Chapter 11:
The Affective Landscapes of S.T.A.L.K.E.R.
Domesticating Nuclear Disaster in a Video Game

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1. Introduction

Computer games allow millions of people to play with and within the past.

Although, even in the realm of pop culture, games are often considered crass entertainment and are generally less respected than movies or literary texts, the rapidly increasing sophistication of history-based game titles leads to an assumption that the cultural impact of the gaming industry will keep growing.

Today, some bestselling games already compete with historiography itself in the way they render facts and events to elaborate a sense of reality for almost every historical epoch. For instance, the *Assassin's Creed* series, famous for using real historical events as a backdrop to the games, has covered multiple scenarios – from Viking expansions into the British Isles, via the Crusades and up to the American Revolution.

The modes of ludic interaction with history vary considerably depending on the game's genre. In strategy games, players may experiment with counterfactual history while commanding ancient armies, running a business enterprise, or ruling a medieval dynasty, whereas a first- or third-person shooter game can offer cinematic depictions of historical drama, for example, on the battlefields of World War II.

Experiencing history through virtual reenactment is probably the most obvious, yet not the only way of interacting with the past. Far less evident is the engagement with history in the games, which are set not in the historical past, but in the present time, and which rely on the player's deeper emotional resonance with the memories of a bygone era rather than on its detailed presentation or simulation. This emotional impact is particularly important for various horror games. Certainly, as digitally created works of art, all video games depend on player input to trigger the majority of in-game events, thus contributing to the player's engagement in the unfolding of the storyline or activating new game levels, however more than other settings for digital games, horror contexts go beyond this 'technical' kind of interaction as they are primarily designed to produce strong emotional responses.

The locale of horror games, i.e., the space in which the player moves, lives, and survives, is usually saturated with elements of gothic aesthetics such as decaying, ruined scenery, 'dark' music, and the ubiquity of monsters. Merging the gothic entourage with the elements of action-oriented games (e.g., shooters or adventures), the 'survival horror' games place the player character, who is usually vulnerable and under-armed, in the middle of this uncanny environment.

Ever since the release of its originator, *Resident Evil* in 1996, the genre of the survival horror has been gradually expanding its aesthetic features, for instance, by incorporating 'ecogothic' elements for modelling the in-game landscapes or for the representation of ecological crises. If gothic is understood as centring around some profoundly historical motifs like the "return of the repressed" (Clemens 1999) or revealing the "unburied past" (Etkind 2013), ecogothic mediates cultural anxieties about the human relationship to the non-human world through uncanny apparitions of a monstrous nature (Deckard 2019: 174).

However, a clear boundary that separates the non-human world of nature from the human realm of history is often impossible to draw. Their interconnectedness is particularly evident in the case of the Chernobyl nuclear accident, where the environmental disaster is often regarded as a pivotal point in history – a dark metonym for the fate of the Soviet Union (Milne 2017: 95).

Chernobyl has been the subject of historical documentaries, crime thrillers, and haunting photo installations – all focusing on both historical and ecological features of the nuclear catastrophe. Similarly, the gaming industry has been invoking the ghostly area of Chernobyl with striking regularity. This paper explores the representation of Soviet history and culture in the main instigator of this trend, the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* game series, which combines the elements of survival horror and ego-shooter against the backdrop of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster.

2. From Cossacks to Stalkers

Roughly at the time when the scholarly community was arguing whether Ukraine has a history (while discussing the eponymous article by Mark von Hagen), a small, Kyiv-based studio of game developers, GSC Game World, was working hard on making this very history playable. The outcome of their efforts was a real-time strategy computer game titled *Cossacks: European Wars*.

The game was released in 2001 and immediately became a massive success both in Ukraine and abroad. By December 2001 *Cossacks* had sold over 500.000 copies globally, thus becoming one of the most popular game titles at the time (Bye 2001). The game is set in the 17th and early 18th centuries in Europe and is divided into several campaign scenarios ranging from Stepan (Sten'ka) Razin's rebellion to the War of the Austrian Succession.[1] Drawing heavily on Microsoft's best-selling strategy game *Age of Empires*,

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[1]   The game consists of four "campaigns", which are divided into "missions" or "scenarios". For example, at the beginning of the "Russian Campaign" the player takes on the role of a tsar general who must supress the Cossack uprising led by Stepan Razin.

the *Cossacks* offer four military campaigns: the English, the French, the Russian, and the Ukrainian campaign. Against the backdrop of the colonial powers' fight for supremacy, a ubiquitous motif in strategy games, the Ukrainian campaign seems out of place, but the product's original title coupled with a fragment of Ilya Repin's *Reply of the Zaporozhian Cossacks* (rus. *Zaparozhtsy pishut pis'mo turetskomu sultanu*; ukr. *Zaporozhtsi pyshut' lysta turets'komu sultanovi*, 1880–1891) on the CD cover leaves few doubts that the Cossacks are the real protagonists of this game.

Apart from its exotic, East European flavour, the game became renowned for its massive battles with a seemingly infinite number of units that players may control. However, the GSC's attempts to apply the same game design and mechanics to different historical epochs and countries were far less successful: for instance, *American Conquest* (2002), a game deliberately designed to appeal to the United States computer game market, failed to build on the success of *Cossacks*.

Figure 11.1: The original cover of the computer game S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl *(2008)*
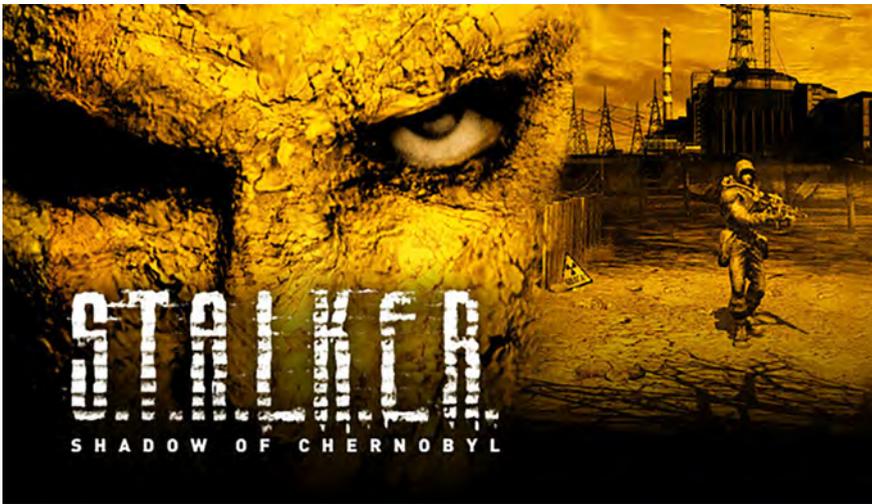
It was only in 2008 that GSC Game World managed to produce another global bestseller: an ego-shooter *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl*. This game has had three iterations since 2008 and supports an energetic fan community all around the globe. In August 2021, GSC and its partner Koch Media GmbH claimed over 15 million total sales for the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* franchise (GSC Game World 2021b).

