

Back in the Saddle

Fallout: New Vegas and Meme Tourism in Goodsprings, Nevada's Pioneer Saloon

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Abstract

Fallout: New Vegas, a video role-playing game released in 2010, is set in Southern Nevada in the aftermath of a nuclear war. The action begins in Goodsprings, which is in effect the game's tutorial space, as the player learns how to move, fight, and interact with others, as well as being exposed to the game's world and the factions that inhabit it. The game's Goodsprings was modeled on the real-life town of Goodsprings, with several locations directly inspired by real-life buildings. The Prospector Saloon's real-world analogue, the Pioneer Saloon, has become a tourist site for the game's devotees. The relatively new phenomenon of meme tourism, made possible by social media, has achieved minimal scholarly attention to date, with most of the reporting in the popular press focusing on its downsides. This study, however, examines how game-inspired meme tourism has positively impacted the real-world town, particularly the Pioneer Saloon.

Introduction

There is no shortage of places for tourists to visit in Southern Nevada. The casinos of the Las Vegas Strip and Downtown Las Vegas are an obvious draw, but national parks and recreation areas, cultural attractions like Atomic Testing Museum, Mob Museum, and Neon Museum, and Hoover Dam are ancillary destinations for those living in and visiting the region. People are attracted to those destinations because they meet some need, either for indulgence (the Strip), interacting with nature (national parks), or education (the museums). In promoting themselves these attractions draw on marketing, publicity, and advertising, investing in communications that will educate visitors about why they should dedicate a portion of their limited time and financial budget while in the area to visiting.

Goodsprings, Nevada, is an unlikely tourist destination. It doesn't have the gambling, retail, or fine dining of the Strip; it is not as accessible as the Fremont Street Experience or Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas sign; it doesn't have the curated natural beauty of Red Rock Canyon; and it lacks an engineering wonder like Hoover Dam. And yet the small town, located about 40 miles south of Las Vegas via Interstate 15 and State Route 161, has an appeal to a subsection of Southern Nevada tourists that rivals that of its better-known

neighbor, due to the town's importance in Bethesda Softworks' 2010 video role playing game *Fallout: New Vegas*. Goodsprings, as the first location in the post-apocalyptic Mohave that the player experiences, leaves a bigger emotional impact on players than later, more grandiose locations that exist both in the game and in real life, like the Strip and Hoover Dam. While the game begins in 2281, over two hundred years after a nuclear exchange that ended civilization as we know it, many of the locations featured in the game are based on recognizable natural and constructed features of the current Mojave. Goodsprings is rendered with particular fidelity, with accommodations made for the exigencies of the game's narrative and gameplay.

The real-life Pioneer Saloon, the most prominent business in Goodsprings, is rendered in the game as the Prospector Saloon, with similarities in both the exterior and interior of the bar. Clearly, the creators of *Fallout: New Vegas* were not trying to faithfully reproduce an early 21st century bar in their game, but walking into the Pioneer, its inspiration on the Prospector is obvious. Because of this likeness, the bar has become a favored destination for *Fallout* fans visiting Southern Nevada. And the bar itself has capitalized, welcoming fans of the game, many of them dressed as characters from the Mojave Wasteland.

Media-related tourism is nothing new; scholars have been writing about it for at least twenty years, and examples from carefully constructed attractions like Disneyland or tours of the studio where the Harry Potter franchise was filmed abound. But the recent phenomenon of meme tourism, in which tourists visit locations from movies and television productions, sharing their visits via social media platforms that amplify them, raising awareness of the site, and thus inspiring future meme tourists, is seen as something different. Video games, particularly immersive ones like *Fallout: New Vegas*, forge even deeper emotional connections with their fans than movies or television shows, giving them correspondingly larger potential to lure meme tourists.

By welcoming players and indulging in their desire to visit the real-world analogue of the Prospector, the Pioneer has broadened its customer base. In many ways, Goodsprings can be seen as a test case for a burgeoning kind of meme tourism: visits to a locale not because one can recreate a popular scene there, but because in visiting one can relive, after a fashion, the experience of being in the world of a video game. The interplay between real-life Goodsprings and its *Fallout: New Vegas* counterpart demonstrates that video games have the potential to inspire meme tourism in the most unlikely places, and that, with a direct financial incentive, certain types of video game-related meme tourism are likely to grow.

About the Game

Fallout: New Vegas is a combination first person shooter/role playing game that affords players the opportunity to immerse themselves in the atmosphere that their character moves through. The *Fallout* franchise began in 1997 with the first entry in the series, entitled simply *Fallout*. In the lore of the series, a series of international conflicts over

limited resources culminated in the October 23, 2077 exchange of nuclear weapons between the People's Republic of China and the United States of America. In two hours of atomic fire, much of civilization was destroyed. This was not the end of the world, but only, is said in the introduction to *Fallout 3*, "simply the prologue to another bloody chapter of human history. For man had succeeded in destroying the world - but war, war never changes."¹

Those last words, repeated in every *Fallout* introduction, sum up the series' central tenet: whether using rock and bone or plasma rifles and proton axes, the nature of conflict does not change. Millennia of escalating violence climaxed in 2077, but humanity did not emerge wiser from the ruins—people continue to kill, which, if nothing else, explains why over the course of an adventure the player character can kill hundreds of others with no consequences.

The first two games were set in New California, an area of the west coast of the United States that, at the time that the first game began in 2161, had begun to stitch itself back together. Thousands of Americans had taken refuge in underground vaults; their descendants are now emerging, with new polities coalescing to bring order to the post-nuclear chaos. *Fallout 3* was set in the ruins of Washington, DC in 2277, and *Fallout: New Vegas*, begins in 2281 in the Mojave Wasteland.

