ESSAY

S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl and Memory of Utopia

How a Ukrainian Computer Game Transfigured Folkloric Processes of Remembering

VOL. 65 (MAY 2016) BY DANIEL FULLER

In the West, the thirtieth anniversary of the Chernobyl Disaster has passed with the usual photo-galleries and retrospective articles providing for the amusement and education of chattering classes while in Kiev candles were lit in solemn commemoration of an unparalleled national catastrophe. Those three decades since the disaster inaugurated a period of change perhaps unprecedented in the history of mankind. The vast Soviet Empire crumbled, as all imperial edifices must; with it vanished the client states that Moscow used as a defensive bulwark against invasion from the West, thus bringing a new European geopolitical order into being. Today the threat of nuclear Armageddon has been supplanted by the neurotic fear of traveling on the wrong airliner at the wrong time, the bearded suicide bomber taking over from the crypto-Red as the great bogeyman of the Western psyche. The contemporary world is alien to that which produced the Zone, but for many who lived through or suffered the consequences of the event it remains pregnant with meaning and sorrow.

To Western eyes the disaster is an abstract thing, fodder for sensationalist documentaries or dinner-party polemics about the terrible price of Communist government. Disaster tourists (the author sadly amongst their number) return from expensive, government-sanctioned tours armed with anecdotes of urban decay to sober and delight their friends. To those in the post-Soviet sphere the Zone is a site of near-religious veneration, a mythical *topos* of mourning and regret; a petrified memorial to the passing of political modernity. The disaster saw the Soviet Union's claim over technological mastery become a thing without substance, dispersed into the winds along with the toxic radioactivity

that was choked out by the flames at Reactor IV. Tens of thousands of families were displaced and dispossessed by the accident, afflicted by thyroid cancer and innumerable other health problems. Taking what they could carry upon their backs, they said farewell to the homes of their ancestors and departed upon the evacuation busses. The medical consequences are still felt today by children in Ukraine and Belarus, many of whom are consigned to the care of under-financed charities for the afflicted of families who cannot afford to pay for expensive treatments; the memory of Chernobyl is a thing of flesh and blood.

The young democracies which arose from the ashes of the Marxist-Leninist experiment have witnessed political, economic and social revolutions. Today they are, along with the rest of us, in the midst of a great technological upheaval. It is beyond the remit of this article to codify the manifold changes technology has wrought upon globalized society. But what can be shown is that the application of information technology that has been expressed through unlikely mediums, can be a powerful vehicle for re-visiting past experiences both personal and collective. In 2007, Ukrainian developer GSC Game World took the bold and counter-intuitive step of using an interactive medium to respond to one of the darkest episodes in their national history: they made a game about Chernobyl.

S.T.A.L.K.E.R: Shadow of Chernobyl is a science-fiction game set in the Chernobyl Zone of Alienation, a fantastic cousin to the Zone of our world. Coming out of Ukraine, the *topos* of the Zone is treated with reverence and care. The Zone is a prescribed space, full of supernatural danger, yet it is paradoxically a place that allows a kind of freedom and metaphysical promise that is not available to us who inhabit the world of the everyday on the outside. The Zone is not a window-dressing for an action scene without context, but rather an expressive and ambiguous requiem to what has been lost.

Taking cues from the long takes so beloved by Russian filmmakers (Tarkovsky first amongst them), the player is invited to explore an interactive imagining of the Zone at a reflective pace. In opposition to most games, the player is not allowed to run through the game-world to expedite the pace. Fatigue is instead modeled meticulously, forcing the player to proceed at a walk. The player is therefore enabled to bear witness to the ruin of modernist grandeur in much the same way that one considers a painting at a gallery. Her roaming takes her through a landscape littered with industrial detritus. She passes beneath metal behemoths of uncertain provenance and gingerly tip-toes through incomplete factories. Soviet iconography is writ large in the game world: red stars ornamenting walls and rusted gates, statues of Lenin crumble untended. Although artistic license has been taken vis-a-vis the precise topography of the Zone, Kiev-based GSC Game World dispatched its developers to the Zone upon a research excursion. This resulted in many of the Zone's most famous landmarks being rendered in-game. The quieted Ferris wheel at Pripyat, one of

the definitive symbols of the city, is recreated in loving detail. Pripyat's Palace of Culture is reproduced in facsimile, as is the city's football stadium. These markers do not merely signify a frame of reference rooted in reality for believability's sake, a distasteful veneer of realism with which to legitimize a hackneyed science-fiction narrative. They exist to situate the player within a historical space, there to engage in discourse with memory. Combined with a fantastic narrative, the Zone thus becomes a grand meditation upon Soviet ideology.

