

FALLOUT: LONDON

A WELCOME RETURN TO TRADITIONAL
GAME DEVELOPMENT VALUES

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INTRO

 On December 28th 2024, Mark Warren, a Senior Staff Writer for vg247.com, a website established in 2008 for discussing all things videogames, wrote an article entitled “Sure, gaming in 2024 had some killer underrated gems, but it was really the year of the mod” (Warren 2024a).

The online article is a short light overview of the year in which he reflects on the past year and considers the best games of the year. This year, however, he has little to say about mainstream and AAA (triple A) games, largely down to the dire state of the current industry. Instead, he contents himself with identifying a few interesting indie games, noting that some of the best experiences of the past year have tended to be game ‘mods’, and that this year those mods took “...a big step forward”. The step forward to which he refers is that mods are (again) becoming increasingly mainstream, often supported by the original game’s developer itself, and that some are so detailed and ambitious that they are effectively complete brand-new games.

In his article Warren particularly singles out for praise a mod of *Fallout 4* known as *Fallout: London* (Team FOLON 2024)

Having played it extensively I consider it to be arguably one of the most important game mods ever created, for reasons that include vision, organisation, and sheer scope. Other reasons hark back to why many people become game developers or decide to study games in the first place, while some have echoes from the very dawn of the industry itself.

WHAT ARE MODS

A ‘Mod’ is a term used to describe fan-made content for games that can be compiled into the final game to mod (modify) the experience. Mods are not new; they have been around since almost the dawn of the game industry.

When I first entered the game industry in the late 1980s, many video games were often the result of single individuals, or small teams, and their skills often had to be hugely cross-discipline to create anything at all. In the early days of game development, the third-party game engines that we think of today (such as Unreal or Unity) simply didn’t exist and instead game developers would reuse sections of code from previous games and often license additional ‘middleware’ code for specialized functions such as “Havok for physics, Miles Sound System for controlling audio or Bink for playing video codecs” (Partha 2012). These gradually morphed into early approaches to reusable ‘engines’ such as SCUMM, used by Lucas Arts for their graphical adventures (Bevan 2013). SCUMM stood for ‘*Script Creation Utility for Manic Mansion*’ which was created for Manic Mansion and continually expanded thereafter with each new game release, to allow for more complex actions. This makes it one of the earliest identifiable game engines that were used.

Market forces (and improving hardware capacity and speed) inevitably led to team sizes rapidly expanding, with team members becoming more specialized in their skillsets in pursuit of larger and grander visions. It also led to most game companies developing, like Lucas Arts, an internal ‘engine team’ to maintain that reusable portion of a game that helped speed up production, and effectively to create their own reusable core ‘engine’.

Using middleware as a model, many companies decided that maintaining this code was expensive, and perhaps they could license this internal game tech as something that could similarly be reusable by other companies. While licensing a game engine could be expensive, it did reduce the amount of work required to maintain the bulk of a game's code base and allowed the licensing company to concentrate instead on adding new features and creating actual game content (models, artwork, animations, levels and other assets).

It was about this time (1996) that Unreal started to carve out its dominance. When I was head of Game Design at Microprose UK we licensed the original Unreal Engine for *XCom Alliance* (Microprose n.d.) before the first Unreal game was released (Greer 2018) and, at that time, negotiation of a license would involve huge sums of money. I don't know what the final agreement was, and how it broke down into upfront costs and royalties, but it certainly cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, and I've since heard anecdotal reports of over the final price tag being one million dollars.

These reusable game engines had to be easy to learn and be usable by non-programmers. They also had to be well documented, otherwise any profit earned by licensing their game engine would be lost through additional technical support and the risk of alienating their licensors.

The side effect of this was that this meant they were also easy for non-developers (i.e. players). Players could actually look at a game's installed files and investigate properties and assets. This was something that hadn't really been available much before. Soon there were editors that allowed modifying and customisation of games. Indeed, the early Unreal games, and any game that used Unreal as its engine, actually shipped with the Unreal editor itself as part of the install. Anyone could just go into the install file on their PC, find the editor executable and run it, allowing them to create new levels and mod the game they had just bought.

Companies like Epic actively wanted players to continue using their engine as much as possible. It gave them a form of 'market share', and simultaneously vastly increased the pool of people who understood the engine. For the first time it became common for job applicants for game development positions to be able to demonstrate their

skills using a third party engine that a company might use. The more the pool of developers knew how to use a game engine, the more likely that engine was to be licensed in the first place.

