

FROM UNDER THE NUCLEONIC CORK TREE

FALLOUT 3



FORMAT REVIEWED

Xbox 360

OTHER FORMATS

PSS, PC

PUBLISHER

Bethesda Softworks

DEVELOPER

Bethesda Game Studios

REVIEWED BY

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The post-apocalyptic, with its focus on survival and loneliness, has long been a ripe area for culture; recent works such as the big-budget adaptation of *I Am Legend* and Cormac McCarthy's stunning, spare 2006 novel *The Road* (with lines like "the outline of a burnt city like a black paper scrim" suggesting a possible key influence on Bethesda's latest masterwork) presenting the world – well, America – in the days and months after a cataclysmic, mysterious occurrence. *Fallout 3* slips neatly into this heritage. It is undoubtedly a game of survival and, at times, desperate loneliness; and yet it also reaches out to embrace such issues as the significance of choice and the great span of life itself. In short *Fallout 3* is a game that certainly doesn't lack ambition.

Set in 2277, at a time when the world is an "abyss of nuclear fire and radiation", the developers have taken enough artistic license whilst still rooting the game in a recognisable environment. So amongst the vehicle carcasses, barren trees, abandoned schools – and it's hard to overstate just how affecting the experience of trudging quietly across this devastated landscape can often be – there are computer terminals, robots and suchlike, but their design, all rusted metal and inelegant antennas, is more reminiscent of the 1940s/50s science-fiction so lovingly referenced in *Mars Attacks!*, than the more overtly 'futuristic' likes of *Halo*. *Fallout 3*'s approach is undoubtedly more realistic as a result, the use of such relatively antiquated technology as microfilm and steam engines recalling 2007's classic *BioShock*, the non-Bethesda game that *Fallout 3* most closely resembles.

The game that *Fallout 3* will most often be compared to though is, of course, Bethesda's previous title *Oblivion*. Like the fourth *Elder Scrolls* game, *Fallout 3* is a genre unto itself: part first-person adventure, part action role-player, part enormous sandbox... the pigeonholing is potentially endless. The gameworld is what helps all these components come together, ensuring that as a player you can approach the experience as you want to without feeling forced (even though on paper a fairly linear trajectory is still followed). Not only is the so-called Capital Wasteland enormous in scale, it's the level of detail that never ceases to amaze. From the carefully etched textures in every interior to the way many characters will have complete diaries, there is a wealth of history here that would take hours in itself to completely digest (one museum location even has descriptions for each exhibit). The 'go anywhere, do anything' approach is certainly no longer radical, but the precision with which everything has been put together here certainly is. As a result the sense of immersion and atmosphere is almost unparalleled.

Given this it's understandable that *Fallout 3* is a game that rewards a patient, exploratory approach. It is of course possible to speed quickly from objective to objective – and it's to the game's credit that such a style of play is as seamlessly accommodated as the steady almost tourist-like perspective we would recommend – but to do so would be to ignore the aforementioned detail and character invested into the remarkable surroundings. Traversing across the huge world you are as likely to come across a group of hostile raiders as you are a boy separated from his family.

“AN EXPERIENCE TO SAVOUR”



These encounters often lead into sub-quests of their own, with entire new cities opening up as you take one direction instead of another. The real genius of *Fallout 3* is that the focus is never lost; no matter how far from the main story thread you stray – and it's possible to ignore it for countless hours – Bethesda have ensured that a sense of cohesion is maintained.

They do this by investing, right from the start, an importance in the player's decisions. From the smallest verbal response to some quite significant moments that change the entire makeup of the world (which we certainly won't spoil here), you're left in no doubt as to the consequence of your actions. Every decision ties in with your overall existence, the world and your character so tangible you rarely remember that this is "only" a videogame. A welcome antidote to the current vogue for sub 10-hour campaigns, *Fallout 3*'s mastery of player motivation should be a case study for any developer looking to follow in the open world footsteps of *Oblivion*.

The much talked-about VATS (Vault-Tec Assisted Targeting System, apparently) even adds a layer of innovation to the combat. Combining the careful planning of a standard turn-based RPG to the stylish dynamism of an action game, the



system allows you to pause any confrontation and then target precise areas on an enemy according to the likelihood of a successful hit. The ease with which VATS slips into the player's repertoire is testament to its success in restructuring the nature of RPG battles. Again it's only an optional tactic, but the conventional FPS approach is intentionally too haphazard; like the third-person view it's there for the sake of choice, albeit difficult to see anyone choosing it over the infinitely more immersive first-person view.

The wealth of content here truly is staggering. After all we haven't even touched upon the sensible levelling system, the solid technical achievements in everything from voice acting to frame rate (facial animation is lacking somewhat, but these are laughably minor grievances), the well-balanced range of weapons, the Pip-Boy 3000 (whose intuitive set-up makes item/quest management become second-nature)...to pick apart everything that makes *Fallout 3* so superb we'd need a word count that ran into five figures. It's a game that begins in breathtakingly audacious fashion – again we're staying resolutely spoiler-free – and simply doesn't let up from that point onwards. Though it doesn't do anything particularly revolutionary, the level of artistry is so far beyond anything we've played recently that it almost doesn't need to; standing uniquely in the busy Christmas schedule and indeed within 2008 as a whole, *Fallout 3* is an experience to savour, a game about which every player will have their own story to tell.

VERDICT ★★★★★