Having changed the game's original title from *Stalker* to *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* due to copyright issues[2], the game still borrows many of its key elements from Andrei Tarkovskii's famous film *Stalker* (1979) based on the science-fiction novel *Roadside Picnic* (*Piknik na obochine*, 1972) by Arkadii and Boris Strugastkii. However, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* is set in the Cher-

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2   S.T.A.L.K.E.R. is a backronym for Scavengers, Trespassers, Adventurers, Loners, Killers, Explorers, and Robbers.

nobyl Exclusion Zone, in present-day Ukraine. The game's backstory assumes that in 2006 another nuclear disaster occurs in Chernobyl, turning the natural environment into a contaminated "Zone" full of physical anomalies, mysterious objects, and aggressive mutants. *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* starts a few years later, after people have begun coming to the Zone in search of money, valuable artifacts, and scientific information. These people call themselves "stalkers" (*stalkery*), while their activities in the Zone and the corresponding ethos are referred to as *stalkerstvo*, a term which is by no means synonymous to the modern English word 'stalking', but rather designates exploration, trailblazing, and economic exploitation of the Zone.[3]

3. Welcome to Wasteland

Starting from the first game of the series, *Shadow of Chernobyl*, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* was designed as an open-world game: although it introduces its own plot and storyline, which the player has to uncover by accomplishing a certain number of missions (quests), the developers place the player in a self-sustaining ecosystem in which game situations arise from the random interaction of different components such as weather conditions, elements of the natural environment (mutants, zombies, and animals) as well as from occasional fights between rival gangs and fractions, who are 'stalking' in the Zone. The great deal of randomised activity taking place in the game, no matter whether or not the player chooses to interact with it, creates an illusion of a living, open universe. Unlike other shooters, which deliberately place the player in the centre of the world, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R*, on the contrary, constructs a self-sufficient environment, which seemingly does not require the player's presence and attention. In terms of the gameplay, this particular kind of 'worlding' also means that the terrain continually shifts its topologies so that strategies that worked before no longer apply.

Being primarily a first-person shooter, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* naturally centres weapons and ammunition as one of its key elements, but it also incorporates features more typical for adventure and role-playing games, including interactions with non-player characters (NPCs): the player may talk, trade or fight with the NPCs, but he also may listen to their conversations, which usually include jokes or stories of the everyday life in the Zone. Other features, like the scary ambience and ominous background music, are typical for the genre of survival horror as they are designed to instil a sense of fear and anxiety in the player. The horror aesthetics are amplified by certain gameplay properties, which make the hero vulnerable to several problems such as radiation, hunger, and bleeding. As is typical for post-apocalyptic tales, the player always has to pay attention to the hero's diminishing forces. Yet unlike most survival horrors of the early 2000s (e.g., *Doom 3*, *Silent Hill*, the *Resident Evil* series) which try to frighten the players by the sheer number, aggressiveness, or ugliness of different monsters, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* offers a setting of striking tranquillity – the Zone produces an atmosphere of suspense rather than that of an action-oriented shooter. To be sure, the flesh-eating, blood-sucking monsters are all there,

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3   The Russian term "stalker" is probably borrowed from Rudyard Kipling's book *Stalky* (1899), a collection of stories with a pronounced imperial subtext.

but, irrespective of a player's preferences and strategies, the far larger part of the playing time in *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* is always devoted to the exploration of the Zone's natural and urban spaces rather than to shooting down its aggressive inhabitants.

By privileging ludic experience over narrative content, the game shifts its emphasis from characters towards the landscape, thus offering its own ecogothic version of the genre of survival horror. If the players of real-time or turn-based strategy games spend most of their time contemplating and changing the geopolitical map of the respective game worlds (thus treating the map as an aestheticised object), the players of the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* series focus predominantly on the natural or urban environment, which they, however, can only observe and study, but hardly alter.

Unsurprisingly, the prominent role of the environment in the game design leads to an assumption that the real protagonist of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* is the Zone itself. Matthew Sakey concludes:

> If characters in narrative are primarily responsible for the evocation of emotional response, and assuming that a character can be anything, then certainly a place can take center stage as easily as a person. The Zone is the star of this show. (2010: 97)

Thus, according to Sakey, the agency of the Zone is rooted in its capacity to evoke emotional responses such as the feeling of peace, threat, wonder, or loneliness. This agency anchors the Zone firmly in the context of the so-called affective landscapes, which consider space and place beyond their material properties while recognising that this "beyond" of "imaginary places, ideals, and real but intangible objects underpin and produce material places and social spaces" (Berberich et al. 2013: 314). The interaction between the material and virtual, which comprise the semantic core of the term "affective landscape", is particularly relevant in the context of video games. While people connect themselves to and detach themselves from topographical areas in complex ways, video games, as a specific medium, highlight our ability to interact with virtual, in-game landscapes through contemplation, exploration, destruction, etc. Although this experience usually remains within the borders of virtual simulation, the empirical dimension of this interaction saturates the corresponding landscapes with powerful associations and symbolic meaning.

