

**Porter Lyons**

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Interviewer: Emily Hilliard

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Porter Lyons (b. October, 1993, Cleveland, OH) is a resident of Dayton, OH and *Fallout 76* gamer. He was inspired to visit West Virginia in anticipation of the game's release, and then visited again after he began playing the game. In 2019 he participated in the Fasnacht celebration in the Randolph County Swiss community of Helvetia, which is featured in *Fallout 76*.

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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EH: Emily Hilliard

PL: Porter Lyons

00:00

EH: Okay starting, okay there we go. Alright. So yeah, how are things?

PL: Yeah, no.

EH: Everything good and everybody staying safe?

PL: Things are going pretty well. (laughs) Well yeah for the most part. My grandpa passed away from the virus unfortunately.

EH: Oh no, I'm so sorry to hear that!

PL: Yeah, so that was a bummer, but he was pretty old anyway. (laughs) So...it didn't take much.

EH: Yeah that's really sad. Wow.

PL: But yeah other than that, everyone's staying safe, staying smart.

EH: Good.

PL: How about on your end?

EH: Yeah, pretty much everyone's good. Probably my mom's being a little over-cautious I think, because she's taking care of my grandma but then also trying to see her granddaughter-- a little baby. So, a lot of family dynamics in play.

PL: Absolutely! And it's like it's difficult to like make these calls, you know? It's by no means easy, especially when you're dealing with the elderly or newborns and things like that.

EH: For sure. Alright, so I guess video games. A little bit of a lighter topic.

PL: Yes!

EH: So why don't you tell me about Wastlanders. I know kind of the basic gist and narrative, but what's your take on that?

PL: So just from like what is Wastlanders?

EH: Mmhm. Yeah. [phone rings]

PL: Yeah, so it was an add-on created for the game obviously to bring back non-player characters to the Appalachian Wasteland and to offer up a more expansive quest line with a lot of tiny offshoots like you know, mini-quests or side-quests what have you. And this is seen by many as Bethesda's attempt to rectify the lack of quality game play that wasn't there in the main game when it launched back in 2018 I think it was.

EH: Mmhm.

PL: So yeah and in terms of the kind of the idea of the quest is everyone, these non-player characters come back to Appalachia in order to hunt for gold that is in one of these pre-war vaults that were built before the bombs dropped. So kind of a treasure hunting narrative there, is the reason they came back, and you know your role as the player is to choose one of these factions that are hunting for the treasure and help them do that.

EH: And the factions...no go head.

PL: Oh, yeah, I was gonna end it.

03:28

EH: (laughs) So the factions are not from the region? They're not from Appalachia or West Virginia?

PL: Some of them are. Some of the non-player characters or NPCs, what they all call them, they do mention that they've come back to Appalachia, because they left because of the Scorched Plague that was introduced in the first segment of the game but then once they heard about the treasure, they came back. But after playing I get the feeling that most of them are not from West Virginia or this Appalachian region.

EH: Okay.

PL: Just because you know you talk to them and they're like "What is the, what's this plague like?" you know, and they're not taking it seriously and that's a whole other storyline, is you know, they don't understand the immediacy of getting a vaccine for the plague, so you know, that's why they make that assumption.

EH: That sounds familiar (laughs)

PL: Yeah. (laughs) Timely thing there.

EH: Right, for sure. So basically I know it changes some things about the game and people had to move C.A.M.P.s and I know it changes basically what people do in the game because now there's this directive whereas most of the people who were playing had finished the quest and were just kind of exploring and building their camps. So could you explain that a little more--the things that it changes?

PL: Yeah, absolutely. So you know to touch on the idea of the camps, there are several spots that had been marked off before the launch of Wastelanders and Bethesda had let everyone know, "Hey make sure you move your CAMP from these spots because stuff is gonna be here." So we did. But before Wastelanders launched the game kind of felt like this sandbox I guess is the right term to use, that was completely empty of other people besides actual players that you could interact with. So you had a higher sense of freedom in that regard, and then Wastelanders launched and all of a sudden a lot of these places are filled with these NPCs so to me it felt sort of restricting in that sense, like I feel like I don't have as much freedom, you know, there. In terms of the exploration component, that's remained pretty much the same. They added in a few more underground locations that I wouldn't even say like they're fun to explore, just because they're so gamey. Really they really have nothing to do with West--they didn't feel inspired by West Virginia, it was very much like they're just being Fallout at this point. They can put this in any area in any Fallout game. It's not just exclusive to West Virginia.

