STALKER series overview

By James Baker

**Introduction**

The Chernobyl nuclear disaster happened in 1986. Reactor 4 of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power plant exploded, unleashing airborne radioactive pollution into the atmosphere. The event was to have dire effects for the surrounding area as well as the rest of Europe. Although the disaster occurred nearly three decades ago, the threat seemingly over, it has had a lasting legacy on the Ukraine and the rest of the former Soviet states. The Wall may have fallen 4 years later, but for many this was the precursor to the collapse of the Soviet Union. As governments changed the disaster zone was left in the intervening years, abandoned, uninhabitable, and burdened with rusting relics from another era. The zone was a trash-laden and scarred landscape left as legacy by a once mighty power.

*Roadside Picnic*, a book written by the Strugatsky brothers well before the Chernobyl disaster, describes aliens landing briefly on earth and leaving both terror and wonderment in their wake. A scientist in the book likens these visits to a ‘roadside picnic’ in which people briefly stop by the roadside and eat their lunch, leaving their scraps and trash for the ants to discover. In the book men called stalkers risk their lives entering these ‘zones’ to see what these unfathomable alien beings have discarded for humanity to find.

*Splinters of Soviet Empire are plentiful in Ukraine – forgotten productions, catacombs, neglected military facilities and so on. Even our office is located at an ex-military factory with no more active production. When walking around such areas you can’t but think how the time froze at this place of man-made catastrophe. Logically, it struck us as a cool game setting to explore.*

- Project Lead Anton Bolshakov in PC Gamer UK, September 2007

GSC Game World, a small game development company based in the Ukraine, took from both of these very Soviet cultural possessions and made Stalker – a PC only first person shooter (FPS) that was to innovate in the medium and have lasting effects, at least in the PC space. Stalker takes as its fiction the Chernobyl disaster (where there is a second, later explosion) and the anomalous zone and stalkers from Roadside Picnic to make a game series full with gameplay possibilities and one that is intrinsically Ukrainian.

Stalker games drop the player in a completely nihilistic world where death and failure are commonplace. Every soul within the Zone is there to make off with whatever spoils they can find. There is very little honour in the zone and no central power; once you are in the zone the gun is the only source of justice and the weak are mincemeat. Other stalkers constantly moan to you about their misadventures scouring the barren wasteland that is the zone, all the while downing their vodka.

The drab, aged aesthetic of the zone fits this world of torment. A big influence on the aesthetic of the Stalker series of games is the 1979 Soviet film *Stalker* (based on *Roadside Picnic*), which itself was shot in and around hazardous abandoned hydro power plants and chemical factories. One of the main lessons from *Stalker* GSC took in making their apocalyptic landscape was the effective use of colour or lack thereof. Trees are not bursting with life but merely clinging onto it. The Zone’s inhabitants wear drab clothing and armour because otherwise they would be easy prey for bandits. The developers took trips to Chernobyl and many buildings, including the iconic cooling tower, are reproduced exactly from photos. The textures that fill the game are all high detail and are comprised of the rusted metal and faded tiles reminiscent of the soviet era. Models of abandoned trucks, farm machinery, and even tanks further this aesthetic theme. All these aesthetic considerations feed into the mood and tone of the game. The soviet legacy and a decaying beauty is what characterises Stalker’s graphical style.

**Stalker: Shadow Of Chernobyl - 2007**

When it comes to the Stalker games, *Shadow Of Chernobyl* (SOC) was the most buggy, closed off, and compromised at release. Despite all this, SOC is considered the best of the series by many Stalker fans. No other game in the series has the same impact on first playthrough or the same lasting appeal of repeated playthroughs. The mod scene is also undoubtedly the strongest. Many mods change the game radically, while others refine or extend the game’s mechanics and reintroduce cut content (I will be covering user modifications in a later section). By the time the last patch rolled around most of the major bugs had been dealt with. Playing SOC today should be a very smooth experience especially on modern PCs. Although Stalker is not a set piece game, the situations the player finds themselves in for the duration are varied, suspenseful, and engaging. SOC’s world is not empty or static, but full of decaying secrets to explore and discover.

SOC is very much a product of the late 90s FPS craze, a time when advanced 3D engines made it possible to extent the genre beyond Doom clone territory and seemingly anything was possible. Many European development houses were a part of this movement. Croteam from Croatia for instance, developed the Serious Engine (and *Serious Sam*), which reintroduced the massive numbers of enemies seen on screen at once in *Doom* (all sprites) to a completely 3D Engine, something not possible in all-3D engines up to that time. The X-Ray engine was developed by GSC as a brand new, state of the art 3D engine that could handle parallax and normal mapping, realistic shadows, HDR rendering, time of day effects, and realistic physics. At the time of its announcement it rivalled its AAA competitors, especially in the way it could simulate very large worlds whilst still providing the aforementioned effects, and blew away the press and FPS fans alike.

