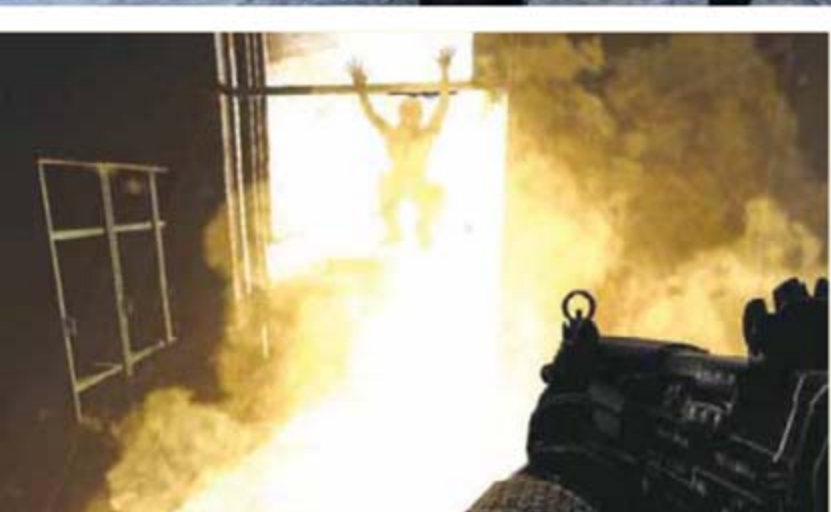


• A sighting of the rare and dangerous Ukrainian fecalsaur.



• In S.T.A.L.K.E.R., tension eggs you on because it frequently feels like someone—or something—is following you.



• Frontal assaults are rarely a good idea, as you will get flanked—often. But we hear that these soldiers like the taste of shrapnel.



• “Hey, Yuri, it’s your turn to tell a ghost story. How about that one where the two young lovers are making out in their car and they’re killed by capitalists?”

S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: SHADOW OF CHERNOBYL

Mad Maxim: Beyond the Containment Dome

PUBLISHER: THQ DEVELOPER: GSC Game World GENRE: First-Person Shooter AVAILABILITY: Retail Box ESRB RATING: Mature
MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS: 2GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 10GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard MULTIPLAYER: 2-32 players VERSION REVIEWED: Gold Master

REVIEW

Y In other first-person shooters, forward is the one and only way to go. Glowing switches and spawning goons and out-of-the-ordinary lighting and other less obvious goads reassure you that you're on the right path. You can see a film and not understand a scene, read a novel and not comprehend a chapter, and the show or the story still goes on. Not so with games. And, as more and more players play more and more games, a "no gamer left behind" mentality emerges. Whether developers decide to lean on figurative signposts or to give up and graffiti their games with literal and gratuitous arrows (as *Perfect Dark Zero* did on Xbox 360 and *Half-Life 2: Survivor* does in Japanese arcades), hours and hours of guinea pig input had some say in it. You can imagine movies and TV shows focus-grouped this way, but what about videogames that aren't?

OK, Ukraine-made *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* isn't the first FPS to assume its audience is intelligent—far from it. Perhaps it's the way it is because the studio bypassed the public part of the test-iterate-test phase to cut costs. Or maybe it was the cultural distance between Kiev and L.A. that made the difference? Or the lag in time between 2001 when GSC Game World announced the title and today in 2007 when market analysts advocate FPS as a "growth genre"? Is it, in other words, just that *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* is similar to some American shooters made before "everyone" became a target audience?

SLAG PILE OF FORKING PATHS

S.T.A.L.K.E.R. isn't quite *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*. You can't pick a compass point and



UKRAINE-MADE
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press on until you hit something interesting; invisible radiation prevents you from scouting a level's perimeter and looking out over the edges, and still *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*'s landscape is less movie set "Main Street" than *Call of Duty's* or *Half-Life's* or *Ghost Recon's*. However constant the tracks, the width of the course changes: Early on, an elevated railway impedes progress. Government men guard one road beneath a bridge and will let you through for a fee or a gunfight. A tunnel works, too...only it's stoppered with electromagnetic anomalies (the PDA file on a nearby dead man explains the environmental puzzle). And finally, a hole in the fence lets you through, if you look to find it. Even when the way isn't triplicate, it feels more natural than another FPS's unspooling script. You'll circle a building burglarlike, for example, before finding a point of entry (and perhaps meet a prisoner who—calling from his cell window—makes a mission offer as you pass).

