

**Kristy Henson**

Where: Conducted remotely over Skype

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Interviewer: Emily Hilliard

Transcription: Emily Hilliard

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Kristy Henson is an assistant professor of forensic science at Fairmont State University and a *Fallout 76* gamer. She is originally from southern Ohio, but has lived in Buckhannon, WV for 5 years. She attended Helvetia's Fasnacht celebration in 2019 based on her experience in the game, and made a papier-mâché owl mask inspired by one of the Fasnacht masks in *Fallout 76*. In this interview, she speaks about how playing the game has informed her understanding of West Virginia culture and geography.

This interview is part of a series of interviews conducted with *Fallout 76* gamers, some of whom are from West Virginia, and some of whom were inspired to visit West Virginia because of the game.

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KH: Kristy Henson

EH: Emily Hilliard

00:00

EH: So yeah, this for a book that I'm working on about contemporary community-based folklife in West Virginia and this will probably be for the last chapter. I'm looking at the narrative of Fallout itself, and how it maps onto real life West Virginia, and then also looking at the social aspect of the game--so how people from WV have--it's encouraged them to explore the state more, and raise interest in the state for people from away.

KH: Okay. [unintelligible]

EH: Go ahead. What?

KH: Hopefully I can help.

EH: Oh I'm sure you can. So why don't you just start by introducing yourself. Say your name, where you're from and when you were born.

KH: Alright, my name's Kristy Henson. I am technically from Southern Ohio but I have lived in Buckhannon, WV for about 5 years now.

EH: Okay. And how did you start playing Fallout 76?

KH: I've played video games my whole life (laughs)

EH: Hold on--someone's at my door. Hold on a second--I'm sorry!

KH: Oh no you're good.

EH: I'm so sorry, I gotta move my car.

KH: Oh, it's okay.

EH: I'll be right back.

03:18

Alright. Sorry about that.

KH: That's okay.

EH: Okay, so why don't you start over--how you got started playing Fallout 76.

KH: Well I've played video games my whole life. I've owned arcade machines and I just saw at, I think it was the video game awards, they had the trailer for it and I was like, "Oh my gosh! I need to play this!" (laughs) So I pre-ordered it, I was chosen from the stress test and the Beta test, so I've pretty much been playing it since before it came out (laughs).

EH: Oh wow. So what were your initial impressions of the game?

KH: So I thought it was oh, super cool actually! So I have not been all throughout WV so I've pretty much been to Marshall and Charleston and Buckhannon and Morgantown. (laughs) So I thought it was-- it's very aesthetic. I like that it was very woodsy, it had a lot of rolling hills. It seemed to accurately portray the outdoorsyness of West Virginia. So I thought that was really cool. I liked that there are lots of towns that I have heard the name of. So my boyfriend's natively from Clarksburg, WV so he's been in WV almost his entire life other than when he moved out of state for school. So anytime they talk about anything, I have no idea what they're talking about, but now that I've been playing the game, I've been to all the cities, so I'm like okay, I've been there in Fallout, okay it has this landmark. I know it has this. So that's how I travel through the state (laughs), which is kind of sad as an educator you know, I should probably do more. (laughs)

EH: Are you a teacher?

KH: I am a college professor so I'm actually an assistant professor of forensic science.

EH: Oh cool. And are you at Marshall?

KH: I work at Fairmont State.

EH: Okay. So how did you feel like the places in the game, at least the places that you know in real life, how do the places in the game map on to those places?

KH: So there are landmarks that I know that I've seen like in Point Pleasant--I've seen the Mothman statue, I've been to the Mothman Festival. I had been to Charleston. So some of the geography of the cities, like there's Clarksburg in it. Those are--the buildings and things aren't correct--I assume that they are getting around copyright. And then a lot of the buildings they've changed the names, which I also assume is for copyright. Like a lot of the mansions in the state they've changed the names of. But other than that, like big landmarks like Helvetia--that is one for one. That is completely almost completely accurate.

EH: Right, I know!

