NEW AMERICAN STUDIES JOURNAL

Volume 77, 2025
10.18422/77-2540

The American Ghoul — Race in the *Fallout* Games in the Context of US Race Relations

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Abstract This essay explores how the *Fallout* game series reimagines the zombie through its figure of the ghoul, questioning its role as a mirror of American racial politics. Unlike the generic video game zombie, which many titles use as a ubiquitous antagonist, *Fallout*'s ghoul foregrounds ongoing processes of racialization and de-racialization, showing how play, history, race, science fiction, and monstrosity intersect. Drawing on the cultural genealogy of zombie figures, the analysis details how the ghoul's uncanny status as posthuman and monstrous Other invites players into affective and ethical entanglements that may reveal the persistence of racial antagonisms. While encounters with ghouls tend to expose the racist basis of xenophobia and anti-ghoul bigotry in *Fallout* 3 and *New Vegas*, the later titles increasingly downplay or erase these dimensions. By tracing how ghouls oscillate between individualized voices and faceless hordes, the essay shows how game design mirrors larger cultural struggles to confront or suppress race. Situating *Fallout*'s shifting portrayals against the backdrop of US race relations, ranging from the Bush era's War on Terror to Trump's populist xenophobia, it reads the figure as a contested and complex site for America's haunted racial unconscious.

Keywords race, video games, *Fallout* game series, monster studies, US race relations

Introduction: The Ghoul as a Racializing Metaphor on Social Media

Through our current pop-cultural codes, zombie figures are often understood as secular and capitalist embodiments of horror that herald the end of human history and our socio-cultural practices of ordering and understanding society rather than their continuation. In cultural texts like video games or films, the zombie appears existential but egalitarian, supernatural but secular, divorced from its colonial-racial history yet reimagined as multicultural, and dangerous but without a justified claim to vengeance. Hence, it seems, the figure of the zombie has been severed from discussions of race and racism to a substantial degree (see Canavan). In the context of the popular *Fallout* game series, however, an intriguing version of the zombie figure, the ghoul, calls this reading into question and draws attention to the ways the zombie/ghoul expresses practices of de/racialization in US culture.

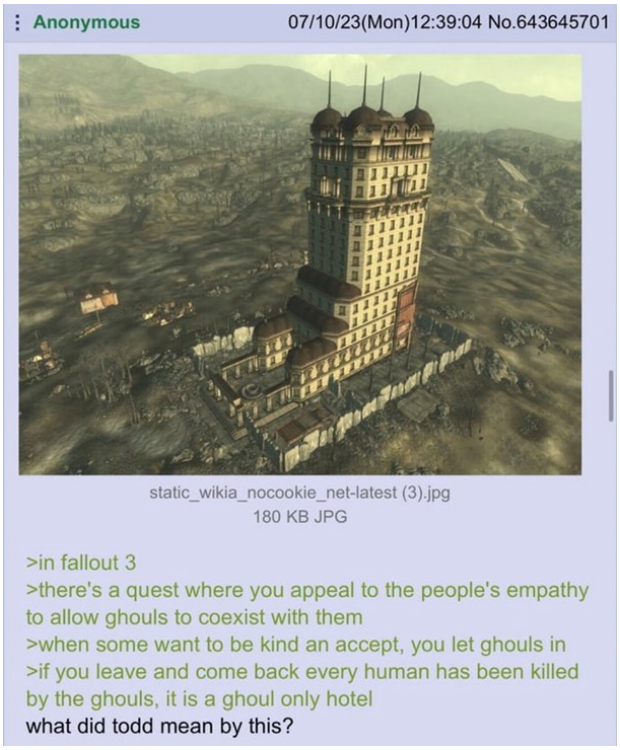

Figure 1. A *9gag* post titled "What do you mean Todd" referencing a quest from the *Fallout* games (etr1uss).

Recently, online participants of the social media website *9gag* discussed one of the quests of *Fallout* 3 (2008).[1] One of the several posts in the style of a 4chan greentext was titled "What do you mean Todd" (a reference to the writer and game developer Todd Howard with Bethesda) and received more than 9100 upvotes (fig. 1).[2] The post reads the quest along the lines of a xenophobic parable of immigration in which "ghouls" and "the people" cannot "coexist" (etr1uss) and the in-game hotel as a metaphor for social space, which, as is argued, is inevitably antagonistic. In addition to the xenophobic reading of the quest, however, the way the online participants read the ghoul in racialized and blatantly racist terms concerns the present essay: the most upvoted comment (at 4,500 likes), "Gouls [sic] only take up 13% of the hotel rooms but," is clearly a White supremacist reference and immediately testifies to the racialized notions of the figure of the ghoul.[3] The second comment says "i will never forget how i entered the ghoul base and killed all of them" while further down the line participants write "it's about that group we don't like isn't it?," post a Black-faced SpongeBob meme saying "ight imma steal that," and post the equation "Ghouls = rapefugees." While some thus relate the ghoul to the topic of immigration, others position it within the context of US race relations, which the game series certainly speaks to. Common to either reading, however, is the practice of racializing the ghoul and thus dehumanizing an Other (here: the non-White or the immigrant body) who is deemed killable. While the following reading of the figure of the ghoul against the backgrounds of the *Fallout* games and US race relations will challenge such racist readings of the quest, the core thesis put forward is that the figure of the ghoul highlights and confronts practices of racialization that run parallel to de-racialization. In other words, despite the game's attempt at de-racializing on-screen hostilities through the explicit designation of a ghoulish, non-human Other, users are readily able to re-racialize a conflict, which can be read as a reflection of racialized structures of antagonism.

In the following, I will first give a short overview of previous research on the figure of the zombie/ghoul in game studies to argue that issues of race have not been given adequate attention. To highlight the immediacy with which the figure urges us to consider it as a carrier of practices of de/racialization, I provide a discursive and historical genealogy of the zombie/ghoul.

Then, I turn to the *Fallout* game series, focusing on the titles produced by Bethesda, and offer a close reading of the complex series of reimaginations of the American ghoul. Finally, I map the development of the game against a backdrop of US racial rhetoric, as exemplified by the presidents in office at the time of the release dates.

Video Games, Race, and the Zombie

Video games offer a distinctive medium for examining contemporary perspectives on race due to their interactive nature, immersive environments, and capacity to reflect and shape social ideologies. Unlike other more traditional visual media, video games engage players in decision-making and world-building, making the (re)presentation of race and ethnicity a dynamic experience that can both mirror and challenge existing biases. Since games usually blend storytelling with gameplay mechanics, they necessarily encode cultural values and hierarchies into their narratives, character design, and world systems. As more than 60% of the US population (ages 5-90) engaged in regular video game play in 2024 (Entertainment Software Association), video games are today among the most relevant and yet under-researched cultural sites for the construction of race and racism.

While game studies still generally neglect perspectives on race and racism, several different approaches have made efforts to foreground these issues and their intersectional ties to other performative constructs such as gender, class, ableism, etc. (see Devane and Squire; Richard and Gray; Srauy). Examining the cultural landscape of game protagonists, Everett and Watkins reveal that nearly 70% of them were White males in 2008, while Williams and colleagues found an even higher systematic over-representation in the US context in 2009. In the fictional world of *World of Warcraft*, to mention a well-known title, world-building is inherently tied to biological essentialism through conceptualizations of race (determining language, intellect, temperament, etc.), as Monson has noted.

David Leonhard's work, most notably, argues that game studies need to scrutinize racial representations in video games ("Live"; "Not a Hater"). Drawing from Omi and Winant's work on racial formation, he conceptualizes games as "racial projects" ("Live" 3). Leonhard considers games "a powerful medium

in which racialized ideas, bodies, and structures are constructed, mediated, and presented" (3). He argues that games disseminate racial stereotypes but also problematically exemplify how "pleasure can be derived from visiting and becoming the racialized other" (4). For a perspective that aims to combine aspects of semiotic representation and affectively lived play, Leonhard's way of thinking of games as "a space to engage American discourses, ideologies, and racial dynamics" (3) rings true. The latter, crucially, includes their potential roles in "education, propaganda, and therapy" (8).

Games can be described as *carriers of practices of racialization* and *de-racialization*, i.e., they actively engage in a construction and deconstruction of racial and racist framings of bodies and bodily differences. As such, video games — either intentionally or unconsciously — partake in a hierarchical structure which unequally distributes notions of humanity and Otherness/death to its characters, mirroring real-world racial characterizations even after their apparent de-racialization. Games thus have the capacity to either challenge or reinforce prevalent racial preconceptions, implying both critical potential and hegemonic reproduction.[4] However, this framing extends beyond games that explicitly thematize questions of race, no matter how expressed, repressive, or regressive the resistance to address games as political agents. Soraya Murray insists on this very point:

> I operate from the base assumption that all games engage in a politics of identity, not just some of them. [. . .] [T]the perceived neutrality of games, even those that do not purport to deal with issues of identity, traffic in the assumption of a perceived "universalism" or "neutrality" that is fictive. It has never been the case that there was a politically neutral or a raceless form of games representation. (40)

Adding to this, the very resistance to scrutinizing the alleged neutrality of games is in part fueled by the supposedly natural, i.e., sedimented way games represent worlds and offer them as play partners (see Wischert-Zielke "Rethinking Playfulness").

