

Gradual Disappearance of the Old

Apocalypse in Eastern European Landscapes

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This paper examines the representations of Eastern European landscapes in local video games with post-apocalyptic settings. To have an emotional impact, the whole genre needs to be anchored in our lived world or resemble it at least and landscape representation is an effective tool to show some of the changes brought about by the more or less specified catastrophe. Those changes can also constitute new relationships with nature as we usually see, for example, cities overgrown with vegetation, which can represent motives of hope in this kind of games. However, since games, like any cultural artifact, are shaped by societal conditions, this paper considers the post-apocalyptic games *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl*, *Metro 2033* and *DayZ* made and set in Eastern Europe. This region is not the traditional centre of the video game industry and therefore the approach to those themes can be different. Concerning their specific geopolitical position and based on close reading I state that those games' landscapes mirror the state of constant transformation of post-communism.

Keywords: landscape, Eastern Europe, post-communist, environment, the West

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Your world's end seems familiar

The final twist of the film *Planet of the Apes* (1968) shows that the world of humans has ended, and the whole of the film's previous sci-fi setting is shifted to a bleaker tone by the final shot of the remains of the Statue of Liberty. This can serve as an example how stories from post-apocalyptic worlds are usually localised clearly which is the case also for digital games. Titles such as *The Last of Us* (2013), the *Fallout* series (1997-) and *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017) are set in the ruins of the United States. It's understandable - if we can observe the aftermath of the end of the world in a familiar and easily recognisable setting that the work itself can have a much stronger emotional impact on us. This better starts our “what if” imagination and thus connecting to it more strongly. Given the long-standing dominance of Western pop culture¹, popular post-apocalyptic stories mostly take place in parts of the world that could be described as Anglo-American. These are one of the centres of the creative industries, especially the gaming one. But the end of the world could also occur in the peripheries and semi-peripheries of globalization. This paper, therefore, interrogates post-apocalyptic worlds set in Eastern Europe as presented by games designed in this periphery to show more intense survival numbness presented in those.

It is necessary to describe the importance of virtual landscapes as well as the importance of space for post-apocalyptic fiction. I will also outline the issues of post-communism and post-Soviet space as starting points for the subsequent analysis of the selected games.

¹ In the case of films, for example, the growth of imports from the US to various markets in the second half of the 20th century (Fu, 2006), in computer games this dominance is also clear (Baeza-González, 2021), the traditional centres of the industry are Japan and the US (Kerr, 2006), which have created a kind of global hybrid in the field of cultural industries (Consalvo, 2006).

The representation of landscapes contributes to the overall aesthetics of video games (Martin, 2011; Murray, 2020); in the case of post-apocalyptic settings, it also serves as a certain element of anchoring it in the real. Beyond this, depopulated spaces in works of this genre can also serve as a critical commentary on contemporary social formations (Walter, 2019). Correspondingly, the key themes of post-apocalyptic narratives can be characterized by questions such as “What went wrong? How can we survive? What kind of new life and society will emerge from the rubble?” (Pérez-Latorre, 2019). Given this trickling of the present into narratives of possible futures, we can ask whether and, if so, how the post-apocalypses of Eastern computer games differ from those of the West, emanating from the traditional centres of the global video game industry, as it is these social formations, even if unwittingly rendered, that will be shaped by a different socio-historical experience.

In the case of computer games depicting post-apocalyptic themes, the importance of depicting different spaces is all the more important because “game worlds are totally constructed environments” (Jenkins, Squire, 2002), and it is the depicted environment that is crucial for computer games to function as carriers of meaning (Aarseth, 2020). The videogame landscape is thus also a meaning-making element and is always created with a particular intention, even though it may, for example, be inspired by real places². If apocalypse carries with it hard-to-guess and predictable threats, setting them in just familiar yet in some way altered places makes these threats present in relation to the current social order (Walter, 2019). A typical and unsurprising cinematic example can also be helpful here – the space of the department store where *Night of the Living Dead* is set, and through which the crowds of zombies march, can serve as an expression of mindless and mind-numbing consumerism.

For all the bleakness of the subject matter, post-apocalyptic games from the last fifteen years typically still contain a certain air of hope. As Óliver Pérez-Lattore (2019) shows in his analysis, the possibility of building a better world, often in the hands of the player and his avatar, on the ruins of the old one, stands in opposition to the otherwise dystopian framing of the game world. His examples of such inhospitable societies and environments are telling - for example, he likens the mechanics of balancing between maintaining an avatar's health and the need to use radioactive food or drugs in *Fallout 4* (2015) to sociologist Ulrich Beck's risk society, as well as framing technology as one of the factors leading to the end of the world. *The Last of Us* (2013), like the *Fallout* series, depicts a dystopian future through, among other things, a lack of resources and the need for extreme solutions in the name of survival. The remnants of the United States, ravaged by a fungal epidemic, are also ruled (at least) by the authoritarian regime of the government agency FEDRA.