Imagine: in 2006 a 'Second Chernobyl Disaster' occurred as a result of clandestine parapsychological experimentation. The Zone was summarily transformed into a site of paranormal phenomena. It became littered with Anomalies – strange phenomena which promise certain death to the foolhardy. Strange electricity flashes in decayed industrial facilities, winds exist in microcosm while the clouds are still. Only physical contact will reveal their location which is inscrutable to the native eye. Less dangerous are the Artefacts, by-products of the Second Disaster which imbue the bearer with inhuman power yet paradoxically sap her strength. The Second Disaster caused a gold rush of fortune-seekers and true believers into the Zone, heedless of the Ukrainian Government's fresh attempts to blockade its boundaries. At the time the player enters the gameworld, the Zone is home to a rogue gallery of factions and interests. Scientists study the strange phenomena, ideological fanatics have carved out fiefdoms from where they plot and scheme with the intent of bending the topography of the Zone to their will. Strange cults have sprung up in the darkened interiors; the so-called 'Stalkers', crazed ideologues who form military patrols, scan the Zone in search of wealth and adventure.

The player is cast into the role of an amnesiac (that most venerable of gamic clichés) stalker, the Marked One. Initially embarking upon a simple quest for identity, the player eventually is set on a path that guides her inexorably towards the encased husk of Reactor IV, the very epicenter of the Zone. It is whispered around campfires that within the Sarcophagus lies a Monolith, a great Anomaly of Anomalies. The mystery of the Zone seems tied up with the Monolith's very existence: scientists seek vainly to understand it, while maddened ex-Stalkers worship it as a God. It is rumored that the Monolith is a Wish Granter, a vehicle for the realization of the most heartfelt desires of those that stand before it.

It is difficult to describe *S.T.A.L.K.E.R* in a purely generic sense. The delineations of genre allow for outliers and oddities, syntheses of different approaches that aim to create something unique and strange, and *S.T.A.L.K.E.R* is one such outlier. It boasts elements of the First Person Shooter, Survival Horror and Role-Playing genres. First-Person Shooters (FPS) are games in the tradition of titles like *Doom*, *Call of Duty* or *Far Cry*. The player experiences the game-world from a first-person perspective and spends most of her time

shooting monsters and men (it's all there in the name). FPS games often feature energetic set pieces reminiscent of Hollywood action movies and rely on a near-constant stream of activity in order to maintain the player's interest. A few common tropes exist for FPS game settings. Blockbuster approaches generally prefer a tried and tested formula rather than experimentation, an understandable convention given the astronomical budget involved in the creation of blockbuster games. Kitsch science fiction shooters such as *Bulletstorm* generally draw from the pulpy, campier end of the SF canon. This school of aesthetic design, of which *Doom* is the progenitor, are replete with primary colors and exaggerated displays of machismo.[1]

S.T.A.L.K.E.R sits uneasily in such company, although in many ways the FPS is its 'mother' genre. Conversely from the examples discussed above, its pace is at a crawl – the player spends a great deal of her time traversing desolate expanses. The game also goes out of its way to confound player expectations by undermining gameplay tropes. A memorable sequence has the player visit a secret laboratory in order to progress further towards the heart of the Zone. Genre conventions generally insist that when in a 'dungeon' (as is the parlance), the player would be beset with foes. *S.T.A.L.K.E.R* frustrates expectations – players do not encounter a single enemy during the horrifying descent into Laboratory X-18.

The Survival-Horror genre, from which the game also borrows heavily, is a more nebulous categorization. Games that fall within this genre do not have one fixed viewing perspective, nor mechanical conventions which tie them together. It shares a lot of features with traditional horror, namely supernatural beings tormenting humanity at a great disadvantage. In its gamic expression, however, the onus is on the player's *survival* rather than the filmic cliché of fetishistic slaughter. In a gamic context terror serves as a vehicle for triumph rather than powerlessness, the metaphysical outside a metaphor for adversity. Nonetheless, the X-18 section is more reminiscent of the relatively new genre of the 'walking simulator' in which the player explores a virtual environment without violence, the story revealing itself through various triggers as the player progresses. The game undermines genre conventions as much as it borrows from them.

