

# Story Stack Analysis - Fallout 4

The story stack is a concept shared by Jesse Schell in a [GDC talk](#) in 2019 (51:00) after learning its methodology from Jason VandenBerghe. It works to align story and gameplay by organising a project's elements in order of flexibility.

The least flexible element of any game is the overall player fantasy, whilst the most flexible element is the story. I developed a solid understanding of this method as part of my studies in The Narrative Department's Game Writing Masterclass.

In this analysis, I use story stack as a tool to explore Fallout 4 and to help me build three new story concepts for it. These new concepts are designed to be strong but flexible, and crucially, remain in sync with the original gameplay.

## Story Stack - Fallout 4

- **Player fantasy:**
  - Post-apocalyptic exploration - the player gets to experience the fantasy of being a survivor in a post-nuclear world, seeing how humanity has rebuilt itself in the 200 years since the apocalypse.
- **Actions:**
  - Venture across a new, barren wasteland environment and unlock new and familiar locations through discovery. Explore the map, fast-travel, and piece together what happened to the world.
  - Experience survival-based gameplay mechanics such as monitoring radiation levels, cooking and crafting meals and medical items, scavenging and building settlements.
  - Discover remnants from the past in the form of terminal entries, holotapes, notes, radio broadcasts etc.
  - Use and modify a variety of weapons and armour, including power armour, to survive the wasteland and its inhabitants. Fight mechanics include a tactical aiming system known as V.A.T.S., which gives players time to target specific areas for attack. Stealth/sneak gameplay is also an available mechanic, as is lockpicking and terminal hacking.
  - S.P.E.C.I.A.L attribute-based levelling up system ensures players can mould and define their character's skills as befits their player fantasy.

- Players can choose companions to join them on their adventures and assist them in enemy encounters.
- **Economy:**
  - System for progression - player levels up through XP gains. These can come from activities such as completing quests, crafting items, building settlements, killing enemies, hacking terminals, picking locks, persuading NPCs in conversation, and discovering new locations on the map.
  - Players can also progress relationships with their companion followers as they journey through the game together. Reaching max level with these companions rewards the player with different perks.
  - Players can also upskill by collecting comics and bobbleheads, which add skill points to their S.P.E.C.I.A.L stats.
- **World:**
  - The game takes place in the year 2287, in post-apocalyptic Boston and its surrounding areas. The world map is known as the Commonwealth and is a futuristic envisioning of the area that used to be eastern Massachusetts.
  - There are several recognisable real-world locations and landmarks on the map. This gives the game world a deeper sense of realism and immersion.
  - Humans are joined by ghouls, synths, mutants and other dangerous creatures in this world.
- **Story:**
  - In October 2077, nuclear war hits the world. The player, along with their spouse and infant son, evacuates to the nearby underground Vault 111 just in time. The family are cryogenically frozen, but the player is unexpectedly awoken for a moment, during which they witness the murder of their spouse and the kidnapping of their baby. After falling back into their frozen state, the player wakes up some time later and discovers they're the sole survivor of Vault 111. They've been frozen in the vault for 210 years and must now discover what remains of the world whilst trying to track down their missing child and seek vengeance on their spouse's killer.
  - Additionally, as the story unfolds the player meets various factions on their journey to find their son. They can go about helping these factions to rebuild or shape the Commonwealth. However, not all of the factions share the same values, and the player will need to consider where they stand before choosing a side to ally themselves with. These choices have an impact on the ending of the main story.

## **New Story Concepts**

### **Concept 1:**

- You play as a ghoul who was heavily irradiated in the bombing but survived. You wear a locket/carry a wallet with a photo of what you used to look like before the war inside it. You're grateful to be alive, but the ghoulfication process that enabled you to survive has left some psychological scars.
- Although physically ravaged, you now have a much stronger immunity to radiation and an extended lifespan. Whilst navigating the wasteland, you often have to defend yourself from attacks by those who think you're a threat to them, as anti-ghoul sentiment remains strong.
- After being beaten up by human raiders one night, you awaken to a radio broadcast the next morning. An advert comes on from a group of scientists, advertising a new drug that can reverse the effects of radiation and effectively "cure" ghoulishness. Upset, you decide to find out more about this cure and set off to locate the clinic. On finding it, you enter the facility to discover that the scientists are carrying out horrific experiments on sentient ghouls in the name of "research".
- You manage to escape the clinic, but the scientists learn that you've seen what they're up to thanks to their in-clinic CCTV. Knowing that you know the truth about their experiments, the scientists deploy synth assassins to track you down and kill you.
- You need to explore the Commonwealth "on the run" for the majority of the rest of the game. Along the way, you'll meet different factions and make friends with NPCs who will believe you (or not) when you tell them about the crimes the scientists are committing. Some of these characters will become companions you can build relationships with. They'll support you on your journey to survive the hitmen tracking you and help you to destroy the clinic and bring the scientist collective to justice.
- The story will follow the thread of you escaping from the scientists and finding allies to help expose the clinic's crimes and prevent any further ghoul-based experimentation. This may be via a public broadcast of some kind or in the Diamond City newspaper. You could even decide to attack/destroy the clinic instead.
- Deeper ethical and moral questions about the persecution of the sentient ghouls will also be raised throughout the story. Its underlying theme will be how tolerance and inclusivity should persist as cornerstones of humanity, even in the face of brutal living circumstances such as a post-nuclear landscape.
- Throughout the story, the player character will develop relationships with NPC companions who convey sentiments of affirmation and encouragement, with a view to the