This feedback loop created an active mod scene that revolutionised the way players thought about game development and led to the first golden age of mods and modding.

The appeal of mods was, and still is, largely down to the fact that those unable to create a game from scratch could still quickly learn how to make changes to a game in order to affect the overall experience in some distinctive way.

This democratisation of game development was no small event. Without modders and modding the game industry would be a very different place today.



Image 1: Minor Mods include graphic overhauls such as this Quake skin.

Although there's no agreed clear sliding scale or definitions for what constitutes a mod, the most frequent forms are normally considered to be roughly as follows:

- **Minor/cosmetic mods** – such as modifying a character skin (Fig 1) in *Quake* (Id Software 1996) or upgrading materials with higher-resolution textures.

- **Functional mods** – e.g. adding a feature that changes gameplay in some way. This could be as simple as a new weapon, or something more complex such as a completely new play mode.
- **Level mods** – new themed game levels which include potentially new environments or experiences. Game levels are in many ways a manifestation of either all, or some subset, of the overall game’s mechanics. It’s hard to build a game level (unless purely aesthetically) without having all a game’s relevant mechanics playable. Theming a level to a specific mix of mechanics works well as a way of showing a level’s uniqueness either in narrative, navigation or gameplay. (Note that game levels are also often differentiated using unique cosmetic additions.)
- **Total conversion mods** – the largest mods. They tend to be comprehensive projects that include all the previously-mentioned minor mod types. This added complexity can sometimes lead to them being considered whole new games. A good, and well-known, example of this is the original *Counter-Strike* (Calvin 2019), which was originally a mod of *Half-Life* (Fig 2) made by Minh Le and Jess Cliffe.



Image 2: *Counter-Strike* started out as a fan-made mod of *Half-Life*.

Modding has, since its earliest beginnings, been a clear route into game industry employment, along with being a useful way of demonstrating complex and hugely relevant technical skills. For example,

Minh Le and Jess Cliffe were both later employed at Valve largely on the back of their *Counter-Strike* mod (Valve 2000). Valve have done this repeatedly: for example, Kim Swift (Swift 2007), a graduate of the DigiPen Institute of Technology, plus many individuals from her project team, were hired to convert the work done on their team project *Narbacular Drop* into the iconic game *Portal* (Valve 2007).

Another good example of a modder gaining employment from their work is Kris Takahashi, who was most recently a full-time designer on *Starfield*. Kris started off by modding *Morrowind* (Bethesda Game Studios 2002). As he says in a biograph on Bethesda's website: "I spent a lot of time looking into mods, started making my own, and eventually got a little too ambitious trying to redesign all of *Morrowind*." (Bethesda.net 2024). Eventually Kris moved onto modding *Fallout*, which led to Bethesda employing him full-time.

This pattern is common. Modders gain experience with a company's game engine (such as Bethesda's *Creation Kit*) and, being free from the pressure of full-time work, can push their mods in interesting and unexpected directions. They then become well-known in the modding scene, and the best get approached directly and offered a position or are recognized for their skills if they simply apply to the company (in the absence of a specific job role advert).

In the same way, offers have also flooded in for some of those who worked on *Fallout: London* (which I'll cover in more detail later). But first, what is this game?

WHAT IS *FALLOUT: LONDON*?

Fallout: London (FL) is a huge DLC-sized total-conversion mod for *Fallout 4* (Swift 2024).

This type of mod is sometimes known as a 'replacement mod', as, unlike other minor mods, installing it overwrites and replaces the main program and much of the original data, making it incompatible with the standard game and the save game. For example, if the player ever wants to revert to the original *Fallout 4* game, they will have to delete both the FL mod, and the original game first then reinstall the original game from scratch.



Image 3: *Fallout: London* is a ground-breaking game mod based on *Fallout 4* and is the first *Fallout* game to be set outside north America.

Fallout: London is the brainchild of ‘Team FOLON’. This was set up by Dean Carter (Director) and Callum J Quick (Chief operating Officer), with a disparate group of amateurs and moonlighting professionals (consisting at times of almost 100 developers, and a similar number of voice actors) who spent five years on realising their initial ambition.

Throughout, Team FOLON kept the interest alive through a regular series of progress videos (Team FOLON:YouTube 2024a), and status updates, going all the way back to 2019 (Team FOLON:YouTube 2024b).

The team members worked remotely on this mammoth project, synchronising and organising it via *Discord*. The very first work shown on *Discord* was dated 3 August 2018, and the game was finally released on 25 July 2024.

The sheer scale and ambition of the project is truly staggering, and it is the largest, most detailed and, I think, important game mod of recent years.

