

FALLOUT FANS: NEGOTIATIONS OVER TEXT INTEGRITY IN THE AGE OF THE
ACTIVE AUDIENCE

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated how fans and producers of media texts negotiate text integrity, which is defined as an ideal about the validity, wholeness, and truth of the text. An evaluation of previous research in fan studies revealed four essential issues underlying fan-producer interaction. These four issues led to the study's four research questions, which centered on fan perceptions of ownership of a text, construction of status-relationship between fans and producers, construction of status-relationship among fans, and how fans envisioned their labor contribution to the game development process. Research questions were addressed using a discourse analysis of the forum interactions of fans of the digital-game series *Fallout*. The investigation focused on fan and producer interaction surrounding the release of the controversial next installment in the *Fallout* series, *Fallout 3*. Using previous literature and data gathered, the study proposed a model for fan-producer negotiation over text integrity that can be applied to fan-producer interaction in multiple contexts.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Rationale

A quick look around the internet, from *You Tube* to *Television without Pity*, reveals a myriad of sites enabling, if not fueled by, visitor interaction. Not least among these sites are media-centered spaces, where film, television, literature, music, and digital-game enthusiasts debate, critique, add to, and modify their favorite media texts. As these sites continue to thrive, theoretical models centering on passive audience reception of media texts are facing further challenges (Jenkins, 2006a; Ruggiero, 2000). In the age of the do-it-yourself media consumer, it seems that anyone, anywhere, with access to the internet and a specific text has the potential to be a contributor to a complex community of active and productive consumers (Baym, 2000; Costello & Moore, 2007; Menon, 2007). As these active audiences become more prevalent, producers of media texts (those individuals and organizations that create, develop, and manage a media text) are fast recognizing the value of courting niche groups of productive consumers. Commanding the loyalty and activity of these productive consumers has several organizational benefits (Gray, Sandvoss, & Harrington, 2007; Murray, 2004; Taylor, 2006a). For instance, *Alias* and *Lost* executive producer J.J. Abrams recently commented that he reads internet message boards about his television shows, because it gives the productions some of the characteristics of a live play, allowing producers to respond and adjust to audience reactions as the show goes on (Andrejevic, 2008). Likewise, Chris Ender, CBS senior vice president of communication, called show-related forums “the best marketing research you can get” (quoted in Jenkins, 2006a, p. 46).

Often, these coveted “inspirational consumers,” “loyalists,” and “brand advocates” are simply fans of a text, defined here as individuals with a heightened intellectual and emotional investment in a media text who increase their activity surrounding the text to the point of being productive consumers. These fans summarize and editorialize on installments of the text, evangelize the merits of the text to others, evaluate storylines and performances, and create art surrounding the text. Digital-game fans will often even create modifications (called mods) of a game that add to or change the basic code of the game, altering characters, storylines, or environments at fundamental levels. Interestingly, when it comes to the recognized organizational value of the active audience, “none of these commentaries on the new economy are using the terms, ‘fan,’ ‘fandom,’ or ‘fan culture,’ yet their models rest on the same social behaviors and emotional commitments that fan scholars have been researching over the past several decades” (Jenkins, 2007, p. 359). In the age of the active audience, the fan appears to have emerged from the cultural margins and become a central and coveted media consumer. This is apparently so substantial a phenomenon that Jonathon Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington (2007), three preeminent fan scholars, declared that we have reached the “fandom is beautiful” phase of fan studies (p. 3).

Such claims about fan influence have also been made by influential fan scholar Henry Jenkins (2006a, 2006b, 2007), indicating a shift in his 1992 views on fan power, the year he published his groundbreaking book, *Textual Poachers*. In it, he said that “like the poachers of old, fans operate from a position of cultural marginality and weakness” and “have only the most limited of resources” with which to influence producers (p. 26). But as Jenkins has since noted, active fansites (hubs of creative consumption where fans interact, create, and critique), and producer attentiveness to these sites, may be subtly altering the relationship between fan and

producer. The “fans as peasants” reality of fifteen years ago may be shifting, as digitally-mediated discourse between fans and producers has experienced an internet-afforded boon. There are some indications that use of the internet has helped foster a more democratic age of fan-producer interaction and collaboration.

However, despite the potential utopian results of the age of the active audience, in reality, there often exists a tenuous relationship between producers and consumers (Postigo, 2008; Shefrin, 2004; Soukup, 2006). This tension exists because producer and fan definitions over the integrity of a text can conflict. What fans believe makes a text whole, true, consistent, ideal, or valid, can often be different from what producers believe (hence the existence of so much fan creativity modifying texts). Fan visibility, despite the opportunities it brings, can work to the disadvantage of productive fans, since such creativity is increasingly noticed, but increasingly attacked or commodified. Many media producers seem to be relating to fans in the same ways they always have, attempting to steer their productivity toward organizationally-sanctioned ends. As Örnebring (2007) put it, “to be sure, media convergence is opening up new possibilities for interactivity, but it is difficult to ignore the fact that much of the interactivity on offer is produced by the ‘usual suspects’ of transnational media conglomerates, and that audiences are addressed primarily as consumers or cultural artefacts” (p. 450).

This tenuous relationship is increasingly prevalent and consequential in the age of the active audience. Understanding how active media consumers relate to a text, each other, and producers is central to understanding a significant portion of modern-day consumer culture, one that media producers are increasingly interested in understanding. Therefore, in this study, I will investigate four important issues in that relationship, four issues that compose the heart of fan-producer negotiations over text integrity. First, I will investigate ownership of the text because

the investment and productivity of fans often leads to ambiguities about who the text really belongs to (Scardaville, 2005; Pearce, 2006). Second, I will investigate fan status-relationship with producers because, as stated, interaction between the two parties is becoming more common, more visible, and potentially more tense. Third, I will investigate fan status-relationship with other fans because fan culture is not a monolith, and fandom is often subject to intense factionism and heated debate as fans interact with greater ease and frequency (Hills, 2002; Johnson, 2007). Last, I will investigate fan labor because an essential part of being a fan is producing for the text one esteems, and in the age of the active audience, this production has the potential to be both celebrated and commodified by producers (Jenkins, 1992; Rehak, 2003).

These four issues represent essential questions in the relationship between fan, text, and producer in any area of fandom, but as I discuss productive consumption further, I will highlight one specific fan subculture: that of fans of digital games (often referred to as gamers). While gamers have long engaged in fan activity and have produced a complex and specialized subculture, the literature surrounding the two subjects has mostly been separate, with little crossover between gaming scholarship and fan scholarship. It has only been recently that the likes of Crawford and Rutter (2007), Jenkins (2006a, 2006b), and Taylor (2006b) have argued that we begin looking at gamer interaction outside of the game, and consider the social world that surrounds the act of playing. For many gamers, the time spent immersed in any one game is only a small fraction of the time they spend engaged with the fan culture as a whole. This study will attempt to honor that fact and contribute to the emerging scholarship that combines gaming literature and fan literature, using both for its theoretical and empirical basis. For, as Crawford and Rutter put it, “recognizing the similarities and interconnections between fan and gaming

cultures allows for a more fully formed understanding of the interaction between ‘users’ and media ‘texts’ ” (p. 275).

Questions of ownership, status-relationship between fans and producers, status-relationships among fans, and labor may be especially pertinent to fans of digital games. Digital gaming is deeply interactive, immersive, and emergent in nature, thanks to the fact that users not only view, listen to, or read the text, but live it and alter it as they progress avatars through their games. Gaming also lends itself naturally to fan labor in the form of mods and walkthroughs (the painfully detailed and descriptive collaborative instructions created and shared by fans that explain how to progress through a game and unlock all its secrets). Furthermore, this labor is especially prolific and influential (Banks & Humphreys, in press; Kücklich, 2005; Taylor, 2006b). All of this leads to further ambiguities about what the text is and whose it should be (Consalvo, 2003b; Grimes, 2006; Humphreys, 2005). As Cory Ondrejka (2006), a former vice-president of product development at Linden Lab, the studio behind the social-gaming hit, *Second Life*, put it, “no other medium provides such breadth and depth of experience, intermingling the visceral and the social while encouraging exploration and discovery” (p. 112). Gamer communities provide an excellent microcosm for studies of productive consumers as a whole, where issues of ownership, status-relationship, and labor are implicitly and explicitly worked out among fans and producers alike.

In this study, I will focus on the daily communication of one of these digital-game subcultures: fans of the game series *Fallout*. Their interactions with each other and producers on the game series’ official forums provide a compelling site for considering fan-producer relationships in a digitally-mediated age. Since deep exploration of regular fan-producer interaction has rarely been done, a micro-examination of the discourse between fans and

producers could yield surprising conclusions. Examining the nuances of fan-producer negotiations over text integrity may help us better understand each of the four issues central to fandom. At the very least, a micro-level discourse analysis is an effective way to test the conclusions made by fan studies to date.

To achieve these goals, I will begin with a historical overview of the rich fan culture of *Fallout* fans. Next, I will explore the theoretical and empirical conversation surrounding fan cultures and productive consumption, relating ownership, status-relationship with producers, status-relationship among fans, and labor to both digital-game culture and *Fallout* fans. As I progress, I will formulate research questions for each issue. Then, I will explore these four questions using a discourse analysis of forum posts on *Fallout*'s official forum. Last, I will propose a model explaining how these four issues interact on the *Fallout 3* forum and within fan culture as a whole. While I will draw on multidisciplinary literature, my investigation will be undertaken from a communicative perspective, since forum-interaction over these four issues hinges on very strategic and intentional communication among parties. During discourse over controversial issues, communication is the central component of expressing and negotiating various diverse perspectives.

Fallout fans and an important historical moment

Fans of the role playing games (RPGs) *Fallout 1* and *Fallout 2* provide an exemplary data-set for a researcher exploring discourse among fans and producers. Many *Fallout* fans are engaged in active discussion across several fansites. These sites function as gathering places where fans of the game can interact with individuals who share their devotion and expertise. With high levels of activity and creative contribution, specialized language, and reliance on a

shared history of in-game experience, fans use the sites to openly communicate with other fans. What's more, Bethesda Softworks, the developer of the series' upcoming next installment, has launched its official *Fallout 3* site (<http://fallout.bethsoft.com>; "Fallout: Welcome to the official site," n.d.) which links to the studio's forum space (www.bethsoft.com/bgsforums; "Bethesda," n.d.), containing forums devoted to the *Fallout* series. The Bethesda *Fallout 3* forum includes a unique feature not present on the many fansite forums, namely developer presence and participation. The producers of *Fallout 3* are members of, and regularly post to, the Bethesda *Fallout 3* forum alongside fans of the games. There is definite interaction between the two parties on the Bethesda forum, even if the interaction is stringently managed by Bethesda.

The timing of this investigation and the potential to observe direct fan-producer interaction are both important because *Fallout* fans and Bethesda are currently using the *Fallout 3* forum to negotiate ownership, status-relationship, and labor issues over the development of *Fallout 3*. Currently, the interaction surrounding *Fallout 3* contains considerable friction since many *Fallout* fans fear everything they loved about *Fallout 1 & 2* will be sacrificed by Bethesda's *Fallout 3* in the name of marketability and profit. Furthermore, many fans believe that Bethesda is making drastic changes without consent from the very fans that have kept interest in the franchise alive for several quiet years (Blancato, 2007 June 19). As *Fallout 3*'s release grows nearer, and fans continue to communicate various opinions to Bethesda and each other about the new game, issues of ownership, status-relationship, and labor all play a central role in the discourse. These negotiations are important since, as Jenkins (1992) pointed out, "the tension between the producer's conception and the fan's conceptions of the series are most visible at moments of friction or dispute" (p. 132). Through an exploration of these interactions, we can learn a great deal about how producers and consumers negotiate meaning with each other

in a culture dominated by mediated interaction. My long history as a fan of the game series, as well as my familiarity with many of the fansites, gives me sufficient context to explore the discourse between fans and producers. The remainder of this chapter will explain the history of the game franchise and the specifics of the current tension between producers and fans, as well as place my fandom of the series in context.

Fallout 1 & 2 were released in 1997 and 1998 for the personal computer (PC) by the digital-game publisher Interplay, and developed for Interplay by Black Isle Studios. I became a fan of the games a few years later in 2001, after a friend and longtime fan introduced them to me. What met me when the CD first whirled to life in my computer's drive was an engaging and unique experience that I have revisited several times since, playing through the games multiple times. *Fallout 1 & 2* center on surviving and questing in a post-apocalyptic America circa year 2200, which has been devastated by a nuclear world war with ambiguous sides and no real victors (Chalk, 2007 April 13). The games take place on the west coast, chiefly in and around what used to be California. Federal and State government have been replaced by city-state towns governed by criminal organizations, militias, martial law, or rudimentary legislative systems. In between these feuding city-states lay only anarchistic wilds. During each play through, it has been up to me and the player character (my avatar) to tame these wilds and save the world.

I am not alone in my appreciation for *Fallout*. Soon after their release, the titles developed loyal groups of fans who deeply enjoyed the distinctive games (Blancato, 2007 June 19; Zenke, 2007 May 22). Stylistically, mechanically, and creatively, *Fallout 1 & 2* have given fans like me much to celebrate. The player character is completely customizable (modified by the innovative S.P.E.C.I.A.L system- an acronym for character attributes of strength, perception, endurance, charisma, intelligence, agility, and luck), with game-play consequences altered based

on how the character is modified. The combat is turn-based (as opposed to real-time), which emphasizes strategic command and character competency over player reaction time or hand-eye coordination. The in-game perspective is isometric (a bird's eye view), and allows for a holistic view of a large segment of the game map, aiding in strategy. The game world is open-ended, with player choices deeply affecting character and game outcomes. It contains a sense of moral ambiguity where decisions on right and wrong are left to the player, not dictated by game-sanctioned goals. Its dialogue is rich with customizable character factors such as charisma, perception, and intelligence affecting a conversation's style and consequences. Finally, *Fallout* became known for its quirky brand of dark humor and a retro-future, 1950's, wastepunk *mis en scene* (*Mad Max* meets *Leave it to Beaver*).

Soon, several *Fallout* fansites such as *No Mutants Allowed* (*NMA*; www.nma-fallout.com; "No mutants allowed," n.d.) and *Duck and Cover* (*DaC*; www.duckandcover.cx; "Duck and cover," n.d.) emerged and began engaging in all the typical fansite functions: posting screenshots, news, mods, walkthroughs, and fan fiction and art, as well as hosting forums for discussion (Blancato, 2007 June 19; Zenke, 2007 May 22). I never became a participant in any communal sense on any of these fansites, but I did engage their content often over the years, downloading patches and mods, lurking in forums, and checking for news updates. Through their productivity, the *Fallout* fans who did interact with each other on *NMA*, *DaC*, and other fansites became participants in, and advocates for, a fan culture that extended far beyond the games' borders. They believed in the game enough, and defended it with enough tenacity, to gain the reputation of being one of "gaming's fringe cults" (Blancato, 2007 June 19).

As time went on, however, it appeared that *Fallout* fans would be without new installments of the game. Two more games based in the *Fallout* universe were released in 2001

and 2004 (*Fallout: Tactics* and *Fallout: Brotherhood of Steel* respectively), but neither were considered canon (installments of the series accepted as valid and official) on *NMA* and *DaC* (Blancato, 2007 June 19). These two games broke drastically with many of the stylistic and mechanical qualities listed above that made *Fallout* so beloved by its fans, and also were narrative spin-offs, not continuing the main story of *Fallout 1 & 2*. The much-anticipated, and much-delayed, third installment of the primary *Fallout* narrative, *Fallout 3*, was cancelled in 2003 when serious financial trouble at Interplay forced staff reductions (Chalk, 2007 Aug. 15; Zenke, 2007 May 4). By 2005, Black Isle's doors had closed and Titus interactive, Interplay's parent company, had gone bankrupt (Chalk, 2007 May 4). Interplay continued to plod along in financial limbo with plans for *Fallout 3* coming to a screeching halt (Graft, 2006 Dec. 12). *Van Buren*, the beta name for *Fallout 3*, became a mythic item among fans, a Holy Grail, never realized (Chalk, 2007 May 4).

With the apparent death of their beloved series, despairing *Fallout* fans began to engage the text as if it was their own, picking up the torch and keeping the spirit of the game alive online. They had gone from marketing reps to consumer advocates in a game culture that had marginalized their interests. *NMA* administrator and fan opinion-leader Thomas "Brother None" Beekers (quoted in Blancato, 2007 June 19), had this to say:

With the times, our goals have changed. Originally, we were formed to be supportive as we could be of *Fallout*, and this was great between *Fallout 1* and *2*, before *Tactics* release dashed our hopes of a good spin-off and no new release was forthcoming...Now we're mostly evangelists of recreating the original *Fallout* experience. We try to convince the

media and publishers that there is a viable niche market for *Fallout*-like games that has been under-serviced for years. (p. 2)

This niche is quantifiable. A recent post on a forum thread listed 68 *Fallout* fansites currently operating in 13 languages and invited others to post their own not in that list (Hungry Donner, 2007 April 20). With Interplay forced to abandon the *Fallout* series, fansites picked up the mantle themselves, continuing to produce mods, fan comics, and fan fiction, as well as hosting continued discussion in fan forums. A fan-made sequel, aptly titled *Fan Made Fallout*, has been in the works for several years. *Fallout* fans had taken the series into their own hands.

Eventually, the *Fallout* franchise was resurrected, but not by Interplay, and the next game would not be developed by Black Isle Studios. Instead, on April 9, 2007, Bethesda Softworks acquired full legal ownership of the series and officially announced its control of the next sequel (Chalk, 2007 April 13). Bethesda had been quietly working on a sequel since July 2004, when they bought rights to develop *Fallout 3* from Interplay, but sale of ownership outright changed the arrangement, ensuring that Bethesda no longer had to answer to Interplay at all (Zenke, 2007 May 22). *Fallout 3* would be developed, but in an updated, mainstream style, with several beloved game elements changed (Amrich, 2008 April). What's more, Bethesda's Todd Howard, not Black Isle's Brian Fargo, would be at the helm as executive producer of the game. This left many *Fallout* fans skeptical, since Black Isle Studios had always been supportive of fan goals, and cooperative with fan interests. For instance, Chris Avellone, a developer with Black Isle Studios, took the time to write fans a multivolume "*Fallout Bible*," which is posted to *DaC* and explains secrets, plot holes, inside jokes, and glitches, as well as expands the *Fallout* universe by answering questions and clearing up inconsistencies within the text (Avellone, 2002).

Fallout 3 is scheduled to be released in fall 2008 and is one of the most anticipated titles of 2008 (Game Informer Online, 2007 Dec. 21; Fong, 2008 Jan. 1). Part of the game's re-imagining includes updated graphics and sound, a switch to a first-person view, real-time combat, and a break from the central narrative of *Fallout 1 & 2*. *Fallout 3* will take place in the ruins of Washington D.C., and has- to date- no known storyline connections to the original games. While these differences are enough to fundamentally alter the way the game is played, a *Game Informer* magazine preview indicated that the self-proclaimed "*Fallout* nerd" producers of *Fallout 3* are attempting to keep its heart and execution as close to the spirit of the first two as possible ("Fallout 3," 2007 July). And indeed producer-created content posted to the official *Fallout 3* website indicates that the mythos, wastepunk style, and even the dark humor of *Fallout 1 & 2* are intact. At least, Bethesda is posting items in an attempt to communicate as much ("Fallout: Welcome to the official site," n.d.).

Since Bethesda's announced takeover of the *Fallout* franchise, a debate has surfaced within the active online *Fallout* fan community as to the quality of the next installment in the *Fallout* series. Skeptics of Bethesda's direction for the game have voiced several concerns. Many are encapsulated in uncertainty about the wide release of the game on consoles (Xbox 360 and Playstation 3), rather than just to a niche market on the PC. Many *Fallout* fans contend that console games are geared to a more casual audience of gamers that cannot appreciate the nuances of what *Fallout* should be, and that the masses demand graphics over gameplay, as opposed to the sophisticated and sensitive gameplay style of the PC RPG. Furthermore, Bethesda's previous blockbuster fantasy game, *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, is a starkly different RPG than *Fallout*, one they contend is more action-oriented and childish. The use of *Oblivion*'s graphics engine for *Fallout 3* is giving rise to the "*Oblivion* with guns" protest across

the fansites. Also, Bethesda is thought to be bad at dialogue and produce more-or-less linear plots without much choice or moral ambiguity (see *The Elder Scrolls* series, *TES*). To many participants on the fansites, all of this means the game will inevitably be made impure in an effort to reach a wider audience.

In contrast, supporters claim that times are changing, games are evolving, and the original *Fallout* games were lacking in a few areas that Bethesda has the ability to update. Moreover, they believe that Bethesda has produced quality games in the past, and has always thoroughly considered and responded to player feedback when developing games. And furthermore, they argue, Bethesda could realistically do nothing to assuage a fan-base that had made up its mind over the game's poor potential as early as 2004. While the majority of fans appear to be skeptical about Bethesda's direction for *Fallout 3*, the debate has occurred with great depth, breadth, and passion on many of the *Fallout* fansites, including Bethesda's official *Fallout 3* forum.

Personally, I remain ambivalent about Bethesda's handling of *Fallout 3*. Part of me thinks the skeptics are over-reacting and thinks that Bethesda's *Oblivion* was a solid game. Part of me sees the points being made by the skeptics, recognizes that *Oblivion* is very different than *Fallout*, and must begrudgingly agree that there is cause for concern. All in all, I am a fanboy that is excited to spend \$60 on anything that has *Fallout* in the title. What's important to this research is that I'm interested in how fans and producers negotiate ownership, status-relationship, and labor issues with each other. I'm not out to rule on which party is right and which is wrong. I'm only here to investigate how they communicate their diverse perspectives with each other during an important historical moment.

