



(ANTI)COLONIAL ANTI-COMMUNISM IN S.T.A.L.K.E.R. SHADOW OF CHERNOBYL: APPROPRIATING THE ANTI-COLONIAL RHETORIC OF HEART OF DARKNESS AND F.E.A.R. TO CRITICIZE SOVIET COMMUNISM

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Abstract: This article analyses the anti-communist rhetoric of the popular Ukrainian video game *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl* which was developed by GSC Game World and released in 2007. In this paper I argue that, in order to mount a humanist critique against Soviet communism, the game borrows the anti-colonial discursive structure of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* filtered through the video game *F.E.A.R.* If colonialism is predicated on the juxtaposition of territorial expansion and a progressive temporality towards a civilizational ideal, then *Heart of Darkness* and *F.E.A.R.* convey a critique of colonialism by highlighting how spatial progress brings about temporal regression manifested as a dissolution of the self. To show this, they employ the doppelgänger convention. Both protagonists representing white civilization are on quest to find a character who has been 'contaminated' by the 'heart of darkness.' This latter character is eventually revealed to be a negative cultural doppelgänger of the protagonist who has assimilated otherness to the point of no return. By the same token, in *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl* the psychological regression of the protagonist is mapped onto spatial progress towards the heart of communism, in this case Reactor #4 of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant. *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* reworks the doppelgänger convention by identifying the protagonist with the character 'gone native,' i.e. gone communist, not only symbolically, but also physically. This enables the game to put forth two scenarios, namely one where the main character overcomes communism, and one where he embraces it. By offering both endings, the game maintains two contradictory views on the communist past. One ending suggests that communism can eventually be overcome, while the other postulates the communist past is here to stay.

Keywords: postcolonialism/postcommunism; intertextuality; intermediality; horror; first-person shooter; doppelgänger.

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Introduction

S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl is a horror first-person shooter with RPG elements developed by the Ukrainian studio GSC Game World and released internationally to critical acclaim in 2007. The action is set in 2012 in the area surrounding the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in a fictional history where in the year 2006 yet another nuclear disaster

befalls Chernobyl. This second disaster causes the appearance of a series of paranormal phenomena and mutations around the former nuclear power plant, an area which is called 'the Zone.' The Zone attracts many individual who seek to collect rare items which they can then sell outside of it. Such individuals are called stalkers. In the game, the player assumes control of an amnesic anonymous stalker who, after being rescued from a near fatal truck crash, finds himself on a

quest to find out his identity and execute an order he reads on his PDA,² namely to kill Strelok.

Taking into consideration the game's storyworld and its evocation of the trauma of Chernobyl as a result of Soviet nuclear policy, the article provides an analysis of the anti-communist rhetoric pervading *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl*. In keeping with recent inquiries into the similarities between postcolonialism and postcommunism, the goal of this article is to shed light upon the manner in which the game's anti-communist discourse is buttressed by an anti-colonial discourse structure. To this end I draw a parallel between *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl* and *F.E.A.R. (First Encounter Assault Recon)*, developed by Monolith Productions and released in 2005, a game with a very similar game design that appears or have been very influential for *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* Like *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, *F.E.A.R.* is also a horror first-person shooter centred on an anonymous protagonist who is on a quest to discover his identity. Its gameplay also simulates the confrontation between the playable character and a series of paranormal activities and phenomena. More importantly, the games feature similar discursive structures as far as their relationship to oppressive power structures is concerned. I argue that, while *F.E.A.R.* uses the anti-colonial rhetorical strategies featured in Joseph Conrad's seminal work *Heart of Darkness* in order to represent/simulate the traumatic experience of patriarchy and colonialism, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* employs the same anti-colonial strategies in order to represent/simulate the traumatic experience of communism.

Both the title and the content of the game make a clear reference to Andrei Tarkovsky's 1979 film, *Stalker*, which also conveys a critique of Soviet communism. Although such an avenue of interpretation is worth pursuing, this article will focus only on the influence of Western (ludo)narratives. A complication of this article's argument in which Tarkovsky's film is considered will be the focus of a future paper.