Although Bethesda support third-party modding of their games (Nunneley-Jackson 2012), albeit with some code and multiplayer exceptions in games such as *Fallout76* (Dorn 2024), its status as an unofficial game means it can’t be sold because of copyright. It is, however, available free to download.

Installing *FL* to Steam means you need to undo the next gen updates that Bethesda forced on players just before *FL* was due to be

released. These ‘updates’ pushed the *FL* mod’s release back. Bethesda’s update also broke a great number of well-established mods and all these problems proved impossible for team FOLON to work around (Zwiezen 2024). This ‘surprise next gen update’ certainly affected *FL*’s release date and almost certainly the number of early bugs experienced. For a while they tried to work round it – but too much was broken and, in the end, Team FOLON gave up and required that the update was ‘wound back’ before *FL* was installed.

However, while *FL* can be installed under Steam, it’s much easier to install it via Good Old Games (GOG). Team FOLON and GOG worked closely together, and GOG helped support and host the mod and its release. By using GOG’s heavily-discounted *Fallout 4 Game Of The Year* (GOTY) edition, it becomes a simple matter to install the mod without having to wind back anything.

On *FL*’s release it became the fastest ever redeemed mod on GOG after being downloaded over 500,000 times in the first 24 hours (Lyes 2024). It’s also now reached well over a million downloads from GOG, making it the most popular mod ever released (Pureza 2024).

The term mod doesn’t do *FL* justice as the size and amount of content is comparable to a complete game in the Fallout Franchise: it has been likened to the size of *Fallout 4* and its DLC (a term that refers to official additional Downloadable Content for a game) *Far Harbour* combined.

So, apart from size, why is it so important?

The Fallout games are large open-world action RPGs set in a post-apocalyptic world.

The first few games were isometric exploration games: *Fallout 1&2* (Interplay 1997/8) were set in New California; *Fallout Tactics* (Micro Forte 2001) is set in the American Midwest; *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios 2008) the first of the 3D games, was set in the Capital Wasteland around and in Washington DC; *Fallout New Vegas* was set in the Mojave wasteland and what was left of Las Vegas; *Fallout 4* (Bethesda Game Studios 2015), was set in the ‘Commonwealth’, in and around the ruins of Boston and the east coast; while the most recent multiplayer *Fallout 76* (Bethesda Game Studios 2018) is set in Appalachia and what’s left of West Virginia.

Todd Howard, director and executive producer at Bethesda Game Studios, who is particularly responsible for the *Fallout*, *Elder Scrolls* and *Starfield* franchises, said, in a recent interview with Greg Millar on *Kinda Funny Gamescast*, that *Fallout*, with its '50s retro futurism, was inextricably linked to US popular culture, and he couldn't see how it could work in any other setting (Parijat 2024).

He might think that, but *Fallout: London* shows how wrong he is.

PLAYING *FALLOUT: LONDON*

Unlike all previous *Fallout* Games, which were set in the US, *FL* is set in the UK, and at a time placing it somewhere between *Fallout 3* and *4*.

What is apparent from the very start is that Todd Howard's belief that *Fallout* can't exist outside of the '60s US cultural bubble, is utterly false.



Image 4: Right from the start familiar elements such as London Underground or the brick-built streets and architecture create a very different feel to any other *Fallout* Game.

The retro '50s/'60s UK setting, while culturally different, is just as rich in symbolism, just as relevant and just as crazily appropriate as the focus on Americana in the original game.

Rather than showing the Cold War from an America perspective, when playing *FL*, we are immediately presented with the use of imagery and audio from the 1950s 'Protect and Survive' UK government videos (Zarity 2018). This is all proof that America isn't alone in its experience of that evocative time, which held so much threat and

promise. The UK had the added frisson of being a country that had recently experienced war first-hand, being bombed during the Second World War. Most developed countries (especially those that were involved heavily in the war and its aftermath) take that same period (from the end of WW2 onwards) as a golden age of optimism for the future: today that has been coloured by a rising cynicism, making it just as ripe for nostalgic parody.

The wartime kitsch associated with the Fallout franchise, along with the fear of nuclear holocaust, memories of the revitalisation of economies and the embracing of science after WW2 are echoed similarly in all western nations. The United States does not have a monopoly on this.

Playing *FL* for the first time is a compelling, interesting and endearing mix of exploration, revelation, frustration and joy.