Role-Playing Games – the third genre the game is often associated with – are a form of games descended from analogue pen-and-paper games like *Dungeons and Dragons* or *Traveller*. They share an onus of playing a character, with many of the earliest examples from the genre often using licensed pen-and-paper rulesets. Modern RPGs have varyingly moved away from this paradigm, although their origins in pulpy SF and Fantasy settings are generally writ large in their aesthetics. *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* features choice in many forms, something which is a hallmark of the genre (although no longer strictly tied to it). The player can choose to align with various factions and interests within the Zone, and is presented with multiple choices in dialogue with NPCs (Non-Player

Characters) as she progresses through the game. The traditional 'quest' structure of RPGs is also in evidence in the game, which is to say that the player is given a list of goals (some plot-sensitive, some peripheral) and is charged with pursuing them at her own pace. This can be as simple as 'go to point X, kill Y' or 'Descend into Laboratory X-18 to ascend further towards Pripyat'. Nonetheless, in a structural sense they are organized according to the same principle. *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* does however break with the conventions of the RPG. In most games of this stripe when choice is evident, it is generally obvious what the dividends will be. (Canadian developer Bioware is a particular offender with regards to this school of design.) With a few noted exceptions, Obsidian Entertainment's brilliant yet flawed espionage RPG *Alpha Protocol* standing out among them, few games have taken the step to have the consequences of the player's decision making process stand entirely oblique until the ending. *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* has such boldness. It is a game that mixes genres and design schools of thought, producing something that exists in the borderlands between genres. The last element in the mix, however, comes from a rich cultural history. *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* is a game that could not have been made in the West.

Its earliest ancestor comes from a strange locale. The word *zona* (Zone) entered the Russian cultural lexicon by way of Gulag slang. The inmates would contrast the *malaia zona* (little Zone) of the prison camp system with the *bol'shaia zona* (big Zone) of the Soviet system as a whole. In her work addressing the history of the Gulag, Kate Brown brings to mind interesting contradictions inside camp life. We are all familiar with Solzhenitsyn's denunciations of the bureaucratic horror of the Gulag, but Brown artfully juxtaposes some of the relative freedom offered to inmates and the deprivations of those living on a collective farm. Brown enigmatically cites anecdotes of fraternization, inmates dancing with the wives of their captors. Which Zone, one wonders, is supposed to be the prison?

The idea of a *metaphysical* zone entered into literature in 1972 with the publication of *Roadside Picnic* (*Piknik na obochine*) by the famed purveyors of Soviet *fantastika*, Arkady and Boris Strugatsky. Having inserted the Zone along with the Stalkers into the canon, that book is the first true ancestor of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* The brothers were literary rockstars of their day, later reputed to have used the supposedly speculative genre of Science Fiction in order to smuggle coded critiques of the Soviet system into respectable literature. Their landmark work *Hard to Be a God* (1964) deals with the failed attempt of a far-future Communist society to prime a feudal planet for historical development through subtle sociological manipulation. It is difficult here not to think of Lenin's outlandish claim that the February Revolution represented Marx's phase of Bourgeois dominance necessary before Proletarian rule be established and the implied folly of attempting to assume mastery over the scientific, abstract laws of history.

Roadside Picnic shares many tropes, themes and archetypes with its descendant. It imagines that alien life embarked upon Earth as part of some unknown galactic wandering, the title-bearing 'picnic by the roadside'. In the aftermath of their visit the six sites of their landing were designated as prescribed Zones, open only to the scientific community who analyzes the artefacts left in the wake of the aliens. The narrative follows Redrick Schuhart, a stalker who becomes drawn into a quest for the 'Golden Sphere' – a fabled artefact which grants wishes. At the terminus of his quest, a weary and battered Schuhart cries his wish before the Sphere – "HAPPINESS FOR EVERYBODY, FREE, AND LET NO ONE BE LEFT BEHIND!" It is left unclear to the reader whether the Sphere grants Schuhart his prayer.