Compared to literary and film studies, game studies have only begun to examine the zombie's role in games. This research gap is severe as the zombie has been a character as pervasive in game design as in film. Since their introduction to early arcade titles such as the 1976 *Death Race*, the zombie has, in the words of Webley, "become a video game character par excellence" (3).

Most game scholars writing about the zombie tie its role to antagonistic design (Brock; Backe and Aarseth; Krzywinska; Hunt; Sihvonen). Krzywinska argues that "most games present zombies simply as expendable and defeatable 'cannon fodder'" (165) in horror survival and action titles such as the *Resident Evil* (1996-2023), *Wolfenstein* (1981-2019), or *Silent Hill* (1999-2012) game series. As mindless and non-human creatures, zombies are "perfect enemies that can be killed without incurring guilt in the name of survival" (Krzywinska 168). Games like *Left 4 Dead* (2008) or *Call of Duty: Black Ops* (2010) heavily rely on this use of the zombie to create apocalyptic spaces haunted by rhythmic and affective waves of charging feral bodies to be purged in the player's gunfire (fig. 2).

Figure 2. Zombies attacking the player-character in *Left 4 Dead 2* (2009).

Going beyond the formalist claim that the zombie has a single meaning derived from its in-game function, other accounts have contributed to a more complex image of the zombie/ghoul in games (Backe and Aarseth; Barr; McKissack and May; Sihvonen; Witkowski). Backe and Aarseth regards them as "political allegories" (2) that may simultaneously suggest "an underprivileged Other, the process of its Othering, and the politics and rhetoric of denial that goes with this process" (4). Backe and Aarseth further suggest that video games from *Plants vs. Zombies* (2009) to *DayZ* (2012) may self-

reflectingly comment on the allegorical dimensions of zombies or engage the player in playful ethical reflections.

Arguments highlighting the *racial connotations* of the zombie/ghoul, however, are almost nonexistent. Brock's discussion of the racist depiction of African (zombified but also pre-zombification) bodies in *Resident Evil* 5 (2009) presents a notable exception. In his reading of the game, it is not just the zombie but its "race [which] stands in for cultural evil. [. . .] Africans are depicted as malevolent and savage" (442). Here, the construction of antagonism is inherently tied to racialization and de-humanization. As a different race, the Other is beyond mutual intelligibility and, therefore, needs to be erased:

> The rationale of the game is kill or be killed, so murder is the default interaction. Humanity is reserved for the protagonist; every infected enemy has forfeited their claim to personhood. [. . .] The combination of narrative, game mechanics, and cultural rationales of primitive strength and genetic susceptibility yield this result: an electronic rendition of savage, deformed, colored bodies that build upon long-standing stereotypes and in-game mechanics to power the player's revulsion and justify their extinction. (Brock 443)

What are these long-standing stereotypes at work in the construction of the zombie? Backe and Aarseth's influential overview touches upon the way the ghoul in *Fallout* 3 taps into the racial notions informing the zombie. They regard the figure as an embodiment of a novel race or ethnicity that enables the player to position herself in the ethically difficult entanglements of the game. In the following, I will expand upon their argument by sketching out the conceptual and discursive genealogies of the *Fallout* series' zombie/ghoul figure.

A Conceptual Genealogy of the Zombie/Ghoul as Racialized/Racializing Figure

Elsewhere, I have argued that the cultural figure of the monster is more than a representation of evil and needs to be scrutinized as a link of the sayable/thinkable and the unsayable/unthinkable, the *discursive* and the *extra-discursive* (Wischert-Zielke "The Impulse-Image"). The monster shows us what is at stake in the moment we meet, what needs to be exorcised (in us) if we are to enable ourselves to go on but also what *cannot* be eradicated as

it stands on the border of our being and threatens to destroy us if we fail to acknowledge it. The ongoing relevance of zombies and ghouls in popular culture testifies to their potential to embody various socio-cultural and historical anxieties and hopes. However, the racial histories and dynamics they have come to absorb through the cycles of adaptation often remain.

Mogk's popular definition of the modern pop-culture zombie ascribes three elements to it: it is 1) a human corpse, 2) relentlessly aggressive, and 3) comes into being through biological infection, i.e., it is "biological in nature, even if dead. It is not supernatural or magical and is thus subservient to scientific rationale" (6-7). As a figure of modernism — Deleuze and Guattari are ubiquitously quoted referring to the zombie as "the only modern myth" (*Anti-Oedipus* 335) — the zombie has for many come to stand in for secular and scientific monstrousness seemingly bereft of racial and colonial histories. This section argues that the zombie/ghoul has never ceased to carry notions and practices of de/racialization.

The zombie does not have as smooth an origin as its simplified representation as a resurrected corpse implies today. The zombie seems to come into being in three distinct practices, namely through

1. *African religious beliefs and practices*; as well as
2. their *displacement* to the Caribbean (particularly the island of Hispaniola and Haiti, which became centers of Spanish and French colonialism) in the course of brutal *colonial abduction*; and
3. the emergence of *Haitian religious practices of vodou* (to be distinguished from the Western racist imaginary of allegedly uncivilized and black magic using Others today constructed via the term *voodoo*[5]) that are *inseparable* from the experience of *slavery* and *anti-colonial resistance* (specifically during the Haitian revolution from 1791 to 1804).

The term *zombi* was used to refer to a variety of different figures tied to the resurrection of the dead in African traditions. Moreman and Rushton (see 2-3) distinguish two initial figures: First, the *zombi astral*, also *zonbi astral* in the Haitian creole (McAlister 459), is a raw and disembodied (but living) spirit whose powers are captured. Second, there is the figure of a soulless body resurrected from the grave but lacking its personality (only this second fig-

ure is part of the current Western and North American imaginary). This later version came to be part of the Haitian imaginary, albeit not as a threatening or aggressive figure (zombification itself, however, was perceived as a real danger). Haitian folklore believed the zombi to be "the product of evil magics employed by a dark priest known as *bokor*, or sorcerer, to be distinguished from the benign priest and priestess, *houngan* and *mambo*" (Moreman and Rushton 3).

Today, the zombie is often described as a unitary figure marked by "the emptiness of a negation of negation, a free flying and autonomous signifier, meaningful in its meaninglessness" (Webley 2). Such framings sever the zombie from a colonial history that ties it *inherently* to "the fear of being enslaved" (Moreman and Rushton 3) but also, as McAlister maintains, a "rebellion against it" (461). Borrowing from Taussig, she refers to the zombi's place of birth as the "colonial 'space of death,'" which is inextricable from the "'culture of terror' of the plantation" (461). Beyond an alleged meaninglessness, in which the zombie *abstractly* points to the concept of death in life, the zombie carries the lived weight of real lives cast into colonial death zones.

Before going into the cultural re-colonization of the *zombi* as *zombie*, often overlooked predecessors in the US context are worth mentioning. A century before the well-known adaptations from the American film industry in the 20th century, the term *zombi* already appeared in newspaper stories. As Ann Kordas reconstructs, there was already an emerging colonial trope of "a creature of African 'origin' that willingly performed services for whites" (16) — a trope Kordas labels "the original American zombi." Furthermore, a second use of *Zombi*, spelled with a capital Z, points to "the name attributed to the leader of various pre-nineteenth-century, non-American slave revolts" (17) (e.g., in 17th century Pernambuco, Brazil). Thus, before the zombie haunted the US screens, it marked the place of colonial slavery and colonial resistance in the American imaginary, too.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the anti/colonial figure of the Haitian/Caribbean zombi was transformed into the American *zombie* through the first of a long and obsessive line of adaptations to and within US popular culture. The latter began in travel literature with William Seabrook's 1929 *The Magic Island*. Published during the ongoing US occupation of Haiti (1905-1934), the book paints a sensationalist image of a savage and exotic

Other by framing the zombie as a real phenomenon witnessed by the autobiographic author. The book inspired the 1932 film *White Zombie* directed by Victor Halperin and starring Bela Lugosi as sinister sugar plantation owner. In the mills of the film, zombified workers toil all night, their mindless bodies controlled by Lugosi's character in scenes predating but mirroring Chaplin's masses of workers in *Modern Times* (1936). Gradually, the original non-American context (and with it, the figure of the *bocor*) was removed and replaced: in the Depression era, the zombie was used as a vehicle to raise gender issues, in the WWII period for comedic relief, and in the 50s as a metaphor for the communist invasion from within (see Dendle 48). Crucially, however, the early US zombie at the beginning of the 20th century carried the notion of "human reductionism" — imported from the Caribbean figure — that marks the colonial and capitalist projects of "reduc[ing] a person to body, [. . .] behaviour to basic motor functions, and [. . .] social utility to pure labour" (Dendle 48). Yet, contrary to the zombi, the early American zombie was "synonymous with a kind of barbaric racial blackness" (McAlister 472), and in many respects still carries those practices of Othering through the concept of race today. Hence, Kordas links the US zombie to anxieties of the White middle class:

> [B]oth the zombie and the zombie master came to represent those elements of society which America's white middle class found disturbing [. . .]. Cultural representations of the zombie in the United States have thus been intimately linked with cultural ideas regarding African Americans and other people of color, southern and eastern European immigrants, and "modern" women — elements considered potentially dangerous to white, middle-class society in the early twentieth-century. (16)

A significant change in the zombie trope came with George Romero's influential series of cinematic reimaginations in the late 60s. The 1968 *Night of the Living Dead* reimagined the figure as a violent and aggressive threat (where it had previously rather evoked, not enacted, the subjugation of the body and mind). The film positions a group of people in an antagonistic struggle against an entire group of walking dead. The sole survivor, the Black character Ben, is unexpectedly shot by a White group of vigilante forces at the end of the film, conjuring repressed images of lynching in the US. The film thus places an evocation of "repressed memories of colonial slavery and racism" in an "ideologically charged survival space where the survivors fought each other in disastrous displays of non-cooperation" (Webley 5). This political

framing of the zombie (that now appears as a *horde*) defies superficial readings in terms of "straightforward allegories of White power and Black abjection" and urges the audience to recognize "the destabilization, collapse, and uncanny merging of such binary identities" (54), as Kee puts it.

