What if we thought of Appalachia as futuristic? Could the mountains be the setting for imagining better, maybe weirder, futures? Artists, writers, and game designers have been asking just those questions, speculating through science fiction, fantasy, and magic realism to rethink the ways cultural traditions in wildly creative ways. From folktales to videogames, cryptozoology to underground highways, this section asks what a future Appalachian utopia (or dystopia) might look and feel like?
“Since cryptids are rooted in folklore, how my designs evolve is almost a collaborative process—creating work that responds to and supports different perspectives with the larger culture is my priority. I like the opportunity to use recognizable imagery to expand on what people might think is possible from their traditions.”

—Liz Pavlovic
Surviving the Fallout: Representations and perceptions of Appalachia in Fallout 76

By Jaime Banks and Nicholas David Bowman

Speculative Appalachian Futures: Two Months in Fallout 76 (AD 2102)

Following 25 years of Great War, nuclear weapons were deployed on 23 October 2022, resulting in a fragmented and fractured world. Twenty-five years later, the citizens of Vault 76—the best and brightest minds in America—emerged from the landscape of West Virginia on “Reclamation Day.” Their task? To leave the vault and rebuild America.

Fallout 76 (Bethesda Studios, 2018) is a video game that puts players in the shoes of three post-nuclear pioneers: West Virginians asked to forge America’s future. In 2102, West Virginians are not portrayed as backwards and uneducated but rather, heroes entrusted to go first and chart the future for a nation burned and broken.

Our research followed over 500 of these digital pioneers for three months. Among our findings included the development of a “sense of place”—a meaningful and emotional connection with the artifacts and places portrayed in the game. Players, however, reported an increased knowledge of the state’s culture and folklore. As with many other video games, Fallout 76 provided players with “lived” experiences that transcended the on-screen action.

Image 4: Outside the Mines

Top: Appalachian Music

Fallout 76—West Virginia, plays host to a number of unusual artifacts, a reminder of the region’s complex history and its role in the region’s economic development. Music breaks also allow players a chance to reflect on the world around them. In game, being “Well Tuned” (the result of playing music for at least 30 seconds) allows players to more quickly recover action points necessary to engage their weapons and rejuvenate themselves. In game, being “Well Tuned” (the result of playing music for at least 30 seconds) allows players to more quickly recover action points necessary to engage their weapons and rejuvenate themselves. In game, being “Well Tuned” (the result of playing music for at least 30 seconds) allows players to more quickly recover action points necessary to engage their weapons and rejuvenate themselves.

Middle: Make War, Then Love

The cośchmikles of Huntington and Bridgeport are the most popular in the region. As with many other video games, Fallout 76 provided players with “lived” experiences that transcended the on-screen action. In game, being “Well Tuned” (the result of playing music for at least 30 seconds) allows players to more quickly recover action points necessary to engage their weapons and rejuvenate themselves. In game, being “Well Tuned” (the result of playing music for at least 30 seconds) allows players to more quickly recover action points necessary to engage their weapons and rejuvenate themselves.
Where will Appalachia Take You?

Scan the QR code and watch the posters come to life.

David Smith
Teaching Assistant Professor, Reed College of Media
West Virginia University
Morgantown, West Virginia

David Smith’s professional work and teaching focus largely on celebrating Appalachia’s assets and nurturing their communities. As a professor in the Reed College of Media, his journalistic and public relations projects include regional reporting projects on topics like urban and rural food insecurity, religion and identity and immigration, as well as advocacy efforts for nonprofits, communities and environmental groups in Appalachia. He’s currently on the leadership team of 100 Days in Appalachia, a reporting project at the Reed College of Media that seeks to tell the complex story of Appalachia’s people, places and lives and to look at issues through the lens of what they mean for the region. He is also brand storytelling lead for BrandJRN, a community branding initiative. BrandJRN works to create comprehensive brand identities for small towns in Appalachia through research-based branding efforts. His background is visual storytelling, through both traditional (photography and video) and emerging mediums (mixed reality, augmented reality, virtual reality).