Thus far, I have argued for the merits of investigating direct fan-producer negotiation over text integrity in the age of the active audience, and introduced a specific fan culture that is

worth such investigation. The next chapter will begin that investigation by exploring the literature surrounding fans, gamers, and discourse over text integrity in those four key areas: ownership, status-relationship between producers and fans, status-relationship between among fans, and labor. In chapter three, I will explain the methodology behind my investigation of *Fallout* fans active on Bethesda's official forum. Chapter four will report the results of that investigation and discuss what they show us about fan-producer negotiation over text integrity. Chapter five will conclude this thesis by synthesizing its results into a model of fan-producer negotiation over text integrity that can be applied to other fan communities as they interact with the text, with producers, and with each other.

CHAPTER TWO

Four Essential Components of Fan-Producer Negotiation over Text Integrity

Ownership and textual poaching

Often, the crux of the discourse between fan and producer in moments of tension is over fan appropriation of text, or as Jenkins (1992) called it (elaborating on de Certeau's 1984 concept), "textual poaching." Textual poaching occurs when fans reject aesthetic distance and conventions of audience inactivity and make a text their own, appropriating it by deciding canon, elaborating on its universe, evangelizing its merits, and other creative endeavors. The key idea of textual poaching is that the integrity of the text is more important than producer perceptions of that text, and tensions manifest when the two are perceived as at odds. So, for example, while *Star Trek* producers may have gone through great lengths to deny that Picard and Crusher had a romantic history or that Data had emotions, many fans decided the facts of the show were to the contrary and updated the canon accordingly (Jenkins, 1992). To these productive consumers, the intent of the producer is less important than the pleasure of the fan and the integrity of the narrative, so texts may rightly be appropriated by fans in order to fulfill either of these ends, even if these appropriations will never be official according to producers. In all realms of fandom, the ease and prevalence of several textual poaching practices has increased with the new possibilities afforded by the internet, where more fans can gather, and more fan-created materials can be distributed faster to a wider audience.

As fans begin to understand a text in terms of their entitlement and ownership, they often must contend with their relative powerlessness in the face of producers who may alter it in ways the fans find unsuitable. No matter how invested fans are in a text, they have to acknowledge that

they are not its official owners and must approach the text, and its producers, as outsiders who can only indirectly influence its destiny. No matter how many fans decide that Picard and Crusher have a romantic history, the producers of the show can write episodes that directly contradict the decision. Because of this marginalized status, an essential part of being a fan is balancing loyalty and disappointment. From there, it is up to the fan to theorize on ways to improve the text (Baym, 2000). This function is so prevalent that Jenkins calls fandom “first and foremost, an institution of theory and criticism” (1992, p. 86).

Work toward text integrity can take diverse forms. Fans can engage in criticism and activism as they pressure producers to alter plans for official installments of the text. When such advocacy fails, or is perceived as pointless before it is tried, fans can turn to creativity, unofficially altering the text themselves. These seemingly oppositional ownership tactics, which will be discussed further below, each contain underlying assumptions about the text. Both are implicit attempts to poach a form of ownership from text producers, either by influencing producers or laboring without regard for them. Moreover, both criticism and creativity are important functions within fan culture. As Newman (2005) explained, “the task of the fan is a dual one that pushes and explores at the edge of the canon, expanding, modifying, enriching, while also preserving, policing, and remedying” (p. 53).

Fan criticism occurs when fans feel producers have mishandled a text, disregarding its integrity, and wish to vocalize their objections to both other fans and producers. Some infractions include: a violation of the truth of the text’s universe, a change in the text’s aesthetic perceived as inaccurate or invalid, dislike of a certain character or plot, or even a complete dislike for an entire text (referred to as antifandom, an interesting if understudied and ambiguous aspect of the relationship between producers and consumers; Gray, 2003 & 2005; Theodropoulou, 2007).

Criticism often occurs when fans feel producers have slighted them by picking profits over integrity or mass appeal over creativity (e.g., Mihelich & Papineau's 2005 study of Jimmy Buffet fans and their struggle to deal with his increasingly contradictory bohemian message and corporate agenda). Through such criticism, fans are advocating that they have just as much understanding of and insight into a text as producers, even if they must work as outsiders in order to accomplish change.

When the criticism becomes intense enough, and when the perceived wrong becomes great enough, fans often mobilize, becoming organized, informed, and sometimes influential activists for a specific text. This is a practice as old as modern fandom. Fans in the late 60's pressured NBC to put *Star Trek* back on the air. Fans tried to save the ill-fated television show *Beauty and the Beast*. Producers of *Cagney and Lacey* solicited fan support when the series was in trouble. *Blake's 7* fans attempted to get PBS to air the British program. Fans petitioned Peter Jackson and New Line Cinema to keep its *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy close to the source text. *Harry Potter* fans fought Warner Bros. to keep their fansites running. Recently, the television show *Jericho* was given second life thanks to fan activism. The internet has been especially helpful in giving these fan activism campaigns voice and reach (Scardaville, 2005).

Theoretically, fan activism in the age of the active audience may be a way to bridge the gap between producer and consumer. In actuality, however, fan perceptions of the influence of their activism have been mixed. Fans of many different media texts have acknowledged that they could hypothetically influence producer behavior, but have also skeptically wondered if they ever actually have (Andrejevic, 2008; Costello & Moore, 2007; Menon, 2007; Scardaville, 2005).

When producers disregard fan interests or ignore their criticism, fans often turn to their own creativity and productivity to work toward text integrity (Sandvoss, 2005). This can occur when fan interests lie outside of the official text, or when fans feel the text merits further fleshing out that will not be done by producers, or when fans feel it is up to them to work to make the text true to their own experiences. As Jenkins (2006b), explained when speaking of the productivity of *Star Trek* fans, “for these fans, *Star Trek* is not simply something that can be reread; it is something that can and must be rewritten to make it more responsive to their needs, to make it a better producer of personal meanings and pleasures” (p. 40). Fan creativity supplements a text to make it more appealing or relatable to fans. Fan fiction, fan scripts, fan movies, digital-game walkthroughs, and modding are ways fans reject the aesthetic distance ascribed to them and give the text integrity on their own terms. In short, “fans transform their criticisms into opportunities to let their own creativity shine” (Baym, 2000, p. 105).

However, this production is not always in opposition to producer interests, but can also be very supportive to organizational goals. Some groups of fans find a sense of ownership in coming alongside the official readings of the text. For instance, Rehak (2003) discusses the productive and simultaneously supportive fans of the transmedia *Tomb Raider* character, Lara Croft, who channel their creativity toward producer-sanctioned goals. Furthermore, many fans seem to operate under the assumption that their creativity is not official, and therefore not as authoritative as official texts, even if those official texts are perceived as lacking integrity. Not all producer-made installments of a text may be canonical, but no fan-made installment ever is. Tushnet (2007) found that productive fans were well aware of this lack of authority. To Tushnet, “fans seem to see their legal status as similar to their social status: marginal and, at best, tolerated rather than accepted as a legitimate part of the universe of creators” (p. 60).

The negotiation of ownership between fan and producer may be especially salient in the ultra-customizable world of digital-game fandom. In gaming, the nature of the text is more interactive and emergent, and more ambiguous in regards to ownership issues than in any other media text (Humphreys, 2005). Gaming takes the idea of the active audience to the extreme, as the story is not told unless the audience manipulates the avatar (or multiple avatars in the case of broader strategy and simulation games). Furthermore, how this avatar is manipulated often has direct results on what story is told, especially in the case of RPGs, where players are often given choices on how to progress through the story. Gamer culture is a fan culture where, “most radically put, the very product of the game is not constructed simply by the designers or publisher, nor contained within the boxed product, but produced only in conjunction with the players” (Taylor, 2006b, p. 126).

Gamers poach through criticism and creativity just like other media fans. And while their criticism may look very similar to other genres, the emergent nature of their text affords the opportunity for unique forms of creativity. Furthermore, this creativity can also alter the official text more significantly than the creativity applied by fans of other media. For instance, *World of Warcraft* players bypassed a ban on chatting with enemies by using non-banned numerals and punctuation to get their message across, creating a specialized non-alphabetical language to use within the game (Lowood, 2006). Game texts can also be extended and appropriated in more ways, with more success, than many other media texts. So if modding is the gamer equivalent of making a fan film that re-shoots a movie, this re-shoot would employ all the same actors, sets, and special effects as the original movie, since the modder has access to all the original code of the game. Machinima films, those created by gamers using only in-game characters and graphics, also allow poaching that resembles the official texts very closely (Sotamaa, 2007). Pearce

(2006) outlines an excellent example of creative fan ownership that works beyond a games' official borders. She chronicles how the fans of a defunct massively-multiplayer online (MMO) game called *Uru* went into *Second Life*, the online social space with a 3D, game-like interface, and recreated the world of *Uru* using the space's customizability. The gamers built their own *Uru* island, complete with landmarks, puzzles, and characters from the game. In doing so, "players have quite literally taken it over and made it their own, carrying it forward to a new level" (p. 23).

Since *Fallout* fans responded to their text being abandoned in a way similar to *Uru* fans, adopting ownership of its destiny, it becomes easier to understand why many of them are skeptical of Bethesda's re-re-appropriation of the text they appropriated as theirs. For instance, a recent "Faction Profile" on the *Fallout 3* official site (Pagliarulo, n.d.) about the Brotherhood of Steel, a joinable faction (a guild of sorts, where the player character could receive goods and get quests) from *Fallout 1 & 2*, raised considerable ire among fans. In the Brotherhood of Steel faction profile, *Fallout 3* Lead Designer Emil Pagliarulo detailed how the Brotherhood of Steel made it from California, the setting of *Fallout 1 & 2*, to Washington D.C., the setting of *Fallout 3*. The continuation of the narrative by Bethesda, who is neither a fan organization nor an original creator of the intellectual property (IP) upset some fans who felt the company was treading where they shouldn't, extending the narrative and robbing fans of the ownership they had claimed. After all, who was it that got to decide what would and would not be canon? Interaction on the official *Fallout 3* forum regarding the Brotherhood of Steel faction profile and other situations is provocative when seeking to further understand ownership and poaching in the age of the active audience. Therefore, the first question I will explore when investigating Bethesda's *Fallout 3* fan forum is:

RQ1: How do fans active on Bethesda's *Fallout 3* forum perceive their level of ownership of the game series?

Given how far-reaching the criticism and activism of fans can be in the age of the active audience, there is reason to believe that *Fallout* fans will perceive themselves as influential entities in the game development process, leading to perceptions of implicit ownership in the destiny of the title. Indeed, much theorizing in the “fandom is beautiful” era is making similar conclusions about fans in general. Moreover, thanks to the prevalence and ease of modding, many *Fallout* fans may not be concerned with the official version of *Fallout 3* at all. The power to alter it unofficially into more acceptable forms could be sufficient enough to create a sense of ownership in the game series.

Status-relationship between producers and fans, and support, contempt, and supervision tactics

While, in the age of the active audience, direct communication between producer and consumer is a real possibility, the results have not been as democratic or utopian as some would theorize. Even 15 years after *Textual Poachers*, fans still must approach producers as marginalized outsiders, those who contribute to the text but do not have the authority to directly define its destiny. This disproportionate power-distance is still shading the status-relationship (i.e., esteem, consideration, importance, and hierarchy) between fans and producers. Even as recently as 2006(a), Taylor theorized four ways fans of MMOs are viewed by producers, none of which is particularly empowering. These fans, according to Taylor, are seen as: mere consumers, (potential) disruptors, unskilled/unknowledgeable users, or rational/selfish actors. Given these

kinds of prevalent producer attitudes, it is understandable that fans are still guarded in their relationship with media producers. It is also no surprise that Andrejevic (2008), while studying fans on the forum site *Television without Pity*, found that fans “agreed with the assertion that online fansites will make TV producers more accountable to viewers” (p. 26) but still “suggested that producers view internet fans as mildly obsessed cranks representing the geek fringe of a show’s audience” (p. 27). Even as some producers embrace fan productivity (such as Will Wright of *The Sims* digital-game franchise), much of this interaction could be labeled as commodification or exploitation.

No matter how producers might perceive fans in the age of the active audience, there are multiple ways to interact with them. Jenkins (1992) outlined three tactics producers use to respond to productive fan bases, each its own indicator of relational status. Producers can use fans as support for their own ends (e.g., enlisting them to become activists during producer battles with networks over the nature of the show, using them as ready-made market research or unofficial public relations representatives, etc.). They can treat them with contempt (e.g., taking legal action against them over intellectual property issues, mocking them in interviews, ignoring them, etc.). Last, producers can attempt to supervise fan endeavors (e.g., holding fan fiction and mod competitions, putting producer presence on fansites, etc.) Conflicted producers, attempting to balance often-tense relationships while retaining ownership and keeping profits up, can have trouble deciding on the best tactic to use. As Murray (2004) expertly stated, “on one hand, corporations are reliant upon devoted fan bases for market research, for development of highly trafficked review sites, and as identifiable niche markets. But on the other hand, these same conglomerates perceive a need for vigilant scrutiny of IP to protect key corporate assets” (p. 11).

The support tactic seems to be increasingly popular as producers realize the enormous market potential of fans. There is something symbiotic in producers supporting fans, so that fans can support producers. Even very recently, striking members of the Writer's Guild of America, the writer's union of the television and movie industry, posted videos on *You Tube*, imploring fans worried about the fate of their favorite shows to mobilize and contact entertainment-industry executives on behalf of the writers. Peter Jackson and New Line Cinema, when beginning the process of turning *The Lord of the Rings*, the beloved book series, into movies, catered to fans with the specific intention of appropriating them into support of the films (Murray, 2004; Shefrin, 2004). They granted interviews to low-level fan websites. They honored a petition by fans encouraging New Line to keep the films true to the source text. They even allowed a fan caught trespassing on set to come back for an official tour and get interviews with producers (of course leading to a laudatory post on her fansite), turning a potential martyr to the cause of fandom into a great ally. Fans of the virtual celebrity Lara Croft mentioned earlier work creatively on many typical fan endeavors (fiction, biographies, art, etc.), and do so without much supervision, yet they have always done so in an effort to support, rather than resist, producer-sanctioned use of the character (Rehak, 2003). Fans producing an online game based in the universe of the cult-hit television series *Alias* did so in a very supportive attempt to expand the existing mythos of the series, and ended up making a product remarkably similar to previous producer-created online games for the series (Örnebring, 2007). All of this reminds us that, when given the opportunity and motivation to do so, fans will very often fall in line with producer goals (Johnson, 2007; Sandvoss, 2005).

Despite the success of many support campaigns, there are still producers who do not seem to want an active, responsive fan base. Producers who respond to fans with contempt are

not concerned about a damaged status-relationship between the two parties, or at least see a reason to justify such damages. For instance, Tim Burton, when directing the first two *Batman* films, dismissed fan concerns about the choice of Michael Keyton as Batman, saying that a profitable movie with mass appeal was more important than satisfying a few fans. Producers exhibiting contempt either ignore or are hostile to creative consumers, sometimes going so far as to threaten and eventually take legal action against them (Jenkins, 1992 & 2006a; Taylor, 2006b). Legal action often comes from producer fear of the financial implications of allowing another entity to control their brand (interestingly though, a vast majority of creative consumption is noncommercial; Consalvo, 2003a; Soukup, 2006). It was this fear that prompted *Star Trek* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* producers to order the shut-down of various fansites using copyrighted images related to the texts. Similarly, when Warner Bros. bought the rights to the *Harry Potter* film series, they immediately issued cease and desist orders to 107 fansites using official names related to the *Harry Potter* brand (Murray, 2004). When fans protested on the grounds that they were the ones that made *Harry Potter* what it was (before it was a movie series, or even a book series, it was one low-level book release in the UK), Warner Bros. backed down, but began to supervise fan activity (Jenkins, 2006a).

This supervision appears to be a common middle ground, acknowledging and enlisting the support of productive consumers, while attempting to maintain legal and cultural ownership of official texts, or even sometimes fan-produced ones. This can create a cooperative, yet hegemonic, fan-producer status-relationship. Such is the model for *Star Wars*, where George Lucas has integrated gamers into the design process for a new MMO, but has also charged that fans wishing to participate in official fan activities be sure to “celebrate the story the way it is” (Murray, 2004). Soap-opera producers are well aware of how much discussion occurs on fan

boards and attempt to use it to their benefit (Baym, 2000). Musicians often use their official fan clubs to appropriate fan activity for the sake of the bottom line (Théberge, 2005; Yano, 1997). This supervision works to achieve the dual goals of elevating producer interests while invalidating fan activity outside of those interests (Johnson, 2007). As Siapera (2004) pointed out while exploring television networks' official fans sites:

In providing a fan site, broadcasters have usurped the more or less spontaneous gathering and organization of fans, and by centralizing the exchange of opinions and ideas they retain considerable control over the show they produce. Further, in claiming official status for their fansites...they formalize their relationship to fans, while delegitimising and undermining alternative fan cultures. (pp. 162-163)

In gamer culture, fans and producers are seeing increased interaction, with consequences often more tangible than in other media, given that fan productivity can alter the official text so completely. Therefore, the game world is in a unique position to be a legal, discursive, and cultural battleground where these three diverse tensions are played out and the complex status-relationship between fans and producers is demonstrated (Grimes, 2006). The examples are prevalent across the industry. Producers monitor actual gameplay to determine which game attributes are used, which are not, and what unexpected ways players engage the game, in order to adjust future installments of the text (Humphreys, 2005; Taylor, 2006b). Modders and producers often strike implicit or explicit deals over fan production and consumption (sometimes resulting in financial gain for the modders; Banks & Humphreys, in press; Postigo, 2008; Sotamaa, 2007). The game studio Konami has actively sought and received the support of fans of

its hit dance game, *Dance Dance Revolution* (Demers, 2006). An examination of the industry reveals that while, as Taylor (2006a) claims, many game producers look down upon fans, they cannot ignore them. The value and prevalence of productive consumption within the digital-game industry merits that producers do not respond to productive consumers with contempt, but seek to commodify that labor into support for their text, supervising it to those ends.

Given that direct communication between producers and fans is now a real possibility, how it actually occurs can deeply affect fan perceptions of importance and esteem (Soukup, 2006). As one beleaguered poster to a soap opera forum cited by Baym (2000) exclaimed after venting frustrations with the text, “sigh, I feel a little better now. What do the rest of you think? Maybe if we yell loud enough they’ll get the message” (p. 103). While this reciprocal influence and potential for near instant feedback can foster communication and understanding, it can also lead to a perceived “us vs. them” dynamic to the interaction with definite consequences to the status-relationship between the two parties. For instance, a recent contest initiated by Bethesda on the *Fallout* official site, labeled the *Fallout* 10th anniversary contest (“Fallout: 10th anniversary contest”, n.d.) asked fans to design their own perk (a choosable character customization such as “sharpshooter” or “pack rat” that, when chosen, affects how the character functions in the game world). Winners received material prizes for their creativity, with the grand-prize winner actually getting his/her perk implemented into *Fallout 3*. Bethesda retained legal rights to the material created and submitted, and fans were able to participate (if minimally) in the game-design process. However, when the contest wrapped up, its winner didn’t go over too well with the active forum fan base, who expressed feeling ignored, swindled, or ripped off by Bethesda’s behavior. From the conception of the contest through its culmination, the complex status-relationship between fans and producers was essential to the parties’ discourse on many

threads in the *Fallout 3* forum. This discourse, along with other interaction on the forum, is an interesting place to investigate this question:

RQ2: How do fans and producers active on Bethesda's *Fallout 3* forum construct their status-relationship with each other?

The prevalence of producer interaction on the official *Fallout 3* forum seems to signify that Bethesda is attempting to turn fan skepticism about *Fallout 3* into support. The very fact that they have created forum space devoted to the game, and voluntarily interact with a mostly hostile fan-base indicates that they are committed to persuading fans to support *Fallout 3*. In the least, Bethesda appears to be trying to mitigate any public relations damages their disregard of fans may create. By exploring how Bethesda relates to fans and how fans relate to Bethesda on a daily basis, much can be learned about the status-relationship these parties afford each other.

Status-relationship among fans, and interpretive and informative practices

As they interact with producers, fans in the age of the active audience also have the unprecedented opportunity to interact with each other in greater numbers and with greater frequency. Fans, once isolated by geography, now have the entire world in which to find comrades and sparring partners (Baym, 2000; Costello & Moore, 2007). This creates another set of status-relationships worth exploring, since this increased visibility and interconnectivity can lead to more than just increased community. It can also lead to increased factionism and debate in fan discourse (Scodari, 2007). And since fan culture is not a monolith, and not all fans see issues the same way, factionist discourse is common in fan interaction (Hills, 2002; Johnson,

2007). In fact, it is so common, and a text can be read and interpreted in so many different ways, that Sandvoss (2005) alleged that texts reach a point of “neutrosemy,” where they have so many meanings that they really have no meaning, and interpretation is always a matter of perspective. Sometimes this factionism can be so pronounced that simply being a fan of one text means nearly automatically being an anti-fan of a rival text (e.g., see Theodoropoulou’s 2007 discussion of defacto anti-fandom as it relates to rival sport teams).

