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Franchise Name: Wasteland
Wasteland, USA, 1988
Wasteland 2, USA, 2014
Wasteland 2: Directors Cut, USA, 2015

"Your enemy explodes like a blood sausage."
A popular example Wasteland's infamous flavor text.

Though not the first game to be set in the ruins of the apocalypse - examples of earlier games include the car-combat RPG *Autoduel* (1985) and turn-based strategy game *Road War* (1986) - *Wasteland* was groundbreaking for the fact that it was the first ever sandbox post-apocalyptic RPG, and created many of the foundational narrative themes of the genre. This is particularly noteworthy for though *Wasteland* was created at a time of limited computing power and when game development was a hobbyist industry, it nonetheless honed many of the conventions of today's computer RPGs. Moreover, without *Wasteland,* there would be no *Fallout* franchise and our contemporary gaming landscape would look very different.

Building on the success of Interplay's world design in *The Bard's Tale* (1985-1988), *Wasteland*'s design allowed players the freedom to explore a persistent world without having to advance the primary game narrative. There are side-quests and random encounters that we recognize in today's RPGs, but there was also a unique effort to design an environment that promoted player led exploration and player centric interactive narrative. The game used a reputation system; the results of player actions rippled across their world. At the time, a unique revolutionary interpretation of the concept of sandbox game design. Moreover, players of *Wasteland* were finding that the appeal of this form of freedom was not simply the exploration of a destroyed world, but also an exploration of political, ethical and moral viewpoints. Many players soon found themselves in an open world full of moral and ethical ambiguity and that playing the game 'their way' meant dealing with the repercussions of 'their' actions for the first time in an interactive setting.[1] More often than not, the game underscored the player's ethical dilemmas with its own infamous brand of flavor texts and combat reports as characters were *"...reduced to a thin red paste"* or *"...exploded like a blood sausage." Wasteland* drew heavily on tabletop RPG traditions of interactive storytelling, eschewing linear events in favour of player freedom that lent the game depth, candor, and a dark sardonic humour.

Combining the tragic subtext of nuclear war, at a time of heightened Cold War tensions, with violence and dark humor was exhilarating and troubling, and earned the game an unofficial PG-13 rating in the USA. There are many works of cultural theory regarding the influence, conscious

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[1] Gladstone, Darren. "The Games for Windows Interview with Brian Fargo: living in the fallout." *Games for Windows: The Official Magazine,* New York, Ziff-Davis Media Inc. August 2007. pp 46-48

or otherwise, of the threat of nuclear war on film, literature, and even music. Indeed, it is pertinent to consider how a society living in the perpetual terror of the threat of self-inhalation could, or should, deal with this pressing psychosocial reality. Games however fall outside many cultural frames of reference and their impact and function was ignored. In the 1960s, Susan Sontag considered that moviegoers were drawn to apocalyptic films by the aesthetics of disaster; audiences were fascinated by witnessing glorious visions of their own destruction. A generation later *Wasteland* is significant in the fact that audiences had matured, it is not simply the aesthetics of destruction that lure players, but examining what it would be like to survive a nuclear apocalypse, what would it be like to start over, what horrors would await us if we really could begin again? For all its dark and brooding content *Wasteland's* narrative and humor underpinned a notional optimism; it would bad, horrific beyond imagination, but perhaps the apocalypse would not be total.

Set in 2087, following global nuclear war in 1998, the player controls a party of Desert Rangers, a small surviving detachment of the US Army, as they explore the remnants of the Southwestern USA. The party consisted of four starting members, expanded to seven by recruiting survivors of the wastes. Based on a stats system, with twenty-seven separate character skills to build from, the player operated a fully customizable party with diverse characteristics. Problem solving was fluid using violence, subterfuge, diplomacy or a combination of all three. The ability to build a squad from a diverse set of characters, all with narrative backstories that molded interactions with the world, were the results of five years of scripting and design work by Interplay. These efforts were recognized by gamers as *Wasteland* quickly became a critical and cult success.[2]

What then occurred is a fascinating study in games design and development. Licensing issues, production challenges and chance combined to see Fargo lose control of the rights to *Wasteland*, instead developing *Fallout (1997)* that moved from squad based to single character play. However, many of the narrative themes and innovations from *Wasteland* were lifted wholesale into the new franchise that quickly expanded with the release of *Fallout 2* (1998). By 2003 Fargo had left Interplay and founded InXile Entertainment, and an interesting turn of events saw rights for *Fallout* transferred to Bethesda and the prodigal son *Wasteland* return to the fold. However, the mounting pressures and escalating costs of games development and publication, and new trends in gaming, translated into less financial enthusiasm for the detailed scripting entailed in sandbox party based games that had prevailed in the previous generation.

Repeated attempts to acquire funding for the development of *Wasteland 2* failed, until it launched on the crowd-funding site *Kickstarter* in March 2012 breaking all records. It reached $600,000 in twenty-four hours and reached its $900,000 goal within two days. It finally reached a *Kickstarter* total of $2,933,252, promising fans a return to complex party based post-apocalyptic storytelling with modern design sensibilities. However, it would appear that *Wasteland* was a cathartic release for a generation living in the nuclear shadow of the Cold War. Now that we stand a decade and a half into a new millennium, what does the crowd-funding success of *Wasteland 2* say about our own psychosocial reality today?

[2] Barton, Matt. "The History of Computer Roleplaying Games Part 2: The Golden Age (1985-1993)" *Gamasutra*. 23/02/ 2007, date accessed 11/01/2016.
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