me how I did – though the look on my face probably said everything. “Come with me”, he said and began climbing stairs.

When we got to the playtest department, Jeremy announced, “Hey Rusty! Scott wants a job!” Rusty had been promoted to head of QA (a fancy acronym for Playtest) and, after meeting, chatting about our favorite games and where we thought the industry was heading, Rusty called me the next day and said that I was in.

“Interplay, Interplay, Interplay! Interplay all day long!
Interplay, Interplay, Interplay! We sing the Interplay song!”

Some of my fondest memories of Interplay are of the Playtest department. When I started, Interplay had just become its own publishing company; there weren't many playtesters, but there were a LOT of games to be tested. This usually meant that each of us would work on a handful of games at the same time. For the rare times we had multiple playtesters on a single project, there was an unspoken competition to try and be the absolute best at that game.

For example, I was hired to replace a playtester named Feargus Urquhart (the same Feargus who later ran Black Isle and is CEO at Obsidian). So I inherited his game, Castles 2: Siege and Conquest. Gus had mastered that game to such a level that new rules had to be programmed to prevent his abuse. For instance, in one story, he succeeded at killing the territory owned by the Pope; something considered impossible to the developers. After that, they created a rule that the Pope's land could not be seized by any player. Of course, that meant I had to outdo him - by being excommunicated, yet still capturing all enemy territories. I figured that after a thousand years of game-time, I was as good as king.

Early in my career Rusty was showing me around the building, and introduced me to Tim Cain in his office. I noticed he was working on a new Bard's Tale game (the Bard's Tale Construction Set), but what really got my attention was the color scheme of the interface. In full VGA glory, the interface menus were in a mishmash of bright pinks, browns, and light green highlights. I inquired about the nauseating color palette, but Tim didn't quite know what I was talking about. It turns out, he's a bit color blind, and the interface looked just fine to him! That was my first lesson on why programmers should not make art for their games.

Within a few short months of hiring me, Interplay purchased a new building a few miles away. As we were still a young company, (heck, I think I was employee #72), we didn't have the money to hire a moving company - we were told to grab our computers and stuff and move them ourselves. Thus, the Interplay Fly-By-Night Moving Company was born. We would work during the day, and then by night, carry as much as we could to our new digs on Fitch Street. There were plenty of stories about programmers nearly being crushed by metal desks being carried up a flight of stairs, people securing their office space by dumping as much stuff into it as possible, and forcing some employee pack-rats to take some of their boxes of crap home lest they be "lost" in the move. All in all, it took a week to move the company into our new, larger (if somewhat stale and corporate) offices.

During my time as a playtester, I had the privilege of testing some of the best games in the early 90's: Alone in the Dark (PC), Out of this World (IIGS), The Lost Vikings (SNES), Rock and Roll Racing (SNES), Battle Chess 4000 (PC), Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers (PC), and more. One of those "and more" games was a small game called Rags to Riches. It was humorous stock market trading game, chock-full of strange and brilliant one-liners (for example, your in-game mother stating that "Broccoli gives your pa the wind something fierce.") As I was tasked to play it, I noticed that I was doing the same arduous interface clicks over and over. So, I drew up a new method of displaying the stock statistics that required no additional menu shuttling. I showed the lead programmer, none-other than Time Cain, my ideas for the interface change, and he liked them so much he worked overtime to get many of the changes into the game at the last minute before it launched.

After that experience, Tim and I began talking about our love of role-playing games. He had created a cool universe generator based on a lengthy series of charts from GURPS: Space, and I showed off a randomly created dungeon program I had been working on. We both yearned for a chance to work on our own RPG... Maybe someday...

Not that kind of Ass Prod

After many months of playtest, I was snatched up by Bill “Wheeze” Dougan to be his Assistant Producer (or Ass Prod, as the position is affectionately referred to). Bill was actually one of the map designers for Wasteland, and if you can find the old crew picture from the box, he’s the tall, lanky one in the back with the baseball bat (or is it a shotgun?)

I was put to work immediately on several projects that no other producers wanted – Dvorak on Typing for Norway, for example. Cringe. However, there were some very bright spots. There was the Lord of the Rings: CD-ROM, where we digitized clips from the Ralph Bakshi film and interspersed them throughout the original LotR PC game. What made this so memorable was that it was on a CD-ROM. These things were still new devices for PCs, and the newly retail CD burners were vicious temperamental beasts. They were the size of a suitcase, and would frequently create bad sectors if it couldn’t get the data as fast as it could burn – which was x1, by the way. I remember that we kept the burner in the hall initially, but quickly found that if anyone walked by while it was in use, the vibration of their footsteps would misalign the head and create another 70 minute waste of disc – which ran about \$20 a piece at the time! I remember one of the worst mistakes I ever made. Holding the gold master to be sent to duplication for LotR, after waiting the excruciating burn time and checking for hours to ensure there were no disc sector errors, I gleefully and obliviously scrawled “Gold Master” - across the back side of the disc. Sigh.

Another fun title that came my way was Interplay’s 10th Anniversary. It was to have 10 of Interplay’s classic games; one a year, from 1983 to 1993. It seemed like fun, and an easy enough task - until I actually tried to get the games. I remember walking into one of Interplay's co-founder's office and asking to see the code archives. He pointed to a three drawer cabinet in the corner. The first drawer contained financial file folders. The second drawer contained cables and various old hardware cards. In the third drawer was a few handfuls of 5.25 and 3.5 floppy disks. I say handfuls because they were literally in loose piles – many unsleeved and unlabeled. After scouring each disk, it appeared that most of the code, let alone the actual GAMES were not there. To make matters worse, the older games would no longer run on modern machines. There were just too many changes in operating systems (DOS 2.0 to Dos4GW) and hardware (VGA, sound cards instead of PC speaker, etc.) There would have to be extensive code changes to get these to even run.

All would have been lost if it weren’t for Burger Bill. Luckily, he had personal backups of all of the games Interplay had made, and most of the code archived as well. There were three games he didn’t have the code for: Mindshadow, Tass Times in Tone Town, and Wasteland. Bill proved to be an assembly ninja. He reverse engineered the game executables of Mindshadow and Tass Times back into C++ code. He also used his elite h4x0r skills to remove the copy protection for the other games, but Wasteland still remained a problem.

Bill and I went around the company, talking to everyone who had been affiliated with Wasteland, trying to find lost code. Finally, Mike Quarles, the programmer of the C-64 version, still had a stack of

floppies that filled in the last of the holes. To make the required changes to the game, the code needed to be recompiled, and after a long search, the backup of the ancient Borland C++ compiler was found, and the new executable was authored. I still shudder to think that the entire code to Wasteland was so close to being lost forever.

During this time, I was playing in and running copious amounts of pencil-and-paper Role-Playing games after work. There was a time that four nights a week was a different campaign – from D&D, to Star Wars, to Shadowrun, to GURPS. As it turns out, people who spend all day making games, also like spending their nights playing them. Go figure.

The bloom leaves the rose

The first real blow to my love of the company came during an all-hands company meeting. Burger Bill and I stood in the doorway and looked at the mass of people gathered. Interplay was expanding exponentially; so large that after this meeting, they would be held in the outdoor atrium. Bill and I had shipped 10th Anniversary only a few months earlier. Brian Fargo addressed the crowd and told everyone that how well the company was doing. But, he especially wanted to point out that the 10th Anniversary was a huge seller, responsible for 60% of the company's sales that quarter. Bill and I stood proud. Brian continued by saying that the 10th Anniversary project wouldn't have been possible if it wasn't for the dedication and hard work of two people. Burger and I grinned in anticipation. Brian continued, thanking two of the marketing ladies who helped to distribute the product. Burger and I stood and gaped. Not to belittle the job of marketing, but after scavenging the code, rewriting executables, creating installers, laboriously digitizing the manuals, for ten whole games, all under a massive crunch – I felt as if I was kicked in the man-bits.