Methodological preliminaries

While the ludic dimension of video games has always been treated as a given, the extent to which video games can also be considered a narrative medium used to be the subject of debate³ and, to a significantly lesser degree, still is today. One of the assumptions of this article is that the medium of the video game has a strong narrative potential which has been confirmed by a number of very popular titles such as *God of War* (2018) or *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dogg, 2013), to give but two examples. In support of video games' claim to the status of narrative, I have previously⁴ drawn on David Herman's theory of narrativity⁵ according to which narrative is a gradient category whose members feature its defining, prototypical traits to various degrees. My analysis has revealed that video games can have high degrees of narrativity, which is why it is not erroneous to refer to them as ludo-narratives.⁶

Besides the ludic and diegetic aspects, there has recently been a call to acknowledge the fact that video games are cultural products enmeshed in the social production of

meaning. As Soraya Murray points out,

“[v]ideo games represent powerful invocations of the lived world in playable form, which offer insights into the core fears, fantasies, hopes and anxieties of a given culture in a specific cultural context. Some games exemplify this quality more than others. This is not disconnected from the degree to which any given game is able – like other forms of cultural expression – to capture the spirit of the moment, to articulate a struggle within culture or to meaningfully intervene in its own discourse or larger histories.”⁷

In recent years, the growing discussion on serious games⁸ has been implying that those games designed purely for entertainment are not serious, in the sense that they do not have effects outside the magic circle of the game proper. Yet, as Murray stresses, games and culture are not separate entities. They maintain a dialogical relationship whereby they mutually shape one another. As I show at greater length in the next section, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl* is no different, as its dystopian, speculatively fictional scenario reflects and at the same time constructs the Ukrainian memory of communism. What is highly interesting about *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl* is that the game's anti-communist rhetoric mirrors the anti-colonial rhetoric of *Heart of Darkness* and *F.E.A.R.*

In order to understand this discursive parallelism, an insight into the similarities between (post)colonialism and (post)communism is required. Despite evident differences in terms of exerting influence over other territories, peoples, and cultures,⁹ Bogdan Ștefănescu identifies important similarities on a macrocultural level between colonialism and communism. For Ștefănescu, coloniality is strongly associated with the idea of modernity in both its Western capitalist version and its Eastern socialist one. As Ștefănescu himself mentions, “[t]he capitalist West colonized the very concepts of time and historical progress as templates for positioning and evaluating any culture as either modern (civilized) or pre-modern (primitive), while the Soviet East counter-colonized the discourse of temporality with its own version of utopian futurism.”¹⁰

By shifting focus away from the spatial dimension of colonialism and concentrating on its temporal dimension, the discursive similarities between the Western civilizing mission and the revolution towards the communist utopia begin to surface. The shared progressive temporality of colonialism and communism stresses the structural parallelism between anti-colonial and anti-communist rhetoric in postcolonial and postcommunist narratives, respectively. This parallelism enables the articulation of an anti-communist critique that mirrors that of an anti-colonial one. Within a colonial and communist framework, the more the colonial/communist subjects embrace the culture of the centre, the closer they are to civilization/communism. Consequently, in a framework that criticizes colonialism and communism, such a view is turned on its head and highlights how the progressive assimilation of the centre's culture actually leads to loss, decay, and



catastrophe. These temporal dynamics are very much at play in the games *F.E.A.R.* and *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, as the subsequent sections show.