The Zone as an affective landscape has a glocal character. It links legacies of the industrial past (e.g., industrial ruins, depopulated settlements, etc.) with geographical and natural space, thus addressing the common experience of de-industrialisation, which the countries of the former USSR share with many other regions of the Global North. But while for Western, particularly American, players the Zone may function as an estranged version of the "old west" or Yukon (Sakey 2010: 101), it cannot be denied that the Zone is also an archetypical no-go-area on the eastern side of the former Iron Curtain and as such it is burdened with specific historical connotations, semantics, and aesthetics. Anton Bolshakov, creative director at GSC Game World, explained this particular meaning of the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone:

> Ruins of old Soviet industrial complexes, blocks of flats, military and civil facilities, vehicles and so on are still plentiful around ex-USSR. However, those traces of old empire can hardly be felt as keen and striking as in the Chernobyl zone. To me it's living history,

as life has been still there for over twenty years now, ending back in USSR times. It was only after visiting Chernobyl that we were able to render the atmosphere of true post-apocalyptic Soviet world which we intended to deliver. (Rossignol 2007)

Interestingly enough, the choice of the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone as the game setting was not a spontaneous decision, but a result of a long and arduous development process. The initial concept of the game with the working title *Oblivion Lost* had no references to Chernobyl whatsoever. Instead, the game relied heavily on the plot of Roland Emmerich's *Stargate* movie (Iatsenko 2008). The game was supposed to take place not in contemporary Ukraine, but in the distant future, an era of interstellar voyages, with thousands of inhabited planets and intelligent races. The player and his comrades were supposed to take the role of intergalactic pioneers – the first to encounter new, previously unknown, and possibly hostile worlds. However, the developers soon abandoned the initial concept as both labour-intensive and trivial (ibid.). Between 2002 and 2007 the project had undergone some significant changes both in terms of gameplay and storyline. In 2002–2003, GSC staff went to the real Chernobyl Exclusion Zone twice, to film footage of rusting machinery and collapsing buildings. As mentioned above, these excursions became an important source of inspiration for the game: what came with the material was not just the images of the decaying architecture, but also myths and narratives of the Chernobyl catastrophe.

An influential British computer games journalist and critic Jim Rossignol, who wrote extensively on *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, goes as far as to valorise the natural and cultural environment of the Zone as "a world that sits apart from the Americanised homogeneity that exists across the spectrum of gaming" (Rossignol 2011). This statement may sound somewhat exaggerated with regard to a game, which basically offers the same ludic activity as *Half-Life 2* (an ego-shooter by American game developer Valve Inc.) and draws heavily on the aesthetics of the post-apocalyptic America of the *Fallout* series (created by Interplay Entertainment). For instance, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* painstakingly follows power fantasies of atomic health in *Fallout*, where the toxic effects of radiation exposure become an element of gameplay that can be easily overcome by wearing "power armor" and consuming "Rad-Away", a chemical solution that bonds with radioactive particles and removes them from the user's body (unsurprisingly, in the East European setting of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, these healing qualities are attributed not to some futuristic potions, but to vodka). *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* provides its own ironic comment on the (dis)continuity of the post-apocalyptic theme in video games: in *Shadow of Chernobyl* (2008) and in *Call of Pripyat* (2009), the second iteration of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, the player may find the dead bodies of Myron (one of the main characters in *Fallout*) and Gordon Freeman (the protagonist of *Half-Life 2*), who obviously did not manage to survive in the Ukrainian wasteland.

Critics however point to some more fundamental differences between Ukrainian and American post-apocalyptic shooters: according to Mukherjee (2008: 235–236) the dissimilarities lay in the affective experience and in the fictional setting of the games, while Rossignol (2010) highlights the authenticity of the Soviet landscape as one of the main factors for the worldwide success of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* With regard to the game's Soviet ambience, some statements made by the gamers in the comment section beneath Rossig-

nol's texts are even more telling. For instance, an Estonian gamer with the nickname "irve" concludes:

> So the S.T.A.L.K.E.R was a thing I (literally) waited for years and as someone from the former Soviet bloc (Estonia): the whole architecture in Ukraine was utterly standardized so I got to be nostalgic about some concrete fences and small checkpoint houses, which got the "exact right" childhood window bar designs... I didn't enjoy the plot of the game: I just trespassed whenever I could: the buildings had lots and lots of places I could climb and they didn't reward me with any stuff or ammo: they were their own rewards. I could spend hours climbing half-built buildings, overlooking abandoned trainyards or just admiring rusty cars from my childhood. (Rossignol 2010)

Another gamer, who obviously does not have any personal ties to the Soviet era, summarises his (or her) playing experience as follows:

> The whole mythos of the Zone, Chernobyl and the Cold War has been churning around in my brain for far too long without reason, and then I realised just what an impact the actual history surrounding the zone had on me when I was playing. There's something engrossing about it, something unpeaceable, and feeling as if you're not only within the games [sic] mythology, but that of the real world only makes it more believable and immersive. (Ibid.)

4. Observing the Ruins

What are the main fascinations with this appropriation and playful transformation of the Soviet past in *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*? Anton Bolshakov describes the 1986 accident in Chernobyl as "one of the black pages in the history of Ukraine", yet in the same interview he also highlights the unique combination of factors, which led to the success of the game's concept: "global public awareness of the setting, mysteriousness of the place, radioactivity dangers, talks about mutations – all combines into a solid concept of a horror-filled atmospheric shooter" (Rossignol 2007). The 'atmosphere' of Chernobyl remains utterly historic, since the affective landscape of the exclusion zone seems frozen in time, on the eternal 'black page' of 1986.

Paradoxically, in the game, the Soviet past is both omnipresent and inaccessible. It appears, for instance, as an overtone in the soundscape of the haunted town of Prypiat, where the game's sinister background music is intertwined with road noise and children's laughter, but also with a fragment of a radio broadcast that informed Soviet citizens about the death of Leonid Brezhnev. The epitome of this inaccessibility is the time machine from the popular Soviet children's miniseries *Guest from the Future* (*Gost'ia iz budushchego*, 1984), which, quite in line with the plot of the miniseries, can be found behind a secret door in the basement of one of the abandoned houses. However, the gameplay allows no interaction with the device – the time machine is, therefore, a typical 'easter egg', a secret feature or image which is hidden in a video game. The tension between the presence of Soviet history and the player's inability to interact with it can

be traced back to the level of game characters. For example, *Call of Pripyat*, features two NPCs, Captain Tarasov and Corporal (*praporshchik*) Volentir from the Soviet cult action movies *In the Zone of Special Attention* (*V zone osobogo vnimaniia*, 1978) and *Hit Back* (*Otvetnyi khod*, 1981). In the game, the two characters appear as members of the Ukrainian airborne unit that supports the protagonist in one of the decisive battles against his adversaries. Yet again, in the heat of battle, the interaction with both Soviet heroes is reduced to a couple of banal phrases.

A player's limited freedom to act is an inherent feature of computer games, hence the inaccessibility of Soviet history is not a deliberate ideological or philosophical message but results predominantly from the gameplay properties. However, combined with an affective landscape of the Zone, full of the remnants of the Soviet past, this technical limitation offers a particular perspective on history: the Soviet characters, cultural artifacts, and, ultimately, the collapsing Soviet architecture may evoke the feeling of sorrow and majesty, but the world it belongs to remains ultimately out of reach. Instead of ludic interaction with history (like in *Cossacks: European Wars*), *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* offers the contemplation and exploration of its visible remnant – a landscape full of ruins.

