

Far More Than a Cash Grab: “Fallout: New Vegas Ultimate Edition”

Written by Grant Williams

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For many gamers, “downloadable content” (DLC) inspires, if not condemnation, at least suspicion. Many modern video games seem overloaded with attempts to make money off of players after the initial purchase. “Microtransactions” parcel out minor aesthetic options or mechanical bonuses in exchange for cash. At its worst, downloadable content means additional fees for core features, as in *Assassin’s Creed II* and *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*, in which segments of the main narrative were omitted and sold as DLC. At its best, well, it’s the DLC for *Fallout: New Vegas*

New Vegas’ DLC includes four major pieces, each a complete story the length and breadth of a smaller single-player game:

Dead Money, Honest Hearts, Old World Blues, and Lo

nesome Road

. There are also two smaller pieces,

Courier’s Stash

and
Gun Runners’ Arsenal

, that are of the more common, largely inconsequential variety. All are collected with the original

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game in the recently released
Fallout: New Vegas Ultimate Edition



New Vegas itself seemed on its first release in late 2010 like a cash grab: a spin-off of Bethesda’s exceedingly successful *Fallout 3*, using that game’s engine and much of its art, handed off to another studio – Obsidian Entertainment – known for producing sequels to other developers’ games. But like Obsidian’s *Knights of the Old Republic II*, which followed up Bioware’s hit first game, *New Vegas* is better-written, better-designed, and just generally more interesting than its predecessor. (It’s also worth noting that most members of the *New Vegas* team are former employees of the collapsed Black Isle Studios, which developed the first two *Fallout* games and was developing a third game similar to *New Vegas* when the company went under.)

New Vegas is an open-world role-playing game in which you’re free to roam the post-apocalyptic but recovering Mojave Desert. Superficially, it’s similar to *Fallout 3* (as well as Bethesda’s *Oblivion* and *Skyrim*) in both its strengths and weaknesses. As with Bethesda’s games, objects and people often seem disconnected from the world on a physical level, and combat is never as interesting as it seems intended to be. In the DLC, this last problem becomes more significant, as combat is frequent, repetitive, and often frustrating.

But unlike Bethesda’s games, *New Vegas* and its DLC truly dedicate themselves to creating living worlds in which every choice the player makes has consequences.

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Some players might even think there are too many consequences in *New Vegas*. Small decisions reverberate throughout the game. Often it's not even clear that you're making a choice, a sharp distinction from the games of Bethesda and Bioware, which go out of their way to clearly telegraph every consequential option.

It's possible to reach the end of *New Vegas* without killing anyone. Conversation is as common as combat, and success requires more than just increasing your character's numerically rated skill at “speech.” The interwoven plot threads create a story about different groups of people trying to build a new world from the ashes of the old one, each failing in their own way.

The plot is surprisingly mundane, often centering on logistical issues; but its focus on basic necessities such as food and water grounds the game and makes it feel real. The player isn't trying to save the world, instead working to determine something smaller but critical to this world and its inhabitants: who will control Hoover Dam, the last source of electrical power in the nuclear wasteland.

If *New Vegas* has a serious fault, it's that the world can seem too dryly political at times, so concerned with negotiating the various factions' alliances and rivalries that other aspects of the game – such as the well-written characters – fall into the background. *New Vegas'* DLC reverses this, as each major piece is laser-focused on just a few characters and examining a theme given shorter shrift in the main game.

For players who miss *Fallout's* sense of survival in unforgiving conditions, the main game offers a “hardcore” mode that requires players to eat, drink, and sleep regularly and makes healing more difficult. Such players may especially enjoy the first piece of DLC,

Dead Money

, with a constantly dangerous environment in which the player is stripped of equipment and forced to scavenge a remnant of the old world. Ultimately, though, the player's survival depends not on looting but on overcoming greed and suspicion to cooperate with a cast of distrusting and unstable companions.

Honest Hearts, meanwhile, goes in the other direction, contrasting the political machinations of the Mojave with a vision of an innocent world untainted by the apocalypse. It presents a surprisingly nuanced and respectful portrayal of religion – never a common subject in video games – and asks the player to determine the worth of faith when the harsh reality of the world intrudes.

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The final two pieces of major DLC directly confront the specter of the old world that has always haunted the *Fallout* series. Every *Fallout* game begins with Ron Perlman’s gravelly incantation that “war never changes,” a statement of powerlessness that the agency offered by *New Vegas* especially drives the player to rebel against. While you can pitch the battle for Hoover Dam in favor of one side or another, it’s a testament to how much choice the game affords players that it’s disappointing when there is no changing that there *will* be a battle, and that it will be over a relic of the old world rather than how to build a new one.

Old World Blues is a largely comedic story about a group of old-world scientists who have survived as literal brains-in-vats, but it becomes clear over the course of the narrative that the broad, hit-and-miss jokes at its start are there to cover darker, more bitter humor about the dangers of science untethered from morality – the same capriciousness that produced nuclear weapons and, in *Fallout’s* world, the apocalypse.

Finally, *Lonesome Road*, the most powerful piece of DLC, boils all of *Fallout’s* themes to their essence. Amid a truly apocalyptic environment of storms and quakes, the player grapples alone with a hate-filled man named Ulysses, who rages about the unintended consequences of a choice the player doesn’t even remember making. Surrounded by ruins of the old world, including a fleet of dormant nuclear missiles emblazoned with the American flag and waiting to strike again, *Lonesome Road*’s incredibly tense climatic conversation asks, at both the smallest and largest scale possible, whether we will continue to fight the same war and destroy the world all over again or, if war never changes, whether there’s a way to avoid it altogether.

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