After the usual character creation step, you wake up (not knowing who or where you are) in a glass restraining pod, where you are assessed by a couple of scientists (voiced by former Doctor Whos Sylvester Macoy and Colin Baker. This really helps set the stage and makes you feel that this is something special and quintessentially British. Suddenly the facility is raided and the scientists killed, but the glass is damaged, allowing you to punch your way out and escape the complex.

As with all Fallout games this initial experience allows you to familiarise yourself with the controls, and to meet one of the new enemy types – the RadShrew, a tiny ball of venomous viciousness that is both tough and annoying.

As you explore, you get nicknamed ‘The Wayfarer’ by the shadowy Ms Smythe (who you will repeatedly encounter) before escaping the Shard (your starting location) via London Bridge station and an underground train. The train then crashes leaving you stranded alone, injured and suffering amnesia, a true stranger in a very strange land.

Whole new plot and setting – Many of the traditional US-based Fallout elements, such as super mutants and the ubiquitous vault-tech sites, aren’t present in *Fallout: London*, but, to compensate, lots of new quirkily-British mutated threats are introduced, including badgers (vicious and huge), foxes, Wombles (effectively *FL*’s version of Death-

claws) which are first encountered near Wimbledon, RadShrews, leeches, killer post boxes and walking naval mines.

But it is the encounters with the various factions created for *Fallout: London* that stand out and make the most impact, and there are many of these (Tang 2024).



Image 5: It's clear that this will be a very different experience and that attention to detail is very high. Your first meeting with the Vagabonds shows just how different this experience will be.

New factions – There are over two dozen factions and variants throughout the game, which is astounding. They are well-designed and unique, and fit with the setting. These factions include the *Camelot Knights* (effectively medieval cosplayers trying to kickstart a new age based on chivalry), and the *Tommies* (more or less WW2 era soldiers that draw upon more recent nostalgia). There are also several crime gangs, the main two being the *Vagabonds* (a *Peaky Blinders* inspired faction) and their nemesis *The Isle of Dogs Syndicate*. But they're not alone.

What still survives in the West End of London is controlled by the *Gentry* and they, in turn, are threatened by the *Fifth Column* (totalitarian fascists). There are also the shadowy *Angels*, a sort of technological shadow organisation that seems to be calling many of the shots across London, reminiscent of the Institute in *Fallout 4*.



Image 6: Greenwich is home to the Jack Tars a bizarre faction that live in land-locked boats.



Image 7: The Jack Tars dress in period navel costume and use insanely powerful muskets with a 10 second reload!

One of my favourite factions is the *Jack Tars*. These dress like 18th-century nautical militia and live in land-locked ships including the *Cutty Sark* in Greenwich: they use insanely powerful flintlocks that take over 10 seconds to reload!

Other new factions include: the *Thames Folk* (humans mutated by radiation into having gills and becoming amphibians); the *Cultists*, who worship Cthulhu toys; and another of my favorites, the *Beefeaters*.

Your first encounter with these vicious cannibals, who control the Tower of London and Tower Bridge, is hugely memorable. Much later, after clearing them out and picking through the remains of the Tower of London, you can find one of their prized possessions, *The Holy Hand Grenade of Antioch* itself, hidden in a turret room. The range of factions and quests involving them, and the ways they

interact with other factions, is impressive. It's fresh, fun and totally bonkers but, within the framing of the Fallout franchise, makes total sense.

Post-apocalyptic London – The map of *Fallout: London* is immense, so large that it's broken down into several subloads and distinct areas. The ability to explore a Fallout-themed London is, of course, one of the main attractions of the game, and here the attention to detail is again mind-blowing for a mod team.

Some areas are a totally trashed and radioactive wasteland (such as the area around the Millenium Dome and Eastwards). Other areas, while badly damaged, have recovering and seemingly-vibrant communities (e.g. Camden Locks or St Pauls). A few locations, such as the West End, from Trafalgar Square down through Westminster to Buckingham Palace, are almost unscathed and even feature a partially working underground system, complete with escalators. Each London area feels distinct and home to very specific communities and factions. The overall feel is one of society that is just 'Keeping Calm and Carrying On', which makes this Fallout world even more uniquely British.

Being largely an urban environment, *FL* it is structured denser to other Fallout games, and is more linear in construction.

Rather than being largely fully open from the outset, this time the overall map is gradually revealed and unlocked via player actions and quests. Initially these distinct routes give pacing and structure and represent a refreshing return to harder linear RPG games.