The authors were careful to situate the tale in a nebulous country outside of the Soviet Union. It is not difficult to see why. The idea of universal happiness is at the core of the utopian premise. The perfect society imagined by Soviet planners was delivered through collectivist action, through the masses working in concert as one meta-mechanical instrument. Collectivist ideology spurred the unwise creation of the collective farm and the inhuman pace of industrialization that produced places like Magnitogorsk. It mandated the utter destruction of the Futurist avant-garde and its replacement with a drab Socialist Realism. Collectivism permeated into the everyday. It insisted upon the breaking of the private family home in favor of communal apartments, those Kafkaesque spaces where ears pressed to paper-thin walls in search of unguarded comments, where the sound of desperate lovemaking freely mingled with that of children's play.

Roadside Picnic can be read as a guarded critique of the Soviet roadmap to utopian happiness in relation to Collectivism. Red Schuhart's plea before the Golden Sphere does not wholly break from the premise of utopia, his cry for universal happiness still accepting the possibility of a utopian ontology. Much like Ilya Kabakov's landmark installation *The Man Who Flew into Space From his Apartment*, the book is a rejection of utopia brought about by the subsumption of the self into the collective. While it is true that the deification of individuals was a feature of Soviet propagandist discourse, individuals were made into exemplars because of what they represented for the collective whole. Stakhanov was not a demigod, but a vision of the future man. Of similar interest is the metaphysical implication of the Golden Sphere, the idea that utopia could *conceivably* be delivered not by the scientific efforts of the ideologically educated but by ineffable and dangerous forces beyond the pale of human knowledge.

The brothers' themes would perhaps have remained the concern of *fantastika* aficionados had they not caught the attention of Andrei Tarkovsky. After his completion of *The Mirror* (*Zerkalo*) the debt-ridden auteur was looking for other projects to shore upon his creditors. After much hand-wringing and politicking with the censure on his part, Tarkovsky decided to put other projects on ice

and commit to an adaptation of *Roadside Picnic* for the big screen.

Stalker was released in 1979. Owing to the creative proclivities of the director, it was necessarily a more oblique and metaphysical work than *Roadside Picnic*. Tarkovsky (like the Strugatskys) always rejected the label of dissident when interviewed in the Western press, yet in his work's rejection of socialist themes positioned he himself outside of the Socialist artistic milieu. His artistic vision ultimately resulted in his self-imposed exile in the West, something that he described as a choice made out of professional rather than political necessity, although we may be minded to not take the director at his word. Tarkovsky abandoned the Science Fiction world-building in favour of leaving the origin of the Zone obscured and uncertain. The Strugatskys' vivid cast of *dramatis personae* of scientists, government officials and sundry is shorn to a core cast of three – the Writer, the Professor and the Stalker. So too did the director shed the abandoned suburbia of *Roadside Picnic*'s Zone. In its place is verdant post-industrial emptiness. Rusted Soviet tanks litter the protagonists' approach, clandestinely placing the action closer to home for the Soviet audience.

Journeying to 'the Room' (the film's version of the Golden Sphere) is the stated intent of the protagonists from the very beginning of the picture. Rather than repeated narrative juxtapositions between the Zone and the outside, the journey towards the Room takes center stage with only brief external segments bookending the film. Depictions of explicitly supernatural phenomena are mostly abandoned, giving the Zone a chimerical aspect that leaves the viewer wondering if the whole thing wasn't simply an imagination of demented minds. Central to our analysis however is the fate of their quest to reach the Room: at its threshold the protagonists turn away, unable to face the potentially horrifying prospect of their heartfelt desires becoming realized. At first resembling a holy man leading supplicants towards an encounter with the metaphysical sublime, in the end the Stalker is as deflated and uncertain as his wards.

In Tarkovsky's entry to the mythos we see a deep mistrust of the ideal of personal utopia, a refutation of the very idea of unqualified happiness. The Writer seeks in the Room a possibility of restoring his departed muse, before realizing that the Room is worthless to his ambition. The Stalker's mentor hung himself after the Room allegedly granted him riches rather than the resurrection of his dead brother. The Scientist seeks to destroy the Room for fear of it being turned towards evil – only to abandon his plans when he understands that its power is poisonous, that it is beyond the ken of conscious will. In the closing moments of the picture the Stalker's wife begs him to take her to the Room. The Zone's former high priest responds with only skeptical fear – "what if it wouldn't work on you?" While it would be reductive to see in the Room a conscious metaphor for Soviet promises of utopia, there is nonetheless a profound ambiguity towards revelatory claims of all stripes – and what are the pseudo-scientific doctrines of the Bolsheviks other than the

promise of the ending of want and suffering in all their forms?