Baaria Chaudhary
Student, Masters in Science in Computer Science, Statler College of Engineering
West Virginia University
Morgantown, West Virginia

Baaria Chaudhary is a mixed reality artist and developer who focuses on how immersive technologies can be used as storytelling mediums. At her alma mater, New York University, she worked in the Program of Creativity and Innovation with various mixed reality technologies to this end, including the green screen, motion capture, and VR headsets. Her project, Pawn VR, presented at AdWeek NYC in 2017, was an interactive VR experience in which participants were photoscanned and turned into 3D chess pieces in a virtual game. Baaria also helped design a live mixed reality performance called Surmages, which was exhibited at the Shanghai Science Festival in 2017. Her most recent project, Personaland: Zen Garden, was the digital homeland of artist Stewart Wilson’s sculptures in which users could interact with the personas, enjoy a peaceful day, and experience the magic of Personaland.
Kentucky Route Zero is a magical realist videogame about a secret highway running through the Mammoth Cave system, and the people who live there. It’s a game about what Mark Fisher called “the cancellation of the future.” For the characters in this game, the future is a broken promise made by a faceless energy company. The cancellation of the future has consequences for the natural flow of time—now erratic, unpredictable, “out of joint”—so we see art and culture from many times co-existing in a murky now. The experience is something like living with ghosts. But still living, playing, building homes in the ruins of the future.

Relieved of the burden of belonging to the future, videogames can be another creative tool we use to explore the present. New game design tools like Twine (http://twinery.org/), Bitsy (https://ledoux.itch.io/bitsy), and Scratch (https://scratch.mit.edu/) make the form accessible to more people without training or experience in computer programming. It’s summer, so let’s make games on the porch. We’re in love, so let’s make private games for our loves. We’ve been through a lot, so let’s make games about our stories. We’re being exploited, so let’s make a protest game.

Cardboard Computer:
Ben Babbitt,
Jake Elliott,
Tamas Kemenczy
Founders, Kentucky Route Zero
CARBON & SALT: The Future We Don’t Want!

Daniel Boyd

Winter, filmmaker, retired professor
Currently Artist-in-Residence, West Virginia State University EDC
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Daniel Boyd is an acclaimed filmmaker (Chillers, Strangest Dreams, Paradise Park), a two-time television regional Emmy nominee, and is a multi-nominated graphic novelist (Chillers I & II, CARBON, SALT). CARBON and SALT are currently being developed for film and TV.

Boyd and Gold/Platinum albums recipient and NPR’s Mountain Stage co-creator and host, Larry Groce, recently collaborated on a full staged musical adaptation of Paradise Park commissioned by Theater West Virginia. The play debuted in June of 2018 to fantastic reviews. It will return in July 2019. Boyd and Groce are working on a new musical to be announced.

A retired media studies professor at West Virginia State University, Boyd also taught around the world including in Tanzania as a three-time Fulbright scholar. He continues to serve as Artist in Residence at West Virginia State University’s Economic Development Center.

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What if there really was a Desert of Ice? A place with a climate hotter for most people we know of, and a future that we dread the most? A fission bomb that has seeded the environment by burning

A nuclear winter. All industrialized civilization having disappeared, the earth’s climate

deteriorates. A 50 year period of total stagnation. Then, you find yourself lurching through the ruins of a former city. You are to assume the role of a man who has

died in a fission bomb. He is to learn the secrets of the desolate world we have left.

The only thing that stands in the way of the end of the world are you, and a

disgusted, embittered shrink and a community of scavengers and misfits.

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Darrick MacBrehon, a government auditor, wakes among the dead. Bloodied and disoriented from a gaping head wound, the man who staggers out of the mine crack in Redbird, West Virginia, is much more powerful—and dangerous—than the one thrown in. An orphan with an unknown past, he must now figure out how to have a future. In a town where the river flows orange and the founding—and controlling—family is rumored to “strip a man to the bones,” the conspiracy that bleeds Redbird runs as deep as the coal veins that feed it.