

RECONSTRUCTION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY IN DIGITAL SPACE: A PHILOSOPHICAL-SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF THE S.T.A.L.K.E.R. BRAND

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Summary

The article provides a philosophical-semiotic analysis of the brand transformation of the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* video game franchise within the context of decolonizing the digital cultural space. It explores the transition from "post-Soviet universalism" in the representation of national identity, characteristic of the series' early games, to a clearly defined Ukrainian agency, as exemplified by *S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2: Heart of Chornobyl*. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's field theory, the study substantiates the prioritization of symbolic capital accumulation over the developer studio's economic interests amidst the full-scale Russian-Ukrainian war. Particular attention is paid to the semiotic analysis of verbal codes (changes in toponym transliteration, modification of in-game currency, etc.) and visual aesthetics that appeal to the actual geography of the Chornobyl Exclusion Zone as a national "place of memory". Through the lens of Kathryn Woodward's concept of identity, the marking of difference in global media discourse and the gaming community's reaction to the brand's shifting communication strategy are analyzed. It is argued that the franchise's rebranding serves as an act of counter-representation that challenges imperial stereotypes regarding the Chornobyl disaster and asserts the Ukrainian cultural code on a global scale. The research highlights the role of video games as instruments of cultural diplomacy and means of constructing modern national identity in the digital age.

Key words: symbolic capital, decolonization, places of memory, representation, post-apocalypse, video games, computer games.

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1. Introduction

In contemporary post-industrial society, video games have ceased to be purely entertainment content and are acquiring increasingly significant importance in the process of forming and transmitting cultural meanings. In this context, the sci-fi video game franchise *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.*, set in an alternative Chornobyl Exclusion Zone and developed by the Ukrainian studio GSC Game World, becomes a unique case study. It vividly demonstrates how a commercial brand becomes a field of intense ideological and philosophical struggle. The release of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2: Heart of Chornobyl* (2024) coincided with a period of tectonic shifts in Ukrainian self-awareness triggered by the full-scale Russian aggression. These events accompanied the franchise's rebranding, which transcended the limits of marketing to become an act of political and philosophical self-assertion.

For a long time, mass culture perceived the Chornobyl disaster and its derived myths as part of a "common Soviet" or "post-Soviet" heritage. Evidence of this can be found in the most popular cultural products that appeared even after the collapse of the USSR: for instance,

the famous book by Nobel laureate Svetlana Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl* (1997), or the HBO series *Chernobyl* (2019) (Bazdyrieva, 2019). This led to the blurring of Ukraine's agency, where the local context was swallowed by the imperial narrative. Consequently, there is a growing need to investigate how the decolonization of a digital product occurs through verbal codes, visual aesthetics, and changes in communication strategy, as "post-Soviet universalism" is displaced by Ukrainian identity.

Thus, the object of our study is the communication strategy and substantive content of the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* franchise during the period of 2007–2024 (from the launch of the very first game in the series to the latest installment, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2: Heart of Chornobyl*). The subject of the research encompasses the philosophical and sociocultural mechanisms of national identity representation within the context of the decolonization of digital space.

For a thorough analysis of the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* brand transformation, we turn to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of social fields (Bourdieu, 1980: 113). In our context, the brand's identity is formed at the intersection of three key fields: the Field of Economy (the global gaming market), the Field of Media (criticism, digital platforms, social networks), and the Field of Politics (national security, war, ideology).

In this framework, we observe a phenomenon that Bourdieu described as the struggle for symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1982: 121). The withdrawal from the Russian market – which was historically the primary market for the franchise – constitutes an act of consciously sacrificing economic capital for the sake of symbolic capital: reputation, ethical stance, and national solidarity.

An important addition is the theory of Kathryn Woodward, who examines identity through the lens of the marking of difference. According to Woodward, identity is not monolithic; it emerges at the point where we say: "We are not Them" (Woodward, 1997: 12). For *S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2*, this marking becomes unequivocal and is vividly demonstrated through the change in transliteration from *Chernobyl* to *Chornobyl* (Skrypina, 2022). This linguistic correction serves as an act of establishing a border between the "indigenous" (Ukrainian) and the "imposed" (colonial) toponym.