Status-relationships among fans among fans are determined by negotiating diverse opinions over text integrity. The age of the active consumer is an age of “knowledge communities” (Lévy, 1997), where participation is intentional, understanding is aggregate, and information is essential. In this era, the fundamental currency of status-relationship within the knowledge community is social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984), which fans obtain and show off in the form of information. Baym (2000), in her study of the online interactions of soap-opera fans, proposed that fans used interpretive and informative practices to discuss their favored texts with each other. These two knowledge-based practices have been underutilized in fan research and could very well be the fundamental components of social and cultural capital among fans. If they are, then they are the basis of fan-to-fan status-relationship as fans negotiate multiple interpretations of text integrity with each other. I will discuss interpretive and informative practices further below, demonstrating how essential they are in fan discourse about media texts.

Fans engage in interpretive practices in several ways, including: personalization (making the text personally meaningful and identifiable to their life through analogy or alteration), character interpretation (an inquiry into the motives and behaviors of various characters in the text and evaluation of whether producer decisions for characters are in line with these

interpretations), and speculation (elaboration of the text by addressing issues of its future, meaning, and even speculating out whole new avenues for the text through fan fiction, art, commentary, etc.- what Baym calls “creative speculation”). After interpretive practices, Baym explored informative practices. These include: sharing updates about the text and its producers (including execs, writers, performers, etc.), spoilers (the sharing of specific developments in the text before the text is released for consumption), trivia, sightings of performers and producers, and plot summaries. Though arguably more benign than potentially-heated interpretive practices, informative practices are often the basis for interpretive practices (e.g., a plot summary containing considerable editorial comment on the installment of the text, or spoiler reports containing an evaluation of the development’s merits).

These interpretive and informative practices are essential in that they keep fans knowledgeable enough to participate in a fan culture that values minutia, and effective use of these practices builds social capital among the fan community. Proper information allows fans to articulate their views on text integrity in an informed manner, keeping their status-relationships with other fans as high as possible (Jenkins, 1992). For instance, Jenkins (2006a) tells of a *Survivor*-fan message board populated by a close-knit knowledge community of “spoilers” who worked to discover each season’s winner before the season finale. Each member had specific strengths that related to the information and interpretations they presented, and status-relationship was tied to these strengths and the social capital they afforded. Those attempting to enter the knowledge community were evaluated based on their own interpretations or information, and status-relationship was allotted as such. These interpretive and informative practices are fundamental to fan debates over text integrity, since no public interpretation occurs without considerable discourse over the interpretation’s merit. If perspectives on text integrity

reach a point of neutroscopy, as Sandvoss (2005) proposed, then interpretive and informative practices are the primary tools fans have for defending their views to a diverse fan community. Through an examination of fan discourse from an interpretive and informative practices perspective, much can be learned about status-relationships within a fan community.

In gamer culture, these practices are important given the amount of interpretation and interactivity games afford. Digital-game fandom is not solely relegated to the in-game experience, and fan-to-fan interaction is an essential part of gamer culture (Crawford & Rutter, 2007). Yet each play-through of a game can be as diverse as every person playing it. Moreover, this diversity is not the same as the interpretive diversity that occurs when two people watch a film. In games (and RPGs in particular), actual plot and character elements can change depending on how the player chooses to play the game. As fans interact over the game, they must merge their various experiences into some standard on canon that is agreed upon by the fan community. Canon decisions can help decide the official and proper ending of an open-ended game, which can be used as a starting place for further fan production, such as fan-made sequels or fan fiction. A text that has an official canon is a text that has integrity. Digital-game texts can be especially susceptible to neutroscopy, given that each new play-through can be a new interpretation of meaning. Interpretive and informative discussions that seek to determine canon are attempting to offset this neutroscopy, and give fans a shared foundation for their community.

Informative practices abound in many digital-game fan cultures as fansites post and share screenshots, and videos, producer interviews, as well as discuss and correct the complex history and mythology of several digital games. Interpretive practices occur as fans create or critique based on their interpretations of text integrity. The world of gaming fandom also provides an example of the relation between interpretive and informative practices: that of walkthroughs

posted to fansites (Newman, 2005). Though primarily informative, these walkthroughs can be interpretive too, just as Baym (2000) proposed. They are mostly written in the instructive second person. However, sometimes they are written as thrilling and ornate third-person narratives (Consalvo, 2003b). So the simple informative directive for the classic video game series *Super Mario Bros.* of “go to the bridge in the castle, jump over Bowser, and get the hammer” can become “Mario, flushed from fatigue and dripping with nervous sweat, emaciated with fear as he stared down the reptilian eyes of the dark king Bowser, knew he had to somehow get past him and retrieve his only saving grace: the bridge’s hammer” and act as an interpretive narrative.

And indeed these practices are used to negotiate status-relationships in many online gamer communities. Fans can use interaction within game forums to socialize newcomers to the scene (as was done in a multiplayer online game studied by Taylor and Kolko, 2003), or use detailed walkthroughs and accounts of cheats and glitches to both collect social capital and acknowledge other fans within the knowledge community who helped in the creative process (Newman, 2005). Links between fansites form a sort of social hierarchy and indicate a form of social capital (Taylor, 2006b). In the *Fallout* fan community, the stalwart dedication of the fansites *NMA* and *DaC* through several desolate years has led to their great respect among many fans. Administrators and regulars on these sites (such as fan opinion-leader, Brother None) have collected social capital thanks to their reputation for being informed and wise.

Of course, the community is not in total agreement over text integrity, especially when it comes to *Fallout 3*. Not even the respected old-guard fansites and fans could stave off the controversy and factionist discourse that has risen in response to the game’s new or altered features. The debate over the merit of these features is so nuanced, so speculative, and requires so much esoteric knowledge that methods of discourse centering on interpretation and

information have come to the forefront of forum discussions. Through these discussions, fans are always (either implicitly or explicitly) using informative and interpretive practices to negotiate complex status-relationships with each other. This leads to the very fundamental question:

RQ3: How do fans active on Bethesda's *Fallout 3* forum construct their status-relationship with each other?

Considering the status implications that proper information and interpretation can have, it will be helpful to see how interpretive and informative practices are utilized by *Fallout* fans during their discourse. The intensity of the factionist debate that is occurring on the *Fallout 3* forum indicates that these practices may be important ways to declare a side and disparage those that disagree.

Labor and the New Organization

All of the previous issues have rested on a central assumption: that many fans are active, creative, productive participants within the labor system surrounding the text they esteem. This is true whether they labor in support of or opposition to producer-sanctioned goals. Indeed it seems that fan culture would not exist without fan labor, and producers would not be so interested in fan culture if its proper management and appropriation did not have viable financial consequences for them. However, as has been the common theme across these issues, the balance between the two parties regarding fan labor contribution is tenuous at best. Jenkins (2006a) explained the delicate relationship between the producer and productive consumer as it stands in the age of the active audience:

The media industry is increasingly dependent on active and committed consumers to spread the word about valued properties in an overcrowded media marketplace, and in some cases they are seeking ways to channel the creative output of media fans to lower their production costs. At the same time, they are terrified of what happens if this consumer power gets out of control. (p. 134)

Given how much this use of fan labor sounds like exploitation, many well-intentioned investigators have questioned the ethical implications of fans engaging in unpaid labor (Pearce, 2006; Postigo, 2003; Taylor, 2006b). However, as Terranova (2000) pointed when speaking of labor in the digital age: “free labor, however, is not necessarily exploited labor” because compensation is often “willingly conceded in exchange for the pleasures of communication and exchange” (p. 48). Jenkins (1992) explained the situation in terms more specific to media fans: “fandom recognizes no clear-cut line between artists and consumers; all fans are potential writers whose talents need to be discovered, nurtured, and promoted and who may be able to make a contribution, however modest, to the cultural wealth of the larger community” (p. 280). While it might be slightly utopian to claim that fan labor always comes from or results in fan pleasure (Terranova herself points out that it doesn’t, 2000), creative consumption very naturally leads to a degree of production, and the goals of this production (implicit ownership, status, esteem, community, social capital, etc.) are often outside the realm of monetary gain.

The labor of productive consumers is particularly interesting when considering its similarity to the “New Organization” as theorized by the likes of Drucker (1994, 1998), Fulk and DeSanctis (1995), and Rice and Gattiker (2000). The New Organizational paradigm has rarely, if ever, been applied to fan production. These authors spoke of how information communication

technologies (ICTs) such as the internet afford organizations the ability to restructure their business model and adapt to a world where information is an increasingly prevalent commodity. In the New Organization (sometimes referred to as the “virtual organization” or simply as a “new form” of the organization), the speed of communication is increased, connectivity is vastly expanded, the desire for innovation is enhanced, organizations are forced to be more entrepreneurial and less hierarchical, and work is done by self-disciplined specialists working across traditional organizational and departmental lines in various fragmented networks. Drucker (1994, 1998) argued that the centerpiece of this new organization would be the “knowledge worker,” whose most valuable skill was not dexterity or loyalty, but intelligence and understanding. McPhee and Poole (2000) supported this by postulating that “the most important resource organizations now have is their members’ knowledge and skills, and organizations must preserve this knowledge and develop it further” (p. 516). The idea of the knowledge worker fits in well with Lévy’s (1997) knowledge communities.

Further, take away the assumption that the knowledge workers in the New Organization are official paid members of the staff of a particular company, and it becomes easy to make the connections between ever-more prolific fan laborers and the worker in the New Organization. As Lucas and Baroudi (1994) observed when exploring the affordances ICTs allow organizational forms, “in the final analysis, the organization of the future may not be an organization at all” (p. 22). Terranova (2000) explored the increased prevalence of the “gift economy” operated by knowledge workers within a “digital economy,” where laborers are known to give up financial compensation in exchange for pleasurable productivity, which is characterized as open, fluid, collaborative, and leading to non-financial rewards. This paradigm seems a natural fit for fan productivity, especially given the apparent attitude shift of many producers. Productive

consumption, many producers are deciding, is no longer something to be ignored or disabled, but something that is better utilized toward organizational ends. In short, fans are more useful when they are recruited as members of the New Organization. This organizational theory may be a worthy descriptor of fan labor, though it has not been used very often (if ever) toward such ends.

It seems that as knowledge workers in the New Organization, fans have the potential to be developer, public-relations specialist, focus group, technical support, journalist, and consultant all in one. Understanding fan activity in terms of labor in the New Organization may give researchers another perspective from which to view fan appropriation of text, producer appropriation of fans, and all the broader issues encompassed in these practices. Going back yet again to Lara Croft fan support of producer-sanctioned goals, Rehak (2003) proposes that the Lara Croft model of fan-producer interaction, one of willing fan labor and producer acceptance of that labor, could become more common as “postmodern media are shifting away from simple polarities of production and consumption, toward a more complex, cooperative, circulatory model” (p. 489). This model is demonstrated by anime fans reported by Jenkins (2006a). The fans subtitle and distribute anime for free, with an explicit message scrolling across the screen urging viewers to “cease distribution when licensed” (p. 159). These fans view their illegal copying as a promotional service for anime producers and a way to increase the visibility and therefore availability of anime in the U.S., not as a permanent and financially lucrative endeavor. The theory even provides an interesting perspective when considering producer response to fan productivity that is considered oppositional to producer interests, such as homoerotic fan fiction, or public fan criticism about a particular installment of a text. In those cases, where it is often simply a case of fan and producer perceptions of text integrity not lining up, producers must weigh the risks of protecting their brand vs. alienating their knowledge workers who so fruitfully

(and cheaply) contribute to it. It is important to remember that knowledge workers do not always take well to direct control or creativity-stifling imposition (Banks & Humphreys, in press; Terranova, 2000).

Gamers may be the ideal members of the New Organization. They will often actively labor for the games they love. These fans mod, create walkthrough, perform public relations functions, advertise, and test demos. All this labor occurs with the hope (tied to ownership and status) that it is obtaining or ensuring text integrity. It seems that game producers are becoming more reliant on such practices to build their brand and increase their product's longevity in a media-cluttered culture. *The Sims* franchise, for instance, promotes downloadable fan-created mods on its website, helping keep the game fresh for both creators and users of the custom material. The PC game *The Movies* maintains a site built both on fan-made in-game films and other fans' reviews of those films (as discussed in Banks & Humphreys, in press). Indeed, some modders have even garnered enough attention and success to be recruited into paid positions within game studios (de Peuter & Dyer-Witheford, 2005). Even non-sanctioned game mods that are never officially appropriated by producers (e.g. the *Tomb Raider* "Nude Raider" mod that allowed players to play as a naked Lara Croft), can be helpful in increasing the longevity and appeal of a game.

We can investigate the New Organizational paradigm as it relates to fandom by examining fans on Bethesda's *Fallout 3* forum. On the forum, fan interaction with producers and each other about a game that is still in progress leads to a significant amount of implicit and explicit discussion over the power and purpose of fan labor, as well as a significant amount of labor itself. All of this is wrapped up in fan wishes that the game serve as a valid installment of the text. How fans perceive their labor contribution to the game development process has been

explored more theoretically than empirically, and seldom, if ever, using the framework of the New Organization. To further understand the issue, as Taylor (2006b) argues, we must investigate exactly how fans perceive labor and leisure when relating to a text. So the question is worth asking:

RQ4: How do fans active on Bethesda's *Fallout 3* forum envision their labor contribution to the game development process?

Given that even the chat room monitors who opened Terranova's (2000) discussion of gift economy eventually got tired of giving without receiving, and eventually filed a governmental complaint against America Online, it seems safe to conclude that free labor can be a contentious issue for fans. No discussion of the New Organization I encountered envisioned that these extended members would not be compensated. Exploring how labor issues are discussed during routine interaction of fans and producers will shed light on how both parties understand the issue.

Now that I have proposed four questions surrounding fan-producer negotiation over text integrity, the following chapter will propose a methodology to investigate these questions. Chapter four will discuss the results of that investigation. Chapter five will conclude the discussion.

CHAPTER THREE

Methods

Research site

The previous chapter yielded the following research questions:

RQ1: How do fans active on Bethesda's *Fallout 3* forum perceive their level of ownership of the game series?

RQ2: How do fans and producers active on Bethesda's *Fallout 3* forum construct their status-relationship with each other?

RQ3: How do fans active on Bethesda's *Fallout 3* forum construct their status-relationship with each other?

RQ4: How do fans active on Bethesda's *Fallout 3* forum envision their labor contribution to the game development process?

When seeking to answer these questions, the official Bethesda *Fallout 3* forum is a worthy research site for several reasons. Beyond the presence of both producers and fans, the forum has other characteristics that make it an interesting site in the *Fallout*-fan scene. First, producers are readily identifiable when they post to the Bethesda forums, thanks to the Bethesda logo that appears under their screen name. Not only does this aid in data collection, it also affects interaction on the forum, allowing fans the ability to know when they are interacting with a producer and giving producer comments an air of authority. Next, it is an active forum with, as of this writing, 53,485 posts on 1,264 subjects. The threads are “rolling,” with older ones consistently falling off the site as new ones are added, so those 53,485 posts have occurred

within the six or so months prior to this study. There is also a forum on the site to discuss past games in the *Fallout* series, and Bethesda has developed other popular games (namely the *Elder Scrolls* series) with their own forums on the forum main page alongside the *Fallout 3* forum. When a forum member logs on to post, the poster logs on with the whole site, not just one game's forum. This feature affords the potential for members to post about multiple games in Bethesda's catalogue, and gives fans of Bethesda's other games a chance to interact with *Fallout* fans. Given the general distaste for Bethesda demonstrated by many *Fallout* fans, their interactions with gamers who enjoy Bethesda's products sometimes creates interesting tension as Bethesda and *TES* fans speak up in the *Fallout 3* forum. The official Bethesda *Fallout 3* forum is active and diverse enough to merit further investigation. A community with this kind of producer-fan interactivity has rarely been studied so closely

Methodology

Previous qualitative analyses of online communicative environments fall along a methodological continuum, with highly-involved ethnography at one end and purely observational discourse analysis at the other (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Both methodologies have strengths and weaknesses, and both have uses in specific situations. In the case of this study, the research questions presented and the context of the scene call for a discourse analytic method, since, as Lindlof (1995) said, "if we want to know how something is done and what it means, we have to know how it is talked about" (p. 234). Conversely, my status as a fan and familiarity with the fan community, even if I have never interacted with fans on any fansite or forum, affords me enough of a participant status to sufficiently understand and explore the discourse that is occurring.

Reading, collecting, and coding forum posts using discourse analysis is a sufficient methodology to answer the proposed research questions for several reasons. First, the issues contained in the research questions can be thoroughly investigated by examining public discourse. When negotiating ownership, status-relationship, and labor with producers and other fans, the posters on the *Fallout 3* forum do so publicly. One simply needs to be able to understand their terminology to sufficiently explore their interaction. This is where my fandom of the game series (and digital-gaming in general) is especially helpful. Second, this interaction, with almost no exceptions, revolves around the text. *Fallout 3* is the extent of the discussion, and when other topics are brought up, it is only in relation to *Fallout 3*. In fact, when posters get too personal or too far off topic in the *Fallout 3* forum, they are often asked to stop “spamming,” or acknowledge themselves that they are spamming. Last, communicative issues categorized by Lindlof and Taylor (2002) as “public problems” such as policy debates and legal controversies lend themselves to discourse analysis since “of particular interest to communication researchers is the role of discourse and other symbolic forms in the way in which conflictive issues are understood by participants and audiences” (p. 73).

Collection and Coding

The next issue to consider concerns what data to sample and how much to collect. While I am familiar with the classic qualitative data collection adage that one has enough data when information begins to get redundant, the 53,000 posts spread across 1,200 threads led me to the problem not of struggling over what to *include*, but rather what to *exclude*. As Jenkins (2006b) stated, “the problem working with the net becomes not how to attract sufficient responses to allow for adequate analysis, but how to select and process materials from the endless flow of

information and commentary” (p. 117). Instead of wading through all of the thousands of threads on the forum when it was time to begin collection and coding, I applied my specialized knowledge as a fan of the series and purposefully sampled. I have been a recreational visitor to many *Fallout* fansites and forums for years. When it came time to move beyond recreation into rigorous examination, I spent the better part of a year on both the official *Fallout 3* forum and other fansite forums, such as the ones on *NMA* and *DaC*, gaining a sense of what issues were important to fans and how the issues contained within the research questions emerged in their discourse. The threads collected and coded for this study are representative of the breadth of a complex investigation, and were chosen because of their exemplary discussions about the issues contained within my research questions.

As I collected data, I focused on threads that presented questions or opinions about the controversial changes being made to *Fallout 3*. Threads about updates to the games’ lore made by Bethesda spurred both implicit and explicit discourse over ownership, status-relationship and labor. Two previously-mentioned controversial events occurred during my time in the field and produced quite a few response threads, each one with relevant data to consider. The 10th anniversary contest (also referred to as the “perk contest”) opened on October 1, 2007, and invited fans to contribute an idea for a “perk” gameplay element, with the winning perk featured in *Fallout 3*. The Brotherhood of Steel faction profile (or the Brotherhood of Steel “developer diary”) was posted to the site on January 9, 2008, and detailed how the Brotherhood of Steel faction from *Fallout 1 & 2* reached Washington D.C. in time for *Fallout 3*. The debates around both issues produced many threads where *Fallout* fans discussed issues surrounding the research questions, so I will focus on both heavily during the Results and Discussion chapter.

Other interesting threads I collected discussed changes in game design, such as altered weapons, combat, and player-perspective. During these threads, specialized conversation over upcoming gameplay elements, such as the Vault Assisted Targeting System (VATS), occurred frequently. Some threads even dealt with research questions specifically, with one thread devoted to debating whether producers wanted fan help with the game development process and another asking if *Fallout 3* should be modable. These threads, of course, could not be ignored, and provided explicit examples of what was often occurring implicitly across the forum. Within all these threads, I paid particular attention to posts that involved direct communication between producers and fans. A pilot study using similar methods was completed in July 2007, and data collection for the primary study began in September 2007 and ran for six months until February 2008. During that time, 28 threads containing 4202 posts were collected. Table 1 details those 28 threads, their creation dates, and how many posts were in each at the time of collection (moderators on Bethesda's forums locked the threads at around 200 posts).

When it came to coding, I tried to be mindful of Van Dijk's (1997) maxim that "discourse studies are about *talk and text in context*" (p. 3, original emphasis) and let it guide my investigation. Most fundamentally, I used pattern recognition in order to uncover structure and normative rules within mundane interaction (Tracy, 2001; Van Dijk, 1997). Investigating these patterns, as well as deviant cases, helped provide the broadest sense of how *Fallout* fans and producers structured their interaction with each other. The most basic categorization I used divided threads and posts by how posters addressed (either implicitly or explicitly) the four research questions. So my four primary research areas became the four primary categories for classifying and analyzing data. Even though this could have led to missing valuable data that lay outside of these categories, I am confident I collected enough pertinent data to more than offset

Table 1: Threads collected and coded

Thread title (description)	Date	Posts
So you want weapons, eh?	09/08/07	201
Official fan interview (Todd Howard answers pre-selected fan questions in a closed thread)	09/14/07	1
My view on <i>Fallout 3</i>	09/17/07	82
Will I be able to play <i>Fallout 3</i> if I have no FPS skills?	09/24/07	141
A comment/suggestion for Emil Pagliarulo	09/25/07	83
<i>Fallout</i> 10th anniversary contest 1 (first thread discussing perk contest)	10/01/07	198
What I fear the most about <i>Fallout 3</i>	10/03/07	161
<i>Fallout</i> 10th anniversary contest 2 (second thread discussing perk contest)	10/05/07	204
What's this? (A link to screenshots from <i>Fallout 3</i> and subsequent discussion)	10/14/07	111
<i>Fallout 3</i> conversation (post of NMA interview between Brother None and Pro-Bethesda fan)	10/19/07	188
<i>Fallout</i> 10th anniversary contest 3 (third thread discussing perk contest)	10/20/07	205
My ideas about Bethesda have completely changed (closed for flaming)	10/21/07	7
Community wish list (things fans would like to see in <i>Fallout 3</i>)	11/11/07	201
Your thoughts on the winning perk	11/20/07	198
Your funny perk entries	11/27/07	42
What will it take for you to buy <i>Fallout 3</i> ?	11/28/07	205
Interplay vs. Bethesda	12/07/07	141
Does it matter to you if the devs play the originals?	12/16/07	87
What needs to be in the game to have that “ <i>Fallout</i> ” feeling?	12/18/07	69
Horrors of past and upcoming events	12/20/07	161
Why is this game going to be bad?	01/02/08	198
New diary today (Bethesda introducing the Brotherhood of Steel faction profile)	01/09/08	201
What the Brotherhood of Steel really is	01/09/08	201
<i>Fallout 3</i> : Need help? (discussion on whether producers want fan help during development)	01/14/08	149
Modability and new content	01/16/08	165
The new Brotherhood	01/27/08	201
Interview with Todd (link to an interview with Todd Howard and subsequent discussion)	02/18/08	200
I just know it... (discussion over whether game will be bad)	02/20/08	201

this shortcoming and sufficiently answer the research questions proposed above. Without making such a sacrifice, choosing depth over breadth, the scope of the study would have been insurmountable.