Long before I ever heard the term “Jump the Shark”, I began to see some warning signs of Interplay's continued success. I sensed a change in the management. There was a shift from a passion for game making, to a desire to make Hollywood-style cinema. We changed from the old adage of “Shoot for the moon. Here's a nickel.” to “How can we make this experience more like watching a movie.” It began with Stonekeep (which started as a throwback to the old Bard's Tale, but became a nightmare of “cinematic experience”), and exploded with the Sim-CD series (Interplay's remakes of SimCity, SimAnt, and SimEarth in CD-ROM format with lots of movies) and the horror show that was “Cyberhood” (an interactive movie that became a black hole of funds.)

I remember one producer summit when we first saw the film footage shot for Sim City CD. The idea was that you could click on buildings and see a movie of the people inside living their lives. They were 30 second clips of people watching TV, or sleeping in bed, or doing aerobics, or eating cereal. And there were dozens of these clips; the most boring and mundane things you can imagine. Immediately after seeing this footage, we learned that it cost over a million dollars to film... and there was more filming to do. Considering that most of the games in production had a sub 100K budget, I (and many of the producers there) about had aneurysms. All it took was for this one game to be a train wreck, and the whole company suffers, or even dies.

During this time, I inherited SimEarth CD-ROM. I was my favorite of the sim games, and I immediately wanted to add features that would enhance the gameplay. For instance, I always wondered what my creatures looked like when they evolved into sapient beings. What would a sapient arthropod look like? What kind of cities would an iron age civilization of sapient

amphibians build? I wanted to create small movies that were rewards for evolving your planet. There was a new artist at Interplay who was quite good at 3DStudio, and he did an amazing 3D movie test. (This was before Toy Story, so a movie with high-quality animated 3D characters was bleeding edge.) As the artist built and rendered these movies in his spare time, the programmer, coded furiously to convert the old Sim Earth into a modern vibrant VGA game. When the incredible movies went into the beautiful game, it began to really shine.

Then, the pain. I was told that I was going over budget. Confusing, because I had spent less than \$100k. But my predecessor spent over \$200K on other cinematic footage. Footage that we had no gameplay use for.

No problem, I'll make it work.

Then, after showing the incredible movies to Steven Spielberg, the artist was pulled from my project to work on "better things". (Spielberg was in the process of founding Dreamworks, and soon after hired that artist to work on Shrek.) Then another artist was also pulled off. Finally, after months of insane hours to meet the schedule the project was canceled. (Since SimCity was having such budget overruns, our product lineup needed trimming.) After all the time and effort we had spent getting the game ready to ship, this was kick-to-the-bits number two.

In another company wide meeting, we learned that Universal Pictures had purchased a portion of the company. The company was treated to a day at Universal Studios, and we were promised several amazing upcoming movie licenses. My fear of the company ditching games and becoming a movie house was getting stronger.

The first movie license arrived in-house, Flipper, a remake of the 70s TV show. (I recall the designer of that project saying that we should buy the rights to ECO the Dolphin and simply rename it.) The second movie license was Casper the Friendly Ghost. When the first design was shot down by Harvey Comics because "Casper should be able to walk through walls" – we realized that trying to create a game with no way to contain the player's movement was, in fact, rather impossible.

The third movie license? Oh, it was the granddaddy of them all: Waterworld. After flying the designers out to Hawaii to see one of the multi-million dollar atoll sets (which would later sink), all they were provided with was the original script to create a game (which surprisingly wasn't bad – the game I mean). However, most of their ideas got thrown out as the movie filming was changing the script on a day to day basis. The game did ship, but it became a Real-Time Strategy game, based in the world, but having nothing to do with the actual movie.

On top of all the craziness, Burger Bill was fired from Interplay. I was told the causes were just and it was a long time coming, but I saw it as one of the last old school non-conformists axed.

Still, as all of this was going on, the late night RPGs lived on. More and more dice-throwing geeks joined in, and a new game called Magic: The Gathering began to take over. One night, Tim Cain showed me his GURPS Character Creator he was working on. It was using his own GUI system and parsed all of the data through text files, making it easy to anyone to add new stuff. I showed off my GURPS Vehicle Creator I was programming, with a cool UI and automated math calculations.

From that point on, we kept saying to ourselves, "We really need to make a GURPS game".

What's a "GURPS"?

While I struggled with Sim Earth, Tim had proposed the idea to management to make a new RPG based on the GURPS license. Yes, from what I hear, "What's a GURPS" was actually asked by someone. Tim sold them on the idea that because GURPS is a generic system, once we make one game, we'll be able to reuse the core mechanics to make any other kind of RPG. Somehow they said "Yes."

Steve Jackson, a legend in the pencil-and-paper gaming world, created and owned the rights to GURPS. However, Steve had been burned by games before. In the past two of his great IPs were turned into Apple II games: Autoduel and Ogre. Ever since, Steve Jackson games had been inundated with developers wanting to turn their beloved IPs into computer games – and failing miserably.

When Interplay approached Steve Jackson Games for GURPS, they were extremely skeptical. They were told of the long line of great RPGs that Interplay had made. No response. They were told that they would have creative control over the game. Still no response. Then they were told the up-front license money they would be getting. Suddenly, there was a response.

With GURPS given a green light, Tim assembled a team, and (because SimEarth was just canned) chose me as the Lead Designer. It was a bit of a rocky start, as much finagling was needed to secure people for the team from other projects.

Once the contract was signed, Steve Jackson came to the studios for a meet and greet with the team. I remember him being extremely cool with our overall ideas about handling the game. One pointed question was, "What do you think about blood and violence in the game?" With a smirk and a wave of his hand, he answered, "The more the better!" Words that would eventually come to haunt us.

Later that day, several of us played a game of Illuminati with Steve (who created the game.) As the game progressed, Steve made a sweeping move, shuffling cards and resources in a flurry of action. One of the players, Floyd, piped up, "Ah, Steve. You can't do that."

Mr. Jackson blinked at him, then replied, "I think I know the rules."

But, Floyd persisted, "No, really. Check the manual."

Tension mounted as Steve took the manual and thumbed through it. After a minute, he said, "I guess you're right." He dropped the manual and changed his action.

After a few heartbeats, Floyd exhaled and exclaimed, "Oh my god! I just corrected Steve Jackson on a rule!"

All was looking good! Now all we needed was a story...

How do you make a "Generic Story"?

One of the brilliant things about GURPS is that it is genre-agnostic; you could have the game set in the old west, on a space ship, in a Lovecraftian universe, or a sword-and-sorcery fantasy. We all really wanted to emphasize this incredible flexibility in the system by making a story that touched on many different genres...

Here's the first draft of a script that came from a night of many beers:

You create your character – an average Joe in a modern setting. As the game begins, you are meeting with your significant other in a sunny park. After a little talking, everything seems to be going great for your date tonight. As soon as you say goodbye, a group of black-robed cultists jumps out and grab your girl/boyfriend. Chasing them you see them drag him/her to a dark and spooky mansion on the edge of town. If you call the police, an officer will show up – but he's grabbed the moment he knocks on the door! It's up to you.

Finding a way inside the house, there is mysterious chanting and ritualistic goings-on. In your search, you find many tomes referring to a Cthulhu-esque monster that the cult is trying to bring to this world with blood sacrifices. At this point, we're firmly in a horror genre.