The game begins with a brief video introducing the *Fallout* universe and establishing the plot of New Vegas. Most of Las Vegas was spared from nuclear strikes thanks to the intervention of Robert House, a reclusive billionaire transparently modeled on Howard Hughes, down to living on the top floor of a Strip resort. Two hundred years later, House is still alive thanks to advanced medical technology, but he has not left his Lucky 38 casino. Through intermediaries, he contracts with Mojave Express for the delivery of a platinum chip, a delivery that the player, known alternately as "The Courier" and "Courier Six," undertakes.

While en route to New Vegas, the player is ambushed by Benny, a casino manager working for House (who has consolidated all of the Strip casinos into a monopoly) and a pair of Great Khans, one of the tribes who live in the Mojave Wasteland. Benny (modeled closely on real-life Las Vegas figure Benjamin "Bugsy" Siegel), steals the platinum chip, shoots the courier in the head, and leaves him for dead. Discovered by a security robot working for Mr. House, the Courier is taken to the Goodsprings home of Doc Mitchell, who somehow manages to treat his ostensibly fatal gunshot. The game begins with the Courier waking up in Doc Mitchell's Goodsprings house. The player, after setting up the character with the help of Mitchell, begins the game by embarking on a pair of tutorials that teach the basics of gameplay and learn more about the world of the Mojave.

The player moves through the game by completing various quests which are assigned by non-player characters or triggered when the player reaches certain milestones. The initial quest, "Ain't That a Kick in the Head," takes place entirely in Doc Mitchell's home, as the player chooses their Courier's appearance and starting abilities. The second quest,

“Back in the Saddle,” introduces the player to Goodsprings and walks them through combat, crafting, and interacting with non-player characters and factions. Along with the main quest lines, there are numerous side quests that allow the player to do everything from reuniting a supermutant with her robot best friend to helping a neon sign artist reconnect with his inspiration to discovering the truth behind a series of caravan raids.

Ultimately, though, the Courier has a larger task before them, one that will change the future of the Mojave forever. The New California Republic, which has been growing since the time of the first *Fallout* game. By the 2270s, it is pushing eastward in search of land and resources, an intended parallel to the United States’ own westward expansion over the 19th century. The NCR meets a rival, though, in Caesar’s Legion, a despotic band of slavers run by Caesar, the former Edward Sallow, who has united dozens of tribes under his autocratic fist across much of what was once Arizona. The NCR and Caesar’s Legion both covet Hoover Dam and New Vegas. Mr. House wants New Vegas to remain an independent power, and a rogue Securitron can help the Courier rule the Mojave themselves. The game climaxes in a battle at the Dam, in which the player can choose which of the four sides they will fight for.

The player becomes enmeshed in the conflict between Mr. House, the NCR, and Caesar’s Legion as they track down Benny to avenge their shooting. Along the way, the player engages in a variety of side quests and explores the Mojave Wasteland, which has many locations based on real-world counterparts, from Mount Charleston to the Colorado River, along with others with no clear antecedents, like the Big MT research facility. The side quests, combined with the ability to customize the player character and make choices that lead to different storylines, give the game a high degree of replayability. The Mojave Wasteland becomes a place where the player can visit time and again, seeing the same people and surroundings. With the replays that the game invites, non-player characters following scripts become almost old friends. When we start one more playthrough, we know that Doc Mitchell will be there when we wake up, and that Trudy’s radio in the Prospector Saloon needs fixing.

Also of note is that in *Fallout: New Vegas*, the Courier is not a lone wanderer. Rather, he or she has the opportunity to work for, with, or against several in-game factions. Both the NCR and Caesar’s Legion have distinctive in-game apparel that can, with some effort, be recreated in real life, giving rise to a thriving cosplay scene. Siding with a faction isn’t just about expediency, as it may be in real life; it is a statement about what one believes. The NCR, ostensibly founded on the ideals of the United States, often falls short of those principles in practice, and Mojave residents resent the officiousness of its government and military representatives, as well as the higher tax burden they bring—a conscious echo of the Sagebrush Rebellion. Still, one can join the NCR and fight in solidarity with their brothers and sisters on the frontlines against the tyranny of Caesar and the anarchy of the Fiends.

Caesar’s Legion’s appeal is, frankly, difficult for the author to grasp, but there’s something to be said for being a contrarian, even though its brutal slavery and enforced

misogyny (women serve the Legion only as slaves) are off-putting to many players. There are other, smaller factions that the player can support or oppose: the Powder Gangers, escaped convicts who have taken over a local prison and threaten Goodsprings; the Fiends, Vipers, Scorpions, and Jackals, various gangs that terrorize the good citizens of the Mojave; the Boomers, isolationist, trigger-happy former vault dwellers who live at Nellis Air Force Base; the Great Khans, a tribe of drug-dealing raiders resident at Red Rock Canyon; the Brotherhood of Steel, a well-armored, highly disciplined group of technology-hoarding militants; the Followers of the Apocalypse, humanitarians who seek to bring education and healthcare to the Mojave from their home base at the Old Mormon Fort; and the Kings, a gang of Elvis impersonators who run Freeside, the name for the anything-goes remnants of downtown Las Vegas. Each of them has its own dress code and props. One can also cosplay as several variants of Courier, or as one of the dozens of distinct non-player characters. The presence of readily identifiable clothes, weapons, and props makes it easy to craft an identity that is easily recognizable to fellow players. Dressing like an NCR Ranger won't really get you into that elite unit, but it will win you instant respect from those who know the game. Dressing as a character and posing in a game location makes for an instant meme.

Although many of the game's most dramatic moments take place on the Strip—confronting Benny at the Tops casino and meeting Mr. House in the penthouse of the Lucky 38—and the game-ending battle is set at Hoover Dam, Goodsprings might be the emotional heart of New Vegas for most players. It is where the Courier is reborn, and where the player is first introduced to the world of the post-atomic Mojave. The inhabitants of Goodsprings greet the Courier with (mostly) unconditional support as the player learns the game. In Goodsprings, the player learns that actions have consequences: helping a resident besieged by mutated geckos earns them their first positive reputation of the game, boosting their standing with Goodsprings. Choosing to side with the Powder Gangers in a confrontation with the town makes a positive impression on that group and an understandably negative one on Goodsprings, while doing the opposite has the opposite effect.

