

STALKER 2: Heart of Chernobyl

ZONNE

New mutants, a new faction, and new ways to die in **STALKER 2: HEART OF CHERNOBYL**.

By Chris Livingston



he Zone of the *STALKER* series is filled with radiation and dread in equal measures. Home to mutant

horrors, hostile factions, and otherworldly anomalies, the Zone only promises one thing: a quick and brutal death. The original *STALKER* games were bleak, terrifying, unforgiving survival sandboxes. The Zone is the most miserable place in videogame history. We can't wait to go back.

We have, however, waited for *quite* a while. It's been over a decade since the release of the last *STALKER* game by GSC Gameworld, *Call of Pripjat*, and *STALKER 2* (oddly enough, it's the fourth game in the series) was originally planned for 2012. It was cancelled that same year, only to reappear in development again in 2018, this time in the Unreal Engine. Aiming for a release in April of 2022, we're finally getting tantalisingly close to another visit to the Zone. And the wait may have been worth it, as it sounds like something closer to the vision GSC Gameworld had for its first *STALKER* game, *Shadow of Chernobyl*, way back in 2007.

"The *STALKER* series always aimed to be set in a seamless open world, but only now is it possible to implement it as planned," says game director Evgeniy Grygorovych. "*STALKER 2* features a vast world to explore with different biomes,

numerous locations, labs, and undergrounds to explore. It's 64 square kilometres, and it's all yours. You can go anywhere."

DEATH AND REBIRTH

Time hasn't just passed for us while we waited for the next *STALKER* game. Time has passed in the Zone, too. Years have gone by since the events of *STALKER: Call of Pripjat*, and that passage of time is evident in the look of *STALKER 2*.

"In terms of art direction and general feel, that means more modern vibes have been added to the atmosphere of decay and devastation," says Grygorovych. "At the same time, locations and environments have become even more obsolete and abandoned, as a significant time has passed in this frozen world. This is why the contrast between technology and abandonment feels even stronger."

That's also why you might be skulking cautiously through the world and suddenly stumble upon a field covered in bright red poppy plants, which provides a shocking burst of colour in the normally grey and gloomy Zone. Green grass, leafy trees, and ruined buildings covered in moss show nature flourishing in some areas, despite all the deadly radiation and decay. At the same time, other locations have plunged further into ruin. As seen in the trailer, a guard tower from the second game in the trilogy, *STALKER: Clear Sky*, can be visited in *STALKER 2*, but the tower is now barely standing, leaning crookedly and held up by



COVER FEATURE

STALKER 2: Heart of Chernobyl



» cables as if it's about to crumble into a pile of twisted and rusty metal.

But flourishing flora and decaying buildings aren't the only thing that's changed over the years. The Zone is home to new inhabitants, both human and otherwise.

OH, DEER

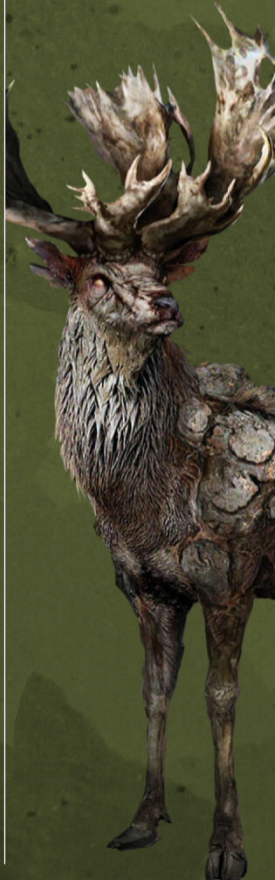
You can expect to meet many of the Zone's familiar residents in *STALKER 2*. As we saw in the E3 trailer, the fast-moving, nearly silent, often invisible Bloodsuckers are back (unfortunately, because they're scary as hell) and you can expect to run into the hooded, dwarf-like Burers again, too, still ready to yank weapons out of your hands and unleash deadly shockwaves with their telekinetic powers. But *STALKER 2* will also feature new mutants and monsters, and even something that initially sounds harmless may wind up being a very grave threat.

Typically in open world survival games, deer are a combination of a bit of pleasant scenery (aw, a deer!) and a resource (yum, a deer!). In most games these gentle creatures are to be admired at a distance or hunted for meat, leather, and other crafting resources. Even in a radioactive wasteland, you wouldn't expect a deer, even an irradiated, mutated deer, to be anything more than a harmless feast.

But this is the world of *STALKER* we're talking about. Mutant deer in *STALKER 2* are nothing to sneeze at. In fact, it sounds like you might want to avoid them altogether. First, the deer look absolutely badass, with glowing eyes set below a massive cluster of jagged antlers. If you were thinking of walking away from your hunting excursion with a cosy warm deer fur pelt, you can probably forget it: most of the deer's fur has fallen out, leaving only a few tufts growing between hard armoured plating of what might be mutated bone that's protruding through the animal's hide. This deer looks mean and not even remotely tasty, and its armoured frame means a simple shot isn't going to take it down – you'll need to find a weak spot somewhere on its body if you want to kill it. And it's not just going to be standing there gently nibbling grass while you shoot: the deer can attack with its sharp hooves – both back and front – and that chaotic crown of jagged horns.