Furthermore, in Romero's vision, the US zombie moved closer to and *merged inseparably* with the figure of the *ghoul*. The characters in the first film label the threatening Others, whose ontology remains in the dark in the film, as *ghouls* rather than *zombies*. The ghoul has mythological origins as old as the Mesopotamian civilization and was later incorporated into Islam, before being adapted again, this time in the West, in the aftermath of the French 18th-century translation of *Arabian Nights* (see Al-Rawi, "Mythic Ghoul" and "Arabic Ghoul"). In the Western imagination, the ghoul (and, through Romero, also the zombie) came to be associated primarily with the (imaginary) practice of cannibalism and the place of the cemetery. Though the zombie and the ghoul are overlapping versions of the undead monster trope in today's cultural imaginary, the latter is framed less as a mindless being and thus seems closer to the human. Furthermore, the ghoul has often been framed as a quasi-racial figure, marked as Other than human, yet disturbingly close to it. This is because both the ghoul and the zombie approach the limits of what may count as human, but the ghoul approaches the limit, so to speak, from the other side: Unlike the zombie, which is a clearly exhuman body, the ghoul's relationship to the human is more one of uncanny similarity across a critical threshold that, as a fiction of supposedly discrete types, can be coded in racial/racist terms. In the racist imaginary of Lovecraftian cosmic horror, a prime example of lingering eugenic paranoia of degeneration at the beginning of the 20th century, the ghoul is a figure of "madness and monstrosity" that appeared "seldom completely human, but often approached humanity in varying degree" (295), as Lovecraft writes in the story "Pickman's Model."

Through the fusion with the ghoul and the resurgence of capitalist framings in Romero's second film, *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), which replaced the earlier domestic interior settings with the suburban shopping mall, the zombie apparently sheds its Haitian legacy (and its magical ontology) but continues to embody and maybe to "expose the ways of racial oppression" (Molpeceres 159). Soon, the antagonism surrounding the figure expanded into the apoc-

alyptic worlds of films like *28 Days Later* (2002) or *World War Z* (2013). The zombie/ghoul became "enraged, feral, frantic, and insatiable" (Dendle 54) and de-individuated further beyond its psychic coloniality as part of a self-reproducing (i.e., self-colonizing) contagious horde of Others (sometimes maybe too) easily read as "capital itself" (Moreman and Rushton 7).

With the intensification of apocalyptic themes after 9/11, the zombie returned as "the ultimate metaphor operating within our twenty-first-century milieu" (Webley 2) and its variants have been proliferating since. Two tendencies are significant in this context: on the one hand, Reyes describes a "cognitive and empathetic turn" that has intensified "a problematic blurring of ontological boundaries — just where do zombies begin and humans end?" (99). On the other hand, the prevailing Whiteness of the zombie is noted by McAlister, who argues that zombies are today part of a "hyperwhite apocalypse" in which the "white zombie" as embodying average, inert, almost "dead whiteness" stands in opposition to the "black body" that is imagined as more "alive" (480).

In summary, a key finding of the present overview is the socio-cultural significance of the zombie/ghoul concerning the construct(ion) of race. From the two-fold Haitian/Caribbean zombi today, inseparable from its racist framings and sensational Othering into the US zombie, and the sedimented pre-20th century colonial figures of the subservient zombie and the slave revolt leader, to the later capitalist allegories that have multiplied the zombie into a devouring and infectious mass of Others in apocalyptic scenarios, and, finally, the present series of adaptations — the zombie needs to be regarded as a carrier of practices of de/racialization that is inextricably tied to colonial histories, anti-colonial struggles, postcolonial fears, and lingering attempts of Othering non-White bodies. Before turning to the role of the figure in the *Fallout* game series, I will briefly discuss the significance of the postapocalyptic imaginary in the contemporary United States.

Fallout's Retro-Futuristic Imaginary of the US Post-Apocalypse

The games of the *Fallout* are set in an alternative US future combining fantastic speculative fiction with a sci-fi post-apocalyptic setting. The design of the game worlds relates to existing cities, architectures, and memorial and historical sites of the US (fig. 3).

Figure 3. The US Capitol (left) and the Lincoln Memorial (right still) in the post-apocalyptic setting of *Fallout* 3 (2008).

In the timeline of the game series' history, which diverges from our world at some point after WWII, an apocalyptic nuclear war between the US and China has ended civilization and society as we know it in the year 2077. Set in the 22nd and 23rd centuries, the games thematize the lives and struggles of post-apocalyptic survivors such as isolated vault dwellers, scattered rural and struggling urban populations, traveling scavengers, religious sects, anarchic tribes, rivaling indoctrinated army corps, futuristic cyborgs, radioactive mutants, and rusty but dangerously dutiful robots. Most notably, the barren and nuclear-contaminated Wasteland embodies various textualities (e.g., billboard advertisements, user manuals, computer files, toys, pieces of technologies, etc.) that evoke a particular imaginary of the 1930s-1950s US, its position in the world, and its anticipated future. This pro-American, nationalist, technocratic, Fordist-capitalist, militaristic, superficially democratic (but prone to leader-cult dynamics), paranoid, yet future-optimistic, transhuman, conservative, and xenophobic set of clichéd and exaggerated worldviews, utterly clashes with the barren and hostile setting of global

destruction, nuclear waste, anarchy, and terror, thus escalating effects of irony.

The *Fallout* Wasteland is thus not merely an apocalyptic setting but also a literal *waste-land* that tells of a future imagined by a past that only survives in the form of waste: ruins, trash, nuclear dumps, collapsed museums, and historical artifacts nobody can understand anymore — a culture that can only be intelligible again through novel series of reimaginations. November reads the series as a "satirical depiction of a post-apocalyptic wasteland littered with the detritus of an Atomic Age civilization that, unlike our own, realized the techno-utopian visions of the future introduced to mid-twentieth-century Americans by popular science fiction and futurist public exhibitions" (297). He describes *Fallout*'s imaginary as "yesterday's impossible tomorrow" and ties it to what William L. O'Neill has called the "American high" — the "consensus among postwar Americans that their society was essentially good and that given enough effort anything could be accomplished by it" (November 297). As this imagined past has already come to perish, however, there are two continuously conflicting imaginaries, one which is *post-apocalyptic* and one which could be described as *retrofuturistic*.[6] As McClancy puts it, the games "posit two imaginary histories: one in which the future of the Fifties came to pass, and one in which that future was destroyed."

The series' setting is thus utterly antagonistic but, at the same time, tired of moral didactics and ideological usurpations, and presents a morally ambiguous world for the ethical explorations of the player. Sara Mosberg Iversen reads the games as "a comment on currently relevant topics" — "[t]he whole series," she argues, "invokes issues such as consumer culture, corporate power, propaganda, racism, and what it means to be human."

The last two issues raised by her find an entire series of ambivalent, complex, and thought-provoking thematizations in the *Fallout* games through the figure of the ghoul. The ghoul's ontology is emblematic of the eco-criticism of the series as it is tied to the man-made catastrophe of nuclear post-war radiation. However, the ghoul's monstrosity is not merely literal but *figurative*, a projection screen of bigotry, stereotyping, and racial Othering, which makes the *Fallout* series a particularly fruitful site for the upcoming analysis.

In the following, the figure of the ghoul is examined more closely in a comparison of the four recent titles, *Fallout* 3 and *Fallout: New Vegas* (2008/2010)[7], *Fallout* 4 (2015), and *Fallout* 76 (2018). Due to their reflective critique of the racial construction of the figure, these games are particularly conducive to my analysis. To highlight the specificity of the potential of the ghoul to spark discussions of race in the series, a close-reading of a moment of game play precedes the following in-depth comparison of the individual titles.

Affective Encounters with the Ghoul

The *Fallout* series generally uses the ghoul as a post-human figure for exploring two intertwined issues. First, ghouls question the ontological status of the human in a post-apocalyptic US beset by the devastating consequences of fascist worldviews. Second, ghouls highlight the exclusivity of our concept of the human, which may at any point give rise to inter-group conflict, hateful Othering, segregation, violence, and genocide. To examine how the *Fallout* games position the ghoul both at the border of human ontology and as a carrier of racial notions, the analytical perspective needs to take into account the affective and interactive layer at which games are not just operated but played with. In the following, I would like to argue that the ghoul becomes a carrier of racial notions not merely due to the abstract semiotics of its status as a mediated image. Rather, it is in lived and embodied game-play that the player is asked to position herself in relation to the ethical micro-encounter with the ghoul. A description of my own first meeting with Gob, a non-player character (NPC) ghoul in the settlement Megaton in *Fallout* 3, can give insight into the dynamic at hand.