Once the Courier has rallied the people of Goodsprings and fended off the Powder Gangers (or, more darkly, sided with the interlopers and killed the residents of Goodsprings), they can leave town, but the lessons they learned there will guide them throughout the game. And they can return, whether it's just to chat with the crew at the Prospector Saloon or to haggle with general store owner Chet. While battles rage around the Wasteland, Goodsprings remains an oasis of calm that the player can revisit. A bit boring, perhaps, but as good a place as any to mark one's progress from a newbie to a liberator of the wastes.

In the game, the Prospector appears to be a stereotypical western saloon. Its sign captures the ramshackle mix of old west and shattered future that characterizes all of New Vegas. "Prospector" is written in an old-style font very reminiscent of the real-life Pioneer Saloon's sign, while "Saloon" is pieced together from three different neon salvages. One of

the game's major themes is how post-apocalyptic society continually turns back on a past that led to disaster. We see this in Caesar's Legion, which draws on a distorted memory of the Roman Empire in creating a misogynistic dictatorship; the Brotherhood of Steel, who seek to hoard pre-war technology; the "Old World Blues" add-on that makes the tragedy of being caught in the past explicit; the ways that many of the characters and factions associated with New Vegas draw on historical precedents; and countless other large and small interactions in the game. Walking into the Prospector Saloon, one has a very good idea of the world they are stepping into.

Upon first entering the Prospector, the player is greeted by Sunny Smiles, who initiates a tutorial quest that acclimates the player to combat and crafting. At the conclusion of the tutorial, Sunny suggest the player return to the Prospector to give their regards to the proprietor, Trudy. The inside of the Prospector appears friendly but worn-down, with the men's room turned into storage and evidence of decay everywhere. Yet the stamped-tin ceiling gives off a homey vibe, and Trudy is quick to sell you a drink or just share background about her corner of the Mojave.

With over 7 million games sold, *Fallout: New Vegas* has a large fanbase.² Though the game is now over a decade old, an active modding community and its inherent strength as a well-written game have kept *New Vegas* relatively current. Although two major *Fallout* games have been released since *New Vegas*, the game set in the Mojave retains many enthusiastic fans. Indeed, it has proved something of a small boon to the real-life town of Goodsprings, which is no longer the thriving mining center it was over a century ago.

Goodsprings

The real town of Goodsprings shares a great deal with the many boomtowns turned to ghost towns of the American West, and a few things with the fictional post-apocalyptic town of Goodsprings in *Fallout: New Vegas*.

Paiute Indians had long been present in the area, and in the 19th century, first Mexican, then American, caravanners ventured into the region of what is now Goodsprings. In 1855, a group of Mormons began a brief effort to mine lead in the region. Over the next four decades, miners continued to sporadically extract minerals from the area. One Joseph Good was a member of a party that in 1868 founded a camp on a site near a natural spring. Good stayed on when his partners left, and the site became known as Good's Springs. When, in 1899, a post office opened at the camp—which had not yet developed into a town—the postmaster dubbed it Goodsprings.³

The 1905 opening of the Salt Lake, Los Angeles, and San Pedro Railroad that created Las Vegas 30 miles to the north also breathed new life into Goodsprings thanks to a station at Jean (originally, Goodsprings Junction) only seven miles away. As late as 1892, the "town" only boasted two buildings, but the discoveries of accessible zinc, copper, and vanadium, along with gold, silver, cobalt, and other minerals, supercharged by the boom brought by

World War I that saw three dozen mines in operation by 1916, made Goodsprings a true town. The springs, fed by a natural aquifer, provided a ready source of water (as did the 35 wells that were ultimately sunk), and, with electricity, telephone service, and relatively easy access by automobile, Goodsprings had a reputation as a “family” town rather than a lawless “shoot-em-up camp.”⁴ At its 1916-7 peak, Goodsprings had between 800 and 1,000 inhabitants, a department store, an assay office, a steam laundry, a movie theater, and, opening in May 1916, a hotel with electric lights, hot and cold running water, and steam heat.⁵ Despite its “family” reputation, at its zenith the city had a large enough carousing population to support seven saloons and a thriving red light district.⁶

Today, the Pioneer Saloon is the only surviving commercial business in Goodsprings, which has fewer than 200 residents. Its decline was similar to that of boomtowns throughout the extractive American west. With the end of World War I, the value of the minerals extracted from the region declined. Exacerbating the decline, the Spanish Flu claimed several lives, including that of George Fayle, the town’s leading citizen and the developer of the Pioneer Saloon, the department store, and the Goodsprings Hotel. World War II did not revive the town’s fortunes, although proximity to Las Vegas and other surrounding developments, such as two casino resorts that opened in Jean in the 1990s, kept the town alive.⁷

The Pioneer itself belies Las Vegas’s reputation as a center for faux attractions like the cartoonish themed resorts that replicated Paris, New York, medieval England, and ancient Egypt in the 1990s, as it is a genuinely historic business in a genuinely historic structure. Its original building dates from 1913, when Goodsprings was on its ascent. Not coincidentally, this was the same year that the schoolhouse, which is also still in operation, was built. The Saloon was constructed of stamped tin laid over a skeleton of wooden two-by-fours—a logical adaptation to a site where wood was in short supply. The walls, consisting of an exterior of tin hammered to appear like bricks and an interior with stamped patterns, as well as a stamped tin ceiling, are still standing.⁸