Repurposing *Heart of Darkness's* Anti-Colonial Rhetoric in *F.E.A.R.*

As I argue elsewhere,¹¹ the game *F.E.A.R.* shares a strong intertextual/intermedial bond with the novel *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad. Published in the late Victorian era, *Heart of Darkness* questions the integrity and homogeneity of the modern subject and its ability to put into practice the ideals of the civilizing mission.¹² To this end, the novel tells the story of the narrator-protagonist, Marlow, who sails up the Congo in order to find Mr. Kurtz, a very efficient colonizer whose unorthodox methods have raised the concerns of his employer. Marlow's spatial progression towards the character who is expected to be an embodiment of the liberal-humanist ideal¹³ is co-extensive with a temporal regression on a psychological level. The closer Marlow is to Mr Kurtz, the more he experiences a disintegration of the self¹⁴ which, in Lacanian psychoanalytic terms, may be regarded as an involution of the ego from the Symbolic Order back into the Real. The culmination of this psychological regression is reached when the dying Kurtz exclaims "The horror!" to suggest not only the dissolution of the self, but also the failure of colonialism and of the civilizing mission.¹⁵ If we consider Marlow a representative of white European culture, then Mr Kurtz is Marlow's negative double¹⁶ who represents the ultimate state of civilizational decay caused by his prolonged contact with African culture that eventually makes him go native.¹⁷

The narrative structure and content of Conrad's short novel is borrowed and appropriated by *F.E.A.R.*

"The videogame updates the story of the novel by setting it in a new spatiotemporal context and translating the major themes and motifs of the novel so as to suit the new cultural frame and the new medium. Consequently, if *Heart of Darkness* was the story of Marlow who, in the late 19th century, became obsessed with Mr Kurtz, a hybrid character caught in between western civilization and African pre-modern culture, whom he follows up the Congo, *F.E.A.R.* simulates the story of an anonymous protagonist who gradually becomes obsessed with Paxton Fettel, a hybrid character caught in-between western civilization (the Symbolic order) and the Real/Nature/his mother, whom the protagonist also follows up a river."¹⁸

What is implied in the above quotation is that the game not only parallels the novel in terms of plot economy, but also borrows its divergent spatial and temporal dimensions. In a manner similar to the novel, the game is designed in such a way so that it juxtaposes the spatial progression achieved via gameplay with a regressive psychological temporality represented either through more traditional storytelling means or through playable hallucinations or dream sequences that are indicative

of an ungovernable psyche which is liable to falter or even break down at any point. As the player guides the playable character (referred to in the game as the Point Man) in his pursuit of Paxton Fettel (the Mr Kurtz of *F.E.A.R.*), gameplay is often interrupted either by cutscenes and audio logs or by a repeated hallucination/dream that provides snippets of (what will later become clear as being) the protagonist's infantile past, where the player has to interactively trudge towards a door with a strongly lit window. It is only when the player reaches the physical end of her journey that the repetition of the hallucination/dream grants the player access to what lies behind the door. The game eventually reveals to the player that the playable character is in fact Paxton Fettel's brother and that the mission's objective has been none other than fratricide.

The intertextual link to *Heart of Darkness* invites us to read the relation between the playable character and Paxton Fettel in a manner similar to our reading of the Marlow-Kurtz character couple. The ambivalence of attraction and rejection inherent to the playable character's Marlowesque obsession with Paxton Fettel encourages us to construe Fettel as a repressed unconscious side of the Western protagonist¹⁹ in as much as Kurtz represents a repressed dark side of European white identity.

The adaptation work implied in the transition of structure and content from the novel to the video game yields many parallels, but at the same time produces important ideological mutations. In *Heart of Darkness*, the divergence between spatial progression and temporal regression functions as a vehicle to criticize colonialism. The overarching implication of *Heart of Darkness* seems to be that the darkness is white-made,²⁰ which to some extent anticipates twentieth-century constructivist approaches to racial identity. In *F.E.A.R.*, the diverging spatiality and temporality are appropriated in order to criticize not only colonialism but patriarchy, too.

The extent to which the game does manage to convey an effective critique of patriarchy is questionable since it unwittingly falls back on the sexist tropes of the monstrous-feminine and anxieties concerning unregulated femininity. In the game, the cause of the paranormal phenomena and Fettel's rebellion against the Symbolic order is his attachment to his monstrous mother Alma, who, after having been abused by her father, survives her physical demise in a disembodied psychological state, but is kept in a scientific facility. Despite her containment, she manages to exert her influence over Paxton Fettel who, as leader of an army of clones whom he controls through telepathy, goes rogue and commands his army to head to the facility where Alma is being kept and free her. The Point Man is tasked with reaching this facility before Fettel and, besides killing his brother, making sure that Alma's psyche is not released. In a manner similar to *Heart of Darkness*, the closer the protagonist is to the facility, the more the paranormal phenomena intensify and the harder the challenges become.