While you can explore almost anywhere if you really put your mind to it, unlike *Fallout 3* or *4* or *New Vegas*, the *FL* map often has definite routes for connecting different areas, and an overall pacing that gradually unlocks the map as questlines are encountered or solved. This means that, rather than the more open sandbox exploration we've got used to in Fallout games, you often find that the map is more 'node-based' and this to some extent controls the rollout of new locations.

Ammo, weapons and armour are also somewhat rationed, and it takes longer for the player to develop a strategy and build up a reasonable inventory. However, this isn't a flaw as it makes the overall experi-

ence far more like a traditional RPG and refreshingly different: you feel that you have earned everything you find.

It also feels appropriate given the far higher density of the map and, strangely, seems to encourage real and careful exploration. This is especially true in the earlier stages of the game when opening up the game too fast could have been confusing, and it allows you to get to know the myriad of factions at a comfortable pace.

Along with the main quests there are also, inevitably, a lot of fairly mundane ‘fetch quests’. There are, however, also some truly outstanding one-off encounters and quests that come out of nowhere and which leave a long-lasting impression. One of my favorite encounters is the Peruvian Artifact Quest that takes place in the British Museum, and which I accidentally joined and activated whilst exploring. The museum, while run down, still has a lot of valuable historical artifacts all guarded by an insane AI hell-bent on disposing of all ‘looters’. It’s superbly written and hugely funny.

The AI system is called TERRY (Techno Electronic Robotic Repository of Yore) which I also found hilarious. *Fallout: London* is full of similar original and well-created content.



Image 8: Churchill – an indestructible Bulldog companion and a real ‘good boy’.

As for companions, rather than Dogmeat you can get an interesting range, my favorite being Churchill, an indestructible Bulldog that I got from a Tommy early in the game. There are several more great character alternatives that I won’t reveal to spoil the surprise. Dialogue and

voice acting for these is funny, extensive and generally very good indeed.

Insane degree of customization — Everything has had a cosmetic make-over, starting with the Fallout staple the ‘Pipboy’ (which in *Fallout: London* becomes the Attaboy). There’s a complete change to the perk system and animations, including some weird perks such as ‘sleepwalking’ that can reset your position almost anywhere on the map whenever you take a long rest.

Even incidental assets such as telephones, toys, canned goods, food, comics, drinks and all collectables have been redesigned with period Britain in mind: beer mats can be collected to gain perks, for example, and underground tickets replace bottlecaps as the main currency. There are also hours of additional audio including original parodies of ‘60s music hits (such as ‘Nuclear Submarine’) and a couple of fun radio channels to listen to. Everything has changed – and it feels glorious.

The game is a visual delight. It rewards exploration with novelty at every turn and feels British to the core while simultaneously feeling 100% Fallout. This is a total make-over that has managed what seemed impossible.

Depending on your individual playstyle, and how sidetracked you get with optional quests, it could take anywhere from 25 to well over 100 hours to complete.

Given the fact that this works, and works so well, it’s clear that many other cultures could be equally interesting if given a similar, and reverent, Fallout make-over.

In fairness, my initial impression of *Fallout: London* was mixed. It was simultaneously an astounding piece of work, a monumental achievement and also a hot-mess of bugs that initially rendered the game almost unplayable. One of the first reviews I saw of the mod (From the PC Gamer site) recognized that same failing, labelling their review “*Fallout: London is a truly impressive modding achievement that mostly hits the mark, but it’s barely playable right now*” (Wolens 2024).

But, like me, the reviewer could still see the gold within and, overall, the review was positive and looked forward to when the main bugs were fixed. This same pattern was present in every review I looked at.

So I persevered and took advantage of a mod called *Buffout 4*

(Nexus Mods 2024a) that seemed to help prevent most of the problems and crashes and allowed me to play the game – and I was instantly hooked.

Since then, there have been several major updates that have resulted in the game becoming far more stable and crashing far more infrequently. Bethesda games are renowned for crashing, so much so that crashes are now down to almost Bethesda's traditional standard rate (and probably also, in many cases, down to Bethesda's original code).



Image 9: Tower Bridge – London is recreated in enough detail that if you know it you can find your way around easily.



Image 10: Just exploring and finding out how well London's landmarks have survived (such as the cannibal infested tower of London) is enormous fun.

The experience has become something quite remarkable. Most mods are small affairs, perhaps adding a new skin, a new quest and

level design or a companion: even when extensive they rarely add more than an hour or two of gameplay.