From there I looked at each issue more in-depth, using Van Dijk’s (1997) three main dimensions of discourse- language use, cognition, and interaction- as a basis. In doing so, I went beyond what was being said and began to investigate how it was being said. Since this investigation was of digitally-mediated discourse, I used Herring’s (2001) thoughts on computer-mediated communication as a guide, treating the interaction as informal, rather than formally

written communication, and paying close attention to how multiple participants interacted simultaneously in a permanent and public setting. At the most minute level, I focused on the form, order, style, rhetoric, and context of the discourse surrounding the research questions (Van Dijk, 1997), and catalogued what these factors revealed about the relationship among fans and producers.

Since this discourse analysis was of online text, I also paid considerable attention to the linguistic structure of the posts, observing more than just the language used (Herring, 2001). I looked for intentional manipulations of standard letters, words, and characters. For instance a custom on the *Fallout 3* forum is to call the game “*Fallout: BoS*” “*Fallout: PoS*” [piece of shit] as a comment on its quality. Also, the use of “leetspeak” hacker spelling and syntax is often used to mock the younger generation of gamers who are believed to use the communication form seriously. Furthermore, I considered how previous posters were quoted within posts (something quite common), since as Herring (2001) has pointed out, “quoting creates the illusion of adjacency, in that it incorporates and juxtaposes (portions of) two turns- an initiation and a response- within a single message” (p. 620). This attention helped me begin to understand in what ways posters categorized the other participants in their discussion. Last, out of respect to the semiotic importance of visual signifiers (e.g., see Ruby’s 1996 discussion of visual anthropology), I focused on any visual symbols (e.g., emoticons, avatars, etc.) contained or linked to in the posts. By grounding the analysis in this sort of rigorous methodology, I believe the study is heuristically sound and furthers the conversation around fan-producer negotiation over text integrity.

Armed with a swath of interesting data and diverse research questions that each spoke to different aspects of fan-producer interaction, when I began to code data, I assumed the process

would be as cut and dry as matching up posts to points one-to-one. Some posts would speak of ownership, others of status-relationship, and others of labor. From there, it would be a matter of highlighting the most exemplary of each and simply and straightforwardly answering each research question, proposing how it may be appropriately studied in the future. That's what I assumed at least. Fortunately for me, the process became much more messy, yielding conclusions that are much more sound. As I read through post after post, it became clear that there were very few (if any) posts that, when they dealt with one of the issues found in my research questions, did not deal with at least one other. For instance, at the most basic level, every post where two fans interacted about say, a labor issue, still contained two fans interacting, and therefore could provide useful insights into fan-to-fan status-relationship. Or let's say that fans fiercely debated about whether producers would listen to the perk suggestions they had labored to create in an effort to feel like they had some control over the text they esteemed. Which of the four issues would such an interaction *not* touch on? So while at their most fundamental level, my categories centered on the four research questions proposed, the field is often much more ambiguous than our categories. Coding revealed that these issues do not operate autonomously. While the Results and Discussion chapter will address each research question as its own category for organizational ease and to clearly answer the questions proposed, the final chapter will attempt to address the overlap.

Ethical considerations

Given that my research was a discourse analysis of public forum posts that required no log-in or password to access and read, I offered no informed consent to the creators of those posts. There were several reasons for this decision, many of which were guided by the ethical

considerations of the Association of Internet Researchers (Ess and the AoIR ethics working committee, 2002). First, the public nature of the forum leads to a diminished need for sensitivity, as information posted is readily available to anyone who wishes to view it, and anyone with internet access is allowed to create a membership and post without screening or scrutiny. Second, the recreational and public nature of the conversation contained within the posts suggests that members would be subjected to no harm if their comments were recorded and published. Last, members already post using pseudonymous screen names, providing an extra layer of anonymity. I do not even include those pseudonyms in this study, except the ones of Bethesda employees, who are acting in an official capacity when they post. The *Fallout 3* forum is a public outlet for public debate over public issues.

Also, as posts are quoted in the Results and Discussion chapter, their grammar, syntax, and spelling are corrected to basic English standards. In all quotes included, this was merely a cosmetic process, and no interpretation of meaning on my part ever occurred. For the most part, these quotes only required minimal window dressing. Through this correction, I set out to increase understandability and limit preconceptions about intelligence that may distract from the meaning behind the mistakes, especially since many of the fans quoted below are most likely non-native English speakers.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results and Discussion

Ownership

RQ1: How do fans active on Bethesda's *Fallout 3* forum perceive their level of ownership of the game series?

Most fundamentally, fans on the official *Fallout 3* forum recognized that the text they esteem was not theirs to control. It may have been theirs for a time, when Black Isle and Interplay had given up on it, and the hopes of *Van Buren* actually coming out were slim, when only mods and the famous (and still ongoing) *Fan Made Fallout* fan-sequel project could be anticipated. But as Bethesda announced their plans for *Fallout 3*, it became evident to many fans that the text they loved so well had fallen out of their hands. They could only wait, pensive and skeptical about the new direction *Fallout* would go. One fan used a hypothetical submission to the 10th anniversary perk contest to explain the plight of being a *Fallout* fan in *Fallout* terms (parentheses contain thread title and post number):

“Old Fallout Fan:” Living year after year in Fallout droughtiness has honed your patience but embittered your heart. You gain +25 to Survival, +1 to Endurance, but -1 to Charisma (“10th anniversary contest 1,” post 78).

So, beleaguered, powerless, and bitter, the fans continued to soldier on, resigned to the fact that they could not really do much to alter game they loved so well. *Fallout* fans did not seem to

agree with much previous fan literature, as they did not perceive the age of the active audience as one of democratization. It was Bethesda who was changing things (such as altering the Brotherhood of Steel faction). One fan remarked that by the end of a hypothetical *Fallout 4*, the Brotherhood of Steel will be all Bethesda's, remembered as they want it to be, not as it is in the eyes of current fans. Many of the comments on the forum reflected the opinions of fan opinion-leader Brother None as he was interviewed for *The Escapist*. The consensus of many fans was that Bethesda was "rebranding" *Fallout*, robbing it of its very heart right under the fans' noses:

Now, after reading this diary, I feel even more fear that my beloved franchise will end up pathos and epic. Recent design is just not like it should be imo. Sorry, Bethesda ("New diary today," post 172).

About the last thing hardcore fans have in mind is how to make money. Hence, about the last thing the producers and devs have in mind is giving hardcore fans any kind of power to influence the development of a product ("Fallout 3: Need help?," post 131).

The point is moot. The train has already left the station. They never had any intention of maintaining fidelity to the basic principles of Fallout. Fallout, an RPG that went back-to-basics when everyone else was selling out, a game that's main influence was PnP RPGs. They like the setting and want to jam it into the Oblivion cookie cutter mold to make more money ("Fallout 3: Need help?," post 18).

A fan-generated poll in the “*Fallout 3*: Need help?” thread asked if hardcore fans could influence game development process. The straw poll found that only 18 of 123 respondents said “yes.” 11 said “I don’t know,” 46 said “no,” and 48 said “I hope so.” The vast majority of posters in the thread were clear on one point: that fans were not the ones who decided whether they had any ownership of the series. It was the producers who could grant or withhold such a privilege. Fan perceptions of influence over text integrity were clear on this point:

Beth, for better or worse, has its own ideas and direction on how this game will develop. Let’s be realistic guys. Posts on a forum are not going to influence this direction. The best any of us can hope to do is come up with some relatively minor detail Beth overlooked that they deem worthy to throw in...like the option to turn off health bars or something (“Fallout 3: Need help?,” post 88).

Now, not every fan active on the *Fallout 3* forum felt that Bethesda was doing a poor job at producing the game. But even with these negative cases, a consistent pattern emerged. Whether coming from a pro- or anti-producer perspective, most fans used “they” and “you” language when referring to *Fallout 3* and Bethesda, indicating that what “they” were doing and what “they” planned for the game was out of fan control. Bethesda was the “other” who owned the game. Fans were the distanced and marginalized, who did not have the influence to alter the course of the game, save for the tactics of the poacher or protester. Several examples illustrate this perception:

They decided to do Oblivion with guns, instead of doing Fallout 3. Terrible decision in my opinion. In every aspect (“Fallout 3: Need help?,” post 8).

They seriously need to hire some writers who know what the [censored] they’re doing (“What will it take for you to buy Fallout 3?,” post 15).

This is an RPG with a history and lore of several centuries, so it’s important that their writers take some time to clear up all the missing info and previous contradictions in Fallout lore so that we can enjoy Fallout 3 (“What the Brotherhood of Steel really is,” post 139).

You tell me it’s Fallout it better damn be Fallout. Man false advertisement is illegal (“What I fear the most about Fallout 3,” post 21).

Producers were others who were spoken of as if they had the right to “give” and “take away” from fans. For example, in the case of the 10th anniversary contest, several fans thanked Bethesda just for the opportunity to participate, and one fan commented that it was “really cool and a great way to reward the *Fallout* loyalists.” Bethesda was the one who could change the text. Bethesda was the one who controlled official canon. The very fact that they had chosen the name *Fallout 3* for the game communicated as much. Several fans indicated that they would have been less displeased with Bethesda making yet another non-canon *Fallout* spin-off, but a name like *Fallout 3* came with an air of canon, and therefore would be harder to disavow, even if inferior. Many fans ended up using language about washing their hands of the situation when

speaking about the game. This allowed fans to distance themselves from Bethesda's interpretation of *Fallout*, and couch their language in disinterest or apathy, as the posters below did (the first one doing so even as he/she submitted perk ideas to the contest):

I leave it to Bethesda to figure out the stats and mechanics of these perks ("10th anniversary contest 1," post 88).

Not that I care overly much, it is just one perk. I'll acknowledge that. But, as I stated once before, the winner and runner ups do speak a lot to me about the tastes of the developers ("Your thoughts on the winning perk," post 88).

The *Fallout 3* situation adds an interesting twist to this ownership struggle, however. In the case of *Fallout 3*, even if fans believed that the game wasn't theirs to control or alter, they weren't quite sure that it was Bethesda's either. There were more than a few accusations that Bethesda hijacked intellectual property from Interplay and Black Isle, the text's true owners:

Bethesda bought a piece of paper that allows them to do whatever they want and say it's justified ("What the Brotherhood of Steel really is," post 16).

"But doesn't that change the continuity of the originals?"

"Hello? We have the IP now. We can do anything we want!" ("My view on Fallout 3," post 8).

The name says Fallout 3, but the PR says, to an astonishing degree, that “we’re doing things our own way. This baby’s ours now, the past be damned” (“What will it take for you to buy Fallout 3?,” post 29).

To many fans, this was the heart of the complaint about rebranding. The text was not Bethesda’s to rebrand, and many felt that Bethesda was not rebranding it well. Bethesda’s chosen perk winner in the 10th anniversary contest was mostly viewed as unsatisfactory, since it lacked either trademark *Fallout* humor or a way to be implemented without negatively altering gameplay. Their vision of the Brotherhood of Steel was also considered invalid, thought to be either high-fantasy influenced like *Oblivion*, or following the simplistic narratives of *Tactics* and *Brotherhood of Steel*. This is an especially damning charge since *Fallout* fans treated an invalidation of the established truth of the text with the utmost of contempt. As Baym (2000) said of soap fans dealing with the same re-negotiation of canon: “one flaw that is rarely funny is violation of the truth of the fiction established through prior shows” (p. 99). Many fans objected to the alteration of the truth of the fiction by Bethesda:

Hey, howabout a gun that you can shoot at the game to make it a real RPG!?!?!?! (“So you want weapons, eh?,” post 89).

They’re not fans of what Fallout stood for. They’re making a cult game into a vapid mainstream fare. Fallout was the total antithesis to what Bethesda does now. Making Fallout into an action game with stats would make it a total anathema to what it stood for. Big fans my tookus (“Fallout 3: Need help?,” post 18).

One fan altered his/her signature, parodying the slogan of the first two games, “*Fallout*: A Post-Nuclear Role Playing Game,” to comment on all the alterations that were occurring. The poster altered the slogan to read “Fallout 3: A ~~Post~~ Nukular **Action** Role Playing Game.” The satire is telling. The word “post” is removed and only “nuclear” remains, thanks probably to all the explosions and nuclear cars purported to be in *Fallout 3*. “Nuclear” is misspelled in a manner fitting a dumbed-down game. “Action” is added in bold, reflecting the feared tone of *Fallout 3*. The consensus among the skeptical seemed clear. Despite the best of fan efforts, *Fallout 3* was being hijacked by a company that knew and cared little about its heart. This position is articulated expertly below:

Even before Bethesda was in the picture, NMA, DaC, and the Codex have a long consistent history of clearly stating what they expect a sequel to be. Years. And years. Consistently. The blueprint was there as laid out by the original devs, and the flame kept lit by the faithful. It's Bethesda who has usurped ownership and is imposing its changes based on its (commercially) successful yet shallow formula. Duck and Cover, NMA, Codex, they've never changed their tune. Their vitriol is only in response to Bethesda's negligence (“Fallout 3: Need help?,” post 100).

But this feeling of powerlessness- despite entitlement- is not the whole story of the ownership issue on the *Fallout 3* forum. Because of this perception of being hijacked, perhaps, indications of implicit ownership were prevalent among fans. It was a type of ownership that said “even though I can’t control the destiny of this text, I certainly have the right to tell you all about how it should go.” Many fans were near-parental in their suggestions for Bethesda, offering

tidbits on how they would create the text if indeed they could. Immense detail and full threads were devoted to everything from the in-game radio to weapons to combat to character creation. Perks suggestions, both before and after the contest (including the ubiquitous claim that “mine should have won”), indicated a feeling of implicit ownership. The Brotherhood of Steel faction profile posted to the official site prompted a myriad of “it should have gone like this,” or “why didn’t this happen?” suggestions to correct Bethesda’s choices. The response was so strong, in fact, that the fansite *NMA* ran a contest inviting fans to write their own accounts of how the Brotherhood of Steel made it to the east coast and what they were doing there. Fans quoted descriptions from a popular *Fallout* fan wiki site, called *The Vault* (<http://fallout.wikia.com>; “The Vault,” n.d.) to argue what the Brotherhood really should be, countering what Bethesda proposed about them. Administrators for *The Vault* took it upon themselves to determine the name for the Washington D.C. branch of the Brotherhood of Steel as these two consecutive posts below indicate (though it is interesting that they did so only after they sought the permission of the game’s true owners, Bethesda):

Capital Wasteland Brotherhood of Steel seems preferable though, don’t you think?

(“What the Brotherhood of Steel really is,” post 108).

Yeah, at least from the in-universe perspective (“What the Brotherhood of Steel really is,” post 109).

One poster implied that fans had the right to pirate the game to test its mettle before giving Bethesda money. Another said he/she would just play the game as he/she saw fit (thanks to the

emergent nature of digital gaming), regardless of Bethesda's decisions or what was canon. To that poster, what Bethesda thought of the Brotherhood of Steel didn't really matter once the game disc began to spin:

At the end of the day, my frustrations aside, I guess I don't care. I will kill the Brotherhood soldiers at every opportunity, as the splinter group is a do-gooder "knightly" police force, and the original Brotherhood was a group of xenophobic racist zealot dictators. I've got a hot .45 slug ready for each and every one of 'em. DEATH TO THE BROTHERHOOD OF STEEL ("What the Brotherhood of Steel really is," post 181).

Another poster responded definitively when someone claimed that no one would even be talking about *Fallout* if it wasn't for Bethesda buying the license and producing another game:

Here maybe. But some of us haven't ever stopped talking about it, and would still be doing so regardless ("*Fallout 3: Need help?*," post 55).

Furthermore, the wide array of screen names, avatars, art, and so on dealing with the *Fallout* universe to be found on the forum all implicitly communicated fan experience and expertise to producers as they advocated their implicit ownership of the text. All in all, the situation was something of a paradox: powerless fans attempting to exert control over a text that they did not own, but they knew in their heart was truly theirs. This was the ownership struggle of the *Fallout* fan.

Despite this norm of implicit ownership, there did exist a bit of schism as to whether fans *should* be in control of the text, even if they could. There were those who said that fans didn't have the right or ability to make any decisions for the game (as the poster directly below did when speaking about *The Vault* wiki site):

What I'm saying is that you can't really consider it canon. Not when anyone can put anything in it (something that would make canon a matter of majority rule, not a matter of the intentions of the games' creators) ("What the Brotherhood of Steel really is," post 48).

I greatly object to "hardcore fans" being in charge of a game's developments, because hardcore fans are opinionated pricks, plus a lot of people just don't have a clue...hardcore fans shouldn't assume they know better than everyone else ("Fallout 3: Need help?," post 48).

Still others didn't mind at all that the text was out of their hands:

I've accepted the fact that Bethesda has the rights to make this game. I've accepted the fact that it's probably our only chance to get a Fallout 3. I've accepted the fact that no matter how much I sit at home in front of my computer and complain about what they're doing I can't do anything about it. And I've accepted the fact that it might be a great game anyway, so there's no reason to complain ("My view on Fallout 3," post 20).

As these negative cases demonstrate, no matter what they thought about this implicit ownership, fans recognized that since they were outsiders, any control over text integrity could only come through indirect suggestion, poaching, or from what was ceded by producers. Fans could play with the threads centering on perk ideas for fun all they wanted, fudging on official contest rules for the sake of showing off expertise, making inside jokes, or playing with the text (e.g. coming up with perks that have a negative consequence as well, turning them from perks to what *Fallout* calls “traits”). However when these fans actually were serious about submitting a perk to be used within the game, they were deeply interested in Bethesda’s wishes. Clarifications from producers in the threads referred to official contest rules, indicating that fans were only allowed to officially operate within the parameters set up by Bethesda. Indicative of this marginalization and inability to directly influence producers was the “I hope” language many fans used when contemplating various game factors (in the first example, Lyons is a member of the Brotherhood of Steel mentioned in the faction profile):

There might be a little twist with BoS HQ playing along with what Lyons does. Hope so anyway (“What the Brotherhood of Steel really is,” post 35).

As for writing...One can only cross one’s fingers (“What will it take for you to buy *Fallout 3?*,” post 22).

I pray FO3 will not feature a jumping button (“10th anniversary contest 1,” post 112).

It also seems somewhat lame to me. I was hoping they would pick something funny and creative that fit more with Fallout's original perks ("Your thoughts on the winning perk," post 16).

One fan spoke to this feeling of marginal influence explicitly while instructing another fan to avoid being negative when suggesting things to Bethesda:

Just make suggestions about what you consider would make the game better. Avoid insulting Bethesda or trying to lay blame or whatever, just lay out your thoughts in a clear and well thought-out manner. If they like your idea, then they might implement it in some form or another. If they don't like it then they won't ("Fallout 3: Need help?," post 10).

When seeking to understand exactly *how* fans active on the official *Fallout 3* forum acted on their feelings of implicit ownership, the criticism and creativity tactics cited in the literature provide an excellent classification system. Through these tactics, fans, working from the de-facto position of outsider, made their boldest and most direct claims to implicit ownership of the text. On the *Fallout 3* forum, creativity was everywhere, as fans responded to and expanded on the information they were receiving from Bethesda. The various weapons ideas, perk ideas, and adjustments to the Brotherhood of Steel narrative became the realm of fans, who produced as much out of pure recreation as official obligation. As fans posted their imaginative ideas for what the game could be, they were clear that they were not concerned about the annoying specifics of how these ideas would be implemented. For instance, the 10th anniversary contest threads went

well past the contest deadline and the announced winners. Fans continued to submit perks, many of them twisting the rules of what a perk officially could be, as far as the contest was concerned. They included anti-perks (negative effects a character might obtain), traits (starting characteristics that often have a positive and negative character consequence), and complex histories and descriptions. When one fan called others on their impropriety in the eyes of the contest rules, the response was quick:

It's probably a bad thing as they are not straight perks. Still, makes 'em more interesting to read here 📖 (“10th anniversary contest 1,” post 162).