Figure 11.2: The town of Prypiat'. Screenshot from S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Call of Pripyat *(2009)*

As uncanny reminders of the passing of time, ruins inevitably trigger meditations on mortality and life's transience, thus providing an ideal scenery for a survival horror. Yet at the same time, the omnipresence of the decaying architecture in *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* makes this scenery programmatically and affectively past-oriented: a place, where an unexpected catastrophe left behind a post-human space of disaster naturally produces a haunting affect, which makes it impossible to see "what now is" without constantly reflecting on "what once was" (Lee 2017: 2).

Figure 11.3: The town of Prypiat'. Screenshot from S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Call of Pripyat *(2009)*

Indeed, juxtaposing the lively past with the decaying present is a commonplace in literary and cinematographic romanticisations of all kinds of ruins – from ancient amphitheatres to the sites of industrialisation. A popular subject of ruins photography ('ruin porn') and dark tourism, the real-life Chernobyl Exclusion Zone certainly fits into this paradigm of aesthetic romanticisation. Although with regard to Chernobyl the thinking of "what once was" inevitably conflates the nuclear catastrophe with the 'geopolitical disaster' of the collapse of the Soviet Union, in *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, the Zone as a haunted place privileges emotional turbulence over the rational reflections on history: rather than providing ideological or political conclusions, it triggers the melancholic mood of childhood memories or, as shown above, an unspecified feeling of 'something engrossing and unpeaceable'.

Unlike photos and historical documentaries, the game turns the melancholic experience of loss into a ludic experience and thus into a form of entertainment and satisfaction. For instance, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* breathes new life into the dilapidated Soviet buildings by making them a haven for dangerous monsters and mutants. These ruins, however, may also harbour valuable artifacts and other treasures, thus, in the game, the player is constantly drawn to what he fears most. This hypertrophied, affective response to decay and material degradation is what drives the 'ruin gaze' in *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, but it also frames the perception and the historical contextualisation of the Chernobyl' nuclear catastrophe.

For instance, Svetlana Bodrunova argues that the non-memories of gamers familiar only with a "virtual Chernobyl" of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* obfuscate the tragic events of the nuclear disaster and effectively substitute them with "a warmed-up interest in mutations,

abandoned and dead cities, stalkerism, and romantics of the place where time stopped" (2012: 23). However, this place is not just a virtual replica of Chernobyl infested by mutants: apart from the real places of the disaster (e.g., the town of Prypiat') the game's topography features some utterly fantastical locations such as the swampy area of Zaton with its grounded ships and dock cranes or the secret research town of Limansk, thus offering an estranged, de-familiarised version of the real Chernobyl Exclusion Zone.

Moreover, the 'ruin gaze' also makes the game's aesthetics programmatically ambiguous in political and ideological terms. The mythology of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* cannot be reduced either to the mere nostalgia for Soviet imperial grandeur or to the blank rejection of Soviet heritage. On the level of the landscape, this ambiguity may be illustrated by one of the most spectacular Soviet artifacts that can be encountered in the game – a gigantic wall of antennae, the *Duga* radar system, which is located within the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone.

Figure 11.4: Photograph of the DUGA Radar Array near Chernobyl from 2014

In the game, however, *Duga* features twice: in its historical role as an early-warning radar system developed for Cold War defence, but also as a sinister "brain scorcher", a psychotropic weapon capable of destroying people's psyche by provoking hallucinations, nightmares, and panic attacks. The two devices are not identical, the "brain scorcher" is smaller in size and does not take the form of the real array, but the resemblance of their metallic structures is by no means accidental – it points at popular conspiracy theories that *Duga* was used for mind control experiments. Thus, within the game universe, the old Soviet radar system manifests the legacy of the perished high-tech civilisation as well as the history of the ruthless, totalitarian regime. Additionally, the aggressive side of the Soviet Union comes to light in the form of military bases and secret bunkers, weapons, and classified documents, yet in the post-apocalyptic, and, by extension, post-

Soviet world of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, the Soviet history also symbolises the state of the world prior to the Chernobyl disaster, i.e., the 'normal world' without mutants and physical anomalies.

5. Mutants from the Past

In the game, elusive Soviet history becomes visible and tangible not on the level of objects and topography, but rather on the level of characters. Conflating Tarkovksii's *Stalker* and the novel *Roadside Picnic* by the Strugatskii brothers with the real events in Ukraine in April 1986, the game revives the "stalkers" as a profoundly Soviet subculture.

The starting point of the stalker trope, the Strugatskiis' *Roadside Picnic*, is set in a post-visitation world in which aliens have left six zones full of mysterious artifacts that defy the laws of physics. The stalkers are tough survivalists and explorers who venture out into the dangerous zones in search of these extra-terrestrial objects. Tarkovskii reinvented his Stalker as a mystical wanderer on a search for spiritual knowledge rather than for wealth or power, but he also modified the Strugatskiis' zones by reducing them into a singular, forbidden, and enigmatic Zone, which features in the film as an area cordoned off behind an army-patrolled border. For Tarkovskii's Soviet audience, the Russian word *zona* (as *singulare tantum*) gave rise to various associations, ranging from the network of prisons and labour camps (GULag) to the walled-off West. Famously shot in the ruins of chemical factories in Tallinn, the film created a powerful image of a contaminated ecology and decaying architecture, but the Zone as a territory of technological disaster and human debris was only one possible interpretation among many others. However, when the Chernobyl accident occurred, Tarkovskii's *Stalker* was the first ready-to-hand model for interpreting it. Due to the film's eerie foreshadowing, the evacuated 30-km exclusion zone around Chernobyl's nuclear plant came to be called *zona*, while illegal scavengers and tour guides to the evacuated area began to call themselves *stalkery*.

Obviously, despite all the differences in terms of genre specifics, the concept of the Zone unites the science-fiction novel by the Strugatskii duo, Tarkovskii's art drama, and the ego-shooter by the GSC Game World. The Zone as a place to which some men are irrevocably drawn, despite the dangers and in search of all-powerful artifacts, resonates through all three instalments.