The gender reading of the disturbances, monsters, and hallucinations that the Point Man must confront is rather

straightforward as a result both of the internal logic of the game's storyworld and of the horizon of expectations triggered by the references to many of the tropes of Japanese horror, in particular the trope of the vengeful ghost who, having been wronged by an abusive patriarchal figure during her time among the living, returns as a ghost to enact vengeance and bring justice to the fictional world of the film.²¹ However, just as the novel reveals a gender dimension to Kurtz's going native towards the end of the novel (when he is taken away on the ship, a female figure appears who seems to hold influence over the natives and even Kurtz himself), so does the game recuperate colonial tropes in order to represent Paxton Fettel's relation to his army and his psychological regression.

"In the novel, African culture is stereotypically portrayed as communitarian rather than individualistic, underdeveloped relative to western standards, superstitious, and matriarchal. In a manner similar to the novel, the video game maintains the negative characteristics of the pre-modern other [...] Negative otherness is projected onto imagined, unreal entities like clones and fictional supernatural individuals, such as Alma. The clones share the lack of individual identity, reason, and free will characteristic of the novel's native Africans, while Alma adds the matriarchal feature, thus resulting in a negative counterpoint to western civilization. [Moreover,] the relation between pre-modern African culture, on the one hand, and Alma and the clones, on the other, is also overtly expressed by Fettel's cannibalism, a typically pre-modern practice. By indulging into cannibalism, Fettel couples abjection with western culture's negative stereotype about African culture."²²

By heavily relying on the game design of *F.E.A.R.*, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl* indirectly borrows the diverging spatiality and temporality from *Heart of Darkness*. What is interesting, however, is that, although twice removed from the novel, the game's appropriation of the structure produces a critique of communism which is closer to the novel's anti-colonial rhetoric than the attempted critique of patriarchy in *F.E.A.R.*

Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, Rector #4: The Heart of Darkness is Soviet Communism

S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl starts with a cutscene showing a truck being struck by lightning. The playable character, who was on the truck when lightning struck, survives the accident, but is left unconscious. When he wakes up, he finds himself on the table of a merchant who intermediates transactions of objects salvaged from the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. The playable character suffers from amnesia, his only clues to his identity being the tattoo which reads "S.T.A.L.K.E.R." on his left arm and the objective "Kill Strelok" in his PDA. The game sets a double objective that dovetails with the spatial and temporal divergence which *Heart of Darkness* and *F.E.A.R.* use for their anti-colonial rhetoric. The playable character (dubbed in the game as the

Marked One) has to traverse the inhospitable Zone in order to fulfil his objective, but also to remember who he is. As in the above-mentioned examples, in *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl*, too, spatial progression towards a physical goal is coextensive with a regressive psychological temporality. But, while in the former two cases this juxtaposition was used to criticize colonialism, now the goal is to convey a critique of Soviet communism.

As far as the issue of spatial progress is concerned, the player soon learns that her target, Strelok, like Mr Kurtz and Paxton Fettel, is known to have reached the source of abnormalities in the Zone, namely Reactor #4 of the decommissioned Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant. The Marked One's adventurous journey towards Reactor #4 mirrors Marlow's sailing on the Congo to the heart of darkness and even more so that of the Point Man's struggle to reach the Facility. The manner in which the Zone is simulated maintains the heart of darkness metaphor proposed by Conrad's novel and later gamified by *F.E.A.R.* Reactor #4 is the source and centre of otherness simulated in the form of "mutated people – zombified Stalkers, animals – beasts and plants, spaces that are gathering static energy ("Electro"), unstable gravitational pools ("Springboard") or "Jellyfish" – dangerous lethal fish."²³ The closer the player is to the nuclear reactor, the more intense the anomalies become.