As your search continues, you reach the dark tunnels beneath the mansion and come across a massive crystalline pillar. As you look into the pillar, you see the shadowy form of a human, just inside the cloudy crystal... Interesting...

Eventually, you come to a huge underground cave where a statue of the Lovecraftian god looms over the proceedings. On the other side of a smoky pit, the High-Priests are preparing your significant other for sacrifice! Unfortunately, the priests are simply too tough for you to fight, and you will soon be overwhelmed by the cultists and brought to the edge of the pit. As the high-priest raises his knife over your girl/boyfriend, he gives the order, and you are pushed into the black-depths of the pit!

Waking up, you find yourself on a huge pile of debris – everything from trash bags, to fast food containers, to rotting skeletons. It seems the cultists – who are nowhere to be found - are using this weird pit as a waste dump. On closer inspection, you find the body of a police officer among the detritus, with his service revolver intact.

Gun in hand, you make your way through the caves and out into bright sunlight. You are startled by what you see: no city, a dense jungle, an erupting volcano, and pterodactyls flying in the skies. Somehow that pit dropped you millions of years into the past! Now, lost in a dangerous dinosaur-filled world, you must find a way back. At this point, the game changes to a prehistoric survival genre.

Exploring the jungle-primeval, your brawn, endurance, and stealth are tested as you fight raptors, run from charging triceratops, and evade T-Rexes. In your journey, you find strange anachronistic devices scattered about that seem to have fallen like meteors. Some are sort of like flashlights, while others are explosives or portable force-fields.

As you reach the top of a hill, you see a glint of metal at the end of a nearby canyon. Making your way towards it, you quickly realize that the canyon is actually a massive trench dredged by the hull of a crashing space ship! The ship's appears mostly intact, but a storage bay seems to have been ripped open. However, a sealed door with a strange red symbol on it bars your way deeper into the ship.

Just outside of the wreckage, a nasty lemur-like monkey chitters and hisses at you from a rock. You notice that it is holding a metallic card with a strange red symbol on it. Trying to coax the monkey towards you, it laughs, points and throws poo at you. This vicious cur scampers from rock to rock, just out of reach, and taunting you maliciously. After being thoroughly humiliated

by the critter, you eventually shoot it, trap it, or throw a rock at it, smashing its little skull, but gaining the keycard. Good riddance!

Using the card to enter the ship, you now enter a science-fiction genre. You find malfunctioning robots, laser guns, and nasty, lurking alien creatures. You find a universal translator in a room that helps you understand the computer systems in the ship. Eventually making your way to the command bridge, you find that the little gray aliens who crashed here were all eaten by the dangerous aliens they were transporting. The ship's mission was to collect species from across time and space – and you suddenly realize that the ship is a time machine!

After activating the computers and repairing the drive core, you are ready to begin take-off. You punch in your future destination date and set the time reactors to go. The fragile ship lists into the sky, and suddenly rockets into hyperspace. In a blink you find yourself soaring towards skyscrapers! Trying your best, you clip a few of the buildings as you crash into the ground with a crunch.

You make your way out of the space ship and find yourself in the heart of a massive metropolis. As you look about confused, a human-sized dinosaur moves up to you. As you see it, its eyes go wide and it runs from you screaming “the Aliens have arrived!”. Somehow you've reached a future where anthropomorphic dinosaurs rule the earth!

You now find yourself in a dystopian cyberpunk genre where velociraptor punks hack the net with cybernetic implants and brontosaurus bouncers flex their augmented muscle implants. Weird? Yes. But kinda cool.

As you flee from the gun toting DinoTech corporate soldiers (who were told to “only bring back alien bodies”), you make your way into the underground of the city. There you find the destitute dino-punks who fight against the evil corporations controlling the people. Your universal translator lets you communicate with them, and they think that the alien technology you bring will finally be the thing they need to win the war. They give you a holographic emitter to hide your alien-ness.

Still trying to find out where you are, you find a data library and research the history of the planet. As it turns out, humans never evolved! Suddenly the terrible truth dawns on you: that nasty little monkey with the keycard was the ancestor of all mankind! D'oh!

With your ship mostly destroyed and now captured by DinoTech Inc, you're really in a jam. Somehow, you convince your dino-punk allies to help you get into the corporation and get your ship back.

Before the mission, a stegosaurus mad-scientist working for the resistance has a solution to the corporate thug's electro-stun weapons. He calls it “Superconducting Underwear”, and has made a prototype pair just for you.

As you and your dino allies break into the corporation, you find that the engineers at DinoTech have already disassembled your ship and are testing the various components. You find from hacking a computer that they are testing the “Temporal Stability Modulator” in a secret lab. Fighting your way to the lab, you arrive just in time to see the experiment underway. The time-core has created a swirling time portal (that looks just like that dark well), and the dino-techs

are about to send a test capsule through it. Securing the room with your dino allies, you punch in the coordinates to take you back to the past and jump into the capsule as it begins to move into the time portal.

Just as you are entering, a group of corporate security burst into the room and begin shooting at the time-core! Just as the core explodes, you slip into the closing time portal and are sent spiraling through an unstable wormhole!

You see yourself flying across space and time, eventually racing towards a planet, and sizzling through its atmosphere. Before you can do anything, you crash like a meteor straight into the spires of a black-stone castle, and come to a landing nearby.

Crawling out of the capsule and from beneath the stone rubble, you see a human dressed in an elaborate “evil wizard” getup approaching you. As you speak, he cuts you off with a wave of his hand and begins monologuing. He proclaims that he is the dark lord of this land, blah blah, master of lightning, blah, blah, and how dare you attack his castle, blah, blah, and he will now destroy you. Like some kind of disco dancer, the wizard waves his hands through the air, collecting a charge of electricity and sends the crackling bolt at you!

And nothing happens. Your superconducting underwear dissipated the bolt. Alarmed, the wizard blasts at you again and again, but to no avail. After awhile, you grow bored and lay him out with one punch.

Since you just single-handedly defeated the dark-lord of the land, you are immediately heralded as a hero. With his evil minions fleeing for the hills, the people can turn to their regular pastime – enslaving the faerie people.

You now find yourself in a darkly humorous fantasy world, where faerie-tales are turned on their head – now entering the sword and sorcery genre!

The sorceress in the nearby village notices something different about you. She can tell you’re from another time and place and vows to help you – right after you do a few little quests for her. As it turns out, gold is worthless - quests are the real currency of the land.

So, after several quests – rescuing a dragon from a princess, protecting a dungeon of peace-loving orcs from rampaging heroes, and delivering flowers to the underworld – the sorceress finally helps you. She hands you three potions. She says to drink the red one, give the blue one to the monkey, then drink the green one.

Drinking the red potion, you find yourself flung into space, hurling towards earth, and landing in prehistoric times right outside of the crashed space ship. Unable to move, you look on as you see yourself trying to coax the passcard from the monkey. You watch as you get frustrated enough to commit lemuricide and take the passcard. As the spaceship takes off, you regain movement and approach the dying monkey. Giving him a sip of the blue potion, it quickly jumps to its feet, throws poo on you, and scampers off. Lovely.

Finally, you drink the green potion. You see green crystalline growth spread out from your body and quickly encase you in a pillar of jagged crystal. You watch as the sun spins above you as the ages dart past. You see yourself buried in a volcanic blast, and then millennia later, watch as the

human miners unearth you and drag you to their underground complex. You look on motionless as your younger self approaches your crystalline pillar in the dark basement, trying to make out your shadowy form.