KH: I thought that was really cool because we went to the Helvetia Festival a couple years ago and then the game came out and I'm walking through and I'm like oh my God. This looks just like it!

EH: Yeah, it is spot on.

KH: So I thought that was really fun. And we went to Fasnacht this year, because I played it in the game! 'Cause last year we couldn't go because of the weather. So...

EH: Why don't you tell me about first of all the Fasnacht in the game and then the Fasnacht in real life.

07:04

KH: Okay, so in the game, it's like it was an event in the month of March. And you could get masks, which was fun, so we pretty much escorted some robots I believe from the church to the library area and if you didn't, if none of the robots got killed, you got a mask. And I think they had 7 or 8 masks. Don't quote me--I don't know if I'm right. But I have, in the game now I've collected almost all of them.

EH: Oh wow. So you've just done the quest over and over again?

KH: I did it a couple times and then now they have these stations, these shops so I can go buy them from other players. Not with real money, with like game money. So I've been able to buy a couple of the masks that way. And I bought one of the masks that I recreated for the festival.

EH: Right, that was so cool!

KH: So the festival in real life, we've been following it for a while, ever since we went to the Helvetia Days and we saw the mask museum. I think it was the Kultur Haus? I can't pronounce any of these properly.

EH: Oh yeah, the Kultur Haus?

KH: Yeah, they had all those crazy huge masks, and I'm already a big Halloween fan and an oddities fan, so we were like, Oh my gosh! So we've been following that festival and we really wanted to make masks this year. And I was just inspired by the game. I'm like well, I could just be my character in the game and the go to the festival in real life. So we were actually able to go this year. And this year I was talking to one of the girls selling tickets--she said it was the largest they've ever seen.

EH: Wow, incredible.

KH: It was triple the size of the year before. I mean it was nice that there wasn't snow on the ground and it was pretty decent outside, but she said that she felt the game really brought a lot of tourism to Helvetia.

EH: Oh, that's really cool.

KH: Yeah. And I saw a handful of other people dressed from the game as well so that was really awesome.

EH: How many other people made masks from the game?

KH: I think I saw 4 other people that did one to one replicas of the game masks. And then a YouTube was there, and I think he documented all of it as well. And Fallout actually shared it. On...

EH: Really? Do you know--could you send that link to me?

KH: Yeah, I think he's Rifle... I can send you his Twitter and his YouTube page, which they have all of our masks on there on their videos, so it was pretty cool. And with side-by-side, so you can see the side-by-side in the game and then our masks that we made. And all of ours are handmade because you know, they're not for sale yet.

EH: Right, right. So this was your first time at Fasnacht right?

KH: Yes.

EH: What did you think of the actual event?

10:01

KH: I thought it was really, really fun. I liked seeing all of the people's masks--there was so much creativity and that was probably my favorite part, was I got to meet all these people from around the country, like people traveled from I believe California. One group came from Maryland. They booked the

room a year in advance. So it was really fun seeing all the creativity and everyone handmade masks. You didn't see like just going to like Hobby Town and buying something, so a lot of time and effort went into what they produced and they were very proud of them. So I thought that was really fun. There was a lot of music which is always really nice. Each building had live music which was fun. There was tons of people, you're really close, you're getting to know lots of people whether you wanted to or not. (laughs) Which is probably not good for today. But...

EH: Yeah, right. Go ahead.

KH: I was just gonna say, the parade was--I really enjoyed the parade, other than the fact I couldn't really see very well. (laughs) Marching from point A to point B. Other than the fact it was 10 degrees out, it was really nice seeing all the people come together and just enjoying their time. There wasn't, there was open drinking but there was no--no one was acting really obsessive or out of control, so that was really nice. Everyone was very friendly. There were no fighting. So it was things that you wanted to happen.

EH: Right, yeah. Did the people who came from California, were they Fallout fans?

11:30

KH: Yes. They came specific for the game and then they said they were gonna tour around the state when they were done.

EH: Wow, very cool.