The crowning advancement of the X-Ray engine though, was the A-Life artificial intelligence system also developed at GSC. This system allows for every actor in the game world to be completely autonomous and non-scripted. NPCs scavenge, eat, heal, find shelter and sleep without the player’s input. Mutants also have A-Life patterns, migrating from one area to the next and interacting with other mutants and NPCs. Actors react differently to different factions according to their own faction and even treat the player as just another actor in the world. This meant a fully simulated autonomous game environment was possible, something that had very few antecedents in the history of video games (*Ultima Underworld* to name one).

The A-Life system was to be heavily modified in the retail release however, due to SOC’s troubled development. SOC was first announced in 2001 and by 2006 after many delays the publisher THQ was pushing GSC to get the game out. The game was released in 2007 but only after THQ had come into the equation and helped finish the game. The A-Life system was reined in, vehicles were cut and the completely open zone GSC originally envisaged was constrained. Stalker became a tighter, plot focused game during this phase. It is evident from various beta builds (which I will link to at the closing of the article) that a mountain of content was cut over the 6 years of development. It is a matter of debate whether those things would still have been cut without THQ’s influence. THQ at least made sure the game got out the door and surrounded the release with sufficient hype to make it somewhat of a hit in the West. The game that was released had concessions that owed more to Half-life than the simulated world GSC was ultimately going for but stands up as a solid shooter. The most prominent mods for SOC all try to achieve what the creators think was the original vision for the game.

While the underlying fiction for the Stalker world is quite interesting and layered, SOC’s main questline or ‘story’ is dense, convoluted, and in many ways superfluous. It is clearly not the main draw for Stalker. It has you waking up with amnesia (of course) and tracking down a Stalker called Strelok who is said to have been to the very centre of the zone. The inhabitants of the zone treat the epicentre as a revelatory place and there are many unfounded theories about what its true nature is. You get various fact-finding missions from a few shady characters and little is directly explained to you. What GSC does well is create a web of exposition slowly unveiled by questioning NPCs in the game world. Many seemingly unrelated conversations may give you information about a current quest, an area or a specific mutant you will have to cross. This is done in a suitably understated manner and not thrown in your face like some modern games. Some information the player will glean is just there to pepper the world with flavour. Stories about the anomaly that sucked a friend into the ether or the bloodsucker that got away are told to fellow stalkers around the many campfires in the zone. Campfires are points where loners and other factions will sit down, play guitar, and forget about the zone for an hour or two.

The Difficulty settings for the game range from Novice to Master. What many players do when they first play the game is start at Novice and will most likely be immediately turned off by the game. This is because SOC handles difficulty strangely. On Master the player is hit by 100% of enemy fire while on Novice only about 40%. What most do not realise is that the opposite is also true- on Master the player hits the enemy 100% but only 40% of bullets hit on Novice**. T**he **player’s bullets literally disappear on easier difficulties**. It is not unusual to empty an entire assault rifle magazine into an enemy before he falls on Novice difficulty. It is for this reason that it is recommended that you play on Master even if you have no experience of the game as it is effectively just as difficult as the easier difficulties. Most mods assume you are playing the hardest difficulty and are built around that. Stalker is a difficult game as far as FPSs go. It is a game where scouting out an area before entering it and patience are key. If a player has not prepared themselves for a fight or possible anomalies they will die. At the very start of the game the player is given an ineffective, inaccurate pistol and told to wipe out a lair of bandits. I can think of no FPS game that is more’ sink or swim’ in its mentality. It may be challenging, but this start of the game is fantastic and gets no less exhilarating each time you play it though.

Although the game is a solid shooter, there are many confrontations that cannot be resolved through the liberal application of lead. Anomalies are central to numerous systems in the game world. They are dangerous aberrations within the zone caused by the disaster. They are usually elemental and can take many forms. One example is an electronic field that sizzles away until stepped on, where it sets off a deafening shockwave usually killing whatever disturbed it. There are random anomalies within the world but most are predetermined and are between the player and some important loot or objective; various acrobatic feats are usually required to get past. To navigate anomalies the player has the use of an infinite supply of bolts. These bolts can be thrown in front of the player to determine if there is any danger as they will set off an anomaly. There are also radioactive fields dangerous to the player and radiation sickness can only be countered with anti-rad medicine or drinking vodka. Artifacts are rare products of anomalies. They can be sold to the game’s vendors for cash or equipped by the player for various immunities or boosts. The powers they provide become more important the further into the zone the player ventures.

Stealth has been an element of the Stalker games right from the beginning here in SOC. It is sometimes viable to sneak up on enemies with silenced weapons or a knife. Most times though, the enemy will hear the player’s approach thanks to the sounds seemingly silent actions make; effectively, if you kill off one enemy, others in the vicinity will be immediately aware of your presence through hearing a death cry or the sound of the player’s silenced weapon. Enemies have super hearing which makes stealth possible but not to be relied upon.

