

Narratology
in the
Zone:
The World of
S.T.A.L.K.E.R.
Shadow of Chernobyl

by

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This essay will serve to outline and investigate the evolution of the First Person Shooter (hereafter FPS) using S.T.A.L.K.E.R. Shadow of Chernobyl (hereafter SSoC) from Ukraine based GSC Game World by gauging the increasing complexity of narrative in video games. Sturm sums up narratology, the nature of video games as mediums for storytelling, as “visual storytelling, visual “fictions” and that “dialogue and cinematic devices convey key elements of story” (2007). This will put the game(s) into a historical context, as part of the development of video games, and as facilitators of progressive technologies across the mediascape.

The central focus of the game revolves around a player-controlled character, known as “The Marked One” who moves throughout landscape known as “the Zone”, the result of a second explosion occurs at the Ukraine based Chernobyl nuclear plant, setting off unexplained scientific anomalies. You must discover the mystery behind the Zone, amongst other things. Investigating such background stories to the game, which Steve Poole refers to as “diachronic” (2000: 94), will serve to better understand the notion of narrative structure and how these are developed in the context of video games.

Wolf and Perron argue that: “Narrative elements and conventions taken from other media are still present to a great degree in many games.” (2003: 11) It is “the first [media] to combine real-time game play with navigable, onscreen diegetic space.” (2003: 11)

Considering Artificial Intelligence (AI) and its advances will prescribe to an increased complexity of the game world environment, where activities outside the control of the player serve to enhance and dynamically alter the game narrative and permit independently occurring sub-plots within the game space. Missions, acting as sub-narratives within the game, will show how these constitute more than a simple success / failure component in regards narratology suggesting advancements in video game development.

Evolving aspects of design and technology will demonstrate enhanced flexibility, incorporated into the game, having increased impact on the narrative. This includes the stronger presence of other game genre being implemented, particularly the adventure and role-playing games (RPG). Additionally will be shown how resource management within the game acts as an agent for narratology, as opposed simply part of ludology (gameplay). These elements combine to foster the sense of story on several levels.

The backstory diachronic is of principle to creating the setting of any game, no matter how simplistic. If one isn't written or otherwise stated literally then it is developed in the players mind; an opposing force has taken over your base, a rival business has infiltrated your corporation and so on. "Many video games are narratives. They have a plot that takes place over time, characters that interact, a setting, and some form of conflict. [...] These stories range greatly in sophistication." (Shapiro et al. 2006: 275) In the video game therefore, this is self imposed or provided in a similar nature to a book or film. There is a link between the topic game and literature.

The Russian Science Fiction novel, *Roadside Picnic* (Strugatsky 1977) features an alien race, which having travelled to earth, simply dropped off artefacts and departed. Fortune hunters and scientists go into what is known as the Zone to collect up these artefacts for their mysterious properties. However, “Unlike film viewers or book readers who passively follow a narrative predetermined by a director or an author, game players constantly interrupt and change the shape of the narrative (if there is any), which has been preprogrammed by game designers.” (Lee et al. 2006: 266) The transcending of novel and computer game is exemplified by Juul’s mention of Laurel’s proposal:

“Brenda Laurel (1986) has proposed a system for generating well formed plots. In this system, the computer program must take on the role of an author while the game progresses and make sure that regardless of the player’s actions, every game session becomes well formed.” (Juul 2005: 16) In this respect the developers of SSoC have linked the real world events of Chernobyl nuclear plant of 1986 and the book *Roadside Picnic* to conceive a much more potent narrative. Some elements are quite literal:

“A city worker came by with iodine tablets, a prophylactic against radioactive iodine 131. Mom also gave Olesya a shot of vodka, widely believed in Soviet lands to protect against radiation.” (Stone 2006: 42) This concept, the need for the player character to eat and drink, and the threat of radiation encapsulate the real world events of the Chernobyl disaster, defining story as game, and game as story. Drinking vodka in SSoC alleviates the effects of radiation.