Sure, there were a fair few problems if I really looked. Some dialogue wasn't polished, some voice-over work could have been improved and several times I really got annoyed at the level design which made some things almost impossible to find. Loading times when moving between inside and outside locations, or different parts of the map were often terrible, and there were many early quest-stopping bugs and crashes that sometimes required the console to address and fix. But these issues never ruined the experience for long and I found myself consistently revelling in what was around the corner and exploring just for the sake of it. I lived in the real London for several years and I was impressed by how easy it was to navigate. Overall, the map felt intuitive and even if routes were blocked, I still knew where I was and where I was going. I just had to use my knowledge of London to find alternative routes.

The voicework, dialogue and quests were often superb, equally as bizarre and haunting as anything created by Bethesda. Some I will remember fondly for years (though I don't want to give out too many spoilers). There are plenty of playthroughs to enjoy that will walk you through a scene if you'd rather not have the hassle of installing and playing, but this is one mod that everyone should experience, if only to marvel at the sheer scope of what was achieved, and especially if you love Fallout.

The very Britishness that oozed out of everything felt very different to any other Fallout game and I felt totally at home. I have loved it more than any other fallout experience since that very first 3D excursion into the Fallout world in *Fallout 3* – suddenly the world of Fallout feels brand new again.

RECEPTION

But I'm not alone in believing *FL* is something special. In fact, IGN (Imagine Gaming Network) actually reviewed *FL* despite never having reviewed a mod before saying:

"Editor's Note: Yes, we've reviewed a mod! It's true that this isn't some-

thing IGN normally does, but seeing as Fallout: London is a project on a scale that rivals a full game, we've made an exception."

The review goes onto say:

"When you consider it's a completely free mod rather than an official game, Fallout: London is extremely impressive. It's a massive RPG worthy of the Fallout moniker, and the way it uses its titular city to shake up the series US-centric formula is extremely effective and refreshingly novel ... going off the beaten path to adventure with companions is as fun here as it is in any modern open-world Bethesda game. There is a lot of fun to be had in Ol' Blighty." (Koreis 2024)

If you look at any review of *Fallout: London* you're likely to see a universal appreciation of the work that has gone into it and the fun that people have had playing it. I've found it interesting to watch numerous playthroughs from a wide range of countries (especially from those who live in the US). While UK players are naturally enthralled by having a *Fallout* game set in the UK, even players from the US have also singled out the unique London setting and flavour as major plus points, and universally (apart from the bugs) it's gone down well. I even came across a YouTube video where weapon experts from the Tower of London discussed the weapons created just for this mod (Ferguson 2024).

In fact, one of the most often repeated observations was we should stop calling it a mod.

By all measures this is a full game.

It may have started as a mod, but it is now a complete and groundbreaking game in its own right: a game crafted with Bethesda's Creation Kit that is, in many ways, indistinguishable from a standard *Fallout* game and a monumental achievement which deserves full recognition and respect.



Image 11: Exploration is often richly rewarded. For example, this is one of 16 Tardis ‘Easter eggs’ (in different degrees of disrepair) scattered across the entire map in a Dr Who quest line. Find them all to claim a special energy pistol – the ‘Dardek’.

WHY IS THE *FALLOUT: LONDON* MOD IMPORTANT?

While there is a clear guiding hand visible throughout (controlled by Dean Carter and Callum J Quick) the player gets the impression that every team member was given carte-blanche to carve out their own little corners of the game to work on. That this was a labour of love by all involved is obvious.

FL is an unofficial mod. Modders traditionally can’t gain any monetary reward for undertaking game mods.

So what were the real motivations for creating mods such as *Fallout: London*?

In an interview with Dean Carter, for the website VG247 in August 2024, Mark Warren asked about the organization of Team FOLON, and what led members to spend so much time on a project such as this (Warren 2024b).

That interview is very illuminating. One contributing factor was certainly the Pandemic. The UK Covid lockdown led to members of the project team having a lot more time on their hands than they had originally expected (effectively giving them a great deal of free time) and allowing the project to advance far faster than would normally have happened. The unexpected opportunity of the Covid lockdown to the mod’s development also underlines why *Fallout: London* might just remain unique. However, this extra time also allowed Team FOLON to

plan better, to “ask tough questions” and get the team into “...the same mindset as professionals”.

Key to this organization was finding out what each team member wanted to get from the project, and Carter found that there were basically a couple of different reasons that team members signed up:

- **Some just wanted to do it as a hobby**, working weekends and having fun with like-minded people. Nothing wrong with this, and it’s a good way to develop skills.
- **Some wanted to get a job in the industry**, and saw this as a way of creating useful portfolio pieces to advertise their skills. Team FOLON becoming more professional and dealing with tight deadlines helped equip anyone thinking of entering the game industry with appropriate experience as to what would be expected. A mod is always a good portfolio piece.