KH: So they were gonna go to various places. I think they said Point Pleasant, obviously Point Pleasant's a big one because of the Mothman. I think Grafton, 'cause the Grafton Monster that's in the game, I think Flatwoods because it's one of the first places you go to in the game.

EH: That's very cool. What do you spend your time doing in the game?

KH: It depends (laughs). Nowadays I just try to, I have my little camp and I try to just build things, collect atoms, I wander around and complete events. I've already bombed a couple things, so I've already gone through the actual game itself--I did that probably a year ago (laughs) So I'm actually in this community on Facebook. It's just girls. So it's called Nuke 'Em Girls, and they have parties where they all get together and you pose and take pictures, or you go and try to tame animals. Now you can tame the monsters and keep 'em as pets. You build your little house so you can buy various masks and building materials from this like game store where it doesn't actually take real money which is nice. And just try to, and you go out and you kill zombie-looking guys which are Scorched or ghouls, and that's pretty much it! It's nice, I use it as stress relief. (laughs) So that's pretty much how I play it. I use it definitely to relieve daily work stress.

EH: Right. What does your camp look like?

KH: I just bought a greenhouse (laughs)

EH: Oh cool!

KH: So I've been saving up all week for that! (laughs) It's not exciting but you know, little joys in life.

EH: Right.

KH: It was a tent, because I went from a giant house and I wanted a tiny house in my game. So I now have this little green house, it's like a dome. I have some display cabinets with my Fasnacht masks in it. I have my food supplies. Just basic game materials to like build various weapons and armor and make chemicals and just the standard things, but it's nothing like luxurious. I do have Father Winter burning in my camp because it's now spring, so I can now take that away. (laughs) That's about it. It's not elaborate. There are some--I saw one player recreated like one of the Death Stars from Star Wars and then someone made a spaceship, so a lot of people are super creative. Somebody recreated the hotel from The Shinning! That was amazing!

EH: Wow. That's insane.

KH: So there's a lot of creativity in there, it's just I don't have it.

EH: And with this group, do you all play together and do you hang out and talk in the game?

KH: Sometimes. I don't have a mic. So I have to type, but yeah, there's mic capabilities where people can get together in groups and complete like really hard events or just go and hang out and try to blow up things.

EH: I see.

KH: So if you get mad at anywhere in the state, you can just go blow it up in the game and then you feel better. (laughs)

EH: Right, right! Cathartic.

KH: If they don't like their professors or their grades or their college, they can just go blow up their college on the game. Just in the game you know, and then be just fine.

EH: Right. How would you say this has informed your understanding of West Virginia culture, history, or folklore?

KH: Well let's see. Culture-wise, I feel that it has really opened my eyes to a lot of the folk, like the old-time museums. 'Cause a lot of the little tiny museums are replicated in the game. So that just lets me see various cities I can go to. And what's really nice is each city kind of, what's the word I'm looking for, emphasizes what that city does. So like Beckley and the Welch area, those are coal mining cities so in the game they emphasize coal mines, so I thought that was--I could learn a lot about the cities based on where I am and what's going on in it. Which is very interesting. You could see like Charleston's a giant city, so if I've never been there I can get an idea what to expect if I were to go there. Obviously not reading into the decay and all that (laughs). Let's see. I do like a lot of the accurate landmarks, because when I meet other people and we discuss the game, they're like oh I'm from the tiny teapot. And I'm like oh, I've seen this before, okay, so that's a real landmark! So that's a nice way to bring money to the towns. And I think the games really going to help tourism in the state because of the accuracy of the landmarks. Which is different than a lot of other states. Like in Ohio, you know, we've got our big cities and our amusement parks. There's a little bit of culture like we've got some Adena and Native American landmarks, but there's not as much granny magic (laughs) as West Virginia. So it's really nice to see and kind of re-awaken your interest in something that's viewed as the dumbest poorest state in the country.

EH: Right, for sure.

17:55

Yeah, I mean it has literally given people a map as a guide to explore the state, which is great for a rural place.

KH: Yes, I agree. I just wish the state was, the places were a little accurate in order of the actual structure of the state (laughs)

EH: Right, the geography's a little off.