Additionally, the game title and the concept of stalkers is taken from the real world events, further to creating atmosphere and sense of risk and danger in a virtual world:

“The technical center, run by the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences, is the home of the “stalkers”, scientists who work in the sarcophagus, exposing themselves to high levels of radiation as they monitor the state of the reactor fuel.” (Stone 2006: 50) The sarcophagus is the now fragile structure encasing the reactor that exploded in April 1986. One stage of SSoC takes place here. The terms for those who inhabit the most dangerous places of both the factual world and that of the game are notably interchangeable.

As a player of SSoC you are immersed in this specific aspect of history. Influences of both the aforementioned novel and the real world events of Chernobyl present a strong case for narratology in a game like SSoC.

Within the game world, and besides from the constant narrative created as a result of the player’s actions, external narratives also constantly play out in SSoC. This is as a result of Artificial Intelligence (AI) programming. A player can watch groups fight in the distance, mutant creatures scavenge for food (take or hunt other stalkers), or be torn apart by radioactive anomalies. These activities can impact the player and other Zone inhabitants alike, when those narrative paths cross. The death of another (non-player) character may mean a reward is no longer collectable, or certain quests will no longer be available in the dynamic universe of the game.

In this way the game environment allows a player to be part of the world, to participate in it, well beyond the notion of the “shoot-em up”. You, as the player, are the story, while constructing an ongoing narrative. Artificial intelligence likewise continuously constructs stories independent of the player’s. While Klevjer remarks of the “linear restrictiveness” of the FPS game (2003: 9), the marked difference with SSoC is its break from this convention, merging the freedom and narrative scope of role-playing games with the direct first person dimension of the shooter. Reinforcing this argument, Lora Disney, product marketing manager for the game, emphasises that “nothing is scripted or linear” (2007: Bonus DVD). Within the larger narrative, and sub-plots, and autonomous events there are traditional goal-orientated tasks, which motivate game activity.

Quests, or “missions”, which come out of classic adventure games and conventional role-playing games (RPG), consisting of these set goal-orientated objectives for the player to achieve, are central to SSoC, which, for all intents and purposes is an FPS. “The single-player experience [...] is built on the model of the journey, or more specifically the quest.” (Klevjer 2003: 2) This suggests both the progression of narrative, and objective, goal-orientated play. Success or failure produces a fresh narratological condition for a player of SSoC. Failure does not necessarily mean in-game death. Other routes can be taken other missions (most often several are concurrently active for the player to accomplish) can be taken up, or sought out. These activities are central as narrative operators in SSoC, motivating the player in a given direction, given them a sense of fulfilment and providing multiple courses.

“Thinking of stories in the game, the Arena, where you meet Arnie, next to the 100 Rads bar, this is more about a mini-narrative. There’s nothing new in game-play, but it allows you to gather additional cash from the gun-battles there. Quests are definitely about stories in their own right. Without them, the actual game-play becomes pointless, say, in repetitive gun battles ” (Murphy 2007)

Looking at how these interweaving stories work in SSoC presents a unique quality in narrative structure which avoids the classic concept of it being “on rails” for the FPS game, merging the aspects of the more open play of the role-playing, adventure game. It produces a more “real” virtual world.

Enhancing the realism factor of the game narrative by incorporating plausible real-world potential future events, in the manner of a novelist, Tom Clancy’s *Rainbow Six* (itself a Clancy novel) demonstrate how this narratological crossover operates. In SSoC this works by reinforcing realistic notions of military operations, lethality of combat, the real world Exclusion Zone, with purely fictional elements of science fiction such as anomalies and artefacts, which are central to the game’s premise. This depth of detail incorporates resource management, as is typical of role-playing games.

Within SSoC the game mechanics permits impact upon narrative structure throughout the course of a game in regards the results of combat, such as gunshot wounds, radiation, and a lack of food and water. “It contains a full inventory much like you would find in an RPG.” (Disney 2007: Bonus DVD)

Respectively, this involves the player considering the need to seek first aid, avoid certain areas if they do not have the correct equipment or supplies (such as radiation suits or intravenous drugs) or the need to acquire food as the effects of starvation set in. The player must, therefore, to remain alive, change course – a narrative path – in order to remain active and “alive” in the game.

