

Mike Mallow

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Interviewer: Emily Hilliard

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Mike Mallow (b.1981, Pendleton County, WV) is a resident of Franklin in Pendleton County, WV, a newspaper producer for *The Moorefield Examiner*, and a *Fallout 76* gamer. He was inspired to visit various locations in West Virginia, such as Spruce Knob and Seneca Rocks, after experiencing the virtual representation of those locations 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

MM: Mike Mallow

00:00

EH: So do you have any questions before we start? I have a list of questions to ask.

MM: Okay, so you're working on a folklore book, is that right?

EH: Yeah, it's about contemporary community-based folklore in WV and the last chapter will be about Fallout and the way it's kind of created community and brought people to the state, looking at if it's actually benefiting people here and then also looking at the narrative it's presenting of culture and folklore and history in WV.

MM: Okay, that's cool.

EH: Yeah, it's been fun to dig into.

MM: Great, I've been playing with it since the Beta was released.

EH: Oh cool. Did you go to the Greenbrier event?

MM: I didn't, well I'm not in the press community as far as video games go. If I had known that was gonna be a thing, I probably would have tried to find a way to get into it.

EH: (laughs) Yeah. Okay, so why don't you start just by introducing yourself, tell me who you are, where you're from and when you were born and then you can get into how you started playing Fallout 76.

MM: Alright, my name is Mike Mallow, I'm a newspaper producer for the Moorefield Examiner. I live in Franklin, WV in Pendleton County but I work in Moorefield in Hardy County. And I'm, I was born in 1981, so I'm 38 at the moment...I guess that's all the questions, wasn't it?

EH: Yeah, so why don't you tell me how you got interested and started playing Fallout 76.

MM: Well I've always been a video game person; I've never been so much into the Fallout series. I did get the 4th one, but I played maybe 2 hours and got tired of it. And the second they released the trailer, I know the first trailer played, "Country Roads" and they were showing like the video game version of Woodburn Hall and the Greenbrier and me and my wife were like, "Well this is about West Virginia, isn't it?" And the second it was confirmed and they put the pre-order up, I jumped on the pre-order right away, 'cause I was like, it's West Virginia, I gotta get it (laughs)

EH: Are you a WVU alum?

MM: Technically. I have a degree there, although technically I only took one class because I only needed 1 class to get my Bachelor's and I had gone to Fairmont and got frustrated because I had tried 3 different times to graduate and they Nickle and dimed me on the reasons so I finally just transferred.

EH: Ah okay.

MM: To WVU and took one class and that was enough for them.

EH: (laughs) nice.

MM: But my wife is an alumni too.

EH: Oh, nice. Yeah, so what were your first thoughts of the portrayal of WV in the game?

MM: I was really surprised, of course there's no characters, actual like NPC characters in the game, so what you kind of have is like a Wasteland with notes and recordings from people in the past that kind of lays out the history of everything. And actually I was really surprised at how on the nose some of the things were in the game as far as like looking at the coal industry and how automation has taken over and kind of pushing back on automation, right down to like water being polluted. I was surprised. They really did their homework as far as the way I think Appalachia is portrayed--not even so much to the world but within the state itself I think.

EH: Yeah, I've been going through all the holotape transcripts and have been pretty impressed by that too. Even some of the tourism, the complications of tourism.

MM: Yes.

EH: Pretty incredible. And you were saying that the, playing the game has lead you to visit some of the places you hadn't been or hadn't been since you were a kid? Can you talk about that?

MM: Yeah, Spruce Knob for one. I've lived in Pendleton County my entire life and I had not gone to Spruce Knob until--I think I went the month the game came out originally and I had just, for some reason I just never had the opportunity or desire to go up there, and I was like, you know, I should go up there and look around and it was a pretty day and it was real nice.

And then with Seneca Rocks, I go by it all the time 'cause it's right there, but I think we took a 7th grade field trip to go up it and went up to the, there's an observation deck up there, but in the fall last year I was like, you know I haven't been up there since 7th grade, I should walk up and actually go to the top of the rocks and look around and that was an experience. I'm definitely not as in shape as I was when I was in 7th grade, but it was worth it, it was a beautiful day there too.

05:47

EH: Mmhm. What else in the game do you think is really spot on and what are also the things that maybe they didn't quite get right?