The saloon’s cherrywood bar is another artifact, having in the early 1860s been shipped around Cape Horn to San Francisco, and thence eventually to Rhyolite, a Nevada boomtown. When Goodsprings was on the rise, Rhyolite was declining, and apparently Fayle acquired the bar, transporting it to Jean via train, then to the Pioneer by wagon. Other historical artifacts that long survived the saloon’s early prosperity include a vintage 1919 cash register, a U.S. Army pot-bellied stove that dates from 1913, a pair of handcuffs and leg irons reportedly used by the local law to subdue miscreants, and 13 bullet holes punched through the saloon’s walls.⁹ There is some dispute about the provenance of the last; while Pioneer legend has them as at least some as the residue to a gunfight between Joe Armstrong and Paul Coski over the ace of spades being played twice in the same poker deal (as depicted in a painting on the wall), others claim that the holes were shot during a later period when the saloon was closed.¹⁰

In any event, after Fayle’s death and the decline of Goodsprings, the Pioneer fell on hard times; in February 1935, it was among several properties being sold in foreclosure.¹¹

Two years later, the saloon reopened “after a long period of darkness.”¹² In late 1941, the Pioneer figured in a “one-man riot” staged by former merchant Pat Sheahan, who shot at a saloon mirror before rampaging around the town, breaking windows on businesses and automobiles.¹³ Today, the most frequently-mentioned episode from the saloon’s past dates to January 1942, when Clark Gable awaited word of the fate of his wife, Carole Lombard, who had perished when her plane crashed into nearby Mt. Potosi. Gable reportedly stayed at the nearby hotel while crews trekked to the crash site though, with the hotel burning to the ground in 1966, the Pioneer is the only remaining business that can claim a connection to this tragic event. A piece of melted aluminum recovered from the crash by a 1967 expedition was later displayed on the Pioneer’s stove.¹⁴

The notoriety from Gable’s vigil was not enough to sustain the Pioneer, and it closed in 1954. Irene Nutman purchased and reopened the establishment in 1960, though she sold it five years later to “Poppa” Don Hedrick, who would cede daily operation of the saloon to his son, Don Hedrick, Jr., in the 1990s.¹⁵ Hedrick became a passionate keeper of the Pioneer’s legacy and advocate for Goodsprings, having moved there from Illinois.¹⁶ This didn’t however, insulate the Pioneer from some controversy; the Clark County Sheriff’s Department briefly closed the car in May, 1971, after a group of Hells Angels “congregated” there.¹⁷ Indeed, the bar does appear to be a popular destination for bikers to this day. This is even reflected in the *New Vegas Prospector*, which has several unusable motorcycles in front of it.

The younger Hedrick retired in 2006, selling the Pioneer to Noel Scheckells, who invested \$600,000 in restoring the saloon and succeeded in having it placed on the Nevada Register of Historic Places.¹⁸ Under the new regime, the Pioneer trades on its past, hosting off-road tours of the region and capitalizing on the rage for ghost tours. The current management, concluding that the Goodsprings history—and a fashion for apparitions—have embraced the legacy of the Pioneer. This focus on the past, though, has not blinded the Pioneer to the potential of a fictional dystopian future in drawing business.

Meme Tourism

The concept of tourism as a widely accessible travel commodity that could be had by those who were neither incredibly wealthy nor compelled to travel for personal or business reasons dates to the 19th century.¹⁹ In the United States, pleasure resorts, centered on geographically-determined attractions like beaches, mountains, hot springs, and other natural wonders, proliferated in the post-Civil War period. In the post-World War II period, American tourism boomed due to several factors, including the advent of relatively low-cost travel, rising affluence, and workers being afforded leave time in which they could travel.²⁰

Tourism can be difficult to define, because its boundaries aren’t always easy to see: few would deny that a leisure traveler visiting Las Vegas to gamble, enjoy fine dining, and see shows is a tourist, but what about an investor attending the Consumer Electronics Show to

better understand emerging trends? Or a technician being paid by their company to travel to Las Vegas to set up and staff a booth at that show? Or a truck driver spending a night at the Wild Wild West casino en route to Salt Lake City? Anthropologist Valene L. Smith formulated an equation that delineates the three elements that she sees as essential to tourism. Tourism, she argues, equals leisure time plus discretionary income plus “positive local sanctions” (social, economic, and cultural mores that facilitate a particular type of travel).²¹ She further echoes earlier writers in declaring that the increase in the amount of leisure time since World War II has led to an explosion of tourism in the United States.

But having the means to travel doesn't fully explain why people choose to visit where they do. This has long been a topic of speculation in academic circles. Donald Lundberg in 1971 offered a theory of tourism motivation that drew heavily on Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which progress from physiological essentials (food, shelter, sleep) to safety needs, to the need for belongingness to esteem needs to self-actualization, the ability to achieve one's full potential.²² Lundberg hypothesized that “the need for change, for divertissement, for new scenery, for new experiences,” was near the top of Maslow's hierarchy.²³

Lundberg believed that tourists chose their destinations for one or more of eighteen reasons that had been categorized by John A. Thomas, which grouped into educational and cultural motives (seeing particular sights, understanding the world better, attending special events), ethnic exploration (visiting the lands of one's ancestors), personal motives (health, status), “to participate in history” by viewing “temples, ruins, current history,” and a sociological desire to know the world.²⁴ Survey research further indicated that people choose to visit a particular place based on several factors. The most important of these were the friendliness of people there, the comfort of accommodations, the natural scenery, and reasonable prices, with a host of lesser factors, from “attractive customs and way of life” to “exotic environment,” pushing one destination above others.²⁵

Further, four “principal determinants” usually guided tourists in choosing their destination. The most important was *financial*, as one's budget necessarily determines what is within reach. The second was obligatory visits, as one felt it necessary to visit relatives. The third was advertising, which could do much to influence decision-makers. The fourth, family status, reflected the tendency for those with children to, budget permitting, defer to their children's desires for where to travel.²⁶