These in-game behaviours and necessities are dictated by narratives, which Lee (et al.) stipulates, “game players can easily focus on their task at hand with the intuitive understanding of the physical and social environments inside the game world. [...] Narratives create specific situations where appropriate actions by game players are required to finish a story.” (Lee et al. 2006: 270) This is constituted in both minor tasks necessary for character survival, “If you don’t eat it will affect your stamina” (Disney 2007: Bonus DVD) and major objectives to allow a successful completion of any one of numerous missions, or to end the game itself.

Particular missions are very difficult or impossible without the application of particular weapons, equipment or tactics, which therefore define the story path uniquely each time the game is played. An in-game example is the eliminating of Duty Faction snipers on behalf of Freedom requires a scoped rifle or a sniper rifle for any reasonable chance of success. Without such a weapon the player is thereby set on another narrative course either forgetting the mission or acquiring the necessary equipment. A reward, besides from cash, is alliance with the Freedom Faction, which has impact on later play.

This alludes to activities such as trade, communication and the correct application of equipment having function beyond that of mere gameplay. “The genre [FPS] has matured; childish play has become more firmly contained by a rationality that mimics adult world.” (Klevjer 2003: 6) Klevjer considers the “hyper-informed vision” of games using scopes, intelligence gathering devices (2003: 7) – these tools enhance the narrative frame providing increased information of the game world. The narrative experience includes warnings and avoidance of potential threats, detecting hazards (such as radiation), and anticipating routes – that is, continuing the journey “story”. This maturity of game environment, in-depth options of play, which effect storylines and permit multiple endings and quests, have not been possible without technological advancement.

Comments by Lee (et al.) on several different methods of narrative driven games due to the advances of technology which allow for greater depth and realism, including character-driven games like Tomb Raider, background story-based games like Max Payne, or film based games like The Matrix or The Lord of the Rings. (2006: 267) SSoC uses a duel approach as the player becomes a stalker in the Zone (character based), and from the outset is challenged to find someone known Strelok and must kill him. Additionally the world is immersed in real world events of the 1986 Chernobyl disaster as a backdrop (background based), further backed up by the fictional elements of the novel Roadside Picnic. This ties the totality of such games together and emphasises their place in the larger mediascape.

Exploring different aspects of S.T.A.L.K.E.R. Shadow of Chernobyl has exposed various levels and elements of narratology within the game. Unique features of the game such as artificial intelligence define probable paths in which development of future video games are likely to take. Traditional FPS games consist of linear patterns of goal-orientated tasks, while SSoC permits the achievement in a non-linear fashion, putting to the side the FPS notion of progress through the game being “on rails”. It has been demonstrated that resource management of this modern FPS game attributes many features of the role-playing game. While there are classic issues of success and failure based narrative governed by objectives within any given game, this, and multiple quest possibilities combine to allow for greater depth in regards narrative flexibility.

While Poole argues that: “The diachronic story of a video game, however complex, is merely an excuse for the meat, the videogame action” (2000: 95) it is clear that game developers, with more advanced technology available, are able to create complex visionary worlds in which the gamer can inhabit. It is these worlds, which “we can speak of a *narrative turn* after which it has become common to see narrative as the primary way in which we make sense of and the structure the world.” (Juul 2005: 15) The increasing development in technology has permitted more complex arrays of possibility within the game space universe and includes the combination of previously separate genres.

An examination of SSoC has found the increasingly detailed game world allows for stories to evolve even outside the scope of the player's own activities, thanks to artificial intelligence, yet they may converge dynamically, therefore impacting the player's activities at a later stage of game play.

The real world events of the Chernobyl disaster in April 1986, merged with the Russian science fiction novel, *Roadside Picnic*, along with evolutionary steps made in game development technology have created the basis for a complex narratively driven video game in *S.T.A.L.K.E.R. Shadow of Chernobyl*.

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