2. Semiotic Decolonization and Visual Retraditionalization of the Brand

The transformation of the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* brand occurs at the level of deep semiotic codes, where every element of the game functions as a sign referring to a specific cultural context. The process of decolonization here is realized through the replacement of imperial (Soviet or Russian) signifiers with purely national, Ukrainian ones.

The change in the transliteration of the game's subtitle from *Heart of Chernobyl* to *Heart of Chornobyl* is not merely a philological issue. In the philosophy of language, a proper name serves as a "fixation point" for meanings (Kripke, 1980: 48). For decades, the use of the *Chernobyl* variant (the Russian transliteration) reinforced the status of the Exclusion Zone as an object belonging to a "common" (imperial) space.

According to Benedict Anderson's concept, nations are constructed around a shared language and print capitalism (Anderson, 1983: 44). In the digital era, "gaming capitalism," simulated within the virtual space of the game, performs the same function. The spelling of *Chornobyl* is an act of agency that reclaims the right to name one's own tragedy and to interact with its legacy directly, making it part of one's own identity. It is a marking of space as distinctly Ukrainian, where the local norm is elevated to the level of a global standard.

A similar act of decolonization is the change of the in-game currency within the virtual world. While in previous installments (e.g., *Shadow of Chernobyl*, 2007), the currency used to trade with non-player characters for equipment and weapons was designated as "RU" (an abbreviation for the ruble – both Soviet and Russian), in *Heart of Chornobyl*, the symbol "K" (coupons) appears. *Kupono-karbovanets* are a historical symbol of the early years of Ukrainian independence, marking the transition away from the Soviet economy. Although this currency has since been replaced by the Ukrainian hryvnia, the introduction of such a detail into the game reconstructs the continuity of the Ukrainian state project even within the fictional world of the Zone, shifting the nostalgic attachment from Soviet to purely Ukrainian semantics.

The visual representation of the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* brand has always relied on the aesthetics of decay. The game space is filled with abandoned Soviet architecture and industrial objects, creating a somber yet nostalgic atmosphere that serves as a metaphor for a "collapsed country" that once existed in this territory. However, in the new iteration, it acquires the characteristics of a "place of memory" (*lieu de mémoire*), as defined by Pierre Nora (*Nora*, 1984: 19). Here, the Chornobyl Zone ceases to be an abstract backdrop for a local post-apocalypse. It is no longer a universal illustration of a derelict space within any Eastern European country that survived the crisis of the USSR's collapse, but rather a specific topography of Ukraine. It is now associated precisely with the Ukrainian historical experience.

The use of photogrammetry and photo-textures captured from actual locations to recreate real objects within the Chornobyl Zone enhances the sense of authenticity and the appeal to real geography (*Mikhel*, 2025). The brand no longer sells an "exotic disaster somewhere in Eastern Europe"; instead, it offers an immersive experience of the Ukrainian landscape with concrete replica models of real architecture, household elements, vegetation, and topography.

The presence of Ukrainian-language radio stations and music by Ukrainian artists within the game world creates an effect of the intangible cultural presence of Ukrainian identity. The language used by characters in the Zone is no longer merely an aspect of video game localization as a product for a specific market. A player can choose the Ukrainian voiceover for a more authentic immersion into the local context or use English as the primary language of the globalized pop-culture market. The Russian voiceover, which was present in the very first games of the series, is absent in the new game (*Artushevska*, 2022). At the same time, in all localization options, the Ukrainian-language music on the radio stations remains the same, which ensures that contact with the real linguistic context is not lost. This also applies to Ukrainian-language inscriptions, graffiti, signage, and other signs within the virtual space of the game.

