

***Memory and Graffiti: Non-Traditional Archives in Left 4 Dead
and Fallout: New Vegas***

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The reviewer's character stands in front of an abandoned casino and hotel in Fallout: New Vegas.

When we think about which historical time periods are the most crucial to preserve, rarely, if ever, do we consider apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic periods. After all, the apocalypse is quite literally considered the end of history. What can really be gained by trying to preserve that which may not be seen by a next generation? Quite a bit, as it so happens.

While playing Valve's [Left 4 Dead](#) and Bethesda's [Fallout: New Vegas](#), I could not help but notice how the archival tradition is alive and well despite a zombie apocalypse and nuclear fallout. Even in the face of near-extinction, characters in both of these video games maintain our very human desire to tell and preserve information and stories. However, instead of preserving history for the long-term future, survivors of each given disaster focus on the present or immediate future. In a world where the future is uncertain and the present is fleeting, saving and sharing information is still priceless.

Left 4 Dead was published on November 17, 2008, by American developer Valve Corporation. The sequel, *Left 4 Dead 2*, was released exactly one year later due to the first game's immense popularity.¹ Inspired by horror film aesthetics and narrative techniques, both games throw the player and up to three other players into a virus-induced zombie apocalypse in a first-person shooter game with semi-realistic graphics. The player(s) take on the role of the only survivors of the apocalypse and fight their way through motels, sugar mills, subway stations, and more, armed with any weapons they can find along the way. Within the game's universe, survival is the primary objective with little-to-no thought given to the long-term future of the world. The games take place in twenty-first century United States with the characters fighting through familiar-looking streets and buildings of our modern-day cities, only devastated by the apocalypse. Both *Left 4 Dead* games have four different main playable protagonists, each with their own backstory that they share bits and pieces of during the quieter moments of the game.



Exterior shot of a zombie-infested motel in Left 4 Dead 2.

Fallout: New Vegas, released in October 2010, was developed by Obsidian Entertainment and published by Bethesda Softworks as a spin-off of existing *Fallout* series games, taking place in the same post-nuclear war universe.² *New Vegas* is an action role-playing game that tells the tale of the Mojave Wasteland after nuclear warfare decimated North America two-hundred years prior. The player takes on the role of a courier caught up in a power struggle in "New Vegas," the rebuilt Las Vegas strip and must fight or ally their way through the vast desert map of the game. Unlike the *Left 4 Dead* series, *New Vegas*'s plot revolves around the aftermath of an apocalyptic event and the rebuilding of a new society from the ashes. During their

¹ Chris Remo, "E3: Valve Talks Left 4 Dead 2's Quick Sequel Strategy," *Gamasutra*, June 3, 2009, https://www.gamasutra.com/php-bin/news_index.php?story=23911.

² Rus McLaughlin and Rowan Kaiser, "IGN Presents the History of Fallout," *IGN*, June 3, 2020, <https://www.ign.com/articles/2010/07/21/ign-presents-the-history-of-fallout>.

journey to recover a stolen package, the protagonist comes into contact with different communities and factions which have emerged in the wake of the apocalypse, each with their own ideas about how best to rebuild the Mojave. Similar to the *Left 4 Dead* series, however, *New Vegas* also features familiar-looking buildings and landmarks from the American Southwest, though in a world where 1950s-style aesthetics persevered well into the 2000s. In addition to aesthetic inspiration, *New Vegas* also borrows heavily from the political and cultural zeitgeist of the 1950s in its conflicts, poking fun at McCarthyism and other Cold War-era staples.

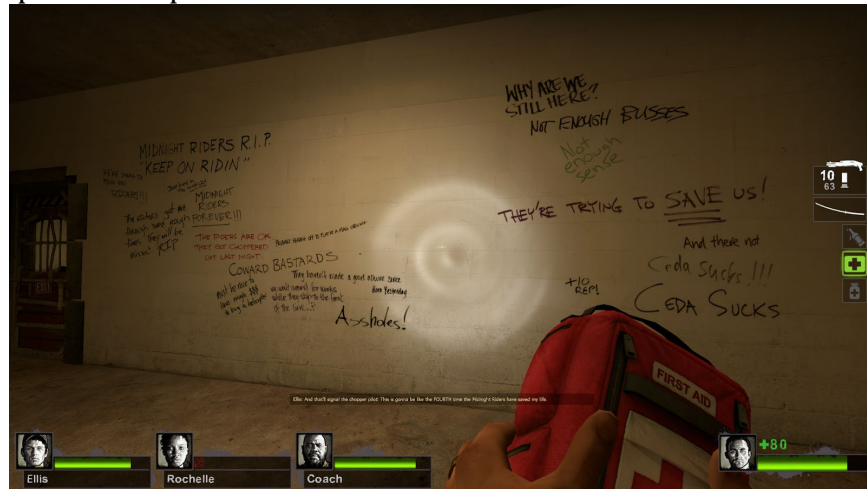


The reviewer's character crouches in front of a rundown street in Freeside, one of the communities in Fallout: New Vegas.