Figure 4. Conversation menu of the first meeting with Gob, a ghoul in the city Megaton in *Fallout* 3 (2008).

My player-character enters Moriarty's Saloon, a bar in the first town the game presents me with, and I catch a glimpse of a line of shady figures in a dark and run-down room. I head to the bar and meet the bartender Gob (fig. 4). Gob greets me: "Hey smoothskin, do you need something? A drink, maybe? Anything? Anything at all?" I stop short for a second at the unexpected appearance: there is something wrong with Gob's face — his skin seems necrotic, disfigured, sunken-in, corpse-like. A fragment of a moment later I wonder what a "smoothskin" is. I search the conversation menu for some clue on how to deal with the situation. It presents me with three choices: a startled and rude reaction, an equally explicit but downright verbally aggressive one, and an attempt to be expressly polite to the point of being out of touch with the situation and setting. If the player chooses to go with the first option, Gob remains calm and routinely takes the time to explain his existence:

> Haven't you ever seen a Ghoul before? Well, not all of us got the chance to hole up in a nice cushy Vault when the bombs fell. A bunch of us got stuck out here in the world, and got a full on blast of heat and radiation, turned us into a pack of walking corpses. Near as I can tell, we age slower than you. A lot slower. There are even a few Ghouls that were alive during the war. Of course, with

> a face like ground Brahmin[8] meat, you can imagine that folks don't take too kindly to us.

When the player-character responds with "You know, it's not so bad," Gob answers: "Nice of you to say so. If you can't be nice, at least pretend, right? Fake it 'till you make it, and all that… [pause] Still though, a fake compliment is better than the usual spit in the face that I get. You're not half bad... for a smoothskin." Gob seems kind, yet nervous and resigned. He struggles for professional responses and some kind of connection yet seems to have received the same hostility and violence over and over. Whatever the player does, there is something between Gob and her, a rift that cannot be bridged, from awkwardness to fundamental alienation in the moments shared (depending on player actions/perceptions), something that can easily be the end rather than the start of a relationship.

Though ghouls in *Fallout* are not explicitly framed as a race, they are positioned in uncanny closeness to the human via a violent and tragic ontology tied to the nuclear radiation they have been exposed to. At the same time, however, ghouls are repeatedly explored as racially Otherized figures that require analysis as carriers of practices of de/racialization. The simple and brutal fact of their affective visuality enables the player to experience an Otherness that gives insight into and explores the complexity of affective responses not identical to, but also entailed by, the dynamics of the problem of racism. To grasp the disruptive power/trauma of the ghoul's corpse-like visuality, Julia Kristeva's concept of the *abject*[9] may be used to describe the affective level of the dynamic between self and Other, which fuels the *Fallout* games' exploration of issues of race.

In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva refers to the corpse as the ultimate frontier of abjection:

> The corpse [. . .] upsets even more violently the one who confronts it as fragile and fallacious chance. A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay, does not *signify* death. In the presence of signified death — a flat encephalograph, for instance — I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in true theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. [. . .] There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. [. . .] The border has become an object. [. . .] The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us.

> It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite. (3-4)

As a personification of nuclear waste, the ghoul exercises an affective, abject visuality but, unlike the corpse, is individuated as a speaking being with a personality and social identity. The ghoul oscillates between the positions of subject, abject, and object, as the conversation with Gob reveals: upon being met with an abject(ing) reaction ("Gah! Fuck! What are you?"), Gob turns himself into an object of knowledge and then becomes a subject again.

It is crucial to point to this affective-perceptive level, which viscerally marks the player's first encounters with ghoul characters in play, because it serves as the opening for *Fallout*'s de/racialization of the ghoul. Crucially, Frantz Fanon's psychoanalytic analysis of racism in *Black Skin, White Masks*, describes the "black man"[10] as "the result of a series of aberrations of affect" (10). The site/sight of this set of affects is the *skin* — Fanon links the violence of a look that racializes the body as much as the internalized performance of an inferiority complex rooted in the (post)colonial history of a culture to an "epidermalization" (13).[11] Distorting the level of affects fundamentally, the problem of racism entails reactions that work "[b]elow the corporeal schema" where a "historico-racial schema" usurps the entailed bodies and installs "elements [. . .] provided [. . .] by the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories" (111), as Fanon writes. The abject dynamic of the encounter with Gob, is, of course, not equivalent to racial perception, as Fanon describes it. However, it serves as a disruptive and traumatic wound on the affective situational level, which the game utilizes as an opening to discuss how the encounter with the Other is racialized and abjected in colonial society.

Though the initial face-to-face with Gob does not entail a racial-epidermal schema, the structural eco-psychological dynamic of the encounter, intertextually recalls Fanon's notion of being "in a triple person" (112). Rather than the experience of a third person point of view, racism entails for Fanon, on the side of the subjugated, a *being* which is "given [. . .] three places": "I existed triply: I occupied space. I moved toward the other… and the evanescent other, hostile but not opaque, transparent, not there, disappeared. Nausea…" (112). This experience of being displaced in and by racism, as I read

Fanon from a privileged and limited White male perspective, entails a being for oneself, a being towards the Other, and a third kind of being: a being captured by and living through the racialization that besets the body and inscribes an alienating fiction into/onto the skin, which resists being eradicated and lingers in abject proximity (neither an inside nor an outside). Gob's address of the player via the out-group marker "smoothskin" immediately builds upon the abject element by adding a social meaning mirroring an ascription of race to the body and the subsequent differentiation of bodies according to racial-epidermal schemas. Thus, the player is enabled by Gob to embody an affective response that serves as an opening for the ghoul as a carrier of the racial notions *Fallout* offers. The game thus links the visual appearance of the figure to pre-existing and novel historical/racial-epidermal schemas to explore issues of race and racism. The player, in turn, engages in a series of micro-political encounters with individuated ghoul bodies, in which doing and undoing race/racism are recurring phenomena.

In their conversation, Gob tells the player that he "get[s] smacked around if [he] look[s] customers in the eyes." The player later learns that Gob was bought from slavers, is regularly beaten by his owner, and forced to work without compensation — he lives the life of a slave. Beyond Gob, the roles of the ghoul as a captured, colonized, mistreated, segregated, dehumanized, muted,[12] working, owned, despised, but also dangerous, terrifying, resisting, angry, healing, empathetic, believing, hoping, and loving body resonate and echo throughout the game series, tapping into different histories of the zombie.

Most importantly, there are two types of ghouls in the *Fallout* universe: ghouls like Gob are like other people except for their looks, slightly coarser voices, and their socially marginalized position. There is, however, a distinct second type of ghoul, usually called *feral*, that comes closer to the aggressive undead figures we know from Romero's films. Feral ghouls, who ignorant inhabitants of the wasteland often fail (or refuse) to distinguish from the first type, offer a kind of enemy that attacks the player on sight and hence can (and needs to) be attacked on sight in turn (fig. 5).

Figure 5. Feral ghouls attacking the player-character in *Fallout* 3.

Feral ghouls act like mindless, voiceless non-individuals bereft of personality. Within the world of the game, they represent faceless objects of aggression, a perfect enemy threatening the player's survival. Taken alone, the feral ghoul serves as a projection and personification of the fear of going feral, a post-human Other, and hence justifies the use of *Fallout*'s vast arsenal of weapons. Juxtaposed with the (here and in the following, non-feral) ghoul, however, the feral ghoul makes explicit the former's racialized connotations, urging the player to relate to its racial imaginary through various micro-ethical encounters.

Fallout 3 (2008)

Set in the ruins of Washington, D.C., *Fallout* 3 presents the player with the possibility of a number of different micro-encounters with the ghoul. The Tenpenny Tower quest presents an antagonistic conflict between humans and ghouls, each framed as non-overlapping social groups. The namesake tower is a fortified building owned by Allistair Tenpenny, a stereotypical colonial patriarch. A group of mostly White characters pay large amounts of money for their residence in the gated community. With shops on the ground level, living quarters above, and an upper-class high-society floor

just beneath the private chambers of Tenpenny himself, the building is both a social structure and an epitome of Whiteness in the postapocalyptic US. In the quest, this segregated community faces its greatest fear, a group of ghouls led by a militant patriarch who claims "we got rights — and we'll take them if they aren't given to us." Beyond issues of class, the game uses this inter-group conflict to thematize racialization. The anti-ghoul racism and xenophobia of the residents, which Piittinen has rightfully called an "ideology of anti-Ghoulism" (45), are voiced explicitly: the prejudices include ghouls being a) dirty, disgusting, uncivilized, and carriers of diseases (e.g., "I've heard they carry diseases. I'd have to sanitize everything after them all the time."), b) evil or dangerous ("they may appear nice, but deep down they want to kill."), c) cannibals ("They eat their own babies"), due to the former reasons, d) distinguishable from humans and not entitled to live at the tower ("Ghouls aren't human" or "they have to earn the right to live here"), or e) without the right to live at all, justifying claims for genocide ("Kill them when you find them. [. . .] You put them out of their misery and save someone else from getting torn apart"). That these are *racial* prejudices is made clear by various attempts to ground them in eugenic discourse. Doctor Banfield, the group's scientist, claims that slaughtering ghouls might be the "best solution." Though he admits that he has "never examined a ghoul up close," he excludes ghouls from a "disease-free environment" that consists of "the correct genes and living conditions." "Why introduce a weakness into a healthy system?" he asks and frames the existence of ghouls as "destructive," a "Ghoul condition" giving rise to "mindless killers." This biological pseudo-scientific construction of race essentializes and naturalizes the hierarchization desired by the other residents.