But that's only part of the problem. *STALKER 2*'s deer hasn't just mutated physically, but mentally. Yes, this is a *psychic* deer, and not only can it launch physical and psy-attacks at you, it can summon other medium-sized mutants nearby for help, meaning targeting a single deer can lead to a swarm of other nasty creatures. Don't worry, it gets

ABOVE: Irradiated dogs hunt in packs, so make sure you're locked and loaded.



even worse. The single deer you were foolhardy enough to shoot at now appears to be many deer, because this irradiated deer can create illusory copies of itself. Now not only are you fighting a potential mob of helper mutants, you're also trying to figure out which of the several deer you're looking at is the real one and which are simply illusions. Like I said, you might want to avoid the deer of *STALKER 2* altogether.

ANOMALOUS MATERIALS

Of course, the whole reason you're going into the Zone and braving encounters with psychic armoured deer in the first place is to hunt for artefacts. Artefacts are rare, valuable, and often dangerous items that have gained unusual properties due to the anomalies of the Zone. If you've been in the Zone before, you're no stranger to anomalies, but familiarity might not help as much as you think.

"Anomalies work in much the same way as before, but have become more dangerous and more varied," says Grygorovych.



Parts of the Zone almost seem idyllic now that nature is reclaiming them.

**ITS ARMoured FRAME MEANS
A SIMPLE SHOT ISN'T GOING
TO TAKE IT DOWN**



Anomalies are extremely dangerous, often fatal phenomena that occur in the Zone. And a lot of times they occur before you're even aware you've stepped into one. They come in many different forms: sometimes they're explosive, fiery events that will flash-fry you where you stand, or gravitational vortexes that will pick you up and spin you around as if you've been caught in a tornado. There can be singular anomalies, they can be clustered together in anomaly fields, and there are new 'arch anomalies', such as the Fire Whirlwind, which represent an even deadlier type of threat.

Special detectors can help you spot the anomalies and point you to the precious artefacts within them, but they're no guarantee you'll escape in one piece or with the item you were searching for. And some tricks for dealing with anomalies from the previous *STALKER* games might not be viable strategies, such as one we probably all did at one time or another – suddenly realising an anomaly is about to go critical

and just running like hell. Dashing through an anomaly field might save your life, but it's not going to be a long-term solution. Even if you survive, your equipment may be heavily damaged or even destroyed. As Grygorovych bluntly puts it, "Your armour will turn to dust" after a few sprints through an anomaly field. With good quality equipment so hard to come by in the game, it'll cost you dearly if you try to take a shortcut through an anomaly field too many times.

As for the arch anomalies like the Fire Whirlwind, GSC isn't telling us much about them yet, other than that simply making your way through them using detectors won't be enough to come away with your prize. "The temperature is too high and the artefact from the centre cannot be retrieved," says Grygorovych of the Fire Whirlwind. "We don't want to spoil the solution, but there is a way to fetch the artefact." I'm guessing it involves something more durable than some sort of fancy oven mitt.

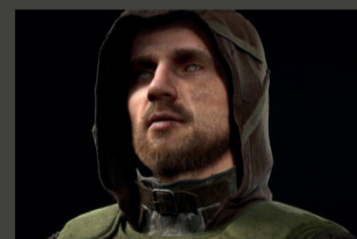
PICKING SIDES

STALKER's factions have different goals and ideologies. Who will you side with?



FREEDOM

Members of Freedom think the Zone's secrets should be shared with the world, not kept by the state.



MONOLITH

The religious cult of Monolith are back, determined to kill anyone trying to reach the centre of the Zone.



WARD

Led by Colonel Korshunov, this new faction acts like the policemen of the Zone. Bandits hate them. Will you?

DUTY SEES THE ZONE AS A HAZARD TO HUMANITY AND FIGHTS TO ERADICATE IT



» IT'S THE FUZZ!

Along with new mutants, a powerful and feared new faction has risen in the years you've been away from the Zone. This new faction was hinted at in the E3 trailer, as eagle-eyed viewers spotted graffiti on a wall written in Ukrainian, which included the word 'guard'.

This new faction is called the Ward. Put it this way: if the Zone is the Wild West and bandits are outlaws and bank robbers, the Ward are the lawmen. They may not have tin stars pinned to their chests, but they're definitely seen as police by the rest of the Zone.

The leader of the Ward is Colonel Alexander Korshunov, an accomplished and experienced soldier who personally recruited the faction's members from groups of highly trained mercenaries and turned them into a proper army. A disciplined leader, he doesn't tolerate disloyalty from his soldiers, and crossing him is a bad idea.