However, all of the aforementioned games also contain “striking post-apocalyptic landscapes spattered with ruins, leaning skyscrapers, the rubble of buildings and dilapidated cars” (Pérez-Latorre, 2019), thus working with a certain aesthetics or rather aestheticization of extinction. In such a ruined world, it is as if a passageway to a new beginning and the construction of a better society than the one before the extinction opens up. The imposing scenery of the former civilization may thus evoke precisely the hope in line with the partially positive message embodied in the tiny utopian enclaves, communities living in harmony in their well-kept places as much as possible after the end of the world. After all, one of the discourses of these utopian enclaves revealed by Pérez-Lattore (2019) is the “Back to nature” motif, which calls for the use of a certain return to the zero point of the relationship between humans and the environment. Martin Walter argues similarly in his analysis of selected post-apocalyptic films:

² Understanding the concept of landscape can sometimes be tricky, as it can be perceived as something natural, as the antithesis of nature versus culture. However, the perception, depiction and ultimately modification of landscape are always influenced by certain cultural assumptions.

“The motif of hope is, then, consistently attached to specific environments in which the characters either actively produce new spatialities or reconnect to more classic tropes of escapism and security.” (2019, p. 148)

The motif of hopeful reconstruction can be found in the aforementioned post-apocalyptic video games. The *Fallout* series is set in the (more or less) contemporary United States, but the country is so transformed by nuclear war that it can be seen as a wasteland in which to build new ways of social functioning. The landscape of *The Last of Us* (2013), in turn, is often reminiscent of the ephemerality of human creations, with buildings or vehicles covered in flora, and the animal inhabitants of the former zoo roaming the depopulated Boston. *Horizon Zero Dawn*'s (2017) post-apocalypse utilises the visuals of a return to a pristine state of nature and vast plains reminiscent of a West not yet conquered by civilization. In all of these cases, the post-apocalyptic landscape is in a somewhat finished state, a new space in which characters can pursue a new world in an altered nature, which is “a particularly complex symbol in post-apocalyptic narratives, since the idea of a 'return to nature' often plays an ideologically ambivalent role in them” (Pérez-Lattore, 2019), and this ambivalence can imply an idealization of the past as much as it does the prospect of a more ecological future.

We will never catch up with the West

Among other games, Pérez-Lattore (2019) mentions *DayZ* (2018), a multiplayer title depicting a world ridden with zombie infection. It is monotonous, cruel and unforgiving, and hope is hard to find. *DayZ* was created as a mod for the Czech military simulation *Arma 2* (2009), and it is its landscape that contains some typical elements of the Czech landscape and thus works with a set of other cultural associations tied to them. It is this implicit setting that distinguishes *DayZ* from other zombie games and is in line with the mood of the game given the preconceived notions of the geographical space where it takes place, as “Eastern Europe evokes a very particular set of associations – likely of ill-read Russian literature imagined to be weighty and desolate – as weighty and desolate as the landscape itself.” (Leiderman, 2022, p. 58) However, the assumption of the degraded environment of the former Soviet bloc countries is based not only on the literary classics of Russian realism but also on the recent history of this territory.

In geopolitical terms, this aesthetics can be described by another ‘post-’ prefix, namely ‘post-Soviet’. It is the experience of the other side of the former bipolar world that can be inscribed in the titles that local development teams create and consciously anchor in places familiar to them (Fousek Krobová, Janík, Švelch, 2022), as well as the consciousness and experience of semi-periphery (Ost, 2018) not only in terms of the distribution of global power but also more specifically of the game industry.

Post-communist countries could fully join this industry after the year 1989. For example, the Czech so-called Velvet Revolution saw a relatively peaceful transfer of power from the ruling Communist Party³ to a nascent civil society that subsequently embarked on a path of economic transformation from a planned economy towards a market economy. This did not, however, prevent a certain paradoxical situation, which Michal Špína (2020) describes in his essay that the populations of the states in the Soviet sphere triumphed over their domestic authoritarian regimes, only to end up as losers in the broader geopolitical struggle between the Western and Eastern blocs.

³ Especially bearing in mind the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops.