Due to similarities in their settings, both games showcase the importance of nontraditional, noninstitutional, dynamic archives in apocalyptic scenarios. Overwhelmingly, real-life archives are designated institutions (or, at least in some way, formal and intentional). However, both games subvert this standard notion of what an archives looks like by creating decentralized repositories for memory that remain practical for the precarious time period in which they exist.

In *Left 4 Dead*, archives predominantly take the form of purposeful graffiti left by unknown survivors across each map. At the end of each level in *Left 4 Dead*, the player must arrive at a safe house where they can rest, heal, and regroup before moving on to the next level. These locations (e.g., cabins, trailers, hallways, or backstage green rooms) are most commonly covered in pre-apocalypse posters and furniture, along with more recent graffiti from various stages of the zombie outbreak. The graffiti varies from simple nihilistic musings, directions for separated loved ones, elaborate odes to lost compatriots, tirades against prioritized celebrities or inefficient government agencies, to simply jokes in response to the messages left by others. The survivors often comment on the conversations occurring in the messages as well, learning from the advice or relating personal anecdotes to the jokes or stories. These moments between levels when the team is safe serve to

ground the characters in the humanity of the moment, offering them a chance to reflect on what has been lost and what still remains. This grounding serves as an equally crucial tool for survival, as the mindless violence of hacking and slashing zombies would likely otherwise numb the survivors to what they are ultimately fighting for and dull their drive. It is the sharing of these personal stories which keeps the spirit of the past alive in the survivors.



Safehouse graffiti in Left 4 Dead 2 discussing the whereabouts of a popular rock band.



Safehouse graffiti in Left 4 Dead including messages and instructions for loved ones left behind.

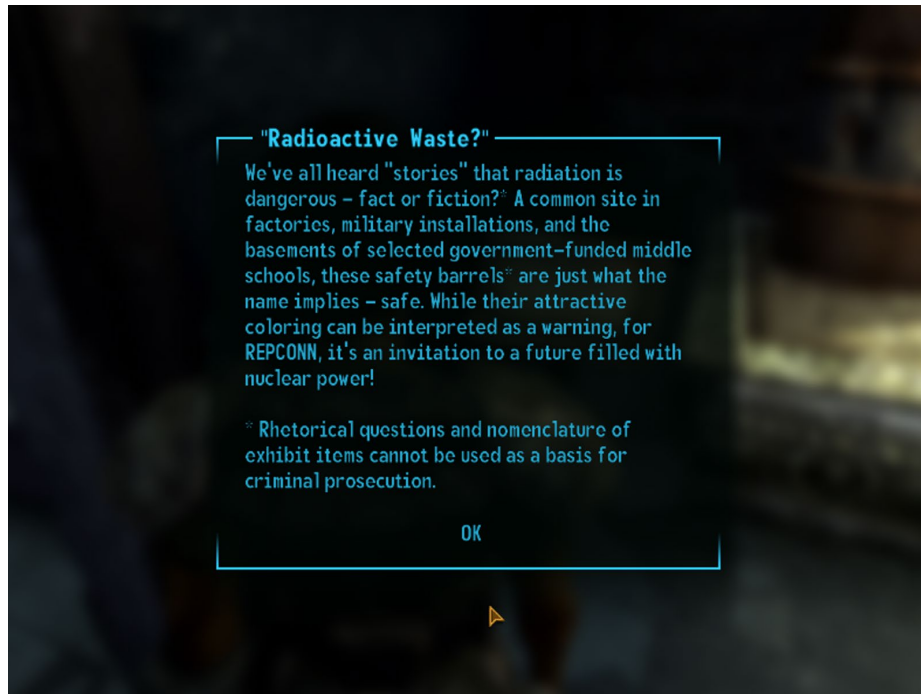
Since neither of the *Left 4 Dead* games provide the player with much background lore beyond the game's general premise prior to starting a level, the majority of universe lore is either banter between the survivors or messages left behind in the graffiti. Because the graffiti is lasting, the conversations from past days, weeks, months, or even years are preserved not just for other survivors, but also for the writers themselves. By “defacing” a wall, one is permanently leaving their mark on the world, ensuring that even zombification cannot totally erase the humans they

once were. Even if traditional means of recordkeeping are largely defunct, the graffiti is a record that this individual existed and that they did not go down without a fight, nor did they choose to die in anonymity. Though they may never actually meet the future readers of their messages, they know that, eventually, someday someone will read it and know them. Because of the accessibility of contributing to these graffiti “archives,” should society survive past a zombie apocalypse, individuals will be remembered more than institutions, laying the brickwork for a genuine “people’s” history.