Like in *F.E.A.R.*, in addition to the increase in paranormal activity, proximity to the reactor also triggers psychological instability as the protagonist loses consciousness at random moments and has a hallucination showing what appears to be Strelok in the reactor's vicinity. The closer the player is to the reactor, the longer each repetition of the hallucination becomes. In a plot twist that reminds one of the trope of the doppelgänger featured in the previous two cases, the player eventually learns that the playable character is none other than Strelok himself, which means that the player has been on a suicide mission all along.²⁴ The reason behind Strelok's suicide mission is revealed once the player succeeds in guiding the Marked One/Strelok to the core of Reactor #4.

As it turns out, a group of Soviet scientists have been hiding underneath the Sarcophagus that has been keeping radiation in the region at bay. The scientists have been conducting research on how to control the human mind and since the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster, the Exclusion Zone established around the power plant in the aftermath of the disaster has been providing them with the perfect cover for their research, which has continued even after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. At one point, the scientists discovered the existence of the noosphere, a global field of energy which has the ability to influence people's thoughts. They realized that by intervening in the noosphere they could remove negative thoughts from people's mind on a global scale, which would lead to a better world. In order to achieve this intervention, the Soviet scientists created a superconsciousness by linking together seven volunteers from the group to form the Common Consciousness. In 2006, the Common Consciousness attempted to interfere in the noosphere to bring global peace, but the result was a blast altering of the biosphere in the Zone



surrounding the reactor. Because the Zone kept expanding, the scientists tried to fix it, but their research was endangered by the interest that the anomalies generated. Soon after the 2006 Chernobyl blast, stalkers started scouring the Zone for artefacts they could sell on the black market. In order to keep their research secret and continue to work on stopping the Zone's expansion, the Common Consciousness erected a series of defences, including a Wish Granter in the form of a monolith.²⁵ The Wish Granter's purpose was to attract stalkers so that the Common Consciousness could brainwash them and use them for various missions and protection. Strelok managed to find the Wish Granter and was subsequently brainwashed, but, due to an error, he was given the mission to kill himself.

It is often the case that dystopian fiction expects itself to be read allegorically in relation to a particular historical event or political context. This is also the case with *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl*, which invites its players to read the game's plot and gameplay as a thinly veiled critique of Soviet communism. By setting the events in an area which approximately overlaps with the actual Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, a symbol of the enduring negative effects of communism, the game cues players to read the events of the game in relation to communism as a disruptive historical and social factor. This expectation is confirmed by the simulation of the Zone as a heterotopia populated with mutants where the natural laws of physics do not apply, and by the game's final moments which reveal the truth behind the 2006 Chernobyl disaster.

Despite their benevolent intentions, the representation of the Soviet scientists is indicative of the scepticism towards communist utopian thinking. First, the utopia of peace achieved through mind control would in fact be a dystopia where freedom of will and thought would be abolished, an aspect evocative of the repression of dissent in the Soviet Union. The game's implication amounts to a humanist critique according to which progress towards the bright communist future is, in fact, a regression from autonomy and individualism. Moreover, the critical error that led to Strelok receiving the order to kill himself is expected to remind one of the absurdities of communist bureaucracy. Again, the undertext is that the utopian future that promises fulfilment in accordance with the ideals of humanism can in actuality lead to one's physical destruction. *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl* employs a dystopian, science-fictional, speculative scenario in order to defamiliarize communism and raise fresh awareness with respect to the gap between its ideal and its practice.