Less evident, however, are the roots of stalkers as a cultural milieu. The continuity of the stalker theme in literature and cinema suggests that the post-Soviet stalkers follow the role-models of their predecessors from Soviet science fiction or, speaking more broadly, from what Mark Lipovetsky calls "the poetics of the ITR discourse" (Lipovetsky 2013). As a common denominator for various strata of the scientific intelligentsia, the term ITR (*inzhenerno-tekhnicheskii rabotnik*, engineer-technical employee) is both a misnomer and a widely used label for a cultural milieu that constituted the leading group in the liberal movement of the late Soviet period. The ITRs were the main audience of the bard song festivals, their humour dominated the competitions of amateur student comedians (known as KVN: *klub veselykh i nakhodchivykh*), but they were also the backbone of the tourist and alpinist movements, and, last but not least, of the energetic Soviet sci-fi community.

The most prominent Soviet science-fiction authors, the Strugatskii brothers, effectively summarised the self-identification of the ITRs in the perennial figure of the progressor, an agent of a highly developed civilisation secretly planted into a repressive and backward society. The idea of progressorism is to facilitate the development of primitive civilisations and to diminish casualties inflicted by historical processes or inevitable crises. According to Lipovetsky (2016: 32–33), the progressor trope primarily offers the intelligentsia reader an identification not with a "colonized subject", but with a "colonizer", a bearer of progress to the passive and backward community of "natives". Thus, the central characteristics of the "ITR discourse" epitomised by the figure of the progressor are essentialism, double confrontation of the authorities and the "masses", and the subsequent exceptionalist position of the intelligentsia (Lipovetsky 2013: 130). This catalogue may also include the inherent urge for escapism, manifested in the zeal for long expeditions or open-air song festivals in the woods, which promised temporary freedom from the pressures of Soviet ideology as well as from the routines of everyday life. The late Soviet intelligentsia's wanderlust combined with the urge for "inner freedom" also predetermined the popularity of a stalker as a subcultural role-model. The strange neighbourhood of ragged bounty-hunters (stalkers) and extra-terrestrial know-alls (progressors) as identification symbols has little to do with the "biographies" of their literary prototypes. However, while in the literary universe of the Strugatskii duo, stalkers and progressors are detached from each other both ethically and aesthetically, the Zone serves as a link between both these figures as it places the stalkers on the opposite end of the progressorism theme: in *Roadside Picnic* the Zone, a remainder of progressorship by some higher-level civilisation, attracts and terrifies the stalkers, while in Tarkovskii's film the stalker treats the Zone with almost religious awe. Although the stalker does not exhibit the elitist superiority typical for the progressors, in the film he still shows an exceptionalist stance of a prophet or a holy fool, as he leads his companions in the path of knowledge and righteousness.

The post-Soviet stalkers from the video game appear, at first glance, as pop versions of their highbrow predecessors mutated beyond recognition. Indeed, the heavily armed men on steroids seem light-years away from the Romantic truth-seekers of late Soviet literature and cinema, yet behind the protective suits and gas masks, one easily recognises the same archetypes of rugged survivalist and mystic seer, which fuse in the figure of the stalker in the works of Tarkovskii and the Strugatskiis. Eavesdropping on conversations between the NPCs in *Shadow of Chernobyl* or in *Call of Pripyat* reveals the stalkers' self-fashioning as aristocrats of the spirit, who would fill their leisure time with music and books: "Oh, I wish I was home now, lying in a hammock with a good book in my hands."

A seven-string acoustic guitar, a frequent companion of the conversations around a campfire or in an improvised bar, anchors stalkers within the Soviet bard subculture as represented by Vladimir Vysotskii or Aleksandr Galich. In the game, the description text for a guitar in the dialog box for equipment features a quote from the song famously performed by Vysotskii "talk to me, my seven-string friend." To be sure, the long echo of the "ITR poetics" comes to light only in the form of hints, brief references, or allusions – often with an ironic undertone. No bard song is actually performed here in full length and the 'conversations' mentioned above are, in fact, nothing more than short exchanges

of phrases, but *sapienti sat* – for those, who are at least vaguely acquainted with late Soviet tourism subculture or with sci-fi fandom, there is no need for lengthy explanations.

Figure 11.5: Screenshot from S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Call of Pripyat *(2009) Stalkers at the campfire*

Unlike the stereotypical landscape of industrial and military ruins from the Cold War era, which remains accessible for the Western audience, the nostalgic subcultural allusions to 'stalkerism', were designed primarily for post-Soviet gamers. Being kept on a low level, these allusions, however, establish no visible links to the heroes of Strugatskiis' novels or to the enigmatic protagonist of Tarkovskii's film, but rather to a generalised, stereotypical figure of stalker, which served as a role model for the late Soviet intelligentsia. As a subcultural role model, the stalker mirrors neither the identities of its fictional prototypes nor the collective identity of the Soviet ITRs, instead, it exhibits a certain set of values and qualities, which the educated urban dwellers (i.e., the audience of Tarkovksii and the Strugatskii duo) eagerly ascribed to a fictionalised figure of a hardened adventurer, thus constructing an easily identifiable ideal of a 'real man'. By adapting this ideal to the genre conventions of an ego shooter, the game resemantisises the fictional archetype of a stalker by conflating it with the universally recognisable figure of a modern action hero, thus placing the aesthetics and the values of 'stalkerism' in a global context.

Modelling its playground as a new frontier to be explored by heroic male adventurers, who value courage, risk, and technical innovations, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* presents these values as explicitly gendered. The Zone is undoubtedly a man's world and a realm of literally toxic masculinity. However, a glaring absence of female characters in all three iterations of the game is rather a sign of escapism than of an explicitly sexist attitude. In the game, this escapism is presented with a sense of self-irony, which can be illustrated by the joke about a stalker, who always carries a picture of his mother-in-law – a reminder that for him the contaminated Zone, full of dangerous anomalies and aggressive mutants, is, in fact, a less hostile environment than the one he calls home.

Furthermore, in the Ukrainian context, the Zone as a terrain of wild nature and the hub of a heroic homosocial society inevitably evokes references to Cossacks and their military stronghold, the Zaporozhian Sich. However, in *S.T.A.L.K.E.R* these references remain marginal – *Cossacks* appear here as a vodka brand, widely renowned among the stalker community as an effective "medicine" against radiation sickness (in the game, the label of the "Cossacks Vodka" is identical to that of *Cossacks: European Wars* by GSC Game World).