The underlying message was this: “the game isn’t ours but this thread is.” One member listed 22 of his/her perk ideas in a thread that began after the contest was over. The same occurred in response to the Brotherhood of Steel faction profile as fans wrote up their own accounts of how the faction got to the east coast in their version of the *Fallout* universe (and many of those probably submitted their ideas to *NMA*’s contest asking for such accounts). One member even re-wrote and posted Lead Designer Emil Pagliarulo’s intro to the Brotherhood of Steel faction profile and invited fans to critique it. And like other modders studied before them, those who advocated modding *Fallout* did so to produce a variant of the game they could enjoy, even if they could not enjoy the official text:

Modding is ESSENTIAL, simply because then, when they ruin the game with relative-leveled monsters like they did with Oblivion, the fans can fix it (“Modability and new content,” post 64).

Through all this, fans produced for their own implicit ownership, not for official inclusion. In short, they poached. They knew the official text was not theirs, but that did not mean their own unique variations of the text's universe could not be theirs.

However, many fans seemed to understand that their creative manipulations of the text were unofficial and therefore inferior, agreeing with Tushnet's (2007) counterintuitive findings about fan empowerment in the age of the active audience. Fans as a whole were interested in influencing the official text more than they were in altering after its release date. Since they were marginalized outsiders, criticism was the only method available to achieve that goal. If fans were unsure about their ownership status, they were certain criticism was one of their primary roles. One fan articulated as much, declaring to producers that, "it's up to players to pass judgment." And in this function was their most direct power. As many fans pointed out, they were the ones who got to call out producer inconsistencies, and ultimately decide whether or not to buy game, even if they did not get to help create it:

Don't buy games that suck. Otherwise, expect more of the same since by subsidizing them, you're encouraging more of the same ("What will it take for you to buy *Fallout 3?*," post 90).

If I am going to spend good money on a game with "FALLOUT" in the title, it better be good! Because if it sucks, I will be all over this forum with comments about how I got screwed over...YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED!!!!!! ("What will it take for you to buy *Fallout 3?*," post 71).

Fans often raised their voices against the transgressions they were otherwise powerless to alter. One fan posted a link in his/her signature to an extremely harsh editorial cartoon (Figure 1) that featured *Fallout*'s iconic "Vault Boy" logo-character being ridden to death by a slew of impurities, with the diminutive figure of Executive Producer Todd Howard at the helm. Several signatures contained criticism of Bethesda (such as the take on *Fallout*'s slogan mentioned earlier).

Figure 1: Critical fan art



Criticism also, of course, existed within fans' posts, like this fan who proposed a perk that would fix the errors Bethesda was making as they developed the game:

"Retro Boy Perk:" Level 1. Choosing this perk allows you to play whole game from beginning to end in turn based mode with isometric view and story comparable to the ones in original Fallouts. Perk is available only on PC version of the game ("10th anniversary contest 1," post 134).

Or this one, in which a fan altered a quote from the cult-hit show *Futurama* to express dismay with Bethesda's version of *Fallout*:

Kittens give Morbo gas. In lighter news, the Wasteland is doomed. Blame rests with known human Todd Howard and his tiny, inferior brain ("Your thoughts on the winning perk," post 3).

Many used criticism to express their dismay at how little they could actually do to save *Fallout*, harkening back to their powerlessness, as this fan did in a post addressed directly to producers:

And who cares about the stupid anniversary. Fallout is dead. I suggest you place this games' rights in a safe and never open it again. Go dig up a hole somewhere and toss the darn thing in it so we can all get on with our lives ("10th anniversary contest 1," post 25).

Antifandom (Gray, 2003, 2005; Theodropoulou, 2007) seemed to be part of this critical function. The very idea of a console RPG seemed so impure to many skeptical fans, that consoles and a good *Fallout* game could not co-exist (much like the de-facto antifandom of Theodropoulou, 2007). As Gray (2003) stated, “of course, fans can become anti-fans of a sort when an episode or part of a text is perceived as harming a text as a whole” (p. 73). This is exactly what has lead to most of the fan criticism about *Fallout 3*. However, not all criticism involved disparaging critiques. Some was very level-headed:

I really liked the faction profile. One minor thing that troubles me- how would the east coast Brotherhood have communicated with the west coast brotherhood? (“New diary today,” post 15).

Even so, the goals of such criticism remained consistent. The integrity of the official text and implicit ownership of that text were paramount ends.

In general, forum-posting was serious business to many *Fallout* fans. Or at least it had important goals, even though many fans felt that they were too small to successfully affect any deep change. After all, their wants, as they perceived the situation, were in direct opposition to what would make the game profitable and appealing to a mass audience. However, they soldiered on for the sake of the text they loved. Some did so with near-parental concern, others with beleaguered hopelessness, fewer still with confident anticipation that Bethesda would honor their wishes and create a text with integrity. All tactics communicated indirect influence at best and marginalization at worst. This is the final answer to the ownership question, and a surprising one given much previous literature. *Fallout* fans recognized that *Fallout* was not theirs and that

any influence over its destiny had to be poached or ceded by producers. Fans used creativity to alter the text unofficially and criticism to attempt to alter it officially. The two functions were not perceived equally though. In all, the most attention and the most esteem, was placed on criticism, as the integrity of the official text became the central issue in many debates. Despite diverse opinions about whether *Fallout 3* could be saved by fans, most fans felt obligated to try. This was how they would own a piece of the game:

But because of people like us on the forums stating our opinions over and over, it pushes the company to actually develop the game the way the gamers want it to be and not the devs way. Of course they could just go the devs way but at least we would have tried to save the franchise (“What I fear the most about *Fallout 3*,” post 32).

I don’t know if there is a preceding moment in the history of game development when base fans could have changed the course of how a particular game was made (“*Fallout 3*: Need help?,” post 1).

*I feel no animosity toward the company. Just a *Fallout* fan, interested in how the game turns out, which is why I’ll continue to post on these boards till release* (“My view on *Fallout 3*,” post 4).

*Fallout 3 MUST be like *Fallout*...the best answer for every question on this forum besides “I have the holy sacred duty to watch over my beloved game”* (“What will it take for you to buy *Fallout 3*?,” post 1).

Fan-to-producer status-relationship

RQ2: How do fans and producers active on Bethesda's *Fallout 3* forum construct their status-relationship with each other?

As I attempted to answer this research question, I realized it contained two unique and equally important components. Fans and producers are two distinct entities with two distinct perspectives and often diverse goals. Each party initiates communication with the other for different reasons, and therefore each party in the relationship must be considered individually. Therefore, research question two will be discussed in two sections. This section will investigate fan-to-producer status-relationship, exploring why and how *Fallout* fans interacted with producers, and how fans perceived the status-relationship between the two. The second section will investigate producer-to-fan status-relationship, exploring why and how *Fallout* producers interacted with fans, and how producers perceived the status-relationship between the two. By doing so, I hope to obtain a more complete examination of the status-relationship between fans and producers as they negotiate text integrity from diverse perspectives.

Fan-to-producer status-relationship is largely tied to one simple fact: that fans must approach producers as outsiders that can only indirectly influence their decisions. The marginalized ownership status *Fallout* fans felt led to a perception of marginalized status-relationship. While reactions to this marginalization were diverse, it was the norm that defined how fans constructed their status-relationship with producers. For instance, this fan speaks of being a lobbyist only indirectly relating to a more powerful Bethesda:

It's for reasons like this that I have been lobbying the guys at Beth to add more features to the VATS queue system ("Will I be able to play Fallout 3 if I have no FPS skills?," post 14).

Likewise, the following fan was only able to request that *Fallout 3* ship with a construction set (software that ships with the game that facilitates modding, CS) and could only offer fan respect as leverage:

How about the knowledge that the community as a whole admires and respects the development team for including a CS? ("Modability and new content," post 159).

Even though the 10th anniversary contest had people's spirits up while it lasted, after it was over most fans agreed with Andrejevic's (2008) findings about perceptions of fan influence over producer behavior. Many commented that their interests had been marginalized in the face of more pressing producer concerns, such as profit and brand longevity. Many fans even explicitly labeled themselves as outsiders, as one poster did, when reworking text from the Brotherhood of Steel faction profile to apply to fans who had been ousted in the name of progression:

The diary also felt like a repudiation of "old Fallout" in favor of "new Fallout"...The idea of the BOS is that dissenters are adhering to what they see as the BOS's core values (like the Fallout "hardcore" with Fallout), but have been outcast...so nobody likes them, just like the Fallout hardcore, both just as misguided as each other ("New diary today," post 126).

So much like lobbyists, fans on the *Fallout 3* forum could only use indirect means to advocate text integrity. Thanks probably to a feeling of implicit ownership and entitlement, many fans on the forum advocated nonetheless. *Fallout* fans used many diverse methods to advocate text integrity to Bethesda. Methods of advocacy I observed on the official *Fallout 3* forum took several forms, with situational and individual differences leading to different ways of interacting with Bethesda. I found four advocacy tactics during my time investigating the forum. In consular/managerial posts, like the first term (borrowed from language rooted in foreign diplomacy) would suggest, fans drew on their expertise or authority as opinion leaders to attempt to influence producer actions. This ranged from non-directive to directive counsel. Antagonistic/adversarial posts set Bethesda and fans in opposition, with fans disparaging Bethesda's ability to produce a quality game. Cynical/jaded posters were evidently so discouraged about the possibility of *Fallout 3* having any integrity that they saw no hope for the situation at all. Deferential/respectful posts deferred to Bethesda to produce *Fallout* or showed confidence in their decisions. Each way of interacting with Bethesda demonstrated a different side of the complex status-relationship between producers and fans. I will give examples for each of these four methods of advocacy below.

Consular/managerial methods of advocacy often resembled watch-dog journalism. They quoted Bethesda's previous statements heavily, keeping detailed account of what producers had and had not promised. They tended to give advice to developers about past mistakes and future opportunities:

I think we should all get stickers. It would be good for PR and take the sting away of not winning ("10th anniversary contest 3," post 71).

I find it amazing that such creative minds can't conceive of a way to balance this perk. Seriously, they could just make it so it only restores a portion of your AP ("Your thoughts on the winning perk," post 66).

To me (and this is just me mind) a sequel should build on the foundations of the games before it, not radically change it...Why bother calling it FO3 if you're going to throw out all the gameplay elements...Be honest and say "we have changed most of the gameplay so this is really a whole new series." I would have accepted that rather than being told "we know what makes a good FO game better than those who play it at least once a year" ("What will it take for you to buy Fallout 3?," post 194).

I'm guessing IF there's to be a CS for Fallout 3 released (someday) we'd be able to make up our own perks, right? That would be a really useful feature 🗝️🔑🔒 ("Your thoughts on the winning perk," post 189).

The plasma pistol looks too steampunk...don't like it at all...The underarmor, the scribe, and elder look too fantasy-futuristic instead of retro-futuristic...The overall style of the text is not to my liking. It has an epic/fantasy subtext to it. I'd like a more cold approach, more like a report...More 50's retro, pulp in the design ("New diary today," post 27).

The whole thing really needs a couple of writers to sit down and fill these gaping holes to become at least semi-believable ("What the Brotherhood of Steel really is," post 76).

And for some more prestigious fans, the consular/managerial role was even more entrenched. Fan opinion-leader, Brother None, indicated as much about himself when asked what it would take for him to buy *Fallout 3*:

Buy it? I assume I'll get a review copy 🗨️ (“What will it take for you to buy *Fallout 3*?,” post 5).

Consular/managerial posts seemed to be most related to the criticism ownership function discussed above and indicated that fans felt they deserved status in the eyes of producers, even if they did not receive it.

Antagonistic/adversarial methods of advocacy received many flame warnings, and many were attacks on Bethesda itself. Most seemed to come from a place of anger and hopelessness:

Yes...I'm a Bethesda basher, got a problem with it? (“So you want weapons, eh?,” post 27).

The best gun is: Bethesda itself! It kills the Fallout fan base and every single fan with one single shot (“So you want weapons, eh?,” post 97).

I'd buy Fallout 3 if, instead of being the heavily Oblivion-influenced sequel to FO:BOS that nobody in the known universe has ever asked for, it was in fact the actual Fallout 3, Van Buren, completed with the original design team as consultants while Todd Howard

was safely distracted by a copy of Juggs in the janitorial closet (“What will it take for you to buy Fallout 3?,” post 2).

Hey, that’s not a bad simile. Bethesda is McDonalds, selling a lot of a mediocre quality product, thanks to good marketing skills, while only starving people actually find it really tasting good. The starving people in this case being people who haven’t enjoyed a real RPG or are incapable of doing so due to personality issues (“What will it take for you to buy Fallout 3?,” post 53).

What you’re witnessing with Fallout it the mainstream consolification of a PC RPG into violent shiny console FPS “RPG” #539 (“What will it take for you to buy Fallout 3?,” post 90).

No, Emil...You have completely and totally mistaken the window dressing for the actual content, or to put it another way, jawdroppingly missed the forest for the trees. But, really, that’s just par for the course. High five! (“New diary today,” post 100).

Seriously...Please Bethesda, are you even trying? What the hell? (“What the Brotherhood of Steel really is,” post 1).

The anger shown in these posts indicates than many fans were not content to merely adapt an inferior text to suit their needs, but wanted the official text to have the integrity they felt it deserved, a counterintuitive idea given how accessible mods are to game fans. In

antagonistic/adversarial posts, fans seemed to communicate that producers were not giving their opinions over text integrity the status they deserved, leading to the hostility.

Perhaps because they were so deeply tied to feelings of marginalization, posts that were cynical/jaded when dealing with producers were prevalent even in the midst of posts using other methods of advocacy. They were unique in the fact that they were almost anti-advocacy, or perhaps attempts at a reverse-psychology form of advocacy. In any case, they centered on fans feeling small and ignored by Bethesda, and therefore often concluded that nothing could be done to influence producers' interaction with fans, let alone their decisions regarding the game (while still posting on a forum Bethesda employees were active on):

Also, just wondering, I vaguely remember them saying there would be about 100 randomly chosen winners, but I only see a small handful, a dozen at the most. Am I mistaken, or was this something that got changed at the last minute so that they wouldn't have to give out a few extra hats and shirts to fans? ("Your thoughts on the winning perk," post 93).

This board is tiny. The people that actually come here aren't even close to 5% of the target audience. We're practically nothing ("Your thoughts on the winning perk," post 149).

I've tried to find the threads, but couldn't. I messaged Gstaff about it, but I assume they just got deleted, which is a shame ("10th anniversary contest 1," post 7).

And I seem to recall reading somewhere that Bethesda said they would not use non-canon material in the development of FO3 (“New diary today,” post 72).

That smacks more of opportunism in my view, which is to say, dishonesty (“What will it take for you to buy Fallout 3?,” post 29).

So the “Oblivianisation” of Fallout has begun...Bethesda, Bethesda never changes 🤖
(“What the Brotherhood of Steel really is,” post 200).

Even in apparent jokes, this attitude of smallness in the eyes of plotting producers could manifest itself (like when one fan demanded a ballot count of perk winners, or when this fan posted a satirical perk submission):

“Fallout Fan Skeptic.” You don’t get excited easily nor been tempted by the Sirens’ call. You are stubborn and rusty like an old billy-goat. You gain +1 to Intelligences but -1 to Agility (“10th anniversary contest 1,” post 78).

The term “PR stunt” came up often when discussing the 10th anniversary contest, and variations of the term “cynic” come up often as well, used by fans to openly question Bethesda’s motives and concerns based on their perceptions of past behavior by the game studio. Cynical/jaded posters responded to repeated marginalization not by confronting Bethesda as those who used antagonistic/adversarial methods did, but by retreating.

Deferential/respectful methods of advocacy were rarer, but still could be found, and they seemed to roughly correlate to the explicitness of the interaction with producers, or with whether fans needed something specific from producers. So fans who were engaged in fairly detailed conversations with producers or fans waiting to hear the results of the 10th anniversary contest were by far the most deferential and respectful to Bethesda posters:

A week to go. Any idea or the number of submissions you've received? Have you got your favorite thousand yet? Hundred? Any of them from a guy named Scott? 🤔🤔 (“10th anniversary contest 3,” post 13).

Now the hard part begins. Somebody get Gstaff a pot of coffee and a big plate of cookies. I think he'll need lots of sugar and caffeine (“10th anniversary contest 3,” post 106).

It was Beth who organized this contest and there is nothing wrong with their choices (“Your thoughts on the winning perk,” post 118).

Along those lines, many, many posters gave Bethesda explicit “thank you’s” when they announced the 10th anniversary contest. One fan even posted special perks in the perks thread that went through eight producers, assigning traits based on their personalities. The two included are directed toward Gstaff, Bethesda’s community manager and frontperson to the forum-goers, and Socrates200x, a well-liked developer who posted with some regularity:

Gstaff- you can quell the meanest forum-goer with a blunt instrument of logic. +20 to speech skill, +1 to intelligence, +10 to melee weapons...Socrates- your computer skills are awesome, you GUI like no one else. Whenever you eat cookies you get a temporary boost of +1 to agility. +20 to science skill ("10th anniversary contest 2," post 75).

Very rarely, posters sided with Bethesda over the complaining fanbase, claiming very deferentially that Bethesda should not listen to upset *Fallout* fans at all. When the following poster did just that, we should remember that this negative case is not arguing that fans have no right to interact with producers in an attempt to influence text integrity, but merely claiming that *Fallout* fans had abused that right:

The hardcore Fallout fanbase burned their bridge with Bethesda long ago. If I were Bethesda, I'd make sure to do the opposite of what the NMA/Duck and Cover maniacs and most of the people on this forum scream about just out of spite. You can only spit on someone's efforts so many times before your influence on them is completely obliterated ("Fallout 3: Need help?," post 82).

Deferential/respectful methods of advocacy followed a "more flies with sugar than vinegar" paradigm, and in doing so spoke of marginalization. It was the fans who had to suck up to Bethesda. Bethesda, conversely, seemed more interested in quelling or controlling fans.

Each of these four methods of advocacy occurred with varying frequency. Consular/managerial posts and antagonistic/adversarial posts were the most common; perhaps indicating just how much of an "us" vs. "them" dynamic existed in the forum. Cynical/jaded

interaction methods were common as well, and often manifested themselves as clauses buried within other types of posts. So a consular/managerial post would often be amended with a statement indicating that the poster did not feel like he/she would be listened to in the end. Deferential/respectful posts were relatively rare, but saw a spike in frequency when posters were interacting with Bethesda employees who were showing kindness and consideration, and answering fan questions thoughtfully. They were also more prevalent when posters wanted something from Bethesda, such as when it came time to choose a winner of the 10th anniversary contest. No matter which method of advocacy was used by fans, all stemmed from perceptions of a status-relationship marked by disproportionate power. That is the most-basic answer to how fans constructed their status-relationship with producers: one of marginalization.

Producer-to-fan status relationship

When seeking to understand how *Fallout* producers construct their status-relationship with fans, one does not have to venture too far from the literature. *Fallout* producers approached fans with the same guarded interest and begrudging tolerance as many other media producers. Producers seemed to view themselves as the keepers of the text, and the fanbase as something to be controlled. However, unlike other producer-to-fan relationships studied in literature, the producers on the *Fallout 3* forum interacted with fans with a great deal of regularity. Bethesda's Community Manager, Gstaff, was a constant presence in conversations, and other posters brandishing shiny silver Bethesda logos below their screen names popped in from time to time. This led to another surprise not indicated by the literature. Each Bethesda poster each had their own unique way of interacting with fans. So while macro-level examinations find that producers either use support, contempt, or supervision tactics to influence fan behavior, this micro-level

study revealed that Bethesda employees used all three simultaneously. This furthered ambiguities in the relationship between producers and fans.

No matter which interaction tactic was used, producers on the *Fallout 3* forum tried hard to convince fans that they had a voice, as these two posts indicate (the first is by Gstaff and the second is by an unpaid moderator):

*They definitely are reading and listening to what folks have to say. When I go downstairs to get lunch (today's chicken and mashed potatoes were fantastic), I'll usually see at least 3 or 4 screens with the forums open while they're on their lunch break, and that's just from going through one row of devs ("What I fear the most about *Fallout 3*," post 9).*

*It's worth pointing out that many devs lurk on the forums, and if I spend much time in here I generally see quite a few throughout the day. They're not reading these forums to see people bicker, they're here to see what people think of the game and what suggestions they are making ("*Fallout 3*: Need help?," post 53).*

Gstaff's job on the forum was to be a point person, responding most often and sounding the most concerned with public relations, but he was not the only producer active on the forum. Other developers (called "devs") posted with some degree of regularity, and occasionally heavy-hitters such as Lead Designer Emil Pagliarulo or Executive Producer Todd Howard communicated through the forum, as Howard did when he answered 25 previously-gathered fan questions in the one-message "Official fan interview" thread. Though the thread was immediately closed, those 25 questions were answered with detail and seriousness. Howard made sure to give correct

information (fans often took on a watchdog role after all), but still defended the producers' position. This indicated that producers were at least aware of how much knowledge and information were valued within the fan community, as this excerpt of Howard's answers detailing the VATS combat system demonstrates:

VATS is meant to be used with real-time. It's not one or the other- they should feel like they go together. I don't want the fans confused that this is turn-based, because it's not. It's a glorified aimed-shot mode, and a pretty glorious one at that ("Official fan interview," post 1).