As your younger self leaves the basement, the crystal begins to crack, quickly breaking apart and releasing you into the basement. You follow after yourself, making quick work of the cultists who were about to jump your earlier inexperienced self.

You arrive in the underground cave right as your earlier self is hurled into the pit. As the high-priest raises his dagger over your significant other, you burst into the ceremony! The cultists who had overwhelmed you before are no match to the skills and strange equipment you've gained on your adventures!

After knocking out the high-priest and his minions, you rescue your girl/boyfriend with style, reminding them with a kiss of your date tonight... The End.

Although we weren't thinking seriously of making the game described above, it still stands as a testimony of the bizarrely humorous design aesthetic of our team.

No, seriously, what game are we making?

The team was still trying to find the perfect genre for our first (of hopefully many) GURPS role playing games. We had discarded high-fantasy, since most every role-playing game in the market was filled with spells, swords, orcs, and elves. Because you could do so much with GURPS, we wanted to do something different. We kicked around the idea of making a science-fiction planet exploration game, potentially using Tim's galaxy generator as the seed. However, that seemed to overlap with the Star Trek license that Interplay was already developing. Drat.

Then inspiration hit: Why not remake Wasteland!?

The Wasteland franchise had ended tragically in 1990 with EA's abysmal sequel Fountain of Dreams. Why not resurrect that incredible game and give it the justice it deserved?

Everyone immediately loved the idea. Tim even mentioned that Steve Jackson Games was working on GURPS: Survivor; a role-playing sourcebook with rules for post-apocalyptic adventuring. What a perfect fit!

The ball was in motion; our first game was going to be GURPS: Wasteland.

I began replaying Wasteland, breaking out my boxed set of Gamma World, re-watching the Road Warrior, Steel Dawn, and Damnation Alley, and re-reading A Canticle for Leibowitz and The Beach.

The post-apocalyptic genre is still very dear to my heart. The idea of humanity destroying itself is one of the darkest themes in all of literature. However, the archetype of the Survivor – the lone hero who does not succumb to the anarchic world or his base desires; who is his own justice and treats people like he would like to be treated – no other heroic figure is stronger. He is literally one man against the world, and no matter the cost to himself, he remains the paragon of the best aspects of humanity, carrying the hope that the idyllic and prosperous world of his past – our world – will eventually be revived.

The world after an apocalypse is fraught with danger and adventure; it brings out the worst – and best – of humankind. It is a brutal world, full of savagery and devoid of honor. There is only Survival. That and a distant dream of lifting themselves from the ashes. Few genres can elicit that level of primal emotions from an audience.

As the team gathered for the upcoming Christmas break, we all shared our ideas of where a GURPS: Wasteland could go. We liked the idea of setting it in Southern California; close enough to the Las Vegas of the first game where we could still use some characters, but different enough where we could tell our own story. Our player would be a member of the Desert Rangers dispatched to So. Cal. to investigate a mutant uprising, or a robot uprising, or something. . . but it was going to be great!

As we were about to end the meeting, Interplay's legal counsel stepped in to say "have a good holiday!" And, just as he was leaving, he said, "Oh yeah, it turns out that EA still retains the rights to Wasteland. Merry Christmas!"

Sadly it was true. We wouldn't be able to use the Wasteland license. Even though Interplay created the game, Electronic Arts had published it and still retained the rights. The worst part? EA had let the Wasteland license die, since it was seven years since the product had been released. However, because Interplay had released Wasteland as part of Interplay's 10th Anniversary collection (and had given EA money for the right), it was as if EA re-published the game, thusly securing the Wasteland license for EA for another seven years.

Bugger.

So we all left for our vacation completely adrift. The genre and the story we had settled on were now gone, and it was back to the drawing board. Not a good start to the project.

Interestingly enough, I later learned that EA didn't even care about the Wasteland license at the time. Apparently there was still some animosity over Interplay becoming its own publisher; competing with EA when only years before they were publishing through EA (and making them fat money). I had also heard that after denying Interplay the right to use Wasteland, EA asked their internal teams if anyone wanted to use this license. Apparently one did. Years later, after Fallout had shipped, I was pitching a game at EA Redwood Shores. I remember walking through their development cubicle-farm and seeing lots of wild-west-meets-Wasteland concept art and was hinted that this was to be a sequel to Wasteland. Although it never was released, that game was prompted by that phone call to deny Interplay the use of Wasteland.

A Vault is Born!

I had done a lot of thinking over the holiday, and came to a conclusion; So what if EA owns the rights to Wasteland? They don't own the rights to the post-apocalyptic genre! I told the team, when we met in January, that we should still push forward with our Wasteland-like concept and make it our own. We all agreed: "Screw EA."

Now, the only hurdle we had was: How do we make ourselves different from Wasteland?

The next week I wracked my brain to come up with ideas to make our game "a different kind of apocalypse":

- An alien invasion! Aliens have conquered the earth and humanity fights a guerilla war through the devastated wastelands to retake their home!
Nah. Too easy to re-create an “Earth vs. the Bug Eyed Aliens” B-movie.
- Watership Down with Guns! Anthropomorphic animals mutated into sapience by radioactive materials work with the last of humanity to survive the HORDE: terrible bestial gopher-critters eating everything in their path!
Nah. Too Gamma World-esque.
- Radioactive Zombies! A virus kills and subsequently reanimates the dead into various hive-minds, driven to “acquire” the last of living humans. Throw in a few crazy humans who follow the “Zombie Gods” and some high-tech soldiers and you got action!
Nah. There were some things I liked about this, but I didn’t want to recreate Omega Man or a George Romero movie.

I had some interesting ideas, but nothing strong enough to call a “good story”.

That’s when Tim Cain had the idea. He said that he had it in a dream. Something about being in a huge fallout shelter locked behind a massive door. This wasn’t just a shelter, this was a whole city. People lived their whole lives there, never seeing the outside world...

To me, that idea was like a lightning bolt to the brain. I was so excited that I blathered some ideas of the top of my head, and being unable to stop the flow, I had to run to my computer to start writing them down. From that one seed came everything that made our game Fallout.

A near future; one where the threat of war was becoming a reality. The only way to win a nuclear war? Have more survivors than the other guys! Thus, government creates underground city-sized fallout shelters – not just for the elite, as in most dystopian futures – but for as much of the populace as possible.

To most-rapidly and cost-effectively make these underground shelters, a hole is drilled a half-mile down into a granite mountain. At the base of the hole, a one megaton nuke is detonated. This creates a quarter mile diameter sphere of liquid magma which eventually compacts and cools into a flat stone floor, leaving a small dome of gasses which escape from the hole in the top. Voila! A domed underground structure!

(It’s probably completely untrue, but I had heard that the US experimented with something like this back when they were building NORAD.)

Each shelter was made for 100 to 1000 people and was completely self-sustainable with 100% water recycling, vegetable and livestock farming, recreation, and housing. It was estimated that it would take 50 to 80 years for the nuclear fallout to be filtered from the air, so generations of people would have to live and die inside of these underground cities.

My immediate thoughts were: Why would they ever want to leave? If these people were told all of their lives that the outside is a contaminated wasteland, why would they leave their sheltered homes?

Because nothing is self-sustainable forever! What if something were to break? What if they were down there for so long that they could no longer replicate the technology they relied on? A hero would be needed to leave paradise and explore a proverbial hell to save them.

What about the other shelters? Did they have malfunctions? Did they come out once they thought it was safe? Were they dug out by those unfortunate enough to be outside when the bombs hit? What about the sanity of these people? What about the almost absolute power their shelter “overseers” could have over them?