Even though the game ironically downplays the connection between Cossacks and stalkers, it would not be an overinterpretation to emphasise the transgressive, liminal qualities of both groups. Similar to the fictional Cossacks, who, in the literary texts of the Romantic era[4], inhabit the frontier between the 'civilised world' and the 'wild field' of the Ukrainian steppe, the stalker, as a liminal figure, connects the 'normal' world of post-Soviet Ukraine with the fantastical realm of the Zone. This liminal status is potentially burdened with political meaning since in liminality people often comply with power in unusual, often irrational ways and tend to create communal structures, which 'interrupt' the routines of the known world. At this point an otherwise redundant plot of the series becomes important.

6. The Stories behind the Story

In *Shadow of Chernobyl*, the first game of the series, the protagonist named Strelok (Shooter) who has lost his memory at the beginning of the story, has to explore both the Zone and his own identity. Typically for all three iterations of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, the game features more than one ending, but only one of them is happy: if the player manages to kill all his enemies, he gets a chance to destroy all things in the Zone that contain the Zone's mystic "consciousness" and the Zone will vanish. The alternate endings imply a self-mutilation of the player: he may, for instance, wish the disappearance of the Zone, which will cause his own blinding, or he may choose immortality, which will turn him into a statue (Schmid 2013: 4). According to Ulrich Schmid (ibid.), these endings show the two fundamental modes of the relationship between the individual and the surrounding world: either the protagonist shapes reality according to his wishes or he changes himself in order to comply with external challenges. More importantly, this scenario resonates with the self-perception of post-Soviet societies dominated by values of survival that imply passive or reactive behaviour to social change (ibid.). Thus, *Shadow of Chernobyl* echoes the gothic aesthetics of Russian popular movies and bestselling book series from the early 2000s, such as *Night Watch* (*Nochnoi dozor*) by Sergei Luk'ianenko, in which the groups that adhere to the archaic principles of clan loyalty and the rule of force appear far superior to the societies organised by moral and legal judgement (Khapaeva 2009: 373–374; Zabirko 2020: 273–280). In the hostile environment of the Zone, neither state nor society can provide the feeling of security, the protagonist's survival results here (quite in line with the conventions of the ego-shooter genre) exclusively from his

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4   E.g., Nikolai Gogol's *Taras Bulba* (1835) or Henryk Sienkiewicz's *With Fire and Sword* (*Ogniem i mieczem*, 1884).

readiness to kill. In fact, the game's backstory assumes an erosion of the state, which is incapable of guarding the exclusion zone: as soon as anomalies start 'throwing' artifacts with fantastic physical properties, a black-market trade springs up, as scientists and collectors offer massive bounties for the bizarre items. As the precious objects grow in value, the military cordon becomes permeable – this leads to an assumption that, in the game, the whole stalker movement ultimately results from the corruption of the Ukrainian state institutions.

However, the second game of the series, *Call of Pripyat*, shifts the emphasis, as it centres Major Aleksandr Degtiarev, an officer of the Ukrainian Secret Service (SBU), who travels to the Zone to investigate the crash of five military helicopters. Thus, unlike in the first iteration of the series, the protagonist of the game is not a homeless adventurer in search of his own identity, but a government agent on a mission. Yet, in the Zone, Degtiarev is cut off from the resources of his powerful organisation and has to earn his living as a simple stalker, thus making contacts with other inhabitants of the Zone such as criminals, environmentalists, traders, scientists, and simple wanderers. Degtiarev's cover allows him to work for various faction members within the Zone and become involved in factions' politics and conflicts. He may support or attack certain factions or may try to remain neutral. In the course of events, the protagonist has to rescue the pilots, defeat the evil forces of the militant renegades responsible for the crash of the helicopters, but he may also save the life of Strelok, the hero of the first game of the series. If the player and his companions manage to escape the Zone after the final battle, the ending slideshow appears, telling the player what has happened after the escape. Major Degtiarev is given the opportunity to be promoted to the rank of Colonel which he declines – however, he later becomes the head of the Security Service in the Zone. Strelok – if he survives the finale – gives all the materials he had found in the Zone to the Ukrainian government, prompting the creation of a Scientific Institute for Research of the Chernobyl Anomalous Area, with Strelok taking up the position of chief scientific consultant.

Against the backdrop of the game's post-apocalyptic aesthetics and the general focus on mutations and anomalies, this somewhat simplistic happy ending appears strikingly normal, if not trivial. However, in post-Soviet countries, an image of a state, in which the agents of the secret service rescue those in need, the government funds scientific research, and the idea of the common good prevails over greed and social climbing, is anything but trivial. Furthermore, the overall 'progressive' tone of the plot can be interpreted as the long echo of the ITR discourse and the corresponding social ideals (epitomised by the progressor trope). If, following Lipovestky, we read the progressors' history as an allegory of the modernising efforts of ITRs from the 1960s' generation onward, then the post-Soviet transformation of the fantastic freedom Zone "into an elite settlement, where modernization works for the modernizers only" (2013: 125), certainly manifests the defeat of this modernising zeal. The rag-tag teams of stalkers are the losers of the post-Soviet transformation, but instead of simply feeding on each other, they swarm to the Zone in search of answers, mysterious artifacts, and, above all, the mythical Wish Granter – a nod to the secret Room from Tarkovskii's *Stalker*, which is said to grant the wishes of anyone who steps inside. Yet, what they usually find in the Zone are rather models of social interaction, and ethical ideals, which the player, however, may share or not, since the plot and the storyline of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* does not diminish or regulate the

scope of possible interpretations of what the Zone might be and what kind of stories may happen in this fantastic realm.

In terms of its gameplay, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* offers a 'sandbox,' which, in video games, usually means a large, relatively free-roaming world, sometimes combined with a non-linear narrative structure. In a typical sandbox, narrative does not limit a particularly free way to play the game and to interact and move around in the world.[5] This is true for all three iterations of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, where the respective plot functions only as a possible story (out of many others supposedly occurring in the Zone) and does not restrict the player's freedom of movement and interaction.