Within her broad definition of tourism as a sum of leisure time, discretionary income, and positive sanctions, Smith breaks down leisure tourism (thus by definition excluding business and family-related travel from her schema) into five types. *Ethnic* tourism allows visitors to experience the culture of indigenous people in genuine or recreated states. *Cultural* tourism, Smith argues, allows tourists to immerse themselves in “a vestige of a vanishing life-style that lies within human memory with its ‘old style’ houses, homespun fabrics, horse or ox-drawn carts and plows, and hand rather than machine-made crafts.”²⁷ Those partaking in cultural tourism might watch a folklore performance or a Wild West-style rodeo. *Historical* tourism comes close to cultural tourism but reads as less “authentic”

and more scripted, as evidenced by Smith's definition of it as "the Museum-Cathedral Circuit that stresses the glories of the Past," with guided tours of ruins as well as visits to the aforesaid museums and cathedrals as essential elements.²⁸ *Environmental* tourism is related to ethnic tourism in that it draws relatively wealthy travelers "off the beaten path to remote areas like Antarctica, or to see how extractive industries interact with the natural world. Finally, Smith sums up *recreational* tourism as "sand, sea, and sex," with activities centering on skiing, golfing, or enjoying the sunshine, though she notes that Las Vegas has emerged as a different kind of recreational tourism center focused on good food, entertainment, gambling, and, as she puts it, "the away-from-home freedom to indulge in the new morality."²⁹

Meme tourism can be imagined as a subset of entertainment-influenced tourism, which is itself a subset of cultural tourism. In many ways, meme tourism is a logical outgrowth of cultural tourism. Since Smith's original publication, cultural tourism has grown immensely. In 2012, tourism researcher Yi-De Liu noted that the World Trade Organization had tabbed cultural tourism as "one of the largest and fastest growing global tourism markets."³⁰ This makes sense if one construes cultural tourism, in the words of Greg Richards, as an antidote to Western societies' "experience hunger."³¹ In a society that privileges experience, tourist markets have labored to construct new experiences for guests and have retooled existing services as experiences.³²

In their 1999 book *The Experience Economy*, Joseph Pine and James Gilmore recognized experiences as a fourth economic offering, joining commodities (raw materials), goods (finished materials), and services. To explain the value that experience adds, they chart a coffee bean's journey from commodity (where it is worth one or two cents a cup), to good (roasted and ground beans can be bought in a supermarket for five to 25 cents per cup), to service (in a quick-serve restaurant, a cup of coffee then cost 50 cents to a dollar) to an experience (\$15 for a cup of coffee at the Caffè Florian in St. Mark's Square, Venice).³³ The authors include video games among a host of new technologies, from 3-D movies to augmented reality, which are creating more immersive experiences.³⁴ They write about a generation of restaurants that pose food as a prop for what they call an "eatertainment" experience. As with the rise of tourism in the post-World War II period, the authors credit rising affluence for the rise of the experience economy.

Experiences, Pine and Gilmore argue, create new value when a company uses services as the stage and goods as the prop to engage individuals.³⁵ "Whereas commodities are fungible," they write, "goods tangible, and services intangible, experiences are memorable."³⁶ Sometimes, the creators or the licensees of a product are able to do as Pine and Gilmore suggest and exercises a vertical monopoly over the "experience" they sell. The Walt Disney Company is perhaps the preeminent example of this sort of packaging: the company creates and manages entertainment properties ranging from Snow White to Baby Yoda that begin as television and movie productions but spiral outward into a galaxy of licensed apparel, alternate media adaptations, and even foodstuffs, culminating in the immersive "guest" experience at its theme parks. One can watch the movie *Frozen* (and its

sequel and spinoffs), then wear a *Frozen* t-shirt, read a *Frozen* graphic novel, and eat *Frozen*-themed chicken nuggets, before visiting *Frozen Ever After* at Disney World.

But what about when the company's good or service (video games could be classified as either) engages individuals in a completely different locale, outside of the managerial domain of a Disney-like conglomerate?

Pine and Gilmore cite one instance of an operator profiting off their guests' familiarity with an existing cultural property in Manhattan's Library Hotel, whose guest rooms they describe as being themed around the Dewey Decimal System.³⁷ Presumably, Melvil Dewey's estate was not compensated. Media, particularly television and movies, have long been recognized as providing an incentive for travel. Graham Busby and Julia Klug define media-related tourism as tourism that "involves visits to places celebrated for associations with books, authors, television programmes and films."³⁸ Busby and Klug chart an increase in travel to locations that have been featured in popular movies and television shows, noting that the practice is frequently welcomed by travel organizations' the British Tourist Authority itself provides a "movie map," and local agencies also facilitated the desires of fans to walk in the steps of their favorites movies and shows.³⁹ The release of *Saving Private Ryan*, for example, preceded a 40 percent increase in American visitation to Normandy, site of the D-Day landings vividly chronicled in the film's opening sequence, and, absent any other marketing, and the 1995 release of *Sense and Sensibility* sparked a 39 percent increase in visits to Saltram House, Devon, England, without any other marketing of the estate on which it was partially filmed.⁴⁰

Media-related tourism, then, is an established concept in the scholarly literature and a known phenomenon, particularly among those with a financial stake in properties that might become magnets for such tourism. It is not surprising, all things considered, that social media has supercharged the practice of entertainment or existing cultural commodities inspiring travel choices, leading the practice to take a more intense and, many argue, less desirable, turn.

Though meme tourism is young, it already has a vivid exemplary that summarizes the ambivalence it has provoked. Following the release of 2019's *Joker*, in which Joaquin Phoenix, playing the titular clown prince of Gotham City crime, dances down a set of stairs, Instagrammers flocked to the outdoor staircase between Shakespeare and Anderson Avenues in the Bronx on which the scene was shot. Tagged as the "Joker Stairs" in Google Maps, the site drew tourists intent on mimicking, often in costume, Phoenix's performance, an exemplar of what *Wired's* Emma Grey Ellis dubbed "meme tourism," in what is the first recorded use of the phrase.⁴¹

Meme tourism is so recent as to have generated scant academic consideration. In assembling a conceptual framework for the notion, Yerin Yhee, Jahyun Goo, and Chulmo Koo describe meme tourism as a phenomenon in which "digital media technologies allow people to create and distribute own travel contents online—and those meme contents have a traction to potential tourists for a hot place to visit."⁴² In other words, meme tourism

marries the idea of media-related tourism with user-generated content that is broadcast via social media channels. The result is a form of tourism expression that can spread rapidly. Where showing one's vacation photos was once a clichéd bore, sharing a snap in a movie location replicating a famous scene—all the better if in costume—can go viral.

