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Pools and parks, but no sunlight: My strange journey into the Fallout bunkers of the super-rich

Amazon's new series sees the ultra-wealthy seal themselves away from the apocalypse above. Its premise is frighteningly close to reality

Bradley Garrett

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Two worlds remain after the nuclear apocalypse. The first is at surface level, where militants, mutants, ghouls, and scavengers compete to survive in an irradiated wasteland. The other is underground, where the descendants of the wealthy elite live inside a comfortable corporate simulation of life before the event, safe inside vaults that sheltered their ancestors from a nuclear war that took place 219 years ago.

Thus begins Amazon's new streaming series Fallout. The fingerprints of executive producers Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy (Westworld) on the production are clear and fans of the video game series on which it is based will be eager to see if it captures the same larky, noir-Western take on the world-after-the-end-of-the-world.

I've spent the better part of a decade exploring, and living in, private bunkers all over the world as part of a long-term research project with doomsday preppers and survivalists. What initially struck me as I watched the first season of Fallout was the uncanny resemblance of these imagined spaces to places that I had actually visited in "meatspace".

The vaults of Fallout contain cavernous communal areas with a retro-future aesthetic, where functional cornfields foreground video projections of a 1950s Nebraska horizon, replete with grain towers, fluffy clouds, and distant mountains shaded by lanskein – the weaving and braiding of horizon lines that you see during the blue hour. The temperature in this Nebraska simulation, I thought, would be perfect. Wind would be non-existent, as would insects. Denizens of Vault 33 – where the series begins – move through riveted tunnel sections from one artificial atmosphere to another with jaunty ease. It was easy to imagine living in the vault, oblivious to the world outside, perfectly content.

This scenario, so vividly rendered in the show, is one that was pitched to me in Kansas – the actual place – by a doomsday prepper named Larry Hall.



The exterior of Larry Hall's bunker

In the 1990s, Hall had worked for the private defence contractor Northrop Grumman, where he oversaw the construction of bunkered data centres. Reading the tea leaves, Hall decided to use his experience as a government contractor to build something that had never been built before: a communal bunker for the super-rich.

And yes, I'm talking about a facility even cooler than the 5,000-square-foot bunker Mark Zuckerberg recently had excavated under his ranch on the island of Kauai or those owned by Tom Cruz, Bill Gates, Donald Trump, former Paypal CEO Peter Thiel. Or indeed the property recently purchased by Jeff Bezos on Indian Creek island off the coast of Florida, a man-made landform often referred to as the "Billionaire Bunker" because of its cluster of super-mogul mansions.

In 2008, Hall purchased an Atlas F missile silo from the federal government for \$300,000. The nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missile that was once housed inside of it had been removed. What remained was a vertical canister made of three feet of epoxy-resin concrete stainless-steel mesh, mounted on spring shock absorbers that stretched 60 vertical metres underground from behind eight-ton armoured blast doors. In other words: a vault. We might call it Vault 1, which bears an uncanny resemblance to Vault 1 in the Fallout video

games built by the Vault-Tec Corporation, located somewhere in the “Great Midwest Commonwealth”.

An Inside Look At Doomsday Bunker Homes With A Price Tag Of \$2 Million



This coincidence – real-world replicating video games, replicating real-life – caused me to think of French cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard, well-known for his theory of “hyperreality”, a condition where the consciousness is unable to distinguish reality from a simulation of reality, especially in technologically advanced societies. As I would quickly find, this was one of those rare occurrences where obscure French theory serves as a perfect map for experience.

By 2010, Hall had transformed the 200-ft deep silo into a 15-story luxury bolthole, where a community of up to 75 individuals could weather five years inside the sealed, self-sufficient bunker during a doomsday event. When the event passed, residents expected to be able to re-emerge into the post-apocalyptic world (or what preppers colloquially refer to as the PAW) to rebuild.

In the meantime, residents would be carrying on their lives mostly as they did before the disaster. As we zipped down 15 stories in the lift, Hall toured me around the grocery store, cinema, bar, and shooting range inside the bunker, as well as a climbing wall, a game room, library, gym, education centre, pet park, hospital, and armoury. At one point, he opened a door and flipped a light switch to illuminate a 50,000-gallon indoor swimming pool flanked by a rock waterfall, lounge chairs, and a picnic table.



One of the condos in the Hall's bunker | CREDIT: Bradley L Garrett

“Whether you’re woodworking or just taking the dog for a walk,” Hall told me. “It’s crucial that people feel they are living a relatively normal life. You want good-quality food and water and for everyone to feel safe and to feel they’re working together towards a common purpose. This thing’s gotta function like a miniature cruise ship.” A ship that moves through time, not space.