One must also consider the philosophical evolution of the "Stalker" archetype, the role of which the player assumes. In the early games, the Stalker is largely an adventurer who does not manifest a specific political or national worldview. He exists as an individual outside the system, whose primary interests are the search for artifacts and survival. To some extent, this image correlates with the Stalker archetype in the novel *Roadside Picnic* by the Soviet science fiction writers, the Strugatsky brothers, who exerted a significant influence on the developers during the creation of the first game in the series (*Rush-Cooper*, 2024: 172). However, in *S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2*, the Stalker's image shifts toward that of a "symbolic guardian of borders," which directly impacts the fate of the Zone as a territory. Simultaneously, the protagonist Skif, controlled by the player, is given a backstory: he is a military veteran whose home was destroyed by an anomalous phenomenon linked to the processes occurring within the Zone.

Under the conditions of a real war, the Exclusion Zone has acquired the features of an actual frontier. The brand transmits this experience to a global audience: the Stalker is now portrayed as a protector of the world against a threat that originates at the very epicenter of catastrophic events.

3. Field Dynamics and the Transformation of Symbolic Capital

According to Pierre Bourdieu's methodology, social space functions as a constellation of autonomous yet interconnected "fields" (economic, political, cultural, etc.), where actors compete for various forms of capital. The case of *S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2* demonstrates a rare instance in the gaming industry where a brand's strategy is determined not by the logic of profit, but by the logic of ideological choice and national affiliation (*Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009: 154*).

Prior to 2022 and the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* brand largely depended on the field of economic interest within the post-Soviet space. The Russian-speaking market accounted for the lion's share of the audience, which influenced the positioning of the product as "universal and post-Soviet." This led to a certain commercial ambivalence: while the game was created in Ukraine, it was marketed as the shared heritage of the entire post-Soviet space—a space usually identified with the so-called "*Russkiy Mir*" (Russian World). This imperial concept is used by Russia to legitimize its sphere of influence and the boundaries of Russian cultural expansion (*Laruelle, 2015: 9*).

However, following the start of the full-scale invasion, a radical rupture occurred. The studio GSC Game World transitioned from a purely commercial field into the fields of politics and national security. The cancellation of the Russian localization was an act of abandoning a massive market segment. From the perspective of classical marketing, this is a loss. From the perspective of Bourdieu's concept, it is the conversion of economic capital into symbolic capital. In this context, the withdrawal from the Russian market is perceived as an ethical gesture aimed at countering imperial ambitions and supporting a national identity integrated into the Western World, as opposed to the "*Russkiy Mir*."

Simultaneously, a shift in the brand's representation on international platforms has taken place. While *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* was previously perceived as an exotic Eastern European shooter, it is now viewed as a manifesto of Ukrainian resilience (*MacDonald, 2024*).

Thus, the brand's symbolic capital operates simultaneously in two directions: internal and external. Domestically, the brand becomes an integral part of the Ukrainian collective resistance against the aggressor. The developers demonstratively support the Ukrainian army, players raise funds for soldiers through in-game events, and the shift in narrative strengthens the loyalty of the Ukrainian community, which now associates the brand with the representation of their state. Externally, the brand serves as a point of contact and participation within the Ukrainian context; supporting the game becomes an act of solidarity with Ukraine.

Consequently, this product of mass culture functions as "soft power," promoting Ukrainian agency in spheres where traditional diplomacy might be less effective (*Nye, 2004: 11*). *S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2* compels the player to become accustomed to Ukrainian toponyms, to hear the Ukrainian language, and to perceive the history of Chernobyl outside the context of "brotherly nations."

This shift in positioning demonstrates that digital identity is not static. It is the result of a constant struggle for the right to define what constitutes the "norm." In the contemporary context, the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* brand manifests a decolonial shift, transforming a gaming brand into a tool for the deconstruction of imperial myths.

4. The Discursive Field Surrounding S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2

The shift in GSC Game World's communication strategy caused significant resonance in the global digital space, exposing deep rifts in how different audiences perceive cultural products. For a long time, both Western and Russian consumers viewed Chornobyl through the prism of a "shared Soviet disaster." This was a convenient stereotype that neutralized Ukraine's specific place in this narrative as the actual territory where the catastrophe unfolded.