The impact of meme tourism is already contested. Local tourist organizations and hospitality operators tended to encourage media-related tourism, seeing it as a pure value add. The musty estates and drafty castles made famous by Anglophile period dramas, after all, have limited marketing budgets, and the influx of visitors following *Sense and Sensibility* or *Downton Abbey* is no doubt a lifesaver. But when, in 2019, *Joker* made its eponymous stairs ground zero for meme tourism, Bronx residents were ambivalent. Some felt that the added attention could be translated into an economic windfall. Bronx borough president Ruben Diaz, Jr. exhorted memers to “learn about some of our borough’s many fine attractions...and spend some \$\$\$ in The Bronx.”⁴³ The reality was, however, that most memers were less interested in stimulating the local economy than taking an Uber to the stairs, getting their shot, and leaving. One local was so chagrined by the added traffic and nuisance—and lack of spending—that tourists brought with them that he threw eggs at memers, shouting, “Y’all not spending no money in my store but come and take pictures!”⁴⁴ *Guardian* columnist Arwa Mahwadi equated snaps at the *Joker* stairs with selfies shot at Chernobyl, declaring that meme tourism (which she called “Yet another sign that humans deserve to go extinct”) was transforming sites into “the seventh circle of selfie hell.”⁴⁵ Mahdawi didn’t elaborate on why memers belonged with the murderers, suicides, profligates, and blasphemers Dante placed in the seventh circle of his *Inferno* (the third circle, devoted to gluttony, seems a better fit), and her analysis comes across as elitist. Why is it permissible for *Masterpiece Theater* viewers to take jaunts to the English countryside, hoping to recapture a bit of the Earl of Grantham’s world, but for younger, less affluent tourists to New York splurging on a ride to the Bronx to snap a quick photo is an offense against propriety? Tourism always is, in historian Hal Rothman’s words, a “devil’s bargain” that, like everything else, involves a series of tradeoffs: more congestion and more spending, or open roads and empty motel rooms?⁴⁶ If the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository can be transformed into a museum chronicling John F. Kennedy’s assassination, is anything off limits?

Meme Tourism at the Pioneer Saloon

Whether it’s *Star Trek* fans visiting Vasquez Rocks, a site thirty miles north of Los Angeles in which several episodes were filmed, or James Joyce devotees taking a guided tour of Dublin that explains *Ulysses*, media-related tourism is a segment of what Valene Smith defines as cultural tourism, perhaps intersecting with environmental tourism, as in the case of Vasquez Rocks. Video games, as an intensely immersive form of entertainment, can inspire a correspondingly large share of cultural tourism. And *Fallout: New Vegas* is a game that is pioneering the genre.

Dancing down the “Joker Stairs” or pretending to fight the Gorn captain at Vasquez Rocks (double-handed chop to the back and all) allows tourists to recreate what they’ve seen on a screen. That may be satisfying, but it is still an act of imitation. Video gamers visiting sites that they move through in-game, interacting with people there, aren’t imitating or recreating: they are *reenacting*, revisiting places that they may have already spent hundreds of hours in-game. It’s a return home.

The Pioneer Saloon, which has survived a century beyond the town’s decline and currently plays up its historic and ghostly connections, fits perfectly as a site for meme tourism. Unlike the Bronx, Goodsprings is a remote location, and its few residents likely accept the transient presence of meme tourists and the annoyances they may bring as the cost of business. Meme tourism can be a feature, not a bug, of Goodsprings.

In recent years, the Pioneer has become a favored spot for amateur ghost-hunters, even running a “Haunted Lockdown” event, during which would-be paranormal investigators are locked into the saloon with the lights turned off at midnight. Many bring their own ghost-detecting equipment to better put them in touch with spectral presences; they can also use the saloon’s. With a free shuttle from Las Vegas, and pizza and soft drinks included in the ticket price, this is a service designed to appeal to those looking for a brief vacation from their Las Vegas vacation.⁴⁷ As many hunters learned about the Pioneer after the saloon was featured on the Travel Chanel’s *Ghost Adventures* program, attending a Haunted Lockdown can be viewed as a form of meme tourism. The saloon even posts pictures from these events on its own website.

But, as a paying event, this doesn’t seem quite like what Ellis or Mahwadi had in mind when they wrote about meme tourism—one of the unspoken elements of the concept seems to be that it is an organic, tourist-driven phenomenon rather than a planned promotion. Along with stargazing nights, the Haunted Lockdown is better understood as a form of traditional cultural tourism, in which venues capitalize on their past or their unique geographic features (in the latter case, unmarred view of the night sky). But as an “authentic” example of meme tourism, visits by *Fallout: New Vegas* players tick all the boxes: it’s tourist-driven, media-inspired, and has a social media dimension.

To understand what *Fallout: New Vegas* fans see when they arrive at the Pioneer, it’s necessary to step back to the game’s creation. Members of the development team visited Goodsprings, taking many pictures of the saloon and the next-door café (which then was still a general store), as well as talking to Pioneer employees including bartender Monica Nordhof. Their time in Goodsprings contributed heavily to the game’s final design, as Trudy, the bartender and Pioneer of the Prospector, is notably similar to Monica, to the extent that *Fallout* players recognize her as the basis of the character. When the developers visited, Monica’s dog, Siggy, was a fixture of the bar. In the game, a similar dog named Cheyenne belongs to Sunny Smiles, who the player first meets at the Prospector.⁴⁸ One of the first things players do when they arrive is to ask to take a picture with Monica/Trudy. Unfortunately, Siggy has passed away, but when she was still alive, she was also a favorite subject for photographers.