However, despite all this interaction, it is telling that Bethesda used the site mostly as a form of one-way communication, fitting a model of traditional information dissemination. Even Howard's interview session was pre-screened and, as stated, the thread was immediately closed. Fans were allowed no content production on the official *Fallout 3* site, save for their forum posts, and even their forum space had to be shared among many other Bethesda titles. What's more, Bethesda decided to close threads after 200 posts, determining that by then, the topic had run its course. In most respects, the site was Bethesda's playground; the fans were just playing on it. Bethesda and its moderators were quick to step in when interaction got too heated, removing flames and closing threads. Producers also responded to fan criticism how and when they wanted, ignoring some complaints entirely and answering others promptly, with no obligation to keep up with the numerous fan-initiated questions. They generally stayed above the fray, so to speak, not nit-picking or deeply engaging in fan discourse, but interjecting with the most general

of reassurances, as this Gstaff post demonstrates (notice how careful he is not to upset the issue while still reinforcing that the game is in good hands with Bethesda):

Of course you're welcome to your opinion, but the guys hard at work on the game are certainly striving to make a great Fallout game. Is it a different Fallout game? Well yeah...we're not the original creator of the series. Still, we are hopeful that fans of the original games will enjoy the game. In the end, I guess we'll see what you and others think when the game hits shelves ("Fallout 3: Need help?," post 71).

Even the popular "Meet the Devs" threads (37 strong as of this writing), which invited fans to interact with various producers in the space of a thread, had their own strict set of rules. They were always initiated when the producers wanted, and all discussion was required, by official decree, to be unrelated to *Fallout 3*, but rather had to consist of general questions about favorite foods, games, and so on. Bethesda has to-date given fans 37 threads dealing with such unofficial issues, but only 25 questions in a closed thread about issues specifically relating to *Fallout 3*. While fans appeared to be given more respect than the MMO fans cited by Taylor (2006a), they still seemed to be kept at arms-length. They were the ones that had to work to communicate. If internet-mediated communication affords the opportunity for a more democratic relationship between producers and consumers, it appears, in this case, that the burden to work for that relationship still rests with fans.

It is not surprising that in this paradoxical environment of communication, but strictly managed communication, all three of Jenkins (1992) tactics of producer response to fan labor were present on the forum. Support, contempt, and supervision messages all occurred

intermittently on the forum. In the case of Gstaff, it was very evident that he had been tasked with trying to (however slowly) nudge a skeptical fan base into Bethesda's camp. Therefore he simultaneously deferred to fans (perhaps on some level recognizing them as important members in the New Organization) and attempted to influence them toward supporting Bethesda:

Personally, I'd suggest having an open mind when it comes to Fallout 3...our guys are definitely trying to give it the "Fallout" feel. Of course, you're free to do as you like 😊
(“What will it take for you to buy *Fallout 3*?,” post 191).

*To answer the original question, I see no reason why anyone wouldn't be able to catch on pretty quickly. It's a game with a FP perspective, but it's not requiring you to drink Bawls to get that extra reflex action (ala *Quake*)* (“Will I be able to play *Fallout 3* if I have no FPS skills?,” post 38).

Just wanted to let you know we have a new Vault diary up on the Fallout homepage. Within the diary, Emil Pagliarulo addresses a question some of you guys have been asking for some time- how the heck did the Brotherhood of Steel make their way to Washington D.C.?? Emil's diary goes into a fair amount of detail on the matter (“New diary today,” post 1).

But not all Bethesda employees had such an official burden, and therefore could engage with fans on different levels. One producer and regular poster, Socrates200x (who self-labeled as a “lowly programmer”) had achieved the support of fans through his positive interactions with

them across the forum. He often got involved in non-official discussions (something few other producers deigned to do), giving in-depth opinion on subjects as diverse as silly 80's songs or the controversial Brotherhood of Steel faction profile. The lowly programmer was also probably the most esteemed dev among the fans on the forum, not least because he was known to actually have played *Fallout* previously and would often chime in about this and other games, building social capital with each post. His posts reflected a triviality, humor, and deference to fans that did not come off as manufactured or disingenuous, and for this he had the support of many fans:

If I wasn't exempt as an employee, and if it didn't totally clash with Fallout's 50's-retro aesthetic, I'd love to see a "Take On Me" perk, which would have no other purpose except to shade the world pencil black-and-white and play the eponymous song for the duration of VATS mode. And maybe put little racer helmets on the enemy's head/head-analog ("10th anniversary contest 1," post 61).

I believe the exact unit of measurement we're up to is "a crap-ton" (or for those across the pond, "a metric crap-tonne"). Seriously though, we've got a lot of entries, like, a lot. I'm enjoying sifting through all the great ideas; keep 'em coming! ("10th anniversary contest 1," post 137).

Around the office, we call them the "D.C. Brotherhood of Steel", but I'm just a lowly programmer; don't be axing me 'bout no canon ("What the Brotherhood of Steel really is," post 94).

In contrast, some producers (such as developers RadHamster and MrSmileyFaceDude) used this freedom of interaction to treat fans with contempt, and were generally a bit combative with fans who were critical of Bethesda:

Why do you think that there has to be some hard and fast rule that every quest has to have exactly N solutions? Since Emil's not giving you an exact number of solutions required, wouldn't the more logical assumption be "as many as makes sense for the quest?" ("A comment/suggestion for Emil Pagliarulo," post 14).

I guess you missed the parts where there's a lot of BoS's soldiers following Lyons...



("What the Brotherhood of Steel really is," post 3).

In one particularly snarky response, MrSmileyFaceDude only offered a one-line rebuff to a poster who disagreed with the direction of the Brotherhood of Steel. After the poster's very specific question was raised, the producer only replied with this jab "QUOTE(The Article)." By keeping the reply so short, so curt, and not engaging on an informational level with the poster (a cardinal value among fans on the forum), MrSmileyFaceDude was doing something very disrespectful and contemptuous. The message was clear in the midst of 200 other detailed and specific posts: "It's so obvious, why don't you get it? Just read the article again, arguing with you is not worth my time." Even Gstaff couldn't resist getting antagonistic with fans at times, though he always had to work to couch it within passive-aggressive language (and in this case a *Transformers* joke at the end):

Hmm, that's interesting. I've never really read that perspective. Seems like there are an awful lot of military folks getting off at that metro stop each day. I supposed they could just be twiddling their thumbs. Or maybe they're trying to figure out why Megatron got to earth? ("New diary today," post 11).

This contemptuous behavior was definitely noticed by fans, many of who implied that the most contemptuous behavior they faced was being ignored, deflected, and misinformed by producers. Contemptuous producers often faced antagonistic/adversarial interaction. It is interesting, though, that the most contemptuous of producer posts were at worst similar to some of the more hostile communication styles fans adopted themselves. This may speak to the higher stakes and standards producers are required to have when relating to the public that consumes their product.

A degree of supervision of fan productivity also existed on the *Fallout 3* forum. The 10th anniversary contest was the clearest example of this, as these posts by Gstaff about the contest demonstrate:

No, we aren't going to tell you about any of the perks that are already in Fallout 3. First, that would spoil it, and second, we don't want to color your ideas with anything we are, or aren't doing. It's a clean slate for you. Be creative ("10th anniversary contest 1," post 1).

I hope you guys are submitting some of these. We're definitely looking at funny/creative ones for prizing. Will that be the key to winning...I don't know, but I'm sure whichever

one cracks up the most people at the office is going to get some sort of prize (“10th anniversary contest 1,” post 98).

For this contest, what we’re really looking for is the best idea. As mentioned in the contest rules, the image isn’t going to make or break whether or not any given perk is selected. So it’s best that your emphasis is going into a great idea (“10th anniversary contest 1,” post 148).

Gstaff was very concerned with regulating and supervising communication. He would often work to quell communication that was “unproductive” or overly critical, and encouraged communication that gave fans the idea that they were contributing:

Come on now... remember, everyone’s entitled to their opinions...m’kay (“New diary today,” post 68).

Thanks for the continued feedback guys...I’ll continue to pass it along (“Modability and new content,” post 44).

As producers communicated with fans using support, contempt and supervision tactics, their interaction heavily influenced fan perceptions of status-relationship between the two parties. This could be why the 10th anniversary contest saw such a positive response from fans (before the results were announced of course), who were generally appreciative for the opportunity to share their ideas with producers (as this jovial post demonstrates):

Rest assured, I send all my nonsense in. And there will be plenty more...You're gonna regret the day you decided not to put a limit on the number of entries 🤔 (“10th anniversary contest 1,” post 99).

It could also explain why the winner, which most felt did not match the true and valid aesthetic of *Fallout*, created such feelings of marginalization:

The whole perk competition feels like a big PR failure for Bethesda. They tried extending the olive branch and tried to show “they cared” and that they are interested in our opinions/contributions. But all they ended up doing was tripping themselves and whipping the fans painfully in the face with the olive branch as they were going down... Jebus, the winning entry doesn’t even have any flavor text at all (“Your thoughts on the winning perk,” post 119).

I mean someone with half an iota of knowledge about Fallout fans should have seen this outcry a mile away. So instead of making it seem like Bethesda wants to listen to the community, all you guys did was show that you don’t give a flying kahoot about what we feel and also end up showing a rather soft grip on Fallouty humor. Thusly, I would have to say, a PR failure (“Your thoughts on the winning perk,” post 132).

When producers were perceived as supportive, support often came back and deferential/respectful methods of advocacy manifested themselves:

“Socrates200x Descendant:” The blood of the infamous socrates200x runs through your veins. Large portions of your dialogue indicates this, as they are full of his trademark wit and humor (“10th anniversary contest 1,” post 101).

Back in 2000, it was known that the beast races (Argonians & Khajits) wouldn’t be playable in Morrowind since they are slaves. There was a huge outcry on these very forums, and the lead character artist started to fight for it too, and eventually they became playable (“Fallout 3: Need help?,” post 5).

In one telling instance, Emil Pagliarulo answered comments aimed directly at him about a storyline he crafted for *Oblivion*. This greatly encouraged fans, who seemed to receive a sudden (if short-lived) boost in how they perceived their status-relationship with producers after Pagliarulo’s honest and respectful responses to the comments:

Mr. Lead Designer, you should post more often if this is the kind of posts we will get (“A comment/suggestion for Emil Pagliarulo,” post 8).

I have been quite critical about the direction you all have been taking the game thus far. However, I would just like to thank you for coming out and posting on this one. And for the efficiency in which you answered this question and put some of our concerns to rest. Thanks man (“A comment/suggestion for Emil Pagliarulo,” post 36).

Conversely, fans who felt small in the eyes of producers often stated that this was because of how they had been treated by producers in the past. Antagonistic/adversarial and cynical/jaded advocacy methods seemed to be the result of contemptuous interaction:

We're addressing your concerns by, once again, saying we're Fallout fans. Come on guys. Really. Seriously. Aren't platitudes and vague promises to "fix it" or "address it" enough for you guys? ("New diary today," post 8).

Nope not going to change. BoS are now saviors of the wasteland, protectors or the common man. It's not like any of us saw this coming ("New diary today," post 143).

And don't worry...you can post any idea, it's not as if some dev will look in this thread unless a lot of arguing and flaming develops ("So you want weapons, eh?," post 102).

The following post was a direct response to the contemptuous behavior of the producer Radhamster. In it, the poster indicates that Radhamster's behavior leads to a diminished status-relationship between the two parties:

I assume that it is not deliberate on your part, but I have to say that I have not found your very brief replies to be helpful. And although it can be easy to misread the intentions behind written communications (that's how most flame wars start), it is difficult for me not to read scorn and dismissiveness into your posts, primarily the latter...Your answers

appear to me as though you are trying to avoid my questions by quibbling with the details of my wording (“Will I be able to play *Fallout 3* if I have no FPS skills?,” post 73).

Producer supervision tactics were also not without their consequences. For instance, how Bethesda handled modders in the past was an influencer of current fan perceptions of status-relationship. Bethesda was accused on the forum of being ambivalent toward modders: needing them to improve their products, but reacting negatively if their mods stepped over even the slightest of copyright or content lines. The arms-length supervision left fans with mixed emotion over their status-relationship with Bethesda. In all of these cases, fan perceptions of status-relationship depended on how fans felt producers treated them in the past. Support, contempt, and supervision tactics each affected the relationship between the parties in unique ways. And the fact that all three tactics were being used by Bethesda simultaneously further muddled the waters.

All of this indicates that the status producers give fans is immensely consequential. Their interaction can affect the fan climate deeply. On the *Fallout 3* forum, the question of how fans and producers construct their status-relationship with each other has no simple answer because no two fans or producers interact in exactly the same way. Previous literature has generally consisted of macro-level evaluations of how producers behave toward fans, and has consequently mostly come up with one-to-one pairings of producers and behaviors. Tim Burton demonstrated contempt and Peter Jackson elicited support. However, this micro-level discourse analysis of regular interaction between fans and producers, has revealed a more complex situation. When multiple producers interact with multiple fans at multiple times, support, contempt, and supervision tactics can manifest within the same organization. At Bethesda, garnering support

seemed to be the most official agenda, and therefore was the most prevalent tactic. Supervision was used when the situation allowed, such as during the 10th anniversary contest. And contempt reared its head more rarely, but still regularly. In all, Bethesda's interaction resulted in a mixed message being communicated to fans. A general trend did emerge out of this multiplicity, however. Both fans and producers seem to acknowledge the need for the other party, but disagree over several important issues relating to text integrity. This disagreement is the heart of the tense relationship between producers and fans on the *Fallout 3* forum, but how the two parties treat each other can alleviate or exacerbate that tenseness. Status-relationship seemed to be deeply connected to how the tense relationship was handled.

Fan-to-fan status-relationship

RQ3: How do fans active on Bethesda's *Fallout 3* forum construct their status-relationship with each other?

When seeking an answer to this question, one must first acknowledge a simple truth. Fans are not themselves always in complete agreement as to what gives a text integrity, a fact which they themselves recognized:

I couldn't disagree with you more. But we could argue about it all day and accomplish nothing...See how much easier that is than wasting time arguing over pointless things when neither of us are likely to change our opinions because of the comments of the other? Sometimes life is just that easy ("My view on Fallout 3," post 24).

This post is a mock dialogue between two disagreeing participants, where a hypothetical disagreement between fans over the text integrity is too deep to be resolved:

I believe this.

-You are dumb.

I want this.

-That is dumb.

Can't we get along?

-No.

Summed up the whole damn message board right there ("10th anniversary contest 2," post 23).

Indeed, factionism was alive and well on the *Fallout 3* forum and fans did not hesitate to let other fans know when they (frequently) disagreed. Schisms occurred over topics like what makes a true fan or whether Bethesda is worth supporting, as these posts show (this first is another satirical perk submission):

"Massive Fan:" You're such a massive fan that you're always right! In fact, you're never wrong! Ever! If someone thinks you're wrong, you get very, very angry! This means that if you enter combat after failing a speech check you get a bonus to your HtH skills, and a significant boost to your critical chance! ("10th anniversary contest 1," post 48).

You know, I'm not even bashing Bethesda (just Todd, a little bit). So there really is no need for you to act as the volunteer Bethesda fire department trying to prove me wrong (“Your thoughts on the winning perk,” post 137).

Fans on the *Fallout 3* forum operated in an environment of Sandvoss’ (2005) neutrosey, where even if they believed in the truth of their perspective, they recognized that it must be defended in the midst of a considerable number of dissenting perspective (all of which were being defended as truth).

However, no matter the side one chose in this disagreement, there were a few things that were always valued. This was surprising given the intensity of the factionist debate on the forum. Even if they did not agree on the issues, these fans all used the same social capital. These universal values were the primary ways fans constructed their status-relationship with each other on the *Fallout 3* forum. For instance, being a true *Fallout* fan (which some said the “hardcore” were not), or being a fan of other RPGs was universally valued. In the sequence of posts below, one poster alludes to such a value, another challenges that value (and by doing so acknowledges it is a norm), and finally the original poster and another fan reaffirm that value:

Let me start off by saying that Fallout 2 is my all-time favorite computer game. I've played most RPGs out there since that is my favorite genre and only games such as Boulder's Gate, System Shock 2, and Fallout 1 come anywhere close (“My view on *Fallout 3*,” post 1).

How come before someone posts anything positive about Fallout they always mention what “games” they have played? Who gives a rat’s ass if you’re a Boulder’s Gate fan or you played Zork on your 382 or whatever? I don’t care. So why should you? (“My view on Fallout 3,” post 63).

Because if I hadn't pointed out that I happen to like Fallout and similar "true" RPGs then I would've been accused of only playing FPSs on consoles (“My view on Fallout 3,” post 64).

The first reason is that people like to pick on other people as not being “true” RPG fans. “OMG you missed the golden age,” they weep, blithely crapping on the indie companies doing equally good stuff today, and tuning their rose-tinted glasses away from the mass of utter dross that was being churned out in their “golden age,” as it is in every age (“My view on Fallout 3,” post 65).

There were other universal norms on the *Fallout 3* forum. Exhibiting intricate knowledge or strong discursive skills was also valued. During the 10th anniversary contest threads, fans used their perk ideas and comments on others’ perk ideas to demonstrate their knowledge of the *Fallout* universe. Fans also linked heavily to their own blogs, fan sites, or web comics in their signatures, showing themselves to be productive fans, making contributions to the knowledge community. The scarcity of posts telling others that *Fallout* was “only a game” that shouldn’t be worried about with this much investment and detail (if there were even any) speak to the value of knowledge and minutia. Also, the norm on the *Fallout 3* forum was to dislike Bethesda, so

support for Bethesda was hardly ever outright, and defense of Bethesda's practices was often couched with criticism. Posters were often forced to defend that they were not "Bethenites" (as one fan put it) or stand proud and defiantly proclaim that they were (a rarity). These fans chose the former path when defending a decision Bethesda made:

Erm...what? Read more of my posts...I don't like Bethesda, and I find most of their games mediocre at best and downright painful to play at worst. I'm not trying to defend them here. I'm just pointing out the obvious ("Your thoughts on the winning perk," post 144).

Oh, just about everything they've shown us so far probably could have been done better. I just don't think that their interpretation of the Brotherhood is really among the worst of those things, or even bad enough to be worth bothering with ("What the Brotherhood of Steel really is," post 52).

This is much like the *Buffy* fans cited by Johnson (2007), where disliking season six was the norm, and one seeking to defend season six had to both defend the season and work within an opposing norm.

Age and experience were also valued by these fans, who often used leet speak (hacker grammar and syntax often used by younger gamers on other game forums) to mock points they perceived as childish. Fans also repeatedly pointed out that Bethesda was trying to appease the "console kiddies" and "twitch gamers" (referring to, once again, a younger demographic that plays in HD on consoles and supposedly therefore demands graphics and excitement over story

and character development). Fans also often questioned the age of posters who were excited about *Fallout 3*. Tellingly, the accused posters mostly replied not by saying that their age didn't matter, but rather by validating that they were in fact old enough to be within the core values of the community.

All of this speaks to underlying central values in the midst of intense disagreements, where the side one comes down on is not necessarily as important as the social capital one obtains by how they advocate for that side. For instance, in one of the most surprising findings of this study, my initial impression that screen names and avatars would be indicators of how fans felt on certain issues (for instance, "Bethenites" using *TES* screen names and avatars, and those against Bethesda leaning on *Fallout* iconography in their screen names and avatars), was not confirmed. While there were some instances of such usage (such as one poster, who used a Vault Boy with a Spartan Helmet as an avatar and said it would not be changed until Bethesda changed the game from an epic fantasy to what it should be), many posters with *TES* screen names and avatars spoke up against Bethesda, and many posters with *Fallout* iconography in their screen names and avatars spoke up for Bethesda. In both cases, it would seem that what was important to fans was not how certain iconography assisted them in advocating for their side, but rather that such iconography showed them to be knowledgeable fans, and therefore insiders within the subculture. In terms of social capital, the use of proper iconography seemed to be universally valued.

When it did come to choosing sides over text integrity, fans used discursive practices to negotiate their status with each other. Fans on the *Fallout 3* forum quoted previous posts very extensively during their discourse, which aside from helping the conversation stay on a logical path, indicates that information was important enough to these fans to merit delving deep into the

heart of other posters' claims and responding point by point (again, something which is done extensively). And indeed these debates could become very minutia-driven and require intensive knowledge to participate in successfully. For instance, in the thread titled "Your thoughts on the winning perk," 40 of the 200 posts involved a heated and specialized debate that began with one poster making one claim about the integrity of the perk chosen and ballooned out to included multiple posters and several intricate observations based on both the *Fallout* universe and the mechanics of other digital games. Through all this, status was tied up in the social capital gained by being an insider within the knowledge community.

Fallout fans also universally valued Baym's (2000) interpretive and informative tactics, and used them heavily. Every piece of issue-related discourse on the board centered around one of these two practices. Much like Baym's soap fans, the fans active on the forum openly valued knowledge as the centerpiece of their discourse:

They did provide evidence to back up their claim. So you really can't fault them. They did better than 99.99% of all people on the internet ("What will it take for you to buy Fallout 3?," post 22).

Considering we don't know the system's balance, that's a bit of a ridiculous assertion to make ("10th anniversary contest 3," post 191).

Usually when I see a new guy making a post that addresses an already volatile section of the community, I put on my trollbait outfit. But I must say that was a very well-written and interesting first post. Bravo ("My view on Fallout 3," post 6).

While I respect your taste in games, you could try expressing your views as your personal opinion, instead of the opinion of a whole generation. Otherwise you are running into the possibility of being corrected by people who don't share your point of view ("What will it take for you to buy Fallout 3?," post 100).

I don't know if D'oh or Duh is a better word here...Only a calm clear mind could have made that connection ("New diary today," post 36).