Following Bourdieu's line of reasoning, it can be argued that the aforementioned change of the word *Chornobyl* in the game's title to the Ukrainian transliteration became an act of "symbolic violence" against the established colonial order. The reaction of a segment of the audience, which accused the studio of "censorship" or an "anti-Russian course," testifies to a certain inertia of perception. For an outside observer lacking immersion in the context of the war and Ukrainian-Russian relations, decolonization often appears as "politicization," whereas for representatives of the colonized culture, it is merely the restoration of historical and linguistic justice (Caldwell, 2024).

The reaction of the Ukrainian community on social media via the hashtag #Chornobyl-NotChernobyl (and similar initiatives) aimed at supporting the developers' decisions demonstrates the formation of digital resistance (Lubenets, 2024). Drawing on the works of Kathryn Woodward, one can mark key differences in the actions of various audience segments (Woodward, 1997: 12). Ukrainian players acted not merely as consumers but as co-creators of the new brand, defending the developers' right to national identification. At the same time, the Russian audience, accusing the developers of "Russophobia," actually demonstrated a reaction to the loss of symbolic control over a cultural product they had grown accustomed to considering "theirs." In this context, accusations of Russophobia serve as a defensive reaction of the imperial consciousness to the emergence of a subjective Other. The *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* brand has ceased to be a "mirror" for the Russian player and has become a "border" that cannot be crossed without acknowledging Ukrainian distinctiveness.

Thus, *S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2* can be defined as a manifestation of the decolonization of digital culture. This manifests on three levels simultaneously: the narrative level, which involves reimagining the Zone as a Ukrainian national place of memory; the linguistic level, consisting of the assertion of Ukrainian transliteration and language as dominant; and the ethical level, expressed through a total refusal to cooperate with the aggressor's market, thereby making the brand a carrier of political value. This highlights the non-homogeneity of the post-Soviet space. What previously appeared to be a unified post-Soviet cultural field proved to be an artificial construct that crumbles as soon as a local producer asserts their agency.

5. Conclusions

The transformation of the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* video game franchise brand has been analyzed as a complex process of reconstructing national identity within digital and media fields. Based on this analysis, the following conclusions can be drawn.

The rebranding of the franchise has become an act of agency. The change in transliteration, the transition to the Ukrainian language, and the implementation of other national markers in *S.T.A.L.K.E.R. 2: Heart of Chornobyl* have transcended the boundaries of linguistic corrections. This process can be defined as semiotic decolonization, which reclaims Ukraine's right to name and interpret its own history and geography. The brand has ceased to be part of "post-Soviet universalism" and has become a tool for asserting Ukrainian distinctiveness.

The game's developers, GSC Game World, have also demonstrated the priority of symbolic capital (reputation, ethical stance, national identity) over economic capital. This conversion of capital occurred through a conscious withdrawal from the Russian market, which had historically been one of the largest for the franchise. This is an unprecedented example of how national values become the decisive factor in the strategy of a global commercial brand.

The process of brand transformation triggered a conflict of interpretations in the global media space. Accusations of "Russophobia" or "politicization" from a segment of the audience are manifestations of the inertia of colonial perception. Conversely, the #ChornobylNotChernobyl campaign in support of the developers' decisions initiated a process of counter-representation and proved that the digital community is capable of acting as an active subject in the defense of national identity.

Due to the shift in positioning, the Chornobyl Zone in the game has transformed from an abstract post-apocalyptic playground into a distinctly Ukrainian "place of memory" (*lieu de mémoire*). It now encompasses both the knowledge of the traumatic experience of the Chornobyl disaster and metaphorical imagery of the Russian-Ukrainian war.

Thus, the *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* brand case serves as an example of successful digital decolonization, where a video game becomes a powerful instrument of cultural diplomacy and the protection of national identity in the face of an existential threat.

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