The game’s economy is fairly easy in the vanilla game as you can sell almost any object for cash or trade and the hub traders have no cash limit. The carry weight is fairly forgiving in SOC so it is possible to carry two different armours and three weapons to suit most situations. This is somewhat balanced out by weapons and armour degrading and not being repairable. Weapons have different rates at which they degrade leading to a strategic choice of what to take. Suits in the game are often a trade off between ballistic protection (getting hit by bullets), anomalous protection (overall radiation and elements), and weight. For example the heaviest suit in the game, the exoskeleton provided all types of protection but you are unable to run while wearing it. For the last stretch of the game you will not be able to buy or sell anything so most players blow their money on the best gear they can get before making the final trek to the reactor. Most weapons in SOC are ones that exist in the real world and have fairly realistic ballistics. There are a couple of futuristic experimental weapons late in the game that you can find. There is no ‘levelling up’ in Stalker and progression is effectively tied to your equipment through a need for increasing radiation protection.

SOC has what some would call ‘RPG-like features’, although many of these features have appeared in FPSs from year dot. The game has a graphical inventory system where what the player can carry is limited by weight. The inventory has three active weapon slots, one each for knives, pistols, and primary weapons. The player can carry extra weapons but these cannot be accessed without opening the inventory screen. Stalker has a 3 tier healing system; there are items to stop bleeding as well as items that heal the player and ones that remove radiation. If the player is shot they can bleed out unless they use a bandage (a blood icon appears on screen with the colour indicating the severity). In the vanilla game the bleeding system does not work that well and bandages seem to just be a lesser form of healing. Many mods make the bleeding more serious, punishing the player with a rapid drop in health until bandaged and making the player think tactically before entering combat. The game also uses a ‘PDA’ system to keep track of quests as well as having useful information about characters and mutants the player meets.

There are a number of ‘factions’ in the zone who will have different relations with you, sometimes depending on your actions toward them or their enemies.

Duty

Duty is committed to destroying the zone and protecting other stalkers under its wing. They are mostly ex-army and are almost fascist in their ideals. Duty is inarguably the strongest faction in this game and, because it guards many checkpoints and the main hub town, it is more difficult but not impossible to complete the game if you get on their bad side.

Freedom

The opposite of Duty, they believe the zone to be a good and liberating thing. Anarchistic in their ways, Freedom are the smaller and more wayward of the two major organised factions.

Military

The military came to the zone to stop stalkers from entering. They are seen as corrupt (for example you can bribe the first officer you meet with vodka to let you through a checkpoint) and they seem to tolerate some level of encroachment by stalkers either through bribes or threat of force. For most of the game however, they are a constant threat to the player and will shoot on sight – Think *Half-life’s* Marines.

Bandits

Bandits are the scum of the Zone. They steal from stalkers rather than find their own artifacts. They are a common enemy for most of the early game and are relatively ill-equipped but travel in gangs.

Mercenaries

Mercenaries are the assholes of the Zone. They are seen by other stalkers as having no loyalties and are working for rich foreign interests. They have no qualms about murdering anyone in their way. They show up around mid-game and are as well-equipped as the military.

Loners

The ‘Loners’ are the defacto faction the player belongs to as they start the game. These are simply the stalkers who do not belong to another faction. Loners will usually be friendly towards you.

Monolith

The Monolith is the mysterious ‘evil’ faction the player will face at the back end of the game. They are extremely well-equipped, fanatical and inhabit the very centre of the zone, standing in the way of many of the player’s main objectives.

SOC is structured so that the ‘levels’ or areas sequentially get closer and closer to the centre of the zone. You start the game just inside a military checkpoint and end up right outside the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant itself. The danger ramps up, not only in the type and number of enemy threats you face, but also the radiation intensity. The game was originally planned to solely limit you from exploring the centre by what protection you have and had less loading screens. The released game tones this down, only stopping you a couple times where you have to have a certain item or suit to continue and areas are surrounded by barbed wire to delineate the edge of the area. Areas are varied and range from abandoned farms, villages, factories, military bases, train depots, forests, and underground scientific facilities. Areas have a ‘lived in’ look and buildings and ruined machinery rarely look out of place, whilst still providing excellent staging for enemy engagements and jump scares. Loading screens occur between levels and when going into underground vaults. These vaults are the dungeons of stalker.

While the scarred landscape above can certainly be frightening and tense, every underground area is an eerie, horrific and sometimes mind-bending experience. They are often populated by unique monsters that are experienced for the first time in dark and confined spaces. The first underground area you experience is sandwiched between two prolonged engagements with the military, leaving you very ill-equipped (at least in the first playthrough). Mutants can have supernatural powers, putting you constantly on edge as a player. To describe any monster in detail would be spoiling some of the surprises in store for the first time player. If you have played Vampire: The Masquerade- Bloodlines and played the infamous hotel level you will understand the tone and mood they are going for in these long-abandoned and forgotten depths. The other games in the Stalker series are notable as having neither as many nor as memorable vaults.