KH: Yeah, it's a little all over, which someone that's no native, you don't know that going in. And I'm like, well I don't think these two cities are beside each other, but where's Huntington? Huntington is not in the game, that I realize. But the Pumpkin House in Kenova's in the game, which I thought was really awesome. That's in the--and the Camden Park. That's things that I grew up with, because I grew up in Southern Ohio so Camden Park was there and the Big Dipper roller coaster is the exact same as the one in real life. So I thought you know, they're really highlighting these tiny little establishments that can really help the economies in those areas. When I was in grad school, we met the mayor of Kenova that made the Pumpkin House. He was looking for volunteers, he was like I'm too old, I don't know if I want to continue this. And a lot of people in the area look forward to it so it's nice to see that kinda marked in the game.

EH: Yeah, have you seen any numbers of how much tourist dollars or visitors it's brought to the state?

KH: I have not. I thought I read somewhere that they were going to start marketing this summer, which is not ideal.

EH: Yeah, unfortunately.

KH: I thought I heard on NPR that they were talking about creating a map for tourists for the game so they could know where to go and what to see and that was supposed to be this summer. I haven't followed up with it. I was going to see if the mask museum wanted to borrow my mask and have it on loan, but now with all of the outbreak and everything being closed, I'm just gonna wait. (laughs)

EH: Yeah, I'm sure they'd be into that later.

KH: So I think this pandemic is at the worst time.

EH: Yeah, for sure. Are you part of a community of Fallout players in WV?

KH: I have some students that play. I don't play with them but I know people that play. But most of my friends are not from the state. I play with my boyfriend's old student. We're both professors and so a lot our communication now is with graduates. So I did play with one of his students for a while. And then he left and went to ARK and I don't want to play ARK.

21:09

EH: I see. Let's see, has any other game lead you to have an in-person experience like this?

KH: Not a real one. I play, I used to play Silent Hill, so that was really fun to try to figure out where it was in WV or Ohio or Pennsylvania, in the game or in the movie. But that's about it. Like the other games don't really have the realism, or if they do I haven't encountered it. So it's more of like fictional but kind of resembles something you know. So this will be the first game that I've played that has actual landmarks and real places.



EH: I see. You said you play for like stress relief, is that the main reason you play?

KH: It is now. When I was younger I would play all the time just to play games. But you know now, having the full-time gig, no longer being a grad student, I only have time to play in the evenings and some weekends so it's, being a quote unquote adult, it's really eaten into my recreation time. But now I try to because my job is kind of stressful. Especially now--everything's online and we have, there's no break in the day when you are a college professor. You're working, you're teaching, you're creating classes, you're doing research, you're writing grants, you're writing articles. You're busy all the time. So it's nice to put away a couple hours and just shoot some stuff! (laughs) Don't quote that one, I might lose my job.

EH: Okay, I won't.

KH: But it's nice to get away and build my little house and go collect food and cook and go pet my cow. (laughs) You know, things that I can't do in real life. And now my boyfriend's daughter has been playing the game too so I can coach her. I'm like, Oh, go to the Greenbrier, which is called The White Springs in the game. I'm like go and steal all these things and sell 'em back to the robots so you can make money and then you can travel over here! So now she's playing it too so it's exciting.

EH: That's cool. Do you think they captured an essence of WV?

KH: I think so, but I'm not natively from here so I don't know really how a lot of the people from the state feel. Like I don't view like a lot of the anarchy in the game or the destruction in the game as representing the state. But in a way it does resemble the state to me. Like what I know about the state and where I've been. I feel that it accurately depicts the state, when you remove all of the ghouls and the bombs (laughs). So when you take all of that out, I feel like I can go to a city there and then know what the city's like.

EH: What about some of the narrative of the game, like government and corporate corruption--do you find resemblances there?

24:51

KH: Um, kind of? But so I'm gonna talk about spoilers in the game.

EH: That's fine.

KH: So in the game it pretty much turns out that all of the world leaders were killed by robots.

EH: Were killed by robots?