Examples of this reliance on knowledge were ubiquitous. Debates over the probability and merits of including certain weapons in the game drew on the weapons-types featured in various other games. Perk submissions were judged by other fans based on how well they fit into the *Fallout* system. And knowledge of digital games wasn't the only type of knowledge valued. When the Brotherhood of Steel was said by Bethesda to have gone to Washington D.C. to raid the Pentagon for its military secrets, a debate surfaced as to whether or not the Pentagon would actually have useful technology, or whether it was more of an administrative center, and therefore a weak plot device. Some said it obviously wouldn't contain such information, but others maintained it fit within the rationality of the *Fallout* universe. Either way, knowledge was the central value:

First of all, how would you possibly know what would be found inside the Pentagon?

Second, a mutated human-computer hybrid with sights set on enslaving the human race wouldn't be found a few miles from Los Angeles either. In this fictional world, there's

military equipment under the Pentagon. That's not a flaw, minor or not (“New diary today,” post 43).

During the 10th anniversary contest, some fans worried that if they posted their ideas on the thread, others would steal their knowledge (but in the case of this fan, the draw to share knowledge was too strong):

I'd drop some examples of perks here but to be honest I'm a bit bugged by the idea of some lazy Joe comin' along and resubmitting all of our work (“10th anniversary contest 2,” post 18).

They're going through them as we post 'em anyway. Might as well lay claim to a few while I'm here (“10th anniversary contest 2,” post 21).

Another poster took a claim that he/she plagiarized perk ideas from other games very seriously, indicating that proper presentation of information was a cardinal value in the community:

While the titles of two of my ideas are coincidentally identical to two character backgrounds in Arcanum, everything came straight out of my noodle. So please, don't confuse coincidence with plagiarism. It's a serious charge and not one I appreciate 🙄 (“10th anniversary contest 1,” post 70).

And while breaks from this rationality occurred regularly (even the previous post ended with what appears to be an obscene-gesture emoticon), they were almost entirely condemned, joked about, ignored, or deleted by moderators as soon as they got out of hand. Such behavior indicated that, even if fans did not always live up to their own standards, knowledge was still the accepted value:

Sigh, I used to enjoy your posts... but they're getting more and more bitter and patronizing of late...Just reinforces the "fan" stereotype even further ("What will it take for you to buy Fallout 3?," post 117).

You may want to enjoy the holiday and learn a few pointers about punctuation. It would make your point much more clear ("10th anniversary contest 1," post 26).

Here's a tip. Use quotes or name people. Makes communication so much easier ("What I fear the most about Fallout 3," post 37).

Perhaps rather than cribbing of Brother None's rant, you'd be better off re-reading the diary and giving it some thought ("What the Brotherhood of Steel really is," post 19).

You may rant now. I got a stick, however! And I'm making it pointy... ("So you want weapons, eh?," post 24).

One of the most ad-hoministic posts I encountered:

Actually, you failed so hard that god just died again...Here's a game that beats Oblivion: first, pretend you're dead; second, stay that way for the next, oh, say...50 years.

Seriously, I urge you to try this (“What will it take for you to buy *Fallout 3?*,” post 55),

did not generate an equally heated response, and went on to receive a warning from a moderator, with the poster ultimately recanting. The offender indicated that the harshness stemmed from boredom, not anger. And another particularly harsh pro-Bethesda post was immediately noticed as detrimental to the spirit of discourse valued on the forum (as these subsequent posts demonstrate):

Lol, I just love how everyone here hates Bethesda just because they're changing Fallout. Don't buy it. Just go play your outdated games. It's that simple. Be glad you're at least GETTING a Fallout game, [censored] selfish pigs. (“What will it take for you to buy *Fallout 3?*,” post 173).

Way to set back forum relations three months 🍌 (“What will it take for you to buy *Fallout 3?*,” post 174).

While there were numerous examples of these negative cases, none denounced knowledge as a central value. At worst, they simply breached that value, and were often corrected accordingly. However, this value may not have been entirely self imposed, given the level of involvement of moderators in keeping the conversation civil, as this oft-warned poster noticed:

My god...if [the moderator] wasn't a deathclaw's hair away from tearing my chest open and eating my heart...the words I'd have for you. The words. The words (“What I fear most about *Fallout 3*,” post 74).

This discourse also had a time and a place, and overall, fans seemed to value those they considered to be true fans, no matter where they came down on certain issues (though, admittedly, it is probably harder to be perceived as true fan by one who thinks that your position is asinine or traitorous). Despite heated debate, fans often took time to enjoy each others' company and even cited other fans opinions as the primary motivators as to what it would take for them to buy *Fallout 3*:

“A good general opinion in Fallout fan sites/forums” if the site being NMA and the opinions coming from the more level-headed people like Brother None and the others in the old guard (“What will it take for you to buy *Fallout 3*?,” post 7).

Even as they complained about the winners of the perk contest, many fans still made a point to congratulate them. Others loved the camaraderie of the whole event (as this usually cantankerous poster pointed out):

Really though, I had a HUGE deal of fun just participating, and I can't wait to see the winner (or even the “runner ups”)... Here's to everyone involved 🍻🍻🍻 (“10th anniversary contest 3,” post 38).

Fans also often respected the wishes of the original poster (OP) of a thread, and if that poster wanted to keep the conversation light and positive, the fans would generally try to accomplish this (at least for a time). They would call each other out when they didn't respect the intended aesthetic of the thread, as in the following dialogue between two fans during a discussion over possible weapons in *Fallout 3* (note that the second fan to speak is in other situations not afraid to slam Bethesda):

How about an in-game copy of Van Buren and an in-game PC. It would be the most powerful weapon. It would kill the game itself (“So you want weapons, eh?,” post 101).

Aaah shut up...We are having fun here (“So you want weapons, eh?,” post 102).

Sorry I have become jaded by the whole thing. I think it's kind of silly to care about the weapons in the game when the combat system is so bland (“So you want weapons, eh?,” post 103).

That's why we are imagining better things. This is a specific thread and the OP stated what he wants...We all know whatever you know and mostly think the same and this is not a thread about it. Capiche...amigo? (“So you want weapons, eh?,” post 104).

As these fans critiqued, defended, and advocated text integrity to each other, they revealed a series of cardinal values that were universal no matter the side they chose to argue. Proper information and interpretation seemed to be at the heart of these values. And though fans

did not always live up to these cardinal values, they were still the primary ideals used to construct status-relationship as they negotiated text integrity in the face of neutroscopy. In short, factionism and neutroscopy were not as damaging to the universal norms of the knowledge community as was to be expected. Interpretive and informative practices were the central currency used for building social capital.

Labor

RQ4: How do fans active on Bethesda's *Fallout 3* forum envision their labor contribution to the game development process?

The desire for *Fallout 3* to be a worthy installment in the series seemed to underlie most of the labor perspectives on the *Fallout 3* forum. Fans envisioned themselves as important contributors in a New Organizational network of sorts, whose primary reward was a text they could be proud of. Despite theoretical concerns about the exploitative nature of uncompensated labor, to fans on the *Fallout* forum, it seemed to be business of usual. The vast majority of *Fallout* fans viewed their labor as a service toward the goal of text integrity. The fan below explicitly cited text integrity as the central reason why fans sought to interact with producers on the *Fallout 3* forum:

Bethesda has undertaken a VERY DIFFICULT JOB. Why do you think this much debate is going on? Fallout is a classic that has a certain unique taste which is very hard to accomplish. Here, people are concerned because games developed by Bethesda do not

have that taste...We are trying to show the differences in here so that people and devs, if they are reading, would get the idea. (“What I fear the most about *Fallout 3*,” post 121).

In the midst of this on-going negotiation over text integrity, some (not all) fans labored in order to defend or achieve the integrity of the text, and just who did labor depends on how one defines labor. My observations led me to believe that fan labor occurred any time fans engaged in the ownership functions mentioned earlier: creativity (especially, in the case of digital games, modding), or criticism (manifested primarily in the multiple methods of advocacy *Fallout* fans demonstrated). Simply put, anytime fans engaged in these functions, there were producing something (art, animation, a critical thought, etc.) in order to achieve text integrity. Many fans spoke of this labor with a strong sense of duty and purpose:

Everything deserves some degree of criticism. If we fail to realize that, we forfeit the prospect of future products and artwork that may go above and beyond to entertain and impress us. If the fans don't speak up, then who will? (“New diary today,” post 3).

Don't many of us want to help them in any way we can to make it a better game? (“What the Brotherhood of Steel really is,” post 70).

We will turn the game into what it deserves to be (“*Fallout 3*: Need help?,” post 36).

Far from worry that labor would be exploited, the standard opinion was that the ability to labor meant happy and fulfilled fans, and a text that could be made whole in some respect, even

if fans had no influence over official text integrity. This was especially salient in conversations about modding (note, however, that each of these suggestions came *after* discussions about the official text being invalid, indicating that official text integrity was more preferable to most fans than modding to give it integrity):

If you really don't want to play any FPS elements at all (player aiming, FPP view) then it's possible the game will be modded to allow VATS to be used exclusively (“Will I be able to play *Fallout 3* if I have no FPS skills?,” post 5).

Here's an idea, just make it easy for modders to add weapons in many many strange ways. If I want to mod the whip of a dominatrix, I would like to be able to do that (“So you want weapons, eh?,” post 23).

I will miss TB action, but instead of whining, I will mod and play the old games if I need a break from RTS (“My view of *Fallout 3*,” post 65).

In the instances observed where people spoke out against modding, the reasoning used did not center on the impropriety of altering another's intellectual property, but rather out of disdain for the fact that fans would *have to*:

Are you serious? “If you don't like it you should just go make one yourself!” (“My view of *Fallout 3*,” post 61).

Wait, so not only do we all acknowledge that we'll need mods to make the game playable, but now we have to manufacture plausibility to cover up the divergences that the writing staff has taken with someone else's IP. I love it! (“What the Brotherhood of Steel really is,” post 69).

In short, objections to modding came from places of “we shouldn’t have to because the game should be done right in the first place.” The debate that occurred over modding dealt with whose responsibility it was to make the text a quality installment of the series. The general consensus, despite the opinions of a few rogue modders (who actually still saw themselves as helpful to Bethesda), was that it was producers who could make the text whole by release date, and fans only wanted to assist in achieving that goal, even if producers refused to let them. All of this indicated that the language of the New Organization was indeed an appropriate paradigm for understanding this interaction, with fans as self-motivated, non-traditional knowledge workers laboring interdependently in fragmented networks for the good of the organization. It also provided further evidence that fans did not perceive the text as theirs to own. The vast majority of fans felt like they were working for the text, even if producers didn’t recognize it. The following three posts dealing with fan contributions to the 10th anniversary contest demonstrate this feeling (note the complete lack of regard for compensation in the name of a text with integrity):

I’m hoping to contribute even if I don’t win 😊 (“10th anniversary contest 1,” post 177).

I'm excited to see if other perks will make it into the game (“Your thoughts on the winning perk,” post 67).

Personally, I hope the devs simply stole the good ideas as their own instead of ignored them because they thought they were bad (“Your thoughts on the winning perk,” post 123).

Because text integrity was the cardinal concern, this labor occurred both in support of and in opposition to producers, depending how each particular fan interpreted integrity. For instance, during the debates around the Brotherhood of Steal faction profile, many fans engaged heavily in speculation over Bethesda’s account of how and why the Brotherhood ended up in Washington, D.C. Some speculation agreed with Bethesda’s propositions, some did not and attempted to correct the misinformation (like the *NMA* contest previously mentioned invited fans to do). Both types of speculation, however, were labor that worked toward what the laborers perceived as the integrity of the text:

I'm thinking that there is a minor flaw in the back story that could be easily resolved. I doubt that you would have found any “High Tech” equipment at the Pentagon. What you would have found though is documents, plans, and locations for the development and testing of new weaponry in development by the military (“New diary today,” post 41).

That's a fairly contrived explanation. If Bethesda is going forward with this design decision, then I really do hope that their "good" BoS is seriously flawed ("New diary today," post 82).

Likely, this is where backdoor dealings with the Outcast would come into play, with the Elders back west working to subvert Lyons' Power ("What the Brotherhood of Steel really is," post 153).

With so much distance between them they can't really do much with Lyons, which greatly limits their options. By cutting off support they will no longer be risking resources that weren't already committed, and by keeping Lyons part of the Brotherhood, if some good does come from all of this they can still benefit ("What the Brotherhood of Steel really is," post 86).

Even when this labor occurred in opposition to producers, fans still felt that they were laboring in a supportive manner (even if producers did not recognize this). For instance, despite perceptions that Bethesda was not wholly supportive of mods, they were considered by the vast majority of fans to be only positive for the integrity of the text and the organization even if they were not official parts of either. Notice in all of these claims, fans appeal to the integrity of the text, the health of the fan community, and even the benefit to Bethesda when speaking of the positive effects of encouraging fan mods:

Construction set= new and unlimited amount of content= more users- more buyers= more money for the creators, right? I don't see the reason not to include a construction set, or simply making the game easily moddable ("Modability and new content," post 10).

It could be just me, but I see many things in favor of releasing a CS, and very little against it. In favor: larger fanbase likely than when it's not modable, I'd say even those who dislike the game itself somewhat might consider purchasing it and using the CS to make it more to their liking; large modding community, meaning more fans here and more fan interaction; perhaps even the possibility to be inspired with ideas for future games, expansions or who knows what. Against: the possibility of people creating mods that might add content the developer is not happy about, like adult content. Though since this game will already be rated Mature, I'd say this is not a problem here. In short, I see only good sides and no bad sides 😊 ("Modability and new content," post 6).

More \$\$\$ for Bethesda. More fun for me. Everyone wins. So please add a construction set ("Modability and new content," post 23).

Ironically, despite believing that their labor would only financially benefit Bethesda, fans worried that if their labor was not utilized by Bethesda, it would be because Bethesda cared about their profits over the integrity of the text:

We look forward to a: "we deeply regret to inform you that there will be no CS released for Fallout 3 because of time constraints and budget issues, which is code for: "we don't

want you pesky modders one-upping our game or creating abominable “free content” for the masses when they can download our \$2.95 Brahmin armor durnit!” (“Your thoughts on the winning perk,” post 196).

Which is code for: “we don’t want you pesky modders turning our game which slightly resembles Fallout into Fallout (“Your thoughts on the winning perk,” post 197).

I observed another paradox in the *Fallout*-fan universe (that may in fact exist within fan-producer relations as a whole): fans believed their labor would give the text more integrity and only benefit Bethesda financially, but feared being shut out by Bethesda in the name of intellectual property and profit. Such was the marginalization of the *Fallout* fan, who, whether they labored in support or contempt of producers, always seemed to feel outside of producer concern.

But to most fans active on the *Fallout 3* forum, this sort of marginalized labor was a foregone conclusion. This was another surprising result. Despite scholars wondering about the justice of unpaid, perhaps exploitative, producer use of fan labor, to *Fallout* fans it seemed it was simply part and parcel of laboring for the integrity of the text. In fact, to the vast majority on the *Fallout 3* forum, the injustice was that their ideas would *not* be used, not that their ideas would be used without their compensation:

Some damn good ideas here. I hope Bethesda will take these into account and my topic will not get COMPLETELY WASTED, thank you. At least, I would like to see our ideas put into play even if they don’t get used (“So you want weapons, eh?,” post 113).

Prizes are nice and everything, but the main thing is that you get your idea in a game, right? (“10th anniversary contest 3,” post 43).

Hire some modders next time. They will do a countless amount of work for little to no payment (“A comment/suggestion for Emil Pagliarulo,” post 55).

Sometimes the amateurs can find solutions that the professionals couldn’t come up with- not least due to the near-unlimited time that modders have at their disposal (“Modability and new content,” post 12).

Even a discussion about modding tools not being available is silly to me (“Modability and new content,” post 133).

Hopefully a dev reads this. That would be perfect (“What the Brotherhood of Steel really is,” post 36).

Even in the posts that did mention compensation, text integrity came before social capital, and social capital came before financial compensation:

Hope we see more of this in the coming months- not so much for cool swag (I wouldn’t mind it though) but to get community input in the game (“10th anniversary contest 1,” post 16).

Heck, just getting my name in the credits is a good enough reward (“10th anniversary contest 2,” post 27).

Besides, if I did win with someone else’s name then it wouldn’t be my name in the credits, would it? 🤖 (“10th anniversary contest 2,” post 34).

I don’t like it. I could do better. Bethesda, hire me (“New diary today,” post 185).

The fact that labor issues were so seldom explicitly discussed when compared to the issues surrounding other research questions could also be an indication of this implicit understanding: that productive consumers produce for the integrity of the text, and that is the duty, blessing, and curse of the fan. In fact, when fans did very occasionally voice concerns that they were being exploited by producers, as the following negative case indicates, these claims were quickly condemned and trivialized, if not downright ignored:

I would bet that Bethesda used this contest to steal ideas from the community to implement them into the game as their own...Someone wanted to scam people (“Your thoughts on the winning perk,” post 17).

LOL LOL LOL. I am sure you meant that as a joke...Let’s bring out our lawyers and sue! Like they are an evil empire like Wal-Mart or Microsoft! (“Your thoughts on the winning perk,” post 18).

I'd of said that was a given...We all kind of assumed it from the start (“Your thoughts on the winning perk,” post 22).

A similar complaint (by the same poster) is dismissed as quickly later on in the same thread:

This contest was a sham to make other people look good by plagiarism (“Your thoughts on the winning perk,” post 79).

LMAO. I'm pretty sure that the whole point of the contest was to get your perk in FO3. And I can't imagine why anyone on this board would be upset if Bethesda followed their suggestions regarding the game (“Your thoughts on the winning perk,” post 88).

Fans, in general, loved and embraced their labor (after all, it was all they had in a system that marginalized their influence and thwarted their ownership). They proudly and boldly displayed links to their modding rings (sites that contain mods they used or even created), as indicators of their productivity. Many fans stated that if the game shipped with a construction set, they would be more likely to buy it. In the *Fallout 3* forum, it appears that Terranova's (2000) claim held up, as compensation was “willingly exceeded in exchange for the pleasures of communication and exchange” (p. 48). Though I would have to amend the list with what proved to be fans' greatest pleasure: the integrity of the text they esteem.

This labor-for-integrity can give fans a sense of ownership in a few ways. Fans can liberate themselves from official (producer-mandated) ideas about the text. They can be commodified by producers to the point where they labor in agreement with goals of the

organization and the official text. Last, they can effectively influence producers' decisions and alter the official text. In any case, productive fan labor is the most direct way to reject aesthetic distance and work to give the text integrity, although in the case of *Fallout* fans, most seemed to indicate that their ownership would have to be ceded to them by Bethesda. Most resigned themselves to labor *within* Bethesda's parameters, and hope to alter the official text in an official manner:

It basically means that by entering your submission to the contest that you in effect turn over that intellectual property to Bethesda. It becomes their property ("10th anniversary contest 2," post 176).

Funny, I don't remember reading any promises that they wouldn't tweak your perks when I bothered to read through the contest rules before I submitted my entry...It seemed pretty much implied to me that they'd be fiddling with the winner ("Your thoughts on the winning perk," post 136).

Perks aren't really the biggest point of this game. Let's have a quest competition where thousands of fans get Bethesda to fire all current writers...Seriously, if you get 17,000 quests written and presented by fans then why would you need the writers??? You might even make a good game somehow, despite yourselves ("Your thoughts on the winning perk," post 123).

Bethesda has the final say on requirements and effects, but if I feel like I have a general idea of how it should work, I will state it. Pretty simple, pretty forward. And seeing how I'll sign over my rights to this particular piece of intellectual property should I be chosen, it's up to Beth what they make of it anyway (“10th anniversary contest 1,” post 180).

During the 10th anniversary contest, many fans thanked Bethesda for “giving” them the opportunity to contribute, indicating that fans recognized this labor was under the supervision of Bethesda. And despite all the controversy surrounding the Brotherhood of Steel’s move east, the administrators of *The Vault* wiki site did seek producer opinions as to what to call the Washington D.C. chapter of the Brotherhood, indicating that they accepted that their labor was subjugated under Bethesda’s. Those that didn’t feel Bethesda had any control of fan ownership, and indicated that they would labor in violation of Bethesda’s wishes, seemed to know that they were being defiant of the norm:

I doubt Bethesda will ever consider the opinions of anyone outside their core design team. Still that's where modders come in. They don't like us. They don't want us. Yet, we are the ones that still have TES III and TES IV in the lime light. Seriously, if it were not for the stream of material, Oblivion would just have faded into Oblivion (“Fallout 3: Need help,” post 36).

I just wonder why the part of the Fallout/Fallout 2 fan base that thinks Bethesda is doing such a lousy job, don't use some of the excellent resources that the BI developers made

for them, instead of whining their misery all over the web...Join one of the many modding projects or make your own ("My view on Fallout 3," post 61).

Whether defiant or commodified, this fan labor often lead to producer-initiated interaction, and producers on the *Fallout 3* forum paid attention to it. The forums themselves attest to this. If fans did not labor (and that labor was not perceived as either a threat or an opportunity as Jenkins, 2006a, claimed), then producers would have no need to interact with them beyond the dissemination of information and product in the same style as, say, a laundry detergent company. So, in essence, producer-initiated interaction is a response to productive consumption. This is especially apparent in the supervision tactic of fan-producer interaction proposed by Jenkins (1992) and discussed in relation to research question two. The question must be asked, would these boards be this heavily monitored, or even exist at all given how often they produce comments that disparage Bethesda products, if producers did not see an imperative or opportunity in appealing to productive consumers? Even as one fan asked this question, he/she still asserted that truly laboring with fans was more ideal than attempting to manipulate them:

So all in all you now need help because you can't think of any perks to add...So your marketing strategy is to give away presents in contests and generate hype that you're such a cool company. It's a good start but get your pad out-! If you wanted real support you could have got it for free by working with fans and not against them from the start ("10th anniversary contest," post 25).

