

## On Fallout Shelter

By Dino Ge Zhang

“Factory labour as the economic infrastructure of the ideological boredom of the upper classes”  
-Walter Benjamin, *Arcade Project*.

From my first impression, the gameplay of *Fallout Shelter* is largely reminiscent of a Japanese indie game [Unholy Heights](#), in which the players manage a building of tenants who are all exotic creatures such as centaurs and demons. In *Fallout Shelter*, the player manages human survivors in a post-apocalyptic vault, which is not humane at all compared to *Unholy Heights*. *Fallout Shelter* is a living machinery, a metaphor for a dormitory labour regime and profit-driven factory; while in *Unholy Heights*, although all tenants are literally “monstrous” and enemies of holy knights who will periodically raid the building, they have emotions such love and hate and personal preferences. Of course, all these come down to hidden algorithms embedded as random events but they are presented in a rather humanistic way. Some demons hate or are hated by other species; if they do not get along, the landlord (i.e. the player) must manage these relationships spatially. Sometimes creatures of various species fall in love with each other, proceed to move in together in the same room and possibly even have offspring. Lesbian and gay relationships are common and babies are not necessary consequences of a union or co-inhabitancy. Each creature has its own personality: some prefer to have a profession and pay the rents on time; others are [hikikomoris](#) who will be very happy if the landlord can buy them new game consoles or plasma TVs but never pay the rent on time since they are jobless and never step outside of their rooms. In short, *Unholy Heights* is a simulator, not of crude capitalist (re)production, but mundane social relations and lifestyles. The landlord in *Unholy Heights* ultimately has the power to kick out the tenants but he does not have the power to decide what the tenants want to do with their lives.



I start with this comparison not to denounce Fallout Shelter but use Unholy Heights to highlight the different allegoric approach of Fallout Shelter. Unholy Heights has presented a utopianist inclusive community of social outcasts who are managed by a benevolent landlord - a shelter of love so to speak. In contrast, Fallout Shelter is a dystopian asylum of survivors of not only the nuclear winter but the quotidianised apocalypse of endless waiting and boredom. The game not only punishes the asylum seekers but the overseer, the player himself, by subjecting him to [waiting](#) (always itching for the next gamic action) and supervising dehumanised workers. In Fallout Shelter, humans are randomly assigned with traits or specialties. Some have greater strength or agility, each corresponds to an entitled job. Some are born with average stats all around - the “commoner”; some are born with certain particularly high stats — the “unique”. There is no equality of intelligence. By intelligence, I mean, the ability to reflect upon one’s life and decides what they want to do on their own will. In Fallout Shelter, intelligence, parallel to strength, perception, endurance and so forth, is merely an indicator and a quantified measure of the suitability for a certain job. The game is a perfect system of meritocracy where one works in an area of his or her “innate qualities”. This pragmatic division is thus indifferently brutal and individuals are denied an opportunity of self-representation.



Production is the central theme of Fallout Shelter. The core objective of the game is to generate and accumulate more resources, recruit or reproduce more workers and expand the size of the vault. The main shop floors are the power station, water refinery and restaurant, which can be upgraded in technology and expanded in size. The brilliance of the metaphor lies in the functional design of “rush”. It is, literally, “rush” - like factory owners luring or forcing their workers to work overtime in order to meet the quotas assigned by the commissioner or maximise profits. Like all “rushes” do in real life, “rush” in Fallout Shelter does induce an incident risk, such as an outbreak of fire or invasion of mutant cockroaches. The game does compel the player to press the “rush” button: when the happiness rating is at 10% and water is low (which induces irritation), the only one thing the player can do except for paying real money for bonuses is to “rush” the production at the water refinery. But the incident rate is already at 70% because you have failed multiple times previously attempting to boost up the productivity. Like all the factory managers and bosses, you are well aware of the risks (even quantifiably informed in the game) but you are very much inclined to press the button.



Happiness does not represent the satisfaction vault inhabitants feel in their daily lives. It is only a quantitative meter of alienation. Happiness will increase or decrease according to the sufficiency of three resources (water, electricity, food) and the radio station as distraction (to add more metaphoric resemblances to industrial modernity). One interesting mechanism is that residents' health is directly correlated to happiness. When happiness is too low, radiation will have a greater effect of decreasing the maximum health, which cannot be recovered by stimpaks. The contradiction is that the aim of accelerating production is to boost up the resources so the vault inhabitants can remain happy but acceleration possibly leads to hazards, therefore unhappiness and even potentially deaths. So, you press the "rush" button hesitantly. Fire breaks out, workers manage to put out the fire by extinguishers and go back to work normally afterwards. Press the "rush" button again because you are an opportunist who would cling to that 20% possibility of success. Giant mutant cockroaches crawl out of the ground and the workers are left defenceless and only the pregnant are able to flee (because otherwise it would be too cruel). The infestation is eventually cleared but a few workers are killed because they do not have enough health to survive the attack due to the radiation and low happiness.



The rest of the workforce carries on with the dead bodies of their workmates on the floor. However, workers are valuable assets and therefore they cannot die permanently and you can revive them at a cost or you can “remove” the body (especially the dead worker is only a commoner) so as not to obstruct the continuing accumulation. Of course, this regime seems to be justifiable considering that in the barren post-apocalyptic world, survival is the sole purpose of life. Isn't it the same excuse many workers are given today, especially in the third world (e.g. when bosses tell their workers if they don't work hard enough the factory will close down and they will lose their source of happiness - the security of a job)?

Reproduction is only part of the production and the circle of accumulation. Charm is one of the quantified measurable and it determines the chances of attracting the opposite sex. But your vault inmates are not going to spontaneously fall in love with each other because no one has the spare time. If the player manually drags the desired parties - a man and a woman – into the living quarter, they would chat for a while, dance a bit, and proceed to have sex in the room at the back. If two men first enter the living quarter followed by two women, they would automatically switch to two heterosexual couples. There is a special camera zoom-in every time a couple goes into the backroom together to remind you that one of your male workers have successfully impregnated a female worker because apparently sex immediately results in the pregnant woman walking outside the room slowly as if heavily burdened and the man sprinting out of the room and back to work. The only purpose of the anti-erotic sex is reproduction.

Fictional post-apocalypse is sometimes not simply a fantasy of human survival but a consistent narrative to justify (or sometimes evoke reflexivity on) the present. If [AdVenture Capitalist](#) is an explicit reference to speculative capitalism and capital accumulation, [Fallout Shelter](#) is a rather repetitious simulation of the manufacture side of modern capitalism. It is certainly not a shallow game because when you look into it, the banality and dullness tells how insensitive we are. It is a commercial game but it does a better job at what some serious or progressive games (such as [In a Permanent Save State](#)) have aimed to do.