Did Fallout 76 launch too early or just in time to be saved?

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- You won’t find many human NPCs in the wasteland, but there are plenty of deadly robots.
- Country railroads, take me home…
- *Fallout 76* is full of mutant monstrosities.
- What did that poor radstag ever do to you?
- For bigger baddies, you might need some help taking them down.
- Appalachia is full of gorgeous views like this one.
- Looks like someone missed their turn.
- Late-game content will eventually let players drop nukes onto the map, because things weren’t quite irradiated enough.
- *Fallout 4*‘s Red Rocket gas stations are back.
- The terror that flaps in the night.
- Vault 76 is home sweet home.

There’s a famous quote around the game industry often attributed to legendary Nintendo designer Shigeru Miyamoto: “A delayed game is eventually good, but a rushed game is forever bad.” That may have been true when he said it, but it seems a little outdated in today’s “launch now and patch it later” game industry.

I’ve been thinking about this a lot since listening to an IGN

interview with Bethesda's Todd Howard yesterday about what he admits was a "bumpy" rollout for *Fallout 76* last year. In the interview, Howard acknowledges it was a "very difficult development on that game to get it where it was," noting that "any time you're going to do something new like that you know you're going to have your bumps."

Fallout 76 was savaged by critics (including our own) at launch for widespread glitches and half-baked content. Looking back, Howard now says he and his team knew "even from the beginning this is not going to be a high Metacritic game."

That's partly because "this is not the type of game that people are used to from us," he suggested. But it's also because "a lot of those [development] difficulties ended up on the screen," Howard said. "[We knew] we're going to get some criticism on it, and a lot of that is very well-deserved criticism."

In practically the same breath, though, Howard also suggests that this knowingly half-baked launch was not a huge deal for a game like *Fallout 76*, in the long run. "All of the games like this… It's not how you launch, it's what it becomes," he said. And Bethesda has indeed kept up with a string of updates that have helped sustain a core group of devoted players in the months since launch. "There's no strategy [for fixing it] other than just keep making the game better," Howard said. "People who play it will come back."

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For many years now, developers and publishers have talked up the idea of a "minimum viable product" release cycle. You release a game when it fulfills the minimum requirements to attract a core of early adopters, then continue to patch and update it to attract more players. It's an idea that has only become more prevalent as more gaming devices have become perpetually Internet-connected across the developed world.

Howard's forthright assessment, then, puts a point on the question that's front and center in the modern game industry: how good does a game have to be before it's "minimally viable"? On the opposite side of the coin, how bad does a game have to be before you decide it isn't ready to see the light of day in its current form?

Recent gaming history has plenty of examples on both sides of that coin. Back in 2013, EA's *SimCity* reboot was never able to recover from a congestion-plagued launch featuring major gameplay glitches.

Diablo III, on the other hand, faced its own admitted balance issues and server problems at launch, as well as pushback on the "real money auction house" that underpinned the in-game economy. But after a few expansions and a lot of patches, the game was able to attract an impressive 30 million sales by 2015.



No Man's Sky was largely considered half-baked at launch, but frequent updates have attracted a continuing player base.

It's not just always-online titles that face this kind of issue—even single-player games can turn around a rocky debut with post-launch attention these days. Back in 2016, critics

and players largely felt that *No Man's Sky*'s ambition outpaced its actual content (thanks in part to outsized pre-release hype). But the team at Hello Games kept their heads down and plugged away at new features and major expansions that filled out the game's galaxy-sized sprawl. Now the game is considered a long-term success that can still attract 100,000 concurrent players when new content launches.

The examples are almost too numerous to list. There are the games like *Evolve*, *Paragon*, *Battleborn*, *Artifact*, and *Lawbreakers* that were never able to turn things around after moribund launches. Then there are titles like *Rainbow Six: Siege*, *For Honor*, *Final Fantasy* XIV, and Bethesda's own *Elder Scrolls Online* that have found long-term success despite some early troubles. Right now, Bioware's rough launch of *Anthem* seems to be sitting on the razor's edge between these two possibilities.

If there's a pattern to be gleaned from all these examples, it's that the games that succeed seem to have just enough core appeal in their basic gameplay experience for early users to overlook any launch-window growing pains. Figuring out if that core appeal is there pre-launch, of course, is not an exact science.

Maybe that's why Howard says that his main takeaway from *Fallout 76*'s launch is that "you have to let it bake with a large live audience for longer than we did. There's certain things you can never see until it's running 24/7 for a number of months. If there's one thing I would have done differently [with *Fallout 76*], it's find a way to let more people at scale play the game 24/7 before you say 'everybody in, here we go, pay us.'"

So maybe it's time to update Miyamoto's famous quote. "A game that can survive a rocky 'early access' beta for long enough is eventually good, but a game that's canceled after losing most of its player base to launch window issues is forever

bad.” Not as catchy, but probably more relevant in today’s industry.

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