MM: Honestly, I'll do the don't get right first. The main thing is like the geography--they just kind if put it where it needed to be. And a lot of the things I think they do get right because the way they have the ski resorts kinda spaced out it's kinda where you would expect Snowshoe and Canaan to be. I forget their game equivalent names, but they're kinda where you would expect them to be as far as the West Virginia geography goes. The one that they got super wrong was the Trans-Allegheny Lunatic asylum, because it's basically, map wise it's almost in Virginia where they have it placed.

EH: Right, right.

MM: But as far as things I thought were interesting that they got right, there's a subplot about a group of raiders--I think the girlfriend of one of their leaders was captured and killed in Charleston, so in

retaliation, they blew up a dam that flooded Charleston, which I took that as like a parallel from when they had said that the Bluestone Dam was getting to the point where it could eventually collapse and if it did collapse it would flood Charleston.

EH: Ah, right, right.

MM: So I thought that was an interesting parallel and I wondered if that was something that they had got from the events. Now geography-wise it doesn't quite line up because of the dam that they blew up was one that was keeping Summersville Lake in. So it wasn't the same dam, but the parallel, Charleston being flooded by a dam collapse was surprisingly spot on.

EH: Yeah, that's true. Yeah, I forgot about that Bluestone Dam story, that's a good point.

MM: And I did at one point google it to be like, I wonder if they ever did get that fixed, and they had (laughs).

EH: Oh they have! Well that's comforting (laughs)

MM: Yeah, it was like a multi-year plan I guess to strengthen whatever was weakening and it looks like they got it done and they were about to finish when I looked it up.

EH: Ah that's good. Yeah, so what about in your words, what is the Fallout 76 story and how does that relate, if you could go into that a little bit more, to history and culture and folklore in West Virginia?

MM: Absolutely. The thing that surprised me about the storyline in Fallout is as you keep digging, you kinda realize, of course you know it's all based after the nuclear apocalypse, but what you kind of come to find about West Virginia in this world is that really the apocalypse didn't have much to do with its destruction. It was all about coal mining greed, because what had happened was the coal mines realized that they could, that the coal was more valuable if they nuked it first? 'Cause it creates a new element, so they started nuking the underground in coal country which created these radioactive bat mutant things that would then convert the population into they call 'em Scorched Beasts. Convert them into these zombie like things, so it all kinda goes back to being the coal company's creation, not as a result of nuclear fallout.

EH: Uh-huh, yeah.

MM: So that was the one interesting thing. And basically people died because of that but also because of when things went bad, the state government just kind of disappeared or the leadership disappeared. So there was anarchy and then it led to different factions being created and then those factions died from infighting and fighting one another.

EH: Yeah, it sort of is this system where there are no good options. That felt very West Virginia to me.

MM: (laugh) Yeah! Yeah, that was another one where I went back and was like actually that's pretty on point!

10:19

EH: (laughs) Yeah. So are you part of a Fallout community, either of WV gamers or on reddit or Twitter, online or anything?

MM: So for the 1st year I played, I was kind of a lone wolf. I mostly just liked going around and exploring on my own. And I still do that for the most part. What I discovered like a month or 2 ago is there's a pretty sizable Twitter community of Fallout 76 people and they like to go on and take pictures of whatever they're doing and post it and some take videos and they, it's just a really fun community, so I'm still new to that community--they're kind of slow to accept me into that community I guess, but they're very encouraging and very fun. I haven't played with anybody yet, but it'll probably result in that eventually.

EH: Go ahead.

MM: I think one of the issues with that is you can only play with people who have the same system you're playing on, so like the X-Box people and the PS4 people can't play together.

EH: Oh, I didn't know that.

MM: And that's what kind of limits me because I think that most of my friends who have the game play on PC.

EH: I see.

MM: So I don't have an option to play with them unless I also get the game for PC. I have it on PlayStation 4.

EH: Uh-huh, got it. If I wanted to tap into that Twitter community, where would you suggest starting? Is there a hashtag or something?

MM: Yeah, you could probably do #Fallout76 as the hashtag. There is this one and I mean I'll look it up here. There's this one it's called the Fallout Homeowners Association where they literally get on the game and like check out people's camps that they build and kind of comment on you know, it's a good camp or a bad camp or what they like about it or the things that they don't. I thought that was a neat concept.

EH: Yeah, that's very cool. I had heard from John Barton who has written about Fallout 76, he's in Milton, WV, and he said there was someone who set up a camp that was actually a bar and had been hosting Appalachian poetry readings there.

MM: I have seen things like that.

EH: Really?