Using a mod as a portfolio piece is a well-established pathway to getting noticed. Prior to game development being taught at university graduate (or higher) level, and prior to the explosion in academic interest in video games, the ability (in the absence of prior employment) to demonstrate modding skills was a significant mark in an applicant’s favor.

Even if someone was in employment, modding allowed for the demonstration of additional skills, and allowed people to work on projects, genres and in roles that they might not yet have attained, or which they aspired to. Basically, mods are a great way of adding to a portfolio, and of gaining attention from the major publishers of the games being modded, even if no current vacancies are advertised.

For whatever reason, a portfolio piece or simply the pleasure and satisfaction from completing work, and the feedback obtained from players are the same reasons why most game developers started out in the first place.

Modders can, however, sacrifice a lot. As Carter says later in the same interview:

"The problem with inspiration is it might seem like a good idea, but you might not realise how much like this has to take over your life to do. If I had worked the hours I've worked in a job now, I don't know, I would probably be in a much bigger house right now. But no, I haven't been working, I've been working in the creation kit for free, for no money, my savings are f**king obliterated, excuse my swearing, like they are gone.

"People don't realise the sacrifice that goes into things like this and that's the biggest thing, is you can be inspired, but understand the sacrifice. The biggest bit of advice is do your research on how long and how many man hours combined this takes and if you can't do that, then just watch other people do it, I would say."

The sacrifice that Carter talks of is immense. *Fallout: London* had (at times) close to 100 people working on it, and the overall development time was close to five years.

None of this work was paid for. Team FOLON is an eclectic mix that includes game students, retired developers, moonlighting professionals and those that want to gain a foothold in the industry. That this 'herd of cats' could be organized into a team capable of pulling off a game of this magnitude is astounding. That it could be so well received and so enjoyable is equally impressive.

It's worth mentioning that Bethesda has in the past attempted to create a category of 'paid' mods, where the creators of those mods would get paid for their work.

They first tried this in 2015 with *Skyrim*, aiming to allow validated content to be sold via Steam. But the community hated it on two fronts (Chalk 2015).

Firstly – vocal members of the community objected to the fact that the mod developer would only receive 25% of the revenue (with the rest being split between Steam and Bethesda).

Secondly – a similar vocal number maintained that mods should always be free!

The framework for paid mods was quickly pulled and failed almost immediately, which I consider a huge shame. In regard to the first point, while not overly generous, it could so easily have been updated

over time once the principle had been established. The second point, however, is more problematic and shows up the warped entitlement of some players: if mod developers can't monetize five years of work in some way, then nothing similar will ever be made.

Bethesda 'Creation Club' on Steam has since introduced the idea of paid mods again (through this is a rather feeble back door without clear guidelines as to what monetary value actually would accrue). So far these are for 'authorized' and simple changes, and not huge total conversions such as *Fallout: London*. In some ways this may open the door for negotiated special cases, and there are some potential avenues that show promise (Pearce 2017).

What is clear is that if we want mods like *FL* then some way of financially rewarding a team responsible for work like this has to be found and implemented. After all, it's worth pointing out that companies (including Bethesda) that support modding can often gain a considerable monetary benefit from a game mod, even if the modders themselves don't. A mod can drive players to buy the original game just to play it. I did this, for example, when setting up *Fallout: London*: I couldn't face the time and effort required to uninstall and wind back my existing Steam copy of *Fallout 4*, so I bought another heavily discounted GOTY edition via GOG.

Both Bethesda and GOG benefited financially from that, but not Team Folon.

However, mods like *Fallout: London* are immense and, without some ongoing financial support, mods of similar scale and ambition are less likely in future. Another *Fallout* mod *Fallout: Nuevo Mexico*, (based on modding *Fallout: NewVegas*), has recently been cancelled. One of the modders involved referred to having "...poured thousands of hours into it, late nights, early mornings, and everything in between." But that "... the workload was enormous, and the costs ahead, both financial and personal, are too great. Continuing forward simply isn't sustainable for me and everyone involved." (Nightingale 2025).

It needs to be stressed that developers gain hugely from having an active modding scene. It prolongs a game's life in the marketplace and maintains an IP's profile between official releases and sequels. If developers want an active modding scene it behoves them to create bound-

aries for what is allowed and what not, and to provide clear guidelines and financial scales as to what recompense modders can expect for creating content and to where copyright will reside.