As in the *Fallout* series, it’s not that difficult to imagine living underground in an environment that can sustain life, technically and materially. The basics of survival at the bottom of Maslow’s hierarchy-of-needs pyramid — food, water, shelter, and security — are relatively easy to provide for during a short-term lock-in. What’s rather more of a challenge is to imagine creating a psychologically and socially tolerable environment that would be sustainable for multi-generational travel through time. Keeping that earth-ship moving requires serious psychological manipulation. And so, in the show, we find the dwellers of Vault 33, deep under Los Angeles, living in a blissful state of ignorance.

Luckily for us, one of the show’s three protagonists, Lucy (Ella Purnell), is perfectly willing to

rupture that naivety, sometimes incredibly violently, while shrugging and cheerily saying “Okey Dokey!” The series, like the games, always centres around a single individual leaving the vault, where they need to rapidly upskill themselves in a hostile, confounding, and of course highly irradiated world.

Fallout - Official Trailer | Prime Video



According to Dr Emma Fraser, an Assistant Professor in Media Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, a foremost expert of the Fallout franchise, the lone outcast wanderer is key to the allure of the storyline. She describes the trope as satisfying a particularly American craving: the idea that we might strike out alone, across vast landscapes, with a gun and a rucksack, fulfilling a quintessential story of American identity.

“The premise of Fallout,” she told me, “is an alternative Cold War history centred on the development of technology, resource wars, self-preservation, and the rebuilding of community, all of which calls into question what it means to be American.”



The bunker's well-stocked armory | CREDIT: Bradley L Garrett

According to UK-based market intelligence firm Pelham Smithers, the video game industry has grown from its humble beginnings in 1972 from a \$2 billion USD industry to a \$180 billion USD behemoth today, making video games the highest-grossing entertainment industry, raking in more money than the music and movie industries combined. The biggest jump came in 2020 when – you guessed it – everybody was trapped inside during COVID looking for a way to distract themselves from the horror outside of their front door.

But why were people inhabiting virtual post-apocalyptic worlds while a real apocalypse raged outside? Either they were so miserable that they wanted to imagine an alternate timeline where they had more agency, or they were actually practising in-game for an even worse scenario, sometimes by building virtual bunkers.

Back in the Kansas bunker, Larry Hall was continuing our tour of the real-world equivalent. On level 11, about 150 metres underground, we visited a well-appointed full-floor, a thousand-square-metre condo. It felt similar to walking into a clean, predictable hotel chain. There was a cushy white living room set and a stone electric fireplace with a flat-panel TV mounted over it. A marble countertop extended to a bar that separated the living room from the kitchen, which was filled with high-end appliances. I looked at one of the windows and

was shocked to see that it was dark outside. My instant, physiological reaction was to assume that we must have been underground for longer than I thought. Then I realised my mistake.



The entrance to Hall's bunker | CREDIT: Bradley L Garrett

“Got you,” Hall said, laughing. He picked up a remote control and flicked on a video feed being piped into the “window”, which was actually a vertically installed LED screen. The scene depicted was the view from the surface-level entrance of the silo above the blast doors. It was daytime, breezy, and leafy outside. But when this video had been made was not necessarily obvious — maybe there was a time lapse, and I was watching a pre-recorded past I was convinced was the present.

