

Fallout 4: A number based simulacrum

As an RPG that tries to simulate a living world with very strong, pre-authored narrative moments, the *Fallout* franchise has always displayed several of the key ingredients that define the ideal *Immersive Sim*: Its interwoven systems, enclosed within an accessible RPG shell, often set up unique emergent gameplay moments that make the world feel reactive while giving players a great deal of agency. While an RPG wrapper around low-level simulations isn't an unknown or unorthodox design approach in *Immersive Sims*, *Deus Ex's* Warren Spector having pioneered it, the newer *Fallout's* approach pushes it further away from the idea. Specifically, the RPG mechanics in *Fallout 4* create inconsistencies in how the world behaves and takes away some of the agency that previous titles tried hard to give players.

Following in the footsteps of the second-wave of 'true' immersive sims[2], *Fallout 4* takes a faster, more action paced look at the age-old question at the core of the franchise's universe: Does War ever change? Yes, it gets simpler – or at least that's the answer the game's mechanics give us. Traditionally, RPG-driven Immersive Sims like *Deus Ex*, have used stats and bars to quantify low-level simulations that would otherwise be hard to get across to players. The idea had been less about simplifying the mechanics from non-stat based Immersive Sims like *Thief*, and more about visualizing those systems in a manner that gives players a greater deal of agency over them. Pseudo *Immersive Sims* like earlier *Fallout* titles have focused more on the stats being keys to progression in and of themselves but strove to make their world more believable by giving players a great deal of options and choices about how those stats may be used. A character with a high enough Charisma could skip entire segments that would normally require strength and precision, for example. This Charisma stat, exclusive to players, could not be used in every single situation that involved combat. It did not function as a low-level system that interconnected with other low-level systems to simulate a living world. However, the sheer number of situations in which this type of stat-based mechanic came up, made it appear to be simulation. And thus, the original *Fallout* games, at the very least, made players feel as though they were within a simulated world. This, sadly, was not the case with *Fallout 4*.

A character with a high Charisma in *Fallout 4* could still use charisma to avoid combat situations by being good at talking. And a character with high intelligence could hack his way through an advanced security system, eliminating the need to trudge through a quagmire of automated turrets. These situations appeared far less frequently than in previous *Fallout* titles. Much of it was due to the complexity that came with creating a 3D world as expansive and polished as the one in *Fallout 4* – a complexity that prevented the exploration of mechanical depth. To make up for the loss in utility, the stats were used more frequently as direct boosts to weapons and items. Sure, the intelligence stat could sometimes make the character say intelligent things, but it also made laser burn flesh more efficiently. The stats were no longer primarily used as systemic allegories for real-life simulated events – their primary function was a meter that affected how high the number on certain weapons and items went.

Numbers and stats being emphasized to this degree hurt the consistency and believability of the world itself. A player character shooting at an iron bedframe with a weapon that he previously used to

bisect a titanium robot should, logically, reduce the bedframe to a molten pile of slag. If the player character has high enough numbers in strength to bash in a 9-foot chameleon monster's head in with their bare hands, they should also be tough enough to punch through a flimsy apartment dry-wall. This however is not the case. Neither the metal bedframe nor the drywall have numbers denoting their state of existence or structural integrity. As such, they are removed from the degree of interactivity to which moving, sentient objects are bound. It is as if static objects exist in a separate plane of existence – one that cares not for the numbers on your Pip-boy.

The free-form open ended approach to problem solving was another aspect that had to be greatly simplified, or, in some instances, removed to accommodate the ever-expansive nature of the modern open-world RPG that *Fallout 4* had become. With fewer instances of gameplay rewarding unorthodox approaches, either designed or emergent, players would often end up relying on their sheer damage dealing and damage taking skills/numbers to navigate a slightly more irradiated version, less angry version of Boston. This caused the moment to moment gameplay decisions to be narrowed down radically. Instead of choosing between sneaking through a neo-Roman military camp or going in guns blazing – the player in *Fallout 4* is limited to choosing the type of gun they are going to be blazing in with.

In a way, however, this made *Fallout 4* surprisingly deep in ways one wouldn't expect. The stat-based gunplay may be a far cry from the open-ended systems heavy setting that have come to be expected in immersive sims. It is, however, a good simulation of other immersive sims and its predecessors. *Fallout 4* strives to recreate the core mechanics of more complex games through simple static interactions. Previous *Fallout* titles tried to simulate the nuances of actual human dialogue with deep, branching dialogue trees. *Fallout 4* does not directly simulate that level of complexity. Instead it attempts to simulate the previous *Fallout*'s simulation of human speech by condensing the dialogue trees to a single button prompt labeled "sarcastic". As a simulation of a simulation, *Fallout 4* can be thought of as a simulacrum [1] – striving not to be an immersive sim, pseudo or otherwise, but rather to simplify an immersive sim through more "mainstream" gameplay conventions. And while the RPG mechanics of *Fallout 4* fail to be analogous to real-world concepts, they are analogous to representations of real-world concepts.

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In-Depth Analysis: Fallout 4
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Works Cited

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2. Yang, Robert. "The Second Death of the Immersive Sim (2007-2017) and a Dark Prophecy for a Third-Wave Immersive Sim." Radiator Blog: The Second Death of the Immersive Sim (2007-2017) and a Dark Prophecy for a Third-Wave Immersive Sim,
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