I took all these ideas back to Tim, and we riffed on the idea. I’m pretty sure he was the one who came up with naming the shelters “Vaults” – but I seem to recall the lucky “13” was from me.

I remember describing these Vaults to our marketing department when they asked what our game was going to be about. I’m pretty sure they nicknamed the game Fallout soon thereafter. I recall initially not liking that name at all – it didn’t sound as tough or dangerous as I wanted – but it grew on me. (Hell, I probably would have ended up calling it RadZone – yeesh!)

Why can’t I climb the walls?

As development started, we quickly came to an understanding of what kind of game this was going to be. There were several decisions that defined the spirit of the game.

Since most of us were rabid pencil-and-paper role-players, we loved the flexibility of approaching obstacles from many different angles. Most of these potential solutions were completely convoluted - much to the chagrin of the Game Master - but fun none-the-less.

For example, if the GM said, “There are two bandits ahead of you.”, there would always be a variety of actions from the players. “I sneak into the bushes to lay an ambush.” “I take cover and ready my bow.” “I approach to parley.” “I run up and intimidate them into giving me their money.” “I run past them shouting, ‘Oh god, it’s right behind me! Run!’” It was rare that players in a paper-and-pencil game would just say, “We attack them.”

GURPS was also a skill heavy game, and its combat was kind of brutal. Characters in a fight could easily be overwhelmed by their opponents, even weak ones. Players had to rely on their character’s skills to best foes or overcome obstacles – and GURPS had a LOT of skills. (No really, at the time there were hundreds of skills, and in its current incarnation there are one thousand plus skills!) It was common to have a dozen of skills on your character sheet, but potentially only use a handful during a whole adventure.

All of this led us to two very important decisions:

Rule #1: Multiple Decisions. We will always allow for multiple solutions to any obstacle.

Rule #2: No Useless Skills. The skills we allow you to take will have meaning in the game.

This meant that the player will never be presented with a dialog stating, “Will your stalwart band choose to (F)ight or (R)un?” They will need to have an enormous amount of freedom to tackle each encounter as they see fit. If they spent the points to purchase the Intimidation skill, they should be able to use it as often as possible and to accomplish as many challenges as possible.

Dark and serious is kind of funny

I wanted the game to seem brutally real. The player should feel that the world is out to get them. There is no safety and you can't trust anyone. Any false step could be your last.

That meant that some of the team's zaniness didn't work well. For instance, a roving gang of cannibals who dressed like evil clowns? That's good. If they threw pies or honked their noses? That's not good.

Most of the humor stemmed from the dialog. We figured that most everyone living in the god-forsaken world outside the vaults had to be somewhat insane, just to survive the daily horrors of living. That helped us create so many bizarrely memorable characters.

Rule #3: Dark humor was good. Slap-stick was not.

(The idea of a clown gang stemmed from my otaku fascination with the movie Akira, but I quickly realized that it didn't really fit the world we were creating.)

I want to be Charisma-boy!

Another core decision that stemmed from our Role-Playing addiction was the idea of creating your own characters. Sure, most RPGs allow you to allocate attribute points and choose a male or female body – we wanted you to be able to create a character that allows you to play the way you want to play.

How do you want to play the game? Do you want to be the gun-wielding tough-guy? The buff melee brute? Maybe the stealthy assassin? The nimble guy who can't be hit? Or maybe the guy who can talk anyone into anything? All of these choices (and any combination between them) must all be valid. By simply choosing from a few skills and abilities, you can tell us how you want to interact with the game.

This also meant that however a player specialized their character, they still had to be able to get through the game. Initially, I underestimated all the permutations that this decision actually meant. What if you had a character that was really good at persuasion, but not trained in combat? If a player wanted that kind of play experience, we had to deliver. Thus, those "Charisma-boy" characters can easily gain allies that fight for them, and are able to talk their way out of most situations in the game.

Rule #4: Let the player play how he wants to play.

Introducing Heap of Gore Technology™

Ah, Leonard Boyarsky! That dude was not only an awesome artist, but single-handedly kept the entire aesthetic look of the game in his head. He was loud, crass, and funny as hell, much like the Lenny Bruce shirt he often wore.

We had already come to the conclusion that this was going to be a bloody game. I think it was Tim that coined the phrase, "Heap of Gore Technology™". (We actually wanted that as a bullet point on the box.) The idea was, if you score a critical hit which kills an enemy, they fountain blood like a Shaw Brothers film and fall dead. The methods of their death showed different animations – critical death by sword and they are cut in half, critical death by machine gun and they shudder with bullet holes before falling into a pool of gore, blasted by a laser and a smoldering ash pile is all that remains.

So, one day, we had an art meeting about the characters and all animations they needed. In going through the list of characters, Leonard noticed that we had children on the list – and subsequent death animations for them – Heap of Gore animations included.

I remember him looking up quizzically at me and saying, “Kids too? Do we really want to do that?”

I had a moment of indecision. I had visions of parents walking into little Timmy’s room and watching aghast as he mercilessly mows down a schoolyard of children with his chain-gun.

Thankfully I stuck to my beliefs and said, “Hell yeah.”

You see, I wanted the player to be able to do anything they wanted in the game – along with suffering the unavoidable consequences. You steal from a shop? That shop owner won’t sell to you anymore. You shoot up a town? The guards will attack you when you come back. Kill children? You gain the “Child Killer” reputation, and now no one in the whole game (except the most depraved or desperate) will even talk to you. If you want to be a villain, you’ll be treated like one.

Rule #5: Your actions have repercussions.

Of course, this led to all sorts of interesting situations. Those sick bastards in playtest had the funniest by far. They would use their character’s Pick Pocket skill on a kid, which would open up a window showing what that kid had in his pockets. Instead of taking anything, they would instead place a timed explosive in one of their little pockets. As their character would duck for cover, the innocent little kid would skip back to his group of friends and then BOOM!

I heard that the testers competed to see how many kids they could take out in one blast.

Sick bastards.

Funny as hell, but sick nonetheless.

“I can say ass!”

We also wanted the characters in our game to speak frankly and crassly – sometimes even curse.

You gotta remember that this was early 1995: the word “ass” was still banned from the public airwaves by the FCC. Lots of people didn’t like the explicit violence in video games, and they spoke loudly to senators who would gladly like to demonize an emerging artform.

Luckily, Interplay’s marketing didn’t think it would be a detriment to have harsh language in the game. As long as we stayed away from George Carlin’s 7 words, we’d be OK.

My old high-school friend Mike “Paco” Greene (who also worked at Interplay) told me that his most memorable Fallout experience was hearing me gleefully racing down the corridors of Interplay shouting to everyone, “I can say ASS!”

Speaking of funny language restrictions, while the Super Nintendo version of Lord of the Rings was submitted to Nintendo for approval, it was rejected. Why? “Nine for mortal men doomed to die.” Nintendo would not allow us to use the term “die” in a SNES game. Seriously. We told them that we were quoting from a piece of great literature, but still they denied our submission.

In anger, the game's producer changed it to "Nine mortal men doomed to cry." (And I can still hear the screams of horror from the Tolkien fans in the office.) Finally, Interplay's lawyers stepped in. It seems that there were a great number of Japanese published SNES games that had used the English translation "die"... and they all passed submission... so why not us Gaijin, hmmm? Nintendo backed down, and the Mortal Men were again doomed to die.

Although I had left Interplay by then, in 1999, Interplay made some political shockwaves by publishing Xatrix's *Kingpin: Life of Crime*. That was the first game to have not only explicit violence, but every line of dialog was filled with intentionally hard-core language.