The number of *Fallout* fans showing up in Goodsprings on any given day is dwarfed by the number of ghost hunters, but they have made a palpable impact on the physical structure of the Pioneer. In a case of fiction intruding into reality, zealous fans have left graffiti in the Pioneer's bathrooms touting the causes of in-game factions. The bar itself exhibits a range of *Fallout* memorabilia, like Nuka Cola (an in-game soda brand) bottle caps, that fans are encouraged to pose with. Typical *Fallout* tourists take pictures in and around the Pioneer grounds, often walking over to visit the schoolhouse, which is also featured in the game, and poke around the shacks and ruins in varying states of decay that dot the Pioneer's vicinity. Some even visit the Goodsprings cemetery, although that is a markedly less popular destination than the Pioneer for two reasons. First, the in-game cemetery, located on top of a hill, looks completely different, and the real-life cemetery doesn't feature the unfilled grave that the Courier was pulled out of to begin the game. Second, there may be real-life mourners paying their respects to the departed, something that would dampen the spirits of all but the least empathetic tourists.

So the Pioneer it is. The saloon lies in a meme tourism sweet spot. It has a connection to a game with a cult appeal; it is far enough away from Las Vegas to make a visit feel like an adventure; with bits of memorabilia, it acknowledges the game; and it is instantly recognizable to other fans who can be reached via social media. At the time of writing, Monica was busy preparing for a *Fallout*-themed wedding to be held in a few weeks. It says something about the appeal of both the game and the Pioneer that a couple was choosing to say their vows in Goodsprings rather than one of the many, many wedding opportunities with themes ranging from Elvis to the Mob Museum to a gondola at the Venetian casino resort.⁴⁹ There are practical considerations, as well, that explain why the Pioneer has become so popular; it's also a stop for fans who, in the word of one survey respondent, "Wanted to see where the game begins, and have a good burger on our way into town."⁵⁰

A Sacred Journey to a Profane Saloon

And yet even a simple stop for a quick meal can be viewed as something more profound. Usually the haunt of ghost hunters, locals, bikers, and off-roaders, few would confuse the decidedly profane Pioneer Saloon (which offers something called "chickenshit bingo") with a sacred space. Yet that might be why *Fallout* devotees visit it.

Anthropologist Nelson Graburn characterized tourism as a "scared journey," tying its evolution back to the Crusades and European and Asian pilgrimage circuits.⁵¹ He sees tourism as "a special form of play involving travel, or getting away from 'it all' (work and home), affording relaxation from tensions, and...the opportunity to temporarily become a nonentity, removed from a ringing telephone."⁵² It is one of the "ritualized breaks in routine that define and relieve the ordinary."⁵³ Graburn's characterization of vacation as a way of recasting oneself as a "nonentity" is of course at odds with the idea of meme tourism that seeks to elevate the tourist, which shows just how radical a phenomenon meme tourism is. One gets the sense that his characterization of tourism as a chance to escape responsibility

and temporarily enjoy a low profile is more a function of his status as a talented senior member of Berkeley's anthropology department whose phone no doubt was constantly ringing than a reflection of why others, not so burdened with the sort of academic fame that brings more obligation than celebrity, might have traveled.

Rather, meme tourism (and even tourism in the pre-meme world, when one had to be content with boring only their work associates and close friends with holiday snaps) is more about relieving tedium by becoming an idealized version of oneself, not slinking into anonymity. This is consistent with Graburn's examination of tourism as a counterweight to "ordinary, workaday life."⁵⁴ In his estimation, modern vacations involving travel are "the modern equivalent...to the annual and lifelong sequences of festivals for more traditional God-fearing societies," with tourism providing the "sacred" alternative to "profane" quotidian existence.⁵⁵ In Graburn's estimation, meaningful events—which he considers tourism—mark the passage of time "and thus life itself." Further:

The profane period, A, is the everyday life of the "That's life!" descriptive of the ordinary and inevitable. The period of marginality, C, is another life, which, though extraordinary, is perhaps more "real" than "real life." Vacation times and tourism are described as "I was really living, living it up ... I've never felt so alive," in contrast to the daily humdrum often termed a "dog's life," since dogs are not thought to "vacation." Thus, holidays (holy, sacred days now celebrated by traveling away from home) are what makes "life worth living" as though ordinary life is not life or at least not the kind of life worth living.⁵⁶

So it is not our everyday lives that are worth living for, but sacred times—when we are "touring."

Though the quest for anonymity that he sees is the antithesis of selfie-obsessed travel, Graburn actually prefigures meme tourism, stating that "few tourists come home without something to show for it, whether it is matchcovers, folk art, or rolls of exposed film."⁵⁷ He also speaks of postcards sent from vacation spots (a tradition that has been replaced and amplified by social media) as a way of vicariously rubbing the "sacred charisma" off on those at home.⁵⁸ Meme tourism, and video-game-inspired meme tourism in particular, might be the ultimate evanescent flight into the sacred. Because here, we are visiting not the places that others have deemed sacred, not the places that we've merely seen or read about, but the places where we, in the powerful, world-changing, better version of ourselves, have walked before. Millions of *Fallout: New Vegas* players who have never set foot in the real Goodsprings would nevertheless recognize and even feel home at the Pioneer Saloon because they have, in a very real sense, been there before.

Tourism is often sanitized and commoditized—there is little need for what Graburn calls "pioneer endurance" in lazing by a hotel pool or playing blackjack in an air-conditioned room. The greater the journey, though, the greater the reward. Ubering to the gritty Bronx to pose on the Joker stairs might evoke some of the film's urban dystopia (much to the annoyance of the New Yorkers who make their lives around those stairs). Posing by the "Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas" sign may be more of an obligation than a bold assay into

the unknown; certainly the paved parking lot and orderly queue speaks to the very ordinary surroundings of the iconic sign.