MM: The creativity is what I think is driving it and I love that. Yeah, I've seen some wild things like that. I'm trying to think of another example. I've seen similar things--I can't think of any right now off hand, though. But I've seen camps where people have made it look like a Star Wars TIE-Fighter and things like that. People were being really clever with it. Mine I put on the top of Seneca Rocks and that's basically where I've been because I was like, that's my home and that's where I want to be at. I've moved around different places but I've always come back to Seneca Rocks.

EH: Yeah, if you do see any kind of more social spaces like that that are happening in games, please send it to me--I'd love to see that. So other than visiting Spruce Knob and Seneca Rocks, how has the game informed your understanding of West Virginia History, culture, folklore?

MM: I've learned some things that I didn't know about West Virginia. For example, just recently I discovered the history behind the town of Gad which is underneath Summersville Lake.

EH: Right.

MM: In real life. And I kinda made a connection because in Fallout 76, because that dam had been destroyed, the lake is basically empty in the game and in the center of the lake, there's a town called New Gad.

EH: Oh yeah, uh-huh.

MM: And I had seen that originally and I didn't make any kind of connection to it until actually just in the last month I discovered the history of Gad and I was like okay, this is real neat. And some of the touristy locations like the teapot. I was aware of Hillbilly Hotdogs, but you know that's in there and there are several places where I'm like huh! I never knew this was a thing. 'Cause I'd see it in the game and not think anything of it and I'd come to realize later that, oh they actually based it on a real place in WV. So the amount of--I would like to have known how much time they spent in WV actually collecting this kind of information because they've definitely traveled more than I have and I've been here my whole life! (laughs)

EH: Right, yeah I mean part of my job is traveling around the state but they really did their homework. I've been trying to get in touch with somebody at Bethesda but haven't had any luck yet.

MM: Okay. The other thing and this is kind of unrelated but something I discovered right after the game came out is the president--I guess the president, the president of ZeniMax Online Games, which is a Bethesda subsidiary, I think they use the ZeniMax servers for Fallout, but their President is from Franklin.

EH: Oh! I didn't know that.

MM: Yeah, I ran for County Commission in 2018 and I found out 'cause his mom was one of my supporters!

EH: Oh wow, that's crazy!

MM: Because he directed the Elder Scrolls online game and she had mentioned one time that oh, that's my son's game and I didn't know what that meant immediately and I went to look and I was like "Oh, he's actually the director of the game." And kept digging farther. But she had told me that he had interviewed as the director for the game and he didn't get the job but he made the suggestion about putting Seneca Rocks and Spruce Knob in the game.

EH: Oh that's very cool. And what's his name?

MM: Matt Firor F-I-R-O-R.

EH: Yeah, I wonder if I could talk to him. He'd be great to talk to.

MM: Yeah, he would have a local perspective. I don't think he talks to much about living here which is why I never picked up on it before. But I know his mom, so I know he's been here. (laughs)

17:08

EH: Yeah, well if you run into his mom, tell him that I, the state folklorist would be interested in talking to him. (laughs)

MM: Alright. So that's my indirect connection to Bethesda.

EH: That's cool. Why do you play the game?

MM: Mainly because of just it being in West Virginia. I just like, really for much of the game, I have not done missions or anything like that, I have just wanted to look around. And that's probably what 2/3 of my gaming experience has been is just exploring. And I'm still discovering new things and that's what's really incredible about it. And they're getting ready to release an update that has characters you can talk to. I think they're kind of doing it as now that Appalachia has been settled, people have been coming back and when the people come back there's gonna be new things going on that are dramatic and game worthy I guess. But that comes out in April and I'll be curious to see what they change.

EH: Yeah, what are you hoping for that update?

18:25

MM: I get a little concerned because I know sometimes when they do too much to make the game--I guess I like the isolation of the game partly too, that's kinda my thing. So I'm interested in having something new to do mainly. I guess that's my hope is something new and fun going on, but also I have the concern that it's gonna take a lot away that I love about it.

EH: Yeah.

MM: 'Cause one thing I noticed, I saw a screenshot from the new version, or the update and it looks like the top of Spruce Knob is one of the settlements. And so I'm like I don't know how I feel about that. (laughs) So I'm excited that Spruce Knob's involved but I guess we'll see what they do with it.

EH: Right, right. Have you participated in any in-game social gatherings like Fasnacht or more informal ones?