EH: So yeah, you were saying you thought it kind of missed the mark in some ways?

PL: Yeah!

07:21

So my understanding at least from the players that I've interacted with in the game is that you know, a lot of the player base stopped doing the game play essentially. It became a lot of just pure exploration and trying to see what else you could find and what ways could you view things, and there are the collectors that just do like the quest for to collect guns and stuff like that. So that's been my understanding of the main player base is people just wandering around together in this irradiated West Virginia, taking photos and building camps. It kinda felt like a simulation in that way. So when Bethesda comes along and adds in this gameplay package saying, "Okay, well we understand that gameplay is missing in a lot of aspects so here you go, here's Wastelanders." And you know, it kinda came and went. I see you know, the communities that I belong to in-game, we really don't talk about Wastelanders much anymore. It was kind of irrelevant after the first couple weeks since it launched and everyone's kinda gone back to the same, the same thing as before Wastelanders launched so I suppose that's what I meant.

EH: So can you...I see, so can you play it without Wastelanders? You can play it the old way? Or you just sort of ignore the NPCs?

PL: Yeah, you just sort of ignore the NPCs. I don't think there's a way unless somebody can mod the game or something. But to my knowledge there's not a way to avoid the NPCs.

EH: I see. So you can't go back and play some old version and have your CAMP in the place where it was previously.

PL: Correct. Right, yeah. And not that that was like too important, you know people have made do with putting their CAMP somewhere else. And people move their CAMPS all the time, it's not really like people are staking out a spot and like saying "This is where I'm settling and this is where I'm gonna be for the entire rest of the game." You know?

EH: Does it feel like it lost its West Virginia sense of place?

10:11

PL: You know, a little bit. They, kind of like what I alluded to before, let me see how to put this. I feel like, yeah, I feel like Wastelanders, it wasn't really inspired by anything West Virginia, so in places that were empty before, you know, now is filled with kind of these gimmicky, video gamey you know, Fallout characters, you know, for example, before Wastelanders launched there was little hints here and there about this idea of the Mothman Cult. It was very mysterious and obviously based out of Point Pleasant and you found little hints of what they were doing before they were driven out of West Virginia and it was very mysterious which I thought was really cool, because you know in real life, this whole idea of Mothman is a very mysterious thing. And you know, but it also plays on the kind of more fun, funny, festive side of Mothman by giving Mothman a cult to which people are gathering around him like a God. So that was a really cool part of the game that I enjoyed before Wastelanders. Then Wastelanders launched and all of a sudden Appalachia is filled with these camps of Mothman cultists and they have these weird like grotesque decorations and effigies to Mothman and they say things like, "Guide me to your holy light Mothman," kind of amplifying that silly side of it but there's really nothing to do with Mothman itself except there are these new enemies that whenever you encounter you have to shoot them. And that's it! There's nothing more to it. And I think that's what I mean by it detracts from the West

Virginia sense of place in this example specifically because the mystery is no longer there. You know the cultists are a presence, but besides worshipping Mothman there's nothing to them. It's a very flat faction of the game.

EH: Mmhm, I see. So what's the response been? I mean I know, it sounds like people aren't really playing the game play, but do you have any sense of the general sentiment among players about Wastelanders?

PL: Yeah, well it was received very positively you know and at first I was also in that group of receiving it positively, but I think we were all very ready for something new. So when something this big and this new came along it was very exciting. And you know, a lot of the critics of the Fallout 76 base game saw Wastelanders as a welcome addition too, but you don't see those people playing really. You know, there's a large group of people that flooded into the game when Wastelanders launched and I don't see them as much anymore in game. I very much see the higher level characters that have obviously been there since the beginning of the game and have been playing this since 2018.