The character's use of the term "game of life" clearly draws a connection between antagonisms inside and outside the game worlds. Through the tenants' failure/refusal to differentiate between ghouls and feral ghouls and their overall hostility and xenophobia, *Fallout* 3 highlights the *racial* construction of social antagonism. This is solidified through the choice presented to players, who can either choose to invade the tower with the ghouls or kill them. A less obvious third option entails driving out those with the strongest anti-ghoul sentiments so that humans and ghouls can coexist in

the tower. However, this option is problematic as well, as it soon turns out that the ghouls kill the humans after all.

Scholars have emphasized the ethical dimensions of the game (see Backe and Aarseth 11; Bosman 11; Kemmer 110). Backe and Aarseth write that "the quest conveys its message — all races are equal — by showing that they all are equally xenophobic, segregationist, and morally questionable" (11). Indeed, the leader of the ghouls also frames the humans in racialized terms as "smoothskin bastards." By siding with the ghouls, the player cannot attain a higher moral ground. However, the ghoul leader calls into question the link between the category *ghoul* and his own lived experience: "We Ghouls are just like the rest of you: Shit out of luck and doing our best to make it. Being a Ghoul ain't anything worse than any other thing somebody's got to deal with." Hence, rather than merely showing that all races are equal, the Tenpenny Tower quest problematizes the racialized antagonism that opens up its ludic possibilities. What is not questioned, however, is the general antagonistic setting of *Fallout* 3, which the feral ghoul has been invented to uphold. Even if players sympathize with non-feral ghouls, the feral ghouls are a faceless mass, always poised to attack.

In the game world, the ghouls are called "zombies" by non-player characters clearly identified as bigots. This is a clue that the antagonisms built into the game tap into historical forms of racism in the US. The ghoul, in other words, is the figure of an enslaved person. In addition, the ghouls are also avatars of the pre-20th century Zombie as slave leader, come back to haunt the White middle/upper-class. Ghouls might also be seen as displaced persons restlessly roaming the wasteland, subjected to a condition of "bare life"[13] (Agamben 4) and excluded from the tower.[14]

The game does provide the ghoul population with a safe haven in close proximity to the institutional and representational heart of the US. Situated between the ruins of the Lincoln Memorial and the Capitol, the game reimagines the current Museum of History[15] as a secret underground city called Underworld. Located at the former public site of national historical memory, Underworld offers a counter-hegemonic history tied to the positionality of the ghoul, whose life is elongated by radiation but threatened by anti-ghoul racism. Only here, "out of sight and out of mind," as Winthrop,[16] the caretaker, puts it, can ghouls live safely. While the city adds to the var-

ious shades of the ghoul, it primarily intensifies the notions of slavery and the colonial past that the figures of the US and Haitian zombie/ghoul carry. In addition, the placement of the ghoul counter-population at the site of the institutionalization of America's official past seems to suggest a counter-history where racialized Others could have been welcomed as fellow citizens.

While Underworld shields its residents from racist violence, the enclave continues to exist in a state of fragile post-coloniality. Cerberus, the security robot, expresses this in a constitutive proclamation of a community of ghouls:

> This is a town full of peace-loving Ghouls, so check your bigotry at the door. They're just like humans! They feel, they hurt, they bleed...They deserve the same love and respect as any human, and don't you forget it! At least, that's what they programmed me to say. Personally, I think they're a bunch of rotting zombie maggot farms, and I'd send them all back to hell if I could. Damn this combat inhibitor! Damn this pansy zombie programming...

The robot's ironic backlash makes it clear that the technology the ghouls use still carries the inscribed "bigotry" the proclamation opposes. Through the short encounter with the robot, the game seems to express that the subjugated qua their relative positionality do not have the same voice even if granted the right to speak. The very means of expression (technology, language, and even the psyche, as the close link between self and Other in the statement shows, and as Fanon's analysis reminds us) are never neutral and continue to carry the marks of a cultural hegemony that excludes them.

Many conversations with ghoul NPCs reveal personal accounts bearing strong testimonies of trauma and healing. Emphasizing the pain of displacement that the radiation of the nuclear fallout shares with the colonial history of the US, the game portrays kinship among ghouls, who share different but intersecting traumatic pasts, as an alternative to the nuclear family and its genetic basis for kinship and love. The game's portrayal of the ghoul also explores the darker sides of their trauma-induced identity, including internalized self-hatred, alienation and forced assimilation, and complicity in the exploitation and oppression of their fellow ghouls. The different possibilities of the player's interaction with the ghoul NPCs reflect the game's broader critique of colonialism and racism, which persist as narrative and gameplay options, challenging the player to navigate the potential of becoming complicit in racist and exploitative systems of oppression.[17]

This tension is brought to the forefront when the game relates to the player as a tourist of exotic Otherness. The city's guardian tells the player: "Come on! Here you are in the mall of our nation's fine capital, taking in the sights, visiting the monuments! Face it. You're a tourist." In addition to the marginalization and segregation of the ghoul, the game addresses the consumption of the invisibilized Other as exotic commodity, fundamentally complicating the possibility of an authentic encounter between the player and the ghoul. Echoing Mbembe's logics of racial assignation, which includes the "tendency toward frivolity and exoticism" (66-7), the game thus irrevocably positions both the ghoul and the player as carriers of practices of racialization. The use of the term *tourist* in this regard is more than metaphoric in that the player *is* a paying visitor. Here, the self-referentiality of the commodified mass medium points to the ghoul as an object for the *exotic* desires of the player who, as Leonhard has pointed out, can derive "pleasure [. . .] from visiting and becoming the racialized other" ("Live" 4). Thus the player is asked to position herself once more in relation to the game's overarching dilemma: ghoulish autonomy, conflicting beliefs held by the world's NPCs, and the player's personal ethical stance all compete in the playful pragmatics of the postcolonial offered by *Fallout* 3. In the final quest, the player can choose to clear the wasteland of radiation, thus killing all mutated living beings, including ghouls — the project of restoring life to the US wasteland is once more tied to the decision to de/racialize the phenomenon of life. As the introduction to this essay has shown, the racializing thinking the ghoul thus carries and draws attention to still haunts the ways the present is imagined in antagonistic terms today.

Fallout: New Vegas (2010)

Set four years after its predecessor, *Fallout: New Vegas* shifts the setting to the Mojave Desert surrounding the postapocalyptic version of Las Vegas, called "New Vegas" in the game. In the title, several rivaling factions fight for control over the source of energy in the region, the Hoover Dam. Following the previous installment's setting in the US capital, *Fallout: New Vegas* again features an environment intimately tied to American history and identity: the American West. Evoking the myth of the Manifest Destiny, McClancy

argues, "[i]ts conflicts between local tribes and expanding nations seem to refight the American Indian Wars."

Among the many settlements, quests, and conflicts of the title, the ghoul resumes *Fallout 3*'s exploration of marginalization. While feral ghouls persist as common and deindividuated enemies, non-feral ghouls appear as marginalized figures integrated into (non-ghoul) human settlements, i.e. as exploited workers, beggars, or vagabonds. In a continuation of the previous game's reflection on fetishized commodification, one of the ghouls can be convinced to engage in sex work, highlighting their characterization as an Other who is not only bound by capitalism as expendable labor but *consumed* as a direct object of desire. *Fallout: New Vegas* further reimagines the ghoul archetype through the introduction of a Latin-American perspective. While *Fallout 3*'s ghouls often evoked memories of US slavery and African-American experiences, its sequel adds distinctly Mexican ghoul NPCs similarly navigating themes of freedom and enslavement. Despite their seemingly deracialized nature, the ghouls of the *Fallout* series personify different historical moments in US race relations, as its various post-apocalyptic scenarios project historical conflicts into a catastrophic future.

Fallout: New Vegas further addresses the ghouls' identity as a social group based on the intertwined concepts of race and religion — the dogma of the "Great Journey" sect is founded on the persecuted position and the history of the ghoul, and offers a solution in the form of a biblical promised land trope: "We wish to escape the barbarity of the wasteland, especially the violence and bigotry of its human inhabitants. The creator has promised to my flock a new land: a place of safety and healing… a paradise in the Far Beyond." Rewriting the wasteland as a spiritual diaspora, Jason, the sect's leader, acts like a savior figure combining a non-violent activism approach (which in the US context of anti-racial struggle is linked to Martin Luther King) with religious escapism and separatism (the latter of which is reminiscent of Malcolm X's approach to racial justice). Their separatism, however, searches for an ultimate retreat as the group's plan involves leaving the planet with three spaceships. Before the take-off, the player gets the chance to betray the group and manipulate the endeavor, once more repeating the availability of violent (egoistic but also potentially racist) actions against ghouls. When the

player helps the group, only two of the three rockets successfully start, and the group's fate is left open.