Stalker has been quasi-mystically associated with the Chernobyl Disaster. More excitable commentators have variously claimed that *Stalker* predicted the disaster or Tarkovsky's own death, as if the auteur was some kind of prophet; one suspects that these suggestions would have pleased Andrei Arsenyevich. It is unfortunately beyond the purview of scholarship to seriously consider outlandish theories, but we can nonetheless repeat their substance to demonstrate a facet of an evocative symbolic mythology that would evolve, as folktales do, into *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* In Tarkovsky's film one of the origins suggested for the creation of the Zone is 'a breakdown in the fourth bunker', while *our* Zone was created after a catastrophic accident at Reactor IV at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant. The deadly consequences of unchecked Soviet industrialism were also felt heavily by those involved in the making of the film. After the initial shooting location in Tajikistan proved to be untenable, a new location in Estonia was chosen. Geoff Dyer reports for the *Guardian* that the film's sound recorder alleged that this new location was downriver from a chemical plant that churned out toxic industrial waste into waters which passed through the filming location. It has been suggested that this was responsible for the untimely deaths of Anatoly Solonitsyn (the Writer), Larissa Tarkovskaya and Tarkovsky himself, all dead from cancer. Stas Tyrkin wrote in *Komsomolskaya Pravda* that a shot in the film lingers on a page torn from a calendar – December 28. Tarkovsky passed away from the world on December 29, 1986, mere months after the disaster visited a cloud of toxic radiation upon vast swathes of the Ukrainian and Belarussian SSRs.

Chernobyl has been depicted by Johanna Lindbladh as the symbolic demise of the Soviet Union, with the political collapse being a mere formality, an aftershock of the cataclysmic trauma. Atomic energy was not just a safeguard of Soviet security, but the culmination of decades of cultural discourse which tied technological progress to political legitimacy. This way of legitimization was central to Bolshevik ideology from the very earliest time. Lenin famously declared in 1920 that "Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country". For Lindbladh, technological expertise was a key claim of the Soviet Union's promise of future utopia. When it was compromised, Marxist-Leninist ideology lost one of its strong edifices.

Under the Tsars the Russian Empire had been famously backward, the shadow of serfdom looming heavy upon its socio-economic topography. After the Romanovs were finally banished from their teetering throne, Bolshevik legitimacy relied heavily upon a fundamentally technological vision of the Proletarian state. In the heady time following the Revolution this impetus manifested itself in artistic and industrial experimentation. The geometric paintings of El Lissitzky and the experimental poetry of Vladimir Mayakovsky expressed the avant-garde belief that the Revolutionary human could be reforged into something resembling a machine, a metal thing of hard angles

and mathematical purity that would shed the frailty of the flesh. The so-called 'Cult of the Man-Machine' used technological metaphors in order to imagine the new Soviet man – *Homo Sovieticus*. To this effect the poet Alexei Gastev founded the Central Institute of Labor, an experimental training facility that sought to mechanize the processes of human labor. Gastev and his colleagues studied the minutiae of bodily movement in an attempt to standardize the production process. These pioneers were in a sense searching for a Platonic form of labor, an abstract truth that would wither away the state by consolidating the schizoid masses into a flawless metallic singularity.

As Stalinism sunk its claws into the Soviet system, the dialectics of utopia became inexorably anchored in the massive industrialization program and were thus drawn away from the earlier experiments with technological utopianism. The Collectivization policies in agriculture and the Stalinist penchant for flagship industrial projects reflected a new, Materialist drive towards utopia. In her study *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, Susan Buck-Morss describes how the discourse of the everyday was colonized by industrial terminology. Workers were encouraged to talk about their 'relationships' with their furnaces, or would express love for their 'little Magnitogorsk'. These linguistic practices can perhaps be seen as a descendant of early experiments like those conducted by Gastev, only set against a background of policy rather than cultural and economic experimentation. The great steelwork at Magnitogorsk, raised in less than a decade, became the totemic center of the whole Soviet industrialization project. It was, to use a slightly vulgar image, the Soviet equivalent of the white picket fence – a model for the fulfilment of the Soviet vision of utopian modernity.