The Ward sounds a bit similar to Duty, another paramilitary faction

ABOVE: Even in the deadly Zone there are a few safe places to visit.

from earlier *STALKER* games, but Duty sees the Zone as a hazard to humanity and fights to eradicate it. The Ward, on the other hand, wants to control the dangers of the Zone so they may serve humankind through the scientific knowledge gained from them. As a result, the Ward's goal is to protect the important discoveries taking place at the Scientific Institute for Research of the

Chernobyl Anomalous Area. They don't look kindly on bandits, and the feeling is mutual.

Choosing to side with Colonel Korshunov and the Ward, or the leader and members of any of *STALKER 2*'s factions, will be an important and difficult choice for players, according to Grygorovych. "Several characters of conflicting ideologies can be found even within

CLUB DREAD

Love *STALKER*'s bleak and hopeless atmosphere? Sure, we all do! Here are other games that capture a similar feeling



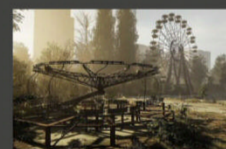
METRO 2033
It's linear, not open world, but *Metro 2033* captures the same dread and horror as the *STALKER* series.



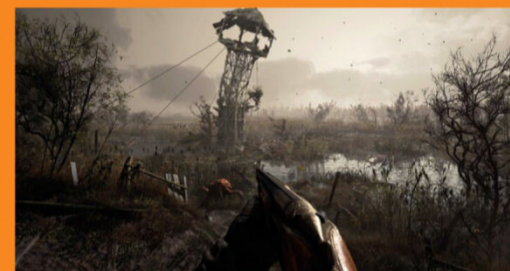
SURVARIUM
Deadly anomalies and FPS combat in a postapocalyptic landscape. Like *STALKER*, but multiplayer only.



ESCAPE FROM TARKOV
Brutal combat and survival elements fill this shooter as players try to escape with valuable loot.



CHERNOBYLITE
Hell, it's a non-linear survival shooter that takes place in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone and features Stalkers.



the same faction," he says. "Even within the [GSC Gameworld], I see people argue about the choices [their coworkers] have made."

SURVIVAL KIT

As always, survival is a challenge and that's not just due to monsters, mutants, and roaming bandits. While most of *STALKER 2*'s survival systems will sound familiar, such as using bandages to stop bleeding, meds to recover lost health, and different types of protective clothing or armour to avoid lethal doses of radiation, there are a few new survival elements sprinkled in that will make keeping yourself alive even more difficult, even when you're not being shot at, blown up, or stalked by psychic deer.

As always, you'll need to keep yourself well-fed, but going without eating for too long will do more than simply lower your hit points. There will be secondary effects of hunger, which include more difficulty aiming your weapons and a loss of stamina. Your stomach may even



begin to audibly rumble if you've skipped too many meals. With a full belly, on the other hand, you'll be able to move faster and cover long distances more quickly.

And sleep will play a big role in maintaining your health and effectiveness in the Zone. If a *STALKER* goes more than a full day without sleep, they'll begin to feel the effects of that fatigue, and the longer they continue pushing themselves without rest the more severe those effects will become. The *STALKER*'s vision will be affected, they'll lose stamina, and they may even begin experiencing auditory hallucinations. There are already plenty of creepy, disturbing and horrifying sounds in the Zone: you definitely don't want to be adding to them by not getting enough sack time.

There are, naturally, short-term solutions for dealing with the negative effects of hunger or lack of sleep. "Any debuff can be overcome with an item for a short time period," says Grygorovych. "For example, the negative effects from the [sleep-deprived] condition can be temporarily removed by having an energy drink. But if you do not satisfy the needs of your character, the sum of all those needs significantly complicates the gameplay." You can put off things like rest and meals for a while, in other

words – and seeing as how the Zone isn't a great place to take a nap, you'll probably have to. But it'll all catch up with you eventually.

FRIENDZONED

Grygorovych expects players to be able to spend 100 hours to see everything *STALKER 2* has to offer, which includes an intricate plot and non-linear storyline. And with different choices to make, such as which faction to side with, he says it's "impossible" to see everything in a single playthrough. "We have 30 narrative designers working specifically on plot and quests," says Grygorovych. "Creating a non-linear story is the most difficult challenge in games and we consider the plot to be one of the main features of the game. We are really proud of how it's shaping up."

There will also be multiplayer elements like PvP, deathmatch, and team deathmatch added after launch. If you were hoping to take on the Zone with a friend at your side, however, that's not in the cards. When it comes to *STALKER 2*, co-op is a non-starter. "It is impossible to add a co-op mode without ruining the experience of overcoming the difficulties on your own," Grygorovych says. When it comes to surviving the Zone, you'll have to do it solo, *STALKER*. ■

The underground of Agroprom is the last place you want to run into someone. Or something.