Although the sequence of areas unfurl in an almost completely linear fashion, the areas themselves do not subscribe you to single path and can be approached in any way the player sees fit. For example, the military warehouse area, which appears mid-game, has a scripted conflict between the two major factions (Duty and Freedom) in the area but then leaves you to explore and interact with the environment in any way you choose. You can help either faction (although helping one usually shuts off the opportunity to interact successfully with the other), you can even completely ignore either faction and still complete the game. There are many other secondary areas on this map to explore such as a mercenary base, an abandoned village full of dangerous invisible creatures and a poisonous swamp with a crazed sniper camping out in the middle of it. Most quests and objectives do not only appear once you receive them but are ever present in the game world. For example, the aforementioned sniper does not ‘appear’ when you receive a quest to take him out, he is always there whether you take the time to find the quest-giver or not. The benefit of this is that it leads to a more simulated and realistic game world where you are not the intended ‘hero’ but just another stalker in the zone.

In SOC the player story or ‘ludonarrative’, rather than the main plot, is the more important story. For example, that the player snuck into the army HQ with only their silenced pistol, under complete darkness, with only the occasional lightning strike making them aware of their surroundings is way more important a story than what ascribed plot reason they were there for in the first place. You are free to approach an objective any way you see fit. The player could approach the army HQ guns blazing, throwing grenades in the middle of the day and it would lead to a completely different game narrative. These seemingly infinite possibilities make the game more engaging on each replay as SOC does not rely on its main linear plot for most of its appeal. Having said all this, the game does have multiple endings that depend on what you have discovered during your playthrough; most of the endings are bad or false endings however, furthering the nihilistic tone of the game. The game does not have a ‘New game plus’ type feature out of the box, but most mods add this in so that you are free to further explore the zone once you have finished the main quest.

SOC is often railed at for being nothing without mods. Many new players coming to the game for the first time will be told to install various mods before playing at all (From this writer’s perspective, it is recommended someone new to Stalker play through the game unmodded first). Despite this, the game was very popular at release and stands up as a solid FPS . SOC should wear its subsequent mods, not as a sign of what the game could have been, but as a sign of its innate endurance. SOC pushed the FPS genre forward in many respects, with new and inventive elements, mechanics, and technologies. SOC’s legacy is still felt today with mods being made nearly a decade after release and the emerging ‘survival’ genre taking many cues from SOC’s development ideas.

**Stalker: Clear Sky - 2008**

*Interviewer: What's the one thing you would have liked to have included [in SOC] but that didn't make it in?*

*Anton Bolshakov: The dynamic [use of obstacles] by AI; NPCs throwing grenades; a more developed system of relations with factions, community; more developed factions as they are and their actions in the Zone; the possibility to play for the factions.*

*The Making of Stalker, part one*, CVG Jan 2007

Clear Sky is the black sheep of the Stalker series. It has a bad reputation as being buggy, as well as a detour from themes and gameplay elements core to Stalker. ‘CODlike’ is the word from the modern vernacular which Stalker fans often refer to Clear Sky by. For all the innovations it brings to the Stalker table – Artifact detectors, RPG-like upgrade systems, advanced AI, and engine improvements, people only remember the broken faction system, the tunnel-like level design of the second half, and the bugs. From developer pre-release videos and interviews it is clear that GSC were full of ideas for Clear Sky but it had a fairly short development time and was pushed out before many of these ideas were properly or appropriately realised. When accepted for what it is Clear Sky is not the complete failure it is often portrayed to be.

Clear Sky functions as a prequel to the story of SOC. The player character is a mercenary named Scar who is given the task of stopping the main character in SOC from reaching the centre of the Zone. Like the novel plot of the *Half-life* expansion *Opposing Force*, the player is fighting against their own interests from a previous game.

Combat is where Clear Sky shines somewhat over the other Stalker games. Clear Sky is very clearly designed around human-on-human ballistic combat. Every area in the game, even the ones repurposed from SOC, has structural features which are conducive to great gun battles. Low walls (don’t worry, there’s no snap-to cover), barrels, and abandoned cars skirt important strategic locations. The AI now effectively uses tactics to thwart the player. Enemies flank, use cover, and throw grenades to keep the player on edge. The combat is much harder than SOC’s, making a quicksave before a fight almost necessary, but this just means resolving a tactical ‘puzzle’ rather than playing through a linear sequence again and again. Clear Sky is at its best when in the thick of its layered, tactical combat.

The bleeding system now works properly in Clear Sky, wounds need to be instantly bandaged otherwise the player will start rapidly losing health. Bandages are in short supply and time is needed to apply them, making fights more intense and challenging. Enemies are not immune to bleeding and can run away and die if they don’t bandage themselves. Enemies also flinch when shot, a small change but one which stops them from firing, adding a tactical element to damage.

Clear Sky’s main addition to the Stalker toolset is anomalous artifact detectors. These are items that, when equipped, indicate the presence of any artifacts in the area. Cheap detectors just ‘beep’ when artifacts are very near, but rarer, more expensive detectors are complex, some pointing towards the artifact, others showing a GPS representation of the anomaly. Artifacts in Clear Sky are not found in random locations like in SOC but in anomaly fields. These fields are extremely dangerous and have background elemental damage as well as classic anomalies that can kill the player if they don’t use bolts. This makes artifact hunting more interesting and selling them for profit more viable as they respawn in the same fields slowly over time.

