

Fallout: Amazon’s atomic disaster series falters badly

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Many artists, especially during the Cold War years, have attempted to tackle the significance of atomic weapons, first used in 1945 by the US military in the mass extermination of civilians in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The possibility of a nuclear holocaust and the circumstances that would exist in its aftermath have inevitably and properly been recurring themes in literature, drama and cinema.

But the results have not always been serious or penetrating, particularly in the last several decades of cultural decline, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the supposed “end of history” and the onset of “free market” triumphalism. Too many artistic brains have stopped working seriously.

Understanding of the historical process has seriously declined in film and fiction, and imperialist propagandists have spread the fallacy that the demise of the USSR ended the likelihood of world war. Often in the last 30 years, the aftermath of nuclear war has simply been a trope to show humanity at its worst, suffused with savagery and violence.

Unfortunately, this is largely the case with the Amazon series *Fallout*, created by Graham Wagner and Geneva Robertson-Dworet for Amazon Prime Video, and based on the iconic video game franchise of the same name—originally developed by Black Isle Studios and published by Interplay Entertainment in 1997. The *Fallout* franchise remains popular for its world-building and its exploration of post-nuclear war themes, with *Fallout*, *Fallout 2* and *Fallout: New Vegas* providing, in the view of some players, more depth and nuance than the rest of the series.

Jonathan Nolan (HBO’s *Westworld* [2016]) is one of the series’ executive producers and directed the first three episodes.

Fallout opens in 2077, in a “retrofuturist” world where clothing and technology resemble their equivalents from the early 1960s in the US. We meet Cooper Howard (Walton Goggins), a veteran Western film star, performing at a children’s birthday party in a house in the Hollywood Hills overlooking Los Angeles. Television news broadcasts suggest the world is dangerously close to war.

Soon after, Cooper and his daughter see multiple nuclear detonations in the city below. The guests at the party don’t notice the mushroom clouds in the distance, and, improbably, the blast wave that follows seems like little more than a strong hurricane (in fact it would be some 750 miles an hour). Cooper and his daughter escape on a horse.

Flash forward 200 years, and we encounter Lucy MacLean (Ella Purnell), a resident of the post-apocalyptic underground bunker

complex Vault 33. She is the daughter of Vault Overseer Hank MacLean (Kyle MacLachlan). It is her wedding day, again in a retrofuture where most people are dressed in space trooper uniforms out of a Robert Heinlein novel with bulky Geiger counters/communication devices attached to their wrists.

Lucy’s wedding night is interrupted by an invasion of denizens (including her new husband) from the “Wasteland” outside Vault 33. Lucy is a deadly martial arts combatant and after a gory, slow-motion battle between the outsiders and the inhabitants of Vault 33, with plenty of screaming, gunfire and stabbing, her father is kidnapped because of his scientific skills. Against the wishes of the other survivors in Vault 33, Lucy escapes to the bone-strewn surface in an effort to find her father.

After more explosions, we move to the surface to witness beatings, high-tech airborne vehicles and men in robotic armor. We are now introduced to Maximus (Aaron Moten), a novice in the Brotherhood of Steel, a military-priestly order devoted to bringing “law and order” to the Wasteland.

Maximus is enjoined to assist a knight of the Brotherhood to find a mysterious object from the Enclave (a remnant of the pre-war US government), carried by a fugitive, Dr. Siggi Wilzig (Michael Emerson), and his experimental dog CX404.

Offscreen, the effects of radiation have transformed Cooper into a zombie-like creature with prolonged life and immunity to radiation. Hereafter, Cooper is referred to as “The Ghoul,” and emerges as a gunslinging mercenary. Bounty hunters in cowboy hats dig him out of a grave. He proceeds to murder them, and then sets about on the mission they had hoped to recruit him for.

The dialogue of the series is both pretentious and banal. Characters spout lines that feel forced and unnatural. For example, in a later episode, when Lucy finally confronts “The Ghoul” after shooting Wilzig, she says,

I’m going to have to ask you to leave him alone. Now, I acknowledge that I’m unfamiliar with your circumstances. But, at first glance, your treatment of this man appears unfair, and I’m obliged to intervene. Now if your instinct is to harm me as a person simply trying to de-escalate a conflict, then I’ll have to assume of the two of you, you are likely the primary aggressor—in which case force is justified—unless you willingly stand down now.

