



Zombies, Russians, Plague: Eastern Europe as a Sandbox for Utopia

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Abstract: The paper examines the peculiar role of the East European landscape in several contemporary video games, arguing that it signifies desolation and openness to violence, while linking both with the realization of a utopian project. Examining the post-apocalyptic or zombie narrative as a contemporary means of earnestly engaging with a utopian discourse, I investigate three games incorporating the landscape of Eastern Europe as a formal support for such an engagement: *Day-Z* (2014) by Dean Hall, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl* (2007) by the Ukrainian studio GSC game world, and *Pathologic* (2005) by the Russian studio Ice-pick Lodge. Each game provides a different meditation on violence and the utopian project, using the Soviet legacy on the landscape and the zombie trope as comparable signifiers of utopia gone wrong, but equally, as supports for imagining utopia: a rock bottom, from which there is nowhere to go but up.

Keywords: Eastern Europe, Video Games, Landscape, Zombies, Violence

This article seeks to advance discussions of post-socialist subjectivity and the representation of post-Soviet space through the formal analysis of the entanglement of Eastern Europe, garbage, zombies and utopia in three contemporary computer games. Games are not a medium often discussed within the context of Slavic studies. Nevertheless, the growing artistic sophistication of the medium and its broad popular appeal make games a significant vehicle for cultural knowledge. The games under analysis are especially interesting due to their intertextuality. They recycle and incorporate cultural tropes and themes borrowed from a vast array of sources, from Dostoevsky to Tarkovsky, to represent Eastern Europe as a testing ground for the reanimation of seemingly dead utopian discourses. The motif of death is prominently represented in these games by “zombies” whom I interpret through the painterly tradition of the *vanitas*, as both moralizing and lurid. I will look at the ways *Day Z* (2014) by Dean Hall, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Shadow of Chernobyl* [*S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Ten' Chernobylia*] (2007)

by the Ukrainian studio GSC game world and *Pathologic [Mor: Utopia]* (2005) by the Russian Ice-pick Lodge studio deploy ruined landscapes, garbage and zombies to rhetorically position Eastern Europe as an equally desolate and utopian space.

These three games are all critically acclaimed, popular, or artistically significant and share several traits. They all represent a first-person vantage point and place a strong emphasis on survival. They are all set in a recognizably East European landscape (the Czech Republic, Ukraine and Russia, respectively) and all feature ‘zombies’. For the purposes of this article, ‘zombies’ are not only the living hostile dead, but any monster who is also a human victim. In all three games, the zombies represent the victims of a utopian project whose realization is apparent in the burden of survival upon the player’s avatar and in the landscape itself. Finally, all three games reserve a particular place for garbage. *Day Z*, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* and *Pathologic* all introduce a multitude of objects that are distracting, cluttering, useless or indirectly useful to the player and which make significant finds rare by contrast, enliven the world and create verisimilitude.

The trash and the East European landscape around it have an important signifying function in these games, obscured by the immediate threats of the zombies and the necessity of survival. In numerous Western games and films involving zombies, especially those following the work of director George Romero (*Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Dawn of Dead* (1978)), images representing the ruination of the contemporary Western world play a moralizing role, delivering a critique of materialism, consumerism and even capitalism, albeit as Adam Turl says in his article on George Romero’s zombies for *The Socialist Worker*: ‘All the right things outrage George Romero, but he sees no solution to the social catastrophe he sees all around him’ (Turl 2008). Through images of the contemporary world in ruinous decay, zombie games like *Day Z*, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* and *Pathologic* make similar critiques, however their shift to East European landscapes changes the implications. In games set in Eastern Europe, the moralizing content turns away from capitalism and consumerism, to critique the damage caused by the realization of utopian social projects.

The entire discourse of moralizing through the sumptuous exhibition of decaying beautiful things recalls the 16th- and 17th-century Dutch and Flemish painterly tradition of the *vanitas*. In a *vanitas*, signifiers of luxury such as fine cloth, fruit and flowers are conventionally painted alongside signifiers of death or decay, such as human bones or rotting fruit. Such juxtapositions are intended to evoke the transience of earthly life and to lead the spectator to meaningfully contemplate the afterlife. Why then do contemporary zombie games utilize such imagery? What argument do they make? What is the role of trash in such games and how does it contribute to the humanization or dehumanization of the malevolent human victims, or ‘zombies’?

In his book *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*, Ian Bogost makes the argument that ‘[b]ecause computers function procedurally, they are particularly adept at representing real or imagined systems [...] The computer magnifies the ability to create representations of processes’, meaning that games can elucidate complex systems by embedding players within them’ (2010: 5). By replacing static images with the representations of systems in the course of dynamic change, games can compel players to learn through working out the logic of the whole structure, rather than by absorbing prescribed lessons. Bogost argues for a ‘procedural rhetoric’, whose ‘arguments are made not through the construction of words or

images, but through the authorship of rules of behavior, the construction of dynamic models' (ibid., 29) and asserts, 'I am interested in videogames that make arguments about the way systems work in the material world. These games strive to alter or affect player opinion outside of the game, not merely to cause him to continue playing' (ibid., 47). Following Bogost, zombie games set in Eastern Europe, such as *Day Z*, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* and *Pathologic* make arguments about violence, survival and nostalgia for the communist past by forcing players to work through their own relationship to personal and institutional violence in the course of exploring the games' systems. I argue that these games use the trashed landscape of the former Soviet bloc to advance a procedural rhetoric that constellates brutality, survival and nostalgic images of ruination akin to the *vanitas*, to point to the impossibility and desirability of utopia and to Eastern Europe as a laboratory for rhetorical and violent experiments with the utopian.