Over the years, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* has developed a strong 'modding' scene. The game modifications, commonly referred to as "mods", allow ambitious players to create their own modifications, which alter various aspects of the original game. These changes may range from minor details to complete gameplay overhauls. While most of the mods tackle certain aspects of the game mechanics (e.g., introducing a new weapon upgrade system or enhanced graphics), others aim at providing new content with a more or less clear political subtext. For example, the yet unfinished mod *S.T.A.L.K.E.R. – The Cursed Zone* addresses the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian war, as it features the Zone as a battleground, where Ukrainian guerrillas fight against the Russian occupation.[6]

Ego-shooters are not famous for their ability to deliver extensive political or philosophical messages; instead, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* offers a wide range of open conflicts, stories, and characters, which can be further developed both in video games and in other media. For instance, the fierce rivalry between two clans of stalkers, the anarchistic Freedom and the paramilitary Duty, runs like a thread throughout all three games of the series without being solved or extensively commented upon, thus leaving a lot of space for interpretation of the reasons and possible outcomes of this conflict. The same applies to Scar, the protagonist of *Clear Sky*, the third game of the series, who earns his living by escorting groups of ecologists to the Zone. Scar never vocally speaks in the game; therefore, his personality and biography are open for interpretation. Thus, the fundamental restrictions of ego-shooter as a genre allow for the basic models and the aesthetic of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* to be transplanted into literature, cinema, and television.

7. Intermediality of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*

Soon after the release of *Shadow of Chernobyl*, the post-apocalyptic mode of the game spread to the book market. The Moscow publishing house EKSMO launched a series with the programmatic title *Russian Apocalypse* and with the covers clearly modelled on the aesthetics of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* In 2009, the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* book series was launched by the same publisher. Today, the Russian-language novelisations of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* are hard to estimate, as they include several dozens of novels and even a larger number of short stories,

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5   A prototypical example is the widely known *Minecraft*, where the player controls a character in a world composed of blocks, where the blocks can be combined into objects and buildings (e.g., swords, doors, rails, beds) depending on their components.

6   The mod is available online, see [Anon.] (2019/2022).

blogs, and other forms of fan fiction.[7] The plots of the books are usually set in a devastated world after an atomic war or, similar to the game's plot, after a second nuclear accident in Chernobyl. In both cases, the hero has to fight for his own survival in the contaminated and hostile environment.

Figure 11.6: Typical book titles of the S.T.A.L.K.E.R *series (2008–2019)*

Most of these books are rather plain and simplistic stories – their protagonists are stereotypical action heroes, while their plot and story are usually of minor importance as they only provide a framework for a seemingly endless chain of shooting and fighting scenes. Although the print-runs of these books remain comparatively small, the sheer scope of such a kind of literary production shows that the bleak and haunted world of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* generates particular excitement among the post-Soviet reading public, even if the authors of these texts seem to abandon the very idea of literature as a more sophisticated kind of entertainment compared to video games.

Standing alone against the background of stalker-fiction, Dmitrii Glukhovksii's best-selling novel *Metro 2033* (2002) borrows extensively from *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* but transplants the Zone into the heart of modern Moscow. In 2007, Glukhovskii was awarded the prestigious Encouragement Award of the European Science Fiction Society at the Eurocon (the biggest European science fiction convention) for *Metro 2033*. Finally, a video game adaption of *Metro 2033* was released in 2010 by Ukrainian developers 4A Games – a studio, which was founded by some former members of GSC Game World, who formed the core team of *Shadow of Chernobyl* (Wordsworth 2014). Providing a vivid example of the wanderings of a fictional topic through different media in contemporary pop culture, *Metro 2033*, however, presents its particular version of survivalist horror and its own metaphys-

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7   Russian-language Wikipedia lists more than 50 titles: "Spisok literaturnykh proizvedenii po miru S.T.A.L.K.E.R." Wikipedia, last modified 16 September 2022, https://ru.wikipedia.org/wik i/Список_литературных_произведений_по_миру_S.T.A.L.K.E.R. The online book store *Labirint* lists 178 books set in the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* universe: "Serii/S.T.A.L.K.E.R.". The fandom-page *S.T.A.L.K.E.R. – Books* counts more than 1800 book titles, including more than 1300 fan fiction texts (written by amateur writers and published online) as well as 524 novels published by the Moscow-based publishing houses AST and EKSMO, see [Anon.] (2010-), [Anon.] (2016-).

ical vision of toxic modernity, which differs both from the original *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* series as well as from their low-quality novelisations.

The latter show a clear tendency towards imperial imaginary (e.g., in the works of Fëdor Berezin or Aleksandr Zorich), providing a particular form of Soviet nostalgia, which sometimes goes along with the possibility of traveling in time. On the level of narrative structure, this implies merging two time layers: the present-day post-Soviet world and the Soviet Union in 1986, on the eve of the Chernobyl accident. The notion of time travels places the literary stalkers from the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* book series, published by EKSMO and AST (two major Russian publishing houses), firmly in the context of the books about *popadantsy*, the revanchist time travellers, who are usually preoccupied with saving various forms of Russian statehood (e.g., the Tsarist empire or the Soviet Union) from their historical collapses (Weller 2019: 167–178; Zabirko 2020: 287–294). However, the most prominent variation of stalkers travelling in time can be found not in a work of literature, but in the TV series *Chernobyl: Zone of Exclusion*, which was launched in 2014 by the Russian federal TV channel TNT. The series centres on a group of young men, who travel to the town of Prypiat' where they accidentally find a time machine capable of bringing them back to 1986, on the day before the Chernobyl disaster. In the course of events, the protagonist of the series manages to change the future – in the end, he finds himself in the alternate year 2013, where the USSR did not collapse and the nuclear accident took place not in Chernobyl, but at the Calvert Cliffs nuclear power plant in the United States, ultimately leading to the dissolution of the USA and a new American civil war.

Obviously, this particular kind of revanchist alternate history is only loosely connected to *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* Although the game provides its own alternate historical scenario of a second nuclear accident in Chernobyl, neither the storyline nor the gameplay offers any deliberate attempts at changing the past, in order to either prevent the collapse of the Soviet Union or to avoid the original Chernobyl disaster of 1986. Instead of altering history, the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* series provides its own model of coming to terms with the disaster that has already happened.

8. The Zone Lives!

The affective landscape of the Zone, in which catastrophe is "reincorporated into the ordinary" (Palmer 2014: 16), comes close to the alternate history scenario of the *Fallout* series set in a fictionalised United States after atomic war. But while *Fallout* satirises the 1950s' and 1960s' fantasies of the American "post-nuclear-war-survival" by making them available for comic play, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* rejects a satirical attitude and treats the nuclear apocalypse with what Jim Rossignol (2011) calls "Eastern pessimism" – a strange mixture of fear, brutality, and despair. Countering Rossignol's assumption of the game's specifically East European attitude, Bartłomiej Musajew (2016) argues that despite its local flavour, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* is "embedded in globalized popular culture, usually associated with the USA". Indeed, the conventional post-apocalyptic setting integrates *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, and by extension both Soviet and Ukrainian history, into the global aesthetic framework of survival horror, but the game's roots in the progressorism of Soviet science fiction allows it to treat the apocalypse in a way that differs from Western "doomwriting litera-

ture" (from Isaac Asimov to Roberto Vacca) and its contemporary pop versions, which are usually pervaded by a sense of anxiety over planetary problems such as the nuclear apocalypse, overpopulation, and ecological disasters.