Another addition to Clear Sky is the weapon repair and upgrade system. Every weapon can be upgraded by special NPCs by selecting upgrades on an ‘upgrade tree’. Decisions have to be made as to how the player wants to use the weapon as some upgrade options lock out when others are committed to. For example, the player may want to make their AK-74 fire faster with an extended magazine of 40 bullets or be able to attach a scope and make the weapon very accurate, but both builds cannot be achieved on the same upgrade path. Weapons can be upgraded to support various attachments such as silencers, scopes, and grenade launchers. Suits can be improved immunity-wise, and players can add increasingly advanced night vision to more expensive suits. Clear Sky handles artifact carrying differently than SOC. All suits have a varying number artifact slots. More slots can be added through upgrades. The upgrade system adds further tactical choice to a player’s loadout, as well as potential consequences.

NPCs are now well trained in the finer points of grenade throwing; something that was left out of SOC and sometimes it can be seen why. Enemies will throw perfectly aimed grenades one after the other, not only that but they have a very short fuse. There is a hud indicator that points out nearby grenades, however, most players will find grenade deaths just cheap rather than genuinely challenging especially in the latter stages of the game. In fact this cheap type of difficulty is present in the beginning of the game. After exiting the swamp the player is faced with getting out of the way of a machinegun emplacement. Getting hit is instant death and unless the exact path past is known, advancing can seem impossible. There is also a certain early plot event which strips the player of everything they had prior to triggering it leaving them with nothing to show for however long they spent fighting the bandits in the swamp.

A game mechanic introduced in Clear Sky, the central theme in fact, is the faction system. Basically each map has two factions fighting for territory. In the swamp area for example, the Clear Sky faction and the Renegades are in conflict for control of the area. The map has pre-ordained nodes or capture points and NPCs attack or defend said nodes accordingly. The player can join factions and when close to a fight they will call them for help. Allies back up the player and say they will attack on their first shot. Each faction also has a base where, depending on your affiliation, the player can receive quests, upgrade equipment and buy supplies. The faction system has many drawbacks that limit what the Player can do. For instance, the game forces them to holster weapons at all bases which means the only means of attacking an enemy base is when the AI wants to. Unfortunately the AI is usually either completely lethargic or suicidal in its approach to attacking. Once an area is taken over, the defeated faction will only spawn in a couple of places and never present a realistic threat to already established faction hubs. The whole system is not balanced very well and becomes completely one sided and static after awhile. Another unwanted feature of the faction system is that every NPC is now represented as a dot on the map, even the mutants. This takes all the surprise and fear out of exploration and combat as most of the danger derives from not knowing where a threat is going to approach from. The faction system is mostly a half-baked mechanic and is one of Clear Sky’s worst failings.

Clear Sky exhibits a far more impressive X-Ray engine than the running SOC. Graphically the engine has been improved with advanced lighting effects, including ‘god rays’ – Shafts of light emanating from the sun, filtering through trees and windows. There are also depth of field effects which manage to neither be irritating nor disorientating. The effect is mostly visible when focusing on reloading a weapon and makes the loss of perfect vision a cool trade off. These visual upgrades make Clear Sky much more system-intensive than SOC and a large framerate difference is to be expected between the two games. The sound design is also greatly improved; the player will notice the sound of rustling leaves and grass before seeing an approaching mutant boar for instance. There is also more voiced dialog than in SOC.

While the first two thirds of Clear Sky has fairly open environments, the last stretch switches to being essentially a corridor shooter where you follow groups of allies through nests of human enemies including a large-ish town called Limansk and a ruined soviet underground hospital. Although these locations are interesting visually, they don’t provide much in the way of tactical options in how to approach the enemy. Even though the fights are fairly straight forward they never get boring and can be likened to Half-Life’s battles with the Marines. One highlight is a pitched fight with Monolith soldiers on a construction site of a gargantuan radar array. The ending of Clear Sky is a novel reworking of the CNPP level from SOC but largely disappoints gameplay and story-wise and is very frustrating unless the player knows what they are doing. Clear Sky is made up of leftover levels from SOC and entirely new ideas probably due to its fairly short development cycle; because of this the game feels quite disjointed.

I should mention that there can be a big game-stopping crash as you enter the town of Limansk. This can be avoided by running forward into the ambush and ignoring the NPCs to the left. I was stuck there for months before I found this out. I will also mention once you cross the drawbridge preceding this section you can never get back so be sure you are ready and have done any quests you’ve left undone.

Weirdly pistols have no iron sights in Clear Sky and merely zoom in. Whether this was a conscious design decision or an oversight (SOC had them), it is easily modded for those who prefer to play without crosshairs.

