

Ansh Patel

Professor Clara Fernandez Vara

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## **Remediating and Constructing Narrative Space of S.T.A.L.K.E.R.'s Fictional World**

Remediation is a theory that refers to the blending of the old and the new media. According to Bolter & Grusin, "*Remediation isn't unidirectional as old media can remediate the new as well, as an attempt to reassert themselves in a world where digital media rule* (Bolter & Grusin, 5)".

*S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl* (abbreviated as *SoC* hereafter) is a first-person shooter game made by the Ukrainian developer, GSC Game World in 2007. The game's alternative reality setting of "The Zone", a nuclear wasteland is partly based on Arkady and Boris Strugasky's novel *Roadside Picnic* (abbreviated as *RP* hereafter) and partly from the Andrei Tarkovsky film *Stalker* which itself was loosely adapted from Strugaskys' novel. As a work that adapts from two different media, *SoC* offers interesting insights into how the developer attempted to create a fictional setting for the player by using remediated aspects from the older media.

### **Distantiation**

One of the components of modern remediation is distantiation. According to Mark Deuze, "*this term refers to the individualization and deconstruction of mainstream media and it often happens simultaneously with remediation, and it results*

*in the borrowing of form coupled with the subversion of content (Deuze 4)*". As Bolter describes, "*digital technologies don't radically change the mediascape as much as alter and add to the older media (Bolter 62)*". Despite adapting many elements of its fictional world from *RP* and *Stalker*, *SoC* seeks to create a distinct and a very specific version of The Zone. Where Strugaskys' novel was interested in exploring the post-visitation society that was infested with alien technology left behind, *SoC* is about a post-apocalyptic nuclear wasteland filled with scavengers and survivors inside The Zone. Where Tarkovsky's film explored the philosophical aspects of surviving in a desolate, apocalyptic setting, *SoC* seeks to express the desperation and risk involved in living such a life. Many of the similarities and differences between *SoC* and its source materials had to be achieved differently based on the restrictions imposed by the virtual medium and conventions of the first-person shooter genre.

For instance, *SoC* has to achieve the quiet, meditative pacing of *Stalker* that evokes isolation while carrying the expectations of being a first-person shooter game. While Tarkovsky framed *Stalker's* protagonists in empty landscapes in long takes, *SoC* cannot do the same because the first-person camera is always controlled by the player. Moreover, a first-person shooter is typically characterized by action which would work against the meditative pacing of *Stalker* it wishes to evoke. Instead, *SoC* overcomes these challenges by spatially separating areas of action and conflicts with large, desolate landscapes. The game forces the player to traverse through these empty, doom-laden environments in order to evoke the same sense of isolation and meditative pacing which *Stalker* evoked.



*Figure 1: One of the many locations in SoC that were based from their real-world counterparts in and around Chernobyl*

This is in addition to the fact that history in the years between *Stalker* and *SoC* has played a key role in informing the latter's process of adapting the former. The differences in their settings largely arise from the fact that *Stalker* prefigured the actual Chernobyl disaster which occurred seven years after the film's release. The abandoned, radioactive "zone of alienation" created by the nuclear meltdown at Chernobyl is eerily similar to The Zone that was portrayed earlier in Tarkovsky's *Stalker*. Thus, *SoC*'s process of adapting *Stalker*'s source material is complicated by the hindsight that it possesses on the actual Chernobyl disaster that occurred in the years between the film and the game. This complication arises from the duality of referents – one being the Zone as portrayed in the film, the other being the actual "zone of isolation" that was set up after the Chernobyl disaster. *SoC*'s developer, GSC Game World based The Zone as well as its surrounding towns like Chernobyl and Pripyat from their real-world

counterparts through Google Maps. (Figure 2). As we can see, the overlay of the inhabited towns particularly Pripyat from *SoC* largely matches that taken from Google Maps. The differences between *SoC*'s map and the real-world referent grow larger as we go into uninhabited spaces around The Zone. As we saw earlier, *SoC* had to separate areas of action with empty, desolate landscapes in order to achieve the sense of isolation and meditative pacing it wished to emulate from Tarkovsky's film. In doing so, it exaggerates the extent of desolation in the actual Chernobyl area to the point that *SoC*'s map starts to appear very different from its real counterpart.

Thus, *SoC*'s remediation process isn't merely concerned in distancing itself from its source material. Despite largely basing the geography of its setting from the real world counterpart, *SoC* had to make changes by exaggerating the desolation in its version of Chernobyl to accommodate the meditative mood of *Stalker* that it wished to remediate. *SoC*'s Zone is an altered adaptation from the one we see in *Stalker*, not simply to overcome the obstacles arising from the differences in their respective media, but also because of the historical events that have occurred in the intervening years between them.