Atomic power was in a sense the culmination of these forces. In spite of the political sensitivity with which nuclear power is dealt with nowadays, atomic power used to be considered not just a safeguard of security but also a powerful tool for social emancipation. With the advent of the nuclear age, Soviet propaganda heavily promoted the idea of the 'Peaceful Atom', of atomic energy as a deliverer of modern standards of living. Lindbladh suggests that this technological optimism had a political context as well as an ideological one. In the early years of Khrushchev's rule a need was felt to accentuate that a 'clean break' with the dark years of Stalinism was underway, wherefore the liberating power of the atom proved a useful banner for Party authorities to wave. This optimistic dynamic permeated Communist SF. Patrick Major describes how East German writers regularly aped the discourse surrounding the Peaceful Atom. He recounts how Krupkat's *The Invisible Ones* (*Die Unsichtbaren*) features thinly veiled panegyrics to the promise of atomic energy, depicting future utopias where the power of the atom was harnessed to terraform dead worlds and finally remove the burden of labor from the shoulders of the worker.

If nuclear energy can be considered the definitive ideological symbol regarding

the possibility of technological utopia, the Chernobyl disaster can be seen as its terminus. It was a moment when the ideological forces which were unleashed by Lenin's 1920 dictum peeled away to reveal a system creaking under the weight of its contradictions. The disaster has been imbued with theological and apocalyptic resonance both in popular culture and academic discourse. In *The Shape of Apocalypse in Modern Russian Fiction* (1989), David Bethea describes a passage in the Book of Revelation foretelling the coming of a star named Wormwood that would make waters bitter and poisonous. Bethea tells how in the aftermath of the disaster a certain figure in Soviet literary circles would delight in revealing that the Ukrainian word for Wormwood was *Chernobyl*. In 1986 the end was most certainly nigh, although the world would remain spinning all the same.

S.T.A.L.K.E.R. exists at the intersection of Soviet technological modernity and folkloric intertextuality. The game uses the imagery and narrative devices of its ancestors and the cultural history of technological utopianism to deliver an account of how, precisely, the rot set in. Its story begins in our non-fantastical world with Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's *Cosmogenesis* (1922), wherein he defined the 'Noösphere' as a sphere of thought which surrounds the planet in much the same way the biosphere does by modern science's standards. The concept was first delivered in lectures by Soviet geochemist Vladimir Vernadsky and developed jointly by the two men and their colleague Edouard Le Roy, although de Chardin is generally credited with coining the term. The idea of human cognition creating scientifically observable phenomena is not a particularly novel one (the Church of Scientology makes some particularly entertaining claims on this front), and the theory generally fell out of favor with the scientific community when it could not be tested or observed. In *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*'s world, however, the Noösphere was a reality and would ultimately prove the catalyst for the creation of the Zone. If the player traverses the game in a certain way, she becomes privy to this knowledge. She can discover that the Second Disaster was itself an aftershock of Soviet experimentation. A shadowy group of Soviet scientists amalgamated themselves into a 'Common Consciousness' (C-Consciousness) in an attempt to mold the Noösphere for the betterment of humanity. The C-Consciousness wished to expunge human frailties such as anger and greed, paving the way for a utopian existence worldwide. The experiment failed. The C-Consciousness wished to gift humanity utopia; instead it was left with the Zone.

This origin myth for the Zone can be said to reflect several cultural strands that were discussed above. We have discussed how the Collective idea was central to the Communist project of the future society. Individualism was seen as a bourgeois value, one of the prime drivers of economic inequality. The C-Consciousness then is a marriage of the Collectivist organizational ideal (in a very literal sense) and a technological utopianism that sought to cure man's ills through mastery of the scientific arts, an extant avatar of two ideological facets of Marxism-Leninism. The attempt to adjust the Noösphere is resonant with the

utopian ambitions of the Soviet government in a generalized, which is to say emotive, sense – an end to hunger and suffering, universal happiness, a triumph over the 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune'. Now we see in the Zone a calamity that has come not from isolated events, but as resulting from an ideological process, perhaps from ideology *itself*.