**Stalker: Call Of Pripyat - 2009**

*Stalker: Call Of Pripyat* (COP) was to be the last Stalker game after GSC ceased development of Stalker 2 in 2012. COP took the X-Ray engine to its very limits and looked very long in the tooth when compared to PC FPSs *Crysis* and *Farcry 2*, which had both been released around the same time as *Clear Sky* and featured similar open environments. GSC decided to yet again try something new with COP, making the environments much bigger than before. On release critics poured on the praise for the game for being neither buggy nor ‘clunky’. With COP GSC took much of what made SOC and Clear Sky frustrating away, but also took some of the exciting and the unexpected elements away along with it.

While Clear Sky is set prior to the events of SOC, COP is set after. COP’s plot goal differs from the other Stalker games in that your character does not want to reach the centre of the Zone, but is tasked with investigating what happened to a lost fleet of helicopters that mysteriously crashed there. The player’s primary goal is to reach these crash sights, which are dotted around the first two areas. Once they have done so the end game is triggered and the path to the last area is opened. Later it becomes clear how the events of SOC relate to the crashes.

COP comprises of three large ‘sandbox’ maps, perhaps taking cues from Clear Sky’s newer maps. The first map is a swamp with two grounded, rusting container ships in the middle providing the only protection from radiation blowouts. The second area is set around an industrial train station on the edge of Pripyat and the third is deep within a residential district of Pripyat. The areas usually have a hub area, then various satellite landmarks where various side missions play out. There is a large amount of wilderness, particularly in the first area, where the player will find various roaming mutants. Unlike SOC there are only a few substantial underground areas that require a separate load screen. Most underground areas are brief ‘caves’ away from the surface. COP has no carry-over areas from SOC or Clear Sky and there is an abundance of new assets art-wise. The three new areas are a mixed blessing, both seemingly fulfilling Stalker’s original goal of sandbox apocalyptic simulation and making the gameplay much more empty and static in the process.

Missions are, on the whole, much more scripted and instanced than ever before. An early example of this being the discovery of a bloodsucker lair where the player follows an NPC around and has scripted encounters along the ‘tour’. Although this allows for a novel scripted sequence at the end of the quest where the player has to sneak past sleeping bloodsuckers, given Stalker’s pedigree it could be argued leaving the player to explore the area by themselves would have been even more effective thrills-wise. There are some missions, such as an early attack on a heavily-armed mercenary base set inside a waste processing plant, where this is the case, and for my money, these are the most successful.

Outside of missions there a lot happening in COP. Roving bands of different factions and creatures pop up here and there in the environment. Because the map is often very barren of obstructions and the groups walk in a tight, straight line formation, these fights rarely amount to anything particularly tactical. Different groups do attack each other and it’s exciting to be thrust into the middle of a fight between Duty and a pack of dogs while looking for hidden supplies. After such a battle there are always ample resources for the player to collect. A consequence of this is the economy is extremely broken in favour of the player, even more ridiculously so than SOC. There is a new trade feature where weapons that have a certain level of degradation are unsellable but this does not help balance the economy anywhere near enough. Although GSC brought back a form of the A-Life system to COP they seem to not have known how to give it much depth beyond wandering conflict.

One improvement COP makes over the other games is how hidden stashes are handled. In the previous games stashes would only materialise once you had found information about one from a dead body. You would frequently find a stash only to open it and see there was nothing inside. This disincentivised exploration, particularly in SOC as there was nothing to gain by it. COP improves this by having all the stashes already hidden in the game, making exploring buildings, sewers and caves worth the player’s time. COP keeps Clear Sky’s artifact detector system, as well as its item upgrade functions, and both work well in this game. The unique anomaly idea is also expanded to include some interesting world-bending puzzles.

COP is unique in the Stalker series of having no moment in the game where you are completely outgunned and unprepared for what you have to face. Often called the ‘hobo phase’ by Stalker fans to describe the lack of resources available to the player in the early game, it is arguably the most thrilling part of a Stalker game. In the Clear Sky’s entire first swamp section, for example, the player only has antiquated break-action shotguns and weak pistols to take on bandit strongholds. In COP the broken economy and the weapons you pick up from dead NPCs, not to mention the fact that the player starts with an assault rifle, means this phase is over extremely quickly. While the other Stalker games do a fairly good job of keeping the player constantly on edge, there are very few instances in COP where you don’t feel in complete control of the situation at hand and this above all often leads to ennui.

**Stalker Multiplayer**

Multiplayer in Stalker is only mentioned in this article for completeness’ sake. All three games have Deathmatch, Team Deathmatch, and Capture the Artifact (a CTF variant) modes. Anomalies play a part in the action with them moving around the multiplayer maps as combatants fight. The games have ranking systems, unlocking more advanced weapons as players win rounds. Weapons and upgrades are bought Counterstrike-style through a menu. Unless you have friends that want to play on a LAN connection, Stalker multiplayer is largely dead, with only some Eastern European groups still playing. It is not worth your time at this point in all honesty.