Funny story, as a few Interplay marketing people watched as Senator Leiberman held aloft *Kingpin* (the game they had marketed) before the Senate floor as an example of why games should be regulated, he called the game by its marketing subtitle, "You're gonna die." The marketing lead was heard to say, "I'm not sure what disturbs me more, that my game is an example of pure evil, or that he got the name wrong..."

But I digress...

Think Big! But not that big...

Like many designers, I like to think big. If someone tells me to come up with a side-quest, I have to physically restrain myself from my keyboard or I'll provide a script that rivals the Tuatha Dé Danann. The same goes for technological improvements; good designers are always looking to push the boundaries.

So, in my quest to create the biggest and best game possible, there were inevitably some things that simply didn't make it into the shipping game.

The beginning of the game was intended to be a lot more interactive. Instead of just a movie of the Overseer, the plan was to start the game in Vault 13:

You would start out in your room, with pleasant music playing, and a computer voice prompting you to dress and go to work. Your closet is full of Vault Jumpsuits – all the same color. As you leave for work, people dressed exactly like you wave and say hello. You pass some people complaining about the taste of their water. Where you work depends on the skills you assigned to your character: Security Guard, Scientist, Maintenance Worker, Vault PR. You are able to pick up a few items in the vault, and talk to as many people as you like. People are generally nice but in a malaise. A few are afraid of the "water problem" but seem a little scared to mention it in public. Luckily, your utopian boredom is quickly brought to an end. The vault's Overseer calls you into his office.

He explains that the vault's water purification chip has burned out. It's only a matter of time before the water recycling will become toxic. The vault's central computer has chosen you as the citizen most likely to succeed in leaving the vault and returning with a new chip.

After this, you can gather whatever supplies your character can beg, borrow, or steal. The people know you are going and hope for your safe return. Some are anxious to hear of news of the outside world, others think only death awaits you. As the mighty vault doors grind open, you enter the tunnels leading out... and that's where the shipping game actually begins.

Personally, I thought that this was an important buildup to entering the Wasteland, for the player to realize what was at stake if they failed.

I intended the Vault to be your base of operations, allowing you to return there as often as you liked. I had also planned that the Vault was to be attacked by some of the desert gangs, and eventually by the Master's hordes of Super Mutants, dragging your family to the Mariposa Base unless you stopped them.

However, the interior of Vault 13 was simply cut due to time. Sure it makes me a little sad, but in the end, all creative endeavors are a business, and sometimes hard decisions must be made.

When I played Fallout 3, as I first left the confines of the Vault and entered into the wasteland, I actually choked up a bit. There was such an air of unbridled exploration and wonder that lay ahead – and that was exactly the feeling I was hoping to invoke in the original. Good stuff.

“But I want to Seduce everyone!”

Another crazy idea I wanted to employ was something I saw in Ultima VI: those NPCs kept to hand-crafted schedules. The woodcutter would get up at 6am, sit at his table until 7am, go to work until 5pm, then return home until 9pm, and then go to bed. This gave a convincing illusion of a living world.

Of course, I didn't just want to steal the idea – I wanted to expand upon it in the following ways:

- We can describe the actions required by certain jobs, so when an NPC is cleaning the sewers, they know where they need to go, what actions need to be performed, and how much time they should take. This means that if the player decides to watch them, they seem to behave intelligently.
- You could alter an NPC's task list. If you tell a friendly NPC to meet you at the fountain at 8pm, they will modify their schedule to appear at the fountain from 8pm to 9pm (and if you leave them waiting, they'll be ticked off!) Also, if the environment changes – like someone in the city is shooting it up - they can override their tasks to get help, find cover, or try to apprehend the lawbreaker.
- You could talk to anyone about anything. There would be a range of pre-defined personalities that could run the gambit of emotions. And, they remember you. If you make them laugh or help them out, they will treat you with respect, become your friend, or even fall in love with you.
- Because anyone can be your friend, enemy, or love interest, technically you could recruit any character in the game into your party. This was intended make the Seduction skill immensely powerful for all those Mata Hari archetypes.
- Personality differences matter. If your actions offend a follower, they might leave you. However, personalities are malleable over time. Instead of an NPC or follower continually being offended that you drink, after a while they just might join you (depending on the strength of their personality.)
- Reputation is king. GURPS has a whole mechanic for reputation effects, so this would be an important part in interacting with NPCs. As you adventure through the game, people will say, “Hey! That's the guy that killed Gizmo in Junktown!”, which will have different reactions based on the NPCs personality traits.

Although very little of this made it into the game, I'm glad that future games had similar ideas and ran with them. When Fable was announced, my immediate reaction was: "See! I wasn't crazy! It can be done! Look, they're doing it!"

As it turns out, Role-Playing Games are complex

From the beginning, Fallout was intended to be the first in a series of GURPS games. Our goal was to recreate the GURPS mechanics faithfully in digital form. This way, we could reuse our core engine over and over for future games.

Early in development, I started designing the game's main interface. The team was very familiar with GURPS, since we played it frequently. It's a very robust game system with lots of options for combat and skill use. And I mean LOTS of options.

At the time, I had a love-affair with X-COM: UFO Defense. In fact, many of the visual decisions for Fallout stemmed from the three-quarter perspective view from that game. The interface was no exception. I wanted to emulate their static, icon laden horizontal combat bar. I kept their big graphic icons showing character's readied weapon (which kept things sexy looking) but there were so many action buttons, we needed a better way to identify the icons. A readout at the bottom of the screen would give the description of the button you were highlighting – and there were A LOT of buttons. You had buttons that changed your stance, buttons that showed and let you use your active abilities, buttons to perform skills, buttons to change up your inventory, to see your reputations, access your stats, to attack, defend, evade, acrobatic dodge, macramé . . . is your head spinning yet?

At the end, I had an interface that faithfully recreated any actions you could perform in a GURPS game.

After it was laid out and coded, it was given to playtest to try out. Apparently it was the most complex and unintuitive thing they had ever seen. Even testers who were intimately familiar with GURPS were completely overwhelmed by the myriad of options and branching / toggle buttons.

The only ideas kept from all this design work? The large item buttons and the readout.

Still, it illustrated that to implement GURPS in its entirety, we would be introducing a huge amount of complexity. What we really needed to do was implement a "GURPS-lite" system; something streamlined for the kind of game we were making.

GURPS becomes a problem

So, Leonard and Jason had just completed the opening movie for the game. It was a slow pan-out from an old 50's style black and white television showing quick documentary style scenes that silently gave the player an idea of the dystopian future they were about to step into. In one of these quick scenes, two soldiers in power-armor shoot a kneeling and unarmed man in the back of the head, and then gleefully wave to the camera. It was a tiny scene, but one that let you know that you were about to play a violent game. We all liked the movie and, just to keep Steve Jackson Games in the loop, a copy was sent to them.

And then it happened. The response came back "Unapproved". The reason? They stated that "The movie was too violent".

Whaaaaa? Too Violent!? Haven't they been looking at the game we'd been making!? There was blood and violence all over the place! We had Head Of Gore Technology™! You could split people in two with a chainsaw for chrissake!

Apparently they hadn't been looking at the game we'd been making. All of that “The more violence the better” stuff was long forgotten. With that rejection it became apparent the game would need dramatic changes to get approval from our IP holder.

A decision had to be made: Keep GURPS, abandoning our creative freedom and yielding to the mercurial whims of the licensor – or throw out all of the mechanics and interface we made functional in the game and start over.