KH: Yes. So robots took over and did away with all of the leaders in the game. So at the White Springs, or the Greenbrier, there's that real fallout bunker. And in the game that is where all of the political entities went and then the robots killed them all and took over. So in the game, you think that you're dealing with people and you're actually dealing with people when you actually get to the bunker level, but the whole game is you chasing after the overlord, or the individual that ruled your Fallout bunker before you were released. You never find them, so I'm assuming they were killed.

EH: So you're looking for the individual because you're trying to kill him or you're trying to find him.

KH: Trying to start a community.

EH: I see.

KH: So you're trying to find them so you can start a new community in the Wasteland world. So throughout the game you pretty much just meet robots and then other players.

EH: Right.

KH: And you do various tasks to help robots out. But you don't know they're robots at the time--you think they're people because they can talk.

EH: I see.

KH: So you keep going through and then at the very end you're in the bunkers and they want you to destroy this gigantic radiated bat that's killing all the people and you kinda figure out that it's just robots and you do the bidding for the robots. So it's kinda like real life! (laughs)

EH: So which was--so was the Overseer a robot or no?

KH: It was a person, but I'm assuming that they died because you never find them.

EH: I see, got it.

KH: So it was a female. So you never find her. You just find her voice recordings.

EH: Yeah, I've read all the transcripts to the voice recordings--that has helped me kind of understand the story better.

KH: That is a lot of reading.

EH: Yeah it was. (laughs) It took a long time. I'm thinking maybe I should do the notes too, but we'll see.

KH: That's a lot of data.

27:29

EH: Yes. What are you hoping for with the Wastelanders expansion?

KH: Oh I don't know. I believe from what I've seen they're adding in other people? But I haven't really followed it that much, I guess I'm just gonna wait for the update and hope I like it.

EH: Mmhm. Yeah.

KH: Yeah, I haven't really given it a lot of thought. I'm hoping they do add more cities, so that's my hope. I'd like to see Buckhannon 'cause it's a cute little city. I'd like to see Huntington 'cause I went to school there. It'd be nice to see Marshall. It would be nice to see Fairmont State where I work.

EH: Mmhm, yeah, totally.

KH: I'm hoping for updated cities. But if they had others, I mean I'll get around to it eventually.

EH: (laughs) Nice. DO you think it's overall beneficial for WV?

KH: I think anything that brings people into the state willingly and brings money to the state is beneficial to the state. A lot of people may disagree because they don't want outsiders exploring their state, but there's a lot of history here and there's a lot of heritage and culture that people can experience and realize that West Virginia is not as socially backwards as they think coming in. So I think anything's gonna be good for the state that brings in resources.

EH: Nice. Well is there anything else you would like to share?

KH: Not that I know of. I might think of some things later.

EH: Yeah, if you do, definitely. I'll give you my email. Actually what's your email address?

KH: [redacted]

29:35

EH: I'll email you because I'll send you a release form so we can put this in our archive and so I can quote you in the piece and then I'll probably send you a draft just to look at before it goes to publication and also just to make sure I got everything factually correct. But yeah, if you would send me the link to the guy that has the videos of the masks that would be incredible. Oh, aside from the Nuke 'Em Girls, are you part of any other online Fallout communities?

KH: That one is it. My friend in real life who now lives in Portland, OR who used to live in Huntington, suggested it to me, so we all play together.

EH: Cool.

KH: Yeah, that's the only one that I'm in.

EH: Got it. Yeah, so I'll email you that and if you think of anything else or you know, think there's anything I would be interested in seeing, definitely send it my way.

KH: Yeah, okay. So I will just send you cool things that I find for Fallout and then...or if my boyfriend's like "Oh did you mention this?" So

EH: Yes, definitely.

KH: Okay, sounds like a plan.

EH: Alright! Thanks so much and take care, be safe.

KH: Thank you, you do the same.

EH: Alright, thanks.

KH: Good luck with writing.

EH: Thanks, bye!

KH: Bye-bye.

31:04  
END OF INTERVIEW  
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