Day Z was created in 2012, by Dean Hall, an amateur programmer from New Zealand, as a 'mod' (or unlicensed modification) for the Bohemia Interactive game *ARMA 2* (2009), a realistic simulator of contemporary military operations. *Day Z* changed the setting to a zombie apocalypse and focused on the multiplayer aspect, pitting players against each other in a geographically vast area called 'Chernarus', modeled on a real region of the Czech Republic. Players in *Day Z* struggle against zombies, injuries, basic needs such as food, water and protection from exposure, resource scarcity and most importantly, other players. The mod's success prompted Bohemia Interactive to license Dean Hall to create a stand-alone release in 2013. *Day Z* inherited *ARMA 2*'s detailed interface and engine, permitting complex interactions. Players can shoot one another, but they can also speak via a microphone, write notes using paper torn from the many books scattered throughout the world, plant crops and even feed each other. There is no plot, aside from the players' own motives, so the unscripted, emergent nature of the gameplay prompts a proliferation of narrative-making within the *Day Z* community. People feel compelled to tell *Day Z* stories, precisely because they can be certain that their experiences, however similar they may be to those of the other players, are still unique.

These stories often trend sadistic: reports of players capturing and torturing other players, breaking their limbs, force-feeding them rotten food, or even poisonous bleach are common. For context, it should be emphasized that *Day Z* is, under the hood, a military simulator where there are guns and knives and other conventional weapons. Gun violence is embedded in the game mechanics and the 'First-person shooter' is an established, common and popular genre. However, there are no other games where force-feeding someone bleach is even an option. These sadomasochistic encounters (masochistic because one can always log out, go on a different server rather than suffering any experience) operate both through the mechanics of the game and in defiance of its assumptions. The core of the game mechanics revolves around simulating combat with firearms, but it is the peripheral trash (rotten food and bleach) that is exploited mechanically for an excess of violence. This violence is profoundly transgressive, but also 'procedural', working through mechanisms offered by the game. Just as one can feed another food, one can also feed them bleach.

Trash is embodied in the landscape and temporality of the game. Chernarus itself is an object in the game, composed of the same mixture of code and graphics. The map of Chernarus is based on a province in the Czech Republic, albeit with the Elbe River replaced by an endless sea. Surprisingly, all of the street and highway signs in Chernarus are in Rus-

sian, which teachers of Russian will be pleased to learn prompts the regular posting of Russian alphabet guides on forums dedicated to *Day Z* (Chris529 2014). The landscape includes both rural and urban areas and is not self-evidently devastated: there are no smoking craters or burning buildings, for instance. There are computer-controlled zombies, of course. These look like regular civilians but dead and bloodied and are regarded as minor threats in comparison to the danger posed by other players. The zombies, like the rotten bananas, bleach, books and the desolate landscape itself, represent another class of trash: extraneous to the competitive first-person shooter at the heart of the game, but necessary for immersive verisimilitude and perhaps agency.

René Glas represents the dehumanized enemy as a stable game convention that relies heavily on ‘moral polarization [...] making it much simpler to see generic adversaries as challenges to overcome rather than as people to kill’ (Mortensen et al. 2015: 46). Glas’ argument is two-fold and paradoxical: enemies like the zombie are dehumanized as irredeemable on moral, human grounds, but also on the grounds that they are mere obstacles and do not count as human in the first place. In *Day Z*, only the other players are worth considering and no one views the computer-controlled zombies as significant actors: their implied personal tragedies are irrelevant to the game itself, while their homes are open for looting. In *Day Z*, the zombies and landscape alike are preemptively trashed, reduced to objects without intrinsic moral meaning, yet open to play and significant as a *memento mori*. Much like the human skulls often present in *vanitas* paintings, the zombies and their homes do not point to any specific individual’s death, but always only to the inevitability of your own demise.

If compared to games like Naughty Dog’s *The Last of Us* (2013), or Telltale games’ episodic *The Walking Dead* (2012), or even such classics of the post-apocalyptic genre as the *Fallout* series (1997-2016), all of which are set in the United States, the differences with *Day Z* are readily apparent. *The Walking Dead* is set at the beginning of a zombie apocalypse and focuses on human relationships amidst violent tragedy. The bulk of the game consists of binary choices surrounding the protagonist’s effort to protect and properly raise a child, while the sequel follows the child’s effort to survive and remain ethical without the guidance of her surrogate father. *The Walking Dead* is a story of trying to raise a decent human being and to remain human in a crisis whose conditions reward callous violence. The procedural rhetoric of *The Walking Dead* is a lament for humanity, sustained or not, depending on the player’s choices. Similarly, *The Last of Us* unfolds many years after the zombies come and also focuses on human drama, family and the struggle to remain human through the perpetual burden of violence against other survivors. *Fallout* is situated decades after a global nuclear war and again explores the crisis of civilization and the difficulty of staving off barbarism and violence amidst cataclysm. In all three cases, the American landscape is deployed to evoke the uncanny, making strange the readily accessible and homey: an overgrown highway overpass, an overrun mall, a fortified Walmart.