14:07

EH: So do you think it's lost some of that collaborative aspect?

PL: Not really. You know because people that played the game before Wastelanders are still playing the game as they did before Wastelanders. Wastelanders just gave them more content and more places to go collect weapons. Wastelanders introduced more weapons that people could collect, it introduced more places that these virtual photographers can go and take pictures at but like I said before it's not--I don't get that West Virginia feel from it. You know, like they just took some components from the other Fallout games and put them on top of the West Virginia level, you know?

EH: Right. So some of that is because it just doesn't map on to the place, but is some of that also because it's now more populated?

PL: Like populated by the NPCs?

EH: By NPCs, yeah.

PL: Yeah I mean I guess you could say the same thing with the NPCs because none of them feel you know exactly inspired by anything West Virginia. Like jeez, I'm trying to think of something. Like, I don't know, like coal mining is a big part of West Virginia past, right?

EH: Right.

PL: You know there's no community of people that came to go back to the mines, you know? There's another large part, and this is like a big part of my fascination with West Virginia is you know, the cryptids. There's no group that came to West Virginia looking for these cryptids and hunting them, like a faction of cryptid hunters or something like that. That would be something that would feel inspired, to me at least, from West Virginia, but instead there are raiders that are there just to have money or there are settlers that are just there because they saw an opportunity to grow. It's very flat storytelling I think in that regard.

EH: Yeah, it sounds like it. Although it does in some ways, it's like resource extraction all over again. (laughs)

PL: Right, yeah, exactly (laughs)

EH: Which I guess makes sense, but I don't know if they really intended that to be a narrative that maps on to Appalachia specifically.

PL: Yeah it very much felt like they came up with this idea separate from the game, you know, they came up with the story and then they're just like, and then they came back to the game and they're like, "Okay how do we just lay this on top of the base game."

EH: Yeah.

PL: If that makes sense.

17:34

EH: Yeah, I wonder if, yeah I wonder if some of that was their hesitation to risk having these stereotypical West Virginia characters. I mean I have no idea what their thought process is, but some of the people I've talked to especially West Virginians have said that it seems like they went out of the way to not do any kind of hillbilly stereotyping or something that could be seen as derogatory about West Virginia, which is a trap that is easily fallen into.

PL: Oh yeah.

EH: So I wonder if maybe that was part of their thought process with that.

PL: I could definitely see that, 'cause to be honest that's one of the first things that comes to my mind when I think of West Virginia, well, when I had thought of West Virginia before being introduced to the state, you know, having never really been there. But at the same time, when you see the base game, you can see all of the parts of West Virginia outside of this hillbilly stereotype that they portrayed so wonderfully!

EH: Definitely. Right, right.

PL: So to me I'm like where did that go? Where did that team of people that put this together go?

EH: Mmhm, yeah.

PL: Because there is just so much to it you know, it was a living breathing replica of West Virginia.

EH: Right. And I mean I've heard that they added pepperoni rolls, but as far as that, beyond that I haven't really heard of any new West Virginia elements.

PL: Right, right! Well yeah, I've got another example here. You know we talked about Fasnacht I'm pretty sure, in the previous call, in Helvetia and when they relaunched it this year it was last month so it didn't align with that real-time Fasnacht celebration back in February, but you know, that was one of the most popularly attended events in the entire game again! Like almost everybody on a server was at Helvetia and participating in this. Which isn't exactly the most stimulating event from a game play--you literally just have to protect this group of robots wearing these Fasnacht masks from getting destroyed by these monsters that try to attack them, so you know, very simple and straightforward. But I think why people enjoy it so much is because it feels so inspired by something that exists in real life, in real life Helvetia.

EH: Yeah and it's so fully fleshed out--the town.

PL: Yeah, yeah!

EH: Yeah, I think one of the things I'm thinking about is West Virginia as a character in the previous version of the game and then gets kind of replaced by these actual characters and also looking at the way the game deals with, kind of creates a commons. I think you really see that in the previous version of the game, it's like a re-frontiering or re-commoning of West Virginia and people are being collaborative and they're sharing things and sort of this exploratory, almost like you're a mountaineer exploring this new land and now...