Everything Bad Is Good For You author Steve Johnson argues that "far more than books or movies or music, games force you to make decisions [...] all the intellectual benefits of gaming derive from this fundamental virtue, because learning how to think is ultimately about learning to make the right decisions: weighing evidence, analyzing situations, consulting your long-term goals, and then deciding." I'll add that choice-rich games are often not only more intellectually engaging, but also more entertaining. Too few single-player shooters force us to make decisions other than when to shoot and what to shoot it with. *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* complicates things by adding both "how to get there" and "whom to oppose/whom to help." One time—and, like *Oblivion*, this is the variety of videogame that lends itself to stories that start with "one time"—I encountered a gang of itinerant stalkers off the highway, and I wondered what was going on. "Buy a Gauss magnetic accelerator gun?" one asked. He wanted next to nothing for it. But once my money was in his hands, he told me to beat it. I happened to have a loaded underbarrel grenade launcher, but the decision to barter and then to fight back cost me more in scarce munitions than in coin.

RADIATION SCORE

In its deep underground facilities (GSC's answer to dungeons), *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* is scarier than *F.E.A.R.* itself. Poltergeists fly past. Invisible hands hurl barrels as your flashlight bobs for the next noise. At times—Geiger counter crackling—I wanted to turn the game off, or at least get topside and into the light. Down



• Check out these exclusive shots from the set of *The Hills Have Eyes 4: The Musical*.

here, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* fares better if evaluated as an FPS with RPG trappings than as a fully fledged hybrid. You lock and load for these things, stock up on armor-piercing bullets and first-aid tins and radiation antidotes, and retool the assortment of artifacts in your belt (think: enchanted items that slow blood loss or limit electrocution injury at the expense of some other vulnerability). The trouble is returning to the shop if it turns out that your rucksack's stuffed wrong. Although RPG-like, the game won't let you click-port between key map points to cut out the hiking. Similarly, a more RPG-derived economy might've solved another snafu (that >



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WHAT'S MOST UNUSUAL, AND PERHAPS MOST UNIQUE, IS THE DEGREE OF DETAIL LAVISHED ON LOCATIONS THAT NOT EVERY PLAYER WILL VISIT.

also leads to the least satisfying of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*'s moralizing endings): lotsa money to spend and little to spend it on.

Branches of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*'s family tree trace back to Austin, Texas and *Deus Ex* developer Ion Storm, but others, those involving the way it looks, seem Ukraine-native. The game's "exclusion zone" setting, a no-man's-land roughly 30 square kilometers surrounding the Chernobyl nuclear reactor, is very much *Mad Maxim*: post-Soviet road warriors just beyond the containment dome. Bleak as the end of the world (or

at least life as we know it), it's an invention as gorgeous as years-old graphics overhauled for a late launch get. Wet squalls and lightning and ripping winds roll through, irradiated wolves track boar through the brush, and everywhere, these weird electromagnetic disturbances shiver and hum and distort space.

What's most unusual, and perhaps most unique to GSC Game World's direction, is the degree of detail lavished on locations that not every player will visit. For instance, I'm finishing the game (again), angling for alternate

endings (seven in all). I know where I've got to go. Instead, I decide to see if those tenements over there are hollow or if they have interiors, and it turns out that they do; block after block, basement to upper balcony, teeming with real estate to explore and treasure seekers to kill. This, under boiling-point pressure and in the closing chapter.

Far away from even voluntary objectives, you'll find vandalized factories and woody, overgrown villages, every girder and path of planks traversable and rendered down to the rust. In a *Half-Life*, these set the stage for climactic moments; here, in this much-removed "zone of alienation," they're home to loner guitarists and feral dogs.

These days, Americans just don't design shooters this way. • **Shawn Elliott**

VERDICT

• Open-ended hybrid gameplay that offers more to do than "point-and-shoot."

• Some set dressing exists purely for show; not enough stuff to spend your cash on.

8/10

GOOD



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