**Music**

Stalker’s ambient music sets the tone perfectly with a haunting, discordant beauty. SOC’s entire soundtrack is freely available as an MP3 download:

Link - <http://www.game-ost.com/albums/828/s.t.a.l.k.e.r._shadow_of_chernobyl_the_complete_original_game_soundtrack_(g-ost_exclusive)/>

**Stalker Origins and Legacy**

Venom/ Codename: Outbreak - 2001

Before Stalker was conceived GSC made another FPS named *Venom* (*Codename: Outbreak* in the west) based on another Sci-fi book called *The Puppet Masters* by Robert A. Heinlein. The game shares some similarities with Stalker in that it has fairly open (though linear) missions and also has an RPG-like interface and inventory. Unique to the game is that the player has only one weapon that can transform into a shotgun, laser rifle, machine gun, etc. depending on the situation. The game is also two player, either with another player in cooperative mode or with the AI. The AI’s view is presented in a little window on the player’s screen. It is very hard, if not impossible; to get *Venom* working on today’s PCs.

Firestarter - 2004

Firestarter was actually the first game to use the X-Ray engine built for Stalker. Although published by GSC, Firestarter was developed by a team entirely separate from the Stalker team. The game is a single player FPS in the style of Quake and Unreal. The music to the game was composed by MoozE who also composed the ambient tracks for SOC and is freely available here:

Link - <http://www.game-ost.com/info.php?id=22>

Xenus/Boiling Point: Road to Hell - 2005

The leads responsible for *Venom,* Sergey Zabaryansky and Roman Lut left GSC to form Deep Shadows and went on to make *Boiling Point* (originally known as *Xenus*); a completely seamless open world FPS set in South America that shared many design ideas with the original Oblivion Lost (the alpha build of Stalker). The game has factions, who the player can do jobs for and increase their influence, cars, boats, planes and wildlife. Deep Shadows followed this up with Xenus 2: White Gold, but this was only released digitally in the west.

Metro 2033 - 2010

Andrew Prohorov, lead designer on SOC, left with the X-Ray engine programmers shortly before SOC’s release to form 4A and make the Metro series of games. *Metro 2033* is set in a post-apocalyptic Moscow where everyone lives in the metro train lines because of the radiation outside. *Metro* shares similar combat, harsh conditions, mutant enemies and environmental hazards in common with *Stalker*. Owing to its confined environment however, it is a much more linear and scripted game.

Survarium - TBA

Vostok Games was created out of the ashes of the Stalker 2 team and is using ideas from the development of that game in their new game *Survarium*. Although right now it exists as an open beta team deathmatch FPS, Vostok games hopes to make Survarium a fully fledged open world game with a story of its own. Only time will tell how well they live up with the Stalker legacy, although the ‘freetopay’ direction they are taking the game in at the moment does not bode well.

**Prominent and Important Mods**

This is a list of mods I have played and enjoyed or believe to be significant; it is by no means definitive or complete.

Most of these mods will require a certain patch version of the game they are for (usually this will only apply to SOC). You will find this information in the mod readme. Players with the Steam or GOG version of the game may find this a problem as their game will be prepatched but there are ways to downgrade versions (google “downgrade SOC to \*version\*”).

A word on the ‘Complete’ mod: an overhaul mod that was released for each game. Many people will say that they skipped playing the out-of-the-box game and played with Complete installed to get the best experience. Frankly these people don’t know what they are talking about. The SOC Complete mod makes the graphics brighter and prettier (not really a plus in a radioactive wasteland), the AI dumber, the game easier, and introduces as many bugs as it fixes. The Clear Sky Complete mod turns everything off (grenades, faction wars) without fixing anything and the COP Complete mod has no significant difference from the (completely fine) vanilla experience. In my opinion the Complete mods are superfluous and have been superseded by better overhaul mods anyway.

**Shadow Of Chernobyl**

Zone Reclamation Project (ZRP)

Most mods alter the base game in some fundamental way. The ZRP mod is significant in that it only fixes bugs in vanilla SOC. Playing with the ZRP mod installed would give a very similar experience to playing the original unaltered game, except without the remaining bugs.

Link - <http://www.metacognix.com/files/stlkrsoc/>

AMK

One of the first mods for SOC, AMK introduces blowouts, random anomalies, reworked ballistics based on realism, realistic dark nights, and a sleep system. The mod’s biggest change is that it unlocks the A-Life system so that NPCs are completely autonomous; they can get in fights, call for help, loot dead stalkers or hidden stashes as well as sell the contents. The player is more likely to run into powerful mutants at random in AMK than the vanilla game. The mod generally makes the game much more of a challenge. There are many different versions and variations of AMK, the latest official version is 1.4. If you want an even more unhinged experience try the Oblivion Lost mod (lastest ver. 2.2), a derivative of AMK.

Link - <http://www.amk-team.ru/forum/?showtopic=480>

Stalkersoup

Stalkersoup or Narodnaya Solyanka is a melting pot of different mods stacked on top of one another. This Russian mod is full to the brim with extra quests, items and enemies. Much of the content makes the game unbalanced, unfair, or both. Stalkersoup is not a mod you play to finish the game, but to have an experience. It includes every area from the three stalker games plus maps that were unreleased stuck together as one big game. The possibilities are endless in this mod. Techno bacon’s release of the mod is the most stable (for a mod that is famous for being extremely unstable) and is all in English, though some of the new quest dialog can be hard to understand.