In such works, Western civilization is always recognizable in decline and the zombies are merely a symptom. Conversely, the protagonists usually represent an effort to redeem humanity from the apparent end of the human race. Certainly, George Romero’s body of work, starting with *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), which is set in a shopping mall, has been convincingly described as an anti-consumerist satire by a vast number of critics, the various arguments aptly summarized in Stephen Harper’s 2002 article ‘Zombies, Malls, and the Con-

sumerism Debate: George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*. Harper works through the entanglement of zombie narratives and the critique of consumerism in Romero's work, concluding:

Despite the film's postmodern awareness of individual differences, it might still be argued that *Dawn* bases its politics on hackneyed or stereotypical images of decadence and luxury from a dead European tradition. In Romero's defense, it might be said that the dramatic exigencies of cinematic narrative rarely permit sociological completeness; Romero's film, one might say, selects only the worst elements of consumerism for critique. (Harper 2002)

Harper's account of Romero emphasizes a crucial feature of the zombie narrative in film: it hides its moralizing content under a luridly ironic postmodern spectacle. Romero's zombie is a critical image of contemporary Western humanity: a consumption machine, fixated on devouring the brains of the living, an anti-intellectual, gluttonous demi-subject still recognizable, tragically, as the person that they once were. The landscape in such works is a zombie as well. Romero's shopping mall is as iconic as his ravening corpses. Both represent the logic of consumerism taken to its monstrous limit. The representation of the landscape extends the moralizing logic of the zombie from isolated individual cases and to the whole society, exploring the end of Western civilization as an extension of its current history and ideology.

Day Z seems both similar and very different from Romero's consumerist apocalypse. Both works prompt the same sort of survival fantasies, thus participating in procedural rhetorics of imagining and visualizing systemic collapse and personal survival. However, unlike Romero's collapsing civilization, in *Day Z*, the zombies and the omnipresent threat of violence only signify the natural state of things. The Czech landscape is treated as though readymade for an apocalypse and readily strange for the Western players, but familiar (and defamiliarized) for the East European players of *Day Z*. The world of *Day Z* is littered with objects: edible and rotten food, common canned goods, rare can openers, clothes and books. Players exploit these useless and useful objects for their most creative games and most sadistic acts of violence. Trash structurally defines the experience of scavenging central to *Day Z* and provides the main edifice for actions that both subvert and complicate the "sandbox" (or game that consists entirely of free play within boundaries, rather than a linear or even branching narrative) that *Day Z* offers, rather than symbolically pointing to the loss of civilization, as it would in *The Walking Dead*.

The East European landscape is represented as a perpetual apocalypse. Here civilization is not so much ending, over, or rebuilding, as going about its business as a ruin. If contemporary zombie games represent the American landscape as a trashed civilization, they represent the East European landscape as a trash civilization and where American protagonists struggle to survive the fall, East European protagonists are surviving through their normal lives: either as the anonymous scavengers of *Day Z* or *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*'s eponymous stalkers. Romero's films and Western zombie narratives prophesy the inevitable and disastrous (but still future) collapse of capitalism, focusing on the time immediately during and after the fall. Eastern European zombie narratives represent mundane survival in an indefinite temporality following the wake of a cataclysm in the almost distant past, an apocalypse which has become "normal". Accordingly, if Western zombie imagery emphasizes the spectacular ruination of

the world, the landscapes in Eastern European zombie narratives seem intentionally normal and unchanged by the disaster.

Day Z continues a precedent of the East European landscape appropriated unchanged to depict an apocalypse, set by GSG game world's *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* trilogy: *Shadow of Chernobyl* (2007) *Clear Sky* (2009) and *Call of Prypat* (2010). The *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* trilogy adapted aspects of Arkady and Boris Strugatskys' novel *Roadside Picnic* [Piknik na obochine, 1972] and Andrei Tarkovsky's film *Stalker* (1979), loosely based on this novel, changing the setting of 'the Zone' to Chernobyl and its surrounding cities, represented in meticulous detail but filled with mutated monsters and roving gangs of 'stalkers' or professional scavengers. *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* is sufficiently popular to prompt tours into Chernobyl organized specifically for gamers wishing to relive their virtual experiences in situ (as discussed in Nick Rush-Cooper's 2014 article 'In the Zone: How Gamers experience the Real Chernobyl').

Roadside Picnic, the source for the plot for *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, reveals a crucial insight about the role of trash within both *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* and *Day Z* in the passage that gives the novella its title. Two characters discuss the alien 'Visitation' that left behind the dangerous and unpredictable 'zones' in the first place:

'What do you think about the Visitation?' 'My pleasure. Imagine a picnic.' Noonan shuddered. 'What did you say?' 'A picnic. Picture a forest, a country road, a meadow. A car drives off the country road into the meadow, a group of young people get out of the car carrying bottles, baskets of food, transistor radios and cameras. They light fires, pitch tents, turn on the music. In the morning they leave. The animals, birds and insects that watched in horror through the long night creep out from their hiding places. And what do they see? Gas and oil spilled on the grass. Old spark plugs and old filters strewn around. Rags, burnt-out bulbs and a monkey wrench left behind. Oil slicks on the pond. And of course, the usual mess—apple cores, candy wrappers, charred remains of the campfire, cans, bottles, somebody's handkerchief, somebody's penknife, torn newspapers, coins, faded flowers picked in another meadow.' 'I see. A roadside picnic.' 'Precisely. A roadside picnic, on some road in the cosmos. And you ask if they will come back.' (Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, 1977: 102)