As already pointed out, in order to convey this critique of communism, the game falls back on Western anti-colonial ludo-diegetic tropes borrowed from *Heart of Darkness* through *F.E.A.R.* There are nevertheless some differences in the way in which the Ukrainian game adapts the tropes of its source. *Heart of Darkness*'s critique of colonialism does not challenge the humanistic assumption of bourgeois individuality. On the contrary, the novel deplores the dissolution of the modern subject begotten by colonial advancement. The dissolution is epitomized, of course, by Mr Kurtz who has gone native, but also by Marlow who for the reader is the medium for observing

the psychological regression caused by approaching the heart of darkness. Mr Kurtz functions as a potential double for Marlow by representing the ultimate effects of being 'contaminated' by the heart of darkness. By the same token, *F.E.A.R.* uses Paxton Fettel to show the ultimate unalleviable condition of modern subjectivity under prolonged matriarchal authority, a condition which is represented in accordance with colonial tropes. While Fettel has crossed the cultural point of no return, the Point Man gives players insight into the transition from the Symbolic order as source of authority to the matriarchal Real. Yet, unlike their irrecoverable doubles, both Marlow and the Point Man manage to wrest themselves from the heart of darkness and rescue the Western modern self.

While in *Heart of Darkness* and *F.E.A.R.* the character contaminated by darkness cannot be saved and the protagonist barely saves himself, in *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl*, because the character couple – the Marked One and Strelok – eventually become one, the game has to accommodate both the salvation and the death of its protagonist. In order to achieve this, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* reworks the doppelgänger convention by letting the player decide which side of the playable character should prevail, the communist or the anti-communist one. The game has eight endings, six of which are considered false, while two are considered true.²⁶ Either of the two true endings can be triggered by a moral choice made by the player at the end of the game. After a hologram of one of the Soviet scientists explains the mystery behind the Zone to the Marked One/Strelok, the player can choose either to join the Common Consciousness or to destroy it.

If the player chooses the former, the implication is that the protagonist has been 'contaminated' by communism to such a degree that, like Mr Kurtz and Paxton Fettel, he can no longer be saved. This version of the ending dovetails with that of *Heart of Darkness* and *F.E.A.R.* where the doppelgänger cannot be saved, and the darkness remains. Allegorically, the humanist critique of communism turns out to be a pessimistic one that posits the impossibility to shed one's communist past. The Marked One's/Strelok's free will reinforced throughout the game through the diegesis focusing on the protagonist's desire to penetrate the heart of darkness against all odds and the gameplay in an open-world environment that gives the player a high degree of freedom of action turns out to be a form of false consciousness that is, unbeknownst to the subject, in the service of communism. Should the player opt to destroy the Common Consciousness, then the Marked One/Strelok pulls out his automatic rifle and shoots the scientists. Soon after the Common Consciousness is destroyed, the Zone vanishes. This ending departs from the game's hypotexts and postulates the ability to save oneself from the heart of darkness, i.e. Soviet communism, despite one's prolonged contact with it, which makes the game's humanist critique an optimistic one.

Conclusion

Both Western colonialism and Soviet communism were engaged in a discursive conflict over colonizing the future,

with both systems proposing an understanding of time as progress towards a societal ideal. This structural similarity of both Western colonialism and Soviet communism has made both colonizing discourses liable to a critique that challenges the belief in progressive temporality. This article has demonstrated the portability of this critical structure by showing how the Ukrainian video game *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl* puts forth a humanist critique of communism borrowed from a gamified version (*F.E.A.R.*) of the critique of colonialism conveyed by Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. If colonialism is buttressed by a convergence of spatial progression (territorial expansion) and temporal progression (the civilizing mission), what *Heart of Darkness* and *F.E.A.R.* do is to highlight the divergence between the two in order to show how spatial progression begets temporal regression. In other words, the civilizing mission becomes an uncivilizing process for the Western white bourgeois individual. *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl* employs the same spatial/temporal

divergence in order to highlight how progress towards the communist ideal means regressing from the humanist ideals of autonomy and individualism.

At the same time, it is worth asking whether the game does not betray its own humanist creed by being so faithful to the Western critique of colonialism. If *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl* asserts its plea for freedom from a homogenizing system of belief such as communism by conforming to a well-established Western critique of colonialism, does the game not take up a position of subsidiarity in relation to Anglo-American cultural imperialism? But such a question can become the focus of another paper.