Most fans would do nothing more than grumble as they attempted to labor within Bethesda's system in order to influence the game development process. Exploitation took a back seat to text integrity. All of this speaks to an implicit understanding on the part of both fans and producers: that fans are indispensable (if marginalized) knowledge workers in the New Organization. *Fallout* producers, however begrudgingly, have apparently recognized that fan labor is an important tool for the success of their brand. Given, they are seeing what they might call the dark-side of laborers in the New Organization: namely, that these self-motivated knowledge workers are more loyal to their perceptions of text integrity than to the organization. Despite this obstacle, it is still all too important in the age of the active audience to commodify the labor of the productive consumer. *Fallout* fans seemed to recognize that they were being commodified and marginalized, but gladly accepted it in the name of text integrity. That was how they envisioned their labor contribution to the game development process.

A cycle of negotiation over text integrity was the central process observed within the official *Fallout 3* forum. None of the issues researched stood alone, but all worked together in a complex web revolving around a central goal. Many fans were in the forum for one reason. They weren't there for friendship or support (though these were pleasant by-products of interaction), but to engage in discourse over the game as advocates for its integrity. To most fans on the official *Fallout 3* forum, no matter where they fell on any of a myriad of nuanced issues, their purpose was clear. Whether marginalized or exploited or ignored or commodified, they soldiered on for the game they loved:

Fallout 3 MUST be like Fallout...the best answer for every question on this forum besides "I have the holy sacred duty to watch over my beloved game" ("What will it take for you to buy Fallout 3?," post 1).

The following chapter will pull these four overlapping questions into a model of fan-producer negotiation over text integrity, and discuss future opportunities for expanded research.

CHAPTER FIVE

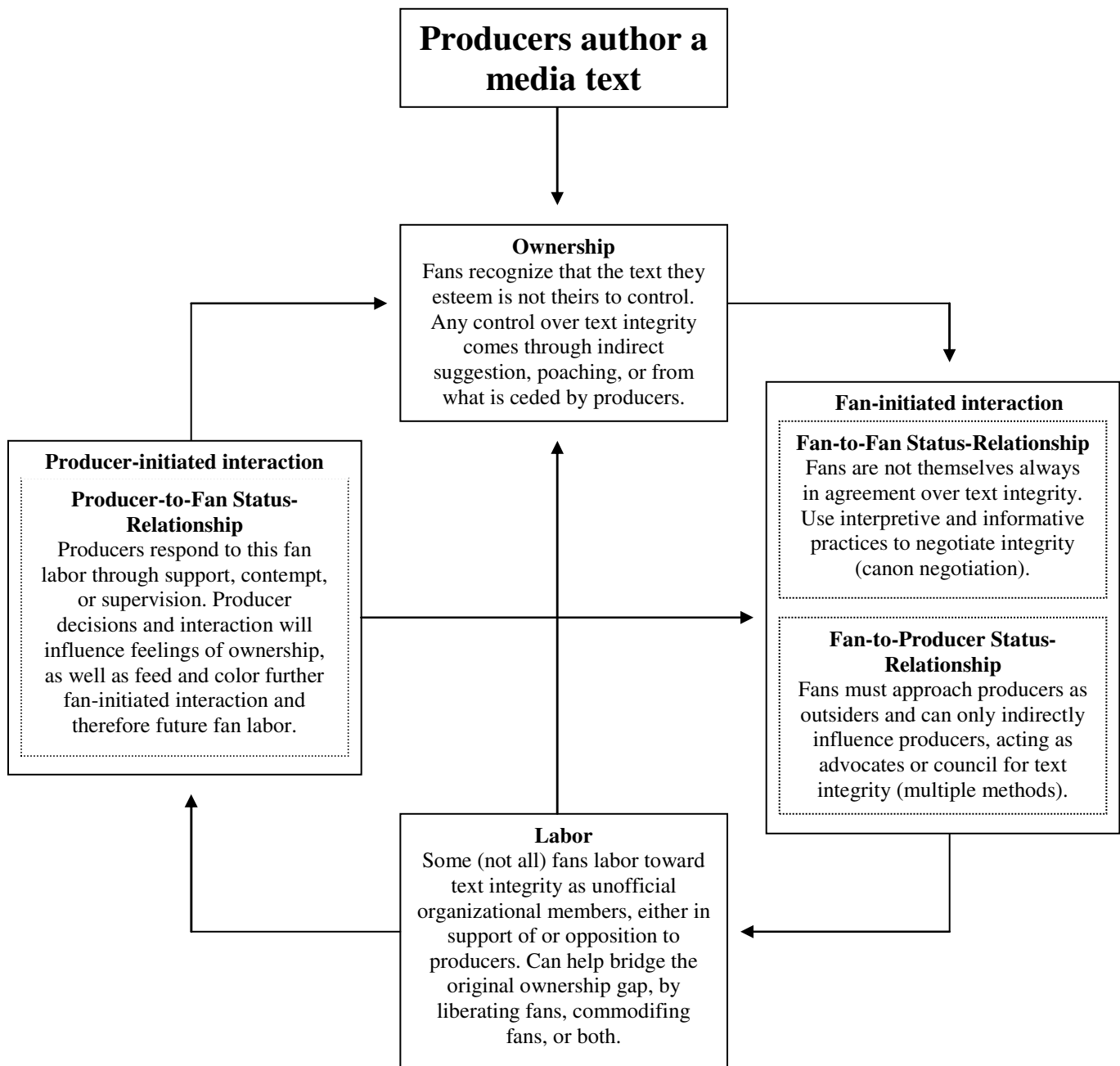
Conclusion

A model of fan-producer negotiation over text integrity

The overlaps and messy interaction I encountered on the *Fallout 3* forum spoke to the fact that the four research questions I proposed were not only related to four fundamental issues in fan discourse over text integrity, they were in fact components in a complex and diverse system of interaction that fans and producers created as they engaged the text and each other. Over time and analysis, it became clear that a complex cycle of communication was occurring as fans and producers negotiated text integrity. This discovery was most fundamentally a benefit of the deep discourse analytic methodology chosen. By going beyond the theoretical propositions and macro-level case studies found in much of the literature surrounding producers and fans, I was able to explore the subtle multiplicity of interaction types between the two parties. Moreover, this depth led to a more nuanced understanding of how discourse surrounding ownership, status-relationship, and labor integrate into a fluid process of interaction. In order to represent that fluid process, I have developed a model (Figure 2) explaining how interaction between producers and fans occurred on Bethesda's *Fallout 3* forum during the time I was collecting data. However, I believe it can be a useful lens for examining all types of fan-producer negotiations over text integrity (especially in an age where these negotiations are becoming more prevalent and instantaneous).

It begins with a media text being produced by an individual or corporation (though this model deals more with corporate control of media texts than individual control). From there, fans of the text recognize that it is not theirs to wholly own, as the answer to research question one

Figure 2: Fan-producer negotiation over text integrity



demonstrated. Any control over text integrity comes through indirect suggestion, poaching, or from what is ceded by producers. In this regard, Jenkins' (1992) arguments about fans as marginalized textual poachers still holds strong, even if the value of commodifying these poachers is increasingly recognized. Despite this marginalization, the drive to advocate, defend, or create

text integrity is strong enough that productive consumers initiate interaction in attempts to achieve the soundness, wholeness, and truth of the text.

Fans initiate this interaction in the name of text integrity on two levels. First, they interact with other fans, who are not themselves a monolith, and use interpretive and informative practices to argue for their perceptions of text integrity in the face of neutrosemey, as the answer to research question three demonstrated. While Hills (2002) claimed that “previous fan-ethnography has largely erred on the side of accepting fan discourse as interpretive ‘knowledge’ ” and advocated that researchers “reconsider fan discourse as a justification for fan passions and attachments” (p. 66), my investigation of *Fallout* fans did not confirm these claims. My data revealed that knowledge was the heart of fan discourse over text integrity, so the model reflects as much.

Second, fans must also communicate with producers as outsiders who can only indirectly influence text integrity. To do this, they use multiple methods of advocacy as they interact with producers. The advocacy methods proposed in response to research question two were how *Fallout* fans interacted with producers. The fact that this interaction is near-instantaneous and relatively two-way is a new phenomenon in fan studies, especially considering producer involvement with fan forums was something dismissed by Newman as “misplaced” and “overstated” (p. 52) recently as 2005 (though he was studying fan sites, and this study was of an official, producer-initiated site). However, in the age of the active audience, fan-producer interaction is becoming more and more common and must be considered when determining how fans and producers negotiate text integrity. While fan-to-fan interaction and fan-to-producer interaction may seem too diverse to be paired together in the same leg of the model, Sandvoss (2005) also classified “the power relations between fans and media producers” and “power

relations within fandom” (p. 9) as two sides of the same phenomenon, placing them in the same chapter of his book, *Fans*.

Out of this interaction, some (not all) fans choose to labor toward text integrity, either in support or contempt of producers. The results of research question four indicate that fans view themselves as extended organizational members (even if they are marginalized ones), so the model reflects that. This labor can help bridge the ownership gap in various ways. It can liberate fans who defiantly poach a text and make it their own, it can give fans a sense of ownership because they have come alongside producer-sanctioned goals and feel they are a part of keeping the official text official, or it can help fans influence the official text. This labor can also lead (and increasingly is leading) to producer-initiated interaction, as producers use support, contempt, or supervision tactics to respond to fan labor, as research question two confirmed. How producers respond to this fan labor can also complete the cycle in a various ways: it can affect feelings of ownership, or further influence future fan-initiated interaction, and therefore influence future fan labor.

Future investigations into fan-producer negotiation over text integrity

As seems to happen so often with utopian predictions, the democratization of producer-consumer interaction in the age of the active audience may have been overstated. While productive consumers have made great strides since Henry Jenkins declared them “peasants” in 1992, it is perhaps a bit early to assume that producers are declaring that “fandom is beautiful,” even if scholars such as Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington (2007) are. More likely, producers are recognizing that “fandom is unavoidable” when looking at the habits of their target consumers, and that “fandom is profitable” when properly commodified. The official *Fallout 3* forum

demonstrated as much. Investigating the “fringe cult” of these long-marginalized fans revealed a complex system of negotiation over text integrity, one that dealt with perceptions of ownership, the status-relationship between fans and producers, the status-relationship among fans, and the labor process of the productive consumer. Several paradoxes exist within this system. Powerless fans attempt to exert control over a text that they do not own, but they know in their heart is truly theirs. Fans believe their labor will help text integrity and financially benefit producers to producers, but fear they will be shut out by producers in the name of intellectual property and profit. Producers encourage an environment of communication, but strictly manage that communication. So while, without question, ideas of passive audience reception must be re-evaluated in the age of the active audience, the liberation for productive consumers that was theorized to come with such an age must be re-evaluated as well. The proposed model of fan-producer negotiation over text integrity provides a more nuanced perspective on the negotiation between the two parties.

The study yielded other interesting conclusions. It is apparent that the language of the New Organization and the self-motivated, specialist knowledge worker laboring across departmental lines in loosely affiliated networks toward organizational ends, is a useful (if heretofore woefully underused) paradigm for understanding productive media consumers. Indeed, Lucas and Baroudi’s (1994) predictions may be coming true after all and “in the final analysis, the organization of the future may not be an organization at all” (p. 22). Future research would do well to consider such a paradigm as it inevitably continues to question the commodification/liberation paradox of fan labor. This study saw knowledge workers who, for the most part, were interested in influencing the official text, even if they did not feel like respected members of the development team. This is evidenced in the sheer volume of criticism

found on the site. Even the prospect of modding seemed to be a last resort, only used to correct the integrity of the text (a less preferable option than a text that had integrity in the first place). Fans who were set to disregard the official text entirely and do whatever they wanted with it were in the minority, indicating that most fans on the site felt they were there to work toward a valid *Fallout 3* on release date, not after. It would be interesting to see if such regard for influencing the official text (rather than altering it later) existed on other (unofficial) *Fallout* fan sites where producer-interaction was not the norm, or even to make comparisons between other texts' official and unofficial fan sites. The fan labor issue raised more questions. To what extent can we consider fans members of an extended network of knowledge workers? Is it only when they are interacting with producers, or is it during the whole of their interactions?

It was also apparent that, even though fans active on the *Fallout 3* forum (like everyone else) did not always live up to their own cardinal values, knowledge was the key component in collecting social capital during interaction. The discourse was driven heavily by information and interpretation, and even other status markers (being a fan of the original games, not being a "console kiddy," and not being outspokenly supportive of Bethesda) all had proper information and interpretation as their root. Once again, it would be interesting to see if this was an effect of this specific forum or something that applies to other fan interaction as well. A cursory analysis would suggest that the more issues-focused a group of productive consumers is in their discussions (be it across a whole forum or on a single thread), the more likely they are to have and uphold these values, and the more socially-focused a group of productive consumers is, the less interpretation and information will be cardinal values (even if they are still valued among other things). This explanation may help explain (outside of pure bias) why some researchers

find fans so emotional and others find them so rational. Of course, detailed research will be needed to further investigate such a paradox.

The study also found that *Fallout* fans used multiple methods of advocacy to interact with producers over text integrity. I found that *Fallout* fans used consular/managerial, antagonistic/adversarial, cynical/jaded, and deferential/respectful approaches to interaction with producers. It would be interesting to apply these terms to how other fan groups communicate with producers and test their validity. Other fan groups could very well engage with producers in completely different ways. While consular/managerial and antagonistic/adversarial methods of advocacy were the most common I encountered, this could very well be a result of the tense situation *Fallout* fans find themselves in. Exploring more benevolent fan-producer relationships (for instance the relationship of *The Sims* franchise with its fans), could yield different methods of interaction. Since so few studies have closely examined direct and consistent producer-fan interaction, literature does not have much of a precedent for how these two parties communicate. This study was a step toward understanding the issue. These methods of advocacy could be usefully tested in other contexts.

Ultimately, the model of fan-producer negotiation over text integrity I developed out of studying the official *Fallout 3* forum is useful for a few reasons, especially since direct and near-synchronous fan-producer interaction has been understudied. The fact that this model came out of an exploration of a digital-game fan community is also important, given that there is still little scholarship linking fandom and gaming. The model provides a way to explain how a few diverse issues (ownership, status-relationship with producers, status-relationship among fans, and labor) overlap and interact. By doing so, it offers a relatively parsimonious explanation for a complex set of phenomena that heretofore have not been explicitly linked. It also takes into account the

many diverse ways fans and producers can interact as they negotiate text integrity. The model appears to be a useful tool when investigating how communities of productive consumers engage with producers and each other. Utilizing it in such a fashion across diverse situations will only help further test and strengthen it. If it holds, it may serve as useful device in explaining how producers and consumers negotiate text integrity in the age of the active audience.

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APPENDIX

Glossary of terms

10th Anniversary Contest (Perk Contest): A competition initiated by Bethesda in which participants were invited to create and submit perks. The winning perk would be included in *Fallout 3*. The winner and runners up would also receive material prizes.

Bethesda Softworks: The game development studio that purchased the rights to *Fallout 3* and is developing it in-house through one of its divisions, Bethesda Game Studios.

Brahmin: A term from the *Fallout* universe. Two-headed cows that serve as livestock.

Black Isle: The game studio that developed *Fallout 1* and *Fallout 2* under producer Interplay.

Brother None: A respected opinion-leader among many *Fallout* fans and one of the founders of the fansite *No Mutants Allowed*.

Brotherhood of Steel (BoS, BOS): A term from the *Fallout* universe. A faction that emerged after the nuclear war who existed to preserve and develop technology. Used imagery, language, and structure akin to knightly orders.

Brotherhood of Steel Faction Profile (Developer Diary): A posting to the official *Fallout* website in which Lead Designer Emil Pagliarulo submitted a narrative detailing how and why the

Brotherhood of Steel made it out to Washington, D.C., the setting of *Fallout 3*, from their base on the west coast.

Console: A digital-game device (such as the Xbox 360 or the Playstation 3) where all the hardware and software necessary to play many games comes packaged in one unit and hooks up to televisions to be played. Many on the *Fallout 3* forum considered consoles inferior to the PC due to the perception that consoles provide immature games that place an emphasis on graphics over story.

Construction Set (CS): A piece of software that some digital-game developers ship with the game that allows players to accomplish many modding tasks (such as altering or creating levels or characters) with greater ease.

Criticals: In many RPGs, these are types of hits that deal extra damage, and are usually correlated to a combination of character skill and luck.

Deathclaw: A term from the *Fallout* universe. These large monstrous creatures dealt great damage and could be savagely brutal or surprisingly sophisticated.

Duck and Cover (DaC, DAC): A fansite (www.duckandcover.cx) widely esteemed, along with *No Mutants Allowed*, by many in the *Fallout* fan community.

Emil Pagliarulo: The lead designer of *Fallout 3* and an important designer on *Oblivion*.

Fallout: Brotherhood of Steel: A 2004 game from the *Fallout* universe that is not considered canon by many fans due to its break from the aesthetic, mood, and story of that universe.

Fallout: Tactics: A 2001 game from the *Fallout* universe that is not considered canon by many fans due to its break from the aesthetic, mood, and story of that universe.

First-Person Perspective (FPP): In digital games, this term is used to describe games where the player sees entirely from the perspective of the player character.

First-Person Shooter (FPS): A genre of digital games played out of the first-person perspective and revolving heavily (if not entirely) around using projectile weaponry to kill scores of enemies.

Hand-to-Hand (HtH): In digital games, melee combat that is done with the player character's fists. In RPGs, this is a skill that can usually be chosen by the player and upgraded accordingly.

Intellectual Property (IP): The concept that something one creates with one's mind (especially media or art) can be owned just the same as physical property.

Interplay: The publisher that released *Falout 1* and *Fallout 2*, which were developed for that release by Black Isle Studios.

Isometric View (ISO): In digital games, a view that places the camera as a “bird’s eye” in the sky and follows the movements of the player character from a distance (often with a slight angle), compared to first-person perspective or over-the-shoulder perspective.

Leetspeak: A distinctive written language and syntax developed among some hacker communities in which words and phrases are shortened with letter and number combinations, or intentionally altered (e.g., “leetspeak” comes from “elite speak” and is often spelled “1337speak”). On the *Fallout 3* forum, this form of communication is often mocked as immature, representative of an inferior demographic, and unintelligent.

Lyons: In the Brotherhood of Steel faction profile, Owyn Lyons is a member of the Brotherhood of Steel who was tasked with traveling to Washington D.C.

Mod: A code-level alteration of a digital game which allows players to significantly alter gameplay objects such as levels or characters, or even produce whole new games.

Morrowind: A 2003 game and the third installment of Bethesda’s popular *Elder Scrolls* series.

No Mutants Allowed (NMA): A fansite (www.nma-fallout.com) widely esteemed, along with *Duck and Cover*, by many in the *Fallout* fan community.

Oblivion: A 2006 game and the fourth installment of Bethesda's popular *Elder Scrolls* series. It is criticized by many on the *Fallout 3* forum as being too simplistic, having horrible dialogue, and containing a weakly-stereotypical high-fantasy plot.

Pen and Paper (PnP): In RPGs, the origins of the genre that many digital games borrow elements from. These RPGs were played without the aid of technology other than a pen and paper and required imagination and lead to player creativity (e.g. *Dungeons and Dragons*).

Player Character: The avatar in a digital game that the player manipulates in order to achieve goals.

Perk: In the *Fallout* games, a perk is a bonus attribute or skill a player receives after progressing to a certain level of character skill. Unlike traits, they have no negative side-effects, but must be earned during gameplay.

Real Time (RT): In digital games, this type of gameplay centers on combat where the player character and enemies are both engaging in combat at the same time. It is thought to emphasize skill and reaction time over strategy and planning.

Role Playing Game (RPG): A somewhat contested genre of digital games which, depending on who is consulted, contains a few key characteristics, including: character customization and development, player choice (in dialogue or character action), and an emphasis on character skill along with player skill.

S.P.E.C.I.A.L.: In the *Fallout* games, character customization and skill rests on the S.P.E.C.I.A.L. system. It is an acronym for strength, perception, endurance, charisma, intelligence, agility, and luck. The player has a certain number of points at the beginning of the game to place in any of these categories. How points are allotted will affect character skill in certain aspects of the game such as dialogue and combat.

The Elder Scrolls (TES): Bethesda Softworks most popular and successful games to-date. They include *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* and *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*.

Todd Howard: The Executive Producer of *Fallout 3*.

Trait: In the *Fallout* games, a trait is a character attribute or skill that is chosen at the beginning of gameplay. Unlike traits, they are available from the outset, but are mostly a balance of a positive and a negative effect on the character.

Turn Based (TB): In digital games, this type of gameplay centers on combat where the player character and enemies take turns engaging in combat (much like a chess match). It is thought to emphasize strategy and planning over skill and reaction time.

Van Buren: The beta name for Interplay's version of *Fallout 3* never released (except recently as an incomplete free download), and thought by many *Fallout* fans to be what *Fallout 3* should have been.

The Vault: A fan-produced *Fallout* wiki site (<http://fallout.wikia.com>) containing an in-depth encyclopedia of all things *Fallout*.

Vault Boy: The iconic, blonde, smiley, cartoon figure that appears throughout much of the *Fallout* games, including as an animation for perks, as the main figure in in-game instructional videos, and as the official logo for the vault program that harbored individuals during the nuclear war.

Vault-Assisted Targeting System (V.A.T.S.): A controversial gameplay element of *Fallout 3* in which real-time combat will be augmented with the ability to pause that combat and use character skill to attempt special, critical attacks.