The image of humanity reduced to insects scavenging the rubbish left by greater beings cuts to the heart of the novella's pessimism. Indeed, the central object of desire for several of *Roadside Picnic*'s protagonists is an alien device able to grant wishes, but incidentally warded by an anomaly that always kills the first human being to approach it. This premise is almost unchanged in the game *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, however the shift from the aftermath of an alien invasion, to the aftermath of Chernobyl is striking. The player still seeks artifacts through a desolate world and still holds the hope of finding the one artifact capable of fundamentally redeeming this world. However, here both the artifacts and the desolation are not the consequences of some incomprehensible outside force, but the cataclysmic realization of Soviet utopian ambitions. This representation of the world again recalls the *vanitas* tradition, as *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* delights in elaborately reproduced vistas of the industrial landscape of Chernobyl and Pripjat as a readymade constellation of Soviet grandeur and dynamic decay, a humbled, disastrous and yet successful project to transform the world.

Within the plot of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, the territory irradiated by the Chernobyl disaster is utilized by the Soviet government for various science-fiction experiments, culminating in the creation of the ‘Common Consciousness’. This entity is a hive mind driven by the goal of improving and altering the world and humanity towards collectivism, using various unsavory radiations to purge individual emotion. Even the ‘wish granter’ is just a tool of the Common Consciousness, designed to expand ‘the Zone’ with each successive use. The incompetence of the Soviet response to Chernobyl is here offset by incredible utopian accomplishments. In this universe, the Chernobyl disaster still happens, the region is still quarantined and the protagonist Strelok, like the first responders in our universe, still relies on alcohol to protect himself from radiation. However, the still incompetent Soviet authorities not only manage to produce a device that grants wishes, but to turn it to the utopian goal of communal harmony. Furthermore, within the timeframe of the game, this project survives the collapse of the Soviet Union and is only stopped at the hands of the protagonist Strelok. But even Strelok spends most of the game scavenging the ruins of the Chernobyl utopia for misplaced Soviet artifacts, only to discover that even his identity is the accidental product of Common Consciousness brainwashing. Here trash is embodied in the useful and harmful artifacts, the landscape and even the protagonist himself, paradoxically representing both the negative remainder of utopia and its memorial and legacy at the same time. The trash, artifacts, ruins and mutants alike work to create a *vanitas* whose appeal to transience and eternity turns perversely around the Soviet utopian project, calling the player to contemplate utopia through the corporeal rot of its earthly manifestation.

Almost every zombie apocalypse narrative offers the fantasy of rebuilding society better, alongside a misanthropic portrayal of the worst excesses of human behavior obstructing this fantasy. The role of trash in *Day Z* and *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* echoes their mutual precedent in Romero’s zombie films, sharing the same ambivalence between material indulgence and moralizing that harkens all zombie narratives to the Dutch *vanitas* still-life. The books, fresh or decaying fruit and flowers of a traditional *vanitas* are supposed to be fleeting and therefore poignant. In *Day Z* just such objects are present, whether as books to read or use for scrap paper, fresh bananas to enjoy, or rotten bananas to force-feed to others, but they don’t telegraph their purpose. It is up to the players to invest these objects with meaning, however traumatic. Instead of pointing us to contemplate loss through symbolic scenes designed to evoke mortality, *Day Z* and *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* offer up objects and terrors from the *vanitas* to persuade the players to get there on their own, by spontaneously experiencing mortality for themselves, or inflicting it upon others.

Paradoxically, this makes *Day Z* the more effective moralizing work than *The Walking Dead* or similar games that do forefront the lament for the loss of civilization through the exhibition of a decaying Western landscape and narrative choices within a clear moral binary. By avoiding the delivery of a scripted message or binary choice such as those that characterize the *Walking Dead*, *Day Z* makes the problem of ethical survival all the more acute. The primary *Day Z* forum has a many hundreds of pages-long discussion on the issue of whether murdering others on sight is authentic to life or not, with numerous arguments for both sides, evoking pragmatic, ethical and moral concerns as relevant to the fictional, but consensual space of the game (GriefSlicer 2014). Numerous posts take the form of ‘missed connection’ letters apologizing for a needless act of violence: ‘To the guy I murdered in Dubrovka...’

(John_E_Vegas 2016). These are not scripted interactions, but the consequences of people encountering one another anonymously and intensely and investing the experience with regret and empathy.

The shock of violence is all the more acute when you have no plot to blame, when you are directly responsible. *Day Z* procedurally leads you to the atrocity that you will commit or experience. The loss of all of one's possessions and progress at the point of death makes the threat of it all the more poignant. In both *Day Z* and *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* the landscape is a prompting object, a 'Chekhov's gun' as much as the actual guns that the players occasionally find. The landscape consolidates the empty space of Chernarus and the wasteland around Chernobyl, as a counter-balance to both the sparse non-violent interactions within the games and the sudden eruptions of violence. For most of both games' temporal passage everyone anxiously walks through a rural or industrial empty East European landscape in relative silence. In *Day Z*, encounters with other players might be hours apart and may pass in mere seconds. Most *Day Z* conversations begin with everyone involved shouting 'friendly!' into their microphone. Few end that way: even if one has no good reason to initiate violence, the possibility that the other might, becomes cause to shoot first. This possibility is encoded into the stark landscape itself: you never know if someone is watching you from hiding.