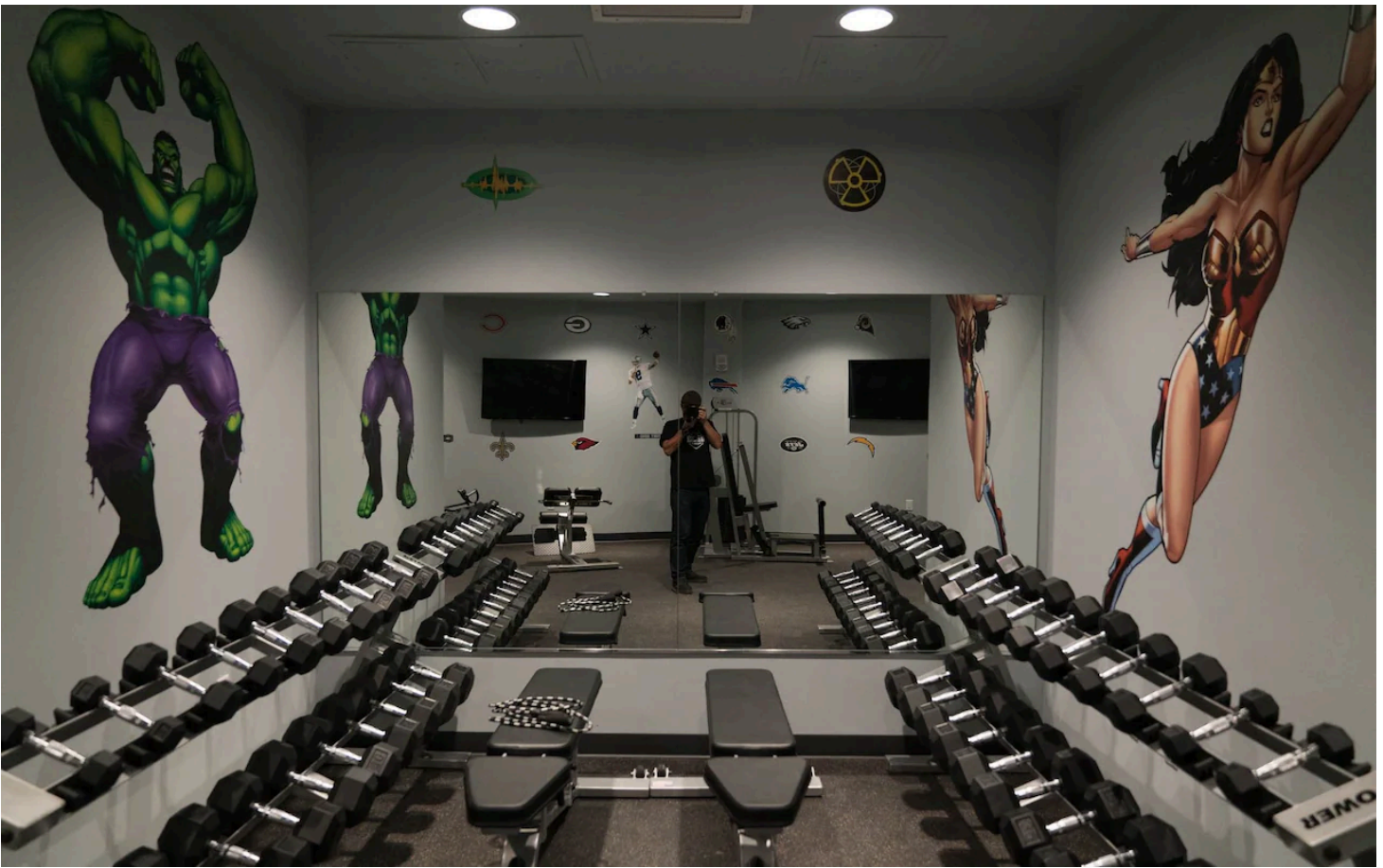
The thought sent a prickle of unease down my spine. Whereas many of the other bunker-builders I’d met were selling hardscrabble fixer-uppers, Hall had created a real bunker in which life outside seemed a distant simulacrum. Survival Condo was a capsule, meant to exclude the hardships of a hostile surface. The grimmer the reality outside the walls, the more pressing was the need to maintain – and promote the desire to stay within – the simulation of the capsule. Creating an illusion of reality through the screens, necessary to uphold stability after an event, was clearly part of Larry’s plan to maintain order during lockdown.



The bunker comes equipped with a vehicle, for those willing to venture outside

This scenario sat in deep contrast to another place where I had spent a lot of time: the xPoint bunker complex in South Dakota, where residents tolerated terrible heat and flies in the summer and deep snow in the winter, always complemented by bone-chilling winds blowing around clumps of cow turds from their grazing herds. As one resident there explained to me, sitting on his cracked faux-leather couch in the middle of his more-or-less empty concrete igloo, the bunker he'd bought was the only place he could close out the horror of the Great Plains outside... perhaps another form of practising for the apocalypse, minus the luxury trappings behind the blast door.

At the end of my time in Larry's vault, he took me to a second one under construction about 30 minutes away, where he described to me his dream of building a series of networked vaults across the Great Plains. Reflecting on my time there, I vacillate between wondering if Larry was going to become Vault-Tec, the company in *Fallout* that originally built the vaults. Or if, in an even more dystopian imagination, The Survival Condo would be absorbed into Amazon, who already had all the supplies for it, and sold to customers as Amazon Vault Prime or something.



Inside the gym | CREDIT: Bradley L Garrett

Which of course brings me back to our French philosopher friend Baudrillard. My experiences of playing post-apocalyptic games, being in Hall’s bunker, and then watching the Fallout series and feeling the boundaries collapse between those experiences is surely an archetypal example of Baudrillard’s “hyperreality”. Trying to decipher whether the alternative histories and convincing simulations humans create are manifesting as tangible spaces or vice-versa seems, at this point in history, to be almost impossible.

The term fallout is usually taken to mean nuclear fallout after an explosion, but fallout can also be taken as meaning “the adverse side effects or results of a situation”. Which leaves me wondering what the fallout of Fallout will be.

Dr Bradley Garrett is a cultural geographer based in Southern California. His latest book is [Bunker: What It Takes to Survive the Apocalypse](#)

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