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Notes

1. In creating the Zone, the designers took inspiration from Chernobyl Exclusion Zone.
2. In the game, a PDA (Personal digital assistant) is a device that the playable character carries around. The player can consult it to get updates on her objectives or diegetic information.
3. See *Game Studies* 1, no. 1 (July 2001), <http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/>.
4. Andrei Nae, *Immersion, Narrative, and Gender Crisis in Survival Horror Video Games* (London: Routledge, 2021); Andrei Nae, *Horror Video Games as Procedural Narratives: Extreme Colonial Encounters in the Digital Heart of Darkness* (Bucharest: Editura Universității din București, 2019).
5. David Herman, *Basic Elements of Narrative* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).
6. Nae, *Horror Video Games as Procedural Narratives*, 87-93.
7. Soraya Murray, *On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2018), 2.
8. "A serious game is a game that has been designed for a reason other than just to entertain." Richard E. Ferdig, "Serious games," in *Encyclopedia of Video Games: The Culture, Technology, and Art of Gaming*, ed. Mark J. P. Wolf, 2nd edition (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2020), 907-908.
9. See Liviu Andreescu, "Are We All Postcommunists Now? Postcolonialism and Postcommunism in Central and Eastern Europe," in *Postcolonialism/Postcommunism. Intersections and Overlaps*, eds. Monica Bottez, Maria-Sabina Draga Alexandru and Bogdan Ștefănescu (Bucharest: Editura Universității din București, 2011), 57-74.
10. Bogdan Ștefănescu, "Late (for) Modernity: Transition and the Traumatic Colonization of the Future of Postcommunist Cultures," in *Literature and the Long Modernity*, eds. Mihaela Irimia and Andreea Paris (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 355.
11. Nae, *Horror Video Games as Procedural Narratives*, 167-192.
12. Andrei Nae, "Imperialist Ideology and Its Counterpoint in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," *Annals of the University of Bucharest, Foreign Languages and Literatures*, no. 1 (2015): 46-48.
13. Dennis Brown, *The Modernist Self in Twentieth-Century English Literature: A Study in Self-Fragmentation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), 25.
14. *Ibid.*, 17.
15. *Ibid.*, 27.
16. *Ibid.*, 25.
17. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, eds. "'Going native,'" in *Post-Colonial Studies*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2008), 106.
18. Nae, *Horror Video Games as Procedural Narratives*, 182-183.
19. Because he has no name and no 'official' history, the Point Man can be regarded as a Western everyman.
20. Patrick Bratlinger, "Victorians and Africans: The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent," in *Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness: A Casebook*, ed. Gene Moore (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 75.
21. For a more comprehensive reading of the game's plot in relation to Japanese horror cinema, see Steve Spittle, "'Did This Game Scare You? Because It Sure as Hell Scared Me!' *F.E.A.R.*, the Abject and the Uncanny," *Games and Culture* 6, no. 4 (2011): 312-26. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412010391091>.



22. Nae, *Horror Video Games as Procedural Narratives*, 184.
23. Magdalena Banaszekiewicz and Anna Duda, "To be a S.T.A.L.K.E.R. on architecture, computer games and tourist experience in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone," in *Tourism Fictions, Simulacra and Virtualities*, eds. Maria Gravari-Barbas, Nelson Graburn, and Jean-François Staszak (London: Routledge, 2019), 201.
24. For a more comprehensive account of the issue of identification in the S.T.A.L.K.E.R. games, see Souvik Mukherjee, "Egoshooting in Chernobyl: Identity and Subject(s) in the S.T.A.L.K.E.R. Games," in *Computer Games and New Media Cultures: A Handbook of Digital Games Studies*, eds. Johannes Fromme and Alexander Unger (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012), 219-31.
25. The Wish Granter is an element imported from the film *Stalker*. As already mentioned, an analysis of the game in relation to its cinematic hypotext will be approached in another article.
26. For an overview of the endings see, the game's fanpage *S.T.A.L.K.E.R. Wiki* https://stalker.fandom.com/wiki/S.T.A.L.K.E.R._Wiki

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