Link - <http://www.moddb.com/mods/stalkersoup>

Autumn Aurora 2

Autumn Aurora 2 is a very recent release and it shows as this is the best looking mod for SOC hands down. The mod gives the Zone an autumnal look and feel. It adds lots of atmospheric effects such as AtmosFear weather (see below), fog, and new nature sounds. It is not just an aesthetic mod, but also adds new features to the game. For the first time the Clear Sky/COP anomaly detector system is implemented into SOC, as well as a change in the UI and HUD to something more like the one from COP. It has model swaps for weapons, character models, and sights which all look in keeping with the theme of the mod. The economy is made more realistic as good weapons are harder to come by until late in the game and not many items sell for much at all. The difficulty is very similar to AMK. Underground labs are given a revamp with many more monsters than in the vanilla game, something that not many mods tend to change. All mutants have new sounds and are much more frightening as a result. The only criticism that could be levelled at the mod is that with all the shaders and fog effects it can be very hard to distinguish enemies from the rest of the environment.

Link - <http://www.moddb.com/mods/autumn-aurora-compilation-mod>

Lost Alpha

The fabled Lost Alpha is a mod for SOC promises to bring back the original vision of the game with all the cut levels and features, plus much more. There are rumours that the Stalker rights holder has given the mod’s developers access to the SOC source code and that it may be released as a full standalone game. It is still TBA at the time of writing but is the most eagerly anticipated mod by far.

**Clear Sky**

Sky Reclamation Project (SRP)

There are no really important mods that I feel comfortable recommending for Clear Sky apart from fixes for grenade spam, pistol sights, and bug fixes. The Sky Reclamation Project, like the ZRP (above) is a mod that fixes all this stuff without altering the base game.

Link - <http://stalker.filefront.com/file/;122002>

**Call Of Pripyat**

Massive Simulation Overhaul (MSO)

MSO comprehensively overhauls the A-Life NPC interaction system in COP. It not only improves AI behaviour but also fixes how they spawn. I would recommend this for even a first time playthrough as it fixes lots of other little bugs as well.

Link - <http://www.moddb.com/mods/mso-massive-simulation-overhaul>

AtmosFear

Also released for Clear Sky, this weather mod adds beautiful sky textures and effects for lots of different times of day and weather states. AtmosFear also adds blowouts, fallout from said blowouts, and even psi-storms. Most overhaul mods include some version of AtmosFear (Autumn Aurora 2 is the only SOC mod I know which uses it).

Link - <http://atmosfear.crommcruac.com/call-of-pripyat/>

Also check out Crommcruac’s Absolute texture packs for all three games - <http://absolute.crommcruac.com/>

Misery

Misery is an overhaul/compilation mod aiming to increase the difficulty and survival aspects of Stalker to the extreme. The mod also has an art style that is even deader than Autumn Aurora 2. The mod adds lots of antiquated WW2 guns and weird items such as cannabis, and *Mein Kampf*. Every item has a use (the cannabis to combat psi-energy attacks, *Mein Kampf* to clean your weapons) but it can get a bit stupid when you’re looking for a particular item or status effect and there are literally hundreds of items to choose from. Many elements of the game have been altered to be just plain unfair and impossible to get past; bloodsuckers (invisible ‘vampire’ monsters) no longer make any noise and will kill you 100% of the time unless you happen to be facing them when they attack and one-shot them. Some difficulty balances do make the game more interesting, particularly in regards to the economy and the new hunting and cooking mechanics but the mod is still fundamentally broken and cheap as of version 2.1 without custom tweaks and fan patches.

Link - <http://www.moddb.com/mods/stalker-misery/downloads/misery-211>

**Appendix**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dS3WvKKSpKI>

A very in depth documentary of the Chernobyl disaster and its subsequent cleanup and effects. Has interviews with experts, journalists, and cleanup crew members.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GM_GOpfEQUw>

A short trailer showing many scenes from the Russian Stalker film put together by bioreflex.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YcL_X9XIydI>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xgp82uSl-RM>

Video captures of unearthed early betas showing environments completely alien to Stalker’s world (more in the channel).

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_r1VYyP_dPE>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zvlb1EQrVV4>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_tgZmaxGgLg>

A series of developer interviews into the making of Clear Sky.

**Further Reading**

<http://www.gsc-game.com/index.php?t=community&s=forums&s_game_type=xr&thm_page=1&thm_id=22142&sec_id=1> Transcript of an extensive podcast interview with Andrew Prokhorov lead designer on SOC

<http://www.rockpapershotgun.com/2007/12/10/stalker-interview/#more-710> Interview with Anton Bolshakov, who oversaw all three Stalker games, just after SOC’s release.

<http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/stalk_int_pat> Another interview with Anton Bolshakov.