Beyond the continuation of the elements of the struggle of the subjugated ghoul and the anti-racist leader figure, the quest offers a further twist on ghoulism: Chris, a human character who identifies as a ghoul but is not identified accordingly by the ghouls themselves.

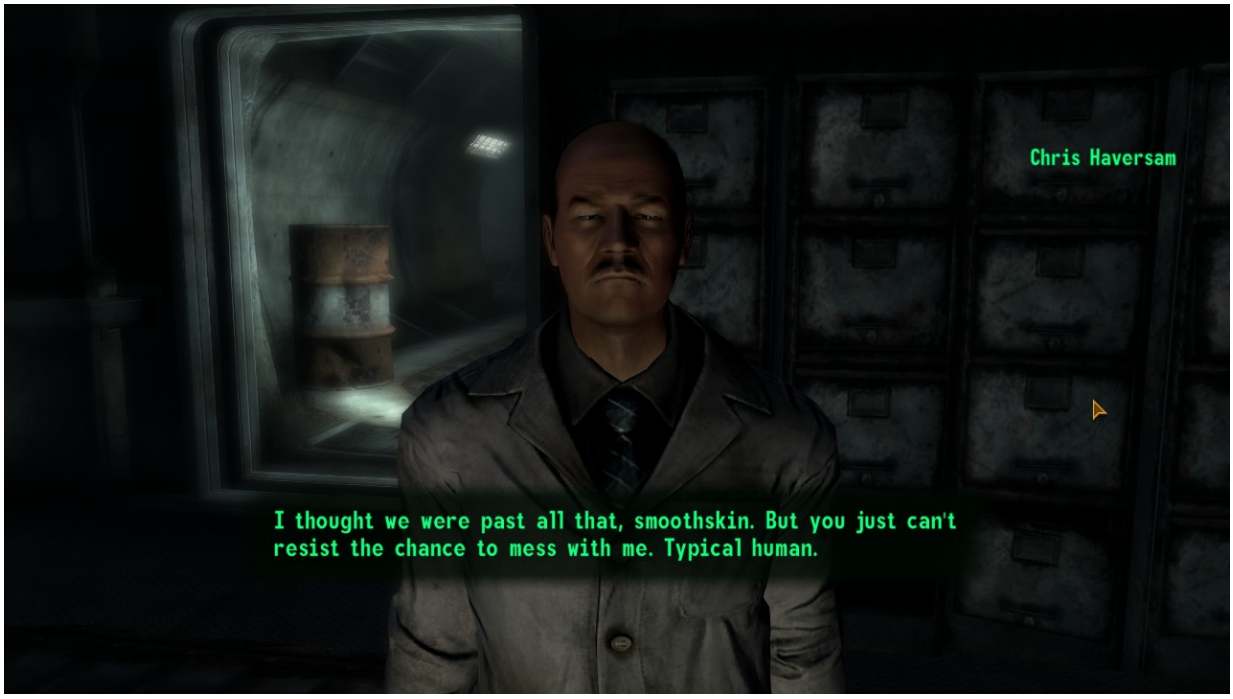

Figure 6. Chris Haversam, a mechanic at the REPCOM test site, identifies as a ghoul.

For Jason, Chris's humanity is a simple fact of being rather than a matter of identification or inner feeling: "I doubt you had much luck if you tried telling him that he's human. We had the same discussions when he first appeared, and the same lack of success. He believes he is one of us." Jason's sentiment repeats the element of an essential biological difference between Chris and the group and excludes him from the promise of salvation (there is no malice in this exclusion though as Jason refers to the high levels of radiation as deadly for humans but not for ghouls).

The player later learns that Chris's self-image as a ghoul and "a monster" stems from his own Otherized experience as a "neurotic," directly tying ghoulism to marginalization. Beyond the experience of not fitting in, Chris's identification with the ghoul is noteworthy as a type of performance. Con-

trary to the idea that ghoulism is a phenomenon grounded in biology, Chris is *doing being a ghoul* as he speaks with a distinct gravelly voice and refers to the player as a "smoothskin" (fig. 6), which appears as a social demarcation rather than an expression of a preexisting biological difference. Chris even expresses a reversed kind of disgust reminiscent of the distinct abjective-affective schema that ghouls are met with (though it remains open whether a genuine affective response is expressed): "God, but are you ugly! Get upstairs and talk to Jason before I throw up just from looking at you." In sum, Chris's performance disrupts the biological essentialism meant to ground the concept of race and reveals that social habitus is a fundamental part of ghoulism. Despite not finally passing as a ghoul, he still de-racializes the figure of the ghoul in this sense.

Fallout 4 (2015)

After *Fallout: New Vegas*'s shift to the US west coast, *Fallout* 4 (2015) returns to the east again: set in Boston and the surrounding coastal and rural areas ten years after the setting of *Fallout* 3, the game opens once more with the same words all titles quote: "War…war never changes." Taking as its main theme the slavery and rebellion of the android (or "synth" in the game), *Fallout* 4 repeats the antagonistic encounter of various opposing factions. The first notable change to the figure of the ghoul in this context is a *visual* one — the graphical models for the ghoul differ substantially from the earlier games in that the ghoul appears with a lighter tone of skin, a prominent nasal disfigurement, and (usually) black eyes (fig. 7). Through these changes, the face of the ghoul is much less grotesque and recalls burn injuries rather than open wounds and necrotic tissues as in the previous titles. The overall visual effect is that ghouls appear closer to the human character models again and, as a group, less heterogeneous.

Figure 7. The character Bobbi No-Nose, whose name references the graphical reimagination of the ghoul in *Fallout* 4 (2015).

The recurring trope of the ghoul in *Fallout* 4 remains social and spatial marginalization: the main settlement, Diamond City, bars ghouls from entry, a policy which some of the characters attribute to populist strategy rather than genuine belief. The settlement's mayor confirms this institutionalized racial Othering, telling the player-character: "When you build up a scapegoat, you need them to remain distant and scary," illustrating the political utility of fear-driven segregation.

Many of the expelled ghouls settle in Goodneighbor, a mixed community of ghouls, humans, and robots akin to *Fallout* 3's Underworld. Its political ideal is explicitly linked to Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and positions it as an alternative to the bigotry ghouls face, once more mirroring Underworld's capacity as a counter-hegemonic archive. The game thus reinforces the idea of ghouls as custodians of forgotten or suppressed US history first explored in their habitation in the former Museum of History in *Fallout* 3. While maintaining its fundamental theme of de/marginalization and representation, *Fallout* 4 emphasizes the ghouls' autonomy and self-determination, reimagining the figure of the ghoul as a strong, independent leader. This narrative emphasis on ghoulish community and cooperation, however, is at odds with

the antagonistic gameplay which emphasizes conquest, defense, exploitation, and ownership.

The game further expands upon the figure of the ghoul through the addition of a Chinese ghoul, a cultural outsider who avoids racialized series tropes, such as calling the player "smoothskin" or addressing inter-group relations. Though based on stereotypes (e.g., mixing English with flawed Mandarin or calling the player a "capitalist"), his inclusion de-racializes the ghoul, framing ghoul identity as socio-culturally rather than biologically grounded.

In another break with previous *Fallout* titles and their efforts to establish the ghoul as an affective and conceptual Other to the nuclear family, *Fallout* 4 reimagines the figure less in tension with but in symmetry to the triangular nuclear family. When the player helps a child named Billy reunite with his parents, all three of which are ghouls, the family attributes their survival to "something in [...] our genes." Rather than a subversive marker of its fictionality, ghoulism appears here as a means to secure the persistence of the genetically grounded nuclear family (in fact, both meanings of *nuclear* become compatible). *Fallout* 4 thus presents the ghoul as just another human being, a narrative arc that subtracts from the ghoul's capacity to question the exclusivity of what is designated as human. While feral ghouls continue to serve as a visceral threat to the player character's survival and an easy justification for combat, *Fallout* 4 further explicates this framing of the feral ghoul. One of the game's non-feral ghoul NPCs, who considers the feral ghouls "his friends," accuses the player: "Do you think you're the first outsider I've met that's chosen to brand 'feral' ghouls as monsters? How many of them have you needlessly slaughtered while ignorantly thinking you're doing the world a favor?!" (fig. 8). His message self-referentially critiques the game world's antagonism and territoriality. Since the game's algorithms have always already positioned the feral ghoul as an enemy attacking the player on sight, the criticism is another prime example of ludo-narrative dissonance between *Fallout* 4's attempts of re-narrating the ghoul and its reliance on the figure as an enemy. Hence, much of the uneasy ethical complexity of the earlier titles is sidelined.

Figure 8. Oswald accuses the player-character of needless killing.

In conclusion, *Fallout* 4 offers a series of reimaginations of the ghoul across which, contrary to the dominant themes of the earlier titles, the ghoul is no longer primarily a body tied to colonialism. Though continuing to be a marginalized figure, the ghoul is generally moved away from the topics of racialization and slavery and towards a reimagined strong and predominantly male figure. The colonial past of the ghoul, which the zombie/ghoul carries, is generally (re)suppressed in *Fallout* 4 in favor of a new conceptual and visual trend of equating or parallelizing the human and the ghoul, which unfortunately robs the latter of some of the figure's potential for questioning affective, racial, and ethical dynamics of Othering.