*Figure 2: An overlay of SoC's version of Pripjat over the actual Google Maps image of the town with the marker emphasizing the similarities.*

### **Narrative Space**

One of the challenges in creating such a fictional world that's partly based on an adaptation often comes from the medium itself. In the case of *SoC*, it comes from its genre's conventions of using a first-person perspective camera and the consequent necessity of simulating a continuous virtual 3D environment to the player to maintain a sense of presence in the fictional world. These challenges have to be dealt in a significantly different manner in *SoC* compared to Strugaskys' long descriptions of the environment in *RP* and even Tarkvosky's slow-panning and silent long takes in *Stalker*. These differences primarily arise from how each medium uniquely incorporates what academic Stephen Heath calls as "narrative space".

Narrative space is defined as the control of movement throughout the story, from the reader/viewer's perspective. In other words, it is an active re-constitution by the participant of the various gaps and spaces left by the author. For example, in the case of *RP*, it could be the implied history of The Visitors that's never explicitly mentioned in words. Or in the case of *Stalker*, it could be the way a viewer has to navigate through the "jumps" and "gaps" left by the film's editing process. According to Heath, "*The presentation of cinematic space is a process of selective framings and editing that produce "space" or "jumps" in the continuity of the flow of images* (Heath 66)".

This narrative space that is created by the continuity of images also fascinates writer and developer Dan Pinchbeck who connects it to narrativisation, the very process of constructing a narrative. According to Pinchbeck, "*In games, narrativisation takes place as the character traverses the game space*". In *SoC*, the player's act of literally moving through the virtual environment can be seen as contributing to the process of narrativisation. Comparing it to the process in films, we can see the continuous screen space in *SoC* as a film devoid of editing when the player is in control of the first-person camera. Regarding player interactivity, Pinchbeck comments, "*Real time interactions by the player are rendered and triggered in real-time in a continuous and uninterrupted manner that takes precedence over narrative developed using cinematic cues* (Pinchbeck 112)". Like props in a stage production, objects of interest may be placed in the environment, but they can be interacted with only by the player's spatial movement. As the one in control of the camera, the player not only determines their spatial relationship with the world but also how they visually frame it. Thus, the active

re-construction of narrative space in a game like *SoC* can be seen as a literal traversal and framing of the game's virtual environment.

What makes this relationship between the player and *SoC*'s space more interesting is "A-Life", an elaborate artificial intelligence system that populates the game's world with thousands of creatures and people who go about their business with no special regard for the player's actions. Through A-Life, events take place outside of the frame of player's first-person camera, whether they see them or not. This break from the scripted relationship between the player and space creates an interesting gap in their knowledge of events that are happening outside the frame of their camera. For instance, the player may come across a fellow survivor and team up with them to defend a small group of unarmed people against bandits. Upon returning at a later point, the player may find the group killed with their former squadmate nowhere to be seen.

In this case, the event happens outside the frame of the player's camera and without their involvement. Thus, they may not have any knowledge of what or who might have been responsible for it. This is one among hundreds of possible events in *SoC* that could occur with or without player's presence. These gaps are often interpreted and filled in by the player's themselves, constituting an act of narrativisation which involves player's own imagined possibilities. In Mark Wolfe's terms, such an act would be closer to a "secondary mode" of imagination – one which is more creative compared to the "primary mode" which is based more on interpreting our sensory data into perception. According to Wolfe, "*the secondary imagination 'dissolves, dissipates and diffuses' the concepts and elements of the world around us so as to recreate something new with them* (Wolfe 22)". The player may construct an interpretation of the event based on what they know, imagining one of the many possible secondary worlds in

which their former squadmate may have been responsible for the deaths of the innocents.

By creating a dynamic world outside the frame of player's camera which operates irrespective of the players' presence creates "gaps" and "spaces" in *SoC*'s narrativisation, the game incorporates player interpretation into its narrativisation process and allows space for their imagined possibilities to exist in a secondary, imagined world. While traversing across the virtual environment may be seen as the narrativisation of a game according to Pinchbeck, the re-construction and interpretation of events that take place outside the frame of player's camera can be seen as part of the same process.

## **Conclusion**

*SoC* remediates aspects of its fictional setting from its source material by distancing itself not just because of the challenges posed by the virtual medium, but also because of the hindsight it possesses on the history of Chernobyl disaster. Through dynamic events and spatial movement, *SoC* creates a fictional world reconfigured through real and adapted sources, both within and outside the frame of player's camera expanding the game's narrative space to beyond what happens in their presence.

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