Bethesda obviously needs to maintain and defend its own copyright, otherwise it could lose it. Equally, modders have to accept they are creating derivative works and that their copyright is always going to be severely limited – or will simply be blocked. I fear under current copyright laws it's simply not in a company's interests to encourage large complex mods that could lead to large complex copyright disputes, without clear guidelines up front.

Modders are often given a great deal of freedom to make what they want, but that freedom is granted only by agreeing to provide the mod free of charge to others.

But this is a complex question: there is no easy solution, and even companies that do loosen their hold over their IP such as Valve with Team Fortress (Bailey 2025), Epic with Old Unreal code (Doran 2024), or EA with Red Alert (Wolens 2024b) currently only allow free distribution of any derivative work.

The complexities of copyright with regard to modding are immense and other creative industries have had similar problems. For example, Star Trek has a long history of fan-made content that originally, for similar reasons to Bethesda, was very lax on specifying exactly what fans could and couldn't do. This led to the infamous 'Return to Axanar' case where a fan team was raising over \$100,000 dollars to make a Star Trek fan film via crowdsourcing. (Gardner 2017). The resulting court case led to a fixed (some would say draconian) set of rules and restrictions about what could and could not be made (CBS & Paramount 2016). Again, central to the settlement and rules was the fact that fans would not make any financial profit from their work.

It will be interesting to see if a solution to this can be found.

Even without financial recompense, however, working on a mod creates a powerful calling card for a developer, and can often be the only way of proving their skills. In the absence of a formal portfolio of professional work, job offers can occur.

Several job offers have come from *Fallout: London* already (Dinsdale

2024), some as far back as 2021, and Carter himself was offered a job on *Fallout*76 in 2022 but turned it down in order to see *FL* completed.

I'm sure that as the team's work on this mod gradually becomes better known, the number of the team that gained entry to professional game development will continue to rise.

Finally, and incredibly, it's worth pointing out that there are currently over 500 mods created for *Fallout: London* itself! (Nexus Mods 2024b). While these are almost all small and graphical, some have been downloaded many thousands of times. To have this number of mods of a mod is another amazing achievement. If there's something someone thinks should be different, anyone can just wade in, without permission, and create a 'fix', that can then be (optionally) installed by those that might feel the same.

This democratisation of development is an important part of what it means to be involved with the mod scene.

CONCLUSION

Games started out as small affairs with a handful of individuals (or even only one) crafting the experiences that forged the game industry.

Over time the development of game engines allowed for the democratisation of game development, so that anyone could create content and variations on a game without needing the skills and time to develop a game from scratch.

Game mods grew out of that time and in many ways *Fallout: London* is a time machine that looks back towards those game industry origins and to a time where the pleasure of simply creating a game was the main reward. To a time when the joy of becoming involved with a franchise was paramount, simply so that you can have your own creative fun with it and not worry about any monetary recompense for your time.

In today's market, the chances are that developers of all disciplines will not work on a franchise they are attached to. Mods offer a way of fending off the mundane work you do whilst often giving the freedom to do something remarkable to a franchise you love, even if it's not an official addition or 'canon'.

Mods like *Fallout: London* are important because they remind us of why we entered game development or why we study and play games. *Fallout: London* is not what an official sequel would be, nor what any intended extension of the IP would be.

Surprisingly, it has been carried out on a shoestring budget using self-motivated developers of varying skills, and has ended up as a hugely appealing product that is exactly what players have wanted.

I'd like to add my congratulations to everyone on team FOLON for their sheer professionalism, invention and dedication to completing (and maintaining) the project they started five years ago.

Fallout: London has been the most fun playing *Fallout* I've experienced since *Fallout 3*. It is testament to the spirit that forged the game industry, and I deeply wish I'd had time to get involved when I first heard of it, just to have been part of this outstanding game. However, I'm also paradoxically pleased that I came to it fresh and had the privilege of experiencing it completely in its finished glory.

Given the sheer amount of work carried out over the Covid lockdown, which is unlikely to ever occur again, I can't see another mod as huge and all-encompassing ever being created. But it's here now, and I think it is something that anyone that has enjoyed a *Fallout* game should play, just to see what is possible given creativity, dedication, organisation and time.

I also eagerly look forward to whatever Team FOLON do next.

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Image 2 2: Counterstrike 1.6 screenshot (ND). Retrieved December 28, 2024, from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:CS2_Inferno_Fight.jpg Image used by fair use.

images 3 -11: Author's screengrabs of Fallout:London. Team Folon, based on Fallout 4. Bethesda Game Studios.

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