And so it goes. In the final episode of the first season, we discover that Vault-Tec, the company that set up the bunker system, in fact sparked the nuclear war in 2077 to “win the great game of capitalism,” and secure humanity’s future by selling the underground vaults, accompanied by plans to experiment on its residents. This is intriguing, but not developed.

From the outset, it becomes clear that the writers have struggled to maintain consistency within their narrative. In a world where slavery, drugs, genocide and war reign supreme, the audience experiences narrative whiplash rather than relief with *Fallout*’s occasional “comic” elements. This is not a scathing satire of the *Dr. Strangelove* variety.

Instead of delving into the complexities of the human condition in a world devastated by nuclear war, let alone the causes of such a catastrophic conflict, the series opts primarily for gratuitous violence and shock value. Nolan and the other creator-directors avoid addressing big political questions and moral dilemmas found in the original games, or how they might translate to the contemporary real world.

Perhaps most frustratingly, *Fallout* relies heavily on superficial elements such as iconography, gore and gunfights to capture viewers’ attention. The script is marred by internal discrepancies, plot holes and contrivances, and the musical score comes in at inappropriate moments, disrupting any semblance of seriousness.

This continues a tradition of poor storytelling, retroactive continuity changes and backpedaling that has plagued the video game franchise ever since Bethesda acquired the *Fallout* license. The series fails to capture more complex themes that have endeared the original games to players for decades.

It is striking that Jonathan Nolan was working on the series while his brother Christopher was directing *Oppenheimer*. In an April 2024 interview with *ANI News*, Jonathan Nolan commented that if there was “a silver lining to either or both of these projects [*Fallout* and *Oppenheimer*] being in the public consciousness,” it was the presence in them of the “nuclear threat.”

Nolan pointed out that when he first moved to the US, in 1987, “pre-Glasnost,” there was

still this very real sense that the world could end at any moment. I think [in] the world we’re in now ... the nuclear threat is as present as it ever has been. But we’ve stopped talking about these things. And so, I think, if anything ... having all of these projects out there that talk about this at least spurs a little bit of conversation about what we ought to be doing to ensure that these sorts of things never happen in the real world.

This “conversation”—in reality, the fight to make the population aware of the nuclear danger and its roots in capitalist society—is now more necessary than at any time since 1945. The threat of a war between US-NATO, Russia, and China grows every day. But *Fallout* will spur very little discussion about the possibility of such a holocaust or how to prevent it. That would take a genuinely significant, or at least coherent work of art.

Nolan and the others had the opportunity and responsibility to depict a plausible aftermath—should mankind survive—of the consequences of a nuclear Armageddon posed, for example, by *Oppenheimer*, in a work that would be viewed by millions.

The filmmakers, however, chose to portray a quasi-whimsical world, replete with science fiction and action/adventure clichés, “romancing the nuclear post-apocalypse,” so to speak, and deviating significantly from the game series’ concept about the rebuilding of civilization.

This is not the fault of *Fallout*’s creators as individual artists. They came of age in years of political reaction and cultural stagnation, when vast resources were deployed to convince people that the Russian Revolution had led to nothing but disaster and there was no alternative to the existing social order, leaving critically minded artists in a terrible quandary.

The issue of nuclear war is an immensely complex one, which cannot be properly understood apart from a conscious rejection of a social order that would contemplate the use of such weapons and risk of humanity’s obliteration in an effort to preserve the profits and wealth of the ruling class.

Moreover, there are the genuine pressures from studios and corporations such as Amazon, whose executive chairman Jeff Bezos is one of the richest individuals on the planet. Would Amazon permit a more in-depth and socially trenchant, i.e., anti-capitalist, production to be made with its support?

Paul Briens observed in his work *Nuclear Holocausts: Atomic War in Fiction, 1895-1984* that most “of those who have depicted nuclear war or its aftermath in fiction have done so in ways that avoid coming to terms with the nature of a nuclear war in the real world. There are sound commercial reasons for this avoidance.”

In any event, the result in *Fallout* is a series that rings hollow, utterly fails to convince and lowers, rather than raises, the understanding of life-and-death issues.



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