The absence of purpose and excess of violence prompts moral action through earnest efforts at community and peaceful exchange amongst *Day Z* players. As Emily Richardson's series of journals for the online magazine *Rock, Paper, Shotgun* entitled 'The Saline Bandit: *Day Z* Diaries' show, such efforts rely on trash objects and procedural interactions to be meaningful. In her essays, Richardson described her experience of playing *Day Z* by offering injured players medical aid, within the bounds of possibility offered by the limited amount of tourniquets, blood bags and bandages found in the game. This humanitarian approach repeatedly got her killed, however these deaths didn't alter her project to virtually engage with threatened and paranoid people at their worst (bleeding to death, often from injuries caused by another player), while offering them nothing but altruistic help within the game parameters. *Day Z* players set up purposeless markets for the exchange of interesting garbage, assemble libraries, deliver sermons at the vacant churches throughout Chernarus, or simply assist new players with food and supplies, evading the game's more violent logics in favor of explicitly utopian aims.

Day Z will likely never accommodate the establishment of a peaceful, permanent Chernarus community, but it will generate numerous unique experiences of dying tragically in the attempt. Much the way the sparse spatial and temporal wasteland of *Day Z* makes encounters dense with tension and significance, the normality of violence in both games makes all peaceful interactions within them seem exceptional and significant. In an odd way, *Day Z*'s image of Eastern Europe builds upon the reputation of Russia and Russian literature as dense, dire, desolate and loaded with meaningful moral content. *Day Z*'s Chernarus is akin to a village in an Anton Chekhov story (for example, 'In the Ravine' [Vovrage, 1899]): a kind of purgatory, made hellish by other people but not wholly irredeemable. The trash and trashed landscapes of *Day Z*'s Chernarus and *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*'s Chernobyl represent spaces of utopian potential, ruined by the violent collapse of the utopia: embers that can still be blown into a flame, if only as destructively as during the original cataclysm. The exploited literary tropes of Eastern Europe as a landscape of dire suffering, poignancy and pyrrhic victories are em-

braced by the players, who spontaneously invest their play with weighty moral meaning, thus taking pleasure in their failures, murders and deaths.

When such games are set in the West, the implications are completely different, as we are encouraged to lament the fall of a functional civilization to consumerism, emblemized by the hungry zombie in a pristine shopping mall. When people act humane in a zombie game set in the West, it is because they have not yet lost their humanity. When people act humane in *Day Z*, it is in defiance to the norm of killing on sight and surviving at the expense of others. Zombie games show the Western landscape to explore fears and fantasies about the collapse of Western civilization, while the East European landscape is deployed as already fallen, as a ruin to pillage for new utopian ambitions, new communities and a more unscripted and genuine society.

Furthermore, if the Western landscape is deployed as a set-piece full of good and bad people and defined moral choices, Chernarus and *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*'s Pripyat are spaces where one slips into transgression organically and learns about moral choices from the perspective of irreversible remorse. The procedural rhetoric of the East European landscape makes its moralizing argument through meaningful, even utopian garbage and its opposite: the threatening, but meaningless zombies. In a perverse twist on the *vanitas* tradition, such games collapse the transcendental appeal to utopia into the horror of corporeal decay, rendering both as a single ambivalent force of desire for that sweeping and terrible restoration of moral clarity that only total societal ruination can guarantee.

So far this article has barely discussed the zombies, as in both *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* and *Day Z*, they are peripheral to both the focal points and dangers of the games. Zombies in these games represent a fundamental contradiction: they are the perpetual reminders of human suffering whose tragic state places them beyond mercy. The only thing to do with a zombie is to evade or kill it. The only thing to desire from a zombie is its destruction and its possessions. They are beyond all moral ambivalence and therefore compassion. The zombie is the crushing reduction of a human being to a walking corpse, but also the symbol of the suspension of all institutional restraints on the freedom of the survivors, enabling the protagonists to kill and to rob their former neighbors without committing moral violations. In various zombie narratives, the former case is epitomized in scenes where a protagonist is forced to kill a loved one who has become a zombie. The latter case is epitomized in scenes where the protagonists enjoy the absence of the others: riding the attractions at a vacant amusement park, or feasting at an abandoned candy store. Much like garbage, zombies have a double function as traces of the meaningful and devastated world before and as objects vacated of their original meaning and free to be put to new, possibly utopian uses.

Both *Day Z* and *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* pay little attention to their zombies, treating their fate and even origin as incidental to the immediate danger they represent to the player. Callousness towards zombies is common in many zombie narratives, as the affected people, whether dead or merely infected, are presumed to be beyond all hope. All the more interesting that *Pathologic* [Mor: Utopia, 2005], makes empathy for the infected into its central conceit. Each of its protagonists is some sort of doctor, up against the same nemesis—a terrible plague in a provincial Russian town. The game lasts twelve days, asking each of its three protagonists to complete several tasks per day. Failing to complete a task within the day, means that one of

the individuals associated with a given protagonists' narrative performs the task instead, catching the plague in the process.