A trip to Goodsprings, though, has markers of a spirit quest. Even for Southern Nevada residents, it involves a considerable drive out of town, both in miles and in spirit. Jay Sarno conceived of the drive past the fountains in front of Caesars Palace as removing his guests from ordinary time and transporting them to an ancient Rome in which they were the center of the action, with every whim satisfied.⁵⁹ Driving to Goodsprings involves a similar journey, which plays out over the course of an hour rather than a minute. First, one gets on Interstate 15, heading south from Las Vegas, possibly leaving or passing through the Strip, a multi-billion-dollar agglomeration of resort architecture where little is left to chance. Muscling alongside tractor-trailers and everyday traffic, one heads south, moving in the shallow end of the alien as hotels give way to master-planned communities and, eventually, the stark Mojave, punctuated only by billboards advertising attractions in Primm and Baker, many minutes down the road.

At Jean, site of Terrible's Hotel & Casino on the highway's southside and a massive gas station on its north, the pilgrim turns off, heading north on two-lane Nevada State Route 161. South lies the Sandy Valley Correctional Center, in much the same place geographically as the NCR Correctional Facility that the player can visit in *Fallout: New Vegas*. Although Jean in-game is the site of an abandoned sky-diving facility and not a casino, one can already feel a bit more connected to the sacred space of the game.

The next seven miles of sage and scrub go by slower than they might, and they look eerily like the wasteland outside Goodsprings depicted in *Fallout: New Vegas*. The pilgrim's mind might wander, imagining their first hours in the game, hesitantly exploring the area around Goodsprings, trading fire with Powder Gangers, wiping out giant mantises, avoiding the deathclaws to the north. Particularly for those not native to the area, it must truly feel like the Mojave Wasteland whipping by outside the car windows.

And then, a slight left turn, and there it is: the Pioneer Saloon, looking so much like the Prospector that you know you are in the right place. Getting through the door is a little disconcerting, since in the game you just turn in the direction you want to go and press "w," pressing "e" when prompted to open doors, but in real life you have to park. But once parked, and inside, you are in an undeniably sacred space. Since New Vegas is unlikely to get a VR remake, this is as close as you'll probably ever come to setting foot inside the Prospector, of living, even for a moment, in the Mojave Wasteland.

A good deal of the journey is in the pilgrim's head, as they overlay their game experiences over what stands in front of them. After all, there are no deathclaws barring the straight shot to the Strip. But the small touches that Monica and that management of the Pioneer have taken to help *Fallout* fans feel at home go a long way to making the journey feel less ridiculous. In the game we can do selfless and heroic things and be welcomed by friendly Goodsprings inhabitants. So when in real life Goodsprings turns out to be warm and welcoming, we feel that much closer to being in the game.

Graburn says that we need these trips to the sacred because they let us “live it up” in ways that we can’t in our humdrum everyday lives. Video games like *Fallout: New Vegas* likewise let us live our “best lives,” to push beyond the limits that confine us. Yes, it’s scripted, and yes, it’s a video game, but it’s a game that you’re seeing (albeit on a monitor) in the first person, and the people you meet have their lives genuinely changed by you, for the better and worse. One of the most striking things about *Fallout: New Vegas* for players unfamiliar with the genre is that the Courier can guide non-player characters through their own issues and help them come to grips with who they are. It’s an interesting concept, the hero as therapist rather than gunslinger (though with some characters the two aren’t mutually exclusive), and it’s an indication of just how real the Mohave Wasteland can seem: you walk through it not just racking up a body count, but helping people as well. So being able to take a journey to Goodsprings is sacred not just because it is a step away from ordinary life, but because it is a return to a place where the player has already been “living it up.”

Conclusion

Meme tourism has likely been around much longer than we realize. Certainly, traveling to a location to boost one’s social standing, or get whatever gratification people do get from celebrating their vacations, is not new. But scholars Yerin Yhee, Jahyun Goo, and Chulmo Koo have advanced a definition of meme tourism that makes a case for it being, if not a total departure, a new wrinkle on how people have traveled in the past. Rather than using postcards, or slideshows, or email forwards to boast about the places they’ve gone, meme tourists are drawn to locations specifically because of the boost that images—still and moving—shared via social networks will give them are amplified by meme-inspired surroundings. Hence a dance down the Joker Steps feels different from touring Highclere Castle while getting the dirt on Lady Mary from *Downton Abbey*. Possibly this is a matter of class and culture—how could anything inspired by a mere Hollywood blockbuster, and a comic book movie at that, relate to the refined entertainment enjoyed by genteel PBS subscribers?

To the extent that meme tourism is a new phenomenon, it is a more concentrated form of “older” media-inspired tourism, with more intense propagation. Its greater visibility and the fact that it is often foisted upon unwilling locals has given meme tourism a bad name, at least in some quarters. But that should not blind anyone to the potential for meme tourism to be positively channeled. The area around Las Vegas is a test case for how businesses might seek to ride the wave of meme tourism. Casinos once spent hundreds of millions of dollars building edifices like the Bellagio, with its postcard-perfect “lake” shooting water into the air on schedule, as ways to lure visitors. But the unpretentious Pioneer Saloon, one hundred years old and counting, benefits from the popularity of *Fallout: New Vegas* with a minimal investment. In a sense meme tourism is a great equalizer, giving a rough-and-tumble saloon as much or, in some circles, more cachet than an opulent resort.

Combining the Graburn's interpretation of tourism as a sacred journey with meme tourism reveals Goodsprings' Pioneer Saloon as a pilgrimage site that players visit in order to return to a place that, in *Fallout: New Vegas*, they already feel welcome. Visiting the real-life Pioneer then reaffirms their commitment to the game. It's a self-sealing circle that came about through a series of mutual needs: the developers needed color for their game, and the proprietors of the Pioneer Saloon aren't about to turn away paying customers. Considering how the Pioneer became a site for meme tourism almost by accident raises the question of whether tourism will evolve to exploit memes in a less organic way. Whatever our feelings about meme tourism, as long as it gratifies the tourists and enriches someone, it is likely to expand.

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