And thus, the SPECIAL System was born, and both problems, IP rights and overly complex game system, were removed in one stroke.

The SPECIAL system was almost identical to the “GURPS-Lite” system that we had been implementing, so in the end, what could have been a big setback was in actuality an enormous boon.

Remember Kids: Finish What You Start

I wish I could continue to tell stories about the joys and terrors of shipping Fallout, or of some of the later decisions that crafted that game to its level of greatness.

One of my biggest life decisions was to leave Interplay while Fallout was still in production.

My old friend, Burger Bill had formed a new company and asked if I would be its Creative Director. The story for Fallout was completed; the locales, NPCs, and the missions well defined. With my growing unease at Interplay's embrace of “Movie Games”, and still stinging from the cancellation of my previous projects, I took Burger up on his offer.

All these years later, I still regret not having seen Fallout through to its shipping. Although I did learn much at my new studio, there's something to be said about finishing what you start. For good or bad, success or failure, joy or pain – you are always shaped by your endeavors. Abandoning them always leaves emptiness.

Games are a magnificent collaborative effort. It's very rare to find a team of creative people skilled at their craft, capable of working together, and determined to create a remarkable product. If you find yourself with such a team, stick with them – you'll thank yourself later.

Fallout Ships!

I felt like a kid again. Having just turned 25, I journeyed to the mall with a fistful of birthday cash on my trusty beach cruiser. (Ok, it was actually in a car, but that's not the point).

I went straight to the Babbage's, skirting their rows of PlayStation, Nintendo-64, and 3DO games, heading to the back of the store where the real treasures lay: the PC games.

Rummaging through the four bookshelves worth of CD-ROM titles (most either based on movies, Doom rip-offs, or made with Macromedia) a striking rust-colored box caught my eye. Nostalgic

thoughts of Wasteland dancing in my head, I gleefully raced back to the office to try it out.

I was very happy with how the story, characters, and world turned out. But more than that, I was amazed at the overall quality level of the game: the animated character heads and Voice Over segments pushed the experience into a whole new place.

It's wonderful to see how Fallout has endured over the years, and humbling to see the die-hard fans it created.

An amazing job from an amazingly talented group of guys.

I'm proud to have been a part of that old team from Interplay, who “just wanted to make the best damn GURPS game we could.”

And now for something completely different

I have been asked several times about certain aspects of the Fallout story – what decisions were made and why. But there are a few questions that keep coming up:

We got nuked by China?

The nuclear Armageddon in the back-story was between the US and China. After shipping several people asked me why China and not the old standby, the Soviet Union. I made the choice when I remembered experiences with Oleg, a Moscow developer I worked with months before when I was assistant-producing a typing game. Once, in the middle of a phone conversation, I heard some muffled bangs, and the phone went quiet. When I asked him what the noise was, he replied, “Oh, it was just the Russian mob firing their guns in the street.” I thought he was joking – he wasn't. After that, I had a really hard time believing that the once mighty USSR would be in a position to threaten the world any time soon. So I turned to the next major communist country that typifies “the East”: China.

You got your Science all over my Fiction!

Why did we bother with the Forced-Evolutionary Virus and not just say radiation caused the mutations? Unfortunately, science tells us high levels of radiation just kill things. Lower levels can cause mutations, but more than 99% aren't advantageous, and often lead to early death. I wanted to explain how something like a Radscorpion could have evolved and proliferated in the course of 60 years – and to me, “it's the power of radiation!” was way-too-obvious junk science.

Because I wanted a plausible game back-story, I wanted explanations that were a little more scientifically plausible (or at least more believable than the plot to THEM!) I also wanted this virus to be part of the main villain's master plan – making a race of super mutants from human stock by subjecting them to a vat of this refined viral agent.

The history of the FEV went something like this:

A virus was genetically altered to treat and repair DNA altered by the Human Immunodeficiency Virus. Like all good things, it also had a drawback: it was engineered to alter specific gene segments in living cells, but sometimes it would change the wrong patterns, causing unpredictable and rapid mutations. So, of course, a government agency put two and two

together and realized that this virus could be programmed to insert itself into the Human genome, altering it to whatever ends they wished – and with the threat of global war looming over them, they wished for a Captain America-style super soldier. So, as the story goes, the military base – which would become the Glow – was a research facility to create this super virus, and they were on the cusp of great success. I tried to greatly hint that this research had gotten out, and that this information leak is possibly the catalyst that caused the missiles to be launched. That also explains why the Glow is still a smoldering radioactive crater. However, even nukes couldn't stop this virus. When the bombs hit, some heavily irradiated versions survived and drifted on the nuclear winds all over the world. The virus that was created to manipulate core DNA structures to yield stronger, bigger, faster, and more aggressive people found its way into all life outside of the safety of the Vaults. The virus had mutated so profoundly that it was able to affect mammals and even certain insects. It wasn't genetic mutation – it was a mutated virus causing genetic modification...

Well, it sounded more plausible to me!

Bottle Caps as currency?

I remember my fellow Fallout designer, Brian Freyermuth, asking how much something will cost in a shop. I remember thinking, “cost what?” What was our game currency? We went through a few ideas:

- A pure bartering system? Nah, that would be difficult for the player to understand the worth of anything. (Two molarat pelts for a cup of coffee? Is that good?)
- Bullets as the currency? I gotta admit, bullets are definitely useful in the wasteland. But that idea was shot down (sorry) when we realized that people would be very hesitant to use things like machineguns, since every trigger-pull would directly lower their bank accounts! That level of financial restraint wouldn't be enjoyable.
- Credit cards ? – just the hard plastic cards, of course - but most would have probably been melted in the nuclear firestorms.

So, I thought, what shiny token-sized thing would you find strewn around the trash piles? Something common, but not so common as to be everywhere? Bottlecaps, of course! (That, and I liked the idea of a string of caps on a chord that jingled when people pulled them out.)

Two headed cows?

Well, they weren't initially. Early on, when I was thinking about the Shady Sands farming community, I wondered what kind of livestock they would keep to feed themselves. Just using cows and chickens didn't seem very post-apocalyptic; we needed a critter that was hearty enough to withstand the wastes, big enough to scare off most predators, and dumb enough to be easily domesticated. Since Shady Sands was to have a Hindi/Tibetan feel to it, I couldn't get the idea of a yak out of my head. So, the livestock became lumbering mutated gophers with long hair. Gopher meat? Now that's post-apocalyptic! Since these beasts were what kept the villagers alive, they were considered almost holy – thus the name Brahmin. I was happy for many months – until someone pointed out that my Brahmin looked an awful lot like Banthas. Damn it! I'm not sure who came up with the two-headed cow thing... but at least it wouldn't get us sued by LucasArts.

Ah, the Brotherhood of Steel!

I do love how these guys eventually turned out, but their origins were not very original. I simply wanted a group exactly like the monks from the Guardian Citadel in Wasteland. This was one of my favorite parts in the original game – an old, isolated stone fortress whose robed monks wielded insane energy weapons and would blast any trespassers. Fantastic.

The Brotherhood was intentionally the same post-apocalyptic religious order that existed to keep the technologies of the old world alive. However, unlike the nihilistic Guardians of Wasteland, I really wanted the player to be able to befriend and join up with this group (and grab all of their awesome gear, of course). In keeping with the medieval monk themes, the Brotherhood became more of a knightly order with a distrust of outsiders rather than a coven of crazy zealots. Although this did make them similar to concepts in Gamma World (the Knights of Genetic Purity) and Warhammer 40K (the Imperial Tech Cults), I just loved the idea of high-tech knights in power-armor wielding virbo-swords and Gatling Lasers. Total fan service to me.