Fallout 76 (2018)

Fallout 76 shifts the series to an action-MMORPG (massively multiplayer online role-playing game), moving away from its hallmark complex storytelling and ethically challenging single-player role-playing. Set in Appalachia (modern West Virginia) in 2102, just 12 years after the Great War, it serves as a prequel to previous *Fallout* titles.

The initial version of *Fallout* 76 featured no human NPCs, leaving little room for the non-feral ghoul. The game relies heavily on familiar enemy types, with the feral ghoul taking a central role. Upon entering the game, the player is immediately attacked by low-level "weak feral ghouls," and, similar to zombies in modern shooters, ghouls are frequent targets, emerging from the ruins in hordes to charge the player (fig. 9).

Figure 9. Feral ghouls attacking the player in *Fallout* 76 (2018).

The non-feral ghoul in *Fallout* 76 largely repeats tropes from earlier titles. Most non-feral ghoul NPCs were added to the sparsely populated map with the Wastelanders update. While some of them are involved in quests or initiate them, the game's narrative does not further explore the figure. To engage new players, the game offers sensationalist interactions, such as the option to ask the first ghoul they encounter, "What's it like being a Ghoul?" Few rudimentary core notions of the figure remain: 1) ghouls are linked to the past, nostalgia, and unresolved conflicts; 2) anti-ghoul prejudice and violence are mentioned but not explored; 3) some ghoul NPCs address the fear of "turning feral"; 4) the entertainment connection is superficially reused.

Overall, the figure of the ghoul loses any racial notions and serves as merely another type of NPC (rather than an Other) in the wasteland of *Fallout* 76. Though most of his lines are conveyed humorously, it is fitting that one of

the ghouls calls ghoulism a "lifestyle" choice, since it is not treated as anything more than that in the writing of the title.

The Ghoul in the Context of US Race Relations

The racist readings of *Fallout*'s ghoul outlined in the introduction appear reductive given the figure's profound critical potential to unsettle essentialist claims of inherent racial difference and to expose what the series frames as anti-ghoul bigotry. Such readings overlook how the early Bethesda titles, especially, mobilize the ghoul to expose xenophobia and racial Othering without prescribing immediate ethical resolutions. Particularly the early games afford player actions that engage with, participate in, or resist anti-ghoul prejudice, casting the figure both as a foil to the 1950s imaginary of the nuclear family and as a projection surface for the grotesque and the exotic. Though the ghoul is continuously reimagined and the colonial notions it carries are repressed throughout the series, it still draws player attention to alternative plotlines in the archeology of American history amid the postapocalyptic ruins of the wasteland. While the series ambiguously positions the ghoul as a faceless, zombified mass, the player is also challenged to work through, through ludic antagonism, the structures of racism that persist in American society. "[T]o play *Fallout*," in Cutterham's words, "is to make history" (312). As with the encounter with Gob in Megaton, the ghoul may at times shed the mask of racialized zombification, the fiction of the faceless multitude, to appear as a voice of the cultural unconscious.

Fallout 3, released in 2008 at the end of George W. Bush's presidency and during Barack Obama's election, reflects the antagonistic worldview of America's War on Terror. Bush's rhetoric, which cast America against an "evil" and racialized Muslim Other, [18] resonates in the game's imaginary of the post-apocalyptic US, where the violent practices of raider factions exemplify terrorism and the Brotherhood of Steel embodies a militarized security response (a theme later continued in the sequel *Fallout: New Vegas* through Caesar's Legion's brutal crucifixions). Within this landscape, the ghoul emerges as a bearer of race: combining the colonial history of American race relations with Orientalist readings of Islam's ghoul, it conceptually engages Otherness and dramatizes de/racialization, un/doing racism, and

anti-ghoul bigotry. Questioning the racial construction of social antagonism, the figure expresses what De Genova terms a "racial crisis." By further conjuring the nation's colonial past, the ghoul — as slaver and enslaved — furthermore links the making of Otherness and its Orientalist consumption to American history and exposes the preoccupation with race as a fundamental cornerstone of the making of America itself. Additionally, through its ironic critique of the 1950s nuclear family ideal, the radiated ghoul (as Other, non-White, and, in Agamben's terms, "bare" life) highlights the former's racial basis tying the War on Terror back to US post-coloniality.

Fallout: *New Vegas*, released in 2010 during Obama's first term, unfolded in a period often framed by post-racial rhetoric. While inheriting Bush's narrative of American exceptionalism and its racial foundations, Obama's victory speech declared that "the true genius of America [is] that America can change." Seen as a symbol of hope for race relations, his presidency often fell short of such expectations.[19] As De Genova argues, Obama "compulsively deracialize[d]" his election through "a precisely American exceptionalist gesture of patriotic post-racialism" ("'War on Terror'" 254), a contradiction underscored by the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2012, which exposed the failures of post-raciality to address the realities of Black lives (Dennis and Dennis). Against this backdrop, *Fallout*: *New Vegas* continued *Fallout* 3's exploration of racial questions, challenging the early Obama era's post-racial discourse. By foregrounding both the marginalization and separatist tendencies of the ghoul as a carrier of the concept of race, these titles address rather than silence ongoing social issues, standing as exceptions to what Higgin terms the "disappearance of race" (23) in video games. While not utopian figures, the ghouls in *Fallout* 3 and *New Vegas* carve out niches in antagonistic social environments without ever being entirely dominated, becoming matters of concern for players who are invited to ethically position themselves within *Fallout*'s world.

Fallout 4, released in 2015 during Obama's second term (2013-2017), emerged amidst growing frustration with post-raciality: by 2016, 69% of adult Americans viewed race relations as generally bad (Russonello). As Gray and Seltzer observe, "the growing optimism on race relations felt prior to Obama taking office waned over time as both black and white people realized the reality of social barriers to racial transcendence" (241). Reed describes this as a

broadly shared disillusionment with post-racialism: "While pundits, Democratic functionaries, and a stratum of middle-class African American professionals celebrated the election of the nation's first black president as a transformative moment in American race relations, Obama's presidency did little to directly address racial disparities" (9).

Contrary to its predecessors, *Fallout* 4 sediments the racial and colonial notions of the rich conceptual history of the ghoul in Obama's second term. While the ghoul remains a figure threatened by marginalization, it is reimagined as strong and independent, resembling a form of ghoul identity politics that blurs rather than interrogates the boundaries between ghoulism and concepts of the human. This shift limits the game's capacity to critique the racial construction of hierarchies, aligning instead with post-racial rhetoric. By de-racializing the ghoul, *Fallout* 4 diminishes its critical role within the antagonistic settings it is used to construct.

After Obama, Trump's presidency (2017-2021) has been marked by a resurgence of populist and antagonistic racial politics, racist and xenophobic anti-immigration policies, paranoid fears of others, and the ungrounding of the concept of truth in a political landscape of post-facts and fake news. Constructing a populist narrative of crisis, an "American carnage," Trump's inaugural address promised to "make America great again," continued Bush's themes of American exceptionalism ("America first") and the Muslim Other ("radical Islamic terrorism") while everywhere installing the spatial antagonism of America's "borders" and simultaneously denying the reality of race and racism ("We all enjoy the same glorious freedoms").

Trump, however, has not fundamentally reinvented American politics but extended a preexisting Manichean worldview. Stone and Rizova argue that Trumpism "fits well into a similar template of earlier types of populism" and aligns with Hofstadter's "paranoid style of American politics" (37). De Genova demonstrates how Trump's populist strategy, rooted in White supremacism, racial conflict, and fascist tendencies, weaponizes fears of Others: "By conjuring a terrifying spectral world of 'illegals,' 'criminals,' 'terrorists' — in short, by invoking impending mayhem and the cataclysmic prospect of a kind of racial Armageddon — for which 'the Democrat Party' are made to serve as the convenient proxy, Trump converts his nightmarish world of *ghoulish* enemies into political currency" ("'Everything'"; my emphasis). Sugino high-

lights the duality of Trump's rhetoric — overtly racist yet constructing a vision of "the American people" that "harmonizes his white racial fantasy with a denial of his racism." In this way, Trump not only rejects post-raciality but also perpetuates its problematic multicultural rhetorics that obscure the reality of race.[20] Among White working-class voters especially, Trump's racial resentment, rather than economic policy, was key to his electoral success. [21]

Though Trump-era America remained rife with racial Otherization, as De Genova's phrasing suggests, the non-feral ghoul in *Fallout* 76 is further de-racialized, and thus no longer serves as a figure for critiquing racism. This de-racialization, as noted in the present analysis, reflects a deliberate game design choice. Historically, both the zombie/ghoul in US popular culture and the ghoul in the *Fallout* series have embodied and interrogated racialization, post/colonial histories, and ongoing racial tensions in America. While the simplification and silencing of the ghoul is substantially subtracting from the complexity of the series' social imaginary, it is in line with ongoing attempts to make racism invisible and replace the reality of bodies and voices with an unmarked positionality that is not meant to be questionable or addressable. In this shift, the non-feral ghoul becomes just another human, while the feral ghoul is further reduced to an abject, objectified, and deindividuated figure, echoing the paranoid fear of ghoulish masses invading American borders, which the social media post at the beginning of this essay has revealed.