The game represents itself as a mere zombie shooter, while really staging the problem of agency and genuine choice, exploring the limits of responsibility, setting the player up to choose one atrocity or another, before letting them ask why they have to choose between atrocities. *Pathologic's* procedural rhetoric articulates acute dilemmas through systemic immersion, investigating and instigating atrocity and utopia by bringing the player to the edge of both and trusting them to take further steps on their own.

In *Pathologic*, the 'zombies' are harmless people infected with the plague. *Pathologic's* zombies are dangerous only because they are capable of spreading the disease. Each day begins with a report letting the player know how many dozens, hundreds, or thousands have become infected with the plague and how many have died. The human tragedy of the suffering zombies is central. It is exaggerated further by one of *Pathologic's* most dramatic literary allusions: the climactic arrival on the ninth day, of the military sanitation force, led by the general Aleksandr Blok, whose forces shoot the infected people on sight and burn them alive. Thus the game procedurally embodies the actual Symbolist poet Aleksandr Blok's narrative poem *Twelve* [Dvenadtsat', 1918], depicting a world swallowed by an uncontrollable tide of violence. By enveloping the player within a ludic structure and forcing them to survive and navigate the town through the plague and purges, *Pathologic* advances a distinct moral argument.

In the original Russian, the title *Mor: Utopia* sounds just like 'More's Utopia', directly suggesting that the space of the game is allegorical rather than real and explores broad moral issues rather than specific personal tragedies. In general, *Pathologic* is the most literary of the three games, full of intertextual allusions and set pieces, scripted and largely deprived of the emergent spontaneity of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* and *Day Z*. *Pathologic* begins in a darkened theater, where each of the three protagonists introduces themselves in a soliloquy denouncing the two others. This conspicuously Brechtian opening note is sustained throughout the game: the motif of the theater is recurring and central, with the town theater providing foreshadowing until the conclusion of the game, which completely breaks the fourth wall, with dialogue directly confronting the player with the allegorical nature of the three protagonists and their world. The three protagonists of *Pathologic* are not the anonymous survivors of *Day Z*, the heroic loner of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, or the regular Americans of the *Walking Dead*, but rather the respective embodiments of rational science, curative violence and prophetic spirituality.

The game's protagonists are meant to be played in sequence and have vastly different experiences of the same events. Each protagonist's narrative revolves around the stories of the other protagonists, whose actions and motives seem inscrutable and troubling from the vantage point of the others. Thus the Bachelor fights the plague with modern science, the Haruspex with alchemical organ harvests, while the Impostress faith-heals from the "religious" (or rather metafictional) awareness that the entire situation, plague included, is a fictional device. The plague spreads rapidly through the town, infecting whole neighborhoods, driving up food and medicine prices, escalating the simmering tensions between the local ruling families and splitting the town's children into warring factions around the mysterious tower, the Polyhedron, on the town's western edge.

The town itself is a significant character of this game. It is unclear what year or even century the game represents, although the late 19th or early 20th century seems likely. *Pathologic* demands perpetual movement through the town and the winding streets and dead-ends quickly become familiar. The town's geographic location is only defined by its distance from 'the Authorities' of the capital and the vastness of the surrounding steppe. The various neighborhoods are named after body parts and organs, setting up the association of the town itself with the flesh of an animal. The climax of this motif comes near the conclusion of the story, when the map interface necessary for the player to navigate, suddenly transforms into a stylized bull, revealing the town itself as an injured, dying animal. Thus, the setting is not a real town, but an allegory: a land literally dying from its successful realization of a utopian project.

The three protagonists' stories revolve around the fate of the town-animal and the utopian project causing its demise. In the Bachelor's ending, he learns that the Polyhedron is a true utopia: a structure within which memories can be inhabited, time is meaningless and death nonexistent. However, he also learns that it is causing the plague by killing the town-animal. When forced to choose, the Bachelor saves the Polyhedron and the utopia within, dooming the town to destruction. The Haruspex, who finds the cure to the plague within the living flesh of the town-animal, makes the opposite choice as the Bachelor, saving the town at the expense of the Polyhedron, allowing the utopia to die, but keeping the town and its people (and especially its children) alive.

Finally, the Impostress ('Samozvanka' in the original Russian) begins the game in an open grave. The mythology around this character, told to her by numerous unreliable narrators, suggests that she is not human, but rather an embodied spirit. The Impostress has a twin sister who is either the personification of good and healing, or evil and disease incarnate. The game does not make it clear which of the two you are playing. At the end, the Impostress confronts her other self, resolving the dilemma without condemning either the town or the utopia that it sustains.

Like the other two games, *Pathologic* reserves a special place for garbage. Each protagonist necessarily spends a good portion of the game seeking through trash bins for pins, needles, broken switchblades, folding mirrors and other similar objects, that are both useless and serve a vital role within the game economy. The trash is traded to children. The children accept various trash objects and in exchange offer the protagonist the ammunition and medicine that they need to survive. The children even have a cure for the plague from the very beginning of the game, apparently contrived by them the last time the town was plague-ridden. The children's association with the trash articulates the relationship between trash and the zombie within the zombie narrative. Trash is the other half of the fracture of the human subject under the strain of the utopian intervention producing the zombie. Zombies materialize the negative consequences of the utopia and the negative remainder of humanity: the sweeping normalization of violence and crude hungers. Trash materializes the positive consequences of the utopia and the positive remainder of humanity: the meaningful objects and marvels left by the disastrous implantation of utopia.