The ensuing sense of inferiority imposed on the states of Eastern Europe is well summed up by the term ‘catching up with the West’. Boris Buden (2013, p. 35) illustrates it with metaphors that commonly appeared in the discourse of the following decades, such as “education for democracy, exams of democracy, school of democracy which still needs diapers”. This learning, according to Buden, involved, for example, accepting the market as the main organizing principle of society and moving towards some ideal of the West, which often did not correspond to the actual situation. This imagined West might thus have included a weak role for institutions and the associated weakening of the welfare state, and an individualism-linked agenda. Although – if we observe the political developments in these countries, including, for example, the Hungarian illiberal turn – these principles are still valid in the countries of the former Soviet bloc. In recent years we can also observe a kind of emancipation of the East, at least in the sphere of culture, as shown, for example, by Agata Pyzik (2014) or the Slavic memes playing with the identity and specific material culture of the countries of the former Soviet bloc.

Catching up with the West also functions as a political mobilisation strategy of a certain part of the political spectrum defining itself against the so-called populist parties (Havlík, Kluknavská, 2022)⁴. In this vein, the space of Central and Eastern Europe is thus partly marred by the experience of communism, leading to its underdevelopment. Catching up with the West also implies a certain looking through the fingers towards more eastern states than our home one. This shows, despite all the efforts, that highly mythologically charged comparative step with the modern West has not happened in the post-communist countries, which may also stem from a certain frustration manifested, for example, in the perception of Eastern Europe and its inhabitants in an overly cautious way (Kalmar, 2022). Thus, post-communism mainly means a transitional phase, which, however, has never ended and is unlikely to end anytime soon.

Landscapes in constant transformation

The statement above raises the question of whether this state of constant transition is somehow imprinted on the world after the more or less concrete disaster in Eastern European computer games, and how the depicted post-apocalyptic landscape can capture this state of encapsulated transformation. I will answer this question through close readings of three titles – the Ukrainian *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl* (2007) and *Metro 2033* (2010) and the aforementioned *DayZ* (2018).

All games share with their Western counterparts the idea of the end of the world against the familiar backdrop of ours. However, in *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* the setting is a little more difficult, as it is set in the immediate and distant surroundings of the Chornobyl nuclear power plant and the city of Pripjat. With it, developer studio GSC Game World identified the central Zone from its inspirations – the Strugatsky brothers' novel *Roadside Picnic* (2012) and its loose adaptation by Andrei Tarkovsky, also called *Stalker* (1979). In these works, the Zone functions as a space of unexplained phenomena and in the game also presents an “almost antagonistic presence for the player” (Rush-Cooper, 2024, p. 186), who moves in unnaturally depopulated places. He regularly encounters forgotten and, in part, already rusted out by time and weather, cars as well as dingy buildings typically in Pripjat itself or the Yantar factory complex, which are neither sufficiently dilapidated to evoke a major catastrophe nor sufficiently well maintained to be considered an attempt to build a new world on the ruins of one. High radiation, the Zone's physical anomalies like psy-emissions, and the dangers of mutated lifeforms in particular make

⁴ For example, the current Prime Minister Petr Fiala's statement on the anniversary of the Velvet Revolution that if he stays in power, Czechs will have “wages like in Germany” in a few years resonated in Czechia (ČT24, 2024)

this impossible. Everything here is rather temporarily adapted to the new situation – the player meets the Stalkers, people who are already volunteering in this hostile environment as explorers, conquerors and researchers. The post-apocalyptic landscape here does not present an opportunity to build enclaves of the future, but rather a space for only temporary utilitarian groupings and relationships. The sort of mundanity of the environment and the forgotten, or rather abandoned, material culture of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, together with the knowledge of a truly imminent end of the world⁵ coming from the places in which the player's avatar moves in the videogame, shape the specifically shabby mood of the whole game. The game's sarcophagus of the Chornobyl reactor represents the Anthropocene and the inseparability of the environment from human intervention. The landscape is familiar, and for so it is also more haunting.