player character realising they don't need a "cure" for who they've become. They'll begin to accept their ghoulish self; their body adapted to survive. Through the later events of the game, the player character will express more transformative statements in their dialogue to reflect a sense of greater self-acceptance.

- The world around them may not change, but they can learn to accept their new identity and feel proud of their achievement in bringing down an evil regime. At the end of the game, the player will place a photo of themselves as their present, ghoulish self on the opposite side of their locket necklace/wallet, with the two sides of who they are as a person now better reconciled.
- Game actions and economy will function in the same way, as will the existing world setting. This new concept continues to support the player fantasy of exploring as a survivor in a post-apocalyptic world.

### **Concept 2:**

- The player awakens in Vault 111 in 2287 with no memory of how they got there. They're not the sole survivor though, and can defrost a few companion vault-dwellers from the nearby terminals. With little knowledge of prior events, the player will need to piece together what happened to them through exploration and memory triggers. Along with their companions, they'll find a way to escape the vault and venture out into the wasteland. They'll also learn to craft and build settlements as they adapt to life in the Commonwealth.
- During the story, the player will discover that they were frozen on the day of the nuclear bombing in 2077 and that their memories were wiped on purpose by Vault-Tec whilst in cryostasis. They'll also eventually find out that they've had trackers implanted under their skin so that Vault-Tec could monitor them after being woken up.
- Furious at Vault-Tec for this non-consensual interference, the player will search and explore the Commonwealth to try and track down those responsible. While they'll eventually learn of Vault-Tec's ultimate demise/disappearance, the player will also discover new factions on their travels, and learn about some of their questionable ethics.
- It'll also become clear that the survivors they awoke with also had their memories erased. As the player develops relationships with these companions throughout their adventures, they'll eventually learn that one of their fellow frozen vault dwellers was their significant other on the day of the bombing and that they had a close relationship. It'll be up to the player to decide how to deal with this information and whether to rebuild this relationship or not.
- The world will then be theirs to explore with their companions and/or partner if they wish, with more open-ended, emergent gameplay being the predominant experience provided,

so that players can explore and imagine their own stories. The map will be packed with lots of NPCs, locations, encounters and sidequests to help fill in the blanks in the player character's memory bank and give more context to the game world.

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### **Concept 3:**

- Boston in 2287. The city has been on total lockdown for the past hundred years, with the vast majority of the human population penned into Fenway Park (now known as Diamond City). Generations of families have lived inside Diamond City for so long, many have no idea what the outside world is like anymore. The people of Diamond City have become accustomed to the security of life inside its walls, but some of its younger inhabitants long to see what lies beyond its gates.
- One morning, all citizens are summoned to an emergency meeting, where it's revealed that several teenagers have disappeared. It's thought that they somehow escaped the city at night, meaning they could be anywhere out there in the wasteland by now.
- The player must track down the missing teens with the help of certain companions from Diamond City and others they meet on their adventures.
- They'll have to discover how and why the kids got out (or were secretly evicted by those in power in DC) in the first place, as well as decide whether they should help to return them to Diamond City or not.
- Players will be able to progress and upskill by carrying out main story missions and additional sidequests once out in the Commonwealth. Relationship building with their companions will also be a core feature of the story and will lead to progression-based rewards and a deeper contextual understanding of the characters they're exploring the world with.
- The player will encounter different factions across the Commonwealth who will show them what life in the wasteland is like outside of the player's strict Diamond City bubble.
- The main story would follow the thread of finding the missing kids but also allow the player to explore the map and consider whether leading a sheltered and regimented life in DC is really the best choice after experiencing the wilderness and curiosity of the wasteland. Some of the factions would show the player that there are other ways to experience life, despite the harsh landscape and its dangers.
- Game actions and economy will function in the same way, as will the existing world setting. This new concept continues to support the player fantasy of exploring as a survivor in a post-apocalyptic world.