Historically, the ghoul in *Fallout* has operated as a lens through which racialization, postcoloniality, and social antagonisms in the US can be examined. From *Fallout* 3's engagement with the War on Terror, through *New Vegas*' challenge to post-racial optimism under Obama, to *Fallout* 4's partial de-racialization, and finally *Fallout* 76's flattening of the ghoul into an empty signifier, the series traces a trajectory that mirrors broader political and cultural shifts in race relations. Across these titles, ghouls have alternately highlighted the persistence of structural racism, allowed players to confront (or engage in) anti-ghoul prejudice, or, particularly in later titles, seen their role as figures of Otherness in the wasteland diluted, as they are increasingly posed as a faceless, deindividuated mass. Taken together, the evolution of the ghoul reflects the broader historical struggle over race in American

political life, revealing how *Fallout* oscillates between addressing and invisibilizing race, exposing racial hierarchies and normalizing their erasure.

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Acknowledgements

Note that this essay reworks material first developed in my doctoral dissertation, later published as *Playing Place*.

Notes

1. The two websites 9*gag* and 4*chan* referred to in this paragraph are image-based English-language media platforms used to upload and share user-generated content. On 9*gag*, user-generated content primarily includes curated memes, humorous images, short videos, gifs, and commentary, often revolving around popular culture, gaming, and internet trends. 4*chan* primarily features text posts, images, memes, original art, and more thoroughly allows in-depth discussions between its anonymous users. Content on 4*chan* is often more unfiltered and niche, with specific boards like /v/ (video games) focusing on gaming-related topics. Reposting content of either website on the other is a widespread practice. Tying into the post discussed in this article, 9*gag* has been criticized for the discriminatory nature of some of its contents (see Wagener).

2. Note that the precise date of the post is not visible but the original 4chan text dates to July 10th, 2023.

3. The comment refers to the White supremacist trope of using the number 13 with the number 52 as a racist propaganda claim that holds that African-Americans, who account for 13% of the overall US population, are responsible for 52% of crimes or homicides (Anti-Defamation League).

4. My use of *race* and *racialization* is indebted to Achille Mbembe and Gabriela Veronelli. Veronelli writes that

"race refers to a classification that dictates 'this being is not human' or 'is less than human'; racialization is the process that dehumanizes, the processes of dehumanization that reduce people by putting them in situations and relations that strip them of their humanity" (113). Achille Mbembe, too, considers the category *race* in conjunction with *practices* of racialization because "[i]n order to reproduce itself, the principle of race depends on an assemblage of practices whose immediate and direct target is the body of the Other and whose scope is life in general" (55). He thinks of race as "a spectral form of division and human difference that can be mobilized to stigmatize and exclude, or as a process of segregation through which people seek to isolate, eliminate, or physically destroy a particular human group" (55).

5. For Moreman and Rushton, *voodoo* denotes "the racist image of devil-worshipping, black-magic wielding, and uncivilized tradition imagined by Western popular culture" (2). *Vodou*, on the other hand, is a "loosely affiliated, syncretistic religion originating primarily in Haiti [. . .], that combines elements of a variety of African spiritualities, most prominently from the West African kingdom of Dahomey (modern-day Benin), with Roman Catholicism and 'New World' native spirituality. The religion began when slaves of wide-ranging African backgrounds were brought together in [. . .] Haiti. Huge numbers of Africans from varied tribal affiliations and cultures were forced to find common ground as they were gathered to the island of Hispaniola" (2). The central role of *vodou* in the Haitian revolution unfortunately "presented the fledgling nation's opponents with the ability to narrativize the link between a slave revolt, the foundation of a black nation, and revolutionary politics with a supposedly barbaric belief system" (Webley 10).

6. *Retrofuturism* is a recent neologism that "builds on the futurists' fevered visions of space colonies with flying cars, robotic servants, and interstellar travel but while futurists took the promise of progress for granted, retro-futurism emerged as a more skeptical reaction [. . .]. Put simply, retro-futurism is a half-nostalgic, half-sentimental memorializing of popular futurism" (Guffey 254).

7. Though marketed and sold as two different games, *Fallout* 3 and *Fallout: New Vegas* rely on the same engine, take place in the same part of the fictional world, and at roughly the same time (with the newer title, *Fallout: New Vegas*, being set four years after the previous *Fallout* 3), making *Fallout: New Vegas* technically a spin-off title rather than a sequel.

8. In the *Fallout* universe, *Brahmin* is the term for mutated two-headed cows (the name thus refers both to an actual type of cattle that was brought to the US in the course of colonization and the highest caste of the Indian caste system).

9. Julia Kristeva's thinking positions the *abject* somewhat between object and subject as an experiential and developmental phenomenon that "cannot be assimilated" (1) into either. Hence, the abject and abjection are describable only as a "twisted braid of affects and thoughts" (1) and, in the psychoanalytic context, relate to the figure of the mother and call into question Freud's distinction between the conscious and the unconscious in favor of a more fundamental or archaic distinction between inside and outside (see 6-7).

10. Note that "the black man" here is not to be read as a biologically grounded identity or essentialism in Fanon. Rather, "the black man" appears as a real and imagined dehumanized figure who is "sealed [. . .] in his blackness" (11) and hence "not a man" (10) only due to the "black-white relation" (11) of a "massive psychoexistential complex" (14) that Fanon seeks to oppose by analyzing it.

11. It is important to add that Fanon links the "internalization" that is an "epidermalization" to a temporarily and causally primary factor that is "economic" (13). Here, the psychoanalytic self-conceptualization of his analysis is "psychological" (12) as he claims, but his "clinical study" (14) does not regard racism as a problem of individuals (alone) but one which requires a thinking of "sociogeny" (13) (rather than phylogeny or ontogeny) and thus a "sociodiagnostic" (13) viewpoint.

12. Note here that beyond the ubiquitous voiceless feral ghouls, Gob's very name entails the notion of being silenced: in British English, *gob* is an informal term for *mouth*. The name Gob can thus be read as the elliptical residue of the silencing speech act ("Shut your gob!"), collapsing the imperative into a single word.

13. Agamben's notion of *bare life* is tied to the concept of the *homo sacer*, following a Roman legal term for a "person anyone could kill with impunity who was nevertheless not to be put to death according to ritual prac-

tices" (72). Most ghouls in the *Fallout* universe are reduced to bare life in this sense as several factions (e.g., the Brotherhood) simply shoot them on sight (see Agamben 131).

14. This conceptualization of the zombie as a displaced refugee has its roots in Haitian traditions, and further reflects popular US-American interpretations as found in Romero's *Land of the Dead* (2005), whose zombies also try to enter a gated community.

15. The place resembles the actual present Smithsonian National Museum of American History in Washington, DC regarding location and interior (a mammoth and a T-rex replace the elephant in the entrance hall in *Fallout* 3).

16. Winthrop, the caretaker of the ghoul retreat, bears a name tying the character (and the figure of the ghoul) further to the colonial past of the US. The historical referent, John Winthrop, is known for his role in the foundation of the second major settlement in New England, the Massachusetts Bay Colony, in 1630. His reference to the settlement as "city upon a hill" (a quote from Jesus's Sermon on the Mount from the Gospel of Matthew) presents one of the key ideological and rhetorical tropes of US politics today (cf. Winthrop 295).

17. The following interaction tree with Winthrop, the caretaker of Underworld, may serve as an example of the violent options against ghouls in the game, which usually come at the cost of karma points (an in-game resource positioning the player as an ethical actor). When a trading deal is considered, the player can threaten Winthrop and the entire group of residents: "[player] I have a better idea. How about I do nothing and you give me what you have? [Winthrop] What? What are you talking about? Do nothing? [player] Yes. As in: I won't shoot your face off and dance in your brains. [Winthrop] You... you wouldn't dare. I've got... I mean... I'll call for help. [player] Go ahead and yell. I'll kill every last one of you."

18. In June 2003 alone, for example, Bush used the word *evil* in 319 speeches and in 83% of them as a noun (Singer 2).

19. A survey shortly after Obama's election aptly captured this hopeful spirit as 67% of Americans gave a positive answer to the question of whether "a solution to relations between Blacks and Whites will eventually be worked out" (Newport). The item scored the highest rate of affirmation ever measured on this question.

20. The reality of race, of course, includes structural racism and oppression but also an American demographics that is more diverse than ever: from 2010 to 2020, the chance that two randomly chosen people are of different race (i.e., the government diversity index) has increased from 54.9 to 61.1% according to a government report (Jensen et al.).

21. Abramowitz and McCoy's empirical data have testified to the influences of economic discontent, racial resentment, and the revolt of the White working class in the 2016 presidential campaign. Their analysis points to a rise of negative partisanship, i.e., voting based on hostility toward the opposing party. A study by Jardina, furthermore, adds to the influence of White out-group racial resentment and White in-group racial identity on candidate evaluations. Finally, Reny and colleagues examined the case of White voters switching votes and found that the switching was more associated with racial and immigration attitudes than economic factors.

About the author

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