The parallel world of the children in *Pathologic*, their continued preoccupation with meaningful trash and their incomprehensible culture, offset the dire adult work of survival and quarantine, seemingly making the children into the representatives of innocence, re-

moved from the dangers of the game's world. Nothing could be further from the truth. *Pathologic*'s children succumb to both violence and disease and their seeming dissociation from the problem of the plague masks their central role in it. The children are as vulnerable to violence as the adults within the game and can be killed and looted by the roving gangs, overzealous military and the player's avatar alike. In his article 'Killing Digital Children', Björn Sjöblom has noted that debates on the killing of children in video games revolve around the issue of moral agency: 'By restricting the possible range of actions the game allows, the designers are thereby depriving the player of a chance to utilize his own moral judgement' (Mortensen et al. 2015: 80). Sjöblom suggests that games that allow for the murder of children 'represent a more egalitarian approach' investing children with adult subjectivity, rather than bracketing them as a 'cultural other' (Mortensen et al. 2015: 80). *Pathologic* supports this view, granting the children a complex role within the narrative as active subjects and significant characters, seemingly at the expense of exposing them to the games' violent procedural logics.

Crucially to the plot, the Polyhedron, the geometrically impossible tower that is accidentally causing the plague, is exclusively inhabited by children. The tower is the utopia within the game and the children use its unearthly properties to suspend their childhoods in eternity, living out dreams, memories and fantasies within the timeless and endless space of the Polyhedron. The children of the town respond to the plague with a schism, breaking into the faction that remains within the Polyhedron, the quarantined utopian space of eternal childhood and the faction that leaves it forever to save the town. Effectively, the children debate the central dilemma of the game long before the player does. This makes their willingness to trade priceless medicines for rubbish all the more interesting.

The major twist of the game's several endings involves the Polyhedron. We are led to understand that the plague is the town's response to the Polyhedron: an allergic reaction of the living body of the town to the intrusion of utopia. We are told that either the town kills its utopia, or the utopia will kill it. At the conclusion, on the verge of deciding which to save, the player suddenly finds themselves in a new space: a sandbox. Within, two children play with a model of the town made of sand. The game's vantage point shifts here: the children we have always seen from the perspective of an adult, are suddenly at the same level as the player's avatar, who is reduced to their height. The children confirm that is the true reality, while the town is their simulation, a literal sandbox for playing utopia. Thus, the children turn out to be 'the Authorities' whose letters and directives have plagued the protagonists from the beginning. This twist suggests that the struggle was never real, the protagonist was never free to choose their role, but a mere puppet in an allegorical game.

The ending of the Impostress embraces the problem of agency posed by the game and resolves the dilemma by entirely refusing the choice that seems categorically unavoidable in the other two narratives. This resolution is immediately preceded by a conversation with the Impostress' twin. Until this point, the game continuously asserted that one twin was pure evil and the other pure good. The conversation reveals that your twin is but the sum of the choices you, as the player, did not choose to make. In other words, the twin manifests waste: the choices trashed and discarded when the player disregarded them. You must choose to be the miracle worker or the demon, the plague-bearer or the healer, at the cost of condemning your sister to be the other. By choosing to save the town, you make her the monster, an incarnation

of plague and evil and through this choice you make it final and inviolate within the preceding narrative you experienced and shaped.

The Impostress's narrative is thus a microcosm of the whole game: staging and resolving the central dilemma through the exposure of the main device. *Pathologic*'s central dilemma cannot be resolved within the universe of the game, but only by the player outside, who chose to play one character over the other, without realizing the full ramifications of their choice. The Impostress fully embraces the limits of her role within the procedural constraints upon the narrative of the game, but as her role is to embody the principle of the player's meta-knowledge of the game, their changing mind and willingness to see both sides of an irresolvable dilemma, she is able to leverage her understanding into an optimal solution for the world she inhabits. Her realization of the basic dilemma of the game allows her to re-frame this dilemma into a problem of player agency, circumventing the necessity of condemning either the town or its utopia, while the other characters are locked into a system with no exit. The game procedurally argues that agency always lies outside of the game and with the player.

The Impostress's function reveals the final implications of the role of trash that *Pathologic* makes evident. Her alignment with trash is articulated throughout the game: she begins the game in a grave, as though herself an abject corpse, she alone interacts with the infected zombies by curing them into personified townsfolk and her 'chosen', the major characters that she has to protect from the plague to achieve her ending, are the outcasts, criminals and forsaken of the town. She is the representative of the trash and of the plague itself, just as the Haruspex is the representative of town as a living animal and the Bachelor is the representative of the utopian project responsible for the threat to the town. Her resolution to the dialectic between the Haruspex and Bachelor places trash at the point of contact and conflict between the landscape and the utopia, the scar and memorial alike, rejecting the binaries, preserving the utopia in an abject, but useful remainder, marking the landscape as a site of desolation, violence and yet potential.

Pathologic shows the potential of games to examine utopia and accommodate the violence of this examination in a controlled exegesis: the metaphysical sandbox that the game makes literal. *Day Z* and *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* both participate in this effort, by creating sandboxes for utopian experiments, although they are certainly much less self-aware and purposeful than *Pathologic*. Despite their differences, all these games begin and end in abject violence and devastation to make every step towards a sovereign choice palpable and only through the excess of meaningful trash and desolate spaces vacated for utopia by the replacement of humankind with zombies. Trash is re-conceptualized here not only the embodiment of the utopia's destruction of daily life, or its beneficial remainder, but as a synecdoche for the ludic act of investing something broken with new meaning and potential.