MM: I did do Fasnacht last year and that was fun. It is fun whenever the players get together and do something, like fighting the big boss in the game is something you have to have multiple people to do and it's always kinda fun to have 20 people shooting at the same thing at the same time instead of, as opposed to shooting at each other I guess.

EH: Yeah (laughs) and what was Fasnacht like?

MM: They had a robot parade that you had to protect. That was kind of the main thing about that. But you got to wear the Fasnacht masks and all that as you were doing it and I think the robots wore 'em too even. (laughs) But it was kind of a neat thing and they had, the town was decorated just for that event and there was a bit going on there. They had a little stage where there was instruments you could play and I have a picture somewhere of me playing an instrument of a couple other people all wearing the masks (laughs)

EH: Oh yeah, I'd like to see that if you don't mind sending it.

MM: Yeah, I just downloaded this picture somewhere, so if I, actually I think it may have been my Facebook page--I'll see if I can pull it off there.

EH: Oh cool. Have you been to Helvetia in real life?

MM: I have not and I've been seriously considering it because it's not super far away from where I live.

EH: Yeah, that's right.

MM: It's maybe, I think I looked it up recently, it was like an hour and a half maybe, which isn't bad as far as WV driving goes.

EH: No, not at all. I mean the restaurant is incredible and I doubt they'll be having their Ramp Supper anymore but that's a fun event and then they do a fall community festival that's very fun.

MM: Okay, nice. Yeah, I'll have to check that out sometime. That's definitely on my bucket list for West Virginia.

EH: Let's see, has any other game led you to have this in-person experience in the same way?

21:39

MM: Not really. In terms of isolation the only other one that was like that was No Man Sky, which was another game I played early on and then they made a bunch of changes and I didn't like it as much anymore. I guess basically, that game drives my basis for being concerned about what Fallout's gonna do next. Because once they started making it more community-focused, I kind of got away from it a little bit. 'Cause that game is massive. I don't know if you're familiar with it.

EH: No.

MM: It basically, you travel to different star systems and everything's kind of randomly generated to an extent, 'cause I think there's more than like, whatever the number after trillion is, that you can visit and they're all randomly--and it's a game where you can meet other people but because it's such a vast game, you pretty much never do. And I kinda enjoy that just because you can go to planets and explore it for the first time and give it, you can name everything on it and would someone happen to stumble upon my planet, it's one that I named and I thought that was kinda cool. But yeah, that game as far as isolation other than that, game-play wise it's similar to other Bethesda games that I've enjoyed but there's been no games that's really taken on West Virginia. I think that's why it's special to me.

EH: Right. And what do you see the role of the character in the game being? I know there's sort of the goal to resettle Appalachia and being the best and brightest, but what do you think the character is supposed to be and supposed to do?

23:39

MM: I think the character is just kind of an explorer of a new world to some extent because it's not the same world that they had left originally. And so it's just, yeah, almost like a explorer from like Columbus days kinda thing.

EH: Yeah, it's kind of you know, Appalachia as a frontier again, or the territory of West Virginia as a frontier.

MM: Exactly.

EH: Well is there anything else you would like to add?

MM: I don't believe. Like I said I'm just excited that WV has a place in pop culture. I'm disappointed that the game had a poor launch. It starts to recover and then something else happens and it starts to recover and I'm hoping this next thing helps people really get back into it, so WV can be back in the spotlight in a good way.

EH: Yeah, for sure. Do you think it has brought positive attention to the state?

MM: I think so. Based on the Twitter community that I'm following, they seem like they are engaged and interested in what WV is. 'Cause I'm always quick to be like "Well I'm from, I live a half hour away from most of these places." And you know, they seem excited by that fact.

EH: Oh that's cool.

MM: So if that drives them here, I feel like I've done my job. (laughs)

EH: Right, yeah. Yeah it seems like it's brought about a curiosity.

MM: Yeah. That at least is something.

EH: Yeah! Well great thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me.

MM: Absolutely.

EH: I'll send you a release form so I can quote you in the chapter and so we can put the recording in our archive. And I'll probably send a draft of the chapter to people I'm talking to just to make sure I got everything right.

MM: That'd be great. Okay. I love that.

EH: But yeah, I was just messaging you on Facebook, right? What's your email?

MM: My email is [redacted].

EH: Alright, well thanks so much.

MM: Thank you I appreciate it.

EH: And enjoy the rest of your day.

MM: You too.

EH: Alright take care.

MM: You too.

26:23
END OF TAPE
END OF INTERVIEW