PL: Right!

EH: ...it seems like the extractors have moved in. (laughs)

PL: Yeah, yeah, and they're just kind of you know, to me I see them now as they're just sitting there with their thumbs up their asses and just waiting for you to come so they have something to do, but it's just through the player that they have something to do. The NPCs settlements themselves are not living breathing parts of the game.

EH: Yeah. I noticed that the HOA Wastlanders Twitter is done and it seemed like it was some issue with the people involved.

PL: Yeah.

EH: But are there still kind of these CAMP building communities and people sharing photos and is that still all happening?

22:13

PL: Yeah! That's still very much active on Twitter. I've got to be honest I haven't been as active in that community lately. I think I just kind of lost the, lost the interest in the virtual photography aspect. It began to feel like almost a chore to have to like go out and like "Okay, well I have to go find something to take a good picture of and I gotta edit it." You know it's just like, I just felt like it was a waste of time.

EH: Right, right.

PL: It was no longer bringing me joy. So I kinda disengaged there, but I still scroll through my Twitter and stuff like that and people are still posting and you know, most of the same people are still active besides the HOA gig.

EH: Got it. Yeah. Well I think those are all my questions. Do you have anything to add?

PL: Um, I don't think so. Yeah, I think just I think just to summarize everything that I've said, you know, Wastlanders felt like a huge missed opportunity to build off of the sense of mystery and the sense of adventure that is inherent to the virtual West Virginia and the actual West Virginia. So what they could have built up, they instead left alone and then on top of that put something that was very much not inspired by West Virginia or any of the work that they had done previously to build that up.

EH: It's too bad, it feels kind of sloppy.



PL: Yeah, which has been kind of the MO for the game from the start. And I think people are just turned off by that.

EH: Yeah, it's strange that someone did such an incredible immaculate detail of mapping this place onto West Virginia and then they would ruin that or not continue that thread.

PL: Yeah! Yeah, very much not at all. 'Cause in previous games, they did do that. They, you know any future content DLC things like that in Fallout 4 which took place in Boston, Fallout 3 which took place in Washington, D.C., Fallout New Vegas which took place in Vegas. All of these places whenever they came out with DLC most of the time it was built upon a story that was already in place when the main game launched. Or an idea or a concept. So yeah, I agree with you when you say sloppy with this game.

EH: Have you read any good articles about Wastelanders that you would recommend?

PL: Oh, I could certainly send a couple your way. It's been a while but I regularly follow a couple sites. Are you talking like Wastelanders reviews?

EH: Yeah reviews or just like an interesting essay. I read some around March. I don't think I've read any new about Wastelanders though.

PL: Yeah...

EH: Or I read one, it's like I can't remember, it's maybe BuzzFeed's video game site? It's one of--I can't remember what it is exactly but yeah, I did read a few reviews right when it came out and they seem kind of mixed. But if you have anything that's really good, it'd be great if you sent them my way.

PL: Yeah, absolutely. I'll look through the sites that I would have looked at for that sort of stuff and see if I've got anything.

EH: Great. Awesome. Well thanks so much and I will, I'm working through a new draft so once I have something that feels [phone rings] a little more together I'll send it your way.

PL: Oh awesome, yeah, I'm totally looking forward to it.

EH: See what you think.

PL: Awesome.

EH: Cool. Great.

PL: And one quick note, my lyonsp2 email that we've been using, it works for now. It is my work email, but I was furloughed for the summer.

EH: Oh wow okay.

PL: And I'm a little concerned that at some point it's just gonna deactivate because they need to do that for whatever reason. So can I give you another email to email me at, is that okay?

EH: Definitely, yes.

PL: Wonderful. So it's gonna be plyons, my first initial and my last name 8076@gmail.com.

EH: Got it. Alright I will email you there.

PL: Perfect.

EH: Alright well thanks so much! Hope you have a good weekend.

PL: Yeah, you too! Stay healthy.

EH: Thanks, you too.

PL: Awesome, talk to you later.

EH: Bye.

27:34

END OF INTERVIEW

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