If the C-Consciousness is representative of the Soviet ideology (and therefore the Party), the Wish Granter acts as a lightning rod for the ideal Form of its utopian promises – a sublime moment of absolution. We have discussed how *Roadside Picnic* critiqued Collectivist pathways to utopia yet left its actualization open to the reader's interpretation. *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* uses the Wish Granting device in a reasonably interesting manner. The game has multiple endings, depending on the manner the player has conducted herself during the course of her playing. There are five so-called 'false' endings which culminate with the player standing before the Wish Granter and making a request. In one instance, the player asks for the Zone to disappear only to be blinded – it has disappeared for *her* alone. In another, the player requests to be made rich (a reference to *Stalker*), only to be suffocated by a mound of coins falling from the sky. These multiple endings can be seen in the context of *Stalker*, albeit in a far more demonstrative sense. They reject various criteria for happiness in a very visceral manner, both utopian and personal. We can look at this in the context of outlandish modernist promises of happiness free from complexity, but further textual analysis reveals another damning indictment against Soviet technological hubris. If the player manages to navigate the way towards the 'true' endings (an oblique process which the author failed to achieve in his first playing), it is revealed to her that the Wish Granter is a fraud. It is a mirage created by the C-Consciousness to lure Stalkers into their sphere of influence. The 'false' endings witnessed by the player are not merely a lack of attainment, but an entirely deluded reading of events. There is no absolution waiting beneath the decaying sarcophagus of Reactor IV, merely poisonous servitude. If we see *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* as an artefact of a folkloric process, then we may witness the utopian promise of the Wish Granter as finally revealed to be a cheap parlor trick, a tool of control in the service of containing a terrible failure.

The Zone is an uncanny place where modernity and postmodernity uneasily cohabit. The player's experience is very much that of the postmodern subject who moves through an unstable and dangerous landscape that cannot be made sense of using the old claims to objective (Scientific/Materialist) knowledge. The Zone's topography is not beholden to rationality; safe paths across the wastes become deadly overnight. It is subject to Emissions which spew forth from the Reactor, changing its landscape of Anomalies and Artefacts. The Zone is personified by many of the Stalkers the player encounters throughout the game and made into a thing of otherworldly intent (they share this habit with Tarkovsky's Stalker and Red Schuhart). In this we can see a reflection of an understanding of history which emerged from the

demise of the meta-narratives which Jean-Francois Lyotard tells us justify cultural modernity. The passing of the Soviet order was a huge political and social upheaval, which arguably emerged from the ideological abyss opened in the aftermath of Chernobyl. The nonlinearity of the Zone's topography is therefore a reflection of the chaotic lived experience of post-Communist time, with its personification constituting the removal and subsequent transformation of the object itself into an abstract and essentially unknowable place beyond the frontiers of human cognition.

There is, of course, much more to be said. Like the Zone itself, the game is a deep thing with many mysteries. I could have talked about the post-Communist political echoes in the game, dissected the character of that new literary archetype the 'Stalker'. Alas, the hour grows late and the inkwell runs dry. *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* is a game about the Chernobyl Disaster, but in folkloric dialogue with fiction and ideology it offers an account of why the disaster occurred in a general, cultural sense. It situates the Disaster not just as an isolated event stripped of all meaning, but as a lightning rod for systemic malaise and a living thing that casts a long shadow over contemporary existence. The Zone is emblematic for the whole of the post-Soviet landscape, littered as it is with the detritus of industrial modernity. One can see similar scenes of abandonment in the Armenian Caucuses, upon the desolate Steppe deep in the Russian interior and in the heavy pine forests of Belarus. Decaying technology abandoned by its masters, is all that remains of an order of things passed into memory.

In the end of the game's sequel (*S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Call of Pripyat*, 2009) it is revealed that something unexpected is happening. Alarmed scientists charged with observing the Zone report to the Government that strange things are afoot beyond the military cordon that protects the outside world from what lures inside. Anomalies are appearing in places they should not be at, and the mutated beasts are roaming farther afield in ever-greater numbers. Technology no longer works as it should in the research stations, and strange afflictions strike the research teams without warning.

The Zone is *growing*. It is alive. And it does not want us to forget.

References

The more realistic end of warfare is captured by 'Military Shooters', which situate the player as a soldier – a cog in a vast military machine – and borrow from military SF works such as R.A Heinlein's seminal "Starship Troopers" and Hollywood films like "Saving Private Ryan". These games trade in a beautification of martial virtue, raising the soldier up as the ideal citizen.