Through horrifying but also appealing landscapes, these games reinvent the widespread post-1989 representation of the post-socialist world as a territory contaminated by a failed utopian project, as embodied in roving monsters, piles of historical trash and grandiose ruins. By representing the East European landscape as a trashed but redeemable and inhabitable remainder of a disastrous utopian project, these games grant trash a multivalent role: as a tool for decentering the violent logics of the games, or for pushing them to the limit and as a *vantitas* prompting a contemplation of utopia through appealing images of its' corporeal decay. All

three games tackle utopian subjects through garbage, treating the ruins of utopia as a tangible approaches for examining its' intangible aspirations and exploiting the pulpy reputation of the computer game medium for the cause of critical procedural rhetoric, suggesting that it is only through its trashed remainders that utopia can be adequately glimpsed.

This understanding of trash as a promising point of entry for examining utopian projects has a powerful precedent within Russian conceptual art. The artist Ilya Kabakov has made numerous works archiving and signifying various bits of rubbish from Soviet daily life. In the installation *Garbage Man* (1988), Kabakov's protagonist alter-ego writes, 'I feel that garbage, that mess where important papers and simple scraps intertwine and aren't distinct, makes up the most authentic and the only real fabric of my life, as nonsensical and awkward as it might seem' (Kabakov 2010: 127). In her book *Ilya Kabakov: The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away*, Amei Wallach interprets garbage as a trace of the legacy of the Soviet project, of its heroic ambitions and its grand failure, but also as a treasured, loved and authentic part of life, resisting the historical and social pressures surrounding and threatening it. Garbage is both sign of the decrepitude of the Soviet utopia and of the vibrant resistance of the meager life against utopian ambitions: 'Garbage is also memory. It is history, "sedimented deposits", "continuity", "connectedness". It is the very human mess of small moments, foolish hopes, intimate disasters' (Wallach 1996: 68). In Kabakov's work, garbage remains the sole witness of the human subjects undone by either the Soviet project or their own personal utopian dreams. The incorporation of garbage into art investigating the Soviet project transforms the legacy of the *vanitas*, turning its focus away from personal mortality and towards the death of the utopia.

Similarly, the Conceptualist and performance artist Andrei Monastyrsky's 'schizoanalysis' essay 'VDNKh—The Capital of the World' [VDNX—Stolitsa Mira, 1986] investigates the VDNKh or the Exhibition of the Achievements of the National Economy, the permanent Soviet amusement park, exhibition center and fair, as a *vanitas* of the Soviet utopia. Monastyrsky guides his reader through the architectural and formal features of VDNKh, interpreting it as an effort to represent the Soviet social project as a cosmic mandala embodying 'the sacred in action, the transcending of dialectical materialism as a constant process' [Monastyrsky 2009: 11]. In Monastyrsky's description, the effort to render the Soviet utopian project immortal contains and generates the project's inevitable demise: 'VDNKh—the Koschei's egg of Soviet power' [Monastyrsky 2009: 12]. Like the fairy-tale villain Koschei the Deathless, whose attempt to hide his death away in a needle and an egg only made it easier for the hero to defeat him, Monastyrsky's VDNKh represents the self-destructiveness of the Soviet attempt to transcend the social project of dialectical materialism into the eternal dimension of the sacred. In Monastyrsky's account, the VDNKh is an accidental *vanitas* of the Soviet social project, prompting contemplation of the utopia that it wants to manifest and exhibit, through obvious signs of that utopia's death and decay.

In *Day Z*, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* and *Pathologic*, the moralizing thrust of the zombie narrative explores the consequences of the utopian project, using the game itself as a secure sandbox for experiments with utopia. Ilya Kabakov's installations are similar utopian sandboxes: examining the awful totality of Soviet civilization through relatable bits of rubbish suspended in an intimate setting, while Andrei Monastyrsky's schizoanalysis represents a kindred attempt to appropriate the Soviet landscape unaltered for a readymade model of a fatal utopian venture.

Furthermore, in context with the three games, Kabakov's and Monastyrsky's approaches to garbage and the Soviet landscape contribute an additional dimension to the moralizing *vanitas* of the zombie narrative. Like Kabakov's *Garbage Man* and Monastyrsky's schizoanalysis of the VDNKh, the protagonists of all three games wander through the trashed post-Soviet landscapes, scavenging the odds and ends of the failed utopia around them. Both Western and East European zombie narratives covertly resurrect the utopian narrative in a postmodern form, appearing disguised as lurid spectacles of violence and degeneracy mostly to distract the audience from their moralizing content, skipping over the abject horror and human destruction of the zombie apocalypse to satisfy fantasies of surviving, flourishing and inventing a new and better world from the ashes of the old one. The ruination of such settings only makes the tentative utopias that become manifest in them more believable.

The games discussed in this article show the potential of the medium to approach the dilemmas explored by Kabakov's installations and Monastyrsky's essay through a procedural rhetoric, advancing a critical argument through sovereign entry into the structural logic of the representation. By covertly introducing the problem of agency and choice regarding the historical meaning of the communist effort towards utopia and its many remainders into a ludic narrative, these games question the logic and historical inevitability of traumatic utopian projects in the post-Soviet world.

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