In *New Vegas*, since the imminent threat of extinction has mostly passed, archives have gained some level of formality again, though this is still far from our real-life systems and repositories. In the Mojave Wasteland, there are a few dedicated museums, such as that in the “Boomer” isolationist faction, located in the ruins of what was once Nellis Air Force Base. The Boomer museum relies on oral history rather than formal preservation of materials. The museum is a rarity, however, as most of the game’s museums are surviving relics from the old world. To in-game characters, these museums (usually associated with pre-war corporations) are little more than buildings to loot or in which to take shelter. To the player, these old-world relics also serve as a tongue-in-cheek warning of how our world can easily become the world of *Fallout: New Vegas*.



The reviewer’s character looks at an empty display case in REPCONN Aerospace’s museum of nuclear history, the robot tour guide oblivious to this fact.



Screenshot of a REPCONN Aerospace museum exhibit placard insisting that nuclear radiation is far less dangerous than the public is led to believe.

Since the remaining museums largely tell propagandistic histories of corporations and not of people, the vast majority of knowledge of the average old-world citizen in *New Vegas* comes from personal stories left behind, much like in *Left 4 Dead*. Prior to the nuclear war, most of the country's population was corralled into underground "vaults." However, many of these vaults ended up being social experiments and thus many failed in different ways. As such, most do not have any survivors to tell their tales. Fortunately, the histories of the vaults are not lost altogether. The stories of these doomed individuals are told through recovered emails, maintenance notices, research notes, and other forms of communication between the vault residents. What often ends up being the most telling form of communication in these vaults' stories is absence, such as when a doctor no longer updates a patient's file, a missing technician is never found, or a diarist descending into madness leaves blank pages.

These communications are often both informal and personal, intended to help preserve an individual's memories or thoughts rather than to formally preserve events which occur, an unintended secondary function. Nevertheless, the presence of these incomplete messages, like the graffiti in *Left 4 Dead*, allows the player character and their companions to reflect on their civilization's past far more than the formal museums and often even helps them survive in the present, should a vault have an existing threat.



Screenshot of a vault's internal maintenance communications hinting at a sinister fate.

However, this very same absence of information also leads to humorously incorrect, albeit largely harmless, inferences about the pre-war Mojave. For example, one of the gangs of New Vegas, known as “the Kings,” base themselves on the appearance and lifestyle of a man they view to be an old-world monarch, due to the fact that they know him only as “the King.” Players recognize that this is obviously Elvis Presley, though no one in the universe is the wiser.



The reviewer's character stands in front of an Elvis Presley impersonation school where a member of the Kings stands guard by the door.

Humor aside, the tale of the Kings makes me wonder how much of our own “ancient” history we misinterpret and retell according to our own biases and gaps in collections. How harmful could this revisionist history actually be? After all, apocalyptic media serves to teach us about the cracks in our own existing societies and systems.

Though we often assume that archives can thrive only in formal settings where they are consciously curated, the often unintentional creation of nontraditional archives in the post-apocalyptic worlds of *Left 4 Dead* and *Fallout: New Vegas* challenge how we as archivists perceive the work that we do. Though street graffiti and ransacked museums are hardly the ideal place to reliably store our stories, the functionality and accessibility of areas and media like these are something that real-life archives can learn from. Removing systemic barriers and allowing both the preserver and preserved to become one and the same is at the heart of dynamic, community-based archives work. Presently, one of the greatest sources of inequity within the field of archives is the lack of access in viewing, contributing to, and curating collections of everyday communities, particularly of those who are marginalized. As one of the founders of the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA), archivist Michelle Caswell notes in her case study on the topic, the radical nature of community archives lies in members of a community themselves consciously creating that open access environment.³ Instead of needing academic expertise to navigate collections, these community-based archives, like those in the post-apocalyptic worlds, focus on ease and usability of collections, often preferring digital formats to boost accessibility.

The shape that a repository takes should be dependent upon the society which the collection serves, rather than attempting to conform to a uniform ideal. Archives will always be incomplete; it is impossible to preserve every single potentially valuable object because value is subjective and resources are limited. But by creating an accessible, dynamic archives of our times, we stand to create a medium where multiple concurrent perspectives create a more honest and detailed story of our present and past, one that is not only informative but also useful to us today and tomorrow.

³ Michelle Caswell, Marika Cifor, and Mario H. Ramirez, “‘To suddenly discover yourself existing’: uncovering the impact of community archives,” *American Archivist* 79, no. 1 (2016): 56–81, <https://doi.org/10.17723/0360-9081.79.1.56>.