The Deathclaw. The horror of the wastes.

Was it always a big scaly lizard thing? Nope. My initial design for this terrible creature was a the apex predator of the wasteland, a mix of wolverine and brown bear, mutated by the FEV. It could survive any environment and feared nothing; a legendary force of nature that struck terror into the hearts of men! Unfortunately, the artists took one look at my concept sketch and said, “Dude, that’s way too much hair.” It was true. The Wolverine-bear was very furry, and there was just no way around it.

So here’s what happened: the newly formed Black Isle started work on what would be Planescape: Torment. One of the first art pieces was a monstrous creature called a Terrasque. It was sculpted in clay and was then point-by-painstaking-point digitized into a 3D model. As Planescape moved forward, it turned out that the Terrasque wouldn’t actually be featured in its design – leaving that tasty model in disuse.... Thus, the furry wolverine-bear became a hairless reptilian biped. (Take a look at page 339 of the D&D second edition Monster Manual. Holy cats! It’s a Deathclaw!)

Yes Master

The Master was not always a conglomerate blob creature. Originally, he was a human, exposed to the FEV in the Vats at the Mariposa Base, and transformed into a Super Mutant – but unlike the others, The Master became incredibly intelligent. He immediately realized the superiority of his new body, and believed that it was his destiny to save humanity – by turning them all into Super Mutants, of course! The Unity would make all humans fit for this harsh world! It would end all wars (since we would control everyone), all inequality (since everyone would be the same mutants), and end all suffering (since Super Mutants are too dumb to know they are suffering). He was just a misunderstood guy trying to save the world.

Oh yeah, the term “Super Mutant”? It was a temporary name given to the über tough Master-Created FEV Mutants. We just couldn't come up with anything better, and it kind of stuck. Since they were enhanced with something akin to Captain America's Super Soldier Serum – Super Mutants it was.

My, what a big chopping block you have

Fallout was a big game, even after many ideas were trimmed out of it. Some ideas were good, but just didn't fit with the world. Others were just too scope intensive. Others were just too silly.

For example, the Desert Raiders were intended to have several warring factions – each with their own adventures and plot lines.

The Jackals were a tribe of cannibals, preferring to eat their captives instead of each other. They were intended to be the low-level crazies that you battle at the beginning of the game. You would get a good reputation if you decided to wipe-out their tribe. However, if you let them live, you would have a never-ending supply of crazy henchmen.

The Vipers were another tribe of blood-thirsty raiders. These guys liked to dress-up in bone armor and find victims to sacrifice to their snake god (merge the Aztecs with the snake worshipers from Conan, and you're fairly close.) Vipers throw their captives in an arena with a giant pit-viper. Survivors are given the choice to become part of their clan, or sacrificed to their god. However, to be part of their clan, you must perform several tasks to show your worth – like hijack a caravan, raid a settlement, clear a RadScorpion nest, or retake a water-source from an enemy group. Of course, you'd have a variety of options on how you solve each mission. In the end, if you did well, you'd have the respect of the tribe (and they'd protect you from all the pesky desert varmints when you are in their territory.)

The Khans (the one tribe that did make it into the game), had its inception from a real-life biker gang, the Mongols. I was imagining the kind of tough, lawless, SOBs that could survive in the desolation of the wasteland; raiding and killing for their spoils. I could see these guys surviving. So, after a few generations, they became similar to the barbaric marauders they emulated.

Watership Down – with guns!

One planned location would have changed the entire feel of Fallout - Brian Freyermuth and I were kicking around the idea of adding sapient mutated animals into the game. Yup, that's right: talking raccoons and bunnies, with guns.

The idea was to create a quest featuring a new tribe of desert raiders. Tracking down the bandits, the player would follow a series of caves and eventually discover they form an underground warren for a large group of bipedal talking animals. The beasts had been uplifted, Secret of Nimh-style, by exposure to the FEV virus administered by medical robots in a lab. The otherwise isolationist critters turned to raiding when their underground farms became infested with Mole Rats. This would inevitably lead the player through the infested farms, into the mole rat burrows, and into the robot filled medical center beneath it all.

The player might even make a friend on this quest – a unique gun-slinging raccoon companion. Quests were being planned to open talks between the Warrens and the Hub, to make caravans trade with the varmints, and all the side quests that that could lead to.

While Brian was off and running, writing quests for our furry additions, the artists had a scope meeting about the number of characters in the game. We had more designed than they had time to actually build and animate. So, a compromise was needed: since the mutant animals were rare, required several sets of armor, and totally different of animations, they were chopped. Poor Brian, he put so much love into those varmints!

The Irvine Utopia

One more silly idea was the “Irvine Utopia”. Interplay was located in the lovely city of Irvine California. On the surface, the city was beautiful – tall glass buildings, palm trees, no crime, no poverty – like a 50’s ideal society come to life. However, a dark force lurked behind the façade of pleasantness: The Irvine Land Company. This corporation was active at every level of society in Irvine, enforcing its pristine perception with an iron fist. (Seriously, there were only three approved colors for any building in Irvine – tan, sand, and adobe. Interplay employees who drove less than nice cars would be harassed by the Irvine Police. If your building front looked dirty, you would get a fine from the city. Yeesh!) So, of course, we wanted to poke fun at our Irvine Overlords – by putting them into our game!

Since Fallout took place in southern California, we wanted to place a city called “Utopia” right about where Irvine was located. Utopia was surrounded by massive steel walls and patrolled by killer robots. However, if you got inside, you found a population of humans living in a perfect pre-war city, well cared for by their robots and wanting for nothing. Of course, the humans were dumb-as-a-bag-of-stupid and could do nothing for themselves without their robot helpers – which, in actuality were their robot overlords, controlling every aspect of their life. The robots were run by a super computer in the middle of the city – manufactured by “The Irvine Land Corporation”.

Ah, satire!

The coolest part of the Utopia idea was that, outside of the walls, we were to build the ruins of Interplay. We’d have a little ruined building and hide skeletons of ourselves around the debris. It would have been magic.

It’s Dead Jim

Still another silly idea that met the chopping block was the “Dead Viper”. At the time of development, Brian Fargo had just purchased a candy-apple red Dodge Viper sports car. He would beam with pride when his V10 roared into the parking lot each morning. Almost immediately, the sports car began suffering break-down after mechanical failure – it ended up spending more time in the Interplay parking lot and repair shops than on the road. Being pitiless bastards, we wanted to poke fun at it.

A player could discover a shiny new red Dodge Viper amongst the ruins of the Interplay building. The character could even interact with it, getting a dialog stating: “It’s a high-performance sports car. With just a few repairs, it could be drivable...” This would send the player to the ends of the Wastes looking for “sports car parts”, bringing them back to the car in hopes of repairing it and cruising through the radioactive desert in style. The evil part was, no matter how many parts you find, nothing would fix the car.

We even joked that in the end credits of the game, we’d show a Super Mutant walk up to the car and stare quizzically at it. He’d kick it, and it’d roar to life. We last see the mutant driving the Viper into the sunset... Priceless.

That's All Folks!

So there you have it. Hopefully all this rambling makes a few fans happy.

Let me end with this story: a few weeks ago, I was in Taiwan giving a lecture on Game Design principals. Afterwards, a young designer came to me and said that Fallout changed his life. Having played it as a young kid, it shaped his views on what computer games could be and encouraged him to get into the games industry himself.

He wanted me to thank the team for giving him that inspiration.

To him, and all of the Fallout fans I can only say, "No, thank you."