Some widely acclaimed Western TV productions from recent years deliberately target the Atomic Age optimism of a nuclear-powered future. Thus, in the American science-fiction horror drama *Stranger Things*, a laboratory, connected to the U.S. Department of Energy, appears as an ominous site of dangerous experiments and paranormal activities. Similarly, in the German series *Dark*, the cave system beneath the nuclear power plant hides a "wormhole", which enables time travel. In both series, the anomalies created by atomic energy bring the world to the verge of the apocalypse. The narrative, which unfolds as a recovery story, highlights the endeavours of the protagonists, who desperately try to bring the world to the *status quo ante*.

On the contrary, the "Eastern pessimism" (Rossignol 2011), if not downright fatalism, of the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* series offers no way back to "normality". Instead, it gives the player a chance to settle in a new, uncanny, and terrifying world. This world is undoubtedly a toxic wasteland, its countryside is dominated by horrifying mutants, while in the abandoned buildings bandits lay in wait for travellers, but after hours of playing, the Zone can be perceived, above all, as a living space, where the world is continuing in its own way. The holistic image of the 'domesticated' apocalypse survived all three iterations of the game and is likely to remain its key element in the future.[8]

In 2021, after years of dormancy followed by scandals, lawsuits, and break-ups, GSC Game World finally announced the revival of the legendary series, with the release of the new *S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2: Heart of Chernobyl* scheduled for April 2022. A short gameplay trailer published on YouTube in June 2021, presents a group of rugged stalkers, who are sitting by a campfire playing guitar. Rendered from the viewpoint of the player's character, the scene is interrupted, as soon as the player approaches. A laconic "How was it?", asked by one of the men, sets off a sequence of combat scenes overlaid with fast, dynamic music.

The Zone seemed ready to produce new stories of stalkers, monsters, and physical anomalies.

It was, however, not to be.

In the afternoon of 24 February, 2022, the first day of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Russian armed forces launched an attack to capture the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. By the end of the day, they had seized control of the defunct nuclear power plant and the surrounding area. The pictures of armoured vehicles and camouflaged soldiers in front of the plant went around the world triggering speculations about further damage to the radioactive site due to fierce fighting, the potential of leaking nu-

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8   The question about the origins of the supposed fatalism of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* is, of course, debatable. This fatalism might be traced back to the game's national origin or to its overall retrospective stance, but it can also be described more broadly as a genre convention of the survival horror, which lacks national or cultural specificity. However, it cannot be denied that most post-apocalyptic video games present the nuclear apocalypse as an event that has changed the entire world. *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, instead, implies the normal world outside the Zone and therefore presents a radioactive wasteland as an integral part of this world.

clear waste or even a possible terrorist attack on the plant: what seemed like the plot of a bizarre video game, suddenly appeared on newsfeeds and came dangerously close to reality.

In the meantime, the official Twitter account of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2: Heart of Chernobyl*[9] stopped posting updates of the game's development process and launched a fundraising campaign to support the Armed Forces of Ukraine.

With Russian missiles raining down on Ukrainian cities, turning them into areas full of ruins, the question, which remains to be answered, is not whether Ukraine will endure and domesticate yet another apocalypse on its territory, but rather, how soon the gaming industry will catch up with the new reality and what new versions of survival horror it will produce.

Filmography

In the Zone of Special Attention (*V zone osobogo vnimaniia*), dir. Andrei Maliukov, USSR 1977.
Guest from the Future (*Gost'ia iz budushchego*), dir. Pavel Arseno, USSR 1984.
Hit Back (*Otvetnyi khod*), dir. Mikhail Tumanishvili, USSR 1981.
Stalker, dir. Andrei Tarkovskii, USSR 1979.
Stargate, dir. of Roland Emmerich, USA/France 1994.

List of Games

Age of Empires, produced by Xbox Game Studios, PC/MAC, 1997.
American Conquest, produced by GSC Game World, PC/MAC, 2002.
Assassin's Creed, produced by Ubisoft, PC/MAC, 2007.
Cossacks: European Wars, produced by GSC Game World, PC/MAC, 2001.
Fallout series, produced by Cain, Tom, Interplay Entertainment, PC/Mac, 1997–2004.
Half-Life 2, produced by Valve, PC/MAC, 2004.
Resident Evil, produced by Capcom, PC/MAC, 1996.
S. T. A. L. K. E. R. Shadow of Chernobyl' (*S.T.A.L.K.E.R. Ten' Chernobylia*), produced by GSC Game World, PC/MAC, 2007.
S.T.A.L.K.E.R. Clear Sky (*S.T.A.L.K.E.R. Chyste Nebo*), produced by GSC Game World, PC/MAC, 2008.
S.T.A.L.K.E.R. Call of Pripyat, (*S.T.A.L.K.E.R. Poklyk Pryp'iati*) produced by GSC Game World, PC/MAC, 2009.
S.T.A.L.K.E.R. The Cursed Zone (*S.T.A.L.K.E.R. Prokliata Zona*) produced by GSC Game World, PC/MAC, 2013.
S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2: Oblivion Lost, produced by GSC Game World, PC/MAC, 2015.
S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2: Heart of Chernobyl (*S.T.A.L.K.E.R. Sertse Chernobylia*), produced by GSC Game World, PC/MAC, 2024.

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9   See the official *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* account on Twitter: S.T.A.L.K.E.R Official (@stalker_the_game): https://twitter.com/stalker_thegame?lang=de [30 September 2023].

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Figure 11.3: The town of Prypiat'. Screenshot from *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Call of Pripyat*, developer GSC Game World, Ukraine 2009.

Figure 11.4: Photograph of the DUGA Radar Array near Chernobyl from 7 August 2014, copyright: Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:DUGA_Radar_Array_near_Chernobyl,_Ukraine_2014.jpg [01 February 2023].

Figure 11.5: Stalkers at the campfire. Screenshot from *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Call of Pripyat*, developer GSC Game World, Ukraine 2009.

Figure 11.6: Typical book titles of the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R* series, various authors, publisher AST/Eksmo: Moscow 2008–2019.

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