In *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, the human cast-off landscape with its occasional anomalies represents a temporary meeting place for individuals with temporarily shared motives and needs, without the goal of creating a new world (even as we can implicitly assume that such a world exists beyond the Zone). By contrast, in the *Metro* series (2010-2024), the nuclear disaster on the surface created the necessity for people hiding underground to create new communities. However, even here these are not the germs of better social arrangements, but rather “mutant utopias – shambling, undead remnants of old twentieth-century ideologies” (Liederman, 2022, p. 51), as there are neo-Nazi, Stalinist or Jehovah's Witnesses camps with whose members the main character Artyom interacts in various ways. The explicitness of these post-apocalyptic ideologies is reminiscent of the impossibility of breaking free from the prefix ‘post-‘ even in such an extreme situation; the setting in the Moscow underground may lend itself to their interpretation as a kind of ever-flowing submerged river of politics. In the *Metro* series “[t]he city and its landmarks remain, in some form, but have lost their history and meaning, in favour of the ghosts of the past” (Hoedt, 2020, p. 128). This lost history can be shown by the transformation of a space whose decoration and architectural treatment, for example as in the case of the VDNKh station in general, was previously also meant to uplift the ordinary population and thus carried a certain emancipatory potential in the spirit of the promised utopia of communism, into a place subordinated to the purpose of survival and fighting with enemy factions. The constant presence of a track connecting the various transformed stations and the tunnels themselves corresponds to the game's procedural setting (meaning variable outcomes), evaluating the player's decisions and actions, on which the ending of *Metro 2033* (2010) subsequently depends. Some of these actions, however, are not simultaneously framed as having this effect throughout the game, so the metaphor of the railway running in a set direction can also work in terms of a post-communist narrative about the unique experience of Eastern Europe, which will be able to ‘teach’ the West⁶ about the dead-end of communism, and which they have explored on its behalf.

In contrast, *DayZ* (2018) gives players the freedom to explore the possibilities of a post-apocalyptic community more widely – due to the multiplayer nature, player communities can be created on both regular and role-playing servers. However, it also means the freedom to behave in a selfish, cruel manner, and the permadeath mechanic builds a sense of distrust in players towards others when every encounter poses a potential danger, much like NPC zombie enemies. The undefined narrative puts players in the position of deciding “where to go and which ruins of contemporary society to explore – dilapidated villages, decrepit military bases, or rotting urban centers” (Schmeink, 2016, p. 73). The everyday decay of ordinary spaces,

⁵ This is why it attracts many tourists, whose motivation to visit the site may be influenced by the video game series *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* In the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone, comparisons between the preimage and the representation are made (Banaszkiewicz, Duda, 2020).

⁶ *Metro: Exodus* (2019), set on the surface, doesn't go off the rails either. Instead of the underground, the locomotive and train here appear as symbols of earlier modernization in a largely positive, often sunny depiction of uninhabited landscapes, which is also consistent with earlier fantasies and advocacies of colonial aspirations.

combined with the marked openness of the videogame world and the growing paranoia towards others, builds uncertainty and tension. In *DayZ*, the landscape is characterised by monotony, one cannot suspect a soon-to-be-pristine nature behind it and therefore some restoration of the 'natural' order. The great cities of Chernogorsk and Novodmitrovsk are mostly abandoned, their buildings just crumbling and not overgrown with life and hope-returning plants. At Vybor airbase one can see an abandoned apartment building, at various hills like Dobry or Simurg one can find more or less preserved cottages that may remind of former idyllic times. The landscapes of *DayZ* (2018) are inspired by the region of North Bohemia, which is negatively influenced by the character of the former and current highly industrial region focused mainly on coal mining, and this industrial character is imprinted in several, especially urban spaces in *DayZ*. A connection to the post-apocalypse of this region, which is gradually decaying and depopulating, is offered. Yet *Arma 2* (2009) was set in the fictional, Russia-referencing country of Chernarus. In the context of *DayZ*'s post-apocalyptic setting points to a certain, embodied impression of Eastern Europe as something broken and crumbling, which at the same time progresses more strongly the further east we go. Here, a structurally disadvantaged region is identified with a Russian-speaking country, and there is also a certain blending of place names where Czech, Polish, Ukrainian and Russian-sounding labels meet.

Conclusion: Numbing survival

It seems crucial that all of the games analysed contain more or less survival elements. In the context of the depicted landscape, this points to the experience of the uncertainty of a transformed world. It is the landscape that serves as a distinctive narrative element in games that presents a different world, as it “demands our attention throughout the game” (Martin, 2011). It may be even more so in the titles analysed, which share, to some extent, a certain enigmatic (*S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*) or empty character (*Metro 2033*, *DayZ*) of the protagonists. The mundanity and the numbing survival is reflected in the landscape of these games, filled with everyday objects and places like swimming pools, subways, and apartment blocks. They don't focus on new forms, but rather on the gradual disappearance of the old.

Although the landscape of the videogame post-apocalypse may resemble ruins understood as a state “where the remains of architecture form a new unity with nature” (Váša, in: Vrabec, 2010, p. 464), there are certain differences in the axis of Eastern and Western games with which it does so. Eastern European post-apocalyptic games are much more anchored in our world with its objects as we can't ignore the material culture for which we thrived and thrive. While Western games show usually already finished change and their environment is radically transformed, the Eastern ones show the landscape in the process of transformation with uncertain hopes – the landscape still closely resembles our lands and countries